

SAFER INTERNET  
**FORUM** 2025

**WHY  
AGE  
MATTERS**

Protecting and  
empowering youth  
in the digital age

## Report from Safer Internet Forum 2025



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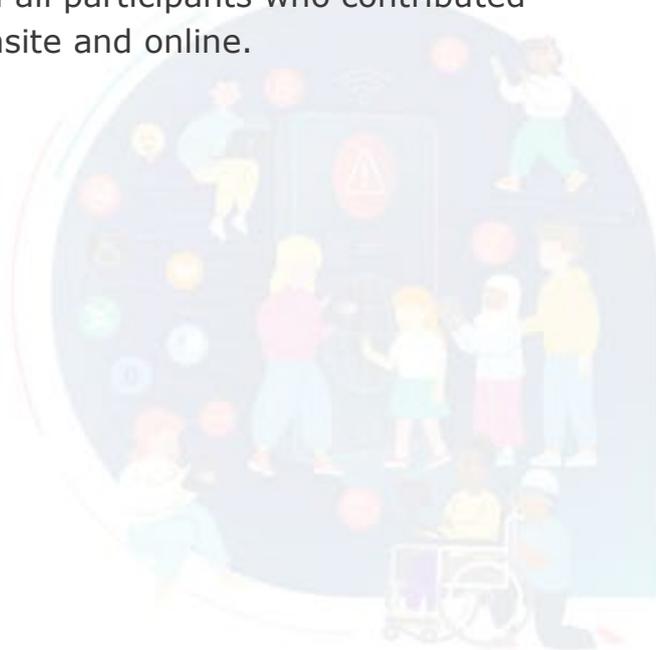
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Safer Internet Forum 2025 was organised in a youth-led manner. We take this opportunity to thank the members of the SIF Youth Advisory Group, the BIK Youth Panel, and the EU Children's Participation Platform for their dedication and commitment to helping to create a safer and better internet for their peers, and young people across the globe.

We also take this opportunity to thank all speakers, panellists and contributors for their input to the Forum, and all participants who contributed so fully to the discussions of the day, both onsite and online.



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Further information, including the Forum booklet with the full agenda and contributor biographies, is available at [better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/sif](https://better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/sif).

Links to the session recordings are included throughout this report.



# Executive summary

The Safer Internet Forum (SIF) 2025<sup>1</sup> convened over **800 participants, onsite and online, from 65 countries** to address age-appropriate, safe, and empowering online experiences for children and young people.

As always, the Forum took a youth-centred approach. Over **30 young people** from the SIF Youth Advisory Group, the BIK Youth Panel, and the EU Children's Participation Platform shaped the agenda and moderated sessions, ensuring young people's voices were central.

In an opening dialogue with SIF Youth Advisory Group members, Executive Vice-President Henna Virkkunen outlined EU priorities under the Digital Services Act (DSA) and recent guidelines for protecting minors online. Discussions focused on **age assurance, addictive design, algorithmic transparency, and shared responsibility** among platforms, governments, parents, and young people.

The **keynote**, delivered by Australia's eSafety Commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, introduced a global perspective, outlining a layered approach to **delaying social media access for under-16s**, complemented by safety-by-design principles and enforcement against harmful content, deepfakes, and AI companions.

Recognising the strategic importance of supporting parents and caregivers in online safety, a high-level panel discussed the **need to empower parents** through education, safety-by-design, and tools such as PEGI ratings and the forthcoming EU Digital Identity Wallet for privacy-friendly age verification.

In a youth-led session, young participants debated **gaming's benefits and risks**, including addiction, loot boxes, and AI-generated content. A panel discussion with experts emphasised trust, shared gaming spaces, and parental literacy as key to safer experiences.

A key aspect of this edition of the Forum was parallel sessions on the ongoing debate on age restrictions on social media access. The discussions revealed diverse views on harmonised age limits, privacy concerns, and the need for

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<sup>1</sup> Safer Internet Forum (SIF) 2025 was organised by the European Commission, with operational support from European Schoolnet, in the framework of the European Commission's Better Internet for Kids (BIK) initiative, with funding provided by the Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL). In case of queries, please contact the Safer Internet Forum Secretariat at [saferinternetforum@betterinternetforkids.eu](mailto:saferinternetforum@betterinternetforkids.eu).



education over bans. The young people and parent representatives agreed that digital literacy and trust are essential for safe participation. In conclusion, participants agreed that bans and rigid age thresholds alone cannot guarantee safety. Instead, a **holistic approach** is needed—combining **regulation, platform accountability, education, and youth engagement**. Safety-by-design, proportional restrictions, and transparent algorithms were identified as **priorities for future** online environments.

Looking ahead, participants envisioned:

- Child-friendly versions of apps with staged access to features.
- Removal of addictive design elements (push notifications, like counters, and endless scrolling).
- Greater **algorithmic transparency**.
- Privacy-respecting age assurance.
- Development of an **'internet driver's license'** (or similar) to embed digital literacy and resilience.

Cross-cutting reflections emphasised the need for evidence-informed enforcement, learning from international developments, and shifting the narrative.

“ We need to shift the narrative from “children are not ready for social media” to **“social media is not ready for children”**. ”

Safer Internet Forum 2025 also hosted the first-ever Best awareness-raising resource of the year award, won by France's FamiNum, a tool for healthy digital habits.

Strategic takeaways from this year's Forum included:

- Safety-by-design is needed by default: private-by-default settings, reduced unsolicited contact, and removal of addictive features are essential.
- Proportionate age assurance: tools need to be effective and privacy-respecting, offering layered solutions without mass data retention.

- Education and digital literacy: both children and their parents and caregivers need to be empowered through effective education and support; bans alone are insufficient, and do not adequately prepare children and young people for their future engagement in the digital economy.
- Youth participation and trust are key: young people need to be actively involved in design and governance processes, and open communication needs to be facilitated across all stakeholder groups.



# High-level opening and welcome

[The recording of this session is available here.](#)

The 2025 edition of the Safer Internet Forum **welcomed about 200 participants onsite and over 600 participants online**, representing over **65 countries** around the world. Once again, the Forum was youth-led, with participants from the Safer Internet Forum Youth Advisory Group (SIF YAG), the BIK Youth Panel, and the EU Child Participation Platform actively shaping the day's agenda and leading many of the discussions.

**Tuuli-Maria Mattila, Head of Unit, Accessibility, Multilingualism and Safer Internet, DG CONNECT, European Commission**, formally welcomed participants and emphasised the Commission's commitment to supporting safer and more empowering digital environments for young people, stressing the importance of youth-led events to ensure young people's voices are heard. These voices are especially important for the focus topics of this edition of the Forum, including ensuring age-appropriate online experiences for young people, social media approaches, how parents can be supported, potential age restrictions, and video gaming.

The Forum kicked off with a dialogue between **SIF Youth Advisory Group members Erik** (Lithuania), **Gabriele** (Italy), **Marta** (Portugal), and **Henna Virkkunen, Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy at the European Commission**.



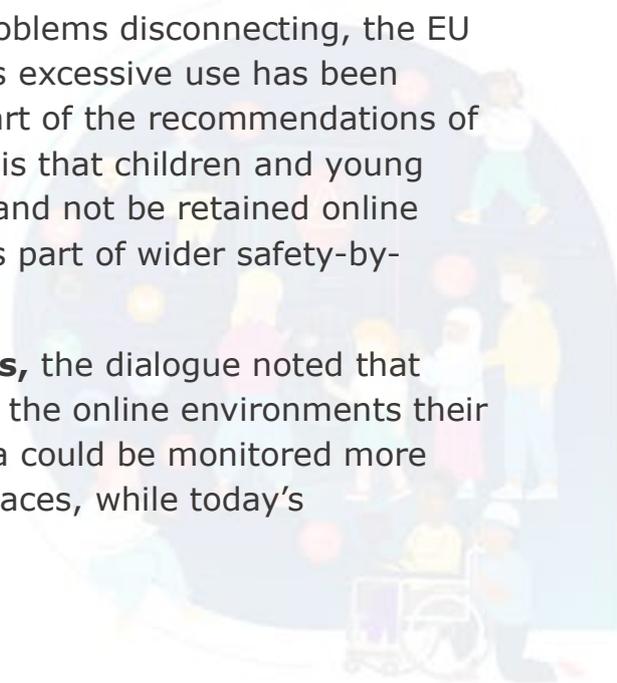
*SIF Youth Advisory Group members Erik (Lithuania), Marta (Portugal), and Gabriele (Italy) led a dialogue with the Executive Vice-President of the European Commission, Henna Virkkunen*

The dialogue began with the question “**What can the EU do to help young people feel safer online?**”. For the EU, a high level of safety, security and privacy is a key priority when children use online services. Several EU initiatives, including the [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#) and the recently published [guidelines on the protection of minors online under the Digital Services Act \(Art. 28\)](#), clarify what platforms must do to protect children, reinforcing the principle that what is illegal offline must also be illegal online. **Despite age limits**, such as the 13-year-old threshold for social media access, **implementation remains weak**. To address this, the EU has introduced an [age verification blueprint](#) and advocates risk-based approaches similar to those used for gambling or alcohol, stressing the need for reliable tools that prevent circumvention while safeguarding personal data. **Concerns** exist about addictive design, inappropriate content, and online criminal activities, and so enhanced compliance and stronger oversight are necessary. The EU is closely monitoring how platforms are implementing age-assurance measures to better protect children and young people online.

The youth session chairs then shared how the **internet has played an important role in their personal development, highlighting its benefits** for learning new skills and languages, developing creative skills, and informing future study and career decisions. Technology is also important in allowing young people to find and explore communities of shared interests they wouldn't have found offline. Despite these benefits, the young contributors acknowledged real **risks: encountering unwanted or harmful content, 'gatekeeping' within online communities, cyberbullying, and addictive features**. These reflections emphasised a common theme: the internet is deeply enriching, but only when appropriate safeguards and digital skills are in place.

Recognising that many people report having problems disconnecting, the EU is also investigating platforms in that regard, as excessive use has been linked to negative impacts on mental health. Part of the recommendations of the DSA guidelines on the protection of minors is that children and young people **should easily be able to disconnect** and not be retained online through dark patterns and addictive designs, as part of wider safety-by-design principles.

Regarding **the role of parents and caregivers**, the dialogue noted that many parents lack digital skills or awareness of the online environments their children inhabit. In previous generations, media could be monitored more easily because it occurred in shared physical spaces, while today's



personalised digital ecosystems operate largely out of view. Again, the youth participants offered nuanced observations on this, highlighting the important **balance among privacy, protection, and control**. While it is important that parents and caregivers are involved in their children's online lives, this should be achieved through communication and support rather than surveillance. Furthermore, excessive restrictions and control can damage trust, leading young people to circumvent boundaries and ultimately exposing them to greater risk of harm.

**Responsibility must be shared** among platforms, governments, parents, educators, and young people themselves. The EU's stance is clear: digital service providers must take responsibility under the DSA and comply with the rules. Platforms need to take responsibility because they design systems and business models that shape user experiences. Governments must protect democratic values by enforcing clear rules. At the same time, parents and educators need digital literacy to guide and support children as they grow up in digital societies, while young people need guidance to make safe and informed decisions online.

On the topic of algorithms and artificial intelligence, **algorithmic transparency is a central requirement** under the DSA, although many platforms have not yet met these expectations. Users must be able to understand why content is recommended and have tools to adjust or decline algorithmic inputs. As general-purpose AI, including conversational AI systems, becomes more widely used, the EU must ensure that safety, security, and transparency remain at the forefront. Above all, online service providers must ensure that they offer age-appropriate environments and content.

The youth participants shared the view that platforms should evolve with users' developmental stages, much as children progress from picture books to chapter books to novels. This 'growth-based' platform design could allow online environments to mature alongside the child.

Turning to the topic of age assurance, it was debated where responsibility should rest and **how safety can be balanced with privacy**. While many platforms have a 13+ age requirement rooted in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), enforcement is inconsistent. Here, the EU prioritises strict age verification for adult-only services, such as gambling or explicit content, and is pushing for stronger tools that do not rely on excessive data collection.

For general social media use, lighter age-verification methods may be appropriate, provided they are effective.

The youth representatives raised concerns about systems requiring ID uploads, citing privacy risks, potential data breaches, and fears of surveillance. It was also noted that many minors lack ID, and there are additional concerns that systems could be easily exploited or hacked. While young people agree that age restrictions are necessary, it is feared that poor implementation could backfire, pushing minors into unsafe or unregulated digital spaces.

The dialogue closed with reflections from the young people chairing the session, who value the collaboration between policymakers, young people, educators, parents, and technology providers. Furthermore, they affirmed that while the internet offers extraordinary opportunities for learning and connection, **ongoing vigilance, regulation, education, and youth engagement are crucial for creating a safer digital future for all.**



# Keynote presentation: Why age matters?

[The recording of this session is available here.](#)



Key takeaways for this session were captured by a graphic illustrator

Australian eSafety Commissioner, **Julie Inman Grant**, began by introducing the topic of social media delay for young people under the age of 16, sometimes referred to publicly as a 'social media ban'. Before focusing on the main topic, Commissioner Grant discussed a variety of measures integrated into Australia's online protection portfolio.

eSafety is the Australian independent online safety regulator. Its approach focuses on prevention, which is key to **providing evidence-based safety resources and programmes**. Data collected by eSafety showed that 42% of 2-year-olds in Australia have access to digital devices, while by the time they are 4 years old, the percentage rises to 94%. Correspondingly, eSafety aims to ensure that **online content is co-designed with young people** for their use, in line with the motto "not about us without us".

According to the regulatory schemes presented, eSafety has systemic powers around transparency, and codes and standards for specific reports regarding cyberbullying, child sexual abuse material (CSAM), non-consensual sharing of images and deepfakes. The eSafety adult cyber abuse scheme deals with

cyber stalking or direct threats of rape or death, and gets about 80,000 reports a year over a population of 26 million people.

eSafety's codes and standards cover eight different sectors of the technology industry. In June 2025, the eSafety illegal content scheme came into force, and regulatory guidance for the HARM Code is being released, requiring coordinated action across industry players to restrict direct access to harmful online content. Data collected by eSafety shows that young Australians under the age of 13 have described their first encounter with harmful online content as unwelcome and unsolicited. The keynote noted that platforms should provide a sensitive content label or an intermediate blur that prevents people from seeing the content in full.

Additionally, eSafety has a **safety-by-design approach**, believing that the technology industry should assess risks and harms and embed safety from the beginning. Commissioner Grant highlighted that **online safety is a global issue and requires a cohesive, coordinated response**, as regulatory targets for Europeans and Australians are often domiciled overseas. In 2022, a global network of online safety regulators between Australia, the UK, Ireland and Fiji led to a Tripartite Roundtable on Child Protection. Digital risks are a topic which is uniting countries and regulators to find the best solutions to guarantee children's online safety, particularly in relation to age verification and other forms of age assurance.

In Australia, eSafety requires platforms to comply with a transparency notice around child sexual abuse material and other illegal content. Commissioner Grant affirmed that the tech industry should be held accountable for preventing direct access to violent content to children and young people. She reported a high-profile case, which took place in April 2024 in Sydney, to explain the importance of stopping young people from seeing content that normalises violence since it can desensitise and sometimes radicalise young users.

Cyberbullying is a priority issue in Australia, and, correspondingly, eSafety has developed a broad content resource titled [Spotlight on cyberbullying](#). According to current data, **cyberbullying is changing in its nature and demographics**, and platforms not traditionally associated with harm, such as Pinterest, Google Forms, and Spotify, are now being weaponised. Language is becoming more aggressive and sexual. Different forms of AI are being used to attack victims, and there are emerging risks of deepfake technology connected to crimes related to the creation of synthetic child sexual abuse

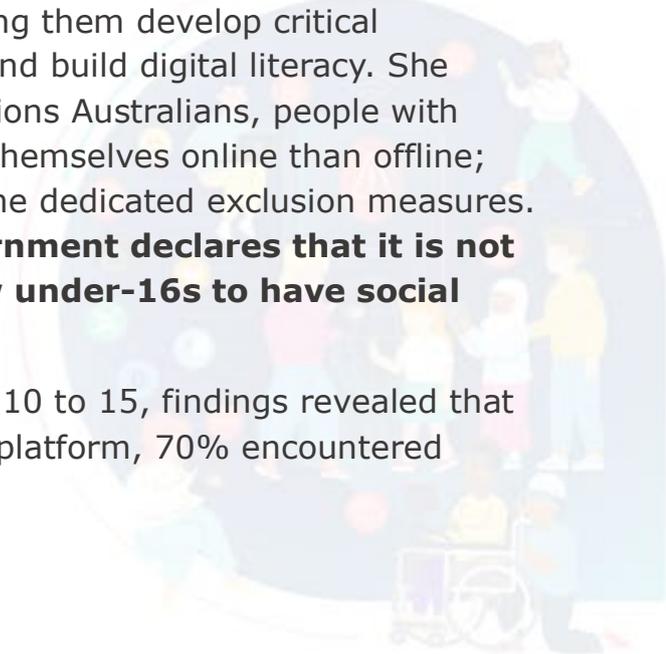
material. eSafety has registered a doubling in the reporting of digitally altered intimate images. Nonetheless, eSafety **has a 98% success rate in getting content taken down** and, with the codes and standards in force, a platform can be forced to pay a penalty if it does not comply with Australian regulations.

In line with its prevention-focused approach, eSafety has also taken enforcement action against **'nudify' apps**, which are now restricted in Australia. Commissioner Grant cited a real case where the [eSafety Commission has taken legal action](#) against a man for posting deepfakes of Australian women, and he was fined with a \$343,500 penalty by the Court. The central message eSafety wants to deliver is that people cannot engage in abuses with impunity. Correspondingly, eSafety has developed instant management tools for deepfake abuse for schools, available to the entire Australian population.

It is anticipated that eSafety will supply new codes to prevent any AI chatbots or AI companions from delivering harmful online content in March 2026. Data collected in Australia shows that **young Australians (aged 11 to 13) are spending 5 to 6 hours a day with AI companions**. It's important to get ahead of new technologies to prevent an escalation of **harms linked to AI**. eSafety's codes are already working, thanks to new commitments from Roblox that set child accounts to the highest level of privacy by default, to better protect children from predators.

Moving to the main topic of the keynote - **social media age restrictions** – Commissioner Grant reiterated that it **was not a ban but a social media delay**. She highlighted that the phone ban in Australian schools in 2023 had positive effects on young people, fostering sociality and interactivity. She asserted that it is important to **adopt a holistic approach to social media access** for children and young people, helping them develop critical reasoning skills, enhance digital resilience, and build digital literacy. She stressed that minorities (LGBTIQ+, First Nations Australians, people with disabilities, etc.) often feel freer to express themselves online than offline; thus, the Australian Parliament provided some dedicated exclusion measures. Under the legislation, **the Australian government declares that it is not legal for social media platforms to allow under-16s to have social media accounts**.

In an eSafety survey of 2,600 children aged 10 to 15, findings revealed that 96% already used at least one social media platform, 70% encountered



harmful material, and 1 in 7 users experienced online grooming behaviour. eSafety's implementation of the social media delay is **supporting children's digital rights and the best interest of the child**, ensuring the measures are reasonable, necessary and proportionate.

Under the law, there would not be penalties for parents or young people, but the responsibility lies with the age-restricted social media platforms to detect and remove existing accounts held by those under 16 years old. Moreover, platforms are asked to apply a layered or 'waterfall' approach.

Australian legislation applies to all social media platforms which have the significant purpose of enabling online social interaction. To identify age-restricted platforms, eSafety has developed self-assessment tools to determine whether the primary purpose of the online platform is social interaction. While there is no specific declaratory power over social media platforms, through the self-assessment tool, legal provisions apply to 10 companies that are now considered age-restricted social media platforms - for example, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X, Twitch and YouTube. Moreover, eSafety consulted with 160 organisations and with young people to provide a principles-based approach for their regulatory guidelines.

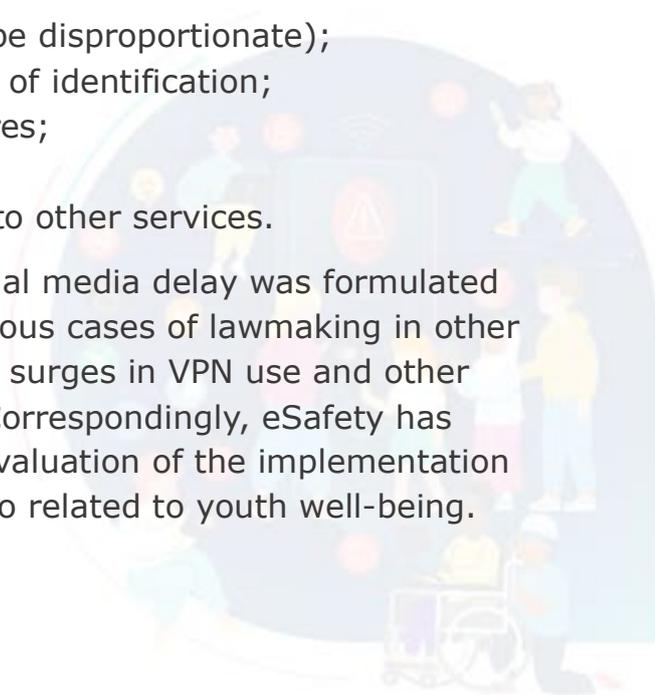
As a result of this legislation, eSafety requires platforms to:

- communicate with kindness and compassion to let those under 16 years old know that their account will be deactivated or removed;
- prevent re-registration by underage users;
- use layered age assurance methods;
- provide clear reporting, and continuously monitor and improve systems.

The social media delay regulation does not require platforms to:

- verify the age of all users (which may be disproportionate);
- use government ID as the sole method of identification;
- adopt prescribed technology or measures;
- retain personal data from age checks;
- automatically transfer underage users to other services.

Commissioner Grant highlighted that the social media delay was formulated based on data collected from observing previous cases of lawmaking in other states. She stated that migratory patterns or surges in VPN use and other forms of circumvention are to be expected. Correspondingly, eSafety has programmed an extensive and longitudinal evaluation of the implementation of the social media delay and its impacts, also related to youth well-being.



eSafety's social media age-restriction hub is open to consultation on its website ([eSafety.gov.au](https://www.esafety.gov.au)).

Commissioner Grant concluded her presentation, emphasising that collectively putting friction in the digital system - through many **tools such as digital literacy, safety by design, and age restrictions - will transform the online world into a safer place for all.**

A BIK Youth Panellist asked how Australia's implementation of age delay will help **avoid circumvention of bans** and a lack of digital literacy among young users. Commissioner Grant replied that **exclusions and exceptions** were written into the legislation by the Australian Parliament regarding messaging and gaming apps to prevent adverse effects on minorities or other vulnerable groups. For example, it was suggested that creating group chats to connect young users of a minority. She emphasised that the aim is to keep children and young people safe from harmful and deceptive design or features on social media, while allowing them to continue searching for information online.



# Panel discussion: How to better support parents to protect and empower their children online

[The recording of this session is available here.](#)



Key takeaways for this session were captured by a graphic illustrator

The panel discussion, entitled *How to better support parents to protect and empower their children online*, was moderated by SIF Youth Advisory Group members **Ishani** (Ireland) and **Philippos** (Greece). It included the following panellists:

- **Renate Nikolay**, Deputy Director-General, DG CONNECT, European Commission
- **Dóra Dávid**, Member of the European Parliament
- **Niamh Hodnett**, Online Safety Commissioner, Coimisiún na Meán, Ireland
- **Dirk Bosmans**, Director, Pan European Game Information (PEGI)
- **Elizabeth Gosme**, Director, COFACE Families Europe

The panel discussion provided a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and solutions needed to create a safer digital environment in which parents can confidently guide their children. There was a general consensus that

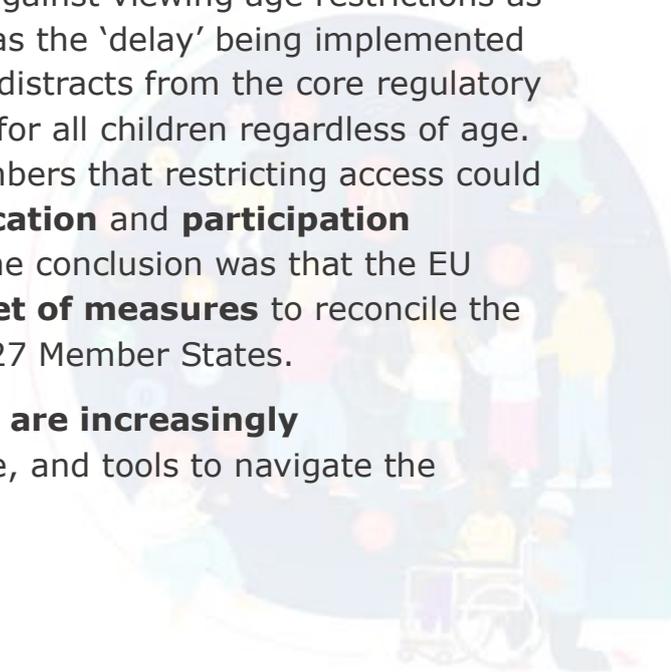
**achieving this goal requires a holistic approach**, supported by **strong regulation** and **collaborative action** from platforms, governments, and families.

The European Union is leveraging a robust legal framework to move the online space away from what might be described as a 'Wild West' environment. The [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#) is central to this effort, **holding very large online platforms (VLOPs) accountable for ensuring a high level of safety, privacy, and security for minors**. This involves placing 'friction in the system' to counteract unchecked access and harmful content. To provide clarity, the European Commission has published the [DSA guidelines on the protection of minors](#), which set out a non-exhaustive list of measures to protect children from online risks, including addictive design features, age-appropriate default settings, and age assurance mechanisms. Looking ahead, the [AI Act](#) is expected to **address emerging harms**, such as deepfakes and the influence of AI agents. This EU legislation provides the essential 'guardrails' and a basic safety net, compelling platforms to **respect children's fundamental rights**.

A significant point of discussion was the European Parliament's proposal for a harmonised digital minimum age of 16 for accessing social media and video-sharing platforms, with access permitted for 13- to 16-year-olds only with parental consent. **Dóra Dávid**, MEP, defended this approach, noting that 16 aligns with the GDPR's age of consent for data consent and strikes a necessary balance between children's rights to participation and their need for safety. She argued that this measure **empowers parents** without placing an excessive burden on them, as it is a one-time consent measure at the point of access.

Discussion among the panellists cautioned against viewing age restrictions as a 'silver bullet', noting that a full ban, such as the 'delay' being implemented in Australia, could be a crude measure that distracts from the core regulatory goal: making the space fundamentally safe for all children regardless of age. Concerns were also raised by audience members that restricting access could alienate young people from **vital civic education** and **participation opportunities** increasingly found online. The conclusion was that the EU must adopt a **nuanced, comprehensive set of measures** to reconcile the diverse cultural and regulatory views of its 27 Member States.

Family advocates underscored that **parents are increasingly overwhelmed**, lacking the time, knowledge, and tools to navigate the



rapidly evolving digital landscape. For example, reconciling work and care responsibilities leaves many parents and caregivers without the time for the lifelong learning necessary to keep up. This reality makes the call for safety by design from platforms more urgent. An audience member also noted that parents do not want to constantly police their children; they want the consumer environment to be inherently safe so that children can explore and use its potential freely.

For children who lack engaged parents or guardians, the responsibility shifts to society. Here, there is a need to **consolidate social systems**—including ensuring that schools and community centres provide trusted adults and specialised support (such as mental health workers)—to offer guidance and protection.

**Dirk Bosmans**, Director of PEGI, provided insight into the video game sector, which, while often excluded from social media regulations, faces similar challenges due to strong social components. He detailed the [PEGI online programme](#), which sets a standard for safety by requiring companies to provide proof of robust privacy policies, community standards, and reporting mechanisms before a game can receive a PEGI license. He also stressed that PEGI ratings are tools for parents—the target audience—to **facilitate conversations and set household rules, not rules for children to follow without question**.

Furthermore, technology itself is being deployed as a solution: for example, an [EU Digital Identity Wallet](#) is being developed and is expected to roll out in 2026. This tool aims to provide **privacy-friendly, secure age verification** that confirms a user is above a certain age without revealing their identity, directly **addressing concerns about mass surveillance and data protection** raised by the audience. While acknowledging that no system will be 100% foolproof against VPNs or misuse, the panellists maintained that such measures significantly raise the level of online safety.

The panel concluded that while regulatory development is still in its early days, the rules adopted in the EU are already driving platforms to adapt by incorporating **safety-by-design principles** and **stronger parental control features**. The ultimate path forward involves rigorously enforcing existing laws, continuing to **develop and deploy smart technological safeguards**, and **strengthening societal support systems** to ensure that all children, regardless of family structure, are both protected and empowered in the digital world.



# Youth-led session: Empowering parents, raising resilient kids: a partnership for responsible gaming

[The recording of this session is available here.](#)

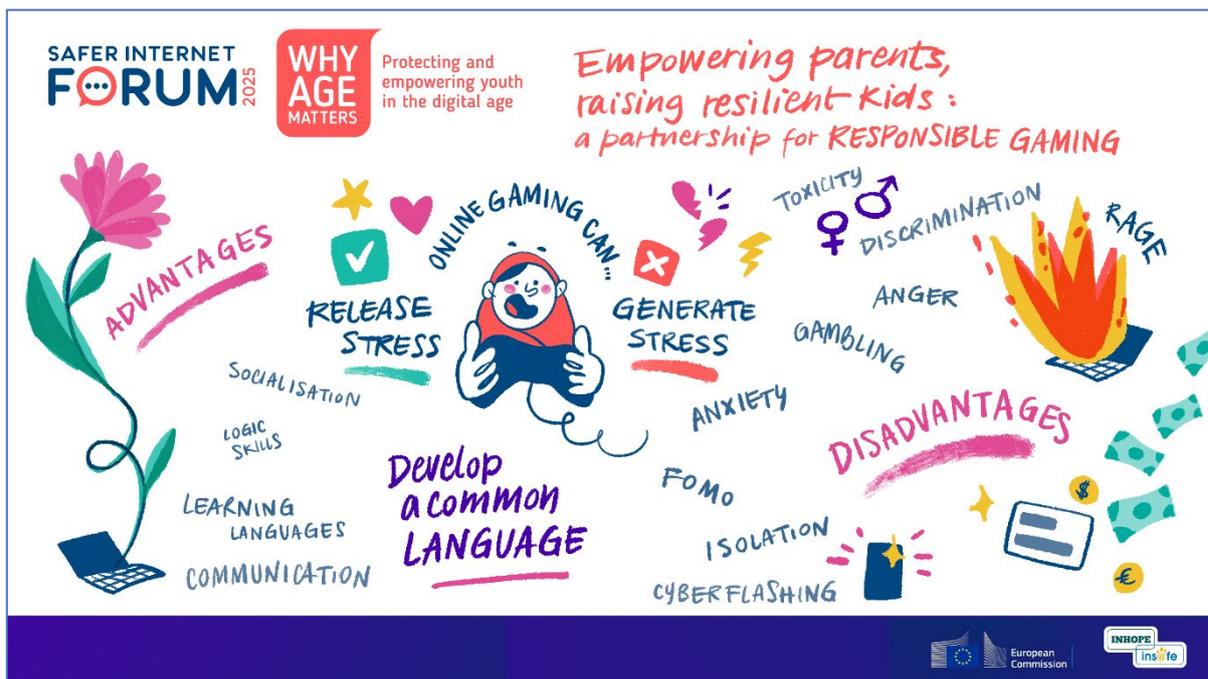
The youth-led session was hosted by BIK Youth Panellists, commencing with an interactive game in which onsite participants could signal their agreement or disagreement with a series of questions, including:

- Does violence in video games affect children?
- Can spending long periods playing video games influence children's or young people's stress levels?
- Can video games positively support a child's learning or problem-solving skills?
- Should loot boxes be regulated as a form of gambling?
- Should esports be considered as real sports?
- Do age restrictions in games prevent adult content from reaching children?

Two youth panellists, **Damjan** (Romania) and **Robin** (Belgium), shared their opinions about the statement "playing video games offers more benefits than disadvantages".

- Damjan agreed, noting that video games can promote relaxation, strengthen strategic and logical thinking, and offer educational benefits such as language learning, programming, and mathematical reasoning through puzzles or simulations. He added that gaming supports teamwork and communication, helps reduce stress, and can even open professional pathways through streaming, content creation, or esports.
- Robin disagreed, emphasising significant drawbacks such as increased anxiety, sleep problems, and social isolation. He warned that excessive gaming can undermine social skills and communication, and that exposure to aggressive games may affect behaviour. He also highlighted risks linked to gambling elements and addictive design features.

**Katarina** (Slovakia) noted that opinions among the younger BIK Youth Panellists, particularly those aged 13 and 14, varied slightly. They highlighted several positive aspects of gaming, including connecting with peers who share similar interests, joining global communities, making new friends, and improving language skills, especially in English. At the same time, they recognised the negative side of gaming, such as risks of addiction, sleep issues, eating disorders, and heightened anger or anxiety.



Key takeaways for this session were captured by a graphic illustrator

A panel discussion followed, involving several of the **BIK Youth Panellists**, **Dirk Bosmans** (Director, PEGI), **Davinia Marie Muscat** (Maltese Safer Internet Centre), and **Tomasz Smaczny** (parenting educator from Poland).

In response to a question about how the PEGI rating system protects children and how it could be improved, Dirk Bosmans noted that PEGI's core mission is to **enable parents to make informed choices**. Gaming companies do not decide their own ratings, although their input is required. PEGI now processes thousands of games each month using a structured classification system based on self-declaration questionnaires and content review. An expert group develops the criteria and oversees the process. PEGI also cross-checks its ratings with those used in other regions to ensure consistency, especially for borderline cases.

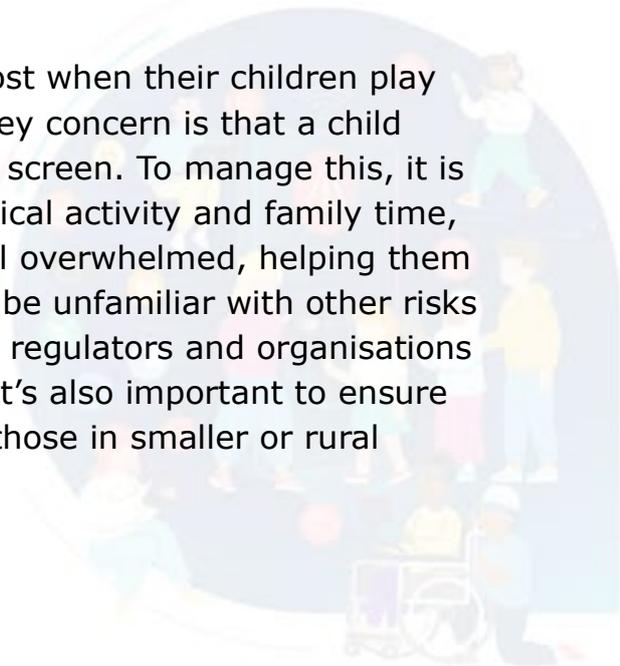
On the question of whether communication between children and parents is important regarding video games, the consensus was that **trust and open**

**dialogue are fundamental to the relationship between children and parents** in every aspect of life, including video games. Parents often feel overwhelmed by expectations, and building trust in their relationships with their children is key.

On the issue of **empowering and supporting parents** to help children have **positive gaming experiences**, the importance of parents familiarising themselves with the online environments their children may encounter and choosing age-appropriate games accordingly was emphasised by Davinia Marie Muscat. Parents and caregivers should be encouraged and supported to develop basic gaming literacy, viewing online games as digital playgrounds where children explore and learn. Parents playing alongside children helps **build a shared understanding** and **strengthens trust**, which can support future help-seeking. The need for parents to teach children when to step back from gaming, promote healthier habits, and remind them to reconnect with the offline world was also underscored.

Moving back to the regulatory framework, young people asked whether loot boxes could be considered a form of gambling and how such concerns could be reflected in the PEGI rating system. Here, Dirk Bosmans explained that debates around loot boxes have persisted because public opinion often conflates them with the legal definition of gambling. However, in his view, there are differences that prevent the inclusion of loot boxes in gambling regulation. Furthermore, only 3% of PEGI-rated games contain paid loot boxes, so parents who wish to avoid such features still have many alternatives. The challenges of regulating loot boxes at a pan-European level were highlighted, given that gambling policy remains a national competence. A focus on practical improvements, such as disabling spending by default, while acknowledging that these tools often place too much responsibility on parents, would be useful.

Discussion then turned to what parents fear most when their children play online games. From a parental perspective, a key concern is that a child might simply spend too much time in front of a screen. To manage this, it is important to ensure children have enough physical activity and family time, and to offer alternative activities when they feel overwhelmed, helping them maintain a healthy balance. Many parents may be unfamiliar with other risks that may arise, which is why it's important that regulators and organisations like PEGI exist to help keep parents informed. It's also important to ensure that valuable insights reach parents, including those in smaller or rural



communities. Moreover, young people themselves could play an important role in strengthening digital literacy among parents and peers.

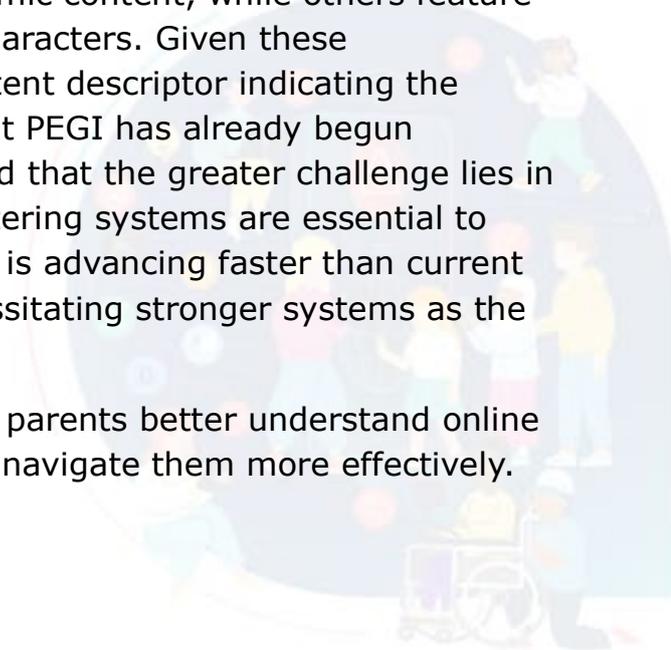
It is important to consider the benefits children can gain from playing online games. These include skills development, teamwork and communication skills in cooperative games, to problem-solving, strategy, and creativity in puzzle or sandbox environments. However, **positive experiences often coexist with risks**, including toxicity, harassment, and overwhelming emotional immersion. Strong communication between parents and children is essential, ensuring that young players feel comfortable seeking support.

In addition to the 'typical' risks, it's important to recognise that gaming can sometimes create feelings of loneliness. While online interactions typically feel social, it is difficult to truly know who is on the other side of the screen, particularly when children play behind closed doors. To support safer habits, parents should seek to foster gaming in shared spaces at home. This allows adults to notice concerning interactions, guide respectful behaviour, and reduce the risk of children encountering harmful content.

Reflecting on the session's theme, **while empowering parents with information and support is key, raising resilient kids is also key**. Protecting children from serious harm is essential, but it is equally important to help them navigate the wider range of experiences they may encounter online. Adolescence is a time when mistakes are natural and necessary, and rather than keeping young people in a protective bubble, adults should allow them space to fail successfully and build resilience.

As the panel discussion drew to a close, questions were invited from the audience. An online participant asked about the growing presence of AI-generated content in video games. The participant noted that some games now include pre-rendered AI assets or dynamic content, while others feature large language models acting as in-game characters. Given these developments, should PEGI introduce a content descriptor indicating the presence of AI? Dirk Bosmans explained that PEGI has already begun assessing the role of generative AI. He noted that the greater challenge lies in user-generated AI content, where strong filtering systems are essential to remove inappropriate material. However, AI is advancing faster than current oversight mechanisms can keep pace, necessitating stronger systems as the technological landscape evolves.

A BIK Youth Panellist asked what could help parents better understand online risks so that children and young people can navigate them more effectively.



Panellists responded that although many resources already exist, parents are often overwhelmed by information. Therefore, they need simple, accessible guides focused on the essentials, along with tools such as PEGI ratings and guidance for each game. By way of example, workshops or gaming sessions organised through schools could motivate parents to engage, especially when encouraged by their children. The general consensus was that **empowering parents ultimately requires collaboration between institutions and families.**

Dirk Bosmans further added that even though age-rating systems and parental controls already exist, they do not remove the **need for ongoing parent education.** Each new generation of parents arrives with outdated knowledge of gaming, making continuous awareness efforts essential. He explained that parental controls have evolved into accessible app-based tools and highlighted the Video Games Europe [#PressPlayTogether campaign](#), through which national gaming partners guide parents step-by-step in using these features.



# Roundtable on potential age restrictions to social media

[The recording of this session is available here.](#)

## Performance by young people

The session opened with a performance by BIK Youth Panellists to frame the discussion on the implications of potential age restrictions for social media. Their scene depicted child confinement, symbolically constructed from laws, limits, and age-based restrictions, alongside known 'addictive behaviours'. It contrasted the choices that young people are often deemed 'not ready' to make, highlighting the disparity between the restricted world of youth and the unrestricted adult world ([watch the performance in full](#); timestamp 00:00 to 02:00).



*Key takeaways for this session were captured by a graphic illustrator*

## Young people's perspectives on age restrictions

A group of BIK Youth Panellists - **Maria** (Romania), **Mirabella** (Romania), **Iggy** (Ireland), **Jade** (Austria), **Philippa** (Austria) and **Maya** (Poland) - shared their perspectives, outlining both the potential benefits of age-



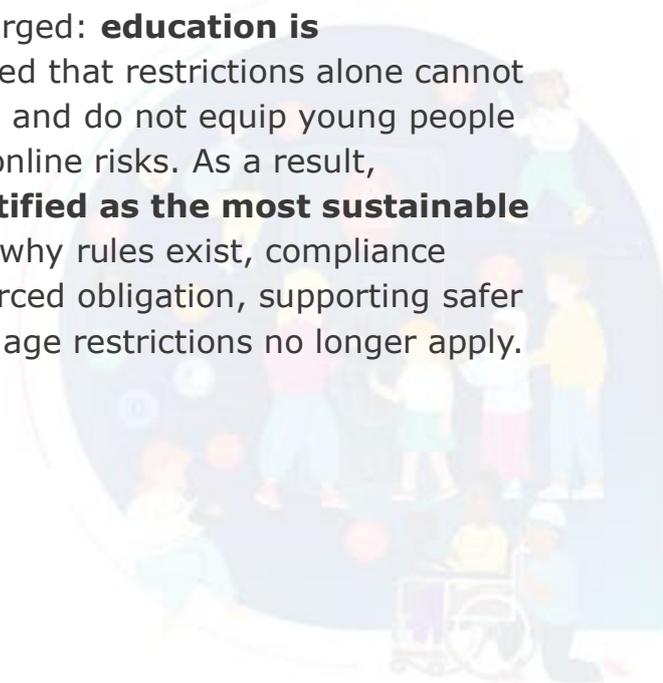
restriction measures and the significant challenges they may pose to children's rights and digital participation.

A key concern was the growing reliance on age-verification technologies, noting the danger of the level of data collection required. The young people warned that these mechanisms could pave the way for broader surveillance. They argued that social media has become a vital space for young people to exchange ideas and mobilise around social issues. Hence, **excessively restrictive measures would risk silencing youth voices in democratic life.**

The youth representatives do, however, agree that **there is a need for age restrictions**, noting that the current system leaves children exposed to content they may not be developmentally prepared to face, specifically highlighting that children under 13 often lack the critical thinking skills needed to assess online risks. Nevertheless, they agreed that the current implementation remains ineffective, as many children can easily bypass existing measures, underscoring the need for more robust, realistic enforcement approaches in both design and deployment. From this perspective, meaningful age restrictions were framed not as constraints on freedom but as necessary boundaries that help reduce risks.

Another key viewpoint focused on the **rights to participation and equality**. For children in rural or under-resourced communities, online platforms are essential tools for accessing education, tutoring, and information. Therefore, restricting access until age 16 could further hinder young people's opportunities. Additionally, the young people argued that without gradual, guided exposure, young people may arrive at older ages unprepared to manage the vast amount of information they encounter.

Across all perspectives, a shared theme emerged: **education is indispensable**. Many young people expressed that restrictions alone cannot protect children, as they are easily bypassed and do not equip young people with the understanding needed to navigate online risks. As a result, **comprehensive digital literacy was identified as the most sustainable solution**. When children clearly understand why rules exist, compliance becomes a conscious choice rather than a forced obligation, supporting safer behaviour both now and in the future, when age restrictions no longer apply.



## Roundtable with parent representatives

The roundtable continued with contributions from **Sarah** (Ireland), **Antonia** (Bulgaria) and **Paul** (Germany) as BIK Youth Panellist representatives, joined by parenting educator **Tomasz Smaczny** (Parenting Educator and Team Coach, Poland), consultant and International Development Leader **Marina Wetzer-Karlsson** (Senior Expert/Consultant and International Development Leader, Finland), and **Amaia Echevarría** (Director, Unión de Asociaciones Familiares, Spain).

The discussion was opened by young people, who emphasised that adults have a responsibility to genuinely listen to them. The **divide between online and offline life no longer exists**, and adults need to engage with children's lived realities by remaining attentive to their experiences and insights.

Referring to one of the banners shown during the performance, stating that access to the internet and social media should be based on competence rather than age, it was suggested that if young people feel competent to engage in these online spaces, they should be able to explain to their parents why they need social media or what purpose it serves for them.

**Antonia** (Bulgaria) responded by explaining that she understood social media as a tool that enables connection, inspiration, learning and self-expression. She acknowledged that, as she grew up online, she made mistakes, such as keeping her profile public, because no one had meaningfully explained the risks to her. This lack of guidance underscored her belief that **education is essential for safe and confident digital participation**. She further emphasised that young people need to learn how to navigate their lives as they grow into adulthood, and education is key to doing so.

This perspective was echoed by the panellists, noting that **the digital revolution has also reshaped parents' lives**, who are still learning to understand the different ways in which young people use technology. Education is essential, and bans cannot replace guidance. For parents to support children effectively, they must engage with them in digital spaces, learn alongside them, and create an environment where young people feel able to ask for help when something goes wrong. Without this shared understanding, restrictions may only discourage children from seeking support.

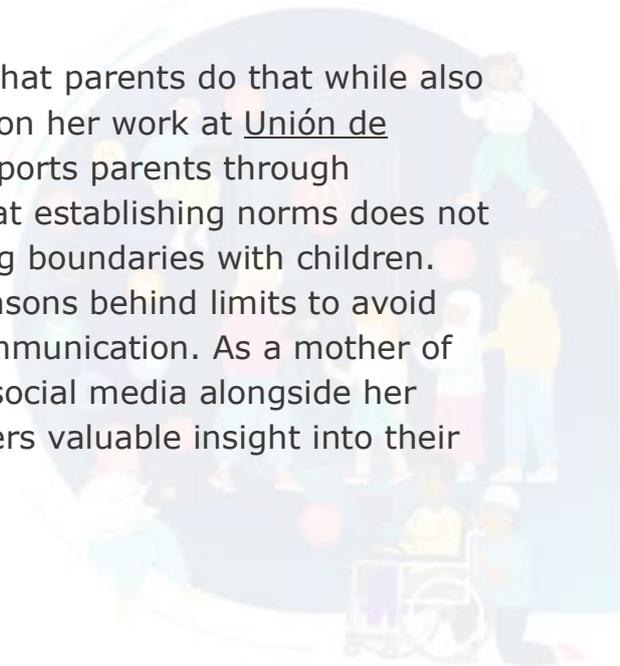


**Sarah** (Ireland) agreed with this, emphasising that education is essential and that open communication between parents and children is key to safer online experiences. She explained that when children feel comfortable speaking honestly with their parents about social media, they are more likely to seek help if something goes wrong. Instead of prohibiting access, she suggested that parents establish reasonable boundaries, such as limiting phone use at certain times, while actively teaching young people how to navigate digital spaces responsibly.

**Paul** (Germany) reinforced the central role of education but stressed that some level of restriction is still necessary. He noted that very young children shouldn't be using addictive-by-design platforms (like TikTok), given the heightened risk of developing dopamine-driven addictive behaviours. To contribute, older children and teens can share clear information about how such content affects the brain and why these risks matter. Additionally, education should not rely solely on parents, as not all families have the time or resources to provide such guidance. Instead, schools should play a key role in ensuring that all children receive the same foundational knowledge and that existing inequalities are not further widened.

**Antonia** (Bulgaria) raised a different point, highlighting the **importance of trust in the relationship between children and adults**. She explained that when young people are told they cannot use social media until a certain age, they often interpret this as a sign that they are not trusted. She reflected on her own experience of bypassing restrictions out of frustration, noting how this affected her behaviour and communication over time. From her perspective, trust is an essential element in raising and guiding children and young people, and they feel its absence deeply. Furthermore, young people have a genuine interest in how adults decide when and how to introduce children to the online world.

**Amaia Echevarría** answered by emphasising that parents do that while also learning to navigate the digital world. Drawing on her work at Unión de Asociaciones Familiares (UNAF), where she supports parents through technology-focused webinars, she explained that establishing norms does not mean imposing rigid bans but rather negotiating boundaries with children. She stressed the importance of defining the reasons behind limits to avoid perceptions of unfairness and to build open communication. As a mother of two teenagers, she shared that engaging with social media alongside her children not only helps guide them but also offers valuable insight into their interests.



**Adults must also lead by example; poor behaviour on social media is not limited to young users.** Parents, grandparents and caregivers all have a responsibility to educate themselves about the digital world so they can better guide children and young people in their everyday lives.

In drawing the roundtable to a close, the young people acknowledged the value of hearing all the different perspectives and thanked everyone for their participation.



# Parallel sessions and key conclusions

[The recording of the key conclusion session is available here.](#)

This part of the agenda was given over to parallel sessions on age restrictions and fundamental rights.

All **onsite participants** took part in a small-group discussion, with an overall focus on protecting children from age-inappropriate online experiences while ensuring their inclusion and empowerment. Across tables in different breakout rooms, participants discussed the following three focus areas:

- **Children of today** – how can we protect children from harmful online experiences while also protecting their rights?
- **Approaches to online safety service design**, which could include age assurance but also safety-by-design, age-appropriate design and child-centred design.
- **Children of tomorrow** – implications of age restrictions and what social media should look like in 10 years.

**Online participants** followed discussions via a live stream within the virtual meeting environment. The session was structured around three mini panels, exploring the same three topics as the onsite participants. There was an opportunity for audience questions and discussion after each panel. Youth participants kicked off the discussions, setting the scene for both onsite and online participants.

Following the parallel sessions, a plenary session, chaired by **Manuela Martra, Deputy Head of Unit, Accessibility, Multilingualism and Safer Internet, DG CONNECT, European Commission**, brought together the rich set of perspectives shared from the youth representatives, experts, and other stakeholders who participated in discussions. The plenary discussion included contributions from SIF Youth Advisory Group member **Maja, Marina Wetzer-Karlsson** as a parent and grandparent representative, **Liudas Mikalkevičius** from the Lithuanian Safer Internet Centre, and **Hans Martens** of European Schoolnet. Together, these voices illustrated both convergence and nuance across the three central themes.



Key takeaways for this session were captured by a graphic illustrator

## Children of today – How can we protect children while respecting their rights?

Reflecting on current online behaviours, **Maja** explained that platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and Snapchat are deeply woven into young people’s daily communication. WhatsApp was considered comparatively safer because direct contact is required, yet other platforms expose young people to unsolicited messages, public-by-default profiles, and algorithmic amplification that may push harmful or disturbing content. The discussions highlighted that **young people frequently encounter design choices they did not request**, such as **persuasive interfaces** and **unfiltered contact channels**, which increase vulnerability.

There was consensus across discussions that **rigid age thresholds or outright bans do not effectively protect children**. Participants observed that children often circumvent restrictions through VPNs, borrowed or fake identification, or secondary devices hidden from parents. This behaviour demonstrates that **bans merely push risk underground rather than resolving it**. The conversations, therefore, pointed to the need for measures that mature with children, reflecting their evolving resilience, rather than binary ‘allowed’ or ‘not allowed’ approaches. Children want **accounts and settings that are private and safe by default**, and they want **reporting**

**tools** that are both easy to use and responsive, since young people frequently receive little or no feedback about what happens after they submit reports.

Legal and cultural considerations also shaped the discussion. In Sweden, for instance, strong constitutional protections around freedom of expression make strict age restrictions difficult to implement. Participants also expressed concerns that rigid age thresholds might reduce investment in broader child protection efforts, leading to an overly narrow focus on age rather than on broader systemic safeguards. They noted that communication platforms are often essential for young people's social development and therefore differ significantly from general entertainment or content-sharing platforms.

Although children's ability to report harmful content is improving across many services, parents rarely report problems, even when they are aware of them. This gap points to an **urgent need to strengthen digital literacy among caregivers**. All too often, the blame for online harms is placed on children themselves rather than on platforms whose design choices enable or exacerbate risks. The discussions on this topic reaffirmed the importance of listening closely to children's lived experiences as a foundation for effective solutions.

## Approaches to online safety service design

Summarising discussions on technical and design measures, **Marina Wetzer-Karlsson** explained that participants examined the full spectrum of age-assurance approaches, including self-declaration, automated age estimation, and verification methods that require IDs or other physical identifiers. While age estimation is already used by some platforms to differentiate features, participants were cautious about biometric age assessment due to limited transparency, oversight and regulatory certainty. Parents and caregivers need much clearer information about what data is collected for age assurance protocols, how it is processed, and how long it is retained, so they can trust the systems intended to protect their children.

The discussions repeatedly underlined the **importance of safety-by-design and age-appropriate design**. Participants argued that platforms should not wait for children to adjust to unsafe environments; rather, environments should be designed to minimise risks from the outset. This means designing default settings that protect children's privacy, ensuring interfaces reduce the likelihood of unwanted contact, and preventing unnecessary data collection.

The [Guidelines on the Protection of Minors under Article 28 of the Digital Services Act](#) set out many of these expectations, though their full enforcement will take time to develop.

It was also observed that **restrictions must be proportionate to the nature of each platform**. Communication tools, gaming platforms, creative apps and large-scale social networks each present different risks and should therefore be treated differently in design and regulation.

The next decade will bring **significant regulatory changes** through the DSA, the AI Act and related policy initiatives, reshaping what platforms can and cannot do. For this transition to succeed, parents and wider society will need to keep learning about new tools and responsibilities. The discussions under this topic concluded that only a **holistic approach** — one that includes platforms, children, parents, educators and regulators — can deliver **balanced solutions** that protect children without undermining their rights to participate and benefit from digital environments.

## Children of tomorrow – what should social media look like in 10 years?

Reporting on the forward-looking discussions, **Liudas Mikalkevičius** described a future digital environment that participants hoped would be **healthier, more meaningful, and less driven by addictive design**. The unpredictability of the digital market, where platforms emerge and disappear rapidly, and the lack of a consistent definition of 'social media' make it difficult to prescribe a single set of rules. Nevertheless, several clear themes emerged.

Participants favoured **child-friendly versions of apps**, with staged access to features based on age and capability. In this **vision**, younger children might have no messaging and limited, time-capped scrolling, while older teens would gradually gain more control and functionality. Public posting for the youngest users would not be available, and persuasive design elements such as 'like' counters and dopamine-triggering notifications would be reduced or removed entirely. Algorithms would need far greater transparency, and tools to distinguish real users from bots would need to be developed in privacy-respecting ways.

Education was again at the centre of these discussions. Many participants supported the idea of an **'internet driver's license'** (or similar); that is, a

skills-based training and assessment sequence that could be integrated into apps or school curricula. This would help young people better understand their digital footprint, manage risks, and know what to do when confronted with harmful content. Participants also highlighted the importance of nurturing real-life communication and connections, suggesting that a **better digital balance** could contribute to improved mental health, physical activity, and overall well-being.

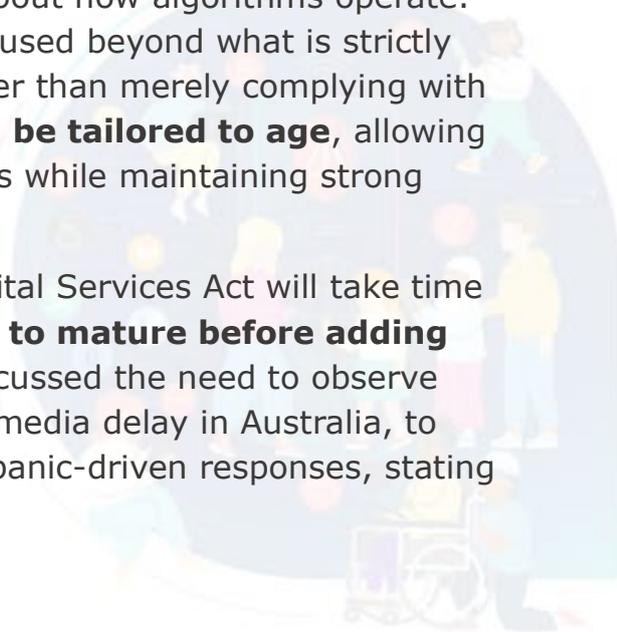
A recurring concern was that young people are already adept at **circumventing age restrictions** and will likely become more skilled at doing so, potentially stimulating a market for fraudulent identification. This reinforced the message that **restrictions alone are insufficient without education, supportive design, and cultural change**. Participants called for universal, straightforward options for reporting harmful content and greater encouragement of offline activities.

## Transversal reflections: governance, enforcement and societal norms

**Hans Martens** reflected on the insights shared during the online session, which brought together more than 100 participants. He pointed out an important issue that had not been raised elsewhere: **research on how social media affects children remains limited** and does not give a clear picture. Some risks are well documented, but others vary greatly from one child to another, making it hard to reach firm conclusions. Because of this, policymakers need to proceed carefully, acknowledging both the uncertainties in the evidence and the topic's complexity.

Participants strongly supported protective defaults in online safety design and urged **companies to be more transparent** about how algorithms operate. They argued that children's data should not be used beyond what is strictly necessary and that companies should aim higher than merely complying with minimum legal standards. **Protections should be tailored to age**, allowing older adolescents to explore and make mistakes while maintaining strong safeguards for younger children.

It was emphasised that enforcement of the Digital Services Act will take time and that the EU should **allow this framework to mature before adding new layers of restriction**. The group also discussed the need to observe international developments, such as the social media delay in Australia, to learn from its outcomes. They warned against panic-driven responses, stating



that the narrative should shift from “children are not ready for social media” to “**social media is not ready for children**”. Several participants echoed the sentiment that adults and industry created the current challenges and should therefore take responsibility for rebuilding safer environments rather than relying on restrictive bans.

In closing the session, **Manuela Martra** reinforced the need for a **holistic strategy that blends education, platform accountability and sustained youth participation**. **Marina Wetzter-Karlsson** added that parents and guardians must first learn and understand the digital world themselves so they can guide children effectively, while also listening closely to children’s perspectives. **Liudas Mikalkevičius** distilled the **value of peer-to-peer learning and youth engagement**, and **Maja** reminded participants that social media is essential to young people’s identity development and cannot simply be removed without addressing deeper issues. She noted that social media is quickly blamed when parents and lawmakers discuss young people's declining mental health. However, she stressed the importance of acknowledging the state of the world with multiple crises and high levels of uncertainty, and their impact on children's and young people's well-being.

These reflections revealed a **shared vision**: a collaborative, evidence-based, inclusive digital ecosystem designed for (and with) children, built through collaboration, evidence-informed governance, and long-term commitment from all parts of society.



*Manuela Martra (European Commission), Liudas Mikalkevičius (Lithuanian Safer Internet Centre) and Maja (SIF Youth Advisory Group, Poland) discussed key conclusions from the parallel sessions*

# Best awareness-raising resource of the year award

[See the recording of the announcement of the Best Safer Internet Centre Awareness-raising Resource of the Year Award.](#)

(from 00:00 to 08:40 of the recording)

Co-funded by the European Union, the [Insafe network of Safer Internet Centres across Europe](#) works to help keep children and young people safe online through a range of actions and initiatives. As part of their work, Safer Internet Centres develop numerous [educational resources and videos](#) aimed at helping teachers, parents and caregivers, and children and young people, to discover the online world safely<sup>2</sup>.

The 2025 Safer Internet Forum introduced a new award, the Best awareness-raising resource of the year, building on the Insafe network's biannual resource competitions. Onsite and online participants were invited to explore the four shortlisted resources in advance of the Forum, and return to cast their vote on the day of the SIF.

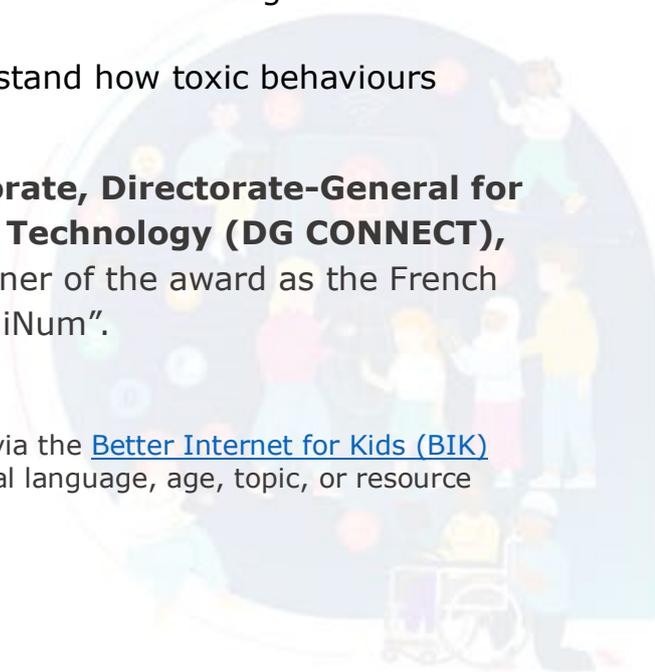
The competing entries for this edition were:

- [Everything you need to know about video games \(Croatia\)](#)  
A guide to video games, including recommendations and guidelines.
- [FamiNum \(France\)](#)  
A tool to help families establish healthy digital habits.
- [Right. Extreme. Online. \(Germany\)](#)  
A teaching resource to recognise hate and agitation online, become aware of propaganda mechanisms, and train civil courage.
- [Toxic: the board game \(Norway\)](#)  
A resource to help young people understand how toxic behaviours online can affect others.

**Yvo Volman, Director of the Data Directorate, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT), European Commission**, announced the winner of the award as the French Safer Internet Centre with the resource "FamiNum".

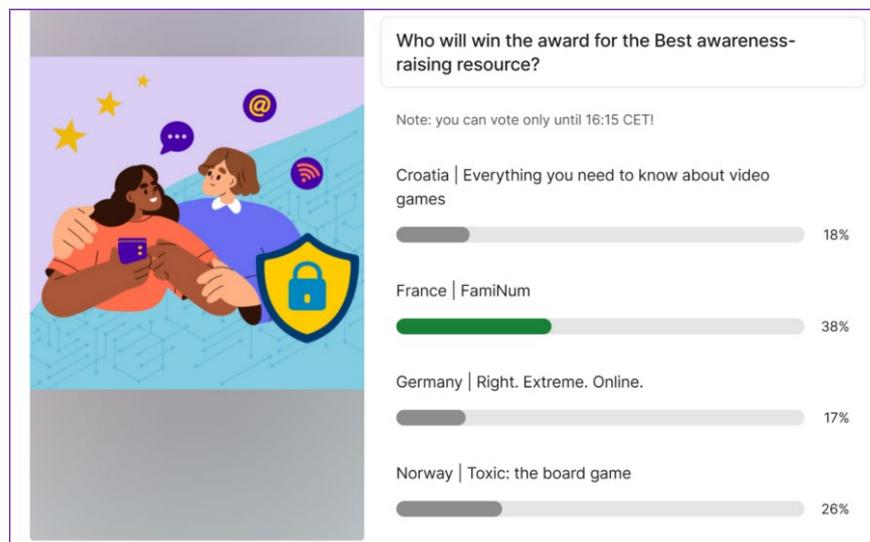
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<sup>2</sup> All of these resources can be accessed in one place via the [Better Internet for Kids \(BIK\) resource directory](#), allowing users to search by national language, age, topic, or resource type.





*SIF Youth Advisory Group members Marta and Gabriele handing over the award to Eva Lopez, representative of the French Safer Internet Centre*



*Results of the online and onsite vote combined, showing France as the winner, with Norway in second place, Croatia in third, and Germany in fourth place*

# Closing remarks

[See the recording of the closing remarks here.](#)

(from 08:40 until end of the recording)

Safer Internet Forum 2025 focused on the evolving dynamics of resource allocation, social inclusion, and the integration of technology and culture. In his summing up, **Yvo Volman, Director of the Data Directorate, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT), European Commission**, emphasised the importance of effectively structuring energy and resources to meet global needs while ensuring the safety and protection of families and individuals worldwide.

A significant portion of the discussion at SIF 2025 addressed the role of social media in shaping experiences, highlighting the **need to implement protective measures and restrictions to safeguard users while promoting inclusion and diversity in digital spaces**. Insights from social media analytics were presented as critical tools for **understanding behavioural patterns and predicting future trends**.

Discussions also touched on **European regulatory frameworks**, noting exhibitions and laws dedicated to specific communities. Compliance with these standards was portrayed as **essential for fostering trust and transparency**.

Another key theme of the day was the intersection of art and technology. Here, Mr Volman advocated for collaboration with young artists and creative professionals, viewing artistic innovation as a resource for societal evolution.

In conclusion, Mr Volman emphasised the need for **continued dialogue** on social media governance, data-driven decision-making, and cultural integration. These elements collectively form the foundation for sustainable development and inclusive growth.

