Erasmus+ Programme
Key Action 2 - Cooperation Partnerships in School Education

FIELD RESEARCH COUNTRY REPORT

R2.2.1_hr

Croatia

Co-funded by the European Union

A Systemic APproach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education
Grant Agreement No. 2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000090043

ASAP

Co-funded by
the European Union

The ASAP project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union under the Grant Agreement No. 2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000090043.

Erasmus+ Programme
Key Action 2 - Cooperation Partnerships in School Education

A Systemic APproach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education

Grant Agreement No. 2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000090043

R2.2.1_hr

Field Research Country Report: Croatia

Co-funded by the European Union

The ASAP project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union under the Grant Agreement No. 2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000090043. The support of the European Commission and of the Italian National Agency INDIRE to produce this publication does not constitute an endorsement of its content, which reflects the views of the authors only. The European Commission and the Italian National Agency INDIRE shall not be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Project Information

Programme	Erasmus+ Programme
Key Action	Key Action 2 - Cooperation among Organisations and Institutions
Action Type	Cooperation Partnerships in School Education
Acronym	ASAP
Title	A Systemic APproach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education
Grant Agreement No.	2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000090043
Starting Date	1 September 2022
Ending Date	30 August 2025
Duration	36 months
Further Information	For more about the project and access to additional results, please visit: - The project website www.socialmediakids.eu - The project page on the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform - The project community page on Zenodo

Document Information

Result No.	R2.2.1_hr
Result Title	**ASAP Field Research Country Report: Croatia**
Work Package	WP2 – Social Media, Preadolescents, and Meta-Cognition: ASAP Transdisciplinary Desk & Field Research
Activity	A2.2 – Field Research
WP Leader	DOBA Fakulteta za uporabne poslovne in druzbene studije Maribor
Main Author(s)	Lana Ciboci Perša (DKMK)
Date	June 2025
Dissemination Level	**PUBLIC**
Short Description	This document presents the results and key finding of qualitative and quantitative field research conducted in Croatia among preadolescents, parents, teachers, and school leaders, within the context of the Erasmus+ ASAP project. The aim of the field research was to provide further insights on the relationship among preadolescents, digital/social media, cyberbullying, and digital/media literacy.

Licence

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

The ASAP Field Research Report for Croatia offers an analysis of how children aged 11 to 13 interact with the digital world, perceive role models, and navigate online risks, with particular focus on issues of social media influence, digital literacy, cyberbullying, and family-school cooperation. The qualitative research was conducted through focus groups and interviews involving over 70 participants across four key groups: students, parents, teachers, and school leaders, while quantitative part of the research was conducted with more than 400 children, parents and teachers. The findings illustrate both the intensity of children's digital engagement and the existing gaps in educational and parental responses to this reality.

Children in the 11–13 age range in Croatia are immersed in digital environments from an early age. Nearly all participants in the student focus groups reported having daily access to a smartphone or similar device, with the majority gaining access between ages 9 and 11. YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp are the most commonly used platforms, with YouTube being the primary source of entertainment and informal learning, while TikTok and Instagram dominate in terms of social status and identity-building. Children show a high level of awareness of influencer culture, including recognition of promotional content and self-branding strategies, but simultaneously admit being emotionally affected by comparison, trends, and perceived popularity.

Children themselves demonstrated a notable degree of digital awareness and critical thinking, yet often lacked the emotional tools to navigate complex social situations online. They expressed a desire for more honest conversations with adults, and valued when teachers or parents treated their online experiences seriously rather than dismissively. Some students admitted to concealing parts of their digital life from adults, citing fear of punishment or misunderstanding, a finding that highlights the importance of trust-based digital education approaches.

Parents express mixed attitudes—acknowledging the inevitability of digital exposure while expressing concern over its psychological and social effects. Only a minority of parents reported using active digital supervision tools such as *Google Family Link* or parental control apps. Many admitted to not fully understanding platforms like TikTok, which impairs their ability to guide or intervene effectively. Notably, several parents described digital parenting as a "trial-and-error" process, revealing both the emotional burden and lack of structural support in their role.

Teachers consistently reported an increase in the number and complexity of digital-related challenges in school life. The majority of interviewed teachers mentioned direct experiences with social media - related incidents such as group exclusion, peer pressure, or exposure to harmful online content. Cyberbullying was identified as a recurring issue, with some schools having dealt with multiple incidents over the past academic year. However, school responses vary widely, depending on available staff, training, and institutional support. While most schools have basic rules regarding mobile phone use and digital conduct, only a few have comprehensive, regularly updated digital education policies. In one school, a serious incident involving an anonymous Instagram account used to harass classmates led to the development of an internal response protocol that included psychological support, parental engagement, and student workshops. Still, many teachers noted that they feel underprepared to manage such situations and called for more structured training, clearer guidelines, and dedicated time

within the curriculum to address digital behavior. Regarding student support, access to professional psychological services remains inconsistent across schools. Where such services are available, early intervention and continuous follow-up are key success factors in helping students recover from negative online experiences. However, both parents and educators highlighted the need for increased institutional support to ensure equal access to such resources across different school contexts.

The data underscore that while Croatian schools and families are making efforts to support children in the digital age, these efforts are fragmented and insufficiently coordinated. With early adolescence being a crucial stage in identity development and peer influence, the implementation of comprehensive digital education policies is essential to ensuring children's safety, emotional health, and digital citizenship in an increasingly complex online environment. In conclusion, the Croatian field research illustrates the urgent need for a more cohesive, inclusive, and future-oriented approach to digital education and child online safety. Key recommendations include developing mandatory media literacy content across primary curricula; providing systematic training for teachers and school leaders on digital risks and prevention; expanding access to psychological and counselling support in schools; strengthening family-school communication around digital topics, and promoting child participation in the development of digital policies and interventions.

Introduction

The field research described in this report is part of the Work Package 2 (WP2) of the ERASMUS+ project ASAP, which combines the activities of both desk and field research. In WP2, we investigated the relationship between preadolescents (kids from 11-13 years of age) and social media in our society with a focus on the educational school context from a transdisciplinary perspective, as well as from a transnational perspective – through the study of the existing situation in five partner countries (Italy, Portugal, Czech Republic, Croatia and Slovenia) highlighting common, transversal features as well as specific local issues in the different contexts.

WP2 consisted of desk and field research. One of the main objectives of WP2 was to collect, analyze, and share data on the relationship among pre-adolescents, digital/social media, and the school context in the five partner countries by listening to the voice of the target groups (school kids, teachers, families, school leaders) and to enable comparative transnational analysis.

Desk research showed that studies focusing particularly on the period of preadolescence are scarce (or even fully lacking in some countries), which highlights the importance of conducting thorough field research to learn more about this target group. Hence, field research aims to promote and further contribute to studies on pre-adolescence as an age of growth and development with specific, inherent features and not just as a transition phase between childhood and teenage hood, in which it is usually included.

The main research objective of the field research was to investigate the challenges of preadolescents related to the use of social media and Internet in general – from the perspective of preadolescents themselves and from the perspective of their parents, teachers and school leaders. We wanted to understand how pre-adolescents behave/would behave when they are faced with a problem/challenge in the online world (e.g., what they do/would do, who they talk to/would talk to, etc.). Also, we tried to find out more about the needs of all target groups (pre-adolescents, parents, teachers, school leaders) – what they would require to be able to address the issues and challenges related to the use of social media among preadolescents better and more efficiently?

The findings of the field research provided relevant input for the development of educational materials and design of the ASAP Educational Program. In that way, we ensured the educational program to be aligned with the actual needs of the target groups.

This report describes the findings of the field research conducted in Croatia.

1. Research method

The field research follows a cross-sectional study design, as data was collected at a single point in time, providing a "snapshot" of the current situation. To achieve the predefined research objectives and the aims of WP2, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed. For the qualitative component, focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to gain in-depth insights from members of the target groups regarding online risks and safety among pre-adolescents. The quantitative component involved structured online surveys, which were used to objectively measure and quantify phenomena related to online risks and safety among pre-adolescents while also facilitating cross-country comparisons.

1.1. Target population and sample

In the field research, conducted in Croatia, the following target groups have been addressed:

1. Pre-adolescents: kids from 11-13 years of age,
2. Parents of pre-adolescents,
3. Teachers of pre-adolescents,
4. School leaders.

Sampling of participants for qualitative and quantitative research was non-random: purposeful, convenient and/or self-selective (depending on the target group). Participants were mostly recruited via schools that were involved in the project as Associated Partners. These schools have expressed their support and interest to participate in the project activities in advance, including research and data collection, and they provided access to the participants.

Table 1. Sample sizes for qualitative and quantitative research in Croatia

Target group	Qualitative research*	Quantitative research*
Pre-adolescents	30	203
Parents	31	185
Teachers	16	34
School leaders	1	/

**Focus group discussions were conducted with pre-adolescents, parents and teachers, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders.*

1.2. Data collection instruments

As no suitable standardized and validated data collection instruments were available to meet the aims of the ASAP project and research objectives of WP2, data collection instruments were designed by the project's expert team, composed of project partner representatives with prior experience and expertise in research, data collection and construction of data collection questions. Some scales were taken and adapted from the EU Kids Online survey[1]. Data collection instruments were first piloted/tested and validated with a small group of respondents and then the final versions were translated (using back and forth translation to ensure consistency and comparability) into Slovene language. They are available on the ASAP project website: https://www.socialmediakids.eu/.

The following data collection instruments have been designed for the purpose of this field research:

- The focus group protocol for pre-adolescents,
- The focus group protocol for parents of pre-adolescents,
- The focus group protocol for teachers of pre-adolescents,
- The scenario for semi-structured interview with school leaders,
- The online survey for pre-adolescents,
- The online survey for parents of pre-adolescents,
- The online survey for teachers of pre-adolescents.

1.3. Data collection procedure

Prior to data collection, the decision of the Research Ethics Committee at DOBA Business School was obtained to justify that the field research was aligned with the research ethics standards and principles. The decision was issued on 7 February 2024.

Three focus group discussions with preadolescents, three focus groups with parents and one focus group discussion with teachers took place face-to-face in schools. Each focus group discussion lasted around 1 hour and was moderated by one researcher who led and moderated the discussion. One semi-structured interviews with school leaders took place face-to-face in schools. Both focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were audio recorded. In focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to talk openly about their behaviours, experiences, insights, needs and expectations related to the use of social media (and the Internet in general) among pre-adolescents.

All three online surveys (for preadolescents, parents and teachers) were hosted on 1ka platform (www.1ka.si), that was moderated by DOBA Business School, the WP2 leader. Parents and teachers received the online survey via email, and it was on them to decide where and when to fill it in. In case of pre-adolescents on the other hand, filling in the online survey took place in schools, during computer classes, for instance. Preadolescents used school computers, tablets or their own portable devices to access the online survey – either through the access http link or QR code. In online surveys, participants were asked to report on their behaviors, attitudes and opinions regarding the topic of this research in a more structured way. There were mostly closed-ended questions in the online survey with only a few open-ended questions that required elaboration with one's own words.

In the case of focus groups, interviews and online surveys, personal data, which could reveal the identity of participants (e.g., information on consent forms) were kept away from the databases with collected content-specific data and files/reports with summarized research findings. Data were analyzed and presented on a sample-level only (not individually), with absolutely no reference to sensitive personal data of participants.

Qualitative research took place from February to May 2024 and quantitative research took place from February to September 2024.

2. Qualitative research

2.1. Focus Group with Preadolescents

The focus group was attended by 30 children aged 11 to 13, 12 of whom were girls and 28 were boys. All of them have mobile devices, and most use them without parental supervision and time limits. They spend most of their time online on TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat. They often play video games, with boys playing them more often. Boys like to create and publish videos from secret profiles their parents do not know about. Girls use social networks primarily to communicate with others and to follow trends. They participate in and follow several secret profiles and groups that include many children from the entire school, and in which they publish jokes and love stories from school. Teachers and parents are unaware of these profiles, pages, and groups.

When the children were described scenario 1 - Mean online messages and what advice they would give to a boy in that situation, girls would provide comfort, honest advice, and recommend communication with an adult. In contrast, boys advised revenge in several ways (argument, fight, do the same thing to him). In doing so, the boys made jokes and gave different plans for revenge (e.g., fight, insult the person, revenge by the same action). At the same time, girls focused on talking to adults, trying to resolve the situation through communication, etc.

After scenario 2 - Online "friend," most children believe such an offer should always be refused, sometimes even blocking the person if they do not give up. Several children choose and advise careless ways of independently checking the person's reliability, which could endanger them. Children mainly advise playing games online with people they know, stopping correspondence if it is unrelated to the video game, and stating that players do not reveal too much information about themselves on video game profiles because it is not necessary for the game.

Among the problems they may encounter online, children listed electronic violence, communication with strangers, computer viruses if they use unreliable sites, and online shopping from fraudulent sites, for which they cited many personal examples. They do not consider it electronic violence if someone insults them once, and they would never share such a situation with others or consider it seriously. Insults in games are typical for them; they ignore calls to action or share some information, and they think it is stupid. They ignore things and people that are not interesting to them. It is difficult for them to explain why they trust someone, but that person must not judge them or get angry.

Boys generally do not talk to anyone about their problems. A third of the participants would talk to their parents about the problem. If the problem arises at school, they do not consider talking to teachers or a pedagogue.

Children believe that their parents did not have access to the Internet when they were their age, so they do not understand what they do online. They believe parents do not know what is happening online; only fathers understand video games because they play them themselves. They state that their parents use the Internet in a different way than they do. Many children stated that their parents checked what they were doing on their mobile phones in the lower grades of primary school, and now they have complete freedom. Furthermore, children rarely talk to their parents about what is happening online. They are ashamed, afraid of punishment, and believe their parents would not

understand either. If they share something with their parents, it is primarily humorous things and things that happened to someone else, not what is happening nearby. Most children have never received advice from their parents about using the Internet and social networks safely. If they have received advice, it is advised not to communicate with strangers. Their parents advise some not to watch inappropriate content and others not to post photos. Some children pointed out that they still do what their parents told them not to do. A few participants said their parents told them not to speak badly and insult others online. The children themselves believe that social networks are safe. What is risky, they point out, is corresponding with unknown people and visiting unverified sites. It is essential to pay attention to privacy and personal data.

Several participants stated they had not talked about the Internet with their primary school teacher. This was the question that everyone answered most quickly and unanimously, and they had no reason to talk to their teachers about what was happening on the Internet because their teachers had told them that it was none of their business. They saw no reason to talk to their teachers about what they were doing online.

Participants advised that parents should show more interest in what they were doing online to understand them better and that they should install the apps and social networks that their children were using. Some had tried to share things with their parents but did not find it interesting, so they gave up. Another important thing to them was not to fear punishment, condemnation, or argue with their parents if something terrible happened.

2.2. Focus Group with Parents

In the focus groups, parents of children aged 11-13 years discussed their experiences, dilemmas, and strategies for managing their children's access to the digital world. Most fifth graders have smartphones, with the average age for obtaining one being around 8-11 years. The primary reasons for getting a phone are safety and communication, but most children use their phones for games and "silly things". Most parents utilize tools like Family Link to monitor the content and applications that children install. Some parents prefer a trust-based system (for example Parent 1 said “I don't control anything, I'm playing on trust, so we'll see how far it goes.”), but many are skeptical because they have observed situations where children abuse that freedom. For instance, even seemingly harmless apps like Pinterest can include chat features, which surprised parents. WhatsApp is often exempt from restrictions as it is used for communication with family and friends.

Some parents employ "reward and punishment" systems—if children use their phones excessively, devices are taken away for a certain period. Concerns about online dangers, such as inappropriate content, communication with strangers, or misuse of personal data, are prevalent. Parents educate their children about risks, for example, by showing them how personal photos can be misused or how algorithms can manipulate their behavior. Parents strive to balance protecting their children and enabling responsible use of digital technologies. They believe the key lies in consistent rules and educating children about responsible online behavior. Parents 2 emphasized that “Children are very smart. If you forbid them something, they will find a way. That's their generation. We can't keep up with that.” Some parents impose strict restrictions and control, while others aim to base their parenting on trust and conversation. Most parents admit that finding a "magic formula" and adapting to situations as they arise is challenging. Parent 2 said that “There is no right or wrong way. Consistence is the only thing that matters. If you choose a way, push to the end.”

Some children have profiles on social networks like Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat, often with parental permission but sometimes without it. Some parents actively monitor their children's activities on social media, while others admit they are not always aware of what their children are doing online. However, there is a general concern among parents about the content on social networks and its influence on children. Some parents believe in communication and trust, while others openly admit they do not fully trust their children, mainly due to the potential misuse of devices (e.g., creating social media profiles without permission). Parents who trust their children often discuss the consequences of internet use and show them examples of potential dangers. Parent 8 emphasized that "The only thing left for me is to talk to them every day and empower them to become responsible users themselves.", while parent 1 said that he "intentionally let him make a mistake. He lost money on a fake Fortnite account, and it was the drama of his life. But he learned."

Parents are divided in their reactions to situations when children break the rules, such as installing social media apps without permission. Some parents would immediately impose a punishment (e.g., taking away the phone), while others are more flexible and use the situation as an opportunity for discussion and education.

Children often use their friends' social media accounts and phones, even if their parents restrict access. This highlights the challenge of controlling children's digital behavior. Parents face a dilemma. On one hand, they want to protect their children from the negative impacts of the digital space, but on the other hand, they understand that social networks play an important role in children's socialization. Parents believe that children, especially younger ones like 13-year-olds, are still too immature for responsible use of social networks. They think that many discussions and education are required for children to understand the negative consequences of excessive social media use independently.

Parents emphasize that children do not listen to advice but rather follow examples. If parents overuse their phones and social networks, children will imitate that behavior. It is important to show interest in what children are doing online and to listen to them without judgment. Talking to children about their experiences and the content they engage with on social networks is considered the most important tool for understanding their digital world. Although parents admit they are often too busy, they highlight the importance of setting aside time for family discussions.

Parents are aware that children might try to manipulate them to gain access to certain content on the internet. The key to protection is to educate children to become aware of dangers and use digital tools responsibly. Regular conversations with children about the internet and social media are considered one of the best ways to raise their awareness and sense of responsibility. Parents emphasize the importance of explaining the digital world's positive and negative sides to their children. They try to educate their children about privacy and online safety but admit that they are often inconsistent. There is a concern that too many restrictions might encourage children to hide their online activities.

Children often complain that their parents do not listen to them when they want to share things from the digital world, which can lead to secrecy about their activities. Some parents admit that they tend to ignore or dismiss their children's internet interests, which can create a sense of distance. Regarding access to content, parents take different approaches—some watch content with their children and use it as an opportunity for education. In contrast, others cut off such discussions and ban certain content outright.

Regarding children's experiences with negative situations online, parents report that their children have not mentioned being bullied online or being victims of such situations. Parents believe that, in most cases, children would share their problems with them, especially in situations involving peer teasing or bullying. Additionally, children might turn to peers, older siblings, or trusted teachers. However, there is concern that in more serious situations (e.g., online manipulation or significant social pressures), children might not talk to their parents because they feel "mature enough" and want to make their own decisions. Parents stress the importance of upbringing and encouraging children to always talk to them first about their problems.

There are divided opinions about trust in the school system. Some parents believe that children should be taught that the system is unreliable and that it is better to talk to parents first. Other parents think that children should trust the school, professional staff, and class teachers so that problems can be resolved constructively. Criticism of the system often stems from parents' personal experiences, such as when children receive school punishments that parents perceive as unnecessary or excessive.

Parents strive to position themselves as their children's primary support and source of trust, especially when they encounter problems online. They believe open communication is key to solving issues but admit that children sometimes hide their responsibility in conflicts. Parents emphasize the importance of emotionally strengthening children to cope with negative comments and situations. Teasing is considered a "normal" part of growing up. However, parents highlight the dangers of escalation into more serious forms of peer violence, especially in the digital world (e.g., group chats, exclusion from groups, insults). The problem with digital bullying is that it lasts 24 hours a day and does not stop after school, which adds additional stress to children.

Parents fear the impact of new technologies, such as AI-generated edits or fake photos, which can be used to insult and humiliate. They also notice how social media creates unrealistic standards of beauty and values, negatively affecting children's self-image. Materialism and status symbols (e.g., iPhones, branded clothing) further increase peer pressure. They are concerned that children compare their lives to idealized portrayals on social media, which can lead to feelings of inferiority, eating disorders, and other issues.

Parents are also worried about the influence of opposing ideologies and cults that might attract children, as well as suicidal and depressive content, which children sometimes have unrestricted access to, and self-harm, which is increasingly appearing as a "trend" among young people. They are less concerned about sexual predators, as they believe they have already sufficiently educated their children on this topic.

Parents believe schools do not provide enough education or support to help them feel competent in raising children in the digital world. They want schools to educate children about trends in digital technologies so they can keep up and understand the challenges. The importance of raising children's awareness about setting boundaries for their curiosity and knowing when to turn to parents for help is emphasized. There is a need for resources that would help parents understand new trends, apps, and digital technologies that children use.

Parents admit that it is challenging to keep up with the rapid development of digital technologies and apps used by their children. They need to stay "up to date," which is challenging. Parents notice they struggle to adapt to the terminology and trends children use on social media. While they try to

understand, they often lack knowledge of new technologies and slang. They highlight the importance of continuous education in helping their children comprehend their digital world better.

Parents often learn about new apps and trends from their children since children naturally handle technology better. For instance, one parent mentioned learning about the Snapchat app through a conversation with their child, while another introduced them to a new app called TenTen. Parents emphasize the importance of talking with their children to understand the purpose of the apps they want to use. Examples include asking questions like, "What are the reasons you want to use this app?" and making compromise decisions after the child explains its functionalities.

Some parents use monitoring tools on their children's phones and set restrictions on app usage. Rules are clear, and children generally follow them. The app TenTen was mentioned as an example of a popular app among children, functioning like a "walkie-talkie" and allowing communication even when the screen is locked.

Parents see trust as key to a successful relationship in the context of using digital technologies. According to them, trust is built through open communication and time and helps ensure a safe digital experience for children.

Regarding household rules regarding device usage, the time spent on technology often depends on children's obligations, such as studying and school assignments. Parents allow more time for digital activities during weekends but within certain limits. Some parents monitor their children's content, limit gaming and chatting time, and ensure that children do not connect with strangers online. Parents emphasize the importance of setting boundaries for internet and digital tool usage in terms of time and online contacts. They believe children need to understand that these rules are not restricting their freedom but teaching them responsibility.

All parents note that children often play games and communicate with peers online. Parents frequently warn children about the potential dangers of chatting with strangers and supervise who their children connect with. They also point out that children know potential risks, such as "suspicious individuals" on apps. Younger children had less access to digital technologies (like TikTok, Snapchat, and online gaming) than older ones, highlighting the rapid development of the digital world. Parents stress the need for children to be aware of responsible online behavior.

Parents express dissatisfaction with the uncontrolled use of mobile phones in schools, especially during lessons. Some subjects (such as foreign languages) suffer because children use their phones for gaming and other activities instead of paying attention in class. There have been attempts to introduce rules regarding mobile phones (e.g., phone pockets), but parents feel these measures are ineffective. They believe greater collaboration between schools and parents is needed to establish clear rules about using phones and digital devices during lessons.

Regarding school support for parents and children, parents feel that schools do not provide enough education about digital technologies and their proper use. They suggest better cooperation between schools, teachers, and parents to achieve control over mobile phone usage and empower children to use technology safely. Parents want schools to educate children about the importance of limited internet access, safety when interacting with strangers, and proper online behavior. They highlight the need to raise awareness about how digital networks can be beneficial and potentially dangerous if used irresponsibly.

Older children occasionally use generative artificial intelligence for entertainment but not for educational purposes. Parents are aware that good teachers can recognize when assignments are written with the help of AI tools, which has already been observed in some schools. They believe children should be educated about the responsible use of AI tools, as their application in education can bring benefits and challenges.

2.3. Focus Groups with Teachers

When a WhatsApp group is created at school, sending offensive messages about a withdrawn child not being accepted in the class (a scenario told to the teachers), the teacher will involve professional associates and parents in resolving the issue. They emphasize the importance of including parents in problem-solving because the messages are sent outside of school and considered private communication; however, parents often expect the school to resolve these issues. Teachers face the challenge of parents not always wanting to take responsibility for their children's behavior on social media, while victimized parents ask the school to act (as Teacher 3 said: "Parents may say, 'You teach them about digital behavior at school.' And we see that parents don't know how to set rules either."). Teachers also highlight that in resolving problems, parents and the school often cannot agree on the appropriate procedures. As a result, the situation often goes unresolved because parents do not want to confront the issue directly, and the school mediates communication between the children.

Teachers point out that children often approach them with problems because they fear judgment or feel misunderstood by their parents. As emphasized by Teacher 6 children “say a lot more at school than at home. They often share with us that they don't want their parents to know because they know we won't immediately judge them.” Teachers frequently assist in communication with parents, while parents sometimes want the school to resolve the issue. Children turn to teachers because they trust them and believe they will act objectively.

To prevent harmful forms of behavior, teachers emphasize the importance of educating children about internet safety, starting as early as primary school. The issue of mobile phones and their usage has become critical as children increasingly use them, creating new challenges. In some schools, a ban on mobile phones has been implemented, with parental consent, after the reasons for this were explained to parents. There is also an emphasis on the need for teachers to support parents in education and counseling regarding technology, as many parents are not sufficiently educated about internet safety. Teachers highlight that, despite the school's attempts to educate them, parents often show little interest in participating in workshops on internet safety. At the same time, children become increasingly well-informed about the topic. A further issue is that children often turn to friends instead of adults or teachers when faced with problems online. Teachers also emphasize the importance of building trust between children and teachers so that children feel comfortable openly discussing their problems.

Teachers noted the negative impact of technology on children's social skills, as children communicate more through digital devices than in person. Schools strive to integrate media literacy into the curriculum. However, teacher 1 emphasized that they “as teachers need support and education on how to talk to children about these topics – because these are not things from the curriculum." At the same time, the responsibility for more excellent education in this area lies with state institutions, particularly in public media, according to the teachers. Special attention should be paid to internet safety, misinformation, the dangers children may encounter online, and ways to protect themselves

in the virtual world. Teachers also stress the importance of encouraging children to recognize and report cases of bullying.

Teachers highlighted that they regularly conduct education on this topic at school, within their subjects, or during class hours. They most frequently cite negative examples of irresponsible use of digital technologies, mainly teaching children how to recognize online threats. Education is mainly conducted through workshops covering responsibility, mutual respect, and online safety. However, the teachers point out that technology is evolving rapidly, raising the question of how the educational process and social issues will develop. Teachers criticized the lack of educational materials, such as films and brochures, that could assist them in teaching and educating children about internet safety.

2.4. In-depth Interview with School Leader

School Leader with more than 10 years of experience emphasized that they have clear rules about device and social media usage in school. “A key challenge is that technology changes so quickly, and our policies often need to catch up.” In the past, they have dealt with several incidents involving social media misuse, such as name-calling in group chats, hurtful image sharing and they even had a problem with online predator who was hunting girls from the school. She emphasizes that it is especially important in such cases to involve the police and other relevant institutions. They have had a very pleasant experience with everyone so far. Children receive counseling, and they maintain close communication with their families, offering emotional and practical support. Parents are involved through workshops and regular updates, and they ensure open lines of communication during any incident. In this regard, a particularly important role is played by professional services (psychologists and pedagogues) in schools, who have more and more work to do in this area every year. Teachers receive professional development each year on online safety. After a serious cyberbullying case, they revised our policy to focus more on prevention practices. They are trying to stay informed through webinars and educator networks, but she believes they “still have work to do, especially in helping families/parents who are harder to reach”.

2.5. Conclusion

The research highlights critical insights into the online behavior and attitudes of children aged 11 to 13, revealing areas for improvement in fostering safer internet use. Children should be taught critical thinking skills to assess online interactions, such as identifying risks in communicating with strangers or sharing personal information. Programming empathy, conflict resolution, and non-violent responses to online issues should be introduced to guide children toward positive digital behavior. Parents need to actively engage in their children's online activities. They should educate themselves about the platforms and apps their children use, while maintaining open, non-judgmental communication. This will help bridge the understanding gap and encourage children to share concerns without fear of punishment or criticism. Teachers should also be trained to create a supportive environment where children feel comfortable discussing online problems. Both parents and teachers need to prioritize trust-building with children, so they feel safe seeking advice and assistance when encountering online problems. This requires a shift from punitive approaches to supportive, understanding dialogues.

Parents face the challenge of balancing the protection of children from potential dangers in the digital world with enabling their engagement in modern forms of communication. Clear boundaries are

needed, along with continuous dialogue to help children understand the responsible use of technology. Parents recognize the importance of open communication and educating children about the digital world. However, they encounter challenges such as their lack of understanding of digital content and the balance between protection and trust. A consistent and supportive approach, while respecting children's interests, is crucial for achieving balance. Parents want schools to organize educational sessions on digital trends, internet safety, and privacy protection. They believe such an education would help parents better support their children in safely using digital technologies. Parents emphasize the importance of ongoing dialogue, setting boundaries, and understanding the digital world through mutual education. Trust is the foundation for a better relationship and safer technology use. Parents are aware of the importance of digital technology in their children's daily lives but highlight the need for more explicit rules and education, both at home and in school. They think that schools should collaborate more with parents, implement more effective controls on mobile phone usage, and provide support in understanding new technologies and trends. Parents stress the importance of educating children about internet safety and the responsible use of digital technologies. They highlight the need for greater collaboration between schools and parents and education about new trends and tools like artificial intelligence. Issues like inappropriate mobile phone use in schools require a joint effort from all involved parties.

Teachers emphasize the need for better cooperation with parents as well, who must take greater responsibility for their children's online activities. Schools should increase efforts to involve parents in workshops and discussions about internet safety and emphasize the importance of parental engagement. Teachers need access to more diverse educational materials, such as films, brochures, and interactive tools, to make lessons on internet safety more engaging and effective. Given the fast-paced evolution of technology, schools and educators must receive regular training to stay updated on emerging online risks and trends.

3. Quantitative research

3.1. Digital Media Usage

According to data, 94.6% of parents and nearly half of children (47.3%) have full access to the internet whenever they want. Only 1% of children said they can never access the internet when they want or need it. Both parents and children access the internet most often via smartphones. However, it is interesting to note that specific differences are observed in the second place of access to the internet – while parents most often access it daily via a computer, children most often access it via television.

Table 2. Time spent on the Internet (%)

	During a regular weekday		**During a regular weekend**	
	Children	Parents	Children	Parents
Little or no time	0,5	1,1	0,5	3,2
About half an hour	2,5	5,4	2,5	3,8
About 1 hour	16,7	8,6	4,4	17,3
About 2 hours	18,7	26,5	14,8	28,6
About 3 hours	23,2	17,3	18,7	21,6
About 4 hours	15,3	13	20,2	9,7
About 5 hours	7,9	10,8	13,8	9,7
About 6 hours	3,4	4,9	9,9	2,2
About 7 hours or more	6,4	11,9	9,9	2,7
Prefer not to say	5,4	0,5	5,4	1,1

While children spend more time online on weekends, parents spend more time online on weekdays. Every third child spends 4 hours or more online during the workweek, while most do so during the weekend, as many as 53.8% of children. At the same time, as many as 40.6% of parents spend four hours or more online every workday (24.3% spend the same amount of time online during the weekend).

When it comes to using social network sites and digital applications, the most popular among children are WhatsApp (99%), YouTube (94.1%), Snapchat (68%), Spotify (59.1%), TikTok (50.7%) and Instagram (39.9%). Only one child said that they do not use social networks. Most children independently opened profiles on all the above networks and digital applications. Interestingly, every fourth parent opened a profile for their children on WhatsApp (21.4%) and YouTube (23.8%), while 26.5% of them did so together with their child when it came to a profile on YouTube, and 34.7% of them when it came to WhatsApp.

Although the most significant number of parents also have profiles on WhatsApp (85.9%) and YouTube (71.9%), the most popular networks among them are Facebook (70.8%) and Instagram (53.5%). Only six parents do not use social networks at all.

3.2. Children and Smartphone Usage

Most children, 93.4%, own a smartphone for their use only, with which they can access the Internet. In addition to smartphones, most children also own their computer (60.5%), tablet (56.9%), game console (63.8%), and television (50%) with which they can access the Internet. Most children, 59.6%, got their first smartphone when they were under ten years old, 29.5% got it at the age of ten, 7.1% at eleven, 2.7% at twelve, and 1.1% of children at thirteen. However, it is interesting to point out that the children themselves would be much stricter on this issue if they had their children and had to decide at what age they would buy them a smartphone. The most significant number of children, 46.8%, would buy their child a smartphone at 10 years old, 17.7% at eleven, 5.9% at 12, 5% at 13 and older. Only one in four (24.6%) children would buy a smartphone for their child before they turn ten.

In the context of the research, it is also important to point out that most children (51.4%) had access to social networks even before they got their smartphone, using, for example, the smartphones of family members. Although every third child said that the time they accessed social networks via someone else's smartphone was not helpful in understanding behavior on social networks, almost the same number of them said that it was beneficial for them. As explanations, they stated, among other things:

- *Because I was online, I believe I learned at least something about social media behavior.*
- *Because I learned how to behave online because my parents explained it to me.*
- *It was useful for me because I learned a lot of new things.*
- *Yes, because I could see how to use social media, and I could learn how to communicate and be polite online. I wish I had gotten my first cell phone later than I did, because I don't think it had a good influence on my current childhood. All in all, I think it was useful for me to have a role model for online behavior.*
- *Because I learned how to behave, because I saw how others behave online. I learned a lesson from that because others behave very arrogantly, rudely, meanly, abuse, mock... I didn't want to be like them, and I never would.*
- *My parents were a real example for me of how to behave online. We were taught decency and good behavior from a young age, so I only applied that to the internet*
- *Because my parents told me how I need to behave.*
- *Because I was able to learn what social networks are and what happens on them.*
- *Because I learned what I can and can't do on the internet.*
- *Because we understand that we need to be careful about what we watch, read, or comment on, and that we shouldn't open messages or answer calls from people we don't know.*

3.3. Children and Smartphone Usage – Parents Perspective

Most parents, 95.7%, confirmed that their child owns a smartphone for their use with which they can access the Internet. The most significant number of parents, 39.2%, gave their child a smartphone when they were ten years old, 31.3% did so when their child was nine, 12.5% when their child was eight, 5.1% when their child was seven, and 1.8% when their child was five or younger. Every tenth parent gave their child a smartphone when they were 11 or older. Parents most often give their children smartphones so that they can communicate with them at any time and see their location, and they often cite that all other children have one, as shown by the following parents' responses:

- *Because she was going on a vacation to an apartment where there was no TV. She was only supposed to have it for the summer, but because of her father's death, I decided to leave it with her so that we could always be in touch.*
- *So that she could call when she got to school and when school was over.*
- *Because of going to school and calling when she got home.*
- *So that I could check where she was and play a little.*
- *She went to school and on trips on her own, so I wanted to be able to call her and track where she was.*
- *Most people around her had it.*
- *Everyone around her had it.*
- *For easier communication when she was away from home. So that she could at least sometimes look up the necessary information for classes on her own (with parental supervision).*
- *He went to a more distant school, so I needed to call him.*
- *Because of school obligations*
- *Because everyone in the class already had one, and we had an extra device.*
- *So that we can get in touch with him and so that he can communicate with us and his peers*
- *Because he has started staying home alone while we are at work so that we can reach him.*
- *So that we can hear each other when he is alone on his way home from school.*
- *For the possibility of contacting and exchanging information in the family on a common WhatsApp group.*
- *She went to music school on her own so that she can contact us in case of unforeseen situations (getting off at the wrong stop, rerouting the tram, canceling classes, etc.).*
- *Due to location tracking*
- *Due to the possibility of contact with family members, when necessary (lack of a home phone), due to peers and inclusion in their society and groups so that social exclusion does not occur.*
- *That we can contact him after training and school and pick him up for training when needed.*
- *That we can be in contact with him when he is alone at home. Because of his persuasion that everyone else in the class has a cell phone.*

Compared to the data provided by children, parents state to a lesser extent that their children have profiles on various social network sites and digital applications. Thus, 77.3% state that the child has a profile on WhatsApp, 70.8% on YouTube, 50.8% on Snapchat, and 43.2% on TikTok. Except in the case of YouTube and WhatsApp, where parents opened profiles for their children, children often opened profiles independently on all other networks and applications.

3.4. Disturbing Experiences of Children Online

Almost one in five children (18.7%) has experienced something upsetting or bothersome online in the past year. Most have experienced it several times (50%), 21.1% only once, 13.2% once a month, and 13.1% once a week or more. Among such situations, children listed the following:

- *It used to happen that I came across a video that was completely against our religion and that really bothered me.*
- *On some sites on the Internet, I used to see inappropriate pictures and videos.*

- *I once came across a very traumatic scene on the Internet, and I felt very uncomfortable and upset.*
- *I saw a video about an earthquake.*
- *When I was on TikTok, it threw up an 18+ page and I already knew what it was for, so I immediately left TikTok*
- *In Split when girls beat up a girl.*
- *I watched scary videos.*
- *Someone abused a cat 3 months ago.*
- *I found an inappropriate game in Roblox and everyone in the lobby was behaving inappropriately.*
- *There are a lot of people on the Internet and most of them are often racist. People also often defend themselves by retaliating against the arguments that the bully made, thus increasing the tension. A large population of people, not only on the Internet but also in real life, like to exalt themselves with racism, cyber bullying, violence or simply by excluding other people as if they are on a higher level than them. I think that we are all perfect in our own way and that there are big differences between all of us, but we should not look at them in a bad sense, but as if a person, as he is, is perfect in his own style.*
- *When they laughed at me in a game for how I looked in it.*
- *When I listened to a horror story.*
- *I saw a video of people torturing other people.*
- *Blocking through social networks.*
- *Well, there are a lot of videos on the Internet that are way too "sexual" and that bothers me.*
- *Inappropriate content, images*

When something happened online that upset or bothered them last time, only 7.9% of children talked to their mother or father, 4.4% to a brother or sister, 6.4% of children talked to a peer, and 7.4% to no one. Others didn't talk to anyone.

Despite these poor results, the study showed that parents know about their children's unpleasant online experiences. Namely, 22.7% of parents are aware that something happened online in the past year that bothered their child. Most parents, 67.5%, believe that this happened to their child several times in the past year, 20% believe that it happened only once, 5% believe that it happened once a month, and 7.5% believe that it happens to their child once a week or more often. Among such situations, parents singled out the following:

- *An ugly event that shook most children, a murder at school.*
- *He is most often upset by messages on WhatsApp.*
- *The massacre in Belgrade.*
- *A photo of violence in a class group.*
- *While playing the PS console, he was kicked out of the game for 3 weeks due to inappropriate behavior and speech.*
- *He asked me about something he did not understand, that is, a person he did not know addressed him and I told him that he should not contact or respond to such people. And to delete or block it, and to always contact me in such situations.*
- *Peer verbal violence.*

- *Situations related to sex or similar inappropriate content via WhatsApp messages.*
- *News about the murder of children in a school in Serbia, posts about armies in the world, a photo of the Anabel doll.*
- *Argument and insults in the comments of a video.*
- *In one group, he received pictures of genitals, which he immediately complained to me about, so we blocked the group.*
- *Blocking via social networks.*
- *Inappropriate videos on TikTok.*
- *He received an explicit picture via WhatsApp from an acquaintance from training that surprised him a little.*
- *Messages in groups, she was attacked and insulted.*
- *She watched Skibidi toilet on YouTube.*
- *Inappropriate communication between peers.*
- *Insults and humiliation, gossiping and writing nasty things about others.*
- *In a WhatsApp group where she was with a few other girls from her class, two of them verbally attacked her because she didn't invite them to her birthday. It seemed like a pretty typical argument for girls at that age, except it was over messages.*
- *Photos from WWII*
- *Communication with friends in which my child felt exposed and/or cheated.*
- *There was inappropriate content on the class WhatsApp group, so we parents had to react.*
- *He was given permission to connect to Tik Tok, but he deleted the app in two days due to the disturbing content.*
- *War in Ukraine, murder of a Tik Toker.*

Most parents, 88.6%, believe they can help their child deal with anything that bothers or upsets them online. When their child last told them about things that upset them online, parents most often did the following:

- Engage in open and non-judgmental communication to understand the child's experience – 17.3%
- Foster a supportive environment at home to help the child cope emotionally – 12.4%
- Teach the child strategies for dealing with online conflicts and challenges – 11.4%
- Encourage the child to take breaks from digital devices and engage in offline activities – 10,3%
- Utilize parental control tools or apps to enhance online monitoring – 7.6%

The need to develop educational activities aimed at connecting parents and children is shown by the fact that 45.3% of children have never or rarely told their parents about something that bothers or disturbs them online, and 46.8% have never asked their parents for advice on how to behave online. It is also interesting to see the results related to helping their parents with something they had difficulty with online. While most children, 55.2%, claim that they always or almost always help their parents with such things, every third parent said that this never or rarely happens.

Table 3. Trusting relationship between parents and children (%)

	Children perspective		Parents perspective	
	Never or hardly ever	Often or very often	Never or hardly ever	Often or very often
a) Told my parent/carer about things that bother or upset me on the internet	45,3	17,7	35,3	13
b) Helped my parent/carer to do something they found difficult on the internet	9,4	55,2	34,2	15,2
c) Argued with my parent/carer about what I do on the internet	70,9	2	44,6	12,5
d) Asked for my parent's/carer's advice on how I should act online	46,8	11,3	27,7	15,2

3.5. Parental Support for Children in Internet Usage

Parents play an important role in children's digital activities, especially in empowering and supporting children to navigate the virtual world more safely. However, if we look at the results of this research, we see that parents do not do this enough. Namely, every fourth child said their parents never or rarely talked to them about what to do if something bothers or disturbs them online. Every fourth child also said that their parents never or rarely encouraged them to explore and learn new things online, which is a great shame considering the important educational role of the internet in today's world. As many as 48.3% of children said their parents never or rarely talked to them about the commercial activities they are exposed to online. On the other hand, if we look at the parents' perspective, we can see significant differences in the parents' attitudes and the activities they undertake to develop digital competencies in their children (table 4).

Table 4. Parental online support (%)

	Children perspective		Parents perspective	
	Never or hardly ever	Often or very often	Never or hardly ever	Often or very often
a) Encourages me to explore and learn things on the internet	24,1	24,1	11,9	35,1
b) Suggests ways to use the internet safely	12,3	47,3	3,2	75,1
c) Sits with me while I'm using the internet	57,6	4,9	11,9	31,4
d) Talks with me about what to do if something online bothers or upsets me	26,1	28,6	2,7	72,4
e) Explains why some online content can be dangerous for me	18,7	32,5	2,7	82,7
f) Talks to me about the commercial activities I am exposed to online (for instance when someone tries to sell me something)	48,3	12,8	1,6	74,1

3.6. Parental Mediation Strategies

Research has shown that children are often unaware of the forms of mediation their parents use regarding their relationship with digital content. Namely, 46% of children and 75% of parents stated that they use specific monitoring or other ways of blocking and filtering some content, 68.3% of parents use location tracking technology, and 49.5% of children know that they use it.

Table 5. Parental mediation strategies (%)

	Children		**Parents**	
	No	Yes	No	Yes
a) Parental controls or other means of blocking or filtering or keeping track of my activities on the internet	35,6	46	23,3	75
b) Rules about how long or when I am allowed to go online	35,1	53	12,2	85,6
c) A service or contract that limits the time I spend on the internet	54	32,7	60	36,7
d) Technology to track where I am (such as GPS)	32,2	49,5	30	68,3

Data showed that 43.6% of children believe that their parents never or rarely check them after using the Internet, 39.6% of them believe that their parents do it sometimes, 10.9% often or very often. When asked how they know that their parents check them after using the internet, 38.2% of children stated that they have such an agreement (for example, to check once a day), 12.7% of children said that their parents ask their permission every time they want to check them, 11.8% of children discovered it by accident. As many as 27.5% of them stated something else with the answers including checking their Internet history, monitoring their activities using various applications such as Family Link, checking them when they do something terrible, checking them behind their backs (e.g. when I go to take a shower). The following answers also show that children are very aware that their parents monitor them primarily for their safety:

- *They are concerned about my safety.*
- *That I am safe and that I am not on my cell phone (smartphone) much.*
- *To find out what I'm watching so that I do not watch inappropriate things.*
- *I think my parents are checking on me because they want to make sure I'm okay.*
- *To protect me from bad things on the Internet.*
- *To check if it is safe on the internet and if there are things that children should not watch.*
- *So that they know what I am watching and how much I am watching because a lot of time on my cell phone is not healthy and that I am not exposed to inappropriate videos and pictures.*
- *To know what I am doing and writing on the networks.*
- *For my own good and so that I do not watch inappropriate content.*
- *For my safety.*
- *To see why I am angry and why I am annoyed.*
- *Because too much time on the internet is not good. And so that I do not do bad things on the Internet.*
- *To be sure what I am doing on the internet.*
- *To protect me from harmful information or games that can harm me.*

- *To know what I do and write on the networks and if someone is abusing me...*
- *To protect me from the evil world.*
- *To know what I do and write on the networks.*

However, it is also interesting to note that almost every fifth child feels protected because their parents check them after using the Internet, while 26.8% feel nothing. A much smaller percentage expressed negative emotions. Thus, 7.4% feel angry, 5.4% sad, 5.4% important, 4.4% embarrassed, 4.4% caring, etc.

When it comes to the parental perspective, 23.7% of parents often or very often check the Internet afterward to see which contacts their child has added to their social media profile; 32.8% of parents check messages on their child's email or other applications where they communicate with other people and their child's social media profile or in online groups; 29.9% of parents check which websites their child has visited; 44.1% of parents check the applications their child has saved, and 44.6% of them check the in-app purchases they made.

Table 6. Monitoring of internet use

	Never or hardly ever	Some-times	Often or very often	Prefer not to say
a) Which friends or contacts he/she added to his/her social networking profile	28,8%	44,6%	23,7%	2,8%
b) The messages in his/her email or an app for communicating with people	18,6%	47,5%	32,8%	1,1%
c) His/her profile on a social networking site or online group	21,5%	43,5%	32,8%	2,3%
d) Which online content he/she viewed	18,1%	50,8%	29,9%	1,1%
e) The apps he/she downloaded	9,6%	44,6%	44,1%	1,7%
f) The in-app purchases he/she made	27,1%	23,7%	44,6%	4,5%

Given all the above, it should not be surprising that 42.1% of children believe that their parents/guardians know a lot about their activities, while 29.7% believe that they know quite a bit, 15.3% very little, and only 3% nothing. Parents' attitudes do not differ on this issue from children's. Thus, 56.3% of parents believe that they know a lot about what their child does online, 34.7% believe that they know quite a bit, 6.8% very little, and only 1.1% say that they know nothing.

Most children, 60.9% of them, would like their parents to know precisely as much about their online activities as they knew when the research was conducted. However, almost every fourth child would like their parents to know less about their online activities. They explained this as follows:

- *I feel like I don't have enough privacy when they watch me.*
- *I like to have my privacy, and I think I'm careful enough about my internet use.*
- *They are too cautious about it*
- *I don't mind anything about the current situation regarding it.*
- *Well sometimes it bothers me when they watch my social networks too much.*

- *I think it should stay the same because it's okay and I think parents should know what we do online.*
- *I think it should stay the same because parents should know what we do online.*
- *Because they know what's best for me.*
- *Because sometimes it's too much for me to control so why not keep it the same.*
- *I think it should stay the same because it's okay and I think parents should know what we do online.*
- *I think it should stay the same because parents need to know what we do online.*
- *I feel uncomfortable when other people know what I do online.*
- *I think they should check it all the time because I feel comfortable and safe.*
- *Well, I wouldn't really want them to look at my private stuff.*
- *It's okay if they check my WhatsApp once a month (because they banned me from TikTok and Instagram and Snapchat), but they do it every week.*
- *Because I don't look at her, she doesn't have to look at mine.*
- *I would like it to stay the same because I think my parents should know what I do online.*
- *I have absolutely nothing to hide from them. I'm fine with them looking at my phone because honestly, I don't hide anything from them.*
- *Because I don't want my parents to know what I do (search).*
- *I don't want my parents to find out what I do online.*

However, 7.5% of children said they would like their parents to know more about their online activities. Among the answers why, they listed the following:

- *My parents know little about my online activities because they only know what I talk about with them. And I would like them to know a little more.*
- *I would like them to take away my cell phone someday.*
- *Much more, so that I can be as safe as possible online.*
- *So that I can be and stay safe online.*
- *I am glad that they care about me, and I have a lot of respect for them*
- *I think it is okay for my parents to know what I do online because they can tell me if there is something good for me to watch or do.*
- *It is better for them to worry than not to worry at all.*

Of every ten children, 11.4% often or very often ignore what their parent/guardian tells them about how and when they can use the Internet; 38.8% do it sometimes, and the most significant number of children, 44.3%, do it never or rarely. Almost every fifth child, 18.4%, believes that parents/guardians are often or very often concerned about the time their children spend on social networks/online, 46.3% of them believe that parents are sometimes concerned, and almost every third (30.8%) believe that parents are never or rarely concerned about their behavior on the Internet.

When it comes to parents'/guardians' interest in their children's activities on social networks/online, 17.4% of children believe that they are often or very often interested in their activities, 55.7% sometimes, and as many as 22.9% of children believe that they are never or rarely interested in what they do in the virtual world.

The answers to this question also show how much parental and children's perceptions sometimes differ. Thus, 21.1% of parents believe that their child never or rarely ignores what they are told about how and when they can use the Internet, 37.1% of them are often or very often concerned about the time their child spends on social networks/online, and as many as 68% of parents point out that they are often or very often interested in what their child does on social networks/online.

Table 7. Children Internet usage – children and parents' perspective

	Children perspective			Parents perspective		
	Never or hardly ever	Sometimes	Often or very often	Never or hardly ever	Sometimes	Often or very often
a) …do you ignore what your parent/carer tells you about how and when you can use the internet?	44,3%	38,8%	11,4%	21,1%	64%	13,7%
b) …are your parents concerned in how much time you spend on social media/online?	30,8%	46,3%	18,4%	9,7%	52%	37,1%
c) …are your parents interested in what you do on social media /online?	22,9%	55,7%	17,4%	2,9%	27,4%	68%

3.7. Teacher Support

That teachers have an important role in developing children's digital competencies is also shown by the results, according to which even 60.2% of children point out that teachers often or very often suggest ways to use the Internet safely. Furthermore, every third child, 35.8%, point out that teachers often or very often help them when they find something challenging to do or find on the Internet, while 34.3% of them point out that teachers do this sometimes. 46.3% of children also said that teachers often explain to them why some Internet sites are appropriate and others inappropriate, 40.3% of them said that teachers often or very often teach them how to recognize misinformation on the Internet and that they often teach them how to find reliable sources of information on the Internet (46.3%). What needs to be worked on in the future is to develop mechanisms to support children when they need it, because, for example, almost every fourth child, 23.4%, pointed out that teachers never or rarely helped them when they were troubled by something online.

3.8. Where Do Parents Look for Support?

One in three parents, 36.4%, believe that they would benefit a lot, and 31.8% would benefit quite a bit if their child's school provided a space for discussing parenting issues, including online safety. Currently, parents most often get information or advice on how to help their child stay safe online from the following sources:

- Online articles and blogs dedicated to parenting and online safety – 50.3%;

- Educational websites and resources specifically focused on internet safety for children – 37.8%;
- Information provided by the child's school or educational institution – 37.8%;
- Parenting apps or tools with features related to online safety – 35.1%;
- Recommendations from other parents within their social network – 30.8%.

In the future, most parents would like to receive this type of information or advice from child's school (70.3%), websites (51.9%), from their child (38,9%), television (34,1%) and children's welfare organizations/charities (33%).

3.9. Teachers Perspective[1]

The most significant number of teachers, 23, always have full access to the Internet whenever they want or need it. Teachers most often access the Internet via smartphone and computer. During the working week, eight teachers use the Internet for two hours a day, seven teachers for three hours a day, six teachers for one hour a day, five teachers for four hours a day, and four teachers for five or more hours a day. Teachers spend less time on the Internet on weekends than during the working week. When it comes to using social networks and digital applications, the most significant number of teachers use YouTube (24 of them), Facebook (22 of them), Instagram (15 of them), Pinterest (8 of them). All teachers use the WhatsApp application.

Ten teachers stated that they often or very often encourage their students to research and learn about these things online, while 22 of them do so sometimes. Most teachers, 18 of them, often or very often suggest safe ways to use the internet to their students, while seven do so sometimes. Most teachers, 18 of them, also talk to their students about what to do if something on the internet bothers them. Twenty teachers often or very often talk to their students about why some digital content is good or bad. Fifteen teachers often or very often helped their students in the past when something bothered them online, while fourteen of them did so sometimes. Most teachers, 20 of them, often explained to children how to recognize misinformation and to find reliable sources of information on the internet.

Over the past year, 2/3 of teachers had encountered a situation where students aged 11 to 13 had told them about things that bother them online and helped them do something when they had difficulty doing something online. As many as 16 teachers said they had never been in a situation where students asked for advice on how to behave online. At the same time 15 of them had never encountered a situation where students asked for help with a situation they could not resolve.

Of those teachers whose students have told about things that disturb them on the Internet in the last year, 22 of them mentioned the following situations that troubled or disturbed the students:

- *During the conversation about the frequency of using the Internet in everyday life and meeting people online, the student stated that she agreed to meet in person with the person she met*

[1] Given the small number of teachers who participated in the study, the data obtained from the study cannot be generalized. Results may indicate certain attitudes and thoughts of teachers, but they should be taken with a certain reserve. Accordingly, only the key results obtained from the study will be presented. Due to the small sample, frequencies were used in data processing.

online. Fortunately, this person was really who he appeared to be on the Internet. It is worrying that the student says that she did not tell her parents anything about it.

- *Students were upset when they received messages with offensive content.*
- *Insults from strangers, via social media.*
- *Ads pop up for things they didn't look up on the internet.*
- *They said that certain websites asked for their information several times, but they refused to give it.*
- *A student was cyberbullied.*
- *Recently. A student came into possession of nude pictures of another student and shared them on social media.*
- *They weren't sure if they recognized fake sites.*
- *Some students talked about someone calling them from an unknown number. I told them that they always have to inform their parents about it. They said that they always do. Things like that happen to them outside of school because they don't use cell phones at school.*
- *A student complained to me about the insults she experienced.*

When students aged 11 to 13 told them about things that upset or disturbed them online, most teachers did the following:

- Provided emotional support and a safe space for the child to talk about their experiences – 16 teachers;
- Offered guidance on responsible Internet and social media use – 16 teachers;
- Educated the entire class about online safety and responsible online behavior – 14 teachers.

Most teachers, 18 of them, believe that their students aged 11 to 13 would be comfortable talking to them about their experiences on the Internet. They gave the following reasons for that:

- *Since they share a lot of their own experiences in this area, I assume they are comfortable. I assume that they do not know enough about it, and they would like to know. Sometimes there is a situation that they want to brag about, so they share it.*
- *They think that I understand them, and they trust me.*
- *Trust and understanding*
- *Because they are respected by an adult, an authority figure.*
- *I think they feel comfortable because they know that they can turn to me for help.*
- *Since I use social media myself and am a younger teacher, they feel comfortable in the conversation and are not ashamed to say what they like to watch, follow, etc.*
- *We have a built-in atmosphere of trust and security.*
- *Because they trust that this will solve the problem.*
- *I am their computer science teacher. We always discuss situations that happen to them. They often hear what happens to someone else, so they are interested in what to do and how to do it in a similar situation. I give them lots of examples, I show them what to pay attention to when they are online.*
- *We have a healthy relationship in which there is no room for awkwardness.*
- *They start talking about the topic on their own, so I assume they trust me.*
- *They like to talk about all the things they have seen on TikTok.*
- *They can confide in me and they know that I will not talk about it further.*

Those teachers who felt that students were uncomfortable talking to them about such experiences highlighted a lack of trust, a sense of shame, and "I think that social media use and browsing history, in general, is intimate for a child and that they are quite uncomfortable talking to an older person about their online activities. Students form a certain image of themselves through their behavior at school with teachers, and it is possible that their activities and communication online could undermine that same image."

To be able to help students who face negative experiences online, teachers themselves must also be regularly educated. Teachers most often gather information and advice on how to help children online and protect them from the following sources:

- Professional development workshops or training sessions provided by the school – 24 teachers;
- Colleague collaboration and sharing of best practices – 22 teachers;
- Educational conferences or seminars on online safety – 17 teachers;
- School district or educational authority resources – 19 teachers,
- Educational websites and online resources – 15 teachers.

For most teachers, such topics are not included in the curriculum of the subjects they teach. Most teachers believe that internet safety and digital literacy are well covered in the school curriculum, and most believe that the school they work in does an excellent job of promoting safe/responsible behavior on the internet among students aged 11 to 13. Those teachers who believed that there was room for improvement in their school, among the things that should be improved, listed the following:

- *The will of the teacher to work on the problem of Internet safety is needed. I am not sure that all the class teachers are working on this enough.*
- *Organize workshops, lectures, discussions, during teacher classes.*
- *Implement education for students within the school and education with external collaborators.*
- *More educational workshops for parents and students.*
- *Educate parents more, unfortunately they often know little and cannot help their children.*
- *Education of parents and students.*
- *Access to the Internet.*

3.10. Conclusions

The data highlights the pervasive role of digital media in the lives of children and parents, with nearly universal access to the internet and widespread use of smartphones as the primary device, with children also utilizing televisions and parents favoring computers as secondary devices. This reflects generational differences in technology preferences and usage patterns. While digital media offers opportunities for communication, education, and entertainment, it also presents challenges, such as excessive screen time, early exposure to social networks, and online safety concerns.

Children's online activity peaks during weekends, with over half spending four or more hours online, while parents are more active during weekdays. This divergence in usage patterns underscores the need for balanced digital habits within families. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok dominate children's online interactions, with many creating profiles

independently. Parents, on the other hand, favor platforms like Facebook and Instagram, though they often assist their children in setting up accounts on WhatsApp and YouTube.

The widespread ownership of smartphones among children, with 93.4% having their device, raises questions about the appropriate age for introducing such technology. While most children receive their first smartphone before age ten, they express stricter views on this matter when imagining themselves as parents. This discrepancy suggests a growing awareness among children of the potential challenges associated with early smartphone use.

Despite the benefits of digital connectivity, the data reveals concerning trends regarding children's online experiences. Nearly one in five children have encountered upsetting or bothersome incidents online, yet only a tiny percentage discuss these experiences with their parents. Parents, while aware of their children's distressing online experiences, often overestimate their ability to help, with only a minority engaging in open communication or teaching coping strategies. While parents often believe they are actively involved in their child's digital life, children's perceptions show discrepancies in how much guidance and support they receive. This disconnect highlights the need for more assertive communication and collaboration between parents and children in navigating the digital world.

The findings emphasize the importance of fostering more assertive parent-child communication about digital media. Educational initiatives to bridge this gap are crucial, as they can empower children to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly. Parents should prioritize creating a supportive environment, encouraging open dialogue, and utilizing tools like parental controls to monitor online activity effectively. Additionally, promoting offline activities and setting boundaries for screen time can mitigate the risks associated with excessive digital media use.

Parental mediation strategies, such as monitoring, blocking, or filtering content, are often implemented without children's full awareness. While many parents use tools like location-tracking apps or content filters, children are frequently unaware of these measures or find them intrusive. Interestingly, while some children feel protected by these actions, others report negative emotions such as anger, sadness, or embarrassment. The study also reveals that parents are more likely to check their children's social media profiles, messages, and browsing history than children realize.

The research highlights teachers' significant role in guiding children through their online experiences. While the majority of teachers have access to the internet and actively use various digital platforms. A notable portion of teachers actively encourage their students to research online and often discuss safe internet practices, highlighting their commitment to fostering responsible digital behavior.

However, there is a discrepancy in the frequency of teachers being approached by children regarding online issues, with many reporting that children seldom seek advice on navigating online challenges. This suggests a potential barrier in communication, where factors like shame and privacy concerns inhibit children from discussing their online experiences openly. Furthermore, teachers rely heavily on professional development workshops and collaboration with colleagues to enhance their online safety knowledge. Continuous teacher education is essential to equip them with the necessary tools to address the evolving landscape of online challenges.

It is crucial to foster an environment where children feel comfortable discussing their online experiences with parents and children. This can be achieved through building trust, enhancing

communication, and ensuring that parents and teachers are well-prepared to address the complexities of the digital world.

4. Conclusions

The educational programme should focus on fostering safe, responsible, and meaningful use of digital technologies for children, parents, and teachers. Below are the key research findings for the development of ASAP Educational Model and Educational Programme:

- Teach children to evaluate online interactions critically, such as identifying risks in communicating with strangers or sharing personal information.
- Highlight appropriate mobile phone usage in schools and encourage responsible behavior through clear rules.
- Organize workshops for parents on internet safety, privacy protection, and emerging digital trends, including artificial intelligence.
- Encourage parents to engage in open, non-judgmental conversations with their children to build trust and enable children to share online concerns freely. Guide parents on setting clear boundaries while allowing children to explore modern digital communication safely.
- Provide teachers with diverse tools like films, brochures, and interactive resources to make lessons on internet safety engagement and effective.
- Ensure teachers receive ongoing training on emerging technologies and online risks to stay updated with the ever-evolving digital landscape.
- Train teachers to foster a supportive classroom atmosphere where children feel comfortable discussing online problems without fear of judgment.
- Promote cooperation between schools and parents to address online issues collaboratively, such as inappropriate mobile phone use or cyberbullying.
- Prioritize trust-building efforts between children, parents, and teachers to create a supportive system for addressing online challenges.
- While most children receive smartphones before the age of 10, both children and parents agree that delaying smartphone ownership could be beneficial. Parents should consider waiting until children are developmentally ready to handle the responsibilities of digital access.
- Given that every fifth child has experienced upsetting online incidents, schools and families should prioritize mental health support and teach coping mechanisms for digital challenges.

FIELD RESEARCH

This report is part of the Erasmus+ project ASAP – *A Systemic APproach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education*.

It presents key findings from field research conducted in Croatia with students, parents, teachers, and school leaders. The study explores the challenges of digital life in early adolescence and the educational needs of all involved.

For more information, visit www.socialmediakids.eu.

ASAP

Co-funded by the European Union

www.socialmediakids.eu