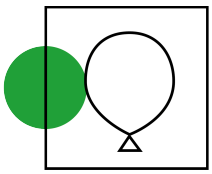
Realising children's rights in the digital age: The role of digital skills

Principle 9: Wellbeing

Enhance and do not harm the health and wellbeing of all children, including through the use of inclusive design.



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Wellbeing in relation to the digital environment relies on policy and design choices that enhance a child's life satisfaction. These can include, for example, promoting a balanced lifestyle, emotional regulation and supportive social connections. Good design and practice can also make mental and physical health and other forms of support easily accessible.

The principle of wellbeing draws together several children's rights, including:[1]

- Life, survival and development.
- Recognition of the specific requirements of children with disabilities and their entitlement to special care and assistance.
- Enabling children to access 'the highest attainable standard' of health, including services, treatments and rehabilitation.
- Adequate standard of living and material assistance to support wellbeing.
- Protection from substance abuse and forms of addiction.

Digital innovation and policy that promotes children's wellbeing encompasses diverse products and services, including games, social media and video streaming platforms. To promote children's wellbeing, it is important to encourage a healthy and balanced lifestyle rather than feeding compulsions, unhealthy habits or harmful experiences.

"On Twitter sometimes there are feeds trending or threads trending on my feed where it's like ways to cope. And I have got a bunch of those added to my bookmarks so that I can go to them quickly." (teenager experiencing mental health difficulties, UK) (17)

[1] UNCRC, Articles 6, 7, 9, 10, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 33, 39.

In framing the 11 principles of children's rights in the digital environment, the principle of wellbeing centres on both broad wellbeing (vital for the right to life, survival and development) as well as specific requirements for children's physical and mental health, including sufficient standard of living, attention to threats to health (e.g., addiction) and specific assistance for children with specific educational needs and disabilities.

The ySKILLS framework recognises that wellbeing is defined in social research in multiple ways, and there is value in **distinguishing the dimensions of cognitive, physical, psychological and social wellbeing**, given that children's wellbeing represents the main outcome of the ySKILLS model.

For cognitive wellbeing, the ySKILLS analysis of the EU Kids Online survey found that **children with higher information navigation and processing skills reported better school performance**, but children with higher content creation and production skills reported lower school performance (27).

For physical wellbeing, **children who used the internet more reported less physical activity** (27). Further, adolescents who reported **higher use of their phone in bed to browse social media slept less overall** (15). There was also a small association between **watching videos and increased relaxation** (15). Those **with higher content creation and production skills were subsequently more likely to search for information about health, injury or physical treatmen**t (18).

The longitudinal ySKILLS research shows that relationships between digital skills and wellbeing are overall very weak. Still, there is evidence that **digital skills reduce the negative long-term effect of time spent online on young people's physical and psychological wellbeing** (28).

When it comes to psychological wellbeing, quantitative studies found that frequent social media use was linked with feelings of loneliness, while listening to music was associated with boredom, loneliness and frustration (15). Intriguingly, children with **higher programming skills reported lower life satisfaction**, and children with **higher communication skills reported higher life satisfaction** (18). Meanwhile, **excessive gaming was associated with lower performance accuracy**, although the direction of causation could not be determined (1).

The qualitative research tells a more nuanced story. **Young people with internet-related mental health difficulties try to develop ad hoc digital skills to protect their psychological wellbeing**, avoiding being exposed to extreme content and locating safe spaces and contacts where they can receive important social support; however, they do not always manage to gain the needed skills, or put them into practice, especially when faced with dark patterns or risky designs that can overwhelm vulnerable children and young people (17). Also, **migrant children develop identity-related skills, which are necessary for their socio-emotional development** (i.e., to gain social validation, social control and achieve self-awareness) and communication skills that help them keep in touch with their diasporic families and networks. **For many young refugees, digital skills are vital for self-care and for the caring of others** (3).

With regard to social wellbeing, ySKILLS findings show that **communicating with friends** was increased for those who had gained higher technical and operational skills, communication and interaction skills and content creation skills, but decreased by higher information and programming skills. Interestingly, **support from friends was higher among children with higher communication and interaction skills** (18) – and children with higher digital skills are more often asked for advice and frequently provide advice to peers (6).

Overall, the ySKILLS findings suggest that **gaining digital skills may both support and undermine both cognitive and social wellbeing, depending on the dimensions of digital skills gained**. More obviously, an increase in internet use correlated with a decrease in physical activity. However, children with greater digital skills were also more capable of searching for information related to health online.

Finally, for psychological wellbeing, the results are nuanced, and need further exploration to determine causal direction. When online, young people develop the digital skills they need for their psychological wellbeing. ySKILLS research indicates that **more time online means lower (physical and psychological) wellbeing, but digital skills reduce this negative impact** (28).

As discussed in Smahel et al. (2023), improving children's wellbeing is an ambitious aim and yet may be insufficient, from a children's rights perspective. Lundy (2020) observes that improving children's wellbeing is not necessarily linked to improving their civil rights and freedoms in a digital world. Children can be comfortable and happy and yet not fully realise their rights in a digital world. It is equally possible that many children's rights can be realised yet their wellbeing be poor.

Additional data

EU Kids Online findings for 9- to 16-year-olds in 19 countries showed that:

- Between 2% (Germany and Slovakia) and 19% (Poland) of children reported seeing self-harm content (related to physically harming or hurting themselves). Sporadic exposure (e.g., a few times a year) was more common, experienced by 11% (Germany) to 37% (Russia) of children. In most countries there were almost none or very low gender differences in exposure to this type of content.

- Even higher numbers reported seeing content related to eating disorders (e.g., ways to be very thin, such as being anorexic or bulimic, or thinspiration). Between 3% (Germany) and 32% (Poland) saw such content at least every month or more often. Girls were more likely to see such content in eight out of the 18 countries that collected data on this.

- On average, 4% of children aged 12–16 reported going without eating or sleeping because of the internet; 10% were bothered when they were not online; 13% spent less time with family or friends or doing homework because they were online; 11% said that they continued using the internet when they were no longer interested, and 10% had unsuccessfully tried to spend less time online.

- Being online, however, can be a positive and freeing experience. Over one-quarter of children (29%) – ranging between 19% (Poland) and 38% (Romania) – said they 'often' or 'always' found it easier to be themselves online than offline, and a further third (32%) said they experienced this 'sometimes.' In all, most children recognised this experience, with slightly more boys finding the internet a conducive place to be themselves online.

- One in five children said they talked about different things online than when speaking to people face-to-face and, 11% said they talked about personal things online that they did not talk about with people face-to-face.