Positive Use Guide

Evidence-Based Insights on the Impact of Digital Devices on Child and Adolescent Wellbeing

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Throughout history, families have faced new technologies that have changed the way that they live. Today, many families are concerned about digital activities such as spending time on screens, using social media, and playing video games.

Digital activities bring risks and opportunities for our children and adolescents. **This guide provides practical, evidence-based tips to help young people and families make the most of devices and avoid potential harms.**

As our children grow older, we want to support them as they transition into adult life – to a world where many of us turn to digital devices for everyday activities such as paying for food, searching for directions, and completing work.

This builds on existing resources such as the Ministry of Health's *Guidance on Screen Use in Children (2025)*, which shares screentime guidelines for infants, toddlers, and young children. Ultimately, our goal is to nurture resilient individuals who can manage devices well and harness their benefits.

Our guide encourages a balanced approach based on the evidence. We do not suggest that devices need to be avoided, nor that devices should be used all the time. By finding the right balance, we can ensure that digital devices become useful tools that help us rather than control us.

1.2. Scope of this guide

This guide is for parents of school-going children and adolescents (aged 7–18), as well as for young digital users themselves who wish to establish healthy relationships with their devices. We focus on everyday use of digital screens ('screen use'), with an emphasis on social media and gaming.

School-going children and adolescents

Aged 7-18

Engaging in activities such as

General screen use   **Social media**   **Gaming**

Box 1: How the Positive Use Guide was created
To create this guide, a team of researchers carried out the following steps:

01   Evidence search

From October 2024 to February 2025, we reviewed approximately 300 research papers, policy documents, reports, and media articles on:

a. how children and adolescents use digital screens,
b. how screen use affects wellbeing,
c. factors that make screen use more helpful or harmful for young users,
d. actions taken by policymakers, researchers, educators, clinicians, and technology companies (e.g., guidelines, policies, in-app features, and screentime interventions), and
e. emerging trends on how children and adolescents engage with devices.

02   Stakeholder interviews

Next, we engaged key stakeholders, including:

a. the Media Literacy Council[a], and
b. 15 mental health professionals in Singapore who work with children and adolescents (including psychiatrists and psychologists from both the public and private sectors, and representatives from community groups and social service agencies).

Based on this research process, we developed practical, evidence-based recommendations for families in Singapore.

In the following sections, we will begin by summarising research on how digital devices impact children and adolescents (Section 2). Based on the evidence, we then provide practical tips for parents (Section 3) and for young digital users (Section 4). Next, we include a worksheet to reflect on the role devices play in our lives (Section 5). Finally, we highlight additional resources on how to thrive in a digital world (Section 6).

Key Idea

Having a positive approach to digital devices requires us to move away from one-size-fits-all solutions. By embracing the challenges and opportunities of technology, we can shape a future where a generation of children and adolescents thrive in the digital age.

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[a] The Media Literacy Council (MLC) comprises members from the people, private, and public sectors. It provides expert advice and thought leadership on issues pertaining to digital literacy and wellness and its emerging areas.

2. The science of screen use: How usage influences children and adolescents

What the experts say:

In this section, we summarise what the science says about screen use. Researchers have found that everyday screen use can be linked to both helpful and harmful outcomes, but this link is more limited compared to other factors like parenting, beliefs or life experiences. However, some children and adolescents may use their devices in problematic ways, which can place them at higher risk for poorer mental health.

2.1. Everyday screen use: What does it mean for young users?

2.1.1. Is screen use linked to wellbeing?

In 2024, a group of researchers summarised findings from over 2400 studies involving nearly 2 million children and adolescents who used digital devices.[1]

The researchers found that there are different ways of using devices, and that **certain types of device use are linked to helpful or harmful outcomes.**

For example, educational apps, content, and eBooks can help <u>improve educational outcomes</u> such as reading skills or numeracy.

On the other hand, excessive amounts of screen use, internet use, and social media have been linked to <u>poorer wellbeing in children and adolescents</u>. This includes lower mood, more mental health challenges, poorer overall health, and being more likely to engage in risky behaviours.

Box 2: Understanding the limits of social media research

We often use the term "social media" to refer to many different social media platforms. In reality, "social media" can refer to platforms like social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram), or content-sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok).

The way children and adolescents use social media platforms has also changed over the past decade. In the past, many studies focused on platforms aimed at social networking. However, today's young users in Singapore are more likely to be using messaging apps and content-sharing platforms. As such, we must be cautious when applying past research findings to today's context.

2.1.2. How strong is the link between screen use and wellbeing?

> **What the experts say:**
>
> The research tells us that everyday screen use can have both positive and negative effects. **When we consider the big picture, screen use has a less significant role in the wellbeing of children and adolescents than other important factors in their development,** such as lifestyle habits or parenting styles.

While we acknowledge how screen use can have a negative impact on wellbeing, **it is important to understand how this compares to other factors that affect a young person's life.**

- In a summary of over 2400 studies, the effects of screen use were 'very small' to 'medium' in magnitude (based on classifications by statisticians). **When compared with other influences such as parenting, beliefs, and life experiences, the impact of screen use of digital devices is more limited.**[2–7]

- Three large studies have also made head-to-head comparisons between screen use and other influences in a child or adolescent's life.[8] Each of these studies involved 12,000 to 300,000 adolescents. Across all three studies, factors like sleep, diet, substance use, getting into fights, being bullied, or being arrested were more strongly linked to wellbeing than screen use. **Screen use was consistently found to be one of the factors with the weakest connection with wellbeing.**

2.2. How might problematic screen use be linked to wellbeing?

> **What the experts say:**
>
> Some children and adolescents may use devices in a problematic way. This places them at a higher risk for poorer mental health.
>
> **Overall, the research suggests that it is important to find a healthy balance with screen use.**

2.2.1. When does screen use become problematic?

A subset of children and adolescents use digital devices in a problematic way.

Some experts compare problematic use to addiction because the young user may:

1. become overly focused on screentime, the internet, gaming, or social media,

2. neglect other responsibilities or interests (e.g., homework, sports, social activities with friends),

3. feel like they are unable to control themselves, continuing to use devices even when it leads to negative consequences,

4. experience withdrawal symptoms (e.g., abnormal levels of irritability and restlessness) when they stop using devices, and

5. find that they need to spend more and more time on devices to feel satisfied.

In turn, problematic use can affect the healthy development of children and adolescents. If children and adolescents use devices excessively, this can displace other important activities such as sleep or exercise.

2.2.2. How common is problematic screen use?

Researchers estimate that among those aged 25 and below, [9-11]

1 IN 4

show signs of problematic phone use

1 IN 3

use social networking platforms like Instagram in a problematic way

1 IN 20

meet the criteria for internet gaming disorder

The above estimates are aggregated from global studies.

2.2.3. Is problematic screen use associated with poorer wellbeing?

For children and adolescents, problematic screen use is more closely linked to poor wellbeing than everyday use of devices.

Research tells us that young people who use devices in a problematic way have two to three times increased odds of experiencing depression, anxiety, stress, and poor sleep quality (compared to those without problematic screen use).

3. For parents: Tips to enable our children to thrive in a digital world

Setting boundaries is a normal part of family life. Whether it's deciding when a child can cross the road independently, what time teenagers should be home, or which social activities are appropriate, **boundaries guide our children as they learn to navigate the world safely.**

In this section, we offer practical tips to help parents set healthy boundaries around digital devices.

3.1. Digital cheat sheets: Quick guides on what to encourage and avoid

3.1.1. What to encourage: Pursuing digital activities for positive growth

Researchers have found that some digital activities can have a net positive effect on children and adolescents.[1] These include:

- Reading eBooks,
- Engaging with educational videos, games, and apps, and
- Watching online content together with parents.

Educational online activities are especially beneficial for younger children (in the primary school age) and those with special learning needs.[12] Educational tools can also help users acquire knowledge, develop skills and enhance their own learning. Other digital activities, such as playing video games, can also have benefits **when enjoyed in moderation.[13]**

Engage in these digital activities together with your children, particularly when they are younger. Your involvement and consistent guidance will help them be more intentional with their device use.

3.1.2. What to avoid: Steering away from online risks

When children and adolescents explore the digital world, some of them may encounter online risks that can have a significant impact on their wellbeing.

Just as we prepare children for unlikely but serious dangers in the physical world (e.g., theft, reckless drivers), we need to help our children prepare for rare but serious online threats.

Core principles to staying safe online

Experts have identified the following core principles that apply to many digital platforms:
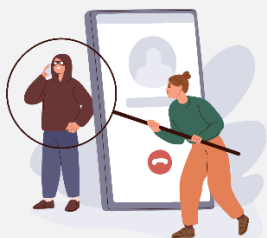
1. Be cautious with strangers online.

Strangers can approach children on any platform, including games, shopping sites, messaging apps, forums, or social media.

Tip for parents: Adjust your child's app settings to restrict contact with strangers.

2. Protect yourself from scams.

Children, like adults, can fall victim to online scams. They may pay for items that don't arrive or receive imitation goods (e.g., fake trading cards).

Tip for parents: Discuss regularly with your children about any online trades or purchases.

3. Learn from real-life cases.

Discussing news stories about online risks can help parents and children prepare for potential dangers.

We shouldn't seek out negative stories actively, since this can make us think that rare events occur more frequently and cause us to be anxious. However, it's helpful as a family to discuss news reports together when the opportunity arises.

Core principles for social media platforms

Here are key principles for social media platforms:

1. Be mindful of what you share online.

Once we post something online (even in private chats), we cannot control how the content is used. Photos and videos can be turned into meme stickers or altered using photo-editing software and artificial intelligence. It can be distressing when your content is used in ways you didn't expect.

Tips for parents:

- Be mindful when you share about your children online. Take into consideration their best interests – including their autonomy, safety, and privacy.
- Have regular discussions with your child about what they're posting online – including content posted in private chats.

2. Set clear expectations in group chats.

Group chats can sometimes encourage behaviours we wouldn't engage in face-to-face. We may exclude others by leaving them out of the group on purpose, or by removing them from the group without warning. We may also 'roast' or tease someone constantly or say crude words that are unkind.

Tip for parents: Follow the minimum age requirement for apps (e.g., 13 for WhatsApp or Telegram) and monitor your child's group chats.

3. Think before following viral trends.

It might be tempting for children and adolescents to follow a viral trend on social media, but not all are safe or appropriate.

Tips for parents:

- **Talk about viral challenges:** When you learn about viral challenges, encourage your children to think about potential consequences before they join in.

- **Help manage expectations and model self-worth:** Viral trends can make children think that they need to look a certain way, buy popular items, or keep up with social events (e.g. attending pop concerts) to fit in. It is important to:
  o Guide them to make practical choices that don't lead to overspending or added stress.
  o Encourage them to identify their strengths and individuality, addressing any concerns they may have that their self-worth depends on keeping up with trends.
- **Communicate regularly:** More broadly, speak regularly with your children about the content or trends they are viewing online.

4. Don't be driven by the 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO).

Children and adolescents can sometimes experience a 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO). This can drive them to check their phones constantly, or to reply to every message. Children may worry that they may miss out on something important, or that their friends may not understand if they don't reply quickly.

FOMO can disrupt your child's daily routines (e.g., homework, sleep) and may make them feel anxious when they're not online.

Tips for parents:

- **Show empathy:** Acknowledge your child's wishes to stay in touch with their friends.
- **Role model:** Show your child how you set limits with your social media use.
- **Set boundaries together:** Work with your child to decide when and how to disconnect from their devices (e.g., during meals, bedtime).
- **Build communication skills:** Help your child communicate with their friends about when they'll go offline (e.g., during the night), so that everyone knows what to expect.

5. Be aware that platform algorithms can influence what we see.

When your child uses social media, much of what they see is decided by the platform's algorithms. These are influenced by what your child searches for and watches, or what the platform knows about your child.

Algorithms can create a tailored experience that makes social media more enjoyable.

While they are not harmful in themselves, it's helpful to recognise that having personalised suggestions may lead your child to spend more time on the platform than they might have planned.

If your child starts watching negative content recommended by the algorithm, it will cause more of such content to appear on their social media feeds. This can affect how they feel or shape their perspectives.

Tips for parents:

- **Discuss:** Talk with your child about how social media platforms use algorithms to suggest content. Guide them to consider whether they're only getting one side of the story, and take some time together to explore other viewpoints.
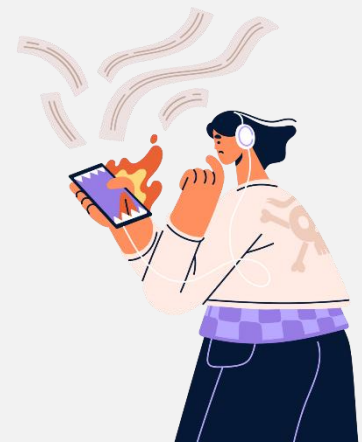
- **Watch for signs:** Notice if your child seems to be spending excessive time on social media, or if their mood or views shift in ways that concern you.
- **Adjust settings:** If you have concerns about the impact of algorithms, work with your child to adjust the platform's settings. You may consider:
    - Turning off 'autoplay' so that new content is not automatically shown;
    - Having content shown in chronological order (rather than being sorted based on what the platform thinks is relevant);
    - Adjusting privacy settings to limit how much personal data is used in recommendations; or
    - Encouraging your child to click 'not interested' (or similar options) when they encounter content that makes them uncomfortable.

Core principles for gaming

Manage your time well.

Playing online games on the computer or mobile devices is enjoyable for children and adolescents. Gamers often find that they lose track of time when they play. While this can help your child relax, it can become counterproductive if your child ends up sacrificing important things like sleep or homework.

Tips for parents:

- **Set limits on gaming time:** Discuss with your child how much time they can set aside for gaming. Since it's easy to lose track of time, support them with strategies like visible timers or the phone's built-in time limits.

- **Handle stopping points with flexibility:** It can be difficult for children to stop playing when they're in the middle of something – like when they're about to win. Encourage your child to check the time before starting a new quest, level or match. If you do allow more game time, make a plan about when to stop and encourage your child to stick to it.

Signs to watch out for

As parents, you may wonder how best to support your child and to recognise when they've fallen prey to online harms. If you notice any unusual changes in your child's behaviour – such as shifts in sleep patterns, eating habits, or mood – it's a good idea to check in and see how your child is doing.

If you discover that your child has had a negative experience online, try not to react with judgement, scolding, or panic. Stay calm and reassure your child that you're there to support them. Section 6 lists professionals you can contact for advice and assistance.

3.2. Introducing phone ownership: How to set your child up for success

3.2.1. When should I give my child a phone?

As children grow older, parents will face the question of whether to give their child a phone. This decision is like letting your child cross the road alone for the first time – a milestone that depends on your child's readiness.

There's no hard and fast rule on when children should receive a phone. Globally, most children own a phone during adolescence (secondary school age), with 9 in 10 owning one and spending around 3.5 to 4 hours daily on their devices.

However, the best timing for your family will depend on your unique situation and your child's maturity and needs. The next page details some principles to consider.

Try to avoid giving a phone…

- When your child is young and your main purpose is to keep track of them or to communicate.

    - Consider alternatives like GPS-enabled smart watches, basic phones without internet browsing, or tracking devices (e.g. air tags).

- Just because of peer pressure, because your child asks for one, or as a reward (e.g., after exams).

Before deciding, ask yourself:

- ☐ Does your child need a phone (e.g., to communicate, for schoolwork)?
- ☐ Can your child keep track of their belongings independently?
- ☐ Does your child manage time and responsibilities well?
- ☐ Does your child have healthy friendships and good social skills?
- ☐ Can your child regulate emotions and show self-control?
- ☐ Is your child mature enough to avoid online risks (like sharing passwords) and to handle tricky online situations (e.g., witnessing a cyberbullying incident, receiving a message from a stranger, differentiating between appropriate and inappropriate content)?
- ☐ Will your child talk to you about issues they might encounter while using a phone (e.g., if they encounter unpleasant messages)?
- ☐ Are you able to supervise your child's screen use (e.g., establishing and enforcing rules on phone usage – including monitoring apps, screen use and internet use)?
- ☐ Can you be a good role model on phone use for your child?

If you answer 'no' to any of these questions, it is wise to wait until your child is older – ideally when your child is in secondary school. Children who are already facing challenges (such as low self-esteem, poor self-control, bullying, or high stress) are more vulnerable to problematic screen use.

3.2.2. How do I prepare my child for phone ownership?

Preparing a child for phone ownership should begin from the time your child is young.

The most important preparation is to **foster a warm relationship with your child and to role-model healthy phone use.** This will help build a safe environment where your child feels comfortable sharing online experiences with you.

Even before your child receives a phone, there will be opportunities for your child to navigate the digital world. For example, you might allow your child to watch an online video or to complete homework through a website.

Starting from these early opportunities, you can help your child build digital resilience through the following strategies:

- **Set clear limits on device use and communicate this clearly with your children.** This can include setting time limits, defining when and where devices can be used (e.g., putting aside devices at the dinner table), and specifying what kind of online content is acceptable.

- **Pair these rules with active supervision.** For example, you can encourage device use in common areas like the living room rather than bedrooms or review the device's browser history to stay informed.

- **Engage in regular conversations about the online content your child encounters.** Help them to think critically about online content (e.g., whether it's real or misleading), and share concerns you might have. Over time, these conversations help children to become thoughtful and discerning users of digital devices.

3.2.3. Getting your child's first phone: A to-do checklist

At some point, you may decide that your child is ready to own a phone. This is a significant digital milestone. To help your child succeed, it's important to provide structure and support and not simply hand over the device.

Experts recommend that parents:

- build on having a warm relationship with their child,

- set and communicate limits regarding phone use,

- pair rules with active supervision, and

- have regular conversations about your child's phone use.

In addition to these strategies, take time to **set up parental controls on your child's device.** Most phones allow you to:

- ☐ <u>Limit usage times</u>: Control what time of the day and for how long the phone can be used.
- ☐ <u>Restrict content</u>: Block access to content that is not age appropriate.
- ☐ <u>Manage activities</u>: Allow only certain games or apps to be used, decide who can be added as friends, and determine whether private messaging is allowed.
- ☐ <u>Safeguard against unwanted spending</u>: Restrict app store and in-app purchases.

It's important that you actively monitor and discuss these controls – especially at the beginning. Remember to praise your child when they use their phone in a responsible and positive way.

After your child receives their first phone or device, look out for these signs that your child may be struggling with device use:

1) When device use interferes with their daily responsibilities or routines.
2) When you notice changes in their behaviour (e.g., mood swings, changes in appetite, sleeping more or less).
3) When limiting device time causes them significant stress or affects their ability to function.

3.3. Finding common ground: Discussing digital habits as a family

3.3.1. What if parents and children don't agree on digital habits?

Perhaps you and your child don't agree on whether change is needed.

- As a parent, you might feel your child's device use needs to be adjusted – but your child disagrees.
- On the other hand, your children may think you need to adjust your digital habits – but you may not see it that way!

In Section 5, we have prepared a worksheet to help you think through these differences as a family.

How can you navigate these differences?

Experts offer a few general principles to help parents handle disagreements with their children.

- **Focus on the relationship:** Use this as an opportunity to practise warm, responsive parenting while still setting clear boundaries and expectations. Engage your children as you work to create a plan for screen use together – when they're involved in the decision-making, they're more likely to cooperate.

- **Seek to understand:** Try to see things from your child's perspective. Explore why your child turns to devices and feels that no change is needed. Work together to understand their goals and whether device use is truly interfering with their daily life, responsibilities, wellbeing, and relationships.

- **Lead by example:** Examine your own device use and strive to role model the positive behaviours you'd like your child to adopt.

parenting for Wellness

For more advice, you can refer to the **Parenting for Wellness** website.

Box 3: Managing disagreements about screen use

In many households, parents and children have disagreements about when and for how long devices should be used. This is especially common when children use their devices before carrying out their responsibilities, for example, doing homework, studying, finishing chores, or having dinner together as a family.

As a parent, it's important to remain calm and:

- acknowledge your child's feelings (e.g., understanding their desire to reply to a friend's messages or to take a break),
- share your own concerns,
- offer reasonable choices, and
- set clear expectations.

Here's a possible script you might follow:

"I get that you want to relax now. Using your phone can be a lot of fun. However, remember our agreement to finish your homework first. I'm concerned that you might get distracted."

"Let's aim to complete your homework first, and then you can enjoy your game or video afterwards. Would you like to start with your Math or English homework?"

If your child resists, consider having a grace period to help them wrap up their device use and transition into work. Children often find it difficult to turn off their devices when they're about to win in a game, or when they've reached an exciting scene in a video.

You can **emphasise how you're on your child's side.** For example, you might say:

"I know it can be hard to stop in the middle of something you enjoy. How about taking five more minutes? I'll set the timer for you. When the timer rings, it's time to finish up and start your homework."

"I'll keep your phone for a while so it's easier to focus, and I'll bring it back once you're done. If you need any help with your homework, just let me know – I'm here for you."

Sometimes, children get frustrated when parents use their phones in front of them and are not fully present. Children may try to regain their parents' attention — by talking to them, nudging them, or acting out. This can lead to conflict, especially when parents are busy with work or other important tasks.

Research tells us that both children and adults dislike it when someone uses their phone in front of them. It can make the other person feel ignored or unimportant.

As a parent, try not to use your phone when you're spending time with your children. If you really need to use your phone, take the time to explain why. For example, you might say:

"I'm sorry, I have to take this work call right now. I know you'd like my full attention, and I'll give it to you in five minutes when I'm done. How about having a snack break first, and when I'm ready I'll be right with you?"

3.4. Conclusion

There are different ways of using devices, and certain ways are linked to helpful or harmful outcomes. While educational apps can improve reading skills or numeracy, excessive amounts of device use may lead to poorer wellbeing.

Encourage your child to engage in activities that contribute to positive growth, such as reading eBooks or engaging with educational videos, games and apps.

Be involved in their online activities and watch online content together with them.

Discuss online risks with your child and work together to safeguard against risks.

If you notice changes in your child's behaviour (e.g., eating or sleeping patterns), check in to see if they've had a negative online experience or if they're struggling with device use.

Ensure your child is ready before giving them a phone. Continue to monitor their device use and encourage them to develop healthy digital habits.

Try to find common ground with your children. If there are disagreements in device use, work through these together as a family.

Remember to practise warm, responsive parenting, set clear boundaries, and model positive behaviours you'd like your child to adopt.

As parents, the job of guiding our children through the digital world is an ongoing process. Digital technologies will continue to change, and so will the challenges and opportunities they offer. By setting clear boundaries and encouraging healthy habits, we can scaffold our children to navigate the online world with confidence.

Remember, you're not alone in this journey. We're in this together – as families, and as a society.

4. For young digital users: How to take charge of your digital life

To young digital users:

You are growing up in a world surrounded by digital devices and online activities. Many of these platforms didn't exist when your parents were growing up, and the digital world continues to change. As a society, we are learning about new technologies together, and we care about how these changes affect you.

This guide was written to journey with you. **We aim to help you make informed choices so that digital devices support your goals and interests, rather than take over your life.**

We share the latest information from experts around the world and outline general principles you can use even as technology changes.

If you ever come across online material that makes you feel uncomfortable, we also want you to know that you are never alone. There are trusted adults, resources, and services you can turn to for support.

We believe that you can find your own path in this digital world, and we look forward to seeing you thrive.

4.1. Digital cheat sheets: Quick guides on dos and don'ts

4.1.1. Digital activities that help you grow

Want to take charge of your digital life? Choose online activities that experts recommend for young digital users like yourself.

Here are some great choices:

Reading eBooks

Using educational videos, games, and apps

Watching online content together with your parents

You might also enjoy activities like video games. These can be part of a healthy routine too — as long as you keep things balanced.

4.1.2. Staying safe online

There are some online situations that can be risky or harmful. Here are expert tips to help you navigate the digital landscape safely so that you can enjoy your digital experience.

General tips

1. Be cautious with strangers online.

Strangers may approach you on any platform – including games, shopping sites, messaging apps, forums, or social media.

Around the world, there have been stories in the news about strangers who commit crimes or harmful activities through these interactions.

Tip: Avoid moving conversations with strangers to other platforms (e.g., messaging apps), sharing personal information, or meeting up without telling a trusted adult.

2. Protect yourself from scams.

Anyone can fall victim to online scams – including you. You may pay for an item that doesn't arrive, or receive imitation goods (e.g., fake trading cards).

Tips:

- Be careful about deals that seem too good to be true.

- Always check with a trusted adult before making trades, especially if transactions happen outside official platforms.

Using social media wisely

1. Be mindful of what you share online.

Once we post something online (even in private chats), we cannot control how the content is used.

Photos and videos can be turned into meme stickers or altered using photo-editing software and artificial intelligence. It can be distressing when your content is used in ways you didn't expect.

Tips:

- Think twice before sharing personal photos or videos – even in private chats with friends. Remember, others may edit or misuse your images without your permission.

- Be mindful of your words and actions online. Anything you post can be screenshotted or forwarded to others (beyond your intended audience). Before posting, ask yourself whether you'd be comfortable if the material became public.

2. Set clear expectations in group chats.

Group chats can sometimes encourage behaviours we wouldn't engage in face-to-face. We may exclude others by leaving them out of the group on purpose, or by removing them from the group without warning. We may also 'roast' or tease someone constantly or say crude words that are unkind.

Tip: Treat others online as you would in person. If you see bullying, speak up or leave the group. If you feel uncomfortable, talk to a trusted adult.

3. Don't be driven by the 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO).

We can sometimes feel like we need to check our phones all the time or reply to every message – especially when we join a new social media platform or chatgroup. This feeling is called the 'fear of missing out' or FOMO.

When we let FOMO take over, we might feel anxious when we're not online. It can even get in the way of our sleep when we stay up late trying to keep up.

Tips:

- Find a healthy balance by setting boundaries on when to disconnect from your devices. You can let your friends know you're going offline for a while.

- Remember to be present with the friends and family you're with. Put your phone aside so that you can enjoy your time together.

4. Understand how algorithms shape what you see online.

Social media platforms use computer instructions called algorithms to suggest content for you. These suggestions are based on what you've searched for, what you've watched, or what the platform knows about you.

Algorithms give you a personalised experience and can make your feed more enjoyable. However, it's easy to spend more time on the platform than you had planned. You might also notice that once you search for a certain topic, you see more and more of the same content. This can be risky if you're feeling down – seeing a lot of negative content can make you feel even worse. Sometimes, seeing the same kind of content can even change your views or make your views more extreme.

Tips:

- If you're struggling with time management, try turning off the 'autoplay' feature so that new content doesn't automatically load.

- Concerned that algorithms are influencing what you see? Take a look at your settings. You can adjust your settings to:

  o Show the most recent post (instead of what the algorithm thinks is most relevant).

  o Limit how much of your personal information is used for recommendations (e.g., by disabling permissions that let apps track your location or your activity across other apps).

  o Click "not interested" (or similar options) when you encounter content that makes you feel uncomfortable.
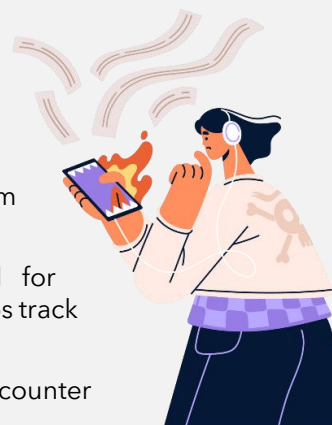
5. Think before following viral trends.

It might be tempting to follow a viral trend, but not all are safe or right for you.

Tips:

- Don't join a viral challenge just because it's funny or because others are doing it. Pause and think about potential consequences before you join in.

- Sometimes, when you see something trending, you might feel you need to join in. You might think about changing how you look, buying a new gadget or toy, or making sure you're at the event everyone's talking about (e.g., a concert). Remember: you don't have to follow every trend to fit in or feel good about yourself.

- If you follow a trend, make sure it's something you actually want to do, and that it's not going to make life more stressful or expensive for you.

Staying in control of your gaming habits

Manage your time well.

Playing computer or phone games can be fun, and many gamers lose track of time while playing. This can be a great way to relax.

But if you end up missing out on important things like sleep or homework, it can be counterproductive.

Tips:

- Before you start, decide how much time you want to spend playing. Use your phone's time limit features or set a timer.

- If you're starting a new quest, level or match, check whether you can stop when your gaming time is over. If your time runs out and you are in the middle of the quest or match, decide how much more time you need to complete it – and stick to that.

If you ever find yourself in an online situation that makes you feel uncomfortable, remember that you are not alone.

- It's normal to feel embarrassed, disappointed, or worried about getting into trouble, but there are people who care about you and want to help.
- Reach out to a trusted adult for support. Section 6 also lists professionals you can contact.

4.2. Getting ready for your first phone: How to set yourself up for success

4.2.1. Am I ready for my own phone?

It can be difficult to see your friends have a phone when you don't have one. Remember, every family and every child is different. Just like how we all start crossing the road alone at different ages, your parents are trying to choose the right time for you.

In the meantime, you can show your parents you are ready by:

Managing your time well (e.g., by completing your homework without reminders)
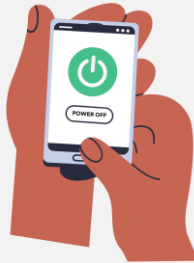
Practising self-control (e.g., by knowing how to turn off screens whenever you're given the opportunity to use them)

Building strong friendships and healthy habits in the physical world

4.2.2. Your first phone: How to start off right

It can be exciting to get your first phone. You might want to download every app and use your phone straightaway!

But remember, your phone is a tool to support you, not something that should take over your life. Before you start using your phone, decide how you can use your phone in a way that fits your goals.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

How will I make sure I get enough sleep?

- Decide on a time each night to stop replying to messages and using your phone.

- To help you get a good night's rest, consider putting your phone on silent or leaving it outside your bedroom.

How will I keep my friendships strong?

While a phone can help you connect with friends online, it can interfere with your friendships if you use it instead of engaging with the friends who are right next to you.

- Decide on when you'll put your phone away so that you can be fully present – for example, when you're hanging out with friends or during meals.

How will I keep up with my responsibilities (e.g., homework)?

Multi-tasking with your phone can be counterproductive. It can slow you down and lead to more errors.

- Think about how you'll prevent your phone from distracting you. You may choose to keep your phone out of reach or turn off notifications for non-urgent things (e.g., group chats).

How will I manage my 'leisure' phone time?

Many apps are designed to keep you engaged for as long as possible. For example, watching videos is enjoyable, and it's easy to scroll for much longer than planned.

- Set limits by turning off auto-play, disabling unnecessary notifications, or by setting alarms.
- Sometimes, we use our phones to avoid difficult or boring tasks. Try some productivity hacks, for example:
    - Break big tasks into smaller, manageable components and start with just one.
    - Use the Pomodoro technique: work for a set time (e.g., 25 minutes), followed by a scheduled break where you allow yourself to use your phone (e.g., for 5 minutes).

Pro tip!

It's much easier to manage your phone use if you set up structure rather than relying on willpower.

For example, you can use device management tools like phone modes (e.g., Do Not Disturb, Work, Focus modes) or reminders (e.g., an alert that is sent after 15 minutes of device use).

The settings your parents put in place are examples of these helpful structures. You may be tempted to get around them, but they're there to help you use your phone in a safe and wise way. Remember, you don't want to lose the privilege of having your phone. Most importantly, make sure you're in control of your phone – not the other way around!

4.3. Finding common ground: Talking about tech habits as a family

What if you and your parents don't agree on digital habits?

- Your parents might feel your device use needs to be changed – but you disagree.
- Or perhaps you think your parents need to adjust their digital habits – but they don't see it that way!

In Section 5, we have prepared a worksheet to help you think through these differences as a family.

How can you navigate these differences?

Experts offer a few general principles to help families handle disagreements.

- **Consider your parent's viewpoint:** Ask your parents to explain their concerns. Listen carefully to understand their views.

- **Show responsibility:** Parents often want to see that you can manage your own devices and that you can stay focused on your responsibilities and goals. Take this chance to set your own device use goals and keep track of your progress.

Box 5: Managing expectations about being present

Sometimes, you might get frustrated when your parents use their phone in front of you. You might want their full attention!

You can let your parents know how you feel. It's important to choose respectful ways to communicate:

- Pick the right moment to talk – at a time when your parents are not busy with work emails or in the middle of a tense discussion.
- Use "I" statements to express yourself. Clearly describe what happened, how it made you feel, and what you would like to change.

For example, you might say:

"Mum, I feel ignored *[feeling]* when I am not allowed to use my phone but you're on yours. Sometimes, I want to talk to you *[what happened]*, but I'm worried *[feeling]* about disturbing you because you're on the phone. Can we set aside some no-phone time today *[what you would like to change]*?"

5. A self-check worksheet: What role do devices play in your life?

Devices aren't good or bad in themselves – it's how we use them that matters. **Experts encourage us to reflect on whether devices enrich our lives or interfere with our goals, and to consider making changes if needed.**[14,15]

We invite both parents and young digital users to explore your own digital habits through the following questions.

Question 1: What do you use digital devices for?
Researchers have found that we use devices for many reasons. Which of these apply to you?

I use my devices:

- ☐ When I'm not quite ready to start a new task (e.g., waking up for the day, starting a challenging task)
- ☐ To unwind and relax (e.g., after a long day)
- ☐ To connect with friends (e.g., through messaging, gaming, or social media)
- ☐ Because I enjoy getting recognition or being validated (e.g., when others like my posts, or I get a high score in a game)
- ☐ To carry out everyday tasks (e.g., searching for directions, making payments)
- ☐ For school or work activities
- ☐ To catch up on news and what's happening in the world
- ☐ To enjoy my hobbies or learn new things (e.g., watching cooking videos, DIY videos)
- ☐ To create things (e.g., making videos, taking photos, working on creative projects)
- ☐ To challenge myself (e.g., with games)
- ☐ For other reasons: _____

There's nothing wrong with using our devices for these reasons. Our devices can:

Bring us convenience	**Help us unwind**	**Spark creativity**
Boost our sense of accomplishment	**Foster connection with others**	**Contribute to our identity**

Question 2: Do your devices support or obstruct your goals?

We need to monitor for balance. Sometimes, our devices can get in the way of our personal goals and wellbeing. Here's a checklist to help you make an assessment.

Do your devices:

☐ Impact your health or basic needs?

    ☐ Are you having difficulties eating well, getting enough sleep or exercise?

☐ Interfere with your relationships (e.g., with family or friends)?

☐ Take up more time than ideal?

    ☐ Do you often lose track of time or miss out on activities you'd like to do because you've run out of time?

☐ Make you feel more withdrawn, isolated, or lonely?

☐ Seem to control you?

    ☐ Do you struggle to put your device down, even when you want to?

☐ Make you feel worse about yourself (e.g., when you compare yourself to others online)?

☐ Distract you from important tasks (e.g., homework, work tasks)?

☐ Increase your feelings of sadness, anxiety, or stress (e.g., from negative comments or distressing news)?

On the whole, are you satisfied with:

How you are using your digital devices?   **Yes / No**

How much time you are spending on your digital devices?   **Yes / No**

If you realise that devices are getting in the way of your goals or wellbeing, turn to the next page for tips on how to get back on track.

Recalibration: Resetting your digital habits

If you feel like it's time for a change, take some time to plan how you can reset your digital habits in a realistic and sustainable way.

In Question 1, you explored the reasons why you're using digital devices. **Now, think about how you can fulfil those same needs either without devices or by using them more mindfully.**

For example: If you use devices to…

- **Unwind and relax** → Can you try an offline activity like sports or music? Setting an alarm might also help you limit your screen time.
- **Connect with friends** → Are there other opportunities to meet in person, or can you join offline interest groups?

Remember – it's not just about removing your device. Think about how you can replace your online activities with other enjoyable options. If needed, ask your friends or family members for support and accountability.

Staying on track

If you've decided to adjust your digital habits, here are some tips to help you stay on track:

- **Start small:** Change can be challenging. To get you started, think about one small change and see how it feels.

- **Celebrate successes:** Take note of positive changes. Did you reclaim time for something you enjoy?

- **Plan for barriers:** Think ahead about potential obstacles and what strategies might help you get back on track.

If you find it difficult to recalibrate your digital habits on your own, consider seeking professional help. In Section 6, you'll find a list of experts you can reach out to.

6. Additional resources

6.1. Additional materials to support families

Parenting for Wellness Toolbox for Parents

The Parenting for Wellness Toolbox for Parents, developed by the Health Promotion Board, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social and Family Development, is a parenting resource that aims to help parents build stronger relationships with their children, understand how to support their children's mental health, and navigate the digital age with their children. Parents can access modules on topics like *Understanding the Digital Landscape, Empowering Your Child to Manage Their Use of Digital Technology,* and *Guiding Your Child to Manage the Harms and Risks of the Online Space.*

Grow Well SG

Grow Well SG is a multi-ministry initiative that aims to support, encourage, and teach children to build healthy habits from a young age. The initiative emphasises 5 'wells'; Eat Well, Sleep Well, Learn Well, Exercise Well, and Bond Well. The microsite also shares practical tools and expert advice to support children in the four key areas of diet, sleep, learning and exercise. It also discusses specific topics such as setting boundaries around screen time, and balancing screen time with family time.

Raising Children in the Digital Age – IMDA Digital for Life Portal

The 'Raising Children in the Digital Age' initiative aims to equip parents with the necessary knowledge to navigate the online space together with their child or teenager. It provides resources for varying developmental ages across different subject matters and shares workshops and webinars that parents can attend to better support and understand their child and the digital world.

MSF Families for Life Parenting Portal

The Families for Life (FFL) Council provides parents with evidence-informed resources and tips through their parenting journey, starting from pregnancy till their child's teenage years. Parents can access practical guides and resources on the website, sign up for parenting programmes and join Families for Life @ Community (FFLC) activities and events in local neighbourhoods across Singapore. Find out more about Families for Life at www.familiesforlife.sg, and explore the available resources on the Parenting Portal at https://familiesforlife.sg/pages/fflp.

6.2. Where to turn to for help

Mindline and Youth Mindline:

Online platforms that provide mental health support for the general public (Mindline) and for youths (Youth Mindline).

Website: https://mindline.sg

National Mindline 1771:

A 24-hour helpline and text service for questions or support related to mental health.

Telephone Hotline: 1771

WhatsApp Messaging Messaging: +65 6669 1771

Online webchat hosted on https://mindline.sg/fsmh

CHAT:

Mental health service for young people aged 16 to 30. It provides access to mental health resources and confidential mental health assessments.

Telephone: +65 6493 6500 / 6501

Email: CHAT@mentalhealth.sg

CHAT Hub: *SCAPE, 2 Orchard Link, #04-07, Singapore 237978

Opening hours: Tue - Sat: 12pm - 9pm (excluding Public Holidays)

SHECARES @ SCWO:

Support centre dedicated to supporting individuals affected by online harms.

Helpline: 8001 01 4616

Textline: +65 6571 4400

Email: shecares_scwo@she.org.sg

Youth Community Outreach Team (CREST-Youth):

Community mental health network designed for youths aged 12 to 25 and their parents or caregivers. It provides basic emotional support as well as screening for mental health symptoms.

CREST-Youth services are available at hubs across the island, including Bedok, Tampines, Pasir Ris, and Lakeside.

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