

# Children with Intellectual Disabilities and ICT

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Piotr Plichta



School with Class  
Foundation

**Be  
Internet  
Awesome.**

5th part of

## **Be Internet Awesome For All**

Developing digital citizenship in children with various educational needs

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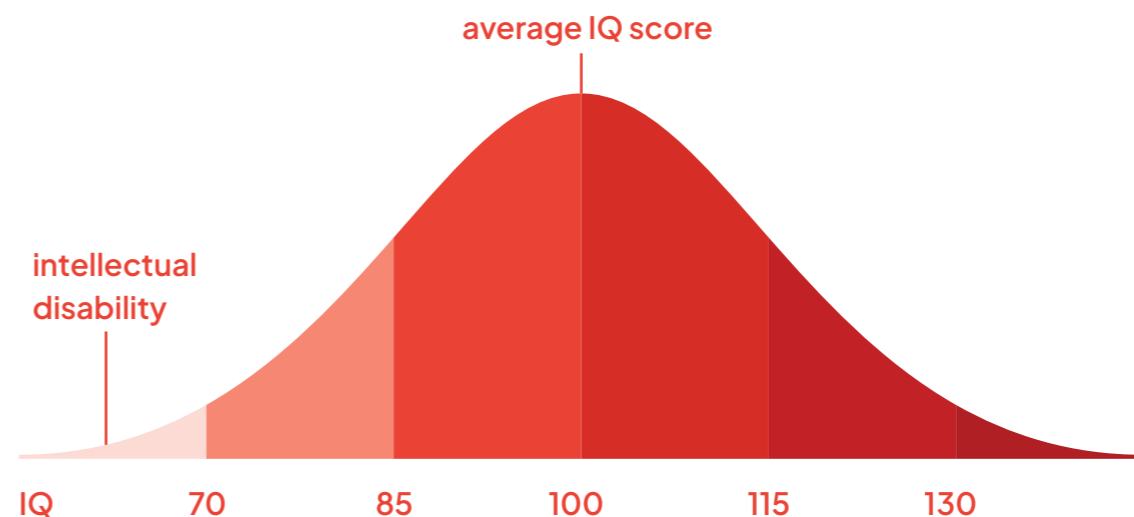
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# 1 What is Intellectual Disability?

Intellectual disability, or general learning disability, involves deficits in cognitive and adaptive functioning such as understanding concepts, social functioning (e.g., communicating with others) and practical skills (e.g., domestic and academic). These problems occur during the developmental period (most often, it is assumed to be before 18 years of age) (Gałeczki, Świącicki, 2015). Intellectual disability is defined by an IQ below 70 (assessed using standardized assessment tools – i.e., IQ tests). In everyday work, knowing the IQ score is less important than the so-called functional diagnosis, thanks to which we can assess what the child can and cannot do without support (their strengths and weaknesses), as well as what they cannot do but is within their reach (for example, they can perform a given task, but with help). Depending on the degree of functioning, four levels of intellectual disability are distinguished: mild, moderate, severe and profound. Young people with intellectual disability constitute a very diverse community, depending on their need for daily assistance and the kind of support they receive (for example, whether they have friends). Some will lead independent lives in the future, others will need lifelong care. It is estimated that about 2–3% of school-age children are diagnosed with intellectual disability, and the vast majority of them have mild intellectual disability. Although there has been a serious breakthrough in thinking about this kind of impairment,

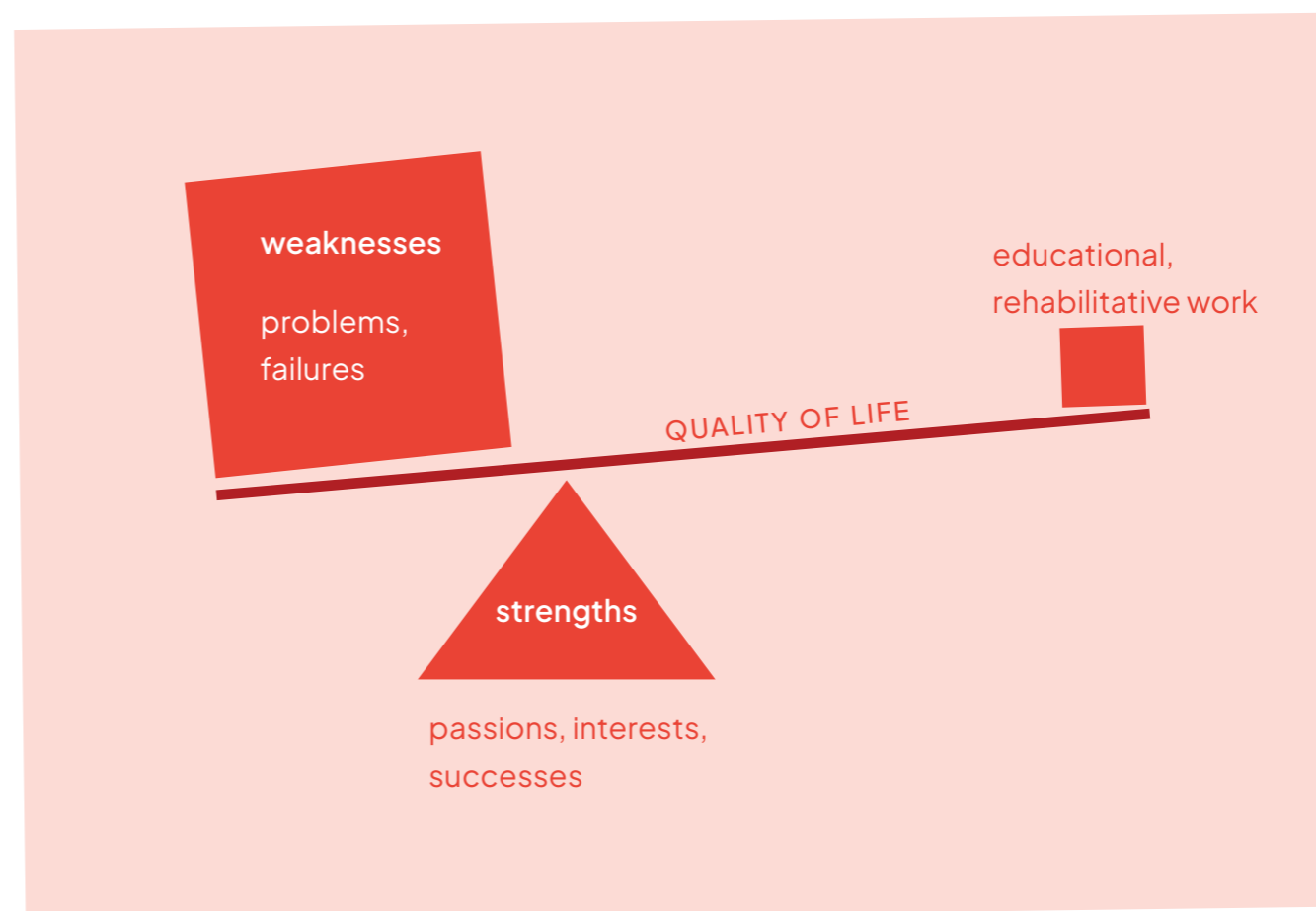
the descriptions of the functioning of people with intellectual disability still largely focus on deficits, the so-called Achilles' heels. Nowadays, this approach is complemented by noting, among other things, that deficits do coexist with strengths and that with tailored support, the functioning of people with intellectual disability can often improve (Schallock et al., 2010).



This is due, among other things, to the spread of the so-called social model of disability. According to it, the functioning of people with disabilities depends more on social factors such as support, adjustment than on individual characteristics and limitations (Wehmeyer, 2021). In general, there is now a major shift in the understanding of intellectual disability. It involves an increasingly integrated, holistic approach to people with intellectual disabilities, a focus on human rights, social justice, tailored services and individualized support in major areas of life implemented in as inclusive an environment as possible (Schalock et al., 2019).

‘Give me a point of support and I will move the Earth’. – we are well aware of the physical sense of Archimedes of Syracuse’s thought. All it takes is the right lever and a point of support to change the position of huge weights with a relatively small force. Metaphorically, when working with another person, especially one who is in a more difficult situation, the term Archimedes’ point refers to his/her strengths (Grzegorzewska, 1969). Often they may not be obvious, not necessarily spectacular and their discovery (e.g. by an attentive teacher) can be a breakthrough in educational, rehabilitative work, improve the perceived quality of life. However trivial it may sound, it may be something seemingly small (e.g., a child’s interests that are underestimated by others).

**Discovering strengths can be a breakthrough in educational and rehabilitative work and improve the perceived quality of life.**



## 2 Students with Intellectual Disability and the Internet

People with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disability, are at risk of digital exclusion (Chadwick et al., 2013); (Glencross et al., 2021); (Chadwick et al., 2022). Although the use of the Internet is increasingly widespread in this group (more and more people have access to the Internet and use it) (e.g., Chiner et al., 2017), the differences – compared to the rest of society – are still significant (Alfredsson Ågren et al., 2020). On top of this, the circumstances of young people with intellectual disability also differ from people with other disabilities (e.g., vision or mobility impairments), who are able to make decisions about themselves to a greater degree. Unfortunately, there is a lack of both diagnoses and solutions in the field of ‘special needs media education’ addressed to students with disabilities (Plichta, 2017). Symptomatically, more attention is paid to threats rather than opportunities resulting from the presence of new technologies in the lives of people with disabilities (Seale, 2014).

Research shows that compared to peers without disabilities, fewer young people with intellectual disability use the Internet, but they do use it similarly (mainly for entertainment purposes). In turn, they use it more often to play online games

(Alfredsson Ågren et al., 2020). Using the Internet for pleasure (Livingstone et al., 2018) is important, but it does not exhaust the possibilities offered by the digital world. One of the biggest differences between teens with and without intellectual disability relates to searching for information online (14% and 80% respectively do this regularly) (Alfredsson Ågren, 2020). Young people with intellectual disability often have difficulty reading, and much online content is text-based and written in difficult language.

**Teenagers with intellectual disability search for information online almost 6 times less often than those without such a disability**



14%

80%

## Numerous Online Materials are Not Adapted to the Needs of Students with Intellectual Disability

INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE

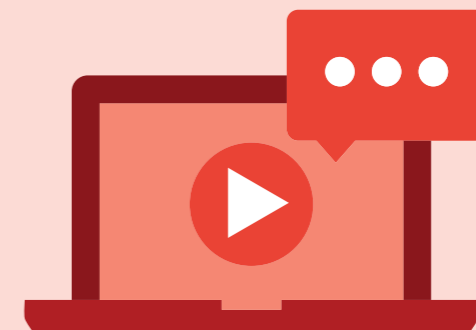
There is a lack of online materials on the Web that are tailored to Internet users with intellectual disability. Some children and adolescents with moderate (and sometimes even mild) intellectual disabilities cannot read, and even if they can read short texts, they do not always find their meaning. Examples appearing in available materials and good practices are saturated with difficult vocabulary or metaphors that those people simply do not understand. What we need is uncomplicated content, but also no infantilism in it.

Having worked in special education for 27 years, I have observed the downplaying of this topic. Not all teachers, educators and parents are experts in modern technology. Therefore, it is worth supporting their work and helping to develop the materials necessary for the digital education of their students and children.

Zyta Czechowska – therapist and special education teacher,  
Be Internet Awesome trainer

### How can content be tailored to individuals with intellectual disability?

- It would be great if the materials contained little text and more images.
- Certainly, aids in cartoon form would work well.
- Short videos with clear, simple messages would also be useful – especially those presenting situations from everyday life.
- Mind maps, infographics and posters are always invaluable aids.
- There is a lack of resources with enlarged fonts, but also with symbols, PCS or pictograms for people who use alternative and assistive forms of communication.



Dealing with rapid changes (e.g., hardware, updates) may be another challenge for people with intellectual disability. In the case of young people with intellectual disability, mastering procedural knowledge (e.g., remembering successive actions in a particular situation) is at a relatively good level. This can be advantageous in developing the skills required to use the Internet safely. However, it is worth remembering that this regularity is not necessarily true for all students with intellectual disabilities, who are an extremely diverse group.

Parents and caregivers typically decide whether children and teens with intellectual disability can access the internet. Therefore, it is essential to learn what they think about the perceived opportunities and risks of internet use (Cook et al., 2017). Therefore, educational and support activities for those who take care of students with intellectual disability are of crucial importance as well. A major challenge is adults' limited knowledge of this group of young people's digital experiences, including risky behaviours (Molin et al., 2015; Sorbring et al., 2017). It also happens that the more competent users of the internet at home are children with intellectual disabilities and not their parents (Plichta, 2017; Plichta, 2019).



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**Educational and support activities for those who take care of students with intellectual disability are of crucial importance.**

# 3 Risks and Opportunities

Serious threats (e.g. engaging in risky behaviours), but also opportunities (e.g. improving social interactions) should always be considered when looking at various aspects of the online presence of people with intellectual disability.

## Specific Risks

One threat is the Problematic Use of the Internet (PUI). This is defined as a behavioural disorder related to the abuse of electronic devices in order to use applications and websites (Tomczyk, 2019). PUI is diagnosed based on symptoms related to, among others, free time, school duties, social relations (e.g., neglecting school work, eating or sleeping due to using the Internet, ineffective attempts at limiting one's use of the Internet; Young, 2017). It may be a behaviour that is compensatory in character and may be a symptom of other difficulties (e.g., mental health issues) and a harmful way of coping with offline experiences.

The increased risk of people with disabilities, especially with intellectual disability, becoming victims of various types of negative actions by others should also be emphasized.

Research shows that Internet use, and especially the use of social media, can lead to difficult and often unforeseen

situations (Buijs et al., 2017; Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2015; Sallafranque-St-Louis, Normand, 2017), for example:

- Excessive use of the Internet,
- Exposure to inappropriate content,
- Online sexual solicitation,
- Cyberbullying and cybervictimization (Chiner et al., 2021).

### Excerpt from an interview with a special educator:

They get in touch with different people, they meet with them. This is also very dangerous, especially in the search for self-esteem, for the feeling that I am someone, someone as valuable as the so-called healthy people, and in the search for intimate relationships (Plichta et al., 2022).



## Bullying and Young People with intellectual disability

When it comes to young people with intellectual disability, the most recognizable risk is becoming involved in conventional and online bullying. The victimization aspect is particularly important because there is a build-up of unfavourable factors: ease of getting harmed, social isolation, lack of support, limited coping skills and trouble communicating. Worse still, when it comes to research, reports about the harm experienced by people with intellectual disability are occasionally treated as unreliable (Plichta, 2010). In his typology of electronic aggression, Jacek Pyżalski (2012) distinguishes Electronic Aggression Against the Vulnerable as one type of aggression carried out with the use of new media.

## Specific Opportunities

For people with disabilities, having more control over their own circumstances, autonomy and ability to participate in society are of great importance. Supporting the use of digital technologies can make it easier for them to take control of their own lives. For example, the digital environment can be an important tool for helping young people with intellectual disability in achieving various goals (e.g., expanding their social circles, enjoying a wider range of leisure activities). Therefore, the Internet can also be perceived as a tool used in the implementation of traditional (offline) tasks in school education (e.g., reading, writing and counting). This also applies to supporting their functioning in an out-of-school environment (e.g., adaptive skills, improved self-control).

In summary, internet use can also contribute to empowerment in various dimensions:

- **Individual** (e.g., by developing a sense of efficacy and acquiring new skills),
- **Interpersonal** (e.g., through the possibility of improving social interactions, expressing oneself and reducing loneliness),
- **Group** (e.g., through participation in online communities),
- **Civic** (e.g., through access to various information and services) – for people with intellectual disability, this dimension is the most difficult to achieve (Amichai-Hamburger, et al., 2008).

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**Supporting the use of digital technologies can make it easier for them to take control of their own lives.**

# 4 Recommendations

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Online experiences are closely related to traditional functioning. Therefore, some recommendations are universal in nature. For example, bolstering the self-esteem of students with intellectual disability and showing them respect helps protect them from both offline and online threats. It protects them against seeking attention and social acceptance in negative groups, which can have a negative impact. The same applies to supporting peer relationships.

Starting with cyberbullying as one of the most commonly identified risks, its victims with intellectual disability do not always reveal the perpetrators. This is because they fear spoiling or losing relationships with people who have harmed them. As one parent said, the reason for this was the desire to maintain a relationship – ‘friendship at all costs’ (McHugh, Howard, 2017).

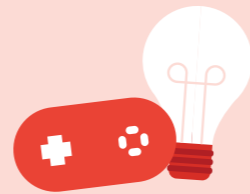
- Because there is a typically **significant degree of coexistence between traditional and new media aggression** (Pyżalski, 2012), they should be considered together in all school activities.
- **It is important to carry out activities specifically aimed at students with intellectual disability.** When working with victims of cyberbullying, activities with multimedia educational materials can be valuable (e.g. analysing the behaviour of film characters and their motivations, together with the students). This can be done using various educational materials (e.g., cartoons, social stories, films or texts written in plain language). In these, it is particularly useful to refer to typical situations from everyday life.

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**Children with intellectual disabilities fear spoiling or losing relationships with people who have harmed them.**



## Referring to Real-Life Situations in Working with Children with Intellectual Disability Thanks to the Be Internet Awesome Program



The Be Internet Awesome program allows you to combine education with play while providing guidance on solutions. Children learn to work with choice, emotions and rules. They connect skill and imagination and apply the resulting experience to real life. The BIA programme is the initial fun that leads to knowledge. We help our students with reading tasks, explain the meaning of words, etc. We let them make mistakes and find their own solutions. We teach them to ask for help. **A wonderful experience!**

Jana Vaňková – teacher at the School for the physically disabled in Opava (works with students with intellectual disability as well)

### INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE

Additionally, one should consider the following:

- **Teaching coping skills in an easily memorable form** (e.g., using mnemonic techniques) should be a priority. This should refer to the basic principles of online activity, e.g., not disclosing personal information, knowing one's rights, what violence is, and how to behave when they feel anxious.
- **For young people with intellectual disability, online risks are far greater than the risks of peer violence** (e.g., financial fraud, susceptibility to advertising, sexual exploitation, engaging in risky behaviours). Therefore, a holistic approach is recommended in protecting and supporting those who are vulnerable. This not only means activities aimed at different levels (e.g., individual, classrooms or the entire school) but also addressing them to different people (e.g., teachers, support staff in schools, parents and students without disabilities).
- Because there are very few specific programmes aimed at people with intellectual disability, **it is worth seeking out particular elements of universal activities** (e.g., anger management training and relaxation training). Educational sessions will also be useful – for example: what bullying is, how it affects how we feel, why people carry out acts of violence, what to do when someone hurts us or hurts others (Majnemer et al., 2021).

- **Diagnosis as a starting point for educational activities.** This should relate to various areas. These includes: access to ICT for young people with intellectual disability, its accessibility (e.g., cognitive), kinds of use, online experiences (positive and negative), support, needs, and motivations related to the use of the Internet. Individual programmes should address such issues and record progress, actions taken, successes and barriers to digital inclusion. Such diagnoses are considered effective forms of combating digital exclusion. They should also comprise involvement in educational activities around peer aggression and bullying (e.g., describing such typical situations, their frequency, the roles played by individuals, interventions undertaken and their effectiveness). Thus, such diagnosis is not a form of clinical diagnosis, but consists primarily of gathering available information about the needs of young people, their online activities and identifying priority areas of support.
- **Setting priorities.** Usually, we do not have the opportunity to address all the important matters in schools, and we need to focus our efforts on a given person's most important needs. For some, that may be cybersecurity, and for others communication or social relations.
- **We all require someone to communicate with.** Of the three levels of Internet usage (technical, intellectual/cognitive and social), the last is the most difficult to achieve (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008). In schools, we should take various actions to help young people with intellectual disability establish and maintain social relationships. Supporting peer relationships can be achieved by using new technologies in tasks that require teamwork (e.g., co-creating digital class archives, albums and working on collective documents). The Internet makes many things easier, but we all require someone to talk to. The presence of other people and support are more important than the tool itself (Internet or mobile phone). However, the recommendation regarding the value of communicating with others through digital tools has its limitations. Given the unmet needs for social interactions and attention from others, particular attention should be paid to the risk of young people with intellectual disability engaging in undesirable environments, where they may seek acceptance without being aware of the potential risks.

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**The presence of other people and support are more important than the tool itself (Internet or mobile phone).**

## On the Importance of an Empathetic Teachers' Presence

To better understand the needs of children with intellectual disability, every teacher should have understanding, empathy and rational thinking. The most important thing, however, is to see this profession as a personal mission.

Jana Hřibovská – teacher at 17. listopadu Elementary School and Kindergarten, in Chomutov

### INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE

Furthermore, applications and devices that we use are less important than what we want to achieve. The key question is what is the purpose of using the Internet and other technologies? Digital means are secondary to the goals.

For example, the use of new media can be an 'Archimedean point' for young people with intellectual disability or it can help reveal what that might be.

- **Less is more.** It is worth limiting the number of devices and apps used in favour of greater personalization that simplifies using them and searching for content (e.g., by properly arranging the number, appearance and size of icons/windows on the screen).
- **The 'by the way' approach** – integrating activities using the Internet into the everyday life of students with intellectual disability (e.g., during free time or travel). A small task performed regularly every day is more effective in improving digital inclusion than using the Internet once in a while or working on improving digital competencies in the classroom.
- **Valuing media experiences.** In today's life, media is equally important as 'non-media' and it is necessary to value their role in the lives of young people with intellectual disability (though without overestimating their importance). Showing a keen interest in the use of technology can be an empowering experience for young people with intellectual disability – asking about their favourite games or the websites they visited ('show me how you do it,' 'teach me,' 'tell me more about it,' etc.).

## Flexibility While Adapting the BIA Curriculum to the Needs of Children with Intellectual Disability

To start, I introduced the BIA program to the pupils. At first, I showed them everything on the interactive whiteboard myself and then the students tried to solve the tasks on their own. If it was too difficult for somebody, someone else tried it, they took turns, or we skipped the activity and explained some parts only verbally.

Markéta Beránková – teacher at 17. listopadu Elementary School and Kindergarten, in Chomutov

### INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE

- **Using new media together** is an opportunity to create a shared area of interest (e.g., naming different things that we find on the Internet and discussing them). From a relational perspective, using the Internet and modern technologies together is as valuable as walking, DIY (Do It Yourself) or other traditionally valued activities performed together with children.
- **Strengthening relationships with children.** Excessive control can give adults a false sense of security. Paradoxically, children who use the Internet less may be more vulnerable (they may be less aware of the dangers and use websites less well). Sometimes, children whose carers have installed parental control software are exposed to more risks than those whose carers did not (Kirwil, 2011; Livingstone, Haddon, 2009).
- **Using flexible methods and forms of work.** Schools are attended by diverse groups of students – students with different digital competencies, abilities, so-called individual educational needs and access to digital technology. In order to meet these different educational needs, including those of students who lack digital competencies, there is a need for flexible tools, methods and ways of working. This recommendation is in line with the advice of the UDL (Universal Design for Learning). The most comprehensive and flexible form of implementing priority tasks is required and may include, for example, digital storytelling to help develop both digital and social competencies.

# 5 Emerging Issues – New Trends

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## → Increasing the Participation of People with Intellectual Disability in Research and Participatory Design


There is a growing need for more research regarding the use of the Internet based on the perspective, experiences and use strategies of young people with intellectual disability. Their participation in technological research will be essential and should help empower them in the long term (Safari et al., 2021). Involving people with intellectual disability in designing solutions (e.g., websites, applications and educational materials) is also a significant opportunity to meet their need for autonomy, proximity and competencies.



→ **Flexible Forms of Achieving Various Educational Aims and Psychological Needs** (e.g., enabling self-presentation, developing social, emotional and digital competencies).

## Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is creating short videos combining sound, images, text, animations, etc. Creating digital stories improves the digital competencies of people with intellectual disability related to the technical processing of content. More importantly, in this process, a space for decision-making, cooperation and the selection of materials emerges. Depending on the competencies of the authors, the story can be created independently or with support. It can be a story about the individual, or the individual as a part of a larger whole (for example, a group or family). The theme of the story may have a broader (e.g., refer to life in general) or narrower scope (e.g. travel, interests, important people, etc.). For some students, it may meet more limited goals (e.g., developing and using digital competencies), while for others, it may have a wider scope (e.g., empowerment, building a sense of belonging or self-presentation) (Saridaki, Meimaris, 2018).

Examples of digital stories created by people with intellectual disability can be found, among others, on the [Digi-StorID Project](#). 

## Photovoice

Photovoice can also be a useful tool (Booth, Booth, 2003; Wass, Safari, 2020). It is a method in which photography is used as a means of accessing the world of human experiences and presenting it to others as long as the participants give their consent. Participants photograph various aspects of their lives, and the photos can then be used to create albums and presentations, and serve as a starting point for conversations. Photovoice allows us to reveal personal perspectives, strengths and opinions, facilitates the communication of one's needs, deepens one's insight, etc. Furthermore, it can be used as a means to achieve educational goals or simply for fun. It can be used as a method of diagnosis, but also in research that involves people with intellectual disability.



# 6 Lessons from Emergency Remote Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has made daily functioning even more intertwined with new technologies and deepened the existing digital inequalities (e.g., Chadwick et al., 2022; Caton et al., 2022). It also revealed the ‘uneven’ use of the Internet – better for individual needs, worse in terms of school education:

Excerpt from the interview with a special educator:  
(...) when it comes to all these social networks, i.e., Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat, children with intellectual disabilities are incredibly familiar with them, but they are unable to send their schoolwork through [when using] Teams

- It was easier for teachers to remotely implement didactic rather than general educational tasks. Most often, they said that remote learning deepens the differences between students rather than balances them (Buchnat et al., 2021).
- The successful use of new technologies in the remote education of young people with intellectual disability

depended on the strong involvement of other household members and a milder degree of intellectual disability (Kversøy et al., 2021). People with intellectual disability (even those with more severe levels of cognitive impairment and higher support needs) who had support and had previously used technology, coped better during the pandemic (Amor et al., 2021).

- Digital inequalities not only affected young people, but also teachers.
- Excessive free time and greater involvement in the world of online activities also brought risks associated with social interactions with strangers.

The pandemic caused an increased interest in the themes discussed in this report. ‘Being thrown in at the deep end’ of technology and new media in education has increased the competencies of teachers (at least in terms of technology). The next step would be to seek new methodological solutions tailored to the online environment and digital tools (Pyżalski, 2019).

# 7 Further Reading

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## [Vulnerable Children in a Digital World Report](#) [↗](#)

The internetmatters.org report presents the results of research on the digital lives of children with special educational needs (10–16 year old) and their susceptibility to online risks.

The study asked:

- Does having special educational needs offline predict such needs online?
- Does each special offline need predict particular types of risk?
- Does the experience of risk predict further risks?

According to the risk factors, the following groups of young people were described: special needs in the family, communication difficulties, physical disabilities, special educational needs and mental health difficulties. In addition to the results, you can find insights for educators, for services, for safeguarding and for industry.

## [Walk a Mile in Their Shoes: Bullying and the Child with Special Needs \(2013\). A Report and Guide from AbilityPath.org.](#) [↗](#)

This report reveals a greater frequency (and even prevalence) of harm to students with disabilities compared to young people without disabilities. Bullying targeted at the former is more chronic in nature and is caused by their disability. This also applies to online functioning. In addition to research findings and participants' statements, the report contains a Parent Toolkit and a Teacher Toolkit where you can find materials to help protect students with disabilities from violence.

## ROBUSD (Reducing Bullying – Strengthening Diversity) Project Materials

→ [Videos](#) 

→ [Manual](#) 

The ROBUSD (Reducing Bullying – Strengthening Diversity) Project was aimed at the prevention of bullying (including cyberbullying) in educational settings, especially regarding students with special educational needs (e.g., with intellectual disability). Peer aggression has profound negative individual and social consequences and is a relevant problem in both education and public health. The main aim of the project was the elaboration of the innovative curriculum and the production of educational materials concerning the mechanisms and prevention of bullying. The knowledge behind the materials is rooted in research, as well as practical experience concerning special educational needs and peer group exclusion. The set of materials consists of a series of video presentations and e-books.

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