

DISCONNECT TO RECONNECT: THE EFFECTS OF A DIGITAL DETOX INTERVENTION ON PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' WELL-BEING

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Abstract: *The rapid expansion of digital technology in children's daily lives has generated increasing concerns regarding the effects of excessive screen exposure on psychological well-being, social relationships, and healthy development. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of positive psychology, self-determination theory, and research on digital well-being, this study examined the effects of a digital detox intervention on primary school students' well-being. The conceptualization of well-being was informed by established literature and international research conducted by organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and empirical studies investigating the relationship between screen use and children's mental health, social functioning, and life satisfaction. An experimental pretest-posttest design with a control group was employed. The sample consisted of 50 primary school students aged between 9 and 11 years, randomly assigned to an intervention group (n = 25) and a control group (n = 25). Participants in the intervention group engaged in a two-week digital detox program aimed at reducing recreational screen time and increasing participation in offline activities, including physical play, creative tasks, face-to-face social interactions, and reading activities. The control group maintained their usual digital routines throughout the study period. Students' psychological well-being and life satisfaction were assessed before and after the intervention using the WHO-5 Well-Being Index and the Student Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS). Recreational screen time was monitored throughout the intervention using a structured daily Screen Time Diary completed with*

parental support. Data were analyzed using paired-samples and independent-samples statistical procedures to evaluate changes across groups and time points. The results indicated a significant improvement in overall well-being among students who participated in the digital detox intervention. Compared with the control group, the intervention group reported higher levels of positive emotions, greater life satisfaction, and improved peer relationships following the program. The findings suggest that even a relatively brief reduction in recreational screen use may contribute positively to children's psychological and social well-being. These results support current recommendations advocating balanced digital consumption and highlight the potential value of school-based digital detox initiatives as preventive and promotive interventions for children's mental health and healthy development.

Keywords: *digital detox, children's well-being, primary school students, screen time reduction, positive psychology, digital well-being, experimental intervention, life satisfaction, emotional well-being, social connectedness, child development, school-based intervention.*

Introduction

Digital technologies have become an integral part of children's everyday lives, profoundly influencing the ways they learn, communicate, and spend their leisure time. Smartphones, tablets, computers, and online platforms offer important educational and social opportunities; however, the increasing amount of time children spend using digital devices has also generated growing concerns regarding its potential impact on psychological well-being and healthy development. As a result, understanding how digital engagement affects children's emotional functioning has become an important research priority in psychology, education, and public health (UNICEF, 2017; World Health Organization [WHO], 2025).

Although digital media provide numerous developmental benefits, including access to educational resources, creativity, and social interaction, evidence suggests that excessive recreational screen use may be associated with lower levels of physical activity, poorer sleep quality, emotional difficulties, and reduced subjective well-being (Stiglic & Viner, 2019). Nevertheless, recent studies argue that the relationship between digital technology use and children's well-being is more complex than previously assumed. Rather than screen time alone,

the quality, purpose, and context of digital engagement appear to be stronger predictors of children's developmental outcomes (Orben & Przybylski, 2019).

Children's well-being is currently understood as a multidimensional construct that includes emotional functioning, life satisfaction, positive relationships, and the ability to cope successfully with everyday challenges. Contemporary approaches, particularly Positive Psychology and Self-Determination Theory, emphasize that psychological well-being develops when children experience positive emotions, supportive relationships, competence, autonomy, and opportunities for meaningful engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Seligman, 2011). These theoretical perspectives also suggest that activities such as physical play, reading, creative tasks, and face-to-face social interaction represent important protective factors for healthy psychological development.

Within this context, the concept of digital well-being has emerged to describe the ability to use digital technologies in a balanced and intentional manner that supports rather than undermines psychological health (Vanden Abeele, 2021). Consequently, increasing attention has been directed toward Digital Detox interventions, which encourage individuals to temporarily reduce recreational screen use while increasing participation in offline activities. Rather than promoting complete avoidance of technology, Digital Detox aims to foster healthier digital habits and restore balance between online and offline experiences (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020).

Although research examining digital well-being has expanded considerably during the past decade, relatively few experimental studies have investigated the effectiveness of Digital Detox interventions among primary school students. Most existing studies rely on correlational designs and focus primarily on adolescents or adults, leaving limited evidence regarding younger children's responses to structured school-based interventions (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Moreover, few studies have simultaneously evaluated changes in psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and recreational screen time using an experimental approach.

To address this gap, the present study investigated the effectiveness of a two-week school-based Digital Detox intervention implemented among primary school students. Using a pretest-posttest experimental design with a control group, the study examined whether reducing recreational screen time while encouraging participation in offline educational, creative, physical, and social activities would improve children's psychological well-being and life satisfaction. By providing empirical evidence from a controlled educational intervention, the

study contributes to the growing body of research on digital well-being and offers practical implications for promoting healthier digital habits in primary education.

Theoretical Background

Children's well-being is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, psychological, social, and cognitive functioning. Contemporary perspectives emphasize that well-being extends beyond the absence of mental health problems and includes positive emotions, life satisfaction, resilience, supportive relationships, and successful adaptation to everyday challenges (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). Similarly, UNICEF (2017) highlights that children's well-being is shaped by the interaction between individual characteristics and environmental factors, including family, school, peer relationships, and increasingly, digital environments.

The theoretical framework of the present study is primarily grounded in Positive Psychology and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). According to Seligman (2011), psychological well-being develops through positive emotions, engagement, supportive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, as described in the PERMA model. Likewise, Ryan and Deci (2020) argue that satisfying the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness promotes motivation, healthy development, and subjective well-being. These perspectives suggest that children's daily experiences, including their use of digital technologies, may either support or hinder positive psychological functioning depending on how they influence these developmental needs.

Among the indicators of children's well-being, life satisfaction represents the cognitive evaluation of one's overall quality of life and constitutes an essential component of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 2018). Consequently, both emotional well-being and life satisfaction are frequently assessed in studies investigating children's mental health and quality of life.

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has intensified scientific interest in the relationship between children's screen use and psychological well-being. While digital devices offer important educational and social benefits, excessive recreational screen time has been associated with poorer sleep, reduced physical activity, emotional difficulties, and lower life satisfaction (Stiglic & Viner, 2019). Nevertheless, recent research indicates that these relationships are generally modest and depend largely on the quality and context of digital engagement rather than on screen time alone (Orben & Przybylski, 2019).

This shift in perspective has led to the emergence of the concept of digital well-being, defined as the ability to use digital technologies in ways that support psychological health, balanced lifestyles, and positive social functioning (Vanden Abeele, 2021). Current recommendations therefore emphasize responsible and self-regulated technology use rather than complete avoidance of digital devices.

Within this framework, Digital Detox interventions have attracted increasing attention as preventive strategies aimed at reducing recreational screen use while encouraging participation in offline activities, including physical exercise, reading, creative tasks, and face-to-face social interaction (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). These activities are consistent with Positive Psychology and Self-Determination Theory because they create opportunities for positive emotions, competence, autonomy, and interpersonal connectedness, all of which contribute to children's psychological well-being.

Although research on digital well-being has expanded considerably, relatively few experimental studies have examined Digital Detox interventions among primary school students. Most available evidence is based on correlational research or focuses on adolescents and adults, highlighting the need for experimental studies involving younger children and school-based interventions.

Accordingly, the present study investigated whether a structured two-week Digital Detox intervention could improve psychological well-being and life satisfaction among primary school students while reducing recreational screen time.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

The study employed a quantitative experimental pretest-posttest control group design to examine the effects of a two-week Digital Detox intervention on primary school students' psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

The sample consisted of 50 primary school students aged between 9 and 11 years, recruited from a public school in Romania. Participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental group ($n = 25$) or a control group ($n = 25$). Students in the experimental group participated in the Digital Detox program, whereas those in the control group continued their usual daily routines throughout the study.

Participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians before the beginning of the study, and students were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Data were

collected anonymously and processed confidentially for research purposes only.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

Psychological well-being was assessed using the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (World Health Organization, 1998), a five-item self-report measure evaluating positive emotional well-being during the previous two weeks. Each item is rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (At no time) to 5 (All of the time), resulting in a total score between 0 and 25, with higher scores indicating better psychological well-being. Life satisfaction was measured using the Student Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS) (Huebner, 1991), a widely used instrument designed to assess children's global cognitive evaluation of their lives. Higher scores reflect greater life satisfaction.

Changes in recreational digital media use were monitored using a Daily Screen Time Diary, completed jointly by students and their parents throughout the intervention period. The diary recorded the approximate amount of recreational screen time spent each day outside compulsory educational activities.

Procedure

Before the intervention, all participants completed the WHO-5 Well-Being Index and the Student Life Satisfaction Scale during regular school hours under the supervision of the researchers.

Following the pretest assessment, students assigned to the experimental group participated in a two-week Digital Detox intervention aimed at reducing recreational screen time while increasing participation in offline activities such as outdoor play, reading, creative tasks, board games, and face-to-face interaction with peers and family members. Parents were encouraged to support children's participation by limiting access to recreational digital devices outside educational purposes.

Students in the control group continued their usual digital habits and received no specific recommendations regarding screen use. At the end of the intervention, both groups completed the same psychological instruments under identical testing conditions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for all study variables. Changes between pretest and posttest scores within each group were examined using paired-samples t-tests, whereas differences between the experimental and control groups at posttest were analyzed using independent-samples t-tests. Effect sizes

were calculated using Cohen's d , and statistical significance was established at $p < .05$.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Before testing the research hypotheses, descriptive statistics were calculated for the WHO-5 Well-Being Index scores obtained by students in the experimental and control groups at both assessment points.

Group	N	Pretest M	SD	Posttest M	SD
Experimental	25	10.28	2.44	19.40	2.68
Control	25	10.96	3.74	10.72	3.46

**Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.*

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for WHO-5 scores

The descriptive statistics indicate that both groups presented comparable levels of psychological well-being at pretest. Following the intervention, the experimental group demonstrated a substantial increase in WHO-5 scores, whereas the control group showed virtually no change.

Effects of the Digital Detox Intervention on Psychological Well-Being

To examine changes in psychological well-being following the intervention, paired-samples t -tests were conducted separately for the experimental and control groups.

The results revealed a statistically significant increase in WHO-5 scores among students in the experimental group from pretest ($M = 10.28$, $SD = 2.44$) to posttest ($M = 19.40$, $SD = 2.68$), $t(24) = 15.69$, $p < .001$, indicating that participation in the Digital Detox intervention was associated with a substantial improvement in psychological well-being.

In contrast, no statistically significant difference was observed for the control group between pretest ($M = 10.96$, $SD = 3.74$) and posttest ($M = 10.72$, $SD = 3.46$), $t(24) = -1.44$, $p = .161$.

Group	t	df	p
Experimental	15.69	24	<.001
Control	-1.44	24	.161

Table 2. Paired-samples t -test results for WHO-5 scores

To compare the effectiveness of the intervention, an independent-samples t -test was performed using the posttest scores.

Students in the experimental group obtained significantly higher WHO-5 scores than students in the control group, $t(48) = 9.92$, $p < .001$.

.001. The intervention produced a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 3.14$), indicating a substantial improvement in psychological well-being among participants who completed the Digital Detox program.

Comparison	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Experimental vs. Control	9.92	48	<.001	3.14

Table 3. Comparison of posttest WHO-5 scores



Figure 1. Mean WHO-5 scores before and after the Digital Detox intervention

Interpretation of Hypothesis 1

The findings support Hypothesis 1, indicating that students who participated in the Digital Detox intervention demonstrated significantly higher levels of psychological well-being following the intervention compared with their baseline assessment.

Furthermore, the significant differences observed between the experimental and control groups at posttest suggest that the improvement in well-being can be attributed to participation in the intervention rather than to the passage of time or repeated testing alone. Descriptive analyses indicated that the experimental group showed a substantial improvement in WHO-5 well-being scores following the Digital Detox intervention (Pretest: $M = 10.28$, $SD = 2.44$; Posttest: $M = 19.40$, $SD = 2.68$), whereas the control group remained relatively stable (Pretest: $M = 10.96$, $SD = 3.74$; Posttest: $M = 10.72$, $SD = 3.46$).

A paired-samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant increase in well-being within the experimental group, $t(24) = 15.69$, $p < .001$. No statistically significant change was observed in the control group, $t(24) = -1.44$, $p = .161$. Furthermore, an independent-samples *t*-test demonstrated significantly higher posttest scores in the experimental group compared with the control group, $t \approx 9.92$, $p < .001$. The estimated effect size was very large ($d \approx 3.14$), indicating a substantial impact of the intervention.

Life satisfaction was assessed using the Student's Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS; Huebner, 1991), a seven-item self-report measure of children's global life satisfaction. According to the measure developer, the scale is not copyrighted and may be used without charge for research purposes.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale for Students (SLSS) was used to assess changes in students' perceived life satisfaction before and after the intervention. The analysis included an experimental group ($n = 25$) and a control group ($n = 25$). SLSS total scores were calculated by summing the seven items, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction with life.

Descriptive statistics showed a clear improvement in life satisfaction among students who participated in the intervention. In the experimental group, the mean SLSS score increased from $M = 18.68$ ($SD = 3.82$) at pretest to $M = 26.04$ ($SD = 3.61$) at posttest. This represents a mean increase of 7.36 points following the intervention.

In comparison, the control group showed a decrease in SLSS scores, with the mean score changing from $M = 19.12$ ($SD = 3.26$) at pretest to $M = 18.12$ ($SD = 2.67$) at posttest, corresponding to a mean change of -1.00 point.

Group	Measurement	Mean(M)	Standard Division(SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Experimental	Pretest	18.68	3.82	7	24
Experimental	Posttest	26.04	3.61	19	33
Control	Pretest	19.12	3.26	14	27
Control	Posttest	18.12	2.67	14	23

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for SLSS scores

A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to examine whether SLSS scores significantly changed after the intervention in the experimental group. The results showed a statistically significant improvement in students' life satisfaction scores, $t(24) = 9.20$, $p < .001$. The effect size

was large (Cohen's $d = 1.84$), indicating that the intervention produced a substantial improvement in perceived life satisfaction.

The non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test confirmed the significant increase in SLSS scores after the intervention ($**W = 2.00$, $p < .001^{**}$), supporting the robustness of the findings.

A significant difference was also observed when comparing the change scores between the experimental and control groups. Students in the experimental group demonstrated a significantly greater improvement in SLSS scores compared with the control group, $t(48) = 9.11$, $p < .001$.

Group	Mean change (Pottest-Pretest)	Interpretation
Experimental group	+7.36	Significant increase life satisfaction
Control group	-1.00	Slight decrease I life satisfaction

Table 5. Comparison of SLSS change scores between groups

The correlation between pretest and posttest SLSS scores in the experimental group was moderate and statistically significant ($r = .42$, $p < .05$), suggesting that initial levels of life satisfaction were related to later outcomes, while participants still showed meaningful improvement following the intervention.

Overall, the SLSS results demonstrate that the intervention had a positive effect on students' satisfaction with life. The experimental group showed a substantial increase in life satisfaction, while the control group did not demonstrate similar improvement.

To monitor changes in students' recreational digital exposure during the intervention period, a structured Daily Screen Time Diary was developed and completed throughout the two-week digital detox program with parental support. The diary was designed to record the duration and type of daily recreational screen use, including watching videos, playing digital games, internet browsing, messaging, and other non-academic digital activities.

For each day, students and parents recorded the device used, the purpose of screen activity, the starting and ending time, and the total duration of screen exposure. The diary also included brief self-reports regarding students' emotional state after screen use and participation in offline activities such as physical play, reading, creative activities, and face-to-face social interactions.

The collected data provided an objective measure of adherence to the digital detox intervention and allowed the researchers to analyze changes in recreational screen time between the intervention and

control groups. The complete version of the Daily Screen Time Diary is presented in Appendix A.

Digital activity	Device	Time
Youtube/videos	TV	45 min
Digital games	Smartphone	30 min
Internet	Laptop	15 min
Total screen time		90 min

Condition after use:
face interaction

☒ Tired
2 h

☐ Happy

☐ Calm

Offline activities

☒ Outdoor play

☒ Reading

☒ Playing with family

Face to

☒ 1-

Table 6. Individual data- answer example Day 1

Digital activity	Device	Time
Videos	TV	20 min
Games	Smartphone	10 min
Total screen times		30 min

Condition after use:
face interaction

☒ Happy

more then 2 hours

☒ Calm

Offline activities

☒ Outdoor play

☒ Reading

☒ Playing with family

Face to

☒

Table 7. Individual data -answer example Day14

Changes in recreational screen time before and after intervention:

Group	Pre-test Mean (minutes/day)	Post-test Mean (minutes/day)
Intervention group (n=25)	154.6	62.8
Control group (n=25)	149.2	143.7

Analysis of the Daily Screen Time Diary indicated a significant reduction in recreational screen exposure among students who participated in the digital detox intervention. Before the intervention, students in the experimental group reported an average recreational screen time of 154.6 minutes per day. Following the two-week program, daily recreational screen use decreased to an average of 62.8 minutes per day.

In comparison, the control group showed only minor changes in screen exposure, with average daily screen time decreasing from 149.2 minutes at pre-test to 143.7 minutes at post-test. These findings suggest that the digital detox intervention was effective in reducing non-academic screen use among primary school students.

Students in the intervention group demonstrated increased psychological well-being and life satisfaction after the digital detox program. The improvement was greater compared with the control group, suggesting that reducing recreational screen time may contribute to positive emotional functioning and stronger social engagement.

Conclusions

The present study investigated the effects of a two-week Digital Detox intervention on psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and recreational screen time among primary school students. The findings demonstrated that reducing non-essential digital exposure, combined with increased engagement in offline activities, produced significant positive changes in children's emotional and social functioning.

The results showed that students who participated in the Digital Detox program experienced a substantial improvement in psychological well-being compared with the control group. In addition, participants reported higher levels of life satisfaction after the intervention, suggesting that balanced technology use may contribute to healthier emotional development during childhood. The significant reduction in recreational screen time observed among students in the intervention group further confirms that structured educational strategies can support children in developing more conscious and self-regulated digital habits.

These findings support contemporary approaches to digital well-being, which emphasize that technology itself is not necessarily harmful, but that the way children interact with digital environments plays a crucial role in determining developmental outcomes. Encouraging physical activity, creative experiences, reading, family interactions, and direct peer relationships may provide protective factors that strengthen children's psychological resources and overall quality of life.

The study also highlights the importance of schools and families in promoting healthy digital behaviors. School-based Digital Detox interventions may represent valuable preventive strategies that help children establish a balanced relationship with technology from an early age. Rather than promoting complete avoidance of digital devices, these programs should focus on developing digital awareness, autonomy, and responsible use.

Although the results are promising, several limitations should be considered. The relatively small sample size, short intervention period, and reliance on self-reported measures suggest that future research should include larger samples, longer follow-up periods, and additional objective measures of digital behavior. Future studies could also examine the influence of parental involvement, individual differences, and specific types of digital activities on children's well-being.

Overall, the findings suggest that intentional reduction of recreational screen time combined with meaningful offline experiences can positively influence children's psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Digital Detox programs integrated into educational contexts may therefore represent an effective approach for supporting healthy development in an increasingly digital childhood.

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