



POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF FOSI'S “PROMOTING WELLBEING IN A DIGITAL WORLD” RESEARCH



FOSI released a [research report about teens' wellbeing](#) in our digital world in December 2024. This study included both quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups with teens and their parents across three countries: the US, Germany, and Brazil. As part of FOSI's mission to make the online world safer for kids and their families, we support thoughtful public policy and regulations informed by evidence. We hope this research is helpful to policymakers in producing effective, nuanced regulation that mitigates online risks and harms while empowering teens to reap the rewards of their digital lives.

TOP TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICYMAKERS



1. Think beyond bans:

- Young people continue to have positive experiences online and report real benefits to their wellbeing. This is an important finding for policymakers to consider as they craft more nuanced policies in the space. Thoughtful restrictions, not blanket bans, are the appropriate way to proceed.

2. Continue to fund research:

- Congress made great progress towards crafting evidence-based online safety policies when it passed the Children and Media Research Advancement Act in 2022 and should continue to fund research year after year.

3. Listen to the experts:

- Online safety takes a whole-of-society approach, and policymakers should listen to medical professionals, academics and researchers, technologists, educators, law enforcement, families, and especially young people themselves when crafting online safety policies.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Definitions matter: carefully consider which services and platforms you intend to include in specific legislation.

- When drafting online safety legislation and regulation, it's important to consider the variety of online platforms, systems, and services. The focus of most online safety bills and laws is "social media" platforms, which are often defined by key features such as a timeline or newsfeed, the uploading of user generated content, and the ability to interact with other users and their posted content. But what about the other online activities where online safety still matters? Online gaming (console or mobile) doesn't fit neatly into most definitions of social media platforms, neither do streaming services, nor the gaming-adjacent spaces dedicated to livestreaming and player discussions. Each of these online spaces are used in distinct ways, with different purposes, risks, rewards, and impacts on digital wellbeing.

"YOUNG PEOPLE CONTINUE TO HAVE POSITIVE EXPERIENCES ONLINE AND REPORT REAL BENEFITS TO THEIR WELLBEING."



- The differences in these platforms and services must be considered when writing broad, inclusive legislation. Alternatively, policymakers could craft narrower, more targeted online safety regulation focused on one sector. Definitions matter - especially when considering what a “covered platform” is or is not.
- *Based on our research, we recommend carefully considering how and where kids are spending their time online, which is overwhelmingly gaming, consuming content, and connecting with others.*

Protect sleep: the top negative effect of technology on teen wellbeing.

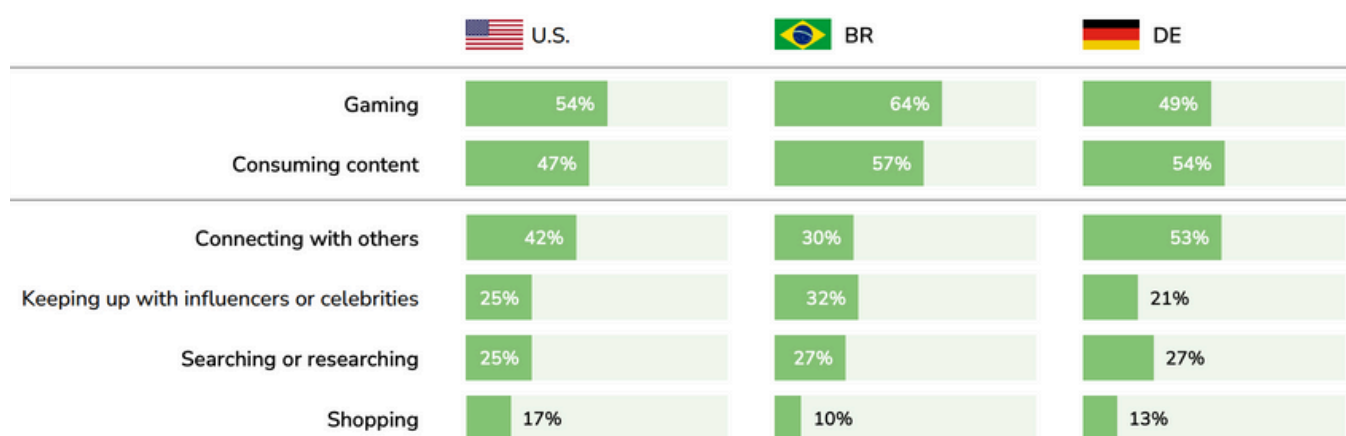
- One particularly interesting finding from our research is that the top self-reported negative effect of technology on teen wellbeing was disrupted sleep.

54% OF TEENS CHOSE GAMING AS A TOP ACTIVITY THEY DID ONLINE

Understanding this as a top harm, policymakers can prioritize aspects of online safety regulation that aim to protect sleep.

- While we do not recommend setting a national bedtime, there are some very reasonable ways to address this major negative effect, including limiting notifications overnight (and/or during school hours). The US Surgeon General has also spoken to the risks to sleep for young people, noting that many of the actual harms that come from time spend online are what other activities are replaced - specifically, sleep.
- *Look for opportunities to fund additional projects and initiatives that tackle this issue.*

Top Activities Teens Say They Do the Most Online (Select Up To Three)
Total Teens % selected as a top activity teen does most online



FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS



Crack down on scams and frauds, and improve media literacy.

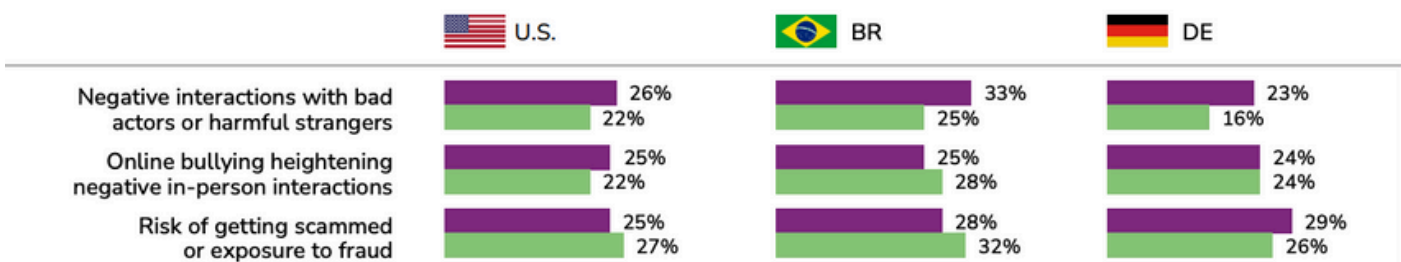
- *The top two online safety concerns reported in our study were the risk of getting scammed or defrauded, and negative interactions with strangers.*
- These fears highlight the role of the FCC and FTC and their significant anti-scam work. Congress passed [good anti-robocall legislation](#) that empowered the FCC to take further action and [better inform consumers](#). Portions of this law could be considered a useful blueprint for similar bills focused on online scams and fraud.
- The FCC recently [banned using AI-generated voices in robocalls](#). The FTC also has [helpful resources](#) to avoid and report scams. Keep funding these agencies to protect people of all ages from online scams.
- The fear of fraud and scams also presents an opportunity to improve public media literacy and awareness, especially for younger and older people. Incorporating digital media literacy into school curricula will help children stay safe online.

Offering similar sessions through public avenues like libraries and community centers will help adults keep up with changing technology.

- There are also legislative opportunities to address the risk of negative interactions with strangers online. One approach is to require online platforms to set default privacy settings for minors to the highest levels, preventing or extremely limiting interactions with strangers. An example of this is the [UK's Age Appropriate Design Code](#), and another is included in a new [California Law](#), that is in the process of a legal challenge.
- Another topic to address through legislation and improved digital media literacy education is the [rise of sextortion](#), which can be devastating to a teen and has led to self-harm and suicide. State and federal laws vary, but there is an opening to update such laws and ensure that AI-generated deepfakes are included. The [TAKE IT DOWN Act](#) is a common sense bill that clearly prohibits the sharing of non-consensual intimate images, including deepfakes, and provides support for victims.

■ Parents ■ Teens

Top Concerns From Being Online to Teens' Wellbeing
(Select Up to Three)





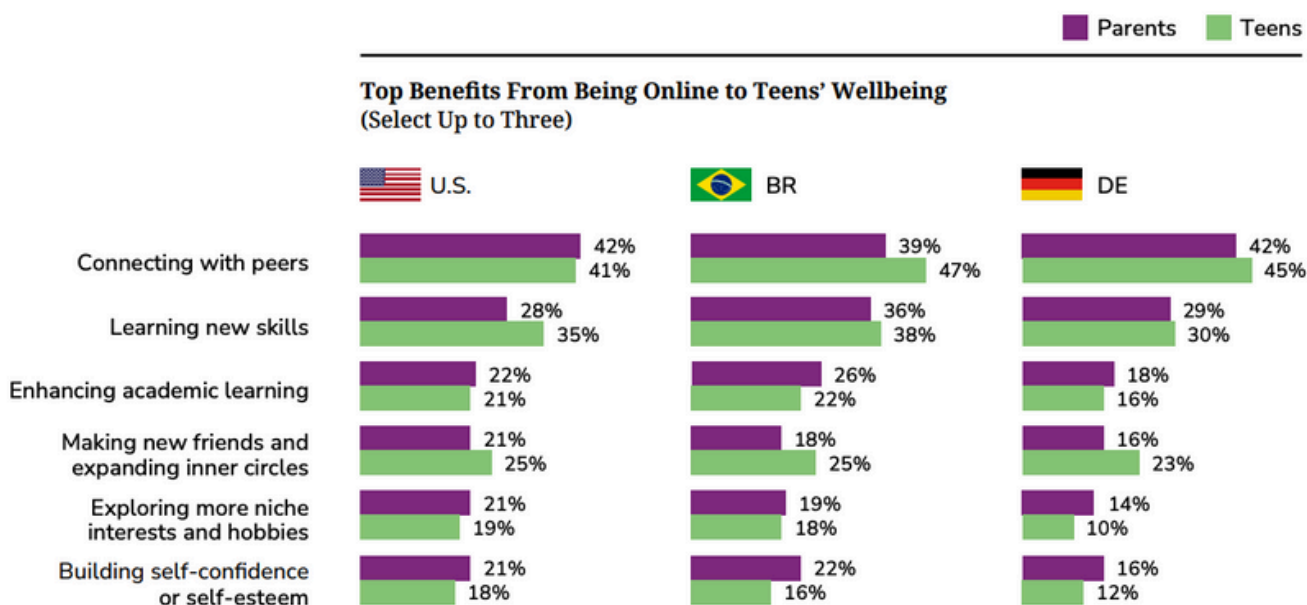
KEY LEARNINGS FOR POLICYMAKERS

There are real benefits to young people being online.

- A key flaw in the comparisons of social media use to tobacco or alcohol is that there are tangible benefits to being online. *The top two benefits to wellbeing reported in our research are connecting with peers and learning new skills.*
- It is not radical news that finding social connection online is one of the top positive effects, but it is a good reminder that finding or enhancing communities online actually helps teens' wellbeing. Connecting with peers who share similar interests or values can unlock a world of camaraderie, learning, and exploration that might not be available in a teen's physical proximity.

35% OF TEENS SAY LEARNING NEW SKILLS IS A TOP BENEFIT TO BEING ONLINE

- It is notable that young people also name learning new skills as a top benefit of being online. The internet is an incredible resource for learning everything from assistance with homework assignments to fostering personal interests, passion projects, hobbies and more.
- We want to both protect and empower young people to maximize the benefits of being online, not ban them from accessing positive and productive spaces. Thoughtful restrictions, not blanket bans, will be more helpful in reducing harms while still reaping the rewards of digital life.

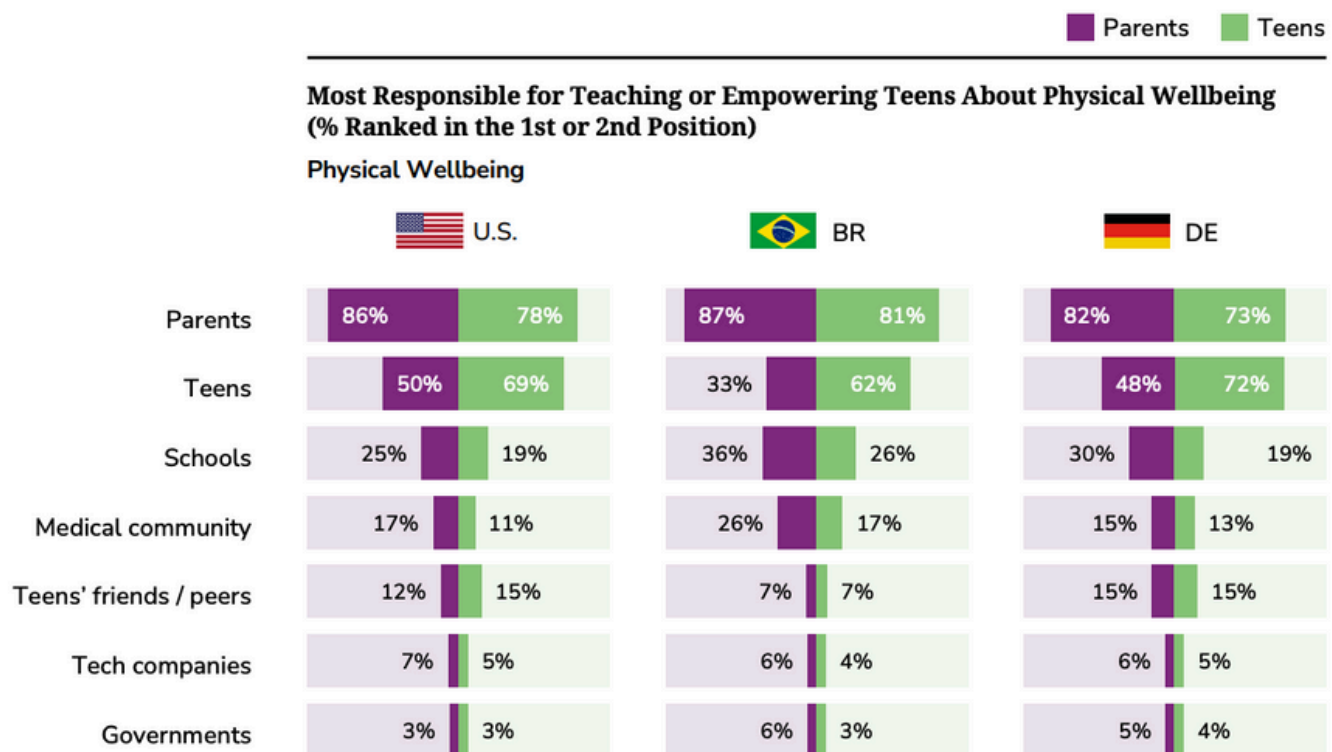




Parents and teens view themselves as most responsible for their digital wellbeing (not the government).

- One standout finding from our research is that both parents and teens overwhelmingly list themselves as the most responsible actors when it comes to educating and empowering teen digital wellbeing. Parents' views on who is responsible for empowering wellbeing are, in order: parents themselves, their teens, schools, their medical community, teens' friends/peers, tech companies, and governments. In addition to being viewed as least responsible, families also report feeling least supported by governments in teen digital wellbeing.

- We interpret these findings in a couple of ways. It is a reminder to not overstep with blanket bans of specific platforms or of all minors, but to instead focus on regulation that empowers parents, teens, and educators. This can be accomplished through requiring higher safety settings by default and offering further customization options for teens' online experiences, including more effective online safety tools and parental controls.
- This is also another opportunity for improved digital media literacy education, especially in schools. Parents and teens already view themselves and their schools as the most responsible for wellbeing, so let's empower them even more with the most accurate and effective information and resources.





Families want more resources for better online safety discussions.

- Families are already regularly having conversations about online safety and digital wellbeing, so we should empower and enhance these discussions as much as possible. *Parents and teens report wanting more resources related to managing screen time, device overuse, and the impacts of digital use on health outcomes.*
- FOSI offers our own [tools, strategies, and information](#) to bolster these family conversations. And so does the US government. A critical outcome of the [Kids Online Health and Safety Task Force report](#) are best practices and resources for parents and caregivers. These include research-backed, expertly derived recommendations, strategies, and even suggested conversation starters. This could serve as an excellent basis for an expanded digital media literacy campaign to improve online safety across the country.
- There is also the [American Academy of Pediatrics Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#). These programs and resources need continued support and funding in order to deliver the highest quality advice and recommendations for keeping kids and families safe online.

GERMANY HAD THE GREATEST POSITIVE TO NEGATIVE ONLINE EXPERIENCE RATIO: 87% TO 58%

INTERNATIONAL DATA - CORROBORATIONS & DISTINCTIONS

An additional benefit of conducting this research internationally is that we can identify trends that appear consistent across all three countries, but also distinctions where parents and teens in the US, Germany, and Brazil view certain topics differently. While most findings suggest similar online experiences for teens across the three countries, giving even more weight to the conclusions, a couple key findings stand out.

- Germany displayed the highest positive-to-negative online experience ratio: 87% of teens had at least one positive experience, compared to 58% who reported a negative one. We should learn from Germany's example, as the US's numbers were 87% positive to 63% negative, and Brazil's were 95% positive to 75% negative.
- Brazilian parents and teens report having much more frequent discussions on the impact of digital life on teens' wellbeing at 80%/72%, compared to the US' 62%/56% and Germany's 48%/42%. Frequent family conversations are key to improving digital media literacy and online safety, and we should strive to match Brazil's families in this regard.
- *Brazilian and German parents are more open to governments taking a more active role in promoting/supporting teens' digital wellbeing.* Unlike the US, Germany has both data privacy and online safety laws, and Brazil has a data privacy law. *These digital protections appear to boost citizens' trust in government programs compared to the US.*

CONCLUSION



This research provides valuable insights for policymakers seeking to balance online safety with the benefits of digital engagement. Addressing families' top concerns—such as scams, sleep disruption, and negative interactions—without disregarding the positive aspects of being online is critical. Regulations should be thoughtful and evidence-based, targeting the harm or topic policymakers are trying to address. By learning from international approaches and fostering collaboration among policymakers, experts, and families, we can create a digital environment that equips teens with the tools to navigate online spaces confidently while preserving the opportunities that enrich their wellbeing.



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