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Intentional use:

How agency supports young people's wellbeing in a digital world

Foreword

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CEO, Internet Matters

We often hear about the risks of young people being online, but it is just as crucial that we remember the benefits. Our wellbeing programme of work has revealed that time online provides significant positive impacts for wellbeing, as well as negative impacts, highlighting the importance of supporting young people to access the benefits of digital technologies safely.

We are delighted to support our understanding with this deep dive into the role of agency in wellbeing. It shows us that more effective for young people – and all of us! – than simply counting time on screen is reflecting on what we are doing online and how it makes us feel. We also know that young people cannot develop agency without help; they need support from parents and carers, and for government and industry to ensure that digital services are designed with agency in mind.

We will be continuing our wellbeing programme of work and look forward to being able to share the future insights this brings.

internet matters.org

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Figuring out the right amount of screen time is one of those questions that most families grapple with as they navigate their digital lives. And it's one where no one answer is perfect because the 'right' amount of screen time depends on many factors - for example, a rainy Saturday afternoon during the holidays is likely to need a different approach to the night before an exam.

In partnership with Internet Matters, we decided to speak to parents and teens to better understand their views on screen time, how they manage it currently and what help they would like. The findings from this research underscore that when it comes to screen time, quantity isn't everything, and that agency is also really important. These insights are valuable for online platforms like ours as we design our services and we also hope, with the help of new 'Questions for Reflecting on Digital Habits' developed by Internet Matters, they will help parents and teens, as well as the rest of our community, think more holistically about their relationship with digital devices.

At TikTok, we're proud to be introducing new well-being tools for our community to help them better manage their time on our app. This is part of our ongoing work to help empower our community to have a positive relationship with TikTok. Our goal is to help ensure that people feel in control of their TikTok experience so they can make the most out of it, whether it's discovering culture-defining entertainment or creating meaningful connections with their community.

We look forward to learning more from our partnership with Internet Matters, and to continue working cross-industry to support families thrive online.

1. Wellbeing and agency in a digital world

As the significance of the digital world in our lives grows, so does its role in our wellbeing. We are using digital technology at ever younger ages, more frequently and for a greater variety of purposes. This is true for young people, just as it is for adults. Over half of 5–15-year-olds now own a mobile phone[1] and young people aged 5-16 spend over 3 hours a day watching online content[2] – not to mention the other things they do online like messaging friends and playing games. To thrive in life, young people need to thrive online.

Access to digital technology provides a range of significant benefits to young people and families. This is particularly the case for vulnerable young people. Research in Internet Matters' vulnerability programme has found that 86% of teens who are autistic felt the internet opened up possibilities for them (versus 62% on their non-vulnerable peers) and 42% of teens who are young carers felt their online life gave them freedom (versus 30% of non-vulnerable teens).[3] Furthermore, as the Covid-19 pandemic has shown all too clearly, lack of digital access or skills are notable risks in themselves, with young people locked out from opportunities to learn, socialise and have fun.

Preventing young people from experiencing harm has been an important focus as we seek to manage the immersion of fast developing technologies into our society. School lessons are typically focused on staying *safe* online, worried parents seek support on

the best ways to protect their children *from harm*, industry is increasingly focused on achieving *safety* by design into their products and new regulations focussed on *harms* are on the horizon across Europe. But while keeping young people safe is absolutely critical, we can aspire for much more – not just for young people to get by online but for them to thrive.

If we are aware of our feelings and behaviours and know how to respond to manage them, we can self-regulate. If we have agency, we have the control over our lives to self-regulate. Self-regulation is an important goal for people of all ages, but it can be a particular challenge for young people who are developing this skill for the first time. Like so many skills we learn in childhood, learning to self-regulate happens through a combination of trial and error and with guidance from adults. Personalised information and tools that support agency can be particularly useful in helping young people to understand themselves and take supported steps to manage their experiences.

To enable a broader understanding of how digital technology can impact young people's lives, for better and worse, Internet Matters launched a new programme of work earlier this year to define their wellbeing in this context. Led by the insights of Dr Diane Levine and her team at the University of Leicester, and through engagement with experts in digital technology as well as young people and families themselves, four dimensions of wellbeing in a digital world were identified: *developmental, emotional, physical and social.*[4]

1. *Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2020/21.* OFCOM: *https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217825/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf*
2. *CHILDWISE data based on fieldwork conducted September-November 2020, among 1976 children aged 5 to16 years.* CHILDWISE: *http://www.childwise.co.uk/*
3. *Refuge and risk: Life online for vulnerable young people.* INTERNET MATTERS: *https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Internet-Matters-Refuge-And-Risk-Report.pdf*
4. *Children and families' wellbeing in a digital world: A four-dimensional model.* INTERNET MATTERS: *https://www.internetmatters.org/about-us-3/children-and-families-wellbeing-in-a-digital-world-report/*

The *developmental* dimension speaks directly to the importance of young people having a sense of agency. Experts and families told us that to develop well in a digital world, young people need to be able to have control over their use of digital technology. Being supported to self-regulate, to manage feelings, beliefs and behaviour, and take steps where they see room for improvement, helps young people have a sense of agency. This may involve but, crucially, is not limited to reflecting on the time they spend online. Having agency is about more than simply monitoring screen time. It is also thinking about *what* you are doing with that time and how it is making you feel. By using tools and insights to reflect on how they are spending their time, young people can be empowered to take action and improve their wellbeing.

In addition to defining wellbeing in a digital world, Internet Matters has also begun work to measure it. Our first annual Index Report[5] (a collaboration with Revealing Reality) sets out findings from a survey of

one thousand households. The findings suggest that some young people struggle to self-regulate and display agency when online - for example, those who reported spending the most time playing video games scored significantly higher on the negative developmental wellbeing dimension. This was partly due to their feeling of lacking control, linked to spending money in-game or to time spent playing video games impacting other activities or commitments in their lives. Boys were significantly more affected than girls.

Internet Matters wanted to explore the importance of agency for young people's wellbeing in greater detail. Our latest research, spotlighted below, reveals how teens and their parents can be supported by industry with tools and insights to help them reflect on what they are doing and its impact, so they are informed and empowered to take action that can help improve their wellbeing.

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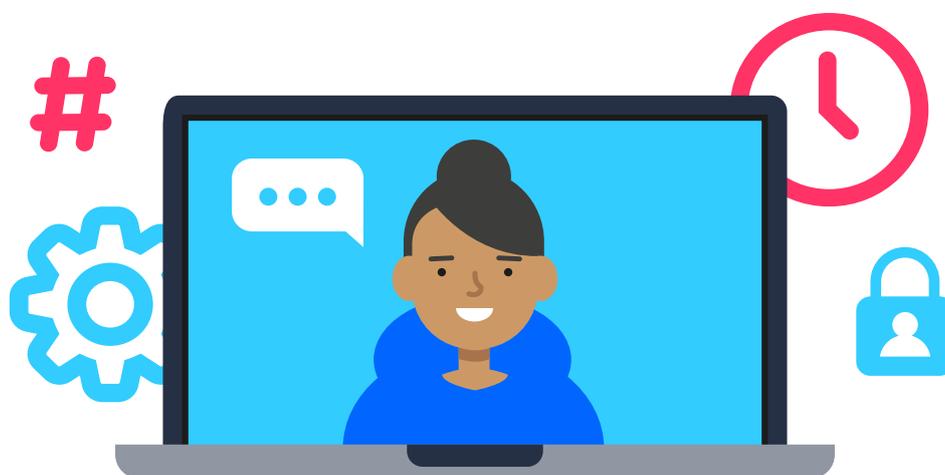
5.   *Children's wellbeing in a digital world: Index report 2022. INTERNET MATTERS: https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/childrens-wellbeing-in-a-digital-world-index-report-2022/*

2. Research spotlight: agency in teen's online lives

Family Panels **is a 2-year research programme coordinated by Internet Matters and TikTok to provide detailed insight into the views teens and their parents from across the UK and Europe hold about varying aspects of their lives online.**

Recently, the programme explored the concept of agency in teens' online lives – focussing on screen time as an example of one area agency can impact. Teens and parents from a range of backgrounds took part, drawn from five countries – UK, Ireland, France, Germany, and Italy. Through online focus groups, early teens (predominantly 13-year-olds) and late teens (predominantly 16-year-olds) shared their views on feeling in control, how they managed their screen time and how this impacted their daily lives.

Agency in teen life

The research confirmed that agency, understood as feeling in control of one's online behaviours and habits, can directly play a positive role in a teen's wellbeing and that a lack of agency can have a negative impact. Agency is something the teens we spoke to look for constantly, especially when they need to plan their time around studying, friends, family and leisure.

We asked the teens we spoke to for examples of when they do and don't feel in control and how this makes them feel. They told us that having agency makes them feel reassured, calm and relaxed, able to feel self-esteem and autonomy.

"[Agency] makes me feel I'm able to do what I need to do … I like being in control of things" (UK, 13, girl)

"I feel calmer when I organise my day - I am happier, I am sure I do things. If I don't organise myself, I lose my time." (Italy, 14, boy)

Lacking agency on the other hand, they told us, can lead to higher stress levels and regret.

"[It] annoys me when I don't get things done." (Ireland, 13, girl)

"I was 20 minutes late for school because I was on my phone … I [felt] really rushed and when I feel rushed, I feel stressed." (UK, 13, boy)

The role of agency in teens' control over screen time

When it comes to their mobile phones, it was common for the teens to feel they lacked agency, which they associated with feeling anxious and frustrated, guilty, powerless or weak. When we asked the teens how they managed their screen time and how well that worked, they typically said they relied on self-discipline to manage their screen time and did not implement a specific approach.

"Sometimes I use the reminder alarm, but then I disable it and I forget about it. It's not working for me." (France, 16, girl)

It's worth noting that lacking control over screen time wasn't only an issue for teens – parents also acknowledged feeling like they used their phones too much and did not have enough in place to manage this behaviour.

Most teens wanted to take responsibility for their screen time themselves, without input from their parents. Only in Italy and Germany did a small group of teens suggest it could be decided between parents and teens, especially if the teen was younger.

"I should have control over this; it should be my decision how long I allow myself on my phone each day. I will know if I have homework to do or study to do." (Ireland, 13, girl)

"For early teens, the parents [should have control], absolutely. [The young person], for those of my age." (Italy, 16, boy)

Screen time management solutions to support teens

We asked teens if they used tools and features to manage their time on their mobile phones. Most didn't. For some, this was because they were not aware of the tools available, and others said it was because they did not think to seek a solution when experiencing negative impacts.

Those who said they did use such tools and features described using a variety of tools including phone alarms, screen time reports, relying on parents and developing their own reward systems around device use (i.e. allowing themselves to use their phone when their homework is complete).

"[Screen time management tools] can help people to not get carried away and lose control, and to have better perception of how they are spending the hours in their day." (UK, 16, girl)

Teens generally accepted they needed help to exercise control in their screen time management. When asked what solutions or improvements could help, teens across all five countries markets centred on three areas:

1. **Information** – Having access to more data about their usage would shock some into acting and would give others a more nuanced understanding of their screen time habits.

   "I find it very interesting to have an overview of the usage time. Especially … how often you open the app [each] day." (Germany, 16, boy)

2. **Flexibility and variation in design** – Having a design which adapts to usage habits without diminishing the user experience was important to teens. They generally enjoy their screen time and, although they want support managing it, they want to have control over it and the flexibility to make changes to suit their circumstances (e.g. more screen time during school holidays, less screen time when they have other demands on their time).

   "So you can finish whatever … you're watching and end your session feeling satisfied rather than interrupted." (UK, 14, girl)

3. **Active alerts** – teens were open to a range of solutions including warning times, pop-up messages, silent modes and recorded messages from celebrities or creators.

   "I know personally myself I can spend hours [online] and not even realise." (Ireland, 13, girl)

Teens enjoy social media platforms for socialising with friends, being entertained or learning new activities or skills but recognise that platforms have a role in providing tools and support to help them overcome the negative feelings or experiences linked to lack of agency around its use.
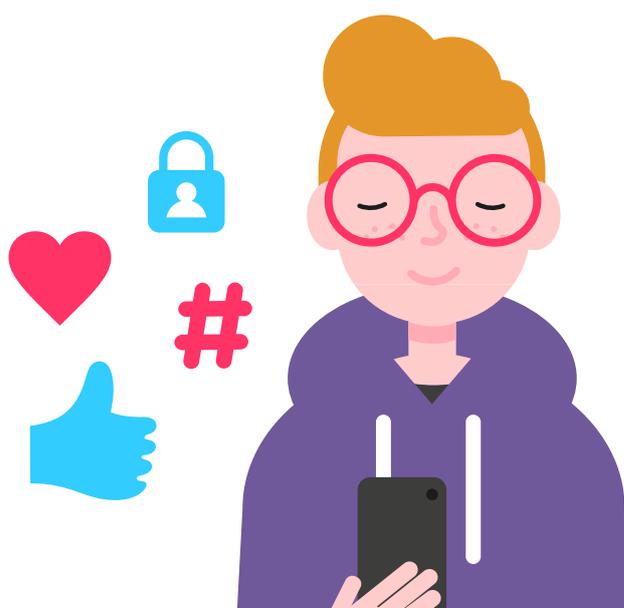
3. What needs to happen now

Listening to the comments of teens and their parents, it is clear that young people who reflect on their online activity and take proactive steps to fine tune their digital habits have a greater sense of agency and therefore improved wellbeing. But this does not mean that they can do so without help.

There is a role for governments to set digital standards and facilitate digital literacy skills, for industry to enable safety and agency through design and for parents and carers to provide young people with guidance and support when they need it. All of us have a part to play in supporting young people and families to feel empowered and in control online.

Government and regulators can champion wellbeing and agency as well as risk reduction and safety. Across the UK (Online Safety Bill) and Europe (Digital Services Act, NetzDG) there is an endeavour to introduce greater online regulation, but the focus has tended to be on safety and harm reduction rather than wellbeing (although there are notable exceptions, such as the UK's Age Appropriate Design Code, otherwise known as the Children's Code). While keeping young people safe is an important goal, there is a need to balance protecting young people from harm with maintaining their access to the benefits of digital participation, as made clear in General Comment 25 from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.[6] When it comes to wellbeing, government and regulators can take action to enhance support for media literacy education in schools and engage with platforms on the tools they can offer 'by design' to help young people have agency and support their wellbeing.

Industry can look to the Age Appropriate Design Code and support user agency through service design, with solutions informed by families and new tools that are clearly explained and easily used. In the Family Panels research, the provision of data, statistics and information on device usage was particularly favoured across all markets, liked by teens because it allowed transparency and control over their actions, and by parents because it was easy to understand and information they could discuss with their children.

Parents and carers can use available resources to support young people's engagement with technology in a managed way, rather than relying on restricting access. Safety online is incredibly important but requires opportunities to build digital skills and be supported to learn to identify, manage and recover from risk.

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6. General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment. UN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRC/Pages/GCChildrensRightsRelationDigitalEnvironment.aspx

Feature: 7 Questions for Reflecting on Digital Habits

Whether you are a young person just starting to learn how to manage your screen time, a parent looking for new ways to manage your own device usage or a family looking to improve your approach to time spent online together, we can all improve our wellbeing with greater agency over the time we spend using screens.

The following reflective questions can help us take control and be more intentional in how we use our digital time. These questions can help us be mindful of what we are doing, why we are doing it, what we are happy with and what we want to change.

Before Use

What do I want to get out of this time online?
Do you want to connect with friends? Relax? Be entertained? By thinking about what you hope to get out of something before you start it will be easier to reflect on what is influencing your behaviour and whether the experience worked out as you hoped.

Are there other things I should be doing?
What do I need to prioritise? What is the best order to do things in? All of us need to balance what we want to do, with what we need to do – sometimes we're lucky and they are the same thing! This quick check before starting an activity can help make sure it won't negatively impact another part of your day.

Will this activity enhance the rest of my day?
Could you try out a recipe you saw online for a meal with friends later? Could you create content based on your skills, experiences or interests? Would a friend or family member be interested in being involved in what you're doing? By thinking about how everything in our day might fit together, we make the most of what we do.

During Use

How am I feeling – at the start, during and at the end?
Has how I'm feeling changed? Do I feel better or worse? Do I feel how I expected to? What affected how I felt? Taking a moment to consider how you feel before, during and after an activity is a great habit to get into and can help you be mindful of how it is affecting your wellbeing, both positively and negatively.

After Use

How did I spend my time?
Did you learn something new? Did you watch something someone else made? Did you create something yourself? Thinking about what we did, and not just how long we did something, can help us understand our motivations and be more conscious about our actions in future.

Did I do what I set out to do?
Did you have a plan and stick to it? Did you have no plan, and where did that take you? Did you expect to do what you did? What guided your actions? Reflecting in this way can help us understand our behaviour and what can affect us.

Could my experience have been better?
What went well? What didn't go well? Why? Thinking about what could be done differently next time or what gave you the most joy in an activity can help you shape your next experience for the better!

Related resources from Internet Matters

Digital Toolkit

Personalised advice for families from the answers to a few simple questions, organised by things to do if they have a little or a lot of time.

Conversation starters

Advice to help parents and carers have regular conversations with their child to help them open up about and manage their digital lives.

Balanced Digital Diet guide

Simple tips for parents and carers to help their children maintain healthy online habits and digital balance.

Age specific screen time guides

- 0–5-year-olds

- 5-7-year-olds

- 7-11-year-olds

- 11-14-year-olds

- 14-year-olds and over

Expert opinion: managing screen time

Guidance for parents and carers from a range of experts on how to recognise when screen time may be affecting young people's wellbeing and how to help them develop good digital habits.

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