

# ***Use of digital media by children and adolescents***

## **Call for action**

### **Foreword**

Today children are growing up in an environment with a wide and growing range of digital media devices available throughout the world. Exposure to screens starts increasingly early in life. Screen-time has been linked to various negative health and development outcomes such as reduced motor and communication skills, obesity, sleeping problems, depression and anxiety. There is therefore a general consensus that screen time should be discouraged in infants and toddlers and limited for older children.

### **Perspective**

Childhood and adolescence are crucial periods for adopting healthy behaviours.

As paediatricians we recognise the growing influence of digital media on various aspects of children's and adolescent's development and health. Children and adolescents have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to advertising, addictive contents, online abuse such as child grooming, cyberbullying, sexting...

Our aim is to raise awareness about the negative health and development consequences of excessive use of digital media by babies, children and adolescents.

Policy makers, educational institutions, medical professionals, media and families should undertake every effort to protect children and adolescents from the risks related to digital media. We appeal to all members of our society to be vigilant regarding the evolving use of electronic devices by children.

## **A CALL TO ACTION**

### **1. TO POLICY MAKERS**

We are calling for worldwide action and a media usage policy that provides a safe environment for babies, children and young people to grow up and develop:

- ensure the right to privacy
- allow for safe communication
- restrict addictive content in the media
- prohibit abusive commercial messages/advertisements
- prohibit and prosecute abuse of personal data
- prevent violations through social networks
- prevent and penalize cyberbullying and online abuse.

The digital environment should be improved, and the awareness of the society regarding these issues raised. Vigilant supervision of digital media, through every means, should be entitled.

Governments must provide resources for preventive measures for media usage by children and adolescents nationwide, and prevention should not be done by

the non-governmental organisations alone. The resources should be allocated for research on the effect of digital media on children and adolescents.

Measures of prevention and combat of digital addiction of all kinds in children and adolescents should be promoted. Governments should establish age - limitations for addictive contents (including online games) together with professionals.

Advertising directed at children should be strictly regulated by law and enforced. Special emphasis should be placed on advertising and promoting behaviors or products negatively affecting child health.

A thorough review of the regulations regarding privacy on-line should be undertaken and appropriate measures for persecution of violations installed.

The governments should implement standards in the development of digital media, through an open, representative and accessible process.

## **2. TO EDUCATIONAL AUTHORITIES AND INSTITUTIONS**

The educational system should work hand in hand with relevant professionals to provide digital competencies to the next generation, with particular emphasis on the knowledge and tools they need to ensure internet safety.

National curricula should include competencies, training, knowledge and skills of how to use digital technologies safely. The curricula must be continuously updated in order to remain relevant, enhancing the important safe and responsible use of the web and

The awareness about risky online behavior, addiction, online violence and privacy violations should be raised.

The usage of smartphones should not be allowed in school, because of its negative impact, especially on social interaction among children.

For adolescents it may be appropriate to embed new technologies across the curriculum in the areas where it is most appropriate as to encourage their adequate and reasoned use. The recommendations about how and when to use digital media should be implemented in educational programs.

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## **3. TO MEDIA**

Media providers and industries should acknowledge and re-examine the strong impact the use of digital media may have on child and adolescent development and social interactions. Our expectations are that they will act in a socially responsible manner.

Addictive media contents should not be destined for use by children and adolescents.

We strongly urge the media industries to contribute to the development of media standards that ensure a healthy social environment in which children can be raised safely. This includes all digital media and new emerging technologies.

We expect the media to acknowledge their responsibility for healthy children and adolescents and society altogether.

Digital media content creators should establish a Code of Ethics and uphold ethical principles.

#### **4. TO PAEDIATRICIANS**

It is necessary to provide national and/or European paediatric guidelines and recommendations for use of electronic media for children and adolescents. They should be revised frequently in order to address the use of new emerging technologies. Paediatricians should use every contact of families with health services as an opportunity to emphasize the importance of responsible and safe use of mobile devices, informing and assisting parents in raising children in the digital world.

Whenever possible the paediatricians advocate family time, discussions, media free meals and safe use of digital media. They should be provided with the materials, resources and supporting prevention and treatment programs regarding this field.

Paediatricians should promote child literacy and reading of age-appropriate books with the help of parents.

Paediatricians should encourage parents to limit the use of digital media in the presence of children, especially under the age of three because of its detrimental effect on social development. They should rather promote direct interaction with their children.

The inappropriate use of digital media affects the acquisition of communication, social and emotional skills, neuro-cognitive and motor development. Paediatricians should promote a healthy family lifestyle with sufficient physical activity, free play time and help the families to set limitations on the use of digital media.

Paediatricians should discourage the use of digital media in the office setting. They should encourage digital media free waiting and examination rooms.

Further research is needed on the impact of screens on neurodevelopment, and paediatricians should participate in that research.

## 5. TO FAMILIES / CAREGIVERS

We ask families to:

- Be a good role model for your children.
- Create plenty of media free time (meals, playtime, reading).
- Recognize the crucial role of direct parent-child interaction in early childhood development.
- Raise awareness about family habits of digital media use.
- Set consistent and age appropriate limitations on screen time and consider a minimum age to possess a personal digital device.
- Media devices are best placed in common areas and should not be allowed in children's bedrooms.
- Encourage reading age appropriate books.
- Discuss all media experiences with the children and adolescents. Unaccompanied access to the internet allows access to harmful content.
- Raise your concerns and participate directly in discussions on digital media use in schools and kindergartens.
- Promote healthy family lifestyle with rational and safe use of digital media.
- Use preventative measures against digital media abuse (limited screen time, use of safe media devices, supervision of digital media use etc.)
- Help your children acquire digital competencies for proper use of digital media.
- Keep informed about updated expert recommendations regarding the use of digital media by children and adolescents.

### References:

Links to guidelines from European and other paediatric societies:

Austrian: [Empfehlungen zur Regulierung von Bildschirmzeiten im Kindes- und Jugendalter](#) Sauseng, W., Sonnleitner, A., Hofer, N., Pansy, J., Kiechl-Kohlendorfer, U., Weiss, S., ... & Kerbl, R. (2017). Monatsschrift Kinderheilkunde, 165(3), 254-256.

German: [2018-03-02 Abschlussbericht BLIKK Medien final](#) (BM Gesundheit 2018)

French: [Growing up and understanding digital tools: 3-6-9-12 , Serge Tisseron \(eng. version\)](#)

EAP : [Social media and children: what is the paediatrician's role?](#)

Hadjipanayis A, Efsthathiou E, Altorjai P, Stiris T, Valiulis A, Koletzko B, Fonseca H. Social media and children: what is the paediatrician's role? Eur J Pediatr. 2019 Oct;178(10):1605-1612. doi: 10.1007/s00431-019-03458-w.

Finnish: [Alle kouluikäisen mediakasvatus. Duodecim](#)

Israeli: [חב : הספר ובית הגן בגילאי בילדים מסך לזמן הילדים רופאי איגוד המלצות](#)