EVERYBODY BENEFITS: EMPLOYEE GUIDE

Growing up online

Supporting the mental wellbeing of children and young people in a digital world

Children, teens and screens!

As 99% of children spend time online and 9 in 10 own a mobile phone by the age of 11, it comes as no surprise that YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok and Roblox are now firmly part of the family.

Apps, social media, online gaming and virtual worlds can help children and young people stay connected, learn new skills, express creativity and even relax. They can support confidence, education, friendships and a sense of belonging to the in-crowd.

But what about the downside?

Almost one million pre-school children are already active on social media platforms designed for teenagers and adults. Screen time is becoming increasingly synonymous with negative news for our Generation Zs and Alphas.

Evidence shows that excessive or unmanaged digital use can have a big impact on their mental wellbeing during their formative years. It is fast becoming the number one culprit for rises in depression, behavioural problems, bullying, anxiety and sleep deprivation amongst the younger generation.

Emotional dysregulation and social withdrawal are increasingly linked to how, when and why young people engage online. That's why the 'digital pandemic' needs to be nipped in the bud before harmful habits take hold at such an impressionable age.

3 in 5

secondary school-aged children have been contacted online in a way that potentially made them feel uncomfortable

The digital dilemma

The harsh reality is that the digital world is evolving far faster than children's ability to cope and keep up with it.

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable because their brains are still developing, and their sense of identity is forming at a time when peer approval and 'fitting in' carries a lot of emotional weight.

Algorithms designed to maximise engagement can intensify emotional responses and reinforce harmful comparisons, often without adults realising what is happening from the discomfort of their omnipresent screens, tablets, smart phones and watches.

For families, these digital disruptions do not stay online – they infiltrate everyday family life, influencing mood, routines, communication and relationships at home.

This guide explores the warning signs that digital use is becoming unhealthy. We also share practical steps to promote healthier digital habits that support mental wellbeing.

9 in 10

children own a
mobile phone by
the age of 11

Spotting the signs:

6 ways unbalanced digital use can affect mental health

1

Anxiety and stress

Fear of missing out (FOMO), constant checking and pressure to respond quickly.

2

Low self-esteem

Comparison with fake images and 'perfect' lives leads to body image pressures and not feeling 'enough'.

3

Sleep problems

This can lead to irritability and low mood.

4

Emotional dysregulation

Mood swings, anger when asked to stop and difficulty tolerating boredom.

5

Social withdrawal

Pulling away from offline 'real' friends, hobbies or activities and using screens to avoid real-world interactions.

6

Attention difficulties

Frequent switching between apps and content can make it harder to focus in social and educational environments.

6 in 10

children aged 8-12 who use social media platforms are signed up with their own profile

9 practical ways to promote healthier digital habits

1

Focus on balance, not bans

- Boundaries work better when they're specific so try 'no phones after 9pm', rather than vague 'less screen time' or extreme 'I'm confiscating your phone all week.'

2

Agree clear boundaries

- Device-free bedrooms overnight (charge phones outside of bedrooms).
- A 'wind-down' period before sleep.
- Mealtimes or family times are device-free times for everyone.

3

Replace, don't just remove

- If you reduce screen time, swap it for something they enjoy, so it doesn't feel like a punishment. A short walk, cooking together, music, sport, crafts…

99%

of children spend time online

8-14 year-olds spend an average of almost 3 hours online each day

4

Use age-appropriate settings and controls

- Check if apps, social media platforms or games are appropriate for your child's age or maturity level
- Use child accounts/profiles where available
- Set up parental controls, screen time limits, content filters and spending restrictions
- Review privacy settings together regularly

5

Lead by example

- Children notice adult behaviour. Put your own phone away during meals or family time
- Turn off non-essential notifications
- Remove social apps from the home screen
- Use built-in screen time tools (time limits, downtime, content filters)

6

Teach digital self-awareness

Encourage them to open up and notice what different online activities do to their mood:

- 'Which apps leave you calmer or more anxious?'
- 'Are you scrolling because you're bored, lonely, stressed or avoiding something?'

7

Encourage positive social media use

- Follow accounts by role models that focus on hobbies, humour, creativity and wellbeing
- Unfollow/mute accounts that trigger comparison or body image pressures
- Remind them that likes, comments and followers don't equal real-life worth

8

Foster healthier gaming habits

- Regular breaks (especially after intense rounds)
- Keep gaming social, not solitary
- Balance competitive play with calmer games
- Keep an eye on 'tilt' (playing while angry/frustrated)
- Agree rules for spending while gaming

9

Conversations that reduce defensiveness

- Try 'help me understand what you enjoy about it', instead of the accusatory 'you're addicted' or 'it's rotting your brain'
- Talk about their online life in casual settings rather than during moments of conflict or tension. Make it part of the everyday conversation

97%

of 8-17 year-olds
play online games

Digitally diligent: making the online space safer

These concerns have reached crisis point in many countries. At the end of 2025, Australia became the first country to introduce a nationwide ban on social media accounts for children under 16, placing legal responsibility on platforms to prevent access. Many are lobbying for the UK to follow suit.

In the meantime, the UK's Protection of Children Codes of Practice came into force in July 2025 which demands that websites and apps must take steps to prevent children from accessing harmful content relating to suicide, self-harm, eating disorders and pornography.

They must also protect children from misogynistic, violent, hateful or abusive material, online bullying and inciting dangerous challenges.

These steps include age checks and ensuring this content doesn't appear in children's 'for you' feeds and they must also have improved reporting tools.

These initiatives recognise that young people may not have the emotional maturity or resilience to navigate highly addictive, competitive or comparison-driven online environments safely.

YouTube and Snapchat account for around half the time online for 8-14 year-olds

Take control

Children

7 in 10 children report experiencing online harm that made them feel uncomfortable, including contact from strangers, hate speech and misinformation. However, only 36% took action by reporting it.

Children should be educated about using platform tools like the 'dislike' button, reporting content, blocking the person who posted the content or telling an adult.

Parents

Worryingly, two-thirds of parents don't use any form of broadband parental controls and three-quarters do not use safe search settings. 8 in 10 parents also say they feel overwhelmed when it comes to keeping their children safe online.

Sources of support

Parents can help their children stay safer on their devices with the ABC online safety checklist where you can find age-specific guidance.

→ FIND OUT MORE

The NSPCC also has many valuable resources to guide parents through the maze of online safety – from setting parental controls through to talking to children about grooming and how to report their concerns.

→ FIND OUT MORE

If you need extra mental health support, consider speaking to a GP or a qualified mental health professional.

7 in 10

children report experiencing online harm that made them feel uncomfortable, but only 36% reported it

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