

Executive Summary: Malaysia Edition

OUR LIVES ONLINE

Use of social media by children and adolescents in East Asia
- Opportunities, Risks and Harms



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This Executive Summary is an adaptation of the main Report, with highlights on Malaysia. **Download the full report.**

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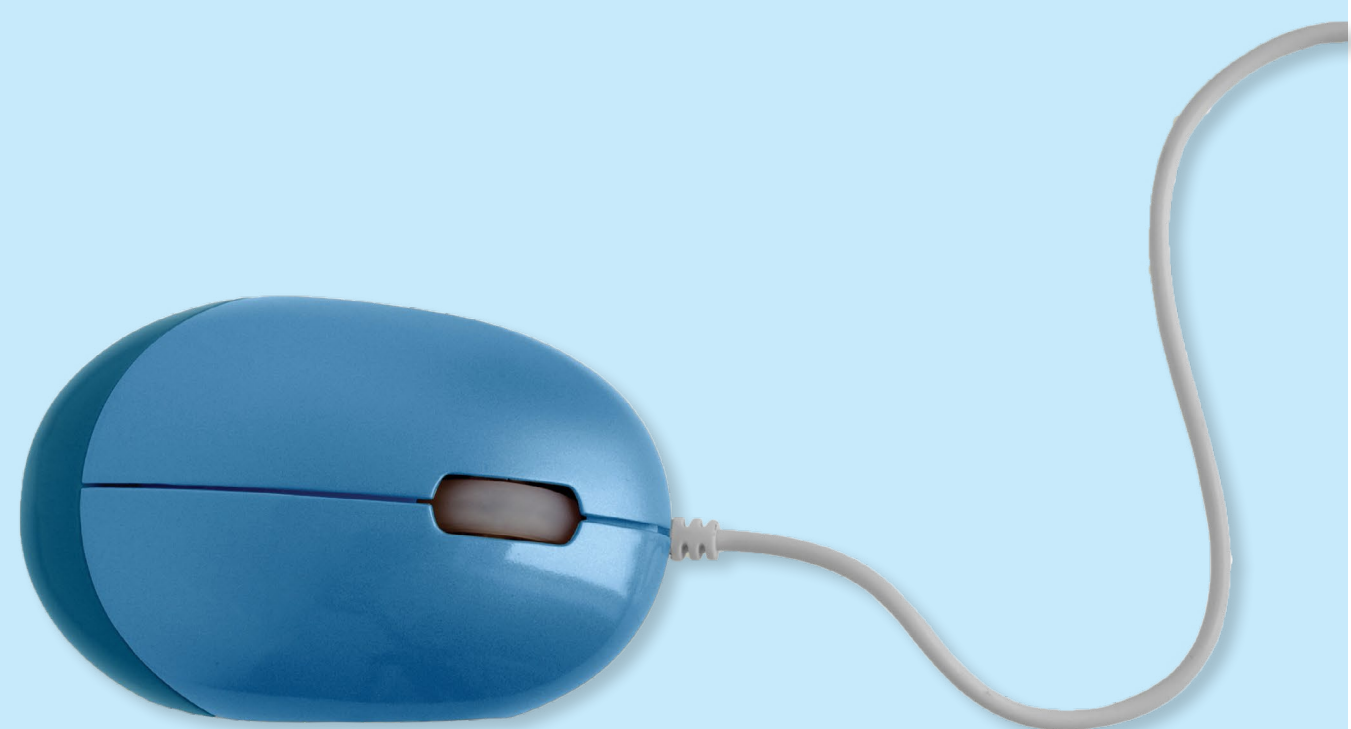
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Foreword

1 in 3 Internet users is a child and more than 175,000 children go online for the first time every day¹



The Internet, with its instant messaging tools and social networks, has become a crucial meeting place for children to connect with friends, to learn and to exercise their right to freedom of expression. And this is no different in Malaysia, where 9 in 10 children aged 5 to 17 is an internet user², while 92% of students aged 13 to 17 have social media accounts³.

With the COVID-19 pandemic demanding a need for physical distancing, children and their families are, more than ever, turning to digital solutions for learning, socialization and play. Online games, social media and video chat apps are providing opportunities for children to connect and play with their friends, parents and relatives to maintain a sense of normalcy. Similarly, many children's learning experiences are being reshaped by the sudden introduction of remote learning, including – where available – technology and virtual platforms as a substitute for the classroom and schoolyard.

While the Internet provides significant opportunities for children to learn and to express their creativity, these same tools may also increase children's exposure to online risks such as cyberbullying and sexual exploitation, all of which can harm a child's mental health and wellbeing.

It is important that measures to mitigate risks should be balanced with children's rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy. Keeping children informed and engaged and empowering them with the skills to use the Internet safely is a critical line of defense.

This study commissioned by the UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional office sought to capture the views and experiences of girls and boys in using social media in East Asia, with a focus on Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. It also captures the perspective of groups of children not usually covered in studies of this kind – lower income families, marginalized children, children with disabilities, street children and refugee children.

I am confident that this snapshot of children and adolescents' use of social media will contribute to shaping discussions and programming on child online protection in Malaysia. Making the digital space safer for children will require collaboration and cooperation among all of us with a duty of care to children – the Government, parents, teachers, civil society, private sector, and UNICEF. It remains our collective responsibility to ensure that children stay safe online, and that their online experience is an enriching and positive one every step of the way into adulthood.

Dr Rashed Mustafa Sarwar

UNICEF Representative to Malaysia &
Special Representative to Brunei

¹ Safer Internet Day Press Release. UNICEF, New York, 6 February 2018.

² Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission, Internet Users Survey 2018: Statistical Brief 23, 2018.

³ CyberSecurity Malaysia 2017.

Introduction

Social media platforms are central to children’s everyday lives in almost every part of the world, including East Asia. Understanding how children interact with social media, their perceptions of risk and the steps they take to mitigate these risks is essential to identifying and developing effective strategies and interventions to prevent and respond to online sexual abuse and exploitation.

The “Our Lives Online” report is a snapshot of children’s use of social media in East Asia, focusing on four countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Written by Monica Bulger and Patrick Burton, the research incorporates the experiences of 301 children across these four countries, including 121 street children and refugees, collected through a series of focus group discussions and participatory exercises.

These were supplemented by discussions with parents, grandparents, caregivers and frontline workers including social workers, counsellors, child psychiatrists and educators.

Profile of Children in Malaysia who Participated in the Study

127

Children participated

58

Boys

69

Girls

18

Frontline practitioners
in Malaysia also
participated in discussions

Also represented: street
children, refugees,
marginalised populations

Methodology

The study comprised two discrete components: a comprehensive desk review undertaken prior to commencement of primary data collection; and in-country data collection, using a primarily qualitative approach.

Desk Review

The desk review was carried out between January and April 2019 and included literature exploring the state of children's social media use in East Asia generally, with focus on particular trends in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. The review included peer-reviewed scholarly literature; administrative data generated by national governments, or international/regional bodies and institutions; sector expert reports and literature generated by civil society organizations. This was supplemented by additional documentation sourced during the field work.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork occurred during four weeks in April to May 2019, with follow-up interviews occurring through August 2019. Focus group discussions were conducted in shelters and other places of care, and in middle and secondary schools, both public and private. The focus group discussions followed a protocol approved by an international ethics review board and was shared with each UNICEF country office as well as each participating organization prior to visits. The protocol design built on the Global Kids Online methodology, as well as work conducted by Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention and University of Colorado, Boulder. The qualitative data collected was supplemented by a confidential anonymous self-administered 20-item questionnaire completed at the end of the focus group discussions.



Internet Use - Snapshot Of Malaysia

ICT Access

In 2019, 90.1% of Malaysian households were found to have internet access while 98.2% had mobile phone access. There were 91% mobile phone users using a smartphone.

5 Most Popular Activities

77.1% of Malaysian households have downloaded software or applications while 84.7% have downloaded images, movies, videos or music and have played or downloaded games. 97% have participated in social networks and have used chat apps while 83.5% have searched for information about goods and services. Out of this total, only 77.4% used telephoning over the Internet or VoIP.

The statistics above were sourced from ICT Access By Households, Malaysia by the Department of Statistics in April 2020.

Children’s Use of Internet

In a survey taken in 2018, it was found that only 92% of children aged 5 to 17 used the Internet while only 91.8% of these children accessed the Internet from a smartphone.

The statistics above were sourced from Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission, Internet Users Survey 2018; Statistical Brief Number Twenty-Three, 2018.

According to Cybersecurity Malaysia, in 2017, 92% of students aged 13 to 17 had social media accounts.

Child online safety and parental control

When it comes to child online safety and parental control, 75.5% of parents reported setting rules and limits of Internet usage to their children while 75.4% have closely monitored their child’s Internet usage by staying near their child when they were using the Internet.

71.1% focused on educating and discussing safe Internet use while only 57.5% checked their child’s social media account or browser history.

The statistics above were sourced from Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission, Internet Users Survey 2018; Statistical Brief Number Twenty-Three, 2018.

How are children in East Asia using social media?⁴

Children from all strata of life and backgrounds in East Asia have access to mobile devices and there is little difference in usage between girls and boys.

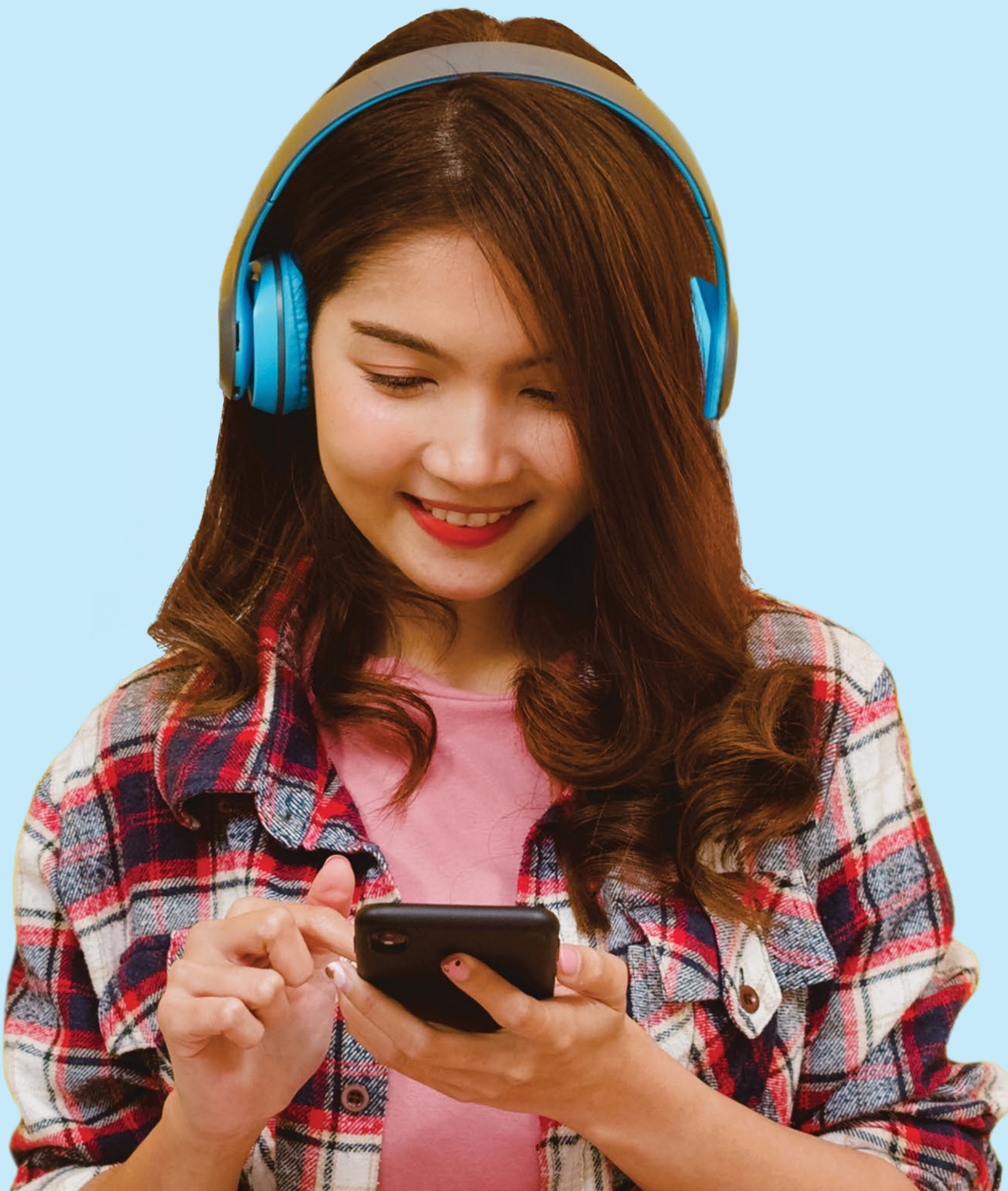
Children’s phones are most often provided by parents and are frequently phones that are passed down from parents or caregivers, or from older siblings. Whether at school, on the streets or in shelters, or living with disabilities, technology is a central pillar of their everyday lives.

Amongst those children using social media, there was little difference in usage between girls and boys, reflecting a narrowing of gendered differentials in use. This may be a result of the rapidly changing landscape and incremental gains in access, speed and provision of services, but it is important in that it marks a departure from previous studies that highlight the very gendered differentials in activities and use. An important caveat must be noted – the study design focused on social media users and did not allow for identification or analysis of gendered access to devices or apps.

In the rare cases where children do not have their own devices, they have developed multiple strategies for accessing devices and content, such as sharing their parents’ phones for access to WhatsApp. To protect their privacy, some report deleting their messages before they return the device to their parents.

Many know the passwords to their parents’ and siblings’ phones and report setting up biometric profiles (their own thumbprint or face) on their parents’ phones.

⁴The study follows the United Nations definition of the child, taken to be under the age of 18, while youth refers to young people 18 years and older, but under 34. Where reference is made to international literature where the term youth is used, the use of the term youth has been maintained.



The use of social media apps was widespread across all the groups interviewed in all four countries.

While it may be expected that apps developed in the region were most common, children almost universally reported Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Google as their most used apps. Line and Telegram, also messaging applications, were also used, as was WattPad, Tik Tok and others, although less commonly.

The majority of children in the study use social media primarily for information-seeking, communication and entertainment.

Consistent with global research findings, the majority of children in the study post photos to Instagram and use social media primarily for information-seeking, communication and entertainment⁵. ⁶Older children engage more actively in chat groups on WhatsApp and in games, and in the generation of content, including YouTube channels dedicated to dance moves (and lessons), guitar lessons, Qur’anic verse instruction, make-up, or gaming strategy, as well as, in several instances, selling goods online.

Gaming was also popular amongst groups as diverse as upper-income international school students and street children. Most popular are those games developed for mobile platforms such as PubG, Mobile Legends and Subway Surfer.

For children with disabilities, their devices offer a means to meet others with similar disabilities, and form friendships and relationships, as well as share skills such as guitar playing. For refugee children, they offer the opportunity to stay in contact with families and friends in the diaspora and at home, but also to stay abreast of news.

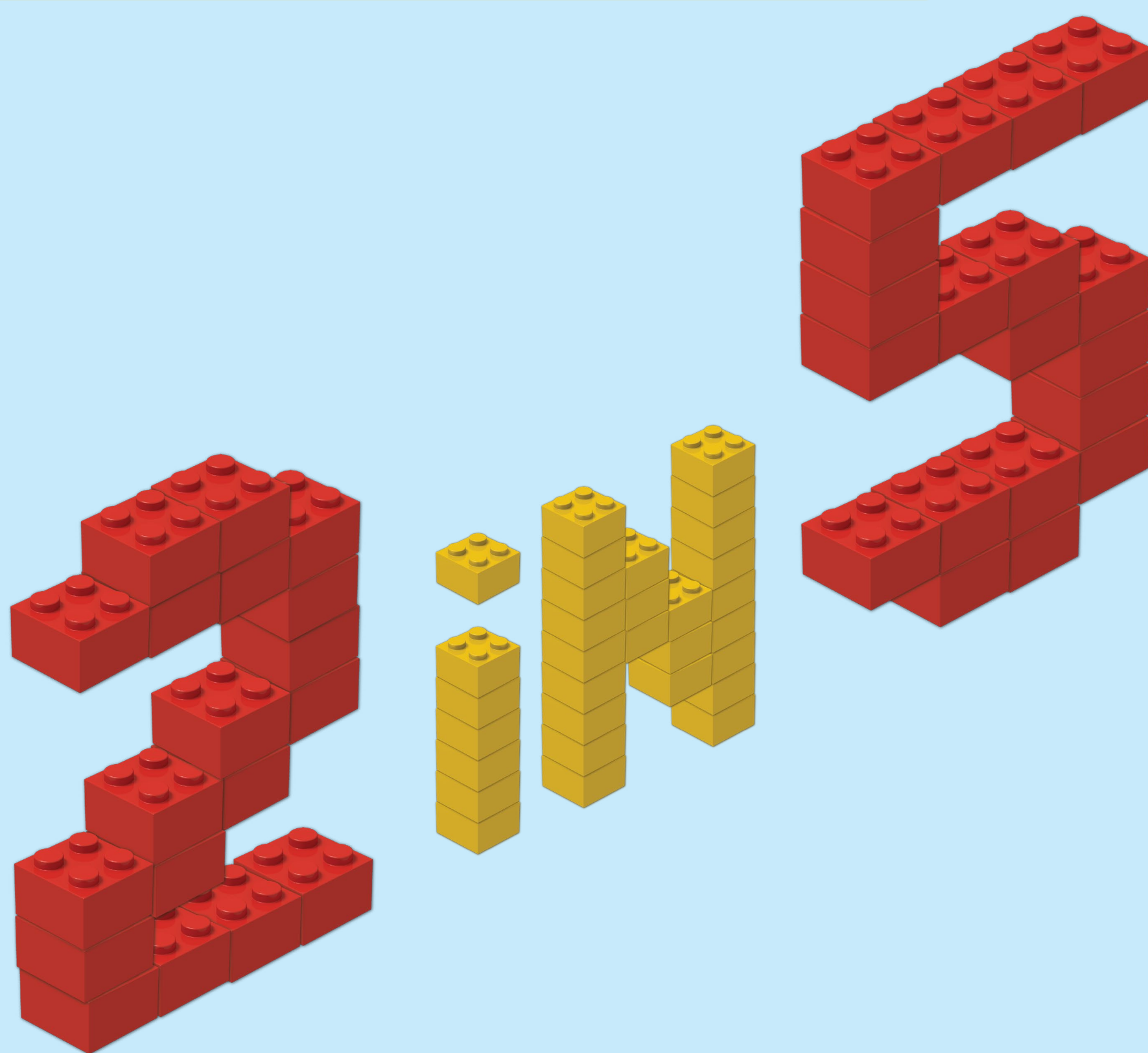
Teens have multiple accounts to engage multiple interests. They often have one account their boyfriend or girlfriend sees and maintain a separate account she or he does not have access to, and a third account for parents and relatives. Sharing passwords to their accounts with their romantic partner is construed as a sign of trust.

Several groups of children report that some sites are blocked in their country, but that they have ways of navigating around this, using virtual private networks.

⁵Livingstone, S., Kardefelt-Winther, D., Kanchev, P., Cabello, P., Claro, M., Burton, P.; Phyfer, J. 'Is there a ladder of children's online participation? Findings from three Global Kids Online Countries', UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, 2019.

⁶Livingstone, Sonia and Helsper, Ellen, Gradations in digital inclusion: children, young people and the digital divide. *New media & society*, 9 (4). pp. 671-696, 2007.

Risks, Harms And Online Protection



Two out of five children in our focus groups reported having bad experiences they would not want to tell anyone about.

The risks children in East Asia are facing online are common to those faced by children in many other parts of the world, from South Africa to the United States.

When asked to share their experiences confidentially through a self-report questionnaire, seven out of ten children shared they had experienced something online that had upset them over the past year. Two out of five reported they had bad experiences they would not want to share or talk to anyone about.

Both girls and boys reported encountering some form of adverse experiences online with the majority of focus group participants, regardless of gender, reporting they had experienced something upsetting online.

Across the Study countries, teens reported being contacted online by strangers. Most had accepted friend requests, consistently accepting requests and messages from strangers that presented themselves as female. Requests from females were deemed safer than requests from males, at least by girls.



More than half of the teens participating in the focus groups had met someone in real life they had initially met online.

However, for the most part, these meetings were benign, someone their own age who went to a school in their area, or other peers.

We asked children across the groups if, when they met a stranger they had first met online, they found it upsetting in any way. The most common response was it turned out disappointing because people didn't look like their profile picture.



► **Both boys and girls reported receiving sexual messages and images on social media.**

Boys and girls reported receiving photographs of strangers' genitals. While most immediately blocked the sender, some would send a response asking the stranger not to send them the image, or asking why they had sent it, which would typically result in a request that the teen send an image, or the stranger would send another image. A few reported the incident to their parents.

A promising finding is the vast majority of children who had been asked for videos, images, or other information of a sexual nature, reported they did not share the requested information.

When asked what upset them about social media use, in addition to obscene photos from strangers, teens mentioned violent videos, particularly school fights (a primary concern for teens in Cambodia), car accidents, and ghost videos (horror). Hoaxes and misinformation were a primary concern for teens in Indonesia, though mentioned by teens in all four countries. Bullying was rarely mentioned, and when it was, there was a further description of people using fake accounts to engage in bullying behaviour, or as part of a breakup.



Frontline workers and parents perceive additional threats and risks for children on social media.

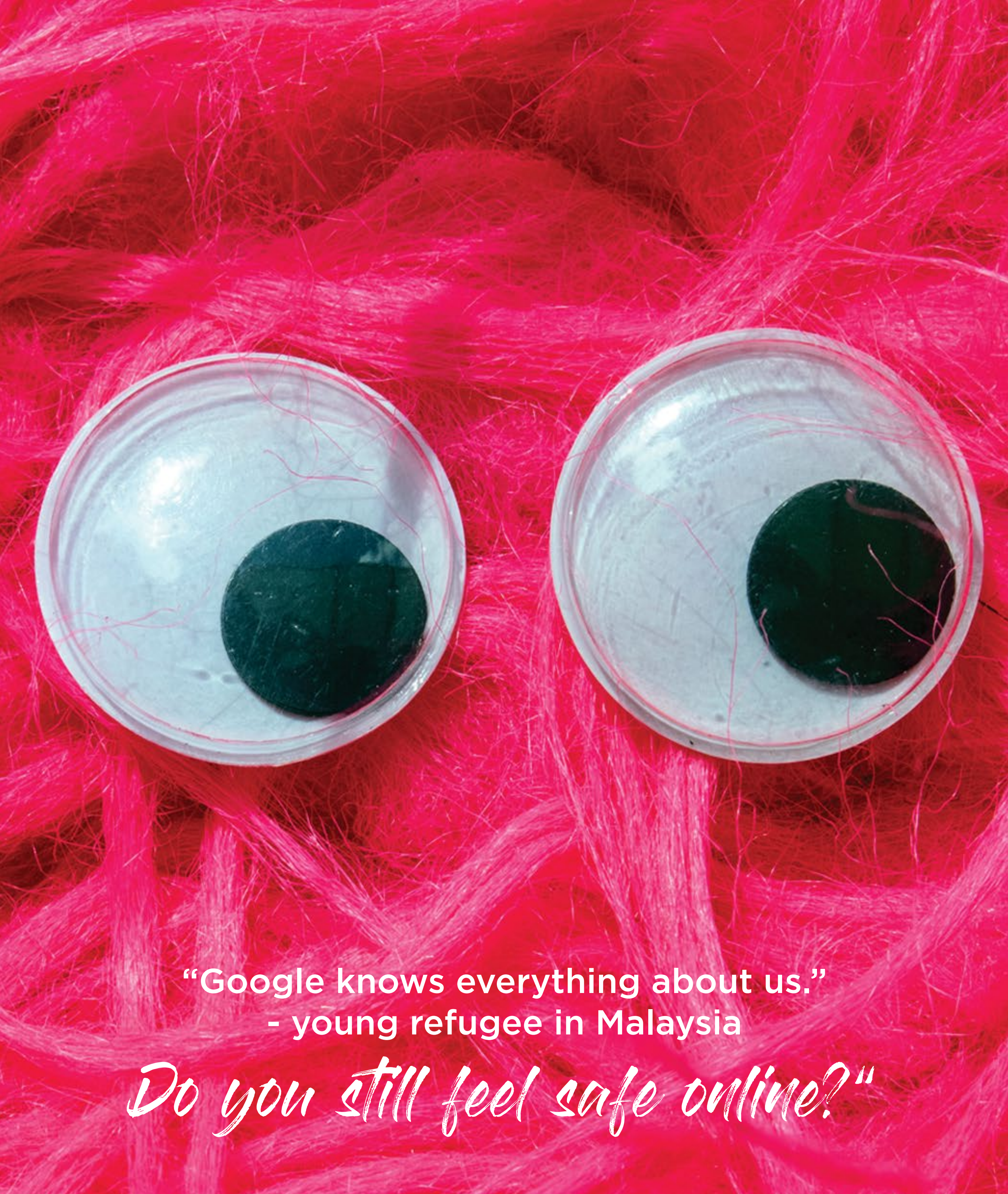
Self-harm amongst children was identified by frontline practitioners and also raised by a few focus group participants. Girls and boys described carving the name of an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend on their arm or leg when a relationship went wrong, which they then photographed and shared on social media.

Counsellors and social workers in Malaysia, Cambodia, and Indonesia stated that LGBTQ children were at particular risk for peer-to-peer and family violence, as well as vulnerable to self-harm.

The notion of ‘screen time’ was raised by frontline practitioners and parents as a key concern. Parent activists described screen time in terms of addiction – an addiction to playing games and chatting, or simply being glued to one’s phone – while for teens it was more of a practical concern: staying up all night playing video games makes them tired for school.

Psychologists and social workers noted the tension between the use of social media platforms isolating children in the online world but also providing a platform for support, particularly for marginalised groups who do not have as many opportunities for self-expression in the offline world.





“Google knows everything about us.”
- young refugee in Malaysia

Do you still feel safe online?"

.....

► **Understanding and awareness of data privacy⁷**

Questions about data privacy yielded the broadest differences in awareness and understanding. In one refugee school in Kuala Lumpur, teens were very aware of data sharing and privacy, and created lists of all their personal information collected by social media apps. This is consistent with the findings from a number of other countries⁸. When asked what the internet doesn’t know, one 14-year-old girl said, “Google knows everything about us.” Yet in another refugee school in Kuala Lumpur, girls had not thought about social media apps collecting information about them. When asked why they would collect information, they said for national security or their own safety.

In terms of privacy and protection, there is a demonstrated lack of understanding by principals and educators.

The use of mobile phones is strictly regulated within schools and other institutions, with many schools restricting children from bringing their phones to school entirely, while most restricted any use of phones during school hours. These restrictions are usually incorporated into school and information communications technology (ICT) codes of conduct, and are intended to ensure children are not ‘distracted’ from class activities and teaching.

⁷Children’s approaches to data protection and privacy were explored drawing on – Stoilova, M., Livingstone, S., and Nandagiri, R., ‘Children’s data and privacy online: Growing up in a digital age’, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 2019.

⁸See for example, Phyfer J, Burton P, and Leoschut, L., South African Kids Online: A glimpse into South African children’s internet use and online activities. Technical Report, Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, Cape Town, 2016.

Recommendations

The recommendations of this Report are framed within a broad socio-ecological approach, that locates the individual within the different spheres in which they live their lives – the family, school, community, and more broadly at a structural and macro level.

The socio-ecological model can be used to support the individual child within these environments, promote protective factors and facilitate resilience, through a combination of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions. This is essential in ensuring that safety is not only a child's responsibility but is a combination of collective and individual responsibility. The recommendations include⁹:

Ensure strategies and programmes to tackle online risks are aligned within broader national and regional violence against children frameworks

Improve support for digital parenting, and parenting in the digital age.

This should be done in two ways:

1. Integrate technology and social media into parenting and caregiver programmes, and early childhood development programming. Many of the characteristics and skills that build children's resilience online are the same as those required to foster healthy, safe children generally, including self-efficacy, confidence, empathy, decision-making and conflict resolution skills. Rather than duplicating programming, digital parenting should be designed into existing evidence-based parenting programmes.

2. Build parents' and caregivers' digital literacy skills. Programming that enhances parents' knowledge, skills and expertise of technology – the fundamentals of digital literacy – is important and should form a measurable and discrete component of support to parents. This is particularly important in programmes that specifically target, or reach, mothers and female caregivers, where levels of digital literacy may be lower.

These approaches should recognise that most parenting programmes are targeted primarily towards mothers and female caregivers, and a concerted effort should be made to ensure integration into fatherhood and parenting programmes targeting male caregivers as well.

It should also be ensured that messages and responses by teachers and adults are based on evidence of patterns of use, and what works.

⁹The recommendations also draw on a slightly adapted INSPIRE model, developed by O'Neill et al, to address online risks and harms, and have particular relevance to three of the INSPIRE strategies: Parent and caregiver support, Education and life skills, and Safe environments. O'Neill, B., Burton, P., and Bulger, M., *Protecting children from ICT-related violence, exploitation and abuse and promoting children's digital citizenship. A review of the evidence for effective programmes and policies*, forthcoming, 2020.

Foster online and offline resilience in children

An established body of evidence highlights that those children most vulnerable to violence online share common vulnerability factors to those vulnerable offline. Children who have been identified as vulnerable, with perhaps street children identified as the most vulnerable, are likely to be less resilient both online and offline.

Resilient children – those equipped with skills in areas such as communication, conflict resolution and self-efficacy – are more likely to make appropriate choices when using social media, be better equipped to manage conflict that they may encounter through the technology platforms they use and take better measures to keep themselves safe online. It is thus important to foster resilience in broad terms, rather than focusing specifically on online or offline resilience.

Improve online safety – three steps for technology companies.

Technology companies require concise, practical and to-the-point recommendations together with a strong business case for keeping children safe on their platforms. There are three steps that technology companies can take, quickly and easily, that will have a direct bearing on the safety of children online:

Technology companies should make profiles private by default, with the option of making them public through settings

The default options for new contacts is most commonly ‘everyone’; this could be changed to for example, ‘friends of friends.’

Social media apps can relatively easily be designed to block unsolicited photos sent by people outside contact lists.



Establish data systems to monitor progress and establish benchmarks

In the absence of nationally representative quantitative data relating to children’s use of social media, risks, harms and protective factors, it is critical that national data systems be updated to establish baseline data on children’s internet use and monitor progress on key measurements. Sometimes, this may simply involve ensuring that national data on internet usage is disaggregated by age.

Another way is to adopt or introduce initiatives such as the Global Kids Online study¹⁰. However, in the interim and in the absence of adequate resources, the measurements can be integrated into existing or planned survey initiatives, including, where relevant, violence against children studies, multiple indicator cluster or demographic health surveys. The data should allow for disaggregation by gender, age, location and key socio-economic variables.

¹⁰<http://globalkidsonline.net>

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