COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online

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COVID-19 has prompted widespread school closures and physical distancing measures and made online platforms and communities essential to maintaining a sense of normalcy. Children and their families are turning to digital solutions more than ever to support children's learning, socialization and play. While digital solutions provide huge opportunities for sustaining and promoting children's rights, these same tools may also increase children's exposure to online risks. This technical note sets out some of the key priorities and recommendations on how to mitigate those risks and promote positive online experiences for children.

COVID-19 has abruptly pushed children's daily lives online

- As of 3 April 2020, COVID-19 has led to at least 188 country-wide school closures, impacting more than 90% of the world's student population.
- In places where there is wide access to digital technology, more and more aspects of people's daily lives are moving online, as people choose or are asked to stay home. Internet usage is up 50% in some parts of the world following the spread of COVID-19.
- Similarly, many children's learning experiences are being reshaped by the sudden introduction of remote learning, including – where available – technology and virtual platforms as a substitute for the classroom and schoolyard.
- Online games, social media and video chat programs are providing opportunities for children to connect with and play with their friends, parents and relatives while in isolation.
- While children aged 13 and older may already be familiar with social media, the pandemic has introduced younger children to social networking tools that may not be designed for them and for which they may have limited preparation.
- Parents and caregivers, meanwhile, are being asked to navigate their children's shift to online learning and recreation while balancing work and other uncertainties related to the pandemic.

Increased online activity supports children's learning, socialization and play, but also puts them at heightened risk

Increased internet use can put children at greater risk of online harms such as sexual exploitation and cyberbullying. Not all risks will translate into actual harm, but children facing other issues in their lives may be more vulnerable. It is important that measures to mitigate risks should be balanced with children's rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy. Keeping children informed and engaged and empowering them with the skills to use the internet safely is a critical line of defence.

Online sexual exploitation. The most recent Global Threat Assessment by WePROTECT Global Alliance and groundbreaking investigative reporting by New York Times set out the scale and impact of online sexual exploitation. It is highly likely that COVID-19 will heighten this risk to children, as highlighted by national law enforcement agencies and civil society organisations around the world. Spending more time online may increase the likelihood that children come into contact with online predators. Physical distancing measures are likely to increase children's outreach to new contacts and groups online, which could be exploited by predators to groom children for sexual exploitation. With more adults isolated at home, there may also be additional demand for child sexual abuse material, leading to more commercial sexual exploitation of children. The livestreaming of sexual abuse by family members is already a well-documented phenomenon in certain communities. Stay-at-home orders will also mean that families are forced to remain in close quarters, which, for children living with abusers, could result in an escalation of sexual abuse, both offline and online.

Cyberbullying. It is well-established that cyberbullying is a major concern among teenagers and has wide-ranging, negative impacts. With many children suddenly experiencing extended periods of unstructured time online and grappling with mounting sources of stress, cyberbullying could proliferate. The COVID-19 pandemic has also introduced instant messaging, online gaming and chat services to an increasing number of young children, who may have limited online experience and be less resilient to hurtful behavior. Girls, children with disabilities and those perceived to be different or at greater risk of catching or spreading COVID-19 may be at increased risk of online bullying and discrimination.

Online risk-taking behavior. A lack of in-person interaction with friends and partners may lead older children to engage in riskier behaviour online, for example, through sexting or the sharing of self-generated sexualized content, which may expose them to risks of extortion, harassment and humiliation.

Potentially harmful content. Increased online activity may expose children to age-inappropriate and potentially harmful content, including content that is violent, misogynistic, xenophobic, promotes political or ideological violence or incites suicide and self-harm. Children may also be exposed to a larger quantity of targeted online marketing that promotes unhealthy foods, gender stereotypes or is age-inappropriate. They may also be exposed to misinformation about COVID-19 that could drive additional fear and anxiety.

Inappropriate collection, use and sharing of data. The shift of children's lives online, including via education technology, may result in the added collection and processing of children's personal data by companies, along with increased exposure to digital marketing content and techniques. This may affect children under 13 years of age who normally have privacy protection by law.[1]

Limited child safeguarding online. With the rush to set up distance learning, schools may not have proper child safeguarding policies in place to govern student and teacher conversations via private networks and other online tools. Parents and caregivers may not be aware of school district policies, if they exist, and may be unfamiliar with new technologies, limiting their ability to engage their children in a discussion about keeping safe online.

Governments, companies, schools and parents must work together to ensure that children's online experiences are safe and positive

In the context of COVID-19, keeping children safe online will require concerted, urgent action on the part of parents and caregivers, school authorities, digital technology companies, providers, social service workers and governments.

1. Empower children online

- Parents and caregivers, school authorities, digital technology companies, media providers, social service workers and governments must recognize that children are agents of change and should equip them with the knowledge and information they need to navigate their online lives safely during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.
- Messages, information and advice on navigating the digital world should be targeted to children in a manner and via the channels that most resonate with them. Children should also be informed about how to seek out help and support.

[1] For example COPPA and GDPR-K.

- Children should also be encouraged to use their voices online to support others in need of help during this crisis.Children's perspectives should inform improvements to platforms and other changes intended to keep them engaged and safe during this quickly moving emergency. Government and social service providers should incorporate children's voices and actively involve children in policymaking that affects them.

2. Support parents and caregivers to help children stay safe online

- Parents and caregivers can help children access the online resources that are vital for learning, socializing and playing in the era of COVID-19. At the same time, parents and caregivers need to be alert to the online risks for children. Governments, companies and others should support parents with appropriate guidance and tools, including how to respond to and, if needed, report harmful contacts, conduct and content.

- Parents and caregivers can establish with their children rules for how, when and where the Internet can be used. Boundaries should be set to establish a healthy balance between online time and other activities. Parents and caregivers should also ensure their children's device/s have the latest software updates and antivirus programmes and ensure that privacy settings are set to 'high.' For younger children, tools such as parental controls can help mitigate online risks.

- Parents and caregivers can discuss openly with their children how and with whom the children are communicating online. Children need to know that kind and supportive interactions are expected, and that hurtful, discriminatory or inappropriate contact is never okay. Children should feel confident about telling a trusted adult immediately if anything distressing or inappropriate occurs.

- Parents and caregivers can also help children differentiate between regular content and advertisements and engage in dialogue with their children to seek to counteract any negative messages.

- Parents and caregivers can be alert to signs of distress that may emerge in connection with children's online activity. For example, if a child is experiencing cyberbullying, they may give off warning signs, such as using their device more or less frequently, or becoming withdrawn or depressed. Governments, companies and school administrators should make parents and caregivers familiar with relevant policies, as well as online and offline reporting mechanisms. Parents should have the numbers of support helplines and hotlines handy and contact the police if their children's distress is related to threats, potential crimes or other illegal behaviors.

3. Provide a safe online learning experience for students

- Schools should create or update their current safeguarding policies to reflect the new realities for children learning from home. One-on-one online interactions between school staff and students should be transparent and regulated. Specific safeguards may include requiring schools to share online schedules; advising children to wear appropriate clothing when in front of webcams and not to connect with their teachers or virtual classrooms from bedrooms; and refraining from using private instant messaging services in teacher-student communications or asking for consent from parents for such sessions. Schools should also seek digital security mechanisms to ensure that only authorized individuals are able to access online learning platforms and that those platforms do not record and store the virtual learning sessions by default.

- Schools should clearly communicate online safety policies and provide resources and information on digital safety to support parents and caregivers in creating a positive online learning experience e.g. Interland, internetmatters.org, NSPCC and Childnet International.

- Schools should clearly communicate with all learners the expected code of conduct on digital platforms and communications, just as would be expected for 'in person' behavior. They should promote and monitor good online behavior among students. Schools should be aware that younger children in particular may not have developed or practiced these skills before and could unintentionally hurt others. Schoolyard bullying among classmates may easily morph into cyberbullying, and school authorities need to adapt anti-bullying rules and policies to online spaces and make them clear to students and parents

- Schools should ensure that children have uninterrupted access to school-based counseling services. In the absence of in-person contact with counselors, children in distress must have safe, confidential means of securing support online or by phone. There may be increased need for counselling services in the context of COVID-19, where children may be experiencing family problems, domestic violence or heightened feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Girls, children with disabilities and those perceived to be different or at greater risk of catching or spreading COVID-19 may be experiencing increased anxieties requiring additional support. Schools should promote country-specific helplines or online counselling platforms. Schools should also update guidance for teachers on identifying and reporting child abuse or neglect via their virtual communications.

4. Make online platforms safe and accessible for children

- In order to avoid exacerbating inequalities during the pandemic, technology companies should work with governments to improve access to digital devices and internet connectivity for disadvantaged children, including those who are affected by poverty, separated, on the move, disabled, in domestic and family violence settings, conflict settings and those who may have lost parents or primary caregivers to the pandemic. ITU's new Global Network Resiliency Platform (#REG4COVID) is a place for regulators, government authorities and industry to share and pool experiences, ongoing initiatives and innovative policy and regulatory measures designed to help ensure communities (and children) remain connected. Technology companies should also make online learning resources available for free or at significantly reduced cost to educators and students. Mobile operators should consider providing online learning resources and COVID-19 health information for free.

- It is imperative that increased safety features are incorporated into all devices, including those being made available at low or no cost, and that parents and caregivers are instructed how to activate these features.

- Companies that are developing and deploying virtual classrooms and other education-specific platforms should make sure that safety features are integrated and enhanced and clearly accessible to educators, parents and students. Data collection and other commercial practices should be transparent, responsible and reflective of national/international laws and regulations. Social networking platforms used for teacher-student interactions should employ built-in protection measures for children while giving adult teachers appropriate permissions to carry out their functions. Furthermore, online platforms using video conferencing services, which are increasingly being used for online interactive sessions, should ensure that relevant security and privacy protections are in place.

- Companies should use their platforms to promote and facilitate child safety referral services and helplines for the estimated 1.5 billion children and youth currently out of school, some of whom may be at increased risk of psychosocial stress, violence and exploitation. This includes sharing information on referral and other support services available for youth, such as national Child Helplines. Companies can seek to increase child helpline capacity with cloud-based infrastructure and by leveraging Interactive Voice Response (IVR)/bot systems to automate helpline queries. Mobile operators should enable short-codes or free-of-cost calls, waving interconnect charges and promoting referral and helpline resources to children.

- Given that the pandemic is bringing younger children onto education and social networks (some for the first time), companies should make significant efforts to help them, and their parents and caregivers, learn to use online resources safely. This includes:
  - Adapting online safety resources to different age groups and making these resources more accessible on their platforms to inform children, parents and caregivers of online risks and provide access to support services.
  - Offering clearly signposted and easy to use technical tools and solutions (e.g. 'parental controls') which can empower parents and caregivers to help their children experience digital technology in an age-appropriate way.
  - Amplifying messaging on safe and responsible behaviour online and supporting children to develop 'digital resilience' skills – in other words, knowledge of how to navigate and respond to risks.

5. Strengthening national prevention, response and support services.

- Governments should actively monitor how restricted movement and lockdowns may exacerbate different forms of violence, both offline and online, using the latest data and existing models to inform policy. Governments should enforce existing regulations and strengthen law enforcement to help monitor and respond to increased online risks.

- Governments should allocate sufficient resources to bolster, train and equip core child protection workers to ensure that they can continue to keep children safe throughout the pandemic. Wherever possible, countries should maintain center-based supports and home visiting for those severely affected or adapt and deliver social services virtually.

- Governments should train health, education and social service workers on the impacts that COVID-19 may have on child well-being, including increased online risks. Those providing front line mental health/psychosocial support will need skills in talking to children about COVID-19 and addressing their anxiety and insecurity. Special attention should be paid to the most vulnerable children including those separated, on the move, disabled, in conflict settings and those who may have lost parents or primary caregivers to the pandemic.

- Government should be aware of the potential increased online risks to children during the pandemic and seek to address them through increased monitoring and enforcement of existing regulations. Law enforcement should be supported to monitor a potential increase in online offending behavior and have their units functional to respond to this.

- Governments should make sure social service providers, schools, parents, caregivers and children are aware of local reporting mechanisms, and that they have the support numbers of local helplines and hotlines. If they do not already exist, local helplines and hotlines should be installed to support children in distress. The major international reporting networks include INHOPE Hotlines and IWF portals. Children can find direct support through the nationally-based Child Helpline. The public should be directed to contact the police when there is imminent danger.

- To complement efforts to connect children to resources for online learning, socialization and play, governments should step up educational initiatives on child online safety. These should include raising awareness about online risks and resources, using media and other communications channels to spread key messages.

Additional Resources

Parenting tips on keeping children safe online during COVID-19

www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-children-heightened-risk-abuse-neglect-exploitation-and-violence
amidst
www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19-parenting-tips
www.end-violence.org/protecting-children-during-covid-19-outbreak
en.unesco.org/covid19
www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19
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