



Youth participation and life in the digital age

Annual report 2023 on MLL media education for young people



Euroopan unionin osittain rahoittama
Verkojen Eurooppa -väline

Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö

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Youth Voice Report 2023, Mannerheim League for Child Welfare



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To the reader

This report describes the media education provided to young people by MLL in 2023, youth participation and their activities in digital environments. The main channels of MLL media education for young people are YouthNet (Nuortennetti.fi) and the social media sites of YouthNet, lessons given in schools, workshops and media surveys.

In 2023, 31 young people took an active part in creating YouthNet content with us. Young volunteers designed and submitted more than 200 media contributions to YouthNet (Nuortennetti.fi) and YouthNet's social media channels during the year. They also talked on the discussion forum and moderated messages posted on the forum. Young people took part in producing a podcast series, and they travelled with us to Brussels for the EU's Safer Internet Forum. We met 7 113 children and young people in our media education lessons. We discussed topics such as online bullying, balanced media use, gaming, digital friendship skills and respectful encounters.

We organized a total of 39 meetings and training sessions for young volunteers. These events gave young people the opportunity to come up with ideas for YouthNet content. They also received advice on how to create media contributions and how to deal with difficult topics. We collected feedback from young people in all the guided meetings, both to develop our activities and to bring up different perspectives on the YouthNet website and in our social media channels. Young people were able to talk about issues that are important to them, making an impact both within MLL and on a wider national level.

In 2023, 116 000 users who had accepted cookies visited the YouthNet website. There were approximately 780 000 page views. Visitors spent relatively long times on the YouthNet website. YouthNet's functional elements, such as various tests and polls, attracted more than 20 000 users. More than 10 500 messages written by young people were published on the moderated and anonymous YouthNet discussion forum. Based on the most popular topics on the discussion forum and the most viewed informative pages, the subjects that young people were the most interested in were sexuality, relationships and mental wellbeing.

2023 was the European Year of Youth, and it culminated in YouthNet winning the award for the Best Youth Inclusion Model in Finland. The winner was selected among 51 participants by an internal jury of experts from the Finnish National Agency for Education.

A big thank you to all the young people involved in our activities and to our partners for the year 2023!

The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare

MLL's YouthNet – Information, support and activities

YouthNet is an MLL service and website, a form of open youth work that can be characterized as:

- a peer support channel for young people
- digital youth work
- information and advisory work (texts by experts and delayed guidance in the discussion forum)
- a participation channel (YouthNet is responsible for the Youth Participation activities under the Finnish Safer Internet Centre (FISIC) project)
- a path for seeking help (guidance to MLL Child and Youth Helpline and digital services, as well as to the online peer groups for bullying survivors).

YouthNet and its activities are governed by the Youth Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Through YouthNet, young volunteers can find meaningful things to do in a digital environment, regardless of their location. YouthNet is a safe and equal community, built together by young people and employees. Young people's experiences, an equal and safe user experience and reinforcing young people's digital inclusion are at the heart of YouthNet's development work. We pay particular attention to accessibility and to topical content that young people find interesting.

Although the number of visitors to the YouthNet website has declined since the COVID-19 pandemic, the site still had 116 000 unique visitors who had accepted cookies. There were approximately 780 000 page views. On average, young people spent more time on YouthNet than on other websites. Various tests and polls were particularly popular, and young people also created these themselves on more than 10 different topics. One example is a test regarding friends and one's boundaries ("Ystävyys ja omat rajat"). Visitors clicked on the various tests and polls more than 20 000 times. The most popular pages in YouthNet were related to sexuality, the mind and body, and help and support. The most common topics on the anonymous discussion forum concerned physical changes in puberty and thoughts about what is considered "normal", difficult relationships, the small joys of everyday life, friends and hobbies. The carefree nature of youth and youth cultures were also prominent in YouthNet's anonymous discussions. The most read pages under the theme of "The Internet and Media" were related to digital well-being and sexual harassment online.

Youth inclusion and participation are at the heart of YouthNet's activities. Youth participation means that young people have the right to express their opinion, to be heard and to receive recognition for their opinions. In addition, they have the right to belong to a community, be an active member of the community and influence its activities. Participation refers to activity where young people set goals, discuss and consider various solutions and make decisions while taking responsibility for their actions. Participation also involves the fulfillment of equal rights and cherishing them. Participation also means having the right to reliable information.

On YouthNet, young people can find:

- An anonymous, open and moderated discussion forum.
- Around 700 informative pages on various issues related to youth and adolescence, such as sexuality, relationships, mental well-being and media education.
- The possibility to submit their own opinion piece, photo, poem or other content for publication on YouthNet.
- The opportunity to do meaningful voluntary work in different roles at different ages,

according to their own resources.

- MLL's Child and Youth Helpline, chat, and referral to the correspondence service.
- "Selviydytään kiusaamisesta" ("Surviving Bullying") online peer groups for young people who have experienced bullying.

YouthNet's young volunteers

YouthNet's volunteers are young people aged 13–29 who contribute to YouthNet together with MLL employees in a digital environment. Anyone can get involved in the activities at any time of the year, regardless of their skills or where they live. If a young person wants to become a volunteer, they will receive orientation and support regarding YouthNet throughout their volunteering period. In 2023, we organized a total of 39 meetings with young people, and young volunteers produced more than 200 pieces of content for the YouthNet website and its social media channels. A Discord server was used to maintain regular contact with young people. YouthNet's volunteers work entirely remotely using digital tools, which makes it easier to take part in communal activities. Volunteering with YouthNet teaches young people a wide range of skills, such as how to work in digital environments, how to work in a group, ethics, communication, media production skills, media criticism and interaction skills. According to young people's feedback, the best thing about volunteering has been the opportunity to try out different things and to do things according to their own strengths. Everyone can find a role suitable for them in the YouthNet community. Making new friends is also an important reason for many young people to get involved in YouthNet's activities. All young people can take part in YouthNet's activities regardless of their situation in life, as they can participate according to their own resources and possibilities.

In 2023, the number of young volunteers was 31. These young people include:

- discussion forum moderators
- discussion forum online volunteers, also known as "Verkk@ris"
- YouthNet web editors.

The moderators read every message posted on the forum and, if necessary, moderate posts before they are published. The Verkk@ri online volunteers make sure that as many people as possible who post messages on the forum receive peer support on their thoughts and feel seen. Messages that raise concern are handled by an MLL Child and Youth Helpline worker. The rules of the discussion forum were revised in 2023, and thematic training sessions were organized for moderators on topics such as gender diversity. Other volunteers received training on topics such as time management and well-being skills. Thematic material called "Examples of good responses" ("Hyvän vastauksen esimerkit") was produced for online volunteers. The material aims to ensure that the discussion on the online forum stays within the ethical guidelines. The quality of youth guidance work was improved in 2023 by developing principles and methods of digital guidance. Guidance work was developed to be more regular, supportive of team building and responsive to the individual needs of volunteers. The orientation material for volunteers was updated, and more detailed instructions were created for different types of content.

All young people can submit content to YouthNet, not just YouthNet volunteers. Content can be sent in various formats (e.g. text, sound, photos, drawings or videos). Young people submitted a total of 86 contributions to YouthNet.

Content produced by young people on YouthNet

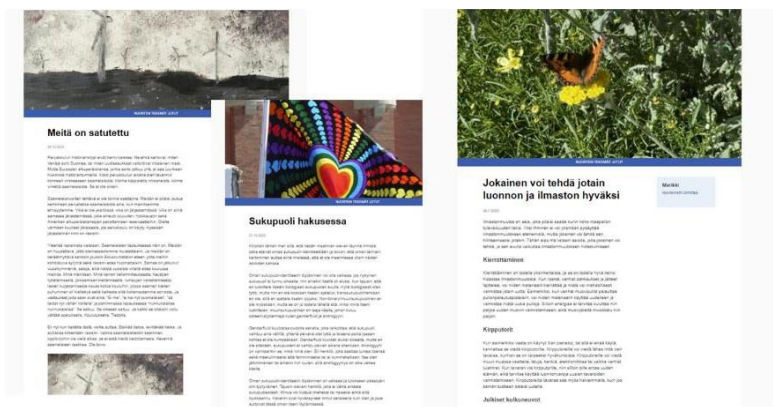


Figure 1. Content created by young people on the YouthNet website.



Nuorten toiveita hyvälle elämälle

Figure 2. A video made by young people themselves titled “Nuorten toiveita hyvälle elämälle” (“Young people’s wishes for a good life”).

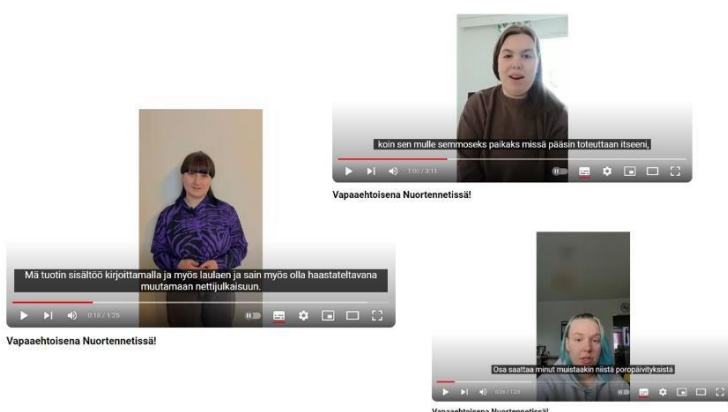


Figure 3. Stories from YouthNet volunteers on the YouthNet YouTube channel.



Figure 4. Young people's podcasts published on the YouthNet website.

Discussion forum provides peer support

"YouthNet is a wonderful place! It's really good that nothing mean gets posted on the forum. And if you need support, you'll always get it."

"Messages are published faster than before. A lovely and supportive forum where you can get help and peer support, a safe space."

– Messages posted on the YouthNet discussion forum.

Young people can participate in discussions on the moderated discussion forum using a nickname without needing to log in. The number of messages on the YouthNet discussion forum has more than tripled in recent years. In 2023, 10 516 messages written by young people were published, which is over 200 more than the previous year. In order to provide a safe, equal and open space for young people, common rules for all, proper moderation, adult presence and quality control are needed. Particular attention was paid to the recruitment and training of YouthNet's volunteer moderators, as well as to clarifying the rules of the discussion forum. The moderators read every message posted on the forum and, if necessary, moderate posts before they are published. When messages are reviewed and published rapidly, the forum remains active and visitors stay interested. Messages that raise concern are handled by MLL's Child and Youth Helpline workers. Young people are aware that the discussion forum includes a section called "Päivystäjä mukana keskusteluissa" ("Worker on call"), where their messages are always answered by an MLL worker.

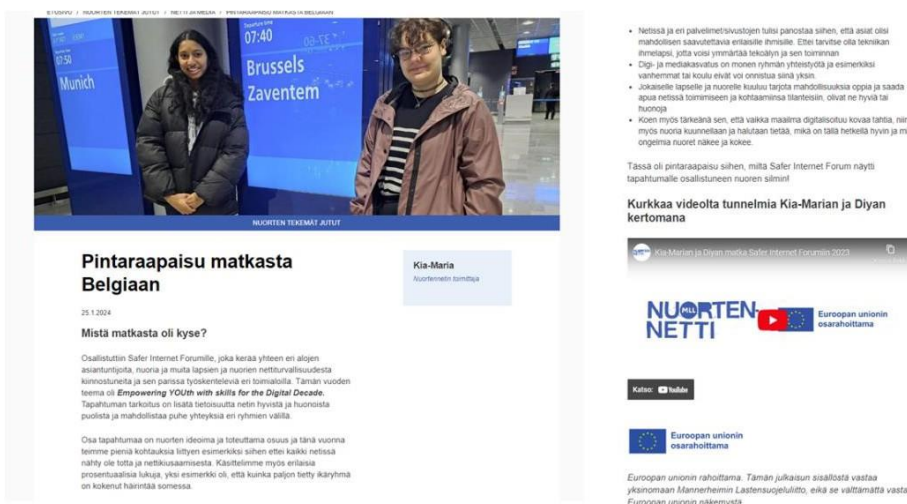
The discussion forum is moderated by young adult volunteers who are interested in the lives of young people and want to do meaningful volunteer work. Some of the volunteer moderators are studying for a degree in education and guidance, and they receive study credits for their work on YouthNet. Quick moderation has a direct impact on the activity of the discussion forum. The sooner the messages are published, the more messages will be posted on the forum. Due to the popularity of the discussion forum, YouthNet's group chats were discontinued, and moderators received additional training to develop and strengthen their guidance work. Moderators were given the chance to suggest what topic or theme they would like to receive further training on. Gender diversity emerged as one of the most desired topics for training.

Serial stories that young people wrote together in long discussion threads were among the new trends emerging on the discussion forum in 2023. Forum participants talked about dating, gender, relationships, studying and their own body. It is worth noting that the number of serious and worrying messages increased in 2023.

Young people in the Safer Internet Forum Youth Panel

The Safer Internet Forum is an international conference organized annually by the EU that brings together policymakers, researchers, authorities, young people, teachers, NGOs and the like to discuss the latest trends related to children's online safety. A Youth Panel is formed for the Safer Internet Forum, and its purpose is to get the policymakers to listen to young people's own ideas and wishes for a safer internet.

Two YouthNet editors participated in the Youth Panel and in the Safer Internet Forum held in Brussels in October 2023. The main theme of the Youth Panel was *Empowering Youth with Skills for the Digital Decade*. During its own program, the Youth Panel talked about children as users of social media and the criteria for safe internet use. YouthNet editors created content based on their experiences and opinions for the YouthNet website, providing insight on the panel's themes also to their peers.



Pintaraapaisu matkasta Belgiaan

Kia-Maria
Nuorten verkkosivustojen

25.1.2024

Mistä matkasta oli kyse?

Osaillistuttiin Safer Internet Forumille, joka kerää yhteen eri alojen asiantuntijoita, nuoria ja muuta lapsien ja nuorten nettivarmuudesta kiinnostuneita ja sen parissa työskenteleviä eri toimialoilla. Tämän vuoden teemana oli *Empowering Youth with skills for the Digital Decade*. Tapahtuman tarkoituksena oli lisätä tietoisuutta netin hyödyistä ja huonoista puolista ja mahdollistaa puhe-yhteyksiä eri ryhmien välillä.


Osa tapahtumaa on nuorten ideoina ja toteuttamana osuus ja tänä vuonna leimme pieniä kohtauksia liittyen esimerkiksi siihen ettei kaikki netissä nähty ole totta ja nettikiuskaamisesta. Käsitteimme myös erilaisia prosentuaalisia lukuja, yksi esimerkki oli, että kunkin paljon tettei käyrimiä on kokonuu hainntää somessa.




- Netissä ja eri palvelimet/sivustojen tulisi parantaa siihen, että asiat olisi mahdollisen saavutettavissa erilaisille ihmisille. Ettei tarvitse olla teknikan ihmeessä, jotta voisi ymmärtää tekniikan ja sen toiminnan.
- Digi- ja mediakasvatusta on monien ryhmien yhteistyötä ja esimerkiksi vanhemmat tai koulu eivät voi onnistua siinä yksin.
- Jokaiselle lapselle ja nuorelle koulussa tarjota mahdollisuuksia oppia ja saada apua netissä toimimiseen ja kohtaamiseen tilanteissa, olivat ne hyviä tai huonoja.
- Koen myös läsnäni sen, että vaikka maailma digitalisoituu kovaa vauhtia, niin myös nuoria kuunnellaan ja halutaan tietää, mikä on lähtä hetkellä hyvin ja mitä ongelmia nuoret näkee ja kokee.


Tässä oli pintaraapaisu siihen, mitä Safer Internet Forum näytti tapahtumalle osallistuneen nuoren näkökulmasta.

Kurkkaa videolta tunnelmia Kia-Marian ja Diyan kertomana

Kia-Marian ja Diyan matka Safer Internet Forumiin 2023

NUORTEN NETTI  **European unionin osarahoittama**

Katso:   

 **European unionin osarahoittama**

European unionin rahoittama. Tämän julkaisun sisällöstä vastaa yksinomaan Mannerheimin Lastensuojeluliitto, eikä se välittämättä vastaa European unionin näkemystä.

Figure 5. Content created by YouthNet's young volunteer editors on Safer Internet activities.

YouthNet visitor survey

In addition to open feedback and data collected on the experiences and encounters of young volunteers, the overall performance of the YouthNet service is assessed annually through an open visitor survey. The visitor survey is used to map out the user group's thoughts on the functionality, topicality and development of the YouthNet website. The visitor survey is carried out using a Webropol questionnaire, and it is widely promoted on the YouthNet website, in its social media channels and in schools. A total of 144 young people responded to the survey in 2023.

The respondents can be divided into three age groups, with the largest group being those that are 13–15 years old.

Mihin seuraavista ikäryhmistä kuulut?

Vastaajien määrä: 144

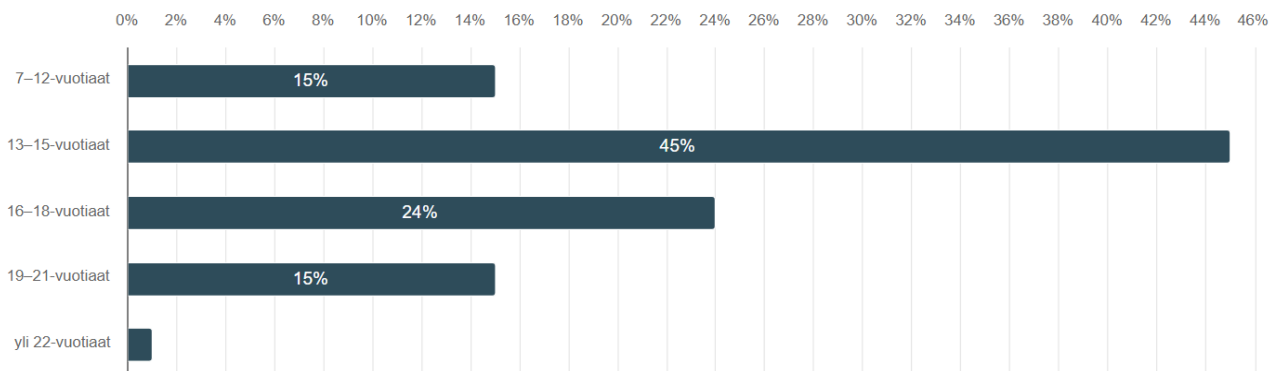


Figure 6. YouthNet user survey

What content found on YouthNet are young people most interested in?

For some respondents, this was their first time seeing the survey and visiting the YouthNet website, so we decided to add a question to the survey that would encourage them to explore the site. Respondents told us what kind of content on the YouthNet website they found the most interesting. Responses were split evenly between three types of content: The discussion forum (25%), tests (22%) and informative content (20%). The Child and Youth Helpline, chat and correspondence service were also popular.

Tutustu Nuortennetti.fi -sivuun muutaman minuutin ajan.

Avaa Nuortennetti.fi uuteen välilehteen tai toisella selaimella, jotta voit helposti palata takaisin tähän kyselyyn.

Mitkä sisällöt olivat kiinnostavimpia?

Vastaajien määrä: 144

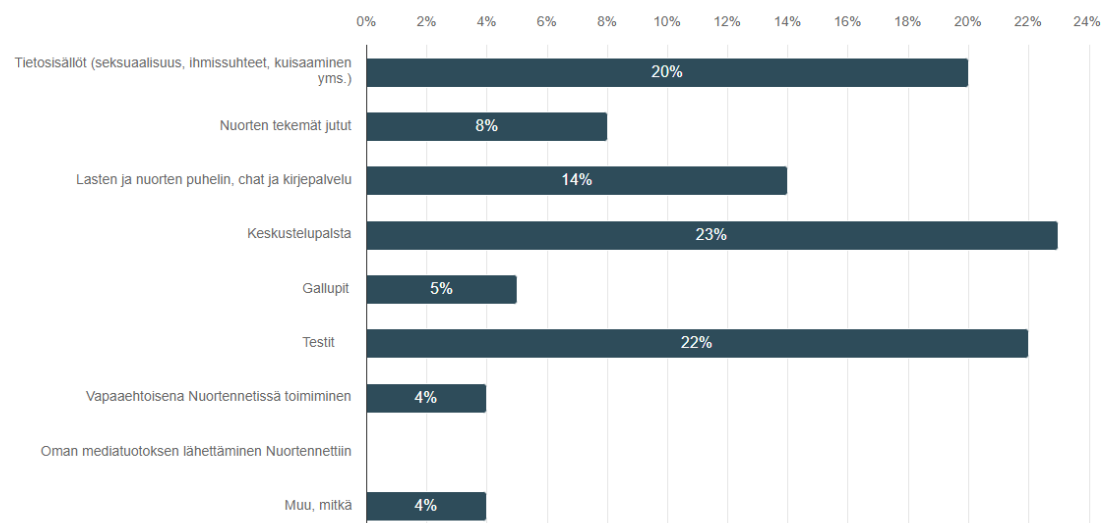


Figure 7. YouthNet user survey.

What would young people like to see on the YouthNet website?

Young people expressed a wide range of ideas in their open responses. Some respondents felt that the YouthNet website had pretty much everything they needed, while others wanted more art content or more articles written by young people. We did receive some

similar responses related to interesting content for young people, however:

"There could be more games and the like on YouthNet, preferably something we could play to pass the time instead of providing information."

"More competitions."

"More tests and polls."

- Open responses from the YouthNet user survey.

Technical functionality of the website and how likely visitors are to recommend the website to others.

The survey also asked respondents to rate the functionality of the website and how likely they would be to recommend the YouthNet website to others. The functionality was rated on a scale of 1 to 4, and the average score was 3. The likelihood of recommending the website to others was rated on a scale of 0 to 10, and the average score was 7.5. Overall, respondents found the content on the YouthNet website to be interesting, and no particular topic or theme was mentioned a significant number of times in the open answers where respondents could point out shortcomings and suggest ideas for improvement.

The visibility of YouthNet is evaluated every year through a series of polls for young people. 3 627 young people responded to the survey on young people's media use. 41.2% (1 494) of the respondents had heard of YouthNet, and 36% (1307) were familiar with the YouthNet discussion forum.

Survivor online groups for victims of bullying

"I learned how to deal with the difficult emotions caused by bullying and to accept the fact that I have been a victim of bullying. I have also realized that I'm (unfortunately) not the only victim, and that bullying is not my fault. Joining the group and actively participating in it has got to be one of the best decisions I've made."

- Feedback from young people who participated in the online group in autumn 2023.

The "Selviydytään kiusaamisesta" ("Surviving Bullying") project is part of the Survivor online groups' activities coordinated by MLL's district organization of Järvi-Suomi. It offers local peer support and individual counseling for young people aged 12–21 who have experienced bullying, as well as training for professionals who work with young people.

The Survivor online group for victims of bullying found on YouthNet is intended for young people aged 12–21 who have experienced bullying and want to share their experiences with other young people who have faced bullying. They can do this remotely, from the safety of their own home, for example. The group aims to reinforce the things that have been undermined by bullying and provides young people with a safe peer group. Each young person interested in the group was interviewed beforehand to ensure that the group was suitable for them. Four young people aged 13–19 participated in the group in autumn 2023. The group met online for nine weeks. The group was supervised by an MLL worker and a social work student.

Various online environments and social media are an essential part of life for almost every single young person. The majority of the young people who had experienced bullying had also experienced bullying online. The creation of fake accounts, hateful comments, various

deepfakes, harassment and sharing photos without permission are unfortunately common phenomena. The Survivor online peer groups give young people a chance to share their experiences with peers also when it comes to cyberbullying. The aim of the group is to strengthen the self-esteem and lift the spirits of young people who have experienced bullying, as well as to provide them with ways of dealing and coping with bullying experiences. By the end of the group, all participants had more courage to express their opinions and ideas, had more positive thoughts about themselves and were more optimistic about the future than at the start of the group.

"I learned how to find different strengths and ways to deal with difficult emotions. The emotions evoked by my bullying experience are empowering. My main thought is that it's now all in the past, and I'm now focusing on the future."

- Feedback from young people who participated in the online group in autumn 2023.

Strengthening young people's digital skills in schools

A total of 101 media education-themed lessons were organized in 2023, reaching 6 658 pupils in total. The themes of the lessons were the relationships between media use and well-being, such as balanced media use, the effects of media use on sleep and concentration, social media and friendships on social media and in games, digital gaming, sexual harassment, cyberbullying, war and the constant flood of news. The lessons involved discussion and activities whenever the group size and the space allowed this. Feedback on the lessons was collected from pupils, and a total of 598 pupils answered the feedback questionnaire. Of the respondents, 94% felt that, after the lesson, they knew well where to seek help and support regarding the topics discussed during the lesson. 82% felt the lesson gave them something new to think about.

The MLL Peer Student Program is implemented in more than 93% of Finnish upper comprehensive and comprehensive schools, and there are around 11 000 peer students in schools in any given year. Peer students attend media education-themed further training events every year (11 training events, 219 peer students). The training deals with friendship skills on social media and in games, as well as with media use that enhances well-being. Support material for the Peer Student Program is produced annually to help give lessons, raise awareness and organize campaigns. Every year, peer students host media education-themed morning assemblies in their schools, in addition to campaigns and lessons for the pupils in their school.

During the entire project period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2024, MLL organized a total of 361 media education events. 11 712 children and young people as well as 9 224 adults (parents' evenings and professional training) took part in the events. With funding from the EU, MLL held a total of 40 free media education training events across Finland. In addition to these, schools were also able to order an MLL instructor to give similar lessons at their own expense. Instructors were ordered at www.mll.fi/tilaakouluttaja.

The "Läppä lentää" digital learning game was produced in autumn 2023, and it was played by 623 teams. The game deals with online bullying, digital friendship skills and respectful encounters. The game was tested by a group of young people who gave feedback on it. The feedback was used to improve the game to meet young people's needs.

Survey on young people's media use

MLL regularly conducts various surveys for young people to ensure that their voice is heard and their ideas are included in MLL's advocacy and development work. The survey on young people's media use was conducted in November 2023. The aim of the survey was to find out how young people use media and what they think about their digital lives.

"It's important that the opinions of us young people are heard and appreciated."

"Hopefully this survey will make a difference."

"This survey made me think about what is acceptable and good on the internet, so I can say it was really useful!"

Conducting the survey. The survey was conducted in November 2023, and responses were collected through schools, educational institutions, the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (MLL), as well as YouthNet and its social media channels. A total of 3 627 young people aged 9–22 responded to the survey. However, the majority of the respondents (83%) were aged 13–17.

Many young people would like to reduce their media use. More than two thirds (69.1%) of young people who took the survey estimated that they spend three hours or more per day on social media services or playing digital games on weekdays. Compared to MLL's Cyberbullying Survey conducted in 2021 (N=1123), the proportion of young people who spend three hours or more per day on social media or playing digital games on weekdays has decreased from 88% to 69%. Correspondingly, the proportion of young people who spend approximately two hours per day on social media services or playing digital games has increased by more than nine percentage points compared to the 2021 Cyberbullying Survey. The proportion of young people who spend one hour or less per day on social media or playing digital games has also increased from 2% to over 3%. The young people who responded to the survey were fairly critical of their own use of time in digital environments. 34.8% of young people say that they would like to reduce their use of the internet or a particular service, and 7.8% say that they have already consciously done this. In contrast, 41.7% of young people feel that the number of hours they spend on social media, playing digital games and generally being on the internet is at an appropriate level. 11.5% of the respondents say that they do not think about how much time they spend in digital environments at all.

"Life is better when your phone isn't constantly vibrating in your pocket and you don't have to think about what's going on online. Being phone-free is wonderful."

Experiences of exclusion and loneliness have increased. Young people's feelings of loneliness and exclusion related to social media use are very much visible in their responses. As many as one in four young people (26%) say that they feel lonely or left out when they see pictures on social media of situations that they were not involved in, for example. In addition, a quarter (26%) of young people say that they often think that their life is boring compared to others. 16.9% of young people feel that they are missing out on something important if they do not follow their social media channels every day. In the Media Survey conducted by MLL in 2018 (N=1554), 16% of young people said that they felt lonely or left out when they saw posts about situations that they were not involved in. This means that young people's feelings of loneliness and exclusion related to social media have increased by as much as 10 percentage points. The pressure related to social media is also reflected in young people's responses. 31% of young people who took the survey said that they have felt pressure to look good in their

social media photos. 26.7% of young people said that they do not feel any pressure related to social media. In their open responses, young people said that they need to be critical of social media content in order to avoid the pressure related to one's appearance created by social media.

"The different beauty standards created and perpetuated by social media can be a big risk for young people's mental health, as they are typically prone to comparing themselves to others and trying to be a part of the "crowd".

"Many social media celebrities edit their photos, which gives young people the idea that they have to look a certain way. It gives the wrong impression to many and adds to the pressure to look a certain way."

Young people's wishes for adults. According to the survey, young people's media use puts some strain on their family life and their relationships with their guardians and other adults close to them. In particular, young people want adults to understand how important being active in digital environments is for young people's social lives and identities. Several respondents talked about how adults think that almost everything young people do on their phones is pointless and harmful to them. Young people emphasize that they also use their phones for important things like studying, reading and relaxing, and they hope that adults would understand this as well. Young people also wish that families could talk about media use in an appropriate and respectful way, instead of imposing one-sided restrictions on screen time and having constant arguments.

"It's important for adults at home to care about and be interested in young people's internet use instead of just banning everything. Two-way communication clears things up, and it's more helpful than bans."

"I think adults should teach young people how to behave and act on social media right after they get their first phone."

"Adults rarely offer help or support, because it's difficult for them to understand that times have changed."

Adults' media use may also be a source of frustration in families. 9.5% of young people who responded to the survey said that their parents' phone use bothers them. In their responses, young people also voiced concerns over the media use of children younger than themselves and about how young they are when they get their first mobile phone and start using the internet by themselves. Young people are particularly concerned about children coming across harmful content online or finding out how to buy drugs, for example.