

## GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

# DIGITAL FOOTPRINT



### What is a digital footprint?

A digital footprint encompasses all the traces we leave online: posts, comments, photos, searches, registrations, and even location. It can be:

Active (something posted consciously)

Passive (data collected without our knowledge, such as cookies or geolocation)

### How important is it?

A digital footprint is a permanent and significant part of our identity in the online world. Everything we post – photos, comments, personal opinions, and even searches – can be saved, shared, or found years later. This digital trail often remains even after the post itself is deleted, because other users, search engines, or automated systems can copy or archive it.

For young people, this means that the actions they take today – even if done without bad intent – can have consequences for:

- School admissions or scholarships
- Job opportunities and interviews
- Personal and online safety
- Reputation among peers, family or future professional circles

### How does a responsible digital footprint differ from a risky one?

Not every post or online expression is inherently harmful. It is perfectly legitimate to share an opinion, to discuss social issues critically, or to express disagreement with someone's actions or attitudes. Such critical speech can contribute to public dialogue and civic awareness.

But the difference lies in the tone, intent, and purpose of the message. When your post focuses on ideas, policies, or actions – that is critical thinking. When you target individuals, insults, ridicule, or discriminatory comments, it becomes a problematic footprint that can affect your online reputation.

A responsible digital footprint reflects maturity, respect, and the ability to engage in dialogue – qualities that are valued in every context, from school to the workplace.

The Internet remembers not only what you think, but also how you say it.

### The digital footprint – your permanent online trace

Everything you post online – a photo, a comment, a like or a search – leaves a trace. Even when you delete it, it may already be saved, shared or indexed. Your digital footprint is part of your online reputation and can affect how others perceive you – today and in the future.

Many young people are unaware that something that seems insignificant or funny today could hurt them tomorrow – when applying for a job, enrolling in school or building trust. That's why it's important to develop awareness: the internet doesn't forget.

**Think before you post. What you leave behind online can follow you forever.**

# More about the digital footprint



## Legal Framework and Challenges Related to Digital Footprint in North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, the protection of personal data and digital identity is regulated by the Law on Personal Data Protection, which is aligned with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). According to this law, every person has the right:

- to know what data about them is collected,
- how it is used,
- how long it is stored,
- and to request its deletion (the “right to be forgotten”).

However, in practice there are challenges, especially in education and the youth digital space:

- Many young people are unaware that their posts and online activities can be misused or permanently stored.
- There is a lack of systematic education on digital literacy and privacy.
- Some applications, games and networks do not comply with data protection standards.

Supervisory institutions (such as the Agency for Personal Data Protection) have limited capacities for education and control of foreign platforms.

### What can young people do?

Knowing your digital rights is the first step. Every child and teenager should know that they have the right to privacy, to control their own data, and to a secure digital presence.

**A DIGITAL FOOTPRINT IS NOT JUST A PERSONAL TRACE**

**it is part of the legal and social reality in which we live.**

### What can parents and educators do?

Although digital footprints are personal, adult support plays a key role in how young people understand and manage their online presence.

Here are some practical steps:

#### 1. Talk, not control

Create a space for open dialogue. Instead of bans, talk about the consequences of online behavior.

#### 2. Be a role model

Demonstrate responsible use of the Internet and social networks - children learn by observation.

#### 3. Educate them about the permanence of content

Explain that anything posted online can remain permanently accessible, even after it is deleted.

#### 4. Encourage critical thinking

Teach children to ask themselves: “Who can see this?” and “What would this look like in five years?”

#### 5. Advocate for digital literacy in schools

Work with teachers and institutions to include digital ethics and privacy in curricula.

