



# ONLINE CHILD SAFETY

Preventing Violence against Children in the Digital Environment

## SUMMARY

Millions of children around the world use the internet for education, as a source of information, to connect socially with others, and for entertainment. As information and communication technologies (ICTs) get more advanced and cheaper, more children are getting online. While the internet holds so much promise for everyone, it is not a safe place for children, which calls for strategies, policies and safeguards to ensure child protection. This reader is based on a review of literature on the potential of the internet to impact children positively, the risks of child abuse and exploitation it poses, and the strategies and policies to ensure children are safe online.

**Keywords:** Child protection, cyberbullying, digital environment, digital parenting, internet governance, prevention, violence against children

## Introduction

Today, many children around the world from different social-economic backgrounds and of various ages are using digital devices to connect to the internet. As information and communication technologies (ICTs) get more advanced and cheaper, more children are getting online. While connecting to the internet is in itself valuable for children owing to the educational benefits it gives, this also poses dangers for children given the potential for child abuse in the virtual world. This means that parents, teachers, school administrators, child protection actors, businesses, governments and international institutions all have a role to ensure children are safe in the digital environment.

## The challenge and the dilemma

Target 16.2 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides for ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children by 2030. The agenda to end violence against children (VAC) is clear and one that states are committed to.

However, the same SDGs provide for universal access to the internet. Specifically, Target 9.c provides for states to 'significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020'. This calls for the expansion of broadband to reach the unconnected in the developing world where most of the world's children live.

### Box 1: Digital parenting

The second edition of the [Internet Literacy Handbook](#) (2017) developed by the Council of Europe provides the notion of digital parenting as guiding parents who were born before the digital age (digital immigrants) in understanding what their children who are born in the digital age (digital natives) are doing today. The goal is to protect children, empower parents and keep the communication open between both parties.

Digital parenting is:

- open communication with children about Internet risks and benefits
- regular involvement in children's Internet activities
- active protection of children's digital reputation and digital identity
- learning with children the opportunities that the Internet can present
- protecting children from the dangers that the Internet may pose
- bringing your offline parenting skills to the online world

'Offline' parenting should not be viewed as separate from 'online' parenting.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), more than 50% of the world's population is now online. By the end of 2018, an estimated 51.2 per cent of the global population, or 3.9 billion people, were using the internet. The strongest growth was reported in Africa, where the percentage of people using the Internet increased from 2.1 per cent in 2005 to 24.4 per cent in 2018 (<https://news.itu.int/itu-statistics-leaving-no-one-offline/>).

Children are prolific users of the internet and are more than 30% of internet users, according to UNICEF's report [The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a digital world](#) (globally 1 in 3 internet users is a child). By 2022, another 1.2 billion new users will have been added to this figure, with children being the fastest-growing online demographic. Even the world's least-developed countries are on course to have universal mobile Internet coverage within the next few years.

Furthermore, the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, in its September 2020 report [The State of Broadband: Tackling digital inequalities](#), has set itself the targets of ensuring that, by 2025:

- 75% of the world's population will be online.
- 60% of all children will have at least basic digital proficiency
- Broadband-Internet user penetration should reach 75% worldwide, 65% in developing countries, and 35% in least developed countries
- All countries should have a funded national broadband plan or strategy, or include broadband in their universal access and services definition

## **What children face online**

The ever-growing access to the internet highlighted above means that children around the world are exposed to risks and harms online, and these are likely to increase if nothing is done to protect children. The Broadband Commission has documented the risks and harms to include:

- Sexual abuse, exploitation, and trafficking.
- Online harassment, victimization, and cyberbullying.
- Exposure to misinformation and age-inappropriate content, such as pornography or violence.
- Apps and games that are designed to encourage unhealthy habits and behaviours.
- Exposure to violence, hate speech and online abuse materials.
- Falling victim to illegal or unethical data harvesting and theft.
- Radicalization and recruitment by extremist organizations.

## **Interventions, mechanisms and measures to keep children safe online**

The risks and harms children face in the digital environment bring into sharp focus the need for internet governance, defined by UNESCO as “the complementary development and application by governments, the private sector, civil society and the technical community, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and activities that shape the evolution and use of the internet.” Examples of actions and initiatives to ensure the safety of children online include:

- Some countries have put in place a regulatory framework to control the online space. For example, the UK and Australia have developed mechanisms for creating a safe environment for children on the internet, and appointed special commissioners in charge of protecting children's rights in the digital space.
- The Council of Europe developed [guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment](#). The purpose is to, among others, guide states in formulating legislation, policies and other measures to promote the realization of children's rights in the digital environment, and address how the digital environment affects children's well-being.
- [The WePROTECT Model of National Response framework](#) and the [Children's Rights and Business Principles \(CRBP\)](#), developed by Save the Children, UNICEF and UN Global Compact, and the [ITU's Child Online Protection](#) guidelines.
- Companies like [NetClean](#) have developed tools that help detect images and videos of child sexual abuse on computers in business environments.
- The [NGO Thorn](#) developed a tool that can be deployed directly onto a company's platform to identify, remove and report child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Thorn also organizes hackathons to fight child sexual abuse and exploitation.
- Microsoft has developed [PhotoDNA](#), a tool that creates hashes of images and compares them to a database of hashes already identified and confirmed to be CSAM.
- Social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and Google work closely with law enforcement, governments and NGOs to develop tools and approaches for combatting child abuse and exploitation online.

African Governments and all stakeholders engaged in protecting children and promoting their rights can learn from these initiatives to ensure the risks and harms the internet poses are addressed.

### Further Reading

Livingstone, S et al. (2015). One in Three: The Task for Global Internet Governance in Addressing Children's Rights. Global Commission on Internet Governance: Paper Series. London: CIGI and Chatham House. Available at: <https://ourinternet.org/publication/one-in-three-internet-governance-and-childrensrights/>

Releasing children's potential and minimizing risks: ICTs, the Internet and violence against children produced by the Office of the SRSG on Violence against Children in 2014

Child Online Safety: Minimizing the Risk of Violence, Abuse and Exploitation Online. October 2019 Report of the Broadband Commission

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### Box 2: Making the digital world safer for all children

The [Child Online Safety: Minimizing the Risk of Violence, Abuse and Exploitation Online](#) (2019) report produced by the Broadband Commission working group on Child Online Safety recommends, among others:

- Incorporating the rights of the child into national broadband strategy and all other relevant areas of national policy.
- Ensuring products and services designed for children by public or private sector, or an NGO have children's rights at the heart of their operating principles.
- Working with private-sector, civil society, subject matter experts and partners in developing online children's rights standards for the respective jurisdictions.
- Developing ways to engage relevant local stakeholders in campaigns against harms such as child exploitation and other online children's rights issues.