

Digital Wellbeing:

Are today's families worried enough about the effect of tech on their health and happiness?



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An analysis and data-based look at this growing concern, why parents should care more about it and expert advice on how to achieve it.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Today's parents are more aware than ever of the dangers to their children's mental and physical health; the pillars of Digital Wellbeing. Despite their growing awareness of cyberbullies, sexual predators, data thieves and addictive or harmful content, our research at Qustodio shows the effect of technology on a typical family's **Digital Wellbeing is still not a top concern—it's not even in the top three.**

As pioneers in digital safety and wellbeing, and makers of the leading parental control app, we wanted to shine a light on this important subject and make sure it becomes top of mind for parents. That's why we've put together this Digital Wellbeing report in an attractive, interesting and practical way that we hope parents will actually read and find useful and easy to apply to their family's lives today.

ABOUT QUSTODIO

[Qustodio](#) is dedicated to making it easier for increasingly connected families, aka 'digital families', to stay safe, find wellbeing and live smarter. Our independent parental control app, expert content and this look at the growing concern of Digital Wellbeing are all part of that mission.

Want to learn more? Visit us [Qustodio.com](#) or contact us at hello@qustodio.com.

Insights

1. Interest in Digital Wellbeing is on the rise, but digital families still **don't see technology as a top concern.**



2. Digital natives **don't see a distinction between online and offline life.**

3. 1 in 3 parents consider themselves **addicted** to their smartphones.

4. Younger parents are more likely to use **parental control** than older parents.

5. A typical family member spends on average **3.5 hours** connected to tech per day.

6. Nearly half of parents set time limits.

7. Most families (approx. 80%) **feel bad** about their current relationship with technology.

8. Parents are **worried their kids will miss out on the tech-free childhood** they grew up with.



1. Children need to be **outside at least the same amount of time they spend in front of screens.** Get Vitamin N for nature!

2. Turn off screens (yes, this includes TVs) **1 hour before bedtime to improve sleep quality** and avoid blue light.

3. Keep mobile phones **off the dinner table.** Resist the temptation of the 'digital pacifier'!

4. Remember you are a role model. Put down your phone and **make eye contact with your child.** Their ability to socialize may depend on it!

5. **Set consistent screen time limits** based on your child's age and maturity or 'digital resilience'.

6. Avoid screen time for children under the age of 2.

7. Take 45 minute **screen time breaks** to protect eye health.

8. Write your agreements down in a **family contract** and sign it together. Put it on the fridge!

Advice for parents



Parenting in the digital age is a challenge.

The mobile revolution of the past decade has multiplied the number of smart devices in our homes and put the threats associated with the internet directly into the hands of children who, **despite being digital natives, are not digital experts.**

Today, a typical U.S. household has an average of [11 connected devices, 7 of those with screens for viewing content](#). Simultaneously, [the time we spend on smartphones has doubled in most countries](#). Qustodio saw this tidal wave coming in 2012 and created the first parental control software to help parents and caregivers deal with the boom by giving them an easy way to monitor and block unwanted apps and risky or inappropriate content, as well as consistently control the time spent on these devices.

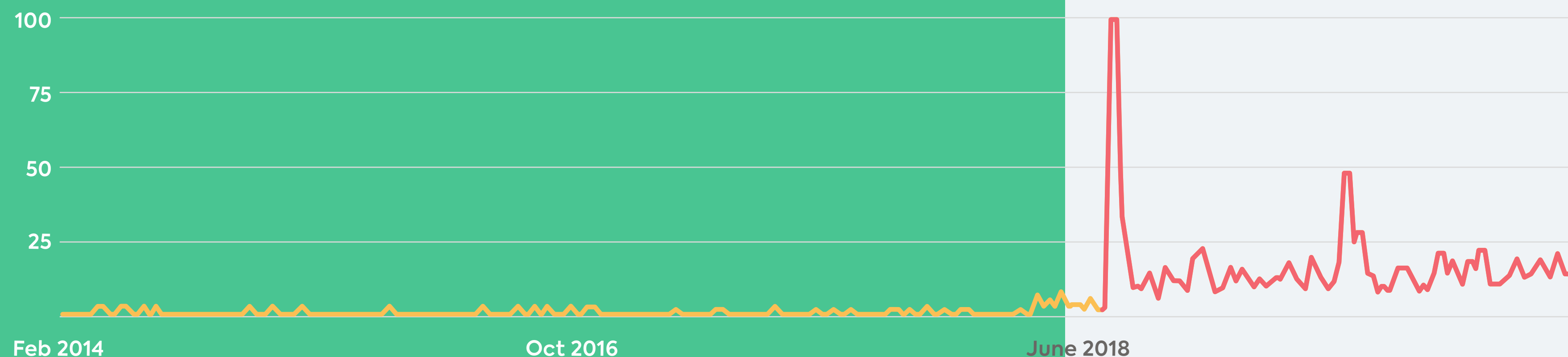
While today's parents have the tools they need to tackle the many threats online and are more aware of what to look out for—cyberbullies, sexual predators, data thieves, addictive or

harmful content and increasing screen time—our research at Qustodio shows technology's effect on a typical family's digital wellbeing is still not a top concern. It's not even in the top three.

We think that part of what makes Digital Wellbeing less of a priority is that many people still don't know what Digital Wellbeing is. We also argue that within the concept of wellbeing there is still large debate on what causes harm to mental and physical health. Current studies and recommendations are still inconsistent and contradictory. Much like warnings against smoking in the early days, we think the results from future studies will make it increasingly clear that excess screen time and addictive algorithms have a direct link to our health and happiness as individuals and families.

Today's digital natives are not digital experts and that's why we think it is so important to continue to shine a light on the important topic of Digital Wellbeing and to help families navigate the waters right now, and not wait until it is too late.

The big picture



* Interest over time on “Digital Wellbeing”. Source: GoogleTrends

The concept of Digital Wellbeing—using technology in a positive way that supports physical and mental health— isn’t some new invention. In fact, [Tristan Harris](#), co-founder of the [Center for Humane Technology](#), was one of the first to speak up about the concept of ‘digital wellness’ in a 2012 memo calling on Google, where he worked at the time, to minimize distraction and respect users’ attention. Whether you call it digital wellbeing or digital wellness, the concept has found a permanent spot in the media today.

New studies on the effect of technology on our minds and bodies have increased pressure on corporations, governments and parents to protect kids from online harm and have contributed to digital wellbeing’s rise. However, as our research with Ipsos revealed, digital wellbeing is still a relatively unknown concept at the household level. There is a general lack of

knowledge about the category and about what Digital Wellbeing means, especially in regards to screen time.

Part of what makes Digital Wellbeing difficult to grasp is that not everyone agrees on its opposite—the negative physical or mental state caused by time spent online—or what causes it. For example, **distraction, depression, suicide, poor self image, violent behavior, mobile phone addiction and its cousin ‘FOMO’ (fear of missing out), gambling addiction, trouble learning, poor eyesight, obesity... are all on the rise**, but research on how much and whether technology is responsible is still not conclusive and is often contradictory.

Experts, many of whom are Silicon Valley insiders, including the above mentioned [Tristan Harris](#), [Nir Eyal](#) and [James Steyer](#), have argued that many of the issues we are facing today stem from the attention economy upon which the internet is built. In this environment, products which appear free are fighting for our attention, so that we spend more time online, share more data and view more adverts. **Many of the techniques deployed by apps, such as endless scrolling, ‘like’ buttons, loot boxes and notifications are reminiscent of the gambling industry, where variable rewards play to human instincts and keep us hooked.** As a result, we are spending more and more time and money on screens, with unknown health, social and economic consequences.

These concerns are even greater for at-risk

children and people with special needs. According to [Ralph Jordinson, risk and resilience coordinator for Middlesbrough Council in the U.K.](#), “For many at-risk families, Digital Wellbeing is a concept that is still very far removed. For the most vulnerable children in our society, being online exposes them to the very real risks of sexual exploitation, grooming and being recruited for criminal offences. For our team, working closely with parents to educate them about these risks is critical for keeping children safe.”

In short, having a global consensus on what Digital Wellbeing is and how to achieve it matters so that people can talk about it and create the norms and regulations needed to protect everyone, especially the more vulnerable segments of the population.

A lot is being done to stop cyberbullying and legislation. For example, COPPA is clamping down on data protection, but guidelines on achieving Digital Wellbeing by controlling screen time are still being drawn up, challenged and revised on a regular basis. These guidelines tend to vary, but they are an important first step.

Here is a look at expert guidelines for screen time limits by region.

Global: The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) issued new guidelines that **children under 2 should not have any screentime and kids aged 2 – 4 should be limited to a maximum of 1 hour a day**, with less being preferable. Their

focus was on reducing the prevalence of obesity in children. These guidelines lead to [wide-scale panic in India](#), with parents contacting pediatricians for advice on how to wean their toddlers and young children off the 5–6 hours of daily screen time they’ve become used to.

U.S.: The [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\)](#) advises, “For children younger than 18 months, avoid the use of screen media other than video chatting. Parents of children aged 18 to 24 months who want to introduce digital media should choose high quality programming, and watch it with their children to help them understand what they’re seeing. They recommend 1 hour of screen time for kids aged 2–5. The **AAP does not place any specific screen time limits on children aged 6 and older** but advises that limits do need to be set and should be consistent.

U.K.: The [Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health](#) in the UK, said that **no screen time limits should be set** for children, given that there was insufficient evidence linking screen time to harm. Their only recommendation is that children don’t use screens within an hour of bedtime.

Spain: There are no official guidelines on screen time use in Spain.


Qustodio has been working with experts to create suggestions for this region, and for children worldwide. Our recommendations are similar to those stipulated by WHO. We recommend no screen time for children under 2. One hour of screen time (max.) for children aged 2–5. We recommend anyone in front of a screen


take regular 45 minute breaks to promote eye health and that screens be shut down 1 hour before bedtime for better sleep patterns.


With conclusive studies and advice difficult to deliver, regulation to protect wellbeing


in an attention economy is still far away. The onus is therefore on parents to understand how the internet works, what makes their children feel good or bad, what is useful and what is a distraction, and what actually has a net cost on their family’s wellbeing.

Qustodio’s screen time recommendations:

**<2**
No screen time
(a quick wave to grandma is okay)

**2–5**
1 hour max
(yes, that includes TV time)

**+5**
Depends on child, tween or teen’s mental maturity and digital resilience

**All ages:**
Take eye health breaks every 45 minutes and disconnect 1 hour before bed

Qustodio

What Qustodio saw

In 2019, we conducted independent research with families and Digital Wellbeing experts to better understand current attitudes toward the emerging subject. We spoke with families across the U.S., the U.K. and Spain, assessing parent and child approaches to the use of smartphones.

In all markets, we saw how parents are concerned about their own habits, many admitting their own digital addiction. We also saw that younger parents were more likely to use parental control software than older parents.

Here’s a look at a typical digital family, their technology use, main concerns and parental control use by region.

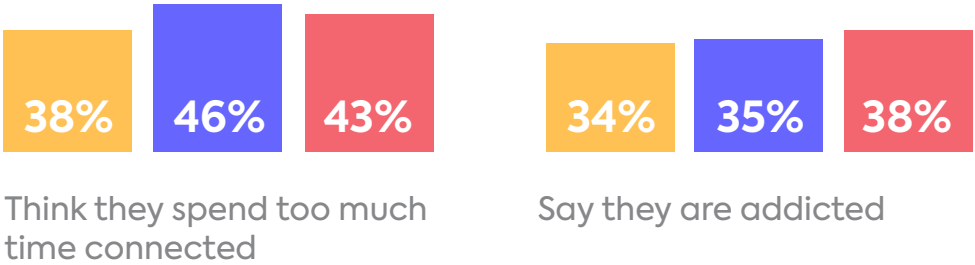
Family technology use, top parenting concerns and adoption of parental control per country

● US ● UK ● Spain

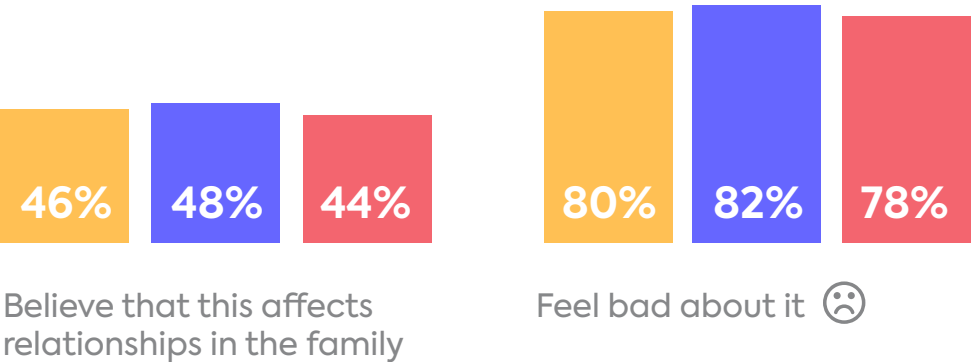
The average family is connected to a device with an internet connection either via a smartphone, tablet/iPad, desktop computer, laptop or Smart TV **3.5 hours per day**.



More than a third of parents think they spend too much time on their devices or **consider themselves addicted**.



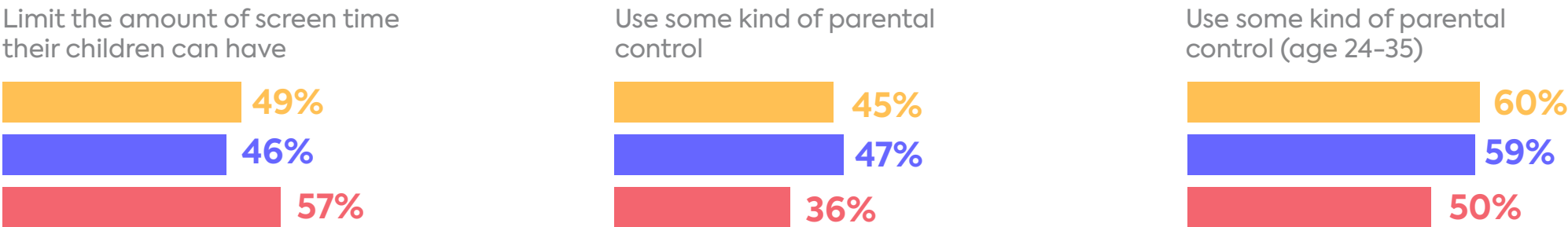
Nearly half of parents agree that tech use affects relationships, and most **feel bad** about it.



Technology use is not yet a top parenting concern, though it is a source of problems related to what they worry about most: education, psychology, communication and health.



Nearly half of all parents set time limits, with younger parents taking the lead in the use of parental control.



In addition to technology use, concerns and parental control adoption, we also took a look at how parents and children view the “digital” world. We saw they have completely different perspectives on how technology affects their lives.

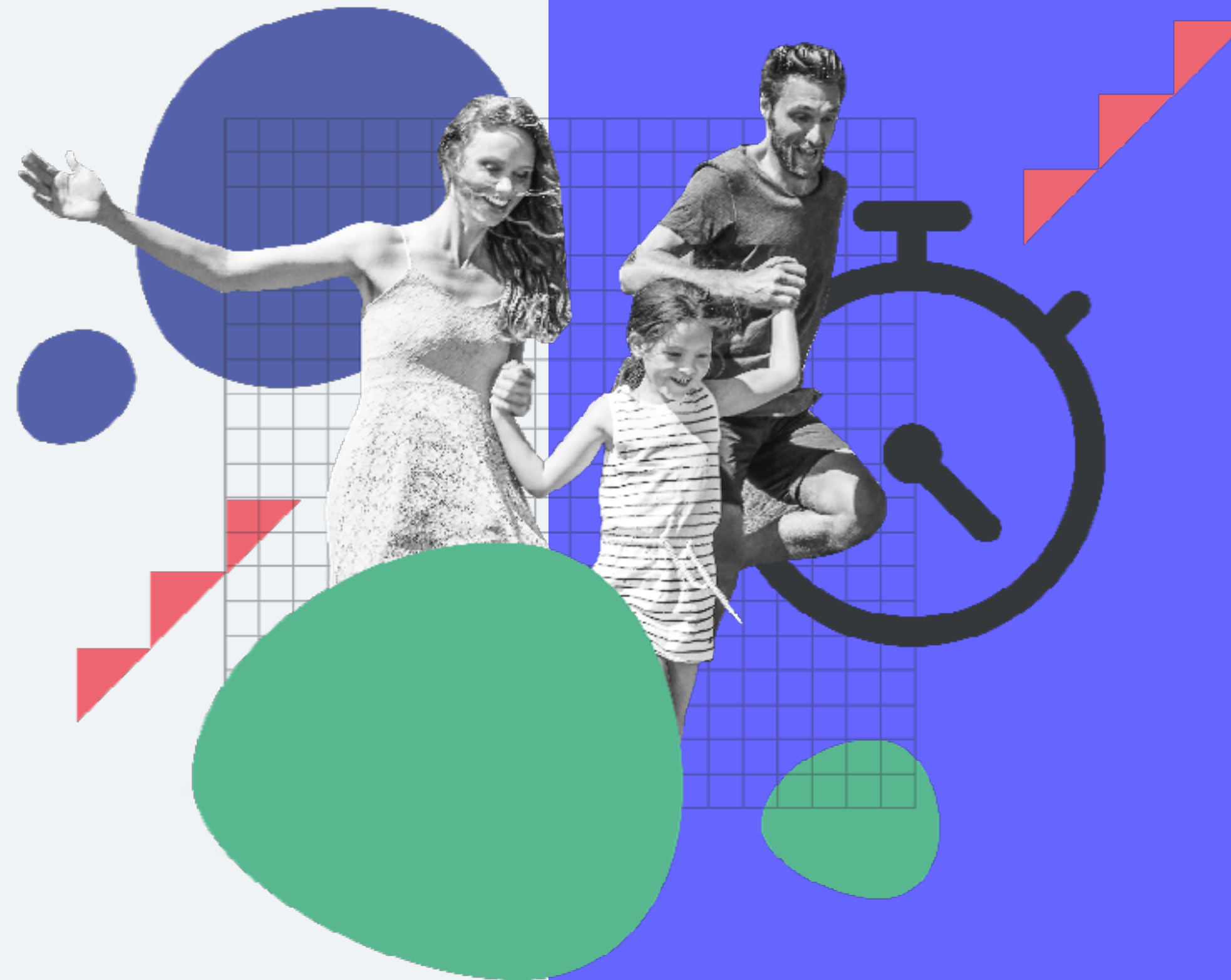
Kids cannot imagine life without screens, but feel they are in control of it. Online and offline experiences are seamlessly intertwined. **There is no digital world separate from the real world.** They are digital natives.

“(Technology) Would be my friend because it’s always close; my other half. It fails when I don’t have Wi-Fi. I want it more when I’m bored and it can entertain me. I want it less when I don’t have the time for it.”

@kid,ES

“Updates of weather and sports scores in real-time on my iPhone is constantly being done and cool having technology, helps me keep things in place and know where my friends are, where we’re hanging out and what may be fun to do that day, and be reachable by my buddies.”

@kid,US



For parents, technology is mostly about convenience. And, they are concerned their kids are missing out on the disconnected lives they remember from their own childhood.

“I have always felt that technology is a means to an end. It is used in order to accomplish a task and shouldn’t be used as the ends to a mean. I find it a vital part of my life and have included that in my children’s lives so that their school/activity tasks are much more easily completed.”

@parent,US

“We can find anything easily and quickly. However, there’s also a negative side I see: children get used to technology at a really early age and they don’t use their imagination as much when they’re playing, like we used to do when we were kids...”

@parent,ES

What's next for Digital Wellbeing?

We expect pressure to protect children online from harmful content and addictive behavior will piggyback on continued actions by governments in the U.S. and the EU to control how big tech deals with taxation and data protection.

We also expect an increased focus on transparency around how online services like YouTube and Fortnite work, how they keep us hooked and whether or not they are appropriate for children. But regulations on time limits, like the 90 minute per day video game curfew implemented on gamers in China, are not likely in Europe or the U.S. in the near future. And, age restrictions, like those on TikTok, will continue to be easy to bypass and difficult to enforce.

Meanwhile, we expect the release of more scientific studies, reinforcing the link between the excessive use of the internet, access to harmful or addictive content, and children's physical and mental health. For example, the MRI study led by **Dr. John Hutton** at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital [linking higher screen use to lower measure of brain structure \(white matter\) and skills in preschool-aged kids](#) is the

first of many we expect to see this year. Though we will also likely continue to see research to the contrary, we over time the evidence will become less deniable and screen time recommendations across the globe to become more consistent.

As the truth becomes harder to avoid, we also expect to see an increase in 'digital wellbeing whitewashing'; the attempt by companies to jump on the bandwagon of Digital Wellbeing, not to protect their users but to improve their corporate image. On the bright side, the more companies talk about Digital Wellbeing, the more we expect parents to become aware and wary of the potential dangers on the internet related to excess screen time. We are confident this will result in the number of parents setting screen time limits increasing to over 50% by the end of this year across all three markets in this report.

We also expect parents of every age to increasingly take regulation into their own hands by using independent parental control tools like Qustodio. We expect over 50% of all parents across all markets, regardless of age, to be doing so by the end of this year too.

How to help your family achieve Digital Wellbeing

The key to achieving Digital Wellbeing in the home is to learn, together, about how the internet works - and where the good, the bad and the ugly may lie. All too often we hear from otherwise proactive parents, who have no oversight of their child's online life because they "don't understand it", they "don't have

time" or because they think "the school will teach them that". Today's children are digital natives, but they are not digital experts. And just as you will teach your child how to be safe in the real world, the rules of the road and of social engagement, so too is there a responsibility to do it online.



Today's children
are digital natives,
but they are not
digital experts.

Our resident Digital Wellbeing expert, **Georgie Powell**, recommends families “work together to set rules of the road to of how the members of the family will use digital devices at home. For example, agree to **never use mobile phones or tablets at the dinner table, and to turn off all devices one hour before bed.** Once written down, it is important to sign a [family contract](#) to activate the ‘signature effect’ and to help avoid future disputes. To further ensure agreements on time limits, I recommend setting up a parental control app, like Qustodio, to ensure those limits are kept consistently. **Consistency is key.**”

Digital Safety Expert, **Karl Hopwood**, backs up the importance of consistency and routines. He says, “We live in a world where children and young people and their parents and caregivers are constantly connected. It is important that discussions around how technology is used

“(Families should) work together to set rules of the road to of how the members of the family will use digital devices at home. For example, agree to never use mobile phones or tablets at the dinner table, and to turn off all devices one hour before bed.”

Georgie Powell

within the home become part of family life. **Setting some sensible routines about when and where technology can be used** helps create a more positive environment by reducing conflict and facilitates discussion about the benefits and challenges that tech can bring.”

Holistic Psychologist, **Dr. Nicole Beurkens**, reminds parents that “**you are your child’s number one role model.** Parents are often the first to admit they spend too much time online. They are distracted and don’t give their children the attention they deserve. Of course, today’s parents are busier than ever before. And many jobs are done entirely online. But you need to show your children that life does not revolve around being attached to a device if you want your children to build healthy habits and have a life beyond screens. **Put down the phone and make eye contact.** Your child’s ability to socialize, focus and learn may depend on it.”

“You are your child’s number one role model (...) you need to show your children that life does not revolve around being attached to a device if you want your children to build healthy habits and have a life beyond screens. Put down the phone and make eye contact.”

Dr. Nicole Beurkens

Much like Tristan Harris, VP of Product Development at Qustodio and YouTube expert, **Manuel Bruscas** warns against the algorithms behind many apps, designed to keep people hooked. “I recommend parents set time limits that force their children to disconnect. It’s just too easy to get sucked into the endless stream of video suggestions. But not all online content is created equal. So a parent’s job doesn’t stop after they set up time limits. They need to monitor the content quality on a regular basis.”

Psychologist and Director of [Mobile Free Life](#), **Joan Amorós**, emphasises the importance of making sure kids disconnect and get outside. He recommends a good dose of what he calls *Vitamin N(ature)*. “Children need to **get outside at least the same amount of time they spend in front of screens.** According to [Kaplan’s Attention Restoration Theory](#), urban environments make us focus on things in a very conscious way, while time in nature allows us to concentrate effortlessly and improves health and wellbeing of not only children but also adults. The more we ‘kill their boredom’ in front of a screen, the more they’ll need Vitamin N(ature).”

Overall, Qustodio aims for openness in families. Every family is different and each person in every family has their own level of maturity and needs, and may use very different devices. Keeping all that under control can be daunting for parents. But it is possible. And the rules for controlling tech are not so different from those for the “real” world: conversation, consistency, balance and a daily dose of fresh air.



Conclu- sion

Today's families are waking up to the importance of setting time limits to help them start detaching from omnipresent smart devices and regain some freedom and achieve something increasingly being referred to as Digital Wellbeing. Yet, children's use of technology is still not a top concern for parents. Mixed messages from various studies have slowed the advance of sounding the alarm on the potential harm to children's physical and mental health. But we believe, and hope, society is at a tipping point, and as Digital Wellbeing becomes top of mind, more parents will be setting time limits, using parental controls and taking responsibility for their family's technology use in the year to come.



It's time to make
Digital Wellbeing
top of mind.

Methodology

First we took a look at the big picture trends in Digital Wellbeing over the past year in some of our main markets, namely the U.S., the U.K. and Spain. We followed that up with a deep dive into the data by looking at the results of a Digital Wellbeing study we ran with Ipsos in 2019. We looked at the attitudes of 3 thousand parents with children aged 5-17 in regards to their children's use of technology and the internet. All those involved in the study used either mobile or tablet devices with an internet connection.

We then make some predictions about where we think Digital Wellbeing is heading and close with practical advice for parents from expert psychologists, pediatricians and industry leaders.

All the data in this report has been randomized and anonymized.



Thank you

We want to thank all of the experts who contributed to the creation of this report by giving their advice and expertise:

Joan Amoros, Psychologist, Coach and Director of [Mobile Free Life](#)

Dr. Nicole Beurkens, [Holistic Psychologist](#)

Manuel Bruscas, [Qustodio VP of Product and Data Insights](#)

Karl Hopwood, E-safety expert and Member of UKCCIS (UK Council for Child Internet Safety)

Ralph Jordinson Risk and Resilience Coordinator for [Middlesbrough Council in the U.K.](#)

Georgie Powell, [Qustodio Digital Wellbeing Expert](#)