Safeguarding Child Speakers During Online Meetings with Adults

Introduction

The Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children revolves around a single mission: to end all forms of violence against children by 2030. End Violence is committed to a vision of world in which every child grows up in a safe, secure and nurturing environment. This extends to the safeguarding of all children with whom we engage through our work – and in the context of COVID-19, such safeguarding has never been more critical. As the world continues to deal with COVID-19 and the necessary social distancing measures, many meetings have moved to online spaces.

The importance of child participation – especially when it comes to matters of violence, exploitation and abuse – cannot be understated. Child participation is a core principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which asserts that children have the right to freely express their views and to be heard. Adults have an obligation to listen to children's views and to facilitate their participation in all matters affecting them within their families, schools and communities. During this process, the best interests of the child should be the primary consideration, from the preparation stage until the follow-up phase of activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled organisations, institutions, and companies to rethink children's right to participate in a meaningful and safe way. To do so, organisers need to create a safe, friendly and enabling place for children to engage, as safeguarding of children does not cease to be important because meetings have moved online. To ensure child participation across the world, End Violence and partners have developed a guidance note to help organisations keep children under the age of 18 safe in virtual speaking environments.

This guidance is broken down into three categories: instructions for moderators, instructions for chaperones, and considerations for the event's organising team. As there is overlap between these roles and functions, End Violence recommends all those participating in the event read through this document in its entirety.

I. Guidance for moderators and organisers to keep children safe during online meetings

Below, you will find a series of steps for moderators to ensure child speakers are kept safe during online events, meetings and webinars.

Before the event

✓ Promote respect to diversity. Some children may communicate and receive information differently. For example, a child with intellectual disabilities may need materials in an easy-read format and may need to receive materials in advance. This includes real-time captioning, sign language interpretation, subtitling, and audio description options. For both children and adults, consider asking participants in advance if reasonable accommodation is required. More information on how to do this can be found here.

✓ If the session is being recorded and published on public platforms, or if a link to the recording is to be shared, ensure the child and their parent/legal guardian are aware that this content will be permanent and there will be no way of containing the movement of the recordings. In this case, you must also ensure that the content poses no risk or danger to the child or family in any way. The child and family should anticipate that all persons, without exception, could access the recording as soon as it is online. This should form part of their own personal safety assessment to determine if they want to participate in the meeting or not.

✓ Host a pre-meeting between the children and the moderator. This is a good way for the children to meet each other and to get to know the moderator. This is also a chance for the child to test the event's platform and familiarise themselves with the camera, microphone and other features. Follow best practice by always ensuring there are at least two adults present during digital pre-meetings (or socially distance physical meetings) with anyone under the age of 18 years old.

✓ Have a run-through of the session and allow the child to practice their speech, making sure to time the session. Remind them that, like all speakers, they must keep to their allotted time. You should have a way to signal to the child when their time is running out – but assure them they will not be cut off in the middle of their presentation. It is also wise to explain the possibilities of what will happen if the programme for the event runs later than scheduled; for example, the question and answer section may need to be skipped.

✓ Ensure children's safety by filtering questions through a moderator and disabling the live chat function. This prevents any unfiltered communication to the child during the session. Let participants know that these measures will be taken during the event and consider giving participants the ability to ask questions in advance. This can be done through the invitation or via a general email address where questions can be vetted before being shared with the child.

✓ Communicate to other speakers that there will be children speaking. For children to be equal participants in the panel, it is important that all speakers use clear, non-discriminatory language that can be understood by everyone.

✓ Do not share any identifying information about the child or personal information about their experience that has not been cleared by the child, parent/legal guardian and their supporting organisation. The standard practice is first name, name of city and country. No last names or names of schools should be used.

During the event

✓ Communicate, in a child friendly manner, ground rules at the beginning of the meeting. This is also a good time to highlight to all participants the commitment to zero tolerance of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment or any child

safeguarding incidences. Emphasise that safeguarding policies governing in-person meetings do not dissolve when meetings occur online.

✓ Make sure to communicate – in a child-friendly manner – your organisation's reporting and response mechanisms to report misconduct and abuse.

After the event

✓ Importantly, children's participation should not be a one-off activity. Organisers need to ensure that children can express their opinions and provide feedback before, during and after the activity. They need also to ensure that children are informed of the results of their participation, and that feedback from participants is monitored.

II. Guidance for chaperones and facilitators of children speaking in an online meeting

✓ Make sure you are following best practice for the ethical, inclusive and meaningful participation of children. This includes preparation, selection process and follow-up. For more information, click here.

✓ Provide the child speakers with opportunities and strategies of what they can do if, at any point, they do not feel comfortable continuing their participation in the event. If the chaperone is in the same room, the child can alert them immediately. If not, consider sending a text message to the chaperone (or a moderator/contact person in the organising entity).

✓ Let children know what they should and should not expect of other participants and what to do if these things happen. This includes:

- Individuals making direct contact (for example, on different digital platforms or face-to-face) without the knowledge of the adult chaperone

- Inappropriate comments or content shared with the child participant

- Requests for private meetings, private messaging and continued contact not monitored by an adult

All of the above – and any other violations of children's protection – should not be tolerated. Make sure the child knows that they can approach the chaperone if any of these instances occur, and that confiding in the chaperone will not result in penalty or reprisal of any kind, no matter who (or how high-level) the offending individuals are.

✓ Have the parents/legal guardians of the child (and the child themselves) sign your organisation's consent forms, including media consent forms, if there will be social media involved. This may include website articles, newsletters, or dissemination on Twitter, Instagram and other channels.

✓ Provide the child and family with basic online literacy information about permanency, privacy and protection to ensure they are aware of what they are agreeing to. This information should be available for them to refer to before,

during and after participation. Ensure these materials are available in accessible format for all, including children with disabilities and information in the child's local language. More information on this can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

✓ As per the above guidance, if the session is being recorded and published on public platforms, or a link to the recording is to be shared, ensure the child and their parent/legal guardian are aware that this will be permanent and there will be no way of containing the movement of the recordings. Therefore, the content must pose no risk of danger to the child or family in any way. The child and family should anticipate that all persons, without exception, could access the recording as soon as it is online. This should inform part of their own personal safety assessment.

✓ Brief the child on the impact of working with social media and alert the child that their image and quotes may be posted online.

✓ Have the child do a dry run and record themselves. Be prepared to provide guidance if some children need assistance. If there are technical challenges, this recording can be used if cleared by the child and parent/legal guardian.

✓ Help the child with the visual backdrop that will be used. Make sure it is authentic to the child, but also not revealing of any personal or identifying information (for example, no school banners or logos should be present, along with names of buildings or community places).

✓ Make sure the child knows how to ask for support during the live event and that they can leave at any point during the meeting. If there are multiple children, have one adult support person per child.

✓ Make sure the child does not give their last name or any details such as addresses or private digital and social media accounts.

III. Guidance for the team managing the online meeting

When brainstorming child speakers, teams should make an effort to promote diverse experiences, socio-cultural backgrounds, ages, genders and capacities. A diversity of opinions is encouraged, with maximum attention to particularly excluded and vulnerable groups. The involvement of children in vulnerable situations and from various backgrounds is encouraged to ensure representation of all children's experiences, ideas and thoughts in the child participation process. End Violence suggests grouping child speakers in their age range (for example, include children between the age of 11-13, 14-18, or other close age ranges for a particular topic).

During the call, follow best practices for maintaining event security. This includes:

✓ Disabling public comments or chat functions. This will prevent any participant from contacting the child directly.

- ✓ Using a registration system to control who will be on the call. Enable the waiting room function to ensure only recognised participants are allowed into the event.

- ✓ Disabling the recording function for participants.

- ✓ Appointing one person to monitor and expel participants who break the rules.

- ✓ If requested, work with providers to set up real-time captions and sign language.

After the call, organisers need to ensure that children can express their opinions and provide feedback before, during and after the activity. They need also to ensure that children are informed of the results of their participation, and that feedback from participants is monitored.

Conclusion

Overall, it is critical to ensure children can participate in events, meetings and conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic – but these environments must promote the safety of child speakers above all else.

End Violence would like to thank all our partners who inputted into this guidance note, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, ChildFund Australia, Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF and World Vision International.