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A WORD FROM THE STEERING COMMITTEE

In June 2024, the Assemblée nationale created the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development. This initiative marked the starting point of a major collective reflection on the many issues surrounding young people's exposure to digital technologies.

In an increasingly connected world, we share the concerns of many parents, researchers and specialists about the place screens occupy in our daily lives. Our work has made it possible to take the full measure of this phenomenon. The consultations we conducted also served to identify the most relevant solutions to promote the well-being of young people in an ever more complex digital environment. We were guided by a common goal during our discussions: to strike the right balance between the potential benefits of digital technologies and the risks they pose, so as to promote healthy and responsible use of screens by young people.

Throughout the proceedings, we were careful to adopt a collaborative, open approach by asking the opinions of specialists, groups and associations, members of the general public and above all, young people themselves. Giving young people's voices a central role was essential, since they are the focus of our mandate. The discussions we had in various elementary and secondary schools across Québec profoundly enriched our deliberations and guided our recommendations. They made us alive to the very real concerns.

We would like to express our appreciation to everyone who took the time to share their expertise, perspectives and experiences with us. This diversity of points of view has been essential to creating concrete solutions adapted to current challenges.

This report highlights the key role we can play collectively in protecting young people through concerted action on multiple fronts. Our recommendations include, in particular, raising both young people's and adults' awareness of the consequences of exposure to screens, developing critical thinking skills with regard to using digital technology and implementing clear regulatory measures to prevent online harm. This report is not intended to be an end in itself: it is an invitation to us all, as a society, to continue reflecting and taking steps to make screen time and protecting young people ongoing concerns.

By combining awareness, prevention and regulation, we hope to see Québec flourish as a place where our young people can thrive and achieve their full potential.

Amélie Dionne

Member for Rivière-du-Loup–Témiscouata
Chair

Alexandre Leduc

Member for Hochelaga-Maisonneuve
Member of the Steering Committee

Enrico Ciccone

Member for Marquette
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Member for Matane-Matapédia
Member of the Steering Committee

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Young peoples' voices were at the heart of the Committee's work. Hearing what they had to say allowed the Committee to provide a realistic, nuanced overview of the role screens play in young people's daily lives. For the Committee members, visiting schools in many different regions of Québec was an ideal opportunity to engage directly with young people and listen to their points of view, concerns and feelings on issues regarding screen use. These valuable discussions helped us to better understand the experiences of the younger generation in a constantly evolving digital world. The Committee members extend their sincere thanks to the students they met, along with the school administrators and teachers who generously opened their doors and made time for us.

The impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development are vast, complex and multi-faceted. Carrying out an exhaustive examination of this matter would not have been possible without the insightful input of the experts, associations and national and international organizations who testified during the public hearings. The Committee members would like to express their gratitude to all those who participated in the special consultations and public hearings. Their testimonies were essential, both in terms of quality and in terms of the relevance of their recommendations and proposals, and proved invaluable to rigorous deliberation and producing this report.

Lastly, the Committee members would like to thank the approximately 8,000 citizens who participated in the Committee's online consultation. Their input was crucial to understanding emerging trends and perspectives within the Québec population with regard to the use of screens by young people.

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INTRODUCTION

Screens, whether in the form of smartphones, televisions or computers, have become essential elements of our daily lives. However, their ubiquity goes hand in hand with a marked increase in exposure time, a trend that raises concerns. A number of studies have shown that this reality, which is now well established in our lives, can have harmful effects on the health and development of children, especially when they are very young. It is in this context that, on June 6, 2024, the Assemblée nationale du Québec unanimously adopted a motion to establish the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.[1] The motion was an expression of the parliamentarians' desire to direct attention to the questions and concerns specific to the presence of screens in the lives of young people and to make the matter a priority for Québec society.

The Assemblée nationale gave us a broad mandate, covering many issues, including

- young people's screen time;
- screen time control measures, in particular at school and on the Web, including access to digital learning tools;
- access to social media, including video games;
- cyberbullying, including the sharing of sexually explicit material;
- minors having access to online pornography;
- mechanisms used by certain applications to create an addiction; and
- advertising targeting children on platforms and applications.

This list illustrates the magnitude and complexity of the task entrusted to the Committee, and the multitude of questions and challenges concerning screens in young people's daily lives. We needed to consider not only the number of hours spent in front of a screen, but also the different factors that influence screen time and the resulting effects. Are the effects of time spent alone in front of a screen, without supervision, the same as those of time spent sharing a screen with family? What should be the place of screens in classrooms and more broadly in schools? What role should social media companies and other digital platforms play in ensuring young people are safe online? These are just a few of the questions we explored over the past year.

These issues are both sensitive and complex. The answers are not always clear-cut and definitive. Rigour and careful thought are required. In order to obtain as complete a picture as possible, we conducted extensive consultations. The aim was to hear the views of specialists, stakeholders and especially young people themselves. The consultations were divided into three parts: public hearings, a tour of elementary and secondary schools and an online consultation.

[1] The motion establishing the Select Committee is in Appendix VI of this report.

Public hearings

We wanted to begin by hearing the views of experts and organizations concerned by the matters we were studying. For that, we held two phases of special consultations and public hearings during which we questioned witnesses from various sectors, including health, education and the digital industry.

The hearings allowed us to delve into the many aspects of screen use, including screen time, the nature of the content consulted, the context of use and the psychosocial effects on young people. They also gave us a better understanding of what science and the latest studies have to say. The witnesses came from different disciplines: the Committee had the opportunity to hear from teachers, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers, computer security specialists, as well as many groups and organizations concerned by the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development. Their varied perspectives also shed light on the diverse facets of the subject matter.

The first phase of hearings took place from September 12 to 26, 2024, and the second, from January 30 to February 5, 2025. In total, we heard from 66 individuals and 2 organizations.[2] In addition, more than 70 briefs were sent to the Committee by witnesses and persons who did not testify.

School tour

Right from the beginning, we put young people at the heart of our mandate. Their contribution is essential, so we decided to meet them to better understand their perspectives, realities and concerns. It seemed essential to us to consult them directly in schools, where they spend a large part of their daily lives. The school setting is more conducive than parliamentary precincts to initiating dialogue and hearing young people give unfiltered opinions.

We are aware that young people's realities are different from one place to the next. That is why we travelled to six regions of Québec in November 2024. During our tour, we met with more than 500 students in 17 elementary and secondary schools. We wanted diverse and representative points of view, so we visited a wide range of schools:

- public and private;
- French- and English-language;
- with differences in deprivation;
- located in rural and urban areas;
- located in an Indigenous community.[3]

During the visits, we asked the students about a wide range of topics that concern them. Students talked to us about the age required to sign up for social networks, the role of screens in the classroom and at school, video games, the rules for using cell phones at home and cyberbullying. Our exchanges with young people have fueled our discussions throughout our proceedings and have made a concrete contribution to developing our recommendations.

[2] The complete list of the persons and groups heard during the public hearings is in Appendix II of this report.
[3] The complete list of the schools visited by the Select Committee is in Appendix III of this report.

Online consultation

Although the school visits made it possible to consult more than 500 students, we also wanted to give all young people and more broadly the population of Québec the opportunity to express their views, so the Committee held an online consultation.

The consultation was held from October 31, 2024, to January 31, 2025. In all, 7075 people completed the questionnaire, setting a record for participation in a consultation conducted by the Assemblée nationale. The high participation rate reflects the importance that citizens attach to the issue of screen use and the effects of that use among young people. Twenty-one percent of the respondents were between the ages of 14 and 17, 52% said that they were parents and 28% mentioned working in education. Excerpts from the responses to the online consultation are presented in the various sections of this report to provide a citizen perspective on the issues under consideration. The full results of the consultation can be found in Appendix IV.

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During our many deliberative meetings, we came up with a set of recommendations that, we believe, will provide concrete solutions to promote the well-being of young people and their families. We present the results of our analysis to the people of Québec in this report. The following pages are intended to reflect as faithfully as possible the different perspectives that were expressed in the course of our proceedings. To this end, we have structured our discussion of the various issues raised during our deliberations by broad themes.

The first section of the report provides context by laying out the effects of screens on young people's health and development. We also discuss the recommendations on screen time issued by public health organizations as well as parents' role in educating their children on the use of screens. The second section deals with screens in schools. Three main themes are addressed: cell phones in schools, using digital educational tools in teaching and e-sports.

The third and fourth sections of the report focus on social media and video games, respectively. More specifically, they detail the effects of these platforms on young people and present our proposals aimed at creating a safer digital environment.

Lastly, the fifth section focuses on the different content that young people may be exposed to while browsing the Internet. It presents our proposals for online advertising aimed at young people, particularly regarding influencer marketing. The last section also deals with minors' access to online pornography.

SCREENS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The use of screens by young people is a topic that concerns many in civil society, including parents, teachers, researchers and policymakers. It is a reality no one can escape. According to the Canadian Paediatric Society, almost all children in Canada are exposed to screens by the time they are two.[4] In Québec, about 50% of kindergarten children spend more than an hour a day in front of a screen, according to the *Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students* by the Institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ).[5]

Screens are an integral part of children's lives from birth. Electronic devices, such as televisions, computers, cellphones, tablets, e-readers, smartwatches and video game consoles, play an increasingly significant role in their daily lives. The diversification of devices used has led to an increase in total screen time. According to the NETendances survey by the Académie de la transformation numérique, in Québec in 2024, 95% of children aged 6 to 12 used electronic devices, and on average they used three different ones.[6] However, young people's habits varied depending on their age. Among children aged 6 to 12, tablets were the most common digital device, but young people aged 13 to 17 showed a strong preference for cellphones with 93% reporting regular use.[7]

During our proceedings, we found that many young people already had a cellphone or tablet in elementary school. The young people we met when we visited schools said they got their first cellphone when they were between 7 and 12 years old. In many cases, it was a hand-me-down given to them by their parents or another family member. When asked why they had a cellphone, young people often said it was for communication. They want to be able to communicate with their friends and parents easily and at any time. They also want to be contacted in case of an emergency. Many young people reported that they got a cellphone at the request of their parents, who want to be able to reach them. The findings of the survey entitled *Enquête sur le bien-être des familles québécoises* confirm these observations. Beginning in Elementary 3, young people use phones and social media more frequently.[8]

For parents, it can be difficult to go against this trend. During the online consultation, a mother pointed out that the issue of cellphones among young people can be very complicated:

> [TRANSLATION] More and more children have a cellphone as early as elementary school, and those who do not have one feel growing frustration. They perceive a cellphone ban as an injustice and a hindrance to their social integration. As parents, it is difficult to find the right balance between protecting our children from the negative effects of screens and meeting their need for belonging. Ultimately, managing screen time becomes a real headache: how do we set limits without marginalizing our children?

Managing screen time is a challenge that is not limited to primary school children. In fact, screen time tends to increase with age.[9] Among teens, the average screen time was estimated at 7.7 hours per day in 2022.[10]

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[4] Michelle Ponti, "Le temps d'écran et les enfants d'âge préscolaire : la promotion de la santé et du développement dans un monde numérique", *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 28, 3 (2023): 184–192, p. 185.

[5] Alexis Auger and Amélie Groleau, *Enquête québécoise sur le parcours préscolaire des enfants de maternelle 2022. Rapport statistique. Tome 1 – Portrait des caractéristiques, de l'environnement et du parcours préscolaire des enfants de maternelle 5 ans pour le Québec et ses régions* (Québec: Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2023).

[6] Académie de la transformation numérique, *NETendances 2024 : famille numérique*, 15, 6 (2025), p. 2.

[7] Ibid., p. 7.

[8] Mélissa Généreux, D'un bouleversement à l'autre : une enquête sur le bien-être des familles québécoises, (March 12, 2025).

[9] Fanny Lemétayer et al., *Usages, impacts sur la santé et encadrement parental de l'utilisation des écrans chez les 6-17 ans : sondage prépandémie auprès des parents québécois* (Québec: Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2022), p. 1.

[10] Krystel Poirier et al. "Evolution of Sleep Duration and Screen Time Between 2018 and 2022 Among Canadian Adolescents: Evidence of Drifts Accompanying the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 74, 5 (2024).

The results of the Committee's online consultation paint a more nuanced picture: about 60% of young people aged 14 to 17 spend between two and six hours a day on screens.[11] Nearly a third (32.6%) of the young people who responded reported spending more than six hours a day on a screen (including time spent on both leisure and educational activities). When asked about their perception of their screen time, 72% of young people said they spend too much time in front of a screen.

Several factors can influence screen time. First and foremost, parental behaviour can be a predictor of young people's screen time.[12] Whether through mimicry or the establishment of a social norm, parents' use of screens can influence the behaviour of children and adolescents.

Families' socioeconomic characteristics can also be correlated with young people's screen time. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to accumulate more screen time than children from more affluent backgrounds.[13] The greater screen time among children from disadvantaged backgrounds is a trend that seems to be growing. According to Caroline Fitzpatrick, professor in the faculty of education at Université de Sherbrooke, it is currently possible only to formulate hypotheses about the causes of this trend. A number of people heard during the special consultations and public hearings pointed out that difficulties in accessing affordable leisure activities and the lack of green spaces in some disadvantaged neighborhoods may encourage young people from these backgrounds to spend more time in front of their screens.

When asked about whether they preferred screen time or other types of activities, young people of all ages spontaneously responded that they preferred screen-free activities. We believe that young people should have access to attractive, real alternatives to encourage them to reduce their screen time. Whether the activities offered are cultural, sports or social, the goal is to provide options that encourage young people, regardless of the background, to unplug and socialize.

First of all, we believe that the use of existing infrastructure can be optimized. We have many public spaces at our disposal, such as school gymnasiums and parks, that can benefit young people. There are many ways these infrastructures could be optimized, such as by lighting parks in the evening or making public facilities available for free or at low cost.

These efforts alone are not sufficient. It is important to expand the availability of versatile recreational and educational facilities to offer young people screen-free services and activities. Children and teenagers should have access to safe spaces to play, have fun, move, socialize, learn and discover, all for free or at a low cost. Similarly, we believe it is essential to better support leisure organizations, sports federations, multi-sport organizations, youth centres, community family organizations and other youth organizations.

We believe that, combined, these measures will promote the practice of physical, sports, recreational, social, cultural and extracurricular activities and encourage young people to put down their screens.

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[11] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

[12] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Caroline Fitzpatrick, September 16, 2024, at 3:40 p.m.

[13] Caroline Fitzpatrick et al., "An examination of bedtime media and excessive screen time by Canadian preschoolers during the COVID-19 pandemic", *BMC Pediatrics*, 22, 212 (2022); Issouf Traoré et al., *Enquête québécoise sur le tabac, l'alcool, la drogue et le jeu chez les élèves du secondaire 2019. Principaux résultats de l'enquête et évolution des phénomènes*, (Québec: Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2021), pp. 155, 160, 164 and 167; Alexis Auger and Amélie Groleau, *Enquête québécoise sur le parcours préscolaire des enfants de maternelle 2022. Rapport statistique. Tome 1 – Portrait des caractéristiques, de l'environnement et du parcours préscolaire des enfants de maternelle 5 ans pour le Québec et ses régions*, *supra*, note 5, p. 47.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends optimizing the use of existing infrastructure, including in municipalities and school service centres, for the benefit of families so that they may have access to free or low-cost screen-free activities. For example, by lighting parks in the evening and transforming public facilities, such as school gymnasiums, into indoor play areas, especially in winter.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends continuing to deploy versatile, adapted facilities, in addition to offering a wide range of low-cost activities, to promote physical, sports, recreational, social, cultural and extracurricular activities. The objective is to encourage young people to put down their screens, particularly in disadvantaged communities and in remote areas.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends better supporting leisure organizations, sports federations, multi-sport organizations, youth centres, community family organizations and other youth organizations while requiring them to offer a variety of attractive screen-free activities.

Analysis of screen time

Although screen time is a key indicator for measuring devices' effects on young people's health and development, we believe that the analysis must be more nuanced. Many people we heard during our proceedings, including Emmanuelle Parent from the Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne, made us aware of the importance of considering different parameters to better understand the phenomenon. The context of use, type of use, content consumed, type of device and people's individual characteristics are all factors that, individually and collectively, vary the effects of screens on young people's health and development.

For example, watching a movie with family members will not have the same effect as spending time alone on the computer scrolling through content on social media. The type of device used can also have an influence. Professor Fitzpatrick pointed out that mobile devices such as phones and tablets are designed for individual use, whereas traditional devices like televisions offer the possibility of shared use.[14]

The social aspect of screens can be a protective factor against the risks associated with exposure. Emmanuelle Parent pointed out that spending time with friends or family can make the experience

[14] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Caroline Fitzpatrick, September 16, 2024, at 3:40 p.m.

beneficial and allow young people to learn or to strengthen certain social bonds.[15] Individual screen use is not necessarily bad for young people. Reading a book on an e-reader or watching online videos to learn a new hobby, such as a musical instrument, are examples of individual activities that have many benefits.

The content consumed is a key factor to be taken into account when analyzing of the effects of screens. The digital environment is full of publications and postings of diverse nature and quality. Online, young people can be exposed to educational information but also to harmful content. This can include misinformation; violent, degrading or hateful content; or content intended for an adult audience. Prolonged or recurrent exposure to harmful content can have many consequences for young people, especially during adolescence.

For the purposes of our proceedings, we distinguished between two types of screen use: recreational and educational. Recreational screen time refers to any activity carried out for leisure purposes and is associated with activities such as watching television, spending time on social media, chatting with friends or family, playing video games and watching videos. Educational screen time refers to the use of screens for learning purposes, such as to acquire knowledge and develop or strengthen skills. It includes autonomous learning, semi-structured activities and classroom learning.

Screens are not necessarily always good or bad for young people. The user's individual characteristics, such as age, gender, maturity, personality and degree of vulnerability, will have an impact on screens' effects. For example, watching an educational video alone will not have the same effect on a preschool child as it will on a teenager. Age is a determining factor in deriving benefit from screen time. Even when the content is educational, preschoolers benefit from the presence of an adult, unlike adolescents, who are better equipped for autonomous learning. In fact, all these factors are interrelated. They must all be taken into account to better understand the effects of screens on young people's health and development.

Screens' effects on young people's health and development

The digital environment offers young people many different things: they can learn, socialize, play and be entertained. Despite the various benefits that can be derived from screens, excessive use can have negative consequences on young people's physical and psychological health, and their overall development.

These harmful effects can be attributed to various causes. For example, there is an opportunity cost associated with screen time. The more time young people spend in front of screens, the less time they have to devote to other activities such as free play, in the case of young children, and physical activity, in the case of teens.[16] Increased screen time, when it replaces physical activity, is correlated with sedentary behaviour, an increased risk of obesity and poorer cardiovascular health.[17]

[15] Ibid., Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne, September 12, 2024, at 2:30 p.m.
[16] Ibid., Caroline Fitzpatrick, September 16, 2024, at 3:40 p.m.; Ibid., Jean-François Chicoine, January 30, 2025, at 2:50 p.m.
[17] Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ), *Mieux vivre avec les écrans – réflexions pour une régulation favorable à la santé publique*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 5.

Screen time also encroaches on sleep hours. For one thing, using a screen before bed is likely to delay bedtime simply because the activity is stimulating and captivating. However, exposure to screens before going to sleep also affects the production of melatonin, a natural hormone that promotes sleep.[18]

Nearly three-quarters (72%) of young people aged 14 to 17 who participated in the online consultation indicated that they used screens every night in the hour before going to sleep.[19] During the visits to the schools, some young people reported that they stay up past their scheduled bedtime because they are absorbed in their online activities. Others even said they get up at night to play video games.

Many lifestyle-related factors affect sleep. However, exposure to screens in the hour before falling asleep is recognized as a disruptor of sleep quality and quantity.[20] The accumulation of a chronic sleep debt has consequences for young people's health and development. According to the Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec, sleep is one of the protective factors for mental health, along with physical exercise and social relationships.[21] The Association des médecins ophtalmologistes du Québec added during the hearings that when sleep duration is shorter, so is REM sleep, a phase essential for memory consolidation and emotion management.[22] Lack of sleep can affect mood and attention and exacerbate symptoms related to anxiety and depression. These effects impact many areas of young people's lives, including school and interpersonal relationships.[23]

Increasing exposure to screens also has consequences on young people's eye health. Again according to the Association des médecins ophtalmologistes du Québec, young people who use screens for more than four hours a day report various symptoms, including blurred vision, eye pain and headaches.[24] These symptoms are indicators of digital eye strain, also known as computer vision syndrome.[25] Looking at a screen reduces the frequency of blinking, which can cause dry eyes and increase sensitivity to light. There is a correlation between screen use and the prevalence of myopia. Although there may not be a direct causal link, the change in behaviour caused by screen use can affect eye health. Looking at a screen up close and being less exposed to natural light contribute to the development of myopia.[26]

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[18] Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec (FMSQ), *Mémoire de la Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 7; Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Servane Mouton, September 17, 2024, at 9:50 a.m.

[19] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

[20] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Servane Mouton, September 17, 2024, at 9:50 a.m.; Ibid., Association des médecins ophtalmologistes du Québec, January 30, 2025, at 12:20 p.m.; Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec, *Mémoire de la Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 7.

[21] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec, January 30, 2025, at 11:50 a.m.

[22] Ibid., Association des médecins ophtalmologistes du Québec, January 30,2025, at 12:20 p.m.

[23] Ibid., Servane Mouton, September 17, 2024, at 9:50 a.m.

[24] Ibid., Association des médecins ophtalmologistes du Québec, January 30, 2025, at 12:20 p.m.

[25] Canadian Association of Optometrists, *Syndrome de la vision informatique (fatigue oculaire numérique)*.

[26] Liang Jinghong et al., "Global prevalence, trend and projection of myopia in children and adolescents from 1990 to 2050: a comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis", *Br J Ophthalmol.*, 2024; Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Association des médecins ophtalmologistes du Québec, January 30, 2025, at 12:20 p.m.; FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 6; Ordre des optométristes du Québec, *Mémoire sur les impacts des écrans chez les jeunes*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, pp. 2 and 3.

Other factors such as the interference of screens in young people's social relationships and negative experiences online also cause numerous harms. Many experts made us aware of the need to analyze the effects of screens according to the different stages in young people's development, as those effects vary greatly.[27]

The impacts of screen use on children

Preschoolers

The early years of life lay the foundations of a child's development.[28] As the Observatoire des tout-petits pointed out in its report *Les écrans et les tout-petits*, the period from 0 to 5 years constitutes "[TRANSLATION] a pivotal moment during which children build the foundations for their future learning".[29] Those are the years when brain plasticity, in other words, the brain's ability to modify its functioning and structure, is at its peak. More than a million new neural connections are created every second as the brain is developing.[30] It is during this period of their lives that children learn to concentrate, to manage their emotions, thoughts and behaviours, to acquire knowledge and to solve problems.

Children are not immune to the stimuli generated by screens. The sound and visual effects of screens are likely to attract and hold infants' attention even if they are not yet able to understand what they hear and see on the screen. Children under the age of two can recall brief sequences and imitate the behaviours and emotions they see on screen.[31] Around the age of 2, children begin to understand the content, but they still have difficulty applying what they observe on screen to reality. It is still difficult for them to learn from screens compared to direct interactions.[32]

The increase in screen time for children under the age of 5 has the effect of replacing activities essential to their cognitive, physical and motor development, such as social interactions and exploring their environment. High screen time can affect the neural structures of the brain given its high plasticity. The most sensitive areas of a preschooler's brain are related to language acquisition and learning how to read and write.[33] Exposure to screens, even in the background, can have negative effects on children under the age of 5. Screens become a source of distraction and can affect concentration, memory and language acquisition.[34]

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[27] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Catherine L'Ecuyer, September 16, 2024, at 2:00 p.m.; Ibid., Jean-François Biron, September 18, 2024, at 11:30 a.m.

[28] Ibid., Catherine L'Ecuyer, September 16, 2024, at 2:00 p.m.; Ibid., Jean-François Biron September 18, 2024, at 11:30 a.m.

[29] Observatoire des tout-petits, *Rapport thématique : les écrans et les tout-petits*, (Montréal, Québec: Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon, 2024), p. 14.

[30] Centre on the Developing Child, *Brain Architecture*, Harvard University.

[31] Michelle Ponti, Canadian Paediatric Society and Digital Health Task Force, "Le temps d'écran et les enfants d'âge préscolaire : la promotion de la santé et du développement dans un monde numérique", *supra*, note 4, p. 194.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Observatoire des tout-petits, *Les écrans et les tout-petits*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 14.

[34] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Jean-François Chicoine, January 30, 2025, at 2:00 p.m.; Michelle Ponti, Canadian Paediatric Society and Digital Health Task Force, "Le temps d'écran et les enfants d'âge préscolaire : la promotion de la santé et du développement dans un monde numérique", *supra*, note 4, p. 195; Association québécoise des neuropsychologues, *Mémoire présenté à la Commission spéciale sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 1.

The content viewed can also play a key role. Television shows and videos that are fast paced and incorporate intense visual and sound elements affect young children's executive functions more than moderate- or slow-paced shows with soothing visuals or promoting learning.[35] Executive functions support goal-oriented behaviours,[36] including attention, memory, problem-solving and self-regulation. Cognitive and executive functions are recognized as predictors of educational success.[37]

Screens' effects on the different domains of child development

According to the 2022 *Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students*, half of preschool-aged children spend an hour or more per day in front of screens.[38] The survey also reveals that the proportion of five-year-old kindergarten students who are vulnerable in at least one domain of development increases with screen time. The domains of development are

- physical health and well-being;
- social skills;
- emotional maturity;
- cognitive and language development; and
- communication skills and general knowledge.

According to the survey findings, 23% of children who spend on average less than 30 minutes per day in front of a screen are vulnerable in at least one domain of development, while this proportion rises to 38% for those who spend 2 hours or more per day. Additionally, children who use screens for an average of two hours or more per day are more vulnerable in each of the domains of development.[39]

Screens can also have a negative impact on preschoolers' mental health. Preschool children may increase externalizing behaviours such as agitation, impulsivity, aggressiveness or difficulty obeying orders. Overexposure to screens is prone to favoring the internalization of emotions, which is characterized by depression and anxiety.[40] Symptoms of depression manifest in older children in the form of sadness, eating

[35] FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 5.
[36] Angeline S. Lillard and Jennifer Peterson, "The Immediate Impact of Different Types of Television on Young Children's Executive Function", *Pediatrics*, 128, 4 (2011), pp. 644–649.
[37] Observatoire des tout-petits, *supra*, note 33,
[38] Alexis Auger and Amélie Groleau, *Enquête québécoise sur le parcours préscolaire des enfants de maternelle 2022. Rapport statistique. Tome 1 – Portrait des caractéristiques, de l'environnement et du parcours préscolaire des enfants de maternelle 5 ans pour le Québec et ses régions*, *supra.*, note 5, p. 47.
[39] Alexis Auger and Amélie Groleau, *Enquête québécoise sur le parcours préscolaire des enfants de maternelle 2022. Rapport statistique. Tome 2 – Mieux comprendre la vulnérabilité des enfants de maternelle 5 ans : les facteurs associés*, Québec, Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2023, p. 49.
[40] Michelle Ponti, Canadian Paediatric Society and Digital Health Task Force, "Le temps d'écran et les enfants d'âge préscolaire : la promotion de la santé et du développement dans un monde numérique", *supra*, note 4, p. 194.

and weight problems, sleep disturbances, lack of energy and low self-esteem.[41] Anxiety can lead to significant emotional distress in children, resulting in disproportionate reactions to a situation. Paradoxically, a study conducted by Professor Fitzpatrick shows that children who exhibit emotional externalization and internalization behaviours are more at risk of being exposed to screens.[42]

Using screens to reward or distract preschoolers can have harmful effects. It can encourage the child to ask for the phone, tablet or game console more often and lead to negative reactions in case of refusal.[43] Using screens to calm or distract children can also make children dependent on screens as a means to regulate their emotions.

There are nevertheless some factors that mitigate the effects of screens on preschoolers. The presence of an adult to interact with the child when they are in front of a screen can make the experience positive, such as in the case of video calls, online games accompanied by a parent, relative or other responsible adult, or activities such as singing and dancing to online videos.[44] Similarly, active games encourage physical activity and help make it a part of daily life. For children aged 2 to 4, age-appropriate educational activities offer benefits, particularly for word learning. Additionally, suitable television programs promote certain aspects of cognitive development, such as imagination and prosocial behaviours.[45] What these activities have in common, however, is an adult supervising or participating in them.

School-aged children

Screen use habits change with age. As they grow older, children use screens more often for leisure purposes, such as with television, video games and social media.[46] For school-aged children, leisure screen time is in addition to educational screen time. In parallel, parental supervision tends to decrease with age, even though greater screen time and solitary use increases the likelihood of being exposed to harmful or inappropriate content.[47]

Young people are aware of the opportunity cost associated with screens. During our visits to schools, elementary school children pointed out that time flies when they are in front of the television or on their tablet. Some mentioned that they have difficulty unplugging or that they had missed an opportunity to spend time with family because they were busy in front of a screen. During the proceedings, Professor Fitzpatrick pointed out that screens replace periods of boredom for young people. Boredom can, however, be beneficial. According to Professor Fitzpatrick, it promotes creativity and can encourage the creation of new games. Boredom may also foster the development of executive functions, will power, and self-regulation. However, too much of it can become a source of stress for children.

[41] Encyclopédie sur le développement des jeunes enfants, *Anxiété et dépression*.
[42] Caroline Fitzpatrick et al., "Preschooler screen time and temperamental anger/frustration during the COVID-19 pandemic ", *Pediatr Res,* 94 (2023), pp. 820–825.
[43] Michelle Ponti, Canadian Paediatric Society and Digital Health Task Force, "Le temps d'écrn et les enfants d'âge préscolaire : la promotion de la santé et du développement dans un monde numérique ", *supra*, note 4, p. 194.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

> "[TRANSLATION] ***Screens take away creativity. Before, when I used to play outside, I had plenty of ideas for games. Now, when I go outside, I have fewer ideas to keep myself busy.***"
>
> Testimony of a student in Elementary Cycle 3.

As the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ) and the Observatoire des tout-petits said in public hearings, missed learning opportunities early in life are difficult to make up for, and lifestyle habits developed during childhood tend to persist and crystallize in adulthood. Similarly, healthy lifestyle habits acquired young are more likely to be maintained in adulthood.

Impacts of screen use on teens

Generally speaking, scientific literature tends to show that adolescents are less vulnerable than young children to the harmful effects of screens.[48] Professor Fitzpatrick said during the hearings that analyzing the effects of screen time on adolescents separately is important since their use of screens is different from that of younger children. They are generally less supervised and spend more time on social media and playing video games. They also have characteristics specific to their age: teens are more impulsive, more inclined to seek thrills and more sensitive to what their peers think.[49]

In her work, Professor Fitzpatrick has found that for adolescent girls, spending more time online is associated with an increase in symptoms of major depression and of generalized and social anxiety.[50] Her research also shows that, for both boys and girls, more screen time during adolescence is associated with a decrease in prosocial behaviours, such as helping and altruism.[51]

Psychiatrist Patricia Conrod also told us about several negative impacts that increased screen use can have during adolescence.[52] According to a study conducted by her research team, screen time is linked to symptoms of attention deficit disorder (ADD), with or without hyperactivity, throughout adolescence. The correlation could be due to an increase in impulsive behaviours. In other words, screen time would make teens more impulsive, which would increase ADD and ADHD symptoms.[53] According to the Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec, this phenomenon is exacerbated by changes in socialization, where online interactions take precedence over in-person relationships. This dynamic hinders the development of

[48] Michelle Ponti, Canadian Paediatric Society and Digital Health Task Force, "Les médias numériques : la promotion d'une saine utilisation des écrans chez les enfants d'âge scolaire et les adolescents", *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 24, 6 (2019), p. 411.
[49] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Caroline Fitzpatrick, September 16, 2024, at 3:40 p.m.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Caroline Fitzpatrick and Elroy Boers, "Developmental Associations Between Media Use and Adolescent Prosocial Behavior", *Health Education & Behavior*, 49, 2 (2022), p. 267.
[52] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Patricia Conrod, September 16, 2024, at 3:40 p.m.
[53] Jasmina Wallace et al., "Screen time, impulsivity, neuropsychological functions and their relationship to growth in adolescent attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder symptoms", *Scientific Reports*, 13 (2023).

essential social skills, making it more difficult for many people to manage interpersonal conflicts face-to-face.[54]

A study by researcher Benoit Gauthier also found that the mere presence of a screen in a 12-year old's bedroom is associated with various negative effects later, namely when the child is 17. Gauthier based his findings on the *Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development*. He observed that having a computer or television in the bedroom at age 12 is a predictive factor for lower overall grades, a higher risk of dropping out of school and a lower probability of having had a romantic relationship compared to young people who did not have a screen in their bedroom at that age. The unsupervised, private nature of access to a screen in the bedroom could explain these impacts.[55]

However, it is important to take a nuanced approach when discussing the effects of screens during adolescence. Screens can certainly have negative impacts, but it is important to be aware that they can also bring positive things to young people's lives. Emmanuelle Parent from the Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne discussed this in detail during her testimony. For example, she reported the words of a young person whose friend was going through a difficult family situation. The time those two spent playing together online in the evening was a way for them to escape and take their minds off things. She said that this kind of time spent together online can be a way for many young people to open up and talk about their problems.[56]

This testimony echoes that of a number of teenagers we met. For them, the various platforms they access via screens are a way to connect with their family and friends. The platforms make communicating easier and allow them to stay in touch with their loved ones. The platforms can also provide a sense of belonging to a community for more introverted people. Many teens also pointed out the practical side of screens. Cellphones are used to pay for things, take the bus and navigate the city. They have become indispensable, and not just for teens.

In its brief, Mouvement Jeunes et santé mentale also argued that the digital environment offers many advantages. Based on the testimonies of young people, the organization points out that health and support resources are very distant or simply absent in some regions. In these situations, the Web and social media provide access to resources and support. The organization also argued that social media help create online communities, which are places where people can connect and support each other, especially for marginalized people such as young 2SLGBTQIA+ people or those experiencing home instability. The same goes for First Nations and Inuit youth. Virtual platforms give them access to their ancestral culture and a space where they are free to express themselves on issues that affect them.[57]

Excessive screen use and Internet addiction

As many specialists confirmed, excessive exposure to screens leads in some cases to addiction to the Internet. This can result from excessive consumption of three major families of applications: video games,

[54] FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 4.
[55] Benoit Gauthier and Linda S. Pagani, "Accès aux écrans dans les espaces privés au début de l'adolescence et difficultés scolaires et sociales à la fin des études secondaires chez les garçons et les filles", *Promotion de la santé et prévention des maladies chroniques au Canada*, 44, 2 (2024): 41–49.
[56] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnel en ligne, September 12, 2024, at 2:00 p.m.
[57] Mouvement Jeunes et santé mentale, *Mémoire déposé dans le cadre de la Commission spéciale sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, pp. 6–7.

social media and streaming (YouTube, Twitch, etc.).[58] In this regard, there is a significant difference between genders: boys are more at risk of having problems related to video games, while girls are more prone to problematic social media use.[59]

During her hearing, psychology professor Magali Dufour emphasized the importance of nuance when discussing the effects of digital platforms: extensive Internet use does not necessarily mean Internet addiction. The consequences of Internet use should be seen along a continuum. On one end, there are young people who engage in healthy Internet use, which she calls "green lights". On the other, are the "red lights": young people who are truly suffering from Internet addiction and need specialized care. In between are the "yellow lights": those who have problematic Internet use and are beginning to experience negative impacts.[60]

> "[TRANSLATION] ***Addiction is when your parents take away your phone and you get angry.***"
>
> Testimony of a student in Secondary 1.

In recent years, Professor Dufour has observed an increase in the proportion of young people experiencing problems related to Internet use. A study conducted in 2012, in which she collaborated, revealed that approximately 20% of secondary school students were at risk of developing some form of addiction.[61] According to her more recent research, this proportion has now reached 31.5%.[62] Her work also shows an increase in the proportion of young people who may be suffering from Internet addiction and require specialized care. The findings show that 3.3% of adolescents may be considered addicted to the Internet, compared to 1.3% in 2012.[63]

This data is cause for concern. It reflects the progression of excessive Internet and social media use. We hope that the recommendations in this report aimed at promoting healthy screen use will help reduce the number of young people needing care in coming years. Nevertheless, we are aware that many young people in Québec already need specialized care and services to treat their Internet addiction. It is therefore essential to continue implementing these services and to guide young people's parents and their legal guardians towards available resources.

[58] Magali Dufour, *L'utilisation problématique d'Internet : portrait des méfaits les plus sévères*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 2.
[59] Christine Lavoie et al., "The relationship between problematic internet use and anxiety disorder symptoms in youth: Specificity of the type of application and gender", *Computers in Human Behavior*, 140 (2023), p. 5.
[60] Magali Dufour, *supra*, note 58, p. 2.
[61] Ibid., p. 3; Magali Dufour et al. "Gender Difference in Internet Use and Internet Problems among Quebec High School Students", *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry / La Revue Canadienne de Psychiatrie*, 61, 10 (2016), p. 666.
[62] Christine Lavoie et al., *supra*, note 59, p. 4.
[63] Magali Dufour, *supra*, note 58, p. 3.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends continuing to implement psychosocial services in institutions in the health and social services network for people with symptoms of addiction related to the use of screens. The Committee recommends that young people's parents and legal guardians be referred to appropriate resources.

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We still have only a very incomplete picture of screen time and its effects on young people in Québec. Many of our questions remain unanswered due to the lack of conclusive data on the effects of screens on young people's health and development. In this regard, the Committee joins its voice to those of many specialists heard during the proceedings to promote research on the matter.

We believe that regular monitoring of screen use and its effects on young people of all ages is essential. Documenting the effects of screens on young people's physical and mental health can help us as a society to better understand the situation and adapt our interventions to those concerned, while taking into account the specificities of different milieus and social groups.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends monitoring screen use and its effects on the health of young people by collecting regular data on preschoolers, elementary school students, adolescents and young adults. It recommends promoting research to evaluate the effectiveness of the initiatives implemented and to better understand the motivations that influence young people's digital use, while encouraging the dissemination of findings. The Committee also recommends documenting the effects of screens on young people's mental and physical health by integrating differentiated analysis that takes into account, for example, different populations in Québec and different socio-economic milieus in order to adapt interventions accordingly.

Progress in research on the effects of screens can benefit many. We believe that efforts to promote research go hand in hand with the continuous training of people who work closely with young people, such as health, education, and community workers. Such information sharing can tailor the approach to young people's needs while contributing to the development of the knowledge and skills of the professionals in the different fields.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that support be given to continuing education for service providers on screen use and its associated risks, particularly for service providers working in health, educational, and community settings.

Screen time recommendations

In light of the effects on young people's development and mental and physical health, a number of organizations have developed screen time recommendations in recent years. These are generally based on age.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends avoiding placing a child under 2 years old in front of a screen. For children aged 2 to 4 years, it favours a maximum screen time of one hour per day but specifies that less is better.[64]

The Canadian Paediatric Society has also published guidelines on screen time for children. Its recommendations are similar to those of the WHO. The Society says that it is not recommended to leave children under 2 years old in front of screens. The only exception is video chatting with caring adults such as family members who live far away. For children aged 2 to 5 years, the Society recommends limiting regular or sedentary screen time to a maximum of one hour per day. It also recommends avoiding screens at least one hour before bedtime to prevent stimulation and melatonin suppression.[65]

The current recommendations from the Gouvernement du Québec are similar to those of the Canadian Paediatric Society. The government suggests not leaving children under 2 years old in front of a screen. The maximum recommended screen time for children aged 2 to 5 years is less than one hour per day. For children aged 6 to 12 years, the government recommends a maximum of two hours per day in front of a screen for leisure activities, but for young people aged 13 to 19 years, it does not suggest a maximum. As many witnesses said during the hearings, it is preferable to conduct an individual analysis of the situation based on the type of content (schoolwork, video games, chatting, etc.), context of use and individual characteristics of the young person[66].

Most of the individuals and organizations that testified at the hearings made recommendations similar to those of the Gouvernement du Québec and the Canadian Paediatric Society. However, some specialists recommended going even further. For example, psychiatrist Victoria Dunckley recommended that children aged 0 to 3 years not be exposed to screens at all.[67] Pediatrician Jean-François Chicoine favoured a similar

[64] World Health Organization, "To grow up healthy, children need to sit less and play more", press release, April 24, 2019.
[65] Michelle Ponti, Canadian Paediatric Society and Digital Health Task Force, "Le temps d'écran et les enfants d'âge préscolaire : la promotion de la santé et du développement dans un monde numérique : document de principes", *supra*, note 4, pp. 193–202.
[66] Gouvernement du Québec, *Utilisation équilibrée des écrans chez les jeunes*, (December 2024).
[67] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Victoria Dunckley, September 16, 2024, at 3:00 p.m.

approach. He mentioned that some organizations in Europe advocate not exposing children under 3 years old to screens.[68]

During its hearing, the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ) proposed a comprehensive approach based on three principles. The first principle is to delay screen use as much as possible, especially at a young age. The INSPQ reminded us that screens are in no way necessary for the development of preschoolers. The second principle is to reduce children's screen time, especially when the content viewed has no educational value. The third and final principle is harm reduction. The INSPQ recommended developing young people's digital skills so that they adopt healthy habits online and in front of screens.[69]

Although the main recommendations regarding screen time for young people are consistent and widely agreed upon, they are not always well understood and, more importantly, not sufficiently well known. Many witnesses at the public hearings reminded us of the need to better communicate this information to parents and in young people's social surroundings. We therefore consider it essential to formulate screen time recommendations that are consistent, clear and easy for everyone to understand. They must take into account the different stages of child development, considering the diverse effects screens can have depending on the user's age. It is also important to ensure that these guidelines are widely disseminated so that parents, grandparents, relatives, teachers and youth workers are aware of best practices regarding screen time and are able to implement them.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends mandating the Institut national de santé publique du Québec to formulate, publish and promote, in the various social milieus, progressive guidelines on screen time based on the stages of youth development so as to create a framework for the use of screens.

In recent years, the INSPQ has developed significant expertise relating to children's screen time. The abundant literature it has produced attests to this. The INSPQ therefore seems to be the most appropriate organization to formulate recommendations that take into account the latest scientific research. Moreover, it enjoys great credibility in the eyes of Quebecers, which is likely to encourage compliance with its recommendations.

In order for these recommendations to be followed, we believe it is essential to promote them on a large scale. They must be widely disseminated to reach all spheres of society. In this regard, many people we heard mentioned the importance of paying particular attention to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Studies show that young children from these backgrounds are more exposed to screens than others.[70] However, specialists, including neurologist Servane Mouton and physician Mélissa Généreux, reminded us

[68] Ibid., Jean-François Chicoine, January 30, 2025, at 2:50 p.m.
[69] Ibid., Institut national de santé publique du Québec, September 17, 2024, at 10:40 a.m.
[70] Caroline Fitzpatrick et al., "An examination of bedtime media and excessive screen time by Canadian preschoolers during the COVID-19 pandemic", *supra*, note 13.

that people from disadvantaged backgrounds can be more difficult to reach through traditional promotional campaigns.[71] Special efforts must be made to reach them.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec establish a national information and awareness strategy regarding screen use recommendations to encourage the population, particularly parents, to adhere to them. Additionally, it should raise awareness among young people about screen time and the negative effects of screen use.

This measure should also raise the awareness of and equip parents, grandparents, extended families, youth workers and early childhood workers on how to develop a healthy relationship with digital technology by drawing attention to already available resources and tools, such as those offered by Tel-Jeunes, Tel-Jeunes Parents, Capsana and nousParents. The national strategy should adopt an approach aimed at balance and well-being, while seeking to reach disadvantaged communities and vulnerable individuals.

[71] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Servane Mouton, September 17, 2024, at 10:00 a.m.; Ibid., Mélissa Généreux, September 19, 2024, at 4:00 p.m.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that this strategy specifically encourage parents to

- set an example, particularly in terms of screen time;
- avoid exposing children to screens before bedtime;
- ban screens in bedrooms;
- be aware of the risks associated with sedentary behaviour and establish the measures necessary to avoid them;
- accompany their young children during screen time;
- use parental control tools to limit screen time;
- avoid using screens during family moments (dinners, shared activities), even in the background;
- avoid the systematic use of screens to calm or distract children;
- avoid content that is not appropriate for their children's stage of development (fast-paced versus slow-paced programming);
- encourage their children to use certain practical tools (activating monochrome mode, disabling notifications and reorganizing apps to reduce solicitations on their phone);
- develop their children's critical thinking towards social media;
- be aware of the risks associated with opening a social media account for their children;
- be aware of the risks associated with taking photos and videos with unsecured tools on digital platforms;
- be aware of the risks, such as deepfakes and online exploitation, associated with sharing images of their children without their consent;
- better protect their children's privacy; and
- be aware of the risks associated with monetization mechanisms and loot boxes in video games.

Over the course of our proceedings, we had the opportunity to talk with representatives of First Nations and the Inuit and to meet young people in the community of Pessamit. In addition to the warm welcome we received from the students and teaching staff, our discussions were very instructive. They helped us better understand the relationship between screens and the youth of these communities. These discussions allowed us to see the benefits of screens in a new light, particularly as a means of preserving the traditions of Indigenous communities by recording and transmitting stories, languages and culture in an innovative way. Various tools have also been developed to facilitate the learning and mastery of Indigenous languages. However, we observed that the challenges posed by screen management are shared by Indigenous communities. Young people, regardless of their background, are not immune to the effects of screens.

In a manner consistent with respect for the autonomy of First Nations and the Inuit, we wish to promote collaboration between the Gouvernement du Québec and the concerned communities in the development of any measure aimed at the use of digital technology. We are aware of the importance of considering the particularities of each milieu. We believe that sharing knowledge can be beneficial for all stakeholders.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that, in the future development of any measure or policy on the use of digital technology addressing and applying to the various Indigenous communities, according to their distinct realities, the Gouvernement du Québec consult their interested representatives.

Screens and parents

As Emmanuelle Parent aptly pointed out during the hearings, screen time is not just a children's issue. It is primarily an adult problem.[72] As adults and parents, we are the ones who first expose young people to screens, give them their first cellphone and set the example for them. It goes without saying that parents have a key role to play in helping young people develop healthy screen use habits.

> "[TRANSLATION] ***My mom tells me to get off my tablet while she's on her phone. She keeps nagging me about it because she hasn't even noticed I have already stopped."***
>
> Testimony of a student in Elementary Cycle 3.

Audrey-Ann Deneault, a psychology professor at the Université de Montréal, said that parents are role models for their children. Children learn by observing and are therefore influenced by their parents' behaviour. If children see their parents using their cellphones during dinner, they will conclude that it is a

[72] Ibid., Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne, September 12, 2024, at 2:00 p.m.

normal, acceptable behaviour. Professor Deneault noted that social skills develop from a very young age, so it is important for young people to be exposed to good habits early on.[73]

Parents play a crucial role in ensuring healthy child development. However, many people heard by the Committee reported a lack of knowledge among parents regarding screen management and, more broadly, the digital environment. Not all parents have the same level of digital literacy or are equally well-equipped to support their children in managing screens. For example, representatives of the Association Québécoise des neuropsychologues argued during the hearings that because some parents have never learned to self-regulate their own screen behaviours, it is difficult for them to help their children develop healthy habits.[74]

Parental technoference

Young people are aware that their parents do not always have good habits. During the school tour, most of the students we met mentioned that their parents spend too much time on their cellphones or computers. For example, one young person spontaneously declared: "[TRANSLATION] My father spends more time on his phone than I do." When questioned on the subject, several students indicated that they sometimes have difficulty drawing their parents' attention away from their cellphones. This phenomenon is known as technoference.

During the public hearings, many witnesses addressed this concept and its effects on children's development. Technoference is defined as technology interfering in interactions between people. In the case of parental technoference, it refers more specifically to technology's interference in the relationship between a parent and their child. This is a rather widespread phenomenon. A study conducted in the United States shows, for example, that 68% of parents with children aged 17 or younger say they are distracted by their phones during interactions with their children.[75] Closer to home, a study by the Institut de la statistique du Québec shows that a third of parents (32%) use their phones or mobile devices when they could be playing or interacting with their children.[76] The same study reports that the level of screen interference in the parent-child relationship is considered high among 14.4% of parents and moderate among 17.3% of parents. The data also shows that parents under the age of 30 and those in their thirties are more likely to have a high level of interference.[77]

Beyond these statistics, the phenomenon of parental technoference is a cause for concern due to its numerous effects on children's development. On this subject, Professor Deneault painted an eloquent picture of the situation during her appearance before the Committee:

> [TRANSLATION] Research shows that parental technoference is associated with less parental engagement, a reduced ability to notice and respond to children's needs, more negative parental responses and a greater

[73] Ibid., Audrey-Ann Deneault, January 30, 2025, at 2:00 p.m.
[74] Ibid., Association québécoise des neuropsychologues, February 4, 2025, at 5:20 p.m.
[75] Brooke Auxier et al., "Parenting Children in the Age of Screens", *Pew Research Centre* (2020), p. 12.
[76] Amélie Lavoie and Alexis Auger, *Être parent au Québec en 2022. Un portrait à partir de l'Enquête québécoise sur la parentalité 2022*, (Québec: Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2023), p. 144.
[77] Ibid., pp. 145–146.

risk of injuries among children. In adolescence, technoference is associated with more conflicts between parents and children and less emotional support from parents.[78]

Professor Deneault also said that children who feel that their parents are not responding well to their needs are more at risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, hyperactivity and inattention. Her research also shows that young people who perceive parental technoference can develop hyperactivity and inattention.[79]

Other studies tend to corroborate these statements. An article published in 2024 shows that there is a link between parents' screen use and children's overall development. A parent's higher number of hours spent in front of a screen is associated with their child's lower overall level of development one year later. According to the authors, this could be attributed to the fact that the more time a parent spends in front of a screen, the less likely they are to devote time to activities that contribute to the child's cognitive, physical or social development.[80]

Screen management at home

In our online consultation, 81% of parents who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they had set rules to limit their children's screen time. Among the main rules in place, the most popular were banning screens during meals (65.5%) and planning alternative activities without screens (62.2%).

MEASURES IMPLEMENTED BY PARENTS TO LIMIT SCREEN TIME

Measures to limit screen time	
Banning screens during meals	65.5%
Planning of screen-free activities (sports, creative hobbies, etc.)	62.2%
Education on the negative effects of screens	50.8%
No screens for one or two hours before bedtime	33.6%
Use of parental control applications	33.5%

Source: Findings of the Select Committee's online consultation.

Most of the young people we met were open to screen use rules at home. They were aware of the effects that excessive screen exposure can have on them. Some even expressed the desire for their parents to better

[78] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Audrey-Ann Deneault, January 30, 2025, at 2:00 p.m.
[79] Audrey-Ann Deneault et al., "Perceived Parental Distraction by Technology and Mental Health Among Emerging Adolescents", *JAMA Netw* Open, 7, 8 (2024).
[80] Caroline Fitzpatrick et al., "Do parent media habits contribute to child global development?", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14 (2024).

supervise them. They also shared other examples of measures, some of which were creative, implemented by their parents to limit screen time:

- No cellphone use allowed until homework is done;
- Turning off the Wi-Fi;
- Only one cellphone recharge allowed per day;
- No bringing cellphones into the bedroom at night;
- Using an application that requires the child to ask a parent's permission to install a new application on their phone; and
- Being required to read for 15 minutes before being allowed to use their cellphone.

Although young people consider it important to have rules to limit screen time, many admitted to circumventing them. For example, some students told us that when their screen time is exceeded at home, they go to friends' houses to continue their online activities. Others wait until their parents are asleep to turn the Wi-Fi back on.

Since young people are not always willing to follow the rules, managing children's screen time is a significant challenge for most parents. According to a study by the Institut de la statistique du Québec, nearly half of parents of children aged 2 to 17 find managing the time their children spend in front of screens very difficult (11.8%) or somewhat difficult (36.0%).[81] A little more than a third (35.0%) of parents say that discussions about screen use cause tensions and conflicts with their children.[82] The constant evolution of the digital world and the proliferation of social media and applications naturally makes things more complex for parents. It quickly becomes difficult to keep up and to adopt effective screen management strategies.

This has led many people to note that parents are not always sufficiently equipped and informed about the issue of screen time. In the online consultation, about a quarter (26%) of parents indicated that they did not have enough information about the risks and effects related to screens and social media.[83] This finding was echoed by several groups heard in public hearings. The Fédération des comités de parents du Québec, the Regroupement des comités de parents autonomes du Québec and the English Parents' Committee Association of Quebec all argued for better equipping parents to make decisions regarding screen time and the digital environment. They suggested providing parents with more tools and resources to raise their awareness of best practices.

The Committee supports the idea of providing more tools to help parents navigate screen management. We recommend making use of existing communication and dissemination channels. There are in fact numerous valuable resources currently available to support and inform parents. The *From Tiny Tot to Toddler: From Pregnancy to Age Two* guide prepared by the INSPQ is a good example. It offers a wealth of information to help new parents navigate their child's development. This guide is offered free of charge to all new parents in Québec at the start of prenatal care, as well as to parents who adopt a child and to

[81] Amélie Lavoie and Alexis Auger, *supra*, note 76, p. 148.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

intended parents in surrogacy.[84] It is thus widely disseminated. It is worth mentioning that the services provided by community family organizations are a valuable resource providing support to parents in various aspects of family life. These organizations have developed unique expertise and are key partners of the health network.[85]

Instead of duplicating efforts and means of communication, it seems logical to rely on these existing resources, which are appreciated by parents. This approach will also centralize all information in one place, making it easier for parents to find help and tools.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that content on screen use, tailored to each age group, be integrated into the main sources of information for parents, such as the *From Tiny Tot to Toddler* guide, and into the tools used by community family organizations and by integrated perinatal and early childhood services. The Committee recommends that this content be disseminated to stakeholders in the various communities, in particular by means of simple, accessible infographics. The information could be distributed to parents through various channels, such as prenatal classes, educational childcare services and schools, to help parents adopt healthy screen use habits within their families.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends including a section on the impacts of screens on toddlers in current programs such as "Agir tôt" and integrated perinatal and early childhood services.

It goes without saying that the digital environment is constantly changing. Applications are being developed at a rapid pace, new social media platforms are being created and the world of video games is constantly evolving. It is difficult for parents to keep up, and it is essential that the resources and information available to parents be updated periodically, to ensure they can keep informed about advances in the digital environment.

[84] Nicole Doré and Danielle Le Hénaff, *Mieux vivre avec notre enfant de la grossesse à deux ans : guide pratique pour les parents*, (Québec: Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2025).
[85] Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille, *Écrans et santé des jeunes : les parents, ces alliés incontournables*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 4.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends updating training programs aimed at improving parents' digital skills, taking into account the evolution of knowledge to equip them to face the challenges related to their children's screen use.

Awareness and prevention

During the proceedings, we identified significant awareness and prevention needs. The entire population, not just young people, must be educated on the effects of screen time and best practices to reduce screen time. Parents, grandparents, extended families, legal guardians and teachers, as well as all youth and early childhood workers, need to be better equipped to address the issues related to screen use. In this regard, many efforts are already being made by community organizations and the Gouvernement du Québec, but considering the magnitude of this challenge, we must remain proactive. It is important to adopt a concerted, comprehensive approach to ensure the well-being of young people.

On one hand, the Gouvernement du Québec must draw attention to the fact that overuse of screens has become a public health issue. Including screen time problems in government strategies and plans would send a clear message about how seriously we take this issue. Addressing it in relevant government documents would help make it a central focus of government action. This would also facilitate coordination among stakeholders in support of shared goals.

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec incorporate, when relevant, the theme of young people’s exposure to screens and the impacts of that exposure into the development of future government action plans and strategies in health care. The Committee emphasizes the importance of coherent and concerted alignment of public policies to promote healthy lifestyles, particularly among children, adolescents, vulnerable individuals and persons from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

On the other hand, it is important to strengthen the awareness and prevention actions already in place. We believe that society's efforts to reduce the negative effects of screens on young people must go further. From a harm reduction perspective, it is essential to help both young people and adults develop healthy online habits and manage their screen time effectively. Carrying out this important work relies notably on community organizations and support centres that already offer workshops, conferences, prevention programs and support resources.

Many organizations are very actively involved in carrying out these actions. During our proceedings, we had the opportunity to hear from many of them who told us about their initiatives. The Centre pour l'intelligence

émotionnelle en ligne, for example, offers a wide range of workshops for elementary and high school students, as well as for parents and school teams. These workshops aim, in particular, to spark discussions with young people to raise their awareness of healthy screen habits, reduce the harmful effects of the online environment and develop critical thinking about the digital environment. Other organizations that testified during the hearings, such as Action Toxicomanie and Maison Jean Lapointe, also offer workshops aimed at raising awareness about screens and preventing problematic use. The on-the-ground actions carried out by these organizations are essential. They successfully reach many young people and their families across Québec, addressing topics such as Internet addiction, video games, social media and cyberbullying.

The workshops and other services offered by organizations are essential for encouraging healthy screen use. They help young people develop critical thinking and adopt good habits when browsing online. They provide them with the necessary tools to understand and cope with the strategies used by web giants to grab their attention. For these reasons, we consider it essential to continue the awareness and prevention efforts undertaken by these organizations. These resources need to be established across all regions of Québec and made accessible to as many people as possible on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends strengthening the prevention and intervention work of community organizations specializing in prevention and addictions in elementary and high schools to support school teams in managing screen use.

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends continuing to provide prevention workshops on specific themes, such as Internet addiction, cyberbullying, sextortion, video games and social media.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that young people across Québec be made aware, in particular through workshops, of the risks associated with screen use, including the collection of their personal data, and be equipped to develop critical thinking and acquire digital literacy to make healthy, balanced, informed and responsible choices.

SCREENS IN SCHOOLS

Prohibition of personal mobile devices in classrooms

In October 2023, the Minister of Education issued a directive prohibiting the use of personal devices in the classrooms of Québec public schools. The directive, which came into force in January 2024, specifies that school service centres:

> must implement the measures at their disposal to prohibit the use of cellphones, headphones and other personal mobile devices by students on the premises of schools and vocational training centres where pre-school education services and elementary and secondary school instructional services are provided.[86]

The directive provides for certain exceptions to the prohibition on the use of cellphones in class. It does not apply when the use of cellphones is required by

- the instructional methods chosen by the teacher;
- the student's state of health; or
- the special needs of a handicapped student or a student with social maladjustment or a learning disability.[87]

It falls to governing boards to define each individual school's approach to prohibiting the use of mobile devices in class. The directive indicates that the approach defined by the governing board had to come into force not later than December 31, 2023, and be implemented for the return to school in January 2024. As the directive applies only to schools belonging to school service centres, the prohibition of cellphones in class does not concern Québec private schools.

During the Select Committee's visits to schools in the fall of 2024, most of the students said they agreed with the measure. They recognized that cellphones are a distraction and can hinder concentration in class. The online consultation yielded similar results. Nearly two thirds (63%) of young people aged 14 to 17 consider that banning cellphones in class is an effective means to limit distractions. The proportion of respondents with this belief rises to 86% when all respondent segments are taken into account.

Studies tend to confirm that banning cellphones is an effective means to limit distractions. A literature review carried out by the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ) shows that using digital devices, including cellphones, in class for personal purposes results in students performing digital multitasking, which is associated with decreased learning. Even a turned-off phone on a desk may affect a student's working memory, which is a cognitive function necessary for learning in school.[88] In other words,

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[86] *Order in Council 1498-2023 concerning the approval of the Directive from the Minister of Education regarding the use of cellphones, headphones and other personal mobile devices by students on the premises of school service centres' schools and vocational training centres where preschool education services and elementary and secondary school instructional services are provided*, *Gazette Officielle du Québec*, Part II, Vol. 155, No. 42, (October 18, 2023), pp. 2613–2614.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Tania Tremblay, *L'utilisation des écrans en contexte scolaire et la santé des jeunes de moins de 25 ans: effets sur la cognition*, (Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2023), pp. 26–28.

the mere sight of the object can interfere with certain cognitive abilities. Though most research has been done on students in higher education, the INSPQ reports that it is logical to presume that "[TRANSLATION] the negative impacts of digital distraction on cognition are also present, if not greater, among elementary and secondary school students whose brains are less mature and therefore more vulnerable".[89]

The main stakeholders in the education sector consider that prohibiting cellphones in classrooms is a good measure. Parents' committee associations and the Fédération des centres de services scolaires du Québec warmly welcomed the ministerial directive and said that its rollout went well. Teacher unions have similar discourse, noting that removing cellphones from classrooms eliminates an element that is disruptive for students. The Fédération autonome de l'enseignement is satisfied that the directive maintains teachers' professional freedom by allowing them to use mobile devices for pedagogical purposes.[90] The Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement supports the ban, but notes that some of its members still have problems enforcing it. Some students still bring their phones to class and use them. In this regard, the union draws attention to the importance of schools having the means necessary to directly enforce potential measures regarding the use of mobile devices at school.[91]

Prohibition of personal mobile devices in schools

During our visits to schools, we quickly noted that there were many cellphones, particularly in secondary schools. In elementary schools, there are generally a little fewer. Many elementary school students do not own a cellphone, and not all those who do bring it to school. The situation is different in secondary schools, where the vast majority do have cellphones and tend to have them on hand during the school day. This observation was confirmed by the recent study *Enquête sur le bien-être des familles québécoises*. Data show that smartphone ownership jumps from 50% in Elementary 6 to 80% in secondary school.[92]

During the public hearings, specialists, including researcher and consultant Catherine L'Ecuyer, psychiatrist Victoria Dunckley, teachers Éric Martin and Sébastien Mussi, and education lecturer Carolanne Campeau, suggested personal mobile devices be prohibited on the premises of all elementary and secondary schools. Many proposed to extend the cellphone prohibition to cafeterias, hallways and schoolyards as well. Specialists affirm that this measure could have several benefits, including reducing young people's total

[89] Ibid p. 2.
[90] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Fédération autonome de l'enseignement, September 17, 2024, 6:10 p.m.
[91] Ibid., Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement (FSE-CSQ), September 17, 2024, 5:20 p.m.
[92] Mélissa Généreux, *D'un bouleversement à l'autre : une enquête sur le bien-être des familles québécoises*, *supra*, note 8.

screen time. It would also encourage young people to partake in other activities, such as going outside, reading or engaging in physical activity.[93]

> "[TRANSLATION] ***If we had our phones, we wouldn't use equipment like the ping-pong tables as much.***"
>
> Testimony of a student attending a school where cellphones are prohibited.

Witnesses who were in favour of this measure also argued that prohibiting cellphones in schools would promote interactions between young people. This is notably the case of lecturer Carolanne Campeau and psychiatrist Victoria Dunckley. They consider that the measure would promote social interactions between young people during lunch and breaks, since they would no longer have the option to use their cellphones.[94]

In this regard, it should be noted that the *Québec Education Program* states that schools' threefold mission is to provide instruction, socialize and provide qualifications.[95] Socialization is thus at the heart of the Québec school system, and we consider that it must remain so. Schools must be more than just places of knowledge acquisition: they are where young people learn to engage in conversation, communicate, resolve conflicts and help one another. Schools play an essential role in learning how to live together as citizens. However, according to many of the young people we met, the increasing presence of cellphones in schools hinders this mission. An elementary school student told us that cellphones create an obstacle to making friends. Others told us that their classmates use their phones during lunch hour or recess instead of interacting with other students.

Parents also described to us the dilemmas posed by cellphones in schools. A mother provided this eloquent testimony as part of the online consultation:

> [TRANSLATION] My child recently started secondary school. He's an active kid who would rather play outside than be glued to a screen. Initially, he thought it was lame that his friends were acting like zombies on their cellphones during the lunch hour. He was proud of not having a mobile device for the first two months. But now, peer pressure has taken its toll and he's begun playing the same games as his friends. He wants to bring his phone to school, too. As a parent, I don't want to be an obstacle to his social integration because I know that it's important for teenagers to be like everybody else. But this just doesn't make any sense to me. Studies show that cellphones are harmful. Every single parent I know is outraged by the situation!

The Service de police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM) drew our attention to an important element in favour of banning cellphones in schools. Many cases of cyberbullying, threats and sharing of intimate images dealt with by the SPVM begin in schools, during class hours. Though the cycle of online violence frequently continues in the evenings and on weekends, it often starts in school, where students are brought together.

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[93] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Victoria Dunckley, September 16, 2024, 3:20 p.m.; Ibid., Éric Martin and Sébastien Mussi, September 24, 2024, 10:10 a.m.
[94] Ibid., Victoria Dunckley, September 16, 2024, 3:20 p.m.
[95] Gouvernement du Québec, *Québec Education Program*, 2006, p. 3.

For this reason, the SPVM representatives added their voice to those in favour of reducing the presence of cellphones in schools.[96]

However, the Association québécoise des neuropsychologues expressed a few reservations about prohibiting personal mobile devices in schools. Its representatives said that a complete prohibition during breaks and lunch hour could deprive certain students of access to their online support network. They pointed out that cellphones can provide social benefits, in particular for marginalized youth, as well as for those with few friends or who feel they are different from everyone else. The Association instead recommends that schools offer screen-free activities so that students stop using their cellphones of their own volition.[97]

The students we met during our school visits also shared their thoughts on the potential consequences of the cellphone ban on more isolated persons. Many underlined the fact that, for those with few friends, the cellphone is a source of entertainment, a getaway and a means to create a safe space in an environment that is sometimes difficult to navigate. According to them, a complete prohibition could have negative consequences on the well-being of certain students. Others raised the opposite point: prohibiting cellphones could encourage students who are more reserved to engage with their classmates and create new friendships.

Most stakeholders agree that this measure would not solve all problems. It is only one way among many others to reduce young people's screen time and raise awareness of the impacts. This is why the Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec proposes, for example, that digital citizenship workshops be offered as a complement to the prohibition of cellphones in schools to inform students on the best practices regarding screen use.[98]

The opinions of the stakeholders from the education sector appear to be mixed regarding the relevance of adopting a national directive on prohibiting cellphones on school grounds. In their testimonies, groups of parent committees favoured using awareness-raising and education instead of excessively restrictive measures. For example, the Fédération des comités de parents du Québec considers that a national ban on cellphones in Québec schools would be difficult to implement properly. The Fédération chair, Mélanie Laviolette, gave the following warning:

> [TRANSLATION] A complete ban would be difficult to enforce given the realities of each region. […] The situations in Abitibi and in Montréal are not the same, and what can be done in one region cannot necessarily be done in another. I do not believe that a complete ban would provide any benefits in terms of understanding of and education on the use of technological and digital tools.[99]

The Fédération des comités de parents du Québec prefers to leave the decision-making to the governing boards, as they are in a better position to understand the reality on the ground.[100] These bodies are made up of parents, school staff, community representatives and students (in the case of secondary schools).[101]

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[96] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Service de police de la Ville de Montréal, February 4, 2025, 4:20 p.m.

[97] Ibid., Association québécoise des neuropsychologues, February 4, 2025, 5:40 p.m.

[98] FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 9.

99 Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Fédération des comités de parents du Québec, September 12, 2024, 12:00 noon.

[100] Ibid.

[101] *Education Act*, CQLR, c. I-13.3, s. 42.

The Association québécoise du personnel de direction d'école advocates for a similar approach. It considers that the principle of subsidiarity is preferable, and that each individual establishment should be responsible for its own decisions concerning the presence of cellphones on its premises. The Association points out that the reality of each school is different. It considers that the implementation of such a measure cannot be standardized, as the situation of a school with a student body of 400 is significantly different from that of an establishment with one of 3,000.[102] For its part, the First Nations Education Council informed us that, in the communities it serves, these kinds of decisions are made on a local level. The schools, communities, councils and community governments are the ones who actually determine what is good for their young people.[103]

The unions we heard expressed similar positions. The Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement also prefers decisions to be made on a local level and promotes a coordinated approach between parents, students, teachers and school officials. Local decision-making would have the benefit of rallying the community around the measure that is adopted.[104] During the hearing, the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement recommended that, prior to the adoption of a national directive, there be an assessment of the effects of the ban in schools that have recently prohibited cellphones. It proposed that the lived experiences of the students in these establishments be studied to learn from them and make the changes necessary for successful nationwide implementation.[105]

Though these stakeholders expressed certain concerns during the hearings, it should be noted that teachers, on the whole, are favourable to the prohibition of cellphones in schools. In winter 2025, the Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement consulted its members on the application of the measure. It found that 76.2% of the 6,855 respondents were in favour of banning cellphones in schools.[106] We believe that teachers' openness to the measure is a promising sign and likely to facilitate implementation.

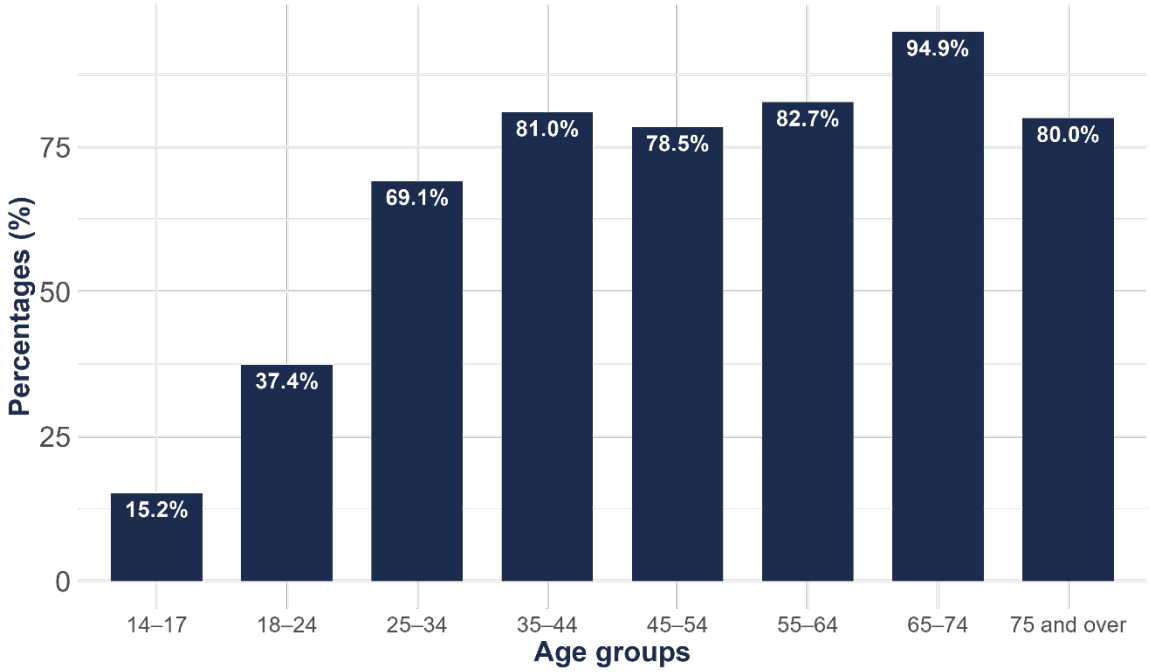
> "[TRANSLATION] ***Cellphones should not be seen as a monster that must be taken away from young people. Cellphones at school are not fatal to learning.***"
>
> Testimony of a secondary school student.

The results of the online consultation carried out by the Select Committee also showed considerable support for the measure: 61% of respondents considered that cellphones should be banned in schools, including in hallways and schoolyards. It should be noted however that the results vary greatly depending on the age group of the respondents. Young people are less happy about to the ban, whereas adults are largely favourable. Among those who identified themselves as parents, nearly four out of five (78%) were in favour

[102] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Association québécoise du personnel de direction d'école, September 17, 2024, 3:40 p.m.
[103] Ibid., First Nations Education Council, January 30, 2025, 9:40 a.m.
[104] Ibid., Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement (FSE-CSQ), September 17, 2024, 5:10 p.m.
[105] Ibid., Fédération autonome de l'enseignement, September 17, 2024, 6:10 p.m.
[106] Zacharie Gaudreault, "Une majorité d'enseignants en faveur de l'interdiction du cellulaire partout à l'école", *Le Devoir*, March 11, 2025.

of a complete ban of cellphones in schools.[107] These data show that the prohibition of cellphones in schools has a certain degree of social acceptability, as researcher Benoit Gauthier argued during the hearing.[108]

PROPORTION OF PEOPLE IN FAVOUR OF PROHIBITING CELLPHONES IN SCHOOLS, INCLUDING IN HALLWAYS AND SCHOOLYARDS[109]



Source: Findings from the Select Committee's online consultation.

We are aware that young people aged 14 to 17 have little enthusiasm for the proposal to ban cellphones in schools. When we met with them, they stated their reticence, and most expressed their attachment to their phones, which they use at school to communicate with their friends during lunch breaks, to keep in touch with their parents, or simply to entertain themselves between classes. Many students also noted that cellphones have practical uses, for example, they are used to pay in the cafeteria and to check bus schedules. Quite a few noted that cellphones have become a necessity in their school lives. They use them to check their class schedules and room numbers, and to receive communications from the school or concerning extracurricular activities. It is thus understandable that the measure raises concerns among young people. Psychiatrist Victoria Dunckley said that, following the announcement of measures such as this one, young people generally express some resistance. She noted however that once the measure is implemented, young

[107] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

[108] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Benoit Gauthier, January 30, 2025, 3:50 p.m.

[109] The findings include the responses of both those who "somewhat agree" and those who "completely agree" with the measure.

people are generally favourable to it. Their anxiety goes down and they feel a form of relief at the thought of no longer being constantly exposed to notifications and social media.[110]

It was in fact reassuring to hear the testimonies of students from schools where a cellphone ban is already in effect. To our great surprise, most of those students told us they appreciated the fact that cellphones were banned in school. They said that the measure promotes socialization, since students no longer have the reflex of checking their phones as soon as they have some free time. Many told us that this measure helped students form new friendships. School officials also said that the complete prohibition of cellphones in schools has led to a reduction in conflicts and conflict management.

In one school where the measure had very recently been implemented, students who had experienced both situations told us that there had been big changes. Since the measure's adoption, students talk with one another more and spend more time outside. The hallways and cafeteria are livelier than before. Students told us that they adapted to the new situation quickly, though they nonetheless considered that there were certain disadvantages. Many of them mentioned finding it more difficult to meet up with their friends during lunch hour or recess without their phones. Others said they circumvent the rules by going to the schoolyard or the municipal library next door to use their phones. Despite this, the young people recognized the benefits of the cellphone ban in schools. Most students indicated that they would rather not go back to the way things were. We believe that this fact is very encouraging, and it has inspired our deliberations.

The Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés also said that nearly 60% of its member establishments had opted for the prohibition of cellphones in schools and that the implementation of the measure had gone well.[111]

> "[TRANSLATION] ***At first, we thought the new rules were a pain, but we got used to them and now we consider them normal.***"
>
> Testimony of a student attending a school where cellphones are prohibited.

***

In light of the various points of view provided over the course of the Committee's proceedings, we have concluded that the place of personal mobile devices, in particular cellphones, in elementary and secondary schools must be reviewed. A school should be a place where young people are socialized: this is at the heart of the educational mission. According to the testimonies of students and school staff alike, cellphones are an obstacle to student interactions. We believe that prohibiting personal mobile devices on school premises during class hours is likely to promote young people's socialization.

In our deliberations, we have taken into consideration the various points of view expressed by groups and witnesses during our proceedings. The challenges brought up regarding the implementation of a national

[110] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Victoria Dunckley, September 16, 2024, 3:20 p.m.
[111] Ibid., Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés, September 17, 2024, 6:40 p.m.

directive prohibiting cellphones in schools are relevant, and they shaped the orientation of our recommendations. We believe that the measure's conditions of application must be determined at the local level to accurately reflect the different realities on the ground. For this reason, it appears essential to us that governing boards, as well as school teams, be fully involved in the implementation of the prohibition of cellphones in schools.

The Second Opposition Group holds a minority position and proposes that the prohibition of cellphones in secondary schools be implemented progressively and in a decentralized manner, and that a directive not be issued for the 2025–2026 school year given the lack of time for school teams, parents and students to agree on its conditions of application.

Notwithstanding,

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec prohibit, as of the 2025–2026 school year, the use of cellphones, headphones and other personal mobile devices in all elementary and secondary schools, including on school grounds, until the end of class hours, and that the prohibition be established through a clear directive to ensure standardized implementation. Exceptions may apply if the use of personal mobile devices is required for the methods of instruction of the teaching staff, the student's state of health or the special needs of handicapped students or of students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities. The conditions of application are recommended to be established, in particular, by the authorities provided for under the *Education Act* and the *Act respecting private education*, within the scope of their respective jurisdictions (school team, students and parents).

The Committee also recommends that the Ministère de l'Éducation provide support to schools to facilitate the implementation of the prohibition of personal screens, in particular through increased promotion of access to screen-free activities and through encouragement of awareness-raising initiatives for students.

School officials must be given sufficient flexibility and room to maneuver to adapt the conditions of application of the measure to the realities of their own school. In our opinion, schools are the most suited to determine the conditions of implementation, such as the location where students will leave their phones (bag, locker, elsewhere) and sanctions in the event of non-compliance with the rules. This flexibility will make it easier for schools to implement the measure.

In light of what we heard from the individuals and groups who testified, we are confident that the measure will be implemented efficiently and in collaboration with the various school stakeholders. The testimonies of students attending schools that have already implemented a cellphone ban are reassuring. Very many young people told us that they appreciated the measure and recognized its benefits. We are aware that this measure alone will not solve all problems. However, it is in line with a global approach to reducing the harmful effects of screens and social media and, together with the other recommendations made in this report, will encourage a more balanced use of screens.

Digital educational tools

Pedagogical use of digital tools is common in schools. Digital educational tools are various technologies designed for teaching and learning such as tools, applications or software that can be used in a pedagogical situation.[112] In 2023, the Académie de la transformation numérique published a survey entitled *Portrait des usages du numérique dans les écoles québécoises.*[113] It revealed that, in 2023, almost all schools had Internet connections in all classes. Moreover, 67% of primary schools integrate digital technology from kindergarten. It has been established that teachers in private schools use digital technology more than those in public schools. In private schools, 69% of teachers use digital technology in the classroom for an average of four hours or more per week, compared to 29% in the public school system.

Most of the groups we heard provided nuanced perspectives on the use of digital educational tools in schools. In general, they immediately linked the benefits to the risks associated with young people's screen time. According to the Association des Entreprises pour le développement des technologies éducatives au Québec, technologies facilitate access to a variety of pedagogical resources.[114] They promote student autonomy and inclusion and provide opportunities for collaboration. The Association québécoise des neuropsychologues believes that digital educational tools can be conducive to learning when their use meets clear pedagogical objectives.

The young people we met during our tour of schools were divided on the use of digital technologies in the classroom. Some said that diversifying content and teaching methods with videos or mobile apps is helpful. Students who used tablets or laptops in the classroom generally reported enjoying working with those tools. Others were relatively indifferent to the use of technology in the classroom. For them, digital technology was comparable to traditional tools such as blackboards and chalk. At home, most young people use a computer to do their homework and lessons, and some use educational applications to enrich their learning.

Regulation of digital educational tools

Regulation of screens varies from one school and one school governance body to the next.[115] There is no Act or regulation covering the use of screens in classrooms. Instead, regulation consists of a set of directives and policies that give schools and school staff a great deal of autonomy over the use they wish to make of screens.

During the special consultations and public hearings, stakeholders raised the lack of research on the effects of pedagogical use of screens. The use of digital educational tools is often based on the premise that they are beneficial to student learning. However, the current state of research permits no clear consensus. Very few digital educational tools have been evaluated, reviewed or certified.[116] In addition, rapid technological

[112] Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, *Digital Competency Framework*, trans. Services linguistiques en anglais, Direction du soutien au réseau éducatif anglophone (Gouvernement du Québec, April 2019), p. 29.
[113] The survey was conducted among 345 principals of public and private elementary and high schools. Académie de la transformation numérique, *Portrait des usages du numérique dans les écoles québécoises* (2023).
[114] Association des Entreprises pour le développement des technologies éducatives au Québec, *Pour une approche raisonnée et raisonnable*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 3.
[115] The term "school governance body" includes school service centres and school boards.
[116] UNESCO, *Global education monitoring report summary, 2023: technology in education: a tool on whose terms?*, p. 7.

change makes it difficult to assess such tools; educational technology products change on average every 36 months.[117]

Many stakeholders, from both the health and education sectors, spoke out in favour of better regulation of screens in schools. The findings of the online consultation indicate that nearly 70% of school staff believe that teachers should limit the use of screens to pedagogical purposes in the classroom.[118] At the end of our proceedings, we concluded that, in schools, digital tools should be reserved for pedagogical uses. In our opinion, the school community is ready to adopt this measure, which should be implemented in a manner consistent with respect for the autonomy and professional judgment of school staff.

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends restricting the use of digital tools in the classroom to educational purposes, to ensure that such use meets clear pedagogical objectives, including by promoting a balance between the various traditional and digital pedagogical methods.

This recommendation aims to rally the entire education system around a shared vision, while preserving the autonomy of schools, governance bodies and school staff. We want each school and each staff member to implement best practices for a balanced, worthwhile use of digital educational tools, with positive and concrete effects on student learning. As Patrick Giroux, professor of educational technologies at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, pointed out, "[TRANSLATION] the effect depends on the way in which the tool is used".[119]

We believe it is necessary to establish clear, consistent, harmonized guidelines on the use of digital educational tools. Such guidelines should be based on best practices and research-validated results. For example, the Institut national de santé publique du Québec has produced a critical summary of methods for reducing the health risks associated with using screens in schools.[120] According to the summary, it is generally recommended to limit screen time in classrooms and in services offered before or after school. Screens should also not be the default methods of teaching and classroom management. They must be complementary and serve specific pedagogical objectives, while promoting active use by students. Digital tools should bring added value, in other words, make it possible to improve teaching and learning.[121]

[117] Ibid.
[118] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.
[119] Patrick Giroux et al., *Vers un usage équilibré des écrans: miser sur les familles et renforcer l'effort scolaire*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 9.
[120] Yan Ferguson and Fanny Lemétayer, *Analyse des recommandations en matière de réduction des risques sur la santé associés à l'utilisation des écrans en contexte scolaire: État des connaissances* (Québec: Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2023), p. 1.
[121] Ibid., p. 24.

Recommendation 20

The Committee recommends that the Ministère de l'Éducation, in collaboration with key players such as the Institut national d'excellence en éducation, develop and update clear guidelines on the pedagogical use of digital tools.

Québec's strategy on screen use and young people's health for 2020–2025 raises a red flag concerning excessive screen use's risks to young people's health and development. It emphasizes prevention and the promotion of healthy lifestyle habits.

We therefore believe that healthy screen habits must also be adopted in the classroom. This includes attention to ergonomics, good lighting and frequent breaks, which can help prevent visual and physical fatigue, and thus optimize learning.[122]

Recommendation 21

The Committee recommends that a reference framework be developed to support the educational milieu in the adoption of healthy and balanced use of screens. The framework could include guidelines on screen time according to young people's age and stage of development and also standards for visual hygiene, including frequent breaks, adapted ergonomics, adequate lighting, etc.

In its brief, the Centrale des syndicats du Québec emphasizes the importance of relying on the judgment and professional autonomy of school staff members whose work is central to the mission of Québec schools, namely, to educate, socialize and qualify students.[123] This principle is also part of the profession's legal framework. The *Education Act* provides that teachers have the right to govern the conduct of each group of students entrusted to their care, determine appropriate methods of instruction and select the means of evaluating progress.[124] In other words, it is up to teaching staff to select classroom management tools, pedagogical approaches, teaching methods and teaching materials according to student needs. This means that decisions relating to the use of technological tools for pedagogical purposes are teachers' professional responsibility, in accordance with educational objectives.

[122] Ordre des optométristes du Québec, *supra*, note 26.
[123] Centrale des syndicats du Québec, *Utilisation des écrans en milieu éducatif: le temps est au rééquilibrage*, brief submitted to the SCSYH.
[124] CQLR, c. I-13.3, s. 19.

Observation 1

The judgment and professional autonomy of teaching staff must be respected when determining permitted or prohibited uses of digital educational tools, in accordance with pedagogical and educational objectives.

Digital solutions

The integration of digital educational tools in teaching requires reliable digital infrastructures adapted to pedagogical needs. As mentioned earlier, the digital educational tools used, whether learning platforms, interactive tools or online resources, must stand out for their usefulness and quality. That said, we are aware of the environmental footprint associated with the purchase and use of digital devices, and we know that some digital tools likely collect data for the benefit of private companies. We therefore believe that the purchase of devices, software and mobile applications must be carried out in a thoughtful manner and according to targeted objectives.

We consider that using digital educational tools goes hand in hand with strengthening a digital ecosystem adapted to the realities of Québec. In its brief, the Association des Entreprises pour le développement des technologies éducatives au Québec emphasizes the importance of developing digital solutions adapted to the cultural and linguistic realities of Québec and francophones This is a concern that we share. The representatives we met also drew attention to digital tools' potential to adapt teaching materials to the varied realities of Indigenous students.

Recommendation 22

The Committee recommends promoting the development of French-language digital solutions in order to offer technological solutions adapted to the cultural and linguistic realities of Québec and francophones, while encouraging local innovation and digital sovereignty.

Digital competency education

Many people who appeared at the public hearings stressed the importance of digital competency education in schools. Digital competency education differs from education *with* digital technologies. Digital technologies are more than a support for learning: they shape our lives, just as they have the power to transform pedagogy and the disciplines themselves.[125] To borrow from the summary by the Fédération des centres de services scolaires du Québec, our objective is to enable the school system "[TRANSLATION] to offer an environment in which digital technology will be both an object of learning and in the service of

[125] Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *Educating for a Digital World: Report on the State and Needs of Education 2018-2020*, trans. Marissa Panetta-Jones (Gouvernement du Québec, November 2021).

learning".[126] The approach is resolutely educational, focused on integrating tools into pedagogy, developing digital skills and learning about healthy screen use.

In the Québec Education Program (QEP), the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) is considered a cross-curricular competency. Although not the subject of a separate curriculum, this competency must be actively developed throughout the education path. It goes beyond disciplinary boundaries and requires all teaching staff to promote its integration into pedagogical practices. Its teaching is therefore based on a cross-curricular approach, without a formalized learning progression or a systematic evaluation framework, which contributes to uneven integration from one school to the next.

In 2019, the Ministère de l'Éducation introduced a document entitled *Digital Competency Framework*, which breaks this competency down into twelve dimensions.[127] Digital competency is defined as follows:

> Ability to find, organize, understand, evaluate, create and disseminate information using digital technology. Multi-faceted and includes ICT skills, social and collaborative skills, and cognitive skills. Also includes the ability to behave ethically and responsibly. Digital competency is related to civic obligations governed by the *Criminal Code* as well as by various laws regarding the protection of privacy and personal information, copyright and intellectual property.[128]

At present, the teaching of digital competency is not compulsory, and its assessment is not formalized. There is a Digital Competency Development Continuum,[129] but it is not formally associated with a progression of learning that would make it possible to identify and classify the knowledge to be acquired, appropriated and used by stage of education, cycle and level.

Like many of the individuals and groups who testified at the hearing, we believe that students would be the first to benefit from uniform implementation of digital competency development across the school system. This harmonization would involve updating the main pedagogical framework documents for Québec schools.

Recommendation 23

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec harmonize and update the Québec Education Program (QEP), the Digital Competency Framework and the Policy on the Evaluation of Learning to establish a coherent framework for the use of digital technology in schools and to chart a clear path forward for all stakeholders in the school community. In addition, the Committee recommends evaluating whether it would be appropriate to introduce digital competency as mandatory content, pending its full integration into the suitable QEP programs.

[126] Fédération des centres de services scolaires du Québec, *Le rôle de l'école dans le développement d'une saine relation au numérique*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 14.
[127] MEES, *supra*, note 112.
[128] Ibid., p. 28.
[129] Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, *Digital Competency Development Continuum*, trans. Services linguistiques en anglais Direction du soutien au réseau éducatif anglophone (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020).

Digital competency particularly relies on digital literacy. According to a literature review, digital literacy is based on

- increased reading and writing skills;
- basic technical skills;
- research and methodological skills;
- socioemotional and communication skills; and
- skills related to the development of critical thinking.[130]

We consider that digital literacy is an important competency to develop. Technologies are here to stay, and schools have a responsibility to train citizens who are comfortable with digital technology while being aware of the associated issues. Students will be exposed to the use of digital technology in their everyday lives, in vocational programs and in higher education, as well as in the labour market.

Over the course of our proceedings, digital citizenship emerged as a key concept. It is seen as citizens' ability to participate in society in the digital environment. Through digital tools, and especially social media, students interact not only with friends and family, but also with a plurality of groups and individuals they know barely or not at all. They are also in contact with a variety of online content of highly inconsistent quality. Faced with this mass of information, we are convinced that it is essential to encourage young people to develop critical thinking skills that will enable them to judge the reliability of content.

Participating in the digital world is not without its challenges. Young people's online behaviour can sometimes have significant effects on their or other people's well-being. Although the effects can be both positive and negative, we believe that the school environment can contribute favourably to the exercise of digital citizenship among young people. According to what we heard during the proceedings, educating students about the importance of caring, courteous and respectful interactions can help prevent online harassment and bullying. In this regard, some school initiatives seem promising. For example, socio-community officers from the Service de police de la Ville de Montréal travel to schools to lead sessions on safe online behaviours.[131] School is a good place to hold prevention activities for young people, from the first year of elementary school to the end of high school. Prevention measures are most effective if they are planned in a concerted, comprehensive manner, and deployed at the right time in an intensive and continuous manner.[132]

To provide concrete support for the development of digital citizenship, the notion should be integrated into everyday school life. We propose two ways of doing this. First, we recommend that schools include it in their code of conduct. In our view, this would be a sensible way to raise awareness among both students and their parents. A code of conduct is approved by the governing board, presented to students at the beginning of the school year and often pointed to at various times. It is usually in the school agenda or handbook. Parents are also invited to read it and sign it at the beginning of the year. Second, we, like the Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec, recommend planning an information and awareness

[130] CSE, *supra*, note 125, pp. 22–23.

[131] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Service de police de la Ville de Montréal, February 4, 2025, at 4:20 p.m.

[132] Gouvernement du Québec, *Integrated Actions to Promote the Health, Well-Being and Educational Success of Young People*.

strategy aimed at young people.[133] It would be useful to offer students clear guidelines to help them adopt a thoughtful approach to using digital technology. Such a strategy should be adapted to students' realities and could help them to better understand the risks associated with having an online presence, develop their critical judgment of online content and promote responsible behaviour in their digital interactions.

Recommendation 24

The Committee recommends that schools integrate the notion of digital citizenship into their code of conduct in order to raise awareness among students of the impact of their online actions and to encourage them to adopt respectful, safe and responsible behaviours.

This integration should be based on the following principles:

- **Respect and caring**: Encourage courteous interactions on digital platforms, prevent online harassment and foster respectful behaviour towards peers and the online community.
- **Digital security**: Teach students how to protect their personal information, use secure passwords and report any suspicious or threatening online situations.
- **Critical thinking**: Develop a critical eye toward online information by learning to identify trusted sources and to avoid spreading fake news.
- **Responsibility**: Encourage the use of digital tools in accordance with the law and with the institution's rules, so as to promote constructive, positive exchanges.
- **Digital footprint**: Educate students about the trail of data left online and the potential impact on their reputation and future.

Recommendation 25

The Committee recommends planning an information and awareness-raising strategy on digital citizenship for young people covering in particular healthy and constructive use of screens, risks associated with screens and critical thinking about online content.

Access to digital educational tools

The use of educational technologies raises issues of equity, both in terms of students' access to technologies and in terms of the skills needed to use them. Until now, the material barrier has been the main obstacle in many educational settings. Over the past 20 years, many States around the world have focused on access to technology through policies, strategies and action plans. In Québec, measures to improve access to computer equipment and connectivity have helped reduce certain inequalities.[134] However, digital

[133] FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 19.
[134] Institut national de santé publique du Québec, *La fracture numérique : contexte québécois, pistes d'action et perspectives internationales. Rapport final*, (2024), p. 28.

inequalities do remain, particularly in relation to geography, socio-cultural factors and the use made of the technology.[135]

Digital educational tools help break down geographical barriers and bolster pedagogical offerings in First Nations and Inuit schools. During its hearing, the First Nations Education Council (FNEC) emphasized that the use of these tools facilitates access to education, helps fight isolation, creates learning communities and promotes resources based on identity, language and culture.[136] In a context where few pedagogical materials are designed with Indigenous realities in mind, technology provides communities with the opportunity to adapt content to make it culturally relevant. This link with cultural identity, made possible by digital tools, can foster a sense of belonging and contribute, in the longer term, to students' school perseverance. The FNEC also mentioned the high autonomy of the affiliated schools, while noting significant disparities between them in terms of infrastructure and digital skills. Several schools are currently adopting internal policies governing the use of screens in school. The FNEC cited the example of an elementary school where at mealtimes students have access only to websites and applications chosen by the teaching staff.

In line with what the Fédération des centres de services scolaires du Québec pointed out, we believe that schools must give each young person the means to develop digital competencies and, where appropriate, reduce inequalities in digital appropriation.[137] We believe that universal digital education (for all students), combined with more targeted accessibility and support measures, can contribute to achieving digital equity.

Recommendation 26

The Committee recommends that equity be taken into account in digital policies implemented in public schools to ensure fair access to technological tools for young people in vulnerable situations or with special needs, including those who

- are living with a handicap;
- have a specific medical condition;
- are socioeconomically disadvantaged;
- are attending classes for newcomers; or
- are Inuit or First Nations youth attending schools outside of their community.

Recommendation 27

The Committee recommends that sufficient material and human resources be made available to support students, particularly those with special needs, in the use of digital tools.

[135] CSE, *supra*, note 125, pp. 17–21.
[136] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, First Nations Education Council (FNEC), January 31, 2025 at 9:40 a.m.
[137] FCSSQ, *supra*, note 126.

Professional development for school staff

To develop their digital skills, students must rely on the expertise of teaching staff who are equipped, competent and supported. Developing teachers' digital competency is therefore essential to maximizing the pedagogical benefits of digital tools. Professional competencies are at first acquired during initial teacher training and then honed throughout a teacher's career through practice, continuing education and professional development activities.

The competency to mobilize digital technologies to benefit students has been included in the Reference Framework for Professional Competencies for teachers since 2020. It has several key elements, including

- exercising ethical citizenship in the digital age;
- harnessing the potential of digital resources for learning;
- collaborating and communicating via digital technology;
- mobilizing digital technology for personal and professional empowerment;
- developing critical thinking with regard to the use of digital technology; and
- adopting an innovative and creative approach to the use of digital technology.[138]

In practice, most teaching staff have access to resources to improve their digital skills, such as training, support, coaching, mentoring, seminars and symposiums, as well as access to a community of practice.[139] However, a number of studies tend to show that training focused mainly on technical mastery of digital tools does not lead directly to effective pedagogical uses of digital technology.[140]

The witnesses heard during the public hearings were divided on the issue of teacher training. For Patrick Giroux, a professor of educational technologies at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, screen time at school is increasingly under control. Teachers are already generally well trained in the use of digital technology for assessment, presentation, planning and didactics. Teachers with a four-year bachelor's degree are equipped to associate digital tools with clear, relevant pedagogical intentions, but even more so to take a thoughtful, professional stance and learn from their experiences.[141] That said, some data from our online consultation show that the feeling of competency can be improved. The findings show that the majority (62%) of school staff believe that they are not sufficiently trained to use pedagogical technologies.[142]

We agree that it is essential that digital training activities be offered to teachers. Such training courses should go beyond the technical mastery of digital tools to focus on their pedagogical and ethical integration.

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[138] Ministère de l'Éducation, *Reference Framework for Professional Competencies: For Teachers* (2020), p. 79.
[139] Académie de la transformation numérique, Portrait des usages du numérique dans les écoles québécoises, *supra*, note 113 p. 70.
[140] Alain Stockless and Stéphane Villeneuve, "Les compétences numériques chez les enseignants" in Margarida Romero et al., eds., *Usages créatifs du numérique pour l'apprentissage au XXIe siècle* (Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2017), p. 145.
[141] Patrick Giroux et al., *supra*, note 119 p. 9.
[142] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

Recommendation 28

The Committee recommends guaranteeing access to content on responsible screen use in teachers' continuing education in order to raise awareness and equip them with respect to the issues, benefits and best practices regarding the pedagogical, creative and ethical use of digital tools.

Recommendation 29

The Committee recommends integrating content on the pedagogical use of screens and digital resources into the university education of future teachers so that they understand both the issues and the benefits.

Teachers should not be alone to bear the responsibility for the development of digital competency. In its brief, the Centrale des syndicats du Québec stressed the importance of offering continuing education to teachers, professionals and support staff so that all those called upon to work with students also develop the skills and a critical eye on the use of digital technologies.[143] Pedagogical technologists and pedagogical advisers, in particular, have a key role to play. We would like to take this opportunity to highlight the work of the RÉCIT teams who, through their expertise, support teachers in the optimal use of digital technology in schools. Through workshops, training sessions and support activities, RÉCIT plays a role in passing on best practices across Québec.[144] We encourage the Ministère de l'Éducation to support the RÉCIT's activities so that it is able, through its resources and funding, to support school teams as artificial intelligence rapidly evolves, bringing with it many challenges and opportunities in education.

Screen time as a reward

As part of our mandate, we also addressed the use of screen time as a reward. This is an issue that emerged during the consultations and concerns recreational use of screens to reward or entertain students. Examples of reward screen time are a movie on a Friday afternoon or being allowed to play on a tablet following good behaviour. In this context, we believe that it is necessary to distinguish between pedagogical and recreational uses in the classroom. In light of the testimonies during the proceedings, it appears that pedagogical uses of screens are generally perceived positively, while recreational uses, such as using screen time as a reward, raise more reservations and should be subject to stricter supervision, or even limited or avoided in schools.

Many stakeholders expressed reservations about recreational use of screens in schools, saying that it contributes to placing such tools on a pedestal. In its brief, Collectif Vital points out that "[TRANSLATION] these are all missed daily opportunities to integrate more active time and interactions between young people".[145] We believe that screens should be usaed as rewards only exceptionally. A number of groups in the education sector also expressed discomfort with this practice. Parents' committees in particular showed great concern.

[143] CSQ, *supra*, note 123, p. 16.
[144] Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés, *FEEP brief*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 13.
[145] Collectif Vital, *Les écrans et les réseaux sociaux chez les jeunes*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 6.

They brought up the need to offer a variety of screen-free activities as well as to provide infrastructure that promotes physical activity and opportunities for young people to socialize.

We believe that real-world experiences should be prioritized over activities in front of screens. We stress the need to make rich, varied and accessible activities available.

Recommendation 30

The Committee recommends that elementary and high schools in Québec avoid using screen time as a reward. It also recommends that schools prioritize options that promote student well-being, such as physical activity, reading and social interaction.

Recommendation 31

The Committee recommends providing access to a broad range of sports, cultural, artistic, scientific and social activities in order to preserve the balance between digital learning and student well-being.

E-sports

E-sports (short for electronic sports) have gradually made their way into some Québec schools in recent years. They have become part of school life through extracurricular activities or special school projects. However, the emergence of these initiatives raises questions about the place that should be reserved for this activity in our schools. The issue has been of concern to us over the course of our proceedings due to the potential and real effects of e-sports on young people's health and development.

E-sports are defined as video game competitions that take place in a structured, performance-oriented environment. They offer the opportunity to compete, individually or as a team, against other players to obtain the best position in the rankings.[146] Participants face off in competitions or championships of varying scales. These can be matches set up by an amateur group or major-league events organized by companies in the industry. The latter sometimes offer prizes such as gaming equipment or sums of money that can reach millions of dollars.[147] Events are streamed online and attract many followers, especially teenagers.

Competitors gather in amateur or professional teams, leagues and tournaments. Some follow structured training programs supported by coaches to hone their playing skills.[148] E-sports differ from the playful practice of video games through their competitive aspect and the time given over to training and developing game strategies.[149]

The cost associated with e-sports can be a financial burden on young people and their families. Although not a requirement of school e-sports programs, players usually need various devices such as a game console

[146] Maryse Caron, *Pratique du jeu vidéo de compétition et santé des adolescents et jeunes adultes: état des connaissances* (Québec, Institut national de la santé publique du Québec, 2023), p. 12.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Fédération québécoise de sports électroniques, *Les impacts des programmes de sport électronique sur les joueurs,* November 2024, p. 6.
[149] Antoine Lemay et al., "Esport programs in high school: what's at play?", *Front. Psychiatry* (2024), p. 2.

and headphones, as well as online subscriptions to take part. The video game industry employs various monetization mechanisms, such as skins and loot boxes, within the games themselves to encourage additional spending to enhance the gaming experience.[150] Combined, these expenses are estimated at between $1,400 and $1,700 annually.[151] According to psychologist Antoine Lemay, since most high school e-sports players do not work during the school year, they must rely on their savings or financial support from their parents.

There is no consensus on the use of the term "e-sports" because of its similarity to the notion of sport, which implies physical activity.[152] In 2023, the Institut national de la santé publique du Québec produced a critical summary on the subject and proposed a definition that favours the expression "competitive video gaming". This is defined as follows:

> [TRANSLATION] Competitive practice at the amateur or professional level, taking place in a virtual environment using technological equipment, which can be played individually or in teams and is based on specific physical and cognitive skills.[153]

While there is a range of names and definitions for e-sports, and some semantic debate, we have retained the term "e-sports" in this report for the sake of clarity.

E-sports at school

In Québec, e-sports have gradually become established in the school system. They are more common in CEGEPs and universities, where some institutions have set up competitive teams or activities. In high schools, the presence of e-sports remains limited, although some institutions have begun to integrate them in the form of extracurricular activities or special school projects.

This type of program generally includes theoretical and strategic courses on e-sports, online training sessions, physical activity periods, workshops on healthy lifestyles and participation in various events. In some cases, to be eligible, students need parental permission and must maintain or improve their academic performance and participate in an additional hour of physical activity each week.[154] However, the structure may vary depending on the school and the type of program offered (area of concentration or extracurricular activity).

Some see potential benefits in introducing e-sports in schools, including the possibility of promoting school perseverance and offering a supervised, structured activity. Others are more concerned about the risks associated with playing video games, such as a sedentary lifestyle, increased screen time and the development of a video game addiction or disorder.

[150] Ibid., p. 7.
[151] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Magali Dufour, September 19, 2024, at 12:15 p.m.; Ibid., Antoine Lemay, February 5, 2025, at 3 p.m.
[152] Maryse Caron, *supra*, note 146, p. 15.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Antoine Lemay, "Les eSportifs en milieu scolaire: des joueurs comme les autres?", PhD thesis (Montréal: Université du Québec à Montréal, 2024), p. 11; Académie Esport de Québec, *Concentration Esport*.

The effects of E-sports on young people's health and development

One of the concerns raised by the introduction of e-sports programs in schools is the increase in screen time among young people. Most of the witnesses heard at the public hearings on this subject maintained that e-sports at school add to young people's total screen time.

At the hearings, psychologists Magali Dufour and Antoine Lemay discussed the results of studies conducted on the screen times of young e-sports players. According to these studies, they spend more time on screen leisure activities than their peers. These young people spend an average of 50 hours per week on screen-based activities, compared to 32 hours for their classmates.[155] Professor Dufour also presented the results of a second study. It shows that young people spend an average of 14 hours per week playing e-sports in addition to the time spent on other forms of video games.[156] Although the number of hours per week varies from one study to another, the picture remains the same: the practice of e-sports is added to the other leisure activities carried out on screens and significantly increases overall screen time.[157] This finding invalidates the hypothesis that e-sports programs replace playing video games at home.

The increase in players' screen time has risks for their physical and psychological health. From the outset, the practice of e-sports is associated with sedentary behaviour. The Fédération québécoise de sports électroniques points out in its brief that young people who play e-sports have a less healthy body composition than their peers.[158]

> "[TRANSLATION] ***On weekends, when my parents go to bed, I reconnect the console and play until 5 a.m. It's an online game, you can't stop whenever you want."***
>
> Testimony of a student in Elementary Cycle 3.

Other aspects of players' physical health can be affected. E-sports are also associated with a variety of problems, including postural injuries, musculoskeletal disorders, sleep disorders and eye strain.[159] In its brief, the Fédération québécoise de sports électroniques adds that sleep quality is affected by the time spent in front of a screen in the evening. According to the Federation, this is a major issue for e-sports players.[160] Reduced sleep quality and duration can have repercussions in different areas of young people's lives. As the Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec pointed out, sleep is one of the protective factors for mental health.[161]

In addition, certain other risk factors associated with e-sports were raised. For example, Lemay and other stakeholders said that young e-sports players often have low self-esteem.[162] Professor Dufour pointed out

[155] Antoine Lemay, *supra,* note 154, p. 51.
[156] Antoine Lemay et al., *supra*, note 149, p. 7.
[157] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Antoine Lemay, February 5, 2025, at 3 p.m.
[158] Fédération québécoise de sports électroniques, *Résumé du rapport sur les impacts des programmes de sports électroniques sur les joueurs*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 1.
[159] Antoine Lemay et al., *supra*, note 149, p. 3; M. Caron, *supra*, note 146, p. 24.
[160] FQSE, *supra*, note 158, p. 1.
[161] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec, January 30, 2025, at 11:50 a.m.
[162] Antoine Lemay et al., *supra*, note 149, p. 3.

during the hearing that 22% of players report having a gaming problem, while in fact only a small proportion (5.6%) are considered to have problematic behaviour.[163] She hypothesizes that players feel somewhat guilty about their gaming habits. E-sports can also become a source of stress, especially during competitions or if conflicts arise within the team.[164]

The findings presented above, which include high screen time, sleep disorders, low self-esteem and stress experienced in a competitive environment, illustrate the factors that may lead to a gaming disorder. According to the World Health Organization, gaming disorder is characterized by

> impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences.[165]

Lemay pointed out at the hearing that young people who play e-sports have a higher prevalence of gaming disorder than recreational gamers. Among high school students, the proportion of e-sports players at risk of developing a gaming disorder is significantly higher (32.8%) than their peers (12.8%).[166] Gaming disorder can have consequences in the lives of young people and affect their personal, family, social and educational activities.

Like Dufour and Lemay, we believe that those responsible for e-sports programs must be equipped to be able to detect problematic behaviours that pose a risk to young people's health and development. These people are well-placed to open the discussion with young people about the risks of playing e-sports.

Recommendation 32

The Committee recommends that school staff involved with e-sports programs be equipped to detect health problems among young people, including Internet addiction. They should also be provided with tools to facilitate discussion about video games, particularly with regard to the games' addictive aspects.

Several stakeholders who testified during our proceedings argued that supervision of young people enrolled in e-sports programs can yield positive results for people at risk of developing an addiction.[167] Lemay believes that the prevention and awareness activities offered in these programs can have a protective effect. In some cases, young people who sign up to e-sports programs may have access to a variety of support resources.

During our proceedings, we had the opportunity to meet with young people enrolled in e-sports programs. The students we met liked their programs. They say they have had training on healthy lifestyle habits and additional physical education classes. They also mentioned that they enjoyed the courses on strategy and team building.

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[163] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Magali Dufour, September 19, 2024, at 12:20 p.m.
[164] Maryse Caron, *supra*, note 146, p. 25.
[165] World Health Organization, *Addictive behaviours: Gaming disorder*, October 22, 2020.
[166] Antoine Lemay et al., *supra*, note 149, p. 6.
[167] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Antoine Lemay, February 5, 2025, at 3 p.m.

These observations are corroborated by the testimonies of the experts heard at the hearing. According to Magali Dufour and Antoine Lemay, e-sports players report seeing the benefits of their programs' support measures on their physical health, psychological health and social relationships.[168] Our discussions with experts and students in the field also showed us that e-sports programs can have benefits for young people. They help build communities of players, foster friendships and encourage the development of skills such as leadership and team spirit.

Offering e-sports programs in schools can have many benefits for young people. They can be a real source of academic motivation for gamers. Nevertheless, the increase in screen time as well as the risk of developing a gaming disorder remains a source of concern for us. This activity requires many hours of training and playing in front of a screen. For these reasons, we believe that these programs must promote a life balance that takes into account activities that are essential to the well-being of young people, such as playing sports, maintaining social ties with friends and family, devoting time to oneself and adequate rest periods. We believe that prevention and education efforts among young people are essential to the successful operation of e-sports programs. In addition, these programs should be rigorously supervised and based on clear pedagogical objectives so that students derive maximum benefit from them.

Recommendation 33

The Committee recommends that schools strengthen the supervision of e-sports programs for young people to ensure that e-sports take place in a healthy, safe and balanced environment. The Committee also recommends that clear educational objectives be defined for these programs, including the development of skills like communication, team spirit and self-regulation.

Recommendation 34

The Committee recommends that e-sports programs in schools include prevention and education measures for issues related to increased screen time, Internet addiction, performance and overall health (physical, mental and social), including holding workshops on screen management, healthy lifestyle habits and employment opportunities. It is important for schools to encourage a healthy balance between e-sports and other activities essential to young people's well-being, such as physical exercise, face-to-face social interaction and rest. Students should also be made more aware of ergonomics, posture and the effects of a sedentary lifestyle.

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In light of these testimonies, we have come to the conclusion that school e-sports programs have both advantages and disadvantages for young people. In this context, we are relying on a harm reduction approach. We believe that to ensure their success, e-sports programs offered in schools must be supervised, in addition to being monitored by the Ministère de l'Éducation.

[168] Ibid.

Recommendation 35

The Committee recommends that before implementing any new e-sports program, a private educational institution or the governing board of a public school inform the Ministère de l'Éducation of its decision to do so and that the new program be subject to increased monitoring by the Ministère. The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec make available to school service centres and institutions a support document to be followed by schools implementing special e-sports pedagogical projects. This document should be based on the available data and promote informed decision-making regarding possible effects on health, associated risks, academic success, motivation and student well-being. In addition, the Committee recommends that the Ministère de l'Éducation ensure increased monitoring of the evolution of e-sports programs in the school network to take into account young people's development and well-being. Schools must provide the necessary data on an annual basis.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The effects of social media

Young people tell us right away that social media have become part of their daily lives. While they bring new possibilities, we must also recognize that social media come with some new risks. During the school tour, students spontaneously expressed their concerns and shared negative online experiences. This lucidity regarding the risks of social media was also evident in the online consultation: 84% of young people aged 14 to 17 who responded to the questionnaire said they knew and understood the pitfalls related to the use of screens and social media.[169]

Whether it is addictive mechanisms, cyberbullying or revenge porn, young people and experts agree: social media present certain risks to development and well-being.

Mechanisms used by social media

From the start, most of the stakeholders we heard from argued that social media are designed to encourage young people to stay connected or keep coming back. Platforms accomplish this by integrating a variety of mechanisms aimed at capturing and maintaining their attention. Businesses use techniques such as infinite scrolling, autoplaying videos and notifications. This is what Sandrine Prom Tep, a professor of digital marketing at the Université du Québec à Montréal, describes as persuasive design. As she says, digital platforms design their interfaces in a way that captures interest and drives engagement.[170]

> "[TRANSLATION] ***The TikTok algorithm shows you videos that will interest you, so you can scroll for hours and hours.***"
>
> Testimony of a student in Secondary Cycle 2.

Dr. Mélissa Généreux reported that social networking and video game companies are going so far as to hire neuropsychologists to help develop sound, visual and architectural strategies aimed at capturing the attention of young people and maximizing their time on these platforms. She gave the example of the red dot used by several apps to signal new notifications: "[TRANSLATION] That red dot is absolutely calculated to create and generate a sense of urgency. Basically, when you see a red dot, it sends a signal: "c'mon, this is urgent, something's going on".[171]

The students we met with spoke about the risks associated with the algorithms used by social media, which work by offering personalized content in order to keep users on the platforms. Young people also expressed concern that the algorithms and artificial intelligence could expose them to misinformation.

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[169] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

[170] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Sandrine Prom Tep, February 5, 2025, at 10:40 a.m.

[171] Ibid., Mélissa Généreux, September 19, 2024, at 15:50 p.m.

The different mechanisms developed by social media have concrete consequences. They increase screen time and can, in some cases, lead to excessive use. Psychiatrist Victoria Dunckley says that many of the techniques used by these platforms have an overstimulating effect on young people's brains and affect the reward system, making young people want to keep coming back.[172] Young people themselves recognize the power of algorithms and other mechanisms used on social media to maintain their attention. Students we met spoke of "dopamine chains" to refer to this process. They recognize that these mechanisms have negative effects, make them lose track of time and increase their screen use.

Psychological effects

Professor Patricia Conrod, of the department of psychiatry and addiction medicine at Université de Montréal, outlined several concerning effects that social media can have on the mental health of young people. A study to which she contributed revealed that social media use is correlated with symptoms of anxiety in adolescents. Every additional hour per day spent on social media was associated with an increase in anxiety symptoms.[173] Her work also indicated that intensive use of social media could be associated in the short term with an increase in aggressive behaviour and, in the long term, with antisocial behaviour.[174]

Another study that Professor Conrod collaborated on showed that social media use in adolescence was closely linked to an increase in depressive symptoms.[175] She said this effect can largely be explained by the impact social media has on young people's self-image and self-esteem.[176] She explained that the content posted on these platforms tends to promote unrealistic social norms, which can be harmful to young people.[177] The Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec pointed out during a hearing that the impacts of social media on self-esteem happen very quickly. Exposure as brief as 8 to 9 minutes to inappropriate content that promotes utopian bodily standards was likely to negatively impact young people's self-image.[178]

The students we met also mentioned that the content shared on social media is often unrealistic and presents standards of beauty and success that are difficult to achieve. During adolescence, a critical time for identity formation, many young people are inclined to compare themselves to models they see online, even though they know they are not realistic. For example, one high school student told us that she has friends who have difficulty with their self-image because of the unrealistic standards they see on social media and to which they compare themselves. Another student gave the example of communities on social media that openly encourage anorexia, which can worsen eating disorders in young people.

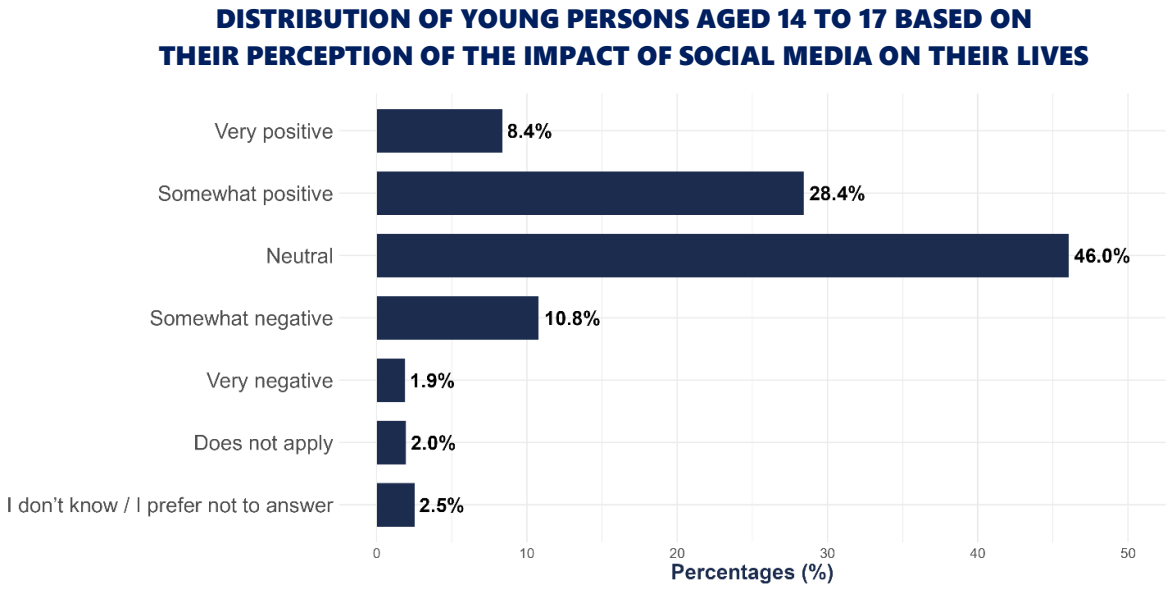
Others denounced hate speech and racism on social media, highlighting the harmful effects it can have on the psychological health of young people. One student told us she once felt ashamed of her origins because of discriminatory comments circulating on the Internet. The young people we spoke to placed the blame

[172] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Victoria Dunckley, September 16, 2024, at 3:20 p.m.
[173] Elroy Boers et al, "Temporal Associations of Screen Time and Anxiety Symptoms Among Adolescents", *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 2020, vol. 65, no 3, p. 207.
[174] Jasmina Wallace et al, "A Population-Based Analysis of the Temporal Association of Screen Time and Aggressive Behaviors in Adolescents", *JAACAP Open*, 2023, vol. 1, no 4, pp. 288-290.
[175] Elroy Boers et al., "Association of Screen Time and Depression in Adolescence", *JAMA Pediatrics*, 2019, vol. 173, no 19, pp. 853-859.
[176] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Patricia Conrod, February 5, 2025, at 3:50 p.m.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid., Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec, January 30, 2025, at 11:50 a.m.

on the anonymity conferred by social media as it gives some people the impression they can say anything without having to deal with the consequences.

> "[TRANSLATION] ***There is racial discrimination in social media, and since it creates a buzz, these comments become normalized and people start repeating it.***"
>
> Testimony of a student in Secondary Cycle 1.

However, it is important to avoid painting an entirely negative portrait of social media. During our meetings, students demonstrated a very nuanced view of the situation. While social media can have negative effects, it also offers several benefits, including facilitating socialization and communication. As one high school student pointed out during the school tour: "[TRANSLATION] Social media is a way to express yourself, it can even help people who have difficulty expressing themselves in person". The results of the online consultation tell a similar story. The vast majority of young people report that, overall, social media has a neutral or positive impact on their lives. However, 13% of 14- to 17-year-olds feel their lives are negatively affected.



Source: Findings of the Select Committee's online consultation.

Cyberbullying and online violence

Social media is a meeting place for young people, but also an environment where violent and hateful behaviour can emerge. As mentioned earlier, the feeling of anonymity conferred by some platforms can certainly promote freedom of expression, but it also encourages making statements that could fuel cyberbullying and aggressive comments.

Social media is not the only platform for cyberbullying. As the youth affairs office of the Directeur des poursuites criminelles et pénales (DPCP) told us, it can occur on almost any online platform. Thus, both social media and video games are likely to be environments conducive to cyberbullying.[179] Emmanuelle Parent of the Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne made a similar observation; she mentioned that cyberbullying can just as easily happen through text messages or even on platforms used by schools, such as Teams.[180]

One of the unique things about cyberbullying is that it offers no respite for young people who are victims. Unlike other forms of bullying, it follows them everywhere and at all times, because social media and electronic devices have become ubiquitous.[181] As a result, young people can be exposed to cyberbullying at home, on the bus, at school, during the day, in the evenings and on weekends.

Unfortunately, this is all too common. In Québec, 14% of high school students have been cyberbullied in the past year, according to the Québec health survey of high school students. Girls (17%) are bullied proportionally more than boys (11%).[182] In its brief, the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse also points out that cyberbullying and cyberharassment are phenomena that affect girls in particular. They are more likely to be targeted by sexual harassment, including behaviours such as sexting and sextortion.[183]

Students who spend four or more hours a day in front of a screen for communication or leisure are more likely to experience cyberbullying than those who spend less than four hours.[184] According to the *Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth*, the most common manifestations of cyberbullying are online threats or insults (16%), exclusion from an online community (13%) and posting hurtful information about someone on the Internet (9%).[185]

The Service de police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM) has reported an increase in criminal acts taking place on social media. These crimes range from cyberbullying and harassment to death threats and sharing intimate images. In 2024, the SPVM alone worked on just over 2,000 cases involving young people and social media. The victims are getting increasingly younger, many of them being 9, 10 or 11 years old. The

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[179] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Bureau des affaires de la jeunesse, Directeur des poursuites criminelles et pénales, September 24, 2024, at 4:20 p.m.

[180] Ibid., Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne, September 12, 2024 at 2:20 p.m.

[181] Ibid., Bureau des affaires de la jeunesse, Directeur des poursuites criminelles et pénales, September 24, 2024, at 4:20 p.m.

[182] Issouf Traoré et al., *Enquête québécoise sur la santé des jeunes du secondaire : Résultats de la troisièmes édition – 2022-2023*, (Québec, Institut de la statistique du Québec), p. 616.

[183] Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, *Consultations particulières et auditions publiques sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes*, brief submitted to the CSESJ, pp. 4-5.

[184] I. Traoré et al, *supra*, note 182, p. 619.

[185] Darcy Hango, *Online Harms Faced by Youth and Young Adults: The Prevalence and Nature of Cybervictimization*, (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Insights on Canadian Society, 2023), pp. 2-3.

SPVM also reported that one of the current challenges is the diversity of platforms used by young people. In some cases, the SPVM investigation covered up to twenty or more platforms.[186]

For its part, the Canadian Centre for Child Protection has stated that very serious situations, including child luring, sometimes occur on social media. Indeed, these platforms offer ill-intentioned people "[TRANSLATION] direct and unhindered access, 24 hours a day, seven days a week" to young people. According to the organization, between 2016 and 2023, the number of reports of luring made on cybertip.ca increased by 2,640%.[187] During the hearing, cybersecurity expert Steve Waterhouse explained that the anonymity provided by social media makes it difficult for young people to identify people with bad intentions. Such individuals take advantage of this to connect with young people in a digital environment before meeting them in person.[188]

As we observed during our visits to schools, students are acutely aware of the harms associated with cyberbullying. Although the majority of young people have not been direct victims, many told us that they have already witnessed it. This observation is in line with the results of the online consultation. About half of teens aged 14 to 17 reported witnessing cyberbullying. However, the frequency of these situations varies: 21% said they had rarely been exposed to it, 14% sometimes, 7% often, and 5% very often.[189]

The young people we met gave us very concrete examples of cyberbullying. In several schools, students have reported anonymous accounts on social media. These accounts are created to identify and humiliate certain young people by posting images accompanied by malicious comments. Even when reported, these accounts tend to reappear under other names to continue the toxic behaviour. Once again, anonymity was mentioned as an issue. It creates a sense of impunity online, thus facilitating problematic behaviour.

> "[TRANSLATION] ***The people who do this are weak, in the sense that they wouldn't have the courage to face people in the real world. They hide behind their screens.***"
>
> Testimony of a secondary school student.

The data on the extent of cyberbullying is concerning. This is a very real phenomenon that has serious repercussions on the mental health and well-being of victims. We were deeply touched by the testimony we heard on this subject. We recognize that, despite the measures included in this report, cyberbullying is not a phenomenon that is going to disappear in the short term. That is why we believe it is essential to offer resources to help young people who are victims of it today. It is imperative for these young people to learn about the resources available anonymously.

[186] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Service de police de la Ville de Montréal, February 4, 2025, at 4:10 p.m.
[187] Ibid., Canadian Centre for Child Protection, September 19, 2024, at 11:30 a.m.
[188] Ibid., Steve Waterhouse, September 24, 2024, at 11 a.m.
[189] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

Recommendation 36

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec ensure that the health and social services network offers young people resources, such as information leaflets, allowing them to inform themselves anonymously on the means available to victims of cyberbullying.

Distributing intimate images without consent

Another disturbing phenomenon discussed in the course of our work is the distribution of intimate images without consent, also known as revenge porn. The Canadian Centre for Child Protection reports that young people are often victimized in this way by their peers, that is, other young people.[190] In fact, according to Statistics Canada data, from 2015 to 2022, 97% of victims were between the ages of 12 and 17, and 90% of accused persons were in the same age group.[191]

Despite the alarming data and stories presented to us, we welcome the various initiatives adopted in recent years. They help reduce the harm associated with revenge porn. The SEXTO project of the DPCP's youth affairs office is an example of this. Launched in 2016, it aims to respond quickly to requests to remove intimate images online. If a young person complains in a school setting that one of their photos has been distributed online, a quick reaction from all the stakeholders involved has it removed. The time lapse between a request and the removal of an image is usually 24 to 48 hours. Since 2016, 1,625 cases have been processed by the SEXTO project.[192]

We should also mention that in autumn 2024, Bill 73, *An Act to counter non-consensual sharing of intimate images and to improve protection and support in civil matters for persons who are victims of violence,* was passed. The Act makes various amendments to Québec civil law to provide a new remedy for victims of non-consensual sharing of intimate images. It allows a person who is the victim of a non-consensual sharing or threat of sharing an intimate image to obtain an urgent cessation or prevention order. The application is dealt with by a judge of the Court of Québec or a presiding justice of the peace.[193]

In parallel with these initiatives, it is essential to continue efforts to educate youth on issues related to sexting and revenge porn. Healthy and age-appropriate sexuality education will allow them to develop their critical thinking skills online and adopt the right reflexes when using social media. However, as the Marie-Vincent Foundation pointed out during the hearing, a guilt-inducing approach must be avoided in messages addressed to young people and in awareness campaigns. Such an approach can have the effect of reinforcing a victim's feelings of shame or guilt. Instead, the organization prefers to address these issues

[190] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Canadian Centre for Child Protection, September 19, 2024, at 11:30 a.m.
[191] Laura Savage, *Online Child Sexual Exploitation: A Statistical Profile of Police-Reported Incidents in Canada, 2014 to 2022* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, March 12, 2024), p. 11.
[192] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Bureau des affaires de la jeunesse, Directeur des poursuites criminelles et pénales, September 24, 2024, at 4:10 p.m.
[193] *An Act to Counter the Sharing of Intimate Images Without Consent and to Improve the Protection and Support in Civil Matters of Victims of Violence*, SQ 2024, c. 37, s. 6.

from the perspective of consent and the responsibilities of young people in their intimate and romantic relationships.[194]

Content generated by artificial intelligence

The Canadian Centre for Child Protection has also warned of the growing risks posed by artificial intelligence. Over the past year, the Centre reports it has processed more than 4,000 sexually explicit images of children generated using artificial intelligence. The tools needed to create these images are now easy to access and use, making it simpler for more people to produce them. When an image is shared without consent, the Centre makes requests for removal to the platforms concerned. Approximately 50% of images are removed within 24 hours. However, some platforms are more reluctant and can take several days to delete the images, while others go so far as to contest the removal requests.[195]

The SPVM has also issued a reminder in connection with images modified with artificial intelligence: most are created from photos or content that the victims or their parents have themselves posted on social media. The SPVM is therefore emphasizing the importance of raising public awareness about content posted and shared online.[196]

The alteration of images by artificial intelligence raises serious issues that go beyond the issue of intimate content. With these tools, it is now easy to create extremely realistic fake content, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between true and false. The proliferation of this type of content on social media poses real risks, including reputational damage, disinformation and manipulation of public opinion. In this context, it seems essential to start thinking about the subject, especially since artificial intelligence is evolving rapidly and continues to be democratized.

Recommendation 37

The Committee recommends that the government conduct an analysis of the proliferation of generative artificial intelligence images on social media platforms and of ways to facilitate their detection by minors, particularly from the perspective of human rights and freedoms.

Regulation of social media

Given the multiple risks associated with the use of social media, many witnesses stated that industry self-regulation does not work. Researcher Catherine L'Ecuyer points out that the companies aim to maximize the time young people spend online, a business model that runs counter to the healthy use of social media.[197]

[194] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Marie-Vincent Foundation, September 26, 2024 at 2:10 p.m.
[195] Ibid., Canadian Centre for Child Protection, September 19, 2024, at 11:40 a.m.
[196] Ibid., Service de police de la Ville de Montréal, February 4, 2025, at 4:20 p.m.
[197] Ibid., Catherine L'Ecuyer, September 16, 2024 at 2:00 p.m.

However, the digital giants say they are putting measures in place to protect young people online. Although they declined the invitation to participate in the public hearings, some of them, including TikTok Canada, Google (YouTube) and Meta Canada, submitted a brief to us outlining those measures.

In its brief, Meta Canada highlights the launch of Teen accounts on Instagram in the fall of 2024. The accounts are enabled by default for everyone under the age of 18.[198] With this measure, young people under the age of 16 need a parent's permission to relax the restrictions associated with this type of account. Sixteen and seventeen-year-olds can remove these features without needing parental permission. Teen accounts have several features that are enabled by default: they are private, interactions are restricted, content moderation settings are more restrictive, and accounts are put into sleep mode between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m.[199]

Similar measures are being proposed by TikTok Canada. For example, all minors are encouraged to create a private account.[200] Other measures are applied by default depending on age. For example, for 14- and 15-year-olds, direct messaging is allowed only to people who subscribe to the account and notifications are turned off between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m.[201] TikTok also offers the possibility for parents or guardians to link their account to the child's account in order to set certain controls. They can control daily screen time, get a summary of the time spent on TikTok and restrict certain content or change account settings.[202]

Regarding its algorithm, TikTok says it uses a personalized recommendation system that is displayed on the "For You" page of users according to their preferences. According to the company, the content is categorized into different levels so that images and videos aimed at an adult audience are not accessible to young people.[203] For example, posts that show or promote cosmetic surgery operations without warning about the risks associated with this type of procedure cannot be seen by minors.[204]

Google says it also moderates the content offered to young people on the YouTube platform. The company says it bans content that promotes or glorifies eating disorders and removes content that may cause emotional distress.[205] The company also says that its YouTube platform offers users several parameters to promote their well-being. For example, for people under 18, video autoplay is turned off by default and there are reminders that it is time to take a break.[206]

However, despite the measures put forward by these platforms, the effects of social media on the health and development of young people are real. For this reason, many groups and experts we heard from believe that government must intervene.

[198] Meta Canada, *Meta*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 1.
[199] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[200] TikTok Canada, *TikTok*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 5.
[201] Ibid., pp. 5-6.
[202] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[203] Ibid., p. 3.
[204] Ibid., p. 6.
[205] Google, *Soumission à la Commission spéciale sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 3.
[206] Ibid., p. 6.

Protecting the interests of young people

As mentioned earlier, social media exposes young people to various risks: cyberbullying, inappropriate content, abusive collection of personal data, false information, etc. Some experts and groups consulted recommend increased accountability for platforms as well as a stricter legal framework to protect young people based on the best interests of the child.

Since 1989, the principle of the best interests of the child has been drawn from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Québec and Canada are parties.[207] The Convention stipulates:

> In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.[208]

According to the general comments of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the best interests of the child is an evolving concept that must be assessed in context.[209] The interests of the parties must be weighed up, but, as the above-mentioned article indicates, the interests of the child must take precedence. Canadian privacy protection authorities add that the concept of the best interests of the child "implies that young people's well-being and rights be primary considerations in decisions or actions concerning them directly or indirectly. As a guiding principle, this concept can be applied in a variety of contexts to help assess and balance the interests of young people against others".[210] This principle must therefore be interpreted according to the circumstances and in the light of each particular situation.

The Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse as well as PhD in Law candidate Marie-Pier Jolicoeur also emphasized that this is not just a principle, but an obligation that applies at any time, in any place and in all contexts of the digital world. Sara Eve Levac of Option consommateurs adds that this principle provides "umbrella protection" since it applies to all processes and all new technologies that may emerge in the future.[211] In her opinion, the mechanisms used by social media such as automatic video playback, infinite scrolling and rigged interfaces could be analyzed in light of the best interests of the child.

In short, we heard several speakers raise the importance of the principle of the best interests of the child and the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These principles should guide platforms in the management of young people's personal information.

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[207] Québec and Canada ratified the Convention in 1991.

[208] *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, November 20, 1989, 1577 RTNU 3, s. 3(1).

[209] The observations are based on a variety of sources, such as international jurisprudence, a series of consultations with States and an international consultation involving 709 young people from 28 countries. Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*, Doc. U.N. CRC/C/GC/25, (2021), para. 36.

[210] Resolution of the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Privacy Commissioners and Ombuds with Responsibility for Privacy Oversight, *Putting Best Interests of Young People at the Forefront of Privacy and Access to Personal Information*, October 6, 2023.

[211] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Sara Eve Levac, September 16, 2024, at 4:40 p.m.

Protecting young people's personal information

Several witnesses, including the Commission d'accès à l'information (CAI) and the Office de la protection du consommateur (OPC), addressed the issue of protecting young people through the prism of protecting their personal information. In its brief, the Commission d'accès à l'information points out, among other things, that young people's personal information is at the heart of their online activities and that the collection, use, disclosure and retention of this information are causes of risk in the digital environment.[212]

As we mentioned earlier, young people use social media for different purposes. They interact with each other, create content, watch videos and more. All of these activities leave traces online. These digital traces represent a gold mine for platforms. The CAI points out that the business model of these companies is to collect a large volume of personal information that will feed their algorithms to offer content adapted to the preferences of Internet users, to increase the number of users and to encourage them to stay connected.[213]

> "[TRANSLATION] ***YouTube, what they want is for you to watch videos for as long as possible because it makes them money.***"
>
> Testimony of a student in Secondary Cycle 2.

In this model of the attention economy, young people are both consumers and products. They use the platforms for free and, in return, they share information about their lifestyle habits.[214] According to the CAI, these companies capitalize on the valorization and resale of this information. Information is a major commercial interest for digital platforms as it allows them to improve their services and strengthen their persuasive mechanisms, such as content recommendations and notifications.[215] In addition, young people are a particularly interesting target for advertising companies since they are expected to remain a long-term clientele.

We believe that young people should be able to spend time in a digital environment without their online presence being the subject of a commercial scheme. Sara Eve Levac reminds us that Québec has been at the forefront of the international scene by banning advertising aimed at children under the age of 13. Yet, today, platforms use young people's personal information for commercial purposes.[216] Several participants shared their concerns on this issue. In particular, they argued for prohibiting the sale of minors' personal information, even with consent.

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[212] Commission d'accès à l'information, *Mieux protéger les renseignements personnels des jeunes pour assurer leur digital bien-être numérique*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 1.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid., p. 2.
[216] Option consommateurs, *Commission spéciale sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 4.

Recommendation 38

The Committee recommends prohibiting both selling personal information or transferring it in any other way and profiling (through "targeted advertising") of minors under the age of 14, even with the consent of the holder of parental authority or guardian.

In its brief, the CAI points out that processing young people's personal information means that their lives are "[TRANSLATION] observed and put into data from multiple aspects: interests, behaviours, social relationships, emotions, bodies, etc."[217] It adds that sharing geolocation data with an app can get young people used to surveillance and expose them to harassment or insistent advertising.

In its report entitled *Ensuring a better protection for young people's personal information in the digital age*, the Commission d'accès à l'information points out that:

> Therefore, the choices made by businesses because of their commercial interests are not neutral. They can significantly affect the likelihood and nature of risks of all kinds to which minors are exposed in the digital environment.[218]

It backs up its position by highlighting the vulnerability of minors who navigate in a digital environment designed primarily for adults.[219]

This view is shared by several witnesses we have heard from over the past few months. In addition, the vast majority (93%) of those who participated in the online consultation believe that web giants should do more to protect the personal information of young people.[220] We believe that the protection of minors' personal information must be increased and that platforms have a role to play in this area.

[217] CAI, *supra*, note 212, p. 1.
[218] Commission d'accès à l'information, *Ensuring a better protection for young people's personal information in the digital age*, 2022, p. 8.
[219] Ibid., p. 9.
[220] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

Recommendation 39

The Committee recommends improving protections of minors' personal information, assuring an interpretation that is favourable to minors and making digital platforms more accountable by specifying in applicable laws that these platforms must not

- collect, use, communicate, store or destroy personal information in a manner that could harm a minor;
- attempt to influence the behaviour or decisions of a minor;
- attempt to influence a minor aged 14 or over to provide their consent to being profiled with the goal of showing them targeted advertising.

The responsibilities of platforms

The people we heard from during our work are unanimous: platforms should also be responsible for protecting young people. The Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec stressed during a hearing that social media must make greater effort to block inappropriate content to which young people may be exposed. Citizens who responded to the online consultation agreed: 90% of them believe that the web giants should do more to moderate the content to which young people are exposed online.[221] However, according to Emmanuelle Parent of the Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne, it is difficult, if not impossible, to control the content to which young people are exposed, such as diets, violent content or negative comments.

Law professors Céline Castets-Renard and Vincent Gautrais brought to our attention a potential lever for action: the *Act to establish a legal framework for information technology*.[222] It provides a legal framework for service providers, acting as intermediaries, that provide document storage services on communication networks.[223] However, this 2001 law was adopted in a context aimed at promoting the new technology industry, which was still in its infancy.

The concept of service providers, also known as technical intermediaries, can be interpreted as referring to content hosts, but also to digital environments, such as social media, whose content is generated by users.[224] However, the application of the concept of technical intermediary to social media has not been the subject of many interpretations and still needs to be clarified by the courts.

In addition, the Act excludes the liability of technical intermediaries with respect to the content available on their platform. It provides that they are not responsible for the activities of their users, with a few exceptions. Céline Castets-Renard and Vincent Gautrais believe that this liability regime no longer corresponds to

[221] Ibid.
[222] CQLR, c. C-1.1.
[223] Ibid., starting s. 22.
[224] Vincent Gautrais, Pierre Trudel and Nicolas Vermeys, *LCCJTI+: perspectives de mise à jour de la Loi concernant le cadre juridique des technologies de l'information (RLRQ c C-1.1) 2001-2023 Rapport final*, 2023, p. 72

today's reality and the active role that digital platforms play in the content they present and the way in which they do so.[225]

According to Professors Castets-Renard and Gautrais, although this law has limitations, it is a good starting point for reviewing and strengthening the responsibility of platforms. In light of the various testimonies we have received, we believe that platforms have a role to play in the protection of young people. They are key players in society who must help shape a healthy digital environment for young people. However, the relevant legal framework must be consistent with this vision.

Recommendation 40

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec conduct a comprehensive reflection on updating the *Act to establish a legal framework for information technology*, which could include considering the matter of technological intermediaries. For example, there could be a reassessment of the responsibility of digital companies regarding practices considered contrary to the interests of the child.

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Given the growing importance of social media in the lives of young people, we believe that rigorous supervision of these platforms is necessary. The proposed measures must aim not only to limit risks, but also to promote a healthy, inclusive digital environment that respects the rights of young people.

[225] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Céline Castet-Renard, January 30, 2025, at 4:30 p.m.

Recommendation 41

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec provide for the updating of applicable laws to ensure that digital platforms take into account the risks to the physical and mental health of minors when their products are designed primarily for the use of minors or are used predominantly by minors, for example by requiring them to

- respect the principles of privacy by design;
- adopt effective moderation mechanisms to report or block violent, hateful, sexual or inappropriate content;
- adopt verifiable security practices of their mechanisms for collecting data from minors;
- adopt measures to counter disinformation, including that conveyed by artificial intelligence;
- not use the types of design that are considered to be rigged interfaces;
- warn of the harmful effects and make it mandatory to post resources for help for young people in order to have quick access to those ressources.

Minimum age for social media

At the moment, the majority of social media platforms have implemented a minimum age for opening an account. Major platforms require users to be at least 13 years old to register and access their services. Some of these platforms have adapted to the Québec legal framework and require their users to be at least 14 years old.

Under section 4.1 of the *Act respecting the protection of personal information in the private sector*, certain social media must require their users to be at least 14 years old. That section sets the age at which an individual may consent to the collection of personal information by specifying that:

> The personal information concerning a minor under 14 years of age may not be collected from him without the consent of the person having parental authority or of the tutor, unless collecting the information is clearly for the minor's benefit.[226]

Despite this provision and the minimum age required by social media, several people who spoke at public hearings told us that young people manage to register well before they reach the required age, and young people themselves told us the same thing. During our visits to the schools, most of the students we met told us that they had already lied about their age to register on social media. In many cases, the circumvention of the rules was done with their parents' agreement. Several young people told us they had created their accounts with their parents, sometimes even at their request. Others had created accounts using a random date of birth or that of an older brother or sister. A few young people mentioned having

[226] *Act respecting the protection of personal information in the private sector*, CQLR, c. P-39.1, s. 4.1.

been banned from apps because they were underage. However, they managed to re-register without too much difficulty.

> "[TRANSLATION] ***Waiting to be the right age takes too long!***"
>
> Testimony of a student in Elementary Cycle 3.

In light of that fact, several people have suggested requiring a minimum age for social media registration, a measure that could be referred to as "digital age of majority". In the course of our work, we have seen some interest in this measure. In order to better protect young people, several jurisdictions have legislated a minimum age to register for social media, or are considering doing so. In Québec, the introduction of a minimum age is also attracting attention: several specialists and organizations at the hearings expressed their support for such an initiative. However, opinions differ on the precise age at which access to social media should be allowed.

The Bareau du Québec has ruled in favour of a minimum age for social media registration. Without recommending a specific age, it suggests that it should be in the range of 14 to 16 years old. The Barreau states in its brief that this range "[TRANSLATION] harmonizes with all Québec legislation and makes it possible to strike a balance between the protection of minors and the gradual increase of their autonomy".[227] As the Barreau reminds us, the Québec legal framework establishes several age limits for exercising certain rights. For example, you must be 14 years old to consent to care required by your state of health,[228] 14 to apply for a change of name,[229] 14 to work (with a few exceptions),[230] 16 for simple emancipation by the tutor[231] and 16 to obtain a driver's license.[232]

The Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec advocates for a slightly different approach. It recommends the establishment of a "progressive minimum age".[233] Under the proposal, the minimum age for registration would be 16 years old, but young people between the ages of 14 and 16 would also be able to register with parental consent. It would be completely forbidden for young people under the age of 14 to register on social media.

[227] Barreau du Québec, *Mémoire du Barreau du Québec*, brief submitted to the CSESJ, p. 5.
[228] *Code civil du Québec*, CQLR, c. CCQ-1991, s. 14.
[229] Ibid., ss. 56.2 and 60.
[230] *Act respecting labour standards*, CQLR, c. N.-1.1, s. 84.3.
[231] CQLR, c. CCQ-1991, s. 167.
[232] *Highway Safety Code*, CQLR, c. C-24.2, s. 67.
[233] FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 17.

Measures adopted elsewhere in the world

In recent years, a few jurisdictions have decided to implement a minimum age for social media sign-up or have decided to raise it. One of the most well-known examples is that of **Australia**. In November 2024, the Australian Parliament passed the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age)* to impose a minimum age of 16 to create a social media account. The legislation does this by introducing the concept of "age-restricted social media platform", in other words, social media that is subject to the imposition of a minimum age for access.[234] The government specifies that the platforms covered by this provision include Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and X. Other platforms, which have educational aims, for example, are not affected. Thus, there is no minimum age required to access platforms such as YouTube, Google Classroom or Kids Helpline.[235] Businesses that do not comply with the legislation and fail to take reasonable steps to prevent youth under the age of 16 from creating accounts on their platforms will be subject to penalties.

In **France**, the President of the Republic promulgated *Law No. 2023-566 of 7 July 2023 aimed at establishing a digital majority and combating online hate*. This law amends *Law No. 2004-575 of June 21, 2004, on confidence in the digital economy*. Under section 4 of the new Act, social media service providers must prohibit registration on their platforms for persons 15 years of age and under. However, the provision provides for an exception. A young person under the age of 15 can register on a social media platform if one of the holders of parental authority gives consent.[236] The Act specifies that social media service providers must obtain the authorization of one of the holders of parental authority as soon as possible for accounts already created and held by persons 15 years of age and under.[237] Thus, both those who already registered and those who wish to register on a social media are covered by the legislation.[238] If a social media service provider fails to comply with its legal obligations, it will be liable to a fine not exceeding 1% of its worldwide turnover for the previous financial year.[239]

Other witnesses heard proposed to set an even higher minimum age. For example, pediatrician Dr. Jean-François Chicoine is of the opinion that no young person under the age of 16 should have the right to register on social media. He points out that below that age, young people are more likely to act impulsively

[234] *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024*, Act no 127, Australia, s. 7, 63C (1).
[235] Anthony Albanese and Michelle Rowland, Social media reforms to protect our kids online pass Parliament, press release, November 29, 2024.
[236] *Loi no 2023-566 du 7 juillet 2023 visant à instaurer une majorité numérique et à lutter contre la haine en ligne,* JORF No. 0157 of 8 July 2023, France, s. 4 (ss. 6-7.-I).
[237] Ibid.
[238] The age verification and parental authority authorization requirements do not apply to non-profit online encyclopedias and non-profit educational or scientific directories. Ibid., s. 4 (ss. 6-7.-III).
[239] Ibid., s. 4 (ss. 6-7.-II).

when browsing social media.[240] Researcher Catherine L'Ecuyer says that young people should not use these platforms before the age of 18. In her opinion, accessing social media before that age can be "destructive".[241]

Conversely, other specialists express reservations about the introduction of a minimum age for social media registration. Notably, the Association québécoise des neuropsychologues, which warned of the potentially negative effects of an age threshold that is too high. They remind us that young people develop their self-regulation skills from a young age, when they benefit from family or school supervision. However, at 16 or 18 years old, this supervision is often less present, which reduces the opportunities to learn to manage their online behaviours independently.[242] This association and other organizations such as the Fondation des Gardiens virtuels therefore favor an approach based on education and awareness to encourage healthy, balanced use of social media.[243]

Banning young people from social media could also have harmful effects on marginalized people. During her hearing, Emmanuelle Parent of the Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne stated that these young people sometimes use social media to find support in various online communities.[244] Dr. Mélissa Généreux agreed, pointing out that social media help break isolation, especially among people who share specific interests or people from marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community. Digital platforms can create a sense of community among these young people.[245] First Nations and Inuit youth can also benefit from these online communities, which help break physical isolation and strengthen social connections.

Specialists are not the only ones to be divided on the relevance of setting a minimum age for accessing social media. Young people are too. Several students we met said they saw this idea in a positive light, considering it as a way to limit the negative effects of social media. However, we noted a certain paradox: the students who supported the measure often proposed a lower age than their own. In other words, young people support the principle, as long as it does not apply to them. Similarly, many admitted that, when they were younger, they would not have liked that kind of restriction.

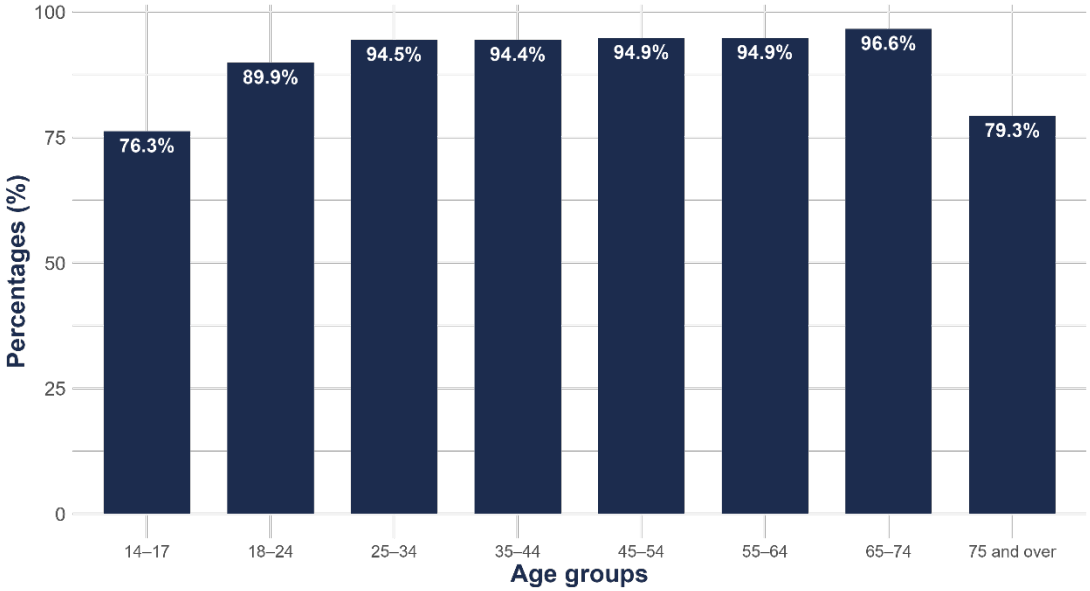
Other students were simply against the idea of imposing a minimum age for accessing social media. For them, the platforms have become essential for communicating and making their voices heard. As one student said, "[TRANSLATION] social media is a way to express yourself, it can even help people who have a harder time expressing themselves in person. It would be unfair to take that away". Young people also explained that in reality, this measure would be easy to circumvent: many young people would simply continue to lie about their age or find other ways to access social media.

Our online consultation showed strong support for the introduction of a minimum age for registering for social media. No less than 90% of the people who responded to the questionnaire said they supported this

[240] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Jean-François Chicoine, January 30, 2025, at 3:10 p.m.
[241] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Catherine L'Ecuyer, September 16, 2024, at 2:20 p.m.
[242] Ibid., Association québécoise des neuropsychologues, February 4, 2025, at 5:50 p.m.
[243] Ibid., Fondation des Gardiens virtuels, September 19, 2024, at 2:20 p.m.
[244] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne, September 12, 2024, at 2:10 p.m.
[245] Ibid., Mélissa Généreux, September 19, 2024, at 4 p.m.

measure. However, there were differences among age groups. Support for a minimum age was lower among 14- to 17-year-olds (76%) and tended to increase with the respondents' age.[246]

PERCENTAGE OF PERSONS IN FAVOUR OF A MINIMUM AGE TO REGISTER FOR AND ACCESS SOCIAL MEDIA[247]



Source: Findings of the Select Committee's online consultation

Our proceedings show that social media plays a major role in the daily lives of young people, particularly in adolescence. These platforms have become essential tools for communicating, forging ties and satisfying a need for socialization. Young people want to talk and stay connected with their friends and family. Socialization has become inseparable from the use of digital technology. In fact, the results of our online consultation show that the main reason young people use social media is to stay connected with friends and family.[248] In this context, restricting access to social media for all young people across the board raises certain concerns. A blanket ban, especially if set at an older age, could make some young people reluctant to talk about what they are going through online or to seek support from adults, when it is essential that they feel comfortable turning to adults in times of difficulty or distress.

In our view, the implementation of a minimum age for registration is nevertheless a lever that can contribute to the protection of young people online, especially children. However, it is essential that this measure be consistent with Québec's legal framework and the other age thresholds in effect in order to promote compliance. As many witnesses pointed out, the age of 14 has been used in many provisions of the legal framework applicable to minors. It therefore seems logical to us that the minimum age required to sign up for social media would also be set at 14. If a young person can consent to health care or authorize the removal of organs or tissues, we believe they can also sign up for social media while understanding the

[246] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.
[247] These results include the responses of both those who "somewhat agree" and those who "completely agree" with the measure.
[248] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

potential risks and harms associated with it. That age is also consistent with the *Act respecting the protection of personal information in the private sector*, which already sets the minimum age at which an individual may consent to the collection of personal information at 14.[249] This age threshold is also in line with measures put in place by other jurisdictions.

Recommendation 42

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec implement a minimum age for access to social media, and that it prohibit signing up for and accessing social media before the age of 14 without the consent of the young person's legal guardian.

Conclusion 1

Recommendation 42 is based on principles already established in Québec's legal framework, which recognizes the capacity of minors aged 14 to provide their own consent in a several spheres of modern life.

The experts and organizations we met agree on one point: setting a minimum age for registration is not enough to protect young people from the harmful effects of social media. To achieve this objective, a set of measures is needed. We agree. That is why we believe in taking action on multiple fronts at once, and why this report contains both recommendations aimed at making companies that manage social media more responsible, and recommendations aimed at making young people aware of the risks online. Without this education in healthy social media habits, young people who reach the legal age to register on these platforms will remain vulnerable.

We believe that a minimum age of 14, combined with the other recommendations, will have a beneficial effect and contribute to changing the social norm toward more restrained use of social media. This comprehensive approach based on awareness would contribute to a collective awareness and a sharing of responsibilities between the actors concerned: young people, parents, organizations, digital platforms and society as a whole.

We are also aware that this measure is not infallible. It is likely that young people will be able to register on social media before they reach the age of 14 if the measure is implemented. As we were reminded by several stakeholders, young people are very adept online and often find creative ways to bend the rules.[250] Several students we met admitted to breaking the rules to create an account on their favorite platforms. That said, we believe that the introduction of a minimum age of 14 years old can still send a strong signal to society: social media are not suitable for young children. As Carolanne Campeau, a lecturer at the faculty of medicine and health sciences at the Université de Sherbrooke, mentioned, this type of measure has a symbolic power[251] and can help limit the trivialization of the use of social media at a young age.

[249] CQLR c. P-39.1, s. 4.1.

[250] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Audrey-Ann Deneault, January 30, 2025, at 2:20 p.m.; Ibid., Steve Waterhouse, September 24, 2024, at 10:50 a.m., Ibid., Fondation des Gardiens virtuels, September 19, 2024, at 2 p.m.

[251] Ibid., Carolanne Campeau, September 18, 2024, at 12:20 p.m.

Recommendation 43

On that point, the Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec assess which appropriate authority or body should develop the standards or guidelines for digital platforms, which would address, among other things,

- the simplicity and clarity expected when informing young people and minors;
- clarification on the obligations of platforms, notably so they clearly state that young people under the age of 14 are not allowed to register on social media and cannot provide their own consent to share their personal information;
- establishment of the functions or differentiated control measures for minors' accounts or profiles, including with regards to protecting their personal information, taking inspiration from the approach based on respecting children's rights from the very conception of the product (Children's Rights by Design);
- the penalties for failure to comply with those requirements.

Age verification methods

Currently, social media registration is based on a self-declaration mechanism. This approach allows many young people to provide false information about their date of birth and create an account even if they are under the required age. The eventual implementation of a minimum age to register for social media would lead to similar challenges: how to ensure that only people who have reached the minimum age can register?

Among the possible solutions mentioned, several stakeholders told us about age verification systems. Such systems rely on a variety of processes to estimate or confirm an Internet user's age with varying degrees of accuracy and reliability. They are generally designed and used to restrict access to certain digital content to people under the required age. However, they present many challenges, not least because the most robust and reliable systems require the collection of personal information.

The different types of age verification methods

In 2024, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada carried out an exploratory consultation on age assurance methods. In its call for comments, the Office presented three broad categories of mechanisms:

- **Age declaration:** An individual, or a person who knows them, declares that the individual is above a defined age. Generally, these declarations are not confirmed by the organization.
- **Age verification:** An individual provides the organization with proof of their age. This can be direct (e.g. providing a copy of a government-issued identifier), or indirect (e.g. directing a third-party service to provide proof of age). The nature and amount of information received by the organization in this process will vary.
- **Age estimation:** The individual's age is estimated based on an analysis of biometrics or behaviours, generally performed by an artificial intelligence system.[252]

As PhD in Law candidate Marie-Pier Jolicoeur points out, age verification technology is evolving rapidly. In recent years, the methods for verifying age online have diversified.[253] We therefore consider it important to continue the analytical work to define in which situations age verification mechanisms are necessary, as well as which criteria they should meet, if any.

The Commission d'accès à l'information (CAI) has issued several warnings in this regard, calling for caution and restraint. They point out that age verification mechanisms are not entirely benign, as they always involve additional processing of personal information. Indeed, they require the collection, processing, communication and storage of a large volume of personal, and sometimes sensitive, information. Furthermore, the very collection of data is in itself a risk factor.[254] The CAI also points out that when a website or app requires age verification, all users who wish to access it must provide personal information, exposing all users to risks to their privacy and the protection of their personal information. Indeed, as the CAI states in its brief:

> […] [TRANSLATION] More conclusive mechanisms lead to more extensive processing. Think of age estimation by facial analysis, which involves collecting a selfie (and biometric analysis), or scanning identity documents, which involves the scanning of a multitude of irrelevant information.[255]

[252] Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, *Privacy and age assurance – Exploratory consultation*, June 10, 2024.
[253] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Marie-Pier Jolicoeur, September 24, 2024, at 5:20 p.m.
[254] Ibid., Commission d'accès à l'information, February 5, 2025, at 11:30 a.m.
[255] CAI, *supra*, note 212, p. 4.

To limit these risks, it recommends adopting the principle of proportionality, by minimizing the amount of data collected in order to ensure that the measures put in place are justified and limited to situations that require it:

> [TRANSLATION] It is not always necessary, in the legal sense of the term, to opt for this mechanism. In many cases, the application of the principle of protection by design and by default, for all users, is a more universal and desirable solution, especially when it is clear that a significant proportion of users are minors. If age verification is chosen, the method chosen should be appropriate to the level of risk. For example, it may be sufficient to opt for the estimation of age (e.g., ability test), rather than for an exact determination (e.g., third-party evidence).[256]

For its part, the Barreau du Québec considers it essential to put in place reliable age control methods in advance so that the minimum age is applicable and effective. It outlines some principles that should guide age verification and emphasizes the importance of transparency. According to the Barreau, transparency allows privacy experts and competent authorities to examine the robustness of processes and to verify the effectiveness of security measures to preserve the confidentiality of personal information.

The Barreau also specifies that age verification mechanisms should be based on privacy by design measures to limit the risks associated with sharing personal information. Finally, it recommends that the collected data be processed locally, i.e. on the user's device, rather than being transferred to external servers or data centers.[257]

The various testimonies received during our proceedings therefore invite us to be cautious. Age verification methods can be very helpful, but they still raise many questions. Some witnesses challenged the effectiveness of these mechanisms, arguing that young people could circumvent them. Others emphasized their intrusiveness and the risks they pose to privacy and personal information. However, it is essential to look at the protection of young people online through a privacy lens. It therefore does not seem appropriate to us at this stage to make a definitive decision on the implementation of age verification mechanisms.

[256] Ibid.
[257] Ibid., p. 10.

Recommendation 44

The Committee recommends that the introduction of age verification methods be approached with caution and that they be used sparingly, as they are not entirely benign. While these mechanisms may help protect young people, they often involve additional processing of personal information for both minors and adults, which raises significant privacy concerns.

Therefore, the Committee recommends that the government carry out analyses before imposing any age verification mechanism on any sector of activity or business. Such a rigorous analysis must rest on the principles of feasibility, applicability and proportionality while also taking into account technical and legal advances internationally. This analysis should look at, among other things,

- the need to limit the collection and use of personal information exclusively for age verification;
- adapting the age verification method based on the degree of risk associated, using a proportional approach that takes into account the gravity and probability of potential threats to minors;
- respect for fundamental rights and liberties, including the freedom of expression of adults and minors;
- integrating the principles of privacy by design;
- the requirement of data to be processed locally; and
- the transparency of the age verification methods put in place and the actors involved.

In the course of our work, we found that technical standards for the development of reliable and secure age verification methods are still being developed internationally. For example, in Australia, the government is in the experimental phase. It awarded a contract to conduct age verification tests in the wake of the passage of a law to prohibit access to social media for young people under the age of 16.[258] For its part, France's regulatory authority for audiovisual and digital communication (ARCOM) has published a technical reference framework on age verification to better protect minors online. In particular, it sets out minimum requirements that apply to all age verification systems.[259] U.S. states have also passed laws to require age verification on certain websites. However, several of these laws are being challenged in court.[260] Although these initiatives are recent and have not yet fully proven themselves, we believe it is essential to learn from them.

Many jurisdictions are currently asking the same questions about age verification mechanisms and, more broadly, about the regulation of digital platforms. It would be in Québec's interest to collaborate with its

[258] Government of Australia, Tender awarded for age assurance trial, press release, November 15, 2024; Thomson Reuters, Australia passes youth social media ban. Now, it has to figure out how it will actually work, *CBC News*, November 28, 2024.

[259] Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique, *Référentiel déterminant les exigences techniques minimales applicables aux systèmes de vérification de l'âge mis en place pour l'accès à certains services de communication au public en ligne et aux plateformes de partage de vidéos qui mettent à disposition du public des contenus pornographiques*, France, 2024, 22 p.

[260] CBS News, Federal judge blocks Mississippi law that would require age verification for websites, *CBS News*, July 2, 2024.

international partners and to actively participate in multilateral forums to draw inspiration from best practices. We believe that a comprehensive, concerted and coherent approach is more likely to lead to a rigorous framework for the digital environment, to better protect young people online.

Recommendation 45

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec begin work with intergovernmental and multilateral authorities of which it is a member in order to push for the adoption of regulations on digital platforms internationally and in domestic law based on a global approach.

VIDEO GAMES

Video games are a fast-growing sector. The diversity and proliferation of games on the market is a testament to the efforts made by the video game industry to reach new audiences. A number of characteristics set video games apart, including

- genre, e.g. role-playing, adventure or shooter games;
- narrative, i.e. the story told in the game;
- mechanics and mechanisms, i.e. the ways in which the game and the individual interact;
- features, e.g. the ability to play online, on a network or alone;
- platforms on which they are available; and
- business model, e.g. whether they are paid or free.

Children and teens are target audiences for the video game industry. The findings of the online consultation confirm the appeal this form of entertainment holds for young people. Of the 14- to 17-year-olds who responded, 42.5% said they played video games daily, compared to 18.6% of all participants in the consultation.[261]

Effects of video games on young people's health and development

Over the course of our proceedings, we found that video games can have both positive and negative effects on young people. The Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec (FMSQ) pointed out in its brief that effects vary depending on the types of games played. For example, strategy and collaborative games tend to promote the development of cognitive skills such as problem-solving and decision-making.[262] Video games can also encourage prosocial behaviours and foster collaboration among peers. To reap the benefits, however, playing video games must be moderate. A balanced approach is essential in order to enhance the educational, playful potential of video games while ensuring that they do not harm young people's health and development.

The Guilde du jeu vidéo du Québec and the Entertainment Software Association of Canada assert that video games provide players with stress relief and positive mental stimulation. According to these organizations, video games are likely to improve memory and visual attention as well as stimulate creativity.[263]

The young people met on the school tour testified to the benefits they derive from this activity. They consider that video games allow them to meet new friends online and to have exchanges in different languages. A young girl in elementary school pointed out that online games help her practice her mother

[261] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.
[262] FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 20.
[263] Guilde du jeu vidéo du Québec and Entertainment Software Association of Canada, *Points de vue de l'industrie québécoise et canadienne du jeu vidéo. Promouvoir la confiance, la sécurité et le jeu responsable pour les jeunes et les joueurs*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, pp. 8–9.

tongue, Italian, with players from abroad. In addition, young people appreciate the feeling of progress, especially through collaborative games, where everyone's participation is essential to the team's success. It is also a source of stimulation for them. They are motivated by developing their potential throughout the game and contributing to their team's success. In this regard, 30% of respondents aged 14 to 17 in the online consultation believed that video games made them feel like they belonged to a community.[264]

> "[TRANSLATION] ***It's very easy to see your progress on a game like this, unlike in real life where it's more difficult to see your progress at school, for example.***"
>
> Testimony of a student in Secondary Cycle 2.

Although video games have advantages, several witnesses highlighted the sometimes harmful effects on young people's health and development. According to the FMSQ, intensively playing video games comes with several significant risks:

> [TRANSLATION] Since video games are played in front of a screen, prolonged exposure can affect concentration, time management, vision and sleep. Like screens and social networks, video games can also promote sedentary behaviour that is harmful to health. Caught up in immersive environments and instant reward mechanisms, young people may find it difficult to engage in offline activities, studying in particular.[265]

Caroline Fitzpatrick, a professor in the faculty of education at the Université de Sherbrooke, added the following nuance: the effects of video games generally vary according to a young person's age. She stressed during the hearing that the use of video games is not the same for children as for teens. The latter often play intensively and with less parental supervision than younger children. They are therefore at greater risk of developing some ADHD symptoms, namely inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity.[266]

Video games can also lead to difficulties in managing emotions. Emmanuelle Parent of the Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne gave the example that young people will sometimes experience anger associated with cheating or losing a game. Young people, she said, already use various strategies to manage their emotions when playing games, like taking breaks or talking with their parents. She believes that it is important to help them develop strategies for self-regulating their emotions to avoid negative behaviours, such as breaking game controllers or other items.[267]

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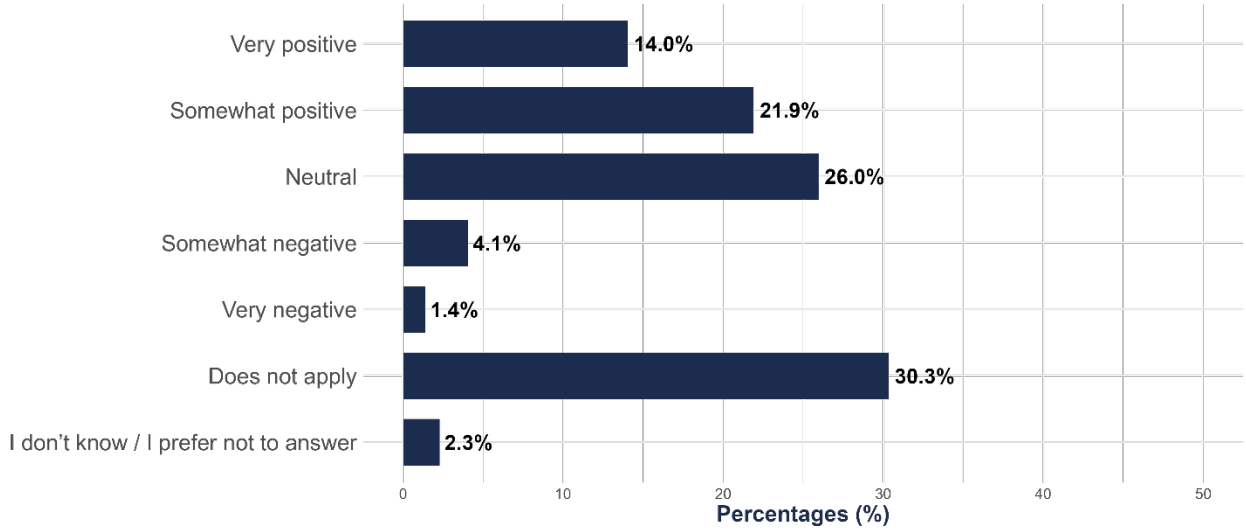
[264] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.
[265] FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 20.
[266] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Caroline Fitzpatrick, September 16, 2024, at 3:40 p.m.
[267] Ibid., Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne, September 12, 2024, at 2:20 p.m.

Video games have several elements that can cause addiction. Loot boxes, microtransactions, advertising, limited time offers, dark patterns[268] and push notifications are strategies used to capture attention.[269] Other games reward or punish players based on the behaviours they adopt.[270] These strategies employed by the industry are used to hold attention and therefore increase the time and frequency of use.[271] In addition, video games frequently incorporate advertising, which exposes children to such content despite the legal framework in force. These practices have often been criticized and are similar to certain mechanisms used in games of chance and gambling.

The students we met when we visited the schools said they were aware of the addictive potential of video games. Some acknowledged that it can be difficult to stop when the game is in progress. They are also aware that companies work hard to encourage them to play for longer. Nevertheless, young people have a nuanced perception of the impact of video games on their lives. In our online consultation, 36% of 14- to 17-year-olds considered that video games had a positive impact on their lives, while 26% said they had a neutral impact.[272]

DISTRIBUTION OF 14- TO 17-YEAR-OLDS BY THEIR PERCEPTION OF THE IMPACT OF VIDEO GAMES ON THEIR LIVES



Source: Findings of the SCSYH online consultation

[268] A dark pattern is a website, application or interface designed to influence the player's decision-making process using manipulative or deceptive elements. The purpose of the rigged interface may be to add fees following the conclusion of a transaction, to make it difficult to cancel a service or to hide information from Internet users.

[269] Maude Bonenfant and Alexandra Dumont, *Commission spéciale sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 7.

[270] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Magali Dufour, September 19, 2024, at 12:14 p.m.

[271] Observatoire des tout-petits, *supra*, note 33, p. 25.

[272] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

Maude Bonenfant, a professor in the department of social and public communication at the Université du Québec à Montréal, believes that young people are not made sufficiently aware of the problems associated with video games. Children are particularly vulnerable to the strategies of video game companies because they do not have the maturity to understand that they are being manipulated.[273] They are more at risk of developing harmful behaviours.[274]

In its brief, Maison Jean Lapointe pointed out that excessive use of video games can lead to the development of Internet addiction.[275] Video game disorder is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO).[276] As with other addiction problems, it is associated with a loss of control over behaviour and an obsession with the app or game in question. Video game addiction can lead to psychological distress, higher rates of comorbidity, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation or behaviour and low self-esteem.[277] Recent studies on the phenomenon show an increase in the number of young people at risk of developing a gaming problem. This increase coincides with the higher number of hours spent online by young people.[278]

In light of these findings, we believe that creating ethical video games in Québec must be encouraged. Witnesses highlighted the importance of increasing transparency in creative studios' business practices and of putting in place specific protective measures for young people from the conception stage. We are fortunate to have a vibrant video game ecosystem. Québec has several studios, largely because of the qualified workforce. College and university video game programs train new graduates year in, year out. Which is why we believe it is essential to make these workers of the future more aware of responsible development practices and mechanisms that are potentially harmful to young people.

Recommendation 46

The Committee recommends that training programs for video game developers include ethical content making them aware of the impact of certain mechanisms that can be harmful to young people.

Regulating the video game industry

In Québec, the video game industry is not subject to a specific regulatory framework, which is a situation that raises concerns from specialists. Many deplored the lack of clear guidelines, especially given mechanisms deemed harmful to young people in games that are intended for or are accessible to them. However, as witnesses reminded us, regulating this industry remains complex due to its evolving nature, diversity and international scope. For the moment, it is based essentially on self-regulation.

[273] Maude Bonenfant and Alexandra Dumont, *supra*, note 269, p. 5.
[274] Ibid., p. 9.
[275] Maison Jean Lapointe, *La prévention, ça marche!*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 5.
[276] WHO, *supra*, note 165.
[277] Magali Dufour, *supra*, note 58, pp. 2–5.
[278] Ibid., pp. 2–3.

We share the position of many stakeholders who believe that industry self-regulation is not enough to guarantee young people's digital well-being.[279] Our discussions with the various witnesses heard during our proceedings and with the young people we met in the schools we visited allowed us to identify possible solutions to better regulate the industry, in particular by rating video games and regulating loot boxes and microtransactions.

Rating video games

In the video game world, video games receive ratings based on various criteria. Internationally, the two main video game rating systems are developed by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) in North America and Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) in Europe. These two systems were created by the video game industry. The ESRB is an organization created by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), which represents the industry, while PEGI comes from its European counterpart, the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE). Both organizations are interest groups. For European and North American digital games, the process is carried out by the International Age Rating Coalition (IARC). The IARC assigns age ratings and content descriptors by region, while ratings for interactive elements are universal.[280]

In North America, the ESRB rates video games sold on physical media. The process uses three labelling categories:

- Rating categories, to determine which age group the game is suitable for;
- Content descriptors, e.g. elements related to drugs, violence or sexuality; and
- Interactive elements, such as sharing of the player's location or the ability to interact with others playing the game.[281]

These ratings are associated with pictograms that are placed on the games' promotional materials and packaging.

In addition to the ESRB system, a number of digital platforms use their own rating systems for video games. This is the case for some virtual app stores that assign and establish age categories for the mobile apps and games they distribute.[282] Ratings may therefore vary between platforms for the same game.[283]

Despite their widespread market use, ESRB and PEGI ratings are poorly regulated by States. Participation in rating systems is based on a voluntary approach by companies that develop or distribute video games and applications.[284] This is the case in Québec, where the industry rates video games.

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[279] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Maude Bonenfant and Alexandra Dumont, September 24, 2024, at 11:25 a.m.; Ibid., Magali Dufour, September 19, 2024, at 12:14 p.m.; Ibid., Jonathan Bonneau, February 4, 2025, at 11:26 a.m.

[280] International Age Rating Coalition (IARC), *How IARC Works*.

[281] Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), *Ratings Guide*.

[282] Sara M. Grimes, Darshana Joyemanne and Seth Giddings, "Rethinking Canada's Approach to Children's Digital Game Regulation," *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 48, 1 (2023).

[283] Maude Bonenfant et al., *Les jeux vidéo pour enfants: bien les comprendre pour mieux les choisir* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2024).

[284] Ibid.

Several stakeholders who testified questioned this system's neutrality and impartiality, given that it is based on mechanisms and criteria established by the video game industry. For example, the ESRB retired the Early Childhood rating in 2018 since few companies were using it. This was the most restrictive category. Games for toddlers are therefore rated "E," "for everyone".[285] However, the content, features and characteristics of games and platforms are not designed for the developmental level of 0 to 5-year-olds.[286] In fact, a child's developmental stage is not one of the criteria considered in the rating.[287]

Other common criticisms relate to the system's transparency and accountability. Since ratings are provided by private organizations, governments are not involved in decisions or in drawing up criteria. In addition, the ESRB is an American organization. Some question the very applicability of the ESRB age categories in the Québec context: what is considered appropriate for an age group may vary due to cultural differences between Québec and the United States, or even between Canadian provinces.[288]

According to Maude Bonenfant, the ESRB rating system does not take into account several factors that influence the audience for which a game is intended. For example, game mechanics, whether or not there are advertisements, the level of maturity required to play the game, the collection and use of personal data and the presence of microtransactions and loot boxes do not affect the final game rating. As a result, a game rated "for everyone" may include advertising and mechanisms akin to those used in games of chance and gambling.[289] Bonenfant suggested, among other things, that a rating be assigned to games containing loot boxes or mechanisms similar to those used in gambling and games of chance to facilitate their identification on the market.[290]

We note that current ratings are essentially based on a self-regulating system developed by the industry itself. They do not take into account the presence of certain mechanisms that are problematic for young people, such as microtransactions and loot boxes. Since these elements are not rated, it is more difficult for parents to choose appropriate games for their children. It therefore seems necessary for young people and parents to have access to more information on the nature of video games and the mechanisms found in them.

We recognize the importance of these rating systems for consumers because they provide more information about a video game, including the recommended age to play it, the types of content it offers and its features. For these reasons, we believe it is essential that an independent industry body develop and disseminate a rating for mechanisms that are inappropriate for minors in video games. This information is very useful to parents who wish to make informed choices about the games their children play.

[285] Maude Bonenfant et al., *supra*, note 283, p. 126.
[286] INSPQ, *supra*, note 17, p. 11.
[287] Observatoire des tout-petits, *supra*, note 33, p. 27.
[288] Sara M. Grimes, Darshana Joyemanne and Seth Giddings, *supra*, note 282.
[289] Maude Bonenfant and Alexandra Dumont, *supra*, note 269, p. 4.
[290] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Maude Bonenfant and Alexandra Dumont, September 24, 2024, at 11:30 a.m.

Recommendation 47

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec mandate an appropriate body—the Institut national de santé publique du Québec, for example—to develop and disseminate a rating for mechanisms that are inappropriate for minors in the development of social networks and video games (such as streaming, permanent data capture, infinite scrolling, addictive practices, loot boxes, etc.). The rating could be disseminated, for example, in collaboration with Option consommateurs or *Protégez-vous* magazine.

In parallel with this approach, we believe that it is necessary to pressure the industry so that the main rating systems consider certain game mechanisms that have harmful effects on young people. Among other things, this would involve making the organizations responsible for those systems aware of the need to better inform the public about the content and mechanisms of video games. A review of the criteria by the industry and greater transparency would help limit young people's access to games with predatory mechanisms.

Recommendation 48

The Committee recommends that, through pressuring the industry and interventions by intergovernmental bodies of which Québec is a member, the video game industry must be required to ensure that the rating assigned to a video game takes into account any microtransactions or paid loot boxes and be required to monitor commercial practices in games aimed at minors.

The pressuring and interventions could be carried out through, for example, a flexible and evolving communication channel set up between the government departments concerned, researchers and representatives of the video game industry.

Loot boxes and microtransactions

The video game industry underwent a sea change in the early 2000s, gradually shifting from selling products such as cartridges and game discs to a service-based business model.[291] Since then, for many in the industry, revenues have no longer been based solely on game sales, but on players' in-game purchases. These purchases take several forms, including extensions and microtransactions, which unlock additional content, like virtual currencies, new game features or skins.

[291] Maude Bonenfant et al., *supra*, note 283, pp. 75–76.

Skins

Skins are virtual items that allow players to customize the appearance of characters and objects within a video game. They usually have no impact on a player's performance. Their value varies according to aesthetic appeal and scarcity. In a video game, skins can be earned or purchased in the online store, using real or virtual currencies. They can also be acquired in loot boxes and may be resold or auctioned. This practice is known as "skin betting" or "skin gambling".

Loot boxes are a kind of microtransaction.[292] They allow players to randomly acquire, in exchange for real money or in-game currency, virtual rewards whose nature is revealed only after purchase. The popularity of loot boxes among players can be explained by psychological and social factors as well as the gaming experience. First, psychological incentives are frequently used to encourage players to buy loot boxes, including discounts, the limited availability of certain items and exclusive rewards.[293] Video game companies also do business with well-known personalities or influencers to promote buying loot boxes.[294] All of these strategies contribute to creating a "fear of missing out" (FOMO) in players if they don't buy loot boxes.[295] Children are more vulnerable to these commercial tactics, and this sometimes leads to impulse buys or addictive behaviours.[296]

> "[TRANSLATION] ***I'm glad I have it because it improves your gameplay. [...] The more you spend, the better you are.***"
>
> Testimony of a student in Elementary Cycle 3.

Maude Bonenfant believes that loot boxes leverage psychological and structural mechanisms similar to those used in games of chance and gambling. For example, spending more on loot boxes does not correlate with rewards of higher value.[297] According to Bonenfant, the presence of random rewards contributes to the gamblification of video games due to their resemblance to games of chance and gambling.[298]

During our visits to schools, a number of students who play video games reported making online transactions. For example, one said he had spent $700 to $1000 on the *Fortnite* game since the pandemic. According to these young people, making purchases is easy since platforms contain mechanisms to facilitate in-game purchases, by storing credit card numbers, for example.

[292] The terms "loot crates" and "prize crates" are also used in the literature to refer to loot boxes.
[293] James Close and Joanne Lloyd, *Lifting the Lid on Loot-Boxes*, GambleAware (2021), p. 2.
[294] Koen Geens, "Les lootboxes de trois jeux vidéo contraires à la législation relative aux jeux de hasard," press release (April 25, 2018).
[295] James Close and Joanne Lloyd, *supra*, note 293, p. 2.
[296] INSPQ, *supra*, note 17, p. 18.
[297] James Close and Joanne Lloyd, *supra*, note 293.
[298] Maude Bonenfant et al., *supra*, note 283, p. 162.

> "[TRANSLATION] ***I ask my mom to download games that cost money, but I know how to buy them on my own.***"
>
> Testimony of a student in Elementary Cycle 3.

Stakeholders heard during our proceedings expressed concerns about loot boxes and microtransactions, given their negative effects on youth. These predatory mechanisms are reinforced by the lack of awareness and of prevention among children, teens and parents regarding the gamblification of video games. Those who participated in the online consultation agreed: 74% of all respondents were in favour of banning microtransactions in video games. We also believe that the presence of these types of elements in children's games raises significant concerns.

Conclusion 2

The Committee concludes that the presence of paid loot boxes and microtransactions in video games is of significant concern when they are aimed at minors and that they should be prohibited.

The groups that participated in our proceedings made various proposals about regulating loot boxes and microtransactions in video games. For Anne Elizabeth Lapointe, executive director of Maison Jean Lapointe, loot boxes should be prohibited in video games that are accessible to minors because they encourage young people to adopt compulsive behaviours and introduce them to games of chance and gambling at an early age.[299]

We are of the same opinion. Microtransactions and loot boxes should be prohibited in games accessible to minors. We believe that video games, and more specifically the predatory practices within them, must be better regulated to provide a healthier digital environment for our young people. We believe that better defining the phenomenon is essential, as is regulating the content and mechanisms found in video games.

[299] Maison Jean Lapointe, *supra*, note 275, p. 5.

Recommendation 49

The Committee recommends that paid loot boxes and microtransactions be prohibited in video games aimed at minors (games rated E, for example).

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec begin an analysis to define and regulate, including through applicable and appropriate legislative means, mechanisms such as loot boxes, unpredictable reward systems, dark patterns and microtransactions in games aimed at minors. This analysis could also look into providing a more rigorous framework for these mechanisms, for example by requiring loot boxes to be reported in product cards (in virtual stores, etc.) and in video game advertisements, greater transparency on the part of developers and platforms and disclosure of the probabilities of the content of loot boxes.

Lastly, the analysis could also look into design practices for video games aimed for minors, such as compliance with safety by design and prohibition of abusive behavioural incentives and other persuasive mechanisms.

EXPOSURE TO ONLINE CONTENT

Over the past few months, witnesses heard at public hearings and students we met during the school tour shared with us various examples of the content young people are exposed to online. These different types of content may affect young people's physical and mental health. Despite the current legal framework, they remain vulnerable to the impact of persuasive advertising and exposure to adult content.

Advertising aimed at young people

In Canada, regulation of advertising content is governed by the Competition Bureau as well as by provincial legislation. Among other things, the *Competition Act* prohibits misleading advertising nationwide.[300] The industry has also implemented other mechanisms, such as the Advertising Council's Canadian Code of Advertising Standards, to regulate the practice.[301] However, self-regulatory mechanisms do not have the force of a law or regulation.

Various stakeholders heard during the proceedings emphasized that Québec is leading the way when it comes to protecting young people.[302] Since 1978, the *Consumer Protection Act* (CPA) has prohibited commercial advertising directed at children under the age of 13.[303] The prohibition is general and applies regardless of the medium. It applies to print ads as well as to radio, television, social media and video games.

According to the CPA, when determining whether a message is directed at individuals under the age of 13, it is important to consider the context in which the message appears, as well as the overall impression conveyed by the advertisement. The CPA establishes three criteria for analysis:

1. the nature and intended purpose of the goods advertised;
2. the manner of presenting such advertisement;
3. the time and place it is shown.[304]

The relationship between these three criteria makes it possible to determine whether an advertisement is aimed at children. The CPA also prohibits deceptive marketing practices.[305] It specifies that advertising can take the form of an affirmation, omission or behaviour.[306]

However, some contemporary practices raise questions about their legality under consumer protection laws. Influencer marketing is an example of this. Omnipresent on social media, influencer marketing takes various forms, such as business collaborations between individuals and companies, or recommendations and behaviours by people whose reputations are well established on social media (influencers).

[300] RSC 1985, c. C-34, s. 52 (1).
[301] Ad Standards, *The Canadian Code of Advertising Standards*.
[302] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Yasemin Beykont and Sydney L. Forde, February 4, 2024, at 9:45 a.m.
[303] *Consumer Protection Act*, CQLR c. P-40.1, ss. 248–249.
[304] Ibid., s. 249.
[305] Ibid., s. 219.
[306] Ibid., s. 216.

In practice, commercial collaborations are identified by a symbol indicating that they are advertisements. Keywords such as *#pub #commandité* in French or #ad #sponsored in English are sometimes used in the description of a post to show that it is an advertisement.

In its brief, TikTok stated that users must enable a setting when posting content to promote a brand, product or service.[307] This way, the content is identified as an advertisement with a banner that reads "Advertisement". If the banner is missing, TikTok may remove or restrict the content.[308] In its brief, Google summarized the guidelines applicable to content creators who engage in product placement on the YouTube platform. In practice, all paid promotions must comply with Google Ads policies and YouTube's community guidelines. Content creators and the brands that sponsor them are responsible for complying with the obligations regarding paid promotion.[309] However, these guidelines are industry-specific and may vary depending on the application used.

Option consommateurs recommends that a specific obligation to disclose online advertising content be established. It argues that legislators could, in the *Consumer Protection Act,* require that advertising content be identified and propose keywords to be used to do so.[310]

Recommendation 50

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec conduct analyses to improve online advertising content disclosure requirements, for example in the context of influencer marketing, and strengthen the requirements for the integration and effectiveness of appropriate keywords or indicators to improve transparency and make it easier for young people to recognize advertising.

It can be difficult for young people to distinguish between advertising and non-advertising content. Influencer marketing can involve undeclared product promotion.[311] According to Sandrine Prom Tep, a professor of digital marketing at the Université du Québec à Montréal, influencer marketing is a way to promote advertising without directly highlighting the brand or making the message obvious.[312] For example, influencers receive products for free, try them out on camera and give their opinions. While this form of content creates an impression of authenticity, in practice, the person in front of the camera is being paid for what they have created.[313] According to Sandrine Prom Tep, this method capitalizes on Internet users' trust in intermediaries.

Sometimes, the content produced by influencers does not necessarily fall into the category of advertising since the intent behind the post is not to sell or promote a product. This is especially the case when influencers show the camera their latest purchases or favorite products, or simply film themselves going

[307] TikTok Canada, *supra,* note 200, p. 11.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Google, *supra*, note 205, p. 3.
[310] Option consommateurs, *supra*, note 216, p. 6.
[311] Clarisse N'Kaa, *Le marketing d'influence : la publicité à l'ère des médias sociaux*, Option consommateurs, 2021, pp. 11–12.
[312] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Sandrine Prom Tep, February 4, 2024, at 10:40 a.m.
[313] Clarisse N'Kaa, *supra*, note 311, p. 12.

about their business. Though not advertisements, these videos can still influence consumer behaviour by promoting a lifestyle or certain products.

In their briefs, Collectif Vital and the Ordre des diététistes et nutritionnistes du Québec made us aware that some content promoting eating habits or lifestyles can be unhealthy. They discussed, among other things, the harms associated with promoting unwholesome food online. According to both organizations, marketing practices in the food industry mostly involve products that are not very nutritious, and their promotion can influence young people's eating habits.[314] The Ordre added that young people do not always clearly recognize food marketing online, unlike advertisements in traditional media.[315] Certain trends on social media, such as videos showing what a person eats in a day, can contribute to normalizing eating behaviors that are not recommended.

Online, young people are likely to be exposed to advertising content that is not appropriate for their age. Some use their parents' or siblings' digital devices or lie about their age to access certain apps. According to the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ), frequent exposure to content promoting products harmful to health such as alcohol, cannabis, games of chance and foods or beverages with low nutritional value can contribute to normalizing and trivializing their consumption.[316] Given the variety of content produced online, we believe that the awareness of people who engage in influencer marketing and create content should be raised and that they should receive better guidance regarding such practices. The content they produce can have a significant impact on young people.

Recommendation 51

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec, in particular through the Office de la protection du consommateur, develop ways to improve guidance for influencers and content creators with regard to advertising aimed at minors.

During the hearings, the Office de la protection du consommateur (OPC) addressed the issue of regulating influencer marketing and, more specifically, influencers and content creators. The OPC noted that young people are not always aware that they are constantly exposed to advertising while scrolling through content on their phones.[317] According to the OPC, although each case must be the subject of a specific analysis, influencers are subject to the *Consumer Protection Act*. Specifically, they are considered advertisers within the meaning of the Act.[318]

[314] Collectif Vital, *supra*, note 145, p. 8; Ordre des diététistes-nutritionnistes du Québec, *Commission spéciale sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 10.
[315] Ordre des diététistes-nutritionnistes du Québec, *supra*, note 314, p. 10.
[316] INSPQ, *supra*, note 17, p. 14.
[317] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Office de la protection du consommateur, February 3, 2024, at 5:25 p.m.
[318] Office de la protection du consommateur, *Mémoire presenté à la Commission spéciale sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes* brief submitted to the SCSYH (February 2025), p. 6.

The OPC also provided us during the hearings with a guide from 2012 for the general public on applying sections 248 and 249 of the *Consumer Protection Act*.[319] The guide explains the contours of the ban on advertising to young people under 13 years of age and describes the various exceptions. We believe that this best practice guide is a useful tool for all citizens. It can help them better understand Québec's legal framework for advertising. We believe that updating the guide to take into account new advertising practices such as influencer marketing would be relevant.

Recommendation 52

The Committee recommends that the Office de la protection du consommateur update the guide to the application of sections 248 and 249 of the *Consumer Protection Act* relating to advertising aimed at children under the age of 13 in order to update the best practices in the digital context, including with respect to practices such as influencer marketing and digital advertising.

The young people we met see advantages to targeted advertising. Many mentioned that targeting makes advertising more relevant to them because they see things that interest them. However, they are aware that this form of advertising is very effective, especially content posted by influencers. A number of young people indicated that they had already been influenced by this type of content. Nearly one-third (32%) of young people aged 14 to 17 who participated in the online consultation use social media to follow personalities and influencers.[320]

In addition, some commercial practices specifically target children. Even though users under the age of 13 are prohibited from accessing certain platforms, there are numerous methods to circumvent the rules. Sometimes parents use their own accounts to showcase their children as influencers. Child influencers are seen unwrapping toys in front of the camera or filming themselves playing games. This type of content is particularly appealing to a younger audience.

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Over the past year, we heard various testimonies from experts and young people who paint a less than glowing picture of business practices targeting minors. We saw that online advertising exposes young people to commercial content that is often difficult to identify as such (including content advertising junk food, plastic surgeries and weight loss products), and likely to harm their health, development or independent judgment.

Although Québec continues to set an example with respect to regulating advertising aimed at minors, the growing popularity of influencers and content creators brings new challenges for both legislators and young people. We consider that a reflection process is needed to better understand the contours of this new form of advertising.

[319] Office de la protection du consommateur, *Advertising Directed at Children under 13 Years of Age: Guide to the Application of Sections 248 and 249* (2012).

[320] Findings of the online consultation conducted by the Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development.

Recommendation 53

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec carry out analysis to define and better regulate the work of influencers, including influencers who are minors, as well as the contracts between influencers, their agents and advertisers when their content has an audience in Québec.

Minors' access to pornography

In the past, access to adult content was largely limited to renting videos or buying specialized magazines. Today's digital environment makes it much easier for audiences of all ages to view pornographic content. Young people can be voluntarily or involuntarily exposed to images, online games or videos of a pornographic nature. According to a study conducted in Canada by MediaSmarts, one-third (32%) of young people have been exposed to pornographic content online without having searched for it. Most of them were between 9 and 13 years old when they first saw such content.[321] According to the study, 22% of young people have actively searched for this type of content on the Internet. Of these, about half (52%) conducted their first search between the ages of 9 and 13.[322]

As witnesses at the hearings pointed out, early exposure to pornography has consequences and is a public health issue. It raises significant concerns for the sexual and emotional development of young people, as well as their perceptions of human relationships. The Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec paints a bleak picture in its brief:

> [TRANSLATION] Young people who are prematurely exposed to adult content may develop hypersexualized behavior or an objectifying view of their peers. They are also at risk of adopting stereotypes and power dynamics in their sexual relationships. The consumption of adult content is associated with early sexual behaviour, an increased number of sexual partners and lower satisfaction in romantic and sexual relationships during adolescence.[323]

During her testimony, Senator Julie Miville-Dechêne addressed the long-term effects of young people's access to pornography by relaying the point of view of several experts. She quoted pediatrician Megan Harrison, who says that the images seen by a child affect the development of their brain. Constantly repeated images, ideas and values that are absorbed and internalized by the brain during childhood and adolescence can have a lasting impact.[324] More specifically, consumption of pornography at an early age can

[321] Kara Brisson-Boivin and Samantha McAleese, "Jeunes Canadiens dans un monde branché, Phase IV : Le contenu préjudiciable et malaisant en ligne", (Ottawa: MediaSmarts, 2022), pp. 15–16.
[322] Ibid.
[323] FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 23.
[324] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Julie Miville-Dechêne, September 24, 2024, at 5:40 p.m.

reinforce gender stereotypes and contribute to the objectification of women. It can also create body dysmorphia, and confusion about sexual expectations and what is considered normal or not.[325]

Given the serious consequences of exposing young people to pornography, many witnesses called for strict regulation of companies that produce adult content and distribute it online. According to Senator Miville-Dechêne, self-regulation fails. She points out that these companies derive income from advertising. Therefore, it is in their interest to maximize the number of clicks on their sites, regardless of the users' age.[326] This is why access to adult sites is typically based on self-declared age, and some websites do not check the user's age at all.

To restrict young people's ability to access adult content websites, Senator Miville-Dechêne introduced Bill S-210, *An Act to restrict young persons' online access to sexually explicit material*, in the Senate on November 22, 2021. Although it died on the Order Paper, the Bill proposed potential solutions to limit young people's access to pornographic sites and would have created an offence to punish organizations that make sexually explicit material available to minors.[327] It also would have required organizations in the adult content industry to have age verification mechanisms in place. Lastly, it aimed to allow Internet service providers to block access to websites not in compliance with the law.

Although the Bill was not passed, it provided a starting point for discussion on youth access to pornographic content. We share the opinion of experts at the hearings who emphasized the need for platforms offering adult content to implement robust age verification mechanisms that are both difficult to circumvent and non-intrusive. The latter is essential: age verification must respect privacy protection principles.

Aylo, which owns several adult content websites, including Pornhub, said that the age verification mechanisms for Internet users carry privacy risks and fail to protect minors. At the hearings, the company's representatives told us that certain age verification mechanisms can increase the risk of data leaks, phishing and identity theft.[328]

Marie-Pier Jolicoeur, PhD in Law candidate, told us that some age verification mechanisms are more respectful of privacy than others. She said that the "double anonymity" principle is an example of such a mechanism. It relies on an independent third party who is responsible for verifying the age of the Internet user. This method has the advantage of transferring less personal information to companies that own adult sites.[329]

Given the complexity of implementing age verification mechanisms, cooperation with partners both in Québec and elsewhere seems essential. Indeed, as Jolicoeur mentioned, enforcing national laws on multinational companies can be challenging.[330] We believe that a great deal of intergovernmental cooperation is required to ensure the effectiveness of the measures adopted and their compliance with fundamental rights. Collaboration is particularly necessary to ensure consistency between the mechanisms

[325] Ibid.
[326] Ibid.
[327] *An Act to limit young persons' online access to sexually explicit material*, Bill S-210, 44th Parliament of Canada, 1st session, (consideration in committee, June 7, 2024), s. 4.
[328] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Aylo, February 5, 2025, at 4:50 p.m.
[329] Ibid., Marie-Pier Jolicoeur, September 24, 2024, at 5:20 p.m.
[330] Marie-Pier Jolicoeur, *Observations autour des droits des enfants dans l'environnement numérique contributorires à la réflexion québécoise sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes*, brief submitted to the SCSYH, p. 9.

put in place by different jurisdictions, as these mechanisms can now easily be circumvented by Internet users thanks to virtual private networks.

Recommendation 54

The Committee recommends that, to ensure effective regulation within Québec, the Gouvernement du Québec coordinate with the federal government and the governments of the other jurisdictions in the federation to impose reliable, non-circumventable, privacy-friendly age verification mechanisms on platforms disseminating sexually explicit content.

Adult sites should be accessible only after age verification has been completed successfully, and such settings should be enabled by default on all devices, operating systems and browsers.

Québec is not the only jurisdiction thinking about ways to regulate the pornography industry. Many governments have put measures in place to restrict minors' access to adult content in recent years. For example, in the United States, Louisiana passed a law to limit young people's access to pornography. It requires adult content companies to implement an age verification mechanism for Internet users to be able to access their websites. Companies that do not comply with these requirements may face fines or even criminal prosecution.[331]

The Act also requires Internet users who wish to consume adult content online to verify their age using government-issued identification. The verification must be carried out by an independent website to ensure the protection of the user's privacy. Adult sites must also prevent users from circumventing age verification measures through the use of a VPN (virtual private network) or other methods. For this, the Act requires that they keep a history of age verification attempts to demonstrate compliance. Other U.S. states have followed suit, including Arkansas, Mississippi and Utah.[332]

In France, the *Code pénal* prohibits the dissemination of pornographic content that could be seen by a minor.[333] This general prohibition has recently been reinforced by *Loi No. 2024-449 du 21 mai 2024 visant à sécuriser et à réguler l'espace numérique*, which regulates access to pornography. Under the Act, the Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique (ARCOM or regulatory authority for audiovisual and digital communication) ensures that minors cannot access pornographic content by establishing and publishing standards for the minimum technical requirements for verifying the age of Internet users.[334] In October 2024, ARCOM published a technical reference framework on age verification. It establishes that users who access a site offering this type of content must be offered at least one "double anonymity" age verification method, i.e. a system that includes an independent third party.[335]

[331] Law Offices of Ossie Brown, "Louisiana Porn Law ", Blog, July 22, 2024.
[332] Associated Press, "Louisiana lawmakers pass bill to fine porn sites not verifying age of users", *AP*, June 4, 2023.
[333] *Code pénal*, France, art. 227-24.
[334] *Loi n° 2024-449 du 21 mai 2024 visant à sécuriser et à réguler l'espace numérique*, JORF No. 0117, May 22, 2024, France, s. 1; *Loi n° 2004-575 du 21 juin 2004 pour la confiance dans l'économie numérique*, JORF No. 0143, June 22, 2004, France, s. 10-I para. 1.
[335] Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique, *Référentiel déterminant les exigences techniques minimales applicables aux systèmes de vérification de l'âge mis en place pour l'accès à certains services de communication au public en ligne et aux plateformes de partage de vidéos qui mettent à disposition du public des contenus pornographiques*, France, 2024, p. 10.

As ARCOM told us during the hearing, it has the authority to impose penalties on websites that do not comply with age verification standards.[336] ARCOM also has a second means of enforcement under the Act: it can require Internet service providers and domain name providers to block access to the addresses of non-compliant sites. Access must be blocked within 48 hours.[337] Lastly, ARCOM may require search engines to delist websites.

The testimonies gathered during our proceedings confirm that all jurisdictions face similar challenges. As ARCOM pointed out during the hearing, regulating access to adult content online is particularly complex due to the industry's power. In addition, the measures adopted by governments are often contested in court, which can be an obstacle to implementation.[338] Given this, we believe jurisdictions have every interest in working together both to share best practices and to promote a concerted approach aimed at better protecting young people from exposure to pornographic content.

Recommendation 55

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec initiate work within the intergovernmental and multilateral bodies of which it is a member to promote a coordinated, long-term approach to effectively restrict minors' access to sexually explicit content online.

We are aware that regulating an industry like that of pornography is complex and involves many challenges. Moreover, legislation is not the only option to consider for protecting young people. As the Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec pointed out, sex education plays a key role in countering the effects of early exposure to pornography. Educational content focusing on healthy, respectful sexuality can "[TRANSLATION] help young people develop a critical understanding of the content they might encounter online".[339]

We fully subscribe to this vision. Sex education is essential to provide young people with the tools they need to critically evaluate the content they may encounter online. It can also help to deconstruct gender stereotypes and foster more egalitarian relationships.

Recommendation 56

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec improve the sex education content offered in schools by including evolving notions about pornography, consent, gender stereotypes and the psychological impacts of early exposure to explicit content.

[336] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique, September 26, 2024, at 11:40 a.m.
[337] *Loi n° 2024-449 du 21 mai 2024 visant à sécuriser et à réguler l'espace numérique*, JORF No. 0117, May 22, 2024, s. 2.
[338] Special consultations and public hearings on the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique, September 26, 2024, at 11:40 a.m.
[339] FMSQ, *supra*, note 18, p. 24.

CONCLUSION

From the outset, we observed a keen interest among members of the general public in issues related to screens and social media's omnipresence in young people's everyday lives. Citizens of all ages wonder about the impact on young people's physical and mental health as well as on their overall development. Screens' prevalence in our daily lives raises legitimate concerns. This report is therefore timely, and we hope it will provide potential solutions that are up to the challenge. It is the culmination of one year of rigorous work carried out in a spirit of collaboration.

Our recommendations are the result of constructive exchanges and extensive consultations with specialists, stakeholders and the general public alike. Naturally, we also asked young people themselves what they thought. The broad range of perspectives we heard enabled us to come up with balanced, nuanced proposals that are in their best interests.

During our mandate, we were committed to putting young people's well-being and concerns front and centre, and we would like to underscore their outstanding contribution to our work. Our exchanges with students in schools were a particular highlight. Their candour both surprised and moved us. Through their stories, they provided us with a nuanced, personal portrait of their relationships to screens. We were impressed by how clearly they saw screens' effects on their lives, as shown by the personal accounts featured throughout this report. It is important to hear from young people themselves in any analysis concerning them, and so it was vital that we listen to them in order to cast light on what we heard from the specialists.

In this report, we put forward a comprehensive approach that draws on a number of action areas: prevention, awareness raising, education, regulation and intergovernmental collaboration. Acting on several fronts will allow us to move toward greater digital sobriety and, above all, promote young people's well-being. Our recommendations form a coherent whole that we are positive will have a real and lasting impact on our society. It is through combining and multiplying tangible actions that we will succeed in reducing the harms associated with certain aspects of the digital environment and in developing a healthy relationship with screens.

The work does not end with the tabling of this report. It begins. Implementing our recommendations will require considerable effort. It is necessary, however, in order to provide young people with an environment conducive to their development. We therefore call on the Gouvernement du Québec, the organizations concerned, and the various stakeholders mentioned in this report to implement these recommendations.

Although our mandate is coming to an end, we will keep a keen eye on the follow-up to this report. As parliamentarians, but above all as socially committed members of the public, we will follow the recommendations' implementation with interest. We invite all Quebecers to take ownership of this report. It offers a multidisciplinary understanding of the phenomenon. Beyond the tangible recommendations it contains, it proposes a vision: a society where young people can flourish in a healthy, safe and respectful environment.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I – OBSERVATIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Screens and young people

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends optimizing the use of existing infrastructure, including in municipalities and school service centres, for the benefit of families so that they may have access to free or low-cost screen-free activities. For example, by lighting parks in the evening and transforming public facilities, such as school gymnasiums, into indoor play areas, especially in winter.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends continuing to deploy versatile, adapted facilities, in addition to offering a wide range of low-cost activities, to promote physical, sports, recreational, social, cultural and extracurricular activities. The objective is to encourage young people to put down their screens, particularly in disadvantaged communities and in remote areas.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends better supporting leisure organizations, sports federations, multi-sport organizations, youth centres, community family organizations and other youth organizations while requiring them to offer a variety of attractive screen-free activities.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends continuing to implement psychosocial services in institutions in the health and social services network for people with symptoms of addiction related to the use of screens. The Committee recommends that young people's parents and legal guardians be referred to appropriate resources.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends monitoring screen use and its effects on the health of young people by collecting regular data on preschoolers, elementary school students, adolescents and young adults. It recommends promoting research to evaluate the effectiveness of the initiatives implemented and to better understand the motivations that influence young people's digital use, while encouraging the dissemination of findings. The Committee also recommends documenting the effects of screens on young people's mental and physical health by integrating differentiated analysis that takes into account, for example, different

populations in Québec and different socio-economic milieus in order to adapt interventions accordingly.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that support be given to continuing education for service providers on screen use and its associated risks, particularly for service providers working in health, educational, and community settings.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends mandating the Institut national de santé publique du Québec to formulate, publish and promote, in the various social milieus, progressive guidelines on screen time based on the stages of youth development so as to create a framework for the use of screens.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec establish a national information and awareness strategy regarding screen use recommendations to encourage the population, particularly parents, to adhere to them. Additionally, it should raise awareness among young people about screen time and the negative effects of screen use.

This measure should also raise the awareness of and equip parents, grandparents, extended families, youth workers and early childhood workers on how to develop a healthy relationship with digital technology by drawing attention to already available resources and tools, such as those offered by Tel-Jeunes, Tel-Jeunes Parents, Capsana and nousParents. The national strategy should adopt an approach aimed at balance and well-being, while seeking to reach disadvantaged communities and vulnerable individuals.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that this strategy specifically encourage parents to

- set an example, particularly in terms of screen time;
- avoid exposing children to screens before bedtime;
- ban screens in bedrooms;
- be aware of the risks associated with sedentary behaviour and establish the measures necessary to avoid them;
- accompany their young children during screen time;
- use parental control tools to limit screen time;
- avoid using screens during family moments (dinners, shared activities), even in the background;
- avoid the systematic use of screens to calm or distract children;
- avoid content that is not appropriate for their children's stage of development (fast-paced versus slow-paced programming);

- encourage their children to use certain practical tools (activating monochrome mode, disabling notifications and reorganizing apps to reduce solicitations on their phone);
- develop their children's critical thinking towards social media;
- be aware of the risks associated with opening a social media account for their children;
- be aware of the risks associated with taking photos and videos with unsecured tools on digital platforms;
- be aware of the risks, such as deepfakes and online exploitation, associated with sharing images of their children without their consent;
- better protect their children's privacy; and
- be aware of the risks associated with monetization mechanisms and loot boxes in video games.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that, in the future development of any measure or policy on the use of digital technology addressing and applying to the various Indigenous communities, according to their distinct realities, the Gouvernement du Québec consult their interested representatives.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that content on screen use, tailored to each age group, be integrated into the main sources of information for parents, such as the *From Tiny Tot to Toddler* guide, and into the tools used by community family organizations and by integrated perinatal and early childhood services The Committee recommends that this content be disseminated to stakeholders in the various communities, in particular by means of simple, accessible infographics. The information could be distributed to parents through various channels, such as prenatal classes, educational childcare services and schools, to help parents adopt healthy screen use habits within their families.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends including a section on the impacts of screens on toddlers in current programs such as "Agir tôt" and integrated perinatal and early childhood services.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends updating training programs aimed at improving parents' digital skills, taking into account the evolution of knowledge to equip them to face the challenges related to their children's screen use.

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec incorporate, when relevant, the theme of young people's exposure to screens and the impacts of that exposure into the development of future government action plans and strategies in health care. The Committee emphasizes the importance of coherent and concerted alignment of public policies to promote healthy lifestyles, particularly among children, adolescents, vulnerable individuals and persons from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends strengthening the prevention and intervention work of community organizations specializing in prevention and addictions in elementary and high schools to support school teams in managing screen use.

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends continuing to provide prevention workshops on specific themes, such as Internet addiction, cyberbullying, sextortion, video games and social media.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that young people across Québec be made aware, in particular through workshops, of the risks associated with screen use, including the collection of their personal data, and be equipped to develop critical thinking and acquire digital literacy to make healthy, balanced, informed and responsible choices.

Screens in school

The Second Opposition Group holds a minority position and proposes that the prohibition of cellphones in secondary schools be implemented progressively and in a decentralized manner, and that a directive not be issued for the 2025–2026 school year given the lack of time for school teams, parents and students to agree on its conditions of application.

Notwithstanding,

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec prohibit, as of the 2025–2026 school year, the use of cellphones, headphones and other personal mobile devices in all elementary and secondary schools, including on school grounds, until the end of class hours, and that the prohibition be established through a clear directive to ensure standardized implementation. Exceptions may apply if the use of personal mobile devices is required for the methods of instruction of the teaching staff, the student's state of health or the special needs of handicapped students or of students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities. The conditions of application are recommended to be established, in particular, by the authorities provided for under the *Education Act* and the *Act respecting private education*, within the scope of their respective jurisdictions (school team, students and parents)

The Committee also recommends that the Ministère de l'Éducation provide support to schools to facilitate the implementation of the prohibition of personal screens, in particular through increased promotion of access to screen-free activities and through encouragement of awareness-raising initiatives for students.

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends restricting the use of digital tools in the classroom to educational purposes, to ensure that such use meets clear pedagogical objectives, including by promoting a balance between the various traditional and digital pedagogical methods.

Recommendation 20

The Committee recommends that the Ministère de l'Éducation, in collaboration with key players such as the Institut national d'excellence en éducation, develop and update clear guidelines on the pedagogical use of digital tools.

Recommendation 21

The Committee recommends that a reference framework be developed to support the educational milieu in the adoption of healthy and balanced use of screens. The framework could include guidelines on screen time according to young people's age and stage of development and also standards for visual hygiene, including frequent breaks, adapted ergonomics, adequate lighting, etc.

Observation 1

The judgment and professional autonomy of teaching staff must be respected when determining permitted or prohibited uses of digital educational tools, in accordance with pedagogical and educational objectives.

Recommendation 22

The Committee recommends promoting the development of French-language digital solutions in order to offer technological solutions adapted to the cultural and linguistic realities of Québec and the Francophonie, while encouraging local innovation and digital sovereignty.

Recommendation 23

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec harmonize and update the Québec Education Program (QEP), the Digital Competency Framework and the Policy on the Evaluation of Learning to establish a coherent framework for the use of digital technology in schools and to chart a clear path forward for all stakeholders in the school community. In addition, the Committee recommends evaluating whether it would be appropriate to introduce digital competency as mandatory content, pending its full integration into the suitable QEP programs.

Recommendation 24

The Committee recommends that schools integrate the notion of digital citizenship into their code of conduct in order to raise awareness among students of the impact of their online actions and to encourage them to adopt respectful, safe and responsible behaviours.

This integration should be based on the following principles:

- **Respect and caring**: Encourage courteous interactions on digital platforms, prevent online harassment and foster respectful behaviour towards peers and the online community.
- **Digital security**: Teach students how to protect their personal information, use secure passwords and report any suspicious or threatening online situations.
- **Critical thinking**: Develop a critical eye toward online information by learning to identify trusted sources and to avoid spreading fake news.
- **Responsibility**: Encourage the use of digital tools in accordance with the law and with the institution's rules, so as to promote constructive, positive exchanges.
- **Digital footprint**: Educate students about the trail of data left online and the potential impact on their reputation and future.

Recommendation 25

The Committee recommends planning an information and awareness-raising strategy on digital citizenship for young people covering in particular, healthy and constructive use of screens, risks associated with screens and critical thinking about online content.

Recommendation 26

The Committee recommends that equity be taken into account in digital policies implemented in public schools to ensure fair access to technological tools for young people in vulnerable situations or with special needs, including those who

- are living with a handicap;
- have a specific medical condition;
- are socioeconomically disadvantaged;
- are attending classes for newcomers; or
- are Inuit or First Nations youth attending schools outside of their community.

Recommendation 27

The Committee recommends that sufficient material and human resources be made available to support students, particularly those with special needs, in the use of digital tools.

Recommendation 28

The Committee recommends guaranteeing access to content on responsible screen use in teachers' continuing education in order to raise awareness and equip them with respect to the issues, benefits and best practices regarding the pedagogical, creative and ethical use of digital tools.

Recommendation 29

The Committee recommends integrating content on the pedagogical use of screens and digital resources into the university education of future teachers so that they understand both the issues and the benefits.

Recommendation 30

The Committee recommends that elementary and high schools in Québec avoid using screen time as a reward. It also recommends that schools prioritize options that promote student well-being, such as physical activity, reading and social interaction.

Recommendation 31

The Committee recommends providing access to a broad range of sports, cultural, artistic, scientific and social activities in order to preserve the balance between digital learning and student well-being.

Recommendation 32

The Committee recommends that school staff involved with e-sports programs be equipped to detect health problems among young people, including Internet addiction. They should also be provided with tools to facilitate discussion about video games, particularly with regard to the games' addictive aspects.

Recommendation 33

The Committee recommends that schools strengthen the supervision of e-sports programs for young people to ensure that e-sports take place in a healthy, safe and balanced environment. The Committee also recommends that clear educational objectives be defined for these programs, including the development of skills like communication, team spirit and self-regulation.

Recommendation 34

The Committee recommends that e-sports programs in schools include prevention and education measures for issues related to increased screen time, Internet addiction, performance and overall health (physical, mental and social), including holding workshops on screen management, healthy lifestyle habits and employment opportunities. It is important for schools to encourage a healthy balance between e-sports and other activities essential to young people's well-being, such as physical exercise, face-to-face social interaction and rest. Students should also be made more aware of ergonomics, posture and the effects of a sedentary lifestyle.

Recommendation 35

The Committee recommends that before implementing any new e-sports program, a private educational institution or the governing board of a public school inform the Ministère de l'Éducation of its decision to do so and that the new program be subject to increased monitoring by the Ministère. The Committee

recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec make available to school service centres and institutions a support document to be followed by schools implementing special e-sports pedagogical projects. This document should be based on the available data and promote informed decision-making regarding possible effects on health, associated risks, academic success, motivation and student well-being. This document should be based on the available data and promote informed decision-making regarding possible effects on health, associated risks, academic success, motivation and student well-being. In addition, the Committee recommends that the Ministère de l'Éducation ensure increased monitoring of the evolution of e-sports programs in the school network to take into account young people's development and well-being. Schools must provide the necessary data on an annual basis.

Social media

Recommendation 36

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec ensure that the health and social services network offers young people resources, such as information leaflets, allowing them to inform themselves anonymously on the means available to victims of cyberbullying.

Recommendation 37

The Committee recommends that the government conduct an analysis of the proliferation of generative artificial intelligence images on social media platforms and of ways to facilitate their detection by minors, particularly from the perspective of human rights and freedoms.

Recommendation 38

The Committee recommends prohibiting both selling personal information or transferring it in any other way and profiling (through "targeted advertising") of minors under the age of 14, even with the consent of the holder of parental authority or guardian.

Recommendation 39

The Committee recommends improving protections of minors' personal information, assuring an interpretation that is favourable to minors and making digital platforms more accountable by specifying in applicable laws that these platforms must not

- collect, use, communicate, store or destroy personal information in a manner that could harm a minor;
- attempt to influence the behaviour or decisions of a minor;
- attempt to influence a minor aged 14 or over to provide their consent to being profiled with the goal of showing them targeted advertising.

Recommendation 40

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec conduct a comprehensive reflection on updating the Act to establish a legal framework for information technology, which could include considering

the matter of technological intermediaries. For example, there could be a reassessment of the responsibility of digital companies regarding practices considered contrary to the interests of the child.

Recommendation 41

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec provide for the updating of applicable laws to ensure that digital platforms take into account the risks to the physical and mental health of minors when their products are designed primarily for the use of minors or are used predominantly by minors, for example by requiring them to

- respect the principles of privacy by design;
- adopt effective moderation mechanisms to report or block violent, hateful, sexual or inappropriate content;
- adopt verifiable security practices of their mechanisms for collecting data from minors;
- adopt measures to counter disinformation, including that conveyed by artificial intelligence;
- not use the types of design that are considered to be rigged interfaces; and
- warn of the harmful effects and make it mandatory to post resources for help for young people in order to have quick access to those resources.

Recommendation 42

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec implement a minimum age for access to social media, and that it prohibit signing up for and accessing social media before the age of 14 without the consent of the young person's legal guardian.

Conclusion 1

Recommendation 42 is based on principles already established in Québec's legal framework, which recognizes the capacity of minors aged 14 to provide their own consent in a several spheres of modern life.

Recommendation 43

On that point, the Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec assess which appropriate authority or body should develop the standards or guidelines for digital platforms, which would address, among other things,

- the simplicity and clarity expected when informing with young people and minors;
- clarification of the obligations of platforms, notably so they clearly state that young people under the age of 14 are not allowed to register on social media and cannot provide their own consent to share their personal information;
- establishment of the functions or differentiated control measures for minors' accounts or profiles, including with regards to protecting their personal information, taking inspiration from the approach based on respecting children's rights from the very conception of the product (Children's Rights by Design);

- the penalties for failure to comply with those requirements.

Recommendation 44

The Committee recommends that the introduction of age verification methods be approached with caution and that they be used sparingly, as they are not entirely benign. While these mechanisms may help protect young people, they often involve additional processing of personal information for both minors and adults, which raises significant privacy concerns.

Therefore, the Committee recommends that the government carry out analyses before imposing any age verification mechanism onto any sector of activity or business. Such a rigorous analysis must rest on the principles of feasibility, applicability and proportionality while also taking into account technical and legal advances internationally. This analysis should look at, among other things,

- the need to limit the collection and use of personal information exclusively for age verification;
- adapting the age verification method based on the degree of risk associated, using a proportional approach that takes into account the gravity and probability of potential threats to minors;
- respect for fundamental rights and liberties, including the freedom of expression of adults and minors;
- integrating the principles of privacy by design;
- the requirement of data to be processed locally; and
- the transparency of the age verification methods put in place and the actors involved.

Recommendation 45

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec begin work with intergovernmental and multilateral authorities of which it is a member in order to push for the adoption of regulations on digital platforms internationally and in domestic law based on a global approach.

Video games

Recommendation 46

The Committee recommends that training programs for video game developers include ethical content making them aware of the impact of certain mechanisms that can be harmful to young people.

Recommendation 47

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec mandate an appropriate body—the Institut national de santé publique du Québec, for example—to develop and disseminate a rating for mechanisms that are inappropriate for minors in the development of social networks and video games (such as streaming, permanent data capture, infinite scrolling, addictive practices, loot boxes, etc.). The rating

could be disseminated, for example, in collaboration with Option consommateurs or Protégez-vous magazine.

Recommendation 48

The Committee recommends that, through pressuring the industry and interventions by intergovernmental bodies of which Québec is a member, the video game industry must be required to ensure that the rating assigned to a video game takes into account any microtransactions or paid loot boxes and be required to monitor commercial practices in games aimed at minors.

The pressuring and interventions could be carried out through, for example, a flexible and evolving communication channel set up between the government departments concerned, researchers and representatives of the video game industry.

Conclusion 2

The Committee concludes that the presence of paid loot boxes and microtransactions in video games is of significant concern when they are aimed at minors and that they should be prohibited.

Recommendation 49

The Committee recommends that paid loot boxes and microtransactions be prohibited in video games aimed at minors (games rated E, for example).

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec begin an analysis to define and regulate, including through applicable and appropriate legislative means, mechanisms such as loot boxes, unpredictable reward systems, dark patterns and microtransactions in games aimed at minors. This analysis could also look into providing a more rigorous framework for these mechanisms, for example by requiring loot boxes to be reported in product cards (in virtual stores, etc.) and in video game advertisements, greater transparency on the part of developers and platforms and disclosure of the probabilities of the content of loot boxes.

Lastly, the analysis could also look into design practices for video games aimed for minors, such as compliance with safety by design and prohibition of abusive behavioural incentives and other persuasive mechanisms.

Exposure to online content

Recommendation 50

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec conduct analyses to improve online advertising content disclosure requirements, for example in the context of influencer marketing, and strengthen the requirements for the integration and effectiveness of appropriate keywords or indicators to improve transparency and make it easier for young people to recognize advertising.

Recommendation 51

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec, in particular through the Office de la protection du consommateur, develop ways to improve guidance for influencers and content creators with regard to advertising aimed at minors.

Recommendation 52

The Committee recommends that the Office de la protection du consommateur update the guide to the application of sections 248 and 249 of the *Consumer Protection Act* relating to advertising aimed at children under the age of 13 in order to update the best practices in the digital context, including with respect to practices such as influencer marketing and digital advertising.

Recommendation 53

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec carry out analysis to define and better regulate the work of influencers, including influencers who are minors, as well as the contracts between influencers, their agents and advertisers when their content has an audience in Québec.

Recommendation 54

The Committee recommends that, to ensure effective regulation within Québec, the Gouvernement du Québec coordinate with the federal government and the governments of the other jurisdictions in the federation to impose reliable, non-circumventable, privacy-friendly age verification mechanisms on platforms disseminating sexually explicit content.

Adult sites should be accessible only after age verification has been completed successfully, and such settings should be enabled by default on all devices, operating systems and browsers.

Recommendation 55

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec initiate work within the intergovernmental and multilateral bodies of which it is a member to promote a coordinated, long-term approach to effectively restrict minors' access to sexually explicit content online.

Recommendation 56

The Committee recommends that the Gouvernement du Québec improve the sex education content offered in schools by including evolving notions about pornography, consent, gender stereotypes and the psychological impacts of early exposure to explicit content.

APPENDIX II – PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE COMMITTEE'S PROCEEDINGS

Organizations and witnesses heard

- Action Toxicomanie (021M)
- Alloprof (040M)
- English Parents' Committee Association (039M)
- Association des Entreprises pour le développement des technologies éducatives au Québec (001M)
- Association des médecins ophtalmologistes du Québec
- Association québécoise des neuropsychologues (049M)
- Association québécoise du personnel de direction d'école (009M)
- Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique de France
- Aylo (054M)
- Yasemin Beykont, Assistant Professor, Communications, Marist University
- Jean-François Biron, Researcher, Direction régionale de santé publique, CIUSSS du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal
- Maude Bonenfant, Professor, Département de communication sociale et publique, Université du Québec à Montréal (024M), with
  Alexandra Dumont, Research Coordinator
- Jonathan Bonneau, Assistant Professor, École des médias, Laboratoire de recherche en médias socionumériques et ludification, Université du Québec à Montréal (051M)
- Bureau des affaires de la jeunesse, Director of Criminal and Penal Prosecutions
- Carolanne Campeau, Lecturer, Département des sciences de la santé communautaire, Université de Sherbrooke (CSESJ-001)
- Capsana (030M)
- Céline Castets-Renard, Professor, Holder of the Canada Research Chair in International and Comparative Law of Artificial Intelligence, University of Ottawa
- Canadian Centre for Child Protection
- Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne (004M)
- Centre québécois d'éducation aux médias et à l'information
- Dr. Jean-François Chicoine, Pediatrian, CHU Sainte-Justine and Associate Professor, Département de pédiatrie, Université de Montréal
- Collectif Vital (029M)
- Comité national des jeunes du Parti québécois (047M)
- Commission d'accès à l'information du Québec (031M)

- Commission-Jeunesse du Parti libéral du Québec (048M)
- Commission Relève de la Coalition avenir Québec
- Confédération des syndicats nationaux (005M)
- Patricia Conrod, Full Professor, Département de psychiatrie et d'addictologie, Université de Montréal (053M), with
  Dr. Isabelle Ouellet-Morin, Full Professor, Holder of the Canada Research Chair in the Developmental Origins of Vulnerability and Resilience, Université de Montréal
- First Nations Education Council (042M)
- COSMOSS (022M)
- Audrey-Ann Denault, Assistant Professor, Département de psychologie, Université de Montréal and Director of Laboratoire RISE (059M)
- Dr. Magali Dufour, Psychologist and Full Professor, Département de psychologie, Université du Québec à Montréal (033M)
- Dr. Victoria Dunckley, Integrative Psychiatrist, Screen Time Expert and Author (011M)
- Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (010M)
- Fédération des centres de services scolaires du Québec (008M)
- Fédération des comités de parents du Québec (003M)
- Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés (006M)
- Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec (043M)
- Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement (FSE-CSQ)
- Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille (026M)
- Caroline Fitzpatrick, Associate Professor, Faculté d'éducation, Université de Sherbrooke, with
  Gabrielle Garon-Carrier, Associate Professor, Faculté d'éducation, Université de Sherbrooke and member of the Digital Child Lab
- Fondation des Gardiens virtuels (019M)
- Marie-Vincent Foundation (028M)
- Sydney L. Forde, Ph.D candidate, Pennsylvania State University
- Benoit Gauthier, Ph.D. candidate in Applied Social Sciences, Lecturer, Université de Montréal, and Responsible for the screens file, Direction de santé publique de la Montérégie (015M)
- Dr. Mélissa Généreux, Physician Specializing in Public Health and Full Professor, Faculté de médecine et des sciences de la santé, Université de Sherbrooke
- Dr. Patrick Giroux, Full Professor, Technologies éducatives, and Associate Researcher at the CRIFPE and the GRIIPTIC, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (041M), with
  Dr. Jacinthe Dion, Full Professor, Psychologist, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, and Holder of the Canada Research Chair in Sexual Violence Among Vulnerable Young People, and
  Dr. Eve Pouliot, Full Professor, Travail social, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and Co-holder of the VISAJ Chair on Youth Life and Health

- HabiloMédias
- Institut national de santé publique du Québec (014M)
- Marie-Pier Jolicœur, Ph.D candidate, Faculté de droit, Université Laval (016M)
- Anne Elizabeth Lapointe, Director of the Maison Jean Lapointe and the Centre québécois de la lutte aux dépendances (017M), with
  Max Teisseire, Director of Prevention Programs, Maison Jean Lapointe
- Catherine L'Ecuyer, Researcher, Consultant, Speaker and Author
- Antoine Lemay, Psychologist
- Éric Martin, Professor, Philosophie, Cégep Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Co-author of *Bienvenue dans la machine. Enseigner à l'ère numérique*
- Hon. Julie Miville-Dechêne, Senator for Québec (Independent)
- Dr. Servane Mouton, PhD in Medicine, Neurologist and Neurophysiologist, with Jonathan Bernard, Researcher, Inserm, Équipe de recherche sur les determinants précoces de la santé (EAROH), Centre de recherche en épidémiologie et statistiques
- Sébastien Mussi, Professor, Philosophie, Collège de Maisonneuve, Co-author of *Bienvenue dans la machine. Enseigner à l'ère du numérique*
- Observatoire des tout-petits (032M)
- Office de la protection du consommateur (046M)
- Option Consommateurs (012M) (CSESJ-010)
- Sandrine Prom Tep, Full Professor, Marketing numérique, École des sciences de la gestion, Université du Québec à Montréal
- Regroupement des comités de parents autonomes du Québec (007M)
- Réseau militant jeunesse de Québec solidaire (052M)
- Service de police de la Ville de Montréal
- Robin Walker, Former Chair, Education Committee, House of Commons of the United Kingdom
- Steve Waterhouse, Lecturer, Microprogramme en sécurité de l'information, Université de Sherbrooke

Persons and organizations who were not heard, but who submitted a brief

- 5Rights Foundation (044M)
- Alliance Médias Jeunesse (023M)
- Entertainment Software Association of Canada and the Guilde du jeu vidéo du Québec (060M)
- Association québécoise des centres d'intervention en dépendance (027M)
- Julie Baribeau (020M)
- Barreau du Québec (045M)
- Véronique Bohbot (018M)
- François Champoux (CSESJ-011)
- Centrale des syndicats du Québec (013M)
- Comité de parents du Centre de services scolaire de la Capitale (002M)
- Comité de parents Marie-Victorin (CSESJ– 004)
- First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission (037M)
- Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (055M)
- Confédération des organismes familiaux du Québec (CSESJ–007)
- École secondaire C.-E.-Pouliot and École secondaire Esdras-Minville (058M)
- Epic Games (CSESJ-009)
- Fédération Québécoise de Sports Électroniques (050M)
- Google (036M)
- Institut du développement de l'enfant et de la famille (CSESJ-002)
- Meta Canada (038M)
- Mouvement Jeunes et santé mentale (CSESJ-006)
- Mouvement santé mentale Québec (CSESJ- 005)
- Ordre des diététistes-nutritionnistes du Québec (035M)
- Ordre des optométristes du Québec (025M)
- Protecteur national de l'élève (057M)
- Rassemblement ÉlectroSensibilité Québec (CSESJ-012)
- Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services (034M)
- Réseau québécois pour la réussite éducative (056M)
- Service national du RÉCIT à l'éducation préscolaire (CSESJ-008)
- Télé-Québec (CSESJ-013)
- TikTok Canada (CSESJ-003)
- Anne-Marie Turcotte-Tremblay, Lise Gauvin and others. (CSESJ-015)

The numbers in parentheses are the reference numbers of the briefs (000M) and documents (CSESJ-000) tabled and published on the Assemblée nationale's website.

People who contributed to the preparatory training

- Vincent Gautrais, Lawyer and Professor, Faculté de droit, Université de Montréal, and Holder of the L. R. Wilson Chair in Information Technology and E-Commerce Law
- Sara Eve Levac, Lawyer and Analyst, Option consommateurs
- Emmanuelle Parent, PhD in Communications, Co-Founder and Director General of the Centre pour l'intelligence émotionnelle en ligne (Le CIEL) and Lecturer, Université de Sherbrooke

APPENDIX III - SCHOOLS VISITED

Collège Héritage (Châteauguay)

Collège Notre-Dame (Rivière-du-Loup)

École Bois-du-Nord (Baie-Comeau)

École Desbiens (Saint-Arsène)

École Gabriel-Le Courtois (Sainte-Anne-des-Monts)

École primaire Paul-Jarry (Montréal)

École polyvalente Nicolas-Gatineau (Gatineau)

École primaire Notre-Dame (Gatineau)

École Saint-Norbert et de l'Escabelle (Cap-Chat)

École Saint-Victor (Petit-Matane)

École secondaire Cardinal-Roy (Québec)

École secondaire de La Seigneurie (Québec)

École secondaire de Rivière-du-Loup (Rivière-du-Loup)

École secondaire de Rochebelle (Québec)

École secondaire du Mistral (Mont-Joli)

École secondaire Uashkaikan (Pessamit)

Westmount High School (Westmount)

APPENDIX IV - FINDINGS OF THE ONLINE CONSULTATION

The following findings are drawn from responses to the questionnaire used in the online consultation carried out by the Select Committee on the Impact of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development. The questionnaire was available online from October 31, 2024, to January 31, 2025.

A total of 7,075 participants answered all the questions, but we also took into account the responses of those who answered only some of the questions. This is why the number of respondents varies between 7,075 and 7,993, depending on the question. For the multiple-choice questions (tables 14, 17 and 23), only the answers from participants who proceeded to answer the next question were counted. This was to ensure they had completed their selections. In addition, some questions were specifically addressed to subgroups, such as people aged 14–24, parents, and school staff. The number of respondents for those questions is therefore lower.

The socio-demographic data (e.g., age, gender, parental status) were compiled only from respondents who answered all the questions to ensure a representative profile.

In the following tables, the letter "N" refers to the number of respondents.

Socio-demographic information

Table 1. Respondent situation

Situation	N	Distribution[1]
Parent	7,075	52.2%
Grandparent	7,075	4.9%
Works in the education sector	7,075	28.2%
Interested in screen time	7,075	44.7%

Table 2. Gender

Gender	N=7,075
Female	71.6%
Male	26.7%
Non-binary	0.6%
Other	0.2%
I prefer not to answer	0.9%

Table 3. Age group

Age	N=7,075
14 to 17	20.8%
18 to 24	5.8%
25 to 34	12.5%
35 to 44	27.4%
45 to 54	23.7%
55 to 64	6.2%
65 to 74	2.5%
75 or over	1.1%

[1] The categories are not mutually exclusive.

Table 4. Administrative region

Administrative region	N=7,075
Montréal (06)	16.5%
Capitale-Nationale (03)	14.0%
Montérégie (16)	12.1%
Laurentides (15)	7.8%
Chaudière-Appalaches (12)	6.5%
Gaspésie–Îles-de-la-Madeleine (11)	6.3%
Estrie (05)	6.2%
Mauricie (04)	6.4%
Lanaudière (14)	4.5%
Centre-du-Québec (17)	3.9%
Laval (13)	2.8%
Côte-Nord (09)	2.6%
Outaouais (07)	2.5%
Bas-Saint-Laurent (01)	2.5%
Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean (02)	2.4%
Abitibi-Témiscamingue (08)	1.2%
Nord-du-Québec (10)	0.6%
I don’t know / I prefer not to answer	1.2%

Questions on screen time

Table 5. Daily screen time by type of use

Use	N	Less than 2 hours	2 to 4 hours	4 to 6 hours	6 to 8 hours	8 to 10 hours	More than 10 hours	I don't know / I prefer not to answer
Screen time per day, solely for leisure activities (computer, cellphone, tablet, television, video games, etc.)?	7,917	38.0%	43.6%	11.6%	3.3%	1.3%	1.3%	0.9%
Total screen time per day, whether for work, leisure or other obligations (computer, cellphone, tablet, television, video games, etc.)?	7,993	4.3%	19.0%	22.6%	22.0%	21.5%	9.7%	0.9%

Table 6. Daily screen time by type of device

Devices	N	Less than 2 hours	2 to 4 hours	4 to 6 hours	6 to 8 hours	8 or more hours	None	I don't know / I prefer not to answer
Cellphone	7,778	47.8%	33.8%	9.7%	3.2%	2.3%	2.6%	0.6%
Video games	7,777	13.5%	3.4%	1.1%	0.5%	0.6%	80.2%	0.8%
Computer	7,780	26.3%	16.2%	14.2%	24.2%	8.2%	10.2%	0.7%
Tablet	7,778	23.4%	5.3%	1.2%	0.4%	0.5%	68.3%	0.8%
Television	7,780	58.7%	17.5%	2.3%	0.5%	0.5%	19.9%	0.6%

Table 7. Perceptions of screen use

Perceptions	N	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know / I prefer not to answer
I spend too much time in front of screens.	7,605	36.4%	42.1%	15.2%	4.8%	1.6%
I am trying to spend less time in front of screens.	7,604	26.1%	47.4%	17.5%	6.9%	2.1%
I think that my screen time management is healthy and balanced.	7,604	9.6%	38.0%	41.2%	8.9%	2.3%
I sometimes experience negative effects (fatigue, sleep problems, lack of concentration, irritability, etc.) after spending several hours in front of a screen.	7,602	17.4%	34.6%	23.2%	20.5%	4.3%
Screens (television, social media, tablet, video games, etc.) help me relax.	7,601	14.0%	54.7%	19.1%	9.0%	3.2%

Questions on screens at school

Tableau 8. Perceptions of screens at school

Perceptions	N	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know / I prefer not to answer
Screens are too prominent in school.	7,438	24.6%	28.6%	24.9%	9.6%	12.3%
Educational digital tools should be used in student learning.	7,434	24.1%	48.1%	17.2%	5.6%	5.0%
The use of reward screens, i.e. screen time that is designed to reward or entertain, should be banned in school.	7,429	40.0%	24.5%	18.0%	11.2%	6.2%
Banning cellphone use in class is an effective way to limit distractions.	7,428	66.0%	19.6%	6.2%	5.9%	2.2%
Cellphones should be banned in schools, including in hallways and in the schoolyard.	7,427	43.7%	16.8%	16.1%	20.5%	3.0%
E-sports programs should not be offered in schools.	7,425	37.5%	17.5%	17.6%	11.4%	15.9%

Questions on social media and video games

Table 9. Perceptions of the Web giants, social media and microtransactions

Perceptions	N	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know / I prefer not to answer
Web giants, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, should better protect the personal information of young people.	7,289	77.0%	15.7%	2.0%	1.0%	4.3%
Web giants, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, should do more to moderate the content to which young people are exposed on social media.	7,287	74.5%	15.7%	5.0%	1.7%	3.2%
The mechanisms available on social media to prevent cyberbullying - reporting, account blocking, etc. - are effective.	7,285	6.3%	10.1%	33.4%	36.3%	14.0%
Microtransactions in video games should be banned.	7,285	54.6%	19.2%	9.0%	5.4%	11.8%

Table 10.1 Perceptions of a minimum age for using social media

Should there be a minimum age for creating and using a social media account?	N=7,277
No	6.2%
Yes	90.2%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	3.6%

Table 10.2 Perceptions of a minimum age for social media

At what age should young people be allowed to create and use a social media account?	N=6,563
Under 1 year of age	0.0%
1 year of age	0.0%
2 years of age	0.0%
3 years of age	0.0%
4 years of age	0.0%
5 years of age	0.0%
6 years of age	0.1%
7 years of age	0.2%
8 years of age	0.2%
9 years of age	0.2%
10 years of age	1.5%
11 years of age	1.2%
12 years of age	10.3%
13 years of age	8.9%
14 years of age	24.3%
15 years of age	10.8%
16 years of age	29.6%
17 years of age	1.7%
18 years of age	7.0%
Over 18 years of age	3.4%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	0.7%

Table 11. Perceived impact of social media

Generally speaking, how would you describe the impact of social media in your life?	N=7,264
Very positive	3.0%
Somewhat positive	23.1%
Neutral	44.1%
Somewhat negative	21.4%
Very negative	4.0%
Does not apply	3.3%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	1.1%

Table 12. Perceived impact of video games

Generally speaking, how would you describe the impact of video games on your life?	N=7,259
Very positive	5.7%
Somewhat positive	13.6%
Neutral	19.2%
Somewhat negative	6.2%
Very negative	2.9%
Does not apply	51.2%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	1.2%

Table 13. Frequency of screen use when the respondent would have preferred to be doing something else

How often do you stay in front of a screen (television, computer, telephone, game console) when you'd rather be doing something else?	N=7,733
Every day	23.7%
Many times per week	22.3%
A few times per week	21.6%
A few times per month	18.0%
Never	12.4%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	2.0%

Questions for young people only

Table 14. Reasons why young people use screens

Generally, for what purposes do you use screens?	N	Distribution[2]
Social media	2,218	72.9%
Video games	2,218	41.5%
Watching videos (television, YouTube, Netflix, etc.)	2,218	76.2%
Chatting (Messenger, Snapchat, texts, etc.)	2,218	76.4%
Homework	2,218	50.5%

[2] The categories are not mutually exclusive.

Table 15. Frequency of screen use in the hour before bedtime

How often do you use screens in the hour before going to sleep?	N=2,342
Every evening	73.0%
A few evenings per week	17.9%
A few evenings per month	2.1%
Rarely	4.1%
Never	1.5%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	1.3%

Table 16. School staff support for online problems

I can count on the help of school staff for online problems (cyberbullying, harassment, etc.).	N=2,342
Strongly agree	22.8%
Somewhat agree	33.0%
Somewhat disagree	15.4%
Strongly disagree	13.0%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	15.8%

Table 17. Reasons for using social media

In general, why do you use social media?	N	Distribution[3]
Keep in touch with friends and family	2,013	89.9%
Look at photos and videos	2,013	75.5%
Share photos and videos	2,013	32.2%
Follow celebrities and influencers	2,013	34.7%
Stay informed and read the news	2,013	50.3%
Other	2,013	7.0%

[3] The categories are not mutually exclusive.

Table 18. Frequency of various situations experienced on social media or in video games

How often do you experience the following situations on social media or in video games?	N	Very often	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know / I prefer not to answer	Does not apply
I experience social pressure or anxiety when using social media.	1,957	4.8%	7.1%	17.8%	27.0%	36.3%	2.0%	5.1%
I see content online that I would rather avoid.	1,955	6.4%	12.4%	32.1%	29.4%	14.7%	2.0%	2.9%
Strangers reach out to me online.	1,955	7.1%	11.4%	23.5%	27.8%	25.6%	1.8%	2.9%
I witness cyberbullying on social media or video game platforms.	1,954	5.7%	7.8%	14.6%	22.3%	41.9%	2.5%	5.3%
I tend to buy certain products or services presented by influencers.	1,953	2.4%	6.7%	14.2%	22.1%	49.1%	1.6%	3.9%
When I play video games, I feel the need to buy something to have fun or help me progress in the game.	1,953	4.7%	7.4%	14.0%	16.6%	32.6%	2.4%	22.4%
I feel forced to keep playing video games to reach my goals.	1,953	4.9%	10.2%	18.0%	16.5%	26.6%	2.6%	21.1%

Table 19. Perceptions of social media and video games

Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:	N	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know / I prefer not to answer	Does not apply
Social media make it easier for me to communicate with my friends and family.	1,917	69.6%	21.5%	2.9%	1.4%	2.0%	2.6%
The number of reactions and comments related to my social media posts is important to me.	1,917	5.1%	20.7%	23.0%	28.7%	4.8%	17.8%
Video games make me feel like I belong to a community.	1,917	9.7%	20.8%	14.7%	17.1%	5.4%	32.5%
I know what resources can help me if I experience difficult situations online.	1,915	17.9%	34.3%	18.4%	13.8%	9.0%	6.5%
I know and understand the risks and issues related to screen time and social media use.	1,915	44.1%	40.3%	6.9%	2.1%	3.8%	2.8%

Questions for parents only

Table 20. Perceptions of social media and video games

Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:	N	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know / I prefer not to answer
I am sufficiently informed on how the various social media function.	3,907	16.7%	47.4%	27.3%	7.9%	0.8%
I am sufficiently informed on the risks and impacts of screens and social media.	3,905	27.2%	46.7%	19.6%	6.0%	0.5%
I would like to have more information on the use of screens in schools.	3,903	47.0%	34.9%	9.9%	4.5%	3.6%
I think it is important for me to be able to contact my child on their cellphone when they are at school.	3,903	6.6%	12.7%	26.4%	46.5%	7.8%
I am concerned about my child or children's use of social media and video games.	3,903	38.1%	30.5%	12.7%	9.8%	8.9%

Tableau 21. Frequency of discussion with children about issues related to the use of screens and social media

	N	Very often	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know / I prefer not to answer
Indicate how often you talk to your children about issues related to screen time and social media use.	3,882	24.5%	37.3%	25.3%	6.2%	3.5%	3.2%

Table 22. Establishing screen time rules for children

Have you established screen time rules for your children?	N=4,126
No	18.7%
Yes	81.3%

Tableau 23. Measures implemented to limit screen time

Measures to limit screen time	N	Distribution[4]
Ban on screens during meals	3,907	65.5%
No screens for one or two hours before bedtime	3,907	33.6%
Use of parental control applications	3,907	33.5%
Planning of screen-free activities (sports, creative hobbies, etc.)	3,907	62.2%
Education on the negative effects of screens	3,907	50.8%

[4] The categories are not mutually exclusive.

Questions for school staff only

Table 24. Perception of cellphones, screens and educational technologies

Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:	N	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know / I prefer not to answer
The cellphone ban in classrooms is an effective measure to help students focus.	2,044	67.4%	24.1%	5.0%	2.1%	1.5%
Teachers should restrict the use of screens for pedagogical purposes in class.	2,044	32.5%	36.0%	22.7%	6.8%	2.1%
Education staff have received adequate training to efficiently use pedagogical technologies.	2,044	6.0%	25.7%	41.3%	20.9%	6.0%

APPENDIX V – THE SELECT COMMITTEE IN NUMBERS

Meetings

30
deliberative meetings
of the 12 Committee members

32
hours
spent in deliberative meetings

23
meetings of the Steering Committee,
whose members included Ms. Dionne (Rivière-du-Loup–Témiscouata), Mr. Ciccone (Marquette), Mr. Leduc (Hochelaga-Maisonneuve) and Mr. Bérubé (Matane-Matapédia)

12
public meetings

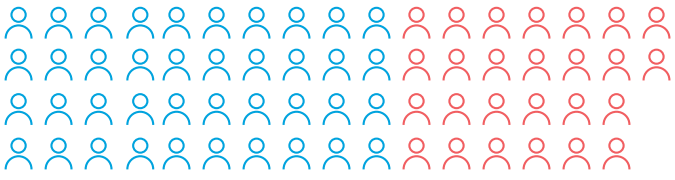
48 hours and 55 minutes
spent in special consultations and public hearings

Witnesses and briefs

74
briefs
received

66
individuals and organizations
were heard during the special consultations:

40
witnesses
from September 12 to 26, 2024



26
witnesses
from January 30 to February 5, 2025

The individuals and organizations heard were from **Canada**, **France**, the **United States** and the **United Kingdom**.

School visits

During the weeks of **November 4 and 18, 2024**

Approximately **500** **students** met

17 elementary and secondary English-speaking and French-speaking **schools,** both private and public

13 **cities** visited across **6** **regions** of Québec

Online consultation

Between October 31, 2024, and January 31, 2025,

7,075 **questionnaires** were completed

2,570 **comments** from citizens

52% of respondents identified as parents

28% of respondents said they work in the education sector

27% of respondents were between the ages of 14 and 24

APPENDIX VI - MOTION TO ESTABLISH THE SELECT COMMITTEE

THAT, pursuant to Standing Order 178, a select committee be established to examine the issues related to the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development, in particular:

- young people's screen time;
- screen time control measures, in particular at school and on the Web, including access to digital learning tools;
- access to social media, including video games;
- cyberbullying, including the sharing of sexually explicit material;
- minors having access to online pornography;
- mechanisms used by certain applications to create an addiction;
- ads targeting children on platforms and applications;

THAT the name of this committee be "Select Committee on the Impacts of Screens and Social Media on Young People's Health and Development";

THAT the Committee be composed of twelve (12) members distributed as follows:

seven (7) Members from the parliamentary group forming the Government, including the Committee Chair;

three (3) Members from the Official Opposition, including the Committee Vice-Chair;

one (1) Member from the Second Opposition Group;

one (1) independent Member sitting under the banner of the Parti québécois;

THAT each parliamentary group forward to the Director of the Committees Service the list of its Committee members, including the name of the Chair and of the Vice-Chair, not later than seven (7) days after this motion has been carried;

THAT the Committee allow any independent Member not sitting under the banner of the Parti québécois to take part in its proceedings according to the terms set out in Standing Order 132;

THAT the Committee's steering committee be composed of the Chair, the Vice-Chair, the member from the Second Opposition Group, the independent member sitting under the banner of the Parti québécois and the clerk;

THAT the Committee may hold deliberative meetings as soon as this motion is carried;

THAT the Committee may hold online consultations pursuant to Standing Order 173.1;

THAT the Committee may hold special consultations and public hearings;

THAT the Committee may hold special consultations during deliberative meetings or in-camera meetings at the request of a witness;

THAT the Committee may use video conferencing within the framework of hearings;

THAT the Committee may hold virtual hearings and deliberative meetings, provided the decisions are made unanimously;

THAT the Committee may travel or meet in a place other than the precincts of the National Assembly;

THAT the steering committee determine the individuals and organizations that the Committee will hear;

THAT the steering committee may determine the total length of each hearing as well as the length of each witness's presentation and exchanges with members of the Committee;

THAT the organization of proceedings be entrusted to the Committee's steering committee, including the preparation of the schedule according to any request for changes made by individuals and organizations;

THAT the Committee be convened by its Chair, pursuant to Standing Order 148 even if it is to consider an order of reference from the Assembly;

THAT the Committee not be limited to three (3) clear days, following special consultations, in which to hold deliberative meetings for the purpose of agreeing upon any observations, conclusions or recommendations that it wishes to include in its report;

THAT the Committee table its report not later than 30 May 2025;

THAT the rules pertaining to standing committees be observed in the Committee insofar as they are consistent with the provisions of this motion;

THAT the Committees Service ensure the necessary support for the smooth functioning of the Committee;

THAT the Committee have the resources needed to fulfill its mandate, particularly in terms of support for research and publicity.

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