Case Study: Supporting National Governments to Develop Child Online Protection-Related National Action Plans

Founded in 1975, Microsoft is a worldwide technology company with offices in more than 100 countries. Microsoft’s mission is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more by building best-in-class platforms and productivity services for the mobile-first and cloud-first world.

Microsoft believes strongly that the Internet should be a safe place for young people and adults alike, and has a near 20-year history making online safety resources available to children and their parents. The company achieves this through developing innovative technology tools, offering education and guidance, and partnering with key stakeholders influencing online safety.

Children’s rights Issue or Risk

Many of the risks that children face in using today’s ICT products and services are similar across the world. However, the regional cultures, societies, and legal frameworks that children operate within often differ greatly.

For example, some countries have robust programs to educate children on safe online practices, to eliminate and to prosecute risky or illegal behaviour. Others are less aware of potential risks and lack the policies and structure to combat perpetrators of online abuse. Therefore, the risk of exposure and the ability to mitigate these risks varies greatly across the world. Engagement with governments and stakeholders at the national level is crucial to developing effective responses and providing a safer online experience for children in all parts of the world.

Additionally, while there are numerous initiatives and programs a country may have on its digital agenda, it is important that business and society help to ensure the safety of children online is among the priorities.

The company response

Since the launch of Microsoft’s first consumer online products some 20 years ago, the company has recognized the need to address the risks associated with an increasingly connected world. Technology use among youth has skyrocketed; the potential for online abuse has increased, and various global policymakers from Canada to the U.K. to Saudi Arabia have approached the company, acknowledging concern around the risks to children online.

In 2013, David Cameron and the UK Home office started engagement with governments, civil society, law enforcement and the leading technology companies in the private sector, including Microsoft, with the goal to start an initiative aimed at eliminating child online sexual abuse and exploitation globally. This resulted in the formation of the WePROTECT Children Online initiative and...
subsequently the WePROTECT Global Alliance to End Child Sexual Abuse Online, a global multi-stakeholder collaboration to combat online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Microsoft is a member of the Alliance’s advisory board.

A key initiative of the WePROTECT Global Alliance is to support a response to child exploitation at the national level in member countries. Beyond the theme of child online sexual abuse, Microsoft saw the need to educate staff, partners, and governments to help broaden the focus on child sexual exploitation and abuse to encompass a child’s full digital life. From this, stemmed the company’s program to support national governments in establishing **National Initiatives and Action Plans for Child Online Protection**.

Through the program, which was launched in November 2015, Microsoft has distributed an internal guidebook to company personnel in all 117 international subsidiaries, offering internal guidelines on how to assist governments in developing such programs. The guidebook was developed through consultation with numerous stakeholders internal and external to Microsoft and focuses on the fact that protecting people online is a concern for governments and should be a priority of Microsoft engagement with national policymakers.

The guidebook focuses on five key strategies to do this:

1. **Reviewing and conducting research**
   Increasing government awareness of existing research frameworks regarding child online protection and how governments can leverage these resources to develop region- and country-specific insights. For example, [Global Kids Online](#), a multi-stakeholder international research effort spearheaded by Sonia Livingstone at the London School of Economics in collaboration with UNICEF Innocenti research centre, is considered landmark research on the risks and challenges children face online.

2. **Developing public awareness campaigns**
   Offering governments resources they can leverage in producing public awareness campaigns in their national context that target parents, teachers, educators, clergy, anyone seen as a trusted adult in a child’s life. While every effort to communicate and educate the public makes a difference, developing strategic and targeted awareness campaigns, which are based on research on the national situation of children and the Internet, and the respective roles of peers, educators and parents in online safety, can achieve much more.

   Content addresses key online safety impacts and risks such as online bullying, sexting, harassment, identifying abusive behaviour, creating a productive dialogue with children regarding safe practices, and more. Governments and organizations can use and translate the content, and localize it for their specific market, all free of charge.

3. **Promoting in-school education: digital literacy and civility**
   Ensuring governments are comfortable discussing online safety issues in school. The guidebook provides recommendations on how to raise awareness in the classroom, as well as integrate such topics into everyday lessons.
4. **Enacting, strengthening and enforcing child protection laws**
   Addressing governments’ varied perceptions and regulations around illegal or risky online behaviour. For example, some countries do not see child sexual abuse material as illegal, while others have stringent regulation in place. The guidebook highlights the importance of enforcement of international standards and helps Microsoft staff in demonstrating to government officials and other key stakeholders why regulation and policy consensus on what is determined as risky or violent behaviour is critical.

5. **Collaborating with the ICT industry and NGOs**
   While the previous strategies focus on content and conduct, the last addresses how governments can bring any or all of the above to life through collaboration with different online safety stakeholders. It provides room for innovation and creativity to engage relevant parties in the journey to create a safer online environment for all.

**Outcomes and Learning**

Since the program’s rollout at the second WePROTECT Summit, the company has reached out to regional leads to ensure they have the tools necessary to engage governments and key stakeholders in their regions. The company will assess progress against internal targets set in the new fiscal year.

In Saudi Arabia, the government reached out to Microsoft as an expert resource when researching best practices in child protection. Microsoft submitted a proposal for Introducing a “National Initiative for Child Online Protection in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”, which was very well received and was presented to higher authorities for discussion to shape the Saudi child protection strategy and supporting programs.

Additionally, since the launch there has been feedback from multiple regions (particularly Asia, Middle East and Africa) welcoming the guidebook with excitement and enthusiasm for the resources and guidance it provides. The developing world specifically has a tremendous opportunity to learn from the risks that the developed world has faced so far and to integrate online safety initiatives and measures as their use of technology rapidly expands and develops.

Governments and NGOs interested in exploring a National Initiative for Child Online Protection in their country, contact your local Microsoft Government Affairs representative, or email saferkids@microsoft.com.