



Bulletin

It's hard to believe that January is almost done and that Christmas was over a month ago, but thankfully there are glimpses of Spring and the evenings are getting a little bit lighter each day. This is quite a bumper edition with some good links to videos and reports that you will hopefully find useful. The news has been preoccupied with online safety and mobile phone use, so this edition has quite a few articles and clips to support parents with this. As ever, if you feel you would like to talk to anyone about any of the issues raised in this bulletin, please contact your child's year team or the Safeguarding team at the school.

Childline - Spot the Fake (Video)

There are two links here for videos regarding 'Sextortion' they can be quite hard hitting. I would advise watching both and then sharing what you feel is appropriate with your children. However, the key principle is to keep children safe online and these videos both highlight some of the issues well.

Protect Us. This is from a company called WeProtect – quite hard hitting, so watch first before showing your children.

Can The Charvas work out who is REAL and who is FAKE? | Childline very relatable, but not as hard hitting, always view first to see if you are happy with how the content is covered.

What is Doomscrolling?

Doomscrolling is where someone gets caught in a continuous cycle of negativity and fits in perfectly with algorithmic literacy above. Whilst doomscrolling is often intentional, it can also be a result of the decisions the algorithm makes and being led down a rabbit hole of doom. This can have ongoing effects such as anxiety and other negative effects on wellbeing.

Internet Matters has a great article about doomscrolling, including things to look out for and advice for parents. You can find the article [HERE](#).

Some really good, easy to read articles about keeping your children safe online – well worth a look!

[Is WhatsApp safe for my child? | NSPCC](#)

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-reporting/>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/social-media/>

Three quarters back increase in minimum social media age

The Daily Telegraph

A survey carried out for the More in Common think tank has found that three quarters of the public would back an increase in the minimum age for accessing social media sites and apps, from 13 to 16, while 71% of adults would back a full ban on smartphones in schools. Luke Tryl, UK director at More in Common, commented: "Support for raising the age at which young people can use social media to 16 is pretty much as close to a slam dunk as you can get in public opinion popularity terms. This is a Government that desperately needs public opinion and policy wins - and raising the age of access to social media would be one of them."

Urgent call to close online safety loophole

BBC News

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) has urged Sir Keir Starmer to address significant loopholes in the new Online Safety Act, warning that "the new regulations threaten to leave gaping loopholes for criminals to exploit." In 2024, the IWF uncovered nearly 300,000 web pages containing child sexual abuse imagery, marking the highest number in its history. IWF chair Catherine Brown highlighted the need for stricter legislation to prevent social media companies from evading their responsibilities. The Government has committed to enforcing the Act, with Ofcom empowered to impose fines on non-compliant companies.

Schools unite against smartphone chaos

BBC News

Leaders from 34 schools in Brighton and Hove are convening to address the effects of smartphone usage on children. The meeting follows initiatives aimed at limiting phone use during school hours, including a complete ban at one school due to safeguarding concerns. Sarah Raymond from the campaign group Smartphone Free Childhood warned: "It's too important an issue for us to say we can't do anything about it." Cardinal Newman Catholic School has implemented a policy requiring students to store their phones in locked pouches during the day, as previous voluntary measures proved ineffective. Assistant headteacher Shaun Meaney highlighted the distractions and risks associated with smartphones, including cyberbullying. The campaign group claims nearly 3,000 parents have pledged not to buy smartphones for their children until they are 14, citing concerns over mental health and exposure to harmful content. However, exceptions are made for children with medical needs.

ADHD prescriptions soar among youth

London Evening Standard

Baroness Fox of Buckley has raised concerns about the rising trend of ADHD being labelled as the "fashionable disorder" among young people. During discussions on the proposed Mental Health Bill, she noted an 18% increase in prescriptions for ADHD medications from April 2023 to March 2024. Fox questioned: "Isn't it tragic that so many people want their children, or want themselves, to have these drugs in order to feel that they can cope?" She warned that this trend could lead to significant financial strain on councils and schools. Baroness Murphy echoed these concerns, highlighting the issue of overdiagnosis and suggesting that many individuals are mislabeled as mentally ill when they are simply experiencing distress. She remarked on the prevalence of self-diagnosis through unreliable online surveys, noting: "There are a lot of websites which are utter rubbish."

Child sexual exploitation recognised as 'an urgent public health issue'

The Independent UK

Online child sexual exploitation is increasingly recognised as "an urgent public health issue that is escalating," according to a recent meta-analysis published in *The Lancet: Child and Adolescent Health*. The study reveals that one in 12 children globally is exposed to such abuse, with a significant rise in online grooming cases reported in the UK, increasing by 89% over six years. In 2023, the US National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children received over 3.2m reports of suspected exploitation, marking a 13% increase from the previous year. Rani Govender, policy manager for child safety online at the NSPCC, outlined the need for the Online Safety Act to be implemented urgently, stating: "Online grooming can have a lifelong impact on victims and survivors."

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Hundreds of police officers to be pulled from schools

The Daily Telegraph

The Metropolitan Police is reportedly withdrawing 370 specialist police officers based in schools under the Safer Schools programme, with a police constable telling *LBC* radio that officers have been "advised that our roles have been abolished or discontinued and we'll be going back into neighbourhood policing". "There'll be no direct contact with the schools", they added, "appointments with the schools, no more safeguarding appointments." The Safer Schools scheme was introduced to help prevent and detect crime, cut anti-social behaviour in schools, and provide support to young people at risk of becoming victims or offenders.

All these guides are attached below for ease of reading.



A study entitled The Digital Health Generation has highlighted that more than 70% of young people in the UK, some aged just 8, are using apps and other digital online technologies to track and manage their health 📱❤️ For those of us who might struggle with sticking to a routine or even knowing where to start, physical wellbeing and fitness apps promise to do the heavy lifting for you 🏋️ providing meal plans, exercise routines and more.

However, some of these apps aren't always as safe as they might first appear, and they tend to present a few risks to their users – especially for their underage demographic. That's why we've put together this free guide on safety concerns around physical wellbeing apps, to provide you with expert advice on how to mitigate these risks for young people.

With 22% of its billion-strong userbase being between the ages of 13 and 17, the popularity of TikTok among the younger generation is indisputable 📱 Providing entertainment in the form of a stream of short-form video content 📺 while allowing its users to post videos of their own 🎥 the app has skyrocketed to prominence over the last few years, becoming a fixture in young people's digital lives 📱

Of course, with a platform as popular and gargantuan as TikTok, it can be intimidating trying to figure out how best to safeguard children and young people using the app. That's why we're releasing our brand-new guide to TikTok, detailing the main online safety concerns and suggesting strategies to reduce these risks for the app's younger users.



Phone ban makes 'big impact' in class

[BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/education-68111111) [Daily Express](https://www.dailyexpress.co.uk/news/education-68111111) [Express.co.uk](https://www.express.co.uk/news/education-68111111)

Greg Morrison, the associate assistant head of Burnage Academy for Boys, one of the first UK schools to ban mobile phones, has discussed the benefits the school has seen since. The school, named UK Secondary School of the Year at the 2024 TES Schools Awards, introduced the ban 12 years ago, Mr Morrison says, and it has seen "a big impact in terms of engagement in class", with "one less distraction in the classroom". "When you see groups of young people out and about in town, they're all sitting round the table looking at their phones and not talking", he said: "What we see here at lunchtime is pupils playing football, pupils sitting talking, pupils sharing food with each other."

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Social media apps such as TikTok and Instagram are immensely popular among children and young people: Ofcom found that 96% of children have their own profile on at least one of these platforms by the age of 17. These apps feature short-form, algorithmically tailored content 📄 ensuring that their users spend as long as possible viewing posts and videos 👁️

As parents and educators, it is vital for us to safeguard the children in our care if – or more likely, when – they use social media 🛡️ However, the question then becomes “what exactly can we do?” This week’s expert-led guide is here to answer precisely that, offering top-level advice on keeping children and young people safe as they navigate the digital landscape



Groundbreaking changes to online safety laws

The Guardian

The recent draft illegal codes published by Ofcom represent a significant shift in online safety policy, aiming to make Britain one of the safest places to be online. Peter Kyle, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, highlights in the *Guardian* the urgent need for these changes after hearing distressing accounts from young people about their online experiences, including fears of cyberbullying and grooming. He comments: "We owe it to them to ensure that no more lives are needlessly lost to this epidemic." The new regulations will compel tech firms to actively remove illegal content and enhance protections for children, making it more difficult for strangers to contact them. The measures are designed to restore confidence in online spaces while addressing the growing concerns surrounding online crime and harmful content.

Shocking rise in online abuse

STV Grampian Online Herald Scotland The Daily Record

Police Scotland reported over 2,000 cases of online grooming and sexual exploitation of children last year, but experts warn this figure is just the "tip of the iceberg." According to a study by Childlight, more than 150,000 children in Scotland may have experienced online sexual abuse in the past year, equating to over 400 children daily. Professor Deborah Fry, director of data at Childlight, described the research as "gold standard," highlighting that an estimated 300m children globally faced similar issues. The report calls for a preventative approach, emphasising the need for education and regulation to combat this growing problem. Paul Stanfield, Childlight's chief executive, noted the stigma surrounding these crimes often prevents victims from reporting them, stating: "I've been approached by people who have kept it to themselves for 50 years." The upcoming Online Safety Act aims to introduce stronger protections for children online.

Gambling commission acts against Roblox casinos

Sky News

An investigation by *Sky News* has uncovered a network of illegal online casinos targeting children through the popular game Roblox. These unlicensed sites allow users, some as young as 12, to gamble their in-game currency, Robux, on games like slots and blackjack. One teenager, Robert, revealed he gambled around 15m Robux (£150,000) starting at age 14, unaware he was breaking the law. The Gambling Commission has responded by blocking these sites in the UK, with Chief Executive Andrew Rhodes stating: "Criminals will always try and find new ways to exploit people, including children." Roblox is facing a class action lawsuit from parents of affected children, alleging negligence in protecting young users from these gambling platforms.

Instagram under fire for child abuse material

Daily Mail

Instagram is facing scrutiny from Ofcom following allegations of facilitating the distribution of AI-generated child sexual abuse material. The 5Rights Foundation, a children's charity, has lodged a complaint against Meta, the parent company of Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, claiming it has "disregarded" police requests and failed to effectively monitor harmful content. An undercover police investigation revealed that offenders are using Instagram to promote their sites, gaining significant followings by marketing AI-generated sexualised images of children. Baroness Beeban Kidron, founder of the charity, said: "It is appalling that a company of Meta's size and resources continues to fail in its duty to protect children." With the Online Safety Act coming into effect next year, Ofcom has been urged to take action against Meta to safeguard children from exploitation and abuse online.

Superman challenge injures dozens of kids

Metro

The Superman challenge, a viral trend on social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, has resulted in numerous injuries among children. Participants, some as young as 10, are thrown into the air by peers, attempting to strike a superhero pose before landing. Reports indicate that at least 20 children in Romania and 19 in Israel have sustained serious injuries, with some requiring hospitalisation. A mother from Montenegro expressed her shock after her son injured his hand, stating: "We thought there was no possibility that a child... could get into that situation." While TikTok has removed related content, videos remain accessible on YouTube and Instagram, prompting concerns from authorities about the challenge's dangers.

10 Top Tips for Parents and Educators

SAFETY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Currently, children are growing up in an immediate and throwaway culture when it comes to content that's consumed online. So much material is now deliberately created to be shorter in nature – and may often contain hidden elements such as advertising, or extreme political and cultural views. With complex algorithms built to keep people on their phones and engaging with social media content, it's becoming increasingly difficult to reduce time spent on these platforms.

1 REDUCE DOOMSCROLLING

It's concerningly common for young people to spend hours 'doomscrolling': trawling through social media and aimlessly viewing every post they see, many of which might make them feel sad or anxious. Social media can be useful for keeping in touch with friends and family, as well as staying up to date on current events. However, it's important to use it with a clear purpose, instead of endlessly scrolling through content, which could lead to young people accidentally discovering harmful material.

2 TALK ABOUT THE CONTENT

It's important to keep apprised of the kind of content that a young person is being exposed to. Discussing what they're watching online can help you understand why they're using social media in the first place. Furthermore, ensure that children are aware of hidden content, such as advertising of a product – and that they know how to spot that the creator is being paid to talk about it.

3 FIND POSITIVE ASPECTS

Despite all the concerns, there's plenty of wholesome content on social media. It's worth spending time with children to help them find something suitable and enjoyable. Perhaps you'll even discover a joint interest, and you can enjoy the content alongside the child. As part of this, you should also point out why certain things shouldn't be given attention, explaining why it isn't suitable and why it's been created in the first place.

4 REDUCE SCREENTIME

Young people can sometimes be unaware of the exact amount of time they spend looking at social media. Smart phones don't just have the capacity to monitor screentime; they also record how much time is spent on each app. Consider setting targets to reduce this and support children to meet these goals, gradually reducing the amount of time spent on different apps.

5 FILL THE VOID

Monitoring and reducing screentime can create a lot of free time to fill, and young people can even face withdrawal symptoms when made to step away from their phones. To mitigate this, consider what offline activities you could introduce the child to, and what they would enjoy. This can ensure that young users will permanently cut down on their screentime, rather than temporarily doing so while they know it's being monitored.

6 REDUCE NOTIFICATIONS

One way in which social media platforms keep people coming back is through notifications. The algorithms behind these apps track people's daily habits, including the times of the day where they're most likely to engage with the platform. This data is then used to deliver specifically timed notifications to draw them back in. To avoid young users being exposed to this tactic, simply turn off notifications for the app in their phone's settings.

7 LIVE IN THE REAL WORLD

Overexposure to social media can distort someone's perception of the real world – from body norms to social conventions. This filtered environment can make it hard for young people to distinguish reality from online content, which is now becoming even more difficult with the rise of AI. To mitigate this concern, take time to teach young people how to discern truth from fiction, both on and off social media.

8 DIGITAL DETOX

Encouraging young people to take a 'digital detox', from even just a couple of the apps that they use, can result in an overall reduction of screentime and less exposure to potentially harmful content. Alternatively, rather than avoiding the app entirely, encourage children to take a 'digital detox' from content creators and influencers, and instead, keep in touch with friends and family – which is generally a far healthier use of these platforms.

9 MODEL GOOD BEHAVIOUR

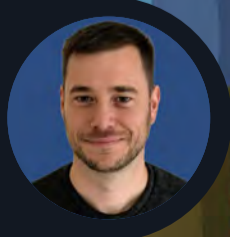
Consider the habits that you're demonstrating to your children. How much time do you spend on your phone? How much do you 'doomscroll'? Comparing your own usage with the child's could put things into perspective for them – or if it turns out that you're also overusing social media, it can turn screentime reduction into a joint mission, which you and the child can work on together.

10 BE CLEAR ON THE "WHY"

Research shows that young people can become addicted to social media. There are many schools that are moving towards being 'phone free' due to the negative impacts of using social media and phones continuously. It's important to explain to young people why managing screentime is important. Set out the benefits and ensure they have all the relevant information, so it's not just seen as a punishment.

Meet Our Expert

John Insley is a senior leader in a Birmingham secondary school and has vast experience in leading schools over the past 15 years – including the development of computing curriculums across primary and secondary schools, writing e-safety policies and supporting schools with computing and e-safety advice.



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What Parents & Educators Need to Know about JUSTALK KIDS

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

JusTalk Kids is a child's version of the JusTalk app – a highly popular social networking platform – designed for users up to 13 years of age, allowing them to video call, message and participate in group chats. While adults can link their own JusTalk account to their child's and make use of parental controls, it's important to understand the risks associated with the app.

SUBSCRIPTION FOR PREMIUM ACCESS

While JusTalk Kids is free, there's the option to subscribe to a kids' premium account or a premium family account. At a cost, this feature allows children to have access to more fun features such as games they can play with others in a call; exclusive stickers; a badge denoting them as a premium subscriber; and exclusive ringtones and themes.

RESISTANCE TO CONTROLS

JusTalk Kids endeavours to allow children the sense of having a chat-based app while allowing parents to set controls (within the app or from their own adult JusTalk account). The basis behind this is positive; however, some children are challenging their parents by refusing to use JusTalk Kids, preferring to use the adult version without any restrictions in place.

KNOWING THE PARENT PASSCODE

After downloading JusTalk Kids, parents can set a passcode which users must enter to add contacts. The parental controls help to manage which content can be viewed and who children can add as a contact: this then allows children to chat with friends in a controlled environment. However, prospective contacts don't have to know a specific username. In theory, someone could type in a random name and then add them as a friend.

POTENTIAL DATA LEAKS

JusTalk and JusTalk Kids claim to be secure and encrypted, going so far as to state that even the developers themselves won't access your data. However, a security lapse in 2022 highlighted that messages were not in fact encrypted – leading to concerns around the security of the app and the transparency of the development team.

CYBERBULLYING

Online chats can provide a sense of anonymity, leading some users to post things which they wouldn't normally say in person. Combined with the option of group chats, there's a risk that young people might join in with this kind of behaviour, escalating it further and potentially turning what should be a fun experience into something deeply negative.

TOO MUCH SCREENTIME

A report by the UK Parliament Education Committee highlighted a 52% increase in children's screen time between 2020 and 2022 – as well as finding that 25% of children used their smartphones in a manner consistent with screen addiction. Introducing children to social networking apps when they're too young can lead to bad digital habits and a reliance on technology from an early age.

Advice for Parents & Educators

JUSTIFY THE CONTROLS

If parents allow their child to use JusTalk Kids, they should explain that they're putting parental controls in place to make the app safer. Make sure the child knows not to put their full name on the account and doesn't use a photo of themselves as their profile picture. This type of open discussion will help to ensure that a child is aware of the app's potential risks and knows how to reduce them.

TALK ABOUT ONLINE FRIENDSHIPS

Young children could be excited to use this app. However, highlight that they must do so in a positive, respectful and responsible manner. While it can be easy to get caught up in a group chat, it's important to talk to others politely and call out any unpleasant behaviour. Discuss the importance of limiting their contacts to people they know in real life and use parental controls to enforce this.

DOS AND DON'TS OF SHARING

Some children might not understand the potential dangers of oversharing online. Set clear guidelines around what *is* and *isn't* safe to share on the internet, and discuss the concept of a digital footprint. Children need to understand that the things they say and share online can never be completely erased. Even if they delete it themselves, it can be saved and distributed by others.

ENCOURAGE OPEN COMMUNICATION

Apps like JusTalk can sometimes lend themselves to bullying behaviours. Parents should monitor what their child is sending and receiving, check in with them regularly and encourage them to share their feelings (both positive and negative) at home. Remind them that they can block a contact if someone is treating them disrespectfully.

Meet Our Expert

Dr Claire Sutherland is an online safety consultant, educator and researcher who has developed and implemented anti-bullying and cyber safety policies for schools. She has written various academic papers and carried out research for the Australian government comparing internet use and sexting behaviour of young people in the UK, USA and Australia.



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Source: See full reference list on guide page at: <https://nationalcollege.com/guides/justalk-kids>

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about

TIKTOK

AGE RESTRICTION

13+

(Certain features are restricted to over-18s only)

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Adults tend to associate online videos with YouTube – but among teens, TikTok is king. The app provides a stream of short clips tailored to users' interests, based on what they've already watched. Around half of British children use TikTok, and while much of the content is benign, Ofcom considers it the app where youngsters "were most likely to encounter a potential harm".

AGE-INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

While TikTok's Following feed only displays videos from familiar creators, For You is a collection based on a user's previously watched clips. Most of these videos will probably be inoffensive, but the app *could* potentially show something unsuitable. If children then engage with this content, more like it will follow. TikTok's guidelines prohibit the sharing of illegal or inappropriate content, but the huge number of uploads means that a small amount inevitably slips through.

BODY IMAGE AND DANGEROUS CHALLENGES

According to Ofcom, most online harms for teens are body image related for girls (promoting unhealthy eating, body shaming and so on) and dangerous stunts for boys. Both are prevalent on TikTok. One extreme example of the latter was the 'blackout' trend, which encouraged users to hold their breath until they passed out from a lack of oxygen. This led to two families filing lawsuits against TikTok over the tragic deaths of their children.

IN-APP SPENDING

TikTok is free, but users have the option to buy TikTok coins, which can be used to purchase gifts for content creators. Coin bundles range from £9.99 to an eye-watering £99; while that may not sound appealing, the app still generated £7.9 billion in user spending in 2023. TikTok's policy is that under-18s can't make in-app purchases, but it's possible to bypass this with a fake birth date.

CONTACT WITH STRANGERS

With more than 1.5 billion users globally, the potential for contact from strangers on TikTok is high – especially as accounts created by over-16s (or young people using a fake date of birth) are set to public by default. This means that not only is someone's profile visible to everyone else on the app, it also suggests their videos to others and enables *anyone* to download or comment on them.

MISINFORMATION AND RADICALISATION

Although the short videos on TikTok tend to be more frivolous than the longer ones on YouTube, clips can still influence impressionable minds in a negative way. Not only is there plenty of dangerous misinformation on TikTok, but Ofcom reports that nearly a third of 12 to 15-year-olds use TikTok as a news source – so you should be wary of misogynistic, racist or conspiracy-themed material shaping how they see the world.

ADDICTIVE DESIGN

With its constant stream of eye-catching videos, TikTok can be addictive to young brains. In 2024, UK children spent an average of 127 minutes per day on the app: that's twice as much as in 2020. Excessive use can interfere with young people's sleep patterns – often leading to irritability – and distract them from other, healthier activities. The instantly skippable nature of bite-size videos may also impact children's ability to maintain focus.

Advice for Parents & Educators

ENABLE FAMILY PAIRING

Family Pairing allows parents to link their TikTok account to their child's, and control settings remotely. Parents can then turn on Restricted Mode (reducing the chances of a child seeing inappropriate content), set screen-time limits, make accounts private and manage whether their child can send messages – and if they can, to whom. Children can't alter these settings without parental approval.

DISCUSS THE DANGERS

If a child wants to use TikTok and you're happy for them to do so, it's good practice to discuss the potential risks. Ensure that they don't share any identifying personal information, and that they know to talk to a trusted adult if they're worried by interactions on the app. With more teens using TikTok for news, it's also worth talking about misinformation and propaganda, and how to identify it.

BLOCK IN-APP SPENDING

If a child is using an iPhone or Android device to access TikTok, you can alter their settings to prevent them from making in-app purchases. We'd recommend enabling this feature, as it can be quite easy for a young person to spend a significant amount of real money buying TikTok coins to unlock more features of the app – sometimes without even realising.

READ THE SIGNS

If you're concerned that a child is spending too much time on TikTok, or that they've been emotionally affected by something they've seen, it's important to know how to spot the signs. Increased irritability and a lack of concentration are potential red flags, as is failing to complete homework or skipping meals. Remember, the parental controls are there for a reason, and it's never too late to introduce limits.

Meet Our Expert

Alan Martin is an experienced technology journalist who has written for the likes of Wired, TechRadar, Tom's Guide, The Evening Standard and The New Statesman.



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What Parents & Educators Need to Know about HEALTH & FITNESS APPS

Physical wellbeing apps are useful tools for monitoring and improving our health. They allow us to balance nutrition, set goals, track our activities and sleep patterns, and motivate us to exercise. Nonetheless, there *have* been some reported drawbacks; this guide outlines some of these concerns and explains how to use fitness apps safely.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

LACK OF PERSONALISATION

Many apps take a one-size-fits-all approach, failing to account for the varying ages and abilities of children: a 16-year-old, for example, will have different physical needs to a child of 10. This can create unrealistic expectations and set exercises which may be too advanced for younger children or too simple for older ones.

NOT DEVELOPED BY EXPERTS

Some fitness and wellbeing apps are developed by experts in the field – but a concerning number of them *aren't*. As such, these platforms may contain inaccurate information. They may present safety concerns by giving incorrect advice regarding physical activities or might include age-inappropriate content which would clearly cause more harm than good.

REDUCED INTERACTION WITH OTHERS

Physical wellbeing apps can remove the social and interactive elements which physical exercise can offer – for instance, meeting people at fitness classes, at the gym or during any other such activities. Research has found that young people generally dislike this aspect of fitness apps, suggesting that they would rather exercise in the company of friends or other like-minded individuals.

DATA AND PRIVACY CONCERNS

Fitness and wellbeing apps tend to collect a lot of personal information from their users, including name, location, date of birth, details of their physical health and more. It's worth keeping in mind that some of these apps may sell this data to third parties. We'd advise that any apps young people download should have the correct legislation in place to protect their safety and privacy while using the service.

ADDITIONAL COSTS

While many fitness apps are free to download, the initial content is quite basic. Users will only receive more helpful content (such as new workouts, nutrition advice or a personalised plan) by signing up to a subscription or paying for extra features. This can incentivise users to spend money on the service – a cost which can quickly mount up.

DEPENDENCY ON THE APP

While physical wellbeing apps can help motivate young users to manage their fitness, there's a possibility that – without being sent frequent rewards and reminders – children could start to lose their natural drive to be active. Young people may also become obsessed with tracking their exercise, health and eating habits: this can have negative effects on their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Advice for Parents & Educators

EXERCISE AND SOCIALISE

Highlight the importance of children enjoying fitness activities with family and friends, rather than always exercising alone. Emphasise the fun they can have by interacting with others rather than solely relying on an app to maintain their regime. Remind them of the importance of staying active, as well as the benefits of doing so with company.

PROMOTE POSITIVE BODY IMAGE

While we want children to be active and healthy, we must also ensure they don't become fixated on how they look and begin take things too far. During childhood and adolescence, the body is still growing and changing. It's vitally important for young people's wellbeing that we promote a positive body image and a healthy relationship with food, empowering them to make informed decisions about their diet and lifestyle.

REVIEW THE APP FIRST

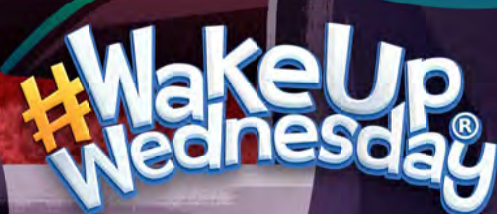
Before allowing someone under 18 to install a fitness and wellbeing app, check its age rating, read its reviews and scroll through its data policy, to ensure its suitability for younger users. You could also try it yourself, to see if it's appropriate for the child's particular needs and decide if you're comfortable with them using it. Ensure that any privacy-compromising features – such as location tracking – are disabled.

USE PARENTAL CONTROLS

As with all apps, it's important for parents to familiarise themselves with any controls on the app and to use these on a child's account. The specific settings vary between platforms but – most commonly – these will relate to screen-time limits, disabling or capping in-app purchases, and managing social aspects or features which aren't age appropriate. By utilising these controls, you can help to ensure a child is getting a safe experience.

Meet Our Expert

Dr Claire Sutherland is an online safety consultant, educator and researcher who has developed and implemented anti-bullying and cyber safety policies for schools. She has written various academic papers and carried out research for the Australian Government comparing internet use and sexting behaviour of young people in the UK, USA and Australia.



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