

# Are Self Help Apps Helpful?



Instead of people turning to self-help books, there is now a rise in the number of us downloading self-help apps – a trend that is increasing with children and young people. Our online safety experts have taken a look at the impact digital self-help apps and services might be having on children and young people, outlining some insights and advice for parents and carers to consider.

In the last two years alone,

**8 in 10**

children accessed online services to help with their mental wellbeing.

## What is a Self-Help App?

If something is described as 'self-help' it means an individual must use their own efforts and resources (alongside the item) to see improvement in themselves. When we look at 'self-help apps', we are seeing digital applications created to help someone achieve an improvement or goal. Some popular topics in self-help apps are: weight-loss, therapy, or sobriety apps.



Online Safety  
Shareable by

**SAFER  
SCHOOLS NI**

[safer.schoolsni.net](https://safer.schoolsni.net)

## Why are young people using these apps?



**Demand for mental health services is at an all-time high.**

Rather than waiting for appointments, access to support through apps is almost immediate and far less gruelling.



**Children and young people may not want to open up.**

If a child is struggling, it might feel easier to seek help discreetly through an app instead of involving their guardians.



**Professional help can be costly in every avenue.**

For a child with no independent income or travel means, a free or low-cost app could be their only option.



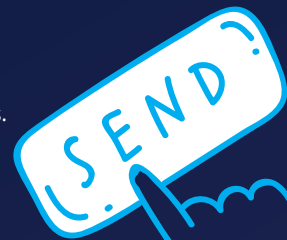
**Accessibility to a service may only be available in-app.**

Downloading an app may be the only opportunity a young person has to make use of a service or explore an area of interest.



**Social media might encourage downloading certain apps.**

The more a young person shows interest in these topics on social media, the more targeted ads and similar videos are shown to them.



## Risks



**'Alternative' help** - Some apps promote themselves as a 'substitute' for professional help. However, the absence of professional advice and monitoring may mean a young person uses certain techniques incorrectly or develops unhealthy coping mechanisms.



**Possible misdiagnosis** - Without professional intervention or assessment, a young person may begin to use in-app tools or give/seek inaccurate advice that fits in with their own self-diagnosis. It may even inspire destructive behaviour.



**Toxic positivity/productivity** - Many apps do not consider time pressures of school, work, and extracurriculars and could lead to further negative emotions, such as shame and guilt, or larger struggles with anxiety and self-worth.



**Physical hazards** - While dietary and fitness apps are unlikely to encourage excessive exercise or eating disorders, their design could aid them. This is especially harmful if a young person doesn't realise they are struggling with a disorder.



**Temporary 'fix'** - Young people might use self-help apps to avoid or deny the true weight of an illness or struggle. They may use the apps to try and 'fix' what needs proper medical attention.



**Vulnerability** - Increased vulnerability in community sections of the app could subject a child to harms such as bullying or grooming from other users who wish to exploit their emotional state.



## Top Tips



**Create an environment of trust and love your child will want to return to.** If they choose to discuss their struggles or worries with you, remember to listen actively, use open questions, and be reassuring in your responses.



**Ensure the young person in your care receives professional medical help if they need it.** This may be uncomfortable to navigate as a parent or carer, but this could save their life.



**Have conversation about the suitability of the app.** Ask them to describe how it helps them and what they like about it. Mention other options available to them, such as their Trusted Adults or their GP.



**Do your research.** If you know your child is using a specific app, it might be helpful to look into its ratings and safety settings on your own time or with them.



**Encourage the child in your care to disclose the use of self-help apps** as a coping mechanism for their mental or physical health issues if there is existing mental health support.



**Outline healthy screen time rules for your household.** Decide with them on what realistic time allowances should be, and encourage breaks to help them feel more connected to their surroundings.



**Talk to your GP about the use of apps.** They may be able to recommend apps, medical advice surrounding the use of self-help apps, or further tips for talking to your child.

