

A Letter to my Children

A yellow brick road to adulthood and parenthood. This is what I wish for both of you. Naturally, I wish the same to all your friends. Will this happen? No. However, can we seriously plan such a path for your children? I am optimistic about this.

In their earliest years, your children will start tracing their formamensis on those persons they spend the most time with, which I hope will be you. As they grow older this is replaced to varying degrees by friends, school, and exposure to society's fabric. So, my advice is to carefully gauge your opportunity costs and spend quality time with your children. From experience, I would rather see you take a step back from opportunities that, because there is little or no genuine support, entail having the Sword of Damocles permanently hanging over your head.

You will also soon discover that life can present checkpoints which add sobriety to your soul like salt to a wound. The recent Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study¹ clearly shows that from a surveyed cohort of countries, Maltese 11-year-old girls have the 2nd highest problematic social media use alongside Romania (18%, average for girls 9%) whilst Maltese 13-year-old girls top the chart alongside Romania (28%, average for girls 16%). In keeping with this, the greatest proportion of adolescents, classified at risk of problematic online gaming, is found in Malta for 11-year-old girls (16%, average for girls 10%) 13-year-old girls (14%, average for girls 8%), 13-year-old boys (26%, average for boys 18%), and 15-year-old boys (27%, average for boys 16%).

I know that you feel me since I struggle with both of you about screen time. Knowing that this is a common problem for other parents does not offer me any solace. Given this alarming trend - since this report builds on a previous one - the government should act on this today before tomorrow.

At this stage, one must acknowledge the role that politics plays in your cognitive development. Children are directly affected by seminal decisions - which relate to the social determinants of health - made by policymakers. So, experiencing free childcare schemes, walking past a newly opened Cannabis Harm Reduction Association 251 metres from your school, as well as having your friend become your town's mayor at age 16, can all seriously affect your life's trajectory.

I am explaining all this so that you understand the importance of the policymaker's role in mitigating your risk, as well as that of your peers, of problematic social media use and online gaming. The negative impact of social media on mental health is well-known and ranges from addictions to cyberbullying. Of note is that Australia has recently introduced legislation requiring technology companies to restrict individuals under 16 years of age from accessing their social media platforms.

Malta needs to establish a task force, possibly through the Responsible Gaming Foundation, with members of the quadruple helix to investigate further the effect of social media use on Maltese adolescents and to develop healthy and safe social media and digital gaming habits. In keeping with this, our EU representatives need to lobby for a European action plan in this regard.

My dearest possessions, I will conclude this editorial with the following advice. We are in Christmas time where many people wear smiling faces. In life, you will meet many pernicious characters who, with their yearlong Duchenne smiles, will try to compromise your righteous nature. This primarily stems from the fact that your benevolent actions, done in good faith, are the antithesis of their *raison d'être*. Of course, along the way, you will also find genuine persons who will acknowledge your efforts and support you. That is why you need to be optimistic and realise that you are your greatest strength. To do so you need to seek the company of each other. As siblings, you can help each other to champion those ubuntu values, including social justice, which I observe in you.

Stand up and be counted. Be accountable. Never compromise your honesty, even if this means facing a Semmelweis reflex.

Be resilient and keep moving, forward. Focus on life's tapestry and not on dropped stitches. The future is bright.



1. World Health Organization. A focus on adolescent social media use and gaming in Europe, central Asia and Canada Health Behaviour in School-aged Children international report from the 2021/2022 survey. Volume 6. 2024. Available from: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/378982/9789289061322-eng.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>