BIK+ strategy
2025

First evaluation of the European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+)

A summary of consultations with children, young people, expert stakeholders, teachers, and parents

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First evaluation of the European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+): A summary of consultations with children, young people, expert stakeholders, teachers, and parents.

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First evaluation of the European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+)

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Preface by BIK Youth Ambassadors

Children and young people are the future, and we are excited that this statement is not a mere tokenistic motto but instead a practice-guiding principle of the work in the Better Internet for Kids initiative. Also, in the first evaluation of the European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+), this credo is being lived up to in practice. Thus, we are excited to share our thoughts about this evaluation, which highlights how children and young people experience life online and what they think can be done to make the internet better and safer for everyone. As BIK Youth Ambassadors[1], we contributed to the design of the consultation methodology, providing input on the questions and approaches used to explore these important topics.

This report shows that children and young people have valuable things to say about their experiences on social media, dealing with risks and harms online, and trying to figure out how to balance screen time better. This consultation shows the depth of insight young people bring to these discussions, and we're excited to highlight some of the findings that stood out to us.

The report shows how the three pillars of the BIK+ strategy resonate strongly with children and young people:

- **Staying safe online:** Online safety remains a top priority for many children and young people. Participants identified several challenges, including harmful content, mental health impacts, privacy concerns, monetisation, online scams, and fake news. Many participants expressed frustration that their rights were more often violated online or that enforcement was lacking. They felt a lack of respect from others online and call for policymakers to create safer online environments.

- **Learning the right skills:** Children and young people strongly ask for better education to help them navigate the digital world safely and confidently. They call for schools to dedicate more time to online safety, media literacy, and responsible technology use. Many participants also recognised the importance of equipping themselves with strategies to manage harmful content, identify potential risks, and build resilience against negative experiences. These skills are essential for their well-being in an increasingly digitised world.

- **Having a voice:** Children and young people like to be included in discussions about their digital lives, and emphasise the importance of having a seat at the table when decisions are made. Whether it's policymakers, tech companies, parents, or schools, young people want their perspectives to be taken seriously. Participants shared many ideas about how they could contribute to these processes.

Looking forward, we also wanted to underscore several key points raised by participants, which should guide future policy decisions:

- **Balancing time online:** It is easy to lose track of time online, which can lead to difficulties balancing online activities with responsibilities like homework or spending time with family and friends. Managing and reducing screen time is a significant priority.

- **Avoiding blanket bans:** Banning children and young people from social media is not the solution, as bans can too easily be bypassed. Furthermore, bans would deprive children and young people from an important aspect of their lives.

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1   BIK Youth Ambassadors are those young people who have successfully participated in the annual BIK Youth Panel and Safer Internet Forum and are willing to stay in touch to further participate in activities under the BIK umbrella. For more information about the BIK Youth Ambassador programme, please **visit the BIK portal**.

- **Holding tech companies accountable:** Children and young people felt that it was important to hold tech companies accountable for enforcing age verification without compromising data protection.

- **Education on artificial intelligence (AI):** Young people ask for more training and education on AI to help them use these tools effectively and responsibly.

This report highlights the thoughtful and meaningful contributions of children and young people across the EU to understanding life online. We hope it inspires action to make the internet a safer, more empowering, space for everyone. By involving us in the decision-making process, we believe that policymakers can create policies and regulations for the digital environment that are better tailored to our specific needs and respectful of our rights.

Foreword by the European Commission

The evaluation you are about to read is the first assessment of the BIK+ strategy. This first ever child-led evaluation of the BIK+ strategy comes at an important moment in the life of our organisation.

As one Commission completed its impactful term, and the new Commission steps in to guide the future, this review offers a unique opportunity to bridge the past and the future. With the protection of minors being a key priority for the new Commission, the findings of this evaluation will provide valuable insights for shaping new initiatives such as the announced Action Plan on cyberbullying or the EU-wide inquiry on the broader impacts of social media on well-being. This will be surrounded by the continuous enforcement of the Digital Services Act, which the BIK+ strategy complements and supports.

This evaluation represents not just the passage of time, but an opportunity to pause, reflect, and critically assess the journey so far. It offers insights that can help us to measure the successes of the strategy and identify its shortcomings, as well as refine and adapt the approach as we move forward.

Notably, this evaluation serves as a reminder that strategies are not static. They are living frameworks that evolve with the world around them. In all efforts to understand and improve the systems that shape our future, the voices of those who will inherit these systems are essential – and this evaluation is no exception.

The BIK+ strategy strongly encourages the active participation of children and young people in shaping digital policies and in carrying out peer-to-peer activities. This first-ever child-led evaluation stands as a powerful testament to our commitment to involving children in the policymaking process. It serves as a strong acknowledgment that children's views are fundamental to creating policies that truly address their needs.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all the children who took an active role in evaluating the work under the BIK+ strategy so far and shared their lived experience. I also extend my sincere thanks to parents, teachers, all the other participants, the European Safer Internet Centres and European Schoolnet whose expertise and dedication made this evaluation possible.

Renate Nikolay

*Deputy Director-General, Directorate-General
for Communications Networks, Content and Technology,
European Commission*

Acknowledgements

The European Commission and the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) team would like to express their gratitude to the more than 750 children and young people across Europe who have played an invaluable role in reviewing and evaluating the BIK+ strategy for the first time since its launch on 11 May 2022. We could not have done this without your support, insight, and willingness to reflect on solutions and recommendations going forward.

We would also like to thank the BIK Youth Ambassadors for their active involvement in the different stages of this review and evaluation process: Andžela (Lithuania), Gabriele (Italy), Jeremy (Malta), Kelyan (Belgium), Kiva (Ireland), Ragnhild (Norway), Sofia (Portugal), Vincent (Croatia), and Wojciech (Poland). Their input and feedback in the early phase of this process have helped establish a protocol and strong set of questions that resonated – in terms of format, the topics discussed, and the language used – with the many children and young people we ended up consulting. Thank you also for taking the time to draft this report's **Preface** and constructively and persistently emphasising what required more attention, nuance, and in-depth understanding throughout the process.

European Schoolnet (EUN), on behalf of the European Commission, coordinated the consultations that have been carried out across Europe and across different stakeholder groups. Yet, our ability to reach and involve so many children and young people was due entirely to the robust and long-standing partnership with the **Insafe network of European Safer Internet Centres**. We thank the participating Safer Internet Centres (SICs) for their strong support and commitment to this important review activity. In addition, we would like to express our appreciation to the expert organisations across Europe who supported this activity by facilitating consultations with children and young people from specific vulnerable backgrounds to ensure that the voices of those who often remain overlooked are heard loudly and clearly.

Lastly, several **COFACE – Families Europe** member organisations supported this evaluation activity by consulting parents and caregivers across the EU. We thank them for their support and strong commitment to making the voices of parents and caregivers heard, including those who, due to their remote and rural place of residence, often do not have the opportunity to share their views in comparable activities.

- AERF — Agrupamento de Escolas Rodrigues de Freitas (Portugal)
- Association Legebitra (COFACE member, Slovenia)BEE SECURE (Luxembourg) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (Croatia) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Child and Youth Friendly Governance Project (Denmark, Spain, France)
- Child Focus (Belgium) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Creative Academy (Spain)
- DCI — Defence for Children International (Czech Republic)
- DKMK — Association for Communication and Media Culture (Croatia)
- DrossInternets.lv (Latvia) (Safer Internet Centre)

- EdVocacy (Greece)

- Egyszülő - Egyedülálló Szülők Klubja Alapítvány (COFACE member, Hungary)

- Estonian Union for Child Welfare (Estonia) (Safer Internet Centre)

- Fundación de Familias Monoparentales Isadora Duncan (COFACE member, Spain)

- Generazioni Connesse (Safer Internet Centre) and Giffoni Film Festival (Italy)

- International Children's Safety Service (Hungary) (Safer Internet Centre)

- Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) (Ireland) (Safer Internet Centre)

- Klicksafe.de (Germany) (Safer Internet Centre)

- KMOP – Social Action and Innovation Centre (COFACE member, Greece)

- INESA (Lithuania) (Safer Internet Centre)

- Marina Wetzer-Karlsson (Independent expert, COFACE member, Finland)

- Media Council for Children and Young People (Denmark) (Safer Internet Centre)

- NASK — National Research Institute (Poland) (Safer Internet Centre)

- NCBI — Narodni Centrum Bezpecnejsiho Internetu (Czech Republic)

- Norwegian Media Authority — Medietilsynet (Norway) (Safer Internet Centre)

- Office of the Commissioner for Children (Malta) (Safer Internet Centre)

- Plataforma de Infancia (Spain) (Safer Internet Centre)

- SAFE.SI (Slovenia) (Safer Internet Centre)

- Saferinternet.at (Austria) (Safer Internet Centre)

- SaferInternet4Kids.gr (Greece) (Safer Internet Centre)

- Save the Children Romania (Safer Internet Centre)

- Share the Care Foundation (COFACE member, Poland)

- Siol - Družinska pobuda, društvo za družini naklonjeno družbo (COFACE member, Slovenia)

- Tulip Foundation (COFACE member, Bulgaria)

- Katholischer Familienverband Salzburg und Tiroler Unterland (COFACE member, Austria)

- UNAF – Unión de Associaciones Familiares (COFACE member, Spain)

- Webwise (Ireland) (Safer Internet Centre)

List of organisations supporting the delivery of the first evaluation of the BIK+ strategy

Dr Valerie Verdoodt and Professor Eva Lievens (Ghent University) supported EUN as external research consultants in this activity. They provided expert guidance for the co-development with young people of the base methodology and design of the consultation protocol to consult children and young people, while also helping to analyse the data and write up the results, drawing on a Good practice guide produced under the Better Internet for Kids initiative titled **Children's rights in the digital environment: Moving from theory to practice**. We hope that these guidelines will be helpful and inspire many other stakeholders who wish to carry out similar work building on meaningful engagement and involvement of children and young people.

Professor Brian O'Neill supported EUN as an external policy expert focused on the consultation of expert stakeholders. In doing so, he provided expert guidance by developing a consultation protocol complementary to the base methodology co-developed with the BIK Youth Ambassadors, to consult expert stakeholders from academia, civil society, industry and policy, carrying out consultation activities, and analysing its outcomes.

In a broader sense, we sincerely appreciate the support, commitment, contribution and enthusiasm of the many people involved in this large-scale review and evaluation activity. This has truly been a cross-country, multi-partner and multi-stakeholder effort, and it would not have been possible without you. Together, we look ahead, inspired and determined, to demonstrate that we take children's and young people's voices seriously and are committed to making the necessary changes and driving future policymaking based on the recommendations drawn together in this report to create a safer and better internet for kids in Europe and beyond.
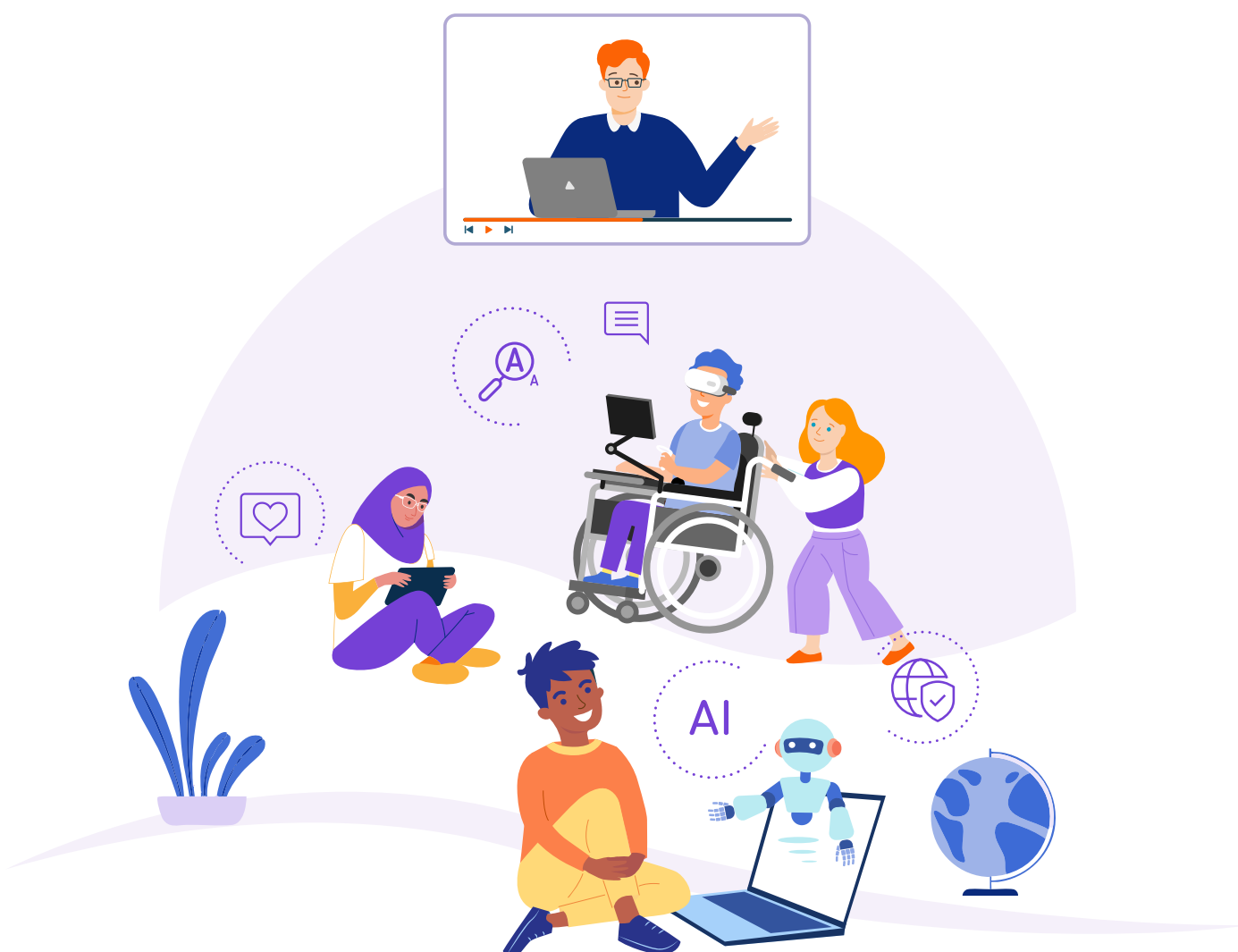
Executive summary

The **European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+ strategy)** represents the European Union's commitment to creating a digital environment where children and young people are protected, empowered, and respected online. Adopted on 11 May 2022, the strategy builds on two decades of EU initiatives aimed at fostering safer, age-appropriate online experiences. The first evaluation of the **BIK+ strategy** has provided invaluable insights into its progress and successes, as well as areas for improvement since its adoption in May 2022. Grounded in the perspectives of 759 children and young people[2], alongside input from 59 expert stakeholders from academia, civil society, industry, and policy across Europe, this report paints a detailed picture of the strategy's achievements and sheds light on evolving needs. The voices of children and young people, including those from vulnerable backgrounds, were instrumental in shaping the findings, ensuring a youth-centred and inclusive approach. The insights gathered through consultations with 170 teachers and educators, along with 133 parents and caregivers from across Europe, complete the findings of this report. This extensive multi-stakeholder approach allowed the review of the progress and achievements of the BIK+ strategy while also ensuring its relevance for the future by addressing the gaps identified by key dialogue groups within the ecosystem considered indispensable to the endeavour of creating safer and better digital environments for children and young people.

Objective and methodology

The primary objective of the evaluation was to review and assess the progress and success of the BIK+ strategy since its adoption in May 2022, identify emerging risks and new challenges, and propose actionable recommendations for improvement. The consultations adopted a qualitative approach similar to the focus group method. The methodology was child/youth-centred and rights-based, ensuring inclusivity, transparency, and a safe environment for participants to share their perspectives. Consultations with expert stakeholders, as well as teachers, educators, parents, and caregivers from across Europe, complemented this approach to provide a holistic review and evaluation of the strategy.

Key findings

Children's and young people's experiences: Participants appreciated efforts to create safer online environments but highlighted persistent challenges. For example, children mentioned being exposed to harmful content, such as explicit materials or hate speech, and falling victim to online scams like phishing attempts. Privacy violations, including hacking and misuse of personal data, were also frequently cited. Many expressed a need for simplified terms and conditions and privacy policies, or clearer instructions on how to report harmful content, which they felt would make navigating the digital world safer and more manageable.

Inclusivity and accessibility: Approximately one-third of the consultations engaged children and young people from vulnerable backgrounds, including those with disabilities, from low-income families, or ethnic minority communities. Concerning these participants, consultation outcomes emphasised the importance of reducing barriers to online participation. For instance, more accessible features on online platforms were highlighted to create barrier-free access for children with disabilities, in particular

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2   Generally, when referring to "children", we refer to children under the age of 12 years. When referring to "young people", we typically mean children over the age of 12.

with respect to reporting harmful content. Another aspect referred to the persistence of a digital divide caused by limited internet access in rural areas.

Digital empowerment: Many children and young people felt confident using the internet but identified specific gaps in their ability to navigate challenges. For example, some struggled to recognise disinformation or scams, particularly in fast-evolving platforms like social media. Younger participants often expressed a desire for more tailored digital literacy programmes in schools, such as interactive workshops on identifying credible sources of information or effectively managing online privacy.

Active participation: Children and young people expressed a strong interest in contributing to policymaking and participating in decision-making, thereby helping to shape digital environments. For instance, they shared ideas on how platforms could better cater to their needs, such as designing more child-friendly interfaces, or providing clearer and more accessible information about terms and conditions. They stressed that digital service providers, in particular, should more actively involve them in developing new and improving existing platforms, tools and features. They also called for more streamlined and regular opportunities to be involved at the local, national, and EU levels of policy development, arguing that this should become the norm.

Expert stakeholder insights: Experts from academia, industry, civil society, and policy highlighted systemic gaps in the current digital ecosystem. For example, stakeholders from academia underscored the need for longitudinal research into the long-term effects of the digital transformation on children. Industry representatives pointed to inconsistent regulatory requirements across EU Member States, which hinder the development of uniform safety measures. Civil society participants stressed the importance of cross-sector collaboration to ensure that interventions are inclusive and actionable. Policymakers identified the need for stronger alignment between national and EU-level strategies to address emerging risks effectively.

Parents' and teachers' views: Consultations with teachers, educators, parents, and caregivers across Europe revealed both alignment and divergence with children's and young people's views. While most consulted adults were previously unaware of the BIK+ strategy, they strongly supported its goals once introduced. Pillar 1 – Safe digital experiences was most frequently prioritised, especially for younger children, while Pillar 2 – Digital empowerment, and 3 – Active participation, gained greater relevance for adolescents. Teachers and parents widely acknowledged the challenges of keeping up with rapid technological developments, particularly around social media, AI, and algorithmic content exposure. Concerns were raised about cyberbullying, misinformation, and screen time, but there was also a shared recognition that digital literacy must extend to adults to support children better. Notably, both groups voiced the importance of trust-based dialogue over blanket bans. They called for improved age verification systems and more precise, explicit, and clear-cut guidance on online safety.

Recommendations

Improving reporting mechanisms: Simplify and standardise processes for reporting harmful content across platforms. Examples include creating more child-friendly reporting processes and interfaces, offering step-by-step tutorials for younger users, and ensuring timely and detailed feedback after a report is filed. In particular, concerning vulnerable groups, current features for reporting harmful content were considered to be too complex or time-consuming.

Enhancing digital education: Implement comprehensive and age-appropriate digital literacy programmes as integral curricular elements in schools. For example, lessons on media literacy can be integrated to help children discern credible information, teach privacy management skills such as setting strong passwords, and educate them on the responsible use of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and AI-powered tools.

Fostering youth participation: Create structured and more accessible channels for children to contribute to policy discussions and the development of digital services, tools and platforms. Examples could include establishing youth advisory boards for tech companies, or organising regular regional forums where children can directly engage with policymakers.

Addressing expert-identified gaps: Act on the recommendations from expert stakeholders to strengthen the strategy's impact. For example, invest in longitudinal studies to better understand the effects of digital engagement on children, harmonise regulatory frameworks across the EU to simplify industry compliance, and promote cross-sector partnerships to develop innovative solutions for online safety and inclusivity.

Increasing the effectiveness of BIK+ in the living room and classroom: To increase the effectiveness of BIK+ across home and school settings, consulted parents and teachers recommended that efforts should be made to actively involve and enhance the digital literacy of the entire ecosystem involved in safeguarding children's and young people's digital experiences. As such, they called for mandatory, state-supported teacher training on online safety and digital citizenship, as well as more accessible workshops and resources for parents. Communication strategies should involve low-threshold awareness-raising and should specifically target families more effectively. Such efforts, among other vital and fundamental online safety aspects, should focus on raising awareness about national Safer Internet Centres and the support they offer, particularly among parents. Policymakers and industry should also ensure the simplification of reporting mechanisms and clarify terms and conditions on platforms, services and games used by children and young people in formats that are accessible to both adults and children. Furthermore, strengthening education on new technologies utilising AI and promoting cross-generational digital competence-building, particularly through peer-to-peer and family-based learning models, would reinforce digital resilience among Europe's youngest users.

Conclusion

This evaluation confirms that the BIK+ strategy has made significant strides in creating a better internet for children and young people across all consulted stakeholder groups. However, more needs to be done to address emerging risks such as increased exposure to harmful content, mental health impacts, privacy concerns, or the monetisation of children's and young people's online activities, alongside enhancing inclusivity and empowering young users.

Additionally, more emphasis should be placed on educating adults on the topics of online safety, first and foremost parents and caregivers, but also teachers and educators, as was expressed in consultations across stakeholder groups, and in particular those with children and young people, parents and caregivers, and teachers and educators. Families and educators often feel underprepared to meet the evolving challenges posed by rapid digital change. Their voices affirm the need for whole-society approaches to digital well-being, including tailored support for adults as co-navigators in children's online journeys. These findings strengthen the case for sustained investment in digital education, more effective enforcement mechanisms, and inclusive policy-making that acknowledges the complex interplay between school, home, and digital space.

Overall, the findings and recommendations presented in this report aim to guide the European Commission and the entire ecosystem of stakeholders in refining the BIK+ strategy's vision and mission, and implementing effective actions to meet the evolving needs of Europe's youngest digital citizens.

Chapter 1: Background

Children and young people are the most active users of digital technologies and the internet. Worldwide, it has been estimated that a third of all internet users online are minors (**UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, 2019**). The latest evidence shows that 97 per cent of young people in the European Union (EU) aged 16 to 29 reported using the internet daily (**Eurostat, 2024**). A growing body of evidence further suggests that the digital environment is integral to children's and young people's daily lives. Moreover, their engagement with the internet, digital information, and communication technologies profoundly shapes how they interact, learn, and exercise their rights. Equally, being online presents both opportunities and risks for their safety, well-being, and development.

Recognising this reality, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted **General Comment No. 25** in 2021. This landmark document reaffirms that children's rights, as outlined in the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, apply fully in the digital world. It highlights the responsibility of governments, institutions, and stakeholders to ensure that children's rights to protection and participation are safeguarded and promoted online, just as they are in offline spaces. As the digital environment continues to evolve, this interpretation ensures that children's rights remain relevant and actionable in the current as well as in new and emerging contexts.

Children's right to participate means having a 'seat at the table', being heard, and sharing their own insights and experiences. Moreover, it means that these inputs should be taken seriously and fed into the decision-making processes in policy and industry that impact their daily lives in the 21st century, which increasingly sees various realms of civic life becoming digitised. In a nutshell, this means that when laws and policies, or new technologies, apps, websites, and services directed at children and young people are being developed, children and young people must be involved and actively consulted.

The current report presents outcomes from a cross-European consultation exercise to review and evaluate the progress and success of the **European strategy for a better internet for kids+ (BIK+ strategy)**. This exercise has been carried out by European Schoolnet (EUN) – on behalf of the European Commission (EC) – as part of the **Better Internet for Kids (BIK) initiative**.

The methodology for this consultation-based evaluation, which was developed and implemented against the backdrop of ongoing EU policy work to safeguard and promote children's rights in the digital world, facilitated the review of progress and success of the European approach to creating a safer and better internet for kids, as enshrined in the BIK+ strategy, and is aligned with the European Commission's policy evaluation principles.

The **BIK+ strategy** is the European Union's flagship policy for safeguarding children's rights and well-being in the digital environment. Adopted on 11 May 2022, the strategy builds on over two decades of European initiatives dedicated to creating safer, more empowering, online experiences for children and young people. As digital technologies increasingly shape our societies and economies, BIK+ reflects the EU's vision of placing children at the heart of Europe's digital transformation, ensuring they are protected, empowered, and respected as digital citizens.

Underpinning BIK+ is the mission to advance the guiding principle that children's rights must be fully upheld in the online world, just as they are offline. This vision aligns seamlessly with the **European declaration on digital rights and principles for the digital decade**, which emphasises that digital technologies must serve people, respect fundamental rights, and empower all members of society. Notably, the declaration identifies the protection and empowerment of children and young people as a priority, calling for:

- Safe, informed and creative digital engagement for children and young people.
- Access to age-appropriate services and materials that enhance their well-being and participation.
- Robust measures to protect children and young people from harmful or criminal activities facilitated through digital technologies.

The BIK+ strategy operationalises this agenda through three key pillars:

1. **Safe digital experiences:** Ensuring a secure, age-appropriate online environment that protects children and young people from harmful content, conduct, and risks while supporting their overall well-being.

2. **Digital empowerment:** Equipping children and young people with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the digital world safely, responsibly, and confidently.

3. **Active participation:** Recognising children's right to be heard by fostering opportunities for child-led, innovative digital experiences.

The BIK+ strategy is deeply rooted in the EU's long-standing efforts to improve the digital landscape for children and young people. From the first Safer Internet Programmes of the late 1990s to the original Better Internet for Kids strategy launched in 2012, the European Commission has championed initiatives to raise awareness, combat online risks, and promote positive digital experiences. Today, BIK+ brings these efforts into a new era, positioning itself as a cornerstone of the EU's Digital Decade vision. By advancing children's rights, safety, and participation online, the strategy reaffirms the EU's commitment to creating a digital world where no child is left behind.

The consultation-based activity and its underlying methodology was developed in alignment with the European Commission's provisions in the Better regulation guidelines and toolbox. Key principles adopted as part of this activity line, therefore, comprised:

- **inclusiveness**, ensuring participation of all relevant stakeholders and diverse approaches to consultation;
- **openness and transparency** both through the consultation process and dissemination of outcomes;
- **effectiveness** by ensuring the inclusion of all key stakeholder groups and networks; and
- **coherence** as defined by the objectives and goals of the BIK+ strategy.

The EU strategy on the rights of the child provides the wider framework for the actions of the EU and its Member States. It fundamentally informed all stages of the development and implementation of this first evaluation of the BIK+ strategy.

Objective and approach

The main objective of the first evaluation of the BIK+ strategy was to review its progress and success since its adoption on 11 May 2022, while also identifying new and emerging risks, challenges, and opportunities that require targeted action moving forward. A key focus of the evaluation was to gain deeper insights into children's and young people's perceptions of their online lives, their experiences of being protected, empowered, and respected online, and any notable recent changes. The consultations adopted a qualitative approach similar to the focus group method. The findings provide a snapshot of how children and young people experience the key priorities and actions of the BIK+ strategy, while highlighting emerging priorities since its adoption.

Additionally, expert stakeholders from academia, civil society, industry and policy were consulted. Rounding off this ecosystem-wide evaluation exercise were consultations with parents and caregivers, and teachers and educators. The outcomes from these different consultation strands are presented in this report.

Consultations with children and young people

During September and October 2024, 84 consultation sessions were carried out with children and young people[3] in 22 countries across Europe[4]. The exercise was supported by members of the Insafe network of European Safer Internet Centres and a wider range of expert organisations who facilitated consultations with children and young people with different vulnerabilities.

In total, the activity included contributions from 759 children and young people. In a structured and systematic manner, in groups with an average of 9 participants each, the exercise continued to uphold the high standard of ensuring meaningful child and youth participation in digital policymaking and evaluation.

About 40 per cent of the consultation sessions involved children aged 12 years and younger, with the youngest participants being six years old. More than 25 groups involved children and young people from vulnerable groups. This extensive engagement reflects the BIK initiative's strong commitment to inclusivity, ensuring that the voices of those who are often underrepresented are heard and valued in co-shaping BIK+. As a result, the majority of the focus group workshops included very young children, children, and young people who identified themselves as members of the LGBTQIA+ communities, children and young people with various types of disabilities (intellectual, hearing, visual and physical impairment), children and young people with emotional and behavioural problems, children and young people with migratory backgrounds, Roma children, children in (foster) care or other public care facilities, children and young people from rural and isolated regions, and from disadvantaged or dysfunctional families.

Throughout this report, the insights drawn from the consultations with children and young people are presented in a more general manner, largely because the shared experiences and issues voiced across groups showed many similarities, regardless of age, gender, or background. Nevertheless, and where useful to illustrate nuances of specific concerns or where representative of frequently mentioned themes and ideas, the report references direct quotes from participants.

The methodology for these consultations was child-centred and child-rights-based, and has been shaped by a wide range of existing best practices for meaningful child participation. These include international and EU experiences with consulting children and young people about key issues, opportunities, and priorities for their rights in the digital age, as documented in a **BIK Good practice guide published in May 2021**. Each session was facilitated by a structured protocol and focused on questions co-developed with BIK Youth Ambassadors. In doing so, the following set of principles was followed:

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3   Generally, when referring to "children", we refer to children under the age of 12 years. When referring to "young people", we typically mean children over the age of 12.

4   Children and young people from the following countries were consulted: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain.

	Principle	Guidelines and requirements
BPG1	Transparent and informative	Children should be provided with all relevant information and offered adequate support.
BPG2	Voluntary	Children should be informed about their right not to participate, sign a consent form, and be able to withdraw consent at any time.
BPG3	Child-centred, age-appropriate, child-friendly	The working methods, the means of expression children can choose from, and the format of the consultations should be adapted to the participating children's capacities.
BPG4	Respectful	Children's views should be treated with respect, and they should be given opportunities to initiate their own ideas and activities.
BPG5	Relevant	Children should be asked to participate in relation to issues that are of real relevance to their lives. There should be room for them to highlight and address the issues that they themselves identify as relevant and important.
BPG6	Non-discriminatory, inclusive	Participation must be inclusive, and all children should be treated equally.
BPG7	Training and support	Train facilitators of the consultations (for example, provide an information package, host online conferences where they can ask questions, and provide tips on how to facilitate sessions).
BPG8	Safe and sensitive to risk	Facilitators should create a safe and relaxed environment in which children can choose to speak or not, and which supports their well-being.
BPG9	Accountable	A commitment to follow-up and evaluation is essential. Children must be informed about how their views have been considered and used, and should be given the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities.

Table 1: Best practice guidance developed in the BIK initiative
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Consultation structure and focus

The consultation protocol provided to all facilitators, including activity materials translated into all EU languages, led to a series of hands-on activities carried out in the participants' national language. The facilitator packages, including the consultation protocol, the questions and all supporting materials, as well as reporting templates provided, can be accessed on the **Better Internet for Kids portal** in all languages.

In a nutshell, the following steps were followed in each of the consultation sessions:

	Purpose	Practical approach
Step 1	Informing and sensitising	The main objective of step 1 has been to provide children and young people with sufficient information about the consultation (process), the topics that will be discussed during the session, the objectives, and the personal data that will be processed. This enabled them to make an informed decision about participating in the consultation session. Before participating in the consultations, children and young people received all the necessary information to enable them to develop their own views on the subject matter. This included information about: • their right not to participate in the consultation; • informed consent/assent; • the scope of their participation and its limitations; • the expected outputs; • how their views will be considered and by whom; • how their data will be processed, for what purposes and who they can contact if they have questions about this; • how they will receive feedback; • what the roles and responsibilities of those involved are. Facilitators were asked to provide the above-listed information, including the info flyer provided and the child-friendly version of the BIK+ strategy, at least one week before the consultation session. Additionally, facilitators were entrusted to obtain informed consent/assent before starting the activity.
Step 2	Start of the consultation session	Step 2 focused on setting the scene and starting the session by reminding participants about the purpose of the consultation and all relevant background information in line with the info flyer they had received in advance. The facilitator confirmed whether the participants had read and understood the information provided in the flyer, underlining once more that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they can decide against participating in the consultation at any time.
Step 3	Opinions and attitudes of children and young people about their favourite online activities	The purpose of step 3 was to gain a better understanding of children's and young people's real-life experiences in the digital world. To start the discussions in children's and young people's own words, creating a safe, inclusive, and inviting space for children to participate actively was vital.
Step 4	Children's and young people's perceptions of their lives online and their experiences of the priorities and actions of the BIK+ strategy	The goal of step 4 was to allow children and young people to share their perceptions of their lives online and about observed recent changes. This was meant to provide a snapshot of how they experience key BIK+ priorities and actions.
Step 5	Children's and young people's priorities	Step 5 aimed to wrap up the consultation session. In this portion of the consultation, children and young people could develop and freely express their views about what they are most concerned about in relation to their rights in the digital environment. This aimed at gaining further insights into children's and young people's expectations of policymakers and other actors.

	Purpose	Practical approach
Step 6	End of the consultation session	In this step, facilitators thanked all participants for their time and input. They explained what would happen with their input and how it would be processed further. In addition, facilitators informed participants that they could receive the report and all child- and family-friendly outputs based on it once it became available in February 2025 (and beyond).
Step 7	Data collection	It was recommended for facilitators to take notes during the consultation sessions – in an ideal scenario, two facilitators were present during each session, with one person responsible for notetaking while the other guided the discussions. It was recommended that the facilitator summarise the discussions and complete the provided reporting template as soon as possible after the consultation session to capture all outcomes as closely as possible.

Table 2: Structure, aims and suggested approaches from the provided consultation protocol

All facilitators completed and submitted a standardised reporting template to EUN within two weeks after the consultation activity, omitting any personal or sensitive data. These reports detailed the session's setting, gave an overview of the main outcomes and themes, and provided recommendations that emerged from the discussion. Additionally, organisations working with children and young people from specifically vulnerable situations and backgrounds were asked to adapt the base methodology as provided by the protocol to make it fit for the purpose of consulting the specific groups they focused on. For this purpose, an additional standardised reporting template was provided for organisations to report, in detail, how they adapted the methodology.

In the following pages, the present report showcases children's and young people's strong opinions and clear views about Europe's strategy to create safer and better digital environments for them. In addition, the report highlights new and emergent issues they identified. It provides a structured overview of the recommendations to the various actors involved, particularly policymakers, directly voiced by the children and young people themselves, complemented by recommendations drawn from analysing and synthesising the overall outcomes of the evaluation activity. Lastly, the report is rounded off by insights and recommendations derived from consultations with expert stakeholders from academia, civil society, industry and policy.

Realising children's and young people's right to participation does not only entail providing them with safe and inclusive opportunities to form and express their views. Instead, to fully realise this fundamental right, their views and recommendations must reach the right audience, and their views should be acted upon appropriately (Lundy, 2013). In this vein, the European Commission aspires to continuously protect, empower, and respect children and young people online as much as offline. We hope this report will support policymakers and other stakeholders in recognising individual and social needs, as well as challenges and opportunities going forward, and actualising them in practicable solutions, fostering a safer and better internet for children and young people for generations to come.

Consultations with expert stakeholders

In parallel to the consultation with children and young people, workshops were conducted with 59 experts. They comprised a two-hour online consultation session facilitated on the Microsoft Teams platform. Using both a plenary format and breakout sessions, participants were guided through a selection of questions in short segments, each led by a session moderator from the BIK evaluation team. A briefing note was provided to participants in advance to give an outline of the workshop, a background on the BIK+ strategy, and an overview of the workshop topics.

Workshops were held under the **Chatham House Rule** to promote an open and free conversation. As such, workshop reports summarise the main discussion points but do not attribute comments to individual speakers. Organisations are only attributed in the final report when requested explicitly by participants.

Consultation structure and focus

Drawing on the **Better Regulation Guidelines** (European Commission, 2021), which informed the overall approach, the aim of the exercise was to carry out an evidence-based assessment of the extent to which the BIK+ strategy is:

1. effective in fulfilling expectations and meeting its objectives;
2. efficient in terms of cost-effectiveness and proportionality of actual costs to benefits;
3. relevant to current and emerging needs;
4. coherent (internally and externally with other EU interventions or international agreements); and
5. has EU added value — i.e. produces results beyond what would have been achieved by Member States acting alone.

(Better Regulation Guidelines, 2021, p.23)

To support this approach, the consultation workshops were organised around four main themes as follows:

1. Addressing the aims and objectives of the BIK+ strategy.
2. Assessing the successes and gaps of the BIK+ strategy.
3. Lessons to be learned.
4. Looking ahead and future-proofing BIK+.

The workshop agenda was organised according to this schema, providing each segment's main organisational topics and discussion points. Each workshop, comprising separate groups of expert stakeholders, adopted the same structure.

Consulted expert groups

For the consultation, four separate consultation workshops were organised as follows:

Workshop I: Policymakers and policy professionals

Invited participants for this workshop included national contacts for the **BIK Policy monitor**, members of the **Expert Group on Safer Internet for Children**, and officials working closely in designing, developing and implementing BIK-related policies at the governmental level. This workshop had a total of 16 participants.

Workshop II: Academia, civil society, and advocacy organisations

Experts invited to this workshop included researchers and professionals from various civil society organisations who have experience working on BIK-related activities. Academic participants included experts on children's digital experiences, EC-funded research and innovation project representatives, and EU Kids Online network members. Civil society organisations included parents' and children's organisations with particular expertise in children's rights and online safety. A total of 17 experts participated in the workshop.

Workshop III: Industry

Participants included industry members from the **Special group on the EU Code of conduct on age-appropriate design**, and representatives of various organisations across the value chain. Participants from regulatory, civil society and legal backgrounds were also invited to join the discussion to encourage a more cross-disciplinary dialogue. A total of 14 experts participated in the workshop.

Workshop IV: International organisations

The workshop included a wide range of European and international perspectives. Invited participants included representatives from UNICEF, the Council of Europe, the OECD, Europol, the European Audiovisual Observatory, and the European Platform for Regulatory Authorities, as well as members of the European Data Protection Board, the Global Privacy Assembly Working Group, and the European Board for Digital Services. A total of 12 experts participated in the workshop.

Consultations with teachers, educators, parents and caregivers

In addition to consultations with children and young people, as well as expert stakeholders, teachers, educators, parents, and caregivers[5] were also heard in this evaluation activity, with consultations taking place between October 2024 and March 2025. Teachers and educators from 20 European countries[6] participated through focus groups (59 participants) and a qualitative online survey (111 participants), while parents and caregivers shared their perspectives exclusively in focus group discussions (133 participants from 17 European countries[7]). The questions addressed in both the focus group settings and the online survey were closely aligned with the consultation protocol developed in collaboration with the BIK Youth Ambassadors for consultations with children and young people across the EU.

The primary goal of the targeted consultations with teachers, educators, parents and caregivers was to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions regarding how the BIK+ strategy affects the rights and digital lives of children and young people. This understanding was gathered by exploring their views on the online experiences of their students or children, any recent changes they have noticed, and their experiences with the key priorities and actions of the BIK+ strategy. Additionally, the consultations aimed to identify any new priorities that have emerged since the BIK+ strategy was adopted in 2022.

Consultation structure and focus

In close alignment with the consultation protocol that facilitated group discussions with children and young people, the consultations with teachers and educators, as well as parents and caregivers, were structured along the following segments, each focusing on specific aspects of the BIK+ strategy:

Segment 1: Aims and visions of the BIK+ strategy

This segment aimed to familiarise participants with the BIK+ strategy (those who were not already familiar with it before the consultation activity). It involved identifying which aspects they considered most important compared to what they believed their students or children would identify as the most

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5   The terms 'teachers' and 'educators' as well as 'parents' and 'caregivers', respectively, are used interchangeably in the present report.

6   Teachers and educators from the following countries were consulted: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain.

7   Parents and caregivers from the following countries were consulted: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain.

relevant. Additionally, the discussion included any observed changes in the digital environment over the past few years.

Segment 2: Safe digital experiences (BIK+ strategy pillar 1)

The second segment discussed risk perceptions and participants' self-assessments of their capacities to support children and young people in staying safe online and reporting inappropriate or harmful content. It also covered their awareness of relevant EU, national, and regional laws for protecting minors, the use of parental control tools, and their approaches to managing the terms and conditions of services and apps used by children and young people.

Segment 3: Digital empowerment (BIK+ strategy pillar 2)

The third segment examined participants' perceptions of their skills and knowledge in guiding children and young people on various topics. These topics included identifying credible sources of information online, distinguishing 'fake news' from reliable journalism, and understanding what improvements are necessary to equip teachers and parents with the skills and knowledge needed to support children in the safe and empowered use of digital technology.

Segment 4: Active participation (BIK+ strategy pillar 3)

The final segment examined participants' views and opinions on children's and young people's active participation in decision-making and policy processes that directly affect their lives. Among other aspects, participants were asked if and how they discussed children's rights (offline and online) with their students/children, if they were aware of any child and youth participation activities and initiatives in their countries or regions, and if they felt equipped to support their students/children in exercising their rights and responsibilities as active citizens.
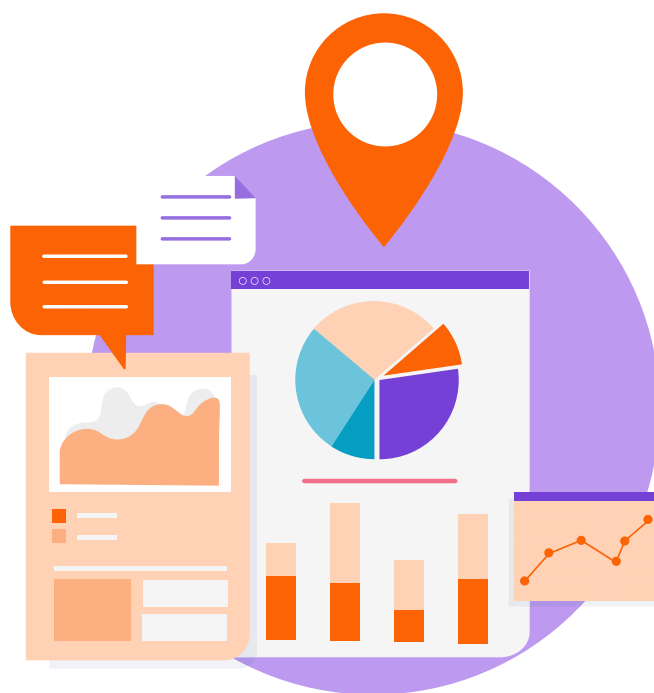
Chapter 2: Results from consultations with children and young people

A total of 84 consultation sessions were held, with 759 participants from across the EU and Norway, aiming to ensure a balance between age, gender, background, and ethnicity. The following chapter summarises the main outcomes grouped under six sections below: **(I) children's and young people's perception of the BIK+ strategy**; **(II) their favourite online activities and motives to engage**; **(III) frequency of using the internet and being online**; **(IV) the priorities and actions of BIK+**; **(V) their own priorities and expectations**; **(VI) further observations**; **and (VII) reflections about limitations**.

I. Children's and young people's perception of the BIK+ strategy

Before the consultation sessions, children and young people were introduced to the BIK+ strategy by sharing the **child-friendly version of the BIK+ strategy in their native language** and discussing its key components and three pillars before the beginning of the workshop.

Overall, children and young people recognised the child-friendly version of BIK+ strategy as straightforward and clear. Facilitators used visual aids to explain the EC's role in drafting and implementing laws. For younger children, they adapted the protocol to provide examples making concepts more relatable.

Younger children, in particular, occasionally found the third pillar of BIK+ (active participation), which emphasises the importance of offering children opportunities to make impactful contributions, a bit overwhelming. Despite initial hesitation, session

Figure 1: Visual aids used during the consultation workshops

facilitators noted that these children often naturally shared relevant insights as conversations progressed. Terms such as "stakeholder", "interested parties", and "challenges" were sometimes unclear to children, with the term "challenges" being interpreted as the "viral challenges" they knew from various social networking platforms, rather than grasping the broader meaning of this term. Some children expressed difficulty in imagining how BIK+ could be effectively implemented. In contrast, others had read the provided info flyer before the session with their parents, who had explained key elements to them during the consent process for participation. Facilitators highlighted that such parent-child discussions often extended into broader conversations about online safety. Overall, the child-friendly version of the BIK+ strategy was found to be effective, while additional visuals could improve understanding and engagement.

II. Children's and young people's favourite online activities and motives

At the start of the consultation workshops, children and young people were invited to reflect on their favourite online activities, drawing from their own experiences in the digital world. This exercise encouraged them to identify what is important to them when they go online, to start the discussions in their own words, and to set the basis for in-depth discussions around the three pillars of the BIK+ strategy.

Children and young people engage in a wide variety of online activities, serving different – or sometimes joint – purposes and reflecting their diverse interests. The consultation revealed common trends in the types of activities they enjoy, why they engage in them, and the emotional and practical value these activities provide.

Overall, children expressed **predominantly positive feelings** about their favourite online activities. Gaming, in particular, stood out as a source of excitement, connection, and achievement, especially for participants aged between 6 and 12 years[8]. Many children and young people associate their online activities with relaxation, happiness, and a sense of belonging. In addition, the digital world offers a versatile space for self-expression, creativity, and learning. Whether through gaming, streaming videos, or sharing updates with friends, children and young people find that their favourite online activities cater to their emotional, social, and practical needs. The most commonly referenced motives to engage in the digital environment are listed below.

1. Staying close to friends and family

One of the most frequent uses of the internet mentioned by children and young people is **maintaining connections with friends and family**. Participants appreciated how it enables them to stay in touch with relatives living far away, such as siblings studying abroad, or with friends they could not meet in person due to busy schedules, long school days, or reliance on parents for transportation. Many highlighted how online communication makes them feel close to loved ones, offering a way to exchange pictures, videos, and messages effortlessly. While some participants occasionally mentioned making new friends through online communities or shared interests, such as video games, they were primarily focused on maintaining their relationships with family and existing friends.

Children and young people also indicated that the internet helps them **avoid feelings of missing out** (so-called fear of missing out or "FOMO") by letting them see what their friends are doing or share funny content to stay connected. Popular communication tools include messenger apps, chat functions in games, and multimedia messaging. For many, online communication is not only enjoyable but also practical, helping them organise social events or discuss homework. One participant, for instance, noted that being able to talk to friends online while staying at home sick helped prevent feelings of loneliness.

2. Entertainment and pastime activities

Entertainment was another widely discussed motive among children and young people, highlighting how much they enjoyed certain online activities. Connected to this, several participants emphasised how the positive activities of online entertainment far outweigh the downsides, noting that these activities are fun and relaxing, and often educational.

Gaming was mentioned in all focus groups and emerged as the most popular activity among younger children. Participants consistently described gaming as a **fun and inherently social activity**, with many sharing how they enjoy playing with friends – whether by chatting in-game, talking on the phone while playing, or collaborating during gameplay. The excitement about specific features of games, such as unlocking certain achievements or milestones, or participating in special in-game events, also added to its appeal.

For some, gaming provides an **escape from reality** and an opportunity

Figure 2: Examples of popular games among participants

to explore new personalities through virtual characters. In addition to entertainment, participants highlighted gaming as a way to develop skills like teamwork and communication, which also contributed to a sense of accomplishment. While many participants approached gaming as a casual activity, a few described it as a more serious hobby, dedicating time to improving their skills and comparing it to sports. Some participants acknowledged playing games with age restrictions or spending money to enhance their gaming experience.

Watching videos was one of the most frequently mentioned activities engaged in, either alone or with their siblings or parents. It serves as a way to pass the time when they feel bored, or to relax or learn something new. Short, fast-paced videos were particularly popular, as they were seen as engaging and easy to enjoy, without requiring serious attention. Participants mentioned various entertaining content, including action-packed clips, funny videos featuring people or animals doing humorous or unusual things, and videos from influencers such as "Get ready with me" or product review videos. Some children and young people mentioned preferring family influencers (which feature children) or content that resonates with their hobbies.

Figure 3: Popular video-sharing platforms mentioned by participants

Social media platforms are also valued for entertainment, offering opportunities to follow accounts from their favourite sports club or influencers, to like their posts, and to post one's own content. A few participants mentioned preferring alternative (national) platforms over the very popular social media platforms, appreciating the freedom to share more honestly without presenting a picture-perfect image.

Content creation is another way participants engage with entertainment online. A few participants mentioned creating videos, including animations or family photo compilations. These creations were sometimes shared privately rather than on public platforms. Others would upload screen-castings from their videogame sessions, illustrating how entertainment intersects with their hobbies, interests and creativity.

Listening to music and podcasts helps participants escape, calm down, or uplift their mood. Often a solitary activity, it lets children and young people express themselves or relax while doing other tasks like drawing.

Watching movies, TV series and anime, as well as watching sports online is also a common pastime, valued not only for its entertainment purposes but also because it provides common ground for conversations with peers.

Children and young people of different ages frequently use the internet to **explore their creative interests and hobbies**, often tailoring searches to their specific passions. Popular activities include discovering DIY projects and experimenting with arts and crafts, exploring new places to visit, looking up baking and cooking recipes, and learning chess strategies or assembling computer parts.

3. Gathering information and keeping up with news

Participants often mentioned gathering information and staying updated with news as key purposes for using social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which they preferred over traditional news websites. While one group mentioned public broadcaster channels explicitly, **participants generally highlighted social media as their go-to news source**, with hardly any references to traditional news websites.
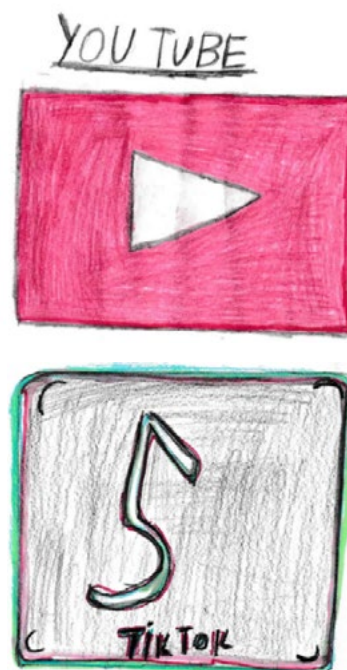
For many, the internet helped them feel more connected to their communities and gave them a better understanding of global issues. Celebrity news was also a popular interest, along with videos containing reviews of shows, movies, products and general opinions. Gamers frequently sought information about game updates, new strategies, and improvements to enhance their playing experience. **Participants love that it is so easy to find answers online**, as they like to keep up to date. For example, some used online tools to translate foreign languages or ask niche questions. Local events and activities were also a focus, with participants looking up information about cinema schedules, theatre plays for children, or other community events in the area.

4. School and educational purposes

Participants rely on the internet and technology to **support their education** in various ways. They use it for conducting research for assignments, projects, and personal study, looking up unknown words to expand their vocabulary, accessing online schooling, study apps, and exercise plans to supplement their learning, and exploring tools to solve math problems. Only a few of them referenced the use of generative AI tools in this context.

5. Online shopping

Lastly, online shopping was mentioned by a smaller number of children and young people. Participants would refer to fast fashion companies or discounter online stores for their wide range of products and competitive prices whenever it was mentioned. One child mentioned that they were aware of the low quality of the products but found them fun to explore. In one of the focus groups with younger children, participants displayed surprising independence, mentioning that they knew how to make purchases themselves without adult assistance. One young participant even mentioned a platform that compares prices from different online stores.

III. Frequency of using the internet and being online

Children and young people's internet usage forms **a significant part of their daily routines, regardless of age**. Daily engagement with social media platforms, online gaming, or other online activities is the norm. They often engage in these activities during free time, such as when commuting to and from school, during breaks, or at home when bored. Participants mentioned that this usage tends to increase during school holidays or weekends. Children and young people primarily access the internet through mobile phones, with the youngest participants mentioning using their parents' devices, while also utilising laptops and tablets in their households for educational purposes and gaming consoles for entertainment.

Several children and young people mentioned **frequently losing track of the time they spend online**. They were surprised by how easily hours could pass without them noticing. Many admitted that they had initially planned to use the internet for a brief time, whether for games or browsing, but ended up spending much longer than intended. Several participants noted that certain features of platforms encourage frequent use. For example, competitive elements like "streaks" motivate users to engage daily. A streak refers to maintaining a consecutive daily engagement, accompanied by a counter displaying how many days the streak has lasted. If a day is missed, the streak is broken.

Participants also **raised concerns about how intensive use might impact their daily schedules**, including homework and other obligations. This emerged as a typical problem many children and young people encounter when balancing their online and offline lives. While some see this time as potentially wasteful, others emphasise enjoyment and learning aspects. Parental monitoring and restrictions are common, either being used as a reward for good behaviour or as a punishment for bad behaviour.

The consultation highlighted **diverse parental approaches to managing children and young people's internet usage**. Some families lack firm rules, allowing unrestricted online engagement, while others impose specific restrictions. For example, some parents grant unlimited phone access to children with top grades but impose limits in response to poor performance. Many use parental controls to manage screen time, and some require homework completion before internet access. Restrictions can also vary by device. Tablets may have limited usage hours, while laptops are often unrestricted for schoolwork. Additionally, some parents delete specific apps or limit social media and gaming, while some children can only access the internet when parents are present, reflecting varying levels of supervision in managing online activities.

IV. The BIK+ strategy's priorities and actions: Children's and young people's views

Following the introductory discussions, children and young people discussed a series of targeted questions designed to explore the three pillars of the BIK+ strategy. The outcome of these discussions provides a snapshot of how participants experience the strategy's key priorities and actions. It highlights the real-life challenges and perspectives of children and young people, shedding light on the impact of these priorities on their digital lives.

BIK+ pillar 1: Safe digital experiences

1. What do children and young people think are the biggest challenges that they face online?

The consultation outcomes clearly demonstrate that **staying safe online remains a major concern for many children and young people**. Participants mentioned risks and challenges such as harmful content, mental health impacts, privacy concerns, monetisation of their online activities, online scams, and fake news. Teenage participants frequently pointed out that these issues seem more significant for younger children than for themselves.

Perceptions of online safety varied widely among participants. Some expressed a lack of worry about their online activities, believing that their understanding of the digital world protects them from harm or that they do not see many risks or challenges. However, others described the internet as a dangerous place where they feel unsafe. Overall, similar challenges were identified across the vast majority of groups, and many examples were given either of their own experiences or of someone they know.

a) Harmful and inappropriate content, contact or conduct online

Participants frequently raised **concerns about exposure to age-inappropriate material**, including graphic videos of violence, adult content, self-harm videos, dangerous social media challenges, videos trivialising war, eating disorder tips, and encouragement to engage in betting and gambling. Sometimes, they accidentally viewed such content because of misleading descriptions or thumbnails. In several groups, a significant concern was being exposed to topics, trends and false role models on social media platforms which can lead to distorted body perception, reduced self-esteem, and eating disorders.

Hate speech is another issue, with children and young people encountering bad language, disrespectful comments, toxicity, and racist narratives on digital platforms. Some switch off the comment function on their own profiles to avoid such negativity, while others fear discussing important issues because of the risk of becoming a target of hate speech online. Participants were also worried that the prevalence

of hate speech and disturbing messages (e.g., "like and subscribe or your parents will die") can contribute to the normalisation of brutality and can erode civility and respect among younger generations.

Sexual content and harassment were frequently mentioned by participants. Several reported receiving messages from strangers, often with sexual images or requests, and being exposed to pornographic and sexist content and/or advertisements. Additionally, several participants, in both the above and under 12 years of age groups[9], expressed concerns about grooming, with some sharing experiences of being contacted by adults on their favourite platforms. Some believe that many adults hang around on these platforms and apps to connect with and gradually manipulate young users.

Bullying and trolling were mentioned as significant problems in numerous groups, with harassment often starting in class and continuing online. Cybermobbing (or cyberbullying), where an entire school class engages in bullying one individual within class group chats, exclusion from such groups, or taking and spreading pictures without consent, were given as examples.

b) Mental health and feeling under pressure to be online

"Apps like TikTok never stop. I wish much more would be done about it. Because to be honest, I'm affected by it myself. I'm also completely dissatisfied with it. But it's hard to get out of this loop."
Teenager, Germany

Children and young people are also concerned about the **impact of their online activities on their mental health** and feel under **pressure to always be online**. Many participants highlighted that social media could become overwhelming due to the fear of missing critical updates or social connections (so-called fear of missing out or "FOMO") potentially leading to **anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem**. Some expressed feeling compelled to share their lives publicly and, at the same time, feeling alienated when curating content instead of enjoying real-life moments. The pressure to be online also includes difficulties in limiting online time because of constant alerts, push notifications, and receiving messages even during the night. Participants shared that social media creates **response stress**, with unwritten rules regarding response times, leading to accusations of ghosting if responses are delayed, making them feel trapped in a loop of continuous engagement with certain apps. Some participants viewed their online activities as being "**addictive**", experiencing feelings of wasted time, exhaustion and being stuck scrolling for hours. In contrast, a few participants did not feel worried about their online time, and did not feel like they spent excessive time online.

Several children and young people mentioned the struggles of constantly being exposed to **unrealistic standards of life and success** set by influencers and how it can turn them into unhappy individuals, finding it difficult to meet these unattainable goals. In addition, some struggle with being themselves online without fear of judgment. In some of these discussions, the **role of algorithms** was mentioned, and how they can exacerbate negative thought patterns, as they tend to show more of what users already engage with, making it even harder to escape a negative mindset.

c) Data privacy, protection and feeling (un)safe

When children and young people engage in online activities, **they are concerned about their privacy and data protection**. The consultations show that many are unsure about what companies, governments or individuals can do with the information they share online and that they want to be protected from all these actors. Concerns include **being tracked or stalked online**, particularly through apps that

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9   As we discuss under <u>Chapter 2, section VII. Reflections and limitations</u>: not all consultation groups involved exclusively "children" under the age of 12 and over the age of 12, respectively, and instead, sometimes included a mix of age groups. Please refer to <u>section VII.</u> for further details.

show detailed location information. There is also uncertainty about what app providers can see, collect, store and pass on, making them nervous about their online activities. Additionally, **participants perceive having to register and share too much personal data for various online activities as intrusive**, leading some to provide false information. Other concerns include being recorded and videos shared online without consent, and social media platforms monitoring conversations to push advertising.

Online fraud, scams and computer viruses (or malware) were consistently mentioned as a major challenge. Unauthorised additions to large group chats and scam messages were common issues, as were scams directed at them on gaming platforms or scams directed at family members through other ways, for instance, through text messages claiming to be sent by the child, asking parents for help or money. Many participants shared concerns about accessing illegal sites and clicking on fraudulent links, being hacked, and having personal details stolen. In several groups, fake or unsolicited calls, as well as issues like catfishing and identity theft, were also mentioned.

Participants frequently discussed **monetisation** issues in the group, expressing a strong dislike for online ads. They found commercials on video-sharing platforms and in-game ads particularly frustrating, especially when these interrupted the content. Many criticised inappropriate advertisements, such as those promoting online gambling or sexist themes, and raised concerns about the impact of influencers on their purchasing decisions, and the strong focus on consumption on certain platforms. Some participants noted that in-game purchases might harm young users by making them feel inadequate if they did not buy them. Despite recognising "teen profile" options on some social media platforms designed to combat manipulative marketing aimed at minors, concerns about targeted advertising and profiling remained prevalent.

Participants shared challenges regarding **unreliable online sources**. Some frequently encountered fake news about celebrities and personal acquaintances, while others struggled to recognise deepfakes. When researching for schoolwork, they often find information that seems unreliable or nonsensical, causing them to doubt the reliability of online content.

2. Do children and young people know how to report content online that they think is harmful or inappropriate? And if so, do they do it, and what's their reasoning?

When asked about their knowledge and practices regarding harmful or inappropriate content online, **most participants indicated that they know how to report** such content or profiles on various platforms. This knowledge, however, is less prevalent among younger participants. Children and young people generally figure out the reporting process themselves or seek assistance from friends, parents, siblings, or teachers. They noted that the reporting process tends to be fairly similar across platforms, and some participants had learned about it in computer or informatics classes. However, despite this knowledge, **many barriers to reporting were highlighted** during the consultation workshops. The level of knowledge about reporting channels varies, with younger children more likely to turn to parents or older siblings for help.

Responses across the different groups varied significantly; some children do report content, while others do not, and no generalisations can be made in terms of the frequency of reporting. Several participants mentioned that they would **rather block accounts and unwanted contact than turn to reporting**. The decision to report content often depends on its severity. Some children have never encountered anything they felt needed reporting, while others have reported inappropriate disturbing content, such as content that glorifies weapons, sexual content, racist content, death, fake news, and nasty comments.

Participants put forward **various reasons for reporting**, such as protecting younger users and feeling

safer themselves. However, **barriers** like fear of complications, lack of knowledge about the process, and feelings of shame deter them. Many find the **reporting process too complicated and time-consuming** and express distrust in its effectiveness, believing their reports will not lead to meaningful changes. Younger children often fear consequences from parents or teachers, for instance, not being allowed to be online anymore if they raise an issue.

Participants mentioned several additional ways to report online issues beyond the platforms themselves, such as contacting teachers, school principals, forum moderators, police officers, or using the national emergency number.

> **✓ Recommendations and proposed best practices**
>
> Some participants recommended that the reporting process be made easier, although others thought it was easy and just a click away on most platforms. In one group, they expressed the need for regular reminders and guidance to stay aware of online safety practices due to the potential normalisation of risky situations, content and behaviour online. Some children appreciated options such as "I don't want to see more from this user" feature, considering it a good practice that empowers them to reduce inappropriate and unwanted content.

3. Have children and young people heard about laws or rules that aim to make the internet better and safer for them?

When asked whether they had heard about laws or rules aimed at making the internet safe for their age group, **most participants responded negatively**. Some of them questioned the effectiveness of such laws, as they believe there are still far too many problems online. The only initiative some had heard of was the BIK+ strategy, because they were discussing it at the beginning of the consultation workshop.

Nevertheless, in some groups, participants mentioned age limits in apps and games. A few of the young people showed slightly more awareness, with two groups mentioning actual legal instruments, including the **Digital Services Act (DSA)**, the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**, and a number of national laws. Privacy policies and cookies were also mentioned a few times, though the discussions did not delve into the existing legislation surrounding these topics. In certain countries, such as Denmark and France, there was some awareness of ongoing legislative discussions to limit access to social media. Additionally, participants sometimes mentioned rules for online behaviour set by schools, including digital etiquette and safety guidelines.

4. Have children and young people encountered websites, platforms or apps that ask for their age before accessing certain content? If yes, which ones? And do they perceive these measures as effective?

Most participants said they have come across websites or apps that ask for their age before letting them access content. They believe this age check can help protect users by confirming they are real individuals and encouraging young users to think about whether the content is suitable for them. Common sites that ask for age include adult websites, social media, video platforms, gaming sites, and dating apps.

However, **children and young people find current age verification methods ineffective**, often bypassing them by lying about their age or using a parent's ID. Many express indifference to age limits and believe that age verification is more legal protection for platforms than genuine child safety.

> *"With most apps, I feel like they don't really care if kids get on. They just have the restriction there so they can say, 'No, we have something in place' if someone complains."*
>
> *Teenager, Germany*

While **parental controls are seen as more effective, some children find them frustrating** and feel they strain relationships with parents. Participants also mentioned that age requirements are only visible during registration and are not consistently enforced during app use, despite varying content appropriateness.

⭐ Recommendations and proposed best practices

Children and young people proposed various ideas for improving age and identity verification. Some suggested alternatives to self-reporting could be submitting a photo, an ID card, or a bank ID with sensitive information omitted, and using a personal phone profile that blocks age-inappropriate apps or content automatically. Technologies such as facial scanning, video verification, and fingerprint scanning were also mentioned.

Concerns about privacy and data protection were raised, with some preferring to share only their birth year rather than the entire date. Participants emphasised the need for a simple verification process to minimise frustration and suggested regular yet quicker updates and checks for continuous verification rather than just at account setup. Age-based restrictions on apps and games to limit interactions between children and adults were also recommended, along with using control questions, possibly assisted by AI.

Lastly, some participants suggested an alternative solution: making services child-friendly by default by only allowing age-appropriate content on social networks, with anyone over 18 being able to opt in for adult content.

5. Have they ever read the terms and conditions (T&Cs) of the apps they use? Do they find them clear and easy to understand?

Almost all participants answered negatively when asked if they had read the T&Cs of the apps they used and whether they found them easy to understand. Only a few participants said they read the T&Cs, often merely skimming through them briefly. Some participants mentioned having attempted to read the T&Cs but found them too time-consuming and unhelpful, leading them to click 'accept' quickly in future instances.

There were numerous reasons for not reading T&Cs:

- **Length**: Many felt the documents were too long, repetitive and boring, taking forever to read.

- **Complexity**: The language was often too complex and filled with legal terms, making it hard to understand. This was particularly challenging for children with limited language proficiency or those with learning disabilities like dyslexia.

- **Overwhelming process**: Some participants perceived the overall process of reading T&Cs as overwhelming and inaccessible, with small print adding to the difficulty.

- **Impatience**: In several groups, participants expressed a desire to start using the app immediately, finding it annoying that agreeing to the T&Cs was mandatory for access.

- **Trust**: Some participants mentioned that they trusted game developers or friends who had been using the app without issues, so they did not worry about the details in the T&Cs.

- **Reliance on parents**: Some assumed that their parents or teachers had read the T&Cs, though others noted that their parents did not, either.

> ⭐✅ **Recommendations and proposed best practices**
>
> Various platforms, apps and sites were mentioned during the discussions across all groups. However, none of them were recognised as good practice examples. Many participants wished that T&Cs were more understandable and recommended developing child-friendly versions that present clear and concise summaries of key points. Placing the main highlights at the beginning will provide an easy overview, while using shorter text and bullet points can enhance readability and encourage engagement. Offering audio versions was proposed to broaden accessibility further, ensuring that everyone can understand the content. Additionally, incorporating visual aids to highlight important information can make T&Cs more engaging for younger users. For individuals with disabilities, it was suggested that shorter T&Cs in larger fonts be provided, translated into their native languages, along with visual instructions to clarify key concepts.

6. Have they noticed any recent changes in the apps they use?

When asked if they had noticed any recent changes in the apps they use, participants would mostly refer in general to updates to apps, such as visual changes (e.g., new colours, layouts or icons) and new features (e.g., new seasons in online games or new features). Specific examples were given a few times, such as TikTok omitting the phone's clock by blocking it out with a black field, making it harder to keep track of how much time they spend on the app, or the addition of voice chat in Roblox. Concerning terms and conditions, a few participants noticed that T&Cs are written in less legal language. Some participants also noted an increase in the number of ads on platforms or longer durations for ads that they could not skip anymore. Lastly, some groups mentioned how various apps now check the age of users at the stage of profile creation.

BIK+ pillar 2: Digital empowerment

1. Do children and young people ever wonder whether what they see or read online is true?

Across all groups, **most children and young people know that a significant amount of online content is not real or true** and often express doubts about various information they encounter. Some children say this question is on their minds for most of the time they spend online, while others say they engage with questionable content for entertainment despite their doubts.

Rich examples of content they questioned were given across all age groups. The most frequently mentioned across responses were:

- celebrity news content, such as exaggerated "Hollywood scandals", altered and photoshopped beauty images, and fake reports about deaths;
- content about politics and wars, for example, concerning the topics of climate change, pandemics such as COVID-19 or Mpox, and the wars on Ukraine and Gaza;
- content about natural disasters featuring AI-generated images or videos;
- information on Wikipedia, as participants acknowledged that everyone could edit the content;

- promotional content that includes exaggerated claims about the quality of advertised products, unrealistically low prices, and similar tactics.

In groups with younger children, responses were more divided. While fake information is a significant concern for many, some participants appear to be less bothered or do not question it as much. Some facilitators of workshops with **younger children** indicated that participants **still lack knowledge** in this area and that some do not worry about the truthfulness of information, as they do not use the internet to follow the news. Instead, they are more focused on information helping them to solve practical problems with apps they know and use. Some younger children fully trust the internet, including AI-generated responses from tools like ChatGPT, and are not particularly interested in the issue of misinformation. Additionally, some of the youngest participants did not understand why someone would want to share something untrue.

2. Do children and young people feel confident finding and understanding information and using different online tools?

Across all focus groups, there were **mixed feelings** about the ability to discern accurate and reliable information from "fake" information. While some felt confident, others felt more anxious and acknowledged that distinguishing fake from real information is becoming increasingly difficult. A range of **indicators that made them question the truthfulness** of content were mentioned:

- **Gut feeling and general suspicion**: Many respondents demonstrated a general sense of scepticism about the content they see online and used logic to evaluate such content.

- **Contradicting prior knowledge**: An often-mentioned indicator is that if the content conflicts with what they already know about a topic, for instance, from school or their parents, they become doubtful.

- **Double-checking information**: Many children and young people double-check information by discussing it with friends, parents or educators, or by checking multiple sources. Some of them also mentioned reading the comments below certain posts or videos to see what others are saying or note whether something important is discussed online.

- **Incredible or exaggerated news**: Many participants mentioned that content that seems "too incredible" to them, "too good to be true", or "too exaggerated" raises suspicion. Sensationalised headlines and clickbait tactics also contribute to their doubts.

- **Quality of the source**: Various participants expressed being sceptical of content from unknown or untrustworthy sources, particularly if the concerned topics are not reported by official sources (e.g., government sites or public broadcasters). Furthermore, they are doubtful about information posted by influencers known for "silly" posts. Some participants consider the number of followers and the presence of "blue ticks" (signifying that an account is "verified") as a sign of reliability.

- **Quality of the content**: Another indicator that was mentioned in several groups is the way videos are edited. Cuts and lighting effects, making content seem more dramatic, were mentioned to raise doubt. Some participants also pay attention to how a person speaks, questioning the intent behind dramatic and emotional speech. A number of participants also mentioned poor grammar as suggesting that content is untrue or created by bots.

Many participants reported being able to identify fake information, but they found it **challenging and often needed to cross-check facts**. They commonly used different platforms for verification, with some kids checking social media against search engines or official news websites. Parents were frequently mentioned as reliable sources of information. While some discussed this topic at school, others lacked formal education on how to critically evaluate online information.

However, many participants felt **unsure about their ability to find and understand information and spot fake news**. They were often **overwhelmed** by the sheer volume of content and sceptical about what to believe, thinking that people could deliberately hide the truth. They noted that staying informed about real-world events helped them recognise fake news more easily.

For **younger children**, results paint a **widely varied picture**. Some felt confident in their ability to identify harmful content and even believed they were more capable than their parents. In contrast, others admitted to lacking the knowledge and skills needed to verify information. Many felt frustrated by conflicting sources and often sought help from parents or siblings. Some struggled with how to cross-check facts or navigate complex websites. In certain groups, children seemed indifferent to the issue; they were satisfied with the first search result and did not feel the need to look for additional sources or conduct further research. They believed they could recognise fake news but rarely verified information found online through multiple sources.

> ⭐✅ **Recommendations and proposed best practices**
>
> **The great variety in responses highlights the need for continued education and support to help children and young people develop the skills needed to critically assess online information. This need was explicitly addressed by participants across several groups. For instance, in one group, children expressed a strong demand for more training and education on AI and how to use AI tools "in a good way".**

3. Have children and young people received any lessons or information at school about staying safe online? What do they think needs to be done to improve teaching students about online safety?

Participants' responses to the questions related to learning about online safety also demonstrated significant variety. While some have received multiple lessons and talks about internet safety, others have had none. However, universally across all groups, **children and young people call for more training and education on online safety** and have many concrete and interesting ideas on how to develop such programmes. It was clear from the workshops that **many participants believed that school is the most important place to address online safety topics**, as it reaches all children and young people. Some noted that responsibility for these topics cannot be solely placed on parents, as children often know more about digital issues than their parents, or because not all parents prioritise these topics.

Most participants indicated that their schools held at least basic discussions about online safety, primarily in computer or informatics classes. These lessons typically covered topics like cyberbullying, hate speech, and some aspects of privacy and data protection. However, many felt the information was too basic and wanted more in-depth discussions on online safety. Common criticisms included an outdated curriculum focusing more on using tools rather than comprehensive safety strategies, insufficient coverage of social media and gaming safety, and an overall perception that the lessons were boring.

> *"How is a teacher supposed to tell me what to do when they themselves lack the experience? It's important that these are people who know what they're talking about, like in peer-to-peer work. Young people can relate to that better."*
>
> *Teenager, Germany*

> *"Have you played Roblox, Fortnite, or used voice chat? No, you haven't. So how can adults teach us about something they don't know about themselves?"*
>
> *Child, Ireland*

When discussing the topic of **peer-to-peer learning**, several participants believed it could be beneficial because children and young people can relate more to peers, share real-life experiences, and feel less lectured or judged. However, some of the younger children were less convinced about such learning methods, believing that teachers might know the material better, or they worried that older students might provide incorrect information.

Recommendations and proposed best practices

Children and young people shared many practical tips and suggestions to improve digital education in schools and promote peer-to-peer learning.

1. Implement mentorship programmes: Pair older students with younger ones to guide them on online safety practices and facilitate peer learning through presentations and discussions.

2. Prioritise digital education: Establish dedicated training programmes on online safety for both students and teachers, making it a core element of the school curriculum.

3. Engage students in curriculum development: Involve children and young people in creating digital education programmes to ensure the content is relatable, hands-on, and culturally sensitive.

4. Focus on prevention: Introduce media literacy education in primary schools, addressing online safety before problems occur and escalate. Regular discussions on this topic should replace one-off lessons.

5. Make digital education more comprehensive:

   • Provide information about frequently used social media and gaming apps.
   • Educate students on self-protection strategies, including privacy management, identifying fake news, and avoiding online risks.
   • Teach responsible use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT.
   • Discuss the importance of respectful and civil behaviour online and the consequences of actions.
   • Create a "Digital Rights Charter" in school in an accessible format and language for students of all ages and backgrounds.

6. Adopt diverse learning formats:

- Organise peer-to-peer projects and mentorship initiatives.
- Host engaging awareness seminars and interactive workshops featuring role-playing and practical exercises.
- Establish support groups and clubs focused on digital citizenship.
- Use guest speakers and real-life examples to enhance engagement.
- Incorporate gamification and include play-based learning for younger students to make workshops enjoyable and practical.

7. Awareness and engagement strategies: Create digital safety materials in children's native language, distribute informative posters, and incorporate educational plays to raise awareness about online safety.

4. Do children and young people think teachers know enough about online safety to help their students, and do they ever talk to a teacher about something that happened online?

Participants had mixed opinions on **whether teachers know enough about online safety** to help their students. Many said it depended heavily on the individual teacher. Some children feel that 'old' teachers had outdated views on online safety and lacked the necessary knowledge, making them hesitant to seek help. They believe teachers underestimated online risks and often could not provide credible advice or understand their students' experiences. In contrast, one group criticised teachers for scaremongering and exaggerating the risks online.

> *"I think there are only a few teachers who really understand online safety well enough to help with serious issues. Some of them know how to stay safe in general, but for more specific situations, they might not have the experience to guide us. It's helpful, but limited."*
>
> *Teenager, Romania*

Overall, **many participants felt teachers were not well-informed** about the latest trends and popular platforms, which affected their ability to offer effective guidance. Some felt they had more experience with online issues than the adults in their lives, highlighting a gap in practical skills.

Some participants noted that **certain teachers put significant effort into teaching online safety**, bringing in external speakers, and keeping themselves informed. Confidence was often placed in informatics teachers, with younger students occasionally relying on class teachers. Many appreciated the supportive environment created by their teachers, feeling comfortable discussing online safety issues. A few had even talked to school counsellors or psychologists about issues or concerns.

However, most participants said they have not talked to teachers about online issues and often **prefer discussing them with peers or family members**. They feel it is too personal to talk to teachers about online problems and get the support needed. Many children and young people feel more comfortable talking to their parents, while others prefer to talk to friends if they see something unpleasant. Several expressed frustration and a lack of trust in their teachers, fearing that discussing online issues with them could make matters worse or that they may be judged. Some participants mentioned that teachers redirected them to their parents when approached about online issues.

Nonetheless, some participants did say they had talked to teachers about online problems. These conversations were mostly related to cyberbullying incidents, account hacks and class communication through messenger groups. In some cases, the entire class talked about the issue.

> ⭐✅ **Recommendations and proposed best practices**
>
> Children and young people offered valuable suggestions to help teachers improve their understanding of online safety. For instance, to effectively educate students on online safety, teachers should participate in mandatory training to keep them up-to-date with the latest trends, issues, and risks. Engaging with social media platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube is considered essential for teachers to understand students' struggles, particularly concerning misleading content. Additionally, initiatives like "Educating teachers about mobile phones day," where students teach teachers about the apps and online services they use, can foster mutual trust and understanding.

5. Do children and young people know of any organisations in their country that provide help and information about staying safe online?

When asked about their awareness of organisations in their country that provide help and information about staying safe online, **many participants said they know of several such organisations**. These include national helplines offering support and guidance on internet safety and hotlines for reporting illegal content online. Other examples mentioned were the national Safer Internet Centres, youth social work departments, children's rights organisations such as UNICEF, and emergency phone numbers.

However, several participants also mentioned they were not really aware of such organisations. In relation to this, some highlighted the importance of promoting awareness of these services, as they believe that this can better equip children and young people to seek help when needed and create a safer and more supportive digital environment.

BIK+ pillar 3: Active participation

1. Have children and young people ever created content to share online?

Most participants have created content such as photos and/or videos to keep for themselves, send to friends, or share on social media. In doing so, children and young people mentioned creating content about themselves, sharing personal experiences such as vacations or events, celebrating accomplishments, or simply sharing snapshots of things they did throughout the day with their friends. Some participants said that they have their own accounts, while others shared content on their parents' accounts. Several mentioned posting content about their dogs, nature, or other topics. A few have created accounts for youth organisations they are part of and create content about their activities.

However, the consultation also showed that **several children and young people said they are careful** about whom they share content with, limiting the sharing of content they consider private to close friends and family. Some participants said they do not like to post or do not feel the need to share moments of their lives with others. Others create private accounts on most apps or only share photos that preserve their privacy (e.g., photos taken from the back keeping their faces invisible), sometimes to avoid being shamed or laughed at.

Responses were mixed in various groups with **younger children**. Some participants mentioned they do not create anything to share online, while others create and share photos, videos, music, or screencasts. Some of these younger children explained that their parents did not allow them to share content online, yet they sometimes share content with friends or family members.

2. What content do children and young people enjoy the most, and how do they decide what is worth their time?

Children and young people enjoy a wide range of content, largely corresponding to their personal interests and hobbies. Many participants mentioned enjoying **content related to their hobbies**, such as sports-related content like news or social media posts from athletes they liked. **Humorous content** was discussed across several groups, as many participants preferred funny videos and clips about jokes and pranks. **Content about politics and culture**, for instance, from activists and political discussions, content about fashion trends, such as "Get ready with me" videos, food-related videos, and content reflecting their personal culture, for instance, Roma culture, are also popular. **Educational content** that teaches something new is also valued, although mentioned less frequently. This includes content that helps them solve a problem, like understanding a math assignment better, providing school information, covering historical topics, keeping them updated on current events, and offering DIY and craft ideas or digital art tutorials. **Social content**, such as digital photo-based diaries, and **content that helps them to relax or fall asleep**, such as ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) videos, are also popular among participants.

When assessing if online content is worth their time, children and young people often rely on a mix of instinct, interest, and visual appeal. Some participants found this question difficult to answer, noting that they had not thought about it before because the fast pace of online video consumption does not allow for much deliberation. Hence, **many noted that they do not make a deliberate choice** but instead choose content randomly, often based on their gut feeling.

Yet, participants prioritise content relevant to their interests, needs or current trends across groups. They mentioned several factors that may play a role in their decision-making process, most often unfolding subconsciously however, as they tend to quickly assess whether the content is worth their time, often in just a few seconds. **Engaging beginnings and immediate explanations** are crucial for retaining their attention. They frequently rely on **meta-information about the content**, such as hashtags, descriptions, thumbnails, likes, and view counts, to evaluate content before watching. **Visual appeal**, bright colours, and **emotional engagement** were mentioned to be key to keeping them interested. They prefer **high-quality, well-produced content** and typically favour **shorter videos**. **Peer recommendations** significantly influence their choices, as do trusted accounts like favourite influencers. Practical value is another important aspect for them.

> *"I usually follow certain accounts, and I know that it's worth my time."*
> *Child, France*

> *"I fall into doom scroll. I don't know what I am doing there. I don't know why I am there. It is not a very pleasant experience."*
>
> *"You can easily scroll your weekend away."*
> *Teenagers, Denmark*

They appreciate content that teaches something new or enhances their gaming experience. Additionally, some participants mentioned that social media algorithms often guide them to content aligned with their past interests, while some continue scrolling until they find something engaging.

In several workshops with **younger children** (aged 12 years and under[10]), a number of participants expressed that they **find everything online worthy of their time**, particularly on social networks or online games. Whenever they have the opportunity (i.e., when parents allow them), they are online, having fun or looking for entertainment. These children typically do not experience issues related to time management due to closer parental guidance and monitoring, and facilitators noted that they might not yet be able to grasp the value of their time fully.

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10   As we discuss under Chapter 2, section VII. Reflections and limitations: not all consultation groups involved exclusively "children" under the age of 12 and over the age of 12, respectively, and instead, sometimes included a mix of age groups. Please refer to section VII. for further details.

3. Do children and young people think they have the same rights online as offline?

Participating children and young people were divided on whether they have the same rights online as offline. **Many felt that their rights online and offline should not be dissociated or separated**, believing they have the same gravity, impact and importance. Several participants expressed a desire for equal treatment and recognition of their rights online as offline.

They shared various examples of exercising their rights online. They highlighted their **right to protection** by ensuring a safe digital environment through measures like age verification to block harmful content and functions allowing them to report incidents of violence or spam. The **right to express themselves freely** was also emphasised, as many participated in online discussions, engaged in social activism, and shared their opinions on different issues, with some finding it easier to express their views in an online setting. They mentioned exercising their **right to privacy** by managing cookies, using privacy settings on social media platforms to control who could see their posts, and using software to protect themselves from hackers and viruses. Additionally, children enjoyed their **right to play** through online games, as well as their **right to education** through digital tools like free language learning apps.

In contrast, **many children and young people acknowledged that, in practice, their rights were more often violated online** and that enforcement of their rights online was lacking. They particularly felt that others showed them less respect online. Some noted that anonymity on the internet contributes to this problem and that offensive comments are more tolerated online, leading them to perceive life online as not being "equally real". Some mention that online rules are not as strict, with fewer reports of violations and fewer offenders punished. Examples of rights violations included easier bullying online, lack of privacy regarding data shared online, photos shared without their permission, and the risk of losing control over expressed opinions or content created online.

> *"Suddenly, people say things they wouldn't dare to say offline. This happens both in a negative way, such as in cases of cyberbullying, but also in a positive way. Maybe it's easier to share things or stand up for something online, which would be much harder for them to do face-to-face."*
> *Teenager, Germany*

Several participants found the questions about their rights difficult to understand and answer. **Younger children**, especially, had never thought about the concept and so **found it quite abstract and struggled to come up with examples**. Even when facilitators discussed rights mentioned in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and General Comment No. 25, it remained difficult for the youngest to grasp. Others mentioned that when they tried to express their opinions online, they faced restrictions from parents who prevented them from sharing certain things or received hateful comments from others online, leaving them feeling dismissed.

4. Do children and young people participate in activities or projects aimed at making the internet a better place? What do they think must improve for children and young people to become more involved?

When asked about their involvement in activities or projects aimed at making the internet a safer and better place for children and young people, **many participants said they had not been involved in such initiatives**. Some mentioned their participation in national Safer Internet Centre (SIC) activities and being part of the national SIC Youth Panel. For most participants, the present consultation workshops were their first experiences sharing their voice on internet issues. School projects were also mentioned a few times, with some mentioning acting as 'Media Scouts' or participating in extracurricular activities with their informatics teachers. Additionally, some participated in Safer Internet Day (SID) activities, such as an ambassador programme where they provided training to peers and led SID campaigns in

> *"I think it would be great if, for example, TikTok did something to prevent people from becoming so addicted. But that's what TikTok wants; that's their business model. It's designed in such a way (...). They do this intentionally. They know exactly that this happens (...). Of course, as a young person, you can suggest great ideas for how to change that. But honestly? As sad as it sounds – it doesn't matter; they don't care at all.".*
>
> *Teenager, Germany*

their schools and communities. Some mentioned other national projects and the BIK Youth Panel.

When asked what should be done to engage more children and young people in such projects and activities, many participants felt that this was a difficult question and did not know how to answer it. A few expressed their scepticism about the actual effect of their involvement, thinking it might not significantly influence how platform providers operate. Nevertheless, across the various groups, several actions for different actors were proposed that they believe could increase the involvement of children and young people.

⭐ Recommendations and proposed best practices

Policymakers
Several participants underlined that children and young people should be involved in more consultations about issues that impact them and in regular anonymous surveys on specific online topics. European and national-level policymakers should do more to involve them in rule-creation and decision-making.

Schools
Participants also believed that schools should offer workshops or seminars on digital literacy, online safety, and rights. These topics should be discussed during class meetings, and schools should provide clear, relatable information and resources for students, such as colourful leaflets with contacts for reporting illegal content or harassment. Involving children and young people in the development of such online safety material was considered important.

Kids and youth
Participants had many ideas on how they could support increasing the involvement of children and young people:

- Be active and not indifferent, regularly report content and people that are harmful, and complain to platforms that lack security and safety.

- Become part of organisations that hear children's and young people's voices.

- Join discussions and forums on related topics that matter to them. Set up groups, use social media to exchange and share reliable information, and create and share content which can inspire the involvement of other children and young people.

- Help each other by offering advice, sharing experiences or teaching digital skills.

- Participate as much as possible in local, national and international events about online safety.

Big tech
Big tech companies should invite children and young people to contribute ideas about how age-appropriate services should look. They should also carry out surveys among them to learn what they think.

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5. Do children and young people engage in discussions and activities related to their rights online?

When asked this question, **the majority of participants indicated they had not been involved in discussions or activities regarding their rights online**, although some expressed a desire to do so. Those who did engage mentioned having conversations with friends, family members, schoolmates, and teachers, often in a classroom or civic education context.

> ⭐ **Recommendations and proposed best practices**
>
> In some of the groups, participants underlined the need for more education and awareness on digital rights to ensure that children and young people are more aware and capable of exercising their rights online effectively.

V. Children's and young people's priorities and expectations for the digital environment

In the final part of the workshops, facilitators engaged participants to share their specific expectations for policymakers shaping and implementing the BIK+ strategy. This section highlights the key messages children and young people want to convey to policymakers, including their priorities for the digital environment and proposed actions.

Across all consultation groups, regardless of age ranges, gender, and background, one key finding is that **children and young people value the internet as a space for fun and connection**, emphasising the need to enjoy it safely. Discussing their priorities, they revisited their favourite activities, such as playing games, watching videos and communicating with friends and family. Some also underscored the importance of internet access in general, with a few mentioning feeling isolated when their access was limited compared to peers. In addition to prioritising the continuation of the online activities they engaged in, participants discussed the three priority areas (or pillars) of the BIK+ strategy in more depth when reflecting on their own priorities. During these discussions, they revisited earlier recommendations they made during the workshop, proposed more concrete actions, and developed clear messages for policymakers.

Though some younger children found the questions discussed in this section of the workshop challenging, many other groups, including groups that involved younger children, enjoyed the activity. They felt empowered that their views and opinions were heard and taken seriously. They were particularly excited to be able to share their key messages with the European Commission.

Many participants identified making the internet safer as the most important priority, emphasising that this priority **applies to themselves and adults equally**. They called for policymakers to create safer online environments by addressing the previously identified key challenges. Their priorities and proposed actions are summarised in the table below.

Key challenges	Priorities	Proposed actions
General online safety	• Make the internet safer for all users, including children and adults.	• Equip children and young people with tools to build resilience and protect self-esteem. • Advocate for safer online environments. • Ensure age-appropriate applications remain accessible to everyone, while tailoring content to align with intended age groups.
Harmful content/conduct	• Protect children and young people, especially vulnerable children, from harmful, inappropriate, and extreme content. • Address harmful online trends.	• Enhance, increase and speed up moderation efforts to remove harmful content and fake profiles. • Develop a social media platform specifically designed for European youth. • Improve reporting mechanisms with transparency about the outcomes, improving response time and human oversight. • Require service providers to implement more robust age verification measures to protect minors from inappropriate material and cyber-harassment.
Cyberbullying	• Prevent and address online bullying to reduce mental health impacts.	• Implement robust anti-cyberbullying policies. • Provide resources for victims, including training for educators and peer support programmes.
Online fraud	• Reduce scams, fake identities, and cyber threats.	• Implement advanced protections against malware, hackers, and online fraud.
Privacy	• Protect children's and young people's personal data and prevent inappropriate content sharing by young users.	• Improve regulations for content sharing on platforms. • Ensure transparency and security in data handling. • Limit data processing in online gaming.
Monetisation and advertising	• Reduce the prevalence of online advertisements and their impact on user experience. • Provide more free and accessible digital content for young users. • Minimise the collection and use of personal data in games and apps.	• Limit advertisements from online platforms, especially in games and apps targeted at young users. • Ensure that games and apps provide free content for children and that they are developed inclusively by involving children, young people, and other marginalised groups in the development process. • Reduce costs for in-game items and eliminate pay-to-advance models in games. • Eliminate the need for cookies and personal data in games. • Ensure strict privacy protections in monetised platforms to safeguard children's and young people's data.
Mental health	• Address the negative impacts of social media on mental health and self-esteem.	• Promote awareness campaigns through influencers and content creators focusing on authenticity, body positivity, and mental health issues. • Limit exposure to harmful content for young children, including sexual and violent content and content that tries to influence their consumption behaviour. • Allocate a dedicated national budget to provide therapy and counselling services for young people.

Table 3: Identified key challenges, priorities and proposed actions in relation to BIK+ pillar 1

During this last workshop section, children and young people were asked to formulate their key messages to policymakers. The below-outlined quotes from workshop participants concerning BIK+ pillar 1 are **representative of the most frequently mentioned themes and ideas**.

Children's and young people's messages to policymakers concerning BIK+ pillar 1

"I would like to feel safe. To have confidence in everything I'm exposed to."
Child, Croatia

"I want to have more content for children, and much less inappropriate scenes."
Child, Croatia

"It's concerning how young people are influenced by trends online, including some really harmful ones. There needs to be more regulation regarding what people post. Accounts that repeatedly share problematic content should be banned, rather than just specific comments being removed."
Teenager, Germany

"We want to be protected so no one can find out our phone number and personal data."
Child, Croatia

"Make getting help in cases of an online danger easy and accessible – we do not know how, to whom and where to report."
Child, Czech Republic

"Hold tech companies accountable for enforcing age verification without compromising data protection."
Child, Spain

"I want the internet to be free. Eliminate ads. [I want] to have games that do not require personal data."
Child, Croatia

"Advocate for stricter laws around digital safety and data protection."
Child, Spain

"Implement stricter laws and policies to prevent the spreading of harmful fake news, promote accountability for fact-checking shared information, and combat discriminatory or racist content."
Child, Spain

Other groups placed greater emphasis on the **importance of the second pillar, highlighting the need for knowledge and skills** that would enable them to use the internet safely. This was frequently mentioned in connection with the purpose of play and entertainment. They emphasised the **necessity of online safety and media literacy education**, suggesting that more time should be dedicated in schools to modern technologies and the safe use of devices. Participants believe that, with proper knowledge, they could use devices more productively during their leisure time. **Learning to protect themselves online and accessing resources to cope with challenging situations** that may negatively impact their self-esteem were seen as essential.

Across the groups, children and young people expressed the need to be equipped with resources to face difficult situations that can pose risks to their well-being, including strategies for managing harmful content, recognising potential online threats, and building resilience against negative experiences. Their priorities and proposed actions related to the second pillar are summarised in the table below:

Key challenges	Priorities	Proposed actions
Education on online safety, digital and media literacy	• Educate children and enable them to use and search the internet safely.	• Compulsory education on online safety, digital literacy and media literacy. • Develop resources to help children recognise and manage harmful content. • Enhance training for teachers and parents to share quality information with their students and children. • Establish knowledgeable peer teams within schools that can act as media mentors. • Promote awareness campaigns for both children and adults, educating them about online safety, digital literacy, and media literacy. • Introduce enhanced sexual education tailored to navigate the highly sexualised nature of the digital environment. • Educate young individuals on consuming digital media content mindfully.
Fake news, disinformation and misinformation	• Reduce the prevalence and impact of disinformation and misinformation online.	• Prohibit the dissemination of fake news. • Provide education to children on recognising disinformation, misinformation and fake content, including deepfakes.
Understanding rights and policies	• Simplify terms and conditions and privacy policies for children.	• Develop visually engaging, age-appropriate materials, organised in a clear manner and designed in a child-/user-friendly way.

Table 4: Identified key challenges, priorities and proposed actions in relation to BIK+ pillar 2

Again, the quotes from workshop participants outlined below, in relation to BIK+ pillar 2, are **representative of the most frequently mentioned themes and ideas**.

Children's and young people's messages to policymakers concerning BIK+ pillar 2

"There should be more education related to the digital environment so they [children] don't find themselves in unpleasant situations. Parents and teachers need even more education than children."

Child, Croatia

"I think we should be able to help in the making of lessons to keep us safe on the internet. Also, if you're making lessons about the internet you should listen to kids' opinions and make it harsher."

Child, Ireland

"Integrate digital literacy into curricula from an early age, with content tailored to children's developmental stages."

Child, Spain

"Teach children to post content that is safe, respectful, and considerate of others."

Child, Spain

"Ensure parents are educated on online safety and responsible internet use for their children."

Child, Spain

"Equip teachers and parents with the skills to discuss internet safety with children before giving them devices, ensuring they understand online risks."

Child, Spain

"[They suggested that school lessons should include] how to recognise bad stuff on the internet [and] what to do if someone is mean online."

Child, Greece

"Ensure that users, especially young people, understand what they consent to when using digital platforms."

Child, Spain

"Encourage children to mentor each other in online safety, empowering them to guide their peers on safe internet practices."

Child, Spain

Lastly, another set of groups found **the third pillar of the BIK+ strategy was the most important**, emphasising the **significance of expressing themselves and having their voices heard** in relation to topics and issues that directly concern their own lives. Across most groups, **children and young people appreciated being involved** in discussions and valued the opportunity to participate actively, **making them feel included in the decision-making processes affecting their digital lives**.

They see opportunities for their participation in decision-making by various actors, including policy-makers and big tech companies, parents and schools, and find **their inclusion crucial to ensuring their voices are heard**, and that their concerns are taken seriously and are being addressed. Their priorities and proposed actions related to the third pillar are summarised in the table below:

Key challenges	Priorities	Proposed actions
Creating meaningful child and youth participation opportunities	• Enable and empower children and young people to actively participate in decisions that affect them and express their voices publicly.	• Introduce opportunities to participate by frequent polling online to gather children's and young people's opinions. • Enhance transparency and provide feedback from politicians about how children's and young people's proposals are implemented, ensuring their voices are heard and impact policymaking. • Social media apps and games could ask children and young people about their views on what they view as appropriate content.
Foster more child and youth participation opportunities	• Encourage all actors to implement more activities that promote child and youth participation.	• Organise more events and discussions where children and young people can actively contribute, similar to this initiative. • Provide and promote good practice guidance on how to best involve children and young people.

Table 5: Identified key challenges, priorities and proposed actions in relation to BIK+ pillar 3

Equally as in the sections above, the quotes from workshop participants outlined below, in relation to BIK+ pillar 3, are **representative of the most frequently mentioned themes and ideas**.

Children's and young people's messages to policymakers concerning BIK+ pillar 3

"We want you to ask us more about our opinion."
Child, Croatia

"We want to have the right to say what we want."
Child, Croatia

"Children should have more of a say when it comes to changes revolving around video games and the internet."
Child, Ireland

"Legislation is not enough. Politicians should consult with children locally to identify local solutions. [There are differences] from city to city, from school to school, etc."
Teenager, Denmark

VI. Further observations from the consultations with children and young people

During the consultation sessions, some overall observations emerged that could contribute to future policy debates. These relate to messages from children and young people that focus on time spent online and addictive design, social media bans, political content on social media platforms, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools.

A recurring point of discussion among many participants was the **time they spent online** and the difficulties they experienced in logging off. **Managing and reducing screen time emerged as a significant priority** for them. To address this, participants proposed several measures, including introducing "break" notifications and usage timers, developing and providing practical tools to balance online and offline activities, and developing digital spaces with features that reduce their addictive nature.

When developing key messages for EU policymakers, some of the participants emphasised that **banning children and young people from social media is not the solution**. They warned against over-regulating social media, as stricter age restrictions could deprive young people of an essential aspect of their lives. They furthermore mentioned that bans could be easily bypassed, for instance by using parents' devices and accounts (in some cases secretly). Instead, **they suggested blocking dangerous content and safeguarding social media's entertainment and fun aspects** to prevent parents from forbidding its use.

A few participants raised **concerns about political content on platforms frequented by young people**. They suggested that politicians should refrain from posting content on social media, arguing that such content could unduly influence young voters and potentially lead to negative consequences. They believed that political topics do not belong in spaces where young people exchange content and communicate.

In several of the groups, the use of AI tools also came up. In these discussions, **participants had varied views on AI**. Some used AI-powered tools like ChatGPT for studying or homework, although there were concerns about AI providing incorrect information. Others found chatting with AI enjoyable, while some found it strange or creepy, particularly referring to a popular app that integrated an AI chatbot by default. Concerns were raised about the misuse of AI and the need for consent when user data is used to train AI. There was also a **demand for more training and education on AI** so that the tool could be used effectively and responsibly.

In addition, some **facilitators shared feedback** about their perception of what children and young people thought about the overall process and exercise. Generally, with very few isolated exceptions, **children and young people enjoyed taking part in the consultation activity**. Facilitators mentioned that children under the age of 12 were particularly eager to share their views. However, some participants seemed to feel hesitant at the beginning of the sessions as they seemed not used to being heard and listened to in such activities and settings.

In terms of the practical approach, the protocol and the materials provided, facilitators noted that **interactive activity elements should be incorporated** into the protocol if there are materials (in the present case, the child-friendly version of the BIK+ strategy) that should be reviewed before the group discussions can start. This would ensure that all participants can develop their views and express their opinions in relation to the topics in focus.

Furthermore, facilitators suggested that future iterations of this or similar other activities should **either reduce the number of questions to be discussed in one session or increase the time allocated to each session**. Furthermore, facilitators suggested recommending smaller group sizes for future activities with around 5 participants per group, as opposed to the recommendation from the protocol for facilitators, which proposed a group size of 5 to 10 participants per group.

To build trust with children and young people and decrease scepticism about such activities, facilitators recommended **following up with participants and sharing with them how their views had an impact and affected actual changes**.

VII. Reflections and limitations

The consultation adopted a qualitative approach, similar to the focus group method. This approach was selected, and the supporting protocol was co-designed with BIK Youth Ambassadors to create an open and supportive environment where participants could freely share their thoughts and ideas. Their feedback on the planned focus group-based consultation activities, including the phrasing and sequencing of questions and the methods for gathering participants' perspectives, fundamentally co-shaped this activity.

Focus group-based research methods provide invaluable insights into children's and young people's experiences, attitudes and opinions, offering in-depth insights that are difficult to attain through other methods. By creating an environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, the focus group-based consultation workshops resulted in authentic and detailed feedback. This qualitative approach captures their rich and nuanced recommendations and priorities for the digital environment, which may help shape policies and programmes that genuinely reflect their needs and priorities. The diversity of participants, including those from different backgrounds and ages, provided a wide range of viewpoints.

However, certain limitations of the focus group methodology must be acknowledged. The findings are not intended to be generalised or quantified, as the conducted consultation sessions were designed to gather detailed input from a relatively small and diverse group of participants. Group interaction dynamics can also introduce potential biases, as some participants may dominate the conversation while others may be more reserved. Furthermore, one child's suggestion or opinion does not necessarily indicate agreement or disagreement from children in the same or in other groups. Some groups, for instance, could not cover all proposed questions from the protocol equally due to time constraints. Thus, a set of core questions was designated in the protocol that were discussed across all groups, and additional questions were provided in case the consultation time allowed for discussion of further questions. The inclusion of mixed groups, spanning across different ages and backgrounds, enriched the range of perspectives but made it challenging to attribute specific comments to individual participants, age groups (i.e., over the age or under the age of 12 years) or other subgroups.

In close collaboration with EUN's external research consultants, the BIK team processed and analysed all data from the 84 session reports submitted by the session facilitators, moving back and forth in an iterative manner from the raw data in the consultation report to a more structured thematic analysis of the main responses, ideas, and key themes that emerged across groups. While consistency was promoted by providing facilitators with a standardised reporting template, variations in the level of detail in facilitators' reports should be acknowledged. Additionally, to some degree, facilitators' interpretations were sometimes involved. While many facilitators tried to capture the exact wording of the participants, others added some of their own interpretations. The final report tries to preserve the voices of children and young people by incorporating a broad variety of insights and, where meaningful, direct quotes, ensuring their words remain central to the analysis.

As a result, the present report aims to accurately reflect the voices of more than 750 children and young people from across Europe, while acknowledging that some level of detail may be lost in an effort to create a concise and accessible report, which cannot do justice to the full complexity of all views and opinions shared. Yet, as mentioned above, the authors of this report have aimed to provide nuance and insight into the richness of the discussions by integrating direct quotes and concrete examples in a meaningful way as much as possible.

Chapter 3: Expert stakeholders' views on the progress and success of BIK+

Four expert stakeholder workshops were held, with 59 experts from the fields of policy development, academia, civil society organisations, industry and international organisations participating. The following report summarises the main issues and topics discussed in these workshops, grouped under the general themes of responding to BIK+'s aims and objectives, its impact to date, and how it can best prepare for the future.

I. Introducing BIK+ and positioning it in the wider legal context

A comprehensive background briefing regarding the evolution of the **European strategy for a better internet for kids+ (BIK+ strategy)** and associated EU policies addressing children's online protection, participation, and well-being in using digital technologies was provided to all participants. BIK+ was described as the umbrella EU policy strategy for the safety and empowerment of children online, supporting and complementing the legal framework, notably the **Digital Services Act (DSA)**, which strongly impacts pillar 1 of BIK+ (safe digital experiences). Various other legal measures were highlighted as also relevant to the strategy, advancing key aspects of its aim to ensure the protection and empowerment of children online.

During each workshop, participants were invited to provide feedback on the underlying vision of BIK+, expressed in the statement: *"to provide age-appropriate digital services where every child in Europe is protected, empowered, and respected online, ensuring that no one is left behind"*.

II. Aims of the BIK+ strategy

In each of the workshops, stakeholders were asked to consider the strategy's overall profile and the extent to which they believed it sufficiently addressed the opportunities and challenges experienced by children and young people when going online. They were also asked to consider if they felt its aims were appropriate and still fit for purpose given the changes in the digital environment in the past two years.

Overall, stakeholders strongly supported the vision and mission of BIK+. The strategy was praised for its **balanced focus** on protecting, empowering, and promoting children's rights in the digital environment. This **holistic approach was regarded as a strength**, although some participants felt the implementation could be more balanced between these pillars.

Policy professionals (workshop I) posited that BIK+ has been effective in setting a framework for child online safety and a unified approach across the EU for discussing the protection of minors online. This has helped align efforts and facilitate consistency in implementation within individual Member States. The three-pillar structure (safe digital experiences, digital empowerment, and active participation) was thought to be a very clear framework, making it easier for stakeholders to align their actions. This framework has also been a very effective lobbying and networking tool, facilitating stakeholder engagement and enabling diverse interest groups to coordinate activities around a single vision.

Academia and civil society stakeholders (workshop II) singled out the recognition of children's rights in the digital environment within BIK+ as a key strength. Contributors argued, however, that not all rights were equally balanced within the strategy and more needed to be done to mainstream children's rights

in relation to the digital environment. However, making children's rights the foundation of BIK+ was regarded as a very significant achievement.

Industry participants (workshop III) similarly noted that aligning with children's rights and balancing protection and empowerment was a significant advance on the original BIK strategy and was important for national policymaking, given the need to position individual policy issues or topics within the full spectrum of children's rights.

Various participating **international organisations** (workshop IV) also positively noted the focus on children's rights, pointing to the synergies with a range of international strategies and standards. They further argued that more significant efforts should be made to coordinate policies in the international arena.

All participants regarded BIK+ as an appropriate, important, and well-articulated strategy, encompassing a vision that stakeholders easily related to. It was felt to be an essential contribution to promoting children's digital well-being in the post-COVID era, and it offered a valuable standard for balancing the different dimensions of children's relationship with digital technologies.

However, experts in each stakeholder group also highlighted the many changes in the digital environment since the adoption of BIK+ in 2022. Among these, policy professionals called attention to the changed regulatory environment, especially with the coming into effect of the DSA. Rapid technological change, including the mainstreaming of artificial intelligence (AI) and generative AI in digital products and services, was also mentioned by researchers and by civil society as a factor impacting children's digital behaviour in the past two years. International organisations also noted the so-called "techlash", or growing negative response towards digital technologies, manifested in highly critical public discourse, the introduction of smartphone bans, or legislative measures to restrict the use of social media. More generally, expert stakeholders expressed concern that the strong focus on "protection" – including in the political priorities for the new European Commission – might overshadow other important aspects of children's engagement with digital technologies. Stakeholders were concerned that an exclusive focus on this dimension may make it more difficult to achieve a balanced approach across the three pillars of the BIK+ strategy: protection, empowerment, and active participation.

III. Successes and gaps of BIK+

Participants were asked to consider if BIK+ has been effective in achieving its aims as well as the relative impact that each of its three pillars of protection, empowerment and participation has had on children's digital lives. A number of noteworthy successes and achievements were highlighted by participants in the course of the workshops.

Leading with children's rights: As mentioned above, the representation of children as individual rights holders was identified as a noteworthy achievement. This has helped broaden its reach so that children's digital lives can be considered more holistically.

Child and youth participation: BIK+ has been particularly successful in mobilising youth participation. Child-/youth-centred activities have been one of the most visible features of the implementation of BIK+ and have ensured that young people's voices are increasingly heard and considered in the context of digital policy topics.

Awareness raising: BIK+ has been instrumental in raising the profile of children's and young people's online safety more generally and calling attention to key issues such as age-appropriate design, age assurance, and safe digital experiences as fundamental policy themes. More generally, BIK+ has raised the profile of children's and young people's online safety as a policy priority in EU Member States.

Safer Internet Centres and multi-stakeholder involvement: Safer Internet Centres (SICs) were widely recognised as a major achievement of BIK+ and its predecessor programmes. BIK+ has also contributed to building comprehensive stakeholder communities with SICs central to these collective efforts. BIK+ has also been very important in facilitating the work of SICs, providing them with a strong EU profile, resources and access to policymakers. Tools such as the BIK portal, the Knowledge hub, and the Policy monitor have also proved very useful in knowledge exchange and provide insights into how Member States approach implementation.

Considering its influence to date and areas where BIK+ has been less impactful, some of the following shortcomings were also discussed:

Complex policy environment: It was noted that there is an overlap between BIK+ and other EU policies and strategies, such as the EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. This may lead to confusion for end users or miss out on potential synergies with other policy frameworks, including at the international level.

Need for better awareness of BIK+: Some stakeholders in the fields of academia and civil society realised that BIK+ could be better communicated. With the coming into effect of the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) rules regarding video-sharing platforms, as well as the introduction of many protection-focused measures at the national level, the influence and visibility of BIK+ is less clear. It was argued that BIK+ could do more to ensure the primacy of a balanced approach to children's rights in this context.

More resources to achieve its aims: Expert stakeholders from academia and civil society also commented that BIK+ appears to be not as well funded compared to other high-profile EU initiatives related to digitalisation. Considering the many demands placed on it, for example, to secure children's safe digital protection while promoting their digital skills, promoting their active participation, and respecting their rights online, it was argued that BIK+ would benefit by being better resourced.

Lack of progress on key topics: It was also pointed out by stakeholders that some BIK+ signature policy topics – age-appropriate design and safety-by-design – have not substantially progressed, with many gaps evident in digital products and services. The status of some key action points in the strategy, such as the Code of conduct on age-appropriate design or the monitoring of the impact of the digital transformation on children's well-being (BIK+ strategy, p.15), has yet to be fully realised. The overlap with the work on developing guidelines for the protection of minors under Article 28 of the DSA has also given rise to some confusion, even among expert stakeholders.

Insufficient evidence base: An observation made by stakeholders, especially among academia and civil society, was that BIK+ lacked an appropriate evidence base to monitor progress. Participants expressed the need for robust data as a baseline to effectively evaluate the extent to which BIK+ is meeting its objectives or having an impact. It was observed that in comparison with other key EU policy areas within the Digital Decade initiative, measurable goals and targets are the norm. By contrast, BIK+ is set out at a high level only and lacks these key metrics to guide its approach.

Discussing the relative impact of BIK+, participants were also asked to consider gaps in its coverage or areas that may need further attention for the strategy to maintain its relevance.

Keeping pace with technological change: A general observation made was that the environment is becoming more complex and that programmes and activities under the umbrella of BIK+ need to be continually refreshed to take stock of changing circumstances. The rapid acceleration of artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-driven products and services was highlighted as a key issue for children. This relates both to increased risks for exploitation and abuse posed by AI, as well as the more general challenge of increasing AI literacy to empower children in this complex and changing environment.

Digital literacy needs: Relatedly, it was pointed out that cyber threats and disinformation risks are now more potentially harmful and serious than when BIK+ was first adopted. This has underlined the importance of raising digital literacy skills levels overall, something commented on in most of the workshops. A priority in this context were vulnerable groups such as younger children in the primary school system and those with special educational needs.

Reaching parents: There was a consensus among stakeholders that parents are a key target group and that, as it stands, there seem to be insufficient awareness-raising resources and activities for them. According to some stakeholders, BIK+ appears to be primarily child/youth-focused. It was pointed out that parents and caregivers also need to be empowered to manage the digital transformation. Given that this is not something children can achieve on their own, equipping parents with the relevant digital literacy skills also helps to achieve the goals of BIK+.

From an industry perspective, there has been a shift in focus from parental control to engagement and dialogue with parents and children. Accordingly, parents need to be more actively involved in their children's digital lives rather than just implementing restrictive measures. In this context, there was also a call for a more collaborative approach involving parents, guardians, and educators to navigate digital challenges effectively.

Vulnerable groups and the digital divide: While BIK+ does acknowledge the needs of vulnerable children, experts argued that more resources, targeted measures and increased efforts to ensure their inclusion and empowerment in the digital environment are needed. The digital divide continues to be a prominent issue impacting children's digital participation. Digital inclusion and empowerment, it was noted, are crucial for vulnerable children, for example, those with migrant backgrounds or those facing exclusion through poverty or other forms of disadvantage. In countries which face challenges in implementing digital literacy programmes in formal education, this disproportionately affects vulnerable groups. The importance of addressing the digital skills gap for vulnerable children was emphasised.

Children and young people as consumers: The workshops highlighted several key points regarding children and young people as consumers in the digital environment. Concerns were raised about the commercialisation of young user's digital experiences, with participants arguing that issues like advertising, marketing, and the overall commercial environment that children and young people are exposed to online need greater attention. It was noted that BIK+ does not adequately address what happens after young users agree to terms and conditions for digital services and that more needs to be done to redress the power imbalances between users, especially between minors and industry.

There were also calls for more focus on younger children as digital consumers. It was noted that resources often target adolescents, but there is a growing need to address issues for children from birth onwards, including clear guidance and recommendations for parents and early years educators. Finally, it was argued that BIK+ should do more to address financial scams targeting children and young people, as this was seen as a gap in the current approach.

IV. Lessons to be learned from the experience of implementing BIK+

Experts also addressed the main lessons to be learned from implementing BIK+ from diverse perspectives and offered recommendations for future consideration.

Lack of binding legislation: While recognising that BIK+ has the status of an EU recommendation, its impact has been less than it might have been due to the lack of any binding legislation or enforcement mechanisms to underpin it. By contrast, enforcement under the DSA is legally mandated and consequently has received greater attention in Member States. Experts recommended that the profile of BIK+ could be enhanced by ensuring that there is a legally mandated national contact point for BIK+ matters

in each country. It was further argued that additional legal measures should be considered to underpin BIK+ commitments. Strengthening and sustaining Safer Internet Centres was also proposed as a way to support enforcement efforts and provide evidence for good practices. Finally, experts pointed out that it is vital to ensure that BIK+ is embedded in the EU budgetary planning process.

Engaging with industry: Stakeholders commented that there were fewer opportunities for engagement with industry than previously, particularly since the coming into effect of the DSA. The discontinuation of the Alliance to better protect minors online was noted as a loss. There were suggestions to reintroduce or create a similar forum for structured dialogue between industry and other stakeholders.

Enhancing regulatory cooperation: The workshops highlighted inter-regulatory cooperation as an important area for improvement in implementing the BIK+ strategy. There was a call for more collaboration between regulators working on various aspects of online child safety, data protection, and media literacy. Better coordination among different types of regulators, especially in light of new regulatory actors emerging with the DSA, was recommended. Participants pointed out that while some regulators have experience in promoting young people's digital safety and empowerment, for others, this is a relatively new field. The call for greater collaboration was also extended to further engagement with international organisations working on child online safety and digital rights.

V. Future-proofing BIK+

Throughout the workshops, experts from each of the stakeholder groups – policy professionals, academia, civil society, industry representatives and international organisations – were asked to offer recommendations to guide future advancements for BIK+. In this context, they were specifically asked for their responses to the priorities for children's online safety as described in the **European Commission's 2024-2029 political priorities**.

Mental health and well-being: Participants were strongly of the view that mental health and well-being should be a key priority for BIK+ and that it should be addressed comprehensively, considering various factors such as safety, privacy and security, as mentioned in DSA Article 28. However, there was also a strong emphasis on finding the right balance between protecting children and young people online and empowering them to participate safely in digital environments. There was a recognition that mental health and well-being are highly complex issues, and stressed the importance of gathering more evidence-based insights on how children and parents perceive and experience mental health issues in relation to digital technologies. It was noted that online communities can both support and potentially trigger harmful behaviour in children's and young people's mental health. Among the solutions proposed were large-scale awareness campaigns to address mental health issues, involving recognised experts and interactive methods, as well as involving parents, teachers, and health professionals on the national level in addressing children's and young people's digital well-being.

Addictive design: The need to address addictive design in digital services and its impact on children's and young people's well-being was also much discussed. It was noted how recommendation systems and infinite scrolling features make it difficult for users, especially children, to limit their time online. Online gaming was also highlighted as an area of concern, with addictive design and dark pattern elements like loot boxes and mechanisms that encourage repeated play. The workshops also touched on how influencer messaging can be constructed in addictive ways, particularly affecting young audiences. In addition, concerns were also raised about the effects of AI tools and emerging technologies on children's and young people's mental health.

More generally, it was argued that industry is primarily responsible for taking measures against addictive design, principally through complying with their obligations towards the protection of minors under

the DSA. However, industry representatives pointed out that so-called "addictive design" is not as clear or as simple a notion as it may seem. Moreover, there was a suggestion to move away from the term "addictive design" and instead use "manipulative retention mechanics" to highlight unfair practices, as the term addiction would unnecessarily stigmatise users affected.

Cyberbullying and aggressive online behaviour: It was observed that cyberbullying has long been a concern for BIK+. Yet, as noted in several workshops, research suggests the problem is worsening. Peer pressure was identified as a critical factor influencing children's and young people's online behaviours, including the pressure to own devices at younger ages and participate in potentially harmful online activities. Moreover, cyberbullying often occurs through private messaging platforms rather than openly on social media, making it more challenging to detect and address. Participants suggested strengthening the role of Safer Internet Centres in combating cyberbullying and peer pressure through awareness campaigns and community involvement. There were also calls for more centralised monitoring and greater consistency in definitions of and responses to cyberbullying. In addition, further research and data collection is needed to inform evidence-based approaches to these issues.

VI. Recommendations from experts

Throughout the wide-ranging discussions, experts provided varying types of feedback and offered recommendations, both in relation to specific points of emphasis for consideration when developing BIK-related programmes and campaigns, and more general observations intended to strengthen its profile and influence.

The following are some of the most prominent overall recommendations regarding the BIK+ strategy derived from the workshop discussions:

1. Make the strategy more actionable

While there was much positive support for BIK+ and feedback that its framework has stood up well, there is a need for more systematic implementation with appropriate accountability mechanisms. BIK+ should integrate clearer benchmarks and evidence-based methods to monitor the strategy's impact and progress. Initiatives such as the BIK Policy monitor can be used to provide greater insights into progress made by Member States. Many stakeholders, however, would also like to see BIK+ evolving from a strategy to a directive to give it greater enforceability in Member States.

2. Enhance engagement with key stakeholder groups, including industry

Over the course of the consultation process, many examples were provided of where stakeholder involvement could be improved. The lack of sufficient opportunities for dialogue with industry was commented on. Additionally, with many new regulatory bodies entering the field, cross-regulatory collaboration, especially in areas like age assurance and data protection, was recommended. This would help address the complex challenges that span across multiple regulatory domains.

3. Increase funding and resources

It was mentioned across workshops that funding and resources for Safer Internet Centres and related initiatives need to be increased to ensure continuity and effectiveness of programmes, given the increasing complexity of BIK+ matters. SICs were regarded as one of the most significant achievements of BIK+ and central to its implementation across Member States. However, their ability to deliver on BIK+ objectives remains uneven due to uncertain funding.

4. Address emerging challenges

Addressing emerging challenges like AI, addictive design, and mental health impacts of digital technologies more comprehensively was recommended across workshop groups. It was noted throughout that the pace of change, particularly in relation to AI, posed challenges for policymakers and that it was vital that BIK+ maintain a close focus on emerging challenges and threats of new technologies. This includes addressing cybercrime and cybersecurity more prominently, educating children and young people about online risks, and protection measures as new technologies come onstream.

5. Improve digital literacy programmes

Improving digital literacy programmes, especially for younger children, and integrating them more effectively into formal education systems across Member States was considered essential. Consideration should also be given to the coordination of digital education across the EU to streamline efforts across Member States, perhaps in the form of a centralised agency. Children and young people with special educational needs require particular attention in developing digital literacy programmes.

6. Maintain the emphasis on positive content

The importance of positive content in the digital environment for children and young people was recognised in several of the workshops. Participants emphasised the need to balance protection with opportunities and positive experiences for minors online. It was argued that rather than restricting their access, the focus of policy should be the positive aspects of online connections, especially in light of lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The concept of positive content is also relevant to the DSA Article 28 guidelines and can inform perspectives on what constitutes good online content.

7. Increase focus on parental involvement and capacity building

Increasing parents' involvement and education to bridge the gap between children's and young people's online experiences and parental understanding is considered critical. The challenge of reaching parents was acknowledged during many of the sessions. However, engaging effectively with parents was also recognised as a vital issue in meeting the challenges young people face. Parental involvement, it was argued, should be a headline theme in order to make progress on this issue.

8. More action is needed in addressing the digital divide

Underpinning BIK+ is the commitment to ensure that all children and young people are supported equally, with their rights protected in the digital environment. Yet, it was regarded that not enough is being done to support marginalised children, including those affected by economic and other forms of exclusion, and that this should be prioritised in future consideration of BIK+.

9. Enhance child and youth participation

Child and youth participation should be enhanced, particularly in policymaking and product design processes related to online safety. Child and youth participation was singled out as one of the key achievements of BIK+. Expert stakeholders recommended that this area of focus be highlighted and deepened, ensuring that good practices are shared widely and that child and youth involvement in decision-making is mainstreamed across all relevant digital policy processes.

10. Maintain a balance between protection and empowerment pillars

This was recommended to ensure that efforts to protect children and young people do not overshadow their right to participate in the digital world and decision-making processes in developing policy affecting

them directly. The balance between different pillars and recognising that rights are interdependent and indivisible was a constant theme throughout the workshops. Building on the foundation that BIK+ has achieved in recognising children's rights as a foundation for their participation in the digital environment, it was put forward that maintaining this balance was vital, particularly in contexts where protection-oriented policies appear to take priority.

These general recommendations were provided to make the BIK+ strategy more effective, comprehensive, and responsive to the rapidly evolving digital landscape while maintaining its core vision of protecting, empowering, and respecting children and young people online.

Chapter 4: Insights from the classroom to the living room: teachers' and parents' views of BIK+

In the context of this first evaluation of the BIK+ strategy, a total of 170 teachers and educators and 133 parents and caregivers from across Europe were consulted.[11] This chapter summarises the main outcomes from these two strands, and juxtaposes insights from both groups under the following sections below: **(I) perceptions of BIK+ in school and at home; (II) teachers' and parents' views on keeping children safe online; (III) supporting children and young people online: skills, tools and knowledge of teachers and parents; (IV) how teachers and parents support the next generation of digital citizens; (V) recommendations to improve the effectiveness of BIK+ in the classroom and the living room; and (VI) reflections and limitations**.

I. The visions of BIK+ and their perception in schools and at home

Similar to the approach taken in consultations with children and young people, the methodology for consulting teachers and parents did not require participants to have prior knowledge about the BIK+ strategy. Instead, at the beginning of each session (and as an introduction to the qualitative teacher online survey), the visions and goals of the BIK+ strategy were discussed.

Overall, most participants across both stakeholder groups were unfamiliar with the strategy before participating in the present evaluation activity. A few participants, mostly teachers and educators, had heard of BIK+ before but lacked knowledge about its specific contents and recommendations. However, when discussions turned to more concrete actions and measures recommended by BIK+ in the later stages of the consultation, participants reported awareness of some of these actions and measures, such as efforts related to introducing robust age assurance methods or awareness-raising campaigns to better protect children from commercial exploitation online.

1. Teachers' and parents' priorities in relation to BIK+

When asked which of the three pillars they found most important, many participants from both stakeholder groups introduced the notion that the **relevance of the pillars depended on the age of the children and young people to whom they applied**. In groups that discussed this notion, pillar 1 – Safe digital experiences was found to be the most important in relation to very young children, while, concerning teenagers, pillars 2 – Digital empowerment and 3 – Active participation were considered to be more important. The majority of participants in both groups, however, did not view their prioritisation as dependent on age. Instead, they widely agreed that, in order of priority, pillar 1 – Safe digital experiences, followed by pillar 2 - Digital empowerment, and then pillar 3 – Active participation, was the appropriate order of importance. These groups also frequently referred to harmful content and contact online as the issues of most concern.

> *"There should be stricter regulations on the kind of content accessible to children. It's too easy for them to come across harmful material."*
> *Parent, Hungary*

In instances where pillar 2 was prioritised, participants frequently expressed the view that creating an entirely safe online environment was not attainable in practice, and hence, they favoured teaching

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> *"We [as adults] don't really know what the real dangers are that they are encountering on the internet. (...) We should first listen to them and see what is really bothering them and what do they see as the biggest problem."*
> *Teacher, Romania*

> *"Pillar 3 is the outcome of all the actions we develop in school."*
> *Teacher, Italy*

children and young people the skills, tools, and knowledge they need to stay safe. Lastly, in some groups, pillar 3 – Active participation was found to be the most important, as mostly teachers and, in some instances, parents felt that children and young people knew best about the digital environment, the skills needed, and the dangers and risks to be combatted. Some expressed that they felt that pillar 3 was a result of actions and initiatives successfully implemented with children and young people under pillars 1 and 2.

Overall, it is noteworthy that there was virtually unanimous acknowledgement that all three pillars were relevant to delivering safer and better online environments for children and young people. However, some participants who belonged to groups advocating for smartphone-free childhoods expressed a contrary view. These participants shared the sentiment that digital devices and the online environment were comparable to drug use, as they felt that frequent use of smartphones and online services was having a harmful impact on children's development, both socially and academically. These participants were generally in favour of the ideas of bans and restrictions for children and young people to participate in the digital environment.

> *"If you don't want [your kids] to be dependent on drugs, don't give them drugs."*
> *Parent, Spain*

2. Teachers' and parents' understanding of children's priorities

Teachers' and parents' views on children's preferred online activities generally align with what the children and young people reported. Both emphasised that **children and young people primarily go online to connect with friends and family and to engage in entertainment activities**. Both teachers and parents concluded that children would prioritise pillar 3 – Active participation, the most, while acknowledging that staying safe online (pillar 1 – Safe digital experiences) was a constant underlying concern for them as well. This notion confirms what children and young people themselves reported. It shows that the participating teachers and parents were very aware of their children's and students' digital priorities, both in terms of activities and focus topics, to foster better and safer online environments.

> *"If they receive the message from their peers, it is different compared to when the message comes from me. I am an old man with white hair."*
> *Parent, Italy*

> *"When we teachers try to approach students 'in their codes, in their language', they tell you 'please, teacher, no!' [laughed]."*
> *Teacher, Spain*

One instance in which the views of parents and teachers diverged from those of children and young people was in the priorities of pillar 2 (Digital empowerment). While both parents and teachers frequently noted that they believed children and young people thought that they already possessed all the skills, competences and knowledge they needed to use the internet in an empowering and positive way, children and young people expressed a desire to learn more about online safety, digital creation, and digital citizenship. When discussions turned to improving education about online safety, digital literacy, and media literacy, peer-to-peer teaching formats were emphasised across

consultations with parents and teachers, echoing a sentiment also expressed in the group discussions with children and young people.

3. The observed changes in the digital environment through the eyes of teachers and parents

When asked about the changes they observed in digital environments, participants primarily referenced the **rise of social media platforms** and how these have transformed the ways in which people connect and interact. Both parents and teachers expressed concerns about the influence of algorithms on individuals' perceptions of reality. Some participants noted that **harmful algorithms** tend to suggest 'more of the same' content, which they believed contributes to children and young people developing increasingly extreme and distorted views of the world and plays a key role in keeping them in front of screens for as long as possible.

"Let's not forget that with the pandemic, all these devices... the usage [of devices] was suddenly normalised. Until then, they [the devices] were a bit demonised by the parents; now they have entered all households. So, it's something very normal for children to suddenly use them."
Parent, Greece

Parallel to the rise of social media platforms, both parents and teachers noted that, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, **the use of digital technologies has intensified in the classroom and in home settings**, which has proven challenging not only for children and young people but also for adults. However, they also expressed the sentiment that reverting to lesser reliance on digital devices would be quite difficult. Many participants indicated that managing a more mindful use of digital technologies, such as smartphones, is also challenging for adults. In this context, the importance of parents and teachers as role models was highlighted.

"It is important to give a good example of not being connected so much."
Teacher and parent, Croatia

"Sometimes you have to fight with the children, but you [also] have to fight with their parents because they say they [the kids] need their phones so they can keep in touch with their children. It is a double fight."
Teacher, Romania

Lastly, many groups discussed the **rise of artificial intelligence** (AI) and believed it would intensify the distortion of perceptions of what is real and what is not. Additionally, concerns have been raised that technologies utilising AI could lead to children and young people losing their ability and willingness to critically assess the information they encounter online. There was also concern from some teachers and educators towards the unpredictability of the challenges that AI might bring in relation to media literacy and online safety, making it harder for teachers to effectively educate young people in this area.

Overall, the discussion about changes in the digital environments over the past few years revealed that

"I wish there was clearer guidance available for us parents. I feel like I'm constantly playing catch-up with what my child is exposed to online."
Parent, Hungary

both parents and teachers felt **overwhelmed trying to keep up with the pace of technological advancement**. This sentiment was shared, often combined with the notion that 'everything has become too much, too fast', as increasingly younger children use smartphones and digital platforms. Consequently, this led to a perception of increased exposure to risks and harms online.

II. Teachers' and parents' views on keeping children safe online

1. The most significant risks for children and young people online and how to combat them, according to teachers and parents

When asked about their views on the most significant risks and challenges for children and young people online, parents and teachers provided similar responses. The majority of teachers and educators identified **cyberbullying** as the most critical risk facing children and young people online.

> *"Cyberbullying happens more often than students admit. It's hidden and very damaging."*
> *Teacher, Sweden*

At the same time, teachers and parents felt that **exposure to inappropriate and harmful content** online was a significant risk for their students and children. Both groups were also **concerned about the amount of time children and young people spend online**. While virtually all groups acknowledged that issues were less about the total time spent in front of the screen and more about what children and young people did with that time and what content or activities they engaged in, most expressed a desire to reduce children's and young people's (and in many cases their own) screen time. Many participants attributed the increase in time that children and young people spent online to the **addictive design of technology and content**, frequently mentioning fast-paced, short video content and video gaming. In contrast, some others believe that **peer pressure** plays a significant role in causing children and young people to feel the need to be constantly connected.

> *"Children who don't participate are a bit left out of school groups, meaning that even during the school breaks, discussions revolve around the games children play or what they did or saw [online]."*
> *Parent, Greece*

This acceleration and intensification of digital technology use and online presence have raised concerns about the risks associated with the increased time people spend online. It highlights the **commercial exploitation of children and young people** through influencer content, as well as the overall increase in exposure to harmful and inappropriate online material, including violence, war imagery, cyberbullying, and other uncivil behaviour. Parents and teachers have expressed worries that this increased exposure could normalise violent, risky, and rude behaviours, and many adults have described feeling overwhelmed themselves.

Another frequently mentioned risk among both teacher and parent groups was related to the spread of **misinformation and disinformation**. While the participants who expressed concerns about these risks did so in more general terms, some occasionally cited specific examples, such as their perceptions of misinformation and disinformation in the context of the political situation in the USA. In some cases, parents and teachers from countries near Ukraine specifically noted an increase in false information regarding the war. They observed that misinformation was spreading on platforms and online games frequented by their children and students, and they believed it was

> *"This is a very serious problem. (...) and when we have war in Ukraine, in Poland, we suffered a lot because of disinformation; Russian disinformation, things like that. And even my kids reported this kind of information was put into online games, something which, for me, was not easy to follow because I have no idea how to play and how to deal with it. But they noticed that at the very beginning of the war. They had to face the problem, and they didn't know what to do with it, and I didn't know either, honestly."*
> *Parent, Poland*

part of a disinformation campaign deliberately orchestrated by the Russian government.[12]

Other, less frequently mentioned, risks include privacy concerns, often related to 'over-sharing', details of both personal information and private family life online, being scammed, the difficulty in distinguishing between real and 'fake' information and images, and the distortion of self-perceptions caused by beauty filters and altered pictures shared on social media.

"We believe we have control as parents, but we don't, neither in the online world nor outside of it. Therefore, the more skills and tools they have, the better."
Parent, Spain

When asked about possible ways to combat these risks, the most prevalent notion across all groups, whether teachers or parents, was that a **collective effort** was needed to keep children and young people safe. Regarding practical solutions, the vast majority suggested that **more education** was required, not only for children and young people but also for all stakeholders, including parents and teachers. Some parents expressed a desire for targeted workshops to learn more about online safety, while others acknowledged the difficulties related to increasing parental involvement. Parents and families, as already mentioned above, were generally seen as a particularly hard-to-reach dialogue group, and the current online safety outreach and educational efforts were no exception.

Regarding the risks of exposure to harmful and illegal content, both parents and teachers called for **more effective and reliable age assurance and verification methods**. Many expressed concerns about the current approaches used by online service providers, and widely felt that they were ineffective.

"We need to find a way to keep students under 12 from having social media."
Teacher, Greece

In the context of discussing practical approaches to enhance children's protection, some parent group discussions turned to general **bans**, frequently citing the example of Australia, where it has been proposed that individuals under 16 years old be prohibited from using social media platforms. Outside of groups that included parents who were members of smartphone-free childhood movements, bans were not discussed as frequently. In the few instances when this specific measure arose, participants expressed the belief that a ban would not yield the desired effects nor make children safer than before. Instead, groups discussing this topic felt that more cooperative approaches were essential and that establishing strong relationships with their children and students, which fostered trust-based open dialogue, was significantly more effective than blanket bans.

Across both groups, the desire for more robust and more effectively enforced regulation was expressed frequently. At the same time, in both teacher and parent groups, **awareness of international and national laws designed to protect minors online was low**. The few single participants in both groups who had some understanding of laws typically had only a general awareness of certain legal measures, lacking more specific knowledge. Those who were more familiar with some of these laws were so due to their profession. Only in rare cases were specific laws mentioned. In those cases, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and, in a few cases, the Digital Services Act (DSA) were named.

2. Teachers' and parents' preparedness to support children's and young people's online safety

When it comes to helping children and young people report content online that they found harmful, fewer parents than teachers felt they knew where to turn. In group discussions with parents, the senti-

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12 Findings from analyses by the European Digital Media Observatory back these observations by parents (see here from 2025 and here from 2025).

ment was often expressed that reporting was ineffective and would not make the internet a safer and better place.

Teachers, overall, seemed less sceptical and more knowledgeable about reporting harmful content. While they acknowledged that they felt their students would rather approach a family member or friend if they encountered something disturbing online, many teachers cited helplines and hotlines or internal school systems where they could turn to for receiving support and help with reporting harm-

> *"I have no idea where to report something like that" (...) "And even if we did, would they [social media providers] actually do anything about it?"*
> *Exchange between two parents, Hungary*

ful online content or conduct. Some groups, both teachers and parents, reflected on the reporting of illegal content, and most frequently referenced turning to the police if they felt content or conduct was illegal.

However, the consultations revealed that overall, awareness of how to assist children and young people when they **encounter harmful or illegal content online was limited**. In the cases of teachers, this primarily comprised providing direct support or referring them to school counsellors. Many participants believed that the only way to avoid encountering harmful content online was to stay offline, while acknowledging that most children and young people enjoyed spending time online. Concerning this aspect, some parents and teachers expressed feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.

When assessing whether parents felt confident using parental control tools and whether teachers felt confident advising parents on how to use such tools, responses were mixed. While some parents noted that **parental control tools were deemed effective in managing the screentime of younger children**, they expressed greater **doubts about the tools' usefulness for teenagers**. Teachers frequently mentioned that parents rarely approached them for help and advice regarding the use of parental control tools. Concerning the effectiveness of these tools, teachers shared similar views to parents, concluding that parental control might be effective for younger children but less so for older ones, as they were typically more skilled and knew how to bypass such measures.

During the consultation sessions, parents and teachers were asked whether they had read the terms and conditions of the services, apps and social media platforms they and their children, respectively, used. Across all respondents in both groups, **very few had ever fully read the terms and conditions when signing up for a new app, service or platform**. They expressed a common opinion that the terms and conditions were too long, too complex, and too time-consuming to comprehend. Some even suggested that these texts were deliberately written in a way that would discourage anyone from attempting to read them. Outliers to this shared perception were only teachers and educators who participated in the qualitative online survey, where a majority indicated that they read the terms and conditions of the platforms, apps, and services their students used. However, the survey did not ascertain whether this applied to all platforms, apps, and services in general or only to those used in school contexts for teaching and learning purposes.

When teachers were asked if they felt prepared to teach about and support their students in staying safe online, for instance, through professional development or teacher training, responses were mixed. While those who participated in teacher training on these topics found it beneficial, the participants seemed to agree that teacher training was not consistently implemented to reach everyone involved in the ecosystem. Many expressed frustration that they had to attend trainings out of their own good will, during their free time, and in many cases had to pay for them, leading many to feel that these trainings and courses would only 'preach to the already converted' (please refer to **section III.3** below for actionable suggestions from participants relating to this aspect).

In both consultations with teachers and parents, discussions about finding adequate information and materials on digital skills and online safety sometimes referenced the national Safer Internet Centres. Overall, however, awareness of national organisations focused on children's online safety, particularly in consultations with parents, was relatively low, with few exceptions in countries where these organisations strongly emphasised public outreach activities, especially through schools. Generally, participating teachers appeared more aware of these organisations' existence, but could not always name specific ones they had in mind.

III. Supporting children and young people online: skills, tools and knowledge of teachers and parents

1. Recognising children's dependencies or compulsive behaviours linked with being connected online

Some groups, in both teacher and parent consultation activities, discussed whether they could identify instances where children had developed a dependency on being online and connected, whether through social media or gaming platforms. Most respondents in both teacher and parent groups felt at least somewhat able to recognise such circumstances. Parents frequently reported observing their children spending a lot of time on their smartphones or computers, occasionally mentioning that discussions about the time they spent online caused disputes between parents and children. Some parents mentioned resorting to parental control tools to limit their children's screen time, but, as mentioned in the section above, felt these measures were less effective with older children as they were typically more skilled and knew ways to bypass such measures, either through researching them or exchanging such knowledge with peers.

At the same time, teachers reported feeling similarly confident in identifying problematic usage patterns, typically referencing observations of behavioural signs in students, such as sleepiness during morning classes or anxiety when asked to hand in their phones for the duration of a period. Some teachers mentioned that their school had a restrictive phone policy, with some citing so-called 'phone hotels' where students lock their phones for the duration of lessons. In contrast, others referred to a general 'no-phone' policy in schools, where students are typically asked to leave their phones in their lockers or school bags. Those who mentioned the latter approach frequently expressed dismay, as they felt students disregarded these rules and used their phones anyway. A few other teachers reported proactive involvement of digital devices in school assignments, such as researching information in workshops or project-based settings during class.

> *"In my opinion, no matter how well-prepared as teachers we are, at the end of the day, it is the family culture [that] could prevent kids from overusing the mobiles."*
> *Teacher, Bulgaria*

In both groups, adults reflected on their device usage patterns, and many acknowledged that they spent more time on their devices than they would prefer. Some groups also referred to the previously discussed **importance of being good role models for their children** by demonstrating the desired behaviours themselves. They believed, in particular, that parents' own behaviour with digital technologies significantly influenced how children and young people engaged with them.

> *"To tell the truth, often all these tablets and games are digital nannies. In younger ages as well (...), it is an easy solution, you put them in front of the child because you are exhausted, you don't have time."*
> *Parent, Greece*

In relation to this question, as well as throughout discussions with teachers and educators, the sentiment

that parents should be more actively involved in how children and young people spend their free time was expressed. This notion was echoed in several discussions within parent groups, often in relation to voicing general feelings of being overwhelmed and lacking the time or energy to engage more with their children.

2. Navigating information online: parents' and teachers' views of their own digital media literacy

Teachers and educators, compared to parents and caregivers, expressed more frequently that they felt at least somewhat confident in their abilities to identify credible sources of information online and distinguish credible journalism and news reporting from so-called fake news. Many teachers cited specific examples of workshop-like approaches and group discussion exercises they conducted in class, where students were guided to perform additional checks to verify information found online. In these contexts, teachers felt that students were performing well; however, they doubted that students would perform equally well when encountering different (mis-)information online independently.

When discussing information and media literacy in more general terms, teachers felt less confident and expressed concern about identifying reliable information online. They also felt overwhelmed by the information and imagery created using AI, such as deepfakes. When asked about their approaches to discerning credible and reliable information, some cited trusting their intuition and gut feelings, while others emphasised the importance of performing additional checks. While some teachers expressed confidence in their own abilities and preparedness to tackle misinformation, they also shared concerns that their colleagues were not as confident or lacked specific training.

The concerns raised by teachers and educators about AI were strongly echoed in discussions with parents and caregivers, who, overall, felt significantly less confident in helping their children find credible online sources and discern fake news. As with other aspects of protecting, empowering, and respecting children and young people online, many parents believed that fostering a close, trust-based, and mutually respectful relationship with their children was the most crucial factor in aiding them to navigate online risks and challenges.

> *We are bombarded with fake news and ads. It's overwhelming."*
> Parent, Slovenia

> *"As parents, we also don't know what is true anymore, and I think the only way for parents is to have a good relationship with their kids and talk about everything and anything daily."*
> Parent, Croatia

Many participants have noted that the rise of AI and its associated risks have rendered previous standards of information and media literacy inadequate. Across the groups that discussed possible measures to build capacities for finding, evaluating, and using reliable and credible information online, it was emphasised that there should be more critical information and media literacy education programmes, not only in schools aimed at children but also in non-formal contexts directed at adults.

3. Improving teachers' and parents' online safety skills, knowledge and digital literacy

In the final portion of the discussions on digital skills and knowledge, participants were asked what they believed needed improvement for teachers and parents to better support students' and children's online safety.

One main point expressed across discussions with teachers and educators related to **in-service teacher training**. Many voiced their dismay that only already very engaged and committed teachers would participate in workshops, courses, and teacher training in their free time. However, participants felt that

digital skills and online safety were so profoundly critical in today's digitised society that it was insufficient to rely solely on the most committed teachers.

Teachers recommended that in-service training should be:

- mandatory,
- centrally organised and monitored by the national ministries of education,
- regular (e.g., annually or biennially),
- free of charge, and
- counted as work time.

When asked what they believed needed improvement to better support teachers in addressing online safety topics with their students, teachers insisted that **online safety education become a mandatory component of the school curriculum**. Many teachers conveyed that they felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of topics they felt they believed they needed to tackle alongside curricular requirements.

In addition to these two key recommendations, teachers emphasised the **importance of enabling parents to become more involved in their children's lives**. They pointed out that this involvement depended not only on having the time but also on being trained and possessing the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively guide children and young people in today's digitised societies.

> *"We need more time. (...) Everything starts and ends at the school: health issues, mental health issues, behaviour training in new technologies, and (...) we are dealing with our curricula. [There are] official curricula in English, Spanish, maths, biology, geography, but everything around all the official curricula is what really makes the (...) pupils go ahead. And we are sometimes more focused on the official curricula, giving exams (...), and because we do not have time, we forget or do not attend [to teaching online safety topics and attending voluntary teacher trainings] as we should, or we could. (...) All these things. We need support, and we need time."*
> *Teacher, Spain*

This sentiment was partly reflected in parents' responses, as they acknowledged that **involving parents and caregivers in capacity-building and awareness-raising campaigns and programmes was quite challenging**. While both parents and teachers acknowledged some of the reasons for these existing barriers, such as parents' and caregivers' time constraints, families' sometimes strained relationships with schools, and communication barriers, no concrete and practical suggestions on how to tackle these were expressed. Due to parents' immense time constraints, most participants expressed a desire for **clear advice and recommendations** on managing children's and young people's relationships with the digital environment. Another aspect mentioned in discussions with parents was the **need for improved parental control tools**. Some noted that these tools were effective with younger children but were perceived as ineffective with teenagers. Parents mentioned being aware of how their kids exchanged knowledge on bypassing parental controls and felt that they were always at least one step behind. Other parents disagreed that more effective tools would solve the issues. Instead, they believed that only **open and trust-based relationships, characterised by mutual respect, would help keep children safe online**.

IV. How teachers and parents support the next generation of digital citizens

The final section of the consultations with teachers and parents addressed topics related to active participation, digital citizenship, and children's rights. Conversations with both teachers and parents indicate that these topics were seen as challenging to approach. They were viewed as broad, encompassing various aspects of both private and school-related contexts that neither teachers nor parents felt they could adequately address in depth.

1. Children's rights in practice at home and school

When teachers and educators were asked if they frequently discussed the topics of children's rights, both online and offline, only about half of the participants indicated that they occasionally addressed issues related to rights. While children's rights, in general, appeared more approachable to participants, children's rights online were mainly associated with conversations about the right to privacy and the right to protection against commercial exploitation. Teachers and educators found it challenging to summarise how such discussions typically progressed in class and emphasised that children's rights-related topics were usually talked about in the context of specific examples and experiences rather than more holistically.

Many parents and caregivers felt it was essential to discuss children's rights with their children, but often expressed feeling inadequately informed, particularly concerning digital rights.

"[In response to the question if parents discussed children's digital rights at home]: Not at all. I barely know my own digital rights, let alone theirs."
Parent, Hungary

Some parents and caregivers, who typically were members of 'smartphone-free childhood' movements, expressed that discussing responsibilities with their children was more important than discussing their rights. Many agreed with the view that children should behave as their parents demanded. At the same time, they acknowledged that having robust child-parent relationships was fundamental to co-navigating and managing children's access to the internet.

2. Teachers' and parents' perspectives on raising active (digital) citizens

Parents and teachers reported limited understanding when asked about their awareness of child and youth participation initiatives or programmes in their countries, where young people were invited to engage in youth-oriented policy and decision-making processes. While some participants mentioned national initiatives, such as youth forums, they noted that these were typically organised centrally by a governmental body and criticised that such opportunities were mainly available in urban areas. When asked how children's and young people's involvement in such activities could be encouraged, parents and teachers suggested that awareness-raising efforts were necessary, as some participants believed such initiatives did not exist in their countries.

V. Recommendations to improve the effectiveness of BIK+ in the classroom and the living room

Drawing on insights gathered from consultations with teachers and educators, as well as parents and caregivers across Europe, the following recommendations were formulated to enhance the overall effectiveness of the BIK+ strategy.

The perspectives shared by **teachers and educators** highlight three key areas for improvement:

1. Mandate and institutionalise teacher training on online safety and digital literacy

Teachers emphasised that current training is voluntary, often conducted during personal time, and only reaches those who are already engaged. They strongly recommended mandatory, regularly scheduled, and centrally organised teacher training on online safety, digital literacy, and children's digital rights, free of charge and counted as work time.

2. Integrate online safety education in official school curricula

Teachers often reported feeling overwhelmed with existing curricula and emphasised that topics such as online safety and digital citizenship are crucial but frequently overlooked. They suggested making online safety education a mandatory and integral part of the school curriculum rather than an optional addition.

3. Improve access to practical, age-appropriate tools and resources

Teachers expressed their struggle to keep up with evolving digital risks, such as misinformation, fake news, deepfakes, advancements in AI technologies, and the addictive nature of digital platforms and content. They called for easily accessible and regularly updated teaching materials that reflect current digital challenges and are tailored to different age groups and levels of digital maturity.

In parallel, the consultations with **parents and caregivers** revealed core priorities that should be addressed to strengthen the impact of the BIK+ strategy at home and within families:

1. Provide simple, clear and practical guidance for parents

Many parents expressed feeling overwhelmed and 'constantly playing catch-up'. They requested concise, actionable advice on how to navigate their children's digital lives, including guidance on privacy, online risks, and screen time, delivered in a parent-friendly format.

2. Offer accessible and engaging parent workshops on online safety

Parents expressed interest in learning more about online safety and digital skills in general, but acknowledged significant barriers, including time constraints and a lack of awareness regarding existing resources. They recommended targeted workshops, ideally offered in convenient settings such as schools, integrated into other school events, and tailored to the digital literacy levels of primary caregivers.

3. Improve and support trust-based digital parenting approaches

A recurring theme among parents was the importance of strong, open and trust-based relationships with their children. This approach was deemed more effective in helping children and young people remain protected, empowered, and respected online than any technical tools or restrictions. While participants acknowledged significant barriers, such as parents' time constraints and, in some cases, lack of interest, they suggested that the BIK+ strategy should emphasise programmes and activities aimed at children and their parents that support learning how to co-navigate, foster dialogue, and promote mutual respect over blanket bans and purely technical solutions.

VI. Reflections and limitations

This chapter has shared a summary of the views of a diverse range of teachers and educators, parents, and caregivers across the EU expressed during the consultative process. The consultations with parents and teachers adopted a qualitative approach similar to that conducted with children and young people. Group discussion formats mean that not all questions received equal attention. Group dynamics often influenced the flow of discussions, which means that some groups did not address certain questions. In some instances, this was due to time limitations, while in others, it resulted from one or more dominant speakers who directed the conversation among parents and teachers, respectively.

As noted earlier, methodologies like focus group discussions are not intended to produce generalisable or quantifiable results. Instead, they aim to provide a deeper understanding of participants' sentiments and opinions. To align the qualitative online survey with the consultation protocol as closely as possible, open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to share their reflections on the posed questions with as much detail as possible.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The first evaluation of the **BIK+ strategy** has provided invaluable insights into its progress and successes, as well as areas for improvement since its adoption in May 2022. Grounded in the perspectives of 759 children and young people[13], alongside input from 59 expert stakeholders across Europe, this report paints a detailed picture of the strategy's achievements and sheds light on evolving needs. The voices of children and young people, including those from vulnerable backgrounds, were instrumental in shaping the findings, ensuring a child/youth-focused and inclusive approach.

Progress and success

Children and young people recognised the strides made under the BIK+ strategy, especially in fostering safer and more inclusive digital spaces. They highlighted tools like enhanced privacy settings and reporting mechanisms, which have improved their ability to manage online risks. For example, children and young people noted the increasing availability of online educational resources, which were considered particularly relevant for children and young people in more rural areas.

Expert stakeholders acknowledged the significant advancements achieved through cross-sector collaborations, particularly emphasising the critical importance of the Insafe network of European Safer Internet Centres. Policymakers praised initiatives such as public-private partnerships, which have bolstered digital literacy and safety awareness campaigns. Industry representatives cited their increased efforts to integrate age-appropriate design principles, such as filtering harmful content and offering robust parental controls.

Consulted educators and caregivers, overall, expressed strong support for the goals of BIK+ once familiarised with them, despite limited prior awareness. Their insights affirmed the continued relevance of the strategy's three pillars, particularly emphasising the need to tailor priorities by age group. Pillar 1 – Safe digital experiences was overwhelmingly prioritised for younger children, while pillar 2 – Digital empowerment and pillar 3 – Active participation were seen as increasingly critical for teenagers. Teachers especially highlighted the role of schools in providing digital skills, media literacy and online safety education, as well as fostering digital citizenship. Parents underscored the importance of being good role models and cultivating robust relationships with their children, characterised by open dialogue, respect and trust in order to develop effectiveness.

The evaluation process itself demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusivity as it engaged children and young people from vulnerable and marginalised backgrounds, such as those with disabilities, migrant backgrounds, or limited internet access. This emphasis on reaching underrepresented voices highlights the importance that the BIK+ strategy itself places on inclusivity, ensuring that no child in Europe is left behind.

Persistent and emergent challenges

Despite these successes, children, young people and expert stakeholders identified several challenges that must be addressed to fully realise the BIK+ vision. Many young participants shared their struggles with harmful online behaviour, including cyberbullying, scams, and exposure to inappropriate content. For example, teenagers frequently described the emotional toll of persistent online harassment, while

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13   Generally, when referring to "children", we refer to children under the age of 12 years. When referring to "young people", we typically mean children over the age of 12.

others noted the difficulty of identifying credible sources amidst a sea of misinformation. This suggests more needs to be done to help children and young people cope with inappropriate online behaviour. More so, the strong persistence of bullying and harassment stresses the need to intensify efforts concerning social and emotional learning to ultimately strengthen civility and respect, offline as well as online.

From the expert perspective, regulatory inconsistencies across EU Member States remain a significant challenge. Industry stakeholders emphasised how fragmented rules complicate the implementation of uniform safety measures. Civil society representatives and representatives from the academic community called for greater investment in longitudinal research to understand the long-term effects of digital technologies on children's development.

Both teachers and parents articulated a shared sense of being overwhelmed by the pace of digital change. Despite the existence of ground-breaking legislation in the EU, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA), which fundamentally improves the legal framework for the protection of minors online, the availability of a number of legal and practical measures to age verification on the national level in the EU Member States, as well as the availability of parental control tools, many adults still expressed growing concern about how online platforms shape what children see and do. They worried that the online environment may distort children's perceptions of reality, contribute to anxiety or stress, and encourage excessive screen time. Many also pointed to the rising impact of social media influencers and online advertising, expressing concern about the commercial exploitation of children and young people. Teachers and parents alike felt that children are increasingly exposed to violent or inappropriate content, often without knowing how to respond or who to turn to. In addition, both groups reported difficulty in keeping up with emerging technologies, such as AI, which they feared would further blur the boundaries between truth and misinformation. These perceived shifts in the digital environment have left many adults feeling outpaced and under-equipped, raising doubts about their ability to effectively support children's safety and well-being online.

Looking ahead: actions and aspirations

To address these challenges, the evaluation outlined several actionable steps:

1. Empowering children and young people through co-design: Children's suggestions included creating more intuitive reporting systems, designing privacy tools tailored to their needs and, overall, establishing child and youth participation as a default practice in developing policies and technologies that directly affect their lives.

2. Closing the digital divide: Expert stakeholders emphasised the need for targeted investments to bridge the gap for rural and underserved communities, ensuring equitable access to high-speed internet and digital literacy programmes.

3. Harmonising regulation: To overcome regulatory fragmentation, the European Union must establish a unified framework for online safety standards, benefiting both children and young people as well as industry.

4. Promoting cross-sector collaboration: Continued partnerships between governments, civil society, and industry are essential to innovate and implement effective interventions. Securing sustained funding and resourcing of the Insafe network of Safer Internet Centres are critical to ensuring continuity and effectiveness.

5. Promoting ecosystem-wide approaches to delivering BIK+: Strengthen collaboration across families, schools, and local community networks to create more coherent and supportive digital environments for children and young people. In doing so, the recognition of parents' and caregivers' critical role in implementing BIK+ should be strengthened.

6. Enhance awareness-raising efforts tailored to parents and caregivers: Increase effective outreach to parents through schools, community networks, workplaces and national media ecosystems, using accessible, family-friendly guidance and resources and tailored messaging to strengthen their awareness, digital skills, and support for BIK+ at home.

7. Ramping up support for teachers in delivering BIK+: Teachers and educators called for the integration of digital skills and online safety education as integral parts of national school curricula, replacing current approaches of catering to these topics alongside the pressures of delivering mandated curricula.

8. Ensuring consistent, nationally supported teacher training: Integrate centrally organised, mandatory, regular, and curriculum-aligned training on online safety and digital citizenship into professional development frameworks across all EU Member States.

9. Addressing adult concerns about children's exposure to risks online: Teachers and parents reported difficulty understanding and managing how online platforms shape children's experiences. They expressed concerns over content that promotes harmful norms, fuels screen overuse, or contributes to the spread of extreme or misleading material. This suggests a need for more evidence-based policy to ensure the provision of more conclusive guidance and resources to help teachers and parents better support children and young people online.

10. Responding to the commercialisation of children's online presences: Parents and caregivers flagged children's and young people's increasing exposure to advertising, influencer marketing, and monetised platforms as key risks. Stronger enforcement is needed to protect children from commercial exploitation and reinforce their digital autonomy.

11. Support adults in navigating fast-changing technologies: From AI-powered content to immersive digital environments, the pace of technological innovation is a major concern for both teachers and parents. BIK+ should expand efforts to keep adults informed and equipped to guide children in these evolving spaces.

A shared vision for the future of BIK+

The BIK+ strategy is not just a policy framework—it is a blueprint for empowering Europe's youngest digital citizens. By centring the voices of children and young people, and leveraging the expertise of the entire ecosystem of BIK+ stakeholders, the strategy can continue to evolve in response to emerging challenges and opportunities.

Creating a better and safer internet for children and young people requires greater integration of school and family environments into the BIK+ framework. The evaluation highlights strong support for BIK+ among all consulted stakeholders. However, both parents and teachers called for more robust, centrally coordinated digital education efforts. Suggested measures include clear and parent-friendly guidance, workshops adapted to caregivers' varying digital literacy levels and time available, and more consistent teacher training centrally coordinated by national education ministries. Additionally, fostering trust-based relationships and co-learning models between adults and children was widely favoured over restrictive or punitive approaches. Future refinements of the BIK+ strategy should more explicitly support parents and educators to become digital mentors and role models.

A better and safer internet can be envisioned as one where children and young people feel safe, have opportunities to learn, and are empowered to express their voices. This sentiment encapsulates the aspirations of children and young people across Europe and should serve as a guiding light for the strategy's next phase.

Moving forward, the European Union has a unique opportunity to lead the way in creating a digital future that prioritises inclusivity, creativity, and safety. With sustained commitment and collaboration, the BIK+ strategy can fulfil its promise to ensure that every child is protected, empowered, and respected online. To future-proof the BIK+ strategy, it is essential to not only centre children's voices but also strengthen the capabilities of those who support them daily. Teachers and parents are integral actors in the digital ecosystem. Their voices underscore the urgent need to demystify technology, promote cross-generational digital resilience, and embed support for adults within BIK+ implementation. The strategy's continued success will depend on how inclusively and effectively it can engage the full spectrum of stakeholders: children, educators, families, communities, and actors in policy and industry, in a shared commitment to safe, empowering, and participatory digital futures. Together with all stakeholders across the entire BIK+ ecosystem, we can build a digital world where children and young people not only thrive but actively shape their futures with confidence and inspiration.

Annex: Overview of successes and recommendations for future actions under the BIK+ strategy

The following tables provide an overview of successes and recommendations for future actions under the BIK+ strategy as expressed by participants of the consultations, and as outlined in this report. Hence, the tables include recommendations and measures that have already been partially implemented to varying degrees across the EU, by way of EU-level legislation and national policy relating to the protection, empowerment, and active participation of children and young people online.

For a detailed overview of different approaches from the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway, to developing and implementing policies and activities promoting children's safety and well-being in the digital environment based on the recommended measures in the BIK+ strategy, please refer to the 2025 edition of the BIK Policy monitor.

Pillar 1: Safe digital experiences		
Stakeholder group	Successes	Recommendations for future actions
Children and young people	Children appreciated improvements in online safety, such as better reporting tools and more awareness around harmful content, which aligns with the BIK+ goal of 'age-appropriate digital services', ensuring children are protected from harmful content.	☑ Equip children with **tools** to build **resilience** and protect self-esteem, for instance, by promoting awareness campaigns through influencers and content creators focusing on authenticity, body positivity, and mental health issues. ☑ **Refrain from blanket bans** on access; **empower youth** to make better and informed decisions. ☑ **Increase public information on safety features** and parental controls. ☑ **Improve regulations for content sharing** on platforms tailored to protect children's and young people's data. ☑ **Implement robust anti-cyberbullying policies** with clear and effective enforcement. ☑ **Provide resources for victims**, including allocated budget for support programmes, therapy and counselling services for children and young people. ☑ Ensure **age-appropriate applications remain accessible** while aligning with each age group's needs, skills, and digital and media literacy levels. ☑ Enforce stricter **age verification** without compromising privacy to protect minors from inappropriate material, including sexual and violent content, content that tries to influence children's consumption behaviour, and harmful conduct such as grooming, cyber-harassment, cyberbullying, and so on. ☑ **Enhance moderation** and remove harmful content and fake profiles **faster**. ☑ Improve **reporting mechanisms** with transparency, feedback about outcomes, and human oversight. ☑ Design **reporting tools** that are visually accessible, barrier-free and child-friendly.

Stakeholder group	Successes	Recommendations for future actions
Children and young people (continued)		☑ **Ban recurring accounts** violating community standards more effectively. ☑ **Ensure transparent and secure** data handling. ☑ **Implement improved protections against online fraud**, malware and hackers. ☑ **Limit advertisements** from online platforms, games, and apps that target children and young people. ☑ Ensure that **games and apps provide free content for children**. ☑ **Eliminate the need for cookies and personal data** in games. ☑ **Ensure strict privacy protections in monetised platforms** to safeguard children's and young people's data. ☑ **Reduce costs for in-game items and eliminate pay-to-advance game models** directed at children and young people. ☑ Remove **advertising and prohibit data processing and data harvesting** from children's games. ☑ Advocate for **safer online environments with adult content by opt-in** (instead of opt-out) **by default** (for example, by creating a social media platform specifically designed with and for children and youth). ☑ **Increase industry accountability** regarding the protection of minors online, at large.
Experts (academia, civil society, industry, policy)	Experts acknowledged increased cross-sector cooperation and legislative support (e.g., DSA provisions), which are directly tied to the BIK+ objective of ensuring privacy, safety, and systemic risk monitoring for children.	☑ **Further alignment of national laws with DSA** to eliminate regulatory inconsistencies. ☑ **Mandate algorithmic transparency** in digital services that target children and young people. ☑ Develop **EU-wide child protection indicators for digital environments** to **enhance the accountability** of all stakeholders in the BIK ecosystem. ☑ **Increase research** on links between online exposure and **mental health** outcomes.
Teachers and educators	Teachers observed a growing awareness of risks among their colleagues and school environments at large, including their students. Teachers appreciated the online safety support materials and campaigns from Safer Internet Centres (SICs).	☑ **Mandate online safety education as a formal curriculum subject**, as opposed to cross-curricular approaches. ☑ Provide **practical toolkits** and **mandatory, centrally coordinated training for teachers on online safety**. ☑ **Equip educators with timely updates on emerging risks** like deepfakes, scams, and novel risks in relation to AI.

Stakeholder group	Successes	Recommendations for future actions
Parents and caregivers	Parents noted an increased focus on online safety discussions at home triggered by impulses at school and in the media, corresponding to the aims of BIK+ to foster parental awareness and digital guidance.	☑ **Improve support to caregivers and adults, at large, in navigating the fast-changing technological environments** and associated risks (such as those brought by rapid advancements in AI and immersive digital environments). ☑ **Promote activities and initiatives prioritising trust-based parental guidance models** over restrictive bans. ☑ Develop **modular digital parenting workshops** focused on online safety, tailored to the child(ren)'s age and the digital literacy and skill levels of caregivers. ☑ **Ensure that online safety supports are accessible** to vulnerable and marginalised families and single parents. ☑ **Respond to parental concerns regarding the commercialisation of children's digital presence,** regulate influencer marketing and advertising, in-game advertising and the commercialisation of 'free digital play'. ☑ Provide **conclusive guidance on screen time** that balances safety with digital participation.

Pillar 2: Digital empowerment

Stakeholder group	Successes	Recommendations for future actions
Children and young people	Children expressed a strong interest in and appreciation for digital skills training, especially around AI, privacy, and digital media literacy, reflecting BIK+ commitments to strengthen digital competence.	☑ **Promote new and expand existing awareness-raising campaigns** directed at children and adults, educating them about online safety, digital literacy, and media literacy. ☑ **Integrate mandatory online safety, digital literacy, media literacy, and resilience modules in all schools** (see also recommendation from teachers and educators in relation to pillar 1, calling for curricular integration of online safety as a designated component). ☑ **Enhance training for teachers and parents** (see also recommendations from teachers and parents in relation to pillar 1). ☑ **Educate children and young people about mindful digital media use** and content consumption, including social media and gaming platforms. ☑ **Strengthen measures against the dissemination of fake news**. ☑ **Promote practical digital creation skills** (e.g. coding, digital art, video editing, digital storytelling, etc.). ☑ **Support critical thinking** about AI, misinformation, disinformation, and manipulated content. ☑ **Offer tailored training to detect risks online**, tailored to the age and digital maturity levels of children and young people. ☑ **Enhance sexual education** tailored to navigate the highly sexualised nature of the digital environment. ☑ **Enable peer-to-peer mentoring programmes** and co-teaching with digitally skilled youth. ☑ **Ensure that terms and conditions** and **privacy policies** of services and platforms used by children are visually engaging and with age-appropriate materials, organised in a clear manner with plain and accessible language, and designed in a child-/user-friendly way, including fulfilling the full range of accessibility requirements including visually- and hearing-impaired people and people with learning disabilities.

Stakeholder group	Successes	Recommendations for future actions
Experts (academia, civil society, industry, policy)	Experts noted the value of BIK+ in raising awareness of the importance of skills-building and in initiating new digital literacy projects aligned with the BIK+ strategy's focus on media literacy and AI readiness.	☑ **Secure long-term funding** for **non-formal digital education** projects. ☑ **Address the digital divide** by targeting rural and low-income regions more effectively.
Teachers and educators	Teachers recognised the increased availability of educational materials but called for more digestible, concise and tailored content, echoing BIK+ actions on SIC support and education ecosystem support.	☑ Ramp up **support for teachers** and make **digital education a designated component of national curricula**. ☑ **Ensure consistent, centrally supported and mandatory teacher training on online safety topics** across Member States with **free** offers that can be taken up **during working hours** (as opposed to individualising training and on-the-job development, rendering it a 'free time activity' for particularly committed teachers and educators). ☑ Facilitate **cross-curricular integration of digital citizenship** themes. ☑ Provide **tools to assess** students' understanding of **disinformation/misinformation**. ☑ Support **AI-focused modules** with clear ethics frameworks for schools and families.
Parents and caregivers	Parents observed children becoming more digitally capable, particularly in navigating social media platforms, yet they would like to receive more explicit and easy-to-implement guidance to "keep up" tied to BIK+ goals for building resilience and responsible use.	☑ **Improve support of adults in understanding the impact of digital technologies**, platforms, and environments on children's (online) behaviour. ☑ **Offer conclusive and clear guidance** on discussing online risks with children constructively, tailored to different age groups. ☑ **Enhance outreach to parents** via schools, traditional media, and workplaces, and offer accessible, bite-sized, family-friendly guidance in plain language. ☑ **Provide all major participation activities in all EU languages**. ☑ **Translate all major digital empowerment resources** into EU languages. ☑ Equip parents with **easy-to-use age verification and privacy tools**. ☑ **Co-design and provide gamified co-learning apps** for families.

Pillar 3: Active participation

Stakeholder group	Successes	Recommendations for future actions
Children and young people	Children felt more included in digital policy discussions and youth-led activities such as the BIK Youth Panel, directly fulfilling the third pillar of BIK+ to promote active participation, yet felt this was more available in urban areas.	☑ **Routinely and regularly involve children and young people directly in decision-making and policy-making** that affects them by, for instance, low-threshold, fully accessible, short online polls or surveys, potentially using social media platforms that are used by these young yet vital dialogue groups. ☑ **Institutionalise and/or mandate youth involvement** and feedback in platform design and content moderation by default. ☑ **Launch EU Youth Digital Assemblies** linked to legislative initiatives, creating youth-focused consultation platforms for engaging with policymakers, and voting and expressing their views on policies throughout the entire policy life cycle. ☑ **Industry should foster co-development** of services, platforms and games targeted at children and young people together with them, including vulnerable and otherwise marginalised groups in the development process. ☑ **Enable children and young people to vote or comment on content moderation, rules and terms for services, platforms and games** targeted at children and young people. ☑ **More emphasis** should be placed on making **participation opportunities available to children and young people in rural areas and from vulnerable and/or marginalised communities**.
Experts (academia, civil society, industry, policy)	Experts appreciated the BIK+ commitment to youth inclusion in shaping digital futures, linked to the strategic objective of empowering digital citizens.	☑ **Develop participation standards for industry** platforms engaging youth. ☑ **Mainstream youth co-creation** into all EU and national (digital) policy-making. ☑ **Ensure funding of transnational youth panels** that advise policy-making bodies and tech companies. ☑ **Monitor inclusion across socio-economic and minority groups**.
Teachers and educators	Many teachers acknowledged a shift toward more student-led digital projects and forums, encouraged by the BIK+ goal of peer-to-peer engagement.	☑ **Provide training for teachers and educators** on facilitating **meaningful (digital) participation**. ☑ **Expand teachers' and educators' digital education regarding creation competencies**, including digital storytelling for expression and advocacy training. ☑ **Foster closer links between schools and online safety organisations** for joint initiatives, especially focused on rural areas and marginalised communities. ☑ **Recognise youth-led projects** in school assessment frameworks.

Stakeholder group	Successes	Recommendations for future actions
Parents and caregivers	Parents expressed growing respect for children's ability to articulate online needs and risks, evidencing the success of BIK+ in boosting awareness of children's digital agency.	☑ **Strengthen the recognition of parents' roles in supporting BIK+ delivery** across ecosystems. ☑ **Support parents and families in understanding the value of digital citizenship**, participation and expression. ☑ **Foster family-focused participatory events** in tech-related policy development. ☑ **Expand participation opportunities in rural and underserved communities**. ☑ **Translate relevant policy, industry documents, and children's feedback** into low-threshold, accessible and visual summaries for families. ☑ **Develop intergenerational dialogue formats** on children's (digital) rights.

Transversal	
Stakeholder group	**Recommendations for future actions**
Experts (academia, civil society, industry, policy)	☑ **Improving ecosystem-wide stakeholder engagement, particularly with industry, and fostering** cross-regulatory collaboration in areas such as age assurance and data protection are essential for addressing complex challenges across regulatory domains.
Teachers and educators/parents and caregivers	☑ **Promote ecosystem-wide approaches** by connecting and enrolling schools, families, communities, policy and industry in delivering BIK+. ☑ **Foster the involvement of and support for marginalised, vulnerable or otherwise hard-to-reach communities**.

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