Digital Habits Checkup: Educator Guide

A protocol for identifying habits and getting more control over our digital lives

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What is the Digital Habits Checkup?

Based on principles from habit science, the Digital Habits Checkup helps students identify their digital habits and make positive changes that support well-being. This routine directs consideration to the innermost ring of the Rings of Responsibility: the self and personal well-being.

How can it be used?

The Digital Habits Checkup is a structured way to help students rethink and revamp their digital habits. By using this protocol and tracking their journeys, students become more mindful of everyday habits that are otherwise automatic and "mindless."

Students 1.) identify their digital habits (positive, negative, and mixed); 2). choose a specific habit that they would like to modify; and 3). make a plan to challenge themselves to change their behavior for a set period of time (e.g., one or two weeks to start). You can invite students to track their journeys as they go, keeping a record of their successes and challenges. This will help you give them support and feedback to be accountable, revise their plans as needed, and stay on track so they experience the value and success of taking control of a digital habit. By reflecting on their own digital habits and how those habits make them feel—and then actively making changes—students develop dispositions to 1). slow down and self-reflect, 2). envision options and possible impacts, and 3). take action.

Where can it be used? How much class time will it take?

This activity can be used anywhere educators see a connection with their learning goals. For example, in:
- advisory period, where students are learning SEL or character education skills.
- library or media class, where students are learning about digital citizenship and technology.
- health class, where students are learning about healthy and unhealthy lifestyle choices.

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This activity is flexible! Students can complete the protocol in a short period of time (e.g., 15 minutes). Or, you can extend the steps with more discussion and expand the activity so it's a special unit with follow-ups over a week or month.

How do you facilitate this activity?

Make a copy of the **Digital Habits Checkup: Student Handout**, which mirrors the sections in the teacher guidance below. Use the teacher's guidance to support students through each step of the thinking routine.

Check

Check and take stock of your digital habits. Keep in mind: Habits can be positive, negative, or both. Brainstorm and list as many of your habits as you can.

Examples:
- Checking Instagram first thing in the morning 😊
- Watching YouTube or TikTok before school and then getting ready too slowly ☹️
- Talking to my grandparents on video chat 😍
- Going on my phone whenever I'm waiting in a line 😑
- Taking my phone out in the bathroom 😏
- Checking social media when I'm hanging out with friends/at lunch 😜
- Using a fitness app to track my activity 😁

Next, draw (or insert) an emoji next to each habit to show how it makes you feel. If you have mixed feelings, feel free to note more than one feeling.

Tip: Use a digital board like Linoit or Padlet to have students share digital habits and react to/build on their classmates' reflections.

Tip: Invite students into this activity by sharing this example related specifically to notifications. (A teacher had her students turn up the volume on their phones and documented all of her students' notifications during a single class period. The example provides a rich jumping-off point for conversations about the volume of digital disruptions.)

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Choose

Choose one digital habit you want to change or try to do differently. Why is it important that you change this habit?

Examples:
- I want to start using my health tracker to make sure I get 10,000 steps each day. This is important to me because I'm trying to be more active and physically healthy.
- I want to limit my time on TikTok to one hour max per day. This is important to me because right now I feel like TikTok runs my life!
- I want to stop getting distracted by my phone when I'm trying to do homework. This is important to me because I really care about my grades right now.

Challenge

Challenge yourself. Make a plan for how you would like to change your habit. Consider *when* you will do something different and *what* you can do instead. (When you're trying to change a habit, it's not enough just to say what we *won't* do. We also have to come up with something to *do* instead!)

Examples of media challenges include:
- Un-following certain accounts that make me feel self-conscious or anxious.
- Setting time limits per day or by app (there are phone settings).
- Using a media-habits tracking app like Moment or ZenScreen to be more aware of how I'm using my time.
- Setting device-free moments in the day, such as during dinner or homework.
- Charging my phone outside of my room at night.
- Adding the Health app (or another fitness app) to my phone to set and monitor fitness goals.

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Boost

Boost your challenge. What are some ways you can give your new habit a "boost" and make it easier to do? If you're trying to break a bad habit, what are some things you can do so that you don't slip back into old ways?

Encourage students to get specific about what they can do rather than the habit to be successful.

Examples:
I will ... put my phone out of sight in a pocket in my backpack; turn off notifications; switch to "Do Not Disturb" mode; use an app like Self Control to temporarily block the app that's most distracting; change app time limit settings with tools like Screen Time; tell my friends I won't be available at certain times.

Tip: End with a discussion of potential barriers or things that might get in the way of actually succeeding with their challenge. Ask: Could you commit to trying your challenge for three days (or one week or one month)? If not, why not? How could you revise your challenge so you pick something that feels both helpful and doable?

Tip: Have them repeat their boost two to three days after they begin their challenge. They can do this individually or with a partner. They might find that their current plan is a good one, but they need to take a few extra boost steps to help themselves stick to it.

Track

Track your journey. Keep track of your progress. Each day, answer two questions:
- How's it going with your challenge today?
- What made your challenge hard or easy today?

Tip: Students can use a journal or daily log, on a blog or with a documentary-style video diary. If time permits, use a few minutes each day to have them reflect with a partner on how it's going or to share as a group.

Tip: You can use tracking as an opportunity to help students get back on track or revise their challenges as needed. The key is to help them recognize that they have the power to identify digital habits they don't like and change them. It's OK to start small. Even just cutting back a negative habit or increasing a desirable habit a little bit can be a meaningful start.

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What are the lessons that include the Digital Habits Checkup?

The Digital Habits Checkup is included as the core activity in the following lessons from the Digital Citizenship Curriculum:

- Grade 6: **Finding Balance in a Digital World**
- Grade 9: **My Digital Life Is Like ...**
- Grade 12: **The Health Effects of Screen Time**