

FAMILY SAFETY NET

CHILDREN AND THE INTERNET SMART FROM THE BEGINNING



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CHILDREN AND THE INTERNET SMART FROM THE BEGINNING



The Internet is the most powerful source of information in the history of human civilization; it is an important cultural tool that shapes the personal development of an individual, significantly changing all aspects of modern life. More and more children are using the Internet, although the content on it is not always tailored to their developmental and psychological needs.

Safe and constructive use of digital devices and the Internet requires possession of adequate digital literacy skills: search and critical evaluation of the Internet information, digital communication, digital content creation, safe online behaviour, as well as problem solving in the digital environment.

The right to adopt digital literacy skills is one of the basic rights of children in the digital age. The responsibility of adults – parents, educators, teachers and decision-makers – is to provide adequate protection and support to children for the unimpeded enjoyment of their rights in the digital world. Digital literacy is one of the eight key competencies to be developed during compulsory education.

1 Competence: set of knowledge, skills and attitudes (European Framework of Key Competences in Education, 2006)

THE INTERNET PROVIDES CHILDREN WITH OPPORTUNITIES²:

- Learning and adopting different skills with the help of technology: numerous web tools, applications, tutorials, e-books (e.g. speaking, reading, mathematics, logic, foreign languages, coding and programming, music and visual arts, social, emotional, motor skills, etc.)
- Educational resources for children of all ages (including the youngest), children with developmental and learning disabilities (e.g. problems with reading and writing – dyslexia and dysgraphia – attention and memory difficulties, autism, visual, hearing and other disorders), as well as gifted children
- Adopting '21st century life skills': digital literacy, problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, responsibility, empathy, teamwork, etc.
- Fun, play (virtual and extended reality)
- Finding practical and interesting information
- Creating and sharing various contents in digital format
- Communication and cooperation with others
- Meeting and connecting with peers from around the world
- Developing personal interests, talents, working on oneself
- Social engagement and activism



Despite the fact that children acquire some of the skills to use digital technology and the Internet easier and faster than adults (which may make them more digitally competent than the adults), one should bear in mind that:

1. Digital literacy means much more than digital dexterity.
2. Scientific research results do **not** confirm the common understanding that today's children, so-called 'digital natives', due to the fact that they are 'immersed' in digital culture from the earliest age, are more digitally literate than the adults (teachers and parents), the so-called 'digital immigrants'.
3. Safe and constructive use of the Internet

thus requires support by **adults** as well as learning about it within **formal education**.

The Internet is a positive and inspirational place that provides us with many opportunities. However, using it also brings certain risks.

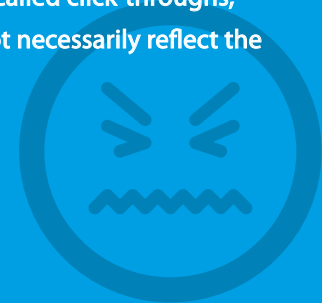
The main challenge for parents/guardians, educators and teachers in the digital age is how **to make the best use of the opportunities that the Internet offers to children and minimize potential risks!**

Adults are responsible for meaningful and purposeful use of technology by children. Ignoring the digital reality in which today's children live might result in opening possibilities for risky use of digital technology.

² Using these opportunities implies intervention by adults, especially when it comes to younger children.

POTENTIAL RISKS ON THE INTERNET:

- Exposure to harmful and inappropriate content (e.g. hate speech, stereotypes, prejudices, violence, pornographic content, etc.)
- Exposure to digital violence
- Contacts with people using the Internet for the purposes of abuse or sexual harassment of children (so-called Internet predators)
- Misuse of personal data, using false identity (identity theft on the Internet), frauds or tricks played on the Internet (hacking someone else's profile, password, website)
- Exposure to inaccurate and unreliable information (so-called click-throughs, created in order to attract readers, although they do not necessarily reflect the content of the text itself)
- Exposure to commercial content (advertisements)
- Spending money (e.g. playing video games)
- Computer viruses, unwanted email (spam)
- Excessive use and dependency on the Internet



Focus attention on the positive aspects of using digital media (what children can do on the Internet and what is good for them), rather than the negative ones (what they cannot do, how much time online is allowed). If you direct your attention to the risks, you might neglect many positive opportunities that the Internet can offer to children.



HOW DO CHILDREN AGED 4 TO 8 MOST OFTEN USE DIGITAL DEVICES AND THE INTERNET?

1 Playing video games (so-called gaming)

For many children, this is the most common activity on the Internet and digital devices. In the video game market, many different video games (for all ages) are currently available, both those that can encourage a child's development and learning, and unfortunately, others that **are not suited** to the needs of children and which can harm their development. **Therefore, it is very important that adults (parents, educators) choose an adequate, age-appropriate game for the child, and participate in the game together with him/her!** There are websites on the Internet where adults can learn about the content of video games, check which age they are intended for and how they are rated by others (see links).

What challenges can children face when playing games online?

- All video games (both purchased and the free ones) contain the option of spending money (buying a game upgrade which allows making progress through the game or provides better options)
- Sharing personal information with unknown users
- Communication with unknown and malicious people (through a chat option)
- Age-inappropriate content (violence, discrimination, vulgar language, etc.)
- Developing dependence on playing video games

2 Watching videos, cartoons

(on video sharing platforms, e.g. YouTube) can also be classified among the most common online activities of children.

These activities, if performed without participation of an adult, informed person, lead to certain risks:

- Exposure to aggressive, violent and age-inappropriate content
- Exposure to commercial content (different types of advertisements, so-called pop-ups – windows that 'pop up' on the screen while playing)
- Leaving personal information on the Internet (so-called digital footprints)

Everyday experience, but also research (both foreign and domestic), shows that children start using digital devices and the Internet **at a younger and younger age!** According to the results of a survey conducted in 2016 in Serbia (UNICEF and the Institute of Psychology), the average nine-year-old began using the Internet at the age of 6, while the average 17-year-old first accessed it at the age of 10.

WHICH AGE IS THE 'RIGHT TIME' TO START USING DIGITAL DEVICES?

- In the experts' opinion (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016), **children under the age of 2 should not spend time in front of the screen** (TV, mobile phone, tablet, computer), **except for participation in adults' conversations via video-chat.**
- Pre-school children (2–5 years of age) should not spend **more than one hour a day** online; such time should be well planned and thought-out, **with necessary adult intervention** (being online together, communicating with the child, explaining or commenting on what the child is watching or doing on a digital device).
- For children aged 6 and older, it is recommended to create an **individual media use plan** with restrictions and family rules to ensure that the time spent in front of the screen does not replace sleep, outdoor play, live conversations, physical activity and other types of behaviour important for the health of the child.



SCREEN TIME?

Despite these guidelines, **there is no solid scientific evidence, nor a universal recipe** for how much time a day each child can spend in front of the screen, **especially when it comes to children over the age of 5.**

'Screen time' is often seen as an 'outdated and meaningless concept'. Experts advise that **a plan for the use** of digital devices and the Internet should be created within the family *(see link) taking into account **individual characteristics of the child** (age, health status), **his/her interests, developmental**

and educational needs, type of activity, family and cultural background.

Experts agree that screen time **cannot replace** other activities that contribute to the healthy development of children – daily physical activity and sports, sleep, mutual activities with family members and socializing with peers without the Internet – as well as that excessive use of digital devices and the Internet negatively affect the health and well-being of children.

The most important thing is to reach the balance between 'online' and 'offline' activities of every child.

Pay more attention to what children do online, the quality of the screen time. Keep in mind the fact that by restricting the usage, we also limit the opportunities for learning, researching, and adopting digital skills! In contrast to passive viewing of video content, interactive and creative activities provided by digital technology contribute positively to children's development.

Technology is a tool! Support children to use it in a smart way! By using technology only for daily communication via chat services (e.g. Viber, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger) and passive viewing of video content, children will not be able to acquire the appropriate digital literacy skills.

Instead of limiting, controlling and supervising, **adults should provide support and actively intervene in the child's use of digital media**; they should act as digital mentors. By their

behaviour, time they spend using digital devices, type of activity they perform, adults shape the behaviour of children, i.e. they serve as models of behaviour.

Take part in children's activities on the Internet, enjoy, play and learn together. Encourage children to learn from what they do, watch and share on digital media.

If you are worried that a school-age child spends too much time on the Internet, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is the child physically healthy and does he/she have enough sleep?
2. Does the child have good social contacts with family members and society outside the Internet or mostly communicate online?
3. Is he/she successful in school activities?
4. Does he/she have other interests and hobbies?
5. Does he/she learn online or use the Internet exclusively for entertainment?

If your answer to most of the questions from the above is YES, there is no reason to be worried! Otherwise, your child's use of the Internet seems to be problematic and you need to take concrete steps (influence a change in the way your child uses the Internet), and, if necessary, seek advice from a professional.

HOW CAN ADULTS (UNCONSCIOUSLY) ENDANGER THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN ON THE INTERNET?

- **When they do not possess proper digital literacy skills** or do not work continuously on their improvement.
- **When they are not familiar with and/or do not respect the terms and conditions of using web services, platforms, web tools,**

e.g. by consenting to or creating a profile for their minor child on a social network site if the child is younger than the age prescribed. The age limit for creating a profile is 13 on most social networks.

- **When they post private information, most often children's photos, on their personal profiles on social networks** – so-called sharenting – or share private information in public, etc.

HOW CAN ADULTS INTERACT IN THE CHILD'S SAFE AND CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF THE INTERNET?

Selecting appropriate digital content and web tools

- Choose **high-quality digital content** (video games, cartoons, applications, websites and web tools) designed for children (e.g. YouTube Kids, Kiddle – search engine for children, Google profile for children under 13 years of age, etc).
- Before you (or your child) download an application or a game, make sure that it is **appropriate for the child's age** (pay attention to the age limit that is usually clearly indicated), read other users' ratings and comments...
- Test the applications, **have insight into digital contents before the child begins to use them**, check what exactly they are

about (unfortunately, sometimes even the Internet content intended for children might contain some inappropriateness).

- Choose **educational content** designed to promote children's intellectual, social, emotional and language development (play, logic, imagination, creativity), but also their physical development (motorics, movement coordination)...
- As shown by neuroscience studies, **two-way communication** with the child (when an adult asks questions and the child responds and vice versa) plays a **key role in early language development**. Passive use of technology does not support children's linguistic development.
- Encourage children to use web tools to **create** content online (alone or in collaboration with others) rather than be passive recipients of the information found on the Internet.

2 Quality communication and participation in children's activities on the Internet

- **Talk to children** about what they like or dislike about using the Internet and digital tools, and why.
- **Be involved in all the online activities** of your child. When it comes to children of **younger (pre-school) age**, it is **NOT recommended for them to use digital devices independently** (after watching a cartoon, turn off the device and discuss with the child the content you watched, check if the child understood it well, ask questions that stimulate thinking and creativity...).
- Talk to children about the **risks** associated

Parental control tools provide protection for children's privacy and safety on the Internet, denying access to certain video games and websites, limiting and monitoring time and money spent by children playing games, restricting online interaction (chat while playing games)...

with using the Internet and the specific steps that need to be taken...

- **Allow children to make a mistake**, use mistakes as opportunities for learning instead of punishing...
- Encourage children to **ask you for help in any situation** when they feel insecure, frightened, upset...

3 Applying technical protection measures

- Use technical protection measures, especially when it comes to **pre-school and lower primary school children**: parental control, spam blocking software, safe search filters, strong passwords... (see the links under Technical protection measures).
- Technical protection measures reduce the chance of a child being exposed to inappropriate content or doing something undesirable (e.g. spend money while playing a video game). However, keep in mind that these measures **cannot provide absolute protection**; therefore, **they should be combined with other forms of parental support** for safe use of the Internet!
- Be aware of the fact that **excessive parental control and protection, even when it refers to the use of digital devices, negatively affects children's development**, since it prevents the children from building their own self-control capacities and growing into people responsible for their own behaviour. It is therefore important to develop children's awareness of potential risks and provide them with such support that they manage time and activities on the Internet on their own.

Proper use of digital devices and the Internet

- Make **family agreements (plans)** on the use of digital devices and make sure that both children and parents stick to them (e.g. mobile devices are not used during a meal, a day without the Internet).
- Establish **clear rules and expectations** regarding the use of digital devices and the Internet: how long, in what activities, when and at what time (e.g. no digital devices one hour before bedtime).
- When defining rules, show respect for the **child's individuality** (personal characteristics and needs), define the rules together, as this increases the child's readiness to obey them since he/she participated in their adoption.
- Before establishing rules, ask yourself whether you are ready to **apply them consistently**, be realistic.
- Do not give children digital devices in order **to get some free time for your own activities**.
- Do not use digital devices and the Internet as **reward** and/or **punishment** (If you do your homework, you'll be allowed to play the game).
- Avoid using digital devices **as the only way to calm your child** (e.g. at the doctor's, while travelling, etc.).
- Plan and practise family activities that do not involve use of digital technology (e.g. play with children games you used to play at their age).
- Associate the Internet experience with the **real life experience** of children (e.g. use video games to teach children to be persistent, to confront challenges, learn from their own mistakes, accept defeat...).
- Use the Internet together with children to **explore and learn, solve practical problems** (e.g. finding information about the places you want to visit, shopping), not just for fun.
- When it comes to the use of digital devices and the Internet, be a **positive model of behaviour – children learn much more from observing adults' behaviour than from direct instruction** (when telling them what is good and what is not).



USEFUL LINKS

Digital content for children (video games, websites, movies, music, applications):

Rating and qualification of video games

<https://pegi.info/>

Information, comments

<http://www.askaboutgames.com/>

<https://www.commonsemmedia.org/reviews>

YouTube for children

<https://www.youtube.com/kids>

Google search engine for children

<https://www.kiddle.co/>

Practical guidelines for adults:

- New guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics (screen time)
 - <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/pages/american-academy-of-pediatrics-announces-new-recommendations-for-childrens-media-use.aspx>
- Guidelines from Australia's Ministry of Health and Aging (screen time)
 - <https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/staying-safe/balancing-time-online/how-much-is-too-much>
- Tools for creating a personalized family plan for using the media
 - <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx#home>
- Using technology in working with children with disabilities
 - <https://www.understood.org/en>
- Google Security Center – Security Tools (Serbian)
 - <https://www.google.com/intl/sr/safetycenter/tools/#home/>
 - <https://www.google.com/intl/sr/safetycenter/families/explore/age-appropriate/>

Safe use of social networks and web applications:

<https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre/social-media-guides>

<https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/blog/key-things-remember-when-helping-your-child-set-new-profile>

<https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre/parents-and-carers/parents-guide-technology>

Technical protection measures (parental control):

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/online-safeguards/parental-controls>

<https://esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/online-safeguards/parental-controls/web-browsers>

<https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/blog/youtube-announce-new-parental-controls-youtube-kids>

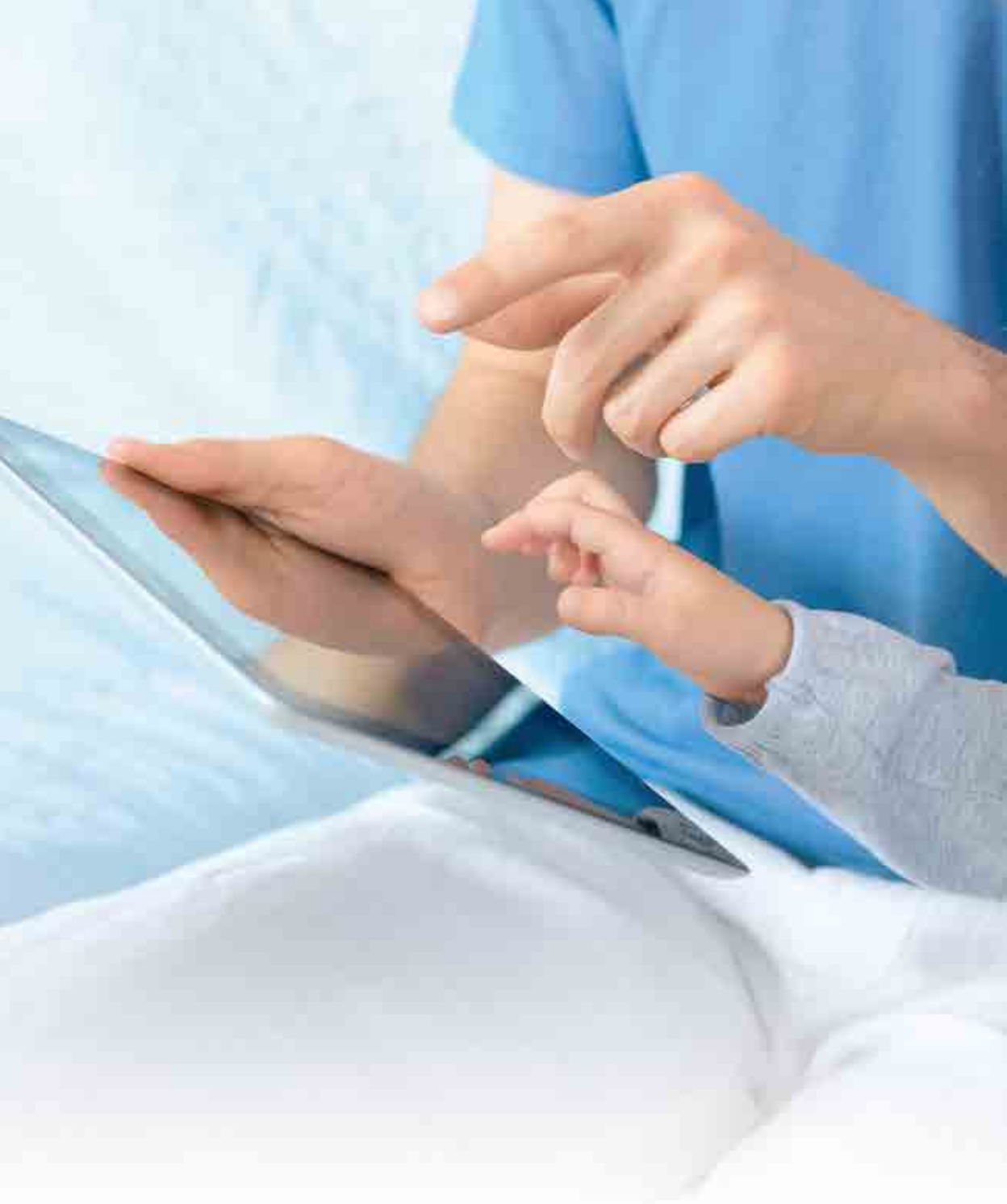
Exposure to harmful content and/or digital violence (explicit sexual content, pedophilia, criminal acts, abuse of children for pornographic purposes):

- National Contact Center for Child Safety on the Internet

<http://www.pametnoibezbedno.gov.rs>
phone: 19833

- Technology Crime Department, Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia
childprotection@mup.gov.rs
phone: +381 11 306 2000

- Superior Prosecutor's Office Belgrade
vtk@beograd.vtk.jt.rs
phone: +381 11 306 1272



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