



INDUSTRY TOOLKIT ON
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND
DIGITAL MARKETING

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for every child

STEP 1

Understand





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Introduction to this toolkit

This [toolkit](#) is designed as a step-by-step guide to support businesses to develop responsible digital marketing practices that respect children's rights. It offers key recommendations that all companies should consider when developing or reviewing their digital marketing practices.

The [toolkit](#) explains why taking a child rights-based approach to digital marketing is vital – not only for protecting children, but also for building responsible and sustainable businesses. The recommendations focus on a child rights due diligence approach, helping businesses prepare for new trends and technologies while aligning with international standards on responsible business conduct.

1.1 Background

The [toolkit](#) adopts a forward-looking approach, grounded in child rights principles, to guide businesses in navigating emerging regulatory landscapes. The foundations for this approach are built on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).

The [toolkit](#) is not designed to be an auditing tool, and it does not ensure compliance with any specific regulation.

The recommendations in the toolkit are built on research of over 48 existing regulations across diverse contexts, including tech-specific regulation, consumer law, corporate accountability regulation and sources of international human rights law. In many cases, recommendations in the toolkit expand on the requirements of current laws in various jurisdictions and adhere to international law standards.

See [Figure 1](#) below for some of the legal sources used for the recommendations in this toolkit, with examples from the EU context.



To learn more about the research underpinning this toolkit, refer to 'Children's Rights and Digital Marketing: Summary of impacts and emerging trends in regulation and industry practice'. This summary along with all elements of the toolkit are available [here](#).



Figure 1

Select sources for recommendations on children and responsible digital marketing, including examples of regulation drawn from the EU context



1.2 Using this toolkit

This toolkit is designed to guide companies through a process of identifying and integrating action to embed child rights considerations through digital marketing practices.

It is structured around three steps:

YOU ARE HERE

1

Step 1
Understand

An essential starting point, Step 1 outlines the toolkit's purpose and the business case for respecting child rights in the context of digital marketing.

2

Step 2
Assess

Acknowledging that companies approaching the toolkit may be at various stages on their child rights journey, Step 2 consists of a self-assessment to determine whether the company is at a 'foundational' or 'mature' level of practice. The outcome of the self-assessment will guide companies to relevant recommendations in Step 3.

3

Step 3
Act

As shown in Figure 2 (below) the digital marketing ecosystem encompasses a range of diverse actors – and all of them bear responsibility to respect children's rights.

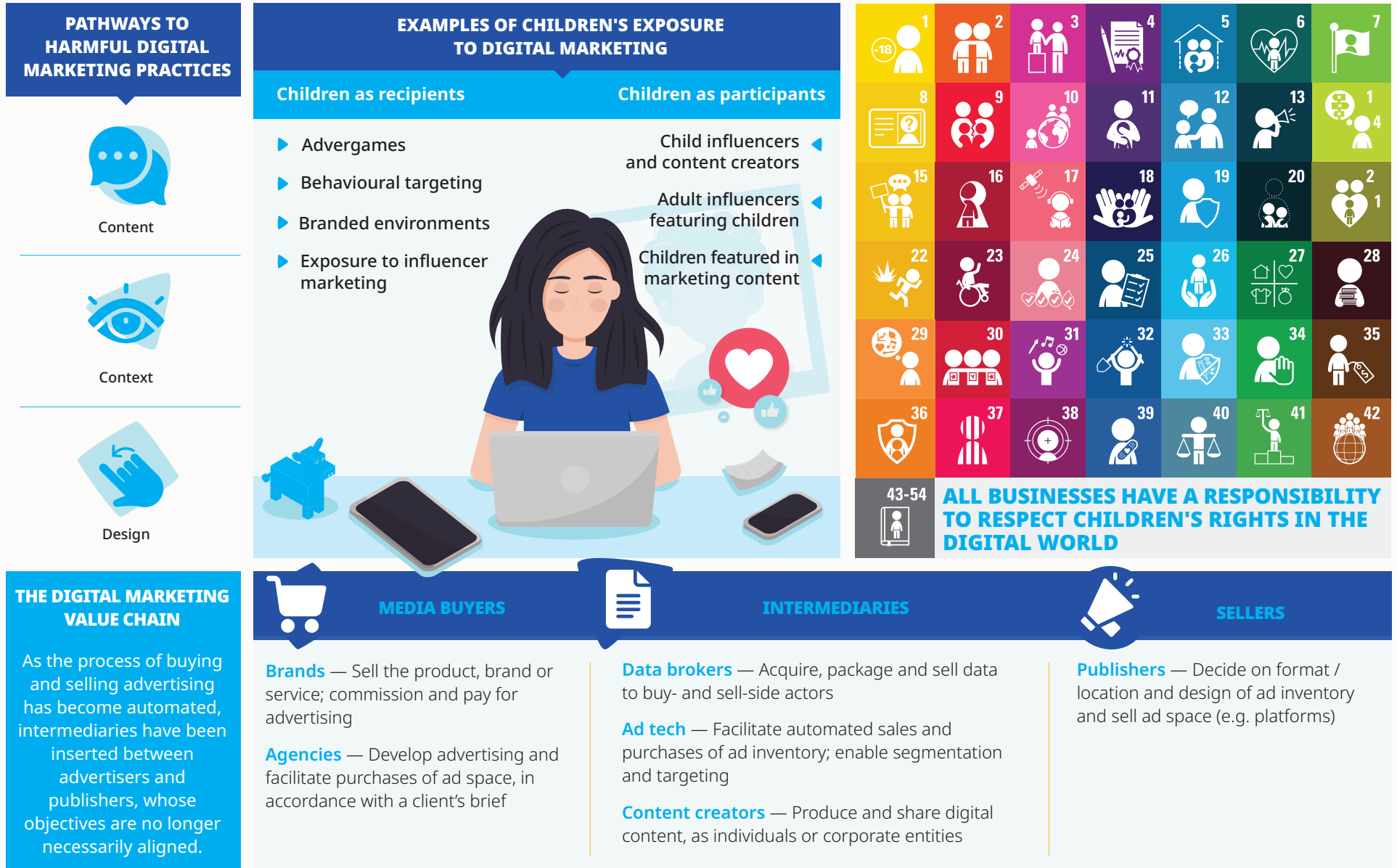
It is understood, however, that diverse actors have different roles and needs. Therefore, Step 3 contains guides for four specific categories of actors: brands, agencies, ad tech and platforms.¹ Each guide provides tailored recommendations and delves into actionable steps for companies to respect and support child rights based on results from the self-assessment.

All elements of the toolkit can be accessed [here](#).

The many interlinkages and interdependencies across the digital marketing value chain are also recognized. All actors are encouraged to consider how to deploy their leverage to promote improved practices across the industry.

Companies seeking to improve their practices can use the self-assessment tool in Step 2 to evaluate and track their performance over time and assess which areas require more attention.

Figure 2
The digital marketing ecosystem



1.3 The business case

Being proactive in efforts to respect human rights, including children's rights, benefits both rights-holders and companies. Businesses that prioritize child rights and champion children's well-being in relation to digital business activities, including digital marketing, can:



Mitigate risk and increase legal compliance

Applying a rights-based approach means prioritizing respect for human rights throughout a company's value chain and business relationships, minimizing risks to rights-holders and minimizing regulatory risk for companies.



Enhance reputation and consumer trust

Consumers are increasingly supportive of brands that demonstrate responsible business practices.²



Drive innovation and differentiation

Companies perceived as respecting children's rights can differentiate themselves in a crowded market and potentially create new market opportunities.³



Increase investor interest

Responsible marketing practices are a key component of responsible business conduct in the digital environment, which is increasingly recognized key issue by investors.⁴



Champion a better digital environment for children

Respecting child rights throughout digital marketing practices can positively influence peers and help advance industry standards at large.

Implementing this toolkit can support businesses along their journey to integrating responsible practices in the realm of digital marketing, while playing a positive role in creating a digital world that works for children.

2

Children's rights and digital marketing

While children can access many benefits and opportunities in the digital environment, they may also be exposed to numerous risks. Digital marketing can pose risks to children when deployed without adequate safeguards, particularly through formats that can obscure commercial intent and make informed decisions difficult.⁵

The often immersive, interactive nature of digital marketing – frequently enabled by AI and emerging technologies – can be used to take advantage of children through invasion of privacy, behavioural manipulation and techniques that may lead to overspending.⁶ Business interests can also be prioritized over children's well-being, for example, through persuasive design and data processing practices used to influence children's preferences and actions, as described in industry interviews during research conducted in the development of this toolkit in 2024.



For further examples of selected impacts of digital marketing practices on children's rights, [click here](#).

2.1 Impacts: Content, context and design

Based on a review of existing literature, this toolkit defines three primary sources of adverse child rights impacts related to digital marketing, namely harmful **content**, **context** and **design** choices (see Figure 3, below). Such practices raise serious concerns regarding failure to respect children's rights, including but not limited to their right to development, privacy, protection from economic exploitation and freedom of expression.⁷

Because the digital marketing ecosystem encompasses a broad range of companies (see Figure 2, above), the toolkit provides tailored recommendations for brands, agencies, ad tech providers and platforms.



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Figure 3

Impact of digital marketing on children: Understanding harmful content, context and design

Impacts on children as a result of digital marketing can be linked with:



Harmful content — *Harmful content is about the message and substance of the advertisement itself.*

Content featured in marketing communications, including imagery and messaging deployed, can be associated with harmful impacts on children (e.g., gender stereotypes).⁸ This category also encompasses the promotion of products and services harmful to children (e.g., unhealthy food)⁹ through digital marketing.



Harmful context — *Harmful context is not about what children see, but where and when they see it.*

The placement and timing of advertisements where children may be exposed to advertising, sometimes as a result of data processing. This includes environments that are inappropriate (e.g., websites not suitable for children), that may obscure commercial intent (e.g., influencer marketing that lacks appropriate disclosure) or that make them more vulnerable to persuasion (such as during gaming or educational activities).



Harmful design — *Design is about how advertisements are structured and delivered.*

The way digital platforms and marketing communications are developed, structured and delivered. This includes design to encourage excessive engagement, such as infinite scrolling mechanisms. It also includes risks associated with tracking and targeting mechanisms and reward-based advertising that exploits children's evolving cognitive capacities.

Beyond user interface or infrastructure considerations, strategic decisions on how marketing campaigns are shaped (e.g. via influencers or social media challenges) can also be considered design elements.

Cross-cutting issues such as data processing and AI can be key components across content, context and design of digital marketing. Some businesses are moving away from surveillance-based models that rely heavily on the processing of personal data towards privacy-by-design approaches (e.g., deploying contextual advertising methods).¹⁰

While this trend addresses some challenges related to targeting practices and children's data and privacy, other impacts associated with harmful content, context and design choices still require attention and action to avoid infringements on children's rights.

Digital marketing practices can deliver positive opportunities for children only if marketing communications are designed responsibly using a rights-based approach. This includes prioritizing privacy, transparency and age-appropriate engagement. Positive impacts may include, for example:




Increased access to educational resources through ad-supported platforms, which offer free access to valuable information and quality content;



The development of digital literacy skills as children learn to evaluate and interpret commercial messages critically; and



Enhanced creativity and self-expression through opportunities for content creation and connection with others.

To read more about the impacts that digital marketing practices have on children,  see [the UNICEF summary of research findings](#).

2.2 Corporate responsibility

States are the primary duty bearers for the protection of human rights under international law, as outlined in the [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights \(UNGPs\)](#). However, companies also have a 'responsibility to respect' human rights, including child rights.¹¹

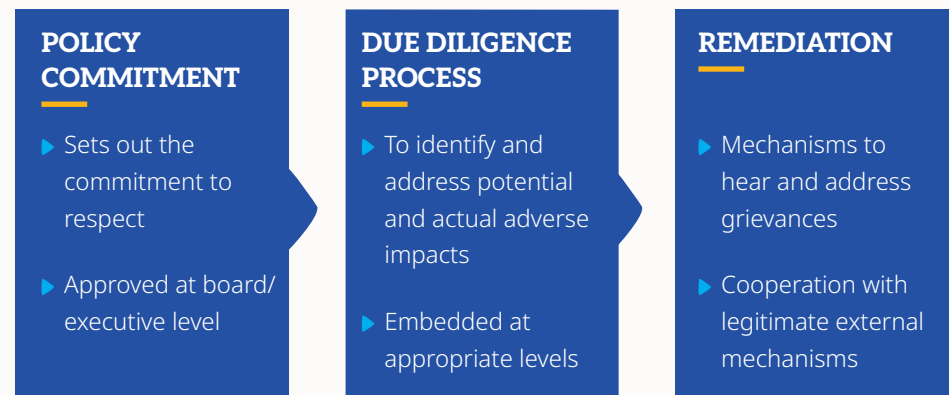
This means that companies should address any adverse human rights impacts they are involved in, whether through their own activities or through their business relationships. Building on the UNGPs, the [Children's Rights and Business Principles](#) state that 'all businesses should use marketing and advertising that respect and support children's rights'.¹²

The corporate responsibility to respect applies to **all business enterprises**, across their operations and value chain – regardless of their size, sector, operational context, ownership and structure. It includes 'knowing and showing' how they address adverse impacts that may occur from the use of the products, services and solutions they provide.¹³ To meet this responsibility, companies should have in place appropriate policies and processes, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Beyond voluntary commitments, mandatory human rights due diligence laws are emerging globally. Regulations such as the EU's Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence and national laws are coming into force, requiring companies to conduct due diligence within their business activities and relationships.

Figure 4

Key elements of the corporate responsibility to respect human rights¹⁴



The child rights due diligence process entails a continuous cycle of five crucial steps:



A. Setting policy commitments –

Establishing a clear human rights policy sets the foundation for a company's commitment to respect human rights, including children's rights, guiding all subsequent due diligence steps.



B. Identifying and assessing impacts –

Identifying and evaluating potential child rights risks ensures businesses understand their impacts, enabling them to take proactive measures to prevent harm.



C. Addressing impacts – Taking action to prevent, mitigate or remediate adverse child rights impacts ensures that identified risks are not only acknowledged but effectively managed.



D. Monitoring and reporting – Continuously tracking child rights performance and transparently reporting findings strengthens accountability and enables improvements in policy and practice.



E. Handling complaints – Providing accessible and effective channels for complaints ensures affected individuals can seek redress, and serves as a notification mechanism reinforcing the effectiveness of all previous due diligence steps.

UNICEF's corporate **disclosure recommendations** on child rights impacts in relation to the digital environment support businesses in disclosing how their digital activities impact children's rights. They are intended for use by all companies operating in the digital environment.

The **D-CRIA Toolbox**

presents further guidance on how to conduct effective child rights impact assessments in relation to the digital environment. It is intended for use by all companies that are developing, deploying or using digital technologies, including artificial intelligence.



3

Conclusion and next steps

The toolkit serves as a vital resource for businesses striving to adopt responsible digital marketing practices that prioritize the rights and well-being of children.

By implementing child rights due diligence, companies can address significant risks posed to children by digital marketing. Simultaneously, implementing responsible digital marketing practices that consider children's rights and safety offers businesses a wide array of advantages, including enhanced reputation, risk management, innovation and long-term sustainability.

This concludes...

Step 1 – Understand

1

You now have a baseline knowledge of why it is important to respect children's rights within your company's digital marketing practices.

Please move to...

Step 2 – Assess

2

Step 2 will support you in determining whether your business is currently at a 'foundational' or 'mature' level when it comes to child rights and responsible digital marketing practices.

Step 3 – Act

3

Knowing your maturity level will allow you to identify the appropriate recommendations for your company in Step 3 – Act.

The next steps of this toolkit (Step 2 – Assess and Step 3 – Act) are built around these five essential steps in the continuous cycle of due diligence.

Annex: Key definitions

Advertising and marketing

While recognizing that 'advertising' is a component of 'marketing', for the purpose of this report the two terms are used interchangeably to refer to the activity of promoting, communicating or praising a commercial product, brand or service in order to induce people to buy or use it. The terms 'digital advertising' or 'digital marketing' refer to the use of digital media to promote, communicate or praise commercial products, brands or services.

Advergames

Digital games that are designed primarily to promote a product, brand or service.¹⁵

Automated decision-making

Processes where decisions are made without human involvement, based solely on algorithmic systems (e.g., deciding what content or ads a person sees based on factual data or inferred data).¹⁶

Child

Every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.¹⁷

Child rights

The fundamental rights that every child is entitled to, as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights treaties.¹⁸

Contextual advertising

A form of advertising that targets audiences based on the content of the web page or app rather than personal data about the user. It does not involve tracking or profiling based on personal data.¹⁹

Human rights due diligence

A business's ongoing processes for identifying and assessing its actual and potential human rights impacts, including on children's rights, integrating and acting upon its findings, tracking its responses and communicating how its impacts are addressed, as set out in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.²⁰

Influencer marketing

Individuals with a considerable online presence, such as those who create video channels that have millions of subscribers, to promote a product, brand or service in exchange for financial or in-kind compensation.²¹

Native advertising

Advertising that mimics the look or feel of content it appears within, making it appear 'native' to the platform and reducing the perception of advertising.²²

Personalized or behavioural ads

Advertising delivered based on personal data, including behaviour, preferences, demographics and online activity.²³

Profiling

Any form of automated processing of personal data consisting of the use of personal data to evaluate certain personal aspects relating to a natural person in particular to analyse or predict aspects concerning that natural person's performance at work, economic situation, health, personal preferences, interests, reliability, behaviour, location or movements (GDPR, article 4).²⁴

Segmentation

The practice of grouping users into categories based on shared traits or behaviours, often to guide marketing or content strategies.²⁵

Endnotes

1. The responsibility to respect children's rights in the context of digital marketing extends to all kinds of 'publishers'. This toolkit uses the term online 'platform' as shorthand to capture a broad range of digital environments where children interact with others and with content. The use of this term does not imply any limitation or exemption of such services from applicable legal responsibilities.
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