

# The Digital Prism Illuminated

Position paper on a systemic view of  
digitalisation and wellbeing

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## Position paper on a systemic view of digitalisation and wellbeing

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## Introduction

### The complex, hybrid reality of digital technologies and wellbeing

The reality of digital technologies and wellbeing is not simple or straightforward. Instead, more often than not it is **complex**, in the scientific sense of the word. Complexity does not mean that we are powerless or that everything is incomprehensible, but rather that the impact is not the same for everyone and at all times. We know now that **positive and negative effects of digital technologies can occur at the same time**, within the same person. Whether an effect occurs at all depends strongly on contextual, situational and individual factors (see for example Rozendaal, Griffioen, & Stein, 2024; Tang et al., 2021; Ferguson et al., 2024). And if an effect does occur, its nature depends on those same factors. **Screen time on its own is therefore not particularly informative** for determining whether digital technologies contribute to wellbeing or detract from it. Effects are also not the same for everyone. This is a crucial difference with something like tobacco, for example, which is a product the sustained use of which almost always leads to deterioration in health.

Technologies such as social media, the internet, and artificial intelligence are deeply intertwined with our daily lives. That means it is much harder than previously thought to predict what effect a certain technology will have, for whom, and under what circumstances. The range of things you can do on your smartphone is almost endless. In addition, it's become a lot more rare for us to just do *one* thing at any given time. Activities and experiences in the physical and digital environment increasingly flow into one another. This gives rise to a **hybrid reality** in which the boundaries between physical and digital become less clear, and less relevant.

All of this means that a good understanding of the relationship between people and digital technology is not impossible, but that it requires a new approach. It is important to know *what* we should be investigating for a better understanding of digital technology and wellbeing, but also *how*. In short: using the right tools for the right questions. At the same time, it is important to **translate the science on the complexity of technology and wellbeing into concrete advice** that society, government and industry can act on.

### How: Methodological Challenges

Not only *what* we study is important in our search for a better understanding of the relationship between digital technologies and wellbeing. We also need to reflect on the **way in which we map those factors**. For a long time, questions about digital media use have been addressed using questionnaires in which people estimate their own use (Griffioen et al., 2020a). However, it has since become clear that for an accurate picture of social media or other digital technology use we should be cautious about relying on questionnaires for this kind of information.

Questionnaires that ask for estimates of frequency or duration often do not give a reliable and accurate picture of digital media use (Parry et al., 2021). This is partly because some forms of technology use are now so pervasive in everyday life that we simply cannot estimate them well. That is why it is very important, for this kind of question, to draw on objective sources such as data logs and screenshots.

This **does not mean that self-report has no value**; on the contrary. Questionnaires and interviews are highly valuable when we want to know what drives people, what else is going on in their lives, and what experiences and feelings they are left with after using digital technology.

There is still room for improvement here too: a lot of questionnaire research could focus more on specific aspects of use such as the precise content, context, motivations and experiences (Griffioen et al., 2020a). And as it happens, these are the aspects of experience that are best suited to the subjective nature of questionnaire and interview research.

For an accurate and in-depth understanding of the relationship between wellbeing and digital media use, we therefore recommend using a **combination of information sources and methods**. Not least because this makes it easier for people to recall their experience well (Griffioen et al., 2020b). In our recent [Research Agenda Digitalisation and Wellbeing 2025–2026](#) we have compactly mapped, for seven digital technologies, which research areas and knowledge questions around wellbeing still need further attention. We invite researchers and knowledge institutions working on the theme of digitalisation and wellbeing to consult the research agenda for useful new directions.

## Our systemic view of digitalisation and wellbeing, and concrete recommendations

This position paper from the Expertise Centre for Digitalisation and Wellbeing presents our view of the relationship between digital media and wellbeing. We argue for a systemic perspective and a balanced approach that does justice to the complexity of the relationship between digital technologies and wellbeing.

In this paper we address the current state of research into digital media use and how insights have shifted over the years. We start with a zoomed-out view of the **complex system that is technology and wellbeing**. In doing so we pay specific attention to what we know about **social media** and **gaming** among young people. Along the way we show that reality is more nuanced than is often assumed.

We then translate these insights into practical applications. We close with concrete **recommendations** for all parties involved: users themselves, parents and caregivers, policymakers, educational institutions and – last but not least – technology companies.

## Digital media use offers both opportunities and risks

Digital technologies have become an important part of our lives. Their use can therefore influence our wellbeing — both positively and negatively. All of us are faced with the search for a **healthy balance**. The Expertise Centre for Digitalisation and Wellbeing at the Trimbos Institute works to ensure that everyone can benefit from the opportunities that digital media offer, and that everyone is protected (or can protect themselves) against the risks.

To support people in finding their own digital balance, the Trimbos Institute and Netwerk Mediawijsheid developed the [Digital Balance Model](#) in 2020. The Digital Balance Model is about organising your time — with and without digital media — in a way that feels right for you. Physically, socially, and mentally.

The Expertise Centre for Digitalisation and Wellbeing does not regard digital technologies as inherently good or bad. The risks and opportunities they bring arise from the interplay between digital technologies' **design features** that either support or undermine wellbeing, and **individual, contextual** and **environmental factors**. For the product categories of social media, games and artificial intelligence we briefly outline the various known risks and opportunities below.

### Social media and wellbeing

#### In brief

- Positive and negative experiences with social media can both — and sometimes simultaneously — occur within a single person.
- Whether an effect occurs at all, and whether it is positive or negative for users' wellbeing, depends strongly on contextual, situational and individual factors.
- Design features of technologies can contribute to children, adolescents and adults using social media for longer than they intended. Certain features also contribute to users being exposed to age-inappropriate content, with possible negative consequences for wellbeing. Social media companies need to be prompted, through external incentives, to adopt wellbeing-oriented, ethical design.

#### *The relationship between social media and wellbeing is often reciprocal*

Research conducted inside and outside of the Netherlands over the past few years suggests that **for the majority of young people social media do not have a major impact on mental health** (Beyens et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2025). The relationship between wellbeing and social media is most likely a **two-way street**: social media use influences wellbeing, but wellbeing also influences social media use. Our wellbeing shapes how we use social media, the motivations with which we do so, and how we process our experiences on social media. Someone who fears social rejection, for example, may take a more passive stance on social media. That in turn will mean fewer opportunities for positive feedback or interaction, which can reinforce feelings of social anxiety and loneliness.

The causal link running from mental health to social media use ('young people with more mental health complaints spend more time on social media') is better supported by research than the other way around (Fassi et al., 2025). The most recent figures from the HBSC monitor in the Netherlands, for example, also show that pressure to perform well at school plays a major role in the mental health of children and young people (Boer et al., 2022). Young people do not list social media as a source of stress, but they do sometimes mention social media in the context of distraction or a way for them to cope with stress.

Social media use appears to be a direct cause of the emergence of mental health problems in only a minority of cases. But **wellbeing is a broad spectrum** and anxiety or depression are not the only expressions of wellbeing (or rather, being unwell) that matter. In qualitative research we see that **young people often — sometimes even simultaneously — have positive and negative experiences** on and with social media (Van der Wal, Valkenburg & Van Driel, 2024).

Qualitative research with young people shows that they experience certain clear advantages in social media. For example in the form of inspiration, social connection, stimulation of creativity, and discovering new skills and hobbies (Pew Research Center, 2022). At the same time, young people can also encounter social comparison, bullying, inappropriate content and the feeling of always having to be 'on' (Skogen et al., 2023). These experiences can coexist and are not stable: **experiences on social media often alternate rapidly** (e.g. Van der Wal et al., 2024).

### *A wide range of factors determines the influence of social media on wellbeing*

Whether one's experience with social media is predominantly positive or negative depends strongly on contextual, situational and individual factors. This interplay determines whether a negative relationship between social media and wellbeing emerges (Rozendaal, Griffioen, & Stein, 2024). We know, for example, that young people who find it more difficult to regulate their emotions, or who have a lower self-image, have a greater chance of a negative association between their wellbeing and their social media use.

Content on social media can also (often subtly) influence users' feelings and behaviour. Content can be inspiring (for instance, people sharing personal experiences of healing or growth) as well as inappropriate and harmful (such as explicit violence and humiliation). Research shows that lifestyle, travel and 'fitspiration' content can evoke both positive and negative feelings (Raggatt et al., 2018; Mahdia, 2018; Burnell et al., 2020).

Not all content on social media is made by everyday users: a considerable share comes from *influencers*. This **disguised marketing** can have a major influence on users' opinions and choices, for example around food, body image and health. For users it is often hard to tell whether influencers' advice is driven by authentic experience and genuine expertise, or by sponsorship from companies. Commercial interests regularly play a role in influencers' content, but this is not always visible.

These insights show that it is important for users, both young and old, to be given the tools to navigate social media in ways that are healthy for them. In the case of children and young people, research shows that it is important for parents to adopt an **overall positive parenting style**, and for caregivers to work on children's and young people's self-confidence in order to strengthen their **emotional and social resilience** (e.g. Geurts et al., 2022; Beyens et al., 2022; Rozendaal & de Jong, 2024). It is also important to invest in media education, focusing not only at technical skills but also learning to make use of the benefits and being made resilient against health risks. Taken together this can prevent many (potential) negative consequences of social media.

### **Age-appropriate introduction of smartphones and social media**

From an educational and developmental perspective, it is important to take into account the child's developmental stages. This means that children should be supported in their first steps into the online social world at a time when parents still play a large role enough in their lives.

Before they are deep into adolescence, children should be given the chance to learn to deal with the risks and opportunities that smartphones and social media bring, with support and guidance from their parents.

By raising the 'entry point' until well into adolescence, children may **miss out on wellbeing opportunities**: they are socially excluded from what other friends see and experience, and they also miss the benefits (social connection, relaxation, identity expression and development, etc.).

It is also important that children feel safe to raise any concerns, unpleasant experiences, conflicts or other experienced harms with their parents. Children who find their way to social media services despite certain age limits — as is already the case — will feel even less able to turn to parents or caregivers safely and without repercussions.

Importantly, we are not saying that social media are suitable for all ages. The age at which children can use social media in a responsible way depends, among other things, on their digital skills and on how involved their parents are in what their child does online. That is why we advocate for a staged introduction of children to smartphones and, later, social media, based on a child's own strengths and resilience. An additional important route to greater digital wellbeing at scale lies in **regulating product features**, not whole products. Some elements of social media are not appropriate for children and should therefore simply not be offered to them.

### *The tech industry has a duty to design social media ethically*

Beyond the characteristics of users themselves and their social environment, the design of social media also plays a role in the effects it has on wellbeing. We see that certain **design features** of social media (and other digital technologies) are built with users' short-term pleasure and *engagement* as the top priority. The consequence is that **certain parts of the social media experience stand in the way of a more holistic, eudaimonic wellbeing**. 'Eudaimonia', an ancient Greek term, refers to a state of flourishing, fulfilment and a 'life well-lived'.

There are also features that exert pressure on users' **money, time** and **attention**, due to the business model of the companies behind them. *Endless scrolls* and algorithms trained to deliver short-term pleasure do not take into account users' deeper psychological needs (such as autonomy over how you spend your time). Such design features can also contribute to the development of **problematic social media use**, precisely because they can affect users' perception of time and/or make it hard for users to step away from social media. Findings from the [Scholierenmonitor 2023](#) show that problematic social media use occurs in 4.8% of pupils aged 12 to 16. It also occurs more often in girls, pupils in pre-vocational (vmbo) education, and pupils of non-Dutch background.

To counter problematic forms of social media use, it is essential that technology companies are compelled – and, if necessary, forced – to design their products with wellbeing as the priority. Historic examples from other industries (such as the tobacco industry) have made it clear that we cannot rely on self-regulation by companies in such a profit-driven market. External incentives are therefore crucial.

As long as wellbeing-oriented design is not yet the industry's top priority, it is essential that young people and adults alike are also given, in parallel, the tools and insights that help them deal with social media in a way that is as healthy as possible for them personally.

## Games and wellbeing

### In brief

- Video games can bring benefits for cognitive development and social wellbeing, but also drawbacks for wellbeing as a result of, for example, sedentary behaviour.
- Some young people show problematic gaming behaviour in which so much time is spent on video games that this has adverse consequences for other areas of life (such as social relationships or school performance).
- Design features of video games can contribute to pressure on players' time, money and attention, with possible negative consequences for wellbeing. Game companies should be prompted, through external incentives, to adopt wellbeing-oriented, ethical design.

Games are a versatile medium: a growing field of research shows that games can have both negative and positive effects on various aspects of our wellbeing, regardless of age. We see, for example, that games can **contribute to spatial insight, problem-solving ability and creativity** (Bavelier et al., 2011; Granic et al., 2014). Moderate gaming also appears to be related to greater wellbeing in children (e.g. Johannes et al., 2021). The amount of time someone spends playing videogames seems to matter less than *why* they play: when someone decides to play driven by an intrinsic motivation, this is positively related to wellbeing, in contrast to when they play because of outside pressures (Vuorre et al., 2022).

There is a **small group of young people who experience problems as a result of gaming, which may manifest in various areas of wellbeing**. Such as their social life, school/work and their physical health (Van Rooij, 2011; Van Rooij et al., 2024). For some of these individuals, the problems resolve on their own. Others may need help and treatment, which is offered at various addiction care organisations in the Netherlands. Findings from the [Scholierenmonitor 2023](#) show that problematic gaming occurs in 2.2% of school children aged 12 to 16. Problematic gaming occurs more often in boys, students in pre-vocational (vmbo) education, and students with a non-Dutch cultural background. During the coronavirus pandemic, problematic gaming had increased somewhat, but it has since returned to the stable pre-pandemic level.

In addition to commercial, entertainment-focused video games, there are also video games developed with the **specific goal of improving wellbeing, directly or indirectly**. Examples include video games that help children and young people regulate anxiety (such as [MindLight](#) and [DEEP](#)), video games used in (trauma) therapy (such as [Bravemind I MedVR](#)), and video games that explicitly embrace the topic of mental health (such as [Senua: Hellblade's Sacrifice](#), [Celeste](#) and [Night in the Woods](#)). These examples all utilise the unique properties of video games to contribute to wellbeing goals. An examples of such properties is video games' ability to fine-tune the experience to the player's level, and the power to motivate players to continue despite negative experiences (Tuijnman, 2023).

**Games' design features** therefore play an important role in the effect games can have. Behavioural design can, for instance, encourage healthy choices, such as building in breaks and making sure the player gets up and gets some movement in after a long period of sitting. But certain design features can also have negative effects, such as exerting pressure on players' time, money and attention. Examples are games that require a player to log in every day to receive rewards, or games that are made extra difficult in order to stimulate in-game purchases (Birk, Van der Hof & Van Rooij, 2024; Van der Hof et al., 2022).

The influence of this kind of design often seems subtle. That makes it difficult for many players, especially young ones, to see that their behaviour is being shaped (Van Rooij et al., 2021). Ethical design of video games in which wellbeing is prioritised is, in our view — just as with social media — a necessity that the industry

should not be able to avoid. Here lies a task for government to set up and enforce effective regulation that requires game companies to adopt wellbeing-oriented design. Not in the least because the game industry, too, has shown that self-regulation does not work (Tuijnman, Andree & Van Rooij, 2021).

## Artificial intelligence and wellbeing

### In brief

- The research field around AI and wellbeing is still young in many domains. Within the 'human-centred AI' movement there has been a lot of focus on transparency, biases in data and algorithms, and the explainability of AI decisions.
- In recent years there has also been a growing interest in the relationship between AI and loneliness/social relationships, the role of AI in education, and ethical AI design.
- A new generation of human-centred AI is needed ('human-centred AI 2.0'), in which there is a both broader and deeper kind of attention being paid to the risks and opportunities that AI brings for all domains of wellbeing.

With artificial intelligence (AI), we see a complex picture arising of opportunities and risks for wellbeing that are more difficult to predict and prepare for. The research field around AI and wellbeing is still relatively young. Public debate around AI is often characterised by tension between technological optimism ("AI can make our lives a thousand times easier") and major concerns about negative effects ("AI will wipe out humanity") (Crawford, 2021). The discourse around **AI operated for a long time primarily in the domain of productivity, and very little in the domain of human experience**. The rapid developments and the concerns that flow from them have led to an essential development within AI: the movement known as **'human-centred' AI**.

### *Human-centred AI 2.0: a systemic view of the risks and opportunities of AI that puts wellbeing at the centre*

Human-centred AI **shifts attention around AI systems from what is technically possible to what is preferable given human values and needs** (Shneiderman, 2020). Within the current interpretation of human-centred AI, data representativeness, transparency, and explainability have long been central. There have been concerns, for example, about the fact that AI systems are trained on data in which prejudices about groups of people have been systematically embedded (so-called 'bias'). In some cases this data bias has already led to direct and severe negative consequences for marginalised groups (Benjamin, 2019).

The 'black box' nature of many AI systems can in turn lead to a sense of powerlessness and a lack of understanding of how AI systems work. This can make it difficult for users to make a well-informed decision based on suggestions or materials that AI generates. The classic human-centred AI movement states that data should be representative of the entire population, and that AI should be transparent and explainable for users, so that everyone has equal opportunities to use it properly.

Although transparency, good data and explainability are crucial components of a human-centred approach to the use and development of AI, we believe there is yet another important step to take.

There is **still too little attention being paid to human wellbeing in all of its facets** and to the ways in which AI can either stimulate or hinder wellbeing across different areas. Autonomy luckily is receiving more and more attention in AI research, as can be seen in [our Research Agenda Digitalisation and Wellbeing](#). Calvo and colleagues (2020), for example, have shown that AI systems which give users the possibility of exercising control over decisions and processes contribute more positively to wellbeing than systems that fully automate

decisions. This is in line with what Ehsan and Riedl (2020) call 'human mediation': the principle that AI systems should **support human decision-making rather than replace it**.

Other themes that have been studied include the relationship between AI and loneliness/social relationships, the role of AI in education, and ethical AI design. However, far too little attention is still being paid to the impact of AI algorithms — and the personalisation and automation they bring — on social relationships, creativity, learning capacity, critical thinking and personal development. The recently popular virtual 'AI companions', for instance, form an uncharted but risky area, in which especially young children run the risk of being influenced and developing an unhealthy attachment to AI models. The 'artificial intimacy' that can emerge from this, and the possible adverse consequences for our social wellbeing, must be taken seriously (Jones et al., 2025).

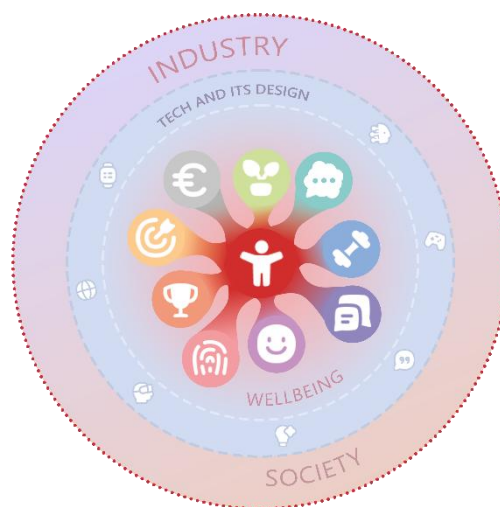
At the expertise centre, we call this systemic view of the opportunities and risks that AI holds for the full spectrum of human wellbeing 'human-centred AI 2.0', and we see it as a necessary step for the future.

## Recommendations for an integrated approach to a healthy digital future

In dealing with digital wellbeing, we are dealing with a **complex and dynamic system**. Within it, a multitude of factors interact with each other at different levels. This means that the solution for a healthier relationship with digital technology does not lie in one single domain or one simple switch to flick.

An **integrated approach is needed**, in which action is taken at various different levels of the system to prevent risks for users and at the same time allow them to reap the benefits that digital technologies can offer for wellbeing.

In this final part of our position paper we present a number of concrete viewpoints and recommendations that address different system levels (see **Figure 1**). Taking each of these levels into account — and being aware that they are always connected to one another — is of great importance for an integrated approach to digitalisation and wellbeing. It is a task that can only be tackled successfully through cooperation between the parties that play a role in the various system levels.



**Figure 1.** The different system levels involved in the complex system of digital technologies and wellbeing.

### Recommendations for individual users

#### Explore your media use

Consider which parts of each digital product offer you benefits, and which parts cost you something. Reinforce the positive parts and change the things that bother you.

#### Concrete steps to explore your own media use

- ✓ Keep track, for one day, of what you do on your digital devices.
- ✓ Then, at the end of the day, reflect on:
  - Your **reasons** for using digital technologies. Was there a specific reason to go on social media, for instance, or did you just want to relax for a bit? Did you log on to your favourite game because you were looking forward to continuing the story, or because an in-game reward was waiting for you? The reasons you consciously or unconsciously have for using digital media can tell you a lot about what you do and do not need.
  - The **things that felt good** about your use of digital technologies. Did you feel connected to others, or could you relax a little thanks to them?
  - The **parts that bothered you**. Did you experience stress, for example, around having to respond to certain messages? Were you affected by content, or were there design features of a technology that bothered you? This gives you a sense of whether there may be settings you can change to improve your experience.

- Whether you got round to **other activities** that are important for your wellbeing. Did you move enough, get enough sleep, and take enough time to truly relax? With healthy media use it is important to find a balance between all your activities in a day, bearing in mind both what those activities give you in terms of health and what they may cost you. Interested in know more about digital balance? Check out the [Digital Balance Model](#) (Dutch only).

### Use the support that is available

If you are finding it hard to get a grip on your media use, or if you are having negative social experiences online, reach out to people close to you or get in touch with organisations that could help you with this. The tips and resources we offer below address two of the most common challenges around healthy digital media use.

#### Tips in case you're struggling to stay in control of your tech use

Sometimes it can be difficult to pull yourself away from digital technologies. You might really want to do something else, but it's simply too easy to keep doing what you're doing. If you run into this, the following things can help you find your way to more control, and a healthier relationship with digital technology:

- ✓ See whether you can build some friction into your digital tech habits. A slightly less smooth user experience is not necessarily a bad thing. Think of friction as an opportunity for intention: give yourself the chance to pause and reflect on what you consider important, and think about what does and does not fit match your needs and values.
  - Turn off your viewing history, for instance, or set time limits on your phone that you cannot easily bypass. You might also benefit from apps and settings that concretely and directly help introduce some friction into your use, such as [OneSec](#) or the [Android Digital Wellbeing](#) settings.
- ✓ The [Digital Balance Test](#) can help kids reflect on what suits *them*: do the test to see whether you are satisfied with your digital balance. The test offers an accessible starting point for conversations with peers, with parents, or in class.
- ✓ Struggling with problematic gaming? Visit [GamenInfo](#) for more information and useful tips. You can also get in touch with a care professional via the [GamenInfo helpline](#).
- ✓ Would you like more guidance? Consider whether you would want to follow a [Moti-4](#) programme guided by a prevention professional in your area.

#### Tips for dealing with unpleasant social situations online

When you, as a user, experience unpleasant situations on digital media, you can do the following things to protect yourself and bring them to an end:

- ✓ Talk about it with someone you trust.
- ✓ Where possible, block the person who is bothering you.
- ✓ Report it to the platform.

- ✓ Gather evidence: take screenshots, save messages and note down contact details.
- ✓ Visit [MeldKnop.nl](https://meldknop.nl). There you will find more information, tips and advice on what you can do if you experience unpleasant situations online.
- ✓ Contact [HelpWanted](https://helpwanted.nl), the national hotline for online transgressive behaviour.
- ✓ In the case of criminal offences, [report it to the police](#). Unsure whether to file a report? Check the website of, or contact, [Slachtofferhulp Nederland \(Victim Support Netherlands\)](https://slachtofferhulp.nl).

## Recommendations for parents and caregivers

We see that parents have a strong need for concrete courses of action that can be adapted to the context of each individual family. We also see that such concrete advice is currently either missing or has not kept pace with the current state of science and practice. The Richtlijn Gezond Schermgebruik (*Guideline on Healthy Screen Use* in English), published in 2025, likewise recommends drawing up courses of action for specific situations as part of its implementation (Koning et al., 2025).

The Expertise Centre for Digitalisation and Wellbeing, together with various organisations (including Netwerk Mediawijsheid), is working jointly with the field, parents and children on concrete support routes within the [Opgavenetwerk Opvoeding in Digitale Balans \(Task Network for Parenting in Digital Balance\)](#). In cooperation with parties within and outside of this task force, we consider it important to work on concrete, context-sensitive solutions for parents and caregivers.

We see great value in a **personalisable 'menu'** of specific actions that encourage healthy digital media use. Parents can, **depending on the context of their family**, choose which actions best fit their situation. Where the context of the family makes it difficult to apply actions, support for parents is needed. Here it is important that organisations with knowledge of specific groups of families think together with parents about how they can be supported. This includes, for example, families in priority neighbourhoods, single-parent families, and families with parents with mild intellectual disabilities.

Such a 'menu' would tie in with existing initiatives such as [the Mediadiamant](#) and [the Mediagesprek](#) and offer concrete, context-sensitive courses of action for the science- and practice-driven recommendations we highlight below.

## Keep talking to your child about what they do and experience on digital media

Staying 'in the know' of what your kid is doing and seeing online is important for both parenting and bonding. That way you can adjust your parenting to what your child needs, and your child feels able to come to you any time they experience something unpleasant online.

### For example

- ✓ Do not only ask your child what they experienced at school, but also what they experienced on social media. Ask your child to show you an example of a video they liked — or did not like.
- ✓ Keep an open, interested attitude when you want to talk about worries, instead of immediately labelling your child's behaviour as problematic. The latter is often counter-productive. See also the conversation tips from [Helderopvoeden.nl](https://helderopvoeden.nl).

## Involve your child in your digital parenting decisions, and tailor your digital parenting to match your child's development

### For example

- ✓ A 14-year-old has a need to be able to make choices independently. Therefore discuss agreements and rules together.
- ✓ A 4-year-old has insufficient sense of time. Choose a suitable time and content for media use, but communicate clearly about it and explain the choice.
- ✓ Do not get a device of their own for your young child. After all, for young children there are mainly benefits to digital media when they are used together with their parents.

## Make agreements and rules explicit in the family and try to apply them equally to everyone

### For example

- ✓ Agree that no one in the family (including yourself!) uses digital devices during meals.

## Set a good example for your child in your own media use

### For example

- ✓ During the time you spend together with your child, turn off your notifications and sound and place your phone at a distance. In that way you show that you do not have to be continuously available for whatever comes in on your phone, and that in a social setting you should give your attention to the other person.

## Use advice on age-appropriate content

### For example

- ✓ Choose which content is suitable for your child based on the [Kijkwijzer](#).

## Provide balance

Children need enough time for sleep, movement, school, social contact and activities other than digital media. What they need exactly differs from child to child.

### For example

- ✓ For your 8-year-old, make an overview of how many hours of sleep, movement, school, eating, and self-care they need in a day. How much time is then left in the day?
- ✓ Communicate clearly with your child how much screen time they can use that day, and look together at when and how they will allocate that time.

## Recommendations for education and civil society

### View the digital world as a living environment

When creating policies, it is important to include the digital world as part of the living environment of children and young people: how do we guide them to reap the benefits and be resilient to the risks? But also: how can we use the digital world to encourage healthy behaviour in general?

#### For example

The digital world is a place where healthy lifestyle choices can be encouraged, but also where potentially unhealthy choices are suggested. Education and civil society can use the digital world as a platform for prevention, while also helping young people to recognise misleading (unhealthy) information online.

Young people go through both positive and negative experiences in the digital world, just as they do in the physical world. Preventing those negative experiences in the digital world should therefore also be included in broader prevention approaches, for example to prevent bullying online.

### Expand the educational curriculum on media literacy to include digital wellbeing

Digital skills and literacy tend to represent the core of media education. Digital wellbeing — across the full breadth of wellbeing domains — should however also be part of the curriculum. It could for instance be integrated into existing programmes and projects, such as Helder op School, which addresses education, environment, early signalling of issues and building solid policy. It is also important here to make the link with what is being done in the area of mental health.

#### For example

- ✓ Have students keep a 'weekly media log' in which they write down *what they do, why, and how they feel about it*.
- ✓ Inform and involve parents through parent evenings, and train teachers to spot signs of problems so that they may be able to support students in a timely and appropriate manner.

### Involve children and young people structurally in the creation of school policies

To ensure that a policy will end up being successful, it is crucial to involve children and young people themselves in drawing it up.

#### For example

- ✓ Develop 'digital wellbeing modules' together with young people, which that can then be used on a *plug-and-play* basis within youth work or awareness campaigns. Methods such as co-creation and *design thinking* can help ensure that the solutions on offer genuinely meet young people's actual needs.
- ✓ When introducing new school policies, invite the students to consider together with you what the new policy might improve as well as what it may cost the students. Student councils can help ensure that education professionals remain aware of students' needs, opportunities and obstacles. This can help prevent tools such as Magister from leading to wellbeing detriments, such as an increase in pressure to perform.

## Recommendations for regional and national government

### Commit to reliable, data-driven policy

Digital technologies develop at a rapid pace. In order to test the effects of policy choices and adjust them in time, routine monitoring of the relationship between wellbeing and technology is needed. It is important that monitoring involves both objective data, as well as qualitative questionnaire or interview data. This produces a more complete picture of the state of wellbeing and technology within a given region or country, with attention to context and individual differences.

#### For example

Have supervisory bodies (such as the ACM or the Dutch Data Protection Authority) include wellbeing impact in their risk assessment of digital markets.

### Develop a 'wellbeing impact assessment'

Introduce a mandatory interdisciplinary review framework to be used throughout the development of new digital technology products. This goes beyond reviewing the state of children's rights, as is currently being done in the Children's Rights Impact Assessment or UNICEF's CRIA. By extending this framework to wellbeing more broadly, other users beside children can also be protected from adverse consequences.

#### For example

In cooperation with ethics and health professionals, develop measurement standards that measure the wellbeing impact on, for example, self-image, autonomy, social relationships and sleep during beta testing. This impact assessment should be able to be carried out fully independently of the industry.

### Set and enforce minimum requirements for product design on the basis of wellbeing criteria

Based on a framework of wellbeing criteria, concrete minimum requirements can be set for how digital products should — and should not — be designed.

#### For example

Good regulation and oversight of technology companies is possible, including at national level, as with the [Age Appropriate Design Code](#) (now called the Children's Code) in the United Kingdom.

### Foster the right market setting

Create a market setting in which moral, healthy, and ethical design by companies is rewarded and strengthened, and where compliance (or lack thereof) is linked to direct, palpable consequences for companies.

#### For example

Commit to public transparency around wellbeing-oriented design. Failure by companies to provide this transparency should result in financial or reputational damage.

Commit to liability. Companies should be held responsible for the harm they cause through unhealthy or unethical product design, as has long been the norm in other physical consumer industries.

## Recommendations for industry and digital media designers

### Put wellbeing at the centre of design

Digital technology should be designed with users' wellbeing as the priority. This requires an in-depth understanding — and commitment — on the part of tech companies.

#### For example

Use the Dutch [Code for Children's Rights](#) for concrete design recommendations.

Set concrete wellbeing goals for both existing and new digital products, and use interdisciplinary design frameworks such as the [Bloombox](#) and the *positive computing* paradigm to achieve those goals.

### Include wellbeing in sector-wide quality standards

Trade associations such as [NLDigital](#) would do well to include wellbeing in their sector quality standards, so as to motivate companies to incorporate this in their development process.

#### For example

App stores can give new app developers with a 'wellbeing by design' approach access to accelerated admission procedures or government contracts.

## Recommendations for research and science

In our [Research Agenda Digitalisation and Wellbeing 2025–2026](#) we have already made a series of recommendations for research around digitalisation and wellbeing. We highlight a number of relevant points here as well.

- **Invest in longitudinal and detailed research.** Most studies are not equipped to gauge the long-term effects of technology use. In addition, researchers have generally focused on general use, rather than the context in which it takes place, even though the context tell us much more about potential impact on wellbeing. More attention is needed to the 'how', 'why', and 'when' of positive and negative wellbeing outcomes.
- **Pay attention to under-studied population groups.** Young people often receive the most attention in research, but much less is known about the effects of digitalisation on very young children, adults, older people and vulnerable groups, such as people with an immigrant background or neurodivergent individuals.
- **Use objective measurement methods where necessary.** Research still relies too often on self-report when objective data sources are in fact needed. Cooperation with the tech industry in a way that safeguards researchers' independence and freedom of publication will be essential for closing this gap.

- **Collaborate with practitioners.** The gap between scientific research and everyday practice remains a challenge. To create and deploy tech-for-wellbeing solutions, prevention programmes or intervention tools effectively, an interdisciplinary approach is of paramount importance. Scientists, policymakers and developers need to work together to generate solutions that truly meet people's digital wellbeing needs.

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### More information

[www.ecdw.nl](http://www.ecdw.nl)

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