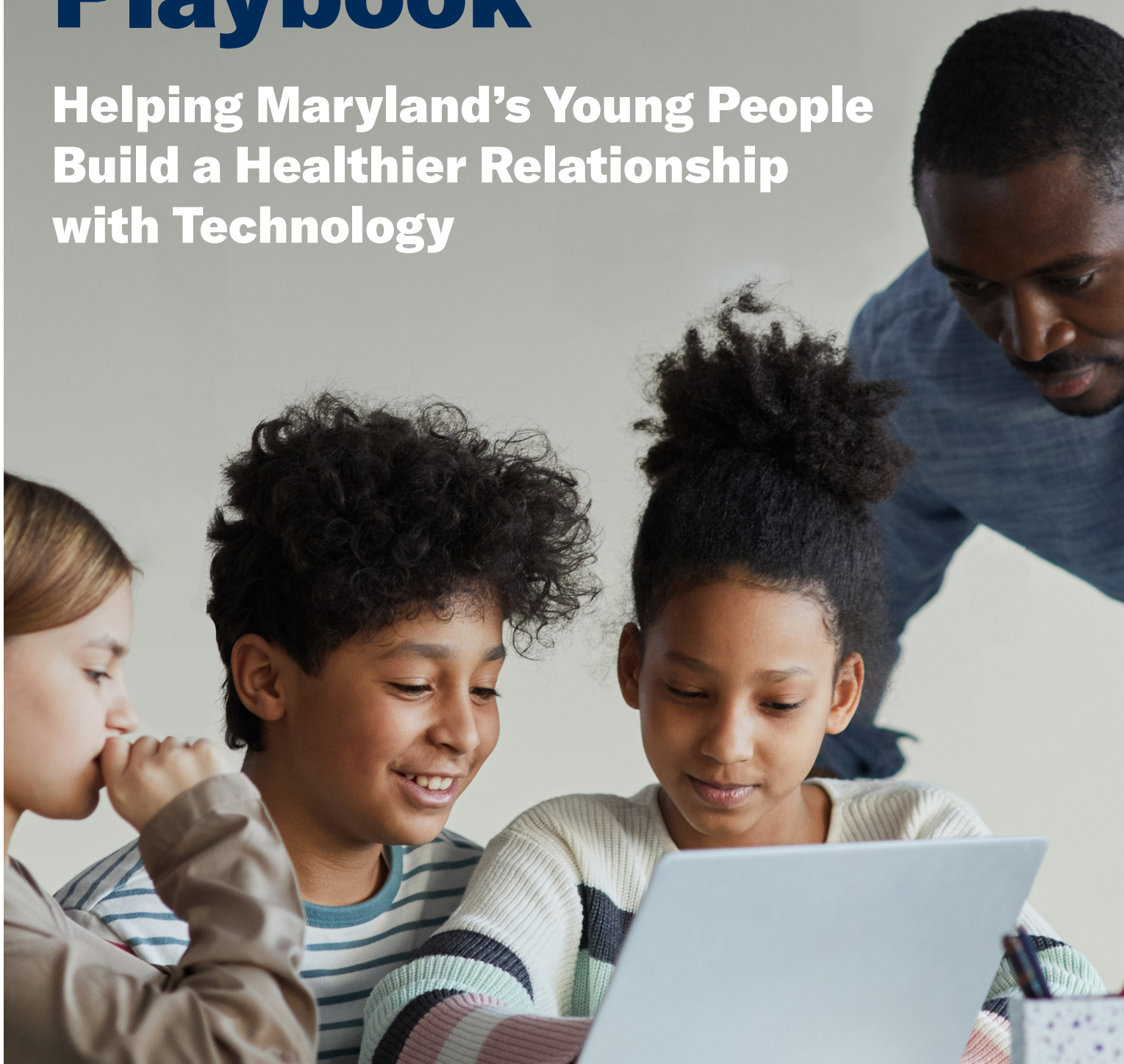


Digital Wellness Playbook

Helping Maryland's Young People
Build a Healthier Relationship
with Technology



A resource for students, families, and educators from the Governor's Office for Children and the Child Mind Institute.



Why a Digital Wellness Playbook?

Technology is woven into the daily lives of young people – from the classroom to the group chat. When used well, it can connect, educate, and empower. But unrestricted, unguided use is linked to rising rates of anxiety, depression, sleep loss, and isolation. This playbook gives young people practical skills to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors related to their digital lives - and gives families and educators the resources to support them.

Who is this Book For?

CLASSROOM EDUCATORS	AFTER-SCHOOL STAFF	FAMILIES
<p>Grades K–5 (Elementary Playbook)</p> <p>School counselors, social workers, and psychologists</p> <p>General education and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) teachers</p>	<p>Boys & Girls Club program staff</p> <p>Community-based organization staff</p> <p>Youth development coordinators</p> <p>Teen mentors and peer leaders (with adult oversight)</p>	<p>Caregivers of students Grades K-5</p> <p>Can be used independently at home</p> <p>Ideal as a take-home companion to continue to practice the school-based work</p>

How to Use This Playbook

The Digital Wellness Playbook is a supplemental resource, not core curriculum. It is designed to help children ages 6–12 build emotional skills and develop a healthier relationship with technology. You don't need special training, just a willingness to sit with your child and explore it together.

This playbook has two parts:

- **A digital wellness resource guide** with curated articles on topics from screen time to online gaming
- **Skill-building activities** for elementary students (developed by the Child Mind Institute)

AT HOME	IN THE CLASSROOM	AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS
<p>Work through sections together, one at a time. Use it as a starting point for conversations about feelings and technology. No need to rush, one section per week is plenty.</p>	<p>Each skill section fits a 15–25 minute session. Use it during advisory, homeroom, or SEL time. The Feelings Scale and Breathing Log make great daily rituals.</p>	<p>The Digital Blueprint is excellent for group discussion. Use the mindfulness activities as program openers or closers.</p>

Technology & Young People: What the Data Tells Us

4x

Young men ages 15–24 die by suicide at four times the rate of young women

~2x

Female high school students are nearly twice as likely as males to attempt suicide

3+ hrs

Daily social media use is linked to heightened risk of depression and anxiety

46%

Of teens say the internet has had a mostly negative effect on people their age

Boys and Girls Experience Digital Life Differently

BOYS & YOUNG MEN

- More likely to engage in **online gaming, sports betting, and gambling** — behaviors that spike during adolescence
- Less likely to **seek help** for mental health challenges; may use technology to avoid difficult emotions
- Higher exposure to **violent content and AI-generated relationships** that can substitute for real connection
- Report higher rates of **loneliness and social isolation** despite heavy device use

GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN

- More likely to experience **social comparison, cyberbullying, and body-image pressure** through social media
- Higher reported rates of **anxiety linked to social media**; more likely to lose sleep to scrolling
- More likely to **seek support** but may rely on online communities that reinforce negative self-talk
- Report more **distress from curated content** — selfie culture, filtered images, and peer comparisons

WHAT ALL YOUNG PEOPLE SHARE

Regardless of gender, young people today navigate unprecedented digital pressures. The skills in this playbook — understanding emotions, practicing relaxation, reframing thoughts, managing intense feelings, and building mindfulness — are the foundation of digital wellness. When young people can recognize what they're feeling, they're better equipped to make intentional choices about how they use technology.

Digital Well-Being FAQ

For parents, caregivers, and educators — answers to the questions that come up most.

Why is it so hard for my child (or me) to put the phone down?

It's not a willpower problem — it's engineering. Apps are designed to keep people engaged through notifications, infinite scroll, autoplay, streaks, and "variable rewards" (the slot machine effect of a social feed).

For children and teens, whose prefrontal cortex — the brain's braking system — is still under construction, stopping is biologically harder. This is not a character flaw. It's a design feature working exactly as intended.

Is screen time always bad?

No. The research has shifted from how much time to what kind of use and what it crowds out.

Healthy use includes: creative projects, homework support, video calls with family, finding supportive communities, and learning new skills.

The "Crowding Out" Test: Is technology replacing sleep, physical activity, offline friendships, or schoolwork? If yes, it's time to recalibrate.

Age matters. Younger children need more structure and adult co-use. Older children need clearer boundaries, but also practice making their own decisions.

What are the warning signs of problematic use?

Look for patterns that interfere with daily life:

- Irritability: intense anger or anxiety when the device is removed
- Neglect: skipping hygiene, meals, sleep, or schoolwork
- Secrecy: hiding devices or lying about time spent online
- Loss of Control: wanting to stop but feeling physically or emotionally "glued"
- Crowding Out: less time with friends, family, or offline interests

A Note on Neurodiversity:

For children with ADHD, autism, anxiety, depression, or learning differences, technology may serve important functions: stimulation, calming, social connection, routine, or escape from stress.

The goal is not to shame the use, but to understand what need it is meeting — and whether it is also causing harm.

Practical Strategies

How can we disconnect without starting a fight?

Focus on routines, not punishments. Clear, predictable "device-free times" work better than sudden crackdowns.

- Before bed: The Last Hour - aim for screen-free time before sleep to let the brain wind down
- The Bedroom Rule: charge devices in a common area overnight, not in the bedroom
- Meals: protect device-free family time at the table
- Modeling: adults should follow the same rules. Children are very good at noticing hypocrisy — a well-documented fact of family life.
- Empathize and redirect: validate that it can be difficult to pull away from screens, try to talk about their interests in the "offline" world, and maintain healthy boundaries around screens.

What if my child is experiencing cyberbullying?

1. STOP — Do not engage or respond to the harasser.
2. BLOCK & REPORT — Use the platform's tools immediately.
3. DOCUMENT — Save screenshots as evidence.
4. ESCALATE — If safety is at risk, report to law enforcement, tell the school staff.

Privacy & the Digital Footprint

What exactly is a digital footprint?

It's the permanent record someone leaves online — posts, comments, photos, likes, location data, and information shared with apps.

A good rule: "If you wouldn't want it copied and shown to your child's future employer or teacher, don't post it."

Teach children early: before posting, ask — "Would I be okay if anyone saw this?"

Why does digital consent matter?

Digital consent means asking before posting, tagging, forwarding, or sharing content involving someone else— photos, videos, screenshots, or private messages.

Teaching consent online helps children build respect, safety, and trust in digital spaces. It's the foundation of being a responsible digital citizen.

Resources at a Glance

RESOURCE	CONTACT / ACCESS	BEST FOR...
988 Crisis Lifeline	Call or text 988	Immediate mental health or suicide crisis support. 24/7, free, confidential.
Crisis Text Line	Text HOME to 741741	Free, confidential text support for any type of crisis.
The Trevor Project	1-866-488-7386 / Text START to 678-678	Crisis support specifically for LGBTQ+ youth.
Call BlackLine	1-800-604-5841	Prioritizes support for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.
CDC Free Mind	cdc.gov/free-mind	Free mental health resources for youth and families.
Family Media Plan	HealthyChildren.org	AAP template for creating shared family rules for healthy media use.

This Book Connects to CASEL SEL & MTSS:

CASEL Self-Awareness: Sections 2, 4 — CASEL Self-Management: Sections 3, 5, 7

CASEL Responsible Decision-Making: Sections 1, 7

MTSS Tier 1 (Universal): All sections • MTSS Tier 2 (Targeted): Sections 4 & 5 with small counseling groups

This resource is NOT a Tier 3 clinical intervention. Students with intensive mental health needs should be referred to licensed professionals.

Digital Wellness Resource Guide

Curated by the Child Mind Institute • Visit childmind.org and youareokay.org for the full library

HEALTHY TECHNOLOGY USE BY AGE

Media Guidelines for Kids of All Ages

childmind.org/article/media-guidelines-for-kids-of-all-ages

When Are Kids Ready for Social Media?

childmind.org/article/when-are-kids-ready-for-social-media

Why Watch TV With Your Tween or Teen

childmind.org/article/benefits-watching-tv-tween-teen

SCREEN TIME & BOUNDARIES

How to Set Limits on Screen Time

childmind.org/article/how-to-set-limits-on-screen-time

When Should You Get Your Kid a Phone?

childmind.org/article/when-should-you-get-your-kid-a-phone

How Phones Ruin Concentration

childmind.org/article/kids-shouldnt-use-phones-during-homework

Is Internet Addiction Real?

childmind.org/article/is-internet-addiction-real

SOCIAL MEDIA & SELF-ESTEEM

Social Media and Self-Doubt

childmind.org/article/social-media-and-self-doubt

What Selfies Are Doing to Self-Esteem

childmind.org/article/what-selfies-are-doing-to-girls-self-esteem

Does Social Media Use Cause Depression?

childmind.org/article/is-social-media-use-causing-depression

Managing Social Media Stress With Mindfulness

childmind.org/article/social-media-stress-mindfulness

ONLINE GAMING, GAMBLING & SPORTS BETTING

Do Video Games Cause ADHD?

childmind.org/article/do-video-games-cause-adhd

SLEEP, ATTENTION & ACADEMIC IMPACT

Encouraging Good Sleep Habits

childmind.org/article/encouraging-good-sleep-habits

SUPPORTING BOYS & YOUNG MEN

How to Build Boys' Self-Confidence

childmind.org/article/how-to-build-boys-self-confidence

Boys and Eating Disorders

childmind.org/article/boys-and-eating-disorders

Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Black Adolescent Boys

childmind.org/article/meeting-the-mental-health-needs-of-black-adolescent-boys

SUPPORTING GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN

Raising Girls With Healthy Self-Esteem

childmind.org/article/helping-girls-deal-unwanted-sexual-attention

Helping Girls Deal With Unwanted Sexual Attention

childmind.org/article/helping-girls-deal-unwanted-sexual-attention

Mood Disorders and Teenage Girls

childmind.org/article/mood-disorders-and-teenage-girls

How to Help Kids Through a Friendship Breakup

childmind.org/article/how-to-help-kids-through-a-friendship-breakup

GENDER & SEXUALITY

Mental Health Challenges of LGBTQ+ Kids

childmind.org/article/mental-health-challenges-of-lgbtq-kids

How to Support LGBTQ+ Children

childmind.org/article/how-to-support-lgbtq-children

How to Support Kids Who Are Questioning

childmind.org/article/how-to-support-kids-who-are-questioning

FOR YOUNG PEOPLE (YOUAREOKAY.ORG)

Phones and Multitasking

youareokay.org/resources/social-media/phones-and-multitasking

How Does Social Media Affect Your Mental Health?

youareokay.org/resources/social-media/how-does-social-media-affect-your-mental-health

Is Internet Addiction Real?

youareokay.org/resources/social-media/is-internet-addiction-real

If you or someone you know is in crisis: **Call or text 988**

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline • Available 24/7 • Free and confidential

Elementary

**GREAT
FUTURES
START
HERE**



Skill-Building Activities

- 1 Understanding Feelings**
- 2 Relaxation Skills**
- 3 Understanding Thoughts**
- 4 Managing Intense Emotions**
- 5 Mindfulness**

About You & Technology

Understanding how technology fits into your life

Practical Strategies

Digital wellness means using technology in a way that helps you, not hurts you. Just like eating healthy food and getting enough sleep, HOW you use technology matters for how you feel.

Digital Wellness is:

- ✓ Use technology in ways that are in line with your values and make you feel good.
- ✓ Knowing when to take a break from screens
- ✓ Staying safe and kind online
- ✓ Choosing what you see and do on the internet
- ✓ Making time for things you love offline too

Is Screen Time Always Bad?

No! Technology can be really wonderful. The question isn't just how MUCH time you spend on screens, it's WHAT you do and what it crowds out.

HEALTHY USE

Learning something new
Calling or texting family you love
Creative projects: art, music, video, writing
Finding a community that understands you
Getting help with homework

THE "CROWDING OUT" TEST

Is technology replacing your sleep?
Are you skipping meals, exercise, or friends?
schoolwork being left behind?
Are offline relationships suffering?
If YES to any of these → time to recalibrate!

What Do YOU Use Technology For?

Circle or check everything that applies to you:

Watch videos or shows
Play video games
Use social media
Talk or text with friends/family
Do homework or learn something new

Listen to music
Create things (art, videos, music)
Read books or stories
Use apps or tools
Something else: _____

Did You Know?

3+ hrs

of social media daily can affect mood and sleep

46%

of teens say the internet has mostly hurt people their age

One thing I use technology for that makes me feel good:

One thing I want to try doing less:

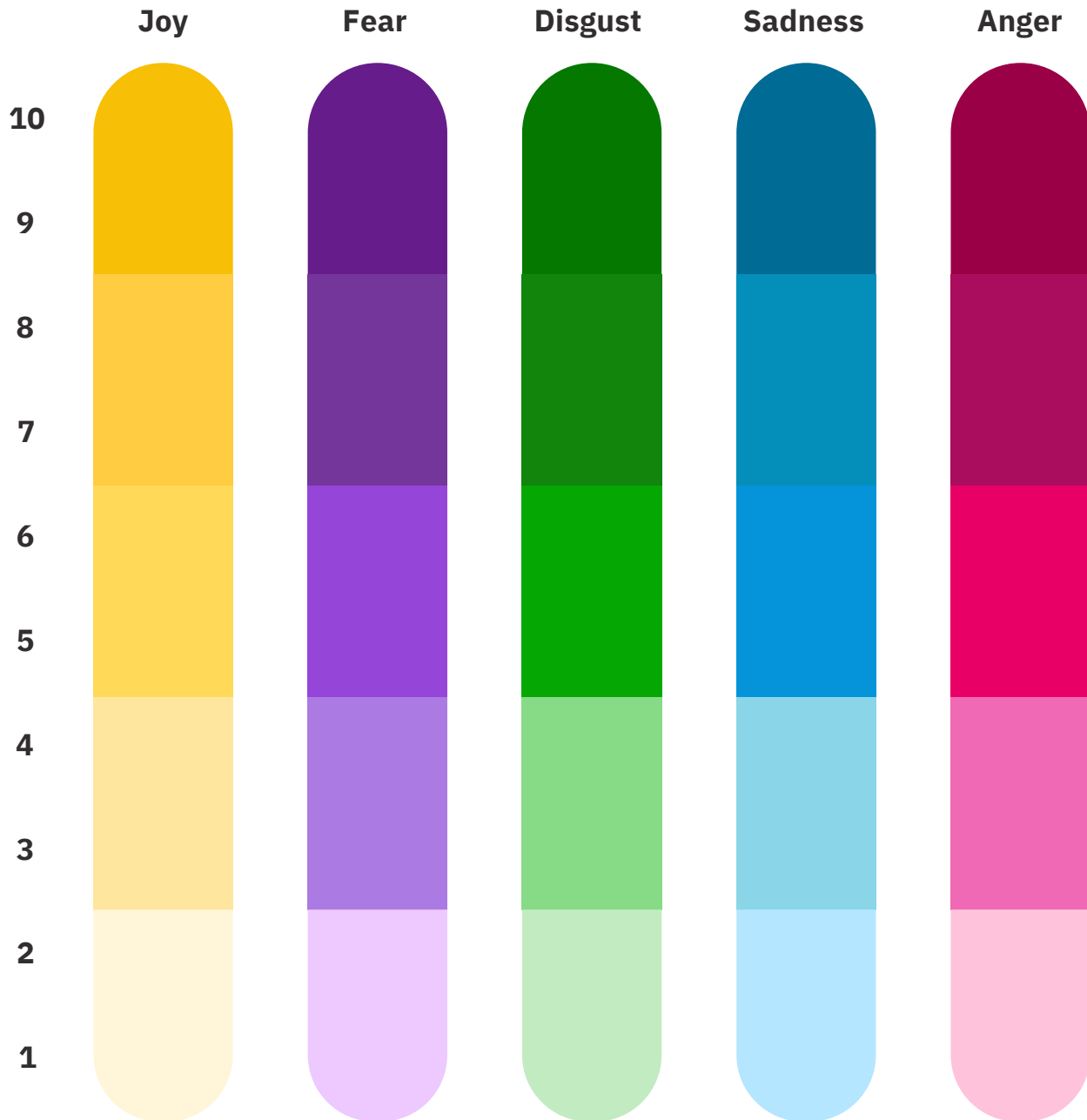
If you or someone you know is in crisis: [Call or text 988](#)

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline • Available 24/7 • Free and confidential

Activity 1a

Understanding Feelings

It's important to be aware of your emotions and how much you're feeling them. Use the **Feelings Scales** below and pick the shade that best matches how much you felt that emotion today.



Activity 1b

Understanding Feelings

How Does Technology Affect How You Feel?

- Before I started using technology today, I felt:

- After I stopped using technology, I felt:

- Something I saw online that made me feel good:

- Something online that made me feel bad or confused:

Important to Know:

It is NORMAL for technology to sometimes make you feel things- happy, sad, excited, left out. If technology is making you feel bad more often than good, it might be time to change something. You can always talk to a trusted adult if something online upsets you.

Activity 2

Relaxation Skills

When your brain feels stressed or anxious, your body can feel it too. You might feel a tight tummy, fast heartbeat, or have shaky hands.

Belly breathing is a simple way to help your body calm down. Your heart can beat more slowly, your muscles can relax, and you can start to feel more calm. Follow the steps below to learn how:

- 1) Sit comfortably in your chair or on the floor.
- 2) Place one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest.
- 3) Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 seconds and feel your belly push out like a balloon filling with air.
- 4) Slowly breathe out for 5 seconds through your mouth, letting the air gently leave your body.
- 5) Repeat 3-5 times, or for as long as you want.



Practice Tip:

It can be easier to practice belly breathing when your body is already calm. The more you practice the easier it gets, and your body will learn how to calm down faster!

Use the space below to think about times to practice paced belly breathing:

Before going to bed

Before taking a big test

Before sports practice

In the morning at school

After getting into an argument with a friend

Outside, sitting down, and enjoying nature

Activity 3a

Understanding Thoughts

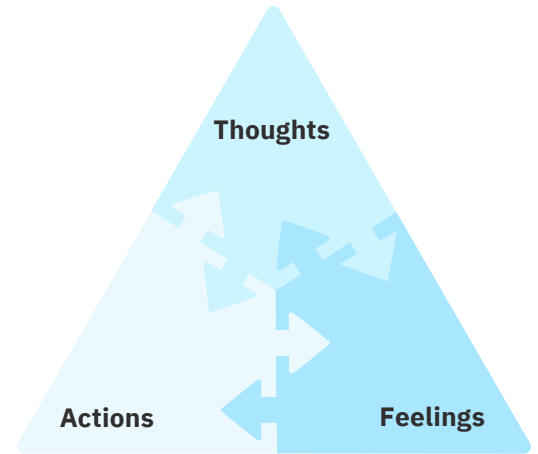
Imagine your brain has a triangle inside it. Each corner controls something important:

Thoughts: what you tell yourself

Feelings: how your mind and body feel

Actions: what you do

All three are connected. When one changes, the others change. Use the example below to see how changing your thoughts also changes your feelings and actions.



Example: A classmate doesn't pick you for their team.

1) Write down the thoughts, feelings and actions you would have if this happened to you.

What might you **think**?

How might you **feel**?

How might you **act**?

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2) Now change the Triangle. Pick a new thought, and see how it changes your feelings and actions.

My new **thought**:

My new **feeling**:

My new **action**:

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Activity 3b

Understanding Thoughts

The Tech Thought Triangle

Think of a time when something online upset you, excited you, or made you feel left out. Fill in the triangle:

What **happened** online?

What did you **think**?

What did you **feel and do**?

2) Now change the Triangle. Pick a new thought, and see how it changes your feelings and actions.

My new, more helpful **thought**:

My new **feeling**:

My new **action**:

Questions to Help Change Your Thoughts:

Is this thought definitely true?

Is there another way to see this situation?

What would I tell a friend who was thinking this?

Will this still feel this big in a week?

Activity 4a

Managing Intense Emotions

Everyone has big feelings sometimes. Those big feelings can make us want to do something right away like yell, run away, or slam a door — but those actions are not always helpful. Here are some ways you can handle big feelings and start to feel better:



1...2.....10

Count to 10



Stop and Think



Move Your Body



**Take a Break
from the Feeling**



Do Belly Breaths



**Be Gentle
with Yourself**

Activity 4b

Managing Intense Emotions

My Personal Calm-Down Plan

- When I feel angry or frustrated, I can:

- When I feel sad or lonely, I can:

- When I feel scared or anxious, I can:

- A trusted adult I can talk to when things feel too big:

Remember:

Feeling intense emotions is normal, and no feeling lasts forever. When we ride out the wave of intensity, we often realize that the feeling and action urge are over sooner than we think.

Activity 5a

Mindfulness

Mindfulness means paying attention, on purpose, to what is happening right now without trying to change it. Practicing mindfulness helps you notice how you feel, and can help you decide what to do with that feeling. Below are some ways to help quiet your mind so you can focus, pay attention, and stay in control:

1...2.....10

Counting to 10



Listen to music and paying attention to one instrument



Going for a walk and naming what you see



Mindfully eating your favorite treat



Dancing



Playing an instrument



Playing a game



Coloring



Blowing bubbles

Activity 5b

Mindfulness

A Mindful Check-In — Use Your 5 Senses right now. Write down what you notice:

I SEE...	
I HEAR...	
I SMELL...	
I FEEL (touch)...	
I TASTE...	

How Mindfulness Helps With Technology:

- When you notice how you feel BEFORE opening an app, you can make a choice instead of just reacting.
- When you feel the urge to scroll, mindfulness helps you pause and ask: "Do I actually want to do this right now?"
- Mindfulness is not about never using technology — it's about using it on PURPOSE.

Activity 6

My Digital Blueprint

A digital blueprint is YOUR plan for how you want to use technology. There are no right or wrong answers, just what feels healthy and right for you.

Step 1: How Do I Feel About My Screen Time?

- How many hours a day do you think you spend on screens?
- What do you do the most? (games, videos, social media, etc.)
- What have you noticed about your tech use?

Step 2: Set Your Goal

- I want my relationship with technology to help me feel:

Step 3: Choose ONE Healthy Change

Set a timer on my phone or tablet
Charge my device outside my bedroom at night
Turn off notifications during meals or homework
Delete one app I don't really need
No screens for the first 30 minutes after waking up

Replace one hour of screen time with something offline
Ask a grown-up to help me set screen time limits
Make a rule about phone-free times at home
Check in with myself before opening any app
My own idea: _____

Step 4: Pick One Offline Activity

- An activity I enjoy or want to try that doesn't involve screens:

Step 5: Stay Safe Online – My Digital Footprint

Your digital footprint is the record you leave online- posts, photos, comments, and likes. A helpful rule: "If you wouldn't want it copied and shown to your teacher or family member, don't post it."

- **Before I post or share something, I will:**
- **To stay safe online, I will:**

Step 6: Know When to Take a Break

If I feel _____, I'll take a break and: