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Wellness education in the digital age

At a time when digital has become a fundamental part of children's lives as well, it is important to pay attention to their physical and emotional well-being. In this landscape, wellness education takes on particular relevance.

In a time when daily life actions involve new technologies, digital plays a central role in **children's lives** as well. The Covid-19 pandemic has accentuated this aspect, showing the **potential of digital technology**, which enables people every day to communicate even at a distance, to receive information and learn from home, via a connection. The importance of digital in education and socialization has made the Internet a fundamental service for people of all ages, so much so that some governments have recognized access to the Net as a human right. Digital technology also offers beneficial opportunities for children, who can connect with friends through social networks and find information easily. But Internet use can also hide risks, from cyberbullying to privacy and health hazards. For this reason, it is essential to provide children with the knowledge and skills they need to safeguard their physical and emotional well-being.

Physical well-being

The increase in children's use of Internet-enabled devices has raised questions about the impact of digital technology on the **health and physical well-being** of those who use new technologies on an ongoing and frequent basis. In particular, concerns have been raised about the amount of time spent in front of the screen, which could have a negative impact on the physical health of children and young people. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, entitled Education in the Digital Age. Healthy and Happy Children, showed the connection between physical well-being and digital technologies, taking into account physical activity, sleep quality and obesity risk. Specifically, the paper noted that:

- Spending a lot of time on digital services reduces time spent on **physical activity** and causes children to develop more sedentary behaviors;
- Time spent in front of a screen can affect **sleep** quality;
- The use of digital technologies may also be linked to **obesity**, both because time spent online reduces physical activity and because of the development of a tendency to eat without a real need when in front of a screen.

The OECD report highlights the increase since 2000 of certain behaviors among children and youth that result in a lack of physical well-being. These include a decrease in recommended daily physical activity, an increase in overweight and obesity caused by poor dietary habits and excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages, and a loss of good quality sleep, often accompanied by a shorter duration of rest time. Thus, the increasing use of new technologies and digital services, including by children, has influenced trends related to physical health, with effects on dietary habits, physical activity and sleep quality.

Emotional well-being

In addition to physical well-being, **emotional health** is a fundamental aspect of life for adults and children. The OECD report on Emotional Well-Being in the Digital Age compiled a number of trends, which emerged in various countries. Specifically, 2016 World Health Organization data showed a decrease from 1990 to 2015 in suicide rates among 15- to 19-year-olds, while bullying levels were unchanged and depression, stress, and anxiety rates increased. The mass use of digital technologies and access to Internet services even by children is a relatively short-lived phenomenon, but entry into the digital age has raised issues and concerns about new technologies and the influence they can have on mental health and emotional well-being. Today, the OECD paper argues, there is evidence pointing to the possibility of a relationship between Net use and problems related to the mental well-being of children and young people. As such, digital has also become a potential "threat" to emotional well-being, although it has also been credited with many opportunities to improve social and emotional cohesion through the promotion of relationship building, communication and distance education. But the reach of digital has raised concerns about potential impacts on children's emotional and mental health. Children in the 21st century, according to the OECD report, report higher and more frequent levels of stress and anxiety, caused in part by the pressure and acceleration associated with an increasingly competitive educational environment.

Students who participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), reported the following:

- 54% of students reported that they "feel bad" when an Internet connection is not available.
- In European countries, socioeconomically disadvantaged students are more likely to report "feeling bad" without a connection than more advantaged students.

In a digital age, where even children use the Web and new technologies, it is critical to keep in mind and recognize the importance of emotional well-being, which can be put at risk by unrestrained use of new media.

Wellbeing education

Given the central role that digital technology has taken on in everyday life and the potential relationship of the use of new technologies to children's physical and emotional health, wellness education has become critical. Educating children to emphasize and prioritize their physical and emotional health is an important goal and enables them to acquire digital skills that will also be useful in the future for making responsible and informed decisions.

The **Covid-19 pandemic**, which has spread around the world, has changed the daily habits of all citizens and has shown the importance of education and training, not only from an academic learning perspective, but also for the development of students' health. In this landscape, schools play a key role, having the opportunity to educate children about wellness in an era where digital has become an integral part of our lives.

According to the OECD report, education has unique potential to be able to "positively influence the health of students and their families" by educating and making a routine those behaviors that are typical of a healthy lifestyle, both for physical health and emotional well-being. The school environment is one of the foremost places for wellness education because it can develop the reasoning and problem-solving skills that are useful in any situation, as well as the emotional and social skills of its students. In this way, children and young people are trained as individuals capable of making decisions individually and paying attention to their own well-being. This is a virtuous mechanism that, according to the OECD, encourages students to stay in school, in turn enabling them to achieve a range of other positive goals, including achieving better employment and higher incomes than those who did not attend school and moving up the social ladder, with health benefits as well.

In general, physical and psychological well-being depends in large part on the ability of children and young people to adopt healthy behaviours and lifestyles that are beneficial to their mental and physical health. Education is therefore a key tool that can also be used to teach children about the importance of their own and others' health and emotional well-being. Schools can use a variety of methods to achieve these goals, but the most common is to incorporate health and well-being topics into the curriculum. In addition, innovative and collaborative models among schools, parents and communities can be useful ways to strengthen children's ability to understand and adapt to different situations, reduce stress levels and improve their well-being.

The World Health Organization's project on school-based health promotion recognized the importance of the link between health and education. It aims to strengthen the capacity of the school environment to promote healthy working and learning conditions by fostering appropriate responses to students' needs. WHO clarifies the characteristics necessarily present in a school, which has as its objective the promotion of health. They consist of:

- Fostering effective **health learning**, using the expertise available to the school;
- Involve **diverse stakeholders**, such as health personnel, teachers, unions, students, parents, and community leaders, to implement the efforts necessary to make the school a healthy place that promotes physical and psychological health throughout the community;
- Provide a **healthy environment** and health education that provides access to nutrition programs, food safety, physical education opportunities, and social and psychological counseling or supports;
- Implement policies and practices with respect for human well-being and **dignity**;
- Commit to **improving the health** of school staff, families, students, and generally all community members by working with national leaders on the importance of health within the community.

Education for physical and emotional well-being appears to be of paramount importance to children in the digital age, and creating healthy lifestyle behaviors must be supported by the family, as much as the school, to ensure students learn about and improve their own and their peers' well-being. These actions have the potential, over time, to reduce tendencies to neglect physical and mental well-being in children and teens encompassed by the digital environment.

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