

April 2026

# Beyond Phone Bans

## A shared statement on digitalisation and youth mental health from the EuroHealthNet Thematic Working Group on Mental Health

### Executive summary

Digital environments are increasingly central to young people's identity, relationships, and mental health. While they offer opportunities for learning, connecting, and seeking information (including on important topics such as health and politics), they also pose risks, such as increased risk of anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, exposure to disinformation and misinformation, and loneliness. Disparities in access to technology and digital literacy can further deepen inequality, leaving vulnerable youth more exposed to risks and less able to benefit from digital opportunities.

Artificial intelligence (AI) presents significant opportunities to drive innovation, efficiency, and insight; however, it also poses risks, including bias, privacy challenges, ethical concerns, and potential misuse. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive, evidence-based approach that goes beyond simple bans and integrates wellbeing-centric design, monitoring, literacy, and regulation. Policies must move beyond simplistic bans and screen-time limits to adopt systemic approaches that balance protection, participation, and empowerment, thereby contributing to flourishing.

**This Joint Statement represents a collective position developed through consultation among experts from public health institutes, national and regional authorities, and research organisations across Europe engaged in promoting mental health and wellbeing.**

The statement was collaboratively developed through a structured process that included discussions during EuroHealthNet's mental health working group meetings and iterative review rounds to ensure consensus and alignment with experts' priorities. Examples are provided based on experts' knowledge and experience.

The working group suggests **four priority actions** at EU and national level:

- 1.** Recognise and monitor digital wellbeing as a pillar of child and youth mental health.
- 2.** Provide comprehensive digital literacy education for all, including children, youth, parents, caregivers, and educators.
- 3.** Empower and include children and young people in shaping safe digital environments via co-creation.
- 4.** Strengthen policy and regulation through decisive legal action against providers breaching EU law.

The working group is calling on policymakers and public health authorities to adopt an integrated, evidence-based approach that embeds digital wellbeing within child and youth mental health policy, ensures equitable access, and empowers children and young people to participate actively in shaping the digital environments that affect their lives.

The terms 'young people' and 'youth' can encompass a wide age range. While some definitions limit it to those under 18, the WHO extends it up to 35 years. This document uses the terms youth and young people interchangeably, referring to ages 0-24, unless specified otherwise, e.g. when the term child is used.

# 1 Digital wellbeing is mental wellbeing: and should be monitored and evaluated as such

Digital environments are integral to young people's identity formation, social relationships, and self-perception. While excessive use, exposure to harmful content, and manipulative design features can heighten risks of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and loneliness, the modest to small average associations observed at the group-level highlight the importance of considering contextual factors and individual differences rather than focusing solely on screen time.

There is a need to systematically monitor digital wellbeing at population level and among those at risk. The digital environment should be treated as a public environment and be systematically monitored for its impact on mental health and wellbeing. Greater transparency and independent monitoring of digital platforms are needed so their health impacts are not defined only by the industry itself. This can be done by using existing tools such as the database provided by EUROSTAT, national monitoring frameworks and industry shared data. A balanced approach should account for both the positive and negative dimensions of digitalisation.

- **Policy ask:** Integrate **digital wellbeing and mental health monitoring** into youth mental health strategies, using objective and high-quality data. Indicators should capture both harm-related metrics (e.g. anxiety, sleep issues, loneliness) and positive / resilience/benefit metrics.

## Examples

- Every four years, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in **the Netherlands** (RIVM) publishes a [Public Health Foresight Study \(PHF 2024\)](#), which includes a broad range of health and mental health indicators in adults and young people, together with results on risk factors from literature. Since 2021, RIVM and the Trimbos Institute conduct a biennial [monitoring survey](#) to identify how students in the Netherlands are doing in terms of their mental health and use of substances, such as tobacco, alcohol and drugs. Indicators of digitalisation, such as problematic social media use and problematic gaming behaviour are measured and related to substance use and mental health, but also to sleep disturbances.
- The Trimbos-institute's [National Digitalisation and Wellbeing Monitor](#) (first national wave starting in 2026) from **the Netherlands** includes indicators of positive and negative wellbeing experiences across nine wellbeing domains, for seven different categories of technologies - ranging from social media to AI and wearables.
- The [Finnish School Health Promotion Study](#), coordinated by the **Finnish** Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), is a nationwide biennial survey monitoring the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents. It includes indicators relevant to digital wellbeing, such as excessive internet use, screen-related disruptions to sleep and meals, and overall sleep duration. Recent findings show that a significant proportion of students sleep less than eight hours on school nights and report missing meals or sleep due to online activity. These measures provide actionable data for schools and municipalities to track trends, identify at-risk groups, and guide interventions, making the study a valuable model for monitoring digital wellbeing.

- The [Health Behaviour in School-aged Children \(HBSC\)](#) study is a large school-based survey carried out every four years in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for **Europe**. HBSC data are used at national/regional and international levels to gain new insights into adolescent health and wellbeing, understand the social determinants of health and inform policy and practice to improve young people's

lives. This report on adolescent social media use and gaming, using the unique HBSC evidence on adolescents aged 11, 13, and 15 years across 44 countries and regions in Europe, central Asia and Canada. It describes the status of adolescent social media use and gaming, the role of gender, age and social inequality, and changes in adolescent social media use and gaming since 2018.

## 2 Digital literacy should be provided to everyone: from children and youth to parents and teachers

Digital literacy should be fostered as a shared responsibility among young people, parents, educators, and industry. All children and young people, regardless of socio-economic background or social or physical disabilities, must have equal opportunities to develop digital skills, access safe online spaces, and receive appropriate guidance. Ensuring that digital environments are safe, supportive, and equitable is essential for promoting inclusion and wellbeing.

Efforts should move beyond restrictive measures and focus on building critical thinking, digital resilience, media literacy, and broader digital wellbeing from an early age. This includes proactively addressing barriers to participation, fostering positive interactions, and implementing safeguards that protect children from harm while enabling them to fully engage in online experiences. Supporting families to strengthen their digital health literacy is essential, including guidance on managing screen time and identifying age-appropriate, trustworthy content. Teachers and professionals also need adequate training and resources to integrate digital education effectively across schools and youth programmes. Addressing disparities in access, skills, and awareness will help ensure that every child can benefit from the opportunities of digitalisation while remaining protected from potential harms.

- **Policy ask:** Fund **media literacy in schools**, alongside parental involvement, and **digital literacy for teachers**.
- **Policy ask:** Invest in **community outreach, peer involvement** and education to **reduce digital inequality**.

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## Examples

- The [initiative Net-Piloten](#) is a prevention programme (from the Federal Institute of Public Health, BIÖG, in **Germany**) implemented in schools for adolescents from age 12 to 19 designed to promote acceptance and motivation for responsible and self-reflective media use, based on a peer-to-peer approach. It foresees the training and establishment of peer “net pilots” (aged 14 years and older) in schools who provide information on media use, explain the risks, and initiate exchange and discussions with their younger peer students on responsible and balanced media usage behaviour, with support from the school teachers. The programme also encompasses informative events and seminars for parents. The peer approach and the work with parents enable reaching young people and families with different social and educational backgrounds.
- Digital and media literacy is structurally embedded in the education policies of the Belgian regions. In **Flanders**, digital competences and media literacy are integrated into the core curriculum and supported by [Mediawijs](#), the Flemish knowledge centre for digital and media literacy. Mediawijs develops tools, teaching materials, and training for teachers, parents ([Medianest](#)), and youth professionals. In the French-speaking Community (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles), transversal media education is coordinated by the [Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation aux Médias \(CSEM\)](#). CSEM provides pedagogical resources, teacher training, and awareness-raising campaigns to strengthen media literacy among children, parents, and educators, with a focus on critical digital skills, safe online participation, and responsible media use. These regional frameworks ensure that digital literacy is addressed from early schooling onwards, actively involving educators and families, and reducing socio-economic disparities in access to digital skills.
- **Wales** introduced a [framework for digital competence](#). Digital competence is a key priority for the Welsh Government and is defined as the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to use technologies and systems confidently, creatively and critically. In September 2016, the Welsh Government introduced the Digital Competence Framework for schools and other educational settings, covering learners aged three to 16-plus. The Framework is designed to equip learners with the skills they need to succeed in an increasingly digital world and places digital competence on an equal footing with literacy and numeracy, promoting the integration of digital skills across the entire curriculum.
- The [new Welsh school curriculum](#) moves away from a tightly prescribed, content-focused national approach toward a broad, purpose-driven framework, giving schools the flexibility to design their own curricula. It emphasises three cross-curricular skills, literacy, numeracy, and digital competence, while also making developmentally appropriate Relationships and Sexuality Education, and Religion, Values and Ethics, mandatory from age three.
- In **France**, for several years, CLEMI ([Centre pour l'éducation aux médias et à l'information, clemi.fr - Centre for Media and Information Literacy](#)) has been committed to promoting co-education between schools and families to help young and old alike navigate the digital world as calmly as possible. With the support of institutional, associative, and media partners, CLEMI has developed a range of free, cross-media resources for the general public entitled ‘La Famille Tout-Écran’ (The All-Screen Family): a practical guide, a web TV series, a comic book, podcasts, posters, online activities, an awareness campaign, a kit for professionals, and more. The resources are designed to inform, advise, and empower parents in their use of technology with a preventive and non-judgmental approach.
- **Finland's** digital education is guided by the national strategic framework [Policies for the Digitalisation of Education and Training until 2027](#), published by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The strategy aims to make Finland a global leader in sustainable digitalisation in education, emphasising equality, high quality learning environments, and the systematic development of digital competence across all education levels.

# 3 Empower and include young people: co-creation should be central

Young people and children should be recognised as active co-creators, rather than passive users, of digital environments and policies that affect their wellbeing. In discussions relating to youth and mental health, it is beneficial that their perspectives are meaningfully integrated and that young people, from diverse backgrounds and with a range of needs, are represented and consulted throughout the development process, from concept to implementation and evaluation. Effective digital policies must balance protection with participation, ensuring that children are both safeguarded from harm and empowered to engage responsibly with digital media. This includes fostering awareness of online risks, promoting the skills to navigate digital environments safely, and supporting children in communicating about negative experiences. By positioning youth and children as partners in decision-making, often possessing a more profound understanding of digital environments than the adults shaping policies, policies can better reflect their needs, strengthen resilience, and encourage responsible and informed use of digital technologies.

- **Policy ask:** Panels involving youth should receive dedicated funding and be embedded into decision-making processes on youth and digitalisation, ensuring that young people's perspectives are systematically heard and acted upon.

## Examples

- In **Belgium**, youth participation in digital wellbeing and online safety is supported through government-funded organisations such as Child Focus, Mediawijs, and WAT WAT. These initiatives involve young people directly in the co-creation of digital content, awareness campaigns, and peer-to-peer educational activities on topics such as online safety, digital stress, sexting, and media literacy. While not part of a national structural framework, these programmes provide meaningful channels for young people to shape messages, tools, and interventions that influence their digital lives.
- In **the Netherlands**, co-creation-based research labs such as [SpaceTeen](#), [Movez Lab](#), and [Games for Emotional and Mental Health Lab](#) involve young people in the development and study of digital environments and their effect on youth wellbeing.
- As part of the **Polish presidency**, [an event facilitated dialogue between decision-makers and young people](#), including secondary school students who presented research on how new technologies affect mental health. This topic was also discussed at the informal meeting of EU health ministers, highlighting the value of youth involvement in shaping solutions that impact them directly.
- **Finland's** national efforts to promote safe, responsible, and inclusive digital participation among children, young people, and adults through [The Finnish Safer Internet Centre \(FISIC\) 2021–2022](#). The initiative focused on strengthening media literacy, providing online safety education, and supporting those affected by digital risks. The programme encouraged youth participation through peer education and digital content creation. Through initiatives like “YouthNet”, young participants develop digital content, such as videos, blogs, or social media posts, that educates peers about safe, responsible, and critical online behaviour. They also use interactive digital tools (quizzes, games, or online workshops) to promote active learning and discussion about online risks, digital literacy, and wellbeing.

# 4 Strengthen policy and regulatory language: action should be legally binding

Many digital platforms are designed to maximise screen time and engagement rather than support user wellbeing, and algorithms frequently prioritise extreme or emotionally charged content, which can contribute to anxiety, fear, or mistrust among young users. Growing recognition of digital wellbeing, however, provides momentum for integrated, preventive approaches that address both digitalisation and mental health at a policy level. Ensuring the responsible use of digital media requires a careful balance between protection, participation, and empowerment, fostering policy-led environments where young people can engage safely, critically, and meaningfully. Evidence from monitoring the digital environment should be translated into policy and regulatory action, creating meaningful accountability for platforms.

- **Policy ask:** Enforce the Digital Services Act and other European and national laws to protect the rights of children and young people and showcase their importance, and adopt a strong Digital Fairness Act.
- **Policy ask:** Introduce a mandatory interdisciplinary assessment framework for product development. This goes beyond assessing children's rights, as is currently the case with UNICEF's Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA). Not only children but also other users need to be protected from (potential) adverse effects.
- **Policy ask:** A number of strategies to hold industry and commercial interest to account are included in a recent publication from the WHO's policy brief on [addressing the digital determinants of youth mental health and wellbeing](#) under point 4. The proposed policy actions focus on increasing transparency and accountability in digital technologies, strengthening research through data sharing, and regulating platforms to better protect young people.

## Examples

- The [Council Conclusions on Promoting and Protecting the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Digital Era](#) is a formal EU-level policy document adopted on 20 June

2025 that reflects the joint commitment of EU Member States—acting through the Council—to address the mental health implications of digitalisation for children and youth.

- The European Commission [hired an additional 60 staff members](#) to enforce the Digital Services Act.

The Thematic Working Group (TWIG) on Mental Health is an expert platform led by EuroHealthNet and the Trimbos Institute. It brings together twelve organisations from across Europe to connect evidence, policy, and practice on youth mental health and digital wellbeing.

EuroHealthNet is a Partnership of public organisations, institutes, and authorities working on public health, disease prevention, promoting health and wellbeing, and reducing inequalities. We aim to tackle health inequalities within and between European States through action on the social determinants of health. For further information and further references go to [www.eurohealthnet.eu](http://www.eurohealthnet.eu).



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