



Vodafone
Foundation



CONNECTED CHILDHOOD

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

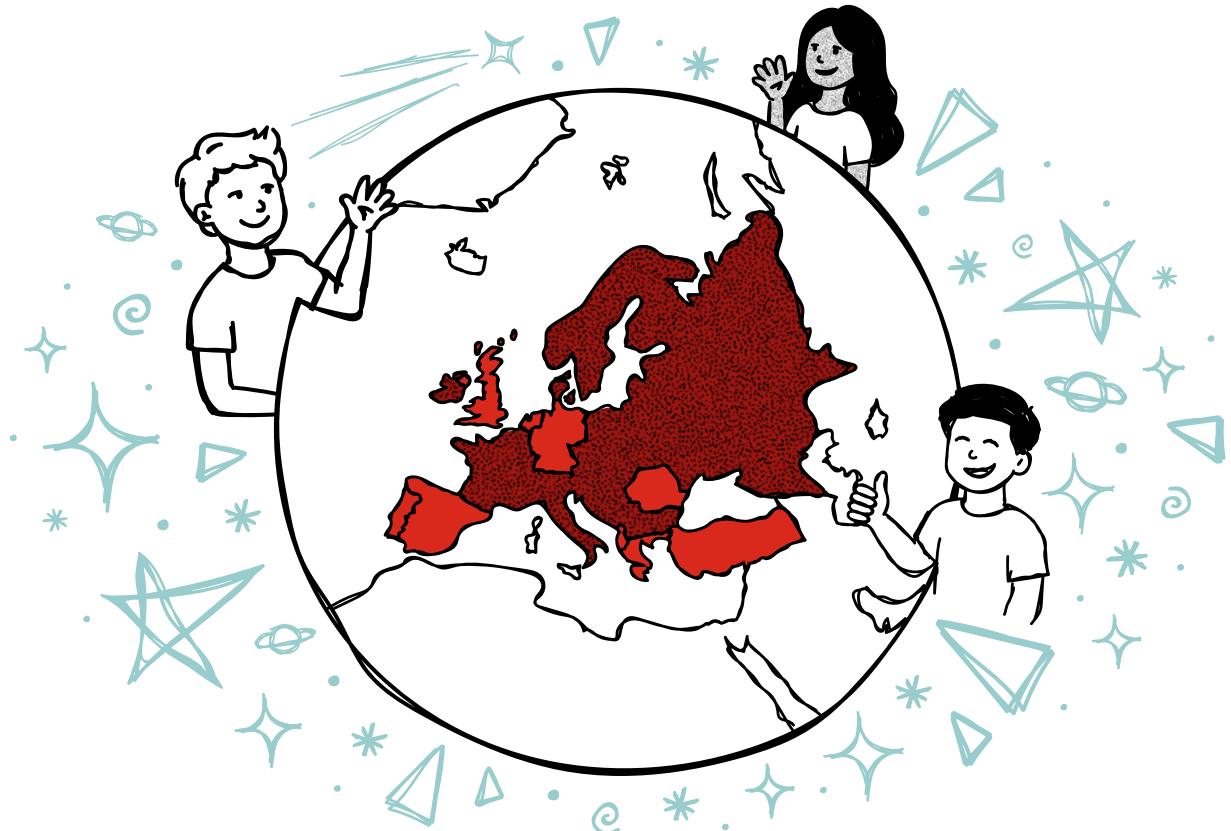


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Europe's children and young people are growing up in an era of unprecedented connectivity but also unprecedented digital risks and impacts. The Digital Wellbeing and Resilience Index (the Index) reveals a concerning state with only one in four children and young people across nine European countries rating their digital wellbeing as good, while three in four seem to be struggling with disrupted sleep, high levels of stress or challenges balancing their online and offline lives. Despite being the most connected generation in history, today's children and young people are not thriving online as much as society might hope. This report highlights the urgent findings of the Index and suggests a path for moving forward with a more holistic, public health approach and protection to bolster digital wellbeing. It serves as both a warning and a call to action and one that policymakers, educators, diverse technology companies and trusted adults must engage with to ensure Europe's next generation can truly thrive in the digital world.

The Index measures multiple dimensions of children and young people's digital lives to create a composite indicator that describes a holistic picture of their online experience. Save the Children and Vodafone Foundation worked closely with Ipsos to deliver this research, drawing on their independent methodological expertise and analysis. This report then applies a child rights and public health lens to the findings so responsibility for the agenda-setting recommendations sits with Save the Children and Vodafone Foundation.



The Index survey was conducted with 7,755 children and young people aged 13-18 across nine countries (Albania, Greece, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Türkiye and the United Kingdom(UK)). It asked about seven aspects of digital activity and impacts: the five domains of the core Index (Security, Management, Identity, Literacy, and Empathy) and two indicators of Engagement and Digital Wellbeing. It was commissioned by Save the Children and Vodafone Foundation and run by Ipsos in December 2025/January 2026.

Key findings

Children and young people are connected but not necessarily protected. Most have their own smartphone, plus use of other devices, and go online at home and elsewhere daily. Half scored 'high' on the Enablement indicator, showing strong connectivity. Most report having basic online safety knowledge, and the Security domain scores are high across countries. Yet digital access and familiarity is not translating into high levels of wellbeing. Greater connectivity can increase exposure to pressures and harms. Knowing about privacy settings and how to avoid strangers, for example, is good but offers little against subtler threats such as social media anxiety, or the daily information overload, or wider harms such as cyberbullying. The survey data details the gap between being connected and feeling healthy and safe online.

Self-regulation is a major area of challenge and is compounded by design features of the platforms themselves. The majority of children and young people cannot easily switch off or ignore their notifications, with implications for them getting enough sleep and maintaining a healthy digital balance. This pattern is surprisingly consistent across the countries, even in highly connected societies, which indicates a much wider, systemic issue. In a society that never truly disconnects, the Management domain showed that children and young people are struggling to do so too, and the survey indicates their wellbeing is suffering as a result.

Subjective digital wellbeing is low or moderate for three-quarters of children and young people, with only one in 30 scoring 'high' on the Digital Wellbeing indicator. There are encouraging aspects: most know when to seek support from a trusted adult, feel balance in their online/offline lives and feel connected to friends and family by being online. However, the emotional impact of being online is negative and the data makes it clear that very few have consistently positive experiences.

Online engagement appears to be taking a particular toll on mental health for many. A third of children and young people often feel stressed or upset after being online and two in five do not feel calm or positive. Almost half worry about missing out when they are not online. Concerns about cyberbullying is a worry for two-fifths of children and young people – adding to wider evidence that online challenges such as exposure to harmful content and constant social comparison are compromising younger generations' confidence and peace of mind.

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However, being online is fundamental for children and young people and can be an essential personal resource. Social connection and entertainment are key drivers for going online, with additional priorities being to get support or feel better, or to express their identity. Wider research shows that some minoritised groups may be at higher risk of harm while using online spaces to explore their identity and curiosity. The survey data provides evidence of this, but most children and young people feel they can be themselves online without being judged, manage online relationships effectively and feel safe from harassment or hate in their usual online spaces. Encouragingly, the survey indicates broad endorsement and knowledge of pro-social online behaviours, with sizeable majorities stating that they would support a friend and know how to help others being targeted online – although it is clear that good intentions and core knowledge do not readily transfer into action.

Despite having grown up with technology, the younger generation has not fully developed certain skills to thrive online, and inbuilt systems can hamper their efforts. Most can use technology but far fewer have learned to critically evaluate online content or actively curb its negative influences. Only two-thirds claim to understand how their content is affected by algorithms or to check if information is from a trustworthy source before sharing, indicating that many are vulnerable to misinformation. Likewise, around half state that they have taken action to keep online spaces kind. Managing time online and maintaining digital balance stand out as substantial challenges for children and young people, linked to the systems they occupy. Strengthening digital literacy and durable measures to facilitate management and digital balance are essential to improve wellbeing.

The Index also highlights differences in access, use and impacts as well as a greater level of challenges experienced by some groups of children and young people. Those who reported having food insecurity, disabilities or functional difficulties, or regular experiences of anxiety or depression, and non-heterosexual children and young people have lower scores on multiple domains and on the overall Digital Wellbeing and Resilience Index. These patterns of divergence suggest that offline structural and societal disadvantage is mirrored online, and in some cases amplified. Groups who reported more negative impacts from engaging online are often those who also face challenges with digital access, are more likely to be seeking support online than connecting with friends and family, and spend more time online. These disparities require further attention and inclusive responses, as all children and young people regardless of their characteristics or situation, deserve systems and environments that support their wellbeing and do not systematically undermine it.

Comparing Index data across the nine countries shows that a country's wealth or digital provision does not guarantee better wellbeing. In some less digitally advanced countries, children and young people's outcomes are notably higher than the nine-country average – such as in achieving online/offline balance. The survey adds to the evidence that technology can amplify risk if not paired with the right support. This indicates that policy and culture matter and the importance of proactive measures like effective school programmes or awareness campaigns can influence how digital life affects children and young people. Every nation has room for improvement and can learn from each other's successes (and challenges).

Recommendations

The Index is a wake-up call but it also points to solutions, in particular calling for multisectoral systemic change. Children and young people cannot be held predominantly responsible for a healthier digital life – it requires effort from other actors, so a public health approach is needed. A coordinated effort from platforms, policymakers, educators, parents/carers and children and young people themselves is needed to achieve change. Six key recommendations have been identified by Save the Children and Vodafone Foundation to reduce the gap between connectivity and wellbeing:

1. Embed wellbeing-by-design and hold technology platforms accountable by enforcing stronger safety- and wellbeing-by-design standards for social media and online platforms. The survey highlights a clear gap between connectivity and wellbeing, and shows that self-regulation is a major challenge for many children and young people. Regulators should require child and youth-friendly defaults, including high privacy and safety settings for children, alongside measures that reduce overuse pressures (for example, limiting addictive design features and strengthening controls that support breaks, sleep-friendly settings and notification management).



2. Integrate digital wellbeing into education by embedding wellbeing, self-regulation, empathy and critical digital literacy into mainstream curricula and teacher training. The findings suggest that basic safety knowledge is not enough on its own: children and young people also need practical, scenario-based learning on managing stress, navigating conflict and supporting others online, including how to respond if witnessing harm, cyberbullying or misinformation. Treat digital wellbeing as a fundamental literacy of modern life.



3. Strengthen mental health support in the digital age by ensuring accessible, child and youth-friendly pathways for support in schools and communities, including when online experiences contribute to stress, anxiety or fear of missing out. The survey suggests that online engagement is taking a toll for many children and young people, with substantial proportions reporting stress or difficulty feeling calm and positive after being online. Funding and strengthening access for support services, counselling, and trusted helplines should be protected and scaled, so support is available early and without stigma. This should happen across schools and communities and be considered within wider national health standards.

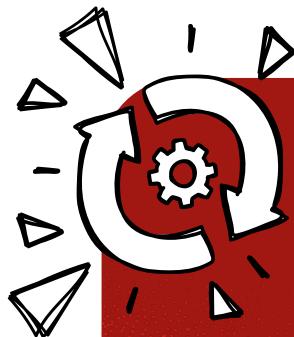




4. Empower educators and parents/carers with the confidence, knowledge and practical tools to guide children and young people online and shape healthier norms around digital balance without shaming connection. Trusted adults need accessible resources that keep pace with platform trends and equip them to have open, non-judgemental conversations, set healthy routines, and support children and young people to manage notifications, sleep disruption and online pressures.



5. Guarantee equity and inclusion, and institutionalise child and youth participation so no group is left behind and solutions reflect lived experiences. The Index highlights lower scores among children and young people facing disadvantage or vulnerability (including those reporting disability or functional difficulties, food insecurity, regular anxiety or depression, and non-heterosexual young people). Policies should strengthen accessibility and targeted support and involve diverse children and young people through structured and unstructured participatory mechanisms so that platforms, services and education responses are inclusive, effective and accountable.



6. Build multi-stakeholder coalitions and commit to ongoing measurement and learning so action is coordinated and progress can be tracked over time. Digital wellbeing requires joined-up responsibility across platforms, policymakers, educators, health actors, civil society, donors and funders, parents/carers and children and young people themselves. Regularly updating the Index, tracking emerging issues (including AI-enabled risks), and sharing data and best practice across sectors and countries will support accountability and keep policy and practice responsive as technology evolves.

