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DWELL
DIGITAL WELL BEING

DWELL

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



D2.3: Executive Report with the Findings and Conclusions of Focus Groups with Parents

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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). A consortium of six European partners from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Poland, and Romania aims to equip educators and parents with evidence-based tools, frameworks, and policy recommendations to promote digital well-being in schools.

This executive summary synthesises findings from 26 focus groups conducted with 203 parents across all six partner countries (WP2, Deliverable D2.2). Parents explored the impact of digital technologies on children's well-being across six domains: emotional, behavioural, mental health, social relationships, physical health, and cognitive functioning, plus a cross-cutting dimension on digital competences. The overarching finding is clear and consistent: digital technologies are deeply embedded in children's daily lives with complex, mixed effects. Benefits emerge from structured, purposeful use; harms arise from excessive, unregulated, or socially pressured engagement.

2. Methodology and Limitations

Research Design and Data Collection

Semi-structured focus groups were conducted between November 2025 and March 2026 using a common cross-country research template anchored in the six well-being domains. In total, 26 sessions engaged 203 parents across Bulgaria (17), Cyprus (13), Finland (19), Greece (37), Poland (19), and Romania (98). Formats included face-to-face, online, and mixed sessions. Participants were parents and guardians of school-aged children (predominantly ages 10–15), recruited through partner school networks and parent associations.

Country	Partner	FGs	Parents	Period	Format
Bulgaria	Acta Foundation	3	17	Jan 2026	Mixed
Cyprus	MMC	3	13	Feb–Mar 2026	Online
Finland	VAMK	3	19	Nov 2025, Jan–Feb	Online

Country	Partner	FGs	Parents	Period	Format
				2026	
Greece	DIMITRA	3	37	Dec 2025–Mar 2026	Online
Poland	KLS Partners	3	19	Dec 2025–Mar 2026	Mixed
Romania	ARAD	11	98	Nov–Dec 2025	F2F
TOTAL		**26**	**203**		

Limitations

Findings are qualitative and exploratory, reflecting parental perceptions rather than statistically representative data. Variation in group sizes (13–98 participants per country) should be considered when interpreting country-level comparisons. The strong convergence of themes across six diverse national contexts lends considerable credibility to the cross-country patterns identified.

3. Key Findings

The impact of digital technologies on children's well-being is mixed and context-dependent across all six countries and all six domains. The table below provides an at-a-glance synthesis; detailed findings follow.

Domain	Overall Impact	Key Positives	Key Concerns
Emotional	Mixed	Achievement, creativity, relaxation	Social comparison, anxiety, emotional dysregulation
Behavioural	Mixed, mainly negative	Structured routines, goal-oriented habits	Self-regulation difficulties, blurred learning/leisure
Mental Health	Mainly negative	Competence,	Mental fatigue, sleep

Domain	Overall Impact	Key Positives	Key Concerns
		confidence, balance as protection	disruption, FOMO
Social	Mixed	Peer connection, collaboration, belonging	Face-to-face displacement, online conflict, exclusion
Physical	Mainly negative	Fitness apps, safety affordance	Posture, eye strain, sedentary behaviour, sleep loss
Cognitive	Mixed	Information access, interactive learning, AI as study aid	Shortened attention, AI over-reliance, reduced critical thinking

3.1 Emotional Well-Being

> *Key positive: Children gain genuine pride, motivation, and creative confidence through purposeful digital engagement.*

Social comparison via Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat was the single most widely reported emotional concern, consistently linked to reduced self-esteem and emotional distress (all countries). Anxiety, irritability, and emotional dysregulation when disconnecting were reported across all six countries. "Doom-scrolling" and algorithm-driven mood decline were flagged in Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, and Finland. Age differentiation is important: younger children (10–12) show immediate visible reactions; older adolescents (13–17) internalise stress, making early detection harder.

3.2 Behavioural Well-Being

> *Key concern: Patterns resembling dependency — compulsive checking, inability to disengage, phantom device use — reported in all countries.*

The same device being used simultaneously for homework, entertainment, and social media makes it structurally impossible for children to "switch off." Notifications and gaming disrupt meals, sleep, and family time. Adolescents resist parental limits, creating ongoing household conflict. Inconsistency between home and school expectations was a universal barrier to stable digital routines. Algorithmic content design (notably TikTok) was identified as a structural barrier that family rules alone cannot address.

3.3 Mental Health

> *Key concern: Chronic overstimulation and sleep disruption are the most prevalent mental health risks identified by parents across all six countries.*

Short-form video platforms and gaming drive mental exhaustion, reduced patience, and diminished capacity for sustained effort (all countries). Sleep disruption from late-night device use was reported in Bulgaria, Poland, Finland, Romania, and Cyprus as a serious and prevalent concern with downstream effects on mood and resilience. FOMO and the pressure to remain constantly available create significant psychological stress. Parents' uncertainty about school digital practices adds a distinct and underreported family stress burden (Finland, Poland, Bulgaria).

3.4 Social Relationships

> *Key concern: Children communicate via messages even when physically together — a fundamental shift in social skills, not merely a communication preference.*

Digital tools positively support peer connection, collaborative schoolwork, and social participation for introverted children. However, online group chats are consistent environments for rapid conflict escalation, peer exclusion, and social pressure. Online harassment most commonly occurs within close peer groups, not from strangers (Bulgaria, Greece). Digital participation has become quasi-obligatory: not having WhatsApp or key platforms creates functional social exclusion (Poland, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus).

3.5 Physical Health

> *Key finding: Physical health shows the clearest negative consensus — posture problems, sleep loss, eye strain, and sedentary behaviour reported across all countries.*

Spinal and postural problems ("tech neck," forward head posture, spinal curvature) are observable in adolescents and reported by PE teachers (Poland, Finland, Cyprus). Prolonged screen time directly displaces physical activity, with children knowing they are sedentary but rarely acting on that awareness. One PE teacher noted declining willingness to change for PE class (Poland). Late-night screen use causes sleep deprivation with documented downstream effects on next-day mood, concentration, and mental resilience.

3.6 Cognitive Functioning

> *Key paradox: Children who navigate TikTok and bypass parental controls may be unable to log into a school account, write a professional email, or use basic office software.*

Shortened attention span and inability to sustain focus was the most widely reported cognitive concern (Poland, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Finland), linked explicitly to short-form video consumption. AI tool over-reliance (ChatGPT, Perplexity) substitutes for independent thinking, with children copy-pasting outputs without reading or verifying them (Greece, Cyprus, Poland). Declining handwriting, reading comprehension, and foundational literacy skills were reported in Poland and Finland. Multitasking across tabs and platforms produces cognitive fragmentation, with children getting frustrated rather than understanding complex material.

3.7 Digital Competences: The Central Cross-Cutting Gap

A consistent finding across all six countries: children are technically fluent but digitally immature. Technical proficiency — navigating apps, using AI, circumventing parental controls — does not equate to responsible, balanced, or critically informed digital engagement. Equally, parents lack sufficient digital knowledge to monitor, guide, or credibly intervene.

The parent-child competence gap generates five downstream risks:

- Reduced parental ability to monitor and mediate digital use
- Increased unsupervised exposure to harmful content, AI misuse, privacy risks
- Difficulty establishing and maintaining consistent household rules
- Children's greater digital autonomy without corresponding responsibility or awareness
- Children dismissing parental concerns as ignorance; parents feeling powerless

Parents called specifically for practical, platform-specific, up-to-date guidance — not generic "be careful online" messaging.

4. Recommendations

The following strategic recommendations are drawn directly from parents' observations across all six partner countries. They are structured by domain and cross-cutting theme.

4.1 Emotional Well-Being

- Integrate digital emotional literacy into existing pastoral or health education frameworks in schools.
- Establish structured, age-appropriate conversations about social media comparison, online validation mechanisms, and algorithmically driven emotional pressure.
- Provide safe spaces in both home and school contexts for children to share digital concerns without judgement.

4.2 Behavioural Well-Being

- Establish clear, consistent, jointly agreed rules for device use — including screen-free periods during family time and school lessons.
- Co-create rules with children (where developmentally appropriate) to increase compliance and ownership.
- Schools must communicate clear, consistent phone-use policies aligned with what families are expected to reinforce at home.

- Treat self-regulation development as an explicit educational goal requiring sustained scaffolding, not an individual family responsibility.

4.3 Mental Health

- Build awareness of the cumulative psychological effects of constant connectivity and short-form content consumption.
- Embed genuine daily and weekly periods of digital disconnection into both school and home routines.
- Address school-side structural stressors: late homework upload deadlines, inconsistent messaging platform expectations, high-frequency online assessments.
- Frame guidance around the qualitative type of engagement (passive scrolling vs. active/creative use), not only screen-time duration.

4.4 Social Relationships

- Schools should actively protect face-to-face interaction through phone-free break-time practices and structured group activities.
- Explicitly integrate digital etiquette, online conflict resolution, and cyberbullying recognition into school curricula.
- Families should model healthy communication habits and reinforce the value of in-person social exchange.

4.5 Physical Health

- Promote structured daily physical activity, outdoor routines, and non-screen leisure as counterbalances to prolonged digital use.
- Establish and communicate clear screen-free periods in the evenings, particularly before sleep.
- Launch targeted awareness campaigns on posture, sleep hygiene, eye strain, and sedentary behaviour consequences.
- Ensure schools provide engaging non-digital activities during break times and avoid unnecessary extension of digital tool use into free periods.

4.6 Cognitive Functioning

- Support children in using digital and AI tools as thinking aids, not substitutes for independent cognitive effort.
- Explicitly address AI tools in school curricula: appropriate uses, limitations, hallucination risks, and academic integrity implications.
- Protect sustained engagement with long-form content, printed reading, and deep problem-solving alongside digital learning.
- Re-evaluate the reduction of printed learning materials in schools in light of consistent parent concerns about cognitive and literacy implications.

4.7 Digital Competences (Cross-Cutting Priority)

> *Targeted capacity-building for parents is a strategic priority identified consistently across all six partner countries.*

For parents, practical, accessible, up-to-date support must go beyond generic online safety messaging to address:

- The specific platforms and AI tools children actually use and the risks they carry
- How algorithms work and how to discuss their influence with children
- Practical strategies for establishing and maintaining healthy digital routines
- How to identify and respond to digital stress, dependency, or online conflict
- How to engage productively with evolving policy debates, including age-restriction enforcement on social media

For children, digital maturity — encompassing critical thinking, self-regulation, responsible communication, source evaluation, AI literacy, and privacy awareness — must be explicitly integrated into school curricula. Technical fluency is not sufficient.

For the system as a whole, digital well-being requires coherent, coordinated, and consistent approaches across home, school, and policy levels — with shared language, shared expectations, and shared responsibility. Peer-

to-peer learning among parents (sharing experiences and strategies) was proposed in multiple countries (BG, PL, GR) as a highly valued and underexploited resource.

5. Conclusion

> *The DWELL project is positioned to make a significant contribution to digital well-being in European schools — both through its evidence base and through the practical tools and policy recommendations it will produce.*

The cross-country synthesis reveals a consistent picture: digital technologies are now structurally embedded in children's lives as the medium through which schoolwork, peer communication, entertainment, and social belonging all occur — often through a single device. Parents cannot simply remove technology without isolating children socially and educationally, yet they observe concrete harms from unregulated, excessive, or poorly guided use.

Eight cross-cutting conclusions summarise the evidence base:

- **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 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 qualitatively differently from other digital use.
- **4.** Children's technical fluency masks a significant digital maturity gap, leaving them exposed to risks their operational confidence conceals.
- **5.** Parents are insufficiently equipped to guide, monitor, or intervene effectively, and need practical, specific, sustained support.
- **6.** Inconsistency between home and school expectations creates confusion and prevents stable healthy routines.
- **7.** Low adult visibility into closed group chats, short-form feeds, and DM spaces combines with cyberbullying and harmful content exposure to create risks parents feel least equipped to address.
- **8.** Digital well-being cannot be achieved by families or schools alone; it requires coordinated action across home, school, and policy levels.

The DWELL framework (FRAME-DWELL) and capacity-building tools (CERTIFY-DWELL, AWARE-DWELL) should reflect the distinction between technical fluency and digital maturity, and build programmes that develop the full range of competences required for genuine digital well-being in children, parents, and educators.

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