

Speaking up for change

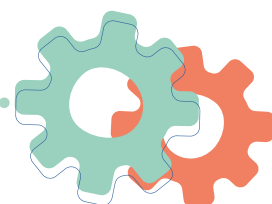
Children's and caregivers' voices for safer online experiences

Executive Summary

Introduction

In today's ever-changing digital world, understanding children's online experiences is key to ensuring they are safe online. As outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to express their views and these views must be taken into consideration in all matters that affect them. Moreover, children are immersed in the online world every day. Thus, they possess a wealth of critical knowledge and experience that is essential for informing effective policies.

ECPAT International, Eurochild, and Terre des Hommes Netherlands, on behalf of the Down to Zero Alliance, designed the VOICE project to listen to and understand children's and caregivers' perspectives on online safety and bring them into policy debates. The aim is to shape effective digital policies that are tailored to children's needs.



Methodology

The VOICE steering group collaborated closely with national implementing partners to select and prepare the participants. In total, 483 children aged 11 to 17 across 15 countries in Europe, Southeast Asia, and South America were engaged. The implementing partners primarily reached out to children via existing programs and schools associated with their organisations, with each participatory focus group discussion being attended by an average of 11 children. The children's average age was 14.5 years, with a gender distribution of 53% girls, 44.7% boys, and 2.3% non-binary. Caregiver consent and children's assent were mandatory for participation. The survey methodology involved the survey company Savanta, who engaged a diverse group of caregivers across the selected countries, resulting in 6,618 respondents.

Limitations

It is important to consider several limitations of the study that may have impacted the results:

- Distinct data collection methods for children and caregivers resulted in non-comparable datasets;
- Respondents were mainly from European countries, which complicates regional comparisons;
- Due to time constraints, the findings were only validated by facilitators and not by the participating children;
- The methodology did not allow for demographic characteristics such as age and gender to be analysed separately, meaning that findings are presented in general terms.



Key insights from children and caregivers

What children are saying about their online experiences

The children consulted reported that they enjoy and value online communication and opportunities, especially when using social media. However, they were not oblivious to the risks associated with the online world. In fact, children expressed concerns about the effects that their online activities have on their mental health, including when confronted with harmful situations. In this respect, they were particularly worried about how their pictures, videos, and other personal information could be shared or used online without their consent. They seemed to express more concern about the in-person consequences of online harm as opposed to harm that remains confined to the online space. Their primary worries revolved around experiencing and trying to avoid contact with unknown persons with bad intentions and the misuse of their personal information. When prompted about detection technologies and other technical measures to ensure child safety online, some children also referred to online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA).

The research shows a significant gap amongst children and caregivers when it comes to how to remain safe online. Children did not seem to understand safety and privacy as two mutually exclusive concepts but as being essentially interlinked. To prevent or respond to risky scenarios, children explained that they tend to use strategies for self-protection, including in-platform safety mechanisms such as reporting and blocking features. On the other hand, caregivers seemed confident that children would reach out to them if anything dangerous happened online. In addition, despite proposing different strategies, both groups saw themselves as those most responsible for online safety, with both children and caregivers tending to underestimate the responsibility of technology companies and governments.

Children's voices matter

Children's voices are essential to shaping policies that protect them online. They are asking for knowledge and appropriate tools to navigate the online world safely. All while their privacy must be guaranteed and their agency promoted. This study collected insights from children and caregivers that can be used to inform digital policy across various levels of governance, paving the way for safer online experiences. The children and caregivers involved shared three main key messages:

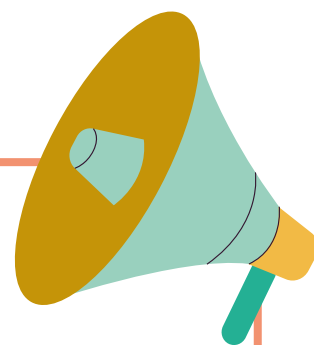
- They want more information about online safety;
- They want both privacy and protection from harm;
- They want to be involved in addressing online safety concerns.



Children’s and caregivers’ knowledge of online safety

Children showed a high tolerance for online risk. They seemed aware of online risks, and yet **only 10% of them reported feeling unsafe**. Some seemed to be “desensitised” to being exposed to online risk and harm, normalising its occurrence. Because of this high tolerance, **children may underestimate risks and overestimate their ability to cope with them**. To some, the risks are automatically accepted as soon as they decide to use a social media platform. Sometimes, children even viewed social media and safety as mutually exclusive.

There is a **big gap between caregivers’ perceptions of children’s online behaviour and the reality**. Most caregivers (almost 90%) believed that they were somewhat aware of their children’s online behaviour. However, as is consistent with other studies, many children reported that their caregivers were not fully aware of their online activities and preferred to keep certain aspects private. The caregivers surveyed felt very confident about their knowledge of how to keep children safe online, but were less confident when it came to online sexual abuse. This overconfidence amongst caregivers was identified as a potential risk factor, as it suggests an underestimation of different types of online risks.



CALL TO ACTION

Children and caregivers urge schools, platforms, and governments to offer them more information on online safety, such as comprehensive education on the subject, better user awareness, concrete and child-friendly suggestions on how to stay safe online, and child-friendly features on online platforms, thus facilitating their online experiences.

The intersections between privacy and online safety

Children repeatedly associated the concept of privacy with the importance of data protection, **emphasising that privacy is ensured when their personal information is protected online**. Any disclosure of personal data and information is perceived as a breach of their privacy, highlighting the importance of privacy settings and data protection measures. They understood privacy measures as having solid passwords and not sharing personal information online.

When asked about online safety, children referred to **personal safety and personal data security**. For example, they expressed the understanding that online safety is ensured by preventing information and pictures from being shared online without their consent and having strong passwords and other data safeguards in place. **Children tended to view privacy and online safety in a similar way, which is interconnected with the idea of protecting personal data and information**.



Having assessed the children's understanding of privacy and online safety concepts, the research aimed to understand their attitudes towards online safety measures. In this context, children often expressed uncertainty in defining these measures but seemed to understand the underlying technological concepts. They referenced practical examples such as age verification, parental controls, reporting tools, and safety-by-design approaches.



Protecting online safety while preventing and combatting child sexual abuse online

When engaging children in discussions about online safety and privacy, children did not explicitly mention specific issues related to online child sexual abuse and exploitation. They might have been hesitant to vocalise these concerns, instead using euphemisms like “weird,” “strange,” or “unpleasant,” which potentially encompass a range of harmful experiences, including child sexual abuse and exploitation online.

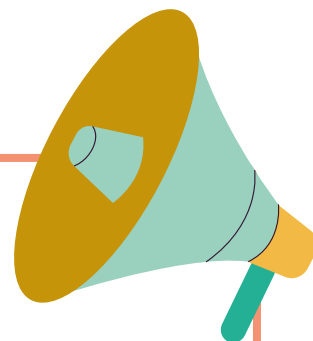
Regarding online safety measures, children did not appear to have a full understanding of the technological aspects related to preventing and combating online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Caregivers instead were asked to what extent they believe current safety measures are protecting children from online sexual exploitation and abuse. Less than half thought that such measures protect children. This highlights the immense burden of responsibility that falls on caregivers, who feel they cannot trust online safety measures to contribute and protect their children from harm.

While caregivers tend to prefer online safety over privacy if there is a potential risk, children expressed a preference for a balance between privacy and protection.

Overall, children called for a balance between privacy and online safety. **Children seemed to be in favour of online safety measures that prioritise their protection without compromising their privacy, leaning towards safety-by-design approaches** such as measures that prevent them from seeing inappropriate content online, automatic filters for friendship and message requests, and the ability to easily block and report content. Parental supervision was welcomed to some extent, but in the context of the children's desire for privacy regarding their online experiences, they emphasised the need for clear boundaries.





CALL TO ACTION

Children and caregivers want platforms and governments to take more responsibility to guarantee their privacy, protection, and safety online. This should include implementing effective sanctions for wrong-doers, improving online platforms' accountability around online risks, and better supervision of online content. Both children and caregivers want platforms to protect them from harm, which can be achieved via safety measures and secure settings, such as age verification and warnings about grooming and data misuse.

Sharing responsibility for child safety online

When talking with children and caregivers about online safety and their strategies to ensure this, it was evident that **both groups see themselves as those most responsible for ensuring child safety online**, which is in accordance with much of the existing literature.

In particular, **children expressed concerns regarding the ways in which platforms are currently designed**. Three out of four children participating in the focus group discussions said they know what to do when they are bothered online. Most children indicated that it is their own online behaviour that increases their sense of safety online. Such behaviours included being mindful of what they post, censoring their content, and actively utilising the safety features provided by platforms, if available. It can be argued that children taking on this sense of responsibility is closely linked with an underestimation of what online platforms and governments can do. In turn, items related to platform design were often identified as decreasing their sense of safety. It was indeed recognised by most children that some **platforms make it difficult for them to implement safety settings**.

Children reported mixed feelings when asked whether methods such as censoring their content online and actively utilising safety features provided by platforms worked. They expressed concerns around people creating new accounts after being blocked, platforms ignoring reports, and feeling conflicted about blocking or reporting an individual who is a family member or friend.

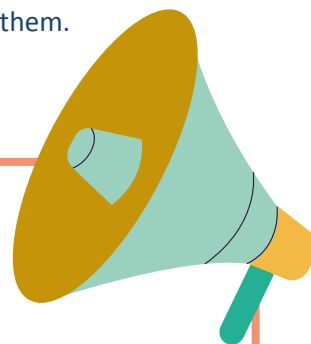
When asked about caregivers' strategies to ensure children are safe online, they primarily mentioned **parental-control tools**, even though two-thirds of the caregivers included in our study said they did not use parental-control apps. The second most common strategy mentioned by caregivers was **talking with children about their online experiences and providing advice on how to prevent risk**. Caregivers said they mostly gathered information from the news and other people's experiences, which they then convey when talking to their children about online safety.



issues. From the research it emerged that, often, caregivers do not have adequate knowledge and, thus, rely on their peers and the media. In addition, caregivers highlighted the importance ensuring a safe home environment **where children can easily share their experiences**.

The children who participated in the VOICE project reported being aware that in-person support exists, such as reaching out to a caregiver. However, **only around 40% of children said that it was easy for them to talk to their caregivers about online safety and risks**. They highlighted several barriers to talking to caregivers about these issues, including feeling uncomfortable, fearing potential restrictions and their caregivers' reactions, and thinking caregivers would not understand. Moreover, children said that they were instead more likely to go to siblings, teachers, or friends.

Most caregivers start discussions about online safety when their children are around 10 years old. However, the research found that children often start using social media before they reach this age, potentially accessing platforms that are not suitable for them.



CALL TO ACTION

Children expressed a strong preference for online safety measures that promote user agency (e.g., pop-up warnings that present children with choices while raising their awareness) and believed that they should be involved in the design of such features and policies.



Towards action

Children and caregivers highlighted a need for more awareness and information, privacy-preserving online safety measures, and participation and inclusion. Responding to the findings, **the VOICE partners call on governments, regulators, and online platforms to:**

1. Enhance children's and caregivers' online knowledge and resilience through better education and information on online safety;
2. Ensure online services do their utmost to reduce the risk of harm to children.

Legislative and regulatory measures are key to fostering a culture of collective responsibility and to safeguarding the online well-being of every child.

We call on governments and regulators to:

- **Establish harmonised legal obligations** to ensure child safety online for all platforms;
- **Mandate the adoption of approaches that are safe by design for all platforms** as informed through consultation with children;
- Integrate **children's rights in all digital policies** ;
- **Consult children** in the drafting, implementation, and review of digital policies;
- **Implement measures that improve children's mental health** as a result of their interactions online;
- **Develop and strengthen online safety education programmes** in schools, encouraging co-creation with children;
- **Design community-level interventions** to increase knowledge and education around safety online for children and caregivers;
- **Introduce mechanisms to assess online risks** to children and resilience to online harm through constant dialogue with children and risk assessments provided by online platforms.



Focus on EU-targeted actions

- As part of the Better Internet for Kids+ Strategy, initiatives should be implemented with the aim to **create safer digital experiences, empower all children to be safe online, especially the most vulnerable, and promote their active participation** ;
- The **accountability of online platforms should be enforced** through policies and legislation in order to keep children safe online.



Online safety measures are key to creating online environments that emphasise the positive experiences children have while drastically reducing the risk of harm.

We call on online platforms to:

- **Assess the risks** children face when using their platforms and adopt safety measures accordingly;
- **Create secure digital environments** for children in which their online safety is closely interlinked to the protection of their personal data and information;
- **Adopt a safety-by-design approach** by ensuring accessible and child-friendly safety and privacy settings;
- **Involve children** in the design of online services and their safety features;
- **Provide comprehensive information and transparency regarding** the risks involved in using their platforms and the safety measures they have put in place in response.

Finally, child protection organisations should continue to actively engage with children and bring their voices into policy debates. In addition, they should continue conducting research and implementing project activities that work *with* and *for* children.

Closing remarks

The VOICE report underscores the need for collective action and the pivotal role that each stakeholder — whether they be a policymaker, online platform, educator, caregiver, or child rights and child protection organisation — plays in safeguarding children’s rights in the digital realm. Together, we can pave the way towards safer experiences for children both on- and offline.

ECPAT International, Eurochild, and Terre des Hommes Netherlands call on all readers to reflect on the children’s views expressed in the VOICE research and work together to make the online world a better place for all kids.



The VOICE project is an initiative of the *Step Up the Fight Against Sexual Exploitation of Children (SUFASEC)* programme from the Down to Zero Alliance in partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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The opinions expressed in this document belong solely to the VOICE partners. Support from the donors and partners listed above does not constitute endorsement of the views expressed.

We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to our esteemed national implementing partners across the 15 countries involved in the study whose local expertise significantly contributed to the successful execution of the research. In addition, we would like to express our sincere appreciation for the invaluable insights provided by the children involved, highlighting the importance of amplifying the voices of those directly affected by digital policies.*

**ECPAT Austria, The Association for Community Development in Bangladesh, Terre des Hommes Netherlands' Bangladesh Country Office, Fundación Munasim Kullakita, ECPAT Brasil, The National Network for Children, Society "Our Children" Opatija in Croatia, Estonian Union for Child Welfare, Terre des Hommes Italia, Malta Foundation for Wellbeing Society, Terre des Hommes Netherlands, The Center for Empowerment and Development (CoPE), ECPAT Philippines, Bidlisiw Foundation, Instituto de Apoio à Criança, Terre des Hommes Lausanne's Romania Country Office, FAPMI, and The Life Skills Development Foundation.*

