

# Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us that schools are not just places of academic learning. Schools are part of the social fabric of our communities, and they are increasingly expected to help all children – especially the most vulnerable – thrive academically, socially, physically and psychologically. Balancing these different elements has long been a challenge; doing so well in the digital world even more so.

Understanding the nature of childhood today is an important first step for education to be able to fulfil these goals. Focusing on the intersection between physical well-being and digital technologies, this report explores the important role of play and risk-taking in learning. It looks at the pressures of modern life and a resulting “pursuit of perfection” in physical, cognitive and academic spheres. It examines how education systems empower children to be informed decision-makers when it comes to their own health and well-being, and how it works to protect them from harm. The volume ends with a look at the role of teachers and key partnerships in achieving these aims. This report is the companion to [Educating 21st Century Children: Emotional Well-Being in the Digital Age](#).

## **Part I: Setting the stage: Who are 21st century children and how are they shaped by the digital age?**

**Part I** explores trends in physical health and digital technologies. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the volume, identifying what has changed in the lives of 21st century children and, equally importantly, what has not. Chapter 2 reviews trends in children’s physical health outcomes and behaviours, highlighting improvements in children’s lives in the last half century: better health care, public safety, and support for their physical and mental well-being. At the same time, rates of childhood obesity have risen and children are reporting less sleep and poorer eating habits. The chapter ends with a look at high priority challenges identified by education ministries across OECD members and partner countries, such as overweight and obesity, as well as the interconnections between those challenges.

Chapter 3 highlights trends in the use of digital technologies by children, who are increasingly accessing digital tools more often and at younger ages. Digital technologies empower children’s self-expression, information seeking and socialisation, and in times of need, help could be just a phone call – or WhatsApp message – away. The chapter closes by highlighting top priority policy challenges identified by education ministries across OECD members and partner countries, such as digital citizenship and cyberbullying.

## **Part II: Play!**

**Part II** of the volume explores the serious side of play and the key role of risk-taking for healthy learning and development. Chapter 4 highlights the importance of exhilarating and scary physical play situations that allow children to gain mastery over their fears. It argues that efforts to protect modern children from injury have reduced their opportunities both for physical activity and in learning how to manage risk. It ends with suggestions of practice and policy necessary to implement sustained and meaningful change. Chapter 5 switches gears to focus on play in the digital environment, exploring the potential cognitive benefits of video games and how the video game industry has influenced the nature of play itself. It highlights the

multi-faceted nature of digital activity and the importance of disaggregating terms such as “screen time” or “media use” to better understand when and how policy and practice can best intervene if needed.

Chapter 6 explores the history of the commodification of both play and learning. It argues that it is important not to subordinate play as an instrumental developmental function of learning and that learning itself should not be conflated with the outcomes of the formal education system. Chapter 6 ends with a series of questions for policy, families, young people and schools.

### Part III: The pursuit of perfection

Over the last almost 30 years there has been an increase in socially prescribed expectations for perfection, exacerbated by social media and the success culture that drives it. **Part III** of this volume explores this from three different dimensions: the physical (body image), the cognitive (use of smart drugs) and the digital (pressures from the myth of the digital native).

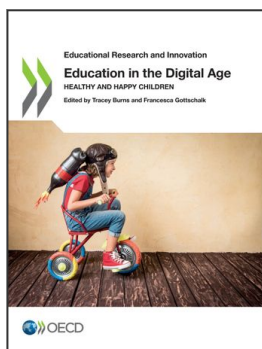
Chapter 7 examines how the rise in social media is related to body image concerns through the promotion of unrealistic and unattainable appearance ideals. Chapter 8 reveals the pressure children face in terms of academic success, which may contribute to a worrying increase in the use of pharmaceutical cognitive enhancers in the absence of medical need. Although still not widespread, a non-negligible number of children and youth are at risk of side effects, while others may feel pressured to take or administer such drugs. Finally, Chapter 9 ends the section with a look at the narrative of “digital natives”, in which young people are portrayed as inherently savvy digital users. Despite limited empirical support, the chapter highlights the persistence of the term and the negative implications it can have for some young people, particularly those already experiencing forms of social inequalities.

### Part IV: Policies, practices, partnerships and the pending agenda

**Part IV** turns the focus to education systems themselves. Chapter 10 highlights the important efforts countries have made to empower students and youth to make informed decisions for their own health and well-being. Providing a rich set of country examples from across the OECD, it looks at food and nutrition, opportunities for physical activity, and the importance of the school as a hub for health service delivery and support. Chapter 11 examines factors that undermine child safety in both digital and physical environments, and the important role education plays in keeping children safe. It highlights policies ranging from safe playspaces and clean air near schools to digital security and anti-bullying initiatives, and explores how teacher responsibility for student well-being is expressed across systems. Chapter 12 looks at two elements crucial to effective delivery of policy and practice: teacher education and partnerships. Focusing on both the digital skills and physical well-being of students, it provides a powerful set of policy examples aimed at building teacher skills as well as innovative cases of partnerships.

Chapter 13 ends with the pending agenda for research and policy. It highlights difficult tensions that exist in education and society more broadly: for example, the conflict between our desire for youth empowerment and the urge for a zero-risk approach to protecting children. It flags the increasing pressure placed on students and schools to be perfect. It identifies gaps in our knowledge and areas for improvement, followed by orientations for policy, research and practice.

As we move further into the 21st century, education will increasingly be called upon to break down its silos and work across policy sectors and research disciplines. To help children thrive academically, socially, physically and psychologically, education must involve an increasingly broad variety of actors, including the private sector. It must continue to engage with challenges that fall outside of the conventional educational discourse, proactively adapting and changing along with our communities and children. We owe it to our children and youth to separate fact from fiction, take risks towards ambitious but achievable goals, and support them to get the best start in life.



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