

## Chapter 2

# Digital Mental Health Interventions for Children and Youth

**Alexandra Silva Machado**

*School of Health, Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal*

**Bianca Ferreira**

*School of Health, Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal*

**Catarina Ye Pereira**

*School of Health, Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal*


**Carolina Carrola**

*School of Health, Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal*

**Bruno Bastos Vieira de Melo**

*School of Health, Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal*

**Carlos Campos**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5966-4050>  
*School of Health, Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal*

### ABSTRACT

*The period from childhood to adolescence is critical for mental health promotion, as it is estimated that, worldwide, approximately 10% to 20% of individuals in this age group have mental health problems that may lead to mental disorders that may persist throughout adulthood. Furthermore, recent studies show that mental health problems during childhood and adolescence contribute to a decrease in academic performance and an increase of risk-taking behaviors, self-injury, and suicide, with consequences into adulthood. Thus, preventing mental health problems in children and adolescents is essential to promote positive lifelong outcomes for young people. Schools are a privileged context for creating favorable environments for the implementation of mental health promotion programs, effectively and with long-term benefits. This context allows for an early intervention during the phase of development of socioemotional skills, thus enhancing the results of the programs themselves, contributing to the healthy development of children and youth and to a higher academic achievement of students.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The present chapter will address the relevance and benefits of digital mental health programs for school-age children and adolescents to promote a healthy child and adolescent development and prevent mental disorders in adulthood. These programs, when applied in schools, allow for a large-scale implementation and they are generally effective in preventing risky behaviors and reducing mental distress. Moreover, these have been shown to be even more effective in managing anxiety, improving depressive symptoms and emotion regulation, and increasing academic performance (Castillo et al., 2019; Dray et al., 2017; Sakellari et al., 2021).

This chapter will also address the relevance of the topic of mental health, as it encompasses and impacts the state of well-being of individuals, influencing their development and functioning in everyday life (WHO, 2004; WHO, 2022). This theme gains even more importance when it comes to the child and adolescent population, as this stage of development is a critical period for mental health promotion (Keles et al., 2020), with about 10% to 20% of children and adolescents experiencing mental illness problems that may persist into adulthood, impacting a large part of the individual's life course, in several key areas of development (Raven et al., 2017) (Dray et al., 2017; Kessler et al., 2005; World Health Organization (WHO), 2016).

The COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease) pandemic brought repercussions on the well-being of youth and adolescents, which led to a worsening of symptoms associated with mental illness (Listernick and Badawy, 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, community-based approaches for social and mental health problem solving already existed, with schools being the best context for implementing mental health promotion programs for children and youth, especially when combined with a cognitive-behavioral component (Castillo et al 2019; Tomé and Matos, 2012).

The pandemic and technological evolution have allowed for increased forms of communication for young people, in addition to enabling the availability of computer technologies, artificial intelligence and mobile applications (apps) (Keles et al, 2020; McIntyre et al, 2021; Sander and Lobo, 2015; Shah et al, 2019). Thus, eHealth has also evolved, facilitating community access to online medical information and digital health-related tools (Ghorbanian Zolbin et al., 2022). Thus, throughout the chapter, it is possible to understand how digital mental health interventions have shown promise for bridging gaps in service delivery in the child and youth mental health sector, which include internet-based programs, mobile devices and computers, as well as cell phone apps (Gan et al., 2021; McIntyre et al., 2021; Wozney et al., 2018).

## **MENTAL HEALTH IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE**

According to World Health Organization (2004), mental health should not be understood only as the “absence of illness”, but rather as a full state of well-being, in which the individual fully develops his or her skills, copes with the stresses of daily life, performs productive work, and contributes to the improvement of his or her community. In contrast, mental illness occurs when there is an inherent condition that affects cognition, emotion, and behavior (Manderscheid et al., 2010).

In the case of children and adolescents, these developmental stages are critical periods for mental health promotion, as they have a limited capacity for self-regulation and are more vulnerable to peer pressure

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