



ECSWE considerations on the

Impact of social media and online environment on young people

The European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education recommends to the CULT Committee of the European Parliament to keep the following remarks at the centre of its report on the impact of social media and the online environment on young people. Policymakers should encourage and empower schools to:

1. Be the example and send the right message

School is the place where children go to learn and develop – academically (intellectually), socially and emotionally and practice turning their knowledge and skills into actions. What takes place at school should aim to be in the best interest of such development, and thus teachers, curriculum and pedagogical experts take on the important task to create such a learning environment.

While there is proof that digital technology increases engagement in activities facilitated by it, there is no scientific proof that such engagement increases learning or overall development of children at school (OECD, 2023. *Pisa 2022 Results Volume II. Figure II.5.14. Time spent on digital devices at school and mathematic performance*). In fact, learning increases in an in-person learning scenario without the distractions of digital tools (screen-based media)¹. Schools should be the place where digital distraction is not reinforced and act as an exemplary space for how learning takes place.

Schools should also be aware of the worrisome overuse of social media and other online spaces by children of all ages in their free time and should in this sense act to counterbalance overuse by limiting the use of digital tools to a minimum. Apart from the possible harmful content children and young people are exposed to online, time spent on digital devices impacts negatively on their physical and mental health. Issues such as myopia, obesity, senso-motoric underdevelopment, sleep disorders and others should not be reinforced at school. School should serve as a space that brings back the balance for healthy development – more outdoor activities, in-person relationships, physical exercise, routine activities, etc.

¹ With exceptions in cases of diverse learning abilities and meaningful use of digital tools to support in-person learning.

2. Find the right tools to teach about digital technology

Since digital technology and AI bring about numerous and profound changes – fast and broad information exchange, advancement in health services, civil services, surveillance to prevent crime, entertainment, etc. – children and young people should learn about the basic principles of this technology and gain all other digital competences, as described in the European Digital Competences Framework for Citizens (DigComp). However, to gain the competences needed to meaningfully interact with digital technology, lessons and practices often do not need to involve digital tools, but can rely on analogue tools, to a large extent, and depending on the child's previous knowledge and age.

Competences such as computational thinking, problem solving, information and data literacy, communication, content creation, safety and wellbeing are better acquired in lived experiences in the classroom, and should in that sense start being developed from a young age. The overdue and very much needed adaptation of the DigComp framework for children and young people should take this reality into account and provide learning aims and teaching strategies that are age-appropriate. An example of such adaptation can be found as part of the HERMMES approach to digital and media education (<https://hermmes.eu/curriculum/>).

3. Practice a whole-school approach and give teachers agency

As much as the threats of the online environment are shaped by technological features such as algorithmic bias, infinite feeds or disturbing notification settings, the agency to protect children and young people from negative impacts should be reclaimed by their parents and teachers. While we should aim to achieve healthier tech design and keep tech companies accountable, teachers and parents should be empowered to draw the lines of digital exposure that children and young people in their care should be subject to. Depending on the child's age, this is best done in collaboration with the child rather than forcefully.

Schools and homes, teachers (including school leaders and other supporting staff) and parents (including legal guardians), in cooperation with young people, should thus create shared agreements on the appropriate and adequate common rules on exposure to digital content, the online environment and social media use. Guidelines to support such processes are available as part of the HERMMES approach to digital media education (Guidelines and Community and Culture Guide: <https://hermmes.eu>).

Who we are:

As the representative body of over 800 primary and secondary schools in 28 European countries, the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (Transparency register number: 256252314853-30) is dedicated to bringing the voice of its schools to EU institutions. Based on the above mentioned considerations, ECSWE suggests the annexed amendments to the Draft report on the Impact of social media and the online environment on young people (2025/2081(INI)). ECSWE offers its expertise for further cooperation with the CULT Committee on this and similar reports.