Save the Children

Vodafone Foundation

Skills Upload Jr

CLICK, SCROLL, CONNECT – AND BALANCE

Children's digital wellbeing in educational contexts across Europe

CHILDREN'S VERSION

> ***We know what's happening online, so we should be involved in making it better.***
>
> Alex, 14, United Kingdom[1]

This report is the children's version of Click, Scroll, Connect – and Balance: Children's digital wellbeing in educational contexts across Europe by Daniela Ritz, Jeffrey DeMarco and Michelle Sandall, developed by Save the Children UK with the Vodafone Foundation in 2025.

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Notes

1 Source: https://5rightsfoundation.com/resource/a-new-era-uncrc-general-comment-on-childrens-rights-in-the-digital-environment/

2 Source: https://5rightsfoundation.com/resource/a-new-era-uncrc-general-comment-on-childrens-rights-in-the-digital-environment/

3 Third and Moody, 2021

4 Save the Children Denmark/Red Barnet, 2021

5 Save the Children Spain, 2024

6 Save the Children Spain, 2024

7 Third and Moody, 2021

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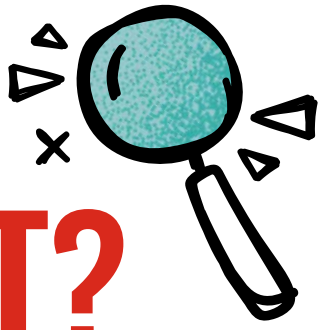
WHAT'S THIS REPORT ABOUT?

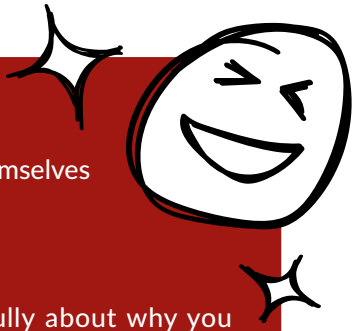


This report is about how we can all work together so that when you and other children are online you are safe to explore, play and learn. And you are included and able to say what you think and feel.

We look at:

- What do children say about being safe online?
- What do digital companies need to know and do to support children be safe online?
- What do leaders, parents, carers and teachers need to do to support the children they care for to be safe online?

To find answers to these questions, we looked at more than 100 reports, articles and books about children online. We also spoke to experts who know about children being safe online and their wellbeing and collected children's views from previous studies we did with children in Romania, Spain, Finland, Denmark and Norway. This report sets out what we found out.



How you can stay safe online: The SMILE framework

Here are five steps to help you stay safe online – based on what children themselves have told us. Called the SMILE Framework, it can be your own online shield!

S = Security. Protect your personal information online.

M = Management. Take control of your online behaviour. Think carefully about why you want to go online, where you want to go and how much time you want to spend. Decide how you want to behave.

I = Identity. Find ways to be yourself online and to be kind and caring towards others.

L = Literacy. Learn how to distinguish between what is real and what is fake online.

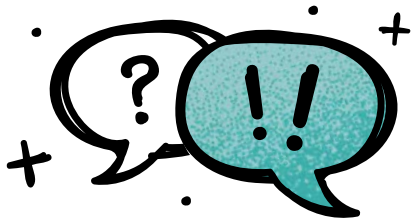
E = Empathy. Showing respect and kindness towards others and consider their feelings.

Our training programme in digital skills and resilience shows children like you how to use the SMILE shield to be safe online when you play, learn and connect.

ACTION:

Take 10 seconds to explore which part of the shield you already use and which parts you would like to strengthen.

WHY DOES THIS REPORT MATTER TO YOU?



> ***Adults make decisions about the internet without knowing what it's like for us.***
>
> Zara, 14, United Kingdom[2]

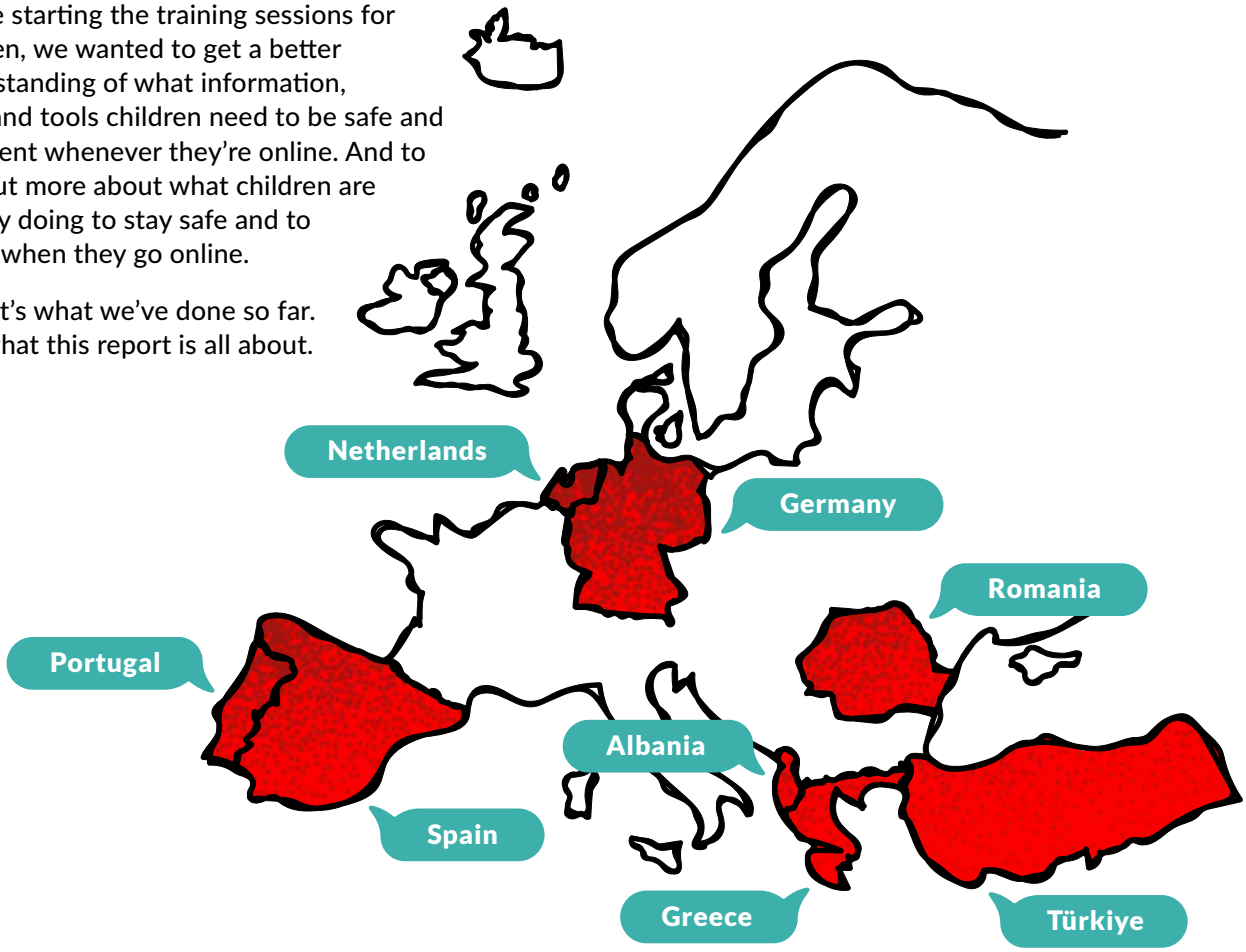
The Vodafone Foundation and Save the Children have come together to create a training programme for children in eight European countries aged 9 to 16 years.

We want to help children like you learn what you need to be safe, confident and able to make the right decisions whenever you are online.

The eight countries where we're doing this training are Albania, Romania, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Netherlands, Germany and Türkiye.

Before starting the training sessions for children, we wanted to get a better understanding of what information, skills and tools children need to be safe and confident whenever they're online. And to find out more about what children are already doing to stay safe and to thrive when they go online.

So that's what we've done so far. And what this report is all about.



ACTION:

In 10 seconds, can you list all the ways you use the internet!

First up, there are a couple of important terms we need to explain.

What do we mean by the digital space?
The digital space is all the websites, games, apps, and videos you use on your phone, tablet, or computer. It should be a fun, engaging and safe space for you. A space to learn, connect and say what you think. Where you chat with friends, do schoolwork, play games and find things out.

Being safe, learning, playing and being able to express yourself in the digital space isn't just something that's nice for a child to have – it's your right.

What is resilience?
Being resilient means, you can deal with and bounce back from difficult or upsetting experiences. Things like cyberbullying, seeing scary content, or being left out. Our research backs up what we expect you already know – that children today are great at using the internet and doing things online. Things like:

- finding fun, interesting and safe websites
- communicating with friends
- blocking or ignoring mean messages
- keeping some information private

In other words, when it comes to training children in how to stay safe and be resilient online, you already have a lot of skills and knowledge. But the internet can be a tough space for children. It's really important you get the support you need, depending on your age and who you are, to stay safe online. And if and when you face hurtful comments or behaviour, that you are able to cope with them and bounce back.

Our training on digital skills and resilience is part of Skills Upload Junior, a Vodafone Foundation programme that has already reached more than 10.5 million children!

WHAT ARE THE ONLINE THREATS TO CHILDREN?

Of course, you can have a great time when you are online. You get to connect with friends, play games, and learn and discover new things. But children have also told us about threats they face online.

ACTION:

In 10 seconds, think about experiences online that have been uncomfortable, upsetting or made you feel this doesn't sound right!

Some of the online dangers and difficulties children have told us about are:

Cyberbullying – people posting hurtful messages or photos online

Discrimination – instead of valuing and celebrating our differences, –some children are made to feel left out, ignore or less important than others because they are seen as different in some way.

Harmful information – for example, misleading information that encourages harm, scary messages, or content created for adults only but that children can access (because of poor safeguards).

Stress and anxiety – apps and games that are designed to get you hooked on them, which can affect your sleep and mess with your moods.

Content that undermines you – for example, by telling you how you should look or be, and if you don't look that way, makes you feel there is something wrong with you.

Not being listened to.

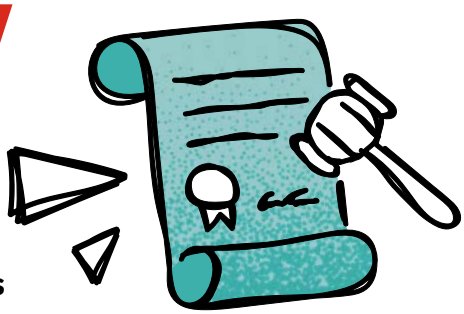
Limited information about to where to go for help or guidance.

Being left out of left behind because you don't have online access or only have limited access.

A study carried out in Romania found that children who have been victims of cyberbullying have much more difficulty concentrating, feel anxious about going to school/consider skipping school, feel hopeless, report having nightmares, or have thought about hurting themselves. Half of the children interviewed said they have been called hurtful, offensive words or insults that made them feel scared. A quarter of children reported they have had difficulty going to sleep after they have been bullied online. (Save the Children Romania, 2025).

All children have the right to be safe, supported and heard. That includes when you are online. The digital space should be made a safe place for all children to learn and play. It should be a space for them to thrive.

WHAT WE FOUND OUT ABOUT CHILDREN'S ONLINE SAFETY



1 What does the law say?

The European Union has introduced laws and policies over the past decade to protect children online.

Two of these laws are the General Data Protection Regulation (often referred to as GDPR) and the Digital Services Act. They aim to make sure:

- online privacy is not ignored by companies that make and run the games, apps and websites you use or is not seen as just an afterthought, but instead is built into online services – by design and from the start
- anyone, including children, can raise concerns, complaints and questions with Instagram, TikTok and other platforms and hold them responsible
- children are protected from harmful content
- there are ways and means to enforce online safety – for example, so that internet companies and platforms can remove harmful content immediately.

But threats to children's online safety are changing faster than the law. Challenges include:

- age verification (how pornographic and other adult-only websites check users' ages)
- content moderation (how websites check their words, images, films, etc, are not harmful or illegal)
- digital literacy (for example, children's ability to find information online and recognise whether it is trustworthy)
- AI-generated child sexual abuse material
- deepfakes (for example, an image or film that has been edited to show a real person without their agreement)
- harmful algorithmic recommender systems that suggest things you might like based on how you have behaved in the past.

What needs to happen

Laws that protect children online, including the AI Act, need to be regularly updated and written in a way that keeps up with new and changing threats to children's safety. That's why we suggest that these legal changes and updates need to be based on four principles that underlie to all children's rights:

- Children should not be discriminated against – for example, because of their race, religion, gender, poverty or disability.
- Children should be protected.
- When decisions are being made about a child, their best interests should be considered.
- Children should be able to express their views on issues that affect them and should be listened to.

2 How can parents and teachers help create a safe online environment?

> *Adults - institutions, companies, parents and teachers - should teach children to know the difference between fake news and true news.*
>
> 16-year-old girl, Romania[3]

For children to be able to learn, play and connect safely online, we need to build a safe online environment. That includes looking at what we do individually and in our relationships with friends, family and colleagues, in school and in the neighbourhoods where we live, as well as what companies, organisations and governments do.

Teachers are vital in helping build this safe online environment for children. Teachers need training to help children become digitally literate (including being able to tell when information might be fake), be resilient (see page 6), and feel healthy and happy in the digital space.

Parents and caregivers also play a crucial role in their children's online safety and need guidance and information.

Research shows that the most effective ways to support children to be safe and happy online come about when families and schools work closely together.

However, both teachers and parents often say they don't know enough about how things work in the digital space to feel confident to support children to be safe online.

What support do children say they need to be safe online?
In research studies with children, they have:

- called for clearer information and support on how to navigate the digital world, and clearer online processes
- wanted to know how their data is used by online companies
- wanted all children, without discrimination, to have the opportunity to build their digital literacy – this means respecting and protecting the rights of younger children, children with disabilities, and children who identify as LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more)
- called for greater investment in educating trusted adults about online risks, platforms and protective strategies.

What needs to change in schools?
We looked at how schools can help children be safe online. Our research found that:

- The national curriculum in schools needs to include ways to help children to be safe and happy online.
- Teachers need to better trained and equipped to help their students learn digital skills and literacy.
- All children need to feel involved and have a say in how they learn at school about online skills and literacy
- What happens to children online is often related to what is happening in the rest of their lives. Schools should teach children how to stay safe online as part of wider lessons on bullying, sexual health and relationship education. This helps children learn about the importance of healthy relationships, dignity, consent and mutual respect in all areas of their lives, both online and offline.

"We need to have values-based conversations with children, conversations that empower them to navigate this world resilient and as healthy as possible. So, they can say: 'I'm turning this off now. I don't want to be part of this network anymore. I'm putting my smartphone aside and meeting my friend.'"

Silke Müller interview, June 2025

Learning through discussion
We found that children find the best way to learn about how to be safe online is through discussing things, at home and at school. Children need to be able to talk to their parents and teachers without fearing saying the 'wrong thing'. And parents and teachers need to recognise that children experience the online world in their own way. So parents and teachers need to listen to what children say about being online and to value children's ideas and experiences on how to stay safe.

In learning about digital literacy, children have the chance to think about important questions. It encourages them to talk about what is important to them and how they feel, to think through decisions, to care for others and to take responsibility for themselves and others.

Students also learn about how being online can affect their physical health – if you are on a screen for a long time, it can be bad for your body.

So learning about online safety and wellbeing covers a lot of areas – it includes your social, emotional, mental and physical health.

Every child's right
Every child has the right to be safe in the digital space, including:

- knowing how to use the internet in a safely
- being able to recognise online stories, images and films that might be fake
- knowing how to protect their online data and privacy
- engaging respectfully with others.

Our recommendations

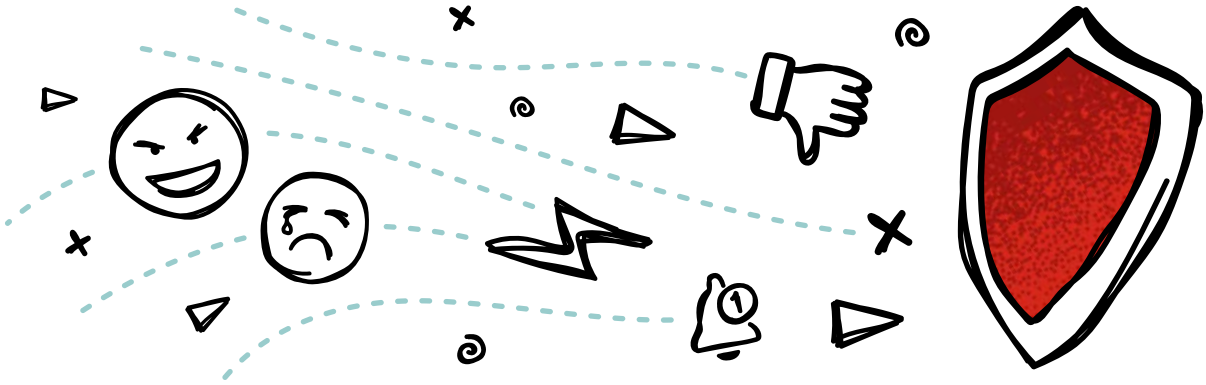
Schools and parents should move beyond simply stopping children going online. Instead, they should work with children, so that they learn:

- how their safety and relationships online are related to their lives offline
- how to balance their time online and offline
- how to cope with online risks and become resilient
- how to get the best from the digital space – including being able to play, learn, create and connect.

Students' digital wellbeing and safety isn't something separate from the rest of their education or lives. It needs to be part of school culture, ethos, policies and daily routines. Schools, mental health professionals, EdTech providers and media literacy organisations need to work together to support children's online safety.

Teachers need better training in how to help children to be safe online. Schools need to work with families so that parents learn how to help their children to be safe online through training and workshops .

> ***I think a lot about how you treat people online. I wouldn't like a nasty comment myself, so others probably wouldn't either. If someone writes something mean to me, I shouldn't hit back, because they probably wouldn't like that.***
>
> Girl, 11, Denmark[4]



3 What support do children need to be safe online?

When it comes to children's online safety, children are experts. We need to listen to what they say about their online experiences, what worries them, what threats they face, and what would help.

From reading research on children's experiences and talking to children ourselves across European countries about their views on online safety, we have this set of recommendations for politicians, teachers, parents and anyone involved in the care and education of children:

- Recognise children as experts not as passive users of digital spaces.
- Value children's insights and build on their understanding of risks; involve children in decision making processes, including working with children to design and co-create digital apps, tech platforms and online processes, consider children's rights, needs and lived experiences.
- Don't just consult with children on the matters adults have prioritised but listen to children's own voices, ideas, priorities and solutions,
- Encourage children to take part in decision-making processes by making those processes clear, understandable and accessible.
- Value children's diverse backgrounds, experiences and views.
- Make sure younger children and children with disabilities are included in discussions and decisions.
- Recognise that if children with disabilities don't have the support and tools they need and if they are not included in research and design of digital services, they will be left out and marginalised.
- Do not treat children unfairly or discriminate against them based on their backgrounds or experiences.
- Respect children's their differences, build on their resilience, and navigate risks and solutions with children not only for them and without them.
- Children are experts in their own lives. They bring important insights to help make online spaces safer, fairer and more fun. They have a right to be involved in decisions affecting their lives.
- Acknowledge children's skills and resilience when shaping policies, support systems and interventions.
- Recognise that when children see that their voices are listened to and are leading to change, they are more likely stay engaged, report problems and help shape a safer digital world.

Our research found that decision-makers need to:

Make sure children take part in making policies about online safety, that it is clear how they can get involved, and they give and get feedback on how their input shapes decisions, especially in digital safety, education and regulation.

Co-create policy materials with children that are accessible to them and that reflect children's diverse experiences, including those of younger children and children with disabilities.

4 Recognising and valuing differences among children

Children have the right to be protected from harm online and offline. That includes bullying, exploitation (where a child is manipulated or deceived into sexual or criminal activity), having their personal data misused, and being exposed to harmful content.

However, our research found that children across Europe are increasingly exposed to cyberbullying, misleading information, platforms that are designed to encourage you to spend more and more time on them ('addictive design features') and harmful social comparisons. All of these so-called digital stressors make children anxious and depressed.

Hate speech, violent images and other harmful content is widespread on the internet. When children see this content again and again, they might think it's normal. Because some platforms don't stop this kind of behaviour, it can make hate, bullying or abuse seem acceptable, even though it's not. Experts warn of the growing influence of prejudice against women and girls (misogyny), and of harmful gender norms, which imply you must behave in certain ways depending on whether you are a girl or a boy and which can be hurtful or unfair. There are also concerns about deepfakes (see page 8).

Children's online experiences are shaped by whether they are a boy or a girl. Girls face pressure about how they look (their body image). Apps and websites quickly learn what someone is interested in, like clothes or fitness, and then show more extreme content that can make girls feel bad about themselves (Charlotte Aynsley, interview, May 2025). Girls face more sexual harassment and are exposed to degrading pornographic content. Boys are at risk of taking on harmful attitudes and behaviour that they come across online. Boys who suffer online bullying and abuse are less likely than girls to tell a responsible adult what's happening.

When politicians and other decision-makers are looking at ways to help children stay safe online, they need to remember that children are not all the same. Children are different ages, at different stages of their development, and are growing up in different situations and with different challenges and opportunities.

Some children face greater risks online because of who they are. For example, LGBTQIA+ young people, children of colour or children with conditions like autism or attention-deficit/hyperactivity are more at risk in the digital space of being harassed, , excluded and to come across misleading information.

Research highlights that children from low-income families, children living in rural areas and those with neurodevelopmental disorders are less likely to have online access – because they don't have access to a computer or wifi or they need special support but don't get it. Not being able to get online – digital exclusion – can lead to children becoming socially isolated and lonely. It can also affect how they do at school and can put them at greater risk online.

To create safe and supportive digital environments for all children, it's vital to recognise and be sensitive to children's diverse identities and experiences, including upsetting and traumatic online experiences.

Our research found that projects and programmes that aim to support children's online safety need to recognise that in order to give all children a fair start we need to recognise children have different needs and face different challenges, depending on their age and background. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, rural areas and minority groups, children from low-income families and those with disabilities all need special support. When thinking about children's online safety, it's also important not to put try to fit children into a single box. Children – just like adults – have multiple identities. For example, a child may be from a minority group, live in a rural area and have disabilities.

> ***Here the problem is partly that if a woman posts something, she's seen as provocative or doing something wrong, but if a man posts it, he's the best in the world.***
>
> 16-year-old girl, Spain[5]

5 You are strong and able to bounce back

> *I think I use it a bit too much. Especially with TikTok, you start at 6pm, like 'just five minutes', and then suddenly it's 8.30 and the whole evening is gone.*

16-year-old girl, Spain[6]

The digital world is a great place to learn, connect with friends and have fun. But as you know, it can also be a really tough place.

Rather than shielding children from all online risks, we need to support children's resilience. Because with the right support you can cope with online threats and upsetting experiences and bounce back from them. Being aware of how you are feeling, being able to think things through for yourself, to make the right decisions and to distinguish between trustworthy and misleading online information (digital literacy) all help build children's confidence and resilience (see page 6). So they can thrive online.

Digital environments are central to children's lives. Children need support that is tailored to their age, development, circumstances and experiences. At the same time, decision-makers, internet companies, teachers and parents need to recognise children's capabilities and resilience.

Peer approval and social status are very important to how children feel about themselves, particularly during adolescence. Rather than avoiding online threats, children learn through guidance and talking to others. Online risks and challenges then become opportunities for to learn and become more confident and stronger. Programmes that can help children develop this digital resilience by helping them understand the emotional impact on themselves and others of what they do online behaviour and by encouraging children to interact online in a way that is respectful, caring and empathetic towards others.

"Reputation-based harms hit adolescents hardest because social status matters so much at that age."

Charlotte Aynsley interview, May 2025

6 Adults must recognise children have rights

> ***Digital rights are human rights. It shouldn't be a trade.***
>
> 17-year-old girl, United Kingdom[7]

As a child you recognise the digital environment is critical to children's futures, both in your private lives and professional aspirations.

Children know that being able to get online is a basic need to get an education, to get a job, for their identity, and to interact with friends and be part of society (Third and Moody, 2021).

In other words, children see digital technology as essential to their lives and their rights.

That's recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which makes clear that digital policies, technologies and services must prioritise the best interests of the child.

Technology companies and content developers must not look at children as users of digital content but as rights holders. Digital tools, resources and experiences online and offline must help children to learn, grow and explore their interests – not just consume.

Banning children from certain platforms may mean they miss out on a chance to develop online confidence and resilience.

Children's digital experiences are inseparable from their experiences overall. Children's online safety must be part of their everyday lives, in their families, schools, communities and government. Supporting children to be safe in the digital space means putting children's interests at the centre, recognising children have rights (see box below), and listening to children's ideas and experiences. Teachers, parents, internet companies, and the government need to work together to do this.

The right to be safe (Article 19)

The right to education (article 28)

The right to be heard (Article 12)

The right to privacy (Article 26)

The right to play and access and information (Articles 17 & 31)

7 We all need to know more about children's online safety

If we don't know what children are experiencing online, the danger is the wrong decisions will be made and certain groups of children will be exposed to online risks and harm.

Our research found that internet companies, governments and others need to invest more time and money in finding out about children's digital wellbeing and resilience. In particular, we don't know enough about the online experiences of children from minority groups.

We also found that research needs to be careful not to lump all children together. Research data needs to be broken down by age, gender, ethnicity, disability and social class.

"[An] idea is if apps and devices had [something like] a rating system where, for example, [one] app gets a green label [indicating] no known behavioural risks, ...and then a red label, where the addictive design is known and documented. [This could include a warning] like: 'May significantly affect attention span, self-regulation, or sleep cycles.'"

Tyler Shores interview, May 2025

WHAT NEXT?

We want to create an online environment where all children can safely connect, explore, create and engage. To help children to be safe and happy online, adults must see things from children's point of view, recognise children's rights based and listen to children's views and experiences.

It's important to consider all the influences on children's lives – in the home and community, at school, and in national and international agencies and policies. In other words, the whole system. Because children's digital wellbeing is everybody's responsibility.

ACTION:

Take 10 seconds to think about all the actions you can take to stay safe online.

What can you do to encourage companies that make and run games, apps and websites to protect children?

How can you make sure they listen to your views and experiences when they are developing digital technology, apps, games, and teaching?

And how can they make sure all children are able to protect themselves with the SMILE Shield (see page 4)?

Together, we can make sure all children are protected, supported and empowered to thrive online and offline.

And shape a digital environment where every child can safely connect, explore, create and engage.