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Student wellbeing in the digital age

How do we find the balance when it comes to technology & students who are in a critical developmental period? The answer is introducing a solid digital literacy strategy in your classroom.

Todays digital landscape: Opportunities & challenges

Widespread internet availability has profoundly changed how we connect, communicate, and access information.

The good: Opportunities of digital technology

Digital platforms offer numerous benefits that can positively contribute to student wellbeing and learning:

- Connectivity and communication: Digital technologies provide a medium for people to connect and communicate from virtually anywhere, fostering a sense of belonging and emotional support. This is particularly positive for minority communities as students can access peers with shared experiences.
- Access to Information: The digital age has largely democratised access to information, providing students with a wealth of knowledge and resources at their fingertips, encouraging intellectual curiosity and personal growth.
- Accessibility and Inclusion: Widespread access promotes inclusivity and enhances educational opportunities, allowing students to connect, learn, and access resources from virtually anywhere. However, it's important to address the digital divide to ensure equal access for all students.

The bad: Challenges to wellbeing in a digital world

Despite the benefits, the pervasive nature of digital technology is not without its challenges, which can impact cognitive, physical, and psychological wellbeing. Research shows statistically significant negative correlations between the amount of screen time (especially on smartphones) and measures of psychological wellbeing. Adolescents with more screen time report lower levels of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and happiness.

On the next page you will find some key areas of difficulty that are worth bringing your students' attention to.

- Sleep disruption: Phones and laptops in the bedroom severely affect circadian rhythms, compromising the quality and quantity of sleep, which impacts every aspect of cognitive and physical wellbeing.

- Cyberbullying & harassment: Increased accessibility makes individuals more susceptible to anonymous harassment, intensifying cyberbullying.

- Body image & comparison: The rising prominence of social media and beauty standards has correlated with a surge in body image issues, self-acceptance struggles, and disordered eating patterns. Constant exposure to others' curated online lives can lead to feelings of "not good enough" unless keeping up, resulting in self-criticism and fear of bullying for not following trends.

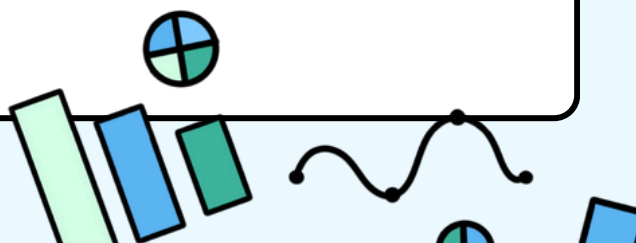
- Distraction, addiction & regulation: Social media and gaming platforms trigger the release of dopamine (pleasure/reward neurotransmitter), leading to a pursuit of instant gratification–a pattern observed in addiction behaviours. Removal of access can elicit reactions similar to those seen in substance abuse. Excessive screen time during adolescence can disrupt neuroplasticity leading to decreased attention spans and impacting the development of social and emotional skills. The constant barrage of notifications and rapid task-switching disrupts the ability to concentrate and engage in deep, sustained thinking, leading to difficulty with sustained attention and reduced opportunity for building emotional tolerance.

It's essential to foster open communication with young people about the potential consequences of excessive technology use and to establish reasonable guidelines for screen time and social media consumption to promote a well-rounded and healthy development during this crucial stage of life. So how do we advocate for positive engagement and digital wellbeing outcomes?

The role of digital technology in wellbeing support

Research indicates that digital technology can be used successfully to assess, monitor, and support interventions for student wellbeing and mental health.

- Assessment & monitoring: Using devices for electronic surveys and questionnaires is easy to administer and cost, and time-saving. Students are often more engaged, open, and honest in online surveys compared to paper-based ones, due to the ease of use, discrete nature, and increased autonomy.



- Interventions: Digital tools such as apps and interactive games can deliver timely therapy activities, psycho-education, and reflections (e.g., mindfulness, gratitude, cognitive behavioural therapy, mood trackers, strength trackers, dialectical behaviour therapy skills).
- Student preference: Students are more likely to engage in digital interventions because of reduced stigma, greater autonomy, and familiarity.
- Effectiveness: Studies show that digital interventions can be beneficial for students struggling with self-harm, emotion regulation, anxiety, depression, social skills, and decreasing the use of recreational drugs.

Schools and educators can integrate digital technology alongside in-person pastoral care to monitor student wellbeing and deliver more effective and better-timed interventions.

Building digital resilience: Digital literacy & empathy

To find the balance, schools must introduce a solid digital literacy strategy. This involves teaching students about digital agency, risk, and digital safety to help them make informed decisions and protect their digital wellbeing.

Step 1: Building digital literacy

Digital literacy encourages critical thinking about online information and the safe use of technology, fostering responsible digital citizens. Below is a collection of topics you can use to facilitate conversations with your students.

Topic	Key discussion points with students
Personal information protection	Why we need to safeguard full names, addresses, phone numbers, & school details. Emphasising how to create strong, unique passwords & the risks of easily guessable ones.
Online privacy	Educating about privacy settings & the implications of sharing personal information publicly. Discussing the concept of "digital footprint" & its lasting trace.
Social media & reputation	Understanding that online actions and posts impact reputation (now and future). Discussing the potential consequences of sharing inappropriate content or engaging in cyberbullying.
Cyberbullying & harassment	Teaching about the negative impact on mental health & wellbeing. Encouraging reporting & providing resources for seeking help.

Topic	Key discussion points with students
Critical thinking & media literacy	Training students to critically evaluate online information, identify AI-created content or fake news, and verify the credibility of sources. Teaching them to question sensational or biased content.
Recognising online scams	Discussing common online scams, phishing attempts, and fraudulent schemes. Teaching caution when sharing personal or financial information.
Online relationships & communication	Discussing the importance of respectful and responsible communication. Highlighting the risks of sharing personal information or engaging in inappropriate conversations with strangers.
Safe online gaming	Teaching about the potential risks (inappropriate content, interactions with strangers). Encouraging age-appropriate content guidelines and settings.
Reporting & seeking help	Informing students about reporting mechanisms on platforms and websites. Providing resources for seeking help in unsafe or uncomfortable situations.

Step 2: Building digital empathy

Digital empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others in the digital world, treating people online with kindness and respect. It involves recognising the real people behind screens and text. Teaching this is pivotal in managing cyberbullying, as it encourages students to think twice before posting hurtful comments.

Ideas for building digital empathy:

- Media analysis: Analyse online content and social media posts, discussing the impact of positive and negative messages.
- Classroom discussions: Create a safe space for students to discuss digital interactions, share experiences, and reflect on the consequences of their online actions.
- Media literacy: Teach students to critically evaluate online content, discern between reliable and harmful sources, and emphasise the importance of respectful communication.

Finding the equilibrium between embracing technology and nurturing digital literacy is a critical endeavour. This is a community effort; there is a role for teachers, students, and the wider school community in protecting digital wellbeing. Collaboration is key to creating a "safety net" so that digital technologies can be used for good.