

Erasmus+ Programme

Key Action 2 - Cooperation Partnerships in School Education

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# ASAP LESSONS LEARNED

**R7.1.1**

# White Paper



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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<b>Short Description</b>	This document synthesises the main results, lessons learned and recommendations emerging from the ASAP project. Drawing on desk and field research, educational piloting and co-creation activities conducted across five European countries, the White Paper analyses pre-adolescents’ digital and social media practices and the role of schools, families and institutions. It provides evidence-based recommendations to support digital literacy, wellbeing and prevention-oriented policies in educational contexts.

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# 1. Introduction and Problem statement

## 1.1. Setting the scene

The digitization of contemporary life presents multi-layered challenges as society struggles with the accelerating pace of technological transformation. Within this rapidly evolving digital ecosystem, technology has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of self-expression, interpersonal communication, and information consumption. It creates new opportunities for engagement while simultaneously introducing unprecedented risks related to (mis- and dis-)information and data manipulation. Children and young people are navigating this complex digital scenario with increasing frequency and intensity from younger ages; yet their access to and engagement with digital technologies remains deeply unequal across socioeconomic and geographical borders. This digital immersion occurs within a regulatory and educational vacuum, characterized by inadequate transparency regarding data collection, insufficient age-appropriate privacy protections, and the absence of comprehensive digital literacy frameworks. As a result, the widespread adoption of digital technologies is outpacing the development of critical understanding necessary for informed, and secure digital citizenship, creating a significant gap between technological capability and digital knowledge - which tends to affect the most exposed and involved users.

The widespread adoption of digital technologies in professional and personal contexts has generated unforeseen social, environmental, health, economic, and cultural challenges that were neither anticipated nor adequately prepared for. As a result, public discourse on these issues has become increasingly polarised: uncritical technological optimism and categorical rejection or fear towards technology.

In response to this challenging and constantly evolving scenario, the project *ASAP - A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education* conducted since 2022 a comprehensive transnational and interdisciplinary research designed to advance understanding of digital and social media usage patterns among pre-adolescents aged 11-13 years. Coordinated by Fondazione Politecnico di Milano (FPM), a university foundation established in 2003 to bridge academia and society at large, the consortium encompassed a diverse range of European expertise spanning education, culture, academic research, media communication, marketing, and psychology. The collaborative network included specialized non-governmental organizations such as Pepita ONLUS, an Italian social cooperative focused on socio-educational interventions; Le Nius ETS, a cultural association dedicated to digital skills and online information; ProEduca z.s., a Czech association of professional educators; and the Association for Communication and Media Culture (DKMK) from Croatia, the country's largest civil society organization for media education. Educational institutions participating in the consortium comprised COFAC/Lusófona University, the largest Portuguese private university, whose research has been focusing on broad topics related to the digitisation of

society; DOBA Business School from Maribor, Slovenia specializing in innovative business education and eLearning; and Istituto Comprensivo Statale Via Bologna – Bresso, a public educational institution in Milan. Through structural, non-contingent approaches and educational reforms, ASAP aimed to support the broader school community—including students, teachers, and families—in addressing digital literacy needs while fostering inclusive educational environments that recognized and valued students' digital competencies and perspectives.

This White Paper results from the ASAP project's various phases of research and intervention into these topics. It proposes a rights and evidence-based approach that transcends the simplistic dichotomy of right vs wrong, safety vs risks. It recognises that digital transformation is an irreversible reality, and that society must assume responsibility for identifying emerging challenges and actively promoting more conscious, ethical, responsible, and health-minded digital practices that uphold fundamental human rights, including digital rights. Rather than adopting a reactive attitude against technological innovation, the approach proposed by the White Paper calls for a proactive, coordinated effort that engages all stakeholders in a preventive attitude that intends to serve the collective good while protecting individual rights and promoting digital well-being.

## **1.2. (Digital) Pre-adolescence, Socialization contexts and Online Risks**

Early adolescence is a period of significant physical and psychological changes (Scott & Saginak, 2016; Steinberg, 2020) that heavily impacts personal growth and individuality within communities (Crone & Fuligni, 2020; Steinberg, 2014, 2020). This phase can be associated with increased emotional and psychological struggles, sensitivity, vulnerability, and conflicts affecting self-concept and psychological stability (Figueiredo & Matos, 2017). During this stage, individuals face crucial experiences towards adulthood, build identities, and learn social and moral values - all of which shape their civic education, independence, and social responsibility (Oliveira, 2022; Crone & Fuligni, 2020).

When reflecting about digital lives, experts highlight the challenges young people face. Loneliness, stress, depression, and online dangers like phishing and cyberbullying (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; UNICEF, 2017; de la Caba-Collado et al., 2016; Dias & Brito, 2016) are some of those that raise the most concern. Cyberbullying, in particular, is a growing problem that affects well-being, safety, and civic behaviour (Cortesi et al., 2020). Defined as aggression via ICT (De-Barros Ventura et al., 2018), cyberbullying has become a global concern due to factors like anonymity and privacy violations (Kowalski et al., 2014). Moreover, studies also alert that students - pre or adolescents - who are victims of online aggression are also frequently victims of aggression and violence in school environments (Coelho et al., 2016; Kessel Schneider et al., 2015). This suggests that ICT can perpetuate and normalise aggressive behaviour that often has its origins in the socialization contexts present.

### 1.3. Schools and teachers

Schools play a crucial role in pre-adolescents' development, providing a space for building relationships, acquiring skills, and sharing values (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). However, and as reflections of society and culture, schools can also become sites of violence and aggression, often linked to the misuse of digital tools and the internet (Figueiredo & Matos, 2017).

At the dawn of the millennium, Pérez-Tornero (2000) warned about the expansion of the internet and the rise of digital media have led to a redistribution of this responsibility, with both media and schools emerging as fundamental promoters of knowledge. This transformation has indeed materialized in our current hyperconnected era, where individuals routinely share knowledge online and engage with multiple forms of media and communication to learn, disseminate and co-create content (García-Ruiz & Pérez Escoda, 2019), demonstrating how the internet has introduced unique opportunities for education and innovative teaching and learning methods.. Consequently, the media have become not only instruments of knowledge but also essential tools for fostering citizenship. Integrating them into educational processes and adopting new pedagogies is therefore fundamental for empowering children and young people to navigate the challenges of the current media landscape. This approach encourages participation, cultivates civic awareness, and reinforces their understanding of rights and responsibilities (Pérez Tornero, 2000; Oliveira, 2022).

Several international studies highlight the lack of media education in initial teacher training across Europe, limiting its integration into formal education (Hartai, 2014; Redecker, 2017; Wilson et al., 2013). Recognizing teachers as key agents of change (Wilson et al., 2013), UNESCO has launched initiatives such as the Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teacher Education to provide guidelines and resources for media literacy instruction. However, assessments such as TALIS 2018 and PISA (OECD, 2019, 2020) show that schools often prioritize ICT skills over comprehensive media literacy. Similarly, European teacher training frameworks - such as DigCompEdu - emphasize digital competence, focusing on technical skills (e.g. information processing, credibility assessment, and digital content creation) while overlooking broader (and basic) media literacy aspects (Redecker, 2017).

Beyond training gaps, fostering teachers' self-reflection on their motivations, beliefs, and approaches to media use is crucial (Hobbs, 2011, 2011b; Hobbs & Moore, 2013). This can also promote a basis for thinking about approaches to media literacy, as research has been showing that teachers' engagement with media varies by discipline, affecting their preferences for formats, content, and tools (Hobbs & Tuzel, 2017). Addressing this diversity is essential for designing effective professional development programs and to support lifelong learning, reducing the tension between teachers and ICTs (Tomé, 2011).

#### **1.4. Families as mediators**

Families play a crucial role in shaping and mediating children's digital experiences. Mediation is understood as a dynamic, two-way process where parents influence media socialization, while children, as they grow, actively shape the adoption and use of digital technologies in the household (Nelissen & Bulck, 2017). On this note, Livingstone et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of young people's agency, distinguishing between restrictive mediation - relying on prohibitions - and enabling mediation - based on open communication, digital skills, and resilience. The latter approach encourages a supportive environment where children feel comfortable discussing concerns while developing autonomy online.

However, some studies suggest that restrictive mediation often leads to resistance. Byrne and Lee (2011) found that children aged 10–16 employ strategies to bypass parental controls, such as concealing passwords, adjusting privacy settings, or hiding online activities. Similarly, Livingstone and Bober (2005) reported that 63% of 12–19-year-olds took measures to avoid parental monitoring. Regardless of how openly parents supervise their children, young people are often aware of these practices and actively seek ways to evade them (Castro & Ponte, 2020; Mathiesen, 2013). While parents aim to protect children from external dangers, children, in turn, attempt to protect themselves from parental oversight, which may “lead to parents having less information about their children's activities” (2013, p. 271).

## **2. Background: Pre-adolescents in a digital world**

In the context of a rapidly expanding and evolving digital landscape, further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, social media plays a complex and significant role in the lives of young people, shaping how they interact, learn, and perceive the world. Pre-adolescents, typically aged between 11 and 13, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of digital platforms, as they are at a crucial stage of personal development, forming their identities, social connections, and life skills.

While these platforms offer undeniable advantages, such as enhanced connectivity, access to information, and opportunities for self-expression, they also pose significant risks, including cyberbullying, misinformation, privacy concerns, and potentially addictive behaviours. Many digital education initiatives already address risk mitigation, but often overlook the development of the personal, social, and thinking skills that are essential for young people to navigate an ever-evolving digital environment with awareness and resilience.

### **The ASAP project: Origins and approach**

The “ASAP – A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education” project was designed to address this challenge. Co-funded by the European Union’s Erasmus+ Programme and selected by the Italian National Agency INDIRE in 2022, ASAP is a Cooperation Partnership in School Education that brings together eight organisations from five EU Member States (Italy, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Croatia), and is further supported by 24 associated partners, including schools, parents’ associations, youth centres, and other educational organisations, which participated in the project’s activities.

ASAP originated from a real-life incident in an Italian lower secondary school, where online content shared by a group of students had a profound impact on the entire school community, affecting pupils, teachers, and parents alike. The school, caught unprepared, struggled to manage the situation and sought external support. This episode revealed a critical gap, highlighting the need for a systemic approach to help schools develop strategies not only to respond to, but also to prevent, digital media-related crises, and to address their broader implications for both individuals and the wider community.

The project focuses on pre-adolescence for two main reasons. First, this developmental stage is often overlooked in research and educational policy, despite being a critical period for identity formation and social learning. Second, it is during these years that young people typically receive their first personal smartphones and begin to navigate social media independently. By concentrating on this under-explored phase, ASAP aims to bring visibility to its unique challenges and to respond to the specific needs of young people as they first engage with the digital world.

ASAP adopts a systemic and participatory approach. Digital media is not merely a technological issue, but a complex phenomenon that affects relationships with oneself, others, and society at large. To address this complexity, the project actively involved teachers, families, researchers, and young people, integrating multidisciplinary expertise and diverse perspectives. The goal was not only to promote safe use of digital tools, but also to foster active, reflective, and responsible digital citizenship by developing critical thinking, questioning, information evaluation, and awareness of the consequences of one's actions.

### **Methodology and key activities**

ASAP began with a desk and field research phase aimed at exploring the online lives of preadolescents and their relationship with digital media. The research engaged over 2,500 pre-adolescents, parents, teachers, and school leaders across the partner countries through interviews, focus groups, and online surveys, providing a comprehensive understanding of their perceptions, behaviours, and needs related to digital media.

Based on this evidence, the partnership developed an educational programme consisting of six learning units focused on: the art of asking questions as the foundation of thinking; communication and active listening; emotional intelligence; recognising misinformation; role models; and the concept of “onlife”, which describes the intertwined coexistence of our online and offline lives. The programme was piloted in multiple rounds – four in Italy and three in Croatia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Portugal – reaching approximately 2,800 pre-adolescents, 1,500 parents, and 500 teachers. In parallel, a training pathway for educators was developed and tested, involving around 170 professionals who subsequently used the project's educational resources with an additional 1,100 students, 600 parents, and 180 teachers.

A special feature of the project was the Collaborative Editorial Board, a pilot activity developed with preadolescent students from the partner school in Bresso, Italy. Within this laboratory, pupils explored the behind-the-scenes of information production, simulating the work of a newsroom and engaging with issues of media creation, source verification, responsibility, and the impact of shared content. The experience also served as an experimental space for designing, developing, and testing many of the activities that later became part of the educational programme.

### **White Paper and Recommendations**

This White Paper marks the conclusion of the ASAP project, summarising the lessons learned over a three-year journey and presenting an overview of its key results and findings. These form the basis the accompanying recommendations for schools, families, stakeholders, and policymakers, aimed at supporting the development of digital competence and critical thinking among pre-adolescents across Europe.

As digital technologies continue to evolve, the need to equip young people with the skills to navigate them responsibly remains a key challenge. The ASAP project has addressed this need

by exploring systemic approaches, fostering critical and reflective thinking, and engaging schools, families, and communities in a shared effort to support pre-adolescents in their digital lives.

### **3. Pre-Adolescents and Social Media: Results from the ASAP Desk Research**

In this chapter, we delve into the main findings of the desk research conducted within the ASAP project. The research compiled and analysed national and international data, policy frameworks, academic studies, and good practices from the five participating countries — Italy, Portugal, Croatia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic — to shed light on trends, risks, and educational responses related to social media use among young people.

In the following paragraphs, we highlight some of the most pertinent aspects related to five key dimensions that emerged from the review: digital engagement and behavioural trends, psychological and social impacts, educational implications, the prevalence of cyberbullying and online risks, and the role of policies and legal frameworks. Together, these insights provide a comprehensive overview of the struggles and opportunities related to young people's use of social networks and the role played by the various educational agents - parents, teachers and schools. By situating the issue within diverse cultural and educational contexts, the chapter seeks to inform more inclusive, targeted, and effective strategies for promoting digital citizenship and media literacy in schools.

#### **3.1. Trends**

In Italy, 82% of youths spend over four hours a day on their smartphones, while in Slovenia, despite 90% of the population being online, specific data suggest that pre-adolescents are increasingly active on social media networks.

In Croatia and Portugal, children and pre-adolescents show early and intensive engagement with digital media. Trends point to growing screen time, earlier exposure to online risks, and significant differences by age and gender.

#### **3.2. Psychological and social impact**

Research across the participating countries - Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Croatia and the Czech Republic - indicate notable emotional and behavioural repercussions related to pervasive and excessive use of digital devices among pre-adolescents.

High levels of smartphone addiction and problematic social media use have been linked to poor mental health outcomes - namely social withdrawal, loneliness, and disruptions in sleep and eating patterns.

Exposure to harmful online content (e.g. violent materials, hate speech, and cyberbullying) puts children and young people at risk of experiencing significant psychological distress.

Digital risks are shown to have impacts at the level of interpersonal relationships, influencing the quality of communications among peers and between children and adults.

### **3.3. Educational implications**

The current digital context and the perceived social and psychological implications underline the importance of enhancing educational strategies focused on digital literacy and online safety.

Existing programs in Italy, Portugal, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia highlight the need for the promotion of continuous teacher training in addition to integrating digital skills in curricula in schools.

Formal education initiatives should be complemented by informal education (e.g. community-led projects, targeted training materials, and best practices) to positively engage both parents and educators.

The incorporation of digital safety, responsible social media use, and critical thinking in educational systems and curricula can contribute to children and young people navigating the digital world in safe and responsible manners, aware of the risks and implications.

### **3.4. Online safety, cyberbullying, and problematic media use**

Italian research shows that problematic media use is a pressing risk among young people, aligning with wider concerns about excessive screen time and its behavioural impacts.

In Slovenia, findings indicate that 90% of the population uses the internet; though, there is a significant prevalence of internet addiction (around 10% of pre-adolescents) and social network dependency (approximately 8%), along with other serious consequences, namely social withdrawal and loneliness.

Among Croatia children aged 12 to 14, 79% feel safe online and positively engage in online communication and support-seeking, while 10% report negative experiences (e.g. exposure to harmful content, online harassment, hacking, and data misuse). More than half (66%) state they know how to respond to unwanted online behaviours.

In the Czech Republic dedicated prevention methodologists in schools are crucial for implementing targeted interventions toward cyberbullying and other risky online behaviours.

In the Portuguese context, cyberbullying tends to be more prevalent than face-to-face bullying, with over a fifth of victims reporting frequent occurrences - several times a month - via mobile calls, text messages, social media dissemination of unpleasant comments, and threats.

### **3.5. Policy, legal frameworks, and data-driven approaches**

Italy was the first country in Europe to introduce legal protection against cyberbullying with Law 71/2017, focused on addressing cyberbullying through educational and preventive measures, including the appointment of a reference teacher in schools and the involvement of parents. Building upon this foundation, Law 71/2017 has been supplemented by Law

70/2024, which extends the provisions of the original legislation to include traditional bullying, thereby creating a comprehensive legal framework aimed at preventing and combating both digital and offline forms of harassment.

Portugal lacks a specific law on cyberbullying, but online criminal practices are addressed in the Tutelary Educational Law (Law 166/1999) - if perpetrators are between 12 and 16 years old -, the Student Statute and School Ethics (Law No. 51/2012), and international regulations that the country adopted - including the General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in the digital environment apply. Furthermore, if the perpetrators are under 12, the Law on the protection of children and young people in danger (Law No. 147/99) applies.

Slovenia lacks a specific law protecting users against Internet abuse. Though, the Electronic Communications Act (Uradni list RS, 2022) regulates users' rights, privacy, and security in compliance with EU standards. The Slovenian Information Commissioner's Office assists with personal data protection and educates users on how to address violations. Additionally, the Guidelines on the Use of Screens in Children and Adolescents provide recommendations for professionals working with youth in education, healthcare, and other services.

While Croatia has no specific law on social media, existing legal frameworks address related matters through the Criminal Code (e.g. child pornography, hate speech, and privacy violations). Besides this, the Ordinance on Pedagogical Measures applies to students' conduct and disciplinary actions.

The Czech Republic addresses social media use, misuse, and abuse through various legislative and regulatory frameworks. Decree No. 72/2005 Coll. requires schools to establish a school prevention methodologist to coordinate counselling and prevention services. Additionally, the School Prevention Program (SPP) provides guidelines for managing risky behaviours.

The evidence gathered during the project reveals the urgency and the complexity towards supporting young people in their digital lives and experiences. While legal frameworks, educational programmes, and prevention strategies vary considerably across the five European countries analysed, the online challenges faced by children and adolescents remain strikingly similar - excessive screen time, addiction risks, cyberbullying and exposure to harmful content.

Another aspect that becomes clear is that no single approach will suffice. Effective responses demand straight collaboration among schools, families, policymakers, and young people themselves, grounded in ongoing research and approaches adapted to local contexts. As digital technologies continue to evolve, our commitment to equipping the next generation with the critical skills, emotional resilience, and institutional support in an increasingly connected world must too.

*For further reading, the ASAP Desk Research reports are available through the project communication channels. See Project Information table above for details.*

## **4. Lessons Learned from the Project: Insights from the ASAP Field Research**

The field research conducted across five European countries - Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Czech Republic, and Croatia - employed both qualitative methods (focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews) and quantitative approaches (structured online surveys) to explore the relationship between pre-adolescents (11–13 years) and social media, with particular focus on the school environment. Data collection spanned from October 2023 to January 2025, involving over 2,800 participants including pre-adolescents, parents, teachers, and school leaders across all partner countries.

The paragraphs below present the common topics and trends identified during data analysis.

### **4.1. Digital engagement patterns and platform usage**

Research from the project shows that across all countries, pre-adolescents demonstrated extensive digital engagement with remarkably consistent patterns. Smartphone ownership was nearly universal: 98% in Slovenia, over 90% in the Czech Republic, and similar rates in other countries, with many preteens getting their first devices around the ages of 9-11. Daily internet usage was significant, with noteworthy time spent online during both school days (2-4 hours) and weekends (4-6 hours or more).

Common platform usage patterns emerged across countries. YouTube is universally popular (ranging from 71-93% usage), followed by TikTok (55-56%), Instagram (54-74%), and WhatsApp. Data analysis revealed a consistent generational digital divide – pre-adolescents preferred visual and interactive platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, while parents predominantly used Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Notoriously, many pre-adolescents accessed age-restricted platforms despite being below the minimum age requirements. This means they often bypassed restrictions.

### **4.2. Communication gaps and trust issues**

Research showed a significant communication gap between pre-adolescents and adults regarding digital experiences. Preteens across the partner countries expressed desires for authentic, judgment-free dialogue with adults, but often perceived teachers and parents as either overreactive or dismissive. In Croatia, only 7.9% of preteens reported speaking to parents about unpleasant online incidents. None admitted to approach teachers. Similar patterns were identified in other countries – pre-adolescents often hide parts of their digital lives due to fear of punishment or misunderstanding.

Table 1. Overview of the ASAP Field Research: Countries, Partners, Target Groups, Participants, and Timeline

Country	Italy	Portugal	Slovenia	Czech Republic	Croatia
<b>Partners</b>	Fondazione Politecnico di Milano Pepita ETS Associazione Le Nius ETS Istituto Comprensivo Statale Via Bologna Bresso	Lusófona University/ CICANT	DOBA - Faculty of Applied Business and Social Studies Maribor	ProEduca z.s.	DKMK - Association for Communication and Media Culture
<b>Team members</b>	Patrizia Giordano, Stefano Sanna (FPM) Ivano Zoppi, Giorgia Veneziano (Pepita) Stefania Cardinale, Cinzia Peschechera (Le Nius) Rosaria Favaro (ICS Bresso)	Ana Filipa Oliveira Teresa Sofia Castro Maria José Brites	Marko Divjak, Daša Grajfoner	Lucie Brzáková	Lana Ciboci Perša
<b>Target groups</b>	Pre-adolescents Parents Teachers Cyberbullying reference teachers School leaders	Teachers School leaders	Pre-adolescents Parents Teachers School leaders	Pre-adolescents Parents Teachers School leaders	Pre-adolescents Parents Teachers School leaders
<b>Number of participants</b>	In the qualitative field research (focus group discussions and semi- structured interviews): 150 pre-adolescents 96 parents 30 teachers 7 cyberbullying reference teachers 6 school leaders  In the quantitative field research (structured online survey): 525 pre-adolescents 478 parents 79 teachers	In the qualitative field research (focus group discussions): 19 teachers 1 school leader  In the quantitative field research (structured online survey): 57 teachers	In the qualitative field research (focus group discussions): 30 pre-adolescents 30 parents 10 teachers 2 school leaders  In the quantitative field research (structured online survey): 197 pre-adolescents 87 parents 32 teachers	In the qualitative field research (focus group discussions and semi- structured interviews): 41 pre-adolescents 30 parents 11 teachers 3 school leaders  In the quantitative field research (structured online survey): 232 pre-adolescents 84 parents 41 teachers	In the qualitative research (focus group discussions and semi- structured interviews): 30 pre-adolescents 31 parents 16 teachers 1 school leaders  In the quantitative research (structured online survey): 206 pre-adolescents 176 Parents 34 Teachers
<b>Data collection period</b>	October 2023 – November 2024	March 2024 – January 2025	February 2024 – January 2025	February 2024 – January 2025	February 2024 – September 2024

At the same time, the data collected during the research also revealed that students naturally gravitated towards empathetic and approachable teachers when facing personal or online challenges. Trust emerged as the central concern and foundation for effective digital citizenship education. It became evident that preteens valued when adults treated their online experiences seriously, highlighting the importance of building emotionally safe spaces where young people feel genuinely heard and not judged. However, significant discrepancies were noted in adult perceptions. In Slovenia, while 97% of parents reported providing safety guidance, only 67% of pre-adolescents acknowledged receiving it. Similar gaps appeared in Italy, where 67% of parents believed children faced no online issues, while 18% of children reported experiencing distressing incidents.

### **4.3. Parental challenges and strategies**

Parents across the partner countries expressed mixed attitudes towards their children's digital engagement. Many acknowledged its inevitability while worrying about psychological and social effects. Additionally, digital parenting was described as a "trial-and-error" process, revealing that most parents feel an emotional burden and lack of structural support. Croatian parents exemplified this challenge, with one in four spending over five hours daily online during workweeks while trying to manage their children's screen time simultaneously. The research also showed that parental oversight approaches varied considerably, from technological solutions to trust-based communication strategies. However, only a small number of adults used active digital supervision tools, with many parents admitting to not fully understanding platforms like TikTok, which hampers their guidance abilities. This often leads parents to seek guidance on balancing protective supervision with fostering autonomy. Furthermore, research indicated that children often assisted parents with internet-related tasks, more frequently than seeking support themselves. In Slovenia, 82% of pre-adolescents helped parents with internet tasks; yet only 49% of parents recognised this help, suggesting role reversals where children act as digital guides.

### **4.4. Teacher preparedness, institutional responses, and curriculum gaps**

Across all countries, teachers expressed a collective sense of unpreparedness to tackle digital challenges. They demonstrated a lack of confidence, expertise, and specific training needed for digital citizenship education. Despite their dedication to promoting safe digital behaviour among students, teachers' intentions and students' perceptions of support do not always align—while teachers believed they often provided guidance, students reported receiving significantly less support, especially regarding distressing online content.

Data also revealed systematic gaps in the digital literacy curriculum that appeared across countries. In Portugal, only 35% of teachers reported that digital literacy was covered in curricula, with over 50% indicating that key topics like online safety were missing from their subjects. Teachers called for the effective inclusion of digital literacy topics within formal education, along with structured training, clearer guidelines, and dedicated curriculum time

for digital behaviour topics.

Regarding schools, their responses to digital challenges varied widely depending on staff availability, training, and institutional support. While most schools had basic mobile phone rules, few had comprehensive and regularly updated digital education policies. Data from the Czech Republic showed that team-based approaches within schools—involving teachers, counsellors, and staff—proved more effective than isolated efforts. As for collaboration between schools and families, it remained fragmented.

#### **4.5. Online risk experiences and coping strategies**

The field research showed that approximately 15-18% of pre-adolescents across the partner countries encountered unpleasant online experiences, namely cyberbullying, inappropriate content, online threats, and exposure to explicit or violent material. Teachers reported increased digital-related challenges, including group exclusion, peer pressure, and cyberbullying incidents. In some cases, schools deal with multiple incidents per academic year.

Regarding coping strategies, when facing online difficulties, preteens most often turned to friends or handled incidents independently. Involving adults was a last resort. Common coping strategies included blocking offenders, hoping problems would resolve independently, or directly confronting issues. Concerning patterns emerged in regard to support systems – more than 28% of pre-adolescents (28% in Slovenia, similar in other countries) avoid telling anyone about troubling incidents. These negative online experiences produced marked emotional impacts. Preteens predominantly reported anxiety (49%), anger (45%) as well as fear, disgust, embarrassment, sadness, and helplessness. Fear of social exclusion strongly influenced their online behaviours through peer pressure and cultural expectations. These aspects point to the importance of integrating mental health support systems into digital literacy efforts.

#### **4.6. Family-school: a challenging partnership**

Collaboration between schools and families regarding digital education revealed to be fragmented and insufficient. Parents often deferred digital education responsibilities to schools; schools struggled with limited resources and unclear guidelines. This misalignment created discontinuity between home and school environments that hinders educational effectiveness. As to educational preferences and approaches, research stressed that these varied according to stakeholders' groups: pre-adolescents responded better to interactive workshop-style sessions incorporating games for personal topics, while parents favoured concrete, practical lecture formats, showing less interest in participatory approaches that extend over several hours. These differences point out the need for differentiated approaches in digital education programming.

#### **4.7. Conclusions**

The findings of the ASAP fieldwork conducted across Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Czechia, and Croatia revealed consistent patterns that transcend national boundaries, highlighting European challenges in supporting pre-adolescents' digital engagement. Across all contexts, a critical communication gap emerges between preteens and adults, characterized by children's desire for authentic, judgment-free dialogue contrasted with adults' tendency towards control-oriented approaches. Pre-adolescents frequently demonstrate higher digital independence than adults recognize – while they help parents with technology, they simultaneously hide troubling online experiences due to fear of overreaction or misunderstanding. Teachers across all countries report feeling underprepared to address digital challenges. Lack of systematic training and clear institutional protocols are some of the fragilities pointed out by them. At the same time, parents struggle with balancing protection and autonomy, often deferring digital education responsibilities to schools. The results of the fieldwork consistently show that trust-based relationships serve as the foundation for effective digital citizenship education, with pre-adolescents naturally gravitating toward empathetic, approachable adults when facing online struggles.

Moreover, ASAP's fieldwork findings highlight the need for coordinated approaches that move beyond fragmented, reactive responses to proactive and collaborative frameworks. Looking at the future, the results indicate that digital education initiatives must prioritize building intergenerational trust through structured dialogue opportunities, comprehensive professional development for educators, and family-school partnerships that bridge the disconnection between formal and informal learning environments. Effective interventions require more than technical skills training - they must integrate emotional support, critical thinking development, and mental health considerations while recognizing the diverse backgrounds and engagement levels of young users. As a critical point, data emphasises the necessity of involving preteens as active participants rather than passive recipients in developing digital policies and educational programs. Acknowledging their digital experiences as legitimate and valuable is fundamental to go beyond dismissive or punitive responses. All in all, success in digital citizenship education will depend on creating sustainable, evidence-based programs that foster resilience, responsibility, and positive online behaviours through collaborative efforts among all stakeholders.

*For further reading, the ASAP Field Research reports are available through the project communication channels. See Project Information table above for details.*

## 5. Good Practices in Partner Countries and Common Success Factors

### 5.1. Good practices in partner countries

ASAP's Desk Research across the five partner countries has revealed a dynamic landscape of initiatives that have been addressing digital literacy, social media education, and online safety for young audiences, particularly pre- and adolescents. The following sections present an overview of best practices identified across Italy, Slovenia, Portugal, Croatia and the Czech Republic.

#### 5.1.1. Italy

Italy demonstrates a strong commitment to addressing digital safety and literacy through several key initiatives:

##### Institutional initiatives

- **Scuola Digitale (PNSD)**, institutional platform for Italy's National Digital School Plan, providing guidelines, funding, and resources to modernise school infrastructures and strengthen digital skills for students and teachers.
- **Piattaforma ELISA**, national e-learning and monitoring system providing Italian schools and teachers with tools and strategies to prevent and contrast bullying and cyberbullying.
- **Generazioni Connesse (SIC)**, Italian Safer Internet Centre coordinated by the Ministry of Education, promoting the safe and positive use of digital media and tackling online risks for young people.

##### Other initiatives

- **Benessere Digitale – Scuole**, media education programme for secondary schools promoting critical thinking and conscious management of digital time and information.
- **Patti Digitali**, community-based initiative facilitating shared agreements between families and schools on digital rules and age-appropriate device use.
- **Parole O\_Stili**, communication project promoting respectful online dialogue and non-hostile language through a widely adopted Manifesto.
- **Patente di Smartphone**, structured educational pathway for lower secondary schools, framing digital access as a conscious "rite of passage".
- **MEDIAEDU**, national network and academic hub supporting media education research and teacher training across Italy.
- **Giovani Ambasciatori (MOIGE)**, nationwide peer-led programme training students to prevent and tackle bullying and cyberbullying.
- **Italian Data Protection Authority (Garante Privacy)**, national authority producing

educational resources and guidelines to protect minors' privacy and personal data.

- **Open the Box** (DataNinja), educational project focussing on data literacy and digital media analysis to combat online misinformation.

#### **From the ASAP partnership**

- **Fondazione Carolina** (ASAP Associated Partner), institution established in memory of Carolina Picchio and official partner of the Ministry of Education, reaching 90,000 students annually through national anti-cyberbullying programmes, such as:
  - **Rescue Team**, cyber emergency service providing urgent support and intervention for minors who are victims of online violence.
  - **TRACeD**, EU-funded project dedicated to preventing and tackling gender-based cyberviolence through research and training.
  - **Minoronline.com**, educational and informative platform providing parents with resources to navigate digital risks and opportunities.
  - **Conessioni Delicate**, multi-stakeholder initiative in collaboration with paediatric associations and Meta, focusing on digital health and early-age prevention.
  - **CyberJoy**, advocacy campaign centring on children's fundamental right to safe, positive, and playful online navigation.
- **Pepita** (ASAP Partner), educational cooperative specialising in digital wellbeing and the prevention of risky online behaviours through training for students, teachers, and families, including:
  - **Io clicco positivo**, digital education format promoting digital awareness and responsible online behaviour through age-appropriate learning.
  - **Solo per te**, educational pathway on affectivity and sexuality in the digital age, focusing on emotional literacy and healthy online relationships.
- **Le Nius** (ASAP Partner), digital communication laboratory and social enterprise providing educational content and media literacy programmes to foster active citizenship, such as:
  - **Digital Bees**, media and digital skills programme focused on developing informed and responsible digital citizens.

#### **5.1.2. Slovenia**

Slovenia promotes various support systems, frequently emphasizing institutional coordination and psychological support:

##### **Safer Internet Centre Slovenia**

- National project co-financed by European agencies and supported by the government
- Consortium includes the University of Ljubljana and other partners
- Three main components:
  - **Awareness Centre Safe.si**: Educational workshops and resources on safe

internet use

- **Helpline TOM telefon:** Support and advice for children and adolescents in stressful situations
- **Hotline Spletno oko:** Anonymous reporting system for images of child sexual abuse

### **Logout – Centre for Digital Wellbeing**

- Initiative that provides free psychological help for youth dealing with digital issues including internet addiction and online abuse
- Programs include:
  - **Logout&Restart:** For internet addictions
  - **Digital Diet:** For excessive digital media use
  - **Logout&SpeakOut!:** For sexually abused children
  - **Youth and Cyberbullying workshop:** Educating on recognizing and responding to cyberbullying

### **ARNES – Academic and Research Network of Slovenia**

- Public institute that provides network services and education to research and educational organizations
- Key programs:
  - **MOOC on safe use of Internet for adults (MOST-V):** Develops digital competencies for educators and adults
  - **MOOC on safe use of Internet for kids (MOST-VO):** Teacher-led course for students aged 9-14 covering online scams, etiquette, privacy, cyberbullying, and health impacts

#### **5.1.3. Portugal**

Portugal demonstrates a strong commitment towards institutional coordination and educational resources to address digital literacy and citizenship:

#### **Centro Internet Segura (Safer Internet Center Consortium)**

Partnership of seven organizations focusing on:

- Making the internet safer
- Enhancing citizens' awareness on online subjects
- Developing digital competencies
- Operates Hotline and Helpline services through APAV (Portuguese Association for Victim Support)
- Actively engages with European and International forums and groups working on digital competences, risks and safety.

#### **Digital Leaders Initiative**

- Initiative promoted by the Portuguese Ministry of Education, through the General Directorate for Education, that intends to empower student teams (ages 9-18) to develop awareness initiatives on Digital Citizenship
- Students serve as Safer Internet Centre young advisers
- Participants represent Portugal in international forums and events

#### **Media Education Guidance**

- Guiding document approved in 2014 to support pedagogical work on Media Education in educational settings
- Promotes a transversal and transdisciplinary approach rather than single initiatives structured around 12 themes with specific learning objectives for each educational level
- An updated version was published in 2024, reflecting the impacts of the most recent technological developments (e.g. articulated intelligence, social networks) and the social and behavioural changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, among other.

#### **5.1.4. Croatia**

##### **Brave Online Shelter (UHO)**

- Online platform created through collaboration between DKMK, Vienna Insurance Group, and Hrabri Telefon
- Uses popular influencers to encourage children to report cyberbullying
- Provides expert advice from psychologists and communication specialists
- Received over 900 messages during a four-month campaign

##### **Portal medijskapismenost.hr**

- Media literacy portal launched by UNICEF and Agency for Electronic Media
- Provides educational materials for schools and kindergartens related to media education
- Offers recommendations for parents and guardians and updated information on media impacts

##### **Brave Phone Memory Game**

- Educational game developed by NGO Hrabri Telefon with the support of the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth, and Social Policy that teaches internet safety
- Addresses online behaviour rules in an engaging format
- Has a particular focus on internet Safety

#### **5.1.5. Czech Republic**

The Czech Republic showcases innovative approaches to digital education using interactive

and audiovisual methods:

### **DigiStories: Nela**

- Interactive video game simulating conversations on social networks to facilitate discussions about cyberbullying, created through collaboration between JSNS educational programme, Charles Games studio, and teachers
- Designed for students aged 11-15 years old
- Recognized with the EDUína 2021 Award for Innovation in Education
- Successfully implemented in over 400 schools since May 2021

### **"Caught in the Net" Documentary and Educational Initiative**

- Documentary exposing online sexual abuse of children
- Features adult actresses posing as 12-year-old girls to demonstrate grooming tactics
- Includes a modified version for viewers aged 12+ titled "In the Net: Behind the School"
- Supplemented by a dedicated website offering professional guidance for children, parents, teachers, and potential predators

### **Bullying Minimization Program**

- Four-workshop series followed by on-site consultations that train teachers to recognize bullying, set safe classroom climates, and properly investigate incidents
- Helps elementary schools develop customized anti-bullying programs
- Facilitates teamwork between teachers in prevention and handling of bullying cases

### **5.2. Common success factors**

The analysis of the various good practices identified in each country highlights a number of success factors that can not only inspire new initiatives, but also justify the validity of replicating programmes and activities in other European contexts.



### **5.2.1. Multi-stakeholder Collaboration**

Successful initiatives in the field of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) tend to rely on strong, multi-sector partnerships that gather government bodies, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and, in some cases, private sector companies. Exploring these strong collaborations ensures that initiatives benefit from diverse perspectives, resources, and networks, ultimately enhancing their reach and impact. MIL programs based or supported by these partnerships can address both the educational and societal dimensions of media literacy in more successfully

A key aspect of these initiatives relies in the integration of expertise from multiple fields - from education to psychology, law enforcement, and technology. Interdisciplinary approaches allow projects and initiatives to tackle the complexity of digital environment from a holistic approach.

Furthermore, cross-border cooperation also tends to be a crucial feature of many successful MIL projects, in particular those supported by European funding. These collaborations facilitate the sharing of best practices and innovative tools across countries, delivering high-quality, accessible and transversal recourses for various target groups.

### **5.2.2. Empowerment vs Restriction: comprehensive approaches to digital literacy**

Effective MIL initiatives are increasingly grounded in empowerment-based approaches. More than preventing dangers and risky behaviours, focusing on equipping young people with the skills, confidence, and critical thinking needed to navigate digital environments is essential to promote responsible and confident relationships with the media. Rather than solely relying on restrictive or fear-based discourses that focus on dangers and its impacts (e.g. cyberbullying), the most successful initiatives are student-led, positioning young people as active participants and decision-makers in media ecosystems. More than fostering agency, these approaches also encourage responsible online behaviour and positive digital citizenship.

Therefore, comprehensive approaches to digital literacy include understanding - and developing - a broader range of competencies that encompass technical, ethical and civic skills. Frameworks such as DigComp 2.2 provide valuable guidance by addressing not just safety, but also confidence, creativity, and critical engagement with digital tools and media. Programs that align with such frameworks shift the focus from prevention to potential, highlighting how technology can be used in constructive manners to communicate, collaborate, learn.

Comprehensive approaches to digital literacy can also benefit from exploring storytelling and real-life scenarios. Documentaries, such as the Czech documentary “Caught in the Net”, can explore authentic narratives to spark reflection and conversation around digital literacy-related topics. When combined with active learning, co-creation, and youth leadership, these approaches make digital literacy education more relevant, meaningful, and impactful.

In addition, the implementation of prevention and response mechanisms is fundamental when it comes to media in education. Combining preventive education with accessible response mechanisms, such as Croatia's Red Button reporting tool, contributes to equipping young people with tools and skills to prevent and recognize digital risks, but also have clear, accessible ways to respond when problems arise. Moreover, strengthening these mechanisms and tools with contributes from experts from various disciplines ensures comprehensive and supportive approach to online safety and digital wellbeing.

### **5.2.3. Age-appropriate content and delivery**

Successful MIL programs demonstrate that one size does not fit all. Customised approaches to training content are essential to ensuring relevance, engagement, and impact. From early childhood onwards, educational strategies must align with learners' developmental stages, using age-appropriate language, scenarios, and learning objectives. Several examples portray successful actions that promote foundational digital skills in playful, accessible formats for younger learners such as Croatia's Petzanet curriculum - target at children aged 7–14 - and the Brave Phone Memory Game.

To effectively engage children and teenagers, MIL initiatives are increasingly exploring interactive and immersive formats such as storytelling, gamified approached, and peer-to-peer learning, methods that not only capture attention but also foster deeper understanding through hands-on, experiential learning. Tools such as the Czech Republic's DigiStories game and adapted documentary content bring digital issues to life in ways that resonate with young audiences, encouraging them to think back to their experiences to critical thinking and reflect on their own media behaviours.

By embracing innovative formats and tailored design, MIL programs can advocate for strong digital literacy foundations from an early age.

### **5.2.4. Integration of updated research and flexibility**

To ensure the relevance, efficiency, and impact of MIL initiatives, evidence-based approaches that are continuously updated and improved in line with new media contexts are fundamental.

By drawing on up-to-date findings, MIL approaches can better understand the young people's realities and online experiences, as well as anticipate emerging challenges. European and cross-country initiatives such as EU Kids Online have been conducting longitudinal research, regularly updating not only research results, but also educational and informative materials that guide both policy and practice.

To remain relevant, MIL programs must also be flexible and adaptive. Programs should evolve alongside the fast-paced nature of digital technology. Therefore, by combining robust research, relatable content, and an agile response to trends, educators, practitioners,

families, policymaker and other stakeholders can ensure that MIL efforts stay grounded, and truly supportive of young people's digital wellbeing.

#### **5.2.5. Ecosystem approach**

Taking an integrated and appropriate approach to media and digital education requires the cooperation of the entire educational community - students, parents and families, teachers, school administrators and remaining staff. Each group plays a vital role in shaping how young people understand and navigate the digital world. Thus, by promoting collaboration among all stakeholders, MIL initiatives can create a more consistent and supportive learning environment that goes beyond the school walls.

By promoting multi-level approaches, both in the development and delivery of training and capacity-building activities, helps to bridge the gap between home and school, reinforcing collaboration and the relevance of the roles of those involved in each context. As a final intent, these approaches positively contribute to reinforcing digital literacy and citizenship across all areas of young people's life.

#### **5.2.6. Psychological support components**

Digital technologies are increasingly becoming central part of young people's lives. As online experiences (positive and negative) can significantly affect a young person's emotional and psychological state, mental health and wellbeing-related topics have become increasingly pressing. MIL programs need to focus on more than just skills and safety, but also enhance approaches on healthy and balanced digital habits and guidance on managing the emotional impact of digital life.

Coordinating MIL actions with experts in the field of security and mental health can contribute to designing new programs or redesigning existing ones, to address digital wellbeing, to help reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking behaviours, and create safer, more supportive online environments.

Platforms such as Croatia's UHO, which offer expert advice and support from psychologists and other specialists, are increasingly relevant. By combining professional mental health guidance with digital literacy education, UHO reinforces the connection between wellbeing and digital engagement and highlights the importance of addressing the emotional and social dimensions of digital life alongside technical and informational competencies.

#### **5.2.7. Free and Accessible Resources**

Relevant and transversal to all the points raised above, ensuring broad and equitable access to MIL resources, training and initiatives is a key component of effective digital education.

On the one hand, initiatives must value and promote the diversity of participants - those in remote or underserved areas and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Promoting an inclusive approach does not expand the reach of MIL programs and aligns with key sustainable

development goals.

Then, making high-quality tools available for free promotes inclusivity, supporting all segments of society, regardless of socio-economic status, promoting a more level playing field in terms of digital literacy development.

To further promote inclusivity, materials should also be developed or adapted in various formats - videos, infographics, and audio content. By doing so, it becomes possible to meet the diverse needs, preferences, and abilities of different users. Ensuring open access and format diversity helps ensure that no citizen is left behind.

## 6. ASAP Key Recommendations

The digital landscape that pre-adolescents navigate today presents unprecedented opportunities and challenges. After extensive research, and collaborative work across five European countries, the ASAP consortium has developed a comprehensive understanding of how young people engage with social media and digital platforms and how educational contexts - from family to school - can address these challenges.

This chapter presents our Key Recommendations — drawn to guide educators, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders to promote healthier digital environments for young people. These recommendations emerge from our research into pre-adolescents' online behaviours, the integration of digital media in educational settings, and the fundamental role of (educator) mediation in shaping positive digital experiences.

Rather than offering simplistic "one size fits all" solutions, we propose systemic approaches that recognize the complex interplay between technology, education, and youth development. Each recommendation addresses specific needs identified through our research while ensuring cultural sensitivity, the importance of context and practical applicability across diverse European contexts.

These recommendations are not self-contained. They call for the constant participation and reflection of stakeholders, to consider them as building blocks for creating more mindful, and balanced digital experiences that support healthy development of Europe's youth.

## **6.1. Key Recommendations for the School Community and Other Learning Communities**

### **6.1.1. Early and systematic digital literacy implementation**

#### **Recommendation:**

Create opportunities within the classroom to implement age-appropriate digital literacy education beginning from first grade, establishing systematic and progressive activities that build skills year over year.

#### **Implementation tips:**

- Develop comprehensive, multi-year digital literacy programs with clear learning objectives and assessment methods.
- Address the gap between when children begin using technology and when formal education starts by replacing isolated workshops with continuous learning experiences.
- Establish formative assessment protocols to regularly measure both technical skills and digital citizenship behaviors.

### **6.1.2. Prioritize foundational skills and information literacy**

#### **Recommendation:**

Emphasize basic digital operations and critical thinking skills before introducing advanced concepts (e.g. programming). Assess your class to integrate a comprehensive understanding of technology's basic principles and ethical dilemmas.

#### **Implementation Tips:**

- Focus on fundamental skills like document management, password security, email communication, and information verification.
- Teach students to critically analyze online content and verify sources to combat digital misinformation.
- Incorporate real-life scenarios, including scams, cyberbullying consequences, and digital risks, to make learning relatable and impactful.
- Move beyond deficit-based approaches to establish evidence-based foundations for digital literacy education.

### **6.1.3. Comprehensive risk awareness and online safety**

#### **Recommendation:**

Address exposure to harmful content while teaching digital footprint awareness and understanding of long-term consequences.

**Implementation tips:**

- Equip students with skills to recognize and respond to harmful online content, providing clear reporting mechanisms and emotional support resources.
- Build awareness of how online behavior affects future opportunities and relationships, encouraging thoughtful digital participation.
- Address myths, anxieties, and moral panics surrounding digital technology, including oversimplified concerns about stranger danger and screen time limits, to establish evidence-based discussions about digital safety.

**6.1.4. Integration of social-emotional learning as a set of core competencies****Recommendation:**

Integrate socio-emotional and metacognitive approaches within your classes, to develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and critical thinking skills alongside technical competencies.

**Implementation Tips:**

- Address shortened attention spans caused by social media consumption through classroom practices and activities that gradually build sustained focus.
- Create explicit connections between digital citizenship and social-emotional learning to counteract declining empathy and strengthen social bonds.
- Recognize and value young people's diverse digital practices beyond entertainment, acknowledging the meaningful role digital platforms play in their social relationships, identity development, and creative expression.

**6.1.5. Inclusive and differentiated learning approaches implementation****Recommendation:**

Establish mixed-ability digital literacy groups and address disparities in children's digital experiences and backgrounds through inclusive learning approaches.

**Implementation Tips:**

- Create peer learning opportunities that pair students with varying levels of technological competence to promote mutual support and knowledge exchange.
- Identify the best curricula, activities and materials that meet your classes' needs, expectations, and digital backgrounds, acknowledging that some students may only be familiar with mobile devices while others have broader technological exposure.
- Address motivation, training needs, and time constraints for both students and educators by providing adequate resources, professional development opportunities, and realistic implementation timelines.

### **6.1.6. Interdisciplinary integration and student voice**

#### **Recommendation:**

Promote interdisciplinary approaches to digital literacy while amplifying and prioritizing children's voices in discussions and decision-making processes.

#### **Implementation tips:**

- Integrate critical analysis and use of technology across subjects, such as exploring algorithms in mathematics classes or examining digital media in language arts.
- Ensure students' perspectives, experiences, and needs are genuinely heard and incorporated into policy and practice.
- Understand the fundamental importance of digital platforms in young people's social lives, recognizing the meaningful connections and communities they create and engage with online.

### **6.1.7. Promotion and engagement in professional development, and pedagogical innovation initiatives**

#### **Recommendation:**

Organize regular training initiatives aligned with pre-identified competency gaps and emerging technological developments, while implementing innovative pedagogical tools and resources.

#### **Implementation tips:**

- Provide regular, updated training (at least on a yearly basis) for teachers and school staff (administrators, counsellors, psychologists and nurses, support staff) on digital literacy and emerging technologies, making opportunities accessible and free to the entire educational community.
- Create teacher collaboration networks to facilitate sharing of best practices and resources. Implement innovative pedagogical approaches including gamification, production-based activities, and collaborative projects that actively engage students.
- Certify educators who complete media literacy training with special professional recognition to incentivize participation and elevate expertise.

### **6.1.8. Parents and families engagement**

#### **Recommendation:**

Develop systematic parent education programs and establish clear communication channels to improve family digital literacy and awareness.

#### **Implementation tips:**

- Develop systematic workshops and resources to address the gap where parents lack

basic digital knowledge while their children are advanced users, enabling better home supervision and support.

- Create regular communication with parents about digital literacy goals and student progress to build partnerships that reinforce digital citizenship lessons at home and ensure consistent messaging across environments.

#### **6.1.9. Intergenerational learning initiatives**

##### **Recommendation:**

Facilitate intergenerational learning activities where students, parents, and grandparents learn together.

##### **Implementation tips:**

- Organize events or workshops that allow different generations to share digital knowledge and skills. This bridges generational digital divides while fostering mutual understanding, respect, and solidarity within families and the community, creating a more cohesive approach to digital literacy across age groups.

#### **6.1.10. Promotion and establishment of multi-stakeholder collaboration and community partnerships**

##### **Recommendation:**

Establish multi-stakeholder dialogue and partnerships among teachers, parents, students, and the broader community to create shared understanding around digital literacy and online safety.

##### **Implementation Tips:**

- Strengthen collaborations with parent associations, pediatricians, and community organizations to create comprehensive support networks.
- Transform traditional school authority structures by promoting collaborative, creative spaces that connect all educational stakeholders as co-learners and co-creators.
- Invite external experts and practitioners to bring specialized knowledge and real-world experience into school environments.

## **6.2. Key Recommendations for Families**

### **6.2.1. Fostering of open and non-judgmental dialogue**

#### **Recommendation:**

Cultivate regular dialogue with your children about their digital experiences through informal conversations that demonstrate genuine curiosity rather than surveillance or control.

#### **Implementation tips:**

- Position yourself as a co-learner rather than an authority figure – this will help build trust and mutual respect
- Practice active listening that validates children's experiences and perspectives, even when disagreeing with their choices
- Approach conflicts as learning opportunities rather than power struggles, focusing on understanding underlying needs and finding solutions that work for and satisfy both sides
- Create safe channels for children to report uncomfortable or harmful online experiences without fear of punishment

### **6.2.2. Responsible digital behaviours portrayal**

#### **Recommendation:**

Question your own behavioural models and digital habits, recognizing that pre-adolescents mirror behaviours and learn not only from what they observe but also from what they are told. Portray balanced technology use and digital mindfulness in your daily interactions with them.

#### **Implementation tips:**

- Consciously limit phone and device use during family time and direct interactions with pre-adolescents
- Practice intentional technology use by explaining when and why you use devices for specific purposes
- Acknowledge your own digital challenges, discussing struggles with screen time and digital distractions with your children
- Show that managing technology use is an ongoing challenge that requires continuous self-reflection and adjustment – even for you.

### **6.2.3. Adoption of family digital agreements**

#### **Recommendation:**

Collaboratively develop a family digital agreement, ensuring all family members have input into rules and expectations. The agreement should reflect shared values rather than imposed

restrictions.

**Implementation tips:**

- Implement "The habits I want to change" framework where all family members identify digital habits they wish to modify, promoting self-reflection and personal responsibility
- Involve children in defining screen time rules rather than imposing strict bans - prohibition can increase temptation
- Align home technology rules with your children's school policies and work with other families to ensure consistent implementation
- Involve other family members (e.g. grandparents) in the digital agreements – cooperation is fundamental for agreements to work out

**6.2.4. Improvement of digital literacy competencies**

**Recommendation:**

Develop a comprehensive understanding of technology's basic principles and fundamental digital competencies to better guide and supervise your children's digital activities. Learning as a family is an important first step.

**Implementation tips:**

- Learn basic digital skills including password management, privacy settings, and online risk recognition
- Stay informed about the social media platforms, games, and applications your children use regularly
- Attend school digital literacy programs and workshops to support both your learning and school efforts
- Participate actively in parent-teacher discussions about digital challenges rather than simply receiving notifications about digital-related topics
- Be cautious of information overload and self-titled experts who offer simplistic solutions to complex digital challenges. Focus on evidence-based resources and professional guidance.

**6.2.5. Understanding digital dependency and self-regulation as pressing topics**

**Recommendation:**

Learn to recognize signs of digital dependency and implement strategies to prevent and support healthy self-regulation skills.

**Implementation tips:**

- Monitor for inability to self-regulate screen time, decreased attention spans, and difficulty transitioning away from devices

- Create device-free zones within your home and establish routines that support both digital and offline activities, ensuring children have opportunities for diverse experiences and relationships
- Provide regular opportunities for activities requiring extended focus such as reading, puzzles, or in-depth conversations – and actively engage in them
- External controls are not enough – help your children build internal motivation and self-regulation

#### **6.2.6. Teaching critical information evaluation**

##### **Recommendation:**

Develop your child's ability to verify online information accuracy and recognize potential manipulation.

##### **Implementation tips:**

- Make information verification a routine family activity - consistently reminding children to check if online information is accurate will help them become conscientious of harmful information they might encounter online
- Use real examples from their online experiences as teaching opportunities to demonstrate fact-checking methods
- Show how to evaluate website credibility, check author credentials, and identify reliable versus unreliable sources
- Address dis- and misinformation in age-appropriate ways, explaining how false information spreads and why verification is essential

#### **6.2.7. Navigating social media influence and peer pressure**

##### **Recommendation:**

Help your children understand how digital platforms can affect social relationships, self-worth, and consumer behavior. Information is the best prevention possible.

##### **Implementation tips:**

- Discuss how social media access has become tied to social status and help children understand that their worth extends beyond digital platforms
- Teach recognition influencer marketing, using specific and familiar examples
- Address fear of missing out (FOMO) and social comparison by explaining how online presentations don't reflect complete reality
- Create alternative sources of social connection through in-person activities, such as participating in clubs, sports, and interests independent of digital platforms

#### **6.2.8. Emotional and social development**

##### **Recommendation:**

Develop essential soft skills for building strong, trustworthy relationships with your children, including empathetic listening, constructive conflict resolution, and collaborative negotiation techniques

**Implementation tips:**

- Prioritize face-to-face social interaction while teaching empathy and emotional regulation in digital contexts
- Explicitly discuss how digital communication impacts others' feelings and teach consideration and respect for the person behind every screen interaction
- Monitor for changes in emotional regulation, sleep patterns, or social behaviour that might relate to digital (mis)use

**6.2.9. Maintaining a balanced perspective on digital engagement**

**Recommendation:**

Recognize the positive aspects of children's digital engagement while maintaining awareness of potential risks, avoiding fear-based approaches that dismiss the value of online experiences.

**Implementation tips:**

- Acknowledge that digital spaces are real social environments where pre-adolescents build meaningful relationships and develop social skills
- Avoid oversimplified approaches (e.g. merely "reducing screen time") without understanding the context, purpose, or value of your child's digital activities.
- Support children in developing critical thinking skills about digital media and online relationships rather than imposing decisions
- Create family routines and spaces that support both digital and offline activities, ensuring diverse experiences and relationships

**6.2.10. Implementation of effective monitoring and guidance**

**Recommendation:**

Combine appropriate oversight with educational conversations to promote digital literacy and self-awareness.

**Implementation tips:**

- Focus on building internal motivation and self-regulation rather than external controls – this can help children develop the skills they need to make healthy choices independently
- Avoid blaming children exclusively for device use issues; examine family patterns, environmental factors, and systemic contributions to digital behaviours

### **6.3. Key Recommendations for Stakeholders & Policymakers**

#### **6.3.1. Establishment of National Digital Education policy frameworks**

**Recommendation:**

Establish unified, coherent national policies that align digitalization efforts with educational goals while resolving contradictory directives about technology use in educational settings.

**Implementation tips:**

- Develop clear policy frameworks that provide consistent direction to schools, teachers, and parents about technology's role in education
- Address conflicts between policies promoting digital literacy and those restricting device access through approaches that maximize benefits while minimizing risks
- Create adaptable guidance frameworks that balance clear principles with flexibility for local adaptation to community needs and contexts
- Establish formal mechanisms for ongoing consultation with educators, parents, children, digital literacy experts, and community organizations

#### **6.3.2. Comprehensive curriculum standards and integration**

**Recommendation:**

Mandate integration of critical digital literacy themes into national curricula, establishing progressive learning objectives that begin in primary education rather than in later educational levels.

**Implementation tips:**

- Create detailed, age-appropriate digital literacy standards for each grade level that build from basic digital operations to advanced critical thinking skills
- Focus on developing critical competencies rather than merely technical skills, emphasizing media literacy, ethical reasoning, privacy awareness, and critical evaluation of digital information
- Balance technical skills with digital citizenship education, requiring equal emphasis on technical competency and ethical digital behavior
- Support initiatives that address socioemotional and metacognitive aspects of digital media use, integrating social-emotional learning with digital education

#### **6.3.3. Professional development and educator support**

**Recommendation:**

Provide adequate, sustained funding and comprehensive support for educator training, including ongoing professional development and collaborative networks.

**Implementation tips:**

- Establish digital literacy as a compulsory subject in initial teacher training courses
- Allocate resources for regular teacher professional development in digital literacy education to address varying skill levels and rapid technology evolution
- Create specialist digital literacy educator roles and coordinators in schools and districts
- Fund platforms and programs that enable teachers to share best practices through formal collaboration networks
- Establish educator support networks that connect institutions to share innovative approaches, challenges, and solutions
- Ensure involvement of meaningful external experts to provide training, research insights, and evidence-based guidance

#### **6.3.4. Parent and Community Engagement**

##### **Recommendation:**

Establish free parent education programs and community digital literacy centers to address the gap between children's advanced technology use and parents' digital knowledge.

##### **Implementation tips:**

- Require or encourage parent digital literacy programs as part of school enrollment processes
- Fund community digital literacy centers that provide accessible adult and family education opportunities
- Create family digital wellness initiatives that support healthy technology use patterns
- Foster partnerships between schools, families, community organizations, and technology companies
- Promote cooperation and shared responsibilities among all stakeholders while ensuring meaningful participation in policy development

#### **6.3.5. Equity, access, and cultural responsiveness**

##### **Recommendation:**

Implement comprehensive programs that address disparities in technology access and digital skills while ensuring cultural responsiveness and multilingual support.

##### **Implementation tips:**

- Ensure universal access to technology and training, addressing situations where some families lack basic computer access while others provide unrestricted device access
- Develop tailored solutions that acknowledge diversity in socioeconomic contexts, cultural backgrounds, technological access, and learning needs
- Provide multilingual and culturally responsive resources that serve diverse communities effectively

- Support schools in under-resourced communities with additional funding and specialized programs
- Ensure resource accessibility across different languages, cultural contexts, and technological capabilities

#### **6.3.6. Safety, risk prevention, and platform accountability**

##### **Recommendation:**

Enact comprehensive regulations establishing evidence-based guidelines for responsible digital media use while mandating platform accountability and transparency.

##### **Implementation tips:**

- Establish comprehensive online safety standards with detailed protocols for prevention, reporting, and response to harmful content exposure
- Regulate age-appropriate access in educational contexts through research-based guidelines and content filtering
- Mandate that social media and technology companies establish formal legal and operational presence within national jurisdictions
- Establish independent Social Media Authorities with adequate resources to regulate platform activities and ensure compliance with child protection standards
- Develop rigorous digital safety standards prioritizing user wellbeing over engagement metrics and profit maximization
- Implement transparency requirements enabling researchers and educators to understand platform impacts on young users

#### **6.3.7. Assessment and quality assurance**

##### **Recommendation:**

Mandate regular assessment of students' digital citizenship skills alongside technical competencies, ensuring measurable outcomes for ethical behavior and critical thinking.

##### **Implementation tips:**

- Create assessment frameworks that evaluate both technical skills and digital citizenship competencies
- Establish data collection systems to monitor student digital behavior, social-emotional development, and academic outcomes
- Develop feedback mechanisms allowing stakeholders to report implementation challenges and successes
- Ensure policies remain responsive to real-world conditions through continuous monitoring and evaluation

### **6.3.8. Research, evidence, and public awareness**

#### **Recommendation:**

Fund longitudinal research on digital education effectiveness while promoting evidence-based public awareness campaigns that counter misconceptions and moral panics.

#### **Implementation tips:**

- Invest in comprehensive research tracking long-term outcomes of different digital literacy approaches
- Build evidence base for policy decisions through systematic data collection and analysis
- Promote evidence-based public awareness campaigns that address myths and misconceptions about digital media use
- Provide families and communities with accurate, research-informed information for decision-making
- Counter oversimplified narratives about technology by acknowledging both opportunities and challenges

### **6.3.9. Multi-stakeholder collaboration and governance**

#### **Recommendation:**

Create Digital Education Advisory Councils and facilitate public-private partnerships while ensuring meaningful participation of all stakeholders, particularly children's voices.

#### **Implementation tips:**

- Establish councils including educators, parents, students, technology experts, and child development specialists
- Develop frameworks for collaboration with technology companies while maintaining public oversight of educational goals
- Ensure meaningful participation of children and young people in policy development processes
- Support international collaboration and learning through participation in global networks focused on digital education and child online safety
- Create formal processes for regularly updating digital education policies based on emerging research and technological changes

### **6.3.10. Sustainability and continuous improvement**

#### **Recommendation:**

Ensure long-term sustainability of digital literacy initiatives through adequate funding, institutional commitment, and continuous adaptation to technological and social changes.

**Implementation tips:**

- Establish regular policy review and update mechanisms that respond to rapid technological change
- Build adaptive policy frameworks capable of addressing new challenges and opportunities
- Ensure sustained funding for all digital literacy initiatives and support systems
- Create institutional structures that support continuous professional development and program evolution
- Develop and disseminate comprehensive, free, and open-access resources including digital literacy toolboxes for parents, pedagogical materials for teachers, and age-appropriate student resource

## 7. Conclusions: Future Directions

The ASAP project emerged from the understanding that pre-adolescents navigate increasingly complex digital landscapes with insufficient systematic and educational support. During three years of research and practice across five European countries, this project revealed both persistent challenges and promising paths forward.

The findings presented in this White Paper underscore several fundamental realities. First, digital engagement among 11-to-13-year-olds is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful – it is omnipresent and significant. While pre-adolescents demonstrate sophisticated digital practices, they still require structured guidance to develop critical thinking, emotional resilience, and awareness. Second, the communication gap between generations remains profound. Young people seek authentic dialogue with adults who understand their digital realities, though they also fear judgment from reference adults. Third, current educational responses are still fragmented, poorly-founded and under-resourced; teachers tend to feel underprepared, and families navigate digital parenting through trial and error.

These challenges highlight a set of urgent needs – effective digital citizenship education systematically integrated across formal curricula, comprehensive professional development for educators, accessible resources for families, and coherent policy frameworks that balance protection with empowerment. But mostly, they identify the urgent need to recognise, in line with the General comment No. 25 (2021) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment, pre-adolescents as active participants in digital environments, whose rights must be respected, protected and fulfilled.

The Key Recommendations presented in this document reflect evidence gathered from over 6,600 students, parents, teachers, and school leaders engaged at different levels in project activities across Europe who voluntarily shared their knowledge, insights, experiences and concerns. Based on their contributions, this White Paper presents priorities and a plan of action for the future, reinforcing the importance of cooperative and shared approaches. If, on the one hand, educational institutions need to move beyond reactive crisis management toward proactive and appropriate digital literacy instruction beginning in early stages of education, on the other, policymakers are called to establish coherent national frameworks that provide clear guidance and margin for contextual adaptation. On another note, families need accessible support to navigate digital parenting complexities, and young people's voices need to be called to inform policy development and programme design. These aspects strengthen the understanding that progress requires sustained commitment across multiple levels – from classroom practices to policy development and implementation.

The partners of the ASAP consortium extend gratitude to all institutional and individual participants who contributed their time, experiences, and expertise to this project. Their willingness to engage with ASAP activities and share authentic perspectives has shaped the

project, this White Paper, as well as our collective understanding of the European landscape. We hope these findings and recommendations will inform policy, inspire practice, and promote continued collaboration across European educational communities.

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# WHITE PAPER

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

It synthesises the main findings, lessons learned and recommendations emerging from the ASAP project, drawing on desk and field research, educational piloting and co-creation activities carried out across five European countries. Building on evidence collected from pre-adolescents, teachers and parents, the White Paper analyses digital and social media practices in pre-adolescence and examines the role of schools, families and policy frameworks in addressing online risks and digital wellbeing. It provides evidence-based recommendations to support the development of coherent, prevention-oriented and rights-based approaches to digital literacy in educational and policy contexts.

For more information, visit [www.socialmediakids.eu](http://www.socialmediakids.eu).



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