Children’s Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age

This briefing outlines the key threats to children’s freedom of expression in the digital age. It identifies the core threats, key drivers and key players as well as UNICEF’s view on what needs to be done.

Key drivers

- The proliferation of devices give children more access to potentially harmful content: 42% of under 8s in the US have their own devices.1
- Children in many countries are freely and confidently using technology without being heavily monitored: In 2016, 91% of young people in the EU used the internet every day.2
- Governments are looking at technology companies to take a more active role in ensuring children are protected online: For example, in the UK the Government worked with Internet Service Providers to provide filters that aim to block content that is inappropriate for under 18s.
- Practices that undermine children’s privacy, for example preventing anonymous IDs online, can also undermine their freedom of expression.

Key players

- Governments who want tech companies to provide solutions that will ensure that children are safe online.
- Parents who want their children to be safe online, free from online bullying and harmful content, and who may seek technology solutions to achieve this.
- Technology companies, such as internet service providers and telecoms companies, who have significant influence over the content children can see.

The Relevance for Children
Children's rights that are affected include:

- **Right to participation**
  - Children have the right to share their views about any decisions that affect them, and to participate in the digital world.

- **Right to expression**
  - Children have the right to freely express themselves online, and to seek, receive and impart ideas and information through digital media.

- **Right to association**
  - Children have the right to gather and communicate with one another, including through online forums and digital networks.

- **Right to information**
  - Children have the right to access information and content online in a way that is beneficial to them.

Opportunities for Positive Change

- **Promote diverse content**
  - The mass media, including digital media, should support children's right to information by providing varied, diverse, unbiased and positive online content.

- **Empower parents**
  - Parents can provide guidance to children, helping them to access and share content, while encouraging them to stay safe online.

- **Ensure transparent and proportionate restrictions**
  - There are times when it is necessary to restrict content for children but this should be done in a legitimate, proportionate and transparent way.

Integrate Children’s Rights Into Corporate Policies and Practices
UNICEF has developed five principles that companies should incorporate into their operations in order to protect children's rights. Some of these relate to the right to privacy, which underpins freedom of expression:

- Children have the right to privacy and the protection of their personal data.
- Children have the right to freedom of expression and access to information diversity from a diversity of sources.
- Children have the right not to be subjected to attacks on their reputation.
- Children's privacy and freedom of expression should be protected and respected in accordance with their evolving capacities.
- Children have the right to access remedies for violations and abuses of their rights to privacy and free expression, and for attacks on their reputation.

When it comes to freedom of expression and access to information online, children are best able to exercise their rights where they:
- have reliable and affordable access to digital technology;
- can freely and confidently use technology without disproportionate monitoring by governments or their parents, unnecessarily strict moderation, the over-policing of user-generated content, or unwarranted limitations on their anonymity;
- can explore the digital world without overly restrictive network or device-level filters or other mechanisms that restrict access to content that might benefit them; and
- can access information from a diversity of sources that is suitable for their level of understanding. Having to provide payment or supply personal data in exchange for a service may act as a barrier to accessing online content.

What UNICEF Is Doing
While protecting children from harm is vital, UNICEF believes that companies should respect the full range of children's rights, including their right to freedom of expression. UNICEF is working with companies across the technology and ICT sector to help them make practical changes to achieve this.

UNICEF is creating and advocating guidance that:
- integrates children's rights into corporate policies and the design and delivery of services;
- creates child protection policies that balance all children's rights to ensure children can develop and grow as digital users; and
- empowers children and parents to engage safely and to their full potential in this fast-paced and evolving digital world.

UNICEF RESOURCES FOR POLICYMAKERS

**Freedom of expression, association, access to information and participation**

- **DISCUSSION PAPER**
  - JUNE 2017
  - Outlines the threats to children's online freedom of expression.
  - Calls for governments, policy makers and the technology and ICT sector to balance concerns around protecting children from harmful content with children's rights.

**Children’s Online Privacy and Freedom of Expression**

- **INDUSTRY TOOLKIT**
  - MAY 2018
  - Created for a wide range of companies across the digital environment, for example, telecoms providers, online platforms and the manufacturers of devices and smart products.
  - Can be used by any company that collects, analyses or sells data or whose business affects the content that children can see.
  - Identifies five principles that companies should adhere to and a checklist of recommendations that ground and shape decisions for governments, policy makers and the technology and ICT sector to balance concerns around protecting children from harmful content with children's rights.