



Welcome to this week's SMRT safeguarding update...

## WAKE UP WEDNESDAY

### Mental Health conversations and young people

This week saw Blue Monday come and go, while the statistical accuracy of Blue Monday being the lowest point for mental health in the year can be argued, there are clear links between seasonal variation and our mental health.

Some young people might be experiencing Seasonal Affective Disorder with symptoms of low mood that come and go in a seasonal pattern (and are usually more intense in the months with lower daylight). Bodily changes in the winter can affect our hormones and impact our sleeping and eating habits, as well as our mood.

There are activities that are known to be good for our mental health, such as exercising and spending time in green and blue spaces, but these are harder to do when the days are shorter and nights are long.

We should be thinking about our mental health every day of the year.

**Perhaps the true meaning of Blue Monday is that we all have mental health and that there are steps that we can take on every day of the year to try and protect it.** We should not just be thinking about our mental health on 18th January this year, but on every day of the year. Mental health problems can affect people in different ways on any day of the year and we have attached a guide from 'The Anna Freud: Mental Health and Wellbeing Foundation' that gives Parents and Carers a range of tips about how to have conversations with young people about their mental health.

At SMRT, we have a wide range of pastoral support available for young people and our Heads of Year are able to discuss the kinds of needs that students may present with.

We hope you find the attached guide useful.

### Mental Health Apps and Young people

A recent study entitled 'The Digital Health Generation' has highlighted that more than 70% of young people in the UK, some aged just 8, are using apps and other digital online technologies to track and manage their health. For those young people who might struggle with sticking to a routine, or even knowing where to start, physical wellbeing and fitness apps promise to do the heavy lifting, providing meal plans, exercise routines and more.

However, some of these apps aren't always as safe as they might first appear, and they tend to present a few risks to their users – especially for their underage demographic. The guide below addresses some of these safety concerns around physical wellbeing apps, to provide you with expert advice on how to mitigate these risks for young people.

# What Parents & Educators Need to Know about HEALTH & FITNESS APPS

## WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Physical wellbeing apps are useful tools for monitoring and improving our health. They allow us to balance nutrition, set goals, track our activities and sleep patterns, and motivate us to exercise. Nonetheless, there have been some reported drawbacks; this guide outlines some of these concerns and explains how to use fitness apps safely.

### LACK OF PERSONALISATION

Many apps take a one-size-fits-all approach, failing to account for the varying ages and abilities of children: a 16-year-old, for example, will have different physical needs to a child of 10. This can create unrealistic expectations and set exercises which may be too advanced for younger children or too simple for older ones.

### NOT DEVELOPED BY EXPERTS

Some fitness and wellbeing apps are developed by experts in the field – but a concerning number of them aren't. As such, these platforms may contain inaccurate information. They may present safety concerns by giving incorrect advice regarding physical activities or might include age-inappropriate content which would clearly cause more harm than good.

### REDUCED INTERACTION WITH OTHERS

Physical wellbeing apps can remove the social and interactive elements which physical exercise can offer – for instance, meeting people at fitness classes, at the gym or during any other such activities. Research has found that young people generally dislike this aspect of fitness apps, suggesting that they would rather exercise in the company of friends or other like-minded individuals.

### DATA AND PRIVACY CONCERNS

Fitness and wellbeing apps tend to collect a lot of personal information from their users, including name, location, date of birth, details of their physical health and more. It's worth keeping in mind that some of these apps may sell this data to third parties. We'd advise that any apps young people download should have the correct legislation in place to protect their safety and privacy while using the service.

### ADDITIONAL COSTS

While many fitness apps are free to download, the initial content is quite basic. Users will only receive more helpful content (such as new workouts, nutrition advice or a personalised plan) by signing up to a subscription or paying for extra features. This can incentivise users to spend money on the service – a cost which can quickly mount up.

### DEPENDENCY ON THE APP

While physical wellbeing apps can help motivate young users to manage their fitness, there's a possibility that – without being sent frequent rewards and reminders – children could start to lose their natural drive to be active. Young people may also become obsessed with tracking their exercise, health and eating habits: this can have negative effects on their mental and emotional wellbeing.

## Advice for Parents & Educators

### EXERCISE AND SOCIALISE

Highlight the importance of children enjoying fitness activities with family and friends, rather than always exercising alone. Emphasise the fun they can have by interacting with others rather than solely relying on an app to maintain their regime. Remind them of the importance of staying active, as well as the benefits of doing so with company.

### PROMOTE POSITIVE BODY IMAGE

While we want children to be active and healthy, we must also ensure they don't become fixated on how they look and begin take things too far. During childhood and adolescence, the body is still growing and changing. It's vitally important for young people's wellbeing that we promote a positive body image and a healthy relationship with food, empowering them to make informed decisions about their diet and lifestyle.

### REVIEW THE APP FIRST

Before allowing someone under 18 to install a fitness and wellbeing app, check its age rating, read its reviews and scroll through its data policy, to ensure its suitability for younger users. You could also try it yourself, to see if it's appropriate for the child's particular needs and decide if you're comfortable with them using it. Ensure that any privacy-compromising features – such as location tracking – are disabled.

### USE PARENTAL CONTROLS

As with all apps, it's important for parents to familiarise themselves with any controls on the app and to use these on a child's account. The specific settings vary between platforms but – most commonly – these will relate to screen-time limits, disabling or capping in-app purchases, and managing social aspects or features which aren't age appropriate. By utilising these controls, you can help to ensure a child is getting a safe experience.

## Meet Our Expert

Dr Claire Sutherland is an online safety consultant, educator and researcher who has developed and implemented anti-bullying and cyber safety policies for schools. She has written various academic papers and carried out research for the Australian Government comparing internet use and sexting behaviour of young people in the UK, USA and Australia.



Source: See full reference list on guide page at: <https://nationalcollege.com/guides/wellbeing-fitness-apps>

@wake\_up\_weds

/www.thenationalcollege

@wake.up.wednesday

@wake.up.weds

Users of this guide do so at their own discretion. No liability is entered into. Current as of the date of release: 22.01.2025

**As always, if you have any immediate concerns about safeguarding issues, students, or the school site, please get in touch via:**

**[safeguarding@smrt.bristol.sch.uk](mailto:safeguarding@smrt.bristol.sch.uk)**