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Digital Childhood: Challenges for Families, Schools, and the State

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Summary

Digital technologies have become an inseparable part of the lives of children and adolescents. Education, communication, entertainment, and skills development increasingly take place online. Alongside these opportunities, however, concerns are also growing. These include excessive technology use, digital addiction, cyberbullying, and, more broadly, the safety of children on the internet.

Key points

- The digital environment is now a normal part of childhood and cannot be addressed in isolation or through simple bans.
- The way children use technology reflects a combination of influences from families, schools, and the state, rather than the decisions of any single actor.
- The risks of the digital environment do not affect all minors equally and, without adequate support, may deepen existing inequalities.
- The goal of public policy is not to isolate children, but to strengthen their digital resilience and their ability to navigate the online world.

The debate on the role of digital technologies in children's lives has intensified significantly in recent years. The youngest generation today is commonly referred to as Generation Alpha and is characterised by constant exposure to the online environment from birth. As a result, discussions about the safe use of technology, child protection, and education are increasingly moving beyond parents and experts and into the realm of public policy. The state, schools, and families are therefore seeking a balance between supporting digital skills and managing the risks associated with the online environment.

At the same time, the digital world brings a wide range of new challenges. The speed of technological change, the constantly evolving nature of online platforms, and the difficulty of content oversight place growing demands not only on children, but also on parents, educators, and public institutions. The question is no longer whether digital technologies should be part of children's lives, but how we can teach children to use them in ways that ensure the benefits outweigh the risks.

Digital Technologies as a Normal Part of Childhood

Access to the internet, smartphones, tablets, and online platforms is no longer an exception but a standard across socio-economic groups. Childhood and adolescence now unfold in a hybrid environment in which the traditional offline world intersects with the new online one.

From a public policy perspective, this shift must be acknowledged. Digital technologies are no longer a marginal phenomenon deserving only occasional attention. They are a routine part of the environment in which children grow up. It is therefore important to move beyond the question of whether technology belongs in children's lives and focus instead on how it should be used. In other words, attention should be paid to the conditions created by families, schools, and the state.

According to the Report on Digital Addictions in the Czech Republic 2024, the vast majority of young people use the internet on a daily basis. Technology is no longer used solely for entertainment, but increasingly for education, information-seeking, and social interaction. At the same time, research shows the emergence of risky behaviours among young people, including addiction, sleep disorders, eating disorders, and mental health problems. These issues are most often linked to social media and digital gaming. By 2024, this was no longer a marginal phenomenon, but one affecting a substantial share of children and adolescents.

The mere presence of technology or the amount of time spent online, however, are neither the only nor the decisive risk factors. What matters most is how technologies are used and the level of support children receive. Smartphones and computers can foster skills development and creativity. In the absence of clear rules and guidance, however, they can also intensify problems related to concentration, mental well-being, and social relationships.

Another key aspect of digital childhood is the uneven distribution of impacts. Children grow up in very different family and school environments, which shape their ability to use and regulate technology in meaningful ways. The digital environment can therefore serve as a tool for skills development, but also as a factor that deepens inequalities, especially where adequate adult support is lacking.

For public policy, this leads to a basic conclusion: the digital environment is not a problem in itself, but a challenge that requires a systematic response. An effective approach should not rely on simple

bans or isolation, but on creating conditions that support the safe, balanced, and beneficial use of digital technologies.

Schools and the Education System

Schools are one of the few places where children and adolescents use digital technologies regularly, in a structured way, and under adult supervision. They are not only spaces for instruction, but also environments in which boundaries and rules are set on a daily basis. It is precisely here that the tension between the growing role of technology in education and the effort to preserve conditions for concentration, social interaction, and students' mental well-being becomes most visible.

Today, virtually every school routinely works with online tools and digital learning materials. This places new demands on both teachers and students. At the same time, educational institutions are increasingly confronted with issues that go beyond teaching itself. These include the use of mobile phones during lessons, the impact of digital habits on students' attention, and the management of conflicts that originate in the online environment. Such issues inevitably affect the functioning of classroom communities.

From a public policy perspective, it is important to distinguish between the use of digital technologies as educational tools and students' broader behaviour in the digital environment. The former can be addressed relatively effectively through curricula, methodologies, and investment. The latter concerns everyday habits, self-regulation, and social skills. These cannot be shaped through isolated measures, but require long-term and systematic efforts. In this regard, the role of the education system is significant, but also inherently limited.

Schools differ widely in their capacities, staffing, and the level of support available to them. Expecting schools to independently and comprehensively address the impacts of the digital environment on children therefore runs up against systemic constraints. Without a clear framework and support from the state, there is a risk that responsibility for digital education will be shifted onto schools unevenly and without adequate tools.

At the same time, even the most progressive school cannot replace the role of the family or the broader social environment. Children's digital behaviour is shaped by a combination of school rules, family habits, and the influence of online platforms, which teachers themselves cannot control. Only an approach that connects the education system, parents, and the state can be effective. Isolated solutions focused on just one of these actors are unlikely to succeed.

The Limits of Legislation and the Role of the State

The state plays a specific but relatively limited role in the area of digital technologies and their impact on children. On the one hand, it is responsible for creating the legal and institutional framework designed to protect minors from risks. On the other hand, it must contend with the fact that technological development and changes in digital platforms proceed far more rapidly than the drafting and implementation of legislation.

It is therefore natural that legal regulation often lags behind and tends to focus on individual issues rather than the broader context of children's behaviour in the online environment. Legislation can set basic boundaries—for example in the areas of data protection, age limits, or platform responsibility—

but it cannot, on its own, regulate the everyday ways in which children use smartphones, tablets, or computers.

At the European level, regulation of the digital space has been strengthened in recent years, particularly with regard to the responsibility of large online platforms and the protection of minor users. In Brussels and across member states, for example, the controversial Chat Control proposal is currently under discussion. Critics, including the Czech Republic, argue that in some respects it represents a disproportionate intrusion into personal freedoms and an excessive level of surveillance. While such frameworks may contribute to greater transparency and safety, they do not in themselves address children's digital habits or their ability to navigate the online world.

The Czech legal framework in this area is gradually evolving, including efforts to address risks associated with excessive technology use and digital addiction among children, as well as preventive measures. Even here, however, gaps in coordination between individual institutions persist. Another limitation of the state's role lies in the fact that the online environment extends into areas traditionally beyond the direct reach of regulation, such as family life, leisure time, and social relationships. The state can set rules and create frameworks, but it cannot replace the role of the family or everyday upbringing.

An effective role for the state in this field therefore lies more in coordination, support, and the creation of shared frameworks than in detailed control. The state can connect the fields of education, healthcare, and social services, support prevention efforts, collect data, and respond to emerging phenomena through timely analytical tools. At the same time, it must recognise that no legislation can fully substitute for children's ability to navigate the digital environment and regulate their own behaviour.

The Role of the Family and Parents

It is entirely natural that the family represents the primary environment in which the digital habits of children and adolescents are formed. It is at home that decisions are made about when and how children use mobile phones or computers. Parents set rules for their use and shape the way children relate to technology. This highlights how central the parental role truly is, particularly in setting boundaries, establishing behavioural patterns, and mediating children's relationship with the online world.

Today, however, the role of parents is far more demanding than in the past. The digital environment evolves rapidly, platforms and forms of communication change constantly, and adults often find themselves expected to set rules for environments they do not fully understand themselves. Digital parenting therefore places new demands on adults, especially in terms of ongoing learning and navigating the online world.

Differences between families also play a significant role. Parents vary in their available time, levels of digital literacy, access to information, and ability to provide support to their children. These differences are then reflected in how children use technology. The online environment does not affect all children in the same way. Where families lack sufficient time, information, or skills, and where support from schools or other institutions is absent, disparities between children tend to deepen rather than diminish.

From the state's perspective, it is therefore important to view the family as a key—but not the only—actor in digital education. Expecting all parents to independently and sustainably balance the benefits and risks of digital technologies is unrealistic. Without systemic support, responsibility for online upbringing remains largely dependent on the capacities of individual families, which in practice leads to further widening inequalities among children.

Digital Resilience as a Shared Goal

The debate on digital technologies in children's lives often oscillates between two extremes: efforts to restrict technology as much as possible and the belief that children can manage the online environment on their own. Neither of these approaches reflects reality.

Mobile phones, tablets, computers, smartwatches, and other digital technologies are not going to disappear from children's lives. They are part of everyday routines, habits, and rituals, and serve purposes ranging from education and communication to entertainment. At the same time, they expose children to situations for which they are not automatically prepared. These include pressure to be constantly available, comparison with others, difficulty distinguishing between high-quality and problematic content, and the ability to regulate time spent online. It is in this context that the concept of digital resilience comes to the fore

The primary goal is not to protect children by isolating them from technology. What matters is teaching them how to navigate the digital environment safely, confidently, and with perspective. Digital resilience represents a combination of skills, habits, and support that enable children to use technology without being controlled by it. This cannot be achieved through a single measure or by the actions of one actor alone.

Schools can set rules and develop relevant skills, families shape the everyday environment, and the state defines broader systemic conditions. If any of these elements is missing, responsibility is unevenly shifted to the others, most often to teachers or parents.

Digital resilience is a long-term process, not a quick fix. It is not about "teaching children the internet," but about helping them understand their own behaviour, recognise risks, and cope with digital pressure. Equally important is creating an environment in which children know they are not alone, have access to adult support, and can rely on clear and understandable rules.

Conclusion

Digital technologies are a normal part of the lives of children and adolescents. They are not a temporary trend or an external influence that can be easily eliminated. Children grow up in the online environment, learn within it, and form their everyday habits there. The key question, therefore, is not whether mobile phones or computers belong in children's lives, but what conditions society creates for their use.

Children's behaviour in the online environment is shaped at the intersection of several settings. Schools, families, and the state all play important but limited roles that cannot be separated or substituted for one another. When one of these elements fails or lacks adequate support, responsibility is shifted onto the others and inequalities between children may deepen further. An effective approach therefore requires coordination rather than isolated solutions.

The common framework for this debate is the concept of digital resilience. It does not mean protecting children from technology by restricting it, but helping them develop the abilities that allow them to navigate the online world safely, confidently, and with perspective.

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