

Emotional Intelligence in the Digital Age

Screen Exposure, Emotional Development and Bullying Prevention

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Abstract

Digital technologies are deeply embedded in the everyday lives of children across Europe. At the same time, cyberbullying and online peer conflict are rising concerns. Recent European evidence shows that the relationship between screen exposure and children's emotional development depends not only on the amount of time spent online, but also on the type of content, the context of use, and the presence of emotional and social support. In this context, strengthening emotional intelligence within primary education becomes a strategic priority for bullying and cyberbullying prevention. Emotional development and digital literacy should not evolve separately, but together, as complementary competences that enable children to navigate digital environments safely, responsibly, and with resilience across Europe. The Erasmus+ PreMedBullying project aims to support this by promoting a whole-school approach that integrates life skills education, school policy development, and responsible digital behaviour.

Introduction: A European Educational Challenge

Across Europe, children aged 8–12 increasingly interact in digital environments for learning, communication and entertainment. The OECD (2021) describes digital engagement as a defining feature of contemporary childhood. While digital environments offer important educational and social opportunities, they also introduce new psychosocial risks.

The most recent Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study (2021/2022 cycle), coordinated by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and published in 2024, reports that approximately 15–16% of adolescents across Europe experience cyberbullying. Rates have increased compared to the 2017/2018 cycle. Gender differences are also observed: girls report higher exposure to relational forms of online aggression, while boys report more direct forms of cyberbullying (Inchley et al., 2024).

These findings confirm that bullying and cyberbullying remain significant European challenges affecting children's wellbeing, school climate, and educational outcomes. In this context, prevention strategies must address both digital environments and children's emotional development.

In response to this challenge, the Erasmus+ PreMedBullying project adopts a whole-school approach that integrates life skills education, school policy development, and digital responsibility.

Emotional Intelligence in the Digital Age

What Recent Research Shows About Screen Exposure

Moving Beyond “Screen Time”

Contemporary research increasingly emphasises that the impact of digital exposure cannot be reduced to the number of hours children spend online. The OECD’s 2024 report *How’s Life for Children in the Digital Age?* highlights that the quality and context of digital interaction are more important than duration alone.

Passive, unstructured digital consumption is associated with higher psychosocial risks, whereas supported and purposeful digital engagement may enhance learning and social connection (OECD, 2024). This reflects a broader shift in scientific understanding: digital environments interact with children’s existing emotional and social capacities.

Emotional Regulation and Digital Habits

Emotional regulation refers to a child’s ability to manage frustration, disappointment, social stress and conflict. These skills develop primarily through:

- Face-to-face social interaction
- Guided reflection
- Adult modelling
- Conflict resolution practice

When digital devices become primary coping tools — for example, used consistently to calm distress — children may have fewer opportunities to strengthen internal regulation skills.

Madigan et al. (2019) found associations between higher screen exposure and later behavioural difficulties in children. More recently, Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens (2022) concluded that digital media effects depend strongly on individual differences, content type, and emotional vulnerability. Children with weaker emotional regulation skills may be more susceptible to negative digital experiences, including online conflict and exclusion.

Social Comparison and Self-Esteem

Digital platforms often promote comparison through visual content, peer evaluation mechanisms, and social metrics. The American Psychological Association (2023), in its *Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence*, notes that exposure to appearance-focused and comparison-based content is associated with lower self-esteem, increased anxiety, and emotional distress.

Emotional Intelligence in the Digital Age

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Low self-esteem is a recognised risk factor for both bullying victimisation and reactive aggression (UNESCO, 2019). Digital exposure therefore interacts with emotional development in ways that can influence peer dynamics within school environments.

Cyberbullying as a Systemic School Issue

UNESCO (2019) emphasises that bullying is not solely an individual behavioural problem but a systemic school climate issue. Cyberbullying extends peer conflict beyond school hours, increases psychological pressure due to permanence and audience reach, and requires coordinated prevention strategies.

The HBSC 2024 findings confirm that cyberbullying is embedded within broader peer interaction patterns in Europe. Effective prevention must therefore address both digital behaviour and emotional resilience.

European Policy Context

EU Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)

The European Commission’s Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) promotes high-quality digital education, digital literacy, safe and responsible technology use, and teacher capacity building. The Plan recognises that digital transformation in education must support inclusion, wellbeing, and resilience (European Commission, 2021).

PreMedBullying aligns directly with this framework by integrating digital responsibility into life skills education and teacher training.

EU Child Rights and Online Protection Framework

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021) calls for the protection of children from violence, including online violence, and emphasises the importance of safe digital environments and resilience-building.

Recent European discussions on cyberbullying prevention further underline the need for coordinated, school-based approaches across Member States.

Emotional Intelligence as a Protective Factor

Across OECD and WHO evidence, one conclusion is consistent: Emotional and social competences are key protective factors in digital environments. Core competencies include:

Emotional Intelligence in the Digital Age

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- Empathy
- Self-awareness
- Emotional regulation
- Responsible decision-making
- Conflict resolution

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) approaches have demonstrated positive effects on school climate and reductions in aggressive behaviour (OECD, 2021). Without structured opportunities to develop these skills, children may encounter digital experiences that exceed their emotional maturity.

The Contribution of PreMedBullying

PreMedBullying is a project funded under the Erasmus+ Programme that aims to prevent bullying and cyberbullying in primary schools. The project supports schools in designing and implementing anti-bullying policies and strategies through a whole-school approach, using Participatory Action Research (PAR) and life skills education.

Building on this approach, the PreMedBullying project strengthens:

- Life skills development among primary pupils (10–12 years)
- Teacher and parent training
- School-specific anti-bullying policies
- Online mutual-help communities
- Whole-school prevention frameworks

By focusing on early intervention in primary education, the project addresses a critical developmental stage where peer norms and emotional patterns are still forming. PreMedBullying does not treat cyberbullying as a purely technological issue. Instead, it recognises it as a developmental and relational challenge requiring emotional competence.

Conclusion

PreMedBullying contributes clear European added value by aligning with EU priorities on digital education, child protection, and inclusive school environments. Through its whole-school approach, the project supports the development of safer and more resilient school communities while strengthening cross-country cooperation within the Erasmus+ framework.

The evidence reviewed in this article highlights a key conclusion: digital literacy alone is not sufficient to support children's wellbeing in contemporary digital environments. Emotional and social competences must

Emotional Intelligence in the Digital Age

develop alongside digital skills in order to enable children to engage safely, responsibly, and confidently online.

By promoting empathy, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and responsible decision-making, PreMedBullying addresses the underlying factors that shape both offline and online peer interactions. In doing so, it contributes to more inclusive, supportive, and emotionally aware school cultures across Europe.

In the digital era, strengthening emotional intelligence within education systems is not an optional addition, but a necessary condition for effective bullying and cyberbullying prevention.

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Emotional Intelligence in the Digital Age

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