UNICEF Office of Strategy
and Evidence – Innocenti

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ISSUE BRIEF

Snapshot of AI Usage and Concerns Among Children and Parents

Insights from 10 countries

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Up to 50 per cent of surveyed children are already using AI,** with millions relying on it for homework and one in ten turning to it for advice about things that worry them. While AI uptake is substantial among many children in this study, it is uneven. What's more, when comparing AI usage among children in the lower income countries surveyed to usage levels in higher income countries, an AI divide emerges. Closing the AI divide is important to give every child a fair chance to benefit from the opportunities of new technology.

- **Children are over three times more likely to be users of AI systems than their parents or caregivers.** Addressing the usage divide within families requires comprehensive AI literacy and support programmes.

- **Children's concerns around AI's risks are uneven,** signalling a strong need for AI literacy and safer AI systems to protect those who are less aware of its risks.

- **The use of AI for child sexual abuse and exploitation is significant.** Recent estimates published by UNICEF suggest that AI was used to create fake sexual images or videos of at least 1.2 million children in 11 surveyed countries, within the span of one year. Children need urgent protection from these harms.

- **Overall, evidence is sparse and is far outpaced by the rate of AI adoption.** There is a pressing need for research to better support children through evidence-informed AI policy and design, as well as programmes to support children and their families to thrive in the digital environment.

Introduction

AI is already in the lives of children around the world. They are using it for homework, to find information and to seek emotional support. For many children it brings benefits, such as more opportunities to learn, play or be creative. Other children experience risks like cognitive offloading – when AI does the thinking for them when completing their homework – emotional dependency on companion chatbots, or the harm of having their images turned into sexually explicit deepfakes with AI tools. **Despite the rapid uptake of AI systems by children, there remain significant evidence gaps:** How many children use AI in each country and for what? What are different children concerned about when it comes to AI? And what factors influence the answers to these questions?

This brief helps address these gaps by sharing new AI-related evidence from children and their parents or caregivers in a diverse range of countries. It highlights some emerging insights into children's and families' use of AI and makes a contribution to informing policymaking and the development of AI systems that support the rights of every child.

This brief draws on data from the second phase of the Disrupting Harm project, a research project led by UNICEF's Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti, ECPAT International and INTERPOL, with funding from Safe Online.[i] The countries included in this brief are Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Jordan, Mexico, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Pakistan and Serbia.

It is important to remember that even with the data presented here, overall, evidence is patchy and lags behind adoption. While many children are already using AI, levels of concern are uneven and understanding of impacts remains limited. Children are taking up AI faster than adults, while policies and the implementation of safeguards are struggling to keep up. In short, further evidence like this, and responsive action, are urgently needed.

AI usage is significant yet uneven amongst children, and reveals an AI divide

The proportion of children who have used AI at least once ranges **between 18 per cent and 50 per cent** in the surveyed countries, amounting to at least 20 million children.

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i The data presented here are based on nationally representative household surveys implemented by UNICEF and IPSOS across 10 countries. Approximately 1,000 internet-using children aged 12–17 and 1,000 of their parents or caregivers were surveyed per country. Where population figures are provided, these are the sum of population estimates by country using the survey weights for the survey population of 12–17-year-olds. The full research methodology is online here.

At the same time, **around half of children in these countries have not used AI**.[ii] In the countries with the lowest number of child users, a substantial number of children did not know what AI was.

GENERATIONAL SPLIT

An AI divide within the family

Among parents or caregivers, the proportion of those who have never used AI is even greater: While up to half of surveyed children had used AI, **at least three in four parents or caregivers have never used it,** a result that was consistent across most countries. Children are over three times more likely to be users of AI systems than their parents or caregivers, signalling an AI usage divide within the family. This may limit parental or caregiver awareness of the AI tools used by their children, or the ability to relate to AI uses and support with concerns.

There are **generally no differences between girls and boys in the proportion of children who have used AI** in these countries (*see Table 1*), or in the proportion of children who do not know what AI is. Their parents or caregivers, on the other hand, do show gender differences in four out of ten countries, with men being significantly more likely to have used AI than women.

Table 1: AI usage by children and parents or caregivers, average across 10 countries

Percentage of children who have used AI	Percentage of child AI users in each gender group		Percentage of child AI users in each age group		Percentage of parents/ caregivers who have used AI
	Boys	Girls	12–14 years old	15–17 years old	
38	39	38	33	44	12

As with other online activities, more older children reported having used AI than younger children in all but one country. Adolescents aged 15–17 years old were 5 to 18 percentage points more likely to say they used AI than their 12–14-year-old peers. In six countries, more than half of 15–17-year-olds had used AI at least once. This is similar to research on children's online opportunities more broadly.

ii In the survey, when asking if respondents had ever used AI, we provided examples of AI apps. These were all generative AI-based products ("ChatGPT, My AI on Snapchat, Bing Chat, Stable Diffusion, DALL-E, Midjourney"), suggesting that overall AI use, including algorithmic systems, might be higher than recorded in the study. Response options included "Yes", "No", "Prefer not to say" and "I don't know what artificial intelligence is".

With a few exceptions, the level of AI usage did not differ depending on whether respondents were urban or rural dwellers. In the majority of countries, both children and parents across urban and rural areas had similar levels of AI uptake. The survey sample was children who use the internet, which likely explains this similarity (in contrast, internet uptake is generally higher in urban areas than in rural areas),[1] but the finding highlights that those with access – regardless of location – are potential AI users.

Parental education is connected to children's and parents' AI use in different ways. In five of the countries surveyed, the proportion of AI users was similar across all levels of parental education, while in the other five countries, children of more educated parents used AI more often and were less likely to not know about AI. For parents or caregivers, the association is more universal: In all but one country, more educated parents were more likely to say they have used AI and less often reported not knowing about AI.

While AI uptake was substantial amongst many of the children surveyed, when compared to their peers in other countries, a stark AI divide emerges. Around seven in ten children in Europe reported using some form of generative AI, either as a standalone tool (e.g., Gemini) or embedded directly within the platforms children use.[2,iii] Usage ranges from 40 per cent to 100 per cent. In the United States of America, 95 per cent of teens aged 13–17 have heard about AI chatbots, and 64 per cent have used them.[3] A global AI divide is real[4] and for children who don't have sufficient access to AI, such a divide could translate into fewer opportunities in a world increasingly shaped by these technologies.

In the countries surveyed, the most common reasons children gave for using AI were to help with their homework and to find information (*see Table 2*). This means an estimated 13 million children used AI for homework across these 10 countries. In the three countries with the highest levels of AI use for homework, an average of 76 per cent of children who used AI reported that they were doing so for academic support. This suggests that AI is already playing a significant role in learning, while raising important questions about potential cognitive offloading and information bias. In comparison, when asked about AI usage in the last month, the primary reasons children in Europe gave were to "summarise or explain a longer text" and to "write essays or stories for schoolwork," yet the percentages were lower: 35 per cent and 33 per cent respectively.[5]

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iii It's worth noting that the European research cited was conducted about a year later than the Disrupting Harm project, which could explain some of these differences – with rapid AI adoption around the globe, it's likely that usage has grown even further since our surveys concluded in early 2025.

Table 2: Percentage of AI-using children who used AI for the following reasons, average across 10 countries

To help with homework	To create or edit images or videos	To find information	To seek advice about things that worry you	For translation
60	30	47	11	24

In some countries, another activity was commonly reported: using AI to create or edit images or videos, although this was far from being the most common use for AI. AI was also used for translation by at least 25 per cent of AI-users in four countries.

On average, **11 per cent of children that use AI use it to seek advice about things that worry them**, peaking at 21 per cent in one country. For context, this average is similar to the results of a study in Brazil, which found that 10 per cent of internet-using children reported using generative AI to discuss personal problems.[6] In Italy, in contrast, over 40 per cent of teenagers aged 15–19 ask AI for help when they are sad, anxious or making important life decisions.[7]

For parents and caregivers, the most common reason to use AI was to find information (more than 50 per cent in seven of the ten countries). Parents and caregivers also frequently reported using it for work or to create or edit images or videos in some countries. In six of ten countries, **more parents and caregivers used AI to seek advice, compared to their children.**

Apart from a few isolated exceptions, there was generally no difference in uses of AI across gender and age for children.

Children are concerned about AI, but perhaps not enough

All children were asked whether they have some worries related to AI, regardless of whether they have used AI or not (*see Table 3*). Among the most common AI-related concerns were the use of AI to scam or trick others (34 per cent), people using AI to spread false information (32 per cent) and the use of AI to create fake sexual images or videos (26 per cent).

Across countries, the perception of AI and concerns associated with it vary considerably. In four countries, three in ten children did not have any of the abovementioned concerns about AI, signalling a need to teach those children about the risks of AI systems. In three other countries, children were more informed about potential risks; only about one in ten did not have any concerns about AI. In general, this signals that many children do have some concerns about AI and awareness of potential risks.

Some concerns are more prevalent in certain countries than others; e.g., the proportion of children expressing concern about "AI giving bad advice" ranges from 5 per cent to 41 per cent depending on the country. This range suggests the **need for improved AI literacy in every country, so as to teach children about the limitations of AI as a source of consistently sound advice**.

The percentage of children who did not disclose whether they feel any of these concerns about AI ("Prefer not to say" or "I don't know") was high overall (23 per cent) and mostly driven by children who have never used AI. This may suggest children develop their opinions and concerns about AI as they get more familiar with it. Regardless of whether they have used AI before or not, children may have chosen not to express how they feel about these concerns because they do not have a set opinion on them, or because of more complex feelings than captured in the question.

Table 3: Children's concerns around AI, on average across 10 countries

Percentage of children who are concerned about the following things					Percentage of children who are not concerned by any of the previous things	Percentage of children who preferred not to respond or who said they do not know
People using AI to scam or trick others	People using AI to create fake sexual images or videos	People using AI to spread false information	AI taking away my future job	AI giving me bad advice		
34	26	32	14	15	24	23

Table 4: Parents' or caregivers' concerns around AI, on average across 10 countries

Percentage of parents/caregivers who are concerned about the following things					Percentage of parents/ caregivers who are not concerned by any of the previous things	Percentage of parents/ caregivers who preferred not to respond or who said they do not know
People using AI to scam or trick others	People using AI to create fake sexual images or videos	People using AI to spread false information	AI taking away my future job	AI giving me bad advice		
40	31	36	17	18	17	27

For parents or caregivers, people using AI to scam or trick others and people using AI to spread false information were also among the top concerns (40 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively) (*see Table 4*). People using AI to create fake sexual images was also a big concern for parents in many countries (31 per cent).

The proportion of parents or caregivers who had no concern about AI was high in certain countries, while low in others. In this way, parents' data show a similar **pattern of a wide divide between those who have concerns around AI and those that don't, partly driven by whether each participant uses AI or not**.

There were barely any differences in the proportion of boys and girls who expressed concerns about AI and which concerns they held.

The use of AI for child sexual abuse and exploitation is significant

Beyond concerns about AI itself, additional questions revealed serious harms emerging at the intersection of AI and children's lives. Deepfakes – realistic-looking images, video or audio created or altered using AI – that sexualize children are being produced with growing frequency. One method is 'nudification,' in which AI tools are employed to digitally remove or modify clothing in existing photographs to produce fake nude images. This represents a new threat to children's right to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation.

Estimates previously published by UNICEF suggest that at least **1.2 million children have had images of them manipulated into sexually explicit deepfakes through AI tools** in the past year, across 11 countries.[8] In some of the countries, this amounts to one in twenty-five children, or the equivalent of one child in a typical classroom.

SKILLS AND HABITS

AI use: Other impacts or outcomes to consider

The study's broader questions about children's digital lives and other important factors offered additional context for their AI-related responses.

AI and children's digital skills

Children with higher digital skills[iv] are more likely to have used AI in all countries. Similarly, parents with better digital skills are more likely to have used AI in eight out of ten countries. The relationship can go in both directions as children who are more skilled may use AI more often, but using AI may also help develop digital skills and confidence in performing online tasks. Further research could explore what skills children develop by using AI.

iv In this study, digital skills is a composite index of self-reported ability to perform a range of online tasks, such as knowing how to change privacy settings or to choose the best keywords for online searches.

However, we did not find that those with more advanced digital skills were more concerned about AI. In fact, **children with higher digital skills were neither more nor less likely to have concerns about AI in most countries.** This suggests the need for comprehensive digital and AI skills training that includes the risks associated with AI usage.

AI use, online activities and time spent online

For both children and parents, **doing more diverse activities online means a higher chance of also using AI**. However, this is not the case for time spent online. While a positive relationship between time spent online and AI use was evident in half of the countries, in the other half, children and parents who spent more time online were not more likely to have engaged in AI use.

AI and the role of parents

Children whose parents have used AI before **are more likely to have used AI themselves**, although **parents could also have used AI because their child was using it**. As far as parental mediation is concerned, children who reported that their parents encouraged them to explore online activities did not have a higher likelihood of having used AI in the past, but those who reported that their parents restricted online activities had a lower likelihood of having ever used AI than those with fewer restrictions. This points to the negative outcome of over restriction, as demonstrated in other research: parents or caregivers who limit children's online activities to protect them may also undermine their children's chances to access new tools and develop digital skills.[9]

Recommendations

How children and their parents or caregivers use and experience AI varies by country, context and age. Research, policies and AI solutions must reflect these differences to serve every child. The key priorities for action listed below are based on the findings of this study. While they draw on the responses to the 10-country survey, they are broadly applicable in the wider context of AI development, regulation and support.

1. **Close the AI divide between and within countries.** Governments should invest in digital infrastructure and meaningful connectivity for every child and their parents or caregivers, at home and at school, including through multi-stakeholder partnerships, with particular attention to marginalized and underserved children and communities. Children without meaningful connectivity are missing the opportunities of AI in learning, health and information and their experiences may not be considered when systems that will define their futures are shaped.

2. **Invest in research on AI's impact on children's development and well-being, especially the risks it poses.** Research suggests new risks associated with AI for children. These include cognitive and pedagogical effects, such as the offloading of thinking, critical reasoning and productive struggle when AI is used for homework without guidance.[10] Children are also worried about the risks of turning to AI for advice and companionship in ways that may displace human connection and shape emotional development.[11] Emerging evidence is concerning but still patchy. There's an urgent need for investment in child-centred research, across ages, contexts and countries, to understand AI's impact on children's learning, development and well-being. Funders of this research would include governments, academic institutions, foundations and the private sector.

3. **Build AI literacy and provide support for children and their parents or caregivers to thrive in the digital environment.** Governments and private sector and non-profit stakeholders should support AI literacy for children, parents and caregivers, and teachers, so that children learn to use AI in ways that support their development. This means equipping children to think critically when using AI to find information, scaffold rather than outsource their learning, recognize that companion chatbots are not human and understand the risks of bias, hallucination and emotional dependency. Parents, caregivers and educators must be supported to learn alongside children, guiding their safe use of AI and exploring its possibilities together.[12] This goes beyond AI literacy to include supportive parenting and helping children and parents find a healthy (online and offline) life balance that works for them. Overall, closing the intergenerational AI divide will result in greater awareness of children's lived experiences in the digital environment, allowing parents, caregivers and educators to be more engaged and supportive.

4. **Create safer AI systems for children.** Since many children have limited AI literacy, AI developers should ensure that AI systems are designed with maximum safety and transparency, so all children are safe while growing their understanding. AI guardrails should default to the highest settings, such as for privacy protection or inappropriate interactions or content.

5. **Protect children from AI-enabled sexual exploitation and abuse.** Governments should strengthen laws, governance frameworks and corporate accountability to stop AI-enabled sexual exploitation and abuse. This means criminalizing the creation and distribution of AI-generated child sexual abuse material, requiring pre-release safety testing of open-source and foundation models and holding platforms accountable for putting appropriate guardrails in place.

Learn more

For more recommendations, see a range of UNICEF resources, such as the Guidance on AI and Children,[13] the policy brief on AI Chatbots and Companions[14] and the issue brief on AI and Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation.[15]

Endnotes

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UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential.

UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti accelerates progress for children by working to ensure that policies and programming are informed by high-quality evidence. As the global custodian of child-related official statistics, it works closely with governments and partners to strengthen national statistical systems. Through world-leading data, research and foresight, it underpins UNICEF's global leadership on children's rights and serves as the organization's hub for setting strategy and monitoring programmes. With the active engagement of young people and other partners, it supports advocacy and dialogue aimed at improving the lives of children everywhere.

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