

DWELL

A holistic approach for the well-being in the
broader digital education ecosystem



D2.2. Report with the Findings and Conclusions of Focus Groups *Parents — Cross-Country Synthesis*



**Co-funded by
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DWELL Project

Report with the Findings and Conclusions of Focus Groups

Parents' Perspectives on Digital Well-Being — Cross-Country Synthesis

Deliverable: D2.2 — Report with the Findings and Conclusions of Focus Groups (Parents)

Work Package: WP2 — Research and Analysis

Lead Beneficiary: MMC Management Center Limited

Contributors: EDITC (CY), KLS Partners (PL), VAMK (FI), DIMITRA (GR), Acta Foundation (BG), MMC (CY), ARAD (RO)

Dissemination Level: Public

Due date: 30 April 2026

Status: Draft for review

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1. INTRODUCTION

The DWELL project (*Digital Well-being: A Holistic Approach for the Well-being in the Broader Digital Education Ecosystem*) is a 36-month Erasmus+ Policy Experimentation initiative (Grant Agreement No. 101195998, April 2025 – March 2028) implemented by a consortium of six European partners from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Poland, and Romania. Its central aim is to equip educators and parents with evidence-based tools, frameworks, and policy recommendations to promote digital well-being in schools across Europe.

Within Work Package 2 (WP2 — Research and Analysis), a series of qualitative focus groups were conducted with parents of school-aged children across all partner countries. These focus groups form part of a broader research strategy that also includes a literature review, customisation of the SELFIE tool for teacher-focused activities, and informative visits to schools and parents' associations. The focus groups were specifically designed to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and concerns of parents regarding the impact of digital technologies on their children's well-being across six interrelated domains: emotional, behavioural, mental, social, physical, and cognitive.

This report presents a cross-country synthesis of the findings from those parent focus groups. It integrates data collected across Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Poland, and Romania, identifying shared patterns, country-specific observations, and emerging themes that will directly inform the development of the DWELL framework (FRAME-DWELL), the capacity-building materials (CERTIFY-DWELL and AWARE-DWELL), and the national policy recommendations (WP5).

The overarching finding across all six countries is consistent: digital technologies are deeply embedded in children's daily lives and exert a complex, mixed impact on their well-being. Benefits are most clearly visible when technology is used in a purposeful, structured, and moderated way. Concerns arise — across all domains — when use becomes excessive, unregulated, or socially pressured. Parents across all countries identified a shared need for clearer guidance, stronger home–school collaboration, and capacity-building initiatives that go beyond simple screen-time management.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The focus groups were conducted as semi-structured qualitative discussions, following a common research template developed within WP2. A core set of questions was complemented by flexible probes allowing facilitators to adapt to the dynamics of each group while maintaining comparability across countries and sessions. Discussions were anchored in six well-being domains — emotional, behavioural, mental/psychological, social, physical, and cognitive — reflecting the conceptual framework of the DWELL project.

Where relevant, school-level insights from SELFIE activities conducted with teachers in participating schools were used to contextualise the broader research. Parents themselves did not participate in SELFIE activities. This in-person and online approach was selected for its suitability in addressing sensitive topics such as digital dependency, peer conflict, and parental anxiety, and for enabling the richer, more nuanced data that interactive discussion produces.

Data Collection

Focus groups were conducted between November 2025 and March 2026 across six partner countries. The table below summarises the data collected:

Country	Partner Organisation	FGs	Parents	Period	Format
Bulgaria	Acta Foundation	3	17	January 2026	Mixed (F2F & online)
Cyprus	MMC Management Center	3	13	Feb–Mar 2026	Online
Finland	VAMK	3	19	Nov–Dec 2025	Online
Greece	DIMITRA	3	37	Dec 2025–Mar 2026	Online
Poland	KLS Partners	3	19	Dec 2025–Mar 2026	Mixed (F2F & online)
Romania	ARAD	11	98	Nov–Dec 2025	Face-to-face
TOTAL		26	203		

In total, **203 parents** participated across **26 focus group sessions**. Participants were parents and guardians of school-aged children, predominantly at primary and lower-secondary level (ages 10–15), though some groups included parents of older adolescents (ages 16–17). Participants were recruited through partner organisations' school networks, parent associations, and open online calls, ensuring diversity of educational, geographical, and socio-cultural backgrounds.

Analysis Approach

Findings were coded inductively across the six well-being domains, with a supplementary focus on digital competences and cross-cutting issues. This cross-country report draws on national reports prepared by each partner, synthesising Areas of Interest (positive impacts, AOIs) and Areas of Concern (negative impacts, AOCs) for each domain. Direct quotations from participants are included where available to illustrate key themes. Country codes (BG, CY, FI, GR, PL, RO) are used throughout to indicate the geographic origin of specific observations.

Limitations

The focus groups are qualitative and exploratory in nature. Findings reflect parents' perceptions and lived experiences, which may differ from observable child behaviour or school-level data. The sample, while broad, is not statistically representative of all families in each country. Variation in group sizes (13 in Cyprus vs. 98 in Romania) should be taken into account when interpreting country-level comparisons.

Nonetheless, the strong convergence of themes across six diverse national contexts lends considerable credibility to the cross-country patterns identified.

3. CROSS-COUNTRY INSIGHTS

A consistent overarching message emerged across all six countries: the impact of digital technologies on children's well-being is **mixed and context-dependent**. Digital tools are neither inherently harmful nor inherently beneficial; rather, their effects depend on how, when, for what purpose, and under what level of adult guidance they are used. Positive outcomes were most frequently associated with structured, purposeful, and moderated use. Negative outcomes arose most clearly in the context of excessive, unregulated, or socially driven use. Across all domains and all countries, parents described themselves as caught between competing pressures — wanting to set healthier limits while also recognising that digital access is often required by schools, peer culture, and everyday life.

3.1 Emotional Well-Being

Overall perceived impact: Mixed

Emotional well-being was among the most extensively discussed domains across all six countries. Parents described children's emotional relationship with technology as deeply ambivalent: digital tools can be a source of genuine pride, motivation, and creativity, but they can also drive anxiety, comparison, and emotional volatility — often within the same day and through the same device.

3.1.1 Areas of Interest

Across all partner countries, parents identified several consistent emotional benefits associated with children's digital engagement:

1. **Sense of achievement and pride.** Completing digital tasks, earning badges in gamified apps, finishing online assignments independently, or successfully navigating a learning platform generated genuine feelings of accomplishment in children across all age groups. Parents from Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus, and Greece described children as visibly "proud and happy" when digital learning went well. Romanian parents noted that gamified tools in particular produced enthusiasm and a positive emotional state, especially among less confident learners. ("A parent mentioned that the child is proud and happy when they manage to do their homework on the computer independently and receives positive feedback" — RO.)
2. **Motivation and engagement through gamification.** Gamified learning environments, interactive quizzes, and game-based educational tools were widely recognised as increasing children's motivation. Parents from Finland noted that well-designed digital learning games — for example, a music theory learning application — could draw children into deep concentration and generate sustained engagement not easily achieved through traditional methods. Bulgarian parents

similarly observed that gamified apps increased motivation for homework and self-directed learning.

3. **Creative expression and digital confidence.** Several parents across Bulgaria, Greece, and Poland noted that children expressed creativity through digital tools — designing, editing video, creating presentations, storytelling digitally — and that this boosted confidence. Bulgarian parents also observed that children's willingness to teach parents how to use digital tools (games, platforms) enhanced children's sense of competence and usefulness.
4. **Relaxation, entertainment, and positive decompression.** Parents from Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Poland acknowledged that, within limits, technology also functions as a legitimate source of relaxation after a demanding school day. ("My son uses the phone to go on YouTube and watch football videos before starting his homework" — CY, Parent FG1.) Digital entertainment, when not excessive, was seen as a normal and even beneficial form of rest.
5. **Accessibility for introverted and less confident children.** Parents from Poland and Romania noted that digital communication tools can provide easier entry points into peer contact for shy or introverted children, reducing social anxiety in some contexts. Online collaboration platforms can also help children who struggle in traditional classroom settings to participate more actively.

3.1.2 Areas of Concern

Emotional concerns were more dominant in the discussions than positive observations and arose with notable consistency across all six partner countries:

1. **Social comparison and exposure to idealised content.** This was the single most widely reported emotional concern across the dataset. Parents in Greece, Poland, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Finland described how social media platforms — particularly Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat — expose children to curated, idealized representations of peers' lives, bodies, achievements, and lifestyles. The resulting social comparison was consistently linked to reduced self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, and emotional distress. Greek parents identified this dynamic as one of the most significant threats to adolescent well-being, noting that children are exposed to "idealised standards" (πρότυπα) related to appearance, social success, and lifestyle that create sustained pressure. A Bulgarian parent described a 16-year-old becoming upset after seeing peers post "idealized" achievements online.
2. **Anxiety, irritability, and emotional dysregulation.** Across all countries, parents reported observable emotional reactions linked to digital use: anxiety before or during online interactions, irritability during prolonged screen use, and sharp emotional dysregulation when asked to stop gaming or disconnect from devices. Polish parents described children "waking up to large numbers of unread messages" and reacting strongly to interruptions of screen time. Romanian parents noted that children can become nervous and upset when asked to put down their phones, "especially after games or videos." Finnish parents described a state of ongoing alertness sustained by continuous connectivity and the pressure to respond quickly to messages.
3. **"Doom-scrolling" and algorithm-driven mood decline.** Bulgarian parents reported that adolescents frequently engage in extended "doom-scrolling" after school, which worsens mood

and motivation. The role of algorithms in feeding children a constant stream of emotionally stimulating, comparison-heavy, or sensational content was identified as a concern across Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, and Finland. Parents noted that children are not always aware of how algorithmic content shapes their emotional state.

4. **Age-differentiated emotional vulnerability.** A recurring cross-country pattern was that younger children (ages 10–12) tend to show immediate, visible emotional reactions — frustration when an app malfunctions, tantrums when a device loses battery, irritation at unclear instructions. Older adolescents (ages 13–17), by contrast, tend to internalise stress, making it less visible to parents until it escalates. This was noted explicitly in Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania, and has important implications for parental support and early detection of distress.
5. **Emotional spill-over from school to home and back.** Parents in Bulgaria, Greece, and Poland observed that emotional events occurring online — peer conflicts, humiliating screenshots being shared, group chat exclusions — continue to affect children's mood and behaviour at home, sometimes hours or days after the event. Equally, home-related digital stress (excessive homework loads on screens, parental conflict over device use) affects children's emotional state at school.
6. **Emotional "numbness" from constant stimulation.** Cypriot parents described a distinctive pattern whereby children, because of continuous access to smartphones and digital content, rarely experience boredom or quiet — and therefore have fewer opportunities to reflect on their thoughts, process emotions, or self-regulate. Parents characterised this as an emotionally neutral or "numb" state, in which children react to external stimuli rather than reflect on their own feelings. ("They have the phone always with them... it's like they are numb" — CY, Parent FG2.) A similar concern about constant alertness and diminished reflective capacity was raised in Finland and Poland.
7. **Online disinhibition — saying things that would not be said in person.** Cypriot parents identified a specific emotional concern relating to text-based peer communication: children sometimes say things through messages — hurtful, confrontational, or inappropriate — that they would not say to another child face to face. This online disinhibition was seen as an emotional literacy concern with knock-on effects on peer relationships and conflict. Greek and Polish parents described closely related dynamics around group chats and screenshots used in peer conflict.

3.2 Behavioural Well-Being

Overall perceived impact: Mixed, with predominantly negative patterns

Behavioural well-being received strong attention across all six countries, with parents describing a broadly similar picture: digital technologies can support organised, independent behaviour when structured and purposeful, but consistently undermine self-regulation, daily routines, and boundaries when use is open-ended and unsupervised.

3.2.1 Areas of Interest

1. **Support for structured routines and task completion.** Parents from Bulgaria, Romania, and Cyprus noted positive examples of digital tools supporting children's daily organisation: a Bulgarian parent described a 17-year-old using a reading app as part of a regular evening routine, and a 13-year-old using an app to track homework deadlines. Romanian parents noted that when technology is used with clear rules, children complete tasks more efficiently and become more autonomous. ("When we only use the phone for homework, the child finishes faster and has time to play" — RO, Parent.)
2. **Gamified learning developing goal-oriented behaviour.** Bulgarian parents observed that games and gamified content helped children develop strategic thinking, persistence, and goal-oriented behaviour — skills transferable to non-digital contexts.
3. **Gradual capacity for self-regulation.** Finnish parents noted that some children, when supported by clear and consistent expectations from both home and school, gradually develop better habits around device use. The development of self-regulation was framed as a process requiring adult scaffolding rather than a capacity to be assumed.
4. **Creative and productive digital habits.** Polish parents from the No Bell School focus group highlighted children using tools such as Canva and CapCut for creative production — film editing, graphic design — as examples of purposeful and positive digital engagement that develops real skills.

3.2.2 Areas of Concern

1. **Difficulty with self-regulation and compulsive use.** This was among the most consistently reported concerns across all six countries. Parents described patterns that resemble dependency: irritability when screen time is interrupted, compulsive checking of notifications, automatic return to devices as soon as offline obligations end, and an inability to disengage without conflict. Polish parents were explicit in describing these patterns as resembling addiction: one parent reported children "clicking invisible mice or moving fingers as if playing games" even after devices were taken away. Finnish parents questioned whether it is realistic to expect 12–15-year-olds to regulate such complex digital environments independently.
2. **Blurred boundaries between learning and leisure.** Across all six countries, parents described the same device being used simultaneously for homework, entertainment, and social media, making it impossible to clearly distinguish productive from non-productive activity. This blurring was reported as a major barrier to both parental supervision and children's own ability to "switch off" mentally. Bulgarian, Greek, Finnish, and Polish parents all identified this as a fundamental structural problem.
3. **Disruption of daily routines.** Notifications, gaming, and social media apps were described as disrupting structured home routines — delaying meals, shortening sleep, causing conflicts with siblings over shared devices, and interfering with family time. Romanian parents noted children rushing through homework to get back to games. Greek parents described children checking phones during family dinners or when guests were present.

4. **Resistance to boundaries and parental authority.** Adolescents across all countries were described as resisting parental limits on device use, sometimes reacting defensively or with emotional hostility when asked to disconnect. This was a particular challenge noted in Bulgaria, Poland, Greece, and Cyprus, where parents described ongoing negotiation and conflict around device use rather than cooperative compliance. Bulgarian parents noted teens acting out on parents when separated from devices.
 5. **Inconsistency between home and school expectations.** A cross-cutting behavioural barrier was the lack of aligned expectations between schools and families. Parents across all countries reported that unclear or varying digital workload requirements, inconsistent school phone policies, and absence of shared guidelines made it difficult to maintain stable behavioural routines at home. Finnish parents were particularly explicit about this: inconsistency between schools and municipalities was experienced as deeply confusing and undermining.
 6. **Algorithmic content design undermining self-regulation.** Cypriot parents pointed specifically to the way platform algorithms (notably TikTok) continuously suggest new content, making it structurally difficult for children to stop browsing once they begin. Parents described a weekend pattern of particularly heavy screen consumption, where open-ended time combined with algorithmic feed design resulted in extended device use that children struggled to limit independently. This algorithmic dimension was noted across Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, and Poland as a behavioural barrier that family rules alone are not equipped to address.
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3.3 Mental Health

Overall perceived impact: Mainly negative; protective when balanced

Mental health was closely intertwined with emotional well-being in parents' accounts, but emerged as a distinct domain centred on stress, psychological fatigue, overstimulation, and the longer-term effects of constant connectivity on children's psychological state.

3.3.1 Areas of Interest

1. **Sense of competence and psychological security.** Parents from Bulgaria and Romania noted that children who successfully use digital tools for learning develop a sense of self-efficacy and psychological confidence. Romanian parents observed that when children use technology for clear educational purposes, they appear "calmer and more confident," able to organise their thinking and complete tasks without psychological tension.
2. **Successful digital learning as a confidence builder.** Finnish parents described well-designed digital learning experiences as capable of strengthening children's positive learner identity — an important protective factor for mental health. When children feel competent in digital environments that matter (not just in social media), this can buffer against the pressures of constant comparison.
3. **Balance as a protective strategy.** Parents across all countries recognised balance — alternating digital and non-digital activities, maintaining sleep routines, engaging in physical activity, and

preserving family time — as the most reliable protective strategy for children's mental health. This was not framed as rejection of technology, but as a necessary structural condition for its healthy use.

3.3.2 Areas of Concern

1. **Mental fatigue, overstimulation, and difficulty disconnecting.** This was the most consistently reported mental health concern across all six countries. Parents described children as chronically overstimulated by constant digital engagement — struggling to rest, to be quiet, to tolerate boredom, or to "switch off" after the school day. Polish parents linked prolonged engagement with short-form video platforms (TikTok, YouTube Shorts) and gaming to a state of mental exhaustion that affects children's patience, tolerance, and capacity for sustained effort. Finnish parents described a constant state of alertness sustained by the pressure to respond quickly to messages.
2. **Sleep disruption as a mental health risk.** Across Bulgaria, Poland, Finland, Romania, and Cyprus, parents identified sleep disruption as a serious and prevalent concern. Late-night screen use, ongoing online conversations, and the anxiety of being "unreachable" were described as regularly reducing both the quantity and quality of children's sleep, with downstream effects on mood, concentration, and mental resilience the following day.
3. **Stress and anxiety from constant connectivity and FOMO.** The "fear of missing out" (FOMO) and the social pressure to remain constantly available and "in the loop" were reported across Poland, Bulgaria, Greece, and Finland as significant sources of psychological stress in adolescents. Polish parents described children waking up to large message backlogs and feeling anxious about unread content. Greek parents noted that notifications and messaging platforms "create emotional stress or distraction, particularly when children feel the need to stay constantly connected."
4. **Uncertainty about school digital practices increasing family stress.** Finnish parents were particularly articulate about a distinct and underreported mental health stressor: parents' uncertainty about how much digital technology is used during the school day, for what purposes, and with what expectations. This lack of transparency created sustained psychological burden for families, complicating boundary-setting and generating anxiety about whether children are using technology appropriately or excessively. This theme also appeared in Poland and Bulgaria.
5. **Algorithm-driven content and psychological pressure.** Bulgarian and Greek parents described the role of algorithm-curated content in creating feelings of inadequacy, social isolation, and low mood — particularly among adolescents aged 13–17. Teens who engage in doom-scrolling and exposure to competitive, appearance-focused, or aspirational content were described as experiencing worsening mood and motivation. Parents noted that children often lack the media literacy to critically evaluate why such content appears in their feeds.
6. **Passive scrolling versus active or creative use.** Cypriot parents drew an explicit distinction between *types* of digital activity and their mental-health effects: passive scrolling through short-form social media content was described as more harmful — producing irritability, frustration, and even aggression in adolescents after prolonged sessions — while communication with friends or active, creative online engagement (e.g., looking up recipes, crafts, DIY activities) was perceived

as less problematic and sometimes beneficial. This qualitative distinction, rather than raw screen-time alone, was seen as a more useful frame for parental guidance.

3.4 Social Relationships

Overall perceived impact: Mixed

Social relationships were described across all countries as one of the domains where digital technologies show clearest positive potential — maintaining connections, enabling collaboration, supporting belonging — but also where some of the most damaging effects occur, including displacement of face-to-face interaction, peer conflict, and social exclusion.

3.4.1 Areas of Interest

1. **Maintaining peer connections outside school hours.** Parents from all six countries recognised that messaging platforms and social media allow children to stay connected with classmates and friends beyond school hours — an important aspect of adolescent social life. Polish parents noted platforms like Discord and gaming communities as creating genuine senses of belonging for some children, particularly boys with shared interests. Romanian parents noted online tools helping introverted children to participate more easily in group communication.
2. **Collaboration and shared learning.** Digital tools facilitate collaborative schoolwork — group documents, shared presentations, online studying. Cypriot parents described children "studying together with cameras open," maintaining both academic focus and social connection. Romanian and Bulgarian parents noted online tools supporting group work and cooperative learning, particularly for students who might otherwise remain on the periphery of classroom activities.
3. **Support for children with social difficulties.** Parents from Poland and Romania noted that digital communication channels can offer a less threatening social entry point for shy, introverted, or socially anxious children, allowing them to participate in peer interactions that might feel overwhelming in face-to-face settings.
4. **Creative social communities.** Polish parents noted that platforms like Discord and Minecraft enable children to participate in interest-based communities of practice — creative collaboration, building, problem-solving — that extend peer relationships beyond the local school context.

3.4.2 Areas of Concern

1. **Displacement of face-to-face interaction.** This was the most universally reported social concern across all six countries. Parents from Poland, Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Romania described children communicating via messages even when physically present together — sitting next to each other in school corridors, attending a sleepover, or sitting at the dinner table. Polish parents expressed particular concern: "Children were observed messaging each other while sitting next to each other at school." Cypriot parents noted: "They could be next to each other texting and not talking." This pattern was interpreted not merely as a communication preference but as a fundamental shift in social skills and relational capacity.

2. **Online conflict, misunderstandings, and peer pressure.** Online communication — particularly group chats — was consistently identified as an environment where conflicts escalate rapidly, misunderstandings occur due to the absence of non-verbal cues, and peer pressure intensifies. Bulgarian parents described a WhatsApp argument causing anxiety in an 11-year-old. Greek parents noted that group chats and social media are spaces where "misunderstandings escalate quickly, exclusion becomes visible, and peer pressure intensifies." Polish parents described hostile comments, screenshots weaponised in conflicts, and idealized self-presentation as sources of sustained social tension.
3. **Online harassment within close peer groups.** Bulgarian parents specifically noted that online harassment most commonly occurs within close friendship groups and among mutual acquaintances — not from strangers — and that this creates a particular risk of social exclusion for children who dare to disagree with dominant group norms. Greek parents similarly noted that peer pressure on social media is reinforced by the constant visibility of exclusion.
4. **Fear of social exclusion from digital non-participation.** A recurring theme across Poland, Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus was the social cost of non-participation in digital platforms. Polish parents noted that children feel they *must* have WhatsApp to be part of the class community — digital exclusion and social exclusion have become functionally equivalent for many adolescents. Cypriot parents added that adolescents who *lack* digital skills risk exclusion from peer groups, because digital communication and online platforms are now central to everyday adolescent social interaction. This framing — of social media participation as a quasi-obligatory condition of peer belonging rather than an optional leisure activity — creates what parents in Cyprus described as a "false sense of belonging," and makes parental attempts to restrict platform use particularly fraught.
5. **Online disinhibition and text-mediated peer conflict.** Cypriot parents noted that children often say things through text messages — confrontational, hurtful, or inappropriate — that they would not say face to face. Greek and Polish parents described closely related dynamics: group chats where misunderstandings escalate rapidly, screenshots weaponised in peer conflict, and adolescents using text as a medium in which normal social inhibitions are reduced. This affects both the depth of relationships and the severity of peer conflict.
6. **Superficialisation of relationships.** Parents across Poland, Romania, and Greece noted concerns about the quality of social relationships in digital environments — that text-based communication with emojis and short messages may not develop the same relational depth, empathy, or conflict-resolution skills as in-person interaction. Romanian parents observed that reduced face-to-face interaction may contribute to "more superficial relationships, difficulties expressing emotions, and conflict generated by written communication."

3.5 Physical Health

Overall perceived impact: Mainly negative

Physical health was the domain with the clearest negative consensus across all six countries. Parents associated prolonged screen use with a distinct constellation of physical symptoms, and positive physical dimensions of digital technology use were limited and conditional.

3.5.1 Areas of Interest

1. **Movement and fitness applications.** Parents from Bulgaria and Finland noted that some digital applications actively encourage physical activity — dance apps, fitness trackers, movement-based learning games. A Bulgarian parent described a 9-year-old using a dance app daily, which parents observed improved mood as well as physical activity. Finnish parents noted that specific applications, when meaningfully integrated into routines, could support self-directed physical activity.
2. **Calming and sensory regulation through creative digital tasks.** A small number of Bulgarian parents noted that quiet, focused creative digital activities — digital drawing, design, collage — could have a calming and physically settling effect on children after busy or stressful school days.
3. **Safety affordance of smartphones.** Polish parents acknowledged one positive physical dimension of smartphone ownership: the sense of security it provides for children travelling independently, returning home later, or needing to contact parents in an emergency. This safety function was seen as a legitimate reason for children to carry devices, even as concerns about overuse remained strong.

3.5.2 Areas of Concern

1. **Posture problems and musculoskeletal strain.** Parents from Poland, Finland, and Cyprus consistently reported concerns about spinal and postural problems associated with prolonged device use. Polish parents described "forward head posture," spinal curvature, and "tech neck" as observable in adolescents — with one focus group noting that a physical education teacher had observed declining basic physical norms (e.g., willingness to change clothes for PE). Finnish parents linked extensive screen time to neck and back problems and reduced general stamina. A Polish parent noted severe posture issues, describing a "hunchback" posture as increasingly visible among digitally intensive students.
2. **Eye strain and headaches.** Parents from Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus, and Finland described eye strain, tired eyes, and headaches as common physical effects of prolonged screen sessions. Bulgarian parents noted sensory overload from bright screens, fast visuals, and continuous audio as causing headaches and physical discomfort, particularly in younger or more sensitive children.
3. **Sleep disruption from late-night device use.** Late-night gaming, continued online communication, and the anxiety of being "offline" were consistently reported across Bulgaria, Poland, Finland, Romania, and Cyprus as causing sleep deprivation and disrupted sleep quality. One Bulgarian parent noted that a 16-year-old had significantly disturbed sleep due to late-night screen use. Romanian parents noted: "If they spend the evening on the phone, they fall asleep late and wake up tired."
4. **Sedentary behaviour and reduction in physical activity.** Parents across all countries described a substitution effect: prolonged screen time displaces physical activity, outdoor play, and

movement. Polish parents noted a decline in adolescent stamina and fitness, with children knowing they are sedentary but rarely acting on that knowledge. Cypriot parents noted children "prefer to stay inside and play online games rather than going out." Romanian parents linked extensive screen time directly to sedentary behaviour and reduced overall energy levels.

5. **Disruption of physical rhythms.** Bulgarian parents highlighted a distinctive physical concern: that screen absorption disrupts basic biological rhythms, including delayed meals (children reluctant to stop for food) and reduced hydration. This pattern of physical disruption — less immediately visible than posture issues but potentially significant for health — was reported specifically in the Bulgarian focus groups.

3.6 Cognitive Functioning

Overall perceived impact: Mixed

Cognitive functioning generated the most nuanced discussion across all six countries, with parents identifying genuine educational benefits of digital tools alongside clear and growing concerns about attention, depth of thinking, critical capacity, and the paradox of high technical fluency coexisting with declining fundamental academic skills.

3.6.1 Areas of Interest

1. **Access to information and educational resources.** Parents across all countries recognised that digital tools dramatically expand children's access to information, educational videos, tutorials, and learning platforms. Greek and Cypriot parents described children using YouTube, Khan Academy, and AI tools to understand difficult concepts, find explanations they hadn't received in class, and prepare presentations. Finnish parents noted that digital tools support differentiation and self-directed learning pathways.
2. **Interactive and game-based learning enhancing understanding.** Structured, game-based digital tasks were consistently identified as cognitively beneficial when purposefully designed. Finnish parents described a music theory learning game that drew children into deep concentration and memory work. Bulgarian parents observed that interactive quizzes and creative digital tasks helped children develop problem-solving skills — and that explaining learned content to parents or siblings improved conceptual clarity and metacognition.
3. **Support for research, homework, and project work.** Parents from Cyprus, Greece, Poland, and Romania noted that digital tools support the completion of school assignments more efficiently, enabling children to access sources, organise information, and produce presentations. Cypriot parents noted: "My daughter found an AI generator that helps her study for tests, gives her notes and everything."
4. **Constructive, bounded use of AI for study support.** Cypriot parents described specific examples of AI tools being used in a purposeful, bounded way — for instance, using an AI application to generate likely questions for a history exam, which helped the student identify priority topics and structure her revision. When framed as a study aid rather than an answer-generator, AI was seen

as a legitimately useful cognitive support. The same parents, however, were quick to distinguish this from the overreliance patterns described below.

5. **Development of digital and technological skills.** Across all countries, parents acknowledged that children are developing genuine skills in navigating digital environments — an increasingly essential competence for future education and employment.

3.6.2 Areas of Concern

1. **Shortened attention span and inability to sustain focus.** This was the most widely reported cognitive concern across the dataset. Parents from Poland, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Finland described a clear and observable decline in children's capacity to maintain focus on long-form tasks, to read extended texts, or to engage patiently with complex problems. Polish parents linked this explicitly to short-form video consumption (TikTok, YouTube Shorts): "TikTok is reducing adolescents' ability to concentrate on longer tasks; students are accustomed to rapid information stimuli." Cypriot parents noted: "I feel like they don't use their brains anymore." Finnish parents questioned whether school teaching should accommodate the rapid pace of digital content or actively protect the slower, more sustained cognitive work that schools have traditionally provided.
2. **Overreliance on ready-made answers and AI tools.** This concern emerged strongly across Greece, Cyprus, and Poland. Parents described children using ChatGPT, Perplexity, and other AI tools as shortcuts — pasting AI-generated responses without reading, understanding, or verifying them. Greek parents raised specific concerns about academic integrity and the risk of AI substituting for independent thought. Polish parents noted the "digital illiteracy paradox": children who can navigate AI tools and complex apps cannot log into a school account, write a professional email, or use basic office software. The concern is not AI use itself, but its use as a replacement for cognitive effort.
3. **Reduction in critical thinking and information evaluation.** Across Greece, Poland, Cyprus, and Bulgaria, parents expressed concern that children absorb information from digital sources uncritically — from social media influencers, AI outputs, YouTube videos, or search results — without evaluating credibility, verifying accuracy, or developing independent positions. Bulgarian parents noted children consuming influencer content uncritically in ways that may distort their worldview. Polish parents described an absence of verification habits: children "just ask ChatGPT" and do not attempt independent problem-solving.
4. **Multitasking, tab-switching, and cognitive fragmentation.** Bulgarian and Cypriot parents described the cognitive cost of switching between multiple tabs, platforms, and activities simultaneously. Children who nominally study while social media is open, messaging running, and entertainment available were described as maintaining only shallow engagement with learning content — getting frustrated rather than understanding, and giving up on complex topics rather than persisting.
5. **Declining handwriting, reading, and foundational literacy.** Polish parents specifically reported concern about declining handwriting skills and reading comprehension as digital input methods replace pen-and-paper tasks, and as summaries and short-form content replace extended

reading. Finnish parents expressed particular concern about the reduction of printed books and physical reading materials in schools. Finnish parents also noted additional challenges for students with dyslexia in digital learning environments.

6. **Information overload and difficulty forming opinions.** Bulgarian parents noted that when children consume information from multiple simultaneous digital sources they experience cognitive overload and struggle to form coherent opinions or establish priorities — a concern echoed more broadly across the dataset.

4. DIGITAL COMPETENCES

Cross-country finding: A consistent gap between technical fluency and responsible, balanced use

Across all six countries, a strikingly consistent finding emerged regarding digital competences: children are technically fluent — capable of navigating complex apps, using AI tools, editing content, and circumventing parental controls — but this technical proficiency does not equate to responsible, balanced, or critically informed digital engagement.

Children's Digital Competences

Parents across all partner countries described their children as "digitally fluent" in operational terms. Children are confident with smartphones, social media platforms, video editing tools, AI assistants, and online communication. In many cases, their technical abilities significantly surpass those of their parents.

However, parents across Greece, Poland, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Finland drew a consistent distinction between **technical fluency** and **digital maturity**:

1. Children who navigate TikTok and bypass parental locks may struggle to log into a school email account, use office productivity tools, or navigate formal digital systems (PL, FI).
2. Children who are prolific social media users may lack the ability to evaluate source credibility, identify misinformation, or recognise how algorithms curate their content (BG, GR, PL).
3. Children who use AI confidently for homework do not necessarily understand its limitations, hallucination risks, or the academic integrity implications of copy-pasting outputs (GR, CY, PL).
4. Children who maintain extensive peer networks online may lack the face-to-face communication skills, conflict-resolution capacity, and emotional regulation to sustain meaningful relationships offline (PL, GR, CY).

This gap between technical skill and broader digital competence was framed by parents as one of the central challenges the DWELL project must address. Technical proficiency, without critical thinking, self-regulation, and awareness of risks, does not constitute digital well-being.

Parents' Digital Competences

Parents across all six countries acknowledged significant limitations in their own digital competences, and these limitations were identified as a structural barrier to effective support of children's digital well-being:

1. Many parents reported limited familiarity with the platforms, apps, and tools their children actually use, and acknowledged that this reduces their capacity to monitor or guide use meaningfully (GR, CY, BG, PL, RO, FI).
2. Technical monitoring tools (parental controls, screen time limits) were widely recognised as insufficient — children can bypass them, create secondary accounts, move to new platforms, or simply wait until parents are not watching (PL, BG, CY).
3. Parents across Greece and Bulgaria explicitly acknowledged not knowing "how to protect" their children online beyond generic warnings. Cypriot parents noted: "I try talking to them about the general dangers, but other than that I don't know how to protect them."
4. The rapid evolution of digital platforms — including the emergence of AI tools in schoolwork — was described as making it increasingly difficult for adults to maintain sufficient knowledge to provide credible guidance (FI, GR, PL).
5. Differences in digital competence between parents and children were reported as a source of tension, with children sometimes dismissing parental concerns as ignorance, and parents feeling powerless to intervene effectively.

The Parent–Child Competence Gap

The gap between children's and parents' digital competences was identified as a cross-cutting structural problem in every country. It produces several downstream risks:

6. Reduced parental ability to monitor and mediate digital use effectively
7. Increased children's unsupervised exposure to risks (harmful content, AI misuse, social media pressure, privacy risks)
8. Difficulty establishing and maintaining consistent household rules
9. Children's greater autonomy without corresponding responsibility or awareness

Across all countries, parents called for targeted capacity-building support — not generic "be careful online" messaging, but practical, specific, and up-to-date guidance on the platforms their children actually use, the risks these platforms carry, and the strategies that are actually effective in supporting healthier digital habits.

A Cross-Country Call for Shared Digital Competence Development

Parents across all six countries converged on a shared position: digital competence must be understood as a **combined, developmental, and relational capacity** — not merely a technical skill — and its development is a shared responsibility between families, schools, and policymakers. Technical skill is a starting point, not a destination. The full range of competences needed for digital well-being includes:

1. Critical evaluation of information and sources

2. Self-regulation and the capacity to disconnect
3. Awareness of algorithmic influence and data privacy
4. Responsible and empathetic online communication
5. Understanding of AI tools' limitations and ethical implications
6. Practical formal digital literacy (professional tools, school systems, email)

Importantly, these competences need to be developed in children **and** in parents, with schools playing a coordinating and enabling role.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Conclusions

The cross-country synthesis of parent focus group findings reveals a clear and consistent picture across all six DWELL partner countries. Digital technologies are now structurally embedded in children's daily lives — not as an optional extra but as the medium through which schoolwork, peer communication, entertainment, and social belonging all occur simultaneously, often through a single device. This structural reality creates a fundamental tension that parents across all countries navigate daily: they cannot simply "remove" technology from their children's lives without isolating them socially and educationally, yet they observe clear and concrete harms arising from unregulated, excessive, or poorly guided use.

The impact of digital technologies across the six domains of well-being is **mixed**, but with a clear pattern: positive effects emerge when use is **structured, purposeful, moderated, and supported by adult guidance**; negative effects predominate when use is **excessive, unregulated, socially pressured, or devoid of critical engagement**.

The key cross-cutting concerns identified across all six countries are:

1. **Excessive screen time** simultaneously affects emotional regulation, mental health, physical stamina, social skills, cognitive focus, and behavioural self-regulation.
2. **The smartphone as a convergence device** — combining learning, entertainment, social media, and communication in one tool — makes limit-setting structurally difficult for both parents and schools.
3. **Social media and short-form content** drive comparison pressure, FOMO, emotional volatility, and attention fragmentation in ways that are qualitatively different from other forms of digital use.
4. **The gap between children's technical fluency and their digital maturity** leaves children exposed to significant risks that their operational confidence conceals.
5. **The gap between parents' and children's digital competences** leaves parents insufficiently equipped to guide, monitor, or intervene effectively.

6. **Inconsistency between home and school expectations** creates confusion, undermines parental authority, and prevents the development of stable, healthy routines.
7. **Low adult visibility into children's online spaces** — including closed group chats, short-form video feeds, and DM environments — combines with concerns around cyberbullying, privacy, and exposure to harmful or age-inappropriate content to create a category of risk that parents feel least equipped to see, understand, or respond to.
8. **Parents need practical, specific, and sustained support** — not generic warnings, but concrete strategies, curated resources, and genuine collaboration with schools.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from parents' expressed concerns, observations, and suggestions across all six partner countries. They are framed at the strategic level and are structured around the six well-being domains and the cross-cutting theme of digital competences.

Emotional Well-Being

Schools and families should help children understand and manage the emotional pressures of digital environments — particularly social media comparison, online validation mechanisms, and emotionally provocative content. Structured conversations about online experiences, age-appropriate emotional literacy activities, and safe spaces for children to share digital concerns should be available in both home and school contexts. Awareness initiatives should address the specific emotional dynamics of algorithm-driven content. Schools can integrate digital emotional literacy into existing pastoral or health education frameworks.

Behavioural Well-Being

Families and schools should establish clear, consistent, and jointly agreed rules for device use — including structured screen-free periods, device limits during family time and school lessons, and gradual scaffolding of self-regulation skills. Rules should be co-created with children where developmentally appropriate to increase acceptance. Schools should communicate clear and consistent policies on device use during the school day, and these policies should be aligned with what families are expected to reinforce at home. The development of self-regulation should be treated as an educational goal requiring sustained support, not as an individual family responsibility.

Mental Health

Schools and families should raise awareness of the cumulative psychological effects of constant connectivity, short-form content consumption, and social media pressure. Daily and weekly routines should include genuine periods of digital disconnection, supporting cognitive rest and mental recovery.

Children who show signs of digital stress, fatigue, or online-related anxiety should have access to supportive conversations and, where needed, professional support. Schools should consider the mental health implications of digital workload practices — including late homework uploads, inconsistent messaging expectations across platforms, and high-frequency online assessment — as structural contributors to student stress. Awareness work should also address the distinction between passive scrolling and active, creative use: the qualitative pattern of engagement, not only its duration, shapes mental-health outcomes.

Social Relationships

Digital communication should be treated as a supplement to, not a replacement for, direct human interaction. Schools should actively protect opportunities for face-to-face conversation through phone-free practices during breaks, group activities, and school routines that encourage real social exchange. Families should reinforce the value of in-person contact and model healthy communication habits. Guidance on digital etiquette, online conflict resolution, and the recognition of cyberbullying should be explicitly integrated into school curricula and parent communication.

Physical Health

Parents and schools should actively promote physical activity, outdoor routines, and non-screen-based leisure as counterbalances to prolonged digital use. Clear guidelines on screen-free periods — particularly in the evenings before sleep — should be promoted through school communication and parent education initiatives. Schools and municipalities should ensure that students have access to engaging non-digital activities during break times and that digital device use during lessons is not extended unnecessarily into free time. Awareness campaigns should address posture, sleep hygiene, eye strain, and the physical consequences of sedentary screen-based routines.

Cognitive Functioning

Children should be supported in using digital tools as learning aids rather than as replacements for independent thinking. Schools and families should encourage deep reading, critical information evaluation, and sustained engagement with longer-form content alongside — not instead of — digital learning resources. AI tools in particular should be explicitly addressed in school curricula: their appropriate uses, limitations, risks, and the ethical and academic integrity implications of their use. Parents should be supported in understanding how to reinforce critical thinking habits at home. The reduction of printed materials in schools should be re-evaluated in light of consistent parent concerns about its cognitive and developmental implications.

Digital Competences — Cross-Cutting Recommendation

Targeted capacity-building for **parents** is a strategic priority identified consistently across all six partner countries. Parents need practical, accessible, and up-to-date support to strengthen their own digital skills and confidence, and to develop effective strategies for guiding their children's digital lives. This support should go well beyond generic online safety messaging to address:

1. The specific platforms and AI tools children actually use
2. How algorithms work and how to discuss their influence with children
3. Practical strategies for establishing and maintaining healthy routines
4. How to have productive conversations with children about online experiences — including privacy, exposure to harmful or age-inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and the low-visibility spaces (closed group chats, DMs, short-form feeds) where much of adolescent online life now occurs
5. How to identify and respond to digital stress, dependency, or online conflict
6. How to engage constructively with evolving policy debates — for example, age-restriction enforcement on social media platforms, raised specifically by parents in Cyprus — rather than relying on platform self-regulation alone

Schools and policymakers should collaborate to provide families with accessible, culturally relevant, and practically grounded guidance through workshops, digital resources, and parent networks. Peer-to-peer learning among parents — sharing experiences and strategies — was specifically proposed in multiple countries (BG, PL, GR) as a highly valued and underexploited resource.

Beyond parental support, the development of **children's digital maturity** — encompassing critical thinking, self-regulation, responsible communication, source evaluation, AI literacy, and privacy awareness — should be explicitly integrated into school curricula and educational frameworks across all partner countries. Technical fluency is not sufficient. The DWELL framework (FRAME-DWELL) and capacity-building tools (CERTIFY-DWELL, AWARE-DWELL) should reflect this distinction and build programmes that develop the full range of competences required for genuine digital well-being.

Finally, the findings underscore that digital well-being cannot be achieved through the actions of families or schools alone. It requires **coherent, coordinated, and consistent approaches** across home, school, and policy levels — with shared language, shared expectations, and shared responsibility. The DWELL project is positioned to make a significant contribution to this coordination, both through its evidence base and through the practical tools and policy recommendations it will produce.

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**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.