CLICK, SCROLL, CONNECT – AND BALANCE

Children's digital wellbeing in educational contexts across Europe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2025, the Vodafone Foundation and Save the Children launched a Europe-wide digital skills and resilience programme for children aged 9 to 16, aiming to go beyond basic digital literacy by promoting safe, ethical and confident online engagement. Rolled out across eight countries and integrated into Vodafone's existing Skills Upload Junior initiative, the programme addresses key issues like online safety, digital rights, and responsible behaviour and is guided by the SMILE framework – Security, Management, Identity, Literacy, and Empathy – supporting children's digital wellbeing and resilience through a rights-based inclusive approach.

In support of the newly formed partnership, both organisations jointly carried out this study to explore and provide a holistic understanding of the current state of digital wellbeing for children across Europe. The objectives of the study were to map existing evidence and identify gaps in provision and delivery, as well as opportunities to enhance protective frameworks and to promote inclusive, empowering digital experiences for all children. This report presents the findings of a semi-systematic desk-based review of academic and grey literature combined with expert key informant interviews. Based on a search of databases and a list of expert recommended documents and content pieces, a total of 112 sources were initially reviewed, of which 53 were selected for in-depth analysis. Children's voices were integrated through secondary data from specific child-focused research studies, in particular studies previously conducted by Save the Children member offices in Romania, Spain and Denmark. These insights provided valuable context and helped ground the analysis in children's lived experiences.

Four interviews were conducted with experts from academia, policy development, civil society and advocacy, representing a diverse range of perspectives on the topic of children's digital wellbeing. The experts were Rhiannon-Faye McDonald (survivor of both online and offline abuse and Head of Advocacy at the Marie Collins Foundation [MCF]), Charlotte Aynsley (Founder and CEO of Rethinking Safeguarding), Tyler Shores (Director of the University of Cambridge ThinkLab Programme) and Silke Müller (secondary school headteacher, author and advocate). This study will form the basis for programmatic and advocacy ambitions of the Vodafone Foundation/Save the Children partnership.

Key findings

Over the past decade, the European Union has developed the world's most comprehensive digital protection framework for children, built on children's rights principles and supported by major legislation, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Digital Services Act (DSA). These collectively mandate privacy-by-design, platform accountability and protections from harmful content, while also providing enforcement tools. Despite progress, disparities remain across the EU in age verification, content moderation and digital literacy, creating a fragmented landscape. The new EU-wide age assurance app and Age Assurance Toolbox aim to harmonise standards but, without flexible and inclusive design, risk excluding vulnerable children. Similarly, content moderation remains uneven, with exposure to harmful content varying drastically between countries.

Emerging risks, including AI-generated child sexual abuse material, deepfakes and harmful algorithmic recommender systems are outpacing regulatory tools. While the AI Act and DSA aim to address these threats, they are still evolving. Stronger alignment with the best interests of the child, children's rights in general and meaningful child participation are needed to make frameworks future-fit. A consistent, rights-based approach that continuously evolves will be essential to address the speed, scale and sophistication of new digital harms.

Children across Europe are increasingly exposed to digital stressors such as cyberbullying, disinformation, addictive design features and harmful social comparisons, all of which contribute to rising levels of anxiety, depression and behavioural issues. Harmful content ranging from hate speech to violent imagery is widespread and experts warn of the growing influence of misogyny, harmful gender norms and deepfakes. Gender significantly shapes children's online experiences: girls face more body image pressure, sexual harassment and exposure to degrading content, while boys are at risk of internalising harmful norms through violent or exploitative media, with abuse often going unreported due to stigma.

Children from minoritised backgrounds, such as LGBTQIA+ youth, children of colour or those with neurodevelopmental disabilities, face compounded risks online, including identity-based harassment, exclusion and misinformation. These harms are often under-recognised in policy and education, despite their impact on mental health and safety. As harmful norms spread rapidly online, there is an urgent need for digital wellbeing strategies that are inclusive, trauma-informed and responsive to children's diverse experiences and identities, ensuring safe and supportive digital environments for all.

As digital environments become central to children's lives, it is essential to recognise their evolving developmental needs and to tailor support to their specific circumstances and experiences. Digital harm can affect all children requiring nuanced and child-centred approaches. These approaches should both acknowledge children's capabilities and resilience when shaping policies, support systems and interventions.

There is growing recognition across the EU that schools must move beyond narrow academic goals to support children's holistic digital wellbeing. This includes fostering digital literacy, safety and mental health through curricula, teacher training and whole-school approaches. EU frameworks like the Digital Education Action Plan, DigComp and Digital Citizenship Education aim to equip students with critical digital skills, while countries implement national initiatives to teach responsible online behaviour and resilience.

> **Spain, girl 16: And here the problem is also partly that if a woman posts something, she's already seen as provocative or doing something wrong, but if a man posts it, he's the best in the world.**

Save the Children Spain, 2024

However, implementation is inconsistent, often hindered by broader systemic challenges such as limited resourcing, time constraints, insufficient teacher training and a lack of curriculum alignment. Children often report lacking essential knowledge on misinformation, data privacy and algorithmic profiling, while teachers cite inadequate training and unclear guidance as barriers.

Children themselves call for greater clarity and support in navigating the digital world, including understanding how their data is used and building media literacy. Despite some effective programmes and tools (e.g. SELFIE[1], DETECT), most teacher training remains fragmented and often relies on short-term, NGO-led campaigns rather than systemic policy. Embedding digital wellbeing into national curricula, strengthening teacher capacity, and adopting whole-school and participatory approaches are essential to address digital risks and promote student wellbeing. However, disparities in infrastructure and resources continue to hinder equitable access, particularly in underserved communities, making it vital to invest in inclusive, sustainable education strategies that prioritise the digital lives of all children.

Advancing children's digital wellbeing requires more than isolated interventions, but rather a system-focused approach that embeds digital wellbeing within the broader structures that support children's lives. Recognising that digital experiences are inseparable from children's experiences overall, supporting their digital wellbeing must be integrated into the everyday environments where children grow and develop, structured around their families, schools, communities and policy frameworks. This approach must be child-centred, rights-based, informed by children's voices, and supported by coordinated action across sectors. Ultimately, digital wellbeing should be seen as a shared responsibility, embedded in the systems that shape children's lives both online and offline.

Taking a children's rights perspective

Children increasingly view digital technology as essential to realising their rights, seeing access to the internet as a basic need tied to education, identity, employment and their participation in diverse societies (Third and Moody, 2021). They recognise the digital environment as a critical enabler of personal development and future opportunities, both in their private lives and professional aspirations. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underscores that digital policies, technologies and services must prioritise the best interests of the child. Children are not just passive users but active rights-holders,

and their voices must be considered in shaping the digital environment. UNCRC General Comment No. 25 (2021) reinforces that children's rights, including to privacy, participation and protection must be upheld online as they are offline.

Balancing children's rights to protection with freedoms like expression and access to information requires nuanced policymaking. Overly restrictive measures, such as blanket bans, may inadvertently undermine efforts to promote children's digital wellbeing. Children are also calling for transparency from companies and tighter regulation to curb exploitative practices like data monetisation and excessive advertising. Despite growing awareness, national laws often lag behind the cross-border nature of digital services, and businesses may prioritise profit over children's best interests. Child Rights Business Principles and systematic tools like Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) can help ensure that emerging technologies respect and support children's rights from the outset. To protect and promote children's rights online, governments must adopt unified, rights-based strategies aligned with international standards. Stronger coordination and enforcement mechanisms are essential to ensure consistent implementation across countries and platforms.

United Kingdom, girl, 17: Digital rights are human rights. It shouldn't be a trade. 🙶

Third and Moody, 2021

Recommendations:

Prioritise children's digital rights through the development of comprehensive national guidelines and resources that explicitly recognise and uphold these rights in online environments. Such efforts should align with international standards, including the UNCRC General Comment No. 25 to ensure a consistent and rights-based approach.

Establish stronger implementation mechanisms that ensure compliance across platforms and jurisdictions and strengthen cross-border enforcement mechanisms to close regulatory gaps.

[1] https://education.ec.europa.eu/selfie

Prioritising children's voices and recognising their agency

Children's meaningful participation is crucial in shaping digital environments that reflect their rights, needs and lived experiences. Rather than being seen as passive users, children must be recognised as active contributors in policy, education and technology design. Experts agreed that most adults, whether educators, families or policymakers have limited understanding of children's online experiences due to, for instance, the use different platforms or engaging with different content due to algorithms. While youth engagement is growing, it remains uneven, with only a few countries enabling formal co-creation structures. True participation involves not only consulting children but involving them directly and meaningfully in decision-making processes. Their awareness of online risks, desire for guidance over restriction and nuanced understanding of digital interactions show that children are experts in their own right.

Younger children and children with disabilities are often excluded from this participatory approach. Policies tend to frame younger users solely as recipients of protection, limiting opportunities to build resilience and agency. Accessibility issues further marginalise children with disabilities, due to limited access to assistive tools and a lack of inclusive research and design. To ensure all children are heard, mechanisms such as school councils, youth panels and feedback loops with regulators must be embedded in digital governance. When children see that their voices lead to tangible change, they are more likely to engage, report problems and help shape a safer digital future.

Recommendations:

Ensure meaningful, ongoing child participation in policymaking with clear structures and feedback loops showing how children's input shapes decisions, especially in digital safety, education and regulation.

Co-create accessible, child-friendly policy materials that reflect the diverse experiences of children, including those with disabilities, to support informed and inclusive engagement in digital governance.

Strengthening systems to create an enabling environment

Fostering children's digital wellbeing in Europe requires a holistic, systems-strengthening approach that goes beyond fragmented or issue-specific interventions. Grounded in the socioecological framework, both child protection and whole-school models emphasise coordinated efforts across all levels – individual, interpersonal, institutional and systemic. These models promote digital literacy, emotional regulation and safe online behaviours while ensuring inclusive, sustainable policies and practices across schools, communities and national systems.

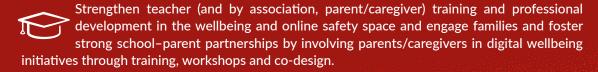> **The move from rhetoric to practice needs a whole ecosystem commitment spanning government, industry, schools, families and civil society to resource, coordinate and normalise a holistic vision of children's digital wellbeing**

Rhiannon-Faye McDonald interview, May 2025

Key pillars of this approach involve supporting teachers and educators through professional development in digital literacy, resilience and wellbeing, alongside actively engaging parents and caregivers, who play a crucial role in shaping children's digital experiences. Research shows that the most effective digital wellbeing strategies are co-created through strong partnerships between families and schools. However, both educators and caregivers feel ill-equipped to support children due to gaps in digital knowledge and confidence. Children themselves call for greater investment in educating trusted adults about online risks, platforms and protective strategies. Successful initiatives promote non-judgmental spaces for dialogue and collaboration, empowering caregivers as relational enablers rather than monitors, and ensuring consistent support for children across both home and school settings. High-quality digital literacy is important, and as part of a system-strengthening approach, should go hand in hand with safety-by-design principals, tech accountability and wider ecosystem responsibilities across the diverse actors that maintain a safe and balanced digital experience for children and young people.

Recommendations:

Encourage system-strengthening and whole-school approaches that embed digital wellbeing into policies, learning environments and broader mental health and inclusion strategies. Digital wellbeing must be woven into school culture, ethos, policies and daily routines. This also includes both multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral collaboration, for instance, through partnerships between schools and mental health professionals, EdTech providers and media literacy organisations.

Strengthen teacher (and by association, parent/caregiver) training and professional development in the wellbeing and online safety space and engage families and foster strong school–parent partnerships by involving parents/caregivers in digital wellbeing initiatives through training, workshops and co-design.

Embedding online – recognising the interconnectedness of online/offline

There is growing recognition that children's digital and physical lives are deeply intertwined, forming a continuum that requires integrated rather than isolated interventions. A whole-school approach to digital wellbeing, endorsed by the European Commission and UNESCO, advocates for embedding online safety within existing programmes on bullying, sexual health and relationship education to deliver consistent messages around dignity, consent and mutual respect across both online and offline contexts. Evidence shows that most online risks and harmful behaviours mirror existing peer dynamics and relationship patterns, reinforcing the need for prevention models that equip young people to navigate complex social interactions in all settings.

Ethical reflection as part of digital literacy helps children to think critically about the moral and social implications of their actions and experiences in digital environments. It encourages value-oriented discussions, thoughtful decision-making, empathy and a growing sense of responsibility, both for oneself and for others. Additionally, digital wellbeing includes physical health: prolonged screen use affects the body through inactivity and strain, making it essential that interventions address the full spectrum of children's digital engagement: social, emotional and physical.

We need to have values-based conversations with children, conversations that empower them to navigate this world resilient and as healthy as possible. So they can say: "I'm turning this off now. I don't want to be part of this network anymore. I'm putting my smartphone aside and meeting my friend."

Silke Müller interview, June 2025

Recommendations:

Promote a balanced, inclusive approach to digital literacy that moves beyond restrictive or protective-only strategies by embedding online safety modules inside existing programmes, fostering healthy online/offline habits, teaching resilience to online risks, and emphasising technology's potential to support creativity, inclusion and student agency.

Considering children's developmental stages and focus on their resilience

As digital environments become central to children's lives, fostering digital resilience, rather than shielding them from all risks, is essential. Resilience enables children to manage and recover from online challenges through emotional regulation, critical thinking and digital literacy. A strengths-based, age-appropriate approach recognises children's evolving capabilities and supports their development, particularly during adolescence when peer approval and social status play a critical role in wellbeing. Rather than avoiding adversity, children learn through guided experience and dialogue to turn challenges into opportunities for growth. Initiatives like the UK's Digital Resilience model and the Council of Europe's 2025 Year of Digital Citizenship Education stress the need for inclusive, rights-based and restorative approaches that equip children to participate safely, empathetically and confidently online.

Recommendations:

Develop policies and initiatives that are developmentally tailored and age-appropriate approaches by differentiating between age groups (e.g. early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence) and align digital protections and supports accordingly.

Promote digital resilience as a core competency through fostering empathy and positive digital citizenship by for instance promoting programmes that help children understand the emotional impact of online behaviour, encouraging respectful and empathetic interactions.

Reputation-based harms hit adolescents hardest because social status matters so much at that age.

Charlotte Aynsley interview, May 2025

Recognising and integrating children's diversity

Children are not a uniform group, yet digital wellbeing policies often treat them as such, overlooking their diverse developmental stages, social contexts and life circumstances. Promoting digital equality requires an inclusive, intersectional approach that considers overlapping identities such as gender, disability, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and geography. These factors shape how children access, engage with and are affected by the digital world and they also contribute to stark disparities in digital inclusion. Strategies must be tailored to reflect these varied realities to ensure equitable access to digital opportunities and protection from harm, especially for girls, children with disabilities and those from marginalised backgrounds.

Research highlights that children from low-income families, rural areas and those with neurodevelopmental disabilities face the greatest barriers to digital inclusion, often lacking accessible technology and targeted support. This exclusion can lead to social isolation, reduced educational outcomes and increased exposure to online risks. Without user-centred design and inclusive policies, digital platforms may reinforce existing inequalities. An intersectional lens is therefore essential to ensure that digital wellbeing initiatives reach and support the most vulnerable, enabling all children to participate fully and safely in digital life.

Recommendations:

Adopt an intersectional framework in policy and practice that addresses the needs of marginalised and underrepresented groups, recognising how overlapping vulnerabilities compound digital risks and exclusion (Stefanidi, 2023; OECD, 2025b).

Ensure equity, inclusion and age appropriateness in all initiatives and programmes that support children's digital resilience and wellbeing by including particular support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, rural areas, minority groups, children from low-income families and those with disabilities.

Utilising evidence-based approaches

Despite growing attention to children's digital wellbeing, current strategies often lack a strong evidence base due to research gaps, weak measurement frameworks and underrepresentation of marginalised groups where the evidence exists. This limits the effectiveness of interventions, especially for children facing inequality and discrimination.

Evidence remains fragmented, particularly around how digital experiences shape identity and social norms, with little intersectional analysis. Monitoring and evaluation of digital wellbeing efforts are inconsistent across Europe and few schools systematically assess impact. To improve outcomes, robust frameworks are needed that include emotional and civic dimensions of digital citizenship. Children, especially those facing discrimination, should be actively and meaningfully involved in research design or evidence generation in general, as well as evaluation efforts. Their voices must be authentically represented and acted upon, especially those most affected by exclusion.

Recommendations:

Close existing research gaps in children's digital wellbeing, particularly around intersectionality and strengthen generation of evidence that is disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status.

Establish and support good-quality monitoring and evaluation systems around children's digital wellbeing through investing in and developing robust methodologies and tools that measure children's digital resilience and wellbeing holistically.

> " **Consider, for example, a rating system for apps and devices – similar to nutrition labels or content warnings. An app might receive a green label indicating no (known) behavioural risks, while another could be marked yellow to suggest moderate use, and red to signal that its addictive design features are well-documented. These warnings could in theory get into specific detail, such as: 'May significantly affect attention span, self-regulation, or sleep cycles.'**

Tyler Shores interview, May 2025