What to be mindful of: children's mental health and the digital environment

An estimated 13% of the global adolescent population aged 12-19 years – or 166 million children – live with some mental disorder, according to UNICEF's new flagship report [State of the World's Children 2021 – On My Mind: Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health](). As lives became [digital by default](), our attention was drawn to the possible impacts of children's internet use on their wellbeing. For [www.parenting.digital](), [Mariya Stoilova]() explores the role of the digital environment in supporting children's vulnerability or resilience looking at the factors that make a difference between wellbeing and harm.

Growing awareness about the importance of mental health comes amid reports of the perceived [negative impact of COVID-19]() on child and youth wellbeing as a result of [losing face-to-face contact]() with family and friends, living in homes that [are not safe](), and missing out on [education and social development](). Launched yesterday at the [Global Mental Health Summit](), [UNICEF's report]() conveys a sense of urgency in tackling children's mental health risks and calls for commitment, communication and action. Yet, the role of digital technologies is explored rather briefly and as a "special case", leaving out important discussions, such as those related to digital design, online regulation, media-inflicted moral panic, and debates around glamorising vs normalisation of self-harm and eating disorders. Discussions of children's mental health generally tend to bracket off the role of the digital environment. Or, when it is considered, they focus more on the risk aspects, underplaying the benefits. So here is what we have learned from several recent research projects – [Adolescent mental health and development in the digital world](), [Global Kids Online](), [ySKILLS](), and [euConsent]():

- **Helping children to develop resilience against negative online experiences is a great way to protect them.** Children encounter [both risks and opportunities]() online and their ability to self-regulate their media use and avoid the negative effects makes a difference between experiencing [beneficial or harmful outcomes](). Supportive and [enabling parenting]() where children are encouraged to use the internet and shown how to do this safely is one of the key factors in the development of children's [digital resilience](). Developing children's [digital skills]() and pro-active [online engagement]() can also help them make the most of the opportunities and avoid online risks. There are limits, however, to [how far children and parents can be expected]() to meet the challenges of the digital environment, and this is where [regulation will be important]().
- **We need to stop focusing on screen time and start paying more attention to online activities and experiences.** Limiting children's time online has been a "quick fix" for parents who are worried about negative effects from internet use but the [evidence suggests]() that this is [not the correct approach](). Screen time restrictions [limit also the benefits]() and in the long run can have negative consequences on children's skills, learning and participation. Instead, we should focus on what children do when they are online, which has an impact on their mental health. Limiting children's access to age-inappropriate content, for example by using tools such as [parental controls](), can reduce their risk exposure. It is also important to make sure that children's online engagement does not interfere with other important aspects of their life, like sleeping, [playing](), socialising offline, and being physically active.
- **Friendships and online communities can help children with their mental health.** The internet affords children important communication and socialising opportunities, which became particularly valuable for maintaining [friendships during COVID]() and staying [in touch with family](). Children often recognise that these connections [help them to cope]() and [support their mental health]() and wellbeing. In situations when children are struggling with mental difficulties, online communities can [offer unique support]() as they [provide a strong connection](), non-judgmental understanding, and a feeling of belonging. Online visibility of mental health issues can also contribute to removing the existing social taboo and can empower those struggling.
- **The internet can provide valuable access to health-related information and access to mental health support services.** Online children can access [vital health information](), especially when other health care resources and services are lacking or children feel [unable to reach out]() to traditional child support services. Online services are usually seen as more accessible and providing greater privacy and anonymity, making them particularly appealing to hard to reach or vulnerable children. Digital technology is also becoming an important part of mental health [support services]() assisting in identification, signposting and treatment.
- **Mental health is a continuum – not only from good to poor mental health but also from offline to digital – and children [move along it]().** Children's [mental health and vulnerability]() are complex and usually

involve a combination of risk factors from their social environment and their digital engagement. **Some children, however, are more vulnerable than others** – those who are vulnerable offline are also more likely to be vulnerable online and children who experience one kind of online risk are also more likely to experience others. We also know that children with more severe mental health issues and those who cannot find help elsewhere tend to turn to the digital environment more often. This can be particularly concerning in the light of recent discussions of how digital design can put children at risk and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities.

The strong demand for action called by UNICEF must be met by the joint efforts of regulators, industry, child practitioners, educators and parents if we are to tackle children's mental health and wellbeing in their full complexity. Such efforts need to place a strong emphasis on the digital, not only as a crucial factor in children's everyday lives but also due to its positive potential for mental health diagnosis, treatment, and support. The digital environment is not without its limitations and harmful effects. Hence, we need an approach that strikes a balance between minimising the risks and maximising the beneficial and protective factors, digital and non-digital.

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