

Digital education

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Trento based FBK-IRVAPP organized a seminar by Marco Gui, associate professor and director of the University of Milan-Bicocca “Digital Wellbeing” Research Center

At what age to hand over a smartphone to a child? It is just one of the questions that, like tips of an iceberg, often emerge from the social debate when it comes to children’s use of digital media. The broad theme of **digital education** was at the center of the [seminar](#) organized by **the Institute for Evaluation Research on Public Policies (FBK-IRVAPP)** on Friday, February 7 in **Trento** and held by **Marco Gui**, associate professor and director of the **“Digital Wellbeing” Research Center** in the **University of Milano-Bicocca Department of Sociology and Social Research**.



Marco Gui, associate professor and director of the “Digital Wellbeing” Research Center in the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Milan-Bicocca

“With the advent of the Internet,” Gui explained, “an era of enthusiasms had begun. *People talked about digital technologies following the idea that the Internet would bring great benefits for the future and would transform schools, in a positive way. Digital technologies were seen as a kind of last resort, something that could turn our distressed societies around. It was said that digital natives had a different way of learning and that schools would have to adapt. They talked about improving learning levels, developing digital skills. This approach dominated the mainstream narrative for many years and was also translated into legislation. However, from the 1990s to the present, the Internet has been transformed. Social media, mobile connectivity, generative AI have arrived. According to OECD data from 2024, digital investment in education is not improving children’s learning. In light of what is emerging from the literature in different disciplines, there is a growing need to rethink digital education.*”

Gui laid out data from the most recent research on the topic. Heavy use of digital tools is associated with a number of issues, although a true causality on decreased well-being has so far not been demonstrated. “*A direct causality on some specific aspects is starting to emerge*”, Gui pointed out. *For example, heavy use of the devices increases sleep disorders, causes cognitive overload problems, and generally negatively affects school performance. All these side effects occur unequally among children and are more intense for those with prior disadvantages.* **At Bicocca, we have conducted a number of studies showing a negative impact on performance in Italian and math of those who were heavy users of screens and social networks in childhood, particularly if this use began before ages 9/10.**”

But how can families deal with the social pressure that tends to increasingly bring forward the time when their children ask, for example, to be able to use a smartphone and social networks on their own?

The answer according to Gui is to find a system approach, which implies a social pact. **The “Digital Pacts Network” now brings together more than a hundred experimentations across Italy: groups of parents, schools, local institutions and associations that agree locally on the most significant steps in the digital education of children and pre-teens** (www.pattidigitali.it). Digital Pacts ask schools to support the many families that wish to organise gradual access to free navigation for their children. This outlines a proposal for building digital safety and well-being in a school-family agreement in search of a new balance in digital education that will also require the involvement of other local players such as pediatricians and local

governments. Because, as stated on the dedicated website, “the challenge for healthier use of digital technologies can only be won together.”

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