Better Internet for Kids

FOREWORD

2021 was another year overshadowed by the global pandemic, with many children and young people obliged to study online, as daily life was again disrupted by lockdowns.

*The **Better Internet for Kids (BIK) platform**, our EU-funded European resource hub under the Better Internet for Children strategy (BIK strategy), and the co-funded network of **Safer Internet Centres (SICs)**, continued to support schools and families across Europe. 2021 marked new records in terms of participation, including remarkable youth participation in **Safer Internet Day (SID)** and at the annual **Safer Internet Forum (SIF)**. Well done!*

*Helping Europe **recover from the pandemic** was very much at the core of the European Commission's efforts. The European Digital COVID Certificate allowed a return to work, education, travel and social life, and thanks to the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Member States and all Europeans will be better equipped for the challenges and the opportunities of the green and digital transitions.*

*Strengthening **children's digital rights** was well present in the EU's legislative work, in particular in the negotiations of the temporary derogation from the ePrivacy Directive to combat child sexual abuse online, and of the ground-breaking proposal for the **Digital Services Act*** that will increase accountability and transparency online.*

*Work started to make the **2030 European Digital Decade** also our children's decade. In 2021, the European Commission took a decisive step towards mainstreaming child participation. More than 10,000 children and young people were consulted for the first comprehensive European strategy on the Rights of the Child. And over 750 children and young people shared their digital priorities and visions in over 70 workshops around Europe, helping shape the European Digital Principles and the new BIK strategy, both planned for adoption in 2022.*

*After looking back at the year gone by, let's turn to the future, to 2022, the **European Year of Youth**. Announcing this in her speech on the State of the European Union 2021, Commission President Ursula von de Leyen mentioned "the inspiration we can draw from Europe's young people. … And while they are anxious about the future, they are determined to make it better. Our Union will be stronger if it is more like our next generation: reflective, determined and caring. Grounded in values and bold in action."*

*That is also our vision for the **new BIK strategy**. Stay tuned!*

Roberto Viola

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

*The Digital Services Act aims to set out harmonised rules for a safe, predictable and trusted online environment in line with EU fundamental rights. This will significantly improve tackling availability and dissemination of illegal content online while protecting users' fundamental rights, including freedom of speech. It also enhances risk management vis à vis the rights of the child. Very large online platforms, that reach more than 10 per cent of the EU's population, also need to increase their transparency and accountability. The act will enter into force once adopted by the European Parliament and the Council.

Discover more about the act and next steps on the European Commission website.

BACKGROUND TO BETTER INTERNET FOR KIDS

Building on a succession of Safer Internet programmes, Better Internet for Kids (BIK) is a European Commission–funded initiative aiming to create a better internet for Europe's children and youth, funded under the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) instrument. This report provides an insight into some of the key achievements and areas of focus during 2021.

The Better Internet for Kids core service platform and related activities is managed on behalf of the European Commission by European Schoolnet (EUN), which coordinates the Insafe network of awareness centres, helplines and youth panels, in partnership with INHOPE (the International Association of Internet Hotlines), dedicated to the removal of illegal online content. These combined strands are commonly referred to as *Safer Internet Centres (SICs)*, operating in 26 EU Member States, plus Iceland, Norway and the United Kingdom, in the drive to keep children and young people safe online.

With EU co-funding to the level of 13 million euro in 2021 for this programme of work – representing the two service contracts (for EUN and INHOPE respectively) and grant agreements with Safer Internet Centres on a pro-rata basis (for SICs in EU member states and EEA countries) – this work is clearly of continuing strategic importance to the European Commission.

What is a Safer Internet Centre?

Insafe and INHOPE work together through a network of Safer Internet Centres across Europe – typically comprising an awareness centre, helpline, hotline and youth panel.

National awareness centres focus on raising awareness and understanding of safer internet issues and emerging trends. They run campaigns to empower children, young people, parents, carers and teachers with the skills, knowledge and strategies to stay safe online and take advantage of the opportunities that the internet and mobile technologies provide.

Helplines provide information, advice and assistance to children, youth and parents on how to deal with harmful content, harmful contact (such as grooming), harmful conduct (such as cyberbullying or sexting) and, increasingly, contract issues (where the child is a consumer in the online space). Helplines can be accessed via a variety of means – telephone, email, web forms, Skype, and online chat services.

Hotlines exist to allow members of the public to report illegal content anonymously. Reports are then passed on to the appropriate body for action (for example, an internet service provider (ISP) or law enforcement agency (LEA) in the country, or corresponding INHOPE Hotline).

Youth panels allow young people to express their views and exchange knowledge and experiences concerning their use of online technologies, as well as tips on how to stay safe. They also advise on internet safety and empowerment strategy, help create innovative resources, and disseminate eSafety messages to their peers. There has been an increased focus on youth participation during 2021, across a number of activity lines. Read on to discover more.

Find out more about the work of European Safer Internet Centres on the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal at www.betterinternetforkids.eu.

Jointly, European Schoolnet and INHOPE support Safer Internet Centres in responding to the latest online issues, helping to promote the many opportunities the online world offers, while also addressing the challenges. And while Europe's children and youth are the main benefactors of this work, the Better Internet for Kids initiative also reaches out to, and collaborates with, a range of other stakeholders – parents and carers, teachers and educators, researchers, industry, civil society, decision makers and law enforcement – reflecting the fact that we all have a role to play in creating a better internet. Additionally, the actions conducted in the framework of Better Internet for Kids frequently reach beyond Europe, impacting upon safer and better internet approaches right across the globe.

While 2021 was undoubtedly a year of continuing uncertainty as the COVID-19 pandemic raged on across the globe, bringing with it new variants and new challenges, Better Internet for Kids actions, and the network of Safer Internet Centres in Europe continued to adapt to this new reality.
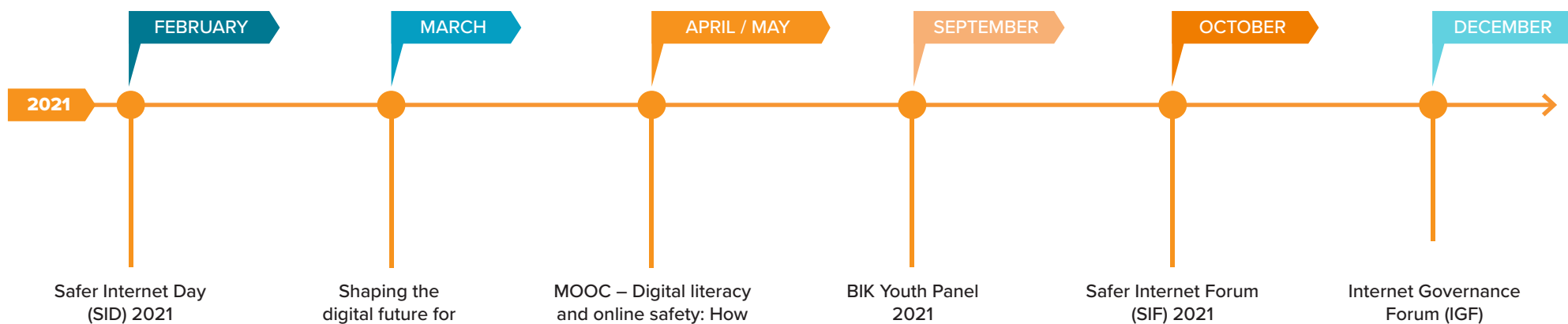
The 2021 edition of Safer Internet Day provides an excellent example of this flexibility of approach. So often a backdrop to a multitude of face-to-face events and training opportunities across Europe and beyond, lockdown restrictions meant that SID stakeholders had to shift to online or hybrid events. Rather than curtailing activities, however, quite the reverse happened – celebrations were many and varied, and allowed for much wider and more diverse audiences to be reached than previously.

Safer Internet Centres continued to produce a range of awareness-raising resources, as is a standard feature of their work. However, in addition to responding to the more typical online safety opportunities and risks, they also covered topics related to well-being, especially in light of young lives mainly lived in the digital space for significant parts of the year. Helplines equally witnessed a shift in trends as the pandemic continued with, for example, fewer calls related to excessive use as parents and carers accepted that their children are spending more time online, particularly during lockdowns, but increased contacts related to love, relationships and sexuality online.

A considerable focus of activity during 2021 was on developing approaches that truly listen to, and act upon, the desires and demands of children and young people in shaping digital spaces. Set firmly within the context of the European Commission's vision and avenues for Europe's digital transformation by 2030, the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation work sought the views of children and young people (and other stakeholders) to ensure that the digital world is fit for the future and can allow everyone to benefit from all the opportunities it offers. While initial findings were presented at the 2021 edition of the Safer Internet Forum, the outputs from this work will continue to shape work programmes and priorities for many years to come.

Discover more about some highlights of the year in the interactive timeline and articles which follow.

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2021 IN REVIEW

2021	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL / MAY	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	DECEMBER

FEBRUARY

Safer Internet Day (SID) 2021

MARCH

Shaping the digital future for Europe's children and young people

APRIL / MAY

MOOC – Digital literacy and online safety: How the pandemic tested our skills

SEPTEMBER

BIK Youth Panel 2021

OCTOBER

Safer Internet Forum (SIF) 2021

DECEMBER

Internet Governance Forum (IGF)

Youth Pledge for a Better Internet… one year on

Better Internet for Kids best-practice guides

INHOPE focus group on the science of reporting

BIK bulletin

Safer Internet Day (SID) 2021 (February 2021)

Safer Internet Day was celebrated on Tuesday, 9 February 2021 in approximately 200 countries and territories around the world

2021 commenced with preparations for the most significant awareness-raising campaign of the global eSafety calendar. The 18th annual edition of Safer Internet Day (SID) was celebrated across the globe on Tuesday, 9 February 2021. With an enduring campaign slogan of "Together for a better internet", this day aims to raise awareness of the importance of both a safer and a better internet, where everyone is empowered to use technology responsibly, respectfully, critically and creatively. The campaign targets a range of benefactors and stakeholders – children and young people, parents and carers, teachers, educators and social workers, as well as industry, decision makers and politicians – to encourage everyone to play their part in creating a better internet.

Organised within the framework of Better Internet for Kids (BIK) activities on behalf of the European Commission, Safer Internet Day 2021 took place in a context never seen before with many countries across the globe still in the midst of lockdowns or severe restrictions as a result of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Despite the many challenges this presented, stakeholders rallied to adapt their plans and localised campaign efforts to take account of this new reality, with many Safer Internet Centres in Europe and Safer Internet Day Committees and Supporters around the globe opting for hybrid or fully digital activities to celebrate SID 2021.

Feedback from SID stakeholders indicates that the day was a huge success, with some form of activity to promote the safe and positive use of digital technology taking place in approximately 200 countries and territories across the globe. Indeed, many SID stakeholders commented that the enforced move to a fully online campaign created new opportunities to engage with target audiences, and many reported increased attendance at online events as a result.

As always, across Europe, the network of Safer Internet Centres provided a diverse backdrop to the celebrations. These included:

▶ In **Bulgaria**, the main event was dedicated to the topic of **false information online** and the risks it poses to uninformed users. Members of the **Youth Panel** chose the topic, and prepared and demonstrated short role-play debates on the most prevalent types of false information especially concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. After the debates, all participants discussed the dangers of fake news, the ways that such news becomes viral, and how it could be stopped, minimised and debunked.

▶ In **Croatia**, a **webinar for children** titled **Where are you in the digital jungle?** was the main event of the day. Children had the opportunity to question a panel, composed of famous YouTubers, about their approaches to online safety and how they have adapted to the COVID-19 crisis. A further webinar, targeted at teachers and others who work with children, aimed to strengthen their capacity for working directly with young people in the online environment and overcoming the challenges which can arise.

▶ The **Danish Safer Internet Centre** celebrated Safer Internet Day by launching a range of materials and activities on **gaming**, targeting parents and professionals working with children and young people. An additional webinar for parents included a panel discussion where experts discussed different family situations related to gaming and took questions from the audience. The event was very successful, reaching 2,100 unique viewers during the live streaming and achieving a total reach of 229,000.

▶ In **Finland**, safer internet issues fall within the concept of **media literacy** and, as such, the traditional Safer Internet Day celebration is included in Media Literacy Week. The aim of the week is to advance the media literacy skills of children, young people and adults as well as to support professional educators, guardians and other educators in their important media education tasks. The week was planned and carried out in co-operation with over 40 partner organisations from all sectors of society, from governmental organisations to NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and businesses. Resources published during the week included a test about digital footprints, a video about what the internet means for elderly citizens, podcasts and articles about small children as media users, two games focused on copyright issues, and news literacy materials for adults.

▶ The **German Safer Internet Centre** decided early in the planning process to focus on a digital strategy and move all activities online. For this reason, it was possible to create even more content for different target groups and bring them together on a multimedia landing page that was launched on SID 2021. This strategy paid off, as almost twice as many users visited the website on SID itself compared to the previous year. The main focus of this year's SID campaign in Germany was on **What do I believe? Opinion making between fact and fake**, and several lesson plans were published to support classroom discussions.

▶ The **Irish Safer Internet Centre** hosted the **#BeKindOnline** webinar series, providing free webinars for parents and teachers to **empower healthier online behaviour in children and young people**. Additional activities for students encouraged them to reflect on issues around well-being online in what has been a most unusual and challenging year. Youth participants in an online peer-led training programme also shared their experiences.

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▶ In the Netherlands, the **Dutch Safer Internet Centre** published a survey on **online well-being in the COVID-19 period**, with a special focus on **online love and sexuality**. The results were somewhat surprising for the centre. Since the Dutch Helpline had seen a large increase of online help requests during lockdowns, it was assumed that being constantly online had possibly led to more problems. But it turned out that since the beginning of the pandemic, young people did not have more negative experiences (such as experiencing online sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and similar) than before COVID-19; indeed, many respondents said that the atmosphere on social media was now more positive than before. So, while COVID-19 has been hard for young people – school lockdowns, not going out, missing socialising with friends, and so on – the online world has provided a bright light during dark times.

Celebrations beyond Europe, facilitated by Safer Internet Day Committees and organisational and industry supporters of SID, were equally vibrant and varied.

The *Safer Internet Day website* is promoted to stakeholders and the wider public as the "home of all things SID", acting as a focal point for all campaign activity. The site received a refresh in autumn 2020 in preparation for the Safer Internet Day 2021 campaign. While the main focus of the refresh was on upgrading the underpinning technology, the site also benefited from a clean new design and attention to accessibility and usability features.

Social media always plays a significant role in the planning and delivery of the annual Safer Internet Day campaign, with activities starting well in advance of the day. For SID 2021, the use of social media was more important than ever – with the world moving increasing online during the pandemic, online platforms became the main method of reaching out to stakeholders and supporters before, during and after the campaign period. Thanks to the multiplier approach developed over previous editions of the campaign, SID 2021 messages were spread worldwide to millions of people via social media via multiple stakeholders.

Find out more about Safer Internet Day at www.saferinternetday.org, or read on to learn more about other events to mark the day.

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Youth Pledge for a Better Internet... one year on (February 2021)

The Youth Pledge for a Better Internet initiative was launched on Safer Internet Day 2020

While normally hosting a high-profile event on the occasion of Safer Internet Day, this year's EC event – like so many others – was transformed into an online version. In addition to providing an opportunity to hear about SID celebrations across the globe and the latest policy and strategy approaches to protecting children and young people online, it also provided the perfect opportunity to reflect on a year of work and collaboration as part of the Youth Pledge for a Better Internet initiative.

The Youth Pledge activity was launched the previous year, on the occasion of Safer Internet Day 2020. As part of this work, a group of Better Internet for Kids (BIK) Youth Ambassadors prepared a pledge on how to make information on the apps and services they use on the internet more age appropriate for children and young people. After an initial mapping of research and youth consultation work carried out by Safer Internet Centres in the Insafe network, the BIK Youth Ambassadors collectively reflected on which priorities should be set to ensure that online platforms and services are designed in an age-appropriate way that truly meets the developmental needs of children and young people. These ideas were presented to members of the *Alliance to better protect minors online* (a self-regulatory initiative designed to improve the online environment for children and young people) at the SID 2020 event, where it was agreed that an ongoing dialogue would take place between youth and industry representatives to progress the aims of the pledge.

Some of the planned activities – such as a co-design workshop – had to be adapted as a result of the pandemic, but still a varied range of co-creation projects took place throughout the course of 2020 in the framework of the pledge, in partnership with six companies, namely Facebook, Lego, Samsung, Sulake, Super RTL and Twitter: all members of the Alliance. While the November 2020 edition of the Safer Internet Forum (SIF) provided an opportunity to present the *first outcomes of the Youth Pledge initiative*, the SID 2021 online event allowed for a more detailed look back at achievements.

Industry activities

Read more about the various projects delivered by industry partners as part of the Youth Pledge activities:

- ▶ **Facebook/TTC Labs**
- ▶ **The LEGO Group**
- ▶ **Samsung**
- ▶ **Sulake**
- ▶ **SUPER RTL**
- ▶ **Twitter**

Based on the successes achieved, the Youth Pledge for a Better Internet initiative is continuing and is now open to new activities and interest from other companies. In order to participate, various criteria must be fulfilled, such as:

- ▶ a commitment to co-creation and co-design, and participatory design techniques.

- ▶ involvement of a relevant and inclusive group of children and youth, providing young participants with a space to express their views and assurances that their voices will be listened to and acted upon.

- ▶ creation of tangible results, delivering more age-appropriate and child-friendly services and products (for example, more user-friendly information, videos, games explaining policies in child-friendly and age-appropriate format). Additionally, participating companies have to demonstrate in detail what improvements or changes have resulted.

- ▶ ongoing dedication to share strategies and results with the wider public, with the aim of further developing capacity for and commitment to youth-led approaches.

Read more about continuing Youth Pledge activities and the detailed criteria for participants on the Better Internet for Kids portal, and discover reflections on the SID 2021 event from the perspective of a BIK Youth Ambassador.

Linked to this work, a best-practice guideline on age-appropriate design with youth was published in March 2021, and the March 2021 edition of the BIK bulletin was also dedicated to this topic.

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INHOPE focus group on the science of reporting (February 2021)

INHOPE hosted a focus group on the science of reporting

With over 200 analysts, the INHOPE network of internet hotlines responds to reports from the public to get CSAM rapidly removed from the internet and provides intelligence to law enforcement so that offenders can be prosecuted and, hopefully, victims rescued. In 2022, the European Commission plans to propose new long-term legislation to fight child sexual abuse after adopting the temporary derogation to the ePrivacy Directive in 2021 to enable voluntary detection of CSAM.

Read more about the ePrivacy derogation and new regulations on the INHOPE website, or see the European Parliament press release.

What if every member of the public knew what to do if they came across child sexual abuse material (CSAM) or suspected CSAM, the same way they know what to do and who to call if there is a fire? What if every member of the public reported online CSAM because they knew that an urgent response was needed and because they knew what to report and how to report? The question, and the topic of INHOPE's 2021 focus group, held in the framework of SID 2021 celebrations in February 2021, was how to make that "what if...?" happen.

It has been predicted that in 2022 there will be 6 billion internet users, and more than 7.5 billion internet users by 2030. As this number increases, it becomes more vital that the public have information at their fingertips on how to report CSAM.

With presentations from the European Commission, INHOPE member hotlines, NCMEC (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children), ICMEC (International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children), and six interactive break-out sessions, the focus group provided a deep-dive into public reporting.

The first part of the day focused on research into reporters which had been conducted by NCMEC. The study found that:

▶ most reporters are one-time reporters.

▶ an increase in viral images shared across multiple platforms is leading to duplicate reporting.

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Focus group participants joined breakout rooms to continue the conversation. Half of the group considered topics including reporting trends, who reporters are, and if there has been a notable change in reporting and reporters. The key findings included:

▶ Self-generated content, grooming and extortion, especially on gaming platforms, is on the rise.

▶ Collectively, we're still trying to understand the impact that COVID-19 has had on reporting.

▶ Greater collection and analysis of available data could drive improvements to processes but challenges remain.

The other half of the group focussed on how reporters can be reached. Their conclusions were:

▶ There is an increase in public confidence through awareness raising campaigns.

▶ "*The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement*".

▶ Connecting with a wider ecosystem of other hotlines, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and law enforcement agencies (LEAs) is crucial.

For the second part of the day, the focus changed to the importance of reporting, where participants heard real-world hotline accounts. A presentation by ICMEC focused on the pros and cons of mandatory reporting, followed by presentations from a variety of hotlines from across the globe. The key takeaways included:

▶ Mandatory reporting of ISPs (internet service providers) can have many advantages, such as incentivising corporate social responsibility, but it also comes with challenges.

▶ The local context of different hotlines is varied and so different strategies for how to improve reporting are required.

Read more about the focus group and discover key takeaways on the INHOPE website.

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BIK bulletin

The Better Internet for Kids (BIK) bulletin is a quarterly electronic newsletter which aims to keep readers informed on better internet issues. Each edition provides a topical focus article looking at the latest trends in online life, with features from youth, industry and the research community, along with a mix of news and resources from key stakeholders in the field, including the European network of Safer Internet Centres, operating under the banner of Insafe and INHOPE. The typical publishing cycle for the BIK bulletin is each March, June, September and December.

Read past editions of the BIK bulletin and subscribe to receive future editions at www.betterinternetforkids.eu/bikbulletin.

The **March 2021** edition considered **age-appropriate design with youth**. Involving children and young people in matters that affect them – giving them meaningful involvement and a voice – should never be considered as optional: they are fundamental rights, which should apply equally offline and online. Online service providers should therefore actively seek ways to enable the voice of their younger users in shaping the service to meet their needs and serve the best interests of children.

The **June 2021** edition focused on **children's rights in the digital environment** and, especially, how we can move from theory towards practice. While the digital revolution has provided many opportunities for child empowerment, participation and expression online, it has also raised some concerns as to how they can exercise their rights in the digital environment. Research evidence must be considered alongside practical approaches.

The **September 2021** edition of the BIK bulletin was dedicated to the theme of the 2021 Safer Internet Forum (SIF) on **how to make Europe's Digital Decade fit for children and young people**. Following consultations with children and young people (and other stakeholders) to ensure that the digital world is fit for the future and can allow everyone to benefit from all the opportunities it offers, this edition presented some initial observations.

The **December 2021** edition provided a **recap on the many initiatives and policy developments in the field over the last year, and looked forward to the ongoing work to keep children and young people safe online in 2022 and beyond**, including the launch of Europe's Digital Principles, an updated Better Internet for Children (BIK) strategy, and ongoing support for the younger generations who have been heavily affected by the pandemic during the European Year of Youth.

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Shaping the digital future for Europe's children and young people
(March 2021 onwards)

The European Commission aspires to put children's participation at the heart of EU policies and initiatives, while ensuring that children in vulnerable situations also have their voices heard. This objective therefore provided a large focus to activities under the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) umbrella during 2021, and will shape continuing work in this space for many years to come.

In March 2021, the European Commission adopted the *2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade* to translate the European Union's digital ambitions for 2030 into concrete targets and to ensure that these objectives will be met. The document identified four 'cardinal points' on digital capacities in infrastructures, education and skills, and on the digital transformation of business and public services. This European way for the digital society also wants to ensure full respect of EU fundamental rights, with the aim of proposing a comprehensive set of Digital Principles, including protecting and empowering children in the online space.

Declaration on European Digital Rights and Principles

The draft declaration, established through this work, was published on 26 January 2022 – *discover more here*. In brief, the draft declaration covers key rights and principles for the digital transformation, such as placing people and their rights at its centre, supporting solidarity and inclusion, ensuring freedom of choice online, fostering participation in the digital public space, increasing safety, security and empowerment of individuals, and promoting the sustainability of the digital future.

Additionally, the importance of the rights of children and young people in the digital environment was highlighted with the publication of the *EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child*, also in March 2021, which aims to build the best possible life for children in the European Union and across the globe, including online, through the normalisation of child participation as part of the decision-making process.

Within the same framework, the publication of the *General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*, by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, again in the same month placed a specific focus on the rights of young people in the online world.

Against this background and as part of the BIK initiative, consultation activities took place from May to October 2021 with children, young people, parents, carers and educators from across (and beyond) the European Union on the priorities they see to promote, protect, respect and fulfil children's rights in a digital world. While contributing to the formulation of the EU's Digital Principles, it was also intended that the collected insights contribute to the development of an updated Better Internet for Kids (BIK) strategy, to be adopted in 2022.

More specifically:

▶ From March to August 2021, a #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation was conducted with support from the Insafe network of European Safer Internet Centres and a wider range of European online safety and child rights organisations.

In preparation for this exercise, a protocol was established to guide activities and set out a number of principles to ensure that consultation sessions were child-centred and rights-based.

In addition, a best-practice guide on *Children's rights in the digital environment: Moving from theory to practice* was published, outlining how to engage children and young people in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of their digital rights.

Over 70 consultation sessions were carried out, meaning the voices of more than 750 children and young people across Europe were heard in a structured and systematic way.

▶ Additionally, as part of a **Better Internet for Kids MOOC** (massive open online course) for teachers in April and May 2021 (see below), with a focus on *Digital literacy and online safety: How the pandemic tested our skills*, over 300 European teachers and educators were consulted on a similar range of questions.

▶ In addition, a broader consultation exercise with EU citizens, conducted from August until October 2021, aimed to gather wider input from those stakeholders who care for, educate, or can otherwise influence positive online opportunities and experiences for Europe's children and young people. This survey posed a series of questions, based on the questions which children and young people responded to, so that perspectives could be compared.

Respondents were asked to consider the opportunities and benefits which children and young people can gain from being online, the challenges and risks which they might face, and who is (or should be) responsible for improving online experiences. They were also asked to give their views on what policy makers need to do over the next decade to bring about change.

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The outcomes of the consultation with children and young people are summarised in the report *How to make Europe's Digital Decade fit for children and young people?*.

> *"Children and young people are the future. They should sit around the table when Europe's Digital Decade is being shaped and built. They are growing up in a time where being offline is hardly an option. This new generation understands and embraces the digital world in a different way than older people do – and this includes policy makers and other stakeholders who are driving the rules of the internet and its governance."*
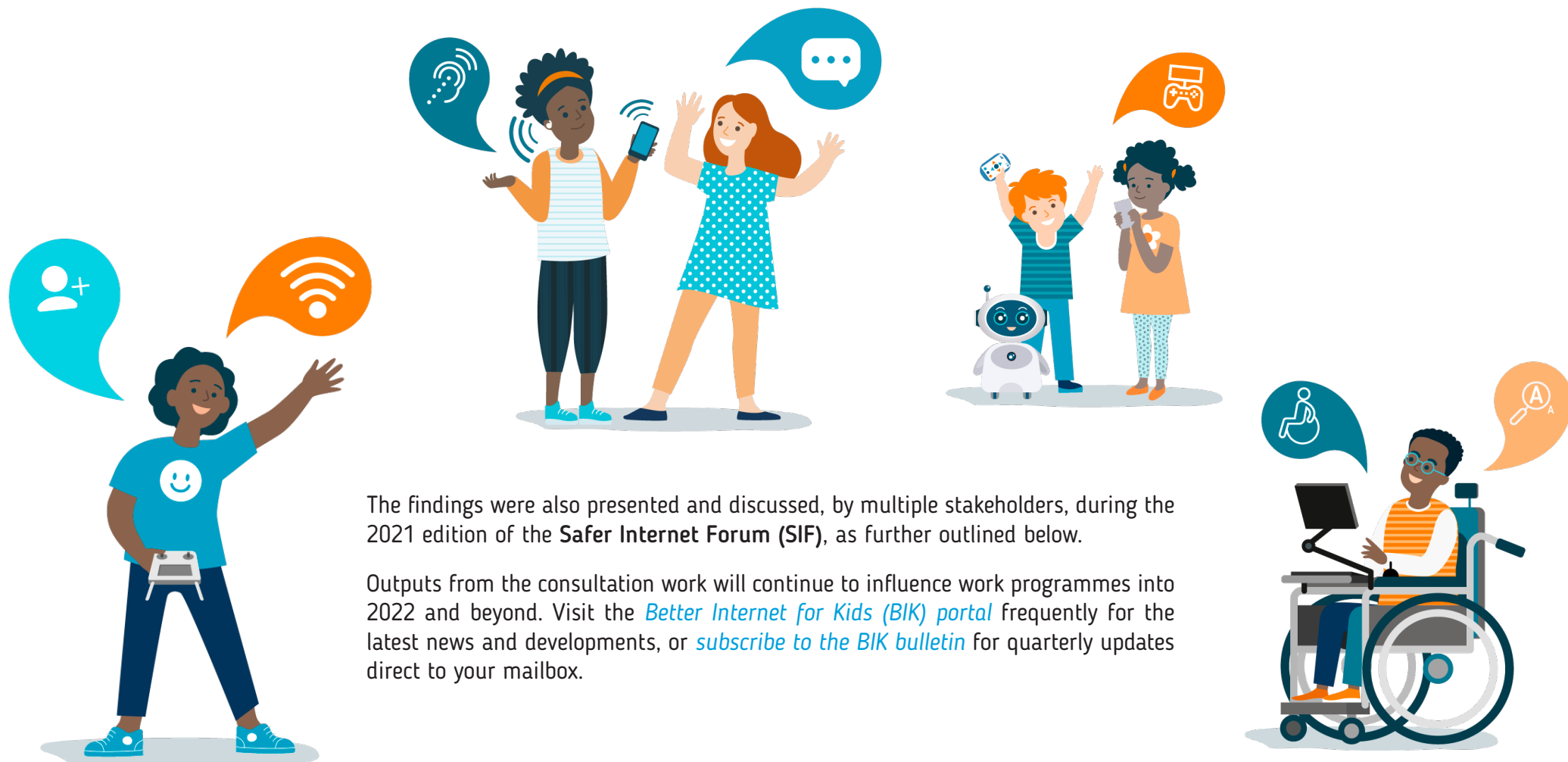
Preface to the report, How to make Europe's Digital Decade fit for children and young people?
A report from the consultation with children and young people, by the #DigitalDecade4YOUth Youth Advisory Group

The key findings can be briefly summarised as follows:

▶ **The internet plays a crucial role in almost every aspect of children's and young people's lives**. It allows them to stay connected with friends and family, it offers various opportunities for entertainment and to escape boredom, and presents an important source of information and learning. The consultation shows that, overall, children and young people have a good understanding of both the positive and negative aspects of the internet. They realise that the digital world – much like the offline world – will never be entirely safe.

▶ When asked to voice their main concerns about the digital realm, most of the groups mentioned **cyberbullying**, closely followed by **hateful and harmful content**. They also consider **fake news and disinformation** to be an important threat, not only for minors, but perhaps even more so for older people. **Privacy and data protection** equally featured high on respondents' risk list.

▶ Across the different consultation groups, general concerns were raised about the **lack of awareness among internet users** (including not only children and young people, but also parents and other adults) about online risks and potential mitigation measures. Several consultation groups highlighted their concern specifically for **younger children**, who may be less experienced and more vulnerable. The respondents agreed that the environment a person lives in is very important, with an essential role to be played by parents.

▶ There seems to be widespread agreement that the digital world provides a wealth of opportunities. Yet, respondents consider it **not sufficiently inclusive and accessible** for children and young people with disabilities. Explicit concerns were also raised about hateful and violent content online targeting children and young people in vulnerable and marginalised situations, with "being different" in any possible way seen as a risk factor often leading to harassment and rejection.

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The findings were also presented and discussed, by multiple stakeholders, during the 2021 edition of the **Safer Internet Forum (SIF)**, as further outlined below.

Outputs from the consultation work will continue to influence work programmes into 2022 and beyond. Visit the *Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal* frequently for the latest news and developments, or *subscribe to the BIK bulletin* for quarterly updates direct to your mailbox.

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MOOC – Digital literacy and online safety: How the pandemic tested our skills (April-May 2021)

Fake news, online fraud and other types of disinformation constantly flood the internet, and this has been especially prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Distinguishing true from false, and useful from superfluous, requires both time and knowledge. To guide users, a Better Internet for Kids (BIK) MOOC (massive open online course), titled *Digital literacy and online safety: How the pandemic tested our skills*, was launched on the European Schoolnet Academy during April 2021.

The MOOC, Digital literacy and online safety: How the pandemic tested our skills, was hosted on the European Schoolnet Academy in April 2021

The online life we live today comes with many opportunities, as well as many potential risks. Being digitally literate and having awareness of such risks plays a crucial role in being safe online. Moreover, the importance of digital literacy skills continued to be emphasised during 2021 as the world battled the ongoing pandemic, and restrictions including teleworking, remote education, and less face-to-face interactions remained a regular feature of our daily lives.

Against this background, this MOOC – primarily targeted at primary and secondary school teachers of any subject – explored online trends and issues in the context of the COVID-19 reality. It provided course participants with essential knowledge, tips and tools to handle a wide range of issues such as misinformation and disinformation, conspiracy theories, online scams (such as phishing, malware and ransomware), account security, online privacy, benefits and risks associated with livestreaming, and healthy online relationships among others.

Moreover, it enabled participants to gain a better understanding of risks and challenges that young people face when they go online. Along with the course moderators, participants discussed strategies for supporting young people and helping them to develop safe and responsible online and offline behaviours. Participants were directed to a wide range of resources that can be used in schools, and were given opportunities to share their own experiences, challenges and successes to support peer-learning approaches.

The learning objectives of the MOOC were:

▶ To understand the benefits and risks associated with digital technologies and the internet in the context of a pandemic, especially in relation to children and young people.

▶ To explore the opportunities that the internet provides to access knowledge, communicate, and develop skills and creativity, but also critical thinking skills.

▶ To learn about various online challenges such as disinformation and scams, and how to support children and young people if they encounter such difficulties.

▶ To raise awareness about the importance of heathy relationships with technology and the internet.

▶ To raise awareness of the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) strategy and Insafe network, as part of the wider work of Safer Internet Centres (SICs) in Europe, and associated resources.

As outlined above, the MOOC also provided an opportunity to survey participants on their priorities for promoting, protecting, respecting and fulfilling children and young people's rights in a digital world as part of wider **#DigitalDecade4YOUth** consultation exercises.

Read more about the MOOC on the European Schoolnet Academy.

Better Internet for Kids best-practice guides

A key aim of the European Commission's Better Internet for Kids programme is to build capacity in Europe (and beyond) for creating safer and better online experiences for children and young people. One way of doing this is by sharing good practices developed through work within the context of the Insafe and INHOPE networks of Safer Internet Centres and other key stakeholders. As such, a number of best-practice guides were published during 2021.

A best-practice guideline on *Age-appropriate design with youth* (published in March 2021) explores ways to meaningfully engage with and involve young people in co-design processes for online services, and the rationale for adopting this approach. It highlights existing projects and provides case study examples, drawing especially on the **Youth Pledge for a Better Internet initiative** (see above) in which young people worked alongside industry members of the Alliance to better protect minors online to improve terms and conditions of use.

A best-practice guideline on *Children and young people with disabilities in an online world* (also published in March 2021) specifically explores the opportunities and challenges of creating an inclusive world for children and young people online. It considers the roles of different stakeholders, policy responses, and the responsibility of industry for ensuring accessibility by design. Importantly, it again reflects on the importance of involving children and young people in co-creation processes.

A Safer Internet Centre + (SIC+) pilot programme was established during 2020 to foster knowledge sharing and capacity building on successful initiatives on online safety for children and young people, at regional and/or global level, building on the success of the Insafe-INHOPE networks in building awareness raising, helpline and hotline services. A best-practice guideline titled *Learning from Safer Internet Centre (SIC) collaboration with non-EU organisations: The SIC+ pilot programme* (published in April 2021) provides an overview of the initiative a year after its inception.

Created to supplement the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation activities, a best-practice guide titled *Children's rights in the digital environment: Moving from theory to practice* (published in May 2021, and amended in December 2021) provides an overview of the existing efforts in child participation and digital policymaking, and formulates best-practice guidelines for engaging children in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of their digital rights.

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BIK Youth Panel 2021 (September-October 2021)

Youth participation is a key strand running throughout the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) project, ensuring that the voice of youth is represented, heard, and acted upon in resource development and policy approaches. Each year, therefore, a BIK Youth Panel is organised prior to and during the Safer Internet Forum (SIF), encouraging a group of young people to voice not just their personal opinions and challenges regarding safer/better internet issues, but also those of their peers who they are representing at European level.

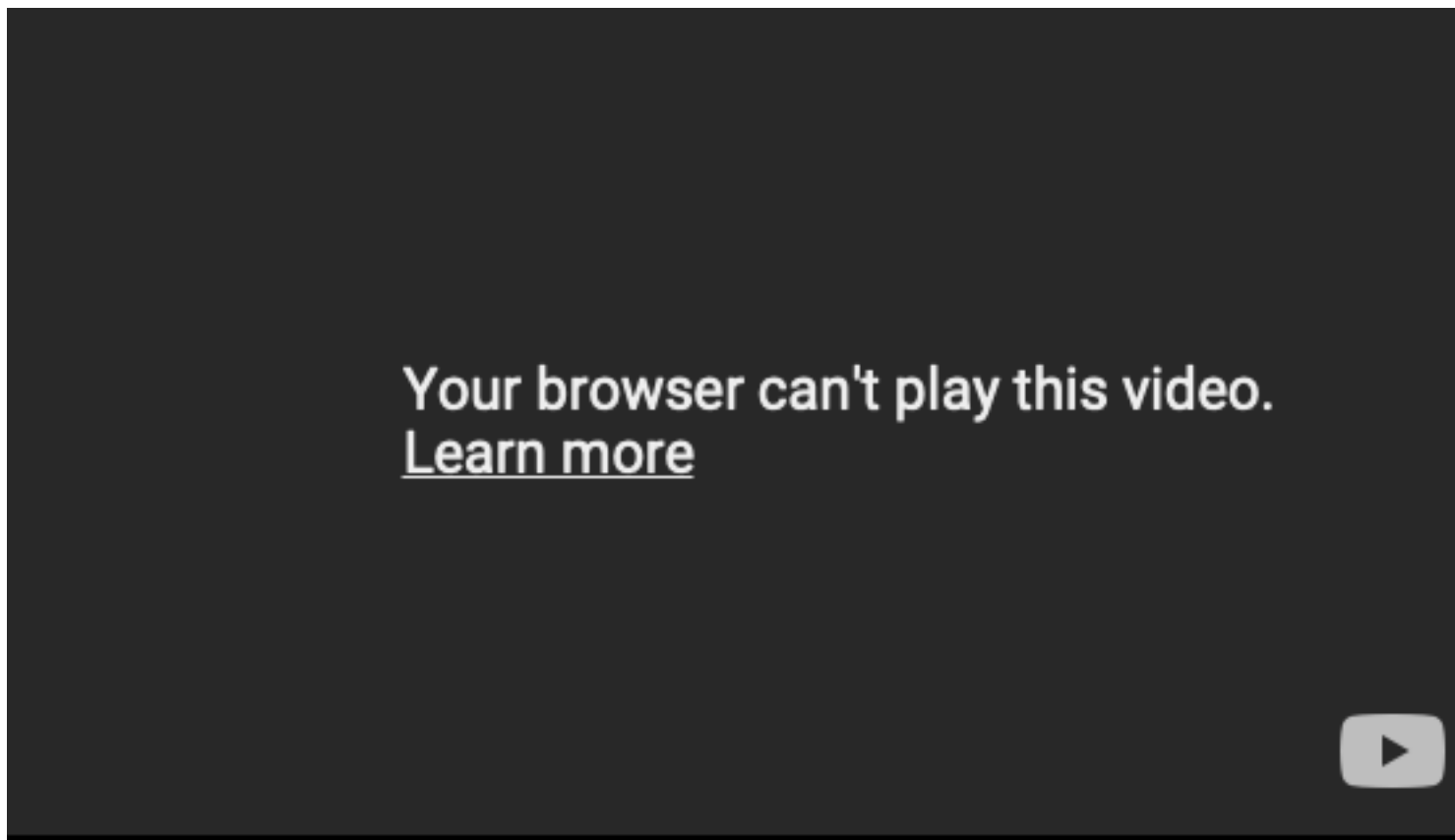*The BIK Youth Panel 2021 was, once again, a fully digital edition*

In the months prior to SIF 2021, 32 young people from 19 countries joined a total of six preparatory online meetings, where they identified the topics they would like to focus on and the groups they would be working in. Throughout these meetings, BIK Youth Panellists worked collaboratively to discuss, script, film and edit video presentations on three diverse topics which explored the following questions:

▶ **Why is it important to create a better online school environment?**

▶ **Why is our data being collected?**

▶ **How do we wish the internet to look in 2031?**

Following the conclusion of preparatory meetings, two days of BIK Youth Panel activities, which would traditionally take place in Brussels prior to SIF, took place online on 4–5 October 2021. Panellists used most of these two days to finalise their videos and to prepare for their presentations during SIF 2021.
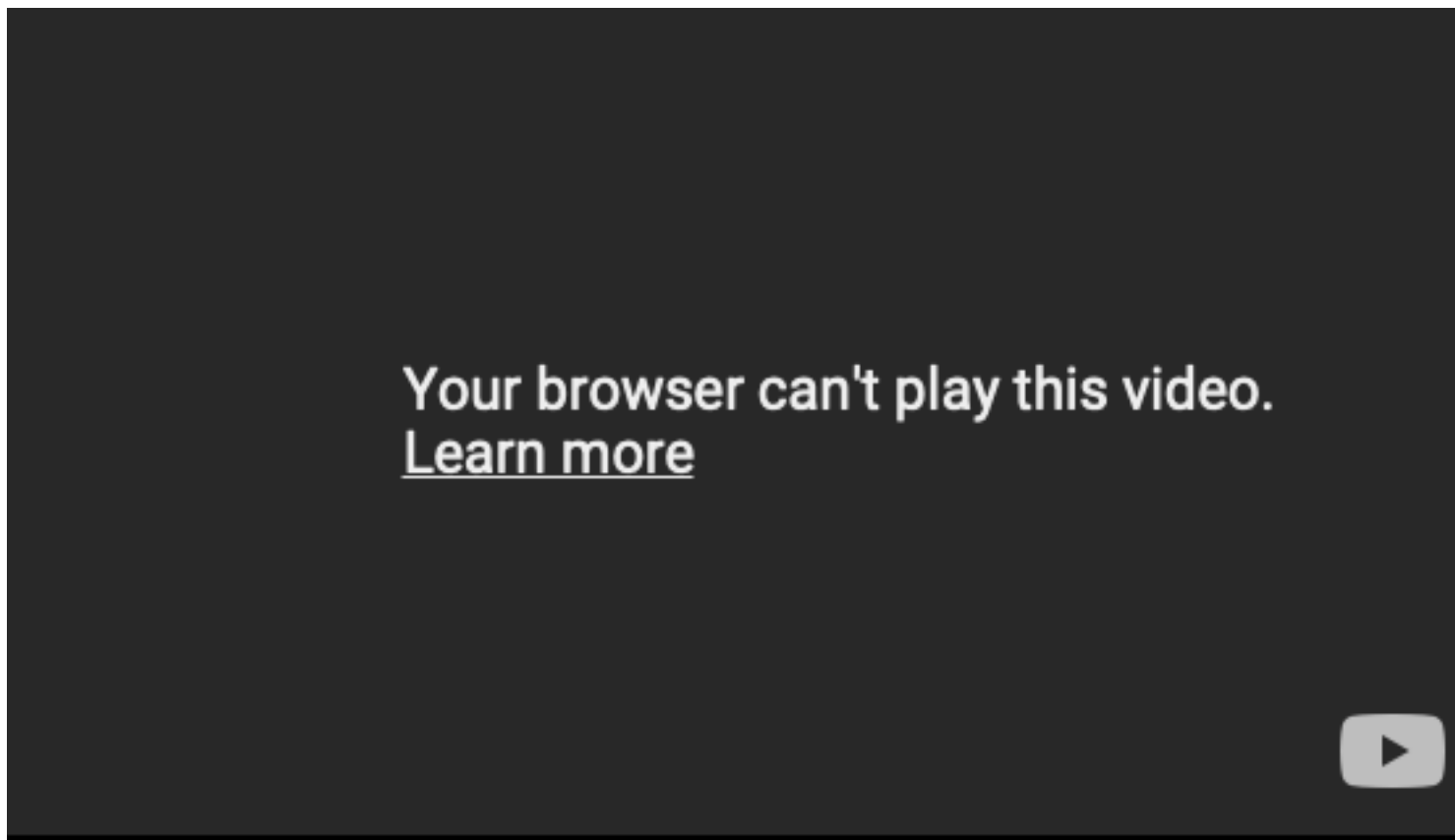
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Why is it important to create a better online school environment?

▶ **Why is our data being collected?**
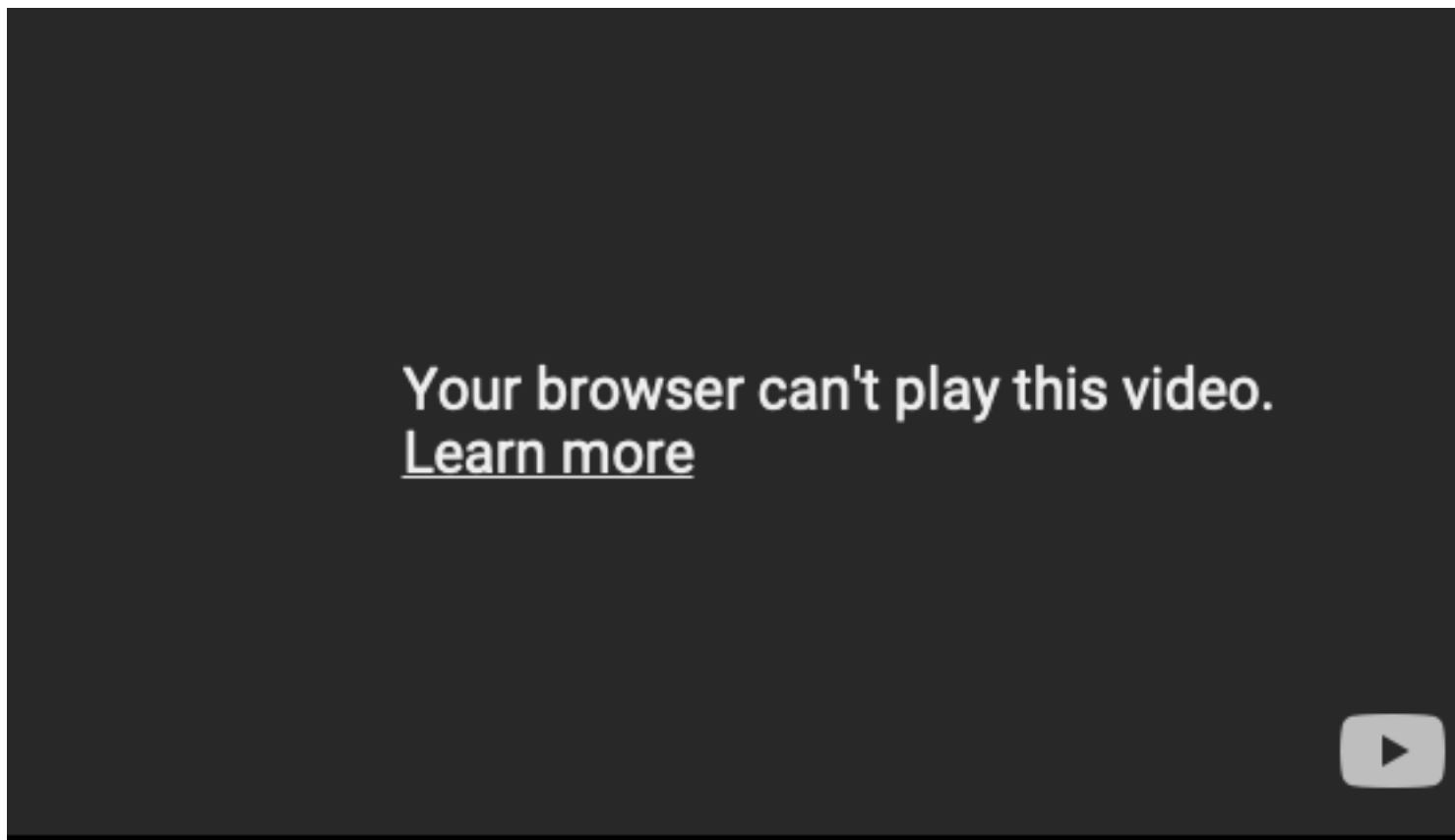
▶ **How do we wish the internet to look in 2031?**

Why is our data being collected?

▶ Why is it important to create a better online school environment?

▶ How do we wish the internet to look in 2031?

How do we wish the internet to look like in 2031?

▶ Why is it important to create a better online school environment?
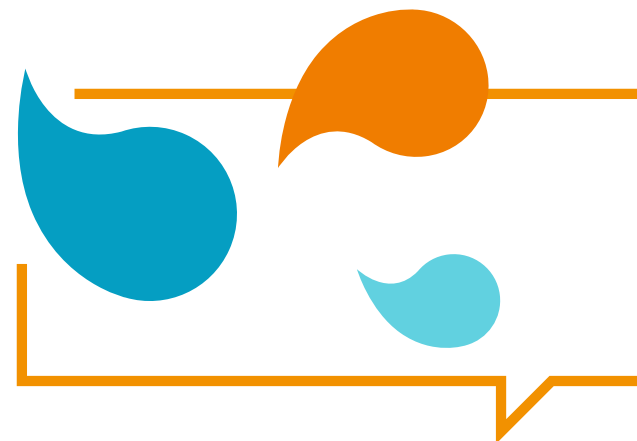
▶ Why is our data being collected?

On the afternoon of 5 October, a pre-event to the SIF was organised. During this event, the outcomes of the *#DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation* was presented followed by a youth-led discussion with the 2021 BIK Youth Panel. As part of the session, participants had the opportunity to discuss the future of the internet with BIK Youth Panellists and engaged in more in-depth discussions on the following topics in breakout rooms:

▶ Online school environment.

▶ Social networks and advertising.

▶ Online society.

The BIK Youth Panellists continued to be very active throughout the main Forum event, with several young people acting as respondents in panel discussions, posing questions of speakers, and contributing with insights into their own experiences and concerns in online chat with the diverse SIF audience.

Read more about the BIK Youth Panel 2021 on the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal or find out more about the BIK Youth programme generally at www.bikyouth.eu.

BIK Youth Panellists are typically involved in other activities too, at both national and European level. Following successful completion of the annual Youth Panel programme, participants are invited to become BIK Youth Ambassadors to further enhance their knowledge and participation in the BIK agenda. Many former panellists have taken on this challenge, and have continued to represent BIK at high-level events such as the annual **Internet Governance Forum (IGF)** and in high-level policy discussions across a number of years, ensuring that the voice of youth continues to be heard across multiple activity lines.

Safer Internet Forum (SIF) 2021 (October 2021)

Building on the *European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children*, the *Safer Internet Forum (SIF)* **is an annual international conference delivered under the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). Bringing together young people, parent and teacher representatives, industry and government policy makers, technological and awareness-raising experts, and political, educational and social leaders from Europe and beyond, the event takes a multi-stakeholder approach to considering the impact of technology on individuals and society.**

The 2021 edition took place online on **6–7 October 2021** and explored **how to make Europe's Digital Decade fit for children and young people**. This edition of SIF was delivered in an online format due to ongoing COVID restrictions, with a record 670 people from 68 countries registering to take part.

As referenced already in this annual review, various activities earlier in 2021 had firmly placed a spotlight on shaping the internet and online services of the future with children and young people in mind, such as the European Commission's *2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade*, the *EU strategy on the rights of the child* and *General comment*

Safer Internet Forum 2021 focused on how to make Europe's Digital Decade fit for children and young people

No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment.

The 2021 edition of the Safer Internet Forum therefore sought to amplifying the voices of children and young people, drawing on recent consultation work and the active involvement of BIK Youth Panel, to deliver a vision for a #DigitalDecade4YOUth on which to build future policies and shape future priorities. Moreover, the event highlighted the priorities that different groups, including parents, carers, and teachers, have identified in order to fulfil children's rights in a digital world, while allowing them to engage, create and contribute within safe, ethical and inclusive online spaces.

Following a pre-event during which the *#DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation report* was launched, SIF 2021 commenced with a video address from Thierry Breton, European Commissioner for the Internal Market. In the address, Commissioner Breton confirmed that a safe, secure and trusted digital space is a cornerstone of European digital society, and this is especially true for children and young people who are increasingly growing up online. Every child has a right to be as respected, protected and empowered online as offline. He reflected that the pandemic has highlighted the digital

divide, and that not all children have equal access to the tools that can support them. Digital literacy is key, and the digital transformation is a fundamental objective for Europe to provide everyone with equal opportunities. Keeping children and young people safe online is crucial, as is reducing risk, and tackling illegal content, while also upholding children's rights and ensuring that they receive adequate education. Commissioner Breton also reflected on the recent consultation exercises, and commented that the Safer Internet Forum provided an opportunity to take stock of the feedback received and seek inspiration on what needs to happen next. He therefore called on all participants to contribute, together, to build a digital world that young people deserve, so firmly setting the context for the discussions to come.

Professor Urs Gasser, Professor of Public Policy, Governance, and Innovative Technology, Technical University of Munich, Germany, delivered the keynote address, opening his presentation by stating that he would explore 'bigger picture' issues for building a better internet for youth. He commented that we need to reflect on the past to build new policies and to focus on some persisting policy challenges that need to be addressed, namely evidence and learning policy, stakeholders and spheres (that is, who is responsible for what), and how we, collectively, can move from policy to practice. A number of presentations and panel discussions followed, which sought to explore these challenges further, and ways in which to mitigate them.

As is typical of the collaborative approach developed during previous editions of Safer Internet Forum, a number of deep dive sessions explored, in more depth, the four pillars of the current BIK strategy which provides a holistic approach to keeping children and young people safe online. Pillar 1 deals with **high-quality content for children and young people**, Pillar 2 is concerned with **stepping up awareness and empowerment**, Pillar 3 aims to create a **safer online environment for children** through approaches such as parental control tools and age verification, while Pillar 4 leads the **fight against child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation**. Each in their own way, the deep dive sessions took stock of these pillars, covering key topics and areas such as:

▶ Age-appropriate design and the role of age assurance/verification.

▶ New and emerging tech, highlighting some of the innovations and developments that we are likely to see by 2030.

▶ Ongoing work to eradicate child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

▶ Online gaming.

▶ The youngest users and the opportunities and challenges that they face online.

▶ Harmful online content, experiences and solutions.

▶ Digital inclusion to ensure positive online experiences for all children and enable active youth participation.

Reflecting on the rich and varied multi-stakeholder contributions during the event, the closing session of Safer Internet Forum 2021 concluded with members of the BIK Youth Panel highlighting priorities for change on behalf of children and young people across Europe. The European Commission gave the final word outlining the next steps to make it happen, including the launch of an updated BIK strategy during 2022.

Find further information on Safer Internet Forum 2021 on the Better Internet for Kids portal, including presentations, recordings of many of the sessions, and a summary report.
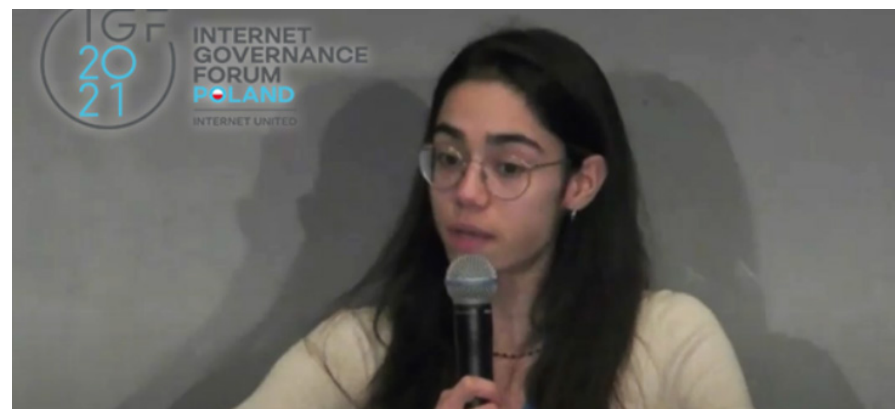
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Internet Governance Forum (IGF) (December 2021)

The annual *Internet Governance Forum (IGF)* **serves to bring people from various stakeholder groups together, as equals, in discussions on public policy issues relating to the internet. This year's edition took place in a hybrid format in Katowice, Poland and online under the theme of** *Internet United.* **As in previous years, a delegation was in attendance to promote the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) agenda in Europe on behalf of the European Commission and the Insafe-INHOPE networks. As well as participating in the full agenda of the forum, the delegation also hosted an information booth and two topical workshops.**

A network delegation represented Better Internet for Kids (BIK) activities at the 2021 Internet Governance Forum

A workshop titled *Mind the gender gap OR Mend the gender gap* sought to raise awareness on different forms of online violence towards women and girls, among them the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, child sexual abuse material (CSAM), and gender-based online hate speech. Marina, a member of the SaferInternet4Kids' Youth Panel, participated in the discussion during which she stressed the extent of the phenomenon in Greece and the importance of dealing with it. Marina pointed out that raising awareness from an early age is a priority.

Greek Youth Panellist, Marina, spoke about gender-related issues online

Participants discussed ways of preventing violence from happening online, and sources of support for women and girls in need of help. Good practice scenarios were also discussed, and consideration was given to the role of technology companies that govern the commercial internet.

A second workshop, titled *Money can't buy me digital literacy*, considered issues pertaining to economic and social inclusion in the field of digital literacy. Often, the term 'digital divide' is used to refer to the gap that exists in most countries between those with ready access to ICT and the relevant knowledge to be able to use it, compared with those who do not. Groups identified as being especially disadvantaged in their uptake of online media/digital literacy include people with low income, education, or literacy levels, the unemployed, elderly or disabled people, and women and girls.

Although recent research indicates that differences in access have narrowed, another second-level digital divide, focusing on differences in how social and cultural groups make use of internet content and applications, is emerging. This workshop therefore focused on aspects related to inclusion such as language barriers and cultural differences, and also aimed to explore the important factors of how to detect and reach different vulnerable groups, and work with them in ways adapted to the specific circumstances in which they use technology. It also considered different ways of co-creating successful digital divide prevention strategies based on established digital literacy concepts. Participants in breakout room sessions commented especially on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of exacerbating many of the issues, and the need to ensure that lessons are learned and acted upon.

Participation in events such as IGF is extremely important. In addition to providing a platform for showcasing the excellent work taking place within Europe to keep children and young people safe online, it also allows the Insafe-INHOPE networks to connect with counterparts across the globe recognising that we must all work together for a better internet.

Find out more about network participation at the Internet Governance Forum on the Better Internet for Kids portal.

2021 IN FIGURES

Safer Internet Day

On Safer Internet Day 2021, over **19,000 schools** were reached and over **5,800 other organisations** were involved across Europe alone. Many more were reached across the globe, with approximately **200 countries and territories** participating in celebrations in some way.

Resources

Throughout the year, more than **29 million EU citizens*** were reached, providing them with more than **1,350 new resources**.

Many new resources responded to the continuing challenges posed by the pandemic, dealing with topics such as **decrypting fake news about COVID-19**, **safe and responsible use of remote learning tools,** and resources supporting **well-being** more generally, such as **guidance on using apps providing verification of COVID vaccination status** in the context of **wider digital citizenship skills**.

* This figure is based on data from 27 Safer Internet Centres.

BIK Youth

While significantly limited by the ongoing pandemic restrictions, almost **300 events** involved youth participation throughout 2021.

Reporting

In 2021*, a total of **928,278 content URLs** were processed in ICCAM** by INHOPE hotlines from which **760,054** content URLs were unknown and assessed. From these content URLs, a total of **443,705 were determined to be illegal** and, subsequently, national law enforcement agencies (LEAs) were informed and a notice and takedown was issued to the hosting internet service provider (ISP).

* These figures represent all INHOPE member hotlines, not just those which are EC funded.

** ICCAM is INHOPE's secure software solution to collect, exchange and categorise reports on child sexual abuse material (CSAM), funded by the EU. ICCAM is used by INHOPE hotlines in different jurisdictions (countries) and INTERPOL. The name ICCAM is derived from the phrase "I see child abuse material".

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WHAT'S NEXT FOR BETTER INTERNET FOR KIDS?

This report is launched on **Safer Internet Day (SID) 2022** when Safer Internet Centres (SICs), Safer Internet Day Committees and supporters across the globe are once again joining "Together for a better internet", highlighting the importance of the multi-stakeholder approach to creating a safer and better internet.

Like last year, we celebrate SID against a backdrop of ongoing COVID restrictions, but it is clear that many stakeholders have once again embraced the challenges, finding innovative – and often hybrid – ways to mark the day. The last two years have demonstrated how essential it is that we can all move between the offline and online realms safely and seamlessly, and how important it is to be alert and empowered in both. **The framework provided by Better Internet for Kids (BIK) actions will continue to support this, as we all work towards pandemic recovery within the context of** *NextGenerationEU*.

Just last month, towards the end of January 2022, the European Commission put forward a *draft declaration on digital rights and principles for everyone in the EU* based on extensive consultation work over the last 12 months. The draft declaration covers key rights and principles for digital transformation, such as placing people and their rights at its centre, supporting solidarity and inclusion, ensuring freedom of choice online, fostering participation in the digital public space, increasing safety, security and empowerment of individuals, and promoting sustainability of the digital future.

These **digital rights and principles** should accompany people in the EU in their everyday life: affordable and high-speed digital connectivity everywhere and for everybody, well-equipped classrooms and digitally skilled teachers, seamless access to public services, a safe digital environment for children, disconnecting after working hours, obtaining easy-to-understand information on the environmental impact of our digital products, controlling how their personal data are used and with whom they are shared. **Key concepts here – access, education, inclusion, safe online spaces, and empowerment and privacy within them – are at the heart of what we do within BIK.**

It is hoped that the draft declaration will be endorsed by the European Parliament and the Council this summer.

2022 has also been designated as the *European Year of Youth* by the European Commission, placing a spotlight on **the importance of empowering youth to build a better future** – and one that is greener, more inclusive, and digital. Within the context of the year, Europe's young people will be encouraged to share their visions, meet with decision-makers, and engage in activities all over Europe, providing a post-pandemic perspective to help Europe move forward with confidence.

Youth have always been at the heart of what we do within BIK, from national youth panels embedded within the work of Safer Internet Centres (SICs), to the annual pan-European Youth Panel contributing perspectives to the Safer Internet Forum (SIF), to the ongoing work of BIK Youth Ambassadors in representing the initiative at high-level events and within industry projects to ensure that the voice of youth is heard and acted upon. **2022 will be no exception.**

Children and young people contributed extensively to consultation activities over the past year to develop an updated **European Strategy for a better internet for children (BIK strategy)** which is due for publication in the coming months. **Equally, we are already making preparations for young people to be at the very heart of the agenda and planning for the 2022 edition of the Safer Internet Forum.**

The launch of an **updated BIK strategy**, as mentioned above, is now imminent. Building on the foundations of the original strategy first published in 2012, extensive consultation work with multiple stakeholders has sought to ensure that the updated strategy is fit for purpose. **The updated strategy will focus on upholding the rights of children and young people online, ensuring that they can benefit from all that the digital space has to offer, with the agility to respond to emerging challenges for the next decade and beyond**. We look forward to introducing it to you, and working with you to implement it.

Stay tuned in the coming months for more!

We encourage you to stay tuned to the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal, the quarterly BIK bulletin, and our Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and TikTok profiles for the latest news and developments across all our areas of activity, and for opportunities to get involved, or connect with your national Safer Internet Centre for localised news, initiatives and resources.

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Better Internet for Kids

European Commission

INHOPE

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