4
DIGITAL
ADDICTION
UEFA
take Care

WHAT IS IT?

Technology influences almost every aspect of our lives, from the way we communicate and work to the way we learn and entertain ourselves. It allows us to access a vast amount of information in record time and supports us on a daily basis. However, the amount of time spent online can also become excessive.

Excessive screen time can interfere with a person's social development, academic and sporting performance, and emotional and physical health. The negative impact it can have on our present and future well-being should not be underestimated.

The UEFA Take Care programme focuses on enhancing health and well-being through football. This white paper aims to provide parents, caregivers, coaches and staff with information and advice on setting limits, encouraging offline activities and modelling balanced digital habits.

TAKE CARE PROGRAMME

The UEFA Take Care programme is composed of six interconnected modules:

- Physical activity
- Nutrition
- Mental health
- Digital addiction
- Substance awareness
- Road safety

In addition to a white paper like this one, each module is supported by several tools including posters, a podcast, a documentary and an educational session.

WHO IS IT FOR?

The programme and its tools are designed for national associations, leagues, clubs, other football stakeholders and schools. It is intended to be used by parents, caregivers, teachers, coaches and staff to benefit everyone, but especially children and young people.

HOW TO USE IT

A user guide is available to help football organisations and schools understand and maximise the use of these tools. Resources can be consulted independently on www.uefa.com/takecare, providing flexibility in learning and application. However, as the topics explored are interconnected, useful references can be found within the other tools.

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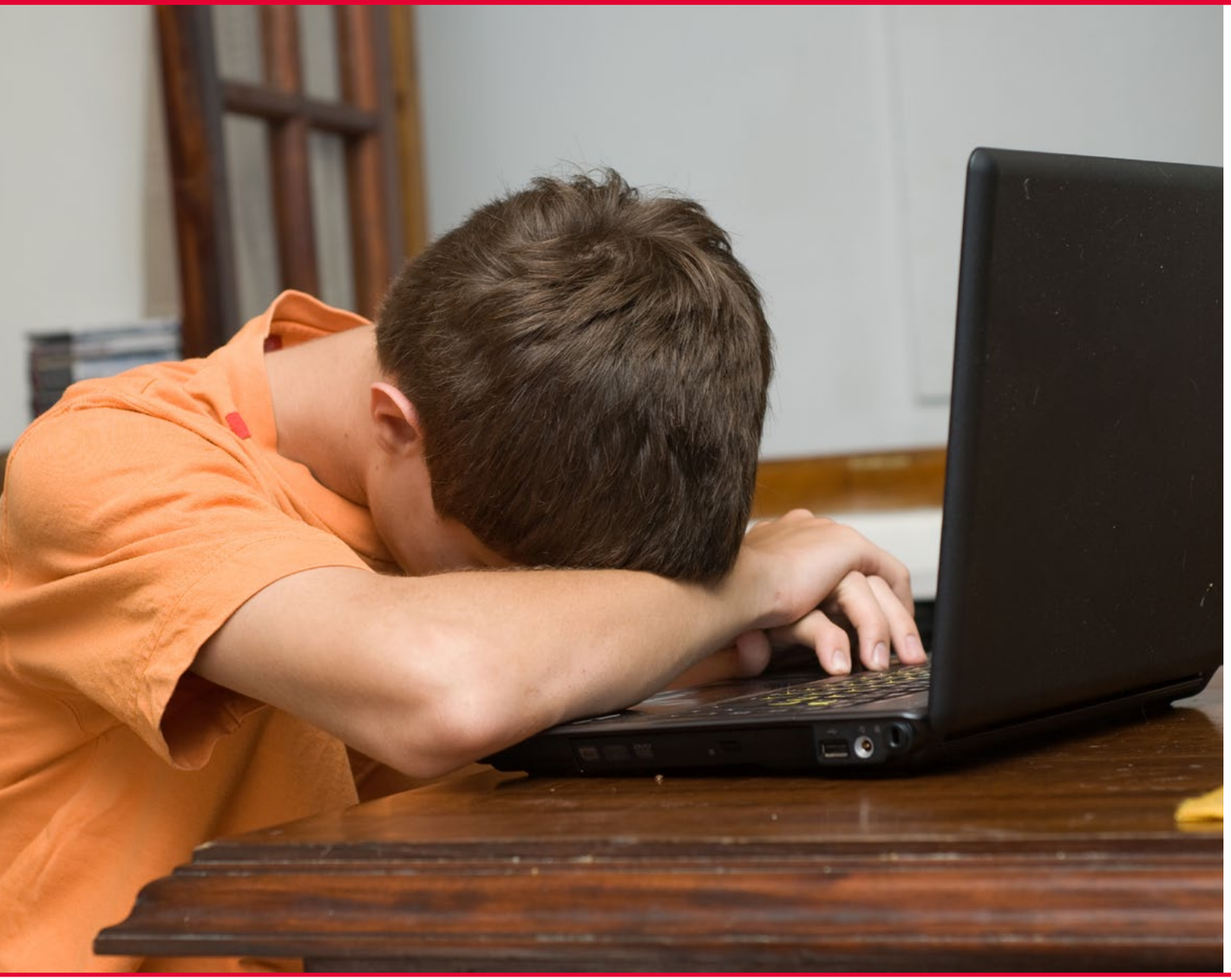

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1. INTRODUCTION

Technological devices and smartphones have been a significant part of our daily lives for over two decades. For many people around the world, online activities are a form of leisure. Recognising the opportunities technology offers for connecting societies, exchanging knowledge and progressing is important. **Technology not only facilitates communication, learning, work and transportation, it can also enhance safety.** For example, parents often provide their children with smartphones so that they can constantly be in touch and even track their location.

However, many children use them for instant gratification, endlessly scrolling through social media feeds, bingeing on videos or playing games designed to keep them engaged for hours. These activities are often reinforced by algorithms that adapt to the user's behaviour and offer content that rewards attention, which makes it difficult to disengage – especially for children.

Digital addiction refers to the excessive use of digital devices such as smartphones and computers and their interference with daily life. It has been defined as "a problematic relationship with technology described by being compulsive, obsessive, impulsive and hasty."[1]

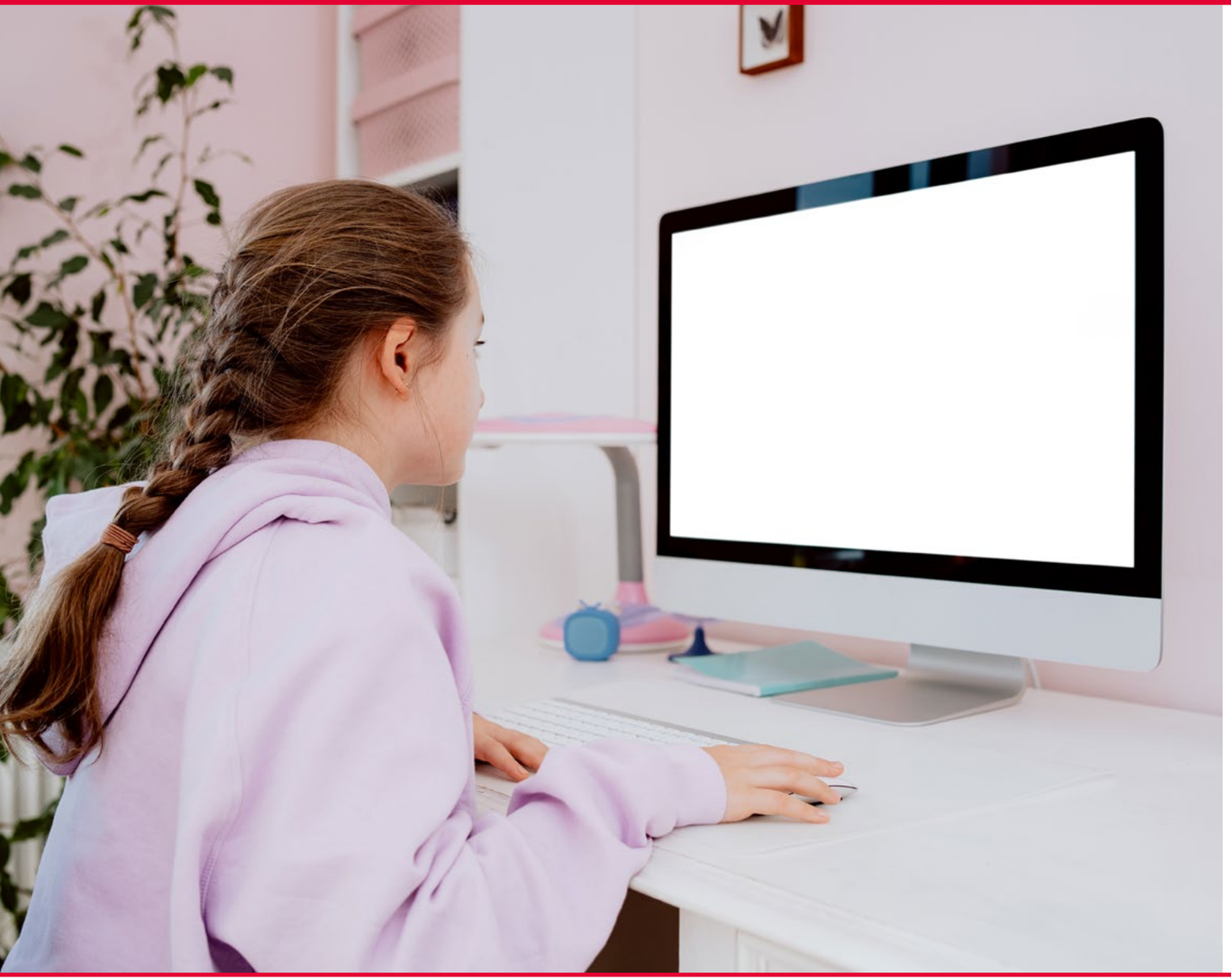
Studies have shown that one in four teens are using their phones in a way that is consistent with behavioural addiction. Increasingly, children and young people are recognising the negative impact that social media can have on their mental health, causing them to be more withdrawn, anxious and depressed.

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is likely to worsen these negative effects as devices and platforms become 'smarter' – more customised, engaging and addictive. A recent study found that 79% of 13 to 17-year-olds and 40% of 7 to 12-year-olds in the UK use generative AI tools and services.[2] A rising trend is AI companions – chatbots that can respond and behave like a friend despite being driven by a predictive AI algorithm.

By the age of 12,
97%
of children in the UK have a mobile phone.[3]

In France,
half
of all people surveyed said they cannot go without the internet for one day.[4]

Globally, children today spend an average of four and a half hours online per day on weekdays and eight hours per day on weekends, which equates to a total of
84 days
a year lost on screens rather than playing in the real world.[5]



Some of the most popular AI chatbots have considerable child and adolescent user bases, including Snapchat's My AI (150 million total users) and Replika (25 million total users).[6] While this AI chatbot technology is still very new, cases of harm to children have already occurred.[7]

CONNECTED DEVICES ARE SUPPLANTING REAL-LIFE INTERACTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN NEW SKILLS OR BUILD LASTING CONNECTIONS AT A CRITICAL TIME IN A CHILD'S COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Parents, caregivers, educators and coaches witness the detrimental effects of increased screen time, including decreased attention spans, delayed development of life skills such as communication, collaboration and resilience, and a lack of physical activity.

2. THE POWER OF FOOTBALL

Football is a great tool for combating the excessive use of digital devices.

ENGAGING IN REGULAR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY CAN SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE A CHILD'S SOCIAL INTERACTION, FOSTERING FRIENDSHIPS AND TEAMWORK SKILLS

It is a positive and productive way to spend time, enabling participants to develop discipline and resilience and enjoy a sense of achievement.

Most importantly, using phones or other electronic devices is almost impossible when playing football, which naturally limits screen time and encourages more direct, face-to-face interactions. Parents, caregivers, coaches and staff can help children and young adults to develop a balanced lifestyle that prioritises both their physical and mental health, ultimately leading to a more fulfilling and well-rounded life.

3. ASSESSING THE RISKS

In the EU, 35% of 9 to 11-year-olds use a smartphone multiple times a day to access the internet, with the overall age group spending an average of 114 minutes online daily. Among 15 and 16-year-olds, these figures rise to 81% using smartphones multiple times a day and the overall age group spending an average of 229 minutes a day online.[8] Such high rates of smartphone use raise the question of how children and adolescents are affected by their devices, especially when they lack the maturity to fully understand how smartphones impact their thoughts, behaviour and brain development.

Many mental health disorders, including addiction, first emerge or become established in adolescence. This is likely due to the tremendous brain development and rewiring that occurs during this critical stage of development.[9] A growing body of scientific research has shown how digital media use in childhood and adolescence affects:

a. Neurological development
b. Mental health
c. Social development

a. Neurological development

The part of the brain responsible for self-control and focused attention – the prefrontal cortex – slowly develops through childhood and adolescence and does not fully mature until people reach their early twenties.[10] This means that children and adolescents may find it incredibly challenging to limit their smartphone use or think through the consequences of what they share or see online.

Furthermore, **developing brains become increasingly wired in early adolescence to seek rewards and social interaction.**[11,12,13] While this has the benefit of prompting adolescents to make friends and grow increasingly independent from their parents, it may also make them especially susceptible to the non-stop and immediate rewards that their phones offer.[14]

Research has shown that a child's social media use affects their brain development. The brains of 12-year-olds who are heavy social media users become increasingly attuned to anticipating social rewards and punishments as they grow up. In contrast, the brains of 12-year-olds who are not yet using social media become less adept at social anticipation over time.[15]

Additionally, teens who report addiction-like social media use (for example, continuing to use social media even though it is harming their life, or trying and failing to cut back on their social media use) show signs of neural tolerance to the effects of social media. Their brains are initially susceptible to social rewards in early adolescence but then grow less sensitive by late adolescence, akin to how people with substance addictions build up a tolerance over time and find the substances decreasingly rewarding.[16]

b. Mental health

Smartphone use can have some benefits, such as making it easier to interact with peers, however children and adolescents can also use them in ways that harm their mental health. For example, **comparing oneself to others online is associated with increased symptoms of depression, especially among girls and those who struggle to fit in.**[17] Thoughts of self-harm and suicide are more common among teens who are bullied online, and those who use social media to post or view content relating to self-harm are at a higher risk of harming themselves.[18]

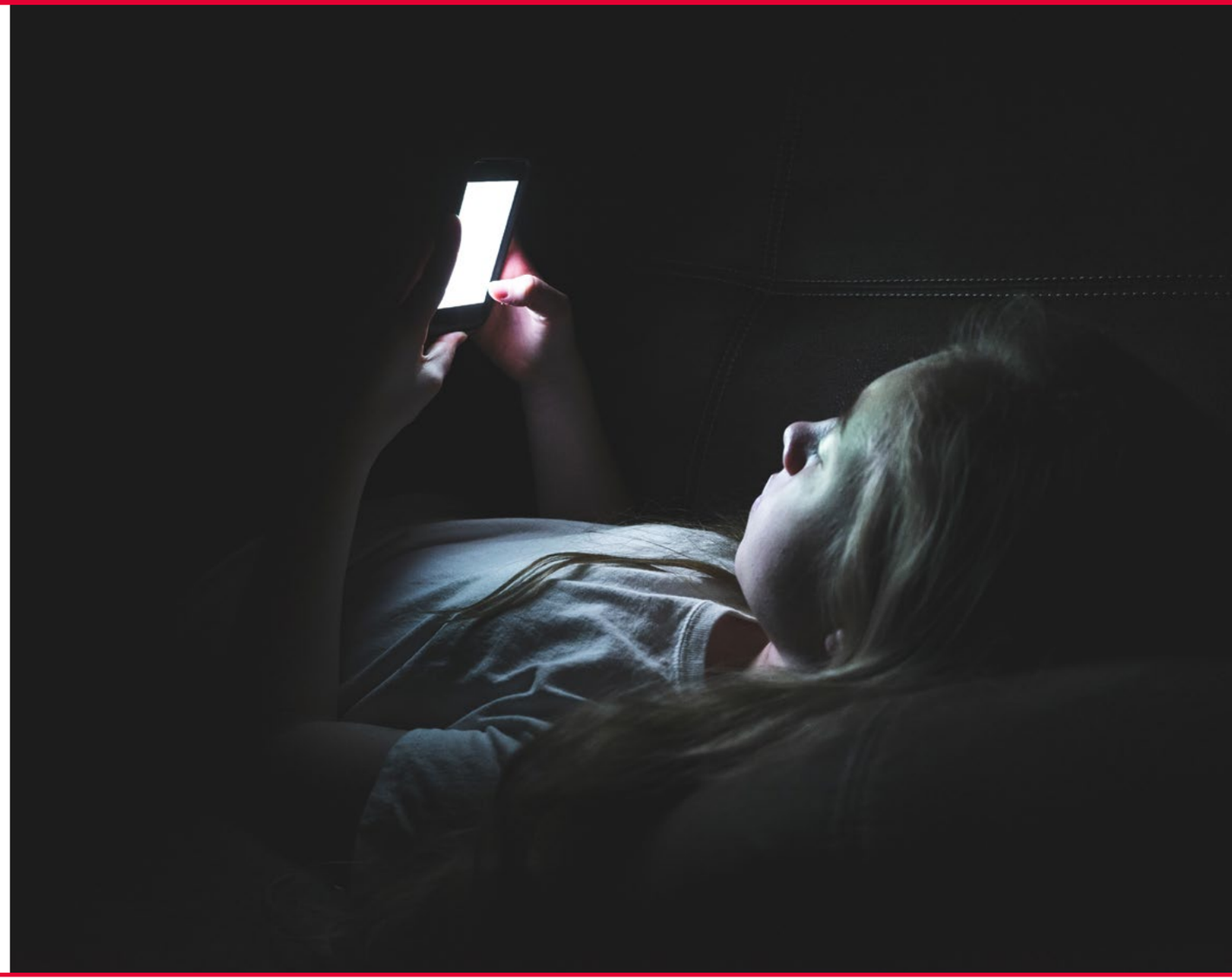
Certain groups are especially vulnerable to harm from problematic smartphone use. **One UK study found that social media use during puberty was linked to greater unhappiness one year later.**[19] Thus, puberty may be an especially sensitive developmental window during which social media can harm adolescents' well-being.

Research has also consistently linked viewing images of idealised bodies to a negative body image, particularly among young girls. Poor body image puts teens at risk of depression and eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

The effects of social media on body image may be especially harmful because of the prevalence of photo editing software and filters and the sheer volume of images.[20] The ability to share and wait for others to like or comment on pictures of your own body on social media can also be problematic.

Teens who spend a great deal of time caring about how they look in selfies or worrying about what their peers will think of their photos have been found to experience more symptoms of depression.[21]

Studies have also shown that, as AI becomes more accessible, children are more likely to share concerns with human-like chatbots than with trusted adults. This poses significant risks as chatbots may respond with incorrect, misleading or age-inappropriate information and messaging. It is therefore important to establish open lines of communication and safe spaces where children can discuss their mental health and access legitimate services.[22]



c. Social development

Childhood and adolescence are also periods when an individual's peers become increasingly influential.[23] **Smartphones and social media set social norms and define acceptable or desirable behaviour.** Research has shown that adolescents take more risks as a result of seeing what their friends are doing online or wanting online validation from excessive drinking to taking selfies while cycling or driving.[24,25]

Bullying and social rejection are other negative social interactions that young people may face online. Unlike bullying in person, cyberbullying via social media can happen anytime and anywhere. Victims have been shown to be at a greater risk of depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts than people bullied in person, while those who experience both forms of bullying face the highest risk.[26] It has also been shown that young people from minority groups are frequently exposed to discrimination online, and that both in-person and online discrimination are associated with significant anxiety and depression.[27]

4. HOW TO RECOGNISE THE SIGNS OF PROBLEMATIC DEVICE USE?

Everyone should learn to recognise the signs of problematic use of digital media and addiction to smartphones:[28]

1. **Excessive time spent** using a phone or similar device, to the point where it harms one's physical, mental or social well-being
2. **Inability to stop or reduce** the time spent using devices
3. **Loss of interest** in other activities
4. **A preoccupation** with wanting to use a smartphone (akin to cravings)
5. Needing to spend an **increasing amount of time** using devices or using them in **increasingly extreme or risky ways** (akin to building up tolerance)
6. **Feeling irritable, restless, anxious or unhappy** when unable to use a phone (akin to withdrawal symptoms)
7. **Lying** about one's smartphone use
8. Using devices in **socially inappropriate ways**, such as **cyberbullying** others
9. Using devices at **inappropriate times**, such as during lessons or face-to-face conversations
10. Using a phone when it is **physically dangerous** to do so, such as while driving or cycling

5. PRACTICAL ACTIONS

FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

1 **BE A POSITIVE DIGITAL ROLE MODEL:** show your children what healthy digital habits look like by limiting screen time, prioritising face-to-face interactions and being intentional with your device use

2 **ENCOURAGE OTHER HOBBIES AND INTERESTS** that do not involve screens, such as reading and drawing

3 **SET TIME LIMITS ON THE USE OF DEVICES,** especially on school nights, to ensure a balance between online and offline activities

4 **TEACH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT DIGITAL ETIQUETTE,** including the potential risks of sharing personal information, the importance of respectful online communication and how to distinguish between true and false information

5 **BALANCE CONNECTIVITY AND SAFETY** by using parental control features or specially designed devices to monitor and limit the content your children can access and restrict their access to social media while keeping them connected

6 **SCHEDULE REGULAR CHECK-INS** to discuss your children's device usage, the content they see, their interactions and how it makes them feel in order to foster trust and a healthy relationship with technology

7 **ENCOURAGE YOU CHILDREN TO SEEK IN-PERSON CONNECTIONS** during their spare time

8 **DRAW UP A FAMILY MEDIA USE AGREEMENT** that outlines rules and expectations for smartphone use, including designated screen-free times and zones

5. PRACTICAL ACTIONS

FOR COACHES AND STAFF

1 **BE A POSITIVE DIGITAL ROLE MODEL:** demonstrate healthy digital habits to your players by limiting screen time, staying present during practices and using devices with purpose to encourage offline interaction

2 **ENFORCE A NO-PHONE POLICY** during training, matches and events to encourage offline interaction

3 **BE AN AMBASSADOR WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION** and suggest digital literacy sessions featuring open discussions about the benefits and drawbacks of digital technology to help players develop a balanced perspective

4 **INCLUDE MINDFULNESS EXERCISES IN YOUR TRAINING SESSIONS** to help players stay present and reduce their reliance on digital devices

5 **ORGANISE DIGITAL DETOX CHALLENGES** where players compete to reduce their screen time over a specific period

6 **ENCOURAGE IN-PERSON INTERACTIONS AND CONNECTIONS** between players during their downtime

7 **SET RULES OR GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF DIGITAL DEVICES** that align with the organisation's policies and the team's values

5. PRACTICAL ACTIONS

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

1 **EXPLORE NEW INTERESTS** like drawing, playing a musical instrument, cooking or joining a sports team

2 **LIMIT YOUR SCREEN TIME,** especially an hour before going to bed

3 **BE AWARE OF HOW YOU FEEL:** if something makes you anxious, sad or angry, take a break or talk to someone you trust

4 **USE SCREEN TIME TRACKING APPS** and set reminders to help you take regular breaks and switch to offline activities

5 **SPEND TIME WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS** and engage in group activities

6 **FOLLOW YOUR CLUB OR ORGANISATION'S RULES** on the usage of digital devices

7 **BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL** in how you use digital devices around your friends and teammates, and support others if they're struggling to manage their screen time

6. GOOD PRACTICES

The four BEs

At the 2024 UEFA Child and Youth Protection Workshop, Dr Phil McRae, Executive Staff Officer and Associate Coordinator of Government Research with the Alberta Teachers' Association, introduced his four basic tips for coaches, parents and children to achieve healthier technology use both on and off the pitch.

1. BE MINDFUL: Coaches should encourage players and their parents to be mindful and think critically about their device use and how it impacts their lives.

2. BE BALANCED: Too often, children and young people spend more time on their phones than playing outside or being with friends and family in person. Enforcing phone-free time and encouraging hobbies and interests that do not involve screens can help players lead a balanced and healthy lifestyle.

3. BE PRESENT: Coaches can help players be in the moment and develop deeper connections by encouraging them to use their downtime to chat or play in real life rather than turning to their phones.

4. BE HUMAN: Coaches can lead the way in creating and fostering a supportive and inclusive community environment that promotes human connection and healthy lifestyles. Technology should exist to benefit our lives and enhance our connection to one another, not make us feel lonelier or more disconnected.

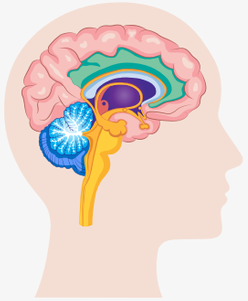
7. GLOSSARY

BEHAVIOURAL ADDICTION

refers to a person's ability to resist the impulse to perform a behaviour that is harmful or has a negative impact on their life.

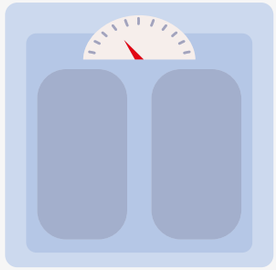
THE PREFONTAL CORTEX

is thought of as the 'personality centre' and is the part of the brain that processes input from a person's surroundings, compares them to past experiences and reacts.[29]



ANOREXIA

is an eating disorder characterised by an intense fear of gaining weight, distorted body image and extreme food restriction, leading to low body weight and severe health risks.[30]



BULIMIA

is an eating disorder involving cycles of binge eating (consuming large amounts of food in a short period) followed by compensatory behaviours such as vomiting, excessive exercise or laxative use to prevent weight gain.[31]

8. OTHER FACTS AND FIGURES

Emotional skills	
Over 30% of young people say that they don't know how to make new friends.	The Prince's Trust NatWest Youth Index, 2022
'Media multitasking' (dividing attention between two or more devices simultaneously) in teens is linked to lower English and Maths scores, weaker working memory, reduced focus and increased impulsivity.	Canadian Paediatric Society, 2019
Teens with the highest social media use are nearly twice as likely to report poor mental health, with 10% self-harming or expressing suicidal intent compared to 5% of the lowest users.	American Psychological Association, 2024
Constant exposure to devices can significantly harm mental health, increasing stress, anxiety and sleep issues in both children and adults.	DHMER School of Epidemiology and Public Health, 2022
Teens with problematic smartphone use are three times more likely to experience depression.	King's College London, 2024
Physical skills	
On average, children spend less time outside than prisoners – under one hour per day.	OMO and Persil survey, 2016
High levels of screen time can increase the risk of near sightedness in young people by 26%.	Anglia Ruskin University, 2021
Increased smartphone use often leads to hand and wrist weakness due to repetitive finger, thumb and wrist movements, contributing to musculoskeletal disorders.	JK Bhamra, 2021
One in five young people wake up at night to check social media, making them three times more likely to feel tired at school.	Royal Society for Public Health, 2017
Intellectual skills	
Digital overuse can lead to a decrease in critical thinking skills, which can impair decision-making abilities.	Aïmeur et al., 2023
At age three, per day, one hour of screen time is associated with 397 fewer words heard, five fewer child vocalisations and eleven fewer back-and-forth interactions.	University of Adelaide, 2024
Constant digital distractions can lead to higher stress, reduced productivity and a superficial understanding of information.	Firth et al., 2019
Higher levels of screen time, including TV, video games and computers are associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing ADHD symptoms.	Nikkelen et al., 2014
UK children at smartphone-free schools achieve GCSEs 1 to 2 grades higher per subject.	Policy Exchange, 2024

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- Claydon, A. L. (2024). Colchester students give up smartphones for 21 days in experiment. BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn4x8jynpgzo.amp

Find and use the tools:
www.uefa.com/takecare

Module 4: Digital Addiction

Previous modules

Module 1:
Physical Activity

Module 2:
Nutrition

Module 3:
Mental Health

Upcoming modules

Module 5:
Road Safety

Module 6:
Substance
Awareness

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Union of European Football Associations

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About the expert

This white paper was developed by UEFA in collaboration with Human Change. Human Change is a coalition of parents, advocates, educators, psychologists, paediatricians, clinicians and researchers who are raising the alarm about the dangers of digital devices and social media to children's health and development.

The Human Change Foundation is a global advocacy campaign that strives to reshape the global narrative on children's and adolescents' mental health and effective life-skills development by spotlighting the impact of social media, digital devices and AI exposure. Founded by Margarita Louis-Dreyfus, in her personal capacity, the Human Change initiative was launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2024. The Human Change House at the World Economic Forum hosted a series of 12 powerful panel discussions. These sessions brought together international experts in psychology, medicine, business, government and more to debate the issues and solutions around how social media and digitalisation are causing irreversible change in children, and how this change will impact the future of our society.