

Children's Rights in the Digital Environment

Eurochild priorities for 2024 – 2029

The new mandate starting on 2024 is an opportunity to build on the achievements of the last five years and put children's rights in the digital environment at the centre of the political agenda of the European Union. The EU has taken big steps forward in protecting children online – ranging from the work with Safer Internet Centres under the Better Internet for Kids+ Strategy to the provisions for Safety-by-design for minors under the Digital Services Act (DSA). However, the challenges children face online have kept evolving and, in some cases, increasing. This is why the EU and its Member States must continue to ensure all children can access safe and empowering digital experiences, and that all of their rights are protected and promoted online as they are offline.

Eurochild and the 12 signatory members below, call on the new European Commission and Members of the European Parliament to:

- 1. Continue the implementation of existing policies and regulations, most notably the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the AI Act**, providing flexible and technologically-neutral compliance guidelines and technical standards for online platforms to ensure all provisions related to children are duly enforced homogeneously across the EU, avoiding possible fragmented and diverging approaches.

- The European Commission should develop **the necessary guidelines and technical standards to advance in the implementation and enforcement of all provisions related to children under the DSA, notably articles 14, 28, 34 and 35**. Guidelines applying to article 28.1 should be based on the UN General Comment No. 25 and existing best practices and instruments enshrining its principles, while ensuring extensive stakeholder consultation. In particular:
 - specific provisions should be made to include child rights impact assessments in minimum requirements to audit compliance with article 34,
 - and technical standards on *inter alia* age appropriate design frameworks, child rights impact assessments, age-appropriate and child-friendly terms and conditions, and/or age assurance shall be developed
- Ensuring a coherent framework of **minimum standards for the provision of age-verification mechanisms and age assurance**, including through technical standards mentioned here above. Avoiding the possible fragmentation of age assurance approaches among Member States is paramount.
- Support and accelerate the development of concrete, **clear and harmonised guidelines on how to apply the GDPR to children**, notably by the European Data Protection Board, and based on existing best practices and internationally recognised standards such as the Irish Fundamentals on children's rights online, the Swedish guide on the rights of children and young people on digital platforms, the Dutch Children's Code, and the UK ICO's Children's Code.
- Ensure the development of the necessary guidelines, codes of practice and codes of conduct for the **effective implementation and enforcement of the AI Act for children's rights**, notably the prohibition of the exploitation of vulnerabilities based on age (art. 5), the special consideration of children's rights in the risk assessment of high-risk systems (art. 9.8) and general purpose AI systems, as well as the possibility to submit all systems impacting (or posing specific risks to) children to the more stringent due diligence. In addition, identify and build

on the AI's potential for child protection and empowerment, i.e. supporting helplines and hotlines work.

2. With the rise of AI-generated child sexual abuse material and children entering online spaces at a younger age, **the EU must level up the fight against child sexual abuse online**, including by ensuring strong criminal legal frameworks at national level and homogenous action at EU level to enable online platforms to prevent and stop the dissemination of child sexual abuse on their services.

- Finalise the revision of the Directive to combat child sexual abuse to ensure it accounts for the specific considerations on how technology facilitates this crime as well as new online forms of crime, including adjusting the terminology to the Luxembourg Guidelines and homogenising the definitions of new forms of child sexual abuse, reinforcing the roles of child helplines and hotlines, providing equal penalties for online and offline forms of child abuse, and deepen into the principles of child-friendly justice. It is imperative that this revision covers technological developments in a technology-neutral and future-proof way.
- Ensure a child-rights based and enforceable Regulation to combat child sexual abuse online – it is imperative that the Regulation enables the detection, reporting and removal of all child sexual abuse online, in respect of the principle of the best interests of the child.

3. As part of the **Better Internet for Kids+ Strategy**, implement initiatives focusing on promoting age-appropriate experiences for children, and promoting active participation of children.

- Advance the work on a **Code of Conduct on Age Appropriate Design**, which is urgently needed to provide companies with agreed frameworks to improve the design of their services for children. The Code should aim above all at empowering children online, recognising the full spectrum of their rights as laid down by the UNCRC General comment No. 25 on children's rights in the digital environment. It should notably focus on:
 - child-centred, child-rights based design, fostering age-appropriate experiences, and ensuring the meaningful participation and inclusion of children in its drafting, application by companies and regular evaluation.
 - enshrine and develop business responsibility and accountability, without shifting burdens on children, parents or teachers while allowing for companies' diverse approaches and innovation to promote all their rights, by design and default.
- As highlighted by Eurochild members in [Paving the way to realise children's rights online](#) in Europe, cyberbullying is still one of the main concerns children face online. It is therefore crucial to reinforce the network of child helplines and hotlines across the EU to ensure that all children have equal access to quality support services at national level.
- Use the relevant instruments to protect children from manipulative practices and potentially addictive game design features.
- Promote research with children and young people to develop a deeper understanding of their needs in the digital environment and identify relevant good practice beyond risk (i.e., on help-seeking behaviours). In addition, there is a need for more statistical data on children's exposure to risk online, the effect of digital technologies on their wellbeing and digital habits, which would allow for better policy monitoring and design.

4. Develop the protection of children as consumers, by addressing their specific rights and vulnerabilities and the heightened risks stemming from digital services and products, notably in the implementation and enforcement of consumer law and in the context of the upcoming Digital Fairness Fitness Check.

- Ensuring an effective and coherent enforcement of the General Product Safety Regulation, including by providing guidance on the need to take into account the (mental) health risk of children posed by digitally connected products and ensure that the products, including software, meet the highest standards of safety, security and privacy by design.
- Ensuring a swift adoption of the Toy Safety Regulation, including in its scope the need to assess the impact on mental health of digital and connected toys, and including games and software;
- Prioritise the protection and promotion of children’s rights in the upcoming **Digital Fairness Fitness Check**, notably by:
 - (i) recognising children’s specific rights and vulnerabilities as set out in EU and International law, notably the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its General comment No. 25 as regards the digital environment;
 - (ii) ensuring that all products and services likely to be accessed by or impact on children meet the highest safety standards by design and by default, including games, applications and software, to address instances of risk to children's physical and mental health and safety that are not covered by the DSA or other legislation;
 - (iii) prohibiting commercial and/or practices such as persuasive, behavioural and addictive design that exploit the vulnerabilities of children and undermine their rights, both as users and as creators, notably by streamlining and strengthening the legal framework on dark patterns and all gambling-like features or functionalities, including on video-games;
 - (iv) Prescribe comprehensive risk assessments covering content, contact, conduct, contract and cross-cutting risks to both the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children, and considering system design; ensure that regulators have a duty to investigate on behalf of children in the case of evidence of abuse of their rights and in cases of suspected breaches of children’s rights, reverse the burden of proof onto the commercial actor to demonstrate compliance.

5. Enhance coordination between and within the different institutions, directorates, units and teams working on children’s rights and digital policy, to enshrine and mainstream children’s rights across digital policy. This should be done at least by:

- (i) appointing a children’s rights adviser on children’s rights online, responsible for streamlining children’s rights in the work of DG Connect;
- (ii) establishing a regular and ongoing mechanism for the European Parliament, the European Commission and EU Council to consult with organisations representing children and/or ensuring child participation on issues related to child safety and empowering online;
- (iii) strengthening the position and portfolios of liaison officials for children’s rights in the European Commission and the European Parliament, and appoint them if non-existent within Commissioners’ cabinets and European Parliament’s Committees secretariats; (iv)

initiating the reforms necessary to establish an EU child ombudsman, and/or specific and dedicated teams within pertinent EU bodies (Ombudsman, Public Prosecutor's Office, etc.).

6. Encourage **national education policies and programmes** that build the capacity of education systems to harness the potential of digital services and products, including data gathering for educational purposes. As highlighted by Eurochild's recent research with children '[Speaking up for change](#)', online safety education programmes tailored to the real experiences and needs for children are acutely needed across the EU. These must cater for the specific needs and situations of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of children. Expand training opportunities for professionals working with children to ensure that they are equipped with adequate and up-to-date knowledge on children's needs in the online environment.
7. Build **synergies across the EU by properly resourcing and scaling grassroot initiatives** successful in realising children's rights in the digital environment, identifying these through comprehensive stakeholder engagement at national level. Some good practice from Eurochild members has been gathered in Annex I

Signatory members of Eurochild

5 Rights Foundation

Børns Vilkår

Central Union for Child Welfare Finland

Defence for Children - ECPAT the Netherlands, as member of the Dutch Children's Rights Coalition

Fondazione S.O.S – il Telefono Azzurro

Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation

Instituto de Apoio à Criança

Maud Stiernet, individual member of Eurochild

Polina Klykova, individual member of Eurochild

Society "Our Children" Opatija

Terre des Hommes Netherlands

The Smile of the Child

Annex I. Good practice

Country	Initiative/Project: what is it about? Who was it targeting? What was the main result achieved?
<p>Croatia [Society “Our Children” Opatija, 2020/2021]</p>	<p><i>Click and participate in your community</i> - The project aimed to develop and improve activities that contribute to improving the quality of life of children in cities and municipalities with an emphasis on the active participation of children in the life of the local community with improving and developing skills important to digital citizenship.</p> <p>Digital citizenship is a concept that enables students, technology leaders and parents to understand what students / children / technology users should know about the appropriate use of technology. By helping children develop skills important to digital citizenship, we will set them on the path to becoming responsible citizens not only in school or while playing, but also in the digital world.</p>
<p>Croatia [Society “Our Children” Opatija, 2020]</p>	<p><i>Activate the change in your community</i> - For the development of civic competence, it is not enough for children to only know human rights, political concepts and processes, but it is necessary to enable them to practice democratic principles within school life and their social community. With this project we wanted to provide education for children’s rights, democratic and digital citizenship to children members of NEF, councilors and mentors of Children’s councils through non-formal education. The results of the planned activities were: Educational interactive online workshops “I shoot from knowledge”; Online campaign “Children’s rights in the first place”; Online meeting of NEF members with decision makers at the local, national level and EU parliamentarians from Croatia.</p> <p>By participating in project activities, beneficiaries will increase civic and digital competencies, we will sensitize children and adults to the need to involve children in decision-making processes from the local to the EU level. The project will contribute to the networking of NEF members and councilors of children’s councils from various parts of Croatia and EU.</p>
<p>Denark [Børns Vilkår]</p>	<p>Informing advocacy with child helpline data - Børns Vilkår collects data of how children use their helpline to inform their activities, especially to identify tendencies and the topics that matter to children. They do it through 3 channels: (a) counselling sessions, including the topics the child talked about and anonymized geographical data (e.g. age, sex, whether they were referred on to others etc.); (b) surveying children (normally 9 – 14 years old) through ‘school panels’ on an array of topics including violence and mental health - approx.. 1.100-3.000 answers; (c) through workshops in schools to listen to the opinions of children.</p>
<p>Greece [The Smile of the Child]</p>	<p>The Interactive Educational Tool against Cyberbullying, addresses students 10-15 years old and aims to create a unified European response to document and manage the phenomenon of bullying and cyberbullying in all its modern forms. It also consists on a European campaign to inform children, parents, teachers and all stakeholders about the problem, with a series of videos that present an incident of cyberbullying from the perspective of the child who bullies, the child who is bullied and the observer. Similarly, the CONVEY programme aims to prevent sexual abuse and harassment, as well as to help eliminate violence against women and girls through raising awareness of gender stereotypes and sexism on social media. It</p>

	<p>consists of an Interactive educational tool, Training the trainers programmes, an online simulation game and youth awareness workshops.</p> <p>Child-led campaigning is also a good practice to showcase. YouSmile - the European Student Volunteer Network of The Smile of the Child was created by and is made up of young people who decide and carry out actions to raise awareness of children's rights, including on Internet safety through social research, information actions and campaigns.</p>
Greece [The Smile of the Child]	<p>Training parents and teachers on online safety</p> <p>“Next to Parents: Internet Safety” consists on interactive prevention interventions for parents and guardians of students of all educational levels with topics related to Internet safety. “Training Seminars for Teachers about Internet Safety” consists on a similar intervention but for teachers of all levels of education.</p>
Hungary [Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation, 2023]	<p><i>The Hintalovon Academy</i> offers online and in-person training sessions and e-learning courses for professionals (social workers, educators, lawyers etc.) and responsible adults on various topics related to children’s rights. The training programmes emphasize both theoretical and practical knowledge acquisition, while also aiming community building and mindset shaping.</p>
Ukraine [Stop Sexting, 2022, represented by Polina Klykova, individual member of Eurochild]	<p>VR quest on child sexual abuse - Before the war escalation, a few locations in different cities hosted the exhibition on Children’s online safety in the context of CSAM and VR quest as a part of this exhibition (as well as informative posters). It was available for children over 13 and it would immerse the user in the role of a teen who experiences sextortion and would allow the user to make choices (storytelling). Psychologist support and special safeguarding was put in place. Feedback gathered from the users showed that for children, it worked as a way to show how to seek for help in those situations, while for adults, it was useful to experience the situation from the teen’s perspective.</p>
Ukraine [Stop Sexting, 2022, represented by Polina Klykova, individual member of Eurochild]	<p>Building the awareness and skills of the most vulnerable children</p> <p>Specific materials on children’s online safety with focus on child sexual abuse prevention adapted for different ages (i.e., for the younger children it consisted on a book “fairytale”) and for children with disabilities (adaptable to specific children’s abilities by their caregivers or any professional working with them).</p>