Protecting children in a digital world, while at the same time unlocking opportunities for them to learn and to express themselves, is a major challenge of our time.

The digital age has brought a whole new world of opportunity to children. Connectivity can be a game-changer for some of the world's most marginalized children. It can help them fulfil their educational potential, facilitate their social inclusion, and amplify their voices in civic participation.

UNICEF supports the safe engagement of children online, but equally recognizes that digital technology can also increase children's exposure to harmful material, unacceptable behaviour and potentially dangerous contacts, both online and offline.

The misuse of technology by sexual offenders is enabling them unprecedented levels of access to children, and new capabilities to abuse children at a mass scale. The online proliferation of child sexual abuse images has reached astronomical proportions, with offenders involved in the production, consumption, dissemination and possession of these materials. Offenders may exploit the socio-economic vulnerabilities that exist in some communities to sexually abuse children, such as by paying children to perform sexual acts in front of a webcam. Such offenders may also be producing made-to-order abuse material for other offenders. Online marketplaces have also facilitated the sale of children for sexual purposes.

In terms of the proliferation of child sexual abuse images, in 2017, the United States-based National Center for Missing & Exploited Children reported a 700 per cent increase in the number of industry referrals of child sex abuse material online between 2013 and 2017. In 2018, its CyberTipline received more than 18.4 million reports, most of which related to apparent child sexual abuse images, online enticement, including 'sextortion', child sex trafficking, and child sexual molestation. In the United Kingdom in 2017, of the 132,636 reports of online child sexual abuse materials handled by the Internet Watch Foundation, 55 per cent of children were assessed as under the age of 10 years and 2 per cent were assessed as 2 years of age or younger.

Children’s online presence provides new avenues for direct, unsupervised contact with offenders, who may groom children for sexual purposes.

Of the 60 countries covered by The Economist Intelligence Unit’s ‘Out of the Shadows’ index, only 21 have specific legislation to outlaw online grooming; and only 9 have established in their legislation mandatory reporting, content blocking, deleting and record-keeping of child sexual abuse material.
Globally, 1 in 3 Internet users is under the age of 18 years, and adolescents’ use of the Internet for social networking has become central in the forging of their identities and peer relationships. Bullying and other forms of peer-to-peer violence are increasingly a feature on various online platforms, whether through social media websites, instant messaging, gaming, online forums, and so on. Children may also be exposed to violent content, hate speech and incitement to self-harm or suicide. Tech companies sometimes breach children’s privacy to collect data for marketing purposes. Child-targeted marketing through apps – and the excessive screen time it often results in – may compromise children’s healthy development.

According to a UNICEF online poll, more than a third of young people in 30 countries reported being a victim of cyberbullying, with 1 in 5 reporting having skipped school due to cyberbullying and violence. Almost three quarters of young people also said that the major social media platforms were where online bullying was most commonplace.¹

As the figure above shows, there are intersections between the online risks resulting from offenders’ abuse of the Internet, and children’s own use of the Internet, interacting to put children at higher risk. Where risks translate into significant harm, the impacts of online child abuse can be comparable to those of offline forms of child abuse. These may include higher rates of social isolation, mental health problems, suicide and self-harm, substance abuse, and an increased likelihood of children being re-victimized or picking up abusive behaviours themselves when they get older.⁶

The rapid growth in access to digital tools and technologies means that children anywhere in the world can be impacted by online violence. Moreover, there is a real risk of losing privacy and facing dire consequences when they grow up – resulting in reputational harm, targeted harassment, and lack of confidence and self-esteem.

It is imperative to consider online violence and exploitation in the context of children’s lives in the physical world such as in families, schools and communities – not as a new behaviour arising solely due to the digital age. Cases of online violence and exploitation almost always have offline antecedents and dimensions, and much can be gained by focusing on the overlaps and interactions between online and offline behaviour.

WePROTECT Global Alliance

The sexual exploitation of children online cannot be addressed by any one country, company or organization working in isolation. It demands a coordinated global response by governments, international organizations, technology companies and civil society. The WePROTECT Global Alliance to end child sexual exploitation online was initiated to provide this response: a global coalition dedicated to national and global action. WePROTECT has unprecedented reach: over 90 countries are members, together with major international organizations, 20 of the biggest names in the global technology industry, and 24 leading civil society organizations. UNICEF is an active member.

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UNICEF’s Approach

With roughly half of the world’s population online, UNICEF works with partners to close the access gap and ensure that every child, no matter where they live, has access to the critical resource that digital technologies can bring. As we open doors to knowledge and self-expression, we must also address the associated vulnerabilities to violent content and behaviours, privacy breaches, exploitation and abuse, and child sex offenders. UNICEF aims to strengthen the safety net of traditional protections that keep children free from harm when they go online.

One pillar of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018–2021 aims to protect every child from violence and exploitation. In 2018, UNICEF worked in 134 countries to build national systems to prevent and respond to violence against children, with child online protection gaining importance.

UNICEF is working to ensure the Internet is a safe place for children to learn, socialize and express themselves. We work with governments to advocate adequate regulation, and with industry to promote the uptake of adequate safety measures on their platforms. UNICEF also works with ministries of education to promote digital literacy among pupils, including how to stay safe online.

UNICEF supports coordinated national responses to online child sexual exploitation in about two dozen countries, using WePROTECT Global Alliance’s model national response as a guide for national action. The partners of UNICEF include faith-based organizations that drive community engagement and help to change behaviour and attitudes about sexual violence against children. There is strong collaboration between UNICEF and private companies providing Internet access and technologies – to make their products and services safer for children, and to use technology to stop the circulation of child sexual abuse materials. UNICEF strengthens the capacity of partners on the ground to provide response services to victims of child sexual exploitation online. We work with governments to make sure they invest in evidence-based preventative programmes and raise awareness.

Gathering evidence on children’s online rights, opportunities and risks is a key component of the work of UNICEF. Through a collaboration between our Office of Research-Innocenti and the London School of Economics and Political Science, the Global Kids Online research project aims to better understand when and how Internet use contributes positively to children’s lives – and when it amplifies the risk of harm and potentially undermines their well-being. This research has so far been completed in 11 countries.

Informed and empowered children are best able to navigate risks, report abuse and seek help when they need it.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

National governments have the primary accountability to protect children from all forms of violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse (articles 19 and 34 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC). State parties to the convention must also protect the child’s right to privacy (article 16), freedom of expression and thought (articles 13 and 14), and access to media from a diversity of services (article 17). While the UNCRC was drafted over 30 years ago, these provisions remain highly relevant to children’s rights in the digital age. Businesses also have a responsibility to respect and support children’s rights: they must ensure the protection and safety of children in all their activities, and seek to bolster children’s rights through their products and services.7

Key Asks

UNICEF CALLS FOR THE FOLLOWING ACTION TO CREATE A SAFE ONLINE EXPERIENCE FOR CHILDREN.

1 **National governments** hold the primary accountability for the protection of children from violence, exploitation and abuse. They should:

- Develop a comprehensive agenda to strengthen child online protection. This should be aligned with wider national strategies to address violence against children. It can be informed by WePROTECT Global Alliance’s model national response. The implementation of this agenda should be overseen by an accountable national governance and oversight mechanism that brings together all stakeholders to better protect and empower children online.
- Ensure a comprehensive and effective legal framework to protect children from online violence, sexual exploitation and abuse. Laws may need updating to encompass online dimensions of violence, exploitation and abuse. There should be appropriate regulation of the industry to ensure their platforms are safe for children and respect children’s rights.
- Strengthen social welfare and justice service delivery for the effective investigation and prosecution of cases, and for appropriate and timely responses for children experiencing online violence and exploitation. Systems for victim reporting and support should provide integrated referral services during investigation, prosecution and aftercare.
- Invest in parenting programmes and the inclusion of digital literacy in national education curricula.

In the Philippines, government efforts to address online sexual exploitation of children have led to the development of a national framework, which includes a national response plan managed by the country’s Inter-Agency Council Against Child Pornography. There are currently three major studies in the national response plan: the Philippine Kids Online Survey, the National Study on Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children, and Changing Social Behaviour on Child Online Protection. The Government of the Philippines will use the results of the studies to inform policy advocacy, develop prevention programmes, and improve services and case management. UNICEF helped to lead the development of the national response plan through a multisectoral workshop involving key government and non-government agencies.

2 **Businesses** have a responsibility to respect and support children’s rights through their products and services, and to ensure the protection and safety of children in all their activities. Businesses should:

- Work with government ministries, other information and communications technology companies, law enforcement authorities, and civil society organizations to create a safe online environment for children by implementing the UNICEF Guidelines for Industry on Child Online Protection.
- Invest in the technological solutions that identify and promptly take down abusive material, as well as work with national and international law enforcement agencies to put in place robust reporting processes and legal accountability.
- Ensure the design of their platforms prioritize the safety of children, for example by protecting privacy by default; by restricting exploitative digital marketing and features that encourage overuse; and by providing tools that allow children to report grooming, sexual abuse materials, bullying and harassment, and harmful content – and that allow children to have content removed, and to gain access to help.

At the global level, UNICEF worked with the International Telecommunications Union to establish the Guidelines for Industry on Child Online Protection in 2015. Major industry partners provided critical inputs into the guidelines, which address the following key areas: integrating...
children’s rights considerations into all appropriate corporate policies and management processes; creating a safer and age-appropriate online environment; educating children, parents and teachers about children’s safety and their responsible use of digital technology; and promoting digital technology as a mode for increasing civic engagement.

3 Parents and educators have the responsibility to ensure that children are informed and guided, in a way that matches their evolving capacities, as they navigate the online world, and that they have a place to go to if they need help.

- Parents should encourage children to talk about their experiences online, should make sure they understand online risks and safe behaviour, and should be available if children find themselves in trouble.
- Educators should – in ways that are appropriate to the children’s ages and local culture and contexts – incorporate digital literacy into their curriculum, to promote the knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow children to flourish and thrive in a global digital world, and to be both safe and empowered.

In India, the #StaySafeOnline campaign was designed in line with the findings and recommendations from the Child Online Protection report launched on 22 September 2016. The campaign goals included increasing the public discourse around children’s rights in the digital space and enhancing awareness around online safety through practical guidance and tools for key audiences, namely children, parents and teachers. A booklet of parenting top tips to #StaySafeOnline and a children’s digi-diary of tips were produced by UNICEF and its partner the Learning Links Foundation. In 2018, the campaign reached some 6 million people.

4 Children and young people should prioritize safety and care for others as they explore the many opportunities available online. They should commit to:
- Being kind and respectful in how they treat members of their online communities, speaking out against online violence, and looking out for each other to confront bullying.
- Being informed and sophisticated when online, to understand basic terms and conditions, how to protect privacy, and when to recognize inappropriate marketing and features.
- Reporting dangerous contacts, harmful content and unacceptable behaviours through the available channels, and seeking out trusted adults such as parents or teachers when help is needed.

In Uganda, UNICEF has reached 42,023 children over the past year with information on online protection in 3 urban districts. This has been facilitated by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. UNICEF Uganda is also investing in a community-based approach to encourage reporting through awareness-raising campaigns on what constitutes online abuse.

In the words of the Executive Director of UNICEF, Henrietta Fore, the challenge facing us today is to ensure that we design systems that maximize the positive benefits of big data and artificial intelligence while preserving privacy, providing protections from harm and empowering people – including children – to exercise their rights. And we are beginning to see action: governments are strengthening regulatory frameworks, private-sector providers are recognizing their role, and educators are thinking about how to equip children with the tools to navigate the online world safely.9

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