

The State of the Youth:

# A Digital Wellbeing Index

Using proprietary data, Aura Parents' Digital Wellbeing Index\* looks beyond screen time, examining 17 dimensions of digital life to understand how smartphone use truly impacts a child's wellbeing.



According to the **Digital Wellbeing Index**, here are three key realities we're observing among kids supported by Aura Parents:

## One

### Low digital wellbeing isn't about screen time alone

Compared to those with higher digital wellbeing, kids with low digital wellbeing:

- Pick up their phones **7x more** often
- Spend **3x more** time on their devices at night
- Send nearly **5x more** messages
- Switch between apps **3x more** often
- Spend **about half** as long on their device per session

**From the experts:** Aura's research shows children who score lower on the Digital Wellbeing Index report exhibiting hypervigilant, restless device use. They feel the weight of being "always on" – driving compulsive checking and a constant background level of stress.

## \*Understanding high and low digital wellbeing

Aura's Digital Wellbeing Score (0-100) measures how a child's phone habits are supportive of their overall wellbeing. Based on digital behaviors, the Index flags shifts from typical patterns that our research links to higher stress, fatigue, or low mood. Scores of 54 or below indicate low wellbeing. Kids with higher scores were more likely to self-report better sleep quality, lower levels of stress, and more positive daily moods.

## Two

### Digital wellbeing scores drop as kids get older

It's not just the time spent on the device – it's the ripple effects that follow:

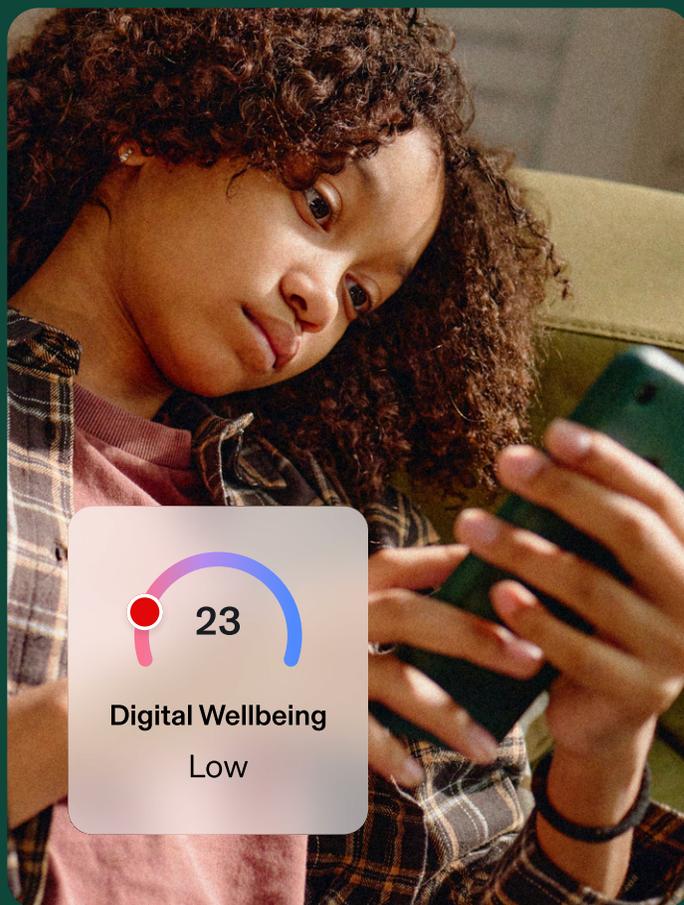


More than **60% of older teens** fall into the low digital wellbeing category, struggling with self-regulation, sleep health, and healthy engagement.



By comparison, fewer than **40% of younger children** fall into this group.

**From the experts:** With more freedom, small tradeoffs add up: later bedtimes, fractured focus, and constant notifications. Over time, healthy habits start to slip, even when teens can feel the impact.



## Three

### Sleep is the single strongest predictor of digital wellbeing

Poor sleep → Higher Digital Stress → Lower Digital Wellbeing



For those who use their devices frequently at night, quality sleep is harder to come by:

- Kids with low wellbeing report taking more than **2x longer** to fully disengage from their devices after bedtime. That lost sleep opportunity has measurable consequences.
- **The worse a child sleeps**, the more digitally stressed they're likely to feel.

**From the experts:** Research shows nighttime notifications can do more than interrupt sleep – they can add emotional strain and reduce next-day resilience, resulting in kids being more likely to feel anxious, overwhelmed, and pressured to stay available. Broadly, when sleep improves, kids' ability to cope improves – and so does their digital wellbeing.

### Did you know?

Kids with lower digital stress score **36% higher** on overall digital wellbeing than their more stressed peers.

Digital Stress is the everyday pressure kids feel from always being connected, worrying about approval, feeling the need to respond, juggling connections, missing out, and staying constantly alert online. That adds up, affecting mood, focus, and how kids feel (Hall et al., 2021).

Aura and Talker Research surveyed **2,000** kids ages 11–17 to explore how digital life shows up offline, influencing their behavior, relationships, and wellbeing. Here's what they had to say:

💔 **Online Drama Creates Real Stress:** More than **1 in 3 kids (37%)** say social media drama made them feel stressed or worried in the past six months.

📱 **Social Stress Drives Screen Time:** **Half (55%)** say they use their phones or tablets much more or somewhat more than usual when their social life feels stressful.

🗣️ **Offline Can Mean Left Out:** **1 in 2 (56%) kids** have felt excluded by friends for not being in the same online groups or on the same social media platforms.

👤 **New Peer Pressures Outweigh Old Ones:** **Nearly half (44%) of kids** feel pressured to be online — higher than pressure to smoke or vape (**31%**), ditch class (**28%**), or drink (**24%**).

👤 **Screens are a Security Blanket:** **1 in 3 (32%)** say it's somewhat easier to be themselves online. Just **4%** feel much more understood in person.

🌐 **It's a Big, Overwhelming Digital World:** **Over half (56%)** feel very or somewhat overwhelmed by the amount of information online.

🔴 **Kids Want to Self-Regulate:** **63% of kids** say they have intentionally avoided group chats, social media, or the news to feel less stressed.

👤 **When Overwhelmed, Kids Still Reach for Real Connection:** **59% talk to family or loved ones.** But, digital coping is close behind: **51%** game, **41%** watch TikTok, **35%** scroll social media.

#### A message from Dr. Scott Kollins:

The takeaway is simple: when kids are left to their own devices, they're usually on their devices. But the solution isn't simply restricting use. As children grow older, digital risks increase while self-regulation and overall wellbeing often decline. Without early intervention, many kids become much harder to reach in their later teen years.

Raising a connected kid requires a more nuanced approach – understanding how children change at different stages of development and moving beyond blanket restrictions toward smarter, developmentally informed strategies tailored to each child.



**Dr. Scott Kollins,**  
Dad & Chief Medical Officer at Aura  
Ph.D., Clinical Psychology

## Aura Methodology

Data for this report derives from three primary analytical frameworks applied to the Aura platform. The first is proprietary, anonymized telemetry from children and adolescents aged 8–17, stratified into key developmental cohorts to analyze app adoption, usage intensity, and seasonal behavioral trends. The second source is Aura's Digital Wellbeing Index (DWI), a composite score examining 17 dimensions of digital life, anchored in real-world evidence stemming from Aura's Techwise study that aggregates sleep health, self-regulation, and engagement quality to derive a score that best predicts psychological wellbeing and digital stress. The third source integrates the Digital Stress Scale (DSS) with Natural Language Processing (NLP), categorizing users by stress levels and analyzing message content to correlate emotional sentiment with digital wellbeing markers.

## Talker Methodology

Talker Research surveyed 2,000 American children aged 11 to 17 who have access to the internet.

The survey was commissioned by Aura and administered and conducted online by Talker Research between Feb. 3 and Feb. 9, 2026. A link to the questionnaire can be found [here](#).

To view the complete methodology as part of AAPOR's Transparency Initiative, please visit the Talker Research Process and Methodology [page](#).