Better Internet for Kids

Children and young people with disabilities in an online world

Best-practice guideline

March 2021

Contents

Introduction

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published General Comment No 25 in March 2021[1]. It focuses on children's rights in relation to the digital environment and notes specifically that this space is becoming increasingly important, with more and more aspects of children's lives taking place online and that they rely on technology. It also states that:

> *Innovations in digital technologies affect children's lives and their rights in ways that are wide-ranging and interdependent, even where children do not themselves access the internet.*

This statement resonates even more so as we move into 2021 and continue responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and the inevitable reliance on technology for communication, learning, working and a myriad of other things as lockdowns continue to be widespread.

Section IX of the General Comment focuses on children with disabilities and notes:

> *The digital environment opens new avenues for children with disabilities to engage in social relationships with their peers, access information, and participate in public decision-making processes.*

It recommends that States should take steps to overcome barriers faced by children in relation to the digital environment:

> *Children…face different barriers in accessing the digital environment, such as content in non-accessible formats, limited access to affordable assistive technologies at home, school and in the community and the prohibition of the use of digital devices in schools, health facilities and other environments.*

This has already been clearly demonstrated during 2020 with many young people with disabilities explaining that when schools closed and they had to carry on their learning from home, they were not able to benefit from many of the assistive technologies that were available to them at school.

Similarly, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child[2] (March 2021) noted that:

> *The use of digital tools can help child with disabilities in learning, connecting, communicating and participating in recreational activities online, **provided they are accessible.***

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[1] https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fGC%2f25&Lang=en
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/1_en_act_part1_v7_0.pdf

In 2018, the Contract for the Web was created by representatives from over 80 organisations – including governments, industry and civil society – with the aim of making sure that the online world is "*safe, empowering and genuinely **for everyone***".[3] It recognises that the web has indeed "*changed the world for good and improved the lives of millions*", but "*many people are still unable to access its benefits and, for others, the Web comes with too many unacceptable costs.*"

One in three internet users are under the age of 18 and special attention must be paid to this group in order to ensure that they are able to use the internet safely while also feeling empowered to actively participate in all that it can offer. UNICEF estimate that there are around 93 million children with disabilities in the world[4] but acknowledges that this figure could be far higher. Significantly more are vulnerable for a range of other reasons and it is important that, like other children and young people, they are able to benefit from all that technology can offer but do so safely and with the proper support that they might need. Making provision for young people with disabilities cannot be seen as "one size fits all" as their needs can be diverse depending on their disability or vulnerability.

Indeed, an important study into the lives of children and young people with disabilities online was published by the Council of Europe in 2019.[5] The *Two clicks forward and one click back report* found that while life online for children with disabilities was similar to life online for those without disabilities, there were some important differences which needed to be highlighted. The report also found that grouping children and young people with disabilities under one heading was not helpful as "*their use of digital media and experiences vary significantly across and within different types of disabilities*" and that seeing them as a homogenous group does them a disservice.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) General Comment No 25 *Children's rights in relation to the digital environment*[6] recognises that children with disabilities can encounter barriers when they are online. These can include policies which can have a discriminatory impact on them such as a ban on technology in some settings despite the fact that these individuals may rely on personal devices in order to communicate and access information. While it is clear that technology can facilitate access to information for many young people, and particularly so if they have a visual impairment for example, it is often the case that when they go to school the very technology that can help them is either not available or not allowed (due to rules about the use of technology within the school). Similarly, too many websites, applications, games and other digital services fail to meet universal design requirements to ensure accessibility. While there is a growing awareness of

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[3] https://contractfortheweb.org/about/
[4] https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/
[5] https://rm.coe.int/two-clicks-forward-and-one-click-back-report-on-children-with-disabili/168098bd0f
[6] https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fGC%2f25&Lang=en

the importance of inclusivity and accessibility of online services and platforms, this is by no means universal and there is considerable disparity between different online environments.

A good example is the terms and conditions for social networking sites. Few people read these for a variety of reasons, not least that the language used is too complex and that they are too long. For an individual with an intellectual disability this becomes even more challenging and there are calls to make these terms and conditions (which provide important information about the data that sites will be collecting) more accessible to all, with some suggesting that they need to be written in a more child-friendly way to enable users to really understand them.[7]

It is clear that, like all children and young people, vulnerable groups are spending increasing amounts of time online but, as Adrienne Katz (Youthworks Consulting Ltd) found in her research[8], "*the support networks around vulnerable children have not yet caught up with the reliance many of them have on their devices and the connectivity it brings them. For example, some parents are unable to offer the support and guidance that their children need to navigate the online world safely and in an effort to safeguard their children they restrict access to the point where their children are unable to unlock the opportunities that exist online. Funding is always a challenge and whilst many recognise the potential of tech to open up access for children and young people with disabilities the money needed to purchase equipment and provide the training and support needed to use it effectively can be lacking.*"
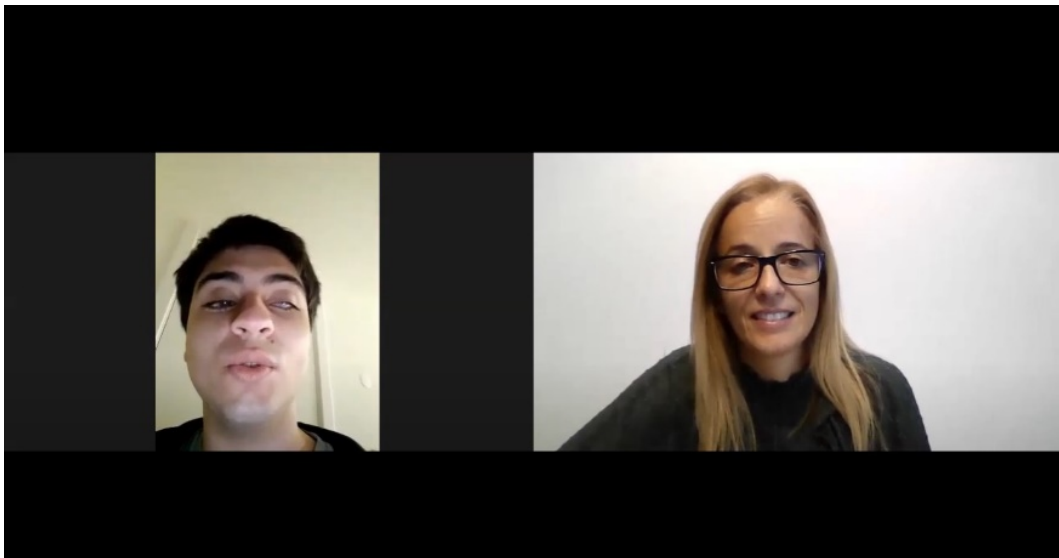
The 2020 edition of the Safer Internet Forum (SIF)[9] – a key annual international conference in Europe where policy makers, researchers, law enforcement bodies, youth, parents and carers, teachers, NGOs, industry representatives, experts and other relevant actors come together to discuss the latest trends, opportunities, risks and solutions related to child online safety – looked specifically at the opportunities and challenges of creating an inclusive world for children and young people online. In addition to hearing from experts from academia, civil society, policy and industry, most importantly it heard from young people directly in order to more fully understand how technology can empower them, but equally the barriers which need to be addressed to enable a fully inclusive online experience.

Joao Moita is an 18-year-old from Portugal where he attends the University of Coimbra. Joao has had glaucoma since he was born and spoke at the Safer Internet Forum about how he uses technology and the benefits that it can offer him.

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[7] https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2017/09/29/childrens-commissioner-launches-social-media-giants-terms-and-conditions-jargon-buster-to-give-kids-more-power-in-digital-world/
[8] https://youthworksconsulting.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Vulnerable-Children-in-a-Digital-World-FINAL-004.pdf
[9] https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/policy/safer-internet-forum

([view video clip on YouTube](#))

Clearly technology provides many opportunities for Joao and he talks about how it has changed over time. The computer has made a significant impact on his life and the use of voice software and screen readers has meant he can access his schoolwork and a lot of other information much more easily. Joao further commented:

> "...sometimes it is difficult to use some websites when using shortcuts and a screen reader because the sites are not explaining what is actually written there. You are trying to learn something which could be easier for you and it could open new possibilities, but it is not as easy as it could be. The screen reader is great, but websites need to be designed in a way that the screen reader can make sense of what is there."

Benefits of being online

It is clear that technology can open up a wide range of opportunities for all users and, of course, this includes vulnerable users. Alessandro Francescon, a student from Italy, was interviewed ahead of the Safer Internet Forum in November 2020 and noted that the internet allows him to communicate with people from all over the world which would have never been possible otherwise. As a music student, he benefits from being able to access huge amounts of content online which he enjoys exploring.

I really liked when my sing teacher gave me the chance to find online videos

(view video clip on YouTube)

> *"I really liked it when my singing teacher gave me the chance to find online videos, because I didn't stop after that. I got the chance to explore new areas that I really liked, discovering songs from Frank Sinatra and Michael Bublé that I loved, and I'm so glad that this relationship with the internet allowed me to do so."*

Similarly, Joao spent three months in Prague as part of a school exchange. He said that technology was really important for almost everything while he was on the school exchange because he used it to contact his family and friends, to work at school and to find his way around the city: "*Technology was present in almost everything!*"
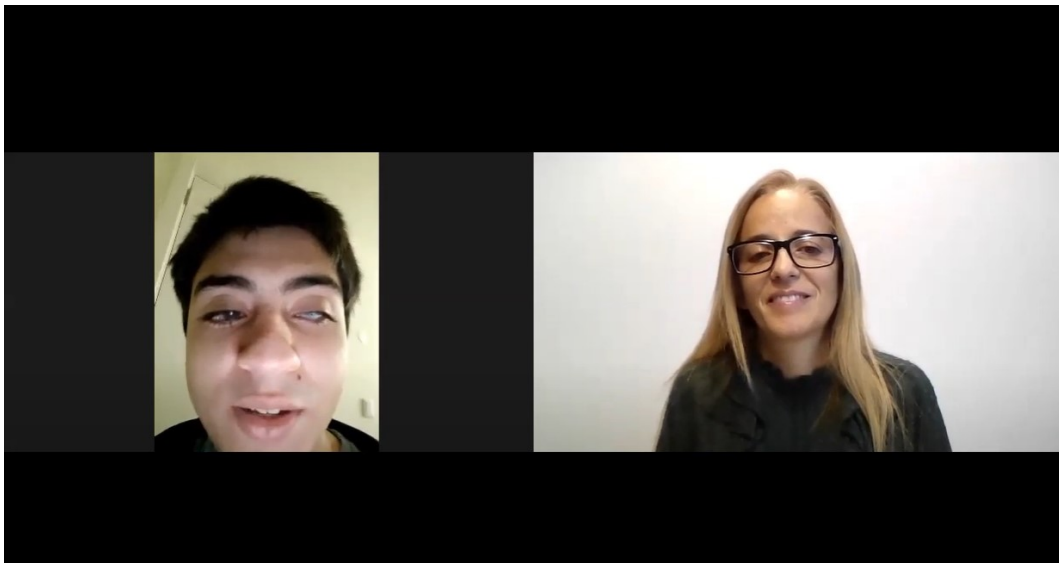
([view video clip on YouTube](#))

The young people gave interesting perspectives on the COVID-19 situation and, in particular, on how technology had helped them during that time. Maya from Austria talked about a practical implication – she did not need to worry about transporting her wheelchair from home to school so during lockdown it was much easier for her to get around. Several young people talked about how online learning allowed them to work at their own pace and manage their time more effectively, but they also recognised the potential to be distracted by tech. Research is still emerging about the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on different groups but there have been clear advantages to using tech; for example, young people have reported feeling less isolated particularly when playing online games with friends.[10]

Joao felt he had an advantage over some of his classmates during lockdown. He has been using a range of different technologies for some time, but for some of his peers lockdown forced them to use new applications and programmes which wasn't always easy for them.

For someone with a hearing impairment, a classroom or a meeting room can be a challenging environment with people talking over each other and lots of background noise making it difficult to follow the conversation. With a video conference it can be a lot easier. Everyone has a microphone and people do not tend to talk over others. There are rules which are communicated ahead of the meeting/lesson about the etiquette that should be observed – muting a microphone or raising a hand before speaking are all quite familiar to many of us now but have perhaps had untold benefits for some.

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[10] https://www.isfe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/IpsosMori-Gaming-during-Lockdown-Q1-Q2-2020-report.pdf

Challenges of being online

No matter what the vulnerability, cyberbullying, sexting, online harassment, misinformation and disinformation can affect everyone. However, research has shown that some young people with particular vulnerabilities can be more susceptible to a range of online harms.

For example, a study published by the Ruderman Foundation in 2019[11] found that students with disabilities were almost twice as likely to be cyberbullied than their peers without a disability. It also found that students who were involved in cyberbullying were more likely to experience depression as a result compared to their peers without a disability (45 per cent compared to 31 per cent).

Parents and carers of children and young people with disabilities acknowledged some of the specific challenges that their children faced online:[12]

- Developing extreme views based on a lack of critical thinking and digital literacy to discern between what is fact and fiction online.
- Context is often missed as these young people do not understand nuance and consequently can be exposed to real world consequences.
- Lack of cognitive ability means it is easier to make a mistake.

The ITU Child Online Protection (COP) Guidelines[13] published in 2020 stated that "*children and young people with disabilities often face exclusion, stigmatisation and barriers in participation in their communities* and that this in turn can lead to them being at *higher risk for incidents of grooming, online solicitation, and/or sexual harassment.*"

Testimonies from young people at the Safer Internet Forum seem to back up some of the concerns. For example, Alessandro from Italy stated: "*I do think that disabled people can encounter issues using the network, that's why I think that they should be supervised either by an adult or a competent individual.*"

Sunna from Iceland was asked whether she thought that people with disabilities were safe on the internet. She immediately answered no and explained that it is difficult to be disabled on the internet "*because people try to take advantage of you and will take advantage of your disability, particularly if it is an intellectual disability.*" She went on to say that "*disabled people are humiliated online*" and that they need help.

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[11] https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/ruderman-white-paper-reveals-students-with-disabilities-are-almost-twice-as-likely-to-be-victims-of-cyberbullying/
[12] Life online for children with SEND https://www.internetmatters.org/connecting-safely-online/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/07/Internet-Mattesr-Life-online-for-children-with-SEND-report.pdf
[13] https://www.itu-cop-guidelines.com/

(view video clip on YouTube)

Online safety

Given Sunna's comments above, some consideration needs to be given to the quality of online safety, both in general terms but also specifically online safety education for children and young people with disabilities. Adrienne Katz (Youthworks) and Aiman El Asam (Kingston University) highlighted a number of specific areas for concern in their research *Vulnerable Children in a Digital World.*[14]

- Vulnerable children miss out on online safety education or find it does not seem relevant given their concerns. They point out it is often given "too late".
- Lack of training and assessment tools for use in cases with a digital component among agencies who work with vulnerable children.
- Exposure to harmful content such as pro-anorexia, self-harm or suicide sites could be a greater risk and is increasing.

Research published by the eSafety Commissioner's office in Australia in December 2020[15] found that children and young people with intellectual disabilities were susceptible to many of the same online safety risks as their peers, but noted that their response strategies differed significantly. Specifically:

- Rather than reach out and seek support, these young people responded to negative online experiences by shutting down and avoiding the use of a particular channel, for example social media, avoiding purchasing online or, in more extreme circumstances, avoiding online/digital services altogether.
- Parents and carers also reported being caught between how to best respond to online safety issues (not wanting to remove technologies or access in the face of the overwhelming benefits they bring to their child), while at the same time wanting to limit or remove their children's exposure to online risks.

Professor Laura Lundy (Queens University, Belfast) who delivered the keynote speech at Safer Internet Forum 2020 explained that a key issue in much of the work that has been done around children's rights in the digital environment was that little or no attention has been paid to the views of children and young people with disabilities. She also explained that many young people with disabilities feel that they are the "*safest kids on the planet*" due to their parents perhaps overprotecting them. Indeed, this was also highlighted in the ITU COP guidelines which noted that "*some parents of children and young people with disabilities may be overprotective because of their lack of knowledge on how to best guide their child's use of the internet or protect them from bullying and harassment.*" Equally, Professor Sonia

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[14] https://youthworksconsulting.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Vulnerable-Children-in-a-Digital-World-FINAL-004.pdf
[15] https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-12/Online%20safety%20for%20young%20people%20with%20an%20intellectual%20disability_0.pdf

Livingstone found that[16] "*some parents…may share information or media (photos, videos) of their child in pursuit of support or advice, placing their child at risk for privacy violations both now and in the future.*" So well-meaning parents can sometimes add to the difficulties that are faced by vulnerable children and young people when they are online. Provision needs to be on an equal basis with other children and, in order to make this happen, they need to be provided with age-appropriate and disability assistance.

Many people talk about a digital divide and often quote Marc Prensky who said that adults were digital immigrants whereas children were digital natives.[17] This idea was echoed by some of the young people at the Safer Internet Forum, particularly by Ammar from Austria who said that "*a lot of teachers are stuck in the analogue world*" and that "*the Austrian school system has to adapt better to the new way of teaching and learning.*"
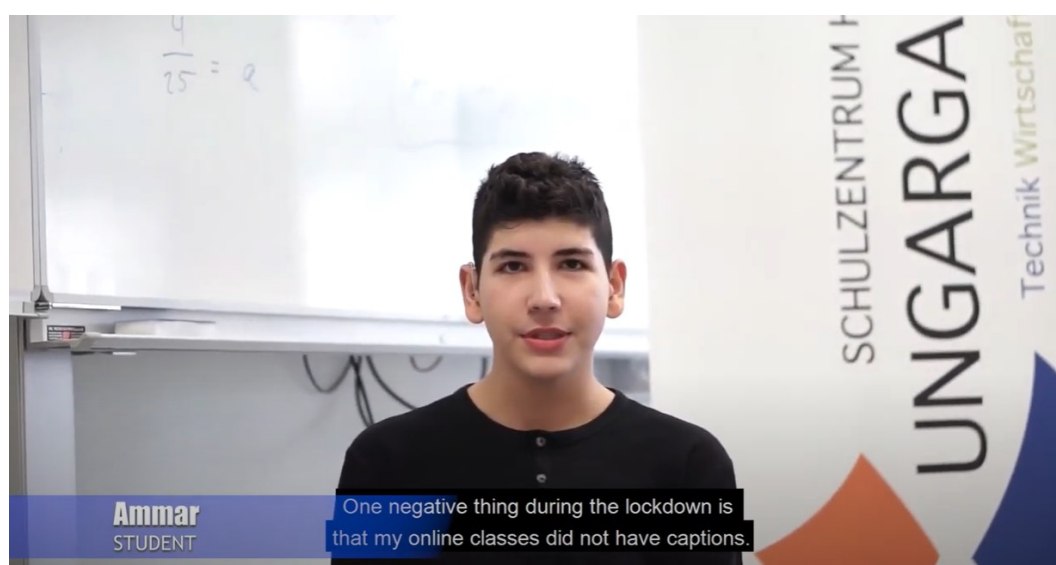
([view video clip on YouTube](#))

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[16] Sonia Livingstone et al. (2019), *UNICEF Innocenti Research Brief: Is There a Ladder of Children's Online Participation?*, https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB_201-02%2013-2-19.pdf

[17] https://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf

What do different stakeholders need to do?

Professor Laura Lundy shared some recommendations at the Safer Internet Forum which highlighted what children and young people with disabilities actually want:

- Adults who know how to support them.
- Not to stand out from their peers.
- Independence.
- Involvement.

The *Lundy model of child and youth participation* is a good example of how to meaningfully involve children and young people with disabilities.

1. Provide a safe and inclusive space for children to express their views:

   a. Have children's views been actively sought?
   b. Was there a safe space in which children can express themselves freely?
   c. Have steps been taken to ensure that all children can take part?
   d. It is important to provide opportunities for children to express themselves in a medium of their choice – not ours.

2. Provide appropriate information and facilitate the expression of children's views:

   a. Have children been given the information that they need to form a view?
   b. Do children know that they do not have to take part?
   c. Have children been given a range of options as to how they might choose to express themselves?

3. Ensure that children's views are communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen:

   a. Is there a process for communicating children's views?
   b. Do children know who their views are being communicated to?
   c. Does that person/body have the power to make decisions?

4. Ensure that children's views are taken seriously and acted upon, where appropriate:

   a. Were the children's views considered by those with the power to effect change?
   b. Are there procedures in place that ensure that the children's views have been taken seriously?

c. Have the children and young people been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken?

The Lundy model of child and youth participation- model checklist for participation as included in Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020
(Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015) [18]

It is important to recognise that children and young people are not the only experts in their own lives – there are many experts who need to be involved, but children do have unique expertise in their own lives and in particular in their own feelings. They have expertise about how they use and experience the internet. Adults with disabilities do not understand what it is like to be a child with a disability; it is not the same. Key points to remember include:

1. Adults do not understand what it is like to be a child.
2. Adults with disabilities do not understand what it is like to be a child with a disability.
3. Children with physical disabilities do not understand what it is like to be a child with an intellectual impairment and vice versa.
4. Girls with disabilities do not have the same experience as boys with disabilities.

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[18] https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/lundy_model_of_participation.pdf

Research carried out by Internet Matters, Youthworks and Facebook[19] highlighted some non-negotiables that parents of children with disabilities wanted to see in resources to help them support their children:

1. Resources should be stark, factual, and easy to understand.
2. Resources should be rules based – there is no room for maybes.
3. Resources should include practical steps on what parents could and should do, and other places they could go for support.
4. Resources should include things they can do together with their child, rather than just be aimed at parents or young people.

It was also noted that there needs to be much better signposting of existing resources and support services.

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[19] https://www.internetmatters.org/connecting-safely-online/about-us/life-online-for-children-with-send-report/

Policy response

The Council of Europe report referenced earlier states that "*the digital environment can be an enabler that brings significant 'added value' to children with disabilities in terms of the realisation of their rights.*" For example, voice activated technology is used by many, but for children and young people with visual or intellectual impairments it has significant benefits allowing them to access information and communicate with others much more easily. Closed captioning, subtitles and text that can be magnified or read out to the user can easily be incorporated into many platforms and services online.

The W3C web accessibility initiative[20] aims to provide standards, strategies, and resources to make the web accessible to people with disabilities. It includes a free online training course on web accessibility which explains how to make websites and apps work well for people with disabilities, as well as how to meet international standards around accessibility.

June Lowery-Kingston, Head of Unit, Accessibility, Multilingualism and Safer Internet at DG CONNECT of the European Commission is clear that the "*European Commission is genuinely committed to creating a Europe of equality. The disabilities strategy for the next ten years will be published in 2021 and also the strategy around children's rights.[21] There is diversity in disability and children's rights need to be embedded within that.*"

A range of stakeholders all have an important role to play in helping to ensure that children and young people with disabilities are able to benefit from what the internet and online services offer. Governments, industry, educators and health care providers all need to be aware of the risks and opportunities that the internet and online services can offer, and it is important that the voice of children and young people with disabilities are involved from the outset. Waiting until a product has been developed and then giving consideration to how to make it more accessible and usable is unhelpful, costly and ineffective. The internet industry has long talked about safety by design but now it is imperative that inclusion and accessibility by design are seen as the cornerstones of development. As Professor Lundy said in her closing remarks at the Safer Internet Forum, "*we need to involve children and young people with disabilities in decisions that affect them and if we are unsure of how to involve them then we should ask them for advice.*" What we need to do is harness the benefits of technology and provide support for the most vulnerable, but not exploit their vulnerabilities.

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[20] https://www.w3.org/WAI/
[21] https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/1_en_act_part1_v7_0.pdf

Accessibility – the role of industry

Technology companies are increasingly recognising their role in promoting diversity and inclusion. For example, Liberty Global's annual corporate social responsibility (CSR) report 2019[22] states that the organisation is "*happy their global community is made up of people with diverse backgrounds, cultures, preferences, perspectives, abilities and physical features.*" It also acknowledges that many people in these groups have been historically disadvantaged by society; their rights have been challenged and their access to meaningful work and economic activity has been limited. Sometimes good intentions can also unintentionally have a negative impact on vulnerable individuals.

Inga Björk Margrétar Bjarnadóttir, Disability Specialist at Landssamtökin Þroskahjálp, the Icelandic National Association of Intellectual Disabilities, highlighted an example of this at the Safer Internet Forum in 2020. She explained that the Icelandic government had made a lot of progress in providing digital public services and that, in some cases, these could now only be accessed online. However, some people, especially those with disabilities have difficulties in accessing and using these services. She made the point that unless people with disabilities are able to be involved in shaping digital transformation, they will often remain disadvantaged in various ways.

This view is reinforced by the General comment No 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment[23] which notes:

> *If digital inclusion is not achieved, existing inequalities are likely to increase and new ones may arise. The opportunities and the risks of harm for children are likely to increase, even where children do not actively access the internet, as societies progressively rely upon digital technologies for their functioning.*

Social media companies and those operating popular platforms online have a responsibility to ensure that their online spaces are as accessible and inclusive as possible. In early 2021, Facebook stated[24] that 3.14 billion people were using at least one of the company's core products (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram or Messenger) each month. Given that around 15 per cent of the world's population experience some form of disability, it is right that these tech giants should set an example in how to create an inclusive and accessible environment for all.

Some statistics from Facebook that were shared during the 2020 edition of the Safer Internet Forum show how important accessibility tools are, with 1 in 10 people using the zoom (or

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[22] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8Ym3V37rOI

[23] https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fGC%2f25&Lang=en

[24] https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/

magnify) functionality on Facebook on desktop browsers, while approximately 1 in 5 people increase the font size when viewing on mobile devices.

The platform is increasingly using AI (artificial intelligence) to develop accessibility tools for users with visual or hearing impairments. Several years ago, Facebook introduced a tool so that users could manually add captions for video and customise the way that those captions appear for a user. There are now real-time captioning capabilities for Facebook Live broadcasts and work is underway to enable automated captioning for video.

Automatic Alt Text (AAT) uses object recognition to automatically generate a description of photos for screen readers so people can hear a list of items that photos may contain. This technology is constantly improving despite some high-profile media coverage of times when it has gone wrong. More than 80 per cent of images displayed on Facebook and Instagram now contain AAT.[25] These tools are widely available now and simply require us to spend a small amount of time thinking about our audiences when creating content. For example, Microsoft have built alt text capabilities into their Office 365 products and encourage users to make use of it.
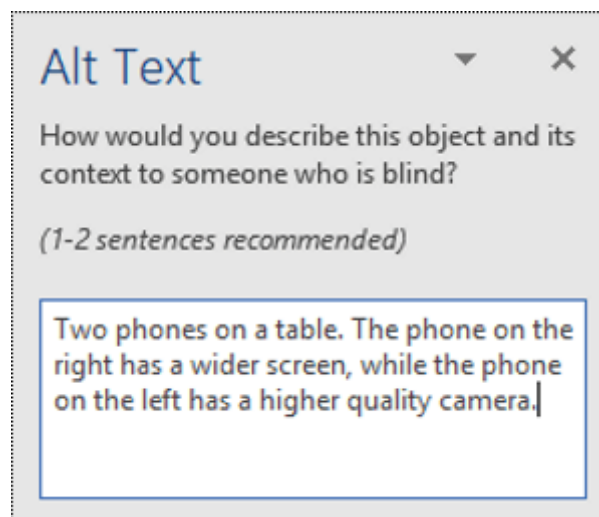
Pop-up asking a user to insert alt text

Similarly, an accessibility checker[26] will provide suggestions for improving the accessibility of content including alt text and contrast ratios.

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[25] Facebook and Instagram data, Global, average from Oct4, 2020 - Nov 4, 2020.
[26] https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/improve-accessibility-with-the-accessibility-checker-a16f6de0-2f39-4a2b-8bd8-5ad801426c7f

Resources

Online safety resources aimed at children and young people must be inclusive and accessible for all. There are several examples of materials which have been designed for or adapted to meet the needs of children and young people with disabilities on the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) platform.[27] Some specific examples are detailed below.

STAR Toolkit – Belgian and UK Safer Internet Centres
The Child Focus helpline in Belgium (operated by the Belgian Safer Internet Centre) has seen an increasing number of helpline cases linked to children and young people with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). The helpline has also seen an increase in demand from professionals who are wanting access to professional tools adapted for a vulnerable public. In order to address this need, Child Focus collaborated with Childnet (part of the UK Safer Internet Centre) to adapt its STAR toolkit. The toolkit aims to equip, enable and empower educators with the relevant knowledge that they need to support children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Crucially, the materials were originally designed to be adaptable to the different needs of different young people in different learning settings.

The toolkit is made up of four key sections which reflect current online safety risks and concerns alongside the experiences of children and young people:

- SAFE – be safe with what you share about yourself and others online.
- TRUST – not everything or everyone is trustworthy online.
- ACTION – take positive action and always tell someone if anything worries or upsets you online.
- RESPECT – be kind online.

The resource makes clear that educators need to spend time discussing how young people are using the internet and how it makes them feel. As shown earlier, some young people with disabilities feel that the internet is not a safe place for them whereas others are very comfortable, while some may not recognise the potential risks and dangers that exist online. A key component of any successful resource aimed at children and young people with disabilities will reinforce this important point of starting with where an individual is and understanding their needs, anxieties and behaviours when they are online.

Helping young people to understand some key concepts is important at the outset:

- What is actually meant by the internet?
- The difference between public and private.
- What the internet knows about us.

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[27] https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/resources

- Recognising early warning signs that something isn't right (and getting young people to act on these).

The internet moves quickly, and resources need to be adapted over time in order to reflect the needs of young people – and particularly those with disabilities – and online trends. Regular evaluation of materials ensuring that they are fit for purpose is crucial.

Access the resources as follows:

- Belgian Safer Internet Centre STAR safety and autism resource (in French)
- UK Safer Internet Centre STAR SEN Toolkit resource (in English)

Media literacy for young people with cognitive disabilities[28] – Dutch Safer Internet Centre
Netwerk Mediawijsheid is a partner organisation with the Dutch Safer Internet Centre and runs a number of projects aimed at promoting media literacy. One key programme line supports children and young people with mild cognitive disabilities. There are 1.2 million people in the Netherlands with a mild cognitive disability and many of them are overrepresented as both perpetrators and victims of online harassment and grooming. This group are also more susceptible to fake news. In addition, many people are not aware that they have some type of mild cognitive disability, and there is a lack of education and trained professionals when it comes to councillors and education experts. To reach people, it is therefore necessary to focus on the caregivers rather than on the group of people with cognitive disabilities themselves. The programme's motto is "a fun online life for all" and raising awareness of identified risks and problems is accompanied by cooking workshops and interactive activities. Other aspects serve to complement the programme: a communications campaign directed at caregivers working in health care, co-creation of tools in conjunction with partners, and building a network of relevant partners and supporting networks.

Other examples from the Netherlands include:

- A website which aims to motivate parents with low literacy skills to talk to their children about media use in easy language (available in English, French, Arabic and Turkish) - see www.mediagesprek.nl/het-mediagesprek/.
- A blended board game, media jungle: a game requiring an iPad, created by one of the Media Literacy Networks' partners. It targets learners, aged 16-17, with mild cognitive disabilities, and seeks to stimulate dialogue between caregivers and clients on media use. The game has proved to be a huge success and is now available in shops.
- The Special Media Awards (the national media awards for creators with mild cognitive disabilities) received over 100 submissions across 10 categories. Everyone nominated received an award, while the biggest winners received larger awards, made by people with cognitive disabilities. The focus of the Media Literacy Network for the period 2021 to 2023 is on creating a manual for

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[28] https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/nl/resources/resource?id=26154

caregivers in collaboration with healthcare professionals, raising funds for a digital platform to gather already available information and research online on a single platform, and getting more strategic partners on board for more future impact.

Conclusions

While much has been done in recent years to improve accessibility and usability for children and young people with disabilities, more needs to be done and a wider adoption of some of the freely available tools needs to happen urgently. As one participant at the Safer Internet Forum commented, "*I am going to look into putting subtitles onto all of our videos to make them more accessible.*"

General Comment No 25 from the UNCRC[29] states:

> *States parties should promote technological innovations that meet the requirements of children with different types of disabilities and ensure that digital products and services are designed for universal accessibility. Children with disabilities should be involved in the design and delivery of policies products and services that affect the realization of their rights in the digital environment.*

There is still some way to go before this is realised, but the conversation is underway and the voices of young people are gradually being heard more clearly. Technology provides an opportunity for all children and young people to participate and have their voices heard; we have to remove any barriers that prevent them from accessing platforms that allow them to be involved in decision-making processes.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child[30] identifies some key actions to be taken by different stakeholders.

The European Commission will:

- promote the development and use of accessible ICT and assistive technologies for children with disabilities such as speech recognition, closed captioning and others, including in Commission's conferences and events.

Member States will:

- ensure effective equal access to digital tools and high-speed Internet connection, digital literacy, accessible online education material and education tools etc. for all children.

ICT companies will:

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[29]
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fGC%2f25&Lang=en
[30] https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/1_en_act_part1_v7_0.pdf

- ensure that children's rights, including privacy, personal data protection, and access to age-appropriate content, are included in digital products and services by design and by default, including for children with disabilities.

Furthermore, the Council of Europe report *Two Clicks Forward and One Click Back*[31] recommends some key actions, as follows:

- Initial teacher training programmes should include opportunities for teachers to be familiarised with assistive technology for the classroom.
- Schools should have policies which make clear that all children and young people must be able to fully participate in school life.
- Children and young people with disabilities need to be given information and support (tailored to their needs) about how to protect their identity and privacy online.
- Children and young people should be consulted on how to ensure their fullest possible access to all aspects of school life, including through the digital environment.

Joao made a powerful closing remark at the Safer Internet Forum, telling participants that "*technology helps us to be at the same level as people who have no problems so just try to understand that if you are not able to use it, it would be very difficult for you to do a lot of things.*"

Hence, in all aspects of our work, we need to keep asking the question *what about vulnerable users?* Once this becomes an embedded part of what we do, the resources, educational programmes, guidance and advice that we create and share are more likely to be inclusive and accessible to all.

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[31] https://rm.coe.int/two-clicks-forward-and-one-click-back-report-on-children-with-disabili/168098bd0f