Children’s rights & Internet

A day in the life of THOMAS MULLER

Child Helpline International supports the creation and strengthening of national toll-free child helplines worldwide, and uses child helpline data and knowledge to highlight gaps in child protection systems and advocate for the rights of children.

My department focuses entirely on collecting, analysing and raising awareness of the stories children tell when they contact child helplines. Listening to what they say can help us make the internet safer

Meet Thomas Müller, head of policy and research, Child Helpline International

At Child Helpline International, everything we do is based on the Right to be Heard, which is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Child Helpline International is one of the world’s largest collective impact organisations, a network of currently 183 child helplines from 142 countries. Collectively, child helplines respond to more than 15 million contacts every year from children and young people in any emergency situation, when no one else is there to listen or help.

My role

I lead the policy and research department, where we focus entirely on collecting, analysing and amplifying the stories children tell when they contact child helplines. I sit on a gold mine of information, which gives unique insights into the situations children find themselves in. It is really quite sobering when you have a closer look at these stories. Every second, somewhere around the world, a child tries to contact a child helpline and every third of these contacts deals with issues related to violence, neglect and various forms of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. And many do mention the internet playing a central role in this.

What motivates me

Despite the huge number of contacts we receive, in many countries only very few children know that a child helpline exists while others do not have the means to get in contact. Others haven’t yet found the courage to talk and some might not even know that what is happening to them is wrong.

For that reason, the work my department does is so fundamentally important. We use the information provided and pass it directly to those who can make decisions that strengthen support and protection for all children. I have seen the difference our work makes in the lives of children and have personally talked to many who said that if it wasn’t for a child helpline they are not sure if they would still be alive. Of course, I sometimes feel angry and appalled by what we allow to happen to our children but I take a lot of motivation and energy out of the absolute conviction I have that my work benefits so many of them.

How I see my profession in 10 years’ time

With the speed at which technologies develop, it is difficult to even predict the next two years and we have to acknowledge that there are, have been and always will be people who try to take advantage of children for their own interests and pleasure. Technology can be utilised to empower children and give them a voice, but it also plays a crucial role in child abuse. If we can collaborate more to tackle problems globally and raise more awareness, especially among children, the work we will do in 10 years will be more efficient, more successful and will protect many more.
My views on collaboration

I am a huge believer in collaboration. Often companies are simply not aware of a certain problem and are happy to collaborate if the issue fits their strategy and they feel they can make a difference. Governments, law enforcement, INGOs and civil society also all play a role in this effort. Governments should reward corporate activities and investments that are beneficial for child online protection. Civil society should look for win-win collaborations with the private sector and not for a confrontational approach by naming and shaming. We all need to take on this challenge together.

Why we all need to be more proactive

Just like with all other forms of abuse though, online sexual exploitation or cyberbullying are not virtual but real events in a child’s life. And like with all other forms of abuse, the majority of the perpetrators can be found within the closer and extended family, people with quick and easy access to the child. I know this because children tell us. So by simply providing parental advice and control tools we are not doing well enough in protecting children.

No one has a greater interest in children being safe online than children themselves. For me, they have to be the leading change makers and we all need to empower them by educating them and raising their awareness about online risks, their rights, ways to report problems and support available. We need to help them to protect themselves. Whenever child abuse material is out there on the net, it is very likely that it stays there forever, or at least as long as the internet is governed, regulated and managed as it is at the moment. So rather than being reactive, I think we should be proactive and prevent bad things from happening to children by making them safe and confident users of the web.

Providing a creative solution

If the internet was a city, we would explain to children where to go and where not to go, that there are good and bad places, that there are safe and unsafe places, and that at times it can be very scary. We would hold their hands when crossing the streets, we would know which movies they watch when they go to the cinema and we would definitely have an eye on who they are talking to and what they are talking about. With the internet however we often just let them walk and find out for themselves. So I would love to provide a creative solution that takes on the role of the well-intended, protective parent for children online for example an avatar superhero that is a child’s best friend as they start exploring the online environment.

I also personally find it quite frightening that there is such a place as the dark web. If I was a developer, I would probably try to create a strong protective wall between the dark web and the one that our children use every day.