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The Online Experiences of Children in the Philippines: Opportunities, Risks and Barriers
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Introduction

The digital world is one that offers a host of opportunities, benefits, excitement and thrills for adults and children alike. Increasingly, the online lives of individuals are inseparable from the world and lives offline. For children and young people in particular, the digital world and Internet is so embedded in the everyday lives and activities, from means of communication with family friends, and strangers, to sources of information and knowledge, that it is increasingly impossible to separate the online form the offline. While this comes with a wealth of benefits and advantages, it also comes with risks, and it is only in truly understanding how children go online – where and what devices and instruments they use to go online, how they learn, who supports them online, and what they do – that one can ensure that this new domain in which children live their life, that is so embedded with the domains of family and homes, schools, and broader communities, is best suited to maximise the benefits, while minimizing and mitigating the risks and harms that might be attached to the space. While snippets and snapshots of some information on children’s engagement and interaction with the digital world within the Philippines are known, there is as yet no comprehensive picture of how children (and their parents or caregivers) in the Philippines use and interact with digital technology and the Internet in their lives, or of the nature of their experiences, positive and negative.
The Philippines Kids Online (PKO) study seeks to fill that gap. Drawing on the foundational work of the Global Kids Online (GKO) network, PKO is a national research study, conducted between 2017 and 2019, to collect nationally representative data on children’s access to, use of, and experiences of, digital technology and the Internet. The study collected data from both children, and their parents or caregivers, throughout the Philippines. PKO has six specific objectives:

1. **Describe** the demographic profile of children in the Philippines aged 9-17 years who use the Internet.

2. **Determine** how children in the Philippines use and access the Internet and the level of their digital skills.

3. **Determine** the benefits and opportunities of online/digital use available to children in the Philippines.

4. **Estimate** the prevalence of online abuse experienced by children among these age groups.

5. **Identify** safety practices of children in the Philippines when using the Internet; and

6. **Identify** how parents mediate the use of the Internet by their children.

**A framework for understanding children’s experiences of digital technology and the Internet.**

Children’s online experiences are explored within the different contexts, or environments, in which they live their everyday lives. A child’s life is shaped and informed by their own individual characteristics and traits, that are themselves influenced by all of those around the child – their parents or caregivers, their extended family, friends and peers, their households, schools, and communities. All these different influencers shape every child’s everyday experiences, and how they interact with their environment around them. The same applies to how children experience their online worlds. Rather than seeing children’s experiences online as separate and distinct from what happens offline, it is important that the interaction and intersection between what happens online, and what happens offline, is recognized. It is similarly important to recognize that even the distinction between offline

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1. Global Kids Online is an “international research project that aims to generate and sustain a rigorous cross-national evidence base around children’s use of the internet.” See [http://globalkidsonline.net/about/](http://globalkidsonline.net/about/) for more information, including a list of participating countries.

2. An overview of the sample and the methodology used for PKO can be found at the end of this summary document. More detail of the PKO study can be found in the full report: UNICEF Philippines, Philippines Kids Online. The Online Experiences of Children in the Philippines: Opportunities, Risks and Barriers. Technical Report, 2020; while the detailed methodology guides and toolkits for the Global Kids Online study on which PKO is based can be found at [http://globalkidsonline.net/tools/](http://globalkidsonline.net/tools/)
and online is largely an artificial distinction. For many children – those that have regular access to digital technology at least - the digital space is so integrated into children’s worlds that it is almost impossible to separate relationships, activities, risks and opportunities that occur offline, and online.

Much of the focus on children’s digital experiences focuses on the potential negative aspects, specifically the risks that exist for children online. It is important to recognize the Internet and technology more broadly present a wealth of opportunities and benefits for children, while at the same time presenting many risks that may jeopardise the wellbeing and safety of children. However, not all risks equate or end in harm; not is it desirable to eliminate all risks. There is now substantial evidence that some risk is necessary in order for children to learn how to develop the appropriate skills, tools and decision-making to safely navigate and mitigate risks they may encounter. It is equally important to acknowledge that risks do not necessarily equate to harms. Risks is the probability, not the realisation of harm; harms refer to actual physical, psychological or sexual hurt or injury that may be caused as a result of an incident occurring. It is important to understand the risks that children encounter online, to support children in learning the skills to manage and mitigate those risks, and to prevent harm from occurring. It is also important that the opportunities that exist online are fully utilised and realised by children. These distinctions all guide the analysis of the data collected in PKO, and the recommendations that are proposed based on the data.

Much of the focus on children’s digital experiences focuses on the potential negative aspects, specifically the risks. It is important to recognize that the internet and technology present a wealth of opportunities and benefits for children.

A young girl child, sister of a victim of sexual abuse, uses a cellphone at her home in a poor community in the Philippines. © UNICEF Philippines/2019/SNoorani

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Findings

The study explored six distinct thematic areas: Access to technology and the Internet; Opportunities and Practice; Children’s Online World (Ecology); Digital Skills; Risks (including sexual risks) and harms; and Protective Factors (including that that rest within peers, family, schools and communities). Key findings from each of these themes are presented below.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has had a profound impact on the way that children use the Internet, specifically the length of time they may spend online, and the resulting levels of risk to which they may be exposed. The PKO study took place prior to the onset of the pandemic, and it is to be expected that the length of time that children spend online during the pandemic has increased significantly, as children are forced to turn online for most of their entertainment, connections, and for e-learning. Where, and how, children access the Internet is also likely to change, with children generally unable to use Internet cafés or Pisonet cafés to go online, forcing even more children online using smartphones. Similarly, the number of children globally exposed to online risks of different forms have been shown to increase during the lockdowns resulting from the pandemic. The true nature of these risks, the degree to which the number of risks has increased, and the extent to which more reports (and greater awareness of and access to reporting systems) are made, and how the trajectory of online risks will change after the pandemic, will only emerge over time.
The age at which children in the Philippines first go online is, on average, 10 years old, and they spend on average just under two hours (116 minutes) a day online.

While it is difficult to say, without longitudinal data, whether the age that children in the Philippines first go online is changing, it does appear that more younger children are reporting going online at a younger age than older children. This has implications for the age at which conversations on online safety and what may be appropriate and inappropriate for children to be accessing or doing online, are had with children. It also suggests that younger children – including those at primary school - should also be taught the technical skills, and digital citizenship, that may be required to ensure their wellbeing. It is also important in determining the nature of support and intervention that may be required from parents or caregivers, in ensuring that children stay safe. There is evidence to show that, for example, parental monitoring and filtering software has limited to no impact on older children’s safety, it may have some impact on enhancing younger children’s safety.4

Older children tend to spend longer online every day, on average, than younger children, suggesting that older children are allowed more space and time by their parents or caregivers and have greater access to devices and data. As noted in the text box above, this may have changed through the course of 2020 with the lockdown and restriction of movement outside of homes for populations all over the world, including the Philippines.5

Children most commonly access the Internet on their smartphone, while at home, but many also frequent both libraries, and Pisonet cafés to go online, which together account for the second and third most common place of access.

While girls most commonly go online at home, boys are more likely than girls to frequent Pisonet cafés. Where children access the Internet has implications for the nature of support and oversight that is available to them, and from whom. It may also provide an indication of the levels of privacy from particularly parental supervision that they may have. The fact that children most commonly go online via the smartphone suggests limits, already identified in much of the international literature, that approaches to online safety through parental supervision and monitoring, presents. It also provides insight into types of activities that children can engage in online within different spaces.

While smartphones are perhaps best suited to communication and connecting with others, for gaming purposes, desktops, such as those offered in Pisonet cafés (many of which offer advanced graphics capabilities, and superior Internet bandwidth) are far superior to those available on mobile devices. This is particularly relevant where less than one in ten children have access to gaming consoles such as PlayStation or Xboxes. It may also be one reason that more boys frequent Pisonet cafés than girls, as more boys report playing games. Children are also able to engage online without any supervision while in public spaces such as Pisonet cafés, which no doubt offers an additional draw for many children to such facilities. Pisonet café’s also offer relatively affordable Internet

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access, with an hour and 40 minutes costing on average PhP20. To a much lesser degree, children, particularly those from lower income households, also use limited duration free Wi-Fi available in schools, coffee shops, and malls. Close to five in ten children in rural areas rely on free Wi-Fi.

**Social media dominates children’s Internet use.**

Children rate social media platforms as their most used online applications, with Facebook their favourite, followed by YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. This broadly reflects trends elsewhere in the region, where Facebook is almost ubiquitous amongst children who go online. More girls than boys in the Philippines report using Facebook and Instagram. Nine out of ten girls use Facebook, compared to eight out of ten boys, while one in five girls use Instagram compared to a little over one in ten boys. It is noticeable that children in the Philippines tend to equate the Internet with social media, rather than viewing social media as one distinct aspect to being online and the Internet. It also reflects the dominant role that social media has assumed in children’s world.

**While most children in the Philippines generally have a good time or fun when online, few children think that there are a lot of good things on the Internet that are good for children their age.**

Most children going online tend to have a good time either sometimes or all the time. However, more girls than boys, and younger children compared to older children, feel they never have a good time. While it is positive that most children enjoy going online, it is cause for concern that only three in ten children feel that there are a lot of good things for children their age online. These feelings may reflect both negative experiences of children they have personally had online or reflect adult or peer narratives that emphasise negative aspects and experiences online over positive. It may also reflect the fact that children feel that the content itself that they encounter online is unsuitable for children their age, referring to educational or entertainment content. The fact that despite most children feeling there is insufficient good or positive things that exist online for them, most still have a good time, possibly reflects that children may be better positioned that is often assumed to process and manage the lack of positive content or experiences online. It may also reflect the types of online activities that children are engaging in, focusing more on social media and less on educational opportunities. Nonetheless, this is an important finding suggesting that children either require more suitable age-appropriate content online, or direction in finding such content where it exists, and provides an important area for policy intervention.

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7 Like the ubiquity of Facebook in the region, this conflation of the internet with social media is also commonly noted elsewhere in the East Asia region, as well as the South Pacific region. See UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office and the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, Our Lives Online, 2020.
Children use the Internet for connecting with others, and for schoolwork and education, more than for any other purposes.

Generally, children tend to interact more with their friends around their own age, than with anyone else. Children most commonly interact with friends their own age via a messaging service or app, when playing games, or via social networking sites, at least once a week, or more frequently, than with any other individuals or groups of people. Friends their own age are followed by family members, either parents or caregivers, and siblings, as the people children are most likely to interact with online. Importantly, while perceptions amongst adults often tend to children being constantly connected to their friends, very few children in the Philippines report being constantly connected, in contact almost all the time or even several times a day, with their friends, family or others they connect with online.8

Entertainment, specifically watching their favourite tv shows, or music videos, followed by online gaming, is the third most common use of the Internet for children in the Philippines.

Eight out of one hundred children interact regularly with someone they met online who falls outside of any of their community, when playing games; six in one hundred interact regularly with someone they first met online via a social network site or app.

The concept of “stranger danger” – the potential risk and harms that children might encounter speaking to a stranger online, still dominates many of the fears that adults have regarding children’s online safety. While findings from elsewhere show that the greatest risks to children often come from those known to them, either family or community members, it may still be reassuring to know that the vast majority of children do not interact regularly with people that might be considered strangers online.9 When this does happen, it is often through online gaming, which commonly tends to involve, by design, other players from all over the world.

One in two children report having used the Internet for schoolwork at least every week to almost all the time, and more girls, than boys, reported regular use of the Internet for schoolwork.

This emphasises the important value that being online presents for children, as being connected (and having the requisite skills to successfully navigate the online space in order to access the educational resources that exist online) is becoming increasingly essential in equipping children with the knowledge and skills they need to realise their full potential. It is also of note given the somewhat limited access to technology

Education and schoolwork are amongst the most common reported uses of the Internet for children:
“It (the internet) adds knowledge about many things...like finding answers to assignments, (and) how to do research.”

(Girl, 12 years old, Quezon City)

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8 Like the length of time that children spend online, and how and where they access the internet, the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted on how connected children perceive themselves as being and may change again following the pandemic into 2021 and beyond.

within schools, identified both through this study and elsewhere, and given that educators were identified by learners as themselves having limited technology and Internet skills. Older children, and boys, tend to use digital technology while at school for making presentations, writing online, making pictures or videos, checking information online, doing group work, chatting online, and joining online discussions, more than younger children, or girls; more girls, however, use the Internet specifically for school work. While it is likely that older children have developed greater skills, and have more access, to technology and the Internet than younger children, it is important to note the gender difference in utilisation of technology for schoolwork, and an emphasis may be required to increase both access to and skills for digital technology, for girls within the Philippines, while increasing boys use of the Internet for school work. There is no precise age at which children should be introduced to technology and digital tools within the classroom. However, as children are increasingly going online at a younger and younger age, both globally and within the Philippines, it is likely that acquiring these skills at a primary school level will likely increase the educational opportunities and benefits that children are able to realise.

**Nearly one in two children in the Philippines say they learned something new online in the past month.**

Related to the use of the Internet for education, the Internet also serves as a vast repository for knowledge. Almost one in two children in the Philippines have learnt something new online, with more girls, than boys, reporting having learnt something new in the past month. It is likely that this is related to the fact that more girls report using the Internet for schoolwork, than boys.

Conversely, it is important to note that one third of the children report hardly ever learning something new. While the exact reason for this is not known, it is possible that limited access to technology at schools, combined with slow Internet connectivity (identified in literature reviewing Internet access in the Philippines) in the country might explain this to some degree.10

It is notable that children in the Philippines rarely use the Internet for civic or community activities, such as getting involved in community movements or political causes, or charities, or to help someone. The degree to which this may impact on children’s own proclivity to seek help online remains unknown, but it is conceivable that an increase in civic activities may positively increase the chances of children seeking help for their own negative experiences online.

**Four in 10 children play online games by themselves, and nearly three in 10 children play multiplayer online games.**

The Internet may be most commonly used (if not indispensable) for schoolwork, but entertainment, including gaming remains a major drawcard. Online gaming is appealing not only for the pure entertainment factor, but also in that it opens the opportunities to interact with people from all over the world, online, combining the possibilities of expanding what are often quite constrained and small worlds for children, with the competitiveness and entertainment aspects of gaming.

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10 The Speedtest Global Index 2020 ranks Philippines 106 out of 174 countries in terms of internet speeds. [https://www.speedtest.net/global-index](https://www.speedtest.net/global-index)
Many children are more comfortable to be themselves online, than in person.

Nearly four in 10 children say it is easier to be themselves online than in face-to-face interactions. The Internet provides an important, and often safe, space for children to explore their own identity particularly when living in societies or households that restrict or limit the opportunity to do so without fear of judgement or discrimination. The Internet clearly provides that opportunity for many children in the Philippines. In such cases, it is even more important that the Internet is a safe space for children. Yet, while many children feel they can truly be themselves online, most children do not feel that the Internet is a safe place for them, stressing the importance of targeted policy and programming intervention to enhance children’s feeling of safety.

Fewer than one in two children feel safe using the Internet.

That the minority of children in the Philippines feel safe using the Internet is in itself significant, given that most children still have fun when they go online. Only one in five children feel that it is very true that they feel safe, while slightly more feel it is somewhat true for them. The feelings of unsafety perhaps reflect the large proportion of children who feel that there are not a lot of good things for them online. More boys than girls report that they feel safe online. These feeling of safety, or unsafety, may be impacted by direct adverse experiences online, by experiences of their friends, or informed by the messaging and narratives around them that the Internet is not a safe place. The absence of feeling safe may impact negatively on how children use the Internet, and the degree to which they are able to realise the full range of opportunities that exist for them online. It must be noted that there are two aspects to online safety – the realisation of safety, and the perception of safety; both are equally important in ensuring children reap the full benefit of everything the Internet and digital technology have to offer. It is thus important that in ensuring that digital technology is safe for children, and that they are equipped with the necessary skills to keep safe online, and to effectively manage situations they may encounter that are risky, this is not done in a way that promotes fear, or inhibits or compromises their enjoyment and realisation of the opportunities that exist for them online.

The perception of safety refers to how safe children feel online, and may be informed by other’s experiences, what they are told or see in the media or around them, as much as their own experiences. While children may be relatively safe, if they do not feel safe, they are less likely to engage in all the opportunities that exist, and explore the internet and digital technology to it’s fullest. The realisation of safety refers to how safe children actually are, and stay, online.
The majority of children show their face on their profile, and many show both their address, and full body photos.

Despite many not feeling safe, and many children reporting that they know what information to keep private, children commonly reveal personal data and information online, through their profiles and their social media presence. Girls are more likely than boys to reveal their face, and to keep their profiles public. This apparent discrepancy between perceived knowledge of data privacy steps, and what is revealed in practice, together with a common feeling of unsafety, may reflect the tension and pressures that children often feel to be popular online and attract followers, while knowing that doing so may put their safety and well-being at harm. It may illustrate a lack of translation of knowledge and awareness into everyday behaviour change, or simply be an over-estimation by children themselves of their own skills and awareness of data privacy and protection, a scenario that has been encountered elsewhere in the East Asia and Pacific region and globally. The apparent contradiction may also be a combination of these factors, which children tending to over-estimate their knowledge of safety and privacy, while in fact having a relatively superficial knowledge, and also wanting to reap the benefits of expanding networks and meeting new people online.

One in ten children accepting friends request from anyone, whether known to them, their friends or family. These people could be absolute strangers to the child. Children are more likely to accept friend requests from someone if they have some friends in common, with almost one in five children reporting they would usually accept such request, while one in three children report that they usually only accept friend request if they know the person making the requests. Only one in 100 children block strangers when they receive friend or contact requests from them.

It is not uncommon for children to have multiple Facebook, or other social media, accounts.

Having multiple social media accounts on a single platform does not itself constitute a risk, although how those accounts are managed by increase certain risks. In total only one in ten children have two Facebook accounts, while just 6 percent have three or more accounts. Children have multiple accounts for several reasons: to keep some information private, to be shared only amongst friends and peer networks, or to keep accounts that are used for school or educational purposes, separate from those that are more social, or used for hobbies and interests. While having multiple accounts may serve very practical purposes for children in terms of interests and keeping private and public conversations and personas separate, they can also present some risks for children. Where parents or caregivers may feel that they are aware of what their children are doing online through friending them on Facebook for example, this may create a false sense of security should the child have another private account of which their parents are unaware. It is also of note that while the minimum age Facebook allows for an account is 13 years, three quarters (73.2%) of children aged nine to 11 in the Philippines have a Facebook account; of these only one ten created their account without changing any information about themselves, while most had their accounts created by family members, or changed information about themselves.

Children’s digital skills can be assessed in terms of their operational, information browsing, social, and creative skills.

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See for example, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office and the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, Out Lives Online, 2020.
Children in the Philippines generally tend to know the more basic and common functions of surfing and consuming online content, but are yet to fully take advantage of the creative and learning, or educational, opportunities of the Internet, or to develop appropriate skills that allow them to do so.

In terms of operational skills, while half of the children in the Philippines know how to save a photo they find online, only three in ten know how to change their privacy settings, one quarter know how to change their network settings, and one in ten know a programming language. Information browsing skills were generally slightly higher, with one in four children knowing how to find a website they had previously visited, and to easily choose the best phrase for searches. Only slightly fewer found it easy to check whether information they found online was true; a particularly important skills as mis- and dis-information spreads online.

More than one in five children also reported ending up on websites without knowing how they got there.

This is particularly significant in light of the frequency of pop-ups and links to adult-content that appear on many seemingly innocuous sites. Being directed through pop-ups on websites or within games or other apps, may also result in children being inadvertently exposed to adult content, whether sexual, gambling, or other age-inappropriate material. It is also important to note this and to better understand where these pop-ups or links are being encountered, as most commonly-used browsers include functionality that prevent pop-ups, the activation of which would protect children from being exposed to these diversions to unwanted sites. The inclusion of these pop-ups and links within commercial apps and games should also be raised with industry and app-developers, as part of their obligations to keep children safe online.

Few children reported being well-versed in creative online skills.

One in three knew how create something new from music or videos they had found online, while even fewer knew how to edit or make basic changes to online content others had created, or how to design a website. This picture suggests that children in the Philippines remain largely consumers of content online, rather than fully taking advantage of the creative and educational opportunities that being connected presents, or developing the more technical and advanced skills that are increasingly required entering into the formal and informal employment arena.

The levels of skills, particularly technical and operational skills (including activating privacy settings, or deleting contacts or friends) have implications too, for how children manage risks that they may encounter online, and what steps they take in mitigating those risks.
The risks that children encounter online, and how children navigate those risks, and as well as how they cope and seek support and assistance, are best understood within a broader context of offline risk and protective factors.

**Few children in the Philippines report engaging regularly in risk-taking behaviour (offline), with less than one in ten children reporting having got really drunk, missed lessons without their parents knowledge, having sexual intercourse, or being in trouble with the police over the past year.**

Risk-taking, when it does happen, is generally higher amongst boys than girls. Engaging in sensation-seeking activities is slightly more common, although less than one in five children report that they often do dangerous things for fun or do exciting things even if they are dangerous.

Slightly more children engage in risk-taking behaviour online than offline. One in five children have actively sought out new friends or contacts online (a relatively small percentage given that meeting people online is one major drawcard of being online), or have chosen to share, either through direct messaging or on a social media site, personal stories, such as photos or videos of themselves or clothes or other stuff of theirs online, thus making some aspects of their personal life public.

**Most children in the Philippines have not encountered risks, sexual or otherwise, online in the past year.**

However, one in four children in the Philippines have encountered sexual images online, while one in seven have received sexual messages in the past year. One in five report that something has happened at least once over the past year that upset or bothered them online.

**One in seven children have also at least once met someone offline they first got to know online over the past year.**

Girls were most likely to meet with another girl like them who they first met online, while both boys and girls commonly met with a person they had only met online but who was already known to their friends or relatives. However, two in five children met with someone they first met online who was totally unknown to them or anyone they know, and a similar percentage of children personally met with someone older than them. One in five children who had met someone online before meeting them face-to-face reported meeting a LGBT person, which may be related to limited opportunities in other environments to meet others of shared gender identity.

**Most children in the Philippines had not encountered sexual content, or messages of a sexual nature, that they did not want.**

It is important when seeking to understand children’s experiences of sexual contact and content online, that wanted experiences be differentiated from unwanted sexual contact, or content.

It is important, when seeking to understand children’s experiences of sexual content and contact online, to differentiate between wanted or desired experiences (such as when children might actively seek out sexual content, or engage in a consensual desired sexual relationship with an age-appropriate peer), and unwanted sexual contact. While the fact that the minority of children
in the Philippines had encountered unwanted sexual contact is itself positive, it is still important to understand the experiences of those who had encountered such unwanted sexual content or solicitation. A little more than one in ten (13.1%) of children reported they had seen or received a sexual message, video or image that they did not want, with slightly more boys than girls reporting having received such messages. Only slightly fewer reported having received an email or a message containing a link to an X-rated site. More boys than girls reported being sent emails or messages containing sexual content that they did not want.

Fewer children have been directly approached by someone else to provide some form of sexual content relating to themselves. When this has happened, more boys than girls have been asked for sexual content. A little over one in ten children report having been asked to talk about sexual acts with someone online when they did not want to, while 79 percent of children report having been asked for a photo or video of their private parts by someone online. A similar percentage of children report having been asked to do something sexual on the Internet when they did not want to or have been asked for sexual information about themselves. Importantly, boys are as vulnerable as girls to unwanted sexual contact.

The most common source of unwanted sexual contact online for children in the Philippines, is a family member of the child.

Of particular concern is that when any of these forms of unwanted sexual contact have occurred it is an adult in the child’s own family who is most commonly cited as being responsible for this unwanted request, rather than peers or strangers. This challenges not only many of the common assumptions surrounding different forms of online child sexual abuse, but also has importance for both prevention and response initiatives. When the unwanted sexual contact came from someone other than a family member, it was still more likely to be from someone known by the child, such as a romantic partner, than from a stranger, with just 5% of those who had experienced unwanted contact reporting it originated with someone they had met online.

Very few children who experiences any form of unwanted sexual attention or contact, sought help or assistance for their experience.

Most children in the Philippines reported that the last time something happened online that upset them, they just ignored it and hoped it went away. One in five deleted any messages from the person involved, and the same number stopped using the Internet for a while. Less than one in ten children reported the problem or the person on the relevant account or platform. It is not unusual for children to speak to their peers and friends about both their positive and negative online experiences. Children in Philippines broadly reflect this trend, with one in two children speaking to a friend around their age, and another third speaking to another classmate, or mother and or father, the last time they encountered something that bothered them online.

These trends highlight the need to strengthen the capacity of peers and children of the same or similar age in how best to support their friends when encountering risky and potentially harmful online experiences, as well as caregivers and parents, and other family members. They also emphasise the need for a ready and accessible psycho-social support service that responds timeously to reports, that children are aware of and feel confident to utilize.
Research shows that parent’s mediation of their children’s interaction with digital technology may be enabling, or restrictive. Each approach impacts on children’s development of appropriate skills and knowledge required to both stay safe, and take advantage of opportunities, online. Enabling mediation refers to active strategies such as talking to a child as to what they do online, and encouraging activities as well as giving advice; restrictive mediation refers to restricting or banning activities, or supervising children on any long list of activities.


The home, school and community environments in which children live may play an important role in equipping children with the skills and capacities to successfully navigate difficulties and risks they encounter online and off; more directly, they may also support children with the successful skills to manage and protect themselves online, or become ‘digitally resilient’.

**Most children in the Philippines feel that their parents or caregivers provide guidelines for them, support them, and are accessible for them to talk to about things that go on in the lives.**

More than half of the children in the Philippines find it easy or very easy to speak to their parent about things that upset them. The majority felt that their parents usually set rules for them about what they do at home, and for what they can do outside of the home. Approximately seven out of ten children feel that it is very true, or a fairly true, that their family really try to help them, while a little more than one in two feel it is fairly or very true that someone in their family listen to what they say. These provide an important foundation on which to develop positive parent-child relationships and communications around their online or digital experiences.

Research shows that parent’s mediation of their children’s interaction with digital technology may be enabling, or restrictive. Each approach impacts on children’s development of appropriate knowledge and skills required to both stay safe, and make the most of the opportunities, online, differently.

On the whole, children in the Philippines feel that their parents or caregivers practice more restrictive mediation with them than enabling, preferring to try and restrict and monitor their child’s Internet use than speaking to them about what they do online, and spending time with them online, or teaching them appropriate skills. However, parents tended not to engage consistently with the children in any form, either enabling or restricting, their Internet use, perhaps influenced in part by the digital skills of the parents or caregivers themselves.
Schools currently play very little role, either through the formal curriculum or through teacher mediation and intervention, in supporting children online, or in facilitating the development of online skills.

School, through both teachers and the formal curriculum, can also play an important role in mediating children’s use of technology and the Internet. However, few children reported that their teachers often or very often assisted them with something they found difficult to do or explained why some websites were good or bad. Slightly more children reported that their teachers suggested ways to behave towards others online either often or very often or spoke to them in general terms about what they could do if something happened online that bothered them. This reflects a generally passive engagement, where it happens, from teachers and schools in supporting children’s Internet use.

The limited role of schools in developing children’s use of technology and the Internet is also reflected in the fact that one in four children never make school presentations online, and one in three never check the school’s websites for information, or chatted online with the school or their teachers. This suggests that even where schools are connected to the Internet, and have digital technology readily available, it is likely that many teachers simply do not have the requisite skills or knowledge to engage with learners online, or to support them in the development of their technical and digital skills.

Children speak to their friends and classmates more about their online experiences, than teachers or other adults.

There was greater engagement and support from peers, with approximately three in ten reporting their peers sometimes suggested ways to use the Internet safely, and encouraged them to explore and learn things on the Internet, while one quarter reported their friends helped them when they found something difficult to do online.

This suggests that even though active engagement with peers about what happens online is not consistently common, children speak to their friends more about things that bother them online, and how to do things online, as well as general online behaviour, than either their teachers or their parents or caregivers, or the teachers. As such, peers offer a valuable entry point for conversations around digital safety and well-being.
Recommendations

Several recommendations are proposed. These recommendations relate to both policy and legislation, and intervention and programmatic responses.

At a policy level:

⇒ Formulate a National Information and Communications Technology (ICT) policy for education, and a related development framework to serve as guideposts and policy benchmarks for implementing agencies.

The study illustrates generally low levels of digital skills of children, parents, and teachers; low appreciation of the opportunities presented by the digital platform for digital creativity, participation, and agency; disparate access and connectivity; and lack of a clear accountability and development framework that work toward not only protecting children but also ensuring that children, their parents, families, teachers, and communities are able to optimize the great benefits of Internet use. A coherent national ICT policy and development framework that concurrently promotes and invests in the opportunities and benefits that can be realised by children online, and provides a framework for keeping children safe online, would provide...
a solid foundation for government, industry and civil society to start to address the current gaps relating to children’s online capacities. Such a policy should include the involvement of at least, the Department of Education, the Commission on Higher Education, the Departments of Social Work and Development, Science and Technology, Information and Communications Technology, the Council for the Welfare of Children, and the National Privacy Commission.

**Revise the basic education curriculum to incorporate digital skills and citizenship for children.** The next stage of basic education curriculum revisions should include components enhancing digital skills of children and values integration across learning areas about the benefits, opportunities, and risks of Internet use. This study found that while children have access to the Internet, not all benefit and enhance their digital skills, especially those in rural areas and in low to middle-income households. In effect, this redirects teacher in-service training and professional development to understanding, being aware of, and utilizing technology integration for teaching and learning.

**Related to this, digital citizenship (including online safety) should be integrated into both college curriculum and teacher-training curriculum (both formal and in-service).** The study, framed within the broader literature, reflects relatively low levels of digital literacy amongst educators. This limitation has been recognized by government. Teacher training curriculum should incorporate both digital technology and the psycho-social aspects of online safety, and conversely, identifying risks and indicators of potential harms resulting from negative online experiences, amongst children. For higher education, include topics in syllabus design—especially in Science, Technology & Society and in the College General Education curriculum—on the positive and potential risks of the Internet. These should draw on recent evidence, both global and regional, that presents both opportunities and potential harms.

**Establish an E-learning Outreach Program in select barangays.** The PKO study shows that many children in more remote and rural communities have limited access to digital technology and are more likely to report slow Internet speeds than those in urban areas. An e-learning outreach programme can provide computer and Internet literacy particularly for lower-income and marginalised households or populations, indigent children, OSYs, and elementary pupils. Such an initiative should be provided for in the national policy and development framework proposed above, and should include the participation of parents, local government units (LGUs), and school authorities, in order to ensure that even those children with limited resources, and who are most commonly marginalised and exclude from access to ICTs, reap the benefits and gain relevant skills.

**Enforce the regulation and accountability of Pisonet cafés to ensure they are “child-friendly” establishments.** While Internet cafés are not unique to the Philippines, the Pisonet café has assumed a particularly important place in young people’s digital environment within the Philippines. PKO shows that these are the second most frequently place of Internet access for children, and as such they occupy an important position with an almost unique opportunity to both contribute to the enhancement of young people’s digital skills and ensuring their online safety.
and well-being. Steps should be taken to maintain barangay tanod’s visibility in Pisonet cafés and enlist local partners (such as the Sangguniang Kabataan) to provide peer support and promote safe Internet use.

At an Intervention and Programmatic level:

- Incorporate digital citizenship and online safety into both universal, and targeted, parenting support programmes, where these exist.

  The study highlighted the limited digital skills and literacy of parents and caregivers, and engagement between parents and caregivers with children in the household about their digital and online activities. At the same time, children thought that their parents and caregivers wanted the best for them and provided appropriate guidelines for their behaviour. This provides a solid foundation from which parents and children can start to have appropriate conversations about their online activities and experiences. However, these conversations on premised on parents and caregivers having the requisite skills themselves.

  At a universal level, pre- and peri-natal parenting services can be utilised to distribute basic guidelines on understanding age-appropriate screen interaction, and basic online safety messages, including those that relate to child data protection and privacy. At a more targeted levels, parenting programmes can include online safety as a core component of programme material and delivery, linking strongly as it does to positive parent-child bonding and communication, for example.

- Identify high-risk communities and populations for targeted caregivers and parent’s digital literacy training.

  These sites should be identified on the basis of objective economic and social criteria for (including rates of offline and online violence, and economic and social households stressors) and offer targeted parenting interventions focusing on digital literacy and online safety supported by government and civil society partnerships.

- Build the capacity of educators at the school level, and within schools, to identify the signs of online abuse and exploitation, cyber-bullying and other forms of negative online experiences that may impact adversely on children.

  In addition to building the skills and capacities of educators to identify trauma, interventions should also ensure that educators are equipped with the appropriate skills to support children and provide service referrals where necessary. This should be focused on behavioural and emotional symptoms as much as on the technology itself.

- Invest in and support school and community-based evidence-informed peer and bystander support interventions.

  The PKO study shows that peers – friends and classmates of children – are the group that children first turn to when encountering negative online experiences or content, and to whom children most talk about what happens online. As such, they offer an important entry point, and asset, to influence peer online behaviour and knowledge. While there is already a growing body of evidence of what works in peer and bystander intervention programmes
for cyberbullying, those developed and tested for offline forms of child sexual abuse and prevention should also be explored.\textsuperscript{12} There is a growing body of global evidence of what works in peer interventions, and this should be drawn upon, together with existing evidence from the Philippines-based programming.

One mechanism to deliver peer interventions could be through School Child Protection Committees. Such an approach could meld interventions that target both educators and peers to provide support to children at-risk within the school, or simply to provide support to peers on decision-making, impulse control and managing adverse online experiences. There is already some evidence regarding the efficacy of such approaches, such as the Safe Schools for Teens intervention, which has shown positive results in addressing child sexual abuse, within the Philippines, although it has not been tested for online child sexual abuse or other online experiences. Such an approach merges support for peers and integrates targeted modules into school Health and Values Education subjects of the school curriculum, thus providing both curriculum-based interventions and peer-support interventions.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Design a learning programme for out-of-school youth to encourage access to digital technology and enhance digital skills.}
  
  While most younger children in the Philippines have access to and attend primary school, out-of-school youth (OSY) constitute a larger proportion of the child population amongst older children. As such, they have little access to formal ICT and digital literacy programming. For OSYs the Alternative Learning System of the Department of Education should collaborate with the ICT industry in funding and running a learning program similar to the proposed basic education curriculum revision.

  Finally, and arguably most important, it is critical throughout all design and implementation of all the above recommendations that children are provided a voice throughout the process affecting them, and determining the most appropriate and desirable pathways to improve their online experiences, opportunities and futures, online and off. The PKO study clearly illustrates the importance of giving children a voice in sharing their own experiences, knowledge and perceptions, and these should be included in all policy and programming approaches aimed at keeping children in the Philippines safe online, and in realising the wealth of opportunities and benefits that exist online.
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\textsuperscript{13} Bernadette J. Madrid, Gilda D. Lopez, Leonila F. Dans, Deborah A. Fry, Francis Grace H. Duka-Pante, Alberto T. Muyot. Safe schools for teens: preventing sexual abuse of urban poor teens, proof-of-concept study - Improving teachers’ and students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes, Helyion, Volume 6, ISSUE 6, e04080, June 01, 2020
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About the Study

The PKO study combined a quantitative and qualitative methodology, drawing on the Global Kids Online study. For the quantitative component, the researchers conducted a nationwide survey of Children in the Philippines and their parents or carers. Data was collected and analysed between 2017 and 2019.

A total 160 enumerators and 20 field coordinators administered the survey in 25 selected provinces in the Philippines. The survey has a representative sample of 2,250 children aged 9-17 years. A total 1,873 children-respondents participated in the survey from 17 regions, 25 provinces, 147 municipalities, and 225 barangays (villages) in the country.

For the qualitative component, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with selected children and parents. These were held at the DLSU campus for participants from the National Capital Region and Luzon, and in Davao City for Visayas and Mindanao participants. A total 44 children and 35 parents participated in the FGDs, distributed based on age groups, gender, and regional locations. The study was conducted by the Social Development Research Center of the De La Salle University, in partnership with UNICEF Philippines and the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti. The report was written by Patrick Burton. The study was made possible with support from the Australian Government.