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OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
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Subject:	Council conclusions on promoting and protecting the mental health of children and adolescents in the digital era

Delegations will find in the Annex the Council conclusions on promoting and protecting the mental health of children and adolescents in the digital era approved by the EPSCO Council (Health) at its meeting on 20 June 2025.

Draft Council conclusions on promoting and protecting the mental health of children and adolescents in the digital era

Introduction

Digital technologies¹ have the potential to enhance mental health by providing access to information, support networks and remote therapy services, and the power to negatively affect mental health², notably among children and adolescents³.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to foster the safer and healthier use of digital tools by children and adolescents which prioritises protecting their mental health, by promoting media and digital literacy together with social and emotional skills, and by creating a healthier, safer and age-appropriate digital environment through close collaboration with key stakeholders, including policymakers, local authorities and the digital industry as well as families, caregivers, educators, healthcare professionals, other adults working with children and adolescents, and youth representatives.

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- ¹ 'Digital technology' is used here as a catch-all term and refers to digital devices (i.e. computers, tablets, mobile phones, smartwatches) as well as digitally mediated activities that children and adolescents engage in via these devices (i.e. internet use, social networking, chatting online or playing games). See more in: Kardefelt-Winther, D., 'How does the time children spend using digital technology impact their mental well-being, social relationships and physical activity? An evidence- focused literature review', Innocenti Discussion Paper, 2017-02, December 2017, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/8181/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Time-Using-Digital-Tech-Impact-on-Wellbeing-2017.pdf>.
- ² European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a comprehensive approach to mental health, COM(2023) 298 final, 7 June 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2023:298:FIN>.
- ³ In this document the category 'children' refers to young children (children who have not started primary school education) and school-age children (children attending primary school), while the category 'adolescents' refers to those attending middle schools, secondary schools and high schools.

Those involved in digital design must take more responsibility and must evaluate the potential consequences of their choices, including risks and threats to children's and adolescents' mental health. By embedding safety, privacy, transparency, diversity and trustworthiness of high-quality content and the user's well-being into the design process from the outset, the creators and providers of digital technologies can help mitigate negative effects on mental health and foster a safer and balanced online environment for children and adolescents.

Finally, recent global and regional challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the escalation of armed conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, the persistent climate crisis and unexpected emergencies, have compounded the stressors impacting mental health, particularly for children and adolescents. Those challenges have been further intensified by the growing influence and rapid development of digital technologies and online environments, including social media, and by the associated rise in problematic online design practices⁴ which try to influence users or exploit children's and adolescents' vulnerabilities⁵. These developments necessitate a coordinated response at European level⁶.

⁴ For example dark patterns or addictive designs.

⁵ European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, Lupiáñez-Villanueva, F., Boluda, A., Bogliacino, F., Liva, G. et al., Behavioural study on unfair commercial practices in the digital environment – Dark patterns and manipulative personalisation – Final report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/859030>.

⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased the time children spent online, with schools, cultural and social life shifting online. See more in: European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: EU strategy on the rights of the child, COM(2021) 142 final, 24 March 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0142>.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

RECALLING

1. That there is no health without mental health, which is defined by the WHO as a ‘state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community’⁷.
2. Article 168(1) of the TFEU, which indicates, inter alia, that Union action should be directed towards preventing mental illness⁸.
3. All children’s and adolescents’ right to health, including mental health, as enshrined in international law, in particular the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child^{9,10} and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU¹¹.

⁷ World Health Organization, ‘Mental Health’, World Health Organization website, accessed 20 January 2025, https://www.who.int/health-topics/mental-health#tab=tab_1.

⁸ Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2012/oj.

⁹ Article 17 of which recognises the right of the child to have access to information that promotes well-being, but also explicitly mentions the protection of the child from content that is detrimental to well-being, Article 24 of which declares the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, and Article 27 of which underlines the ‘right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development’. See more in: United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 September 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/crc.pdf>.

¹⁰ In addition, General comment No 25 by the Committee on the Rights of the Child states that all children’s rights should be promoted, respected, protected and fulfilled in the digital environment, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/media/10596/file>.

¹¹ Article 24 of which recognises that children are entitled to ‘protection and care as is necessary for their well-being’, and that the child’s best interests must be the primary consideration for public authorities and private institutions. See more in: OJ C 303, 14.12.2007, p. 1–16, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/char_2007/oj.

4. That in recent years, the European Union has prioritised the topic of mental health on its agenda and, consequently, the mental health of children and adolescents has received increased attention^{12,13,14,15,2,16,17,18}, including in the 2022 European Year of Youth, the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027)¹⁹, the European education area flagship initiative Pathways to school success²⁰, and the Digital Education Action Plan²¹.

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- ¹² Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on the future of the European Health Union: A Europe that cares, prepares, protects, 11597/24, 26 June 2024, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11597-2024-INIT/en/pdf>.
- ¹³ Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on mental health, 15971/23, 30 November 2023, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15971-2023-INIT/en/pdf>.
- ¹⁴ Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States on a comprehensive approach to the mental health of young people in the European Union, OJ C, C/2023/1337, 30.11.2023, ELI: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/1337/oj>.
- ¹⁵ European Parliament: Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, Cerdas, S., ‘Report on mental health’, 2023/2074(INI), 17 November 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0367_EN.html.
- ¹⁶ European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Wellbeing and mental health at school – Guidelines for education policymakers, school leaders, teachers and educators, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/590>, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/supporting-wellbeing-at-school-new-guidelines-for-policymakers-and-educators>.
- ¹⁷ Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on strengthening women’s and girls’ mental health by promoting gender equality, 16366/24, 2 December 2024, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16366-2024-INIT/en/pdf>.
- ¹⁸ Joint Declaration of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade, OJ C 23, 23.1.2023, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2023_023_R_0001.
- ¹⁹ Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, OJ C 456, 18.12.2018, p. 1–22, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A42018Y1218%2801%29>.
- ²⁰ European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Pathways to school success, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/477763>.
- ²¹ European Commission, European Education Area - Digital Education, 'Digital Education Action Plan', European Commission website, 23 November 2023, accessed on 20 May 2025, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>.

5. The EU strategy on the rights of the child, which recognises the importance of good mental health for children's development²², and the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, which places a special focus on mental health²³.
6. The Commission's Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health, which recognises childhood as a crucial stage in life, stressing the long-lasting impact of mental health challenges during childhood on individuals, communities and societies as well as the key role played by families², their socio-economic resources as well as their environment in general.
7. The Council Conclusions on strengthening women's and girls' mental health by promoting gender equality that highlight the negative impact of cyberbullying, misinformation, disinformation, and exposure to unrealistic beauty standards on the mental health of children and adolescents¹⁷.

²² European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: EU strategy on the rights of the child, COM(2021) 142 final, 24 March 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0142>.

²³ Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee, OJ L 223, 22.06.2021, ELI: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reco/2021/1004/oj>.

8. The recent legislative and non-legislative work undertaken by the Union on making the digital world safer for children and adolescents^{24,25,26,27,28,29} and on combating online child sexual abuse^{30,31}.

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- ²⁴ Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) OJ L 277, 27.10.2022, p.1, ELI: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj>.
- ²⁵ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Digital Decade for children and youth: the new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+), COM(2022) 212 final, 11 May 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52022DC0212>.
- ²⁶ European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2021 on children's rights in view of the EU strategy on the rights of the child, OJ C 474, 24.11.2021, p. 146-155 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2021_474_R_0017.
- ²⁷ Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on media literacy in an ever-changing world, OJ C, 2020/C 193/06, 9.06.2020, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020XG0609\(04\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020XG0609(04)).
- ²⁸ Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) in view of changing market realities, OJ L 303, 2018/1808, 28.11.2018, p. 69, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2018/1808/oj>.
- ²⁹ Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act), PE/24/2024/REV/1, OJ L, 2024/1689, 12.7.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj>.
- ³⁰ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, COM(2020) 607 final, 24 July 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0607>.
- ³¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/1232 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 July 2021 on a temporary derogation from certain provisions of Directive 2002/58/EC as regards the use of technologies by providers of number-independent interpersonal communications services for the processing of personal and other data for the purpose of combating online child sexual abuse, amended by Regulation (EU) 2024/1307 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2024, PE/38/2021/REV/1, OJ L 274, 30.7.2021, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/1232/oj>.

9. The Digital Services Act, which, amongst others, imposes requirements on online platforms to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors using their services²⁴, and obliges very large online platforms to conduct regular risk assessment and risk mitigation in connection with systemic risks to the respect for the rights of the child and to the protection of minors from negative consequences to their physical and mental well-being; the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, which, amongst others, provides a specific framework with safeguards against harmful audiovisual content, including content provided on video-sharing platforms, and also obliges Member States to ensure that audiovisual media services providers and video-sharing platform providers under their jurisdiction take appropriate measures to protect minors from any programmes or user-generated videos and audiovisual commercial communications which may impair their physical, mental or moral development²⁸; the new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+), which includes measures to support mental well-being online and age-appropriate designs, aims to raise awareness of and build capacity in respect to online risks, such as cyberbullying, misinformation and disinformation, and promotes healthy and responsible behaviour online²⁵ and the Artificial Intelligence Act, which sets horizontal and risk-based rules for how artificial intelligence (AI) can be developed and used in the Union in all domains and sectors, aims to ensure a high-level of fundamental rights protection and safety, and takes into consideration the specific rights of children, including by explicitly prohibiting AI systems that exploit the vulnerabilities of children online²⁹ and by implementing proportionate and effective safeguards for high-risk AI systems.

10. The Council conclusions on supporting well-being in digital education, which call on Member States to strengthen learners' and educators' well-being when designing national policies and strategies in digital education and to support schools in developing appropriate time management as regards digital and face-to-face teaching and learning activities³².
11. The Council conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship, which encourage Member States to enhance effective media and digital literacy, in view of the increasing challenges that children and adolescents face in digital contexts and online, relating to issues such as digital security and privacy, cyberbullying, disinformation, hate speech and radicalisation³³.
12. The Commission's Preparedness Union Strategy, which aims at integrating preparedness into school curricula, at training educational staff to help develop essential preparedness skills, such as media and digital literacy, and at increasing awareness about risks and threats, notably by countering misinformation³⁴.
13. The Council conclusions on the promotion of motor skills and physical and sports activities for children, which emphasise the link between physical activity and the mental well-being of children and adolescents³⁵.

³² Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on supporting well-being in digital education, 2022/C 469/04, 9.12.2022, ELI: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022XG1209\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022XG1209(01)).

³³ Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship, *OJ C*, C/2023/1419, 1.12.2023, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/1419/oj>.

³⁴ European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Preparedness Union Strategy, JOIN(2025) 130 final, 26 March 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JC0130>.

³⁵ Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on the promotion of motor skills, physical and sport activities for children, *OJ C*, 2015/C 417/09, 15.12.2015, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52015XG1215%2807%29>.

14. The Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on lifelong physical activity, which stress the impact of physical activity on mental health during childhood³⁶.
15. That these Council Conclusions are without prejudice to the negotiations on the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework.

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT

16. The mental well-being of children and adolescents can allow them to achieve developmental milestones³⁷, learn about ways to cope with problems, regulate their own emotions, acquire social and emotional competences, establish secure and nurturing relationships with peers and adults, succeed at school, develop a strong sense of self-worth and build up the self- confidence and self-identity they will need to thrive³⁵.
17. Up to 20 % of children worldwide experience mental health issues²² and 9 million adolescents (aged between 10 and 19 years) live with mental disorders in Europe³⁸, which – if untreated – severely influence their development, educational attainment and potential to live fulfilling lives.

³⁶ Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on lifelong physical activity, OJ C, 2021/C 501 I/01, 13.12.2021,

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2021_501_I_0001.

³⁷ SOS Children's Villages, 'A truly comprehensive EU approach to mental health: Putting children and families' wellbeing at the centre', September 2024,

<https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/677b48e5-a312-4454-bc0a-766057acbf30/Briefing-note-mental-health-SOS-CVI>.

³⁸ United Nations Children's Fund, The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health, UNICEF, New York, October 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/media/114636/file/SOWC-2021-full-report-English.pdf>.

18. The causes of mental health challenges often develop in early childhood, and around half of all mental disorders appear before the age of 14, thereby demonstrating the utmost importance of this stage of life in an individual's development³⁷. Likewise, adolescence is a crucial period for developing social and emotional habits that promote mental well-being. Even in cases when mental health challenges develop later in life, early experiences are formative and, if these are difficult, they can contribute to the development of mental disorders at any age.
19. Today, the daily lives of children and adolescents increasingly take place in digital environments, and it is therefore crucial that their rights in the digital world are safeguarded to the same degree as in the physical world.
20. The rapid development of digital technologies offers plenty of benefits for children and adolescents related to education, entertainment and communication, such as for instance options for personalised learning, developing their digital skills and competences or access to virtual communities. These benefits contribute to the creation of social connections, especially among adolescents, which can strengthen their mental health³⁹ and overall well-being. They can also contribute positively to preventive campaigns geared towards children and adolescents, such as suicide prevention campaigns.

³⁹ An example of these benefits is playing games responsibly that can benefit mental health by sharpening reflexes, boosting mood and letting players explore new identities and emotions. Online games can also help build global connections, especially for those who struggle with socialising. See more in: Mental Health Europe, 'Report on Digitalisation in Mental Health, Mental health in the digital age: Applying a human rights based, psychosocial approach as compass', December 2022, <https://www.mhe-sme.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Mental-health-in-the-digital-age-Applying-a-human-rights-based-psychosocial-approach-as-compass.pdf>.

21. At the same time, the abovementioned rapid development of digital technologies poses a threat of still partly unknown scope and consequences to the overall mental well-being of children and adolescents. Therefore, more research is needed to properly assess its impact on the developing brain and personality, including cognitive abilities and skills, as well as its potential behavioural consequences⁴⁰, especially with reference to children and adolescents in vulnerable situations.
22. The risks associated with the expansion of digital technologies for children's and adolescents' mental health may be high, therefore it seems prudent that until enough research is conducted, preventive measures should be taken to mitigate the potential risks, based on the current scientific evidence. Such measures can include for example integrating the teaching of social-emotional skills and stress coping mechanisms into the educational system, regulating practices already known to be addictive and manipulative, as well as supporting parents by providing them with the appropriate information and tools so that children and adolescents learn how to navigate the digital world in a safe and empowered manner.
23. Regulatory and educational systems must better address these challenges in order to ensure children and adolescents benefit from its opportunities, while at the same time its potential adverse impact on their mental health is prevented and mitigated.
24. In most cases it is not the digitalisation itself or the use of digital technologies per se that is the problem, but rather a group of digital determinants, such as, for example, user, conduct, environment, content and design, which may influence children's and adolescents' mental health.

⁴⁰ European Public Health Alliance, Farah, L., 'Strengthening countries' cooperation to safeguard children and adolescents from screen addiction and to protect mental health', European Public Health Alliance website, 24 September 2024, accessed on 21 January 2025, <https://epha.org/strengthening-countries-cooperation-to-safeguard-children-and-adolescent-from-screen-addiction-and-protect-mental-health/>.

25. Children and adolescents as users of digital technology constitute a vulnerable group especially prone to becoming victims of cybercrime (e.g. identity theft, extortion, child sexual abuse), manipulative and/or addictive design practices, illegal use of personal data, or entering into activities which are inappropriate or illegal for them (e.g. viewing adult content, gambling online and within online games (e.g. so called loot boxes), purchasing alcohol, tobacco and similar products¹⁴, or betting online). Children and adolescents can also be vulnerable to online recruitment for the purpose of further exploitation, and girls are particularly exposed to the risk of gender-based cyber violence, including cyber harassment⁴¹, while children with disabilities are especially exposed to cyber bullying and violence⁴².

⁴¹ Sala, A., Porcaro, L. Gomez, E., ‘Social Media Use and adolescents’ mental health and well-being: An umbrella review’, Computers in Human Behavior Reports, March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100404>.

⁴² Barringer-Brown, Ch., ‘Cyber bullying among Students with Serious Emotional and Specific Learning Disabilities’, Journal of Education and Human Development, June 2015, Vol. 4, No. 2(1), <https://jehdnet.com/vol-4-no-2-1-june-2015-abstract-4-jehd/>.

26. In terms of conduct, providing access to digital technologies for young children, either too early, non-gradually or without proper supervision, may impair their cognitive and mental development⁴³, while the misuse or excessive use of digital technologies by school-age children and adolescents may lead to mental issues, for instance by limiting social interactions offline⁴⁴, by leading to social isolation⁴⁵ and loneliness⁴⁶, by having a negative impact on cognitive abilities⁴⁷, by forming a gaming disorder⁴⁸ or by transforming into a behavioural addiction⁴⁹.

⁴³ World Health Organization., Guidelines on physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep for children under 5 years of age, World Health Organization, 2019, <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/311664>.

⁴⁴ Mental Health Europe, ‘Report on Digitalisation in Mental Health, Mental health in the digital age: Applying a human rights based, psychosocial approach as compass’, December 2022, <https://www.mhe-sme.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Mental-health-in-the-digital-age-Applying-a-human-rights-based-psychosocial-approach-as-compass.pdf>.

⁴⁵ World Health Organisation, WHO infographic ‘Social isolation and loneliness affect people of all ages, worldwide’, WHO website, 15 November 2023, accessed 20 May 2025. <https://www.who.int/multi-media/details/social-isolation-and-loneliness-affect-people-of-all-ages--worldwide>.

⁴⁶ European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2024): EU Loneliness Survey. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC) [Dataset] PID: <http://data.europa.eu/89h/82e60986-9987-4610-ab4a-84f0f5a9193b>.

⁴⁷ Small, G. W., Lee, J., Kaufman, A., Jalil, J., Siddarth, P. et al., ‘Brain health consequences of digital technology use’, Dialogues in clinical neuroscience, Vol. 22, Issue 2, 2020, pp. 179–187, <https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2020.22.2/gsmall>.

⁴⁸ World Health Organization, website, accessed 15 April 2025, <https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/frequently-asked-questions/gaming-disorder>.

⁴⁹ The misuse and excessive use of digital technologies, especially social media, resemble a pattern of behaviour characterised by addiction-like symptoms, including an inability to control usage, experiencing withdrawal when not using such technologies, neglecting other activities in favour of using digital technologies, and facing negative consequences in daily life due to excessive use. See more in: World Health Organization, ‘Teens, screens and mental health’, World Health Organization website, 25 September 2024, accessed 20 January 2025, <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/25-09-2024-teens--screens-and-mental-health>.

27. The misuse or excessive use of digital technologies by children and adolescents can also have an adverse impact on their physical health, for example by resulting in reduced physical activity⁵⁰, contributing to the formation or aggravation of a sedentary lifestyle as well as poor eating habits, which both can lead to obesity⁵¹, problems with sleep⁵², cause visual impairments (especially myopia), or lead to the development of musculoskeletal disorders⁵³. All these factors also risk worsening mental health and overall well-being.
28. Environments where digital devices are used excessively by children's and adolescents' parents, educators or caregivers can lead to a technology-based interruption in the formation of proper adult-child interactions (technoference) and disrupt the development of life skills, which are essential for mental well-being⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ Kardefelt-Winther, D., Rees, G., & Livingstone, S., 'Contextualising the link between adolescents' use of digital technology and their mental health: a multi-country study of time spent online and life satisfaction', *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry, and allied disciplines*, Vol. 61, Issue 8, 2020, pp. 875–889, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13280>.

⁵¹ Poor eating habits may result in the development of dyslipidemias and diabetes as well as in the formation of overweight and obesity. See more in: Aghasi, M., Matinfar, A., Golzarand, M., Salari- Moghaddam, A., & Ebrahimpour-Koujan, S., 'Internet Use in Relation to Overweight and Obesity: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Cross-Sectional Studies', *Advances in nutrition*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, 2020, pp. 349–356, <https://doi.org/10.1093/advances/nmz073>.

⁵² Sleep is a crucial factor for mental health, and one of the primary adverse effects of the use of digital technologies among children and adolescents is reduced length of sleep and lower quality of sleep. See more in: Stanković, M., Nesic, M., Cicevic, S., & Shi, Z., 'Association of smartphone use with depression, anxiety, stress, sleep quality, and internet addiction. Empirical evidence from a smartphone application', *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 168, January 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110342>.

⁵³ Tereshchenko S., Kasparov E., Manchuk V., Evert L., Zaitseva O. et al., 'Recurrent pain symptoms among adolescents with generalized and specific problematic internet use: A large-scale cross- sectional study', *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, Vol. 16, December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100506>.

⁵⁴ McDaniel, B.T., Radesky, J. S., 'Technoference: Parent Distraction with Technology and Associations with Child Behavior Problems', *Child Development*, Vol. 89(1), May 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12822>.

29. With regard to the content that is being viewed by children and adolescents, two categories can be distinguished. The first is the quality of the content presented in social media and similar platforms, which may well be age-appropriate, but because of how it is actually delivered (e.g. the frequency with which it is displayed to users) and because of particular design features aiming to increase users' engagement, it can have a negative impact on an individual's self-esteem³² or self-confidence, increase levels of stress and anxiety⁵⁵, lead to the development or exacerbation of mental disorders such as depression⁵⁶, behavioural disorders such as hyperactivity/inattention⁵⁷ and contribute to the formation of negative body image and the development of eating disorders⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ Karim, F., Oyewande, A. A., Abdalla, L. F., Chaudhry Ehsanullah, R., & Khan, S., 'Social Media Use and Its Connection to Mental Health: A Systematic Review', *Cureus*, Vol. 12, Issue 6, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.8627>.

⁵⁶ Ma, L., Evans, B., Kleppang, A. L., & Hagquist, C., 'The association between screen time and reported depressive symptoms among adolescents in Sweden', *Family practice*, Vol. 38, Issue 6, 2021, pp. 773–779, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/cmab029>.

⁵⁷ United Nations Children's Fund, 'Child and adolescent mental health. The State of Children in the European Union 2024', Policy Brief no 2, February 2024, https://www.unicef.org/eu/media/2806/file/Child_and_adolescent_mental_health_policy_brief.pdf.pdf.

⁵⁸ Marks, R. J., De Foe A. & Collett J., 'The pursuit of wellness: Social media, body image and eating disorders', *Children and youth services review*, Vol. 119, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2020.105659>.

The second type of content is inappropriate content, which refers to situations where children and adolescents are exposed to harmful content such as violence (cyberbullying and cyber harassment)⁵⁹ and extreme violence, sexual materials (pornography)⁶⁰, misinformation and disinformation (including AI-generated images, videos or sound or ‘deepfakes’)⁶¹, hate speech⁶², commercial and non-commercial communication or promotion of the use of unhealthy food and drinks, alcohol, tobacco and similar products¹⁴, or substances which are prohibited (drugs)¹³.

30. The design of a digital product plays a crucial role in shaping user’ experiences and behaviours, particularly for children and adolescents. Thoughtful design can promote ease of use, safety, and privacy, while problematic design choices can expose users to risks that impact their well-being and mental health. In particular, ensuring exposure to a diverse range of content is essential to prevent users from becoming trapped in algorithmic bubbles that reinforce the same perspectives, potentially exacerbating anxiety, isolation, or harmful self- perceptions, especially among children and adolescents. What is more, harmful, misleading and deceptive design practices such as dark patterns, which exploit vulnerabilities and manipulate behaviours, addictive and manipulative designs, which focus on retaining users while encouraging extensive interaction (autoplay, infinite scroll, streaks, notifications, loot boxes and prompts about ‘missing out’), and deceitful personalisation techniques (algorithms), which can be exacerbated by malicious business models, poor corporate governance and bad business choices, lead to the exploitation of children and adolescents in the digital world.

⁵⁹ Including deadly violence, abuse, death, self-harm and suicide.

⁶⁰ Raine, G., Khouja, C., Scott, R., Wright, K., Sowden, A. J., ‘Pornography use and sexting amongst children and young people: a systematic overview of reviews’, *Systematic Reviews*, Vol.9, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01541-0>.

⁶¹ Pilgrim, J., & Vasinda, S., ‘Fake News and the “Wild Wide Web”: A Study of Elementary Students’ Reliability Reasoning’, *Societies*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc11040121>.

⁶² Kansok-Dusche, J., Ballaschk, C., Krause, N., Zeiig, A., Seemann-Herz, L., et al., ‘A Systematic Review on Hate Speech among Children and Adolescents: Definitions, Prevalence, and Overlap with Related Phenomena. Trauma, Violence, & Abuse’, Vol. 24, Issue 4, 2023, pp. 2598-2615, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/15248380221108070>.

31. The population of children and adolescents does not constitute a homogenous group. While factors such as gender⁶³, educational background and socio-economic inequalities⁶⁴ play a significant role in the mental health of children and adolescents, age⁶⁵ appears to be the most important factor when it comes to planning strategies for interventions against the negative impact of the misuse or excessive use of digital technologies on their mental health.

⁶³ Twenge, J. M., Haidt, J., Lozano, J., & Cummins, K. M., 'Specification curve analysis shows that social media use is linked to poor mental health, especially among girls', *Acta Psychologica*, Volume 224, 2022, 103512, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103512>.

⁶⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, 'Digital technologies, child rights and well-being. The state of children in the European Union 2024', Policy Brief no 4, UNICEF, February 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/eu/media/2586/file/Digital%20technologies%20policy%20brief.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Holly, L., Demaio, S., & Kickbusch, I., 'Public health interventions to address digital determinants of children's health and wellbeing', *The Lancet Public Health*, Vol. 9, Issue 9, 2024, pp. e700-e704, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(24\)00180-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(24)00180-4).

RECOGNISING THAT

32. Europe is witnessing a deterioration in the mental health of children and adolescents², and therefore there is an urgent need for a bold, multifaceted and forward-thinking approach which addresses the complex root causes, is firmly grounded in the scientific evidence and based on multidisciplinary research, and is reinforced through enhanced cooperation and sharing of best practices across Europe to ensure a healthier future for both current and future generations⁶⁶.
33. In addressing the mental health of children and adolescents, equal emphasis should be placed on the promotion of a healthy lifestyle and healthy settings⁶⁷ that foster overall mental health and well-being, preventive actions, directed especially towards children and adolescents in vulnerable situations, and on providing psychological and psychiatric help and support where needed.
34. Evidence of the positive correlation between physical exercise (including outdoor activities), mental health and cognitive processes⁶⁸ highlights the fact that physical activity is one of the most important and effective factors in maintaining both physical and mental health throughout life³⁶. Developing children's psychosocial skills from an early age is also essential to help them adopt behaviours that support their mental and physical health throughout their life, preventing later misuse of digital tools.

⁶⁶ It is crucial to involve different stakeholders in such work: parents, caregivers, educators, policymakers, scientists, mental health professionals and technology providers. See more in: World Economic Forum, 'World Mental Health Day: How to safeguard children's mental wellbeing in the digital era', World Economic Forum website, 10.10.2023, accessed on 21 January 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/10/world-mental-health-day-how-to-safeguard-childrens-mental-well-being-in-the-digital-era/>.

⁶⁷ World Health Organization, 'Health Promotion' WHO website, accessed on 20 May 2025, <https://www.who.int/teams/health-promotion/enhanced-wellbeing/first-global-conference/actions>.

⁶⁸ Cosma A., Abdrakhmanova S., Taut D., Schrijvers K., Catunda C., Schnohr C., A focus on adolescent mental health and wellbeing in Europe, central Asia and Canada. Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children. International report from the 2021/2022 survey. Volume 1, Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe (2023), accessed on 20 February 2025, <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/373201>.

35. A healthy diet, regular physical activity, and high-quality sleep, together with a balance between rest and activity are vital to children's full physical and mental development; in addition, socialising with peers, cultural participation, creative activities, time for free play, nurturing environments and spending time in nature can have a positive impact on children's and adolescents' mental health by building up their self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-confidence and self-worth²².
36. The use of digital technologies by children and adolescents is an essential part of a broader concept of risk behaviour prevention and prevention strategies at national level.

INVITES MEMBER STATES TO:

37. DEVELOP and PROMOTE targeted communication and campaigns to raise awareness across society, with a particular focus on parents, caregivers and educators, about the benefits of delaying access to digital technologies for young children until a specified age and, afterwards, about organising a gradual, supervised introduction to safe use, highlighting the positive impact of this approach on young children's cognitive and psychological development^{69,70}.

⁶⁹ The age when children start to use digital technologies is constantly decreasing. Swedish statistics from 2019 show that 16 % of one-year olds watched videoclips (e.g. YouTube) for at least one hour per day. See more in: Swedish Media Council, Nutley, S., & Thorell, L., 'Digital media and mental health problems in children and adolescents. A research overview', 2022, https://mediemyndigheten.se/globalassets/rapporter-och-analyser/2022/digital-media-and-mental-health-problems-in-children-and-adolescents_tillganglighetsanpassad.pdf.

⁷⁰ The risks and possible negative consequences associated with providing such access too early, non- gradually or without proper supervision should be also presented.

38. DEVELOP, PROMOTE and OFFER diverse offline methods to care for, educate and entertain young children, emphasising activities that foster cognitive, emotional and social development, such as interactive play, outdoor activities, spending time with family and friends and creative expression through engaging, non-digital alternatives. These alternatives could include developing attractive urban and rural public spaces conducive to screen-free activities, such as green spaces and recreational areas, libraries, cultural hubs, and an inclusive, accessible infrastructure for all children. Those efforts can support a balanced approach to early childhood development while reducing reliance on digital technologies⁷¹.
39. PROMOTE evidence-based actions to reduce the misuse or excessive use of digital technologies among school-aged children, supporting their cognitive and emotional well-being, and AIM for those actions not only to address restrictions on children's use of digital technologies but mainly to teach them how to use digital technologies responsibly. Furthermore, while designing such actions, the importance of maintaining digital hygiene⁷² by all family members should be emphasised, recognising that modelling healthy patterns of behaviour is a powerful and effective teaching tool⁷³.

⁷¹ Raustorp, A., & Fröberg, A., 'Comparisons of pedometer-determined weekday physical activity among Swedish school children and adolescents in 2000 and 2017 showed the highest reductions in adolescents', *Acta paediatrica*, Vol. 108, Issue 7, 2019, pp. 1303–1310, <https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.14678>.

⁷² The term 'digital hygiene' refers to the healthy balance of digital and non-digital activities in everyday life, focusing mostly on behavioural practices such as reducing and effectively managing screen time as well as improving online safety.

⁷³ Konca, A. S., 'Digital Technology Usage of Young Children: Screen Time and Families', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 50, 2021, pp. 1097–1108, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01245-7>.

40. RECOGNISE the critical role played by interdisciplinary school education in promoting healthy lifestyles, mental health literacy, media and digital literacy, as well as digital hygiene, while building up the competences of learners and educators, and CONSIDER implementing environments within educational settings that are free of personal digital devices to support those objectives⁷⁴ or, when personal digital devices are necessary, IMPLEMENT rules that support the objective of limiting digital use, bearing in mind the right of children to disconnect.
41. CONSIDER pursuing preventive policies that further manage and regulate access by school- aged children to digital technologies, thereby minimising the risk of harm, including by strengthening accurate, reliable, robust and privacy-preserving age verification processes, where appropriate, proportionate and applicable⁷⁵, protecting children from addictive design practices such as deceptive designs, manipulative online choice architecture, online gambling and gambling within games, as well as from aggressive personalised persuasion techniques, and INSIST that providers of digital platforms and other digital businesses take significant responsibility for their design and for the content they host.

⁷⁴ In 2023, UNESCO called for a ban on smartphones in classrooms. See more in: Global Education Monitoring Report Team, Global education monitoring report, 2023: technology in education: a tool on whose terms?, UNESCO, Paris, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.54676/UZQV8501>. Moreover, there is growing evidence of the benefits of environments that are free of digital devices. See more in: South Australia Department of Education, 'Behaviour improves as a result of mobile phone ban', 2 March 2025, accessed on 20 May 2025, <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/departments/media-centre/our-news/behaviour-improves-as-a-result-of-mobile-phone-ban>.

⁷⁵ See for example 'zero knowledge proof based age verification processes' or the European Commission's initiative: Age Verification Task Force; <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/digital-services-act-task-force-age-verification-0>.

42. STRIVE to mitigate the negative consequences of the misuse or excessive use of digital technologies among the adolescent population⁷⁶, in particular by raising awareness among adolescents about the regulations and laws designed to create a safer online environment, and by making efforts to educate them on media and digital literacy and on how to protect themselves, including how to protect their mental health, in the digital world, through available tools such as flagging harmful content, reporting inappropriate behaviour and utilising helplines.
43. DESIGN or PROMOTE, as appropriate, information campaigns highlighting the risks and dangers of the digital world and their potential negative impact on the mental health of adolescents, taking into account the gender perspective, and including those at risk of discrimination, cyberbullying, privacy breaches, misuse linked with addictive designs and exposure to harmful content.
44. STIMULATE, EXPAND or CONTINUE awareness campaigns, school-based activities, extracurricular programmes and other existing appropriate tools promoting a healthy lifestyle, including through physical activity, a balanced diet and sufficient sleep, and fostering the development of interpersonal, social, emotional and resilience skills to effectively manage stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration among the adolescent population.

⁷⁶ 73 % of adolescents aged between 17 and 18 years reported that their use of digital media leads them to neglect activities shown to have positive effects on mental health such as sleep, exercise and schoolwork on a weekly basis. See more in: Swedish Media Council, Nutley, S., & Thorell, L., 'Digital media and mental health problems in children and adolescents. A research overview', 2022, https://mediemyndigheten.se/globalassets/rapporter-och-analyser/2022/digital-media-and-mental-health-problems-in-children-and-adolescents_tillganglighetsanpassad.pdf.

45. DEVELOP or ENHANCE accessible and attractive social infrastructures for children and adolescents as an alternative to screens, focusing on reducing or limiting the conditions that cause harm, while being more rigorous in controlling those circumstances of digital environments that could generate harm and lead to addictions.
46. DEVELOP joint policies and actions to promote responsible use of digital technologies, especially social media, and ADVOCATE for a well-balanced use of gaming to prevent compulsive use and mitigate its negative impact on daily life among school-aged children and adolescents².
47. ESTABLISH initiatives to combat online sexual exploitation and prostitution systems by enhancing reporting mechanisms and launching awareness campaigns to help children, adolescents, parents and caregivers recognise and respond to these threats making best use of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)⁷⁷.
48. ENSURE that all the planned and developed strategies, information campaigns and programmes are age-appropriate, accessible and recipient-friendly and that they take into account children and adolescents in vulnerable situations, in order to guarantee their effectiveness and success⁶⁵ as well as to allow monitoring and evaluation of their impact.

⁷⁷ The European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) is an EU flagship instrument for multidisciplinary and multiagency operational cooperation to fight organised crime at an EU level. See more in: Europol, 'EU Policy Cycle - EMPACT, EMPACT 2022+ Fighting crime together', accessed on 20 May 2025, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas-and-statistics/empact>.

49. IMPLEMENT or, where necessary, DEVELOP and IMPLEMENT audience-tailored media and digital literacy programmes and initiatives, ensuring that those for school-aged children and adolescents focus on online privacy, digital security, recognising and dealing with cyberbullying, sexual abuse including grooming, understanding digital footprints and their impact on children's future, managing screen time effectively, identifying disinformation and misinformation and building up resilience to and preparedness for it, fostering social and emotional skills, understanding advertising practices and the business model of the profit-driven online world, as well as the mechanisms of algorithms and the nature of content creation on social media platforms, promoting critical thinking and interaction with the online world and making informed decisions online.
50. ENSURE that media and digital literacy programmes and initiatives also raise awareness about the possible risks associated with AI-generated content, virtual worlds⁷⁸ and cognitive manipulation. Those programmes and initiatives should inform school-aged children and adolescents about the diverse set of risks related to AI, including the emerging risks related to developing relationships with AI agents, and emotional dependency on them, and provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to recognise and critically assess the influence of AI-enhanced media, such as deepfakes, manipulated images, videos or sound and biased algorithms, as well as emphasising that the misuse of AI can distort reality, shape perceptions, support the fast spread of disinformation, increase susceptibility to manipulation and influence decision-making in harmful ways. These programmes and initiatives should also target the ethical and responsible use of AI technologies and educate children and adolescents about the appropriate use of AI for educational purposes.

⁷⁸ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. An EU initiative on Web 4.0 and virtual worlds: a head start in the next technological transition, COM(2023) 442, 11.07.2023, Strasbourg, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52023DC0442>.

51. ENSURE that media and digital literacy programmes and initiatives designed for adults (e.g. parents, caregivers, educators and advocates) are easy to access for all, including persons in vulnerable situations, and that they include practical guidelines on digital hygiene, age- appropriate use of different types of social media, and on using existing and up-to-date technical features of digital technologies, such as parental controls, usage tracking, notification management and time-limit settings, as well as suggestions for avoiding risks and knowledge of how to recognise signs of distress, mental health problems and the symptoms of digital addiction among children and adolescents, with advice on how to handle this as a parent/caretaker. Those guidelines should also inform adults about the risks children and adolescents are confronted with when online, for example the risk of child sexual abuse online (recognition and avoidance) together with the risks associated with their own activities, for example over-posting content concerning children in their surroundings (sharenting) as well as how to report harmful content (e.g. hotlines, police).
52. ENSURE that all kinds of media and digital literacy programmes and initiatives are regularly updated to remain relevant and effective in view of the rapid pace of the digital transformation of our societies, and including the continuous rollout of digital tools and online applications and their evolution over time.
53. PROVIDE access to professional, evidence-based services and treatments, including psychological and psychosocial counselling, legal assistance, peer services, for instance experts by experience, and digital safety support, for all children and adolescents, particularly those in vulnerable situations, who have experienced harm online or present symptoms of compulsive or addiction-like digital media use.

54. CONSIDER using interdisciplinary advisory bodies that include children's rights advocates and experts in the fields of neurobiology, psychology, psychiatry, addiction science, AI ethics, mental health promotion, child development and digital technologies, in order to provide informed guidance, support decision-making processes and ensure that decisions regarding the digital environment prioritise the interests, mental well-being and safety of children and adolescents.
55. ENCOURAGE the introduction of participatory processes enabling children and adolescents to express their views on their digital habits.
56. FOCUS on strengthening cooperation among families, schools, governmental and non-governmental organisations and other key stakeholders involved in protecting the mental health of children and adolescents in the digital world and promoting a balanced use of digital media.

INVITES THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND THE MEMBER STATES TO:

57. MAP existing legislative and non-legislative measures at both EU and national level in order to develop uniform and high European standards for the advice given to parents, caregivers and educators on digital hygiene and for the age-appropriate use of social media to address the adverse impact of the misuse or excessive use of digital technologies on the mental health of children and adolescents.

58. SUPPORT the design and implementation of structural reforms safeguarding the well-being and mental health of children and adolescents in the digital world and PROMOTE the collection and exchange of best practices and lessons learned among Member States⁷⁹, building on the activities enabled by the Technical Support Instrument (TSI)⁸⁰, concerning effective measures to prevent and mitigate the adverse impact of the misuse or excessive use of digital technologies on the mental health of children and adolescents.
59. PROMOTE healthy lifestyles in the Member States of the European Union, emphasising a balanced approach, including both online and offline methods of learning and entertaining for children and adolescents, such as participating in physical and cultural activities, reading books and spending quality time with family and friends.
60. CALL ON online intermediary service providers to comply with their responsibilities for creating a safe online environment for minors, such as those under the Digital Services Act, for example. This includes taking greater corporate responsibility for content moderation and for how it is presented in the digital world accessed by children and adolescents, such as apps, social media, streaming platforms, online gaming sites and pornography by establishing child protection by design and ensuring respect for all fundamental rights.

⁷⁹ Best practices can be exchanged through the EU Best Practice Portal on Public Health. See more in <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/dyna/bp-portal/submission/search>.

⁸⁰ The Technical Support Instrument (TSI) is an EU programme that provides tailor-made technical expertise to EU Member States to design and implement reforms. In the area of mental health of children and adolescents, see for example: 'Healthier Youth - Addressing the risks of online gambling and gaming', 2024, https://reform-support.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/health-and-long-term-care/healthier-youth-addressing-risks-online-gambling-and-gaming_en#:~:text=This%202-year%20project%20aims%20to%20reduce%20the%20risks,contributing%20to%20their%20wellbeing%20and%20improved%20mental%20health; and 'Supporting mental health and care for the wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people, Child & Youth wellbeing and mental health first', 2023, https://reform-support.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/labour-market-and-social-protection/supporting-mental-health-and-care-wellbeing-vulnerable-children-and-young-people_en.

61. CALL on providers and deployers of AI systems to ensure a high-level of fundamental rights protection and safety by complying with the Artificial Intelligence Act, with specific regard to the impact of AI systems on children. Furthermore, call on providers and deployers of AI systems to take measures and implement safeguards to address risks stemming from AI applications accessible to or impacting children, including through safe and ethical design and use, and avoiding any exploitation of their vulnerabilities in harmful ways.
62. ENFORCE the rules established in the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the Digital Services Act, the Artificial Intelligence Act and other legislative frameworks that contribute, *inter alia*, to the protection of children from manipulative and addictive design practices, cyberbullying, child sexual abuse, online recruitment practices for the purpose of further exploitation and privacy violations, inappropriate and deceitful content, disinformation, intrusive information-harvesting, aggressive online marketing of unhealthy food, beverages, beauty standards and unrealistic body images, alcohol, tobacco and similar products¹⁴, and CONTINUE to implement the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and the Digital Services Act, in accordance with their respective relevant provisions, in a way that fully considers the potential mental health harm caused by excessive social media use and other digital technologies, such as algorithm-driven video platforms, immersive virtual environments, online gaming platforms, and content recommendation systems, where applicable.

63. URGE digital business stakeholders to set the default settings for children to the highest safety and privacy standards, avoiding formats and features that encourage addiction, such as infinite scrolling or the use of opaque algorithms, as well as to guarantee age-appropriate content and a safe digital space, to adhere to and enforce age verification processes, where appropriate, proportionate and applicable, and in a manner that respects the privacy of users, and to consider the significant risk, in the current state of play, that the ages of most users are overestimated. Essentially and especially where it is not possible to differentiate between children and adult users, business stakeholders should be encouraged to apply these default settings to all users in order to prevent children from harm.
64. Under regulatory and ethical oversight, CALL on digital business stakeholders to conduct transparent and independent assessments of the impact of digital technologies – and in particular of the design features aiming to increase users’ engagement – on the mental and physical health of children and adolescents, including those in vulnerable situations, and to share data relevant to that health impact with independent researchers and the general public in a manner that is timely and protects privacy.

65. SUPPORT and PROMOTE research to better document and characterise the links between mental health and digital technologies, and the possible harmful effects of such technologies.
66. FACILITATE adequate funding support to provide for sustainable backing of both research and evidence-based action in this field.
67. FACILITATE the efficient and impactful use of funding programmes, such as the Technical Support Instrument, European Social Fund+, EU4Health programme, Digital Europe and Horizon Europe. Erasmus+ can also support digital education and the development of the digital skills, including media and digital literacy, of all learners with a view to supporting their digital inclusion and empowerment.

68. MAINTAIN regular reviews and PROMOTE the use of guidelines on digital education (i.e. guidelines for teachers and educators to promote media and digital literacy and tackle disinformation through education and training and ethical guidelines for educators on the use of AI and data in teaching and learning) and on well-being and mental health (i.e. guidelines for policymakers and educators to promote well-being and mental health at school) and promote the use of those guidelines at national level to raise awareness of different aspects related to digital education and well-being, such as digital resilience and digital citizenship⁸¹.

INVITES THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO:

69. CONTINUE to implement and promote the comprehensive approach to mental health outlined in the Communication from the Commission on a comprehensive approach to mental health, including the actions and flagship initiatives focusing on the prevention of mental health problems and those aimed at establishing a safer and healthier digital space for children and adolescents².

⁸¹ This paragraph refers to the guidelines published in 2022 – Action 6 and Action 7 of the Digital Education Plan (2021-2027). Those guidelines are currently under revision.
See more in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0624>.

70. ENSURE that the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents continue to be prioritised in the implementation of the Digital Services Act and other relevant legislation and ELABORATE the Guidelines provided for under Article 28 of the Digital Services Act in a timely manner, stressing the need for online platform services providers to refrain from intentionally addictive design practices aimed at children, to promote age-appropriate design practices and to adopt accurate, reliable, robust, and privacy-preserving age verification solutions, where appropriate, proportionate and applicable.
71. CONSIDER the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents in the upcoming evaluation and possible review of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive.
72. CONTINUE the implementation of the better internet for kids strategy (BIK+), balancing the protection and empowerment of children and young people online.
73. CONTINUE to implement the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) to ensure that young people can make informed and safe choices when online and have the digital skills and competences to use digital technologies in a responsible, critical and confident manner.

74. CONTINUE to support the implementation of the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success^{20,82} by sharing effective practices, guidelines and practical tools to help schools and educators promote well-being and mental health, in line with a whole-system, whole-school approach to well-being and mental health⁸³. This includes prevention and awareness-raising efforts, making full use of EU collaborative tools, online platforms, and education communities — such as the European School Education Platform, including eTwinning⁸⁴.
75. CONSULT with Member States on the EU-wide inquiry on the impact of social media and excessive screen time on mental health and well-being in order to establish positive, creative and balanced use of digital technologies⁸⁵.

⁸² Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success and replacing the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving (Text with EEA relevance) 2022/C 469/01, ST/14981/2022/INIT, OJ C 469, 9.12.2022, p. 1–15, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022H1209%2801%29>.

⁸³ European Commission, European Education Area - School Education, 'Wellbeing at school', 7 October 2024, accessed on 20 May 2025, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/school-education/wellbeing-at-school>.

⁸⁴ The European School Education Platform is a meeting point for the school education community – school staff, researchers, and policymakers – for sharing news, interviews, publications, practice examples, courses and partners for their Erasmus+ projects. Its eTwinning area is dedicated to eTwinners and their activities. See more in: <https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en>.

⁸⁵ There is a growing body of scientific evidence highlighting the need for interventions to control children's and adolescents' screen use. See more in: Qi, J., Yan, Y. & Yin, H., 'Screen time among school-aged children of age 6–14: a systematic review', Global Health Research and Policy, Volume 8, 12 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41256-023-00297-z>; Muppalla S.K., Vuppalapati S., Reddy Pulliahgaru A., Sreenivasulu H., 'Effects of Excessive Screen Time on Child Development: An Updated Review and Strategies for Management', Cureus, 18 June 2023, Volume 15(6), <https://www.cureus.com/articles/162175-effects-of-excessive-screen-time-on-child-development-an-updated-review-and-strategies-for-management#!/>.

76. COLLECT data and knowledge through an EU-wide inquiry on the impact of social media and excessive screen time on mental health and well-being, and, based on the results obtained, CONSIDER actions such as preparing an action plan or other appropriate document that will identify and address challenges and risks as well as outline strategies for prevention, education and support in order to establish a positive, creative and balanced use of digital technologies and prevent and mitigate the adverse impact of digital technologies on the mental health of children and adolescents⁸⁶.
77. TAKE INTO ACCOUNT the mental health dimension, including preventive actions, non- discrimination, effective safeguards, reporting and comprehensive support, in the development of an upcoming action plan against cyberbullying.
78. DEVELOP evidence-based guidance, based on the results of the EU-wide inquiry on the impact of social media and excessive screen time on mental health and well-being⁸⁷, for policymakers, educators, caregivers and parents as regards the importance of digital hygiene as well as effective and responsible screen time management strategies (i.e. rules concerning screen time and the type of content that is viewed, screen-free periods, alternative activities to reduce reliance on digital technologies)⁴⁰, and age-specific recommendations for the use of screens and social media.

⁸⁶ This action plan will complement the upcoming action plan against cyberbullying. See more in: U. Von Der Leyen - Candidate for the European Commission President, Europe's Choice –Political Guidelines For The Next European Commission 2024–2029, Strasbourg, 18.07.2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf.

⁸⁷ Mission Letter from Ursula Von Der Leyen, President of the European Commission, to Glenn Micallef, Commissioner-designate for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, Brussels, 17.09.2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/c8b8682b-ca47-461b-bc95-c98195919eb0_en?filename=Mission%20letter%20-%20MICALLEF.pdf.
Mission Letter from Ursula Von Der Leyen, President of the European Commission, to Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate for Health and Animal Welfare, Brussels, 17.09.2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/b1817a1b-e62e-4949-bbb8-ebf29b54c8bd_en?filename=Mission%20letter%20-%20VARHELYI.pdf.

79. ENSURE that European and national law operate together efficiently to prevent unfair and harmful business practices in the online environment and enforce existing regulation effectively.
80. ENSURE the active and meaningful participation of children and young people across Europe in the development of EU policies, actions and solutions aimed at empowering them online and reducing the negative impact of digital technologies on the mental health of children and adolescents⁸⁸.
81. RAISE AWARENESS within the European Union about the potential adverse consequences of providing children and adolescents with access to digital technologies at an early stage, without proper supervision, guidance or limits.
82. ENCOURAGE research on and development of mental health services tailored for the digital age with resources, helplines, and online counselling⁸⁹.
83. MONITOR and ENFORCE compliance by digital business stakeholders with the existing regulations on the protection of children and adolescents in cyberspace, their progress in that area and their proactive stance and continuously ASSESS whether we have the right tools to address the challenges.

⁸⁸ Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, OJ C 456, 18.12.2018, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2018_456_R_0001.

⁸⁹ Chen, T., Ou, J., Li, G., Luo, H., 'Promoting mental health in children and adolescents through digital technology: a systematic review and meta-analysis', Frontiers In Psychology, 12 March 2024, Vol. 15, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1356554>.

84. IDENTIFY examples, with regard to children's and adolescents' needs and vulnerabilities, of good and safe design of digital technology, particularly that of social media platforms, and ENCOURAGE initiatives that promote healthy content to counteract the negative effects of digital technologies.
 85. CONSIDER the diversity of the European population when designing policy initiatives, so as to promote the proper protection of children and adolescents whose mental health is potentially at risk.
 86. PROMOTE research and innovation to generate further scientific evidence of how the use of digital technologies affects the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents in an increasingly digital society, FOLLOW UP and EVALUATE the impact of strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting healthy and balanced use of digital technology and ASSESS possibilities for consistent funding to support both research and evidence-based actions in this field.
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