

Wellbeing in a Digital World: online facilitated interventions to support wellbeing in Childhood and Adolescence

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With special thanks to Dr. Magdalena Balica, Dr. Jennifer Merriman, Dr. Jose Marquez, and the Wellbeing Research Centre team at the University of Oxford.

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Executive Summary

This report delves into **the impact of digital technology on children and young people**, offering schools various methods to harness these technologies to boost pupil wellbeing while also considering the potential negatives. It also reviews several online interventions that have been evaluated through randomized controlled trials for their promise in improving various aspects of adolescent wellbeing.

It is crucial for schools to understand current trends in digital usage and the potential impact of online facilitated interventions on wellbeing. The goal is to provide schools with insight into these dynamics and offer potential intervention strategies.

The report acknowledges that while the use of digital media by young people is often viewed negatively, **the reality is far more complex.**

By recognizing the complexities of digital engagement, schools can **better leverage technology to enhance student wellbeing.** The evidence available about online facilitated interventions serves as a foundation for schools to identify the most relevant intervention elements and characteristics for their specific environments and needs. **It is vital for educational institutions to maintain a balanced view of technology and make informed decisions tailored to the unique requirements and conditions of their educational settings and student populations.**

Digital Use and Wellbeing

The current generation of young people, particularly in middle- and high-income countries, is deeply embedded in digital environments, with different levels of technology use associated with both benefits and risks.

Digital technologies offer significant benefits, such as access to information, support networks and platforms for socialization and creativity, which improve the lives of children and young people.

But they also pose serious risks, including exposure to cyberbullying, inappropriate content and the emerging threats of AI and deep-fake technologies, which can exploit or harm young users.

The impact of digital technology on adolescents in the Global South is currently under-researched, which prevents a clear understanding of its effects. This gap highlights the need for a more contextual understanding of how technology influences youth development. Recognizing these dual aspects is crucial for maintaining a balanced perspective on the role of technology in the global development of young people.

Particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increasing interest of schools in digital technology and how it can be integrated into educational settings. For instance, the Department for Education in the United Kingdom noted a rise in the number of schools adopting digital strategies in recent years. As primary institutions for youth development, schools are pivotal in providing students with the essential digital skills needed for modern adulthood. The ability to recognize and navigate misinformation on digital platforms has become increasingly crucial today.

It is worth noting that this development might be particularly useful given that global estimates suggest approximately 240 million children worldwide have a disability. Compared to their peers without disabilities, these children are significantly more likely to have never attended school. Online technology offers a promising avenue to bridge these educational access gaps and to support students with special educational needs in mainstream settings. Therefore, the integration of assistive technology in classrooms could greatly improve accessibility and enhance the quality of life for those with additional needs.

Although research often highlights the negative effects of technology on wellbeing, a deeper insight into the topic suggests that the impact of technology on adolescent wellbeing is complex and varies depending on the context.

Factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural attitudes towards technology, and differences between urban and rural access can all influence this relationship. This complexity underscores the importance for schools to critically assess the research and adapt strategies to meet the specific needs and contexts of their diverse student populations.



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Online Interventions

Therefore, to holistically support student wellbeing in a digital learning environment, it is crucial for schools to consider the entire educational ecosystem. This includes not only providing support to students but also extending wellbeing resources to school staff and teachers.

The field of online wellbeing interventions has become increasingly significant, as evidenced by numerous systematic reviews published in recent years. In the full report, we have included Table 1, which synthesizes a wide range of these interventions.

This table lists specific interventions, frequently cited in academic literature for their rigor, providing schools with a valuable resource to explore diverse online-facilitated interventions.

Research indicates that digitally facilitated interventions can effectively deliver wellbeing programs to children and adolescents. The advantages of using digital platforms are numerous.

They are capable of:

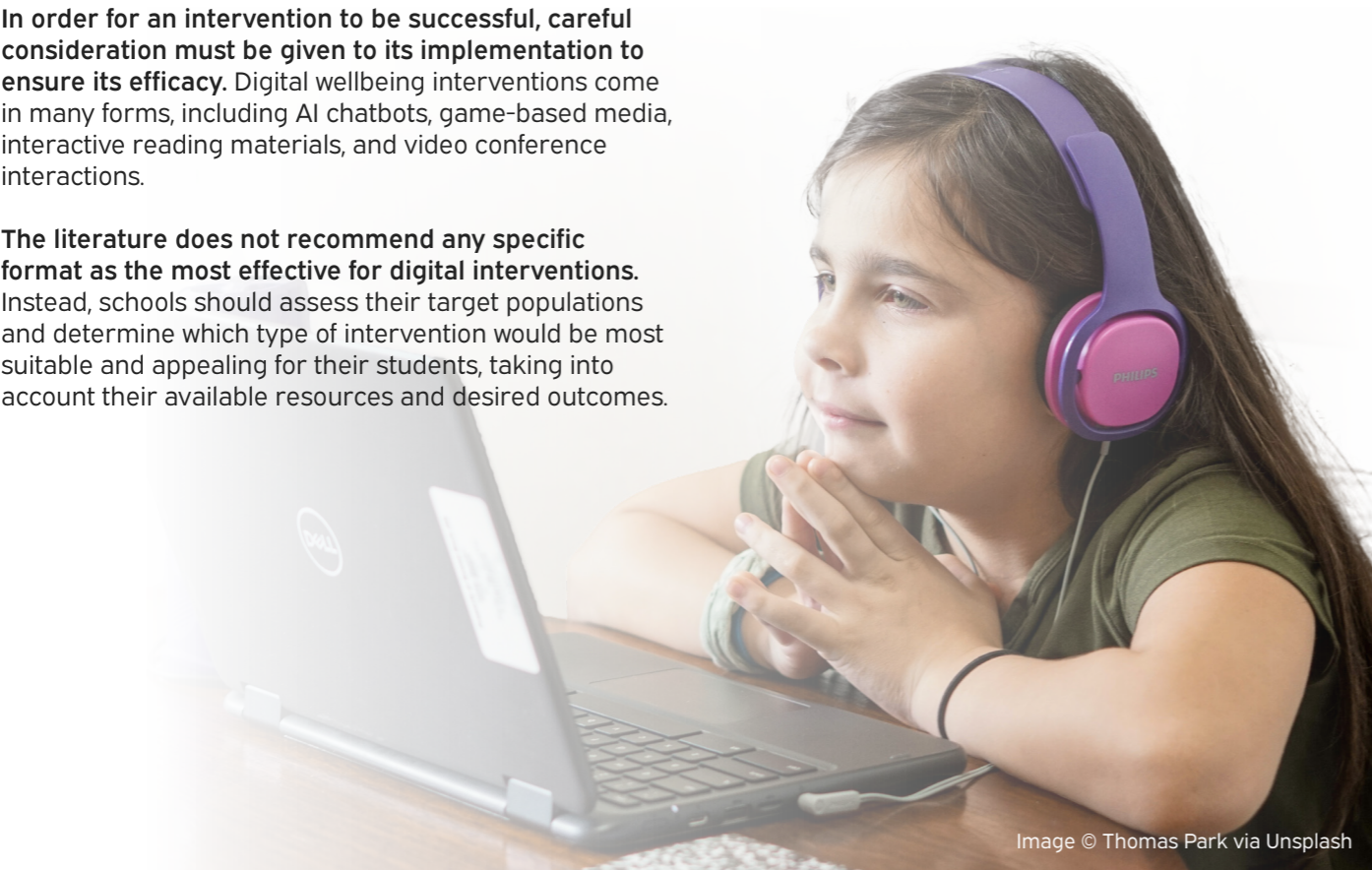
1. Meeting high demand;
2. Catering to individual preferences;
3. Offering unparalleled convenience;
4. And extending the reach of programs to participants who might otherwise be underserved.

However, despite these benefits, the implementation of digital wellbeing interventions is not without its challenges. These include:

1. The high costs associated with developing and maintaining digital platforms;
2. The potential for overuse which can lead to dependency or reduced effectiveness;
3. Difficulties in maintaining participant engagement and retention over time;
4. And a notable lack of empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of some digital interventions.



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In order for an intervention to be successful, careful consideration must be given to its implementation to ensure its efficacy. Digital wellbeing interventions come in many forms, including AI chatbots, game-based media, interactive reading materials, and video conference interactions.

The literature does not recommend any specific format as the most effective for digital interventions. Instead, schools should assess their target populations and determine which type of intervention would be most suitable and appealing for their students, taking into account their available resources and desired outcomes.

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Common Characteristics

Some common characteristics of successful interventions are shared to guide this decision-making process: first, **thorough pre-planning is essential** to define clear objectives and strategies.

Additionally, **interventions should be supported at multiple levels**, from administration to the classroom, aligning with overall educational goals. It is also crucial to provide **adequate support and training for those delivering the intervention** to ensure they are well-prepared.

Effective interventions often include short, frequent sessions that revisit core topics to reinforce learning.

Including diverse stakeholders in the design process can help tailor the intervention to meet the specific needs of the community it serves.

Content should be age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and developmentally suitable to engage students effectively. Moreover, content needs to be both **engaging and exciting** to maintain student interest.

Lastly, **incorporating face-to-face elements alongside online activities can enhance the intervention's impact**, offering a blended approach that leverages the strengths of both formats.

Considerations

There are essential considerations for schools to understand when exploring online-facilitated wellbeing interventions.

Firstly, the empirical evidence supporting these interventions is relatively scarce, particularly for young adults, and is even less substantial for children under 12. **Schools should therefore be cautious when implementing such interventions for younger students.**

Moreover, **most existing research has been conducted in developed, English-speaking countries**, often with assumptions of a certain level of digital access, economic resources, and proficiency.

It is crucial for schools to adapt these research findings to their specific contexts and address the unique needs of their populations, as many interventions are designed with particular demographic and socio-economic considerations in mind.

Further reading

Taylor, L. J., De Neve, J.-E., DeBorst, L., & Khanna, D. (2022). *Wellbeing in Education in Childhood and Adolescence (Report No. 1)*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

Taylor, L., Zhou, W., Boyle, L., Funk, S., & De Neve, J.-E. (2024). *Wellbeing for Schoolteachers (Report No. 2)*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

Zhou, W., Taylor, L., Boyle, L., DeBorst, L., & De Neve, J.-E. (2025). *Wellbeing in a Digital World: online facilitated interventions to support wellbeing in Childhood and Adolescence: Literature Review*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

References

For a full list of references used in this report and access to additional supplementary materials, visit wellbeing.hmc.ox.ac.uk/schools.

