Save the Children

Vodafone Foundation

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CONNECTED CHILDHOOD

The State of Digital Wellbeing and Resilience for Children and Young People in Europe

CHILDREN'S REPORT

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This report is the children's version of Connected Childhood: The State of Digital Wellbeing and Resilience for Children and Young People in Europe developed by Ipsos, Save the Children UK and Vodafone Foundation in February 2026, written by Viraj Rajdev, Caroline Paskell, Maya Bozhikova, Diana Vasileva and Rosie Castle (Ipsos) together with Jeffrey DeMarco and Daniela Ritz (Save the Children UK).

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CONTENTS

Introduction 4

1 Why does this report matter to you? 5

2 The digital challenge for children and young people 9

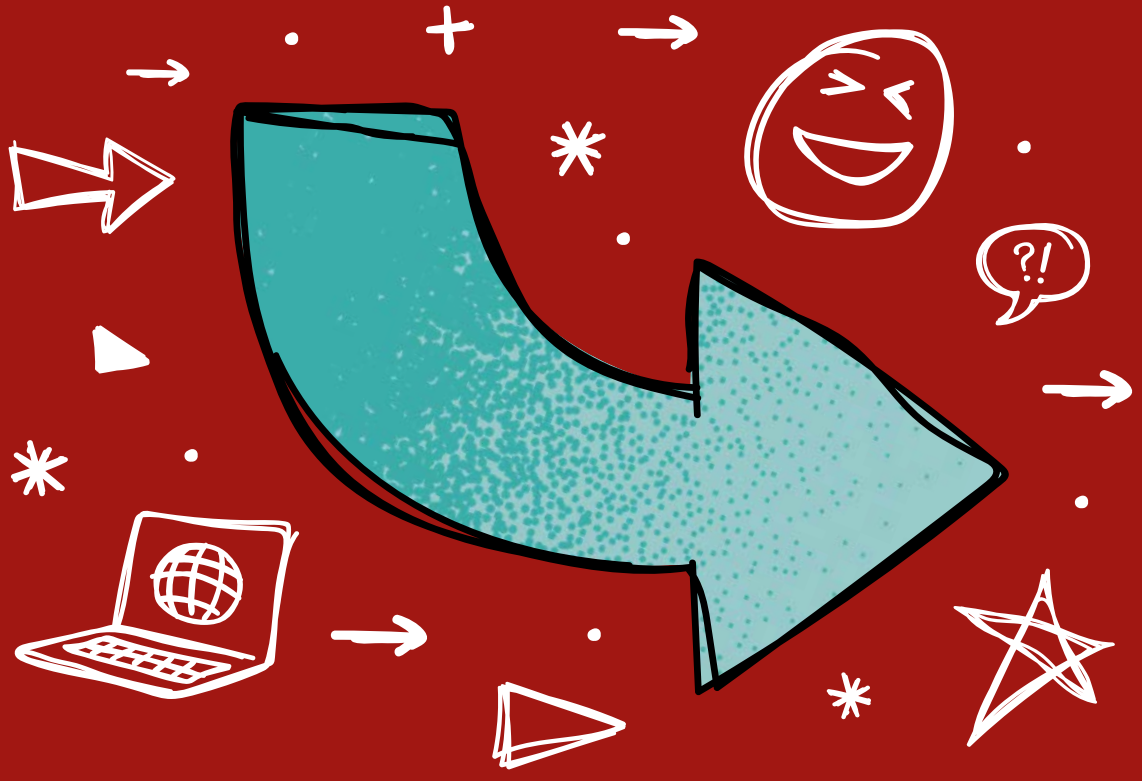
3 What we found out 11

4 Country highlights 15

5 What the findings mean 17

6 Recommendations: What should change – and who should do it 18

7 How you can use this report 21



INTRODUCTION

Vodafone Foundation and Save the Children published the first Children and Young People's Digital Wellbeing and Resilience Index report based on a research study we did in December 2025/January 2026 in partnership with IPSOS. This children's report provides a summary of the findings and key insights from the research so that you can understand what we found out about children and young people's lives in a digital world.

These findings are important because today's generation of children and young people are more connected than any before it. 7,755 children and young people (aged 13-18) across 9 countries in Europe – Albania, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom – participated in the study.

The Digital Wellbeing and Resilience Index has been created to provide the first snapshot of how children and young people across Europe are navigating the digital world.

It reveals children's patterns of self-reported access; the behaviours, knowledge and skills they use to navigate the digital world; the online challenges they face; and their wellbeing in the digital world – exploring security, self-management, identity, digital literacy and empathy. Rather than just focusing on harm, the Index provides a full picture that shows children and young people's strengths, identifies gaps and enables us to build opportunities for all children and young people to play and learn online. It points the way for children and young people to live digitally connected lives where their rights and wellbeing are respected and protected, where they realise their own agency and their power to hold technology companies, platforms, governments and trusted adults to account.

In this children's version of the Connected Childhood report you will hear more about the findings from the Index, why they matter, what the results mean and how things can be improved so that your generation and the next generation of children and young people remain digitally connected, protected and heard. Your voices are at the centre of this research: the Index is designed to capture children's insights. The findings signal a warning as well as a call for action for all actors with the power and influence to work together – including partnering with children and young people so that solutions help create accountable platforms and apps that place children and young people at the centre.

We hope you can use the evidence from this report to support your efforts to advocate for systems change that builds on your capabilities, upholds your rights and enables you to hold to account adults that make decisions impacting your digitally connected childhood!

We want to spread that technology can be a great tool.

CDAN Member, Greece

1 WHY DOES THIS REPORT MATTER TO YOU?

You have the right to grow up in a digital environment where children and young people can have fun, learn and be safe.

That's critical to your childhood and your future. And it's what this report is all about.

How can we make sure the online world is a place where all children and young people have fun, learn and are safe?

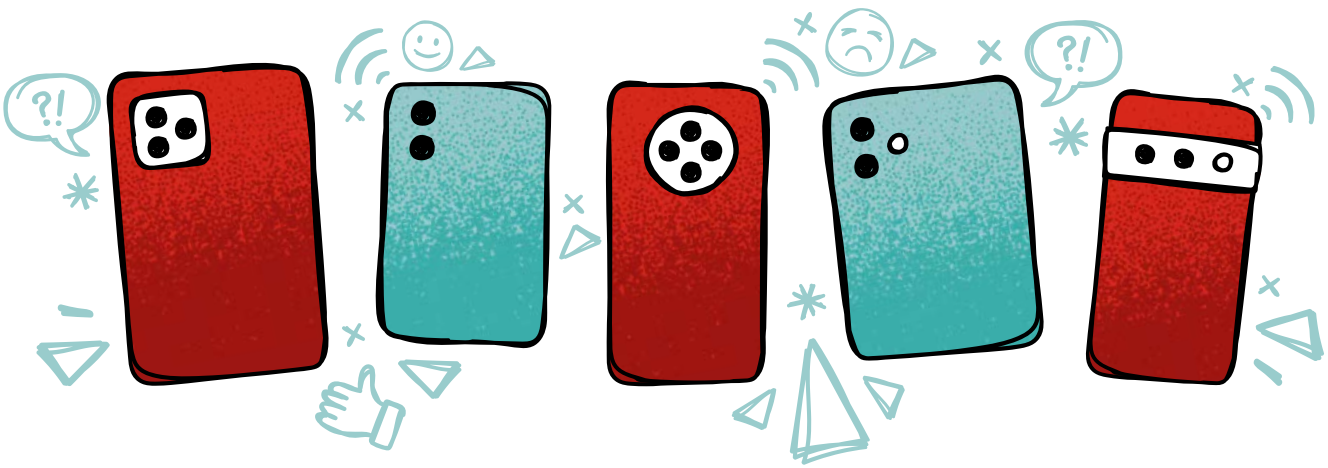
To start to answer that, we asked thousands of children and young people in nine different European countries what kinds of things do they do online? What do they like about being online? What don't they like? How do they feel when they're online and afterwards when they switch off?

Their responses are surprising, insightful and important. This report sets out what children and young people said about:

why the online world matters to them

what challenges it brings

what needs to change – so that together, we build a digital world that is safe and supportive for all children



What children told us – the quick 2-minute version

Children and young people are more connected today than previous generations. They told us they are online every day, connecting with friends, chatting, relaxing, watching videos, playing and learning.

Most children have strong digital safety skills, good access and feel connected to friends online. However, many still struggle with stress, sleep and getting the right balance between time spent online and offline.

Children who have a high degree of online regular access, good connectivity, data, a quiet space and accessible tools also have higher scores in wellbeing and security.

Other examples are:

- 73% of children and young people surveyed scored good or high on the overall Digital Wellbeing and Resilience Index. Only 2% scored low.
- 72% say online activity helps them feel connected to friends/family.
- 73% report sleeping well most nights. 70% feel their online/offline life is balanced.
- 78% know when to seek support from a trusted adult.

> ***I want to help children be safe on the internet and know how to spot liars and fake news.***
>
> CDAN Member, Greece

However, most of children and young people surveyed are not having as positive an experience as you would hope.

Most say being online often leaves them feeling tired and stressed.

And many children and young people say they find it hard balancing time online with other parts of their lives. 30% say they often feel stressed. 9% say they don't sleep well. Apps and notifications constantly distract children and young people, so they end up staying online longer than they want to. It can stop them getting enough sleep.

Most children and young people know about privacy and reporting concerns.

However, children who face challenges in their lives – like not having enough to eat, a disability, anxiety or depression, or being from a minority group – often have worse online access and find being online more harmful to their wellbeing. That's not because of who they are, but because of things not being fair.

How you can stay safe online: The SMILE framework

Here are five steps to help you stay safe online – based on what children themselves have told us. Called the SMILE Framework, it can be your own online shield!

S = Security. Protect your personal information online.

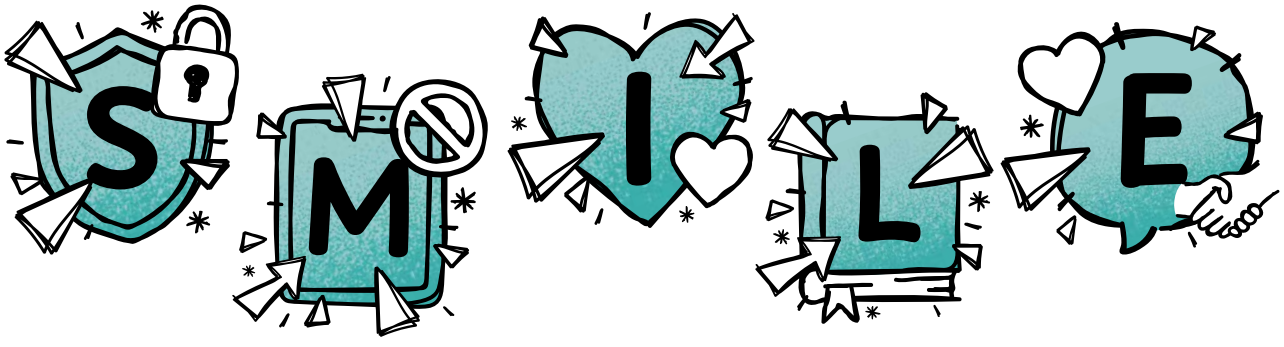
M = Management. Take control of your online behaviour. Think carefully about why you want to go online, where you want to go and how much time you want to spend. Decide how you want to behave.

I = Identity. Find ways to be yourself online and to be kind and caring towards others.

L = Literacy. Learn how to distinguish between what is real and what is fake online.

E = Empathy. Showing respect and kindness towards others and consider their feelings.

Our training programme in digital skills and resilience shows children like you how to use the SMILE shield to be safe online when you play, learn and connect.



Our research showed that the strongest areas for children and young people are their online security and identity. Managing their time online – getting the right balance between time online and offline – was where children generally fare worst. And they also need support with digital literacy, such as identifying fake content and AI content, understanding algorithms, and recognising ads.

What needs to change:

Apps should be designed so that they support children's – and adults' – wellbeing.

Schools should teach digital life skills.

Children and young people should be able to get mental health support when they need it.

Adults need up-to-date guidance on how to support children to have fun, learn and be safe online.

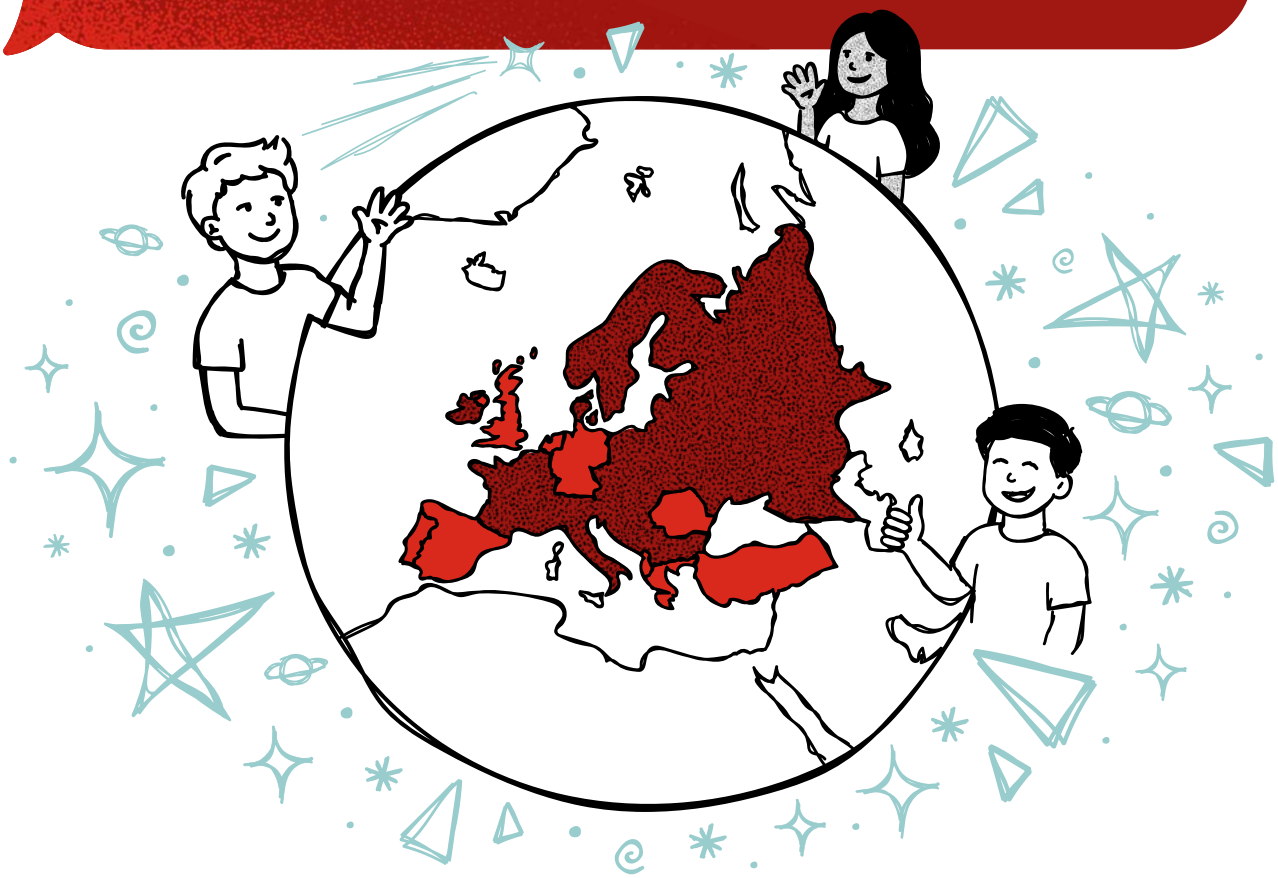
All children must be able to go online and be safe there.

Children and young people, parents, teachers, tech companies and governments must work together to make sure children are safe online. Children and young people must be recognised and valued as important partners.

2 THE DIGITAL CHALLENGE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Who did we talk to?

In our research on 'A Digitally Connected Childhood', 7,755 children and young people aged 13–18 from nine European countries – Albania, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Türkiye and the United Kingdom – told us what being online is like for them.



> ***We use the internet to find out what is gong on in the world.***
>
> CDAN Member, Greece

> ***AI plays a major role in our life. We need to know how to use it, take advantage of it but make sure it does not take over our lives.***
>
> CDAN Member, Spain

Growing up in today's world means being digitally connected.

Connected to phones, laptops, tablets, video games., Doing homework online. Being on group chats with friends and family. It's a way to have fun, be sociable and learn.

But it's also a lot to deal with. Sometimes too much.

We live in a fast-changing, complicated world. For example, AI and other kinds of tech are changing fast. News and trends quickly come and go. Rules and platforms keep changing.

It can leave you confused. All of us – children, young people and adults – know that feeling. That's when we need a break.

Then, we can look to bounce back. In the digital space, it's important you come to your own opinion about what you think and feel and about what's right for you – rather than just following what other people are doing. That means you should look to be curious and ask questions – to think critically.

You need support from people you trust – friends, family, teachers. And you need to feel OK in yourself. So that when things get too much and you feel let down, sad or upset, you are able to take a breather, learn from the experience and try again.

3 WHAT WE FOUND OUT

Our research findings show that it's important for children to be digitally connected – but in a safe way.

We measured children and young people's online experiences against 7 measures:

1. Do you have access to digital devices and the internet?
2. How does being online make you feel?
3. Do you feel safe online?
4. Are you good at managing what you do and how much time you spend online?
5. Do you feel you can be yourself online?
6. Can you tell the difference between what's real and what's fake online?
7. Do you treat others kindly and with respect when you are online?

Strength

1. Do you have access to digital devices and the internet?

- 83% of young people in our survey have their own smartphone.
- Most go online every day.
- Home is the main place to connect (90%).
- Half (50%) have a high level of online access, with good devices and internet connection.
- But 43% don't have standard level access – with low or no access. It means a lot of children face barriers.
- At weekends, 56% are online for 4 or more hours a day. 28% are online for more than 6 hours.
- The main reasons to go online are to talk to friends (67%), to relax/for entertainment (62%), and to learn new things (51%).

What do these findings tell us?

Many of the children and young people in our survey have good digital access – but not everyone.

Time online can be fun and useful. But children often struggle to balance their online and offline time and some stay online longer than planned.

Why does it matter?

If access isn't fair or stable, some children miss out on schoolwork, friendships and getting help.

The amount of time spent online doesn't tell the full story. It's how you use your time online and whether you can switch off that matter most.

Needs a boost

2. How does being online makes you feel?

- Children enjoy being online and it is important to them.
- Only 26% of children and young people in our survey have good or high 'digital wellbeing'. 64% have moderate wellbeing. And for 10% of the children and young people, it's low.
- 45% have FOMO and worry about missing out
- 30% often feel stressed or upset after being online. 57% usually feel calm or positive afterwards.
- 73% say they sleep well most nights.

What do these findings tell us?

The impact of being online is mixed. It's good for connecting with people, but not always good in how it makes you feel. Lots of children are coping with the online world rather than thriving in it.

Why does it matter?

When being online leaves children and young people feeling stressed or means they lose out on sleep it can affect how they get on at school, their friendships and their health. They need online spaces and routines that protect their health and wellbeing.

Strength

3. Do you feel safe online?

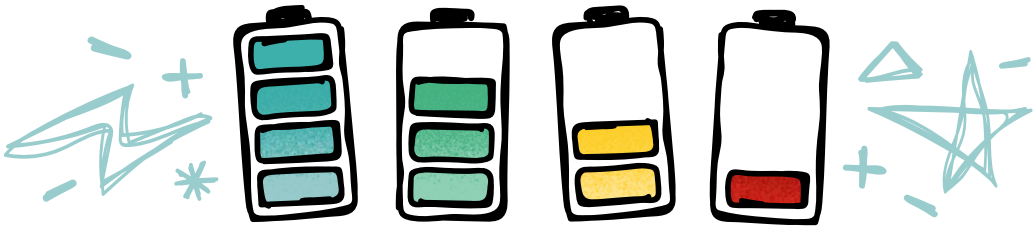
- 67% of children and young people in our survey have good or high online security, with 20% coming out as scoring high.
- Children and young people know about privacy, blocking, reporting, device security.
- 15% reuse passwords across different accounts
- 70% of children and young people surveyed confirmed they can access the accessibility tools they need (such as captions, screen readers, or font size adjustments), and 15% indicated this was not something they require.

What do these findings mean and why do they matter?

It's great that children are learning safety basics.

Now we need easier, safer defaults (like password managers, stronger privacy by default), so it's easy to be safe online.

A significant minority of children and young people do not have access to tools they may need such as captions, screen readers, or font size adjustments.



Weakest

4. Are you good at managing what you do and how much time you spend online?

- This comes out as the area where children and young people surveyed are weakest.
- Only 33–34% of children and young people in our survey come out as good or high in managing their online behaviour. 17% have a low score.
- Managing notifications, autoplay and infinite scroll is a struggle for many children and young people. Many also find it hard to make time for screen-free winddowns. Only 54–62% use tools like a Do Not Disturb message, app timers or a regular bedtime routine.

What do these findings mean and why do they matter?
When apps are designed to keep you scrolling, it's no surprise if you find it hard to stop. That's not your fault. The design of apps should help you, not hook you. A lack of balance between time spent online and offline is linked to poor-quality sleep and bad moods.

Strength

5. Do you feel you can be yourself online?

- This came out as an area of strength among children and young people in the survey.
- 66% of children and young people scored as good or high. Many children feel able to choose who they connect with, to say no to pressure, and to share safely. But only 54% reported having found a supportive community in which they feel they belong, 3 in 10 children and young people don't feel safe from harassment/hate.

What do these findings mean and why do they matter?
Online spaces can help you be yourself—but they must also be kind and protective, so no one feels pushed out.

Needs a boost

6. Can you tell the difference between what's real and what's fake online?

- 55% of children and young people we surveyed were ranked good or high.
- Only 63–66% check if information is trustworthy, are aware of the influence the design of online content may have on them, understand how algorithms determine the content we see online based on our online data, or are able to spot AI edited content.

What do these findings mean and why do they matter?
With AI and viral content, children need sharper detective skills to spot tricks and fakes.

> *"I have serious concerns about deepfakes & AI-generated content"*
>
> CDAN Member, Greece

Middle

7. Do you treat others kindly and with respect when you are online?

- 61% of children we surveyed scored as good or high.
- 82% would support a friend. 78% know trusted adults/helplines.
- Only 56% have acted to keep spaces kind and 62% know how to help safely when someone's targeted.

What do these findings mean and why do they matter?

Children want to help when someone is targeted. A majority of children surveyed have already acted to keep spaces kind and most know how to act. But there is still much room for improvement. All children need to feel confident they have clear, safe ways to act, such as reporting, muting and supporting others in ways that won't make things worse.

Who scores lower?

Some groups of children and young people are more likely to have lower scores. Those who consistently don't get enough healthy food to eat, who have a disability, who suffer from anxiety or depression, or who are LGBTQI+ or, in some cases, are from a minority ethnic group have lower scores across several areas, especially for their wellbeing and how being online makes them feel.

What does this mean and why does it matter?

Design and targeted support are needed so no one is left behind.

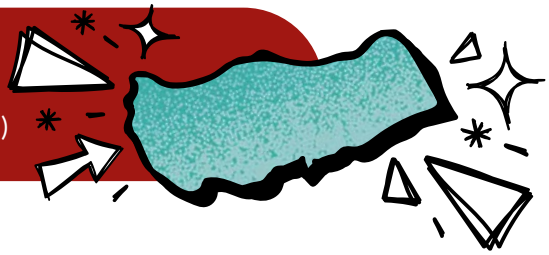
4 COUNTRY HIGHLIGHTS

Romania

- strongest overall country with 82% of children and young people scoring good or high
- high levels of online access and safety
- lower score for managing time online

Türkiye

- strong on skills – security, identity, empathy)
- but wellbeing is low (only 22% score good or high)



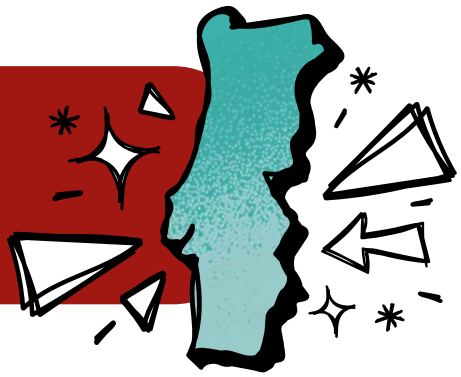
Albania

- online wellbeing has 53% of children scoring good or high
- but also lots of children at the very low end

> ***We need stronger privacy protections to prevent children's personal data being sold or used for advertising.***
>
> CDAN Member, Spain

> ***Children living in warzones maybe unable to go online because the infra-structure has been destroyed.***
>
> CDAN Member, Spain

Portugal



- good overall skills (75% score good or high)
- But has the lowest wellbeing score, with only 17% of children coming out as good or high

The Netherlands and Greece:

- strongest overall country with 82% of children and young people scoring good or high
- high levels of online access and safety
- lower score for managing time online

UK, Germany and Spain

- middle range overall
- children and young people surveyed spend lots of time online
- managing time online and wellbeing are challenging.

5 WHAT THE FINDINGS MEAN

1. Connection is not wellbeing
Being online helps children and young people connect with friends and have fun but doesn't automatically make them feel good. We must focus on feelings, sleep and balancing time online and offline, not just digital access.

2. Design matters
Features like autoplay, infinite scroll and streaks encourage you to stay online and make it hard to come off – for adults as well as children. We need wellbeing-by-design.

3. Teach the 'new basics'
As well as knowing how to stay safe online, children and young people need to know how to manage stress, how to behave kindly, and need to have truth-detective skills for AI and algorithms.

4. Support those most at risk
Life can be tough offline – and online too. Children and young people need accessible tools (such as captions, screen readers or font size adjustments), targeted help, and safe online communities.

5. Children are partners
Many children and young people already support their friends. They need opportunities to share their powerful insights and diverse voices to shape digital experiences, apps, learning and wellbeing services in schools, and regulations that are better for children's health and wellbeing.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT SHOULD CHANGE – AND WHO SHOULD DO IT

Each recommendation includes what it is, why it matters for children, and what we ask from policymakers, industry and others.

1. Wellbeing-by design (safer defaults)

- What needs to change? Platforms must reduce harmful hooks (limit autoplay, infinite scroll, streak pressure), set sleep-friendly defaults, and turn on privacy and safety for under 18s by default.
- Why do these changes matter for children? So, it's easier to stop, sleep and feel calmer. You shouldn't have to fight the app.
- What are we calling for?
  - **Policymakers** should enforce child-friendly defaults and wellbeing standards, and audit addictive design.
  - **The tech industry** should redesign feeds and notifications; offer break nudges; simplify reporting; publish impact data.
  - **The tech industry and regulators** should teach and model healthy device settings (Do Not Disturb, timers).

2. Learning about digital wellbeing in school

- What needs to change? Children need to learn at school about managing their online behaviour, about techniques and routines to encourage calmness, about dealing with conflict, helping others, checking for misinformation, and being aware of how AI and algorithms work. Teachers need training in these areas too.

- Why do these changes matter for children? Learning about digital wellbeing at school can help you feel OK, think clearly, and care for friends online.

- What are we calling for?
  - **Policy-makers** should make digital wellbeing a core topic taught in schools, not something optional. They need to fund teacher training on this.
  - **The tech industry and NGOs** should co create practical lessons and scenario guides with children.

3. Stronger mental health support

- What needs to change? Children and young people need quick, easy, stigma-free access to counsellors, helplines and peer support when online harm affects mood or sleep.

- Why do these changes matter for children? So that you can get help early if being online is making you worried, sad or tired.

- What are we calling for?
  - **Policymakers/Health services** should fund child-friendly services; integrate digital impacts into health standards.
  - **Schools** should build clear pathways to talk and get help.

4. Empower adults (parents, carers and educators)

- What needs to change? Parents, carers and teachers need to provide children and young people with up-to-date tools and conversation guides, as well as focus on routines (bedtime winddown, shared agreements) without shaming.

- Why does this change matter for children? So that adults can help and facilitate children's online behaviour rather than judge it – and help spot problems early.

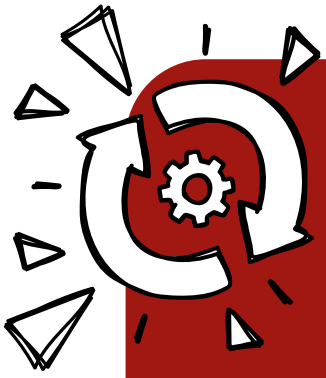
- What are we calling for?
  - **Policymakers and NGOs** should fund resources that support children's online wellbeing that are easy to use and keep pace with trends.
  - **Schools** should run family sessions on healthy digital habits.

5. Equity, inclusion and child/youth participation

- What needs to change? For children from different backgrounds to be able to engage safely and healthily with the digital world, the design of online tools needs to be accessible and children with different abilities and experiences need to be supported – recognising, for example, children with disabilities, who are facing food insecurity, who have anxiety, depression and stress. Child and youth panels need to be set up to help shape policies and online design features.

- Why do these changes matter for children? So that no groups of children are left behind. That involves listening to and understanding the lived experiences of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- What are we calling for?
  - **Policy-makers and the tech industry** need to co design policies and online platforms with children from diverse backgrounds and to report their progress publicly.
  - **Schools and NGOs** should create safe spaces and mentorship for children from affected groups.



6. Work together and keep measuring

- What needs to change? Coalitions across platforms, governments, healthcare, schools, community organisations, and children and young people are needed to address these issues. Change in children and young people's online wellbeing and AI-enabled risks needs to be tracked regularly, for example, with the Digital Wellbeing and Resilience Index.

- Why do these changes matter for children? Everyone needs to share responsibility for the online world being a safe place and we need to be able to track changes and improvements over time.

- What are we calling for?
  - Digital platforms, policymakers, schools, healthcare managers, local organisations, donors, funders, parents, carers and children and young people themselves need to work together across countries– sharing data, lessons and best practice.

> ***Children's rights must be guaranteed; it is the responsibility of adults.***
>
> CDAN Member, Spain

7 HOW YOU CAN USE THIS REPORT

This report is a powerful resource for you as it provides you with key information about how children across Europe are feeling about being online.

It shows the diverse experiences of children and young people in navigating the digital world:

- how they are feeling
- what's working well for them
- the challenges they face.

We suggest you use the report to:

- find out more about other children and young people's experience of the online world and share that with your friends and family

- engage in conversations with your peers and teachers, and with community leaders, your government and with technology companies – so that we all work together to create a safer, supportive and enabling digital environment for all children to engage and thrive

- hold technology decision-makers to account so that they design platform technology and apps that reflect on children and young people's realities, safety needs and potential to thrive.

In your school

- Develop a class charter: Propose a Digital Wellbeing Charter (quiet hours, Do Not Disturb in class, screen-free winddown before tests). Use the stat: "Only 1 in 4 children and young people surveyed feel good online most of the time" to show why.

- Set up a peer support squad: Set up a "Kind Online Team" trained to help friends report, mute, block, and find trusted adults. Use the stat "Only 56% of children and young people surveyed have taken action to keep spaces kind" to argue for peer support and training.

- Start a truth-detectives club: Practice checking sources and spotting AI-edited content. Share weekly tips.

With your family or carer

- Start a home agreement: Co-create simple rules (charging devices outside the bedroom; Do Not Disturb at night; 20-minute breaks after spending a long time on screen). Share findings on the impact being online can have on sleep and stress (see page 12).

- Practice switching off: Try turning off autoplay and disabling streaks and notifications for certain hours. Only 54–62% of children and young people in our survey are using these tools now – let's aim higher!

Speak to leaders (Student Council, Youth Parliament, local officials)

- Present the top stats from our survey: only 1 in 4 children and young people feel good online most of the time (page 12); children and young people find it particularly difficult to manage how long they spend online (page 11 & 13); many do not act to protect themselves or others online (page 14).

- **Ask for:**
  1. Lesson time to learn about digital wellbeing and AI literacy
  2. Funding for school counsellors and helplines to support digital wellbeing
  3. Public reporting on platform safety features for under 18s

Talk to tech companies (with adult support)

- Ask for sleep-friendly defaults, break nudges, fewer streak pressures, easier reporting, and regular youth panels to test features. To show the need, use the stats on the difficulty children have in managing the amount of time they spend online on page 13.

Hold adults to account (considerately but clearly)

- Track promises: If a school or platform makes a commitment, write it down and check progress each term.

- Use the Index: Ask leaders to measure what changes, not just announce plans. So that they put children and young people's on and offline experiences front and centre – to create a digital world where children play, learn, develop and thrive.

> ***Spaces for creativity to thrive through technology is important. I value technology that empowers rather than controls behaviour.***
>
> CDAN Member, Greece