

The #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultations (and the publication of this resulting report) were coordinated by European Schoolnet on behalf of the European Commission in the framework of the EC's Better Internet for Kids initiative, with funding provided by the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF).

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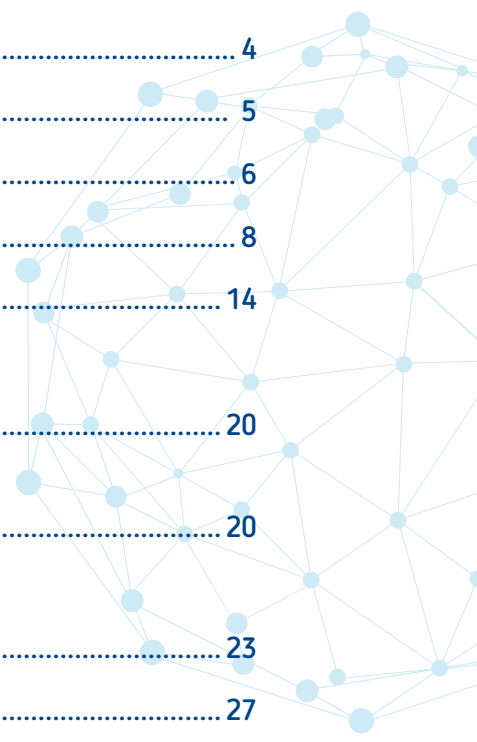


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Contents

Preface by the #DigitalDecade4YOUth Youth Advisory Group.....	4
Foreword by the European Commission.....	5
Acknowledgements.....	6
Executive summary.....	8
Background.....	14
Section 1: Children’s use of digital media and online activities	20
Where, how and for how much time did children and young people access the digital environment?.....	20
Which online activities were most popular among children and young people and what did they like or dislike about these activities?.....	23
Which other activities emerged from the consultation?.....	27
What difficulties did children and young people experience when accessing the digital environment?.....	28
Section 2: Children’s and young people’s views on opportunities and risks	29
What online activities do children and young people care about, what would they miss?	29
What online risks are children and young people most concerned about?	32
General concerns and remarks.....	32
Specific concerns.....	35
Section 3: Children’s and young people’s recommendations for policy	39
What do children and young people identify as the most important areas for improvement?	39
What can policy makers/other actors do?	40
The school environment.....	40
At home	41
Conclusions	48
Annex 1: Protocols.....	53
Protocol – Step 1	53
Protocol – Step 4	54
Protocol – Step 5	55



Preface by the #DigitalDecade4YOUth Youth Advisory Group

Children and young people are the future. They should sit around the table when Europe's Digital Decade is being shaped and built. They are growing up in a time where being offline is hardly an option. This new generation understands and embraces the digital world in a different way than older people do – and this includes policy makers and other stakeholders who are driving the rules of the internet and its governance.

In our view, adults should do better and try to benefit from the experience and ability that children and young people have. This will help them to identify the key risks and challenges at stake, but also to bring a more innovative perspective to online opportunities and benefits for society as a whole.

A number of interesting findings come out of the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation report:

- Children and young people spend a lot of time online – the COVID-19 pandemic made our digital interactions even more pervasive and excessive.
- Children – especially younger children – may be more naive in relation to the bad things which may happen.
- Nevertheless, children and young people tend to have a balanced and critical view on the risks and opportunities they are confronted with – for example, they understand that social media companies are driven by business interests, which may in turn result in data privacy risks.
- It is worrying that – after so many years – cyberbullying continues to be flagged as a systemic problem where more needs to be done, and that hateful content or advertising continues to reach the screens used by children and young people when it should not.
- While leisure time has largely moved from offline to online environments, parents don't seem to be sufficiently aware of the problems children and young people may encounter – they often lack the required knowledge and skills, or perhaps they just don't care that much.
- The fact that so many children and young people in Europe are still not fully included in the digital world is troublesome – this is something which needs to change, keeping in mind the European Union's 2030 digital targets also.

In terms of policy priorities, we agree that:

- All children and young people should have access to the digital world, and they need to be taught and given accurate information on how to use digital technology in a responsible and positive manner.
- It is equally important to bring adults into the conversation – children and young people rightly point to the online behaviour and experience of older people from their family and broader community, showing how important it is to create awareness for everyone on how to empower young digital users.
- There is a strong need for policy makers to agree – together with industry – on minimum standards when it comes to children's and young people's digital media experiences and to make sure that the rules are being enforced.

As members of the #DigitalDecade4YOUth Youth Advisory Group, we have been able to follow the many different steps of this consultation process. For us, the exercise has been successful already in giving children and young people a space to discuss the opportunities and risks they face online and to voice their opinions.

It is now up to policy makers and other stakeholders to take up the challenge. They need to put down their guard and accept that part of their role is to carefully listen. They need to put in place iterative and dynamic decision-making processes, suitable for the digital innovation pace, where we, as children and young people, feel we are all working together to make the digital world a better and safer place.

Yevgeny (Malta), Lili (Austria) and João (Portugal)

On behalf of the #DigitalDecade4YOUth Youth Advisory Group

Foreword by the European Commission

“Adults – and in particular politicians – do not care about their [children’s] experiences in the digital environment.”

So declared one of the around 750 children and young people who shared their thoughts on digital risks and opportunities and their views of the digital future in European Commission’s #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultations in spring-summer 2021.

We at the European Commission want to ensure that politicians do care and do consider young people’s opinions. Youth engagement cannot be a mere nice addition to have. It must offer genuine possibilities for a meaningful participation, so that policymaking is based on real needs, and has an effective and positive impact on young people’s lives. This has been the guiding principle in this consultation process. As Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared, when she proposed to make 2022 the Year of European Youth: *“If we are to shape our Union in their mould, young people must be able to shape Europe’s future. Our Union needs a soul and a vision they can connect to.”*

The outcome of the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultations offer valuable data and evidence to two ongoing processes at the European Commission, both looking into Europe’s digital future. They will help shape a set of digital principles, which also include child online protection and empowerment, which were announced in the Commission’s 2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade (2021). In addition, they lay the foundation of the new European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children, due in spring 2022, 10 years after the first strategy was adopted.

This report is a result of the enthusiasm and hard work of many people. We wish to express our gratitude to the EU-co-funded network of Safer Internet Centres who were responsible for the groundwork and organised over 70 workshops around Europe, including among children with disabilities, with special needs or in vulnerable situations. This work simply could not have been possible without you. We are also grateful to European Schoolnet who planned and coordinated the process, including a consultation of around 300 teachers, and produced this report. And last but not least: to the hundreds of children and young people in Europe and beyond who were willing to help build a better and safer digital future for all European children, thank you.

As this report states: *“children and young people have strong and specific opinions about the activities they like to do in the digital environment, what they find important and what concerns they have in this regard. They also have a clear vision about which issues need to be tackled as a priority”.*

Children do have a voice and they have a right to use it. We, European policymakers and other adults, have an obligation to listen to this generation living a digital childhood.



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Acknowledgements

The European Commission and the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) team would like to express their gratitude to the more than 750 children and young people who have played an invaluable role in the development of this #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation report and its recommendations. We could not have done this without you!

We would also like to thank the members of the BIK Youth Advisory Group for their active involvement in different stages of the consultation process: João (Portugal), Kathrin (Germany), Lili (Austria), Lorcan (Ireland), Sina (Luxembourg), Sunna (Iceland), and Yevgeny (Malta). Their input and feedback in the early phase of this process has greatly helped to establish a protocol which resonated – in terms of format, the questions asked, and the language used – with the many children and young people we ended up consulting. Thank you also for taking the time to discuss with us a first version of the consultation report and to draft its *Preface*, constructively (yet insistently) explaining what – in your view – required more nuance, in-depth scrutiny or attention.

The consultations were coordinated by European Schoolnet on behalf of the European Commission. However, our ability to involve so many children and young people was due entirely to the long-standing partnership we have with the Insafe network of European Safer Internet Centres¹. At the same time, we would like to specifically thank the following schools and online safety and child rights organisations from across and beyond the European Union for the consultation sessions they have all been running:

- Agrupamento de Escolas José Relvas (Portugal)
- Associação Social Recreativa Juventude de Vila Fonche/ Juventude (Portugal)
- Associação SRCBF Vai Avante (Portugal)
- Casa da Juventude de Guimarães (Portugal)
- Center for Digital Youth Care (Denmark) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (Cyprus) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Czech Safer Internet Centre (Czech Republic)
- Escola Profissional Agostinho Roseta – Polo de Castelo Branco (Portugal)
- Escola Secundária Évora (Portugal)
- Estonian Union for Child Welfare (Estonia) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Foundation Open Society – Macedonia (North Macedonia)
- Fundacion Diagrama. Residencia De Recepción Y Residencia De Acogida Para Niños, Niñas Y Adolescentes Con Problemas De Conducta Lucentum (Spain)
- Greek Safer Internet Centre
- Instituto de Apoio à Criança (Portugal)
- Instituto Politécnico de Santarém (Portugal)
- Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude e Centro Social e Paroquial dos Santos Mártires – Bragança (Portugal) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Internet Sans Crainte – Tralalere (France) (Safer Internet Centre)
- IPDJ (Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude) – Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth – Alentejo Regional Service/city of Portalegre (Portugal) (Safer Internet Centre)
- IPDJ (Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude) – Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth – Alentejo Regional Service/city: of Évora (Portugal) (Safer Internet Centre)
- klicksafe Awareness Centre (Germany) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Latvian Safer Internet Centre
- Lisbon and Tagus Valley Regional Directorate of the Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth (Portugal)
- NGO Association Resource Center for Parents of Children with Special Needs (North Macedonia)
- Media Council for Children and Young People (Denmark) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Monserrate Basic School/Monserrate School Group, Viana do Castelo (Portugal)
- National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and Protection of Children and Young People (Portugal)

¹ <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/policy/insafe-inhope>

- Office of the Commissioner for Children (Malta) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Plataforma de Infancia (Spain) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Primary school Hostivař, Kozinova 1000, Prague 10 (Czech Republic)
- Primary school "Hristijan Todorovski Karposh" (North Macedonia)
- Primary school Litvínov-Janov, Přátelství 160, okres Most (Czech Republic)
- Primary school náměstí Svobody 2, Prague 6 (Czech Republic)
- Projeto Cercar-te E8G (Portugal)
- Projeto Escolhe Vilar E8G – Programa Escolhas (Portugal)
- Projeto Mudaki e8g (Portugal)
- Regional Directorate of Algarve of IPDJ, IP (Portugal)
- Roma CSO Center for Education Support "Dendo Vas" (North Macedonia)
- Saferinternet.at (Austria) (Safer Internet Centre)
- São Martinho Basic School (Santo Tirso) (Portugal)
- Save the Children (Italy) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Save the Children (Kosovo)
- Save the Children (Romania) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Service National de la Jeunesse (BEE SECURE) (Luxembourg) (Safer Internet Centre)
- SOS II Telefono Azzurro Onlus (Italy) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Spanish Confederation of Families of Deaf People FIAPAS (Spain)
- University of Florence (Italy) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Via Nova - Vila Real (Portugal)
- Webwise (Ireland) (Safer Internet Centre)
- Youth Advisory Board for the Austrian Ministry of Youth Affairs (Austria)
- Youth Educational Forum (North Macedonia)
- ZAVOD MISSS (Slovenia) (Safer Internet Centre)

Dr Valerie Verdoodt (Ghent University) supported European Schoolnet as an external research consultant on this project. She provided expert guidance for the design of the consultation protocol, while also helping to analyse the data and write up the results. In preparation for this targeted consultation exercise, she drafted a best-practice guide on *Children's rights in the digital environment: Moving from theory to practice*² on how to engage children and young people in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of their digital rights. We hope that these guidelines will help and inspire others who wish to carry out similar work.

More broadly, we are grateful for the contribution, support and enthusiasm of the many people who at some point became involved in the consultation process. This has very much been a cross-country, multi-partner and multi-stakeholder effort. Together, we all look forward to now see how the voices of children and young people will be taken into account in the ongoing policy-making cycle to make Europe's Digital Decade fit for children and young people.



² <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/documents/167024/200055/Best-practice+guideline+-+Childrens+rights+in+the+digital+environme nt+-+May+2021+-+v2+FINAL+CC+BY.pdf/f947d4f9-4ec4-49ae-5e2e-b6e9402c5fa2?t=1624532196598>

Executive summary

The European Commission aspires to put children's participation at the heart of EU policies and initiatives while ensuring that children in vulnerable situations also have their voices heard.

In March 2021, the European Commission published:

- **2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade**, which presents a vision, targets and avenues for a successful digital transformation of Europe by 2030.³ "EU rights and values are at the heart of the EU's human centred way on digital. They should be fully reflected in the online space as they are in the real world. This is why the Commission proposes to develop a framework of digital principles, such as access to high-quality connectivity, to sufficient digital skills, to public services, to fair and non-discriminatory online services – and more generally, to ensure that the same rights that apply offline can be fully exercised online".
- **The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child** aims to better protect all children, to help them fulfil their rights and to place them right at the centre of EU policy making.⁴ This includes a commitment to make sure European children and young people continue to be empowered and protected online.

Against this background, European Schoolnet consulted – from May to October 2021, on behalf of the European Commission, as part of the www.betterinternetforkids.eu initiative – children, young people, parents, carers and educators from across (and beyond) the European Union on the priorities they see to promote, protect, respect and fulfil children's rights in a digital world.

More specifically:

- European Schoolnet organised, from March to August 2021, the **#DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation** with support from the Insafe network of European Safer Internet Centres and a wider range of European online safety and child rights organisations. **Over 70 consultation sessions** were carried out, following recent guidance and experience on children's rights to be heard in the digital age. As such, **the voices of more than 750 children and young people across Europe** were heard in a structured and systematic way, setting a high standard on how to ensure meaningful child and youth participation in digital policy making.
- As part of a Better Internet for Kids MOOC (massive open online course) for teachers in April and May 2021, with a focus on *Digital literacy and online safety: How the pandemic tested our skills*,⁵ **over 300 European teachers and educators** were consulted on a similar range of questions.
- In addition, **EU citizens** – including parents and carers, teachers and educators, and wider stakeholders – have been invited to respond to an **online campaign survey**, based on the questions which children and young people were consulted on so that we can compare perspectives. This work is ongoing at the time of publication of the report and hence its findings are not referenced here.

This #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation report underlines, once more, **the importance of children's right to be heard** in any decision-making process that affects them, as enshrined in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Our findings provide strong support for the need to **more systematically embed the best interests of children and young people into the EU's digital ambitions for 2030** to ensure that the rights of children and young people which apply offline can also be fully exercised online.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_983

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en

⁵ <https://www.europeanschoolnetacademy.eu/courses/course-v1:BIK3+DigitalLiteracy+2021/about>

One of the principles proposed in the European Commission's 2030 Digital Compass Communication⁶ is *Protecting and empowering children and young people in the online space*. In subsequent policy work⁷, this has been specified as follows:

- The online environment should foster children's and young people's well-being and their participation as digital citizens.
- Children and young people should be equipped with digital literacy and the necessary skills and competences to navigate safely and responsibly online from an early age and throughout their education and training.
- Every child should be protected from harmful and illegal content, including from child sexual abuse and exploitation.

It is clear from the consultation sessions that children and young people have strong and specific opinions about the activities they like to do in the digital environment, what they find important, and what concerns they have. In addition, they have a **clear vision about which issues need to be tackled** as a priority and were able to form **original and specific guidance and recommendations for various actors** including, but not limited to, policy makers and digital operators, on how this should be done in practice.

As such, this report has the potential to **help articulate what the European way for the digital society could entail in more concrete terms**, building upon the needs, challenges and opportunities children, young people, teachers and educators see in the context of digitalisation.

The views and experiences of children and young people

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

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

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

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

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0118>

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_2288

Key recommendations for policy makers and digital operators

The solutions and recommendations provided by children and young people demonstrate a holistic view on the responsibility for safeguarding and empowering them in the digital environment. To make the internet a better place, **all relevant actors should take up their respective role and collaborate** where possible.

It is significant to note that, in terms of **the changes children and young people really want to see**, participants largely decided to focus on the key online risks they had previously identified as part of the consultation exercise.

- Participants found **inappropriate content** to be a priority for change because it is affecting society as a whole, desensitising citizens to hateful messages and behaviours.
- **Cyberbullying** was also seen as a priority for policy makers, because it has an impact on children's and young people's behaviour and self-esteem, ultimately leading to problems in all areas of life. Some participants felt that cyberbullying presents a massive challenge, particularly for younger children.
- Aside from these specific issues, some more overarching problems can be extracted from the discussions. According to participants, the root cause of many of the online risks and challenges lies in a **lack of awareness and media literacy** among internet users, the possibility to remain anonymous in the digital environment, and **public attitudes online** which should be changed towards decent communication and behaviour.

In response to this, participants insisted that **different actors have to take up their share of responsibility**, depending on the specific context and issue at stake:

- As a general remark, policymakers should aim towards **harmonisation at the EU level**, as this could result in a better protection of minors from online risks and harmful media within the entire EU. They could think about introducing uniform age limits and improving monitoring at EU level.
- The message most often heard in the consultation sessions was the need for **improved media literacy and online safety education** for children and young people in schools, and that policy makers should make this happen. The participants believed that without knowing how to correctly use online tools, they are more vulnerable to risks and threats. The metaphor was used of being handed a complex tool without an instruction manual. Some respondents emphasised that schools and parents have to take their role more seriously than they do today.
- Aside from more media literacy education, several groups stressed that **improved monitoring and enforcement of existing rules** in the digital environment is necessary, with stricter penalties for those who misbehave online (such as those who harass, bully, or spread harmful content). Children and young people feel that when they report certain content or behaviour to social media platforms, no actions are effectively taken, which in turn discourages them to report or act against hate speech. They believe that if internet users and social networks do not face any consequences for bad online behaviour, not much will change.
- In addition, children and young people think that EU policy makers should exercise **pressure on industry to provide safe and child-appropriate services and platforms**. This entails finding ways to ensure that children's voices are heard, and offering settings and content according to age and category. This could include banning sexual or violent content, or better regulating access to certain content such as gambling, advertisements and spam.
- Last but not least, participants feel that **technology can play an important role in making the internet a better place**. Here, it was argued that EU policy makers should collaborate with internet companies or create the necessary incentives to ensure that companies, such as social media platforms, continue developing tools which are child-friendly.

The perspectives of European teachers and educators

As one might expect, the European teachers and educators involved in this consultation exercise largely echoed the education needs put forward by children and young people.

They call upon policy makers to **substantially invest in national and international programmes which support education and awareness-raising efforts**. For teachers, this is primarily about:

- Making sure that media literacy, online safety and digital citizenship are part of the formal curriculum from an early age onwards.
- Ensuring that these topics are properly addressed in teacher training and professional development also.
- More actively reaching out to parents and carers so as to develop a shared understanding of what is going on in children's and young people's online lives, in turn making it possible to foster an ongoing whole-school dialogue.
- Taking an evidence-based approach and better assessing the results of existing education efforts.

Secondly, much reference was made (here again) to **the need to have proper legal and regulatory frameworks and to make sure these rules are properly enforced** and do not only exist on paper. The accountability of industry is something which respondents raised often. They should be forced (or, more positively, encouraged) to develop technological solutions and come up with age-appropriate standards and measures to keep their platforms and services safe.

Of course, this particular group of European teachers and educators do not represent the views of teachers in general as these are teachers who signed up to a Better Internet for Kids MOOC (massive open online course) and therefore are already committed to making a difference in this sphere. In fact, many of them talked about difficulties in getting their own colleagues on board, with reasons cited including that **the curriculum is full, there is not sufficient awareness, many teachers lack the required knowledge, skills and confidence** and it is **difficult to keep up to date with the continuous flow of technological development**.

It is noteworthy to add that even this group of open-minded and enthusiastic European teachers and educators had – in comparison with the children and young people we consulted – **a rather narrow and protective view of children's rights in a digital world**. For example, while many of our younger respondents talked passionately about online entertainment and gaming as important opportunities for positive and creative participation, teachers primarily framed these activities in relation to concerns about time spent online or minors accessing inappropriate services and content. When asked about protective measures, teachers typically argued that access should be restricted based on age. By contrast, children and young people themselves would rather point to the need for policy makers and industry to prevent negative things from happening in the online spaces they already inhabit, while equally providing more age-appropriate alternatives for them to engage with.

In many ways, these examples illustrate – in very concrete and practical ways – how **the rights of children and young people to provision and participation are easily overlooked when minors are not sitting around the table** when child online protection is being discussed.

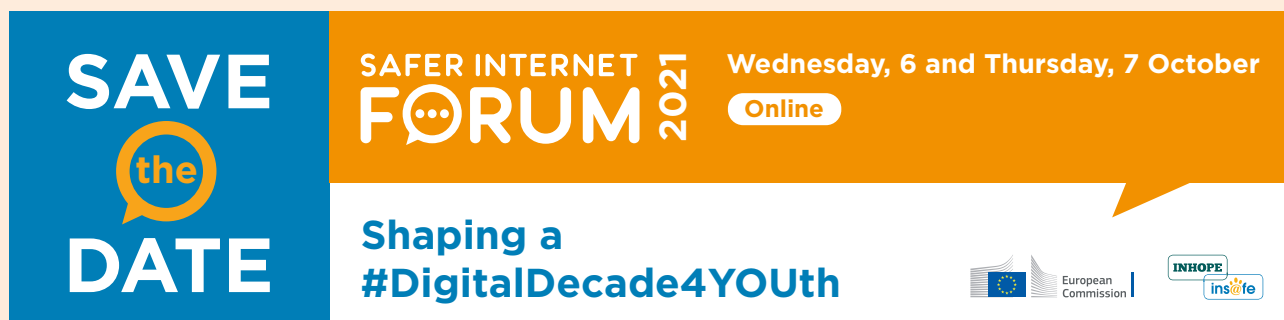
To conclude, respondents of all ages and backgrounds acknowledged that the digital world is complex. In their collective view, it is difficult to say where exactly the responsibility sits because more often than not it is shared. In line with this, we hope the results of this consultation will therefore be an encouragement and source of inspiration **for EU policy makers and other actors – including internet companies, parents, and educators – to continue to join forces** to make the internet a better place for children and young people!

This report has been published ahead of the 2021 edition of the Safer Internet Forum (SIF) which has been specifically organised this year with the purpose of giving the opportunity to a wider range of public and private stakeholders – including children and young people – to draw this consultation process to a close.

Results will contribute to the development of a set of digital principles for an interinstitutional declaration between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council to be published in late 2021, and to the new Better Internet for Kids (BIK) Strategy to be adopted in 2022.

Putting the spotlight on the 2021 Safer Internet Forum

The Safer Internet Forum (SIF) is a key annual 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.



SAVE the DATE

SAFER INTERNET FORUM 2021 Wednesday, 6 and Thursday, 7 October
Online

Shaping a #DigitalDecade4YOUth

European Commission | INHOPE ins@fe

This year's edition will take place online on Wednesday, 6 and Thursday, 7 October 2021 and will consider what we want the digital world to look like in 2030. We will hear from a number of leading experts in the field who will offer their vision of the landscape over the next decade and discuss what key stakeholders need to do to ensure that we have the internet that we want and need.

Importantly, the voices of young people will be present throughout the Forum as they share their hopes and concerns for their futures online. Composed of 35+ young people from across 19 European countries, the BIK Youth Panel 2021 has been meeting twice a week throughout September to prepare their intervention for the SIF. This year, the Youth Panel will look ahead to the future of the internet and discuss how certain issues, such as the online school environment, the online society in general, and social networks and advertising, will change over the coming 10 years. Presented in an interactive way including video presentations and breakout sessions, youth panellists have the opportunity to interact directly with various Forum participants.

Additionally, a number of deep dive sessions will explore in more depth the four pillars of the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children²⁴ (the BIK Strategy) which has provided a key point of reference for online safety policy making since 2012. The BIK Strategy provides a holistic approach to keeping children and young people safe online. Pillar 1 deals with high-quality content for children and young people, Pillar 2 is concerned with stepping up awareness and empowerment, Pillar 3 aims to create a safer online environment for children through approaches such as parental control tools and age verification, while Pillar 4 leads the fight against child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Each in their own way, the deep dive sessions will take stock of these pillars, covering key topics and areas such as:

- Age-appropriate design and the role of age assurance/verification.
- New and emerging tech, highlighting some of the innovations and developments that we are likely to see by 2030.
- Ongoing work to eradicate child sexual abuse material (CSAM).
- Online gaming.

²⁴ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-strategy-better-internet-children>

- The youngest users and the opportunities and challenges that they face online.
- Harmful online content, experiences and solutions.
- Digital inclusion – ensuring positive online experiences for all children and enabling active youth participation.

All sessions will consider challenges, propose solutions and identify the range of actors who can provide them. The results of the Forum will further contribute to the new BIK Strategy to be adopted in 2022.

More information is available at www.betterinternetforkids.eu/sif.



Background

Children are highly engaged users of information and telecommunications technologies, with one third of internet users being younger than 18 years old.⁸ A growing body of evidence shows that children are active on the internet at increasingly younger ages.⁹ The digitalisation of their 'lifeworlds' significantly influences not only how they can exercise their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), but also how their rights may be supported or neglected.¹⁰ The recent adoption of General Comment No. 25 by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) confirms that children's rights are equally applicable in the digital environment and that the CRC is a flexible human rights instrument which can be reinterpreted in new contexts.¹¹

Children's right to be heard requires that their own insights and experiences are channelled into the decision making that impacts their everyday lives in the digital age.¹² In other words, when laws, policies or, more generally, decisions are made about children's engagement with digital technologies, they should be actively consulted.

The current report presents finding from a cross-European #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation exercise coordinated by European Schoolnet – on behalf of the European Commission – as part of the www.betterinternetforkids.eu initiative.

The #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation was developed against the backdrop of ongoing EU policy work to safeguard and promote children's rights in the digital world:

- The European Commission has proposed to set up a Digital Compass, containing a vision, targets and avenues for a successful digital transformation of Europe by 2030.¹³ By translating the EU's digital ambitions into concrete targets, it allows the monitoring and tracking of the EU's trajectory. As part of this, the EU will develop a comprehensive set of digital principles by the end of 2021, to inform users and guide policymakers and digital operators. These include, for example, universal access to internet services, to sufficient digital skills, to public services, and to fair and non-discriminatory online services. Also, the Commission stresses that it is crucial that digital technologies and services respect and enable children to realise their rights. Therefore, one of these digital principles should be 'protecting and empowering children in the online space'.¹⁴
- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child provides a clear framework for action by the EU and the Member States. It sets out six thematic areas and key actions planned by the European Commission to help children fulfil their rights and place them at the heart of EU policy making.¹⁵ This also entails a commitment to ensuring that children and young people continue to be empowered and protected in the digital environment.

The strategy emphasises that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the challenges children face when they go online, including exploitation, cyberbullying and an increase in child sexual abuse material (CSAM) circulating online. Furthermore, distance learning has impacted very young children and those with special needs or living in difficult circumstances disproportionately. For these and other reasons, it was felt that a new comprehensive strategy was needed, which would reflect the new realities and enduring challenges. The Strategy is anchored in the CRC, and links to the Council of Europe standards on the rights of the child.

- The European Commission is preparing a new version of the *European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children* – in short, the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) Strategy – to be adopted in 2022. The BIK Strategy was first launched in 2012 to give children the digital skills and tools they need to fully and safely benefit from being online.¹⁶

8 Sonia Livingstone, John Carr and Jasmina Byrne, 'One in Three: Internet Governance and Children's Rights' (Centre for International Governance Innovation and the Royal Institute of International Affairs 2015) 22 <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/one-three-internet-governance-and-childrens-rights>

9 UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World* (UNICEF 2017).

10 Amanda Third and others, *Children's Rights in the Digital Age [Documento Elettronico]: A Download from Children around the World* (Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre 2014).

11 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No. 25 (2021) on Children's Rights in Relation to the digital environment.

12 Article 12 CRC.

13 For more information, see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_983

14 European Commission, 'Communication "EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child", COM(2021) 142 Final' <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0118>

15 European Commission, 'EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child' https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/child_rights_strategy_version_with_visuals3.pdf

16 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/european-strategy-deliver-better-internet-our-children>

In more practical terms, the main objective of the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation exercise was to gain a better understanding of how the digital world impacts (the rights of) children and young people, what they themselves view as key opportunities and challenges, and the expectations they may have for policy makers.

Over 70 consultation sessions were carried out with support from the Insafe network of European Safer Internet Centres and a wider range of schools and European online safety and child rights organisations following recent guidance and experience on children's rights to be heard in the digital age. As such, the voices of more than 750 children and young people across Europe were heard in a structured and systematic way, setting a high standard on how to ensure meaningful child and youth participation in digital policy making.

While the majority of groups consulted were adolescents (age 12-18), 21 out of 71 consultation groups primarily consisted of children under 12, with the youngest respondent being 5 years old.

In addition, to make the consultation process as inclusive as possible – reflecting the digital life and experiences of the wide diversity of children and young people living in Europe – substantial time and effort was invested to specifically reach out to children and young people in vulnerable and marginalised situations¹⁷ as they are often forgotten in these types of consultations, in particular:

- Children with disabilities
- Migrant/Roma/refugee children
- Children in care
- LGBTQ+ children
- Children living in poverty groups

As a result, 30 out of 71 consultation sessions included (at least some) representatives from one or several of the aforementioned groups. This included children and young people with various types of disabilities (intellectual, hearing, visual and physical impairment), children and young people with emotional and behaviour problems, migrants, Roma children, children in care, children and young people from rural and isolated regions, and from disadvantaged or dysfunctional families.

In this report, we will typically present the views of children and young people in a more general manner, in part because we found many similarities between the different groups which have been consulted. Still, we have integrated into this report a number of more focused inserts which elaborate in more detail on the specific perspectives of children under 12, and the perspectives of children and young people from more vulnerable or marginalised backgrounds.

The methodology for these consultation sessions was child centred and rights based and has been informed by a variety of existing benchmarks for meaningful child participation. These include recent international and EU experiences with consulting children and young people about key issues, opportunities and priorities for their rights in the digital age.¹⁸

¹⁷ This is in line with the approach which was adopted for the recently published *Children and young people's contribution to the new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee*. See <https://www.unicef.org/eu/media/1276/file/Report%20%22Our%20Europe%20Our%20Rights%20Our%20Future%22.pdf>

¹⁸ These initiatives and experiences have been mapped and integrated into a best-practice guideline document *Children's rights in the digital environment: Moving from theory to practice*, <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/documents/167024/200055/Best-practice+guideline+-+Childrens+rights+in+the+digital+environment+-+May+2021+-+v2+FINAL+CC+BY.pdf/f947d4f9-4ec4-49ae-5e2e-b6e9402c5fa2?t=1624532196598>

For each consultation session, a structured protocol building upon the following set of principles was followed:

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

This protocol led to a series of hands-on activities, each time carried out in participants' national language. A more concrete and detailed overview of the materials and activity sheets used are included in *Annex 1*.

In brief, the following steps were followed in each consultation session:

Nr	What?	How?
Step 1	Informing and sensitising (one week before the consultation session)	<p>The main objective of <i>Step 1</i> was to provide children and young people with sufficient background information about the targeted consultation session.</p> <p><i>Step 1</i> encouraged children and young people to start thinking in advance about their day-to-day online media experiences, reflecting on both positive and negative aspects. As such, they started developing their views on what they like in the digital world, and which changes they would like to see. This allowed the facilitator to build upon participants' pre-existing knowledge, views and experiences while motivating them to participate more actively.</p> <p>At the same time, <i>Step 1</i> ensured that participants received all relevant information from an ethical point of view.</p>
Step 2	Start of the consultation session	As part of <i>Step 2</i> , the facilitator of the session reminded participants about the purpose of the consultation session and all relevant background information in line with the flyer they received in advance. The facilitator confirmed that the participants had read and understood the flyer, underlining once more that their participation was voluntary.
Step 3	Children and young people's digital media use	<p>The purpose of <i>Step 3</i> was to get a better understanding of children's and young people's everyday experiences of the digital world. Facilitators started having a discussion with them in their own words, trying to create a safe and inclusive space for participants to actively participate.</p> <p>As an icebreaker exercise, the session started with an open-ended group discussion based on the diary of their online activities from <i>Step 1</i>.</p>



<p>Step 4</p>	<p>Children and young people's views on online opportunities and risks</p>	<p>In <i>Step 4</i>, participants were prompted to develop and express their views about what they see as key opportunities and risks in the digital world. This helped to gain insight into the priorities children and young people see for policy making in this space.</p> <p>Participants first discussed a list of online opportunities as previously identified in international research. Participants were able to add items to this list. Participants were then asked to indicate which benefits or opportunities for participation they find most important.</p> <p>Subsequently, participants discussed a list of risks as previously identified in international research (in particular ongoing work on the 4C's of online risk – content, contact, conduct, contract). Participants were again able to add items to this list, and were asked to prioritise the risks that they are most concerned about.</p>
<p>Step 5</p>	<p>How to make the digital world a better place?</p>	<p>In <i>Step 5</i>, participants continued to work in smaller groups to consider – in their own words – what European policy makers need to do to make the digital world a better place for European children and young people. This helped to further gain insight into the priorities children and young people see for policy making in this space. It also allowed facilitators to collect their ideas on possible solutions and the role to be played by policy makers, industry, educators or any other relevant actors.</p>
<p>Step 6</p>	<p>End of the consultation session</p>	<p>The main objective of <i>Step 6</i> was to properly close the consultation session, thanking participants for their contribution, while reminding them how their input will feed into the ongoing policy-making process.</p>

Based on these activities and discussions, all facilitators completed and submitted (within two weeks following the consultation activity and without any personal or sensitive data included) a standardised reporting template to European Schoolnet, describing in more detail the setting in which the targeted consultation sessions took place and an overview of the main answers, ideas, themes and recommendations emerging from them.

As part of the protocol, facilitators were also encouraged to ask participants to evaluate the consultation process. The available feedback suggests that adolescents (12-18) in particular valued and enjoyed this opportunity to give input to the policy-making process. For some, the icebreaker activity was an eye opener in terms of how much time they actually spend online. Several facilitators spoke of “*vivid and constructive discussion with participants highly interested and willing to contribute*”.

Meanwhile, feedback from some of the younger children suggested that some of the activities were not sufficiently tailored to their evolving capacities and online media experiences. For example, some of the younger children felt that activities on the prompt list seemed far from their everyday experiences and therefore not very relevant. Others had difficulties understanding some of the concepts like ‘hate’, ‘harassment’, and so forth. Of course, these were then explained by the facilitator who worked together with them. However, there is an inevitable risk that this kind of interference might have unduly steered some of the discussions which were taking place.

It is also important to acknowledge that several participants expressed a certain amount of scepticism about this kind of consultation exercise, because they feel “adults – and in particular politicians – do not care about their experiences in the digital environment”. A limited few even suggested that it was a pointless exercise to talk to politicians and policy makers as they are “too caught up in their own interests”. This latter point very much resonates with the right to participation as laid down in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As explained by Professor Laura Lundy, in order to realise the right to participation, it does not suffice to provide children and young people safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views. Equally, their views and recommendations should reach the right audience and their views should be acted upon as appropriate.¹⁹

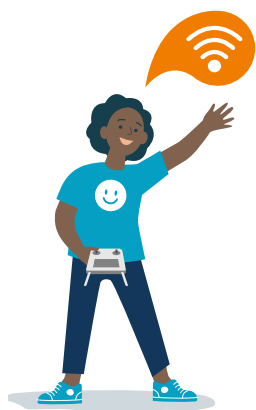
With this being said, by and large, the quality of input and feedback received overwhelmingly points to the added value brought by the child-centred and rights-based consultation format which was put in place.

Together with an external research consultant, the Better Internet for Kids team at European Schoolnet processed and analysed all results from the 71 consultation session reports, moving back and forth in an iterative manner from the raw data in the consultation reports to a more structured analysis of the main answers, ideas and themes which emerged. As a result, we are confident that this report accurately reflects the voice of more than 750 children and young people from across (and beyond) the European Union.

Of course, a written report cannot do justice to the full complexity of views and opinions as expressed by the many children and young people who have been consulted during the last few months. To give some flavour of the rich and nuanced picture they have painted, we have integrated throughout a number of individual quotes, concrete examples and more creative outputs.

As will become clear in the following pages, children and young people have strong and specific opinions about the activities they like to do in the digital environment, what they find important, and what concerns they have in this regard. In addition, they have a clear vision about which issues need to be tackled as a priority and they were able to form original and specific recommendations for various actors including, but not limited to, policy makers. While children and young people have specific needs and rights in the digital world, this consultation equally illustrates that they should not be considered as a homogenous group. As with all citizens, their opinions and ideas can greatly vary, often in idiosyncratic ways.

The European Commission aspires to continue to protect and empower children and young people in the online space. We hope this report will help policy makers and stakeholders to unravel the individual and social needs, challenges and opportunities at stake when *making Europe's Digital Decade fit for children and young people*.



¹⁹ Laura Lundy, “Voice” Is Not Enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (2007) 33 British Educational Research Journal 927.

Section 1: Children's use of digital

Prior to and during the consultation workshops, children and young people were encouraged to think about their day-to-day online media experiences, reflecting on both the positive and negative aspects. This enabled them to start developing their own views on what kind of changes they would like to see in relation to the digital environment. Although some of the participants found it quite personal to share exactly what they do online, some of the facilitators explicitly remarked on the lively debates and interesting comments.

Where, how and for how much time did children and young people access the digital environment?

The consultation confirms that children and young people growing up today frequently access the digital environment, where they engage in a broad variety of activities. When asked where they would go online, respondents answered that they tended to go online from **home**. Older respondents talked about having their phone with them all the time “*on the go*”. Some respondents also mentioned that technology is often used at school because not everyone has the same opportunity at home. Children living in care homes had specifically allocated times when they were able to use technology. Some children in Portugal talked about using a “*street hotspot*” to get online. In answer to the question, some groups said “*everywhere*”, including at home, on the bus, while out with friends, and so on.

Mobile phones and tablets were the most common way for respondents to get online. There were some references to laptops and computers but not many, while some groups mentioned the TV as a way of getting online and there was also reference to using a PlayStation to connect.

The **time** children and young people spend online varied considerably across the different consultation sessions, not only depending on age, but also on other factors such as the views of their parents or whether it was a school day or weekend. One of the respondents from Estonia said that they were often online for around 12 hours per day, whereas a young person from France said they were only online for around 10 minutes per day. Some Danish participants talked about “*always*” being online, using two or three screens at the same time. Upon further reflection as part of the exercise, they expressed being surprised at how much time they spent engaging with digital media. Being online every day was a “*must*” for one Portuguese respondent and one of the facilitators noted that several young people were constantly checking their phones, even during the consultation activities. Interestingly, there was also mention of making a conscious effort to go offline from one of the older groups. Others remarked that because the internet takes a lot of time, they prefer offline activities. Finally, time of year also had an impact on the time spent online, with some users in Italy preferring to spend time outside with friends when the weather was hot.

As one might expect, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was reflected in the answers of the respondents. Several groups mentioned spending significantly more time online, especially during the lockdowns. Others indicated that they would mostly access the digital environment from their homes over the last year or so, simply because they were at home most of the time during the pandemic. During lockdowns, different family members had to share devices and internet connections which sometimes led to conflicts.

The voice of... young children

While the majority of groups involved in the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation were adolescents (age 12-18), 21 out of 71 consultation groups primarily consisted of children under 12, with the youngest respondent being 5 years old.

Children did not significantly differ from teenagers in terms of what they care about most online.

The younger and the older groups typically put watching videos, playing games, listening to music and communicating with friends and family at the top of their favourite activity list. The older users did, however, highlight social media more often, along with photo sharing, news and current affairs, as well as talking to people from different backgrounds.

The **younger children tended to use digital technology less often than older respondents** – some had days where they did not access the internet at all. If they did, this mainly happened from home and often through the device of a parent. **Improved access was highlighted as an important area for improvement.** Several consultation sessions heard about children under 12 having to share devices or simply not having a device of their own which caused considerable difficulties during periods of lockdown and remote learning. Some of the more vulnerable and minority groups had similar issues but again this was particularly the case for those under 12 who were part of such groups.

Although children indicated they go online less frequently and mainly used digital technology for entertainment purposes, in general terms, **they often reported similar issues as the older youth.** Their input echoed the wider consultation findings in that cyberbullying and violent and hateful content were the two issues that concerned them the most. Unwanted ads and sexual content were high on the list of risks also and from the wider comments made it seems that – even at a younger age – children are exposed to unpleasant online experiences on a fairly regular basis.

Of course, **this does not mean that the specific types of benefits and challenges they experience do not evolve with age.** For example, it's primarily the older groups who brought up the more active and creative ways of engaging with the digital world, with reference to the possibility to learn about and share different points of views, creating blogs or websites, or getting involved in campaigns. Meanwhile, the younger groups were less likely to report on issues such as identity theft, scams and blackmail. They equally seemed less concerned by a fear of missing out (FOMO), the need to look perfect online, or being pressured to share intimate images. And indeed, these are the kind of challenges around identity, self-image and sexuality one would expect teenagers to more typically struggle with as they explore and discover their personal identity and interpersonal relationships as they make their way through adolescence.

Furthermore, **the role of parental control** was discussed more often in the younger groups. Family rules seem to largely determine the amount of time children can spend online doing different types of activities, with some children being strictly monitored and controlled while others are left alone with connected devices, particularly when their parents are busy. For example, in the report from a French consultation session

with 6- to 8-year-olds it was said that “while two children reported being left alone in front of their devices most of the time, the majority of the group was very tightly controlled and led by the parents. Most of the parents seem to monitor the average duration of the daily time spent by their children in front of a screen. It goes from ten minutes a day to three hours depending on the child. The children also report differences between activities happening during a school day or during the weekend”. **Having an older sibling** might also explain why some are more likely than others to discover new activities or games.

Interestingly, even at a young age, several children seemed **reluctant to discuss online concerns or incidents with their parents**. In one group, participants said that “even if it makes us sad or worried, we prefer not to tell our parents”. A girl in another group with 9- and 10-year-olds talked about a friend who received messages from a stranger asking for intimate pictures. “The girl was too embarrassed to talk about it to her parents, but [my friend] told everything to my own mother who then helped to solve the situation”.

One report from a Portuguese group with 9- and 10-year-olds concluded that “**children consider themselves particularly vulnerable** and [they feel that] the internet should provide specific levels of protection for them”. Some of the older groups had similar views, expressing concern about their younger siblings “having easy access to content that is not age appropriate”. In line with this, the younger children were sometimes described by their older peers as “curious and naïve at the same time – often clicking on interesting links without realising that it could lead to harm”.

Overall, the children who took part in the consultation seemed to agree that **child protection online is needed**. In terms of policy responses, respondents pointed to the role of education and better legislation, with stricter age controls and checks to delete inappropriate content and suspicious profiles.

More specific (yet sometimes contradicting) ideas included:

- Avoid forcing children to create social media accounts – it should be possible to use social networks without logging in, so that strangers can not contact and communicate with children.
- Strengthen verification mechanisms on social media, requiring people connecting to confirm their identity, while also ensuring that fake accounts are removed promptly.
- Develop child-friendly apps for under 13s to give children safe access to social media.
- Promote an online/offline balance, and encourage children to exercise in the physical world.

Which online activities were most popular among children and young people and what did they like or dislike about these activities?

The consultation showed that respondents hold a balanced view of the activities they engage in when accessing the digital environment. When asked to reflect on what they liked and disliked about the online activities most popular among children and young people, they mentioned both positive and negative elements. The activities that were most popular among respondents can be grouped into three clusters:

1. communication and socialisation
2. media and entertainment; and
3. education and information.

The **first cluster** of activities relates to **social aspects** of children's and young people's lives. Several groups of respondents highlighted communicating and staying in contact with friends and family as an important reason for why they spend time online. For instance, one of the groups from Portugal noted that they felt the need to be connected to see any notifications from friends – they like to be in permanent contact. Some young people in Slovenia talked about going online because they felt bored, lonely or distressed. Respondents chatted directly with their friends and family via social platforms and instant messaging services such as Instagram, Messenger, Discord, Facebook, WhatsApp and so on, or within a class group on one of these social networks. They conversed both by writing messages and by calling or video-calling. One of the groups from Estonia talked about not enjoying writing emails, preferring to use instant messaging services instead.

According to the respondents, the internet enables them to meet with others who share the same interests (from all over the world). In one group, for instance, it was mentioned that after a wedding or some other celebration, they cannot wait to see each other on YouTube as they all share content about those celebrations on their channels, which can be viewed by whoever is interested. In other words, children and young people view the digital environment and the broad variety of platforms and online services as spaces to connect with likeminded people. In relation to this, one of the groups from Kosovo mentioned that it also offers a place for children and young people who don't "fit in" in the offline world.

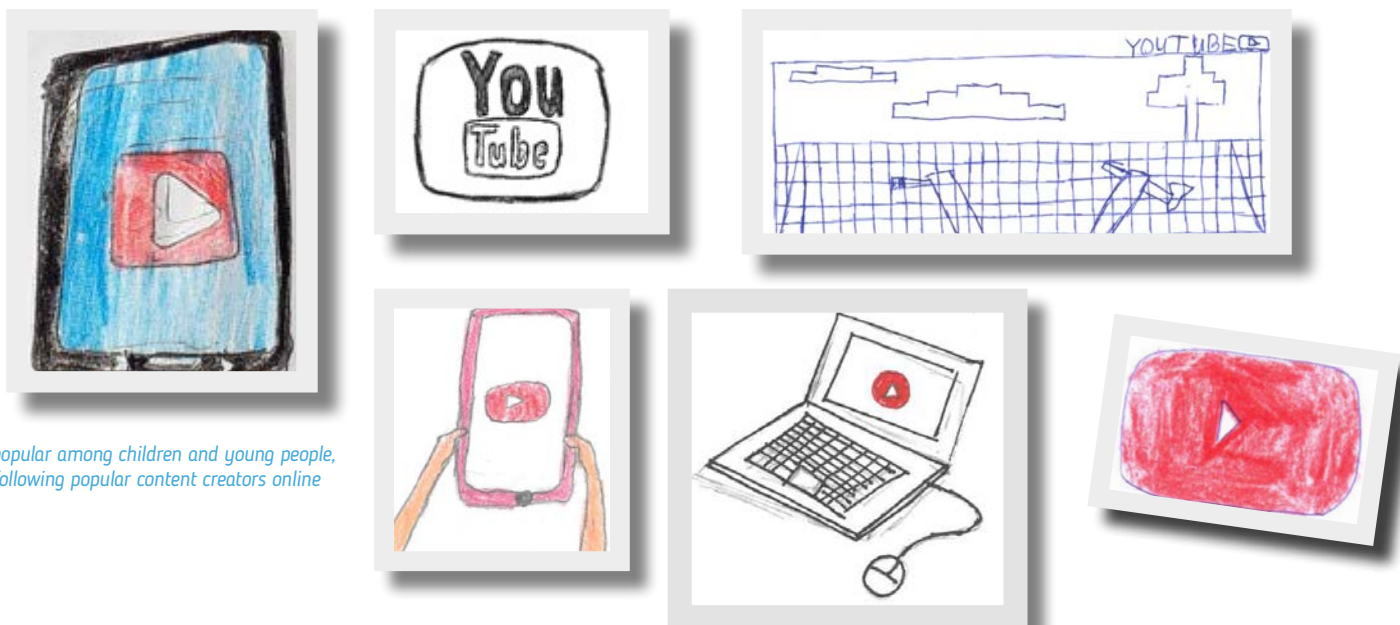
However, respondents also recognised that the internet brings its challenges, such as bad actors trying to exploit them and their desire to make new friends. Clearly online safety is taught in some schools, but some respondents said that schools do not pay enough attention to these issues. For instance, respondents made the point that despite some schools discussing things like cyberbullying, it does not actually stop or reduce the problem – it still keeps happening. One respondent shared their own experiences about being bullied at primary school and said that they had to turn to their parents for protection, who installed stricter controls to "monitor her online activities". Another more negative aspect of children's and young people's social activities online emerging from the discussions was the spread of online hate (or perhaps more broadly, violent and hateful content). Many respondents made references to online hate as something they do not like when they socialise in the digital environment. In one of the Spanish groups, respondents talked about "toxic" comments from friends and colleagues that they did not like. Additionally, being sent images ("dick pics" were referenced specifically) that they did not want to see, and being approached by strangers who want to chat on social media was referenced by one of the respondents from Luxembourg.

A **second cluster** of activities that were most popular among children and young people can be categorised as **media and entertainment**. From the workshops, it is clear that respondents spend a lot of their time online consuming various types of media content. First, watching videos or streaming online content, or watching series or movies on-line as opposed to on television was a common theme which appeared in several responses. Respondents specifically mentioned using the internet to watch, among other things, sports (for example, Formula 1), video instructions, funny videos on TikTok (such as Bella Poarch and Khaby Lame), or even culinary content.



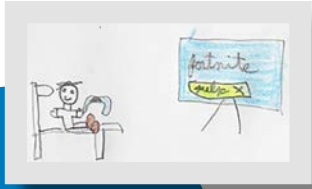
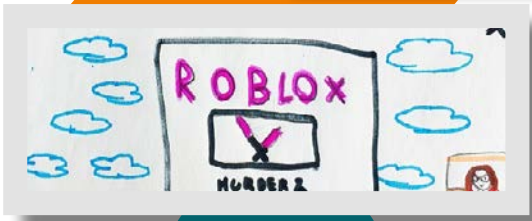
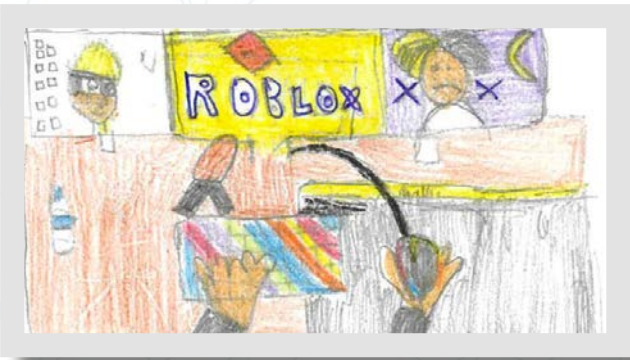
Platforms such as TikTok were popular among consultation participants

A second activity that stood out across the various groups was online gaming. The many examples of games shared by the respondents nicely demonstrated that children and young people view online gaming as an important pastime in the digital realm. Specific examples included Roblox, Minecraft, Viaplay, League of legends, GTA, Fortnite, FIFA, Brawl stars, PKXD, Among us, World of Warships, World of Tanks, Sims, and more. Linked to this, some respondents said that they specifically follow YouTubers or other online content creators who record videos about how they themselves play online games.



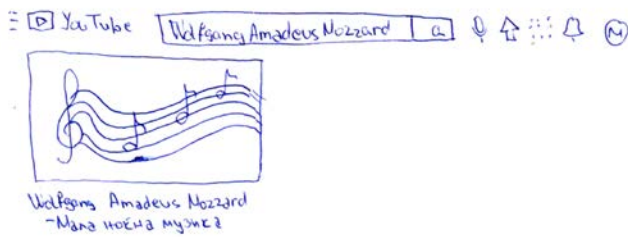
YouTube is popular among children and young people, with many following popular content creators online

COIN MASTER



Children and young people view online gaming as an important pastime in the digital realm

Aside from watching and playing, listening to music (from Chopin and Liszt to Travis Scott and others), podcasts or interviews with famous people was also mentioned as a popular activity (mostly by the older respondents). Equally, some respondents used the internet to look up chords to learn how to play some of the songs they liked to listen to.



Children and young people cited listening to music, and creative activities linked to this, as a popular activity online

When discussing aspects of media and entertainment activities that they disliked, many children and young people addressed the topic of digital advertising. Various complaints were voiced about being confronted with too many advertisements when accessing the digital environment, which they thought was irritating. For instance, advertisements broadcast during gameplay were identified by one of the groups as “the worst type of ads”, but equally ads between shows and pop-ups were criticised by other groups. Aside from the extensive commercialisation of online content, respondents also found some content online to be scary, violent and unpleasant. Inspirational content, however, was not so easy to find.



Some of the consultation participants portrayed less positive outcomes of being online in their drawings



Reference was also made to the ability for many people to livestream content and the fact that there is instant coverage, sometimes of content that users do not want to see. A common theme from many respondents was that they knew they spent too much time on the internet and some preferred offline entertainment activities. Completing the diary that they were asked to do as part of the consultation had helped some of them to realise just how much time they were spending online. Some talked about taking a voluntary digital detox for a few days in order to try and manage this. Some of the children wrote that they felt they ‘wasted’ a lot of time using services like Facebook and Netflix and, hence, considered these as unwanted activities.

The **third cluster** of activities relate to **education and information**. First, most groups reported using digital media for school purposes, for instance when searching for information for class assignments, or when using an electronic pupil’s record book. Respondents mentioned activities such as working on projects, searching for information, work discussions, online classes, Wikipedia, and so on. Being able to access learning remotely during the pandemic was seen as a positive by some respondents, but not by all. While some groups talked about school assignments being more enjoyable and faster to do online, other groups found it unpleasant to do schoolwork online and indicated they did not like online lessons.

Aside from school-related activities, respondents also mentioned that they used the internet for learning in different ways, from taking language classes online to watching video tutorials (for example, to learn how to draw, play the ukulele or improve football skills during lockdown). The internet helped many of them to find new interests (such as crocheting, a love for history, historic fencing, card tricks) and interesting information (tips on what books to read). Simply browsing the web for leisure purposes and searching for information on topics they like was also mentioned by some respondents.

Others talked about being online as a way to be able to keep up to date with current affairs, politics and the news. A positive element to this was the easy access to information and news. Conversely, fake news or false information online was seen as a problem by many; one of the groups talked about the lack of analytical thinking of internet users when it comes to trusting sources of information online.

Which other activities emerged from the consultation?

Aside from the popular activities outlined above, participants also shared a few interesting, but less popular activities during the consultations, which offers some additional insights into children’s and young people’s use of digital media.

As a first example, **online shopping** was mentioned by a number of groups as one of the online activities they would engage in. Some commented that they participated alongside their parents in online shopping sessions, for instance when buying new school material, shoes or clothes. In addition to shopping, certain respondents also turned to the digital environment to follow the latest fashion trends.

The use of the internet for **creative work** was a further activity which was mentioned a few times. Specific examples of such creative work included taking photographs and making photo collages, online drawing, creating graphics and graphical material, and so on. Some respondents also highlighted that they would sometimes turn to the digital environment for inspiration in various areas.

One of the Spanish and one of the Irish consultation groups also discussed the use of religious apps (such as Biblia) and **meditation apps**.

Finally, one of the groups mentioned that they found online **humanitarian actions**, and being able to participate in these, important.

What difficulties did children and young people experience when accessing the digital environment?

Some of the groups talked about the **difficulties in connectivity** in remote, isolated or rural areas (but not just in these locations). Similarly, some talked of problems when several family members were using the same connection and the lack of bandwidth. Some of the Roma children who took part in the consultation talked about not having any connectivity and needing to buy mobile data in order to get online. Distance learning was a significant problem for them as they did not have devices or connectivity – this was particularly the case for younger users. In some cases, devices are shared with siblings or parents. Another concern from this group was that many of their parents had no online skills at all and so this made it difficult to learn or ask questions.



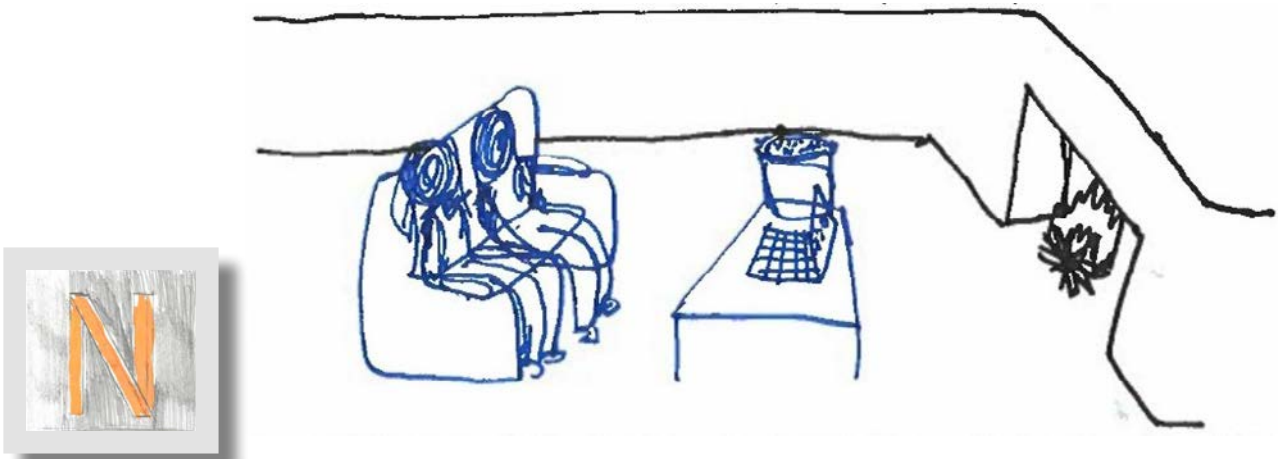
Section 2: Children's and young people's views on opportunities and risks

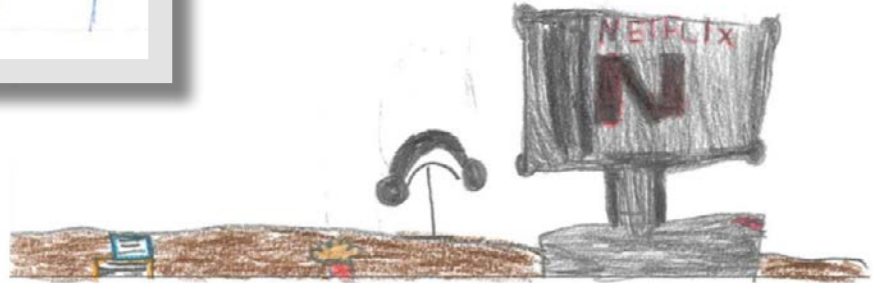
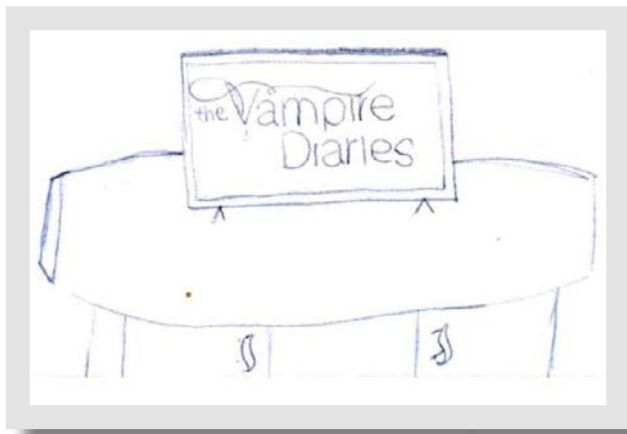
In a second step, children and young people were prompted to develop and express their views about what they see as key opportunities and risks in the digital world, starting from a list of opportunities and risks as previously identified by international research. The aim was to gain further insight into the priorities children and young people see for policy making in this space.

What online activities do children and young people care about, what would they miss?

When the participants were asked to identify key opportunities in the digital environment and prioritise them, the debates mirrored earlier discussions. Overall, while there are some young people who use the internet for more creative activities, the majority cares mostly about using it for entertainment and leisure activities, communicating with family and friends, and for learning purposes. As a general remark, some of the respondents mentioned that they would feel sad if they could no longer be online.

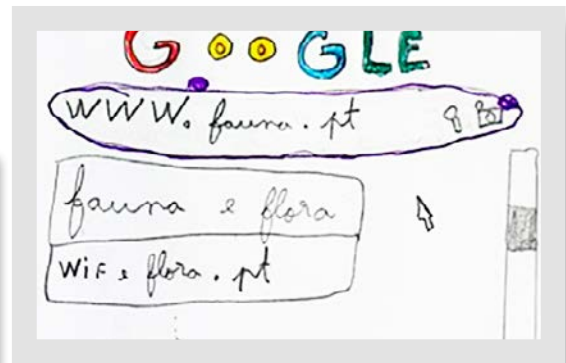
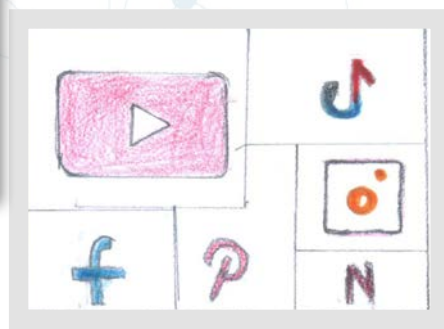
First, **media and entertainment activities** appeared at the top of children's and young people's lists of the activities they care about the most. More specifically, **listening to music** was the most popular choice here – with most consultation groups including this as one of the things that they care about the most. **Gaming** is also clearly an activity which young people care about, with 48 of the consultation groups referencing this. Interestingly, some of the participants debated if it mattered whether they were online or not and more specifically, what difference it made playing games online or offline. The facilitator noted that this showed how young people nowadays take the internet for granted and how the offline and online contexts are no longer viewed as separate areas of their lives. Additionally, **consuming video content** was rated highly by many participants. It was mentioned in an Irish group that watching (Netflix) series connects people, provides common interests and talking points. Watching videos that are motivating and inspiring was also deemed important by participants, as it helps them to learn new things and different perspectives. Creating content as opposed to consuming or watching it was much less likely to be something that young people cared about. Only two consultation groups mentioned creating websites and six talked about making videos.



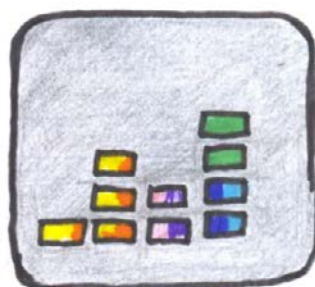


Consuming video content was rated highly by many participants

Second, **communicating with friends and family** ranked high on the list of priorities and the consultation activities illustrated that the internet is a fundamental tool for children's and young people's social relations. Several respondents commented that they did not switch off their mobile phones at night, so that they would not miss a message from a friend. Some respondents felt it was important to stay in touch with others both offline (for example, hanging out with their friends in the summer) as well as online. Others specified that they find it important to be able to **express their opinions** and share these with many people, for instance through social media. In relation to this, one of the respondents also shared how they appreciated that they could communicate with **people from other parts of the world** and learn something about their way of life, giving the example of meeting a student from Kazakhstan through an app. Participants also recognised that during the pandemic, the internet was their most **important link to the outside world**. It would have been a lot more difficult for them to cope with the impact of the pandemic if it were not for the internet.

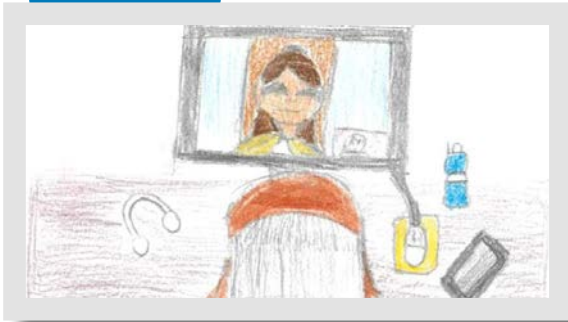
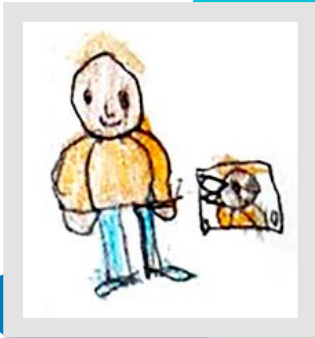


Snapchat



Deezer





Participants mentioned a range of benefits to being online, including communicating with friends and family, connecting with others, and searching for information

Third, **schoolwork** and using the internet to support **learning** was highlighted by under half of the groups while **searching for information** was mentioned by over half. More specifically, children and young people recognised the usefulness of the internet in their educational development. The fact that you can easily get access to any information is seen as the biggest opportunity by the participants. Someone made the interesting remark that if it were not for the internet, they would not be able to extend their knowledge beyond their school textbooks. A young Portuguese person living far from the city mentioned that they would lose the speed and diversity of information and would have to go to the library to do research.

As a side note, 12 groups identified **online shopping** as something that was missing from the original list which would seem to suggest that this is important to some young people.

What online risks are children and young people most concerned about?

Aside from the opportunities the internet and digital media has to offer, respondents were asked to consider what they believe to be the most important online risks. From the consultation sessions, it was clear that children and young people have both general and very specific concerns about the risks they may face online. Some participants thought that all of the risks listed were very relevant and preferred to select all the options.



Children and young people have both general and very specific concerns about the risks they may face online

General concerns and remarks

Across the different consultation groups, general concerns were raised about the **lack of awareness** among internet users (including not only children and young people but also adults like parents) about online risks and potential mitigation measures. In one group, the specific example was given that although content providers already offer different age settings, people are not aware of this and do not act according to it (for example, the 'E' (or EXPLICIT) classification on Spotify is not known to kids or their parents). Interestingly, in a lot of groups, respondents voiced concerns not necessarily for themselves or their peers, but rather for children younger or adults older than themselves. This might indicate that they believe these other groups are more vulnerable or prone to these online risks.

The respondents agreed that the **environment** a person lives in was very important, as it influences their behaviour the most (also on the internet). In particular, they felt that parents have an important role to play in talking to their children about their activities and experiences online. Others found it easier to talk to peers and discussed online risks with their friends, or professionals at school (such as a psychologist or the police).

The voice of... children and young people in vulnerable and marginalised situations

To make the consultation process as inclusive as possible – reflecting the digital life and experiences of the wide diversity of children and young people living in Europe – substantial time and effort was invested in reaching out to a number of children and young people in vulnerable and marginalised situations²² which are often forgotten in these types of consultations, including:

- Children with disabilities
- Migrant/Roma/refugee children
- Children in care
- LGBTQ+ children
- Children living in poverty groups

As a result, 30 out of 71 consultation sessions included representatives from one or several of the aforementioned groups. This included children and young people with various types of disabilities (intellectual, hearing, visual and physical impairment), children and young people with emotional and behaviour problems, migrants, Roma children, children in care, children and young people from rural and isolated regions, and those from disadvantaged or dysfunctional families.

According to many respondents, the digital world provides a wealth of opportunities both for learning and leisure, for entertainment and social interaction, but it is **not sufficiently inclusive and accessible for children and young people with disabilities**. For example, the facilitator of one Spanish group with boys and girls with severe deafness explained that their needs and concerns are the same as any person their age, but due to their disability they risk being left out. Therefore, they need subtitling on all platforms, applications, websites and audiovisual materials; they need the option of real-time communication via text; they need video calls which facilitate lip reading; and they need technical aids and supports such as a magnetic hearing loop available on devices by default. Likewise, several children and young people with disabilities pointed out **how difficult it was to engage with remote learning**, for example because the quality of audio in online classes tends to be poor and often there is no proper captioning available.

At the same time, several young participants expressed **concerns about hateful and violent content online**, with disability seen as a risk factor often leading to harassment and rejection. Likewise, some Danish youth growing up in marginalised situations explained that they often felt the target of hate because they are seen as different. This was confirmed by a number of other facilitators who felt that **disadvantaged youth are exposed much more often to violence and sexual content compared to other young people**. The facilitator of one group of children from socially deprived backgrounds in Portugal also felt they were not really aware of a lot of the potential risks that they might encounter online. Some facilitators spoke about vulnerable children and young people lacking the required self-confidence to recognise the importance of being heard and that what they had to say was relevant. According to an Austrian facilitator, this is often because of a lack of parental involvement and education – as a result, these children tend to use the internet in a much more passive way, feeling helpless and having no words to grasp what is happening with them.

²² This is in line with the approach which was adopted for the recently published *Children and young people's contribution to the new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee*. See <https://www.unicef.org/eu/media/1276/file/Report%20%22Our%20Europe.%20Our%20Rights.%20Our%20Future%22.pdf>.

One of the consultation sessions conducted in Slovenia worked with **young people with emotional and behavioural problems**. The facilitator was surprised at how much online violence and sexual content they had been exposed to. This particular group spoke about self-harm and suicide, and said that they were constantly harassed by people asking for naked images or other sexual content – this was particularly the case for the girls in the group. These young people also explained that they spent a lot of time online (between 6 and 10 hours a day) because they were lonely and felt bored or distressed.

One group of **Roma children** from Greece explained that they live in a Roma settlement and that there is no connectivity there. They must buy mobile data to be able to get online. This, along with a lack of devices, caused significant problems for them during lockdown when they were reliant on online remote learning. Some other Roma groups spoke about having to share devices with their brothers and sisters or other family members. The Greek group also explained that **adult members of the community were not familiar with the internet or how to use it**. This meant that children and young people did not have any opportunity to ask their parents and carers for help and advice about how to stay safe online. In line with this, they also spoke about the need for stricter rules in order to protect younger users as this protection would not come from parents and family members. To illustrate the many differences which may exist within similar social groups or communities, one other consultation session with Roma children in the Czech Republic rather suggested that access to digital technology was less of an issue. For these respondents, communicating with family and friends online, as well as listening to music, watching videos, or updating and checking their social media account was considered very important and they spent a lot of time doing as such. In terms of risks, the response of this group again resembles those of other respondents around their age. They did however report feeling particularly uncomfortable when they see hate content targeted at Roma communities and they spoke about a recent example linked to the death of a Roma man in their region.

Finally, several groups brought up **issues in regards the representation of LGBTQ+ people in the online world or spoke about the prevalence of anti-LGBTQ+ attacks or attacks against minorities more broadly**. In one German group it was argued that this is primarily due to the anonymity people feel online which increases the likelihood of individuals attacking, degrading and insulting others. One facilitator indicated this particular topic led to highly emotional discussions, triggered also by – at that time – ongoing political discussions in regards the use of rainbow symbols during Euro 2020, as well as continued controversy in regards Hungarian anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.



Specific concerns

When asked to voice their main concerns about the digital realm, most of the groups mentioned **cyberbullying** as the key concern, closely followed by hateful or violent content. Respondents from Greece say that this is a situation that they have to deal with very often. Some of the discussion indicated that this really upsets young people and that often they were not able to stop seeing it. One group from the Czech Republic said that they had been victims of cyberbullying and had become used to seeing and dealing with hateful comments – this is of concern as it could suggest that some young people are becoming desensitised to the content that they are being exposed to. In another reference to cyberbullying, a respondent talked about cyberbullying by exclusion where his classmates blocked him from a group on WhatsApp and set up another group against him. Another example involved people on social networks creating false profiles of friends with information and photographs, in order to bully and defame the victims. The observation was made that hateful comments on social media contribute to someone being more or less popular among peers.

As mentioned, closely following cyberbullying as a main concern is the spread of **harmful or hateful content**. Clearly some of the content children and young people are confronted with is inappropriate, as there were references made to:

- Ads with naked women and “*inappropriate content with dubious intentions*”
- Pressure from a stranger asking them to send nudes
- Requests to follow naked women
- Self-harm content
- Content promoting eating disorders
- Inappropriate political ideas (for example, neo-fascists)
- Anti-LGBTQ+ (hate against minority groups)
- Hate targeted against the Roma community

Interestingly, several consultation groups highlighted their concern specifically for younger children, stating that they are curious and that they will click on things without realising what type of content they may be faced with. Furthermore, they are considered less experienced and more vulnerable. In relation to this, **YouTube influencers** were also mentioned several times – one respondent talked about younger users wanting to impress their favourite YouTuber and imitating their behaviour without realising that some of the challenges can be life-threatening. Additionally, they often compare their own lives with their online idols which may lead to a lower self-esteem and an inferiority complex.

One girl had been live-streaming when someone watching the livestream asked her to strip – she said that this was a “*very unpleasant experience*” and that now she prefers not to livestream. Across the research there was evidence of a **gender split** with girls appearing more likely to be asked for nudes. Respondents from Romania felt that there needed to be more work done on ensuring that the internet was a safe space, especially for girls.

The **graphic nature of content** was also cited by several groups. For example, the recent collapse of a Danish football player during a Euro 2020 game was mentioned. Young people felt that this type of footage should not have been taken and should not have been shared. Similarly, respondents from North Macedonia talked about shocking news stories which were upsetting and disturbing. Some respondents in an Estonian group felt that their exposure to violent content has only increased during the pandemic, as they spent more time online.

Finally, some of the debates touched upon the **responsibility** for minimising harmful content online. One of the groups argued that website administrators should play a more important role in keeping comments and forum discussions polite.

Children and young people also considered **fake news and disinformation** as one of the biggest threats on the internet. Fake news was not only considered to be a problem for young people, but perhaps even more so for older people. According to respondents, older people have trouble separating true stories from fake news because of their traditional perception of news in the media to be true (in “the good old times”). They do not realise that information online does not go through the same rigorous fact-checking processes. Moreover, many older people actively forward fake news and young people find it difficult to convince them that such information is false. Specific examples mentioned during the consultation groups were the Spanish crisis with Morocco and COVID-19 hoaxes.

Another threat that appeared high on the lists of concerns of the respondents were risks related to **privacy and data protection**. The participants expressed great concern about identity theft and theft of personal data, and feared that their information may be used inappropriately. Some of them did not like the fact that social media providers force them to create their own account. They would rather have the option to access the entire service without having to share personal data. Others expressed the need for more awareness about how the internet can be used to influence people (“it ends up influencing us to do things we don’t want to do”) and at the same time is a form of control (“it tracks our interests and our location”).

One of the respondents from Ireland talked about the **pressure to look or behave in a certain way** online. “We worry about how we are perceived online; you can overthink a post. There is pressure around posting the right type of content”. Feedback from one of the consultation sessions that took place in Malta suggested that there was a difference between boys and girls in this regard. The boys were more concerned with data and identity theft, whereas the girls spoke about pressure to “look or be a certain way”. However, one of the boys in another group mentioned that he often experiences the compulsive feeling to stand out on social media and equal others with a “perfect” profile. He also dealt with fears of missing out (FOMO). Another group discussed the use of filters on social media and how they can make someone prettier on social media. In relation to this, the importance of promoting body positive content was also underlined.

A young person from Denmark spoke about concerns regarding the **amount of time spent online**. “Yes, sometimes it’s like you’re glued to your phone and it’s kinda scary watching people on the street with their phones up in their face. I try not to use my phone outside if I can avoid it”. Related to this, participants discussed how social networks employ mechanisms to encourage users to spend even more time online. They found it easy, for instance, to get carried away by Instagram Reels. One group pointed out that parents did not always understand how important the internet was for young people. If parents were to limit the amount of time their children are allowed to spend online, the child may resort to hiding their online activities (for example, using their phone in their bedroom).

Finally, participants were also concerned about a number of **financial risks in online games**. First, it was mentioned that games often offer various paid upgrades during gameplay, which is very enticing for children, and they may spend large amounts of money without their parents’ knowledge. Additionally, children and young people reported feeling harassed by advertisements in games that promote the installation of gambling apps or contain false notifications of wins. More generally speaking, they expressed concerns about the lack of control of advertising in online games. Another participant said a significant amount of money had been stolen from them through fraud in a game they were playing.

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact the views and experiences of children and young people?

Questions and activities in the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation did not specifically address the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, its impact on the digital life of children and young people was apparent in various ways.

Overall, many respondents shared the widespread concern among policy makers about **fake news and misinformation**, with COVID-19 hoaxes and other disinformation campaigns being mentioned throughout. Meanwhile, a number of other trends stood out:

- **Access to the internet** was often mentioned as a challenge. Several respondents spoke about difficulties to connect at home with several family members needing to be online at the same time. Some of the youth said that they had to share devices (such as laptop, tablet, or smartphone) within a household which sometimes could lead to conflict. The cost of connectivity was also raised in one of the consultation sessions in Spain with some pupils unable to connect to classes due to connectivity costs. In a Latvian consultation session, respondents said that *“many children and young people did not have access to a suitable computer during the pandemic”*.
- In response to the pandemic, many countries moved to **remote learning and education**. As a consequence, several respondents indicated that access to education became heavily dependent on access to the internet and digital devices. Within this context, respondent’s views and opinions on online learning differed. One group from the Czech Republic spoke about the improvements that had been made to education because of *“the need to digitalise the system due to COVID-19”*. Many teachers switched to online learning out of necessity but continued to use the online tools when face-to-face learning had resumed – allowing them to share relevant information and education materials online. Other respondents did not enjoy learning online. Several issues were also raised in relation to digital inclusion, as illustrated already in a previous section of this report on vulnerable youth. For example, youth living in more marginalised situations risked being excluded from education due to limited access to the internet.
- Many young people **spent more time online** during the pandemic and some said that they saw the internet as their connection to the outside world, being able to connect with friends and family. Some respondents spoke of *“an additional two hours per day”*, while one group from Italy said that *“the amount of time they spent online almost doubled”*. One of the Portuguese groups noted that there has been an increase in social media use because of the pandemic and another (also from Portugal) said that cyberbullying had increased during lockdown, along with hate speech. One group from the Czech Republic talked about the importance of data protection and reflected on how this will likely develop in future: *“There will be more and more things we do and keep in the online environment. In fact a big part of our privacy is already online”*.

Inevitably, these data suggest that the pandemic may have had a wider impact on the results of the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation exercise. Lockdown measures, and in particular school closures, meant that children and young people became increasingly reliant on digital technology to communicate with friends and to do their schoolwork. This seems to have exacerbated a number of existing inequalities and vulnerabil-

ities online, particularly for those who lack support and resources at home. At the same time, the increased amount of time spent online may have impacted – both in positive and negative ways – the nature and number of opportunities and risks children and young people encountered in a digital world. Further research would be needed to better disentangle the mechanisms at play.



Section 3: Children's and young people's recommendations for policy

In the final stage of the consultation session, participants were given an opportunity to explain to the European Commission – in their own words – what needs to happen to make the digital world a better place for European children and young people. Again, the aim was to gain further insight into children's and young people's priorities for policy making in this context. This also helped to collect ideas on possible solutions and the role to be played by policy makers, industry, schools, parents or any other relevant actors.

What do children and young people identify as the most important areas for improvement?

The consultation groups produced interesting and rich insights into what type of changes children and young people really want to see in the digital environment. Importantly, **participants largely decided to focus on the key online risks they had previously identified** as part of the consultation exercise.

More specifically, **inappropriate content** was the most common issue to be highlighted by the respondents in this final stage. The participants found this a priority for change because it has the ability to affect society and other people, who could also become rude and impolite. In other words, it might desensitise us to hateful messages and behaviours. **Cyberbullying** was also referenced by 17 of the consultation groups as an important area to be addressed. As for reasons why this should be a priority for policymakers, participants argued that cyberbullying limits them in their life, affects their behaviour and self-esteem, and can ultimately lead to problems in all areas of life. Some participants felt that cyberbullying presents a massive challenge, particularly for younger children.

Across the different groups, various participants also identified **disinformation and fake news** as their main priority for improvement. Several reasons were mentioned for selecting this topic, and while some see disinformation as mainly a problem for younger children, others see it as a challenge for society at large. A lack of awareness about **privacy** and how to protect accounts and personal data was also seen as a significant issue which needed to be prioritised by EU policy makers. **Access to the internet for all** and **access that was reliable and cheap (or free)** was also seen as important, and this was mentioned by 17 of the consultation groups.

Aside from these specific issues, some more **overarching problems** can be extracted from the discussions. According to the participants, the root cause of many of the specific issues mentioned above lie in (1) **a lack of awareness** and **media literacy** among internet users; (2) the possibility to remain anonymous in the digital environment; and (3) **public attitudes online** which should be changed towards decent communication and behaviour. Hence, in various consultation sessions, participants debated and worked towards solutions for one of these broader issues.

From the discussions, it can also be derived that some children and young people are not convinced that policy makers can improve the digital spaces they frequent and hence bring about effective change. For instance, in a number of groups, participants expressed the sentiment that adults – and in particular politicians – do not care about their experiences in the digital environment. A few participants were rather sceptical about the assignment, suggesting that it was a pointless exercise to talk to policy makers as they were *“too caught up in their own interests”*. Others doubted the potential effectiveness and power of policymakers to realise changes in the digital context.

In this regard, the participants stressed the important role of parents who ultimately make the decisions about their children's digital media use (for example, are they granted a mobile phone? How much time can they spend online? Do they use parental control tools or not?). The majority of children and young people also recognise that adults can help them to make good choices online. As such, they viewed it as a priority to make adults more aware of the world of the internet to prevent or reduce young people's exposure to risks online. However, it was equally stressed that when providing support, adults should also take into consideration and respect children's and young people's privacy.

What can policy makers/other actors do?

As a second step, participants brainstormed about potential solutions for the issues mentioned above and ultimately created a key message for EU policy makers. This activity again resulted in a broad variety of creative and well-considered ideas from the unique perspective of children and young people. The proposed solutions offer further insights into their views on, for example, the division of responsibilities between the actors involved; the role of regulatory tools such as technology and media literacy education; and how they themselves look at the tension between the objectives of protection and empowerment that is inherent to the digital environment.

Children and young people do not consider policy makers to be solely responsible for making the internet a better place. Across the various consultation sessions, participants insisted that different actors had to take up their share of responsibility, depending on the specific context and issue at stake. As a general remark, the participants recommended that policymakers should aim towards more **harmonisation at the EU level**, as this could result in better protection of minors from online risks and harmful media within the entire EU. More specifically, they could think about introducing uniform age limits and improving monitoring at EU level.

The message most often heard in the consultation sessions was the need for improved **media and online safety education** for children and young people in schools, and that policy makers should make this happen. The participants believed that without knowing how to correctly use online tools, they are more vulnerable to risks and threats. The metaphor was used of being handed a serious tool without an instruction manual. Some respondents emphasised that schools and parents have to take their role more seriously than they do today. Several measures were suggested, each for increasing media literacy in different contexts:

The school environment

First of all, participants discussed media literacy education in the school context. As a starting point, policy makers should ensure that media and online safety education are included into the school curriculum. One way to pay for the cost of this would be to levy a tax for big digital companies. Some spoke about this education needing to be delivered by external experts or specialists rather than by regular teachers (for example, through workshops on internet safety, podcasts, or similar). Of course, one of the challenges here is ensuring that online safety education makes an impact and is effective, hence a robust evaluation of online safety education needs to take place in parallel. Teacher and parental education were seen as important too; one group suggested that this was particularly important for older teachers. Improving online safety education in teacher training institutions could also contribute to this.

At home

Aside from focusing on schools, policy makers should also develop general awareness-raising campaigns for children, for instance by involving famous influencers, as well as for parents. Such campaigns should, for instance, focus on encouraging parents to spend more time together with their kids and listen to them when it comes to their online activities. When developing such awareness campaigns, participants recommend that people from different social standings and backgrounds are involved. A more fun way to do this would be by creating educational games, for instance about cybersecurity or how to recognise fake news.

Aside from more media literacy education, several groups stressed that **improved monitoring and enforcement** of existing rules in the digital environment is necessary, with stricter penalties for those who misbehave online (for example, those who harass, bully, or spread harmful content). Such penalties could include fines, banning bullies from social media, or even more severe punishments such as prison. At the moment, children and young people feel that when they report certain content or behaviour to social media platforms, no actions are effectively taken, which in turn discourages them to report or act against hate speech. Additionally, they believe that if internet users and social networks do not face any consequences for bad online behaviour, not much will change. Young people find it unacceptable that managers of big internet companies seem to fear their shareholders more than regulatory bodies, such as data protection authorities. The youngsters also mentioned the need for **independent, non-commercial, public service agencies or bodies**, to protect the rights of internet users. Examples were given of a public agency for LGBTQ+ issues in the digital environment, or an ombudsman for internet users to protect their rights and raise awareness of the risks of being online. Such an ombudsman could also advise ISPs (internet service providers) to be more user friendly. Additionally, a public and neutral organisation for fact-checking and filtering out fake news was felt to be important.

The **possibility to remain anonymous online** was also seen as a big problem by several of the respondents, as it facilitated online risks such as cyberbullying and the spread of disinformation and other harmful content. To address this problem, 11 consultation groups suggested that there should be laws in place to prevent users from signing up to social media (and other online) platforms without proving their real identity. One group made it clear that, while others should not necessarily know who someone is online, the platform and law enforcement services should be able to access this information if necessary (for example, if requested by a judge). Age-verification measures were also often mentioned in different contexts (such as for playing video games, accessing websites containing sexual content, or for registering for social networks) as a way for internet service providers to have a better idea of which of its users are children and young people, and hence take measures to protect them accordingly.

In addition, children and young people think that EU policy makers should exercise pressure on industry to provide **safe and child-appropriate services and platforms**. This entails finding ways to ensure that children's voices are heard, and offering settings and content according to age and category. This could include banning sexual or violent content, or better regulating access to certain content such as gambling, advertisements and spam.

According to the participants, **technology** can also play an important role in making the internet a better place. Here, it was argued that EU policy makers should collaborate with internet companies or create the necessary incentives to ensure that companies, such as social media platforms, continue developing tools which are child-friendly. Participants had many ideas of what such technologies could or should do, and the following suggestions were made across the various groups:

- Develop mechanisms to control news and information published on the internet.
- Develop algorithms that remove hate speech faster and more effectively.
- Introduce more identification requirements, to both prevent identity theft and to ensure that internet users cannot falsify their age.
- Invest more time in the development of specific features for apps to detect the levels of media literacy of their users. For example, if someone with a lower media literacy level accesses the app, the technology should detect this and suggest a safer or more appropriate app for that user.

- Promote the use of time management tools for the internet, to overcome the problem of spending too much time online.
- Develop a tool or feature that allows children and young people to delete images that are shared, even if screenshots are made.

The topic of **privacy and data protection** was also a priority for improvement for several consultation groups. In this context, participants developed recommendations for websites and social platforms. One of the main problems that needs to be resolved, according to the respondents, is the opaqueness and lack of transparency – young people have no knowledge about the security policies of websites or platforms, and whether or not their data are safe. As such, they think that an upgrade of these policies and security measures is necessary. Particular attention should be given to limiting the collection of children’s personal data (“*by not spying on us*”) or making tracking of under 18s data illegal. In addition, terms and conditions should be in understandable language for everyone, in particular younger users. A similar requirement can already be found in Article 12 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), so this recommendation by children and young people underlines the need for effectively enforcing such requirements. Participants suggested that this could be done by increased monitoring of websites, and performing a “*cleaning*” of inappropriate websites.

Although a lot of participants mentioned **advertising** in the opening discussions of the consultation sessions as annoying or irritating, the topic did not reappear so often in the discussions about problems they wanted to solve. Only a few groups discussed the problem and proposed restrictions for online ads, in terms of their duration (“*maximum of 1 second*”), having a mandatory skip button, having restrictions on the use of personal data for advertising, or banning ads altogether.

Several groups talked about the importance of **good quality, reliable internet access** for all, something which has clearly been highlighted as an issue by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was reflected in other parts of the consultation as being a particular challenge faced by many and, in particular, by vulnerable groups.

Finally, children and young people also made recommendations for improving the problem of **excessive internet use**. In relation to this, EU policy makers could think of informing families about the dangers of using the internet too frequently, or creating incentives for youngsters to engage in offline activities. Some of the participants mentioned here, once more, that parents have an important role to play and should limit the time their children can go online. One of the groups even suggested turning off the internet connection at certain times of the day.



The voice of... European teachers and educators

As part of a Better Internet for Kids MOOC (massive open online course) for teachers with a focus on Digital literacy and online safety: How the pandemic tested our skills,²³ over 300 teachers and educators from over 20 countries in the European Union were consulted in an online survey on a similar range of questions in regards the online opportunities and risks they see for children and young people, and how best to respond to these.



What do teachers and educators consider to be the main risks and benefits to children and young people online? Do they feel children and young people are more vulnerable than others and, if so, why?

As part of the Better Internet for Kids MOOC, which listed and covered a range of online safety risks, such as *fake news and misinformation, phishing and scams, mental health and well-being, time spent online, child sexual exploitation and grooming, and exclusion*, participants were asked early on to identify the online risks that concern them most, with a possibility to list up to five risks.

Time spent online was identified most often as a key online safety risk with over half of MOOC participants including it as one of the key priorities. In their open-ended responses, this was often associated with gaming in particular. **Fake news and misinformation** came out as the second most important risk according to MOOC participants, followed by child sexual exploitation and grooming, phishing and scams (and a wider range of security risks), and mental (and physical) health and well-being.

MOOC participants also identified a number of risks which were not covered explicitly in the MOOC, most notably **cyberbullying** (which was mentioned as often as some of the pre-listed risks), **data protection and privacy**, and various types of **inappropriate content** (typically with reference to violent or sexual content).

²³ <https://www.europeanschoolnetacademy.eu/courses/course-v1:BIK3+DigitalLiteracy+2021/about>

Later on in the course, respondents were asked if they consider some children and young people to be more vulnerable than others and, if so, which ones and why. Here, much reference was made to the lack of knowledge, digital skills and digital literacy among children and young people, but also the lack of awareness, support and guidance from teachers and family. Moreover, many respondents singled out children and young people with disabilities and special needs as being particularly vulnerable, together with those with mental health issues or from poor and disadvantaged communities.

Looking towards the positives, MOOC participants were asked to identify what they consider to be the main benefits of the internet to children and young people. Here, **information and education** clearly stood out as being the biggest benefit according to educators. Almost all respondents referred, in some way, to positives including the access to information, knowledge and education which the internet provides, alongside the opportunities to learn and develop digital skills, and improve literacy and critical thinking. Additionally, according to the MOOC respondents, it allows children and young people to explore different views and cultures, broaden their horizons, develop their identities, and express their voices.

It is interesting to note that, while other aspects and dimensions like communication with family and friends, creativity and entertainment were also mentioned a number of times, this happened substantially less compared to the overall response from the children and young people we consulted.

How do schools teach children and young people about the safe and positive use of the internet? Do teachers and educators feel that schools and the education system do enough to support children and young people to be safe online?

When asked how their school teaches children and young people about the safe and positive use of the internet, almost all respondents mentioned **a range of activities, including ICT classes, online safety lessons and media literacy courses, hands-on workshops and cross- or extra-curricular projects**, active participation in campaigns such as Safer Internet Day, school policies which promote safe and responsibility behaviour, and so forth.

When asked, however, if they felt that schools and the education system is doing enough to support children and young people to be safe online, **almost four out of five teachers responded “No” or “Not sure”**, often stating in quite explicit terms that the amount of effort and commitment continues to depend on individual goodwill and initiative rather than being systematically embedded in the education system.

Along this line, a number of **weaknesses** were identified by respondents, and these can be summarised as follows:

- Several teachers indicated that the curriculum is quite full and strict, with a lot of competition with other priorities. Often, time is missing to gain more in-depth insight.
- At primary school level, there is still not sufficient awareness of the importance of addressing the topic from an early age onwards.

- Many teachers continue to lack the required knowledge and skills in terms of ICT, media literacy and online safety. Therefore, they often do not appreciate how important these topics are, nor do they feel comfortable addressing them.
- Meanwhile, some respondents point to the fact that digital technology is continuously evolving, which implies that what is learned today might be outdated tomorrow. This places additional pressure on teachers who may already struggle with the topic.
- As a result, it is sometimes difficult to convince colleagues about the importance of the topic. Therefore, media literacy and online safety typically end up being part of cross- or extra-curricular activities. While this might be useful, it may not always trigger the required impact in terms of passing on relevant knowledge and experiences to pupils.

As such, MOOC participants shared a number of **suggestions for improvement**:

- There is a need for more structural government support and programmes to ensure that activities are at school level rather than an individual level.
- More adequate teacher training is important, as is more active and continuous involvement from external experts.
- Within this context, schools should not only work with children and young people but also more actively reach out to parents and carers so as to develop a shared understanding of what is going on in children's and young people's online lives, in turn making it possible to foster an ongoing whole-school dialogue.
- At the same time, adults should realise this is not simply about telling children and young people what is "right" or "wrong" – it is about helping pupils to better understand the opportunities and risks so as to empower them to make informed and responsible decisions on how to engage with the digital world.
- Finally, it is important to take an evidence-based approach and to better assess the results of existing courses and education efforts. Without measurement there is no way to hold teachers and schools accountable. One respondent therefore suggested to aim for national media literacy tests, in line with OECD's PISA approach which already measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge, and skills to meet real-life challenges.

What do you think governments, online platforms and companies, NGOs and charities should do to help children and young people to be safe and positive online?

As part of the MOOC, participants were also asked to reflect on the role to be played by various public and private stakeholders to help children and young people to be safe and positive online.

MOOC participants broadly identified **two clusters of responsibility for governments** in this space. First of all, they need to invest in national and international programmes which support education and awareness-raising efforts. For teachers, this is primarily about making sure that media literacy, online safety and digital citizenship are part of the formal curriculum from an early age onwards, while ensuring that these topics are properly addressed in teacher training and professional development also. Yet, as previously said, it is also about reaching out to parents and carers more broadly and, in fact, many respondents pointed to the important responsibility parents have to protect and support their children.

Secondly, much reference was made to the need to have proper legal and regulatory frameworks and to ensure that these rules are properly enforced and do not exist only on paper. The accountability of industry is something which respondents raised often. They should be forced (or, more positively, encouraged) to develop technological solutions and come up with age-appropriate standards and measures to keep their platforms and services safe.

When asked more specifically about **the role of industry**, respondents identified the following priorities:

- Age verification seems to be a key solution for many teachers, often in combination with parental controls. It is interesting to note that this was often defined in a rather restrictive manner, where companies need to make sure that children and young people should not be able to access certain types of content and create accounts on certain social media services. Several respondents pointed out that *“we all know young people are on those platforms, often without permission of their parents. If we all know it, companies and governments know it also”*.
- In line with these suggestions, several other protective measures were put forward. Most of them again revolve around the notion that companies should do a better job in monitoring their platforms and services, ensuring that community rules and standards are properly enforced. This can be about blocking or filtering content or banning users who violate terms and conditions. Industry should also build upon its capacity to innovate, with algorithms seen as *“powerful vehicles in the digital era”*.
- By contrast, several respondents questioned an online safety approach which is overly restrictive, also because they feel it will never work. Therefore, they suggest instead focussing on more positive strategies, with companies getting involved in education programmes and awareness-raising campaigns. For example, companies should find ways to *“make it ‘cool’ to stay safe online, be kind and use digital technology to help and become a good citizen”*. This can happen, for example, by creating short catchy videos with involvement from celebrities who can act as role models.

More broadly, many respondents acknowledge that it is often **complicated to say where exactly the responsibility sits as often it is shared**. Some pointed to a more systemic tension between the business models of online platforms and children’s rights in a digital world. In this view, design choices are often meant to monetise the time people (including children and young people) spend online which might in fact lead to them having access to content and service which are not designed with their best interests in mind. Others feel there are limits in terms of how far the responsibility of industry goes. As one respondent said, *“for sure, many kids lie about their age when opening a social media account, but parents equally allow it”*. What may therefore be needed is *“a partnership where companies help educate parents so that parents can best guide their children”*.

As far as **NGOs and charities** are concerned, their role primarily is seen in terms of the provision of education to children and young people, and also to teachers and families. This might take many different forms: information or tip sheets, presentations, workshops and school visits, running contests or campaigns such as Safer Internet Day, creating videos, posters, quizzes, interactive games or other playful materials. Within this context, NGOs and charities have an important responsibility also to reach and cover that part of society that the education system struggles or fails to reach. In addition, a few respondents also made a more elaborate point that these kinds of non-profit organisations may play an important role in putting forward and promoting alternative business models or different types of age-appropriate online content and services.

If you were the Minister in charge and had an unlimited budget to improve the rights of children in their digital lives, what two things would you do?

Finally, respondents were given the opportunity – just like the children and young people involved in the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation – to tell policy makers what they would do to make the digital world a better place for children and young people.

Their responses and suggestions largely echoed the priorities they had previously identified, with a particular role to be played by education and awareness-raising efforts on the one hand, and proper legal and regulatory frameworks to hold industry and citizens accountable on the other hand.

Once combined, this led to a number of ambitious ideas and proposals, some of them drawing upon the potential for digital technology to be an innovative part of the solution, for example:

- An international system of labels and symbols which identifies and certifies all suitable online content and services for children and young people.
- Collaboration between policy makers and technology companies to create automated tools and programmes which can seamlessly verify online content and services intended for children and young people, blocking what is inappropriate, while equally taking account of the evolving digital literacy levels of internet users.
- Automated face recognition mechanisms to ensure that children and young people only access content and services that are designed for their age and level of development.
- Free access to the internet and digital technology for all citizens, also in poorer and more rural areas, while equipping all schools with a proper digital infrastructure, and aiming for a massive roll-out of digital skills and literacy programmes from an early age onwards.

Last but not least, as did several children and young people in the consultation, several respondents equally noted the importance of being able to disconnect – therefore, they suggested providing support for schools to organise obligatory *offline* picnics and gatherings with their pupils!

Conclusions

The #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation underlines once more **the importance of children's right to be heard** in any decision-making process that affects them, as enshrined in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Our findings provide strong support for the need to **more systematically embed the best interests of children and young people into the EU's digital ambitions for 2030** to make sure that the rights of children and young people which apply offline can also be fully exercised online.

One of the principles proposed in the European Commission's 2030 Digital Compass Communication ²⁰ is *Protecting and empowering children and young people in the online space*. In subsequent policy work ²¹, this has been specified as follows:

- The online environment should foster children's and young people's well-being and their participation as digital citizens.
- Children and young people should be equipped with digital literacy and the necessary skills and competences to navigate safely and responsibly online from an early age and throughout their education and training.
- Every child should be protected from harmful and illegal content, including from child sexual abuse and exploitation.

It is clear from the consultation sessions that children and young people have strong and specific opinions about the activities they like to do in the digital environment, what they find important, and what concerns they have. In addition, they have **a clear vision about which issues need to be tackled** as a priority and were able to form **original and specific guidance and recommendations for various actors** including, but not limited to, policy makers and digital operators, on how this should be done in practice.

As such, this report has the potential to **help articulate what the European way for the digital society could entail in more concrete terms**, building upon the needs, challenges and opportunities children, young people, teachers and educators see in the context of digitalisation.

The views and experiences of children and young people

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

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

²⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0118>

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_2288

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

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

Key recommendations for policy makers and digital operators

The solutions and recommendations provided by children and young people demonstrate a holistic view on the responsibility for safeguarding and empowering them in the digital environment. To make the internet a better place, **all relevant actors should take up their respective role and collaborate** where possible.

It is significant to note that, in terms of **the changes children and young people really want to see**, participants largely decided to focus on the key online risks they had previously identified as part of the consultation exercise.

- Participants found **inappropriate content** to be a priority for change because it is affecting society as a whole, desensitising citizens to hateful messages and behaviours.
- **Cyberbullying** was also seen as a priority for policy makers, because it has an impact on children’s and young people’s behaviour and self-esteem, ultimately leading to problems in all areas of life. Some participants felt that cyberbullying presents a massive challenge, particularly for younger children.
- Aside from these specific issues, some more overarching problems can be extracted from the discussions. According to participants, the root cause of many of the online risks and challenges lies in a **lack of awareness and media literacy** among internet users, the possibility to remain anonymous in the digital environment, and public attitudes online which should be changed towards decent communication and behaviour.

In response to this, participants insisted that **different actors have to take up their share of responsibility**, depending on the specific context and issue at stake:

- As a general remark, policymakers should aim towards **harmonisation at the EU level**, as this could result in a better protection of minors from online risks and harmful media within the entire EU. They could think about introducing uniform age limits and improving monitoring at EU level.
- The message most often heard in the consultation sessions was the need for **improved media literacy and online safety education** for children and young people in schools, and that policy makers should make this happen. The participants believed that without knowing how to correctly use online tools, they are more vulnerable to risks and threats. The metaphor was used of being handed a complex tool without an instruction manual. Some respondents emphasised that schools and parents have to take their role more seriously than they do today.
- Aside from more media literacy education, several groups stressed that **improved monitoring and enforcement of existing rules** in the digital environment is necessary, with stricter penalties for those who misbehave online (such as those who harass, bully, or spread harmful content). Children and young people feel that when they report certain content or behaviour to the social media platforms, no actions are effectively taken, which in turn discourages them to report or act against hate speech. They believe that if internet users and social networks do not face any consequences for bad online behaviour, not much will change.

- In addition, children and young people think that EU policy makers should exercise **pressure on industry to provide safe and child-appropriate services and platforms**. This entails finding ways to ensure that children's voices are heard and offering settings and content according to age and category. This could include banning sexual or violent content, or better regulating access to certain content such as gambling, advertisements and spam.
- Last but not least, participants feel that **technology can play an important role in making the internet a better place**. Here, it was argued that EU policy makers should collaborate with internet companies or create the necessary incentives to ensure that companies, such as social media platforms, continue developing tools which are child-friendly.

The perspective of European teachers and educators

As one might expect, the European teachers and educators involved in this consultation exercise largely echoed the education needs put forward by children and young people.

They call upon policy makers to **substantially invest in national and international programmes which support education and awareness-raising efforts**. For teachers, this is primarily about:

- Making sure that media literacy, online safety and digital citizenship are part of the formal curriculum from an early age onwards.
- Ensuring that these topics are properly addressed in teacher training and professional development also.
- More actively reaching out to parents and carers so as to develop a shared understanding of what is going on in children's and young people's online lives, in turn making it possible to foster an ongoing whole-school dialogue.
- Taking an evidence-based approach and better assessing the results of existing education efforts.

Secondly, much reference was made (here again) to **the need to have proper legal and regulatory frameworks and to make sure these rules are properly enforced** and do not only exist on paper. The accountability of industry is something which respondents raised often. They should be forced (or, more positively, encouraged) to develop technological solutions and come up with age-appropriate standards and measures to keep their platforms and services safe.

Of course, this particular group of European teachers and educators do not represent the views of teachers in general as these are teachers who signed up to a Better Internet for Kids MOOC (massive open online course) and therefore are already committed to making a difference in this sphere. In fact, many of them talked about difficulties in getting their own colleagues on board, with reasons cited including that **the curriculum is full, there is not sufficient awareness, many teachers lack the required knowledge, skills and confidence** and it is **difficult to keep up to date with the continuous flow of technological development**.

It is noteworthy to add that even this group of open-minded and enthusiastic European teachers and educators had – in comparison with the children and young people we consulted – **a rather narrow and protective view of children's rights in a digital world**. For example, while many of our younger respondents talked passionately about online entertainment and gaming as important opportunities for positive and creative participation, teachers primarily framed these activities in relation to concerns about time spent online or minors accessing inappropriate services and content. When asked about protective measures, teachers typically argued that access should be restricted based on age. By contrast, children and young people themselves would rather point to the need for policy makers and industry to prevent negative things from happening in the online spaces they already inhabit, while equally providing more age-appropriate alternatives for them to engage with.

In many ways, these examples illustrate – in very concrete and practical ways – how **the rights of children and young people to provision and participation are easily overlooked when minors are not sitting around the table** when child online protection is being discussed.

To conclude, respondents of all ages and backgrounds acknowledged that the digital world is complex. In their collective view, it is difficult to say where exactly the responsibility sits because more often than not it is shared. In line with this, we hope the results of this consultation will therefore be an encouragement and source of inspiration **for EU policy makers and other actors – including internet companies, parents, and educators – to continue to join forces** to make the internet a better place for children and young people!



The voice of... EU citizens

What can be done to ensure that the digital world is fit for the future? And how can we ensure that we promote, protect, respect and fulfil the rights of all children and young people when they go online?



At the heart of the #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation work is a desire to ensure that the digital world is fit for the future and can allow everyone to benefit from all the opportunities it can offer. To further complement the findings presented in this consultation report, the Better Internet for Kids team put in place a wider online campaign including an online survey in which we gather wider input from those stakeholders who care for, educate, or can otherwise influence positive online opportunities and experiences for Europe's children and young people.

Based on the questions which children and young people were consulted on, we ask respondents to consider the opportunities and benefits which children and young people can gain from being online, the challenges and risks which they might face, and who they think is (or should be) responsible for improving online experiences. We also ask for views and ideas on what policy makers need to do over the next decade to bring about change.

Alongside the responses already received from children, young people and educators, the feedback provided in this survey will contribute to the development of the set of digital principles for an interinstitutional declaration between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council to be published in late 2021, and to the new Better Internet for Kids Strategy to be adopted in 2022.

Please note, this work is ongoing at the time of publication of this report and hence its findings are not referenced here. More information is available at www.betterinternetforkids.eu/digitaldecade.

Annex 1: Protocols ²⁵

Protocol - Step 1




Activity 1: My week online. Write down 10 activities you have done online this week!

This can be things you've done on a computer, laptop, tablet or mobile phone. This can be at home, in school or anywhere else, alone or with friends or family.


For example, you might have played games, watched videos or listened to music, connected with others or checked what they are doing, searched for information, or found inspiration online.

You might have done many other things too!

All of this is fine, and there are no wrong or right answers. Just think of the activities which stand out. Tell us if you liked them (or not) by listing them under the columns in the next slide.




Better Internet for Kids



#DigitalDecade4YOUth

Didn't like	Liked	Liked a lot




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Draw a picture of the online activity you liked most (optional)

Please give your picture a title (a few words to describe it)



Better Internet for Kids



#DigitalDecade4YOUth


25 A full overview of all consultation materials across EU languages is available at www.betterinternetforkids.eu/digitaldecade, including the full protocol in English.



Protocol - Step 4

Activity 3: We'd like to know what you care about most when it comes to being online


Looking at the table on the next slide, are there any online activities which are missing? Which activities do you care most about? What makes you happy online? What would you miss if you could no longer do it?



- First, read the suggestions and add to the table (using the blank spaces) if you feel that anything is missing.
- Next, put a circle around the **top five online activities that you care about the most.**





 Better Internet for Kids

Search for information	Play games	Post photos or comments	Listen to music
Watch videos	Communicate and connect with family or friends	Create my own video or music and share it	Do schoolwork
Get inspiration for activities, outfits, places to go...	Talk to people from places or backgrounds different from my own	Look for resources or events about my local neighbourhood	Look for information about work or study opportunities
Discuss political or social problems with other people	Create a website, blog or social media account for a project, a hobby...	Update my social media account(s) or check what my friends are doing	Look for breaking news or catch up on current affairs
Connect with others who share the same interests as me	Use instant messaging services (e.g. WhatsApp)	Get involved in campaigns or raise awareness of issues that I feel strongly about	Support my learning
Anything else?			







 Better Internet for Kids



Activity 4: We'd also like to know which challenges or risks worry you the most about being online

Looking at the table on the next slide, is there anything that you feel is missing? What are the things which bother or upset you online? What makes children or young people like you most unhappy?

This can be about the **online content** which is out there, the **online contacts** you have, **how you and others behave** online, how people may **exploit you** or your personal data, or any other issue.

- First, read the suggestions and add to the table (using the blank spaces) if you feel that anything is missing.
- Next, put a circle around the **top five online activities that you care about the most.**



 Better Internet for Kids

The content which is out there	The contacts you may have	How you and others behave	How people may exploit you
Violent or hateful content	Bullying	Too much time spent online	Unwanted ads
Sexual content	Harassment or stalking	Promotion of self-harm	Personal data being collected without you being aware
Everyone looks perfect on social media (beautiful, happy, glamorous...)	Pressure to behave in a certain way	Pressure to share something intimate	Identity theft, scams or blackmail
Fake news and disinformation	Exclusion or fear of missing out	Gambling	Viruses and malware
Anything else?			





 Better Internet for Kids

Activity 5: We'd like to hear your ideas on how to make the digital world a better place

Think one more time about the things you do online, and the opportunities and risks this brings. If you could change one thing about the digital world to make it a better place, what would you change and why?

To give you an idea, this can be about things like:

- **Access** – making sure all children and young people can go online.
- **Digital skills, literacy and education** – making sure children and young people learn how to participate in the digital world, in school or at home, by talking with teachers, family or friends.
- **Raising awareness** – making sure children and young people are aware of online opportunities and risks, and how to respond to them.
- **Protection** – making sure children and young people don't need to worry about risk or harm with online platforms, services and content being safe and appropriate for their age.



#DigitalDecade4YOUth



Better Internet for Kids

These are some of the examples policy makers have put forward already. But we really want to hear from you what you think needs to change and why! We understand this is not an easy question, so try to answer with three specific statements.

Thinking about the many things which children and young people do online, **YOU** think the most important problem or area for improvement is:

YOU think it's important because:

YOU think EU policy makers can help to make the digital world a better place for children and young people by:



#DigitalDecade4YOUth



Better Internet for Kids





Safer Internet Day 2022

Tuesday
8 February

Together for a better internet

www.saferinternetday.org

