Child safety and well-being online

Taken from Children's Rights: Political will or won't? Eurochild 2023 report on children in need across Europe.

Policy recommendations

Based on the input from Eurochild members included in this sub-report, Eurochild calls:

On policy-makers at EU and national level:

- To keep the political momentum to **mainstream a child-rights based approach into digital legislation** and policy at EU and national level;
- To **ensure additional robust legislation that holds platforms accountable for protecting children from online harm**, especially cyberbullying and child sexual abuse, and paying special attention to avoiding hubs of impunity for perpetrators in neighbouring countries;
- To **work on the implementation and enforcement of already existing policies**, in particular the Digital Services Act at EU level, the LOPIVI in Spain and the Online Safety Bill in the UK at national levels;
- To increase investment in digital literacy and skills programmes, while ensuring a multi-stakeholder approach to **digital literacy and skills that empower children to exercise their rights online**, going beyond online safety and the remit of education;
- To **ensure national policies and provision of services supporting children's wellbeing are well equipped to address online harm** and support the effects of digital technologies on the mental health of children; **working in close collaboration with civil society** organisations, reinforcing the protection services provided by them at national level;

On online service providers:

- To **comply with existing legislation** at EU and national level, while **harnessing good practice** and inter-industry learning on protecting and empowering children online;
- To **assess and mitigate the risks of their design and main features on children from a child-rights based perspective**, minimising the use of persuasive and addictive design;
- To **promote high standards of safety and privacy by design** for children, accounting for the full spectrum of their rights as laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, their autonomy and evolving capacities.

Paving the way to realise children's rights online in Europe

Introduction

This report compiles information on children's rights in the digital environment extracted from Eurochild's 2023 report on children in need across Europe, "Children's Rights: Political will or won't?". The information presented here is based on assessments provided by 32 Eurochild members in 22 countries and territories[1].

As children across Europe live in an increasingly digitalised world, society adapts to respond to emerging challenges. While online environments bring many benefits for children in terms of development, socialisation, and educational opportunities, they also create a new set of challenges to be tackled. Eurochild members report that **children are increasingly at risk online,** with disastrous repercussions on their mental health and general well-being.

This section will outline existing good practices in different participating countries and analyse the main risks highlighted by Eurochild members in terms of online child safety, and their repercussions on children across Europe.

First encouraging steps

The omnipresence of internet services and digital devices in children's lives has made online platforms and services play a core role in their development. In 2022, 96% of children in the EU used internet services daily, compared with 84 % of the whole population, according to Eurostat. Following this, Eurochild members working on safekeeping children's rights in the digital environment welcome the increased attention given to the topic of digital wellbeing and safety.

The Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation (HCR) notes that the **Hungarian** government has put up strong online child safeguard policies to report and punish cybercrimes more efficiently. Similarly, **Germany** recently reformed its Protection Minors Act in 2021, making important contributions to protect children's rights in the digital environment. The Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC) underlines **Cyprus'** government's efforts to inform and protect children online, investing in helplines, trainings, and creating a dedicated police unit, alongside tight cooperation with civil society. **Turkish** member Hayat Sende Youth Academy Association highlights as good practice a national awareness campaign on online child safety, which is also aimed at educating children and teachers at school.

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[1] Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine and Wales. To see the full list of members who contributed, please read the full report.

Eurochild members in Wales, Northern Ireland, and England[2] appreciate the efforts made with the **UK** Online Safety Bill, which will mandate online platforms to take extra actions to protect children such as identifying and removing illegal and harmful content, including child sexual abuse material. Eurochild members call for a quick adoption and enforcement by the UK government.

Ireland has implemented a new Online Safety and Media Regulation Act in 2022, which establishes an Online Safety Commissioner in charge of developing safety codes and frameworks. These frameworks will serve as guidance for online platforms to comply with national and EU laws and follow child protection regulations. This is of key importance given that many large online platforms are based in Ireland. Alongside our member the Children's Rights Alliance Ireland, Eurochild had the opportunity to provide input on an online safety code for video-sharing platforms, where we encouraged building upon the existing focus on inappropriate content by including preventative measures from harmful contact and conduct online, among others.

Eurochild's Portuguese, Maltese, and Bulgarian[3] members highlight their national government's involvement with the **Safer Internet Centres (SIC)**, co-funded by the EU, which provide trainings for parents and teachers and share resources to raise awareness on online safety. The SIC collaborates with civil society and public services providing information centres, helplines, hotlines and child/youth participation services in Europe. For example, Eurochild members in six countries[4] underline the collaboration between civil society organisations and national authorities to train police forces on online safety and child protection. This cooperation strengthens the detection and reporting of online harm against children, and empowers children online by giving them the tools and knowledge to enjoy the internet safely.

Main concerns in the digital environment

Despite some encouraging first steps taken by national governments supported by civil society organisations, important threats to online child safety are highlighted by Eurochild members.

The primary issue raised is **cyberbullying**, ranging from insulting messages and hate speech to harassment, spreading rumours, and mockery in online spaces. It affects an alarmingly number of children online: the *Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society* displays in a survey that one out of three children in Malta suffered from cyberbullying, half of them from people they knew. Seven of our members[5] participating in the full report underline cyberbullying in their country as the most pressing issue children face in the digital environment. The problem is widespread in group environments such as schools, friend

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[2] Children in Wales; Children in Northern Ireland; Children's Rights Alliance for England.
[3] Sergio Costa Araujo (Individual member), Instituto de Apoio à Criança & Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso for Portugal; Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society for Malta; Hope and Homes for Children, The Know-How Center for Alternative Child Care, New Bulgarian University (nbu.bg) & The National Network for children for Bulgaria.
[4] Belgium, Cyprus, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain.
[5] Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Malta.

groups and sports teams, and has disastrous repercussions on children affected by it. Cyberbullying is facilitated by the anonymity that online environments provide and the digitalisation of society seems to have exacerbated a pre-existing problem of bullying.

A second dramatic issue reported by Eurochild members is the widespread increase in **child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE)** online, under all its different forms, including grooming and sextortion, the dissemination of Child Sexual Abuse Material, etc. This cybercrime is mentioned explicitly by seven of our members[6], warning about its rise in Europe and calling for measures to protect the children and prosecute offenders online. For instance, Finland's *Central Union for Child Welfare* stated that 62% of Finnish children say they have been contacted by an adult online, an increasing number over the past years.

However, this problem is not one of the EU alone. If legislation is only implemented within EU borders, neighbouring countries risk becoming a safe haven for child abusers online, as the *Child Rights Centre Albania* notes for the Balkans. The organisation pinpoints the need for strong laws to fight child sexual abuse online, a growing problem also in the Balkan region, and to harmonise them across Europe to protect all children equally.

Overall, Eurochild members in this report called for policy makers to push for a strong Regulation combatting CSA that efficiently prevents, detects and removes the sexual abuse of children online in Europe.

Thirdly, Eurochild members raised concerns around the **digital wellbeing** of children. As noted by the *Association Latvian Child Welfare Network*, children's mental health has worsened since the Covid-19 crisis due to isolation and an increase of screen time, affecting their online wellbeing ever since.

As online platforms' business models most often rely on addictive and persuasive features to maintain the engagement of their user base, we are witnessing an increase in the cases of children suffering from mental health issues. *The Smile of the Child* in Greece warns that 46% of children undergo excessive screen use and have lower levels of general well-being[7]. Similarly, the *Association Latvian Child Welfare Network* raises the concern about the unregulated addictive features used by online platforms. The European Parliament has recognised the special toll such designs have on its users, especially children, and leads to severe mental distress: addictions, attention disorders, anxiety, and depression.

The **gender dimension** affecting online child safety has also been highlighted by our members from Greece and Spain[8], the latter warning that among 3500 complaints filed to the police by children in 2020, more than 2000 were from girls. Cybercrimes disproportionally affect young girls, especially sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and grooming. However, gender norms also affect boys differently when recognising and reporting abuse.[9] It is urgent to address this gender dimension and make the internet a

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[6] Belgium, Albania, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Spain, Ukraine.
[7] Nationwide Survey on School Bullying in Greece, 2023, The Smile of the Child.
[8] FEDAIA; Plataforma de Infancia.
[9] Global Boys Initiative, ECPAT International.

safer place for all children, protecting their right to enjoy the internet without discrimination.

These four main considerations underlined in this report display the areas that need attention to create a safer, enjoyable, and positive online experience for children. At Eurochild, we believe **children's right to privacy, safety and participation must also be guaranteed online**. Safeguarding these rights is key to ensure a better, safer and more inclusive online experience for children. This will only be possible through a comprehensive approach, built hand in hand with civil society and children themselves, taking into account digital designs that empower children and respect their right to privacy and safety by design.

The way forward: investing in education and building robust legislation

In the country reports from Eurochild's 2023 report "Children's Rights: Political will or won't?", **two key recommendations** stand out as main tools to empower and protect children in the online environment: investing in **education** to raise digital awareness, and building holistic **legislation** that respects children's rights and best interests.

The importance of education

Children's overall experience in the online environment relies partly on their digital skills and media literacy levels. It is essential for children, parents, teachers, and practitioners to have the knowledge and skills needed to support children's needs online.

Ten Eurochild members [10] bring up the importance of **investing in multi-level education in digital literacy** to protect children online, referring to children, parents, teachers and police. Our Serbian members, the *Network of Organisations for Children* and *Pomoc Deci*, highlight research by UNICEF that shows that 86% of children in Serbia use the internet daily, but that many lack the knowledge on how to report harmful content and seek help.

Though children and parents are willing to learn more about online safety, they lack the means to acquire this expertise. Some encouraging initiatives to train children on online safety and raise awareness on privacy and online harm have been highlighted by members in six countries[11], mainly through schools and community events.

For instance, The *Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society* promotes digital awareness among professionals and volunteers working with and for children and parents via the Promote Online Protection Project — P.O.P-Up. In Belgium, the Wallonia government launched a media education plan aimed at developing the critical thinking of children applied to the digital environment. In Slovenia, our member *Association of Friends of Youth (SAFY)* welcomes the Spletno Oko initiative from civil society, which facilitates the identification, reporting, and prevention of child sexual abuse images.

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[10] Turkiye, Slovenia, Serbia, Romania, Portugal, Malta, Latvia, Finland, Belgium, Albania.
[11] Belgium, Germany, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia, Hungary.

However, in many cases these programmes are still lacking funding, attention, and standardisation, and need to be coordinated, strengthened, and widespread around Europe.

As raised by the _Fairstart Foundation from Denmark_, another worrying issue is the **lack of professionals trained to tackle the effect of online harm** on mental health and wellbeing, despite the increasing problem in recent years. Similarly, our Bulgarian[12] members mention that the quality of helplines, authorities and organisations to protect children online has deteriorated due to lack of funding and qualified staff. The _Child Rights Centre in Albania_ echoes the lack of training of authorities to address online child safety.

Overall, it seems like there is a **need for more investment in education and social services on digital literacy and wellbeing not only for children but for practitioners themselves**. At Eurochild, we therefore call on national governments to promote children's rights and agency online by providing quality education and mental health support services to children, caregivers and professionals.

The importance of legislation and policy

Eurochild members in thirteen countries call for legislative reforms and new laws to protect children from harm online.[13] Systemic approaches aiming to create safe digital spaces and going beyond awareness raising are needed at national level.

The _Association Latvian Child Welfare Network_ denounces that the actual safety of children on the internet depends entirely on the knowledge, actions and capacity of parents, with no guidance nor support from the State. Eurochild's Spanish members _Plataforma de Infancia_ and _FEDAIA_ mention some steps such as the LOPIVI law in Spain, which covers online violence, while highlighting it as a first step of many that need to be taken to ensure children are protected from online harm. This is echoed by our members in Belgium[14], who welcome the decree on audiovisual media combatting harmful content, but insist that more must be done to efficiently protect children. Along these lines, Eurochild Portuguese members[15] recommend their national government to implement a National Strategy with an action plan to safeguard children's rights in the digital environment. The _Child Rights Alliance in Ireland_ also mentions the importance of providing enforceable guidance to online service providers through online safety codes, such as the one being currently developed for video-sharing services.

Eurochild members in Northern Ireland, Slovenia and Spain also explicitly call legislators to **hold online platforms and services accountable** for their users' safety and privacy. For example, the _Slovenian Association for the Friends of Youth_ call for a more systemic and targeted approach with legislation that goes beyond awareness raising. _Plataforma de_

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[12] Hope and Homes for Children - Bulgaria, Know-how Centre for Alternative Care for Children, New Bulgarian University, and the National Network for Children.
[13] Albania, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Ukraine, Wales.
[14] A Little Lining comes, L'Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance & the Flemish Child Rights Coalition
[15] Sergio Costa Araujo (Individual member), Instituto de Apoio à Criança & Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso.

Infancia and *FEDAIA* noted that future laws on the protection of children in the digital environment must consider the General Comment 25 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. *Children in Northern Ireland* call online platforms to stop exposing children to preventable abuse and ensure their products no longer contribute to serious harm to children, which is echoed by our Spanish members.

The EU has recently prompted several regulations to address children's experiences online, such as the Digital Services Act that mandates online platforms to implement high standards of privacy, security and safety for children and bans the use of profiling of children for advertisement purposes. Nonetheless, more needs to be done in that direction by providing concrete and enforceable guidance on how to implement existing legal provisions and by building concrete legislation to cover all forms of harm children experience online, including addictive designs and child sexual abuse.

Child participation is also brought up as a core principle to build efficient and respectful legislation by our members from Cyprus, Portugal, and Wales[16]. As laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), European policy makers must hear children's input, opinions, and needs, and take them into account when drafting policies that affect them. This is reinforced by UN General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in the digital environment. Eurochild member Children in Wales showcases a good practice from Wales, as children provided comments to the Welsh action plan on youth digital education to adapt to the latest technology and challenges, a welcomed input we encourage to normalise in Europe.

Overall, there is a clear need for robust legislation and policy to protect children's rights in the digital environment, including risk assessment obligations, removal of harmful content and stronger support measures for children. This must be done in consultation with children, following the Better Internet for Kids+ strategy and the UNCRC.

Eurochild believes that children must be recognised as full rights holders in the digital environment, and should not be the sole responsible for their online safety and wellbeing. Building digital literacy and skills of children must go hand in hand with **safety-by-design and robust legislation** that upholds children's rights online.

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[16] This includes the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC) for Cyprus, Instituto de Apoio a Criança for Portugal, and Children in Wales.

Key Takeaways

In the Eurochild 2023 report on children in need across Europe, "Children's Rights: Political will or won't?", members have highlighted that:

1. The three main issues on children's online safety are **cyberbullying**, **child sexual abuse and exploitation**, and **digital wellbeing of children's mental health.** These were reported to be on the rise with dramatic repercussions on children's development.

2. The issue of online child safety is starting to become salient among policy makers and online service providers, but **more still needs to be done** in terms of child protection and inclusion. Participating members in the report have noted the importance of **digital education** and **strong legislation** to build better digital spaces for children.
   - It is important to **raise awareness** with children, parents, teachers, practitioners and authorities on how to **empower children online** as digital users while better equipping the ecosystem working to protect children online.

Efficient legislation which holds online platforms accountable for not only reporting and removing harmful *content*, but also for the *design* of their digital services, is key to provide a better and safer internet for children. Legislation and policies should be drafted by listening and including children's views.

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