

Speaker: Sam Flynn

So yeah, I'm going to start the digital and tech bit by talking about something that links to what I believe you've been talking a little bit about this morning: wellbeing and mental health. It's all going to link into that.

We'll be talking about protecting children's digital wellbeing. To be honest, we could take the "children's" out of there because we're all in the digital world, and actually it's about protecting all of our digital wellbeing.

So a quick introduction to me. I have been delivering social media training as my main business for the past 15 years, so I've been fully immersed in the digital world, working with businesses on their social media.

Around four years ago, I also moved into the world of digital wellbeing. My background is in organisational psychology, so it combines the two together: the digital and the psychology.

It came about really from an interest solely for myself initially, because I found during the pandemic I had become addicted to my smartphone. I was home alone with my three daughters, who at that stage were all quite young. The youngest was only 18 months old. My husband got to leave the house every day because he worked in construction, and trying to run a training business with three young girls at home—when everyone's saying, "Just do it all online"—isn't all that easy.

I found that I was actually running my business mainly from my phone. When I really looked into it, that phone was stuck in my hand all the time. During that time as well, I found my mental health took this major, major dip, as so many people's did.

I got to the point where I thought, "I can't have that phone in my hand anymore. I need a break." I deleted all the apps off my phone and, slowly but surely, it was almost like this weight came off my shoulders. I was free again.

That's what really got me interested in digital wellbeing and how it impacts our everyday lives and our own wellbeing.

What is Digital Wellbeing?

Digital wellbeing is essentially how the digital world impacts our wellbeing. It's pretty much what it says on the tin.

What it isn't is rejecting the digital world.

I have a lot of people asking me, "Oh, so you support this smartphone-free childhood? You believe children shouldn't have phones then? You think we should all throw our phones in the bin?"

Absolutely not. We live in a digital world. That's the reality of it. All of us use digital tools every single day, and in many ways those digital tools aid, improve and make things easier for us.

Digital wellbeing isn't a rejection of the digital world. It's about understanding how that digital world impacts our wellbeing, both positively and negatively. It isn't saying,

"Let's reject it." It's saying, "We all use the digital world every day—probably every hour of every day. How can we ensure that use isn't having a negative impact?"

Today I'm going to focus on children, but some of these things you'll all be thinking, "That's me." So it might be useful for your own digital wellbeing as well.

As I mentioned, I'm a mum of three and I have two daughters now who have phones. My youngest has a tablet. They are in the digital world, but I do take steps to ensure that doesn't negatively impact their wellbeing.

Why Protect Children's Digital Wellbeing?

Many organisations do brilliant work around online safety and online security, educating children about dangers online. That's important.

However, I think there's a gap. Much of the conversation focuses on obvious risks—giving away personal details, grooming, inappropriate content, misinformation and AI-generated content.

The gap comes when kids are simply doing safe things on their devices:

- Doing homework
- Scrolling social media
- Playing games with friends
- Using educational tools

Even those activities can negatively impact wellbeing.

One of the biggest issues we need to think about is how the digital world impacts our ability to focus and pay attention.

There's a brilliant book by Johann Hari called *Stolen Focus*. I would 100% recommend it. It's hugely insightful.

Hari talks about an attention crisis. People's ability to focus has never been lower.

In education, attention is everything. If you're not paying attention, you're not taking in information. If you're not taking in information, it's harder to learn, pass exams and apply that learning in the wider world.

For me, one of the most important reasons to think about children's digital wellbeing is the impact on focus and attention.

If you're someone who loves scrolling TikTok, you're effectively brain-training yourself to pay attention only for very short snippets of time before moving on to the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing.

Unfortunately, many social media apps are highly addictive.

Sleep and Wellbeing

Sleep is another really important factor.

I've spoken to many parents who assumed their children were sleeping through the night, only to discover they were scrolling on their phones or tablets until the early hours of the morning.

Then they're difficult to wake up. They're tired all day.

We've already talked about focus and attention. What affects focus and attention? Energy.

If we're tired and have no energy, our ability to focus drops.

On top of that:

- We're more irritable.
- Our mood is lower.
- Anxiety can increase.

Which leads into mental health.

Mental Health and the Digital World

Of course, there's the obvious negative side of the online world: bullying, grooming, harmful content and so on.

But even the ordinary digital world can negatively affect children's mental health.

When I was growing up—I'm 40 now—digital devices simply didn't exist in the way they do today.

I spent time:

- Riding my bike.
- Visiting friends.
- Playing with siblings.
- Being outdoors.

If the weather was bad, we might watch television. But you couldn't choose anything you wanted on demand. You watched what was on, or you turned the television off.

Kids today find it hard to believe we only had four or five channels.

Children now spend more time:

- Indoors.
- Alone.
- On devices.

Even when they're communicating online, it's not the same as interacting face to face.

That can have a significant impact on mental health.

Then add in:

- Social media pressures.
- Comparison syndrome.
- Unrealistic images.

My daughter is nearly 13 and she's entering the age where she'll naturally compare herself to what she sees online. The problem is that much of what she's seeing isn't even real.

Yet she's comparing herself to it.

That's a huge issue for mental wellbeing.

And this isn't just about children. We spend our days working on devices and then spend our evenings on devices too.

This is something all of us need to think about.

The Challenge of Time

Another issue is time.

Children might say they don't have time for homework or other activities, yet they may be spending six hours a day looking at devices.

I don't want to paint a completely negative picture because devices are brilliant. They can improve wellbeing, provide education, and give access to opportunities people otherwise wouldn't have.

But we have to acknowledge the negative impact too.

What Can We Do?

We can't simply say, "That's just how things are now."

I'm not particularly a believer in a smartphone-free childhood.

What I do believe in is asking:

What steps can we take to make sure children are in the digital world without it negatively affecting their wellbeing?

One of the biggest things parents can do is manage their child's device from their own device.

I deliberately use the word manage, not control.

Nobody likes being controlled.

I call this approach hand-holding.

When a child is young and starts walking, we hold their hand to keep them safe. Eventually they don't need that anymore.

The digital world is similar.

Giving a child a device and saying, "Off you go, do whatever you want whenever you like" isn't hand-holding.

Hand-holding means:

- Limiting usage time.
- Approving app downloads.
- Restricting access to certain apps.
- Monitoring usage appropriately.
- Introducing independence gradually.

There are lots of digital management tools available.

For example, if my child hasn't done something they're supposed to do, I can temporarily switch off access to certain apps. If they want music while tidying their room, I can leave the music app available while restricting everything else.

It's about guidance rather than punishment.

I strongly recommend this approach, although many parents don't realise these tools exist.

Education, Not Conflict

My final point is that this shouldn't become a source of conflict.

I hear parents and teachers say:

- "It's so hard to get them off devices."
- "It's always an argument."
- "I've taken their phone off them."

You can hear the frustration.

I believe the solution is conversation and education.

Not just educating parents—educating children too.

Children are capable of understanding:

- Their wellbeing.
- The effects of excessive screen use.
- Focus and attention challenges.
- Healthy digital habits.

I spend a lot of time working in schools, typically from Year 6 upwards, helping children understand digital wellbeing.

If children understand:

- Why device management matters,
- Why parents are involved,
- What healthy use looks like,

there is much less conflict.

There is less:

"That's not fair."

"You can't take my phone away."

Instead, they understand the reasons behind the decisions.

Children can then begin making positive choices themselves:

- Putting the phone down.
- Going outside.
- Seeing friends.
- Doing something they've been putting off.

When they understand how digital use impacts focus, attention and wellbeing, they can make conscious decisions to change their behaviour.

So I am all about conversation and education—for children and parents—and bringing them together to have those conversations rather than conflicts.

Closing Remarks

This is something I do a lot of work on in schools. I speak with children and often ask schools if they'd also like sessions for parents.

That's an area where I'd really like to encourage more educational institutions to provide support: helping parents understand digital wellbeing as well.

If you have any requirements or you'd like to talk about the sessions I run, my email address is:

Sam@samflynn.co.uk

Please do get in touch, even if it's just to have a conversation and explore this topic in more detail.

I also have a resource called:

"10 Mistakes Parents Make With Their Child's Smartphone Use"

You'll receive the slides, so you'll have access to the details.

My final thought is this:

It's not just children—it's us too. We can be their role models. If we can manage our own digital wellbeing, it will help them manage theirs as well.

Thank you very much.

Audience

(Applause)