Better Internet for Kids

positive online content campaign

Positive Online Content for Children

Best practice guide

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This best practice guide delves into positive online content (POC): what it is, why it is necessary, how children (aged 0-12) can benefit from it, and how its production and mainstreaming can be facilitated to reach as many users as possible. The ultimate aim is to promote a better digital childhood for young children, and encourage the creation of new tools and services by providing positive examples of digital content for a variety of target groups.

Different groups function as stakeholders regarding positive online content: young people, parents and carers, teachers and other educational staff, content producers, policy makers and the research community. All of their perspectives are featured in this guide, offering possibilities to engage with and promote positive online experiences for young people all over Europe.

The presented findings and recommendations are based on extensive work of the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) Coordination Team in 2019. Following the success of the 2017 POCC (Positive Online Content Campaign) Awareness Week, another EU-wide campaign was organised – together with members of the Insafe network of Safer Internet Centres (SICs) in Europe and some former members of the POSCON (Positive Online Content and Services for Children in Europe 2012-2014) thematic network – to place a spotlight on the issue throughout the month of September 2019. The 2019 edition of the POC campaign built on the foundations of previously acquired extensive knowledge and experiences gained during POSCON, the Best Content for Kids Award (2013-14), and the first POC campaign. It was realised in collaboration with FSM e. V., the German Association for Voluntary Self-Regulation of Digital Media service providers.

In order to give it the appropriate amount of visibility, this edition of the Positive Online Content Campaign took place across the entire month, and was promoted using a variety of (updated) tools, best practices and examples via a special POC minisite. Additionally, each stakeholder group was targeted during a specific time frame with a weekly focus. The awareness month culminated with a focus group meeting where a select group of content producers and providers of children's content were invited to meet face to face, to discuss and share best practices about the challenges of providing safe, educational and entertaining content for children, incorporating their needs and ensuring they use age-appropriate services only, as well as looking into creating synergies for sustainable, ethical and successful content for children.

What is Positive Online Content?

Defining and identifying positive online content

The aim and importance of positive online content mainly lies in giving young internet users access to high-quality online experiences which can assist and empower children and young people to become active and participatory citizens. Moreover, it allows for the strengthening and broadening of awareness of positive content concepts across Europe.

Building upon the definition above, positive online content enables children to:

LEARN AND DEVELOP
HAVE FUN AND ENJOY THEMSELVES
ACQUIRE AND RETAIN LIFE SKILLS
STRETCH OR STIMULATE IMAGINATION
ENHANCE AND ENABLE CREATIVITY
DISCOVER NEW POSSIBILITIES AND ABILITIES
BUILD UP POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR FAMILY AND FRIENDS
ENHANCE SOCIAL/CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING
ENCOURAGE THEIR SENSE OF SELF, COMMUNITY AND PLACE
DEVELOP A POSITIVE VIEW OF THEMSELVES AND A RESPECT FOR THEIR IDENTITY
ENHANCE THEIR PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY
PRODUCE AND DISTRIBUTE THEIR OWN POSITIVE ONLINE CONTENT

Criteria checklist

The Positive Online Content criteria checklist, originally created as part of the POSCON (Positive Online Content and Services for Children in Europe) thematic network's work, was reviewed and updated during the 2019 campaign.

The aim is that content providers use this checklist when developing new content and services to ensure that their products are fit for purpose, and take measures to ensure that children can go online free from risk of harm, whether this be in terms of content, contact, conduct, or commercial considerations.

Explore the #PositiveContent CHECKLIST

positive online content campaign

Parents, carers and educators can also benefit from the checklist by being better aware of the features they should look out for when choosing online experiences for younger children.

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Positive online content and services include all kinds of digital offerings, such as apps, games, podcasts, platforms, video channels, and websites. They can be:

- Empowering – enables the child to feel confident and as independent as possible in their developing abilities within a safe digital environment.

- Engaging – causes the child to be motivated and inspired.

- Stimulating – encourages the child to feel curious to learn more.

- Safe – provides the child with the space to explore the digital experience at minimum risk.

The key elements of the checklist are:

- Basics: target group and objectives.

- Transparency.

- Stimulating experiences.

- Usability.

- Accessibility and inclusion.

- Reliability.

- Safety: harmless content, social media elements, communication.

- Privacy.

- Commercial elements.

1 BASICS
Decide target age-range
Define objectives
Plan the benefits to the child

CLEAR, TRANSPARENT OBJECTIVES
Consider the age range for design and interface purposes
Consider child development abilities and interests for each target age
Consider the socio-cultural factors for your context

STIMULATING DIGITAL EXPERIENCES
Creative, interactive, stimulating, educational products
Appealing visuals, sounds and videos

ENSURE USABILITY ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVENESS
On mobile devices, different browsers, operating systems
User-friendly navigation, adapted to the target group
Clearly marked navigation elements to help orientation
Unequivocal URL address/name
Ensure accessibility (for example, assistive technologies, alternative texts/attributes)

RELIABLE CONTENT
Ensure that your product complies with legislation or regulations (protection of minors, data protection, commercial communication, copyright and so on)
Provide accurate and reliable content which is maintained and reviewed regularly

AND ABOVE ALL
Reliable, up-to-date content
Safety-by-design
The privacy of the child is paramount
Sensitively developed social media elements and other communication features
Responsible use of commercial elements

POC checklist

Browse the checklist on the POC minisite; you can download various language versions there, too.
www.betterinternetforkids.eu/positive-content/checklist

Positive Online Content in Europe

But what is the actual state of play in Europe? European Safer Internet Centres and their partners were invited to showcase best practice examples from their countries which meet the POC criteria checklist through an online survey in summer 2019. The collection of examples functions as an inspiration, and offers a great diversity and variety of content and services to get to know. Furthermore the survey results offer information about the different national approaches to positive online content across Europe.

How diverse is the European positive online content landscape?

Get inspired! There are over 130 best practice examples from 26 European countries collected by European Safer Internet Centres and their partners to browse through.

SUITABLE FOR DIFFERENT AGE RANGES

More than 60 examples suitable for preschool children

More than 170 examples suitable for primary school children

More than 90 examples for older children from 10 years of age

COVERING A DIVERSITY OF TOPICS

Arts and culture

Everyday life and leisure

Nutrition and health

Media

Politics and society

Science, nature and technology

DIFFERENT TYPES

Apps

Video channels

Podcasts - Only just starting to occur for children

Online games

Websites – this is the majority of content and services

Icons designed by Matsabe/stock.adobe.com, Damaratskaya Alena/Shutterstock.com, VLADGRIN/Shutterstock.com and Rashad Ashurov/Shutterstock.com

Have you seen the positive content gallery? All of the collected positive online content examples can be found here:
www.betterinternetforkids.eu/positive-content/examples
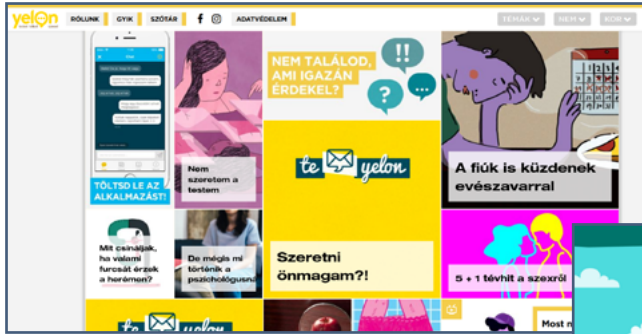
Hungary: Yelon sex education website

Latvia: Drošā diena (The Safe Day – game on fire safety and civil protection)

Greece: Digital playground
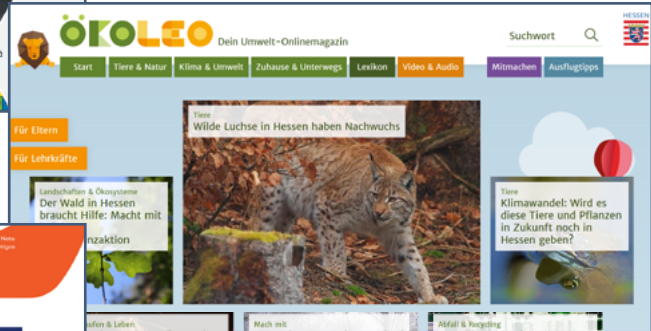
Germany: ÖkoLeo – Your environmental online magazine
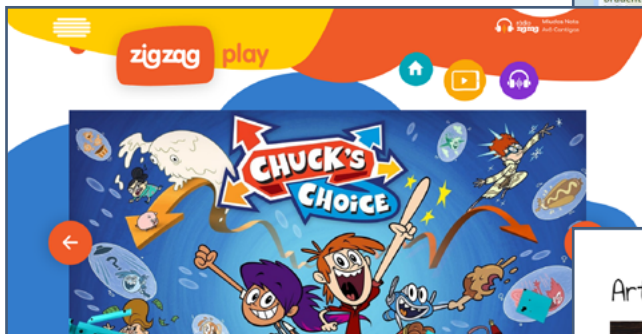
Portugal: Rádio Zig Zag

Italy: Artoo
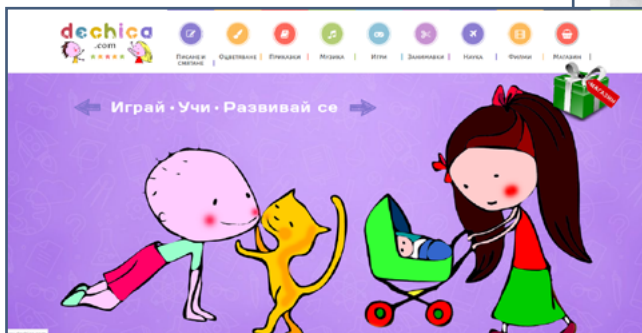
Bulgaria: Дечица (Young children)

Collage of best practices

Country case studies

Czech Republic

- Strong commercial subjects and publishing houses are providing POC.

- Most websites focus on pre-school or early primary school children.

- Public libraries engage in "positive content" activities.

Germany

- Diverse and comprehensive landscape of positive online content for children.

- Several search engines and portals for children lead to positive content.

- The fragFINN.de whitelist lists around 600 websites offering content specifically for children.

- Public (financial) promotion of online content for children funded by the Federal Government.

- Digital checklist and handbook "Children's websites and GDPR: This works well!" as a low-threshold information material for providers of positive online content for children on the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Latvia

- Private and public organisations engaged in providing POC.

- Content providers collaborate with schools.

- Teachers are invited to work with content and services during class lessons.

The Netherlands

- Interactive games for the school environment.

- Competitions for children and young people to actively take part.

Want to find out about your individual country? Click on the flag on this site:
www.betterinternetforkids.eu/positive-content/countries

Positive Online Content and the BIK Policy Map

Although there is clearly some great work going on in terms of POC provision across Europe, this is sometimes patchy and inconsistent, and there is a need for more work to be done on national level and across all the European countries. This is strongly reflected by the BIK Policy Map findings of 2018, showing that just under a quarter (23 per cent) of the 26 participating countries have dedicated BIK-related policies covering positive content for children. While a little over a quarter address this area as part of broader policy or policies, a total of 10 countries unfortunately report not having any policy on quality online content for children. On a broader scale and with regard to the different pillars examined by the BIK Policy Map, the support for quality online content for children/positive content (Pillar 1) is the most fragmented one.

During an upcoming new round of research focused on updating the BIK Policy Map it will be crucial to see how national efforts towards positive online content and services for children have been improved and revised.

The voice of young people

Children and young people

Children and young people have the right to enjoy the best possible online experiences that the internet can provide. By providing them with positive online content from an early age, we can help children to learn, develop and express themselves, and overall have fun in a safe online space, in which they are free to participate without risk of harm. Ensuring that children have access to high-quality positive online experiences from an early age can assist and empower them to become active and participatory citizens.

The Positive Online Content criteria checklist was formulated with the best interests of children and young people in mind. Content and services are supposed to be not only safe and reliable, but also attractive, easily usable, inclusive and fun. But what do European young people have to say? In interviews with some Better Internet for Kids (BIK) Youth Ambassadors they shared what positive content means to them:

Engaging

Trigger curiosity and inspiration

"Positive content should be accessible to all so that it can be positive for everybody."
(Lorcan, Ireland)

Safety

Skills and education

"POC gives us inspiration, make us understand the world we live in, and make us understand and improve ourselves"
(Catarina, Portugal)

"By having a mindful attitude to promote positive content, we (youngsters) can be educated and enrich valuable skills."
(Hadia, UK)

Supports learning

Positive content and services are only as good as they are known to children, meet their needs, are liked and used. Therefore it is crucial for providers and producers to engage children in the development and production process as early as possible. Feedback from

children in user experience studies or focus groups, online or offline, should shape content and services from the earliest possible stages. It is also important – and at the same time resourceful – to consider children's input on new ideas, features and topics.

Another important aspect is positive content and services which aim to motivate children and young people to become content producers themselves. Providers and producers are asked to stimulate and motivate the role of children as active producers and providers of positive content. They can offer digital tools and features allowing them to actively participate rather than just consume online services, for example creating their own videos or articles, as well as providing opportunities for communication and self-expression.

The role of parents, carers, educators and teachers: We need your help!

It is in the interests of all parents and carers for their children to have access to the best online experiences and that they are safe, while at the same time stimulated, informed and empowered. The Positive Online Content Campaign and this best practice guide aim to raise awareness and inform parents and carers of what you should be looking for in online services/apps/content that is respectful of your children's needs and learning capacities.

Then, by developing your digital literacy skills as parents and carers, we empower you to act as digital role models, providing positive examples for your children right from their earliest online experiences!

What parents should know – top tips!

Parents and carers want what is best for their children. Navigating through the sheer amount of online services and content targeted at younger users to make sure that those in their care are safe, while at the same time stimulated, informed and empowered, is a difficult task which orientation and support is needed for.

Martin Schmalzried from COFACE-Families Europe told us what's new in the world of digital content for children aged up to 12 and, most importantly, what parents and carers should be on the lookout for:

- Know how to pick the best digital content for your child.

- Look for other parents' reviews.

- Look for repositories and collections.

- Stay informed about the latest trends.

- Do your research about the content/service your child wants to use.

- Know the business models of content/services your child uses.

- Did you consent to your child using the content/service? Make a decision together!

- Engage with your child and build up trust.

- Be a (digital) role model!

- Support (independent) positive content producers, such as through paid content or crowd-funding.

Watch the full video here:

The role of teachers and educators: Positive online content means a better digital childhood for your pupils

Teachers and educators

Digital content is playing an increasingly significant role in children's education, from an ever-younger age. For this reason, teachers and educators should be equipped to properly and effortlessly navigate through the wide array of online content available, in order to ensure the safest, most informative and engaging experiences for their pupils. Positive online content and services have the potential to enrich lessons – and indeed any educational activities – by taking advantage of children's almost innate fascination and motivation to learn through digital media.
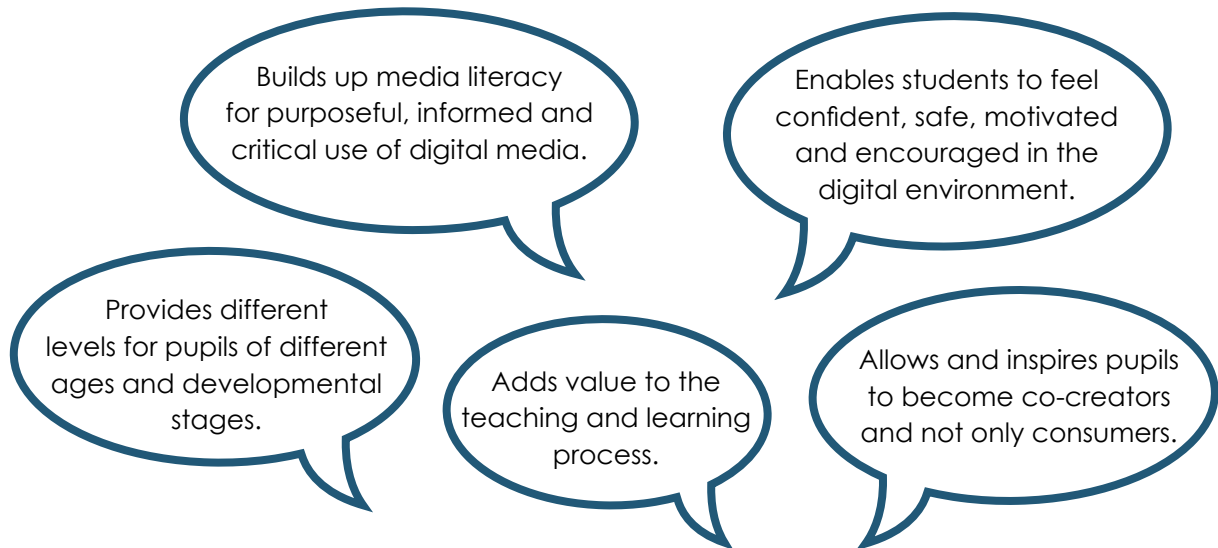
Innovative teachers can also further explore the potential of digital content for recognition and boosting self-esteem. Furthermore, the experience and perspectives of teachers are

needed for providing a more inclusive and accessible online landscape (for example, for children with special needs).

What do European teachers think? During a Twitter chat during the campaign month we heard from teachers all over Europe!

Positive Online Content…

Builds up media literacy for purposeful, informed and critical use of digital media.

Enables students to feel confident, safe, motivated and encouraged in the digital environment.

Provides different levels for pupils of different ages and developmental stages.

Adds value to the teaching and learning process.

Allows and inspires pupils to become co-creators and not only consumers.

What is challenging?

- Parent education is needed because teachers are limited to classroom and school work; bringing parents and carers into the conversation is a must! The aim should be to have shared agreements and understandings between the home and schools.

- Staying up to date with digital media trends and related challenges or risks – exchange with other teachers is considered resourceful and inspiring!

- Media literacy for teachers as a key asset in order to educate and inspire children about positive online experiences, as well as providing support for parents and carers, needs to be strengthened.

See the highlights of our Positive Online Content Twitter chat here:

Do you want to learn about positive online content, collect resources, and implement them in your classroom work? Use our resources collated especially for educational purposes!
www.betterinternetforkids.eu/positive-content/teachers

The responsibility of content providers and producers: Positive online content ensures a better digital childhood for all

Content producers and providers

Producers and providers of digital content who design, develop and distribute online content and services targeted at children up to 12 years of age probably play the biggest role in ensuring that younger generations have access to age appropriate, safe, informative and empowering online experiences from the outset.

With the help of the offered checklist, content providers and producers from across Europe may design, adapt and customise their products so as to contribute to raising an empowered and digitally-skilled generation of active citizens.

During the Positive Online Content Awareness Month, a POC Focus Group for industry members, content providers and content producers took place in Brussels on 26 September 2019. Together with European Schoolnet, FSM and representatives of the European Commission, twelve providers and producers from all over Europe shared best practices, and discussed challenges and future perspectives on positive online content and services.

Motivation – why industry is producing positive online content

- By providing POC, industry is strengthening the focus on positive digital opportunities for children while, at the same time, minimising the risks for young people.

- POC apps, websites and digital services offer positive and fun experiences for children.

- Providing child-appropriate content allows children to engage with the world.

- POC combines fun and safety and therefore creates a safe space for children to explore, without fear of failure or mistakes.

- Industry offers support and orientation to parents and carers who face challenges in a digital world.

- Positive digital content gives children a voice, and makes them feel connected, represented and included.

- Positive online experiences strengthen children's self-esteem.

- Creativity and inspiration for children are promoted.

- Companies live up to their responsibility when offering safe, age-appropriate and trustworthy content.

- Industry providers and producers support and collaborate with NGOs and non-profit initiatives.

Success stories of providers and producers

- Know your target group! "Test, fail, learn!"

  - Research and exchange with external experts.

  - Learn from user experiences and feedback from children, for example through focus groups – offline or also directly within the platform/service (such as through an avatar).

  - Involve children to come up with new ideas, features and topics.

  - Also involve parents and carers to gain their feedback.

Super RTL, Germany

Super RTL digital content is provided as "content hubs" – there are different brands dedicated to different age groups. In the context of content for children, Super RTL as a private TV broadcaster is changing its strategy, focusing more on apps, such as Toggolino (pre-school) and Kividoo (streaming) to reach children. The team behind the new Toggolino video app, for example, has developed a new selection of videos, radio plays, games, and so on. The app aims to provide safe media use, offering age filters and time limits. Radio plays are offered specifically in the evening – smooth and less dynamic content in order to not excite children before they go to bed.

Lego, Denmark – user experience and children's influence

The Lego Life app is engaging children with positive content. The app targets children aged 8 to 12 and offers five digital multidimensional personas for children (Builders, Storytellers, Creators, Decorators, and Explorers). The app has around one million active personas per month. The audience (children) builds the content, and they are further inspired to be creative through various challenges – create, decoration challenge, and so on. The Lego team has identified some favourite features of children with different outcomes – for example, video formats tend to inspire building and creation, while creating content bundles is always popular. The Lego team has found that kids are very resourceful in finding ways to communicate with each other. Often, users use the comments option to create multi-contributor stories together, while many also create their own discussions rooms.

Lego maintains two-way conversation with the users through the personas and through open group discussions. The company has dedicated a lot of resources to user-experience testing, which includes talking directly to kids in order to create content that resonates with them, and also through face-to-face meetings with parents and carers.

- Safety: involve parents and carers, and offer individual decisions for their child.

- Let users interactively and playfully engage with safety features and measures.

Lego, Denmark – safety and parental input

The Lego app offers various safety features: digital signature, random username generation, moderation, no facial disclosures and parental gates to unlock certain features. The sign-up process requires the user to accept a safety pledge. The parental gates to features have proved, in many cases, to be a limitation for some users; parents tend not to get involved in their children's online activities and hence they don't tend to unlock features for their kids.

Časoris, online newspaper for children, Slovenia

Časoris is an online newspaper for children with daily stories on politics, science, sports and culture. It includes a special section in which children publish their own stories about what is going on in their world. Časoris also has a channel on YouTube. Children find Časoris useful and fun; the stories are written in a children-friendly language and the topics are interesting and important at the same time. The stories include a glossary and points to consider so that they can also learn something while reading the news.
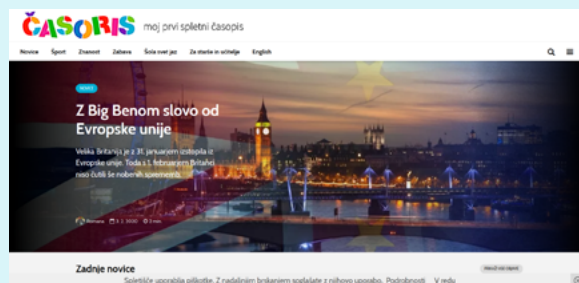
- Do not underestimate children's content – sometimes a clear and simplistic approach to covering topics can be appealing to adults as well!

- Distribute content and formats through a diverse range of services (e.g. TV format developed into apps, games, podcasts, and so on).

- Bring offline ideas to digital and vice versa – it meets children's understanding of an interweaved offline-online world.

- Do not be afraid of difficult topics! Bullying, refugees, terrorism or death have made core themes of age-appropriate and engaging digital content.

Mussila, app, Iceland

Mussila Music School is a music learning app for kids. It teaches kids music through gamified and joyful exercises and classical music courses that keep kids motivated to learn more. At the end of each session, the student will be able to play a song from a great classical piece and know the theory basics behind it. Kids and parents love it and teachers recommend Mussila.
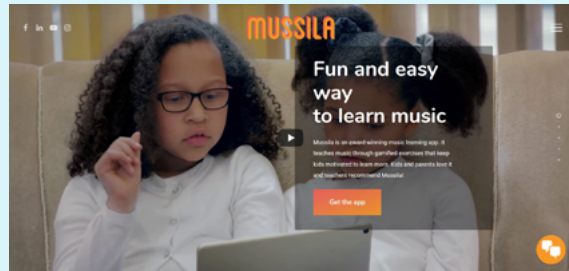
What are the main challenges?

- "Get children to use it! – children will only use content and services that are appealing to them, that are fun, and when other children use it, too." (Dr Sonja Merljak Zdovc, Slovenia)

- Engage with parents and carers – providers struggle with reaching them:

    - With older children, parents usually do not get too involved and children use services more freely; the age of 11 seems to be a turning point.

    - Safety features that need their involvement – for example, when parents do not want to get involved regarding safety features and do not take action, it can result in limitations for users.

    - Realising educational campaigns targeting parents and carers.

- Balancing the perspectives: children usually prioritise fun and engagement, while parents and carers focus on the benefits (usefulness) of resources.

- Financing and sustainable funding:

    - It is crucial to consider the benefits of business models for the target group.

    - Very often, despite the wish to produce POC, stakeholders struggle to dedicate resources for solely that purpose.

    - Programme-based financing is not sustainable.

- Take the different cultural contexts of children into account; it is almost always impossible to just translate resources. More efforts are needed to localise the content.

> Top tip: Check out the various language versions of the POC checklist
> **www.betterinternetforkids.eu/positive-content/checklist**

Top tips for providers and producers

How can you better reach out to parents and carers? Parents and carers introduce children to content and services, and they also function as gatekeepers to children's media literacy in general.

- Localisation is key! Address parents and carers in their national language and consider the cultural context.

- Communicate with parents and carers through their children – invite and support them to start the conversation.

- Guide parents and carers to easily find the important information; do not hide your advice among pages of terms of conditions. The younger your target group, the more straightforward and informative your communication should be.

- Provide more user-friendly and engaging design, as well as innovative solutions for parents and carers; make it easy for them to find information and adapt this into their individual family. Also think about reaching out to teachers and educators.

What do we do now? – The Future of Positive Online Content

Framing the conversation

From empowerment versus safety to empowerment AND safety

Often the focus of financing and awareness initiatives lies on protection rather than empowerment. However, these two perspectives are of equal importance, especially regarding the digital wellbeing of children and young people.

With the perspective that positive content is beneficial across the whole of society, it is crucial to strengthen the framework and opportunities for its funding. Investing in its production and distribution should be realised with a multi-faceted and mixed strategy from public funding to industry engagement, cross-financing and innovative payment models. Transparency about funding sources and motivation, as well as sustainability, need to be prioritised.

Collaboration and sharing experiences

Producers and providers agree that it would be useful to establish a European-wide structural platform to share experiences and exchange best practices. They are motivated to learn from each other, especially on topics such as how to organise focus groups with the target group(s), how to analyse user behaviour, and how to increase parental involvement. Many content providers find that they struggle with the same challenges and follow similar strategies for engaging children and parents with positive content; hence, they are motivated to get involved in collaborative initiatives. A structural platform would offer good opportunities for them to share good – and bad – practices from their experience. Here, already-existing platforms and networks (such as the Alliance to better protect minors online) should be the starting point to initiate and regularly facilitate collaboration and experience sharing. The EC can play an important role in encouraging industry as well as providing the framework for a joint approach, especially with the aim of providing improved guidance for families all over Europe.

We are in this together – improve awareness raising all over Europe

- Better Internet for Kids (BIK) strives for positive online experiences – there is a need to promote and highlight the topic of positive online content within the communication narratives regularly and continuously!
  ! Multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration on EU level.

- Showcase materials and resources at various events and action days at the European as well as national level, for example through:

- Safer Internet Day (SID) and the Safer Internet Forum (SIF).

- Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG).

- National conferences and local events.

- Network training meetings of the European Safer Internet Centres – the Insafe network functions as a key distributor in European countries, addressing the relevant target groups of children, families and educators.

- Collaborate with existing networks of relevant stakeholders, such as the Alliance to better protect minors online and the ICT coalition.

- Initiate competitions for children and young people: providing tools for them to create their own positive content and showcase their production on a high level.

- Put young people's perspectives and voices first – include them in awareness campaigns, develop a child-friendly criteria checklist with and designed for them, and offer them opportunities to meet with producers and providers.

And finally: Make your pledge to Positive Online Content!

- Share best practices in your community, to young people, parents and carers, and educators!

- Listen to the voice of children: What do they have to say? What do they like/dislike? What are they missing?
  ! Producers/providers: Engage children and teenagers in creating positive online content!

- Encourage children to actively participate and produce their own online content!

- Collaborate with others when possible – joint efforts are likely to be more successful!

- Communicate and learn from each other! Let different perspectives inspire your work and benefit from lessons already learned.

- Better Internet for Kids (BIK) strives for positive online experiences – there is a need to promote positive online content continuously!

- Make it a priority on national level to politically support quality online content for children and positive online content – through funding, awareness raising and by initiating collaborative structures.