

Erasmus+ Programme

Key Action 2 - Cooperation Partnerships in School Education

FINAL REPORT

R2.2.2

Field Research



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



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Short Description	This document presents the key findings of qualitative and quantitative field research conducted among preadolescents, parents, teachers, and school leaders in all partner countries. The aim of the field research was to provide further insights on the relationship among preadolescents, digital/social media, cyberbullying, and digital/media literacy.

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Executive Summary

Introduction and objectives

The field research presented in this report forms a core part of Work Package 2 (WP2), which integrates desk and field research to investigate the relationship between preadolescents (aged 11–13) and digital/social media. The research adopts a transdisciplinary and transnational perspective, analysing both shared patterns and country-specific features across the five partner countries: Italy, Portugal, Czech Republic, Croatia, and Slovenia.

Desk research revealed a scarcity of studies focused on preadolescence, highlighting the need for targeted empirical investigation. The field research aimed to: 1) explore challenges preadolescents face in using social media and the internet, 2) understand their coping strategies and support-seeking behaviours when encountering online problems, 3) identify the needs of preadolescents, parents, teachers, and school leaders in addressing online risks and promoting digital/media literacy.

Research methodology

A cross-sectional study design was adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to capture both in-depth experiences and measurable patterns.

Target groups included preadolescents, parents, teachers, school leaders, and cyberbullying reference teachers (Italy only). Sampling was non-random, using purposeful, convenient, and self-selective methods via schools, involved in the project as associated partners. Sample size: 518 participants for qualitative research (focus groups and semi-structured interviews) and 2,352 for quantitative research (online surveys).

Data collection instruments were designed by the expert project team, piloted, validated, and translated using back-translation to ensure consistency. Instruments included focus group protocols for preadolescents, parents, and teachers; interview scenarios for school leaders and reference teachers; and online surveys for preadolescents, parents, and teachers. Ethical approval was obtained from the DOBA Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Surveys were administered via the 1ka online platform, ensuring comparability across countries.

Qualitative data provided rich narratives on behaviours, perceptions, and needs, while quantitative data allowed cross-country comparisons and identification of key trends and gaps in digital practices and support structures.

Key findings per partner country

Czech Republic

Preadolescents in the Czech Republic generally prefer to manage minor online issues independently, such as blocking strangers or ignoring upsetting messages. They seek adult help only in cases of serious threats, often turning to siblings or friends over parents or teachers due to concerns about overreaction or loss of privileges. While preadolescents understand basic online safety practices, some still engage in risky behaviours. Parents aim to balance protection with fostering independence, but communication is inconsistent. Teachers and school leaders provide preventive interventions, but

these are mostly reactive and school-focused. There is a clear need for empathetic adult engagement, consistent guidance, and trust-building to support preadolescents effectively.

Croatia

Croatian preadolescents require guidance in critical thinking, empathy, and non-violent problem-solving for online interactions. Parents face challenges balancing protection and independence, emphasizing open dialogue and trust. Teachers report the need for structured resources, professional development, and ongoing support to foster safe digital environments. Collaboration between families and schools is essential to improving digital literacy and resilience among preadolescents.

Italy

Italian preadolescents express a strong desire to be heard authentically, highlighting gaps in communication both at school and at home. Social media is widely used to maintain social bonds, yet risk awareness remains limited. Parents often prioritize control and monitoring over dialogue, while teachers and cyberbullying reference teachers report inconsistent protocols and lack of coordination. Findings underscore the importance of trust, relational guidance, and alignment between school and family strategies to enhance online safety and support.

Portugal

Teachers in Portugal play a central role in guiding students and bridging school and family guidance. However, digital literacy education remains fragmented due to curriculum gaps and limited systemic support. Teachers report high commitment but face challenges in addressing online risks consistently. Focus groups emphasize the need for collaborative approaches, trust-building, and adaptive, ongoing educational strategies to strengthen students' digital citizenship.

Slovenia

Slovenian preadolescents are highly digitally connected but often refrain from seeking support due to fear of judgment. Parents show contradictions between their own digital behaviours and rules set for children, creating gaps in trust and communication. Teachers and school leaders provide fragmented guidance, constrained by online activity occurring outside school hours. The findings point to the need for emotionally safe spaces, coordinated approaches across home and school, and adult training to effectively support preadolescents' digital well-being.

Conclusions and implications for the ASAP Educational Programme

Across all countries, preadolescents are digitally competent but emotionally isolated, often handling online issues themselves. Parents and teachers share the goal of digital safety but often act independently, leading to fragmented guidance. Effective digital literacy education requires trust, relational support, open communication, and coordinated interventions across home and school.

The field research provides a clear roadmap for developing the ASAP Educational Programme. Findings emphasize **the need for an approach that is emotionally grounded and relationship-driven**, ensuring that preadolescents feel safe to express their experiences and emotions without fear of judgment or punishment. **The programme should equip both adults and young participants with practical strategies for navigating online challenges**, fostering trust, empathy, and supportive presence rather than relying solely on control or monitoring.

A persistent challenge across countries is the gap between adults' perceptions of support and preadolescents' experiences. While parents and teachers often believe they provide guidance, preadolescents frequently perceive limited understanding and approachability. **The programme should promote open, two-way communication**, offering tools that facilitate constructive, non-judgmental dialogue. This approach will help bridge perception gaps, enhance help-seeking behaviour, and strengthen the support system surrounding each child.

Given the pervasive influence of digital platforms and the rapid evolution of online trends, **the programme must integrate digital and media literacy as core life skills**. Pre-adolescents need to develop critical thinking, recognize online manipulation or bias, and make informed decisions in digital environments. Ready-to-use, practical resources for teachers and parents should complement classroom instruction, empowering students to engage with online spaces safely and responsibly.

Learning activities should be interactive, scenario-based, and adaptable, reflecting real-life experiences, collective behaviours, values, and digital identities. Simulations, storytelling, gamification, and co-created content will enhance engagement, while modular content that can be updated ensures continued relevance as new platforms, risks, and online behaviours emerge.

The programme should also foster collaboration between schools, families, and communities, transforming fragmented efforts into a coherent, coordinated system. Shared learning activities, unified messaging, and joint educational initiatives will strengthen collective responsibility for preadolescents' digital well-being. Professional development for educators should be structured, continuous, and embedded in school systems, equipping teachers and school leaders with the skills, confidence, and resources to provide emotional and digital guidance effectively.

By combining relational approaches, practical skills, and systemic collaboration, the ASAP Educational Programme will ensure that preadolescents, families, and educators are fully supported in navigating the challenges of the digital world, creating safer, more resilient, and digitally competent communities.

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 (children 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.

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 preadolescence 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 addressed the following research objectives:

- to investigate the challenges of preadolescents related to the use of social media and the internet in general;
- to understand how preadolescents 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.);
- to investigate the needs of the target groups (preadolescents, parents, teachers, school leaders) for addressing the issues and challenges related to the use of social media.

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

This report summarizes the key findings of the field research conducted in five partner countries. More detailed results for each partner country are enclosed and available in the corresponding Field Research Country Reports, which serve as stand-alone project deliverables and are available on the ASAP project website: <https://www.socialmediakids.eu/>.

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 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 preadolescents. The quantitative component involved structured online surveys, which were used to objectively measure and quantify phenomena related to online risks and safety among preadolescents while also facilitating cross-country comparisons.

1.1. Target population and sample

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

1. Preadolescents: children from 11-13 years of age,
2. Parents of preadolescents,
3. Teachers of preadolescents,
4. School leaders,
5. Cyberbullying reference teachers¹ (in Italy only).

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 in participating 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 per partner country

Target group	Qualitative research*	Quantitative research
CZECH REPUBLIC		
Preadolescents	30	234
Parents	15	84
Teachers	10	35
School leaders	3	/
CROATIA		
Preadolescents	30	206
Parents	31	176
Teachers	16	34
School leaders	1	/
ITALY		

¹ Cyberbullying reference teachers are appointed as anti-bullying and cyberbullying coordinators in every school in accordance with Italian Law No. 71/2017 to prevent, monitor, and address cases of bullying and cyberbullying.

Preadolescents	150	525
Parents	96	478
Teachers	30	79
School leaders	6	/
Cyberbullying reference teachers	7	/
PORTUGAL		
Teachers	20	65
School leaders	1	/
SLOVENIA		
Preadolescents	30	197
Parents	30	205
Teachers	10	34
School leaders	2	/
TOTAL	518	2,352

*Focus group discussions were conducted with preadolescents, parents and teachers, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders and cyberbullying reference teachers.

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 survey². Data collection instruments were first piloted/tested and validated with a small group of respondents and then the final versions were translated (using back-translation to ensure consistency and comparability) into each national 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 preadolescents,
- The focus group protocol for parents of preadolescents,
- The focus group protocol for teachers of preadolescents,
- The scenario for semi-structured interview with school leaders,
- The scenario for semi-structured interview with cyberbullying reference teachers (based on the focus group protocol for teachers),
- The online survey for preadolescents,
- The online survey for parents of preadolescents,
- The online survey for teachers of preadolescents.

² <http://globalkidsonline.net/tools/survey/>

1.3. Data collection procedure

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

Each focus group discussion lasted around 1.5 hours and was moderated by two researchers: one of them led and moderated the discussion, the other one acted as an observer, paying attention to non-verbal clues and taking down the notes. Semi-structured interviews lasted around 45-60 minutes and were moderated by one researcher. 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 among preadolescents (and the Internet in general).

All 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. Usage of the same data collection tool ensured better comparability in the process of data collection across partner countries. 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 preadolescents 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 behaviours, attitudes and opinions regarding the topic of this research in a more structured way. There were mostly closed-ended and multiple-choice questions in the online survey with only a few open-ended questions that required elaboration with one's own words.

In 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 analysed 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 April 2024 and quantitative research took place from February 2024 to January 2025.

2. Key research findings per partner country

In this chapter, the key findings of qualitative and quantitative research per partner country are briefly elaborated and presented. More detailed information can be found in the corresponding partner country research reports, available on the project website (<https://www.socialmediakids.eu/>).

2.1. Czech Republic

Qualitative research

Preadolescents

Preadolescents show a clear preference for handling online problems independently, especially when the issues are minor—such as blocking strangers or ignoring mean messages. They are unlikely to turn to adults unless they feel genuinely threatened, such as in cases of blackmail or explicit harassment. When they do seek help, they often carefully choose whom to approach.

Preadolescents hold mixed feelings about involving adults. Some trust their parents, particularly those with technical skills or a calm, supportive attitude. Others fear overreactions, punishment, or a loss of digital privileges. In these cases, they may turn instead to siblings, friends, or even grandparents, who are seen as less emotionally reactive.

Despite their autonomy, preadolescents display a basic understanding of online risks. They can articulate safety practices such as avoiding personal data sharing, blocking or reporting suspicious users, and questioning the intentions of online contacts. However, this caution sometimes coexists with risky ideas—like giving false information or considering a real-life meeting if a friend comes along.

Teachers, while generally trusted, are rarely seen as the first point of contact for personal online issues—unless the situation directly involves classmates or the school environment. Even then, some students prefer to keep more serious incidents private, suggesting that they see such matters as outside a teacher's domain.

Preadolescents repeatedly express a desire for more empathetic adult communication. They want adults to listen without judgment, avoid immediate scolding, and create an atmosphere in which it feels safe to share concerns.

Parents

Parents are highly motivated to keep their children safe online and emphasize rules about privacy and stranger interaction. At the same time, they acknowledge the importance of fostering independence and preparing preadolescents to navigate the digital world responsibly. Most seek a middle ground—equipping their children with guidelines while also trusting them to learn through experience.

Communication between parents and children varies. Some report open-door policies and aim to be approachable at any time. Others admit that stress, work, or emotional reactions sometimes get in the way of consistent conversations. Many recognize that children often withhold minor incidents and tend to speak up only when a problem becomes serious.

Support from schools is often seen as minimal or inconsistent. Most parents rely on their own knowledge or online research to guide their children and would welcome more structured guidance from schools. They express a strong interest in joint educational activities or consistent school-home messaging.

Parents also voice concern about the influence of social media, especially around cyberbullying or exposure to harmful content. They advocate for unified strategies that reinforce positive online behaviour both at home and in school settings. While most believe the family holds primary responsibility, they see collaboration with schools as essential.

Teachers and school leaders

Teachers tend to approach digital incidents using a team-based model, involving school counsellors, psychologists, or prevention methodologists³ when needed. Situations like cyberbullying are rarely handled by one teacher alone; instead, responses are planned collectively to ensure they are sensitive and appropriate.

Many schools integrate prevention into everyday routines, using class sessions (*třídnické hodiny*) or themed lessons to raise awareness of digital issues. These programs often focus on privacy, content sharing, and responsible online behaviour. Teachers believe regular exposure to these topics helps shape students' digital habits over time.

There are cases in which students confide in teachers more easily than in parents, particularly when teachers maintain a calm and constructive tone. Still, teachers acknowledge that they do not always see the full picture. Students may delay disclosure or choose not to report issues that they consider private or unrelated to school.

Educators are acutely aware of shifting trends in digital behaviour. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect students' social skills, and many now interact primarily through digital platforms. Teachers note the growing influence of online fame and "influencer" aspirations. As these trends evolve, teachers adjust their prevention efforts accordingly.

At the same time, teachers remain mindful of the limits of their responsibility. Incidents that occur outside of school hours are often considered family matters—unless they impact classroom relationships or climate. Training for teachers often happens reactively, based on new developments or emerging needs, though many schools draw on national prevention frameworks or expert resources.

School leaders shared a common dedication to creating a safe and developmentally appropriate digital environment for students. They emphasized the need for open dialogue with staff, students, and

³ In the Czech school system, prevention methodologists play a crucial role in ensuring the safety and well-being of students. These professionals are unique to the Czech Republic and may not exist in the same capacity in other countries. They are responsible for addressing various issues related to student welfare, including those arising from the use of digital technologies and social media. Prevention methodologists are typically appointed within schools and are specifically trained to identify and address risks and challenges faced by students.

families, and recognized that social media-related incidents—while sometimes unavoidable—could often be resolved through trust, mediation, and swift response.

Looking ahead, they saw opportunities for strengthening parental support, increasing student involvement in digital policies, and closing practical skills gaps. Ultimately, all agreed that prevention is not a one-time solution but an ongoing process, requiring flexible strategies and continuous updates in response to the fast-paced nature of the digital world.

Quantitative research

Preadolescents

Over 90% of preadolescents reported frequent internet access, with only 2% saying they never go online. Most (92%) owned a mobile phone and used it daily for internet access. In contrast, daily use of computers was much lower (18%), and tablets or gaming consoles were typically used weekly or occasionally.

YouTube and WhatsApp were the most widely used platforms, each with over 90% of preadolescents reporting regular use. Instagram (67%) and TikTok (60%) followed, while Snapchat was used by just over half.

During school days, most preadolescents spent 2–4 hours online daily, with about 20% exceeding 5 hours. On weekends, time online increased significantly—over 40% spent more than 5 hours online, and about 1 in 6 reported 9 or more hours per day.

Around 17% reported encountering upsetting online content in the past year, with another 13% choosing not to answer. These incidents were typically rare. Most did not take formal steps like blocking, reporting, or changing privacy settings. Emotional responses varied, but many skipped these questions, with no clear pattern emerging.

When facing problems online, most preadolescents did not seek help—from parents, teachers, or professionals. They often ignored the issue or turned to friends or siblings. Formal support systems were rarely used.

Parental involvement was inconsistent. A third said their parents rarely or never encouraged safe internet use, and around 40% said their parents either sometimes or never checked on their activity. While many saw this as motivated by care, feelings about monitoring were mixed. Most reacted neutrally or positively, but some felt angry, embarrassed, or mistrusted. About a third wanted less parental involvement, while nearly half thought the current level was fine. Only a small number wished for more oversight.

Parents

Smartphones were the most used device, with nearly nine in ten parents using them daily. Computers and laptops followed in frequency, while tablets, consoles, and smart TVs were used less often. Most parents reported being online 1 to 3 hours per day during the week, with a slight increase on weekends, suggesting moderate digital engagement.

WhatsApp and Facebook were the most popular platforms, followed by YouTube, Instagram, and Spotify. TikTok and Snapchat were rarely used, reflecting a generational gap between parents and their children. Only 1–2% of parents reported not using social media at all.

Most parents said they regularly discussed online risks, safety, and behaviour with their children. Over half gave frequent guidance on staying safe and understanding harmful content. Few parents reported sitting with their children while online, likely due to their age or independence. Some preadolescents sought advice or shared upsetting online experiences, and a few helped their parents with digital tools.

Most households had rules around screen time and online activity. About 75% of parents used content filtering or monitoring tools, and half used location tracking or time limits. While many families had open discussions about checking online activity, a quarter of parents monitored unilaterally, with a few doing so without their child's knowledge.

Parents mostly learned about internet safety informally, through websites or discussions with others. Many wanted more support from schools, trusted websites, and direct conversations with their children. About 75% said they would welcome a school-based forum to discuss parenting and digital safety, showing strong interest in collaborative approaches.

Teachers

Most teachers said they occasionally discussed online life and safety with students aged 11–13. About half regularly reminded students about responsible behaviour and recognizing risky content. Conversations about harmful or upsetting online experiences were usually informal and event-driven. Few teachers reported closely supervising students' online activities, which aligns with their age and school structures.

Students sometimes approached teachers with digital concerns, including issues in group chats or exposure to inappropriate content. These disclosures were occasional rather than frequent. Teachers noted that students might delay reporting problems or prefer talking to them over parents—especially if they feared being punished or misunderstood. In such cases, teachers aimed to respond calmly and supportively, though they admitted not always being aware of issues unless explicitly told.

About two-thirds of teachers said their schools had rules on device use and policies for promoting safe internet practices. Some schools offered prevention programs, class discussions, and access to counsellors. Satisfaction with these systems varied—about a third rated their school's approach as “very good,” another third as “adequate,” and the rest felt support was insufficient. Teachers frequently asked for more time, training, and institutional resources.

Teachers observed evolving digital behaviours among students, including greater awareness of privacy and a strong interest in influencers and online validation. While students knew basic rules, they were also drawn to risky trends. Teachers often responded by learning from peers or directly from students, though many expressed the need for structured professional development and expert input.

Key takeaways

Preadolescents are digitally savvy but emotionally isolated

They handle most online problems themselves—blocking, ignoring—especially when they seem minor. Both data sets show they only reach out when they feel genuinely unsafe, such as in cases of blackmail or serious harassment. Even then, help-seeking is selective; many prefer siblings or friends over adults, citing fears of overreaction or losing device privileges. Although they can articulate safety strategies, these often coexist with risky attitudes like giving false identities or considering offline meetups under certain conditions.

Parents walk a tightrope between control and trust

Most parents use monitoring tools and discuss safety but admit their children often disclose issues only when they escalate. Quantitative data shows one-third of preadolescents say their parents rarely talk to them about online behaviour, and about 40% report little or no supervision. Qualitative insights reveal that emotional factors—like being busy, stressed, or reacting harshly—can hinder open conversations. Parents want to protect their children but also recognize the need for digital independence, leading to inconsistent practices and missed opportunities for early intervention.

Teachers are trusted but under-resourced digital guides

Students sometimes prefer speaking with teachers over parents, especially if they fear emotional responses at home. Teachers, in turn, aim to be calm and constructive, but quantitative data shows that digital issues are addressed only occasionally and often informally. Qualitative findings emphasize that teachers typically respond reactively, rely on school counsellors, and adapt based on experience rather than training. Many express a clear need for structured support, updated resources, and time within the curriculum and the classroom to address online safety meaningfully.

Digital education is still fragmented across homes and schools

All three groups—preadolescents, parents, and teachers—recognize that schools could play a key role in digital education. About 75% of parents said they'd welcome school-led forums, and many teachers report efforts like class sessions or themed lessons. Yet, both parents and educators acknowledge that these efforts are often inconsistent, vary widely between schools, and lack coordination. Preadolescents don't typically view digital risks as a "school matter" unless peers are involved, revealing a gap between prevention efforts and how students experience digital life.

Prevention needs to be ongoing, adaptable, and student-informed

Teachers and school leaders emphasize the fast-changing nature of digital behaviour—especially the rise of influencer culture and shifting student priorities. Preadolescents' desire for social validation and online fame brings new risks not always covered by existing programs. While students show awareness of rules, they're also drawn to trends that challenge them. Prevention, therefore, cannot be static. Schools need flexible, evolving strategies that reflect the current media ecosystem, real student experience and involve students actively, not just as recipients but as contributors to shaping safer digital spaces.

2.2. Croatia

Qualitative research

The research highlights critical insights into the online behaviour and attitudes of children aged 11 to 13, revealing areas for improvement in fostering safer internet use. Preadolescents 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 preadolescents toward positive digital behaviour. 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 preadolescents to share concerns without fear of punishment or criticism. Teachers should also be trained to create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable discussing online problems. Both parents and teachers need to prioritize trust-building with preadolescents, 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 preadolescents 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 preadolescents understand the responsible use of technology. Parents recognize the importance of open communication and educating preadolescents 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 preadolescents' 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 preadolescents 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.

Quantitative research

The data highlights the pervasive role of digital media in the lives of preadolescents and parents, with nearly universal access to the internet and widespread use of smartphones as the primary device, with preadolescents also utilizing televisions and parents favouring 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.

Preadolescents' 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 preadolescents' online interactions, with many creating profiles independently. Parents, on the other hand, favour 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 preadolescents, with 93.4% having their device, raises questions about the appropriate age for introducing such technology. While most preadolescents 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 preadolescents of the potential challenges associated with early smartphone use.

Despite the benefits of digital connectivity, the data reveals concerning trends regarding preadolescents' online experiences. Nearly one in five preadolescents 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, preadolescents' 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 preadolescents 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 preadolescents' full awareness. While many parents use tools like location-tracking apps or content filters, preadolescents are frequently unaware of these measures or find them intrusive. Interestingly, while some preadolescents 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 preadolescents realize.

The research highlights teachers' significant role in guiding students through their online experiences. 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 behaviour.

However, there is a discrepancy in the frequency of teachers being approached by students regarding online issues, with many reporting that students seldom seek advice on navigating online challenges. This suggests a potential barrier in communication, where factors like shame and privacy concerns inhibit preadolescents 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 preadolescents feel comfortable discussing their online experiences with parents and teachers. 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.

Key takeaways

There is a disconnection between preadolescents' needs and adults' assumptions about digital support

While nearly 1 in 5 preadolescents encountered distressing online experiences, only a small portion shared them with their parents. Parents often overestimate their involvement and ability to help, assuming open communication exists when preadolescents don't feel the same. Qualitative data confirms that preadolescents are hesitant to share due to fear of punishment or losing access (to digital devices). This highlights the urgent need to close the perception gap between parent and child and promote trust-based, non-punitive dialogue.

Early smartphone use is widespread—but increasingly questioned, even by preadolescents

More than 93% of preadolescents have their own smartphone, with most receiving one before age 10. Interestingly, many preadolescents report they would delay giving a phone to their future children, indicating a rising awareness of associated risks. Preadolescents are immersed in digital spaces (especially on weekends), yet often without adequate coping strategies or adult guidance. This suggests a need for developmentally appropriate timing for introducing smartphones in preadolescents' routines and better preparation for both preadolescents and parents.

Digital literacy education needs to go beyond safety to include empathy, critical thinking, and emotional regulation

Qualitative findings emphasize the need to teach not just how to avoid risk, but how to resolve online conflicts non-violently, assess digital interactions critically, and act with empathy. Teachers and parents agree on the importance of values-based education, yet current efforts tend to focus on technical measures or rule enforcement. A broader, skills-based approach is needed to equip preadolescents for the social-emotional challenges of digital life.

Parents and schools both see collaboration as essential—but it remains limited and uneven

Both groups call for more school-led initiatives, joint education sessions, and consistent messaging. Yet many parents report a lack of structured support from schools, and teachers say parents need to take more responsibility. Quantitative data shows parents often use digital controls without children's knowledge, leading to mistrust or emotional backlash. A more effective approach would be shared responsibility—transparent, cooperative strategies between schools and families that preadolescents also understand and accept.

Teachers are willing but under-equipped to deal with digital challenges—and students don't often approach them

Teachers encourage safe online behaviour and feel committed to guiding students, but they rely heavily on peer collaboration and sporadic training to stay informed. Many say students rarely confide in them about digital problems, pointing to a barrier in communication. Shame, privacy concerns, or seeing digital life as outside the classroom context may be reasons. Investing in ongoing teacher training and creating safe, approachable school cultures is critical to building trust with students.

2.3. Italy

Qualitative research

Preadolescents

Analysis of focus groups with preadolescents reveals a strong desire of preadolescents to be listened to authentically, without fear of judgement. At school, they often feel they have no space to express themselves, since the teaching context is set up on a model where the teacher talks and they listen. In the family, too, communication is problematic: parents, caught up in other occupations, tend to pay only partial attention and, in many cases, fear of disapproval or punishment stops preadolescents from opening up. A significant example that emerged in the focus groups was that of a girl who said: 'I only talk to my grandmother because she tells me when I am wrong. My parents, on the other hand, always agree with me, but I don't want to be right all the time'. This statement found great agreement among the other participants, highlighting the importance of authentic educators capable of providing constructive feedback, and not just unconditional support.

Social media is seen not only as a tool for entertainment, but also to maintain bonds and share experiences. One girl reported that she and her friends often exchange funny videos, finding in this practice a way to be together even when they cannot see each other in person. However, despite the positive perception, many young people show little awareness of the dynamics and risks of the digital environment. A desire emerges for clearer and more shared rules for social use, defined together with adults rather than imposed from above. One boy explained how his father simply tells him not to be on the phone too much, without giving him any real explanation as to why this might be harmful. This suggests that prohibitions without explanations are not effective and that an open dialogue between adults and preadolescents could foster a more conscious use of digital platforms.

Parents

Parents express a strong concern about the risks associated with their children's use of the Internet, citing problems such as addiction, cyberbullying, invasion of privacy, online grooming and fake news. During the focus groups, one parent said: 'There are many dangers, from paedophilia and phishing to bloody and age-inappropriate images'. However, this concern often results in control strategies that are not always accompanied by a real dialogue with preadolescents. Some parents resort to parental control and monitoring systems such as 'Family Link', while others rely solely on trust. One parent stated: 'If my child installed TikTok without my permission, I would feel very betrayed', highlighting how the issue of control can also become an emotional issue. Other parents, on the other hand, emphasize that schools should play a more active role in digital education, promoting greater collaboration with families.

Teachers

Teachers also note an increasing difficulty in managing digital communication among students. Many preadolescents struggle to understand the permanence and consequences of the content they publish or share. One teacher told of a student who had sent an offensive photo on WhatsApp, thinking it was 'just a joke', without realizing the emotional impact on the recipient. Moreover, the tendency to respond aggressively and impulsively in online groups is a common problem, often fuelled by anonymity and virtual distance. At the school level, teachers highlight the need to educate students

about digital awareness and managing emotions online, working on the difference between written and spoken communication and the social implications of one's actions. Another teacher shared that she asked her pupils to analyse the consequences of an offensive post on social media and reflect on how they would feel if they were the targets. This exercise helped many pupils develop greater empathy and a better understanding of the importance of responsible use of social media. From a school management perspective, the issue of cyberbullying is particularly critical. Teachers report that schools do not have structured protocols for dealing with incidents of online abuse, and each case is handled differently depending on the teacher or head teacher involved. In addition, families do not always actively cooperate with the school, and many students do not see adults as reference figures for digital issues. One teacher reported that some parents, during school meetings, continue to chat on the phone while discussing online safety, demonstrating a lack of awareness of the problem.

Cyberbullying reference teachers

Interviews with reference teachers confirm that the issue of cyberbullying is a critical area in which schools still lack clear and shared procedures. Most institutions do not have standardized protocols to deal with episodes of online abuse, and responses tend to vary depending on the individual class coordinator or head teacher. One teacher reported, for example, that in her school each case is handled "based on common sense" and personal experience, rather than following defined guidelines, which creates confusion and inconsistency among staff. Another educator described how, in the absence of an official procedure, she had to consult colleagues informally to decide how to respond to a serious case of online threats between students.

Furthermore, some schools have introduced anonymous reporting systems, such as dedicated email addresses, but these tools are rarely used. One reference teacher noted that "students don't trust that their messages will really remain anonymous, so they prefer to stay silent." The educators also underline the structural challenges: in some cases, schools have over thirty classes, which makes it extremely difficult to coordinate shared actions or prevention strategies. "We're too many, with too few shared moments. Even organizing a common meeting on digital education becomes a logistical puzzle," said one teacher.

School leaders

School leaders highlight the difficulties in creating a unified digital education strategy, often due to fragmented initiatives and lack of resources. In many schools there are good projects, but they are not integrated into a structured and shared plan. One head teacher pointed out that the absence of clear protocols makes the effective management of digital issues complicated, stating: 'Every time something happens, we try to intervene, but often we do not have defined procedures'. Furthermore, the managers recognize the importance of a broader digital education that is not limited to online safety but also develops students' critical thinking. One executive suggested introducing fact-checking activities in the classroom to teach students to recognize fake news, a key skill in the digital age.

Quantitative research

The use of devices, internet and social media

Internet access and device use vary significantly across groups by age and role. Among preadolescents, digital connectivity begins to solidify between the ages of 10 and 11, often coinciding with the acquisition of the first smartphone. The majority (58%) report being always online, while another 33%

are connected frequently. Time spent online differs notably between weekdays and weekends: on school days, 66% spend between one and three hours online, while 17% reach up to six hours. On weekends, usage increases, with 38% spending four to six hours online and 10% exceeding seven hours per day.

Smartphones are the dominant device among students, used daily by 88%, reinforcing the view that digital access for young people is closely tied to mobility and immediacy. In contrast, computers play a more marginal role: only 15% of students use them daily, while 45% report weekly use, typically for school-related tasks.

Parents and teachers tend to have more balanced digital habits, with greater reliance on computers and more structured usage patterns shaped by professional and family responsibilities. These differences illustrate a clear generational divide into how technology is accessed and experienced, with young people engaging in more fluid, mobile, and socially driven digital practices.

Social media usage: generational gaps and digital trends

Social media use also reveals significant generational divides in both platform preferences and patterns of access. Among preadolescents, platforms like TikTok (55%), Instagram (54%), and Snapchat (32%) are the most widely used, reflecting a preference for visually engaging, interactive content. However, these platforms officially require users to be at least 13 years old, meaning many students are accessing them before the minimum age, often bypassing age restrictions with a false birth date or, in some cases, with the assistance of an adult.

Despite their young age, most preadolescents create their own social media accounts without parental help. Independent registration is especially high on platforms like BeReal (89%), Twitter/X (85%), and both Discord and Snapchat (81%). Even on more adult-oriented platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, only 20% and 32% of users, respectively, report setting up accounts with a parent. High levels of unsupervised access also extend to YouTube and Reddit, where many students engage with content even without a personal profile.

In contrast, parents and teachers show more selective social media habits. Their platform choices lean toward Facebook (65%) and WhatsApp (used daily by 95% of parents and 96% of teachers), with some use of Instagram. Their engagement is typically driven by communication and information-sharing rather than content creation.

Teachers' role in supporting students' online experiences

Teachers show strong commitment to fostering safe and responsible digital behaviour. Many encourage mindful internet use and regularly address online risks: 67% often set rules for internet use at school, 56% suggest safe practices, 51% explain how to recognize misinformation, and 57% guide students in finding reliable sources.

However, a significant gap emerges between teachers' intentions and students' perceptions of support. While 39% of teachers say they often discuss how to handle upsetting online content, only 21% of students report the same, and 28% say it rarely or never happens. Similarly, 47% of teachers claim to frequently help with difficult online tasks, but just 23% of students agree. Support with distressing content is even less aligned: only 13% of students say they often receive help, while nearly half report they rarely or never do.

The disconnect may reflect emotional barriers and limited communication. Teachers themselves report that students rarely seek support: 68% say students never or rarely ask for help with online situations they can't handle on their own, and 47% say they don't seek advice on online behaviour. Fear of judgment, embarrassment, or lack of trust may discourage students from reaching out.

Despite their efforts to offer emotional support, create safe spaces for discussion, and collaborate with families or school staff, only 3% of teachers report that students often seek help in serious online situations. This highlights the need to strengthen trust and communication between teachers and students, and to improve teacher training in digital support.

Parental awareness and response to preadolescents' online experiences

Parental awareness of preadolescents' online experiences shows significant gaps between adult perception and preadolescents' reported realities. While 67% of parents believe their children did not encounter unpleasant situations online in the past year, 18% of preadolescents report having experienced distressing incidents. These include cyberbullying, body-shaming, exposure to explicit or violent content, and unwanted contact with strangers – sometimes involving peers or occurring on platforms like WhatsApp and social media.

When faced with such experiences, preadolescents most often turned to friends (40%) or parents (33%), followed by siblings (21%). A smaller number sought help from teachers (7%), school principals (2%), or professionals (4%), while 17% did not tell anyone. This suggests that although parents are among the main sources of support, many preadolescents still avoid sharing sensitive issues at home.

Preadolescents' coping strategies include blocking the offender (37%), hoping the problem would resolve on its own (35%), or directly confronting the issue (24%). Others reported the incident online (22%) or deleted related messages (18%), reflecting a mix of reactive measures and limited access to guided support.

Emotionally, these experiences had a marked impact: 49% reported anxiety, 45% anger, and 34% fear or disgust, with many also feeling embarrassed, sad, or helpless.

When parents were aware of the incidents, 64% responded through open dialogue, while others monitored activity (26%), involved other adults (27%), or encouraged support-seeking. These findings highlight the need to strengthen parent-child communication and ensure that families are equipped to support preadolescents in navigating online risks.

Parental involvement in preadolescents' online activities

Parental involvement in preadolescents' digital lives tends to centre on safety messages rather than active, hands-on engagement. While 50% of parents say they often offer guidance on secure internet use and discuss risks of harmful content, fewer engage directly: only 22% report regularly sitting beside their child during internet use, and just 23% encourage online exploration. Conversations about commercial content, like ads or marketing, are even less frequent.

Preadolescents' perspectives reflect similar trends. Although 38% say they receive advice on safe internet use, few are guided on how to deal with distressing content. Most report minimal adult presence during their online activities, suggesting that parental input is perceived more as instruction than active support.

There is also a gap in communication around online difficulties. While some preadolescents occasionally discuss upsetting experiences with their parents, many rarely or never do, preferring instead to confide in peers or siblings. Parents, however, often believe their children are more willing to talk, revealing a mismatch between perceived and actual communication.

Interestingly, the digital support dynamic is often reversed: many preadolescents regularly help their parents with internet-related tasks, a pattern both groups acknowledge. Conflicts over online habits do occur, though not frequently, and both parents and preadolescents agree that requests for behavioural guidance are occasionally at best.

Parental restrictions and supervision in preadolescents' Internet use

Parents and preadolescents differ significantly in their perceptions of digital restrictions and supervision. While many parents believe they impose clear rules and controls, preadolescents report greater autonomy than adults acknowledge. For example, 70% of preadolescents say they can freely use their device's camera, compared to just 38% of parents who say they allow this without supervision. A similar gap appears with social media: 59% of preadolescents report unrestricted access, while only 31% of parents say they allow this freely.

These discrepancies suggest either that preadolescents are bypassing restrictions or that parents underestimate their digital independence. Parents also report higher use of tools like GPS tracking and filtering systems than preadolescents recognize, suggesting that some monitoring may occur without their children's full awareness.

Rules around screen time are commonly reported by both groups, but many preadolescents admit to occasionally ignoring them. Parents express concern about time spent online, with 30% constantly vigilant and 50% occasionally worried. Despite their involvement – 51% say they regularly monitor preadolescents' activity – parents and preadolescents often differ in their views on the extent and impact of supervision.

Preadolescents' emotional responses to parental control vary. While many feel protected, others experience frustration, embarrassment, or a lack of trust. These findings highlight once again the need for transparent, trust-based communication. Balancing safety with autonomy requires open dialogue, where preadolescents understand the purpose of rules and feel comfortable engaging with their parents about online experiences.

Improving students' online safety: the role of teachers and parents in collaboration

Improving students' online safety requires joint effort from both families and schools, but current strategies and expectations differ between teachers and parents. Teachers primarily rely on professional and school-based resources, including collaboration with colleagues, training seminars, expert consultations, school workshops, and educational materials. Many also use online courses and webinars to stay updated. However, teachers often feel that online safety and digital literacy are not sufficiently covered in school curricula. Looking ahead, they express interest in expanding training through specialized books, workshops, and expert-led sessions, highlighting a need for more structured, in-depth support.

Parents, in contrast, tend to use a broader mix of digital and institutional resources. These include online articles, blogs, and parental control tools, alongside school seminars, institutional guidance,

and discussions with friends or associations. While parents value diverse sources, they place strong emphasis on the school as their main point of reference for information and guidance on digital safety.

Notably, most parents support the idea of a dedicated school space for discussing online safety and parenting. Most see this as a valuable initiative to foster more structured, ongoing dialogue on digital risks.

Key takeaways

Preadolescents want honest, respectful guidance—not just rules

Preadolescents in Italy express a strong desire to be listened to without judgment—at home and especially at school, where communication is often one-sided. They prefer adults who provide constructive feedback over those who offer passive agreement or imposing rules without explanation. Quantitative findings confirm this: while many preadolescents face online distress, they often turn to friends (40%), siblings (21%), or remain silent (17%) rather than seeking help from adults. This gap shows the urgent need for relational trust and two-way conversations rather than top-down control.

Parents overestimate their control and communication—preadolescents are more independent than they seem

Parents report applying various monitoring strategies (e.g., filters, GPS, content restrictions), but preadolescents often operate with more freedom than adults realize. For example, 70% of preadolescents say they freely use their device's camera, compared to just 38% of parents who claim to allow that. Preadolescents frequently create social media accounts independently—even on platforms meant for older users—and rarely receive help from parents during setup. Emotional responses to monitoring range from feeling protected to feeling embarrassed or mistrusted, showing that secretive controls erode trust, and open, negotiated boundaries work better.

Teachers are committed but not fully equipped—and students rarely turn to them

Teachers regularly promote digital safety, discuss online risks, and guide students in evaluating content. However, students don't always perceive this support: only 13% say they often receive help from teachers with distressing content, despite 39% of teachers claiming to offer it. Nearly 70% of teachers say students rarely seek help, highlighting a perception gap and limited emotional connection. Teachers call for clearer protocols, more consistent training, and school-wide strategies—not just one-off efforts—so they can respond more confidently and effectively.

Cyberbullying remains a critical but inconsistently managed issue

Schools often lack standardized protocols for addressing cyberbullying. Teachers and cyberbullying reference staff report that responses depend on individual judgment, with no school-wide consistency. Anonymous reporting tools are underused due to a lack of student trust. Structural constraints—like too many classes and too few shared planning opportunities—also hinder effective prevention. Both qualitative and quantitative findings show that emotional safety and procedural clarity are missing, underscoring the need for systemic approaches and better inter-staff coordination.

Parents and schools agree on the importance of collaboration—but need shared frameworks

Parents want schools to take a more active role in digital education, while teachers seek stronger parental involvement. Parents rely on a mix of sources (articles, blogs, seminars) but often look to

schools as a central guide. Teachers, however, say digital topics are underrepresented in the curriculum and handled unevenly. Both groups express support for structured spaces—such as regular school sessions on digital parenting and online safety. This signals a shared interest in institutionalizing collaboration, turning *ad hoc* initiatives into ongoing, integrated partnerships that include students' voices too.

2.4. Portugal

Qualitative research

The findings from the focus groups conducted with teachers in Portugal highlight the intricate and multifaceted nature of the challenges and opportunities associated with digital media, particularly social media, and its impact on student relationships, behaviour, and educational environments. The data collected during the discussions show that teachers still play a pivotal role in supporting preadolescents as they navigate the complexities of digital interactions, providing guidance and fostering trust and accountability. Furthermore, teachers also play a relevant role when it comes to creating bridges with life lived in the physical world and with other adults that have educational responsibilities, such as parents or guardians. The importance of implementing a culture of continuous intervention, rather than merely crisis management, is underscored, highlighting the need for schools and families to not only adapt but also collaborate in addressing these changing realities.

The discussions make evident several challenges faced by schools, and particularly teachers. Inappropriate behaviour, offensive speech, and misuse of another's image are the problems most highlighted by focus group participants and underscore the need for clear boundaries and guidance from both educators and families. Student behaviour and immaturity often intersect with the family context; this aspect emphasizes teacher's belief that there is a need for collaborative approaches to establish and enforce appropriate use of technology. In addition, the influence of online behaviour on school interactions further emphasizes the urgent need to equip teachers to act toward promoting positive digital citizenship.

Training and information are identified as significant needs, with a focus on social media and digital citizenship. Teachers acknowledge the usefulness of ICT and Citizenship classes, as well as the importance of dedicating time and space within the head teacher's lessons to address emerging issues. The examples presented by teachers in terms of integration of innovative tools and resources, such as gamification and production-based activities, highlights the dynamic nature of educational methods and the importance for ongoing professional development – teachers often undertake training on their own initiative.

In line with this, online resources and networks, such as eTwinning and SeguraNet, have been contributing for educators to enhance their practices and share valuable information. The data also highlights that social network, like Facebook, are still relevant for professional collaboration and resource sharing. Even though not clearly mentioned by the participants, this aspect further underscores the interconnected nature of modern education. Still, the findings illustrate how a multifaceted approach is required to effectively leverage technology in supporting and enhancing the learning experience – not only of students, but also of teachers and other educators (e.g. parents).

On a final note, it is essential to highlight that the focus groups reveal the necessity for continuous, collaborative efforts between educators, families, and broader educational networks. The evolving digital landscape presents both challenges and opportunities that demand adaptive strategies and proactive interventions to digital literacy education. By fostering trust, accountability, and positive digital citizenship, educators can create supportive and resilient educational environments that empower students to navigate the complexities of the digital age in a responsible and conscious manner.

Quantitative research

The findings of the study conducted with teachers underscore both their commitment to digital education and the structural limitations they face in fully preparing students for the digital world. Teachers demonstrate high digital engagement themselves, with nearly 88% using smartphones daily to access the internet and over 78% spending more than two hours online during weekdays. Platforms like WhatsApp (89%), Facebook (77%), Instagram (74%), and YouTube (71%) are the most frequently used, reflecting broad familiarity with key communication and content-sharing tools.

In terms of classroom practice, teachers are proactively involved in promoting digital safety and literacy. Around 80% report setting rules for internet use in school, while nearly 77% help students evaluate online content, recognize misinformation, and navigate online environments safely. These figures reflect teachers' willingness to address digital challenges head-on and foster responsible online behaviour among students.

However, significant challenges persist. Only 35% of teachers say that digital literacy is currently part of the curriculum, and over half report that essential topics such as online safety, online risks, and misinformation are not addressed in the subjects they teach. This curricular gap results in inconsistent coverage of critical issues, often depending on individual teacher initiative or school-level decisions. Without a national or systemic mandate, many students may miss out entirely on structured digital education. Teachers also express mixed confidence in their support roles: 52% believe students feel "quite comfortable" discussing online experiences with them, and 65% feel equipped to help.

Professional development and support for teachers are equally fragmented. Many rely on school-organized training (44.6%), peer collaboration (44.6%), and online resources (43.1%)—highlighting the importance of diverse, accessible, and practical forms of guidance. Although most teachers rate their school's efforts on digital education as "Satisfactory" or "Sufficient," they also emphasize areas for improvement. These include embedding digital literacy into the curriculum, banning mobile phones in some contexts, offering targeted training, and organizing awareness workshops for both students and staff.

Overall, the data points to a clear need for systematic, whole-school approaches that elevate digital literacy from an optional subject to a core educational priority. As emphasized by both national and European trends, integrating digital safety, critical thinking, and media literacy into everyday teaching is essential to ensure all students—regardless of school or region—are equipped to navigate the risks and opportunities of the digital age. Strengthening teacher capacity through continuous training, unified protocols, and stronger collaboration with families will be key to creating safer, more informed digital learning environments.

Key takeaways

Teachers play a central—but strained—role in promoting digital citizenship

Teachers are deeply involved in helping students navigate online risks, with 80% setting internet rules and 77% actively teaching students to assess digital content and misinformation. Qualitative data reinforces their proactive engagement, showing how teachers also serve as bridges between schools, families, and the digital world. However, they face significant strain due to a lack of systemic support, unclear protocols, and inconsistent curricular inclusion of digital literacy topics.

Digital safety education is fragmented and overly dependent on teacher initiative

Only 35% of teachers say digital literacy is part of the official curriculum, and over 50% report that key topics like online risks and safety are missing from the subjects they teach. This leaves schools and individual educators to decide how and whether to cover these issues. Such gaps lead to uneven student experiences and missed opportunities for consistent education. Teachers call for curriculum reform and school-wide strategies to embed digital topics systematically.

Building trust and addressing online behaviour requires a whole-community approach

Teachers consistently emphasize the importance of collaborative action between schools, families, and students. Many online incidents—such as offensive language, misuse of images, and impulsive behaviour—are linked to both digital immaturity and lack of parental guidance. Focus group discussions highlight the value of shifting from reactive crisis management to ongoing, preventive engagement across home and school. This also means investing in relationship-building, not just technical instruction.

Teachers seek more professional development and practical tools

While teachers access a range of training sources—school-based sessions (44.6%), peer support (44.6%), and online platforms (43.1%), most professional development is undertaken voluntarily. Teachers express a need for continuous, targeted training, especially in social media, online behaviour, and digital citizenship. Many already experiment with innovative tools (e.g. gamification, student-driven media projects), showing strong potential if better resourced and supported.

Digital responsibility requires culture, not improvisation

Teachers and school leaders stress the importance of moving beyond isolated workshops or pilot projects. Although some national and local efforts (e.g., phone bans, awareness campaigns) are underway, they remain fragmented. A systematic, school-wide approach, aligned with national educational goals, is essential. This includes clear protocols for cyberbullying, dedicated space in lessons for digital literacy, and shared accountability among educators, parents, and institutions.

2.5. Slovenia

Qualitative research

Despite mature understanding of online risks, preadolescents vary widely in how they cope with them. While some seek adult intervention, others choose silence, fearing judgment or retaliation. Trust, or the lack of it, emerges as a central concern in the preadolescents' relationships with adults. Many perceive teachers and parents as either overreactive or dismissive and often avoid disclosing negative experiences out of fear that adults will either exaggerate the problem or fail to understand it. This signals the importance of cultivating emotionally safe spaces where preadolescents feel genuinely heard and not judged.

A key theme in parental discussions is the tension between shielding preadolescents and preparing them for independence. While some adopt monitoring technologies, others emphasize open communication and gradual autonomy. All agree, however, that listening, modelling appropriate behaviour, and emotional availability are critical to good digital parenting. Interestingly, parents also admit their own contradictions—such as telling preadolescents to limit screen time while constantly being online themselves.

Moreover, teachers point to the inconsistencies in how online misbehaviour is addressed within the school system. Much of the harmful activity happens outside of school hours or through personal devices, limiting teachers' authority and complicating the enforcement of school rules. Despite these challenges, teachers find that students do open up when trust is established—often during informal moments or when they feel that teachers care about them personally.

Across all groups, then, certain patterns emerge. Trust, emotional safety, and consistent communication are recurring themes. All groups recognize the need for education—not just in terms of information, but in shaping judgment, resilience, and empathy. Yet, while preadolescents want adults to listen and include them, adults often operate in silos: parents without guidance, teachers without time, and headmasters without effective enforcement. The result is a patchwork of good intentions constrained by systemic gaps.

In conclusion, this comparative analysis reveals that protecting and empowering preadolescents online is not merely a matter of rules or awareness campaigns. It is a relational and cultural challenge that requires coordinated effort across the family, school, and community. Preadolescents need to be seen not only as users of technology but as partners in building safer digital environments. Parents, teachers, and school leaders must be supported with the training, time, and tools to create these environments—together, not in isolation. What unites all groups is the shared desire to keep preadolescents safe and supported. What divides them is often not intention, but approach. Bridging this gap will be essential to cultivating a generation of digitally resilient, emotionally intelligent, and socially connected young people.

Quantitative research

The use of devices, internet and social media

Preadolescents are highly digitally connected: 98% of preadolescents own a personal smartphone, and nearly half (49%) received it before the age of 10. Preadolescents spend substantial time online: on school days, 30% of preadolescents spend 4+ hours daily online; on weekends, this rises to 50%.

Social media use is almost universal among preadolescents: they mostly use YouTube (93%), Snapchat (71%), TikTok (56%), and Spotify (56%). Most parents (98%) also use social media themselves, but they use different social media than their children, highlighting a generational digital divide: 89% use Facebook, 72% YouTube, 48% Instagram and 36% WhatsApp.

Early smartphone ownership and use are driven by both practical needs and social pressures. Parents cited four key reasons for giving a child a smartphone: 1) communication, 2) safety and emergency reachability, 3) fostering independence, and 4) peer conformity / digital participation.

Parental advice/guidance & dialogue

There is a significant perception gap between parents and preadolescents about the level of parental involvement: while parents report high levels of engagement in discussing online risks and supporting their child's internet use (e.g. 97% of parents reported suggesting ways to use the internet safely), preadolescents perceive considerably less involvement (e.g. 67% of preadolescents reported their parents suggesting ways to use the internet safely).

Preadolescents are more likely to help their parents with online tasks than ask them for support. 82% of preadolescents say they help their parents with internet use, but only 49% of parents recognize this. Conversely, fewer preadolescents report asking their parents for advice (30%) than parents report being asked (53%). This suggests a reversal of expected roles in some cases, with preadolescents acting as digital guides.

Schools are seen as key partners in supporting parents with online safety education: 39% of parents think it would be useful to "a fair amount" if their child's school provided an open space for discussion about parenting issues, including internet safety; additional 28% of parents feel this would be useful "a lot".

Parental control / regulation

Significant discrepancies exist between preadolescents' and parents' perceptions of online freedom: preadolescents report having much more unrestricted access to online activities than what parents claim they allow. For instance, 63% of preadolescents say they can use social media anytime, compared to only 26% of parents. This points to either limited parental awareness, miscommunication, or lack of consistent rule enforcement.

Also, the data shows a consistent gap between what preadolescents perceive and what parents report when it comes to the use of parental control mechanisms. Parents report significantly higher use of monitoring and regulation tools than preadolescents acknowledge. For example, 67% of parents say they use blocking, filtering, or activity-tracking tools, while only 37% of preadolescents are aware of this.

Preadolescents mostly accept and follow their parents' rules about the use of smartphones and do not feel that monitoring is intrusive—many even describe it positively as "care" or "protection." However, one third (33%) would prefer less parental involvement, often citing a desire for more independence and privacy in their online interactions.

Experience with difficult / unpleasant situations online

Around 15% of preadolescents encountered unpleasant or upsetting experiences online in the past year, most commonly involving cyberbullying, scary or inappropriate content, or online threats—indicating that online risks are a reality for a significant minority of preadolescents. As a response to an incident, more than half of the preadolescents blocked the person from contacting them (52%). Although many preadolescents confided in parents or peers, 28% did not tell anyone about the incident, showing that a notable portion of preadolescents may be dealing with online harm alone, underscoring the importance of open communication and support.

Similar questions about their child’s unpleasant online experiences have also been asked to the parents. 15% of parents reported their child had unpleasant online experience(s) in the past year. After a child told their parents about things that bothered or upset them on the Internet, most parents responded by engaging in open and non-judgmental communication to understand the child's experience (81%).

Teachers’ perspectives

Most teachers frequently talk to students about online safety, misinformation, and responsible internet use. However, a majority feel that online safety, risks, and digital literacy are underrepresented in the current curriculum, highlighting a clear disconnect between teaching efforts and institutional support.

Teachers already receive guidance via school workshops, peer exchanges, and online resources, and wish to expand this with more involvement from school counsellors and external experts. They also see a strong need to include parents in digital education efforts and suggest increasing class time and preventive programs on digital well-being.

Key takeaways

Trust is the cornerstone of digital support—but often missing

Across all groups, a consistent theme is the mistrust or fear preadolescents feel in sharing negative online experiences with adults. Despite having a relatively mature understanding of online risks, preadolescents often stay silent due to concerns about judgment or overreaction. Quantitative data confirms this: 28% of preadolescents who encountered something upsetting online told no one. Both qualitative and quantitative findings emphasize the need to cultivate emotionally safe spaces where preadolescents feel genuinely heard without fear of punishment or dismissal.

There is a significant perception gap between preadolescents and parents

Parents report high involvement in digital guidance (e.g., 97% say they suggest safe internet use), but only 67% of preadolescents agree. Similarly, preadolescents say they help parents online more than parents acknowledge, and fewer preadolescents report seeking advice than parents claim. These discrepancies point to a disconnect in communication and understanding, suggesting that parental involvement is often felt more in intention than in impact. Real, reciprocal dialogue—not just top-down instruction—is needed.

Preadolescents’ digital independence is growing—and underestimated by adults

Preadolescents report far more freedom online than parents recognize. For example, 63% say they can use social media whenever they want, compared to only 26% of parents who say they allow that.

Additionally, 98% of preadolescents have their own smartphones, with many receiving them before age 10. Despite this, most preadolescents view parental rules positively as a form of care. The key challenge is to balance autonomy and protection, ensuring rules are not only set but also understood and co-owned by preadolescents.

Teachers are committed but feel under-supported

While teachers frequently discuss digital safety and misinformation with students, they note that these topics are underrepresented in the curriculum. Many rely on workshops, peer exchanges, or personal initiative, but call for more structured, systemic approaches, including external expert involvement and parental collaboration. Both data sets highlight that teachers act as first-line responders in digital education but lack sufficient institutional backing to fully address the complexity of online risks.

A coordinated, relationship-centred approach is needed across school and home

All groups— preadolescents, parents, and teachers—share the goal of keeping preadolescents safe, but they often work in parallel rather than in partnership. Adults act with good intentions, yet systemic gaps, inconsistent enforcement, and siloed actions result in fragmented support. The data suggests a need for relational, not just informational, strategies: empowering preadolescents as active participants, supporting adults with training and time, and fostering collaborative frameworks that bridge schools and families.

3. Implications

Based on the key findings from the field research conducted in partner countries, we have identified the following implications for the development of the ASAP Educational Programme:

1. The programme should be emotionally grounded and relationship-driven

Emotional well-being must be at the core of the programme, acknowledging that preadolescents often experience strong emotions—fear, anger, embarrassment, and helplessness—following unpleasant online experiences. However, these feelings are frequently kept hidden due to a lack of emotional safety in communication with adults. The programme should foster safe environments where preadolescents feel heard and understood, without fear of judgment or punishment. It should include practical strategies to help preadolescents develop emotional literacy and resilience, while also supporting parents and teachers in building relationships based on trust, empathy, and presence—not control. A relational approach is key to helping all stakeholders navigate online challenges together.

2. The programme should prioritize open communication and trust-building between preadolescents and adults

A central challenge identified across all countries is the gap between what adults think they communicate and what preadolescents perceive. Many parents believe they actively guide their children's internet use, while preadolescents report limited dialogue and often turn to peers or no one at all when issues arise. Teachers, too, are not always seen as approachable on digital matters. The programme should explicitly promote open, two-way communication, equipping both adults and preadolescents with the tools to engage in constructive, non-judgmental conversations about digital life. By normalizing dialogue about online risks and experiences, the programme can reduce stigma, increase help-seeking behaviour, and strengthen the support system around each student.

3. The programme should integrate digital and media literacy as essential life skills

Given the pervasiveness of misinformation, inappropriate content, and digital manipulation, it is essential that the programme positions digital literacy not as a technical add-on but as a fundamental skill for modern life. Teachers across countries report feeling unsupported in delivering this content due to curriculum gaps, despite their strong motivation to teach it. The programme should provide practical, ready-to-use materials that help preadolescents evaluate online content critically, understand the nature of digital platforms, and recognize manipulation, bias, and online threats. It should also reinforce and extend teacher efforts, bridging the curriculum gap and helping students build the judgment and autonomy needed for responsible digital engagement.

4. The programme should be interactive, scenario-based, and adaptable to evolving digital realities and cultures

Traditional, lecture-based teaching methods are insufficient for addressing the complex and fluid nature of digital life. Young people—and adults—respond best to engaging, real-life learning that mirrors their online experiences, collective behaviours, values, norms, and identities. The programme should be grounded in active methodologies, using simulations, storytelling, gamified exercises, and

co-created content to foster practical understanding and engagement. It should include flexible, modular content that can be updated regularly to reflect new platforms, trends, and risks. This dynamic approach ensures that the programme stays relevant and effective, helping all participants build confidence in navigating the constantly shifting digital environment.

5. The programme should foster meaningful collaboration between schools, families, and communities

A recurring theme in the research is that adults—parents, teachers, and school leaders—often operate in isolation, despite sharing the same goal of supporting preadolescents. The programme should aim to bridge this divide by promoting unified, consistent messaging across home and school. It should include shared learning activities, discussion tools for families, and school-wide campaigns that foster coherence and cooperation. By emphasizing co-responsibility and shared language, the programme can help transform fragmented efforts into a coordinated educational alliance that supports preadolescents not just in isolated moments, but throughout their everyday digital lives.

6. The programme should include structured and ongoing professional development for educators

Teachers are vital actors in digital education but often lack the institutional support, time, and training to fully address online safety and digital citizenship. The program should incorporate a professional development pathway that builds teacher confidence and competence in areas such as online risk prevention, emotional support, media literacy, and communication with families. This training should be practical, continuous, and embedded into school systems, providing educators with concrete tools, peer-learning opportunities, and expert input. A well-supported teacher is more likely to build trust with students and serve as a reliable guide in their digital lives.

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 of qualitative and quantitative field research conducted among preadolescents, parents, teachers, and school leaders in the Czech Republic, Croatia, Italy, Portugal and Slovenia. The study provide further insights on the relationship among preadolescents, digital/social media, cyberbullying, and digital/media literacy.

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