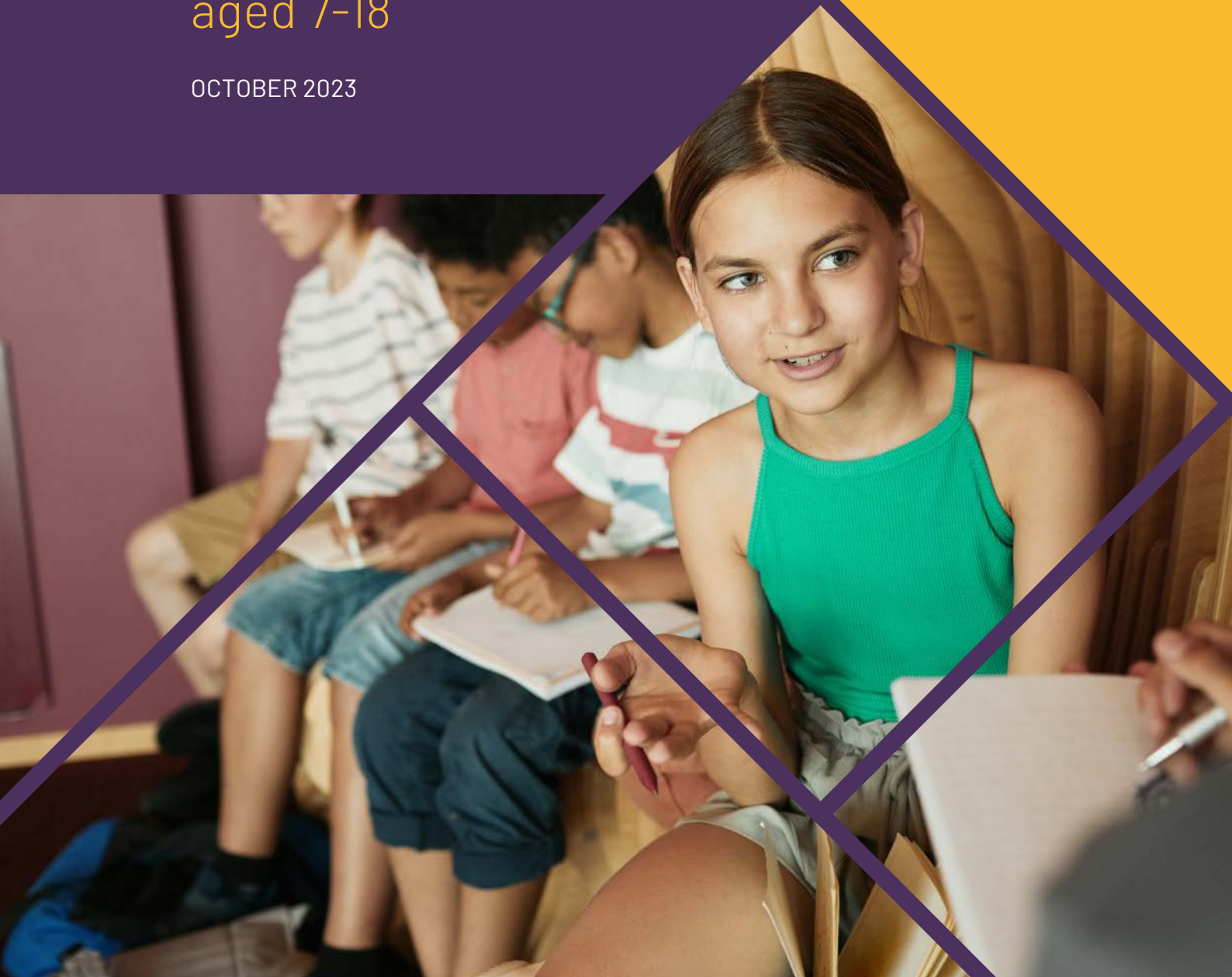




#MyVoiceMySafety: exploring children's perceptions of safety and risks online

A global poll
of children
aged 7-18

OCTOBER 2023



Introduction

The internet has become an integral part of the lives of children and young people. From communicating with friends, family and teachers, to education and entertainment, online services have become a daily feature in their lives. In 2022, the Boston Consulting Group found that [as many as 93% of 8-17 year olds surveyed across the world are on the internet](#), with 81% of these children using the internet daily and almost 45% online for more than 3 hours a day. Despite all its advantages and opportunities, the internet also poses a number of risks to children, such as cyberbullying, harmful content and child sexual exploitation and abuse online, taking forms such as grooming, the production and sharing of child sexual abuse material and live streaming abuse.

While much research is being conducted in the online safety space, all too often children and young people's perspectives and experiences are not sought or prioritised. Children have a right to be heard, and as Internet users, their knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of online spaces are important to understand.

WeProtect Global Alliance (the Alliance) and the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (OSRSG VAC) conducted a poll open

to children from around the world. While many studies explore the prevalence of harm, such as where and how children experience harm online, less is explored of children's perceptions and feelings. The poll aimed to better understand children's perceptions of online safety and explore whether these match their experiences. Thematic areas cover perceptions of online dangers, the safety of various digital platforms, potential sources of online harm or abuse, comfort levels when disclosing personal information online, perceived risks associated with online interactions, and proposed solutions to improve online safety.

The poll results highlight there are real gaps in how safe children feel online. By looking at how the use of technology manifests in children's lives and what online safety means to them, we can identify steps to ensure they can enjoy all the benefits of the digital world free from the threat and long-term harm of violence and abuse. This report includes a number of recommendations in response to their voices and concerns.

Key findings include:

- An overwhelming majority of respondents believe they are likely or very likely to encounter harmful or unsafe situations online, especially 14-18 year olds.
- While respondents perceive various online platforms differently in terms of safety, private messaging apps are generally considered the safest, followed by gaming platforms.
- Respondents believe that they are most likely to experience harm or abuse online from adults and children they don't know, and the home is significantly perceived as the most likely location for these incidents to occur.
- Respondents across age groups and genders largely agree on the biggest online risks: being asked to do something sexual they are uncomfortable with, interacting with someone who is pretending to be someone they are not and having personal information stolen or shared without their permission.
- Sharing personal images, videos, or information with people children only met online is met with significant discomfort, especially among those in the 7-10 and 11-13 age groups.

Methodology

The survey was conducted as a global online poll open to self-selecting participants.

The development of the poll utilised a participatory approach with young people in the design of the questions and dissemination strategy. Children and young people from the Microsoft Digital for Good Youth Council reviewed the questions, tested them with their peers and provided in-depth feedback and suggestions on how to make the questions more child-friendly, and designed to ensure children and young people could easily make their priorities heard.



Following child and youth consultation on suggested questions and interventions, an ethical and safeguarding review was undertaken in line with the guidance contained in Ethical Research Involving Children (2013 – UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti) and the safeguarding policy of the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (OSRSG VAC).

The poll had nine questions about respondents' perceptions of online safety and their priorities for action, along with some additional questions gathering demographic information.

The respondents were categorised based on age (grouped 7-10, 11-13, 14-18), and gender (boys, girls, and those who did not specify). Results based on geographical location were intentionally omitted due to disparate response rates, however respondents were spread across Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and South America.

Children and young people aged 7-18 (inclusive of 18 year olds) accounted for 650 out of the total 878 respondents. Additional responses from adults were omitted from the analysis.

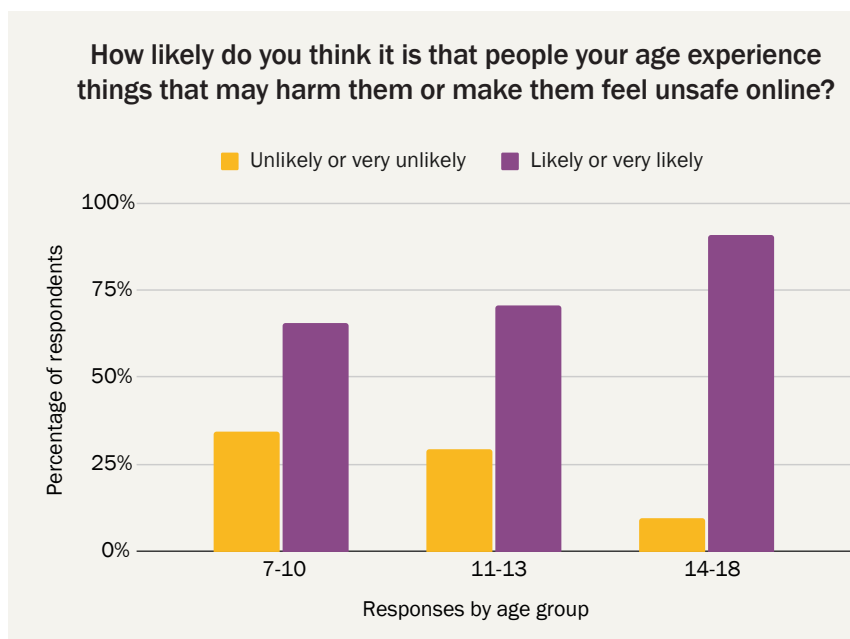
The survey was chiefly administered through WeProtect Global Alliance's members, youth groups, and schools, in addition to being promoted online by organisations operating in this space.

Key findings

8 in 10 children think it is 'likely' or 'very likely' for children to experience things that may harm them or make them feel unsafe online

Survey results demonstrate a widespread perception of the internet as an unsafe place. The overwhelming majority of children (83%) think it is 'likely' or 'very likely' for them to experience things that may harm them or make them feel unsafe online and this perception of online danger tends to increase with age.

While a majority of both boys (57%), girls (45%) and those of unspecified gender (33%) consider online harm likely, a higher percentage of girls (37%) and those of unspecified gender (50%) believe it to be very likely, compared to boys (29%). This highlights the need to create and implement tailored interventions that suit the different needs of children with different gender identities.



Unspecified Gender: A response option in the survey, which allows participants who do not identify strictly as a boy or girl, or who prefer not to disclose their gender identity, to participate without being required to select a binary gender option.

Children feel safest using private messaging apps and gaming platforms, while they feel less safe using social media and chat rooms

Private messaging apps are ranked as the platforms that children felt safest across age groups and genders, with 52% of the total children and young people polled identifying private messaging apps the safest, followed by 24% for gaming platforms. Conversely, when asked where they feel least safe, over a third (38%) of the total poll respondents highlighted social media platforms, followed by a quarter (26%) identifying chatrooms as the online spaces which posed the greatest risk.

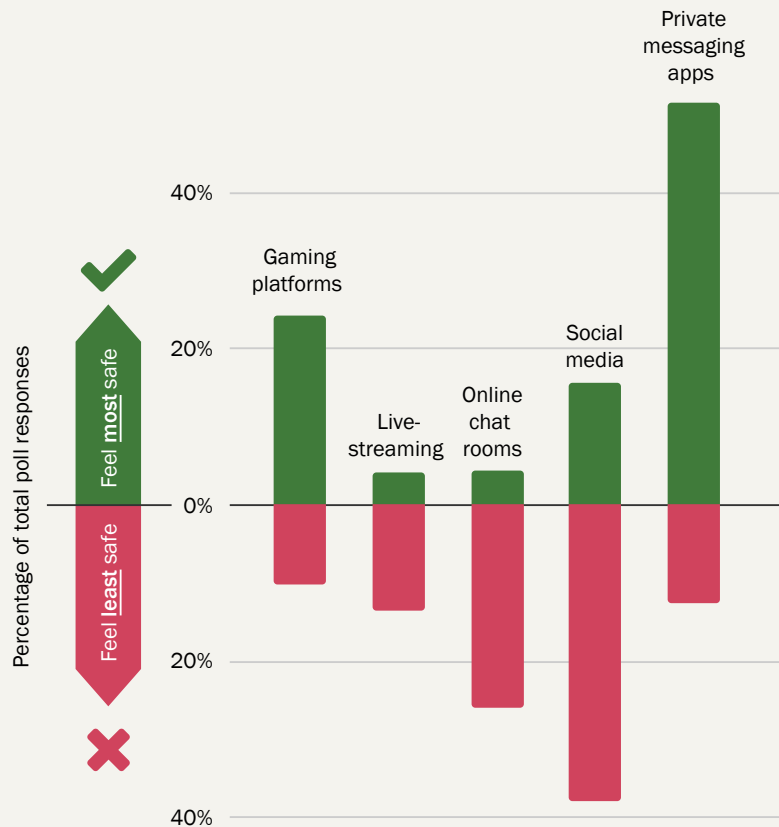
No matter how they use the internet, children deserve to feel safe online. However, it is important to identify where children are feeling unsafe to identify the risks, better understand their needs and concerns and consequently develop an improved and effective international response. Different types of digital services can have varying implications for children's online safety – from the opportunity to connect with friends, play and explore to exposure to harmful content, predators and extreme sexual content.

Perceptions of platform safety change when children enter adolescence

There is a difference in perceptions between age groups. While 11-13 year olds (49%) and 14-18 year olds (55%) feel most safe on private messaging apps, 7-10 years olds identify gaming platforms as where they feel safest (43%). Gaming platforms are the second choice among both 11-13 year olds (25%) and 14-18 year olds (22%), while private messaging apps (29%) and social media platforms (23%) rank as the second and third safest online environments in the eyes of 7-10-year-olds.

Poll responses indicate similarities in perceptions across age groups regarding their primary concerns, with social media and online chatrooms being identified as the first (38%) and second (26%) least safe online spaces across all age groups. However, the perception of risk surrounding online chatrooms increases with age with 17% of 7-10-year-olds, 24% of year olds and 28% 14-18 year olds claiming them as the place where they feel least safe.

Out of the following platforms, where do you feel most and least safe?



Almost double the number of girls feel safest using private messaging apps compared to boys

While children of all genders feel private messaging apps are the safest, this is particularly true for girls where 62% expressed feeling safest on private messaging apps, compared to 42% of those of unspecified gender and 37% of boys. Gaming platforms are perceived as the second most safe place among from the three respondent categories with boys (35%) and those of unspecified gender (33%) feeling significantly safer on such services than girls (17%).

These concerns are also reflected in the gender breakdown with both boys and girls emphasising that they feel least safe on social media platforms (40% and 37%) and online chatrooms (26% and 25%). For those of unspecified gender, poll responses for the primary and secondary concerns were inverse with 38% indicating online chatrooms as least safe and 33% stressing that social media environments were the most unsafe.

The overwhelming majority of children think they are more likely to be at home when experiencing harm or abuse online

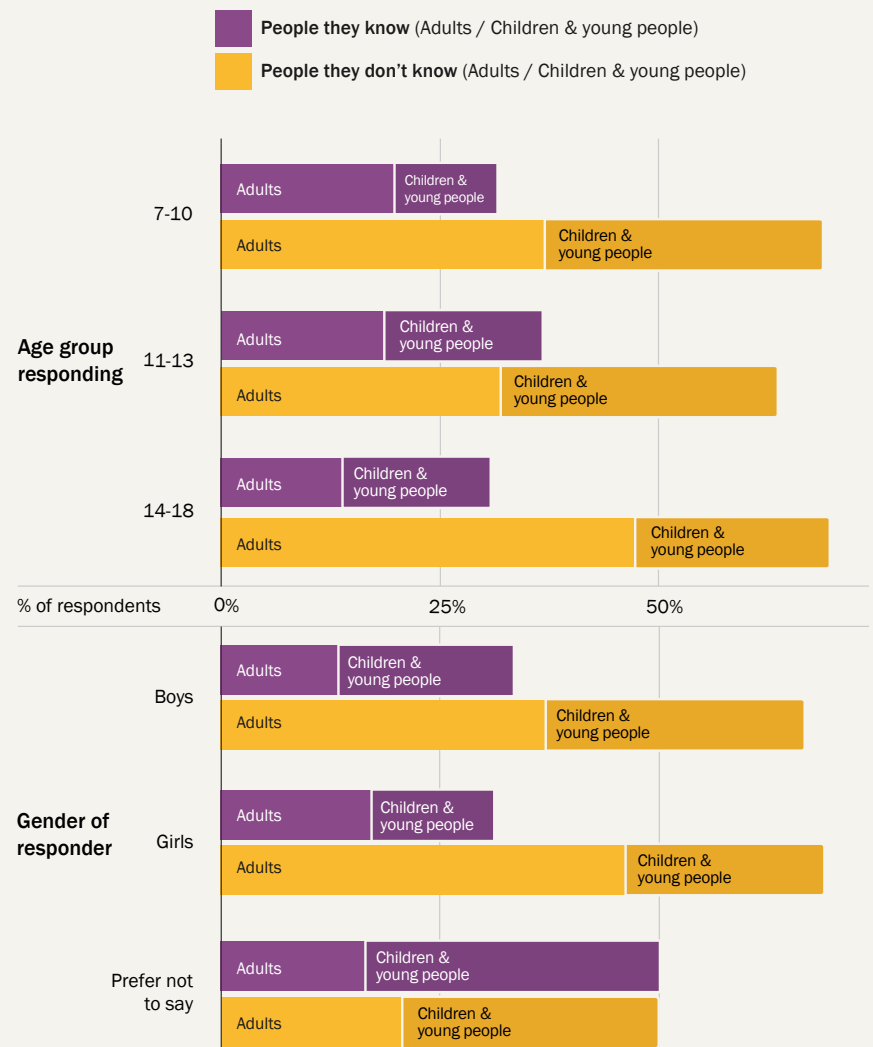
When asked where in the physical world children are most likely to be when they experience harm or abuse on their internet-connected devices, respondents across all age groups and genders perceived home as the most likely location for online harm or abuse to take place. This is most strongly perceived by teenagers aged 14 to 18, with 64% of respondents in this age group sharing this belief (compared to 53% and 54% of the younger age groups) and 64% of girls (compared to 55% and 54% for the other gender groups).

Public places are considered the second most likely location, though this perception appears to decrease as children get older. 7-10 year olds (34%) and boys (23%) are most likely to feel that harm takes place in a public place, whereas 14-18 year olds (9%) and those of unspecified gender (21%) are more likely to perceive that harm takes place at a family or friend's house. These findings are important to consider when designing support and safeguarding interventions for children, e.g., by considering home-based protective factors that can mitigate risks to online sexual harm.

Almost 7 in 10 children think that people they don't know are most likely to harm them online

Across all age groups, individuals they don't know, whether adults or other children, are perceived as the most likely to perpetrate online harm. Unknown adults in particular are felt to be the main threat with over 2 in 5 respondents (42%) believing that they are most likely to cause them harm while online. This is also true for 37% of children aged 7-10, 32% of those aged 11-13, and 47% of teenagers aged 14-18. Girls are significantly more worried about adults they don't know (47%) compared to boys (37%) and those of unspecified gender (21%), whereas boys and respondents with unidentified gender (both 29%) showed greater concern about interacting with children and young people they don't know online.

Who do you think is most likely to harm or abuse people your age online?



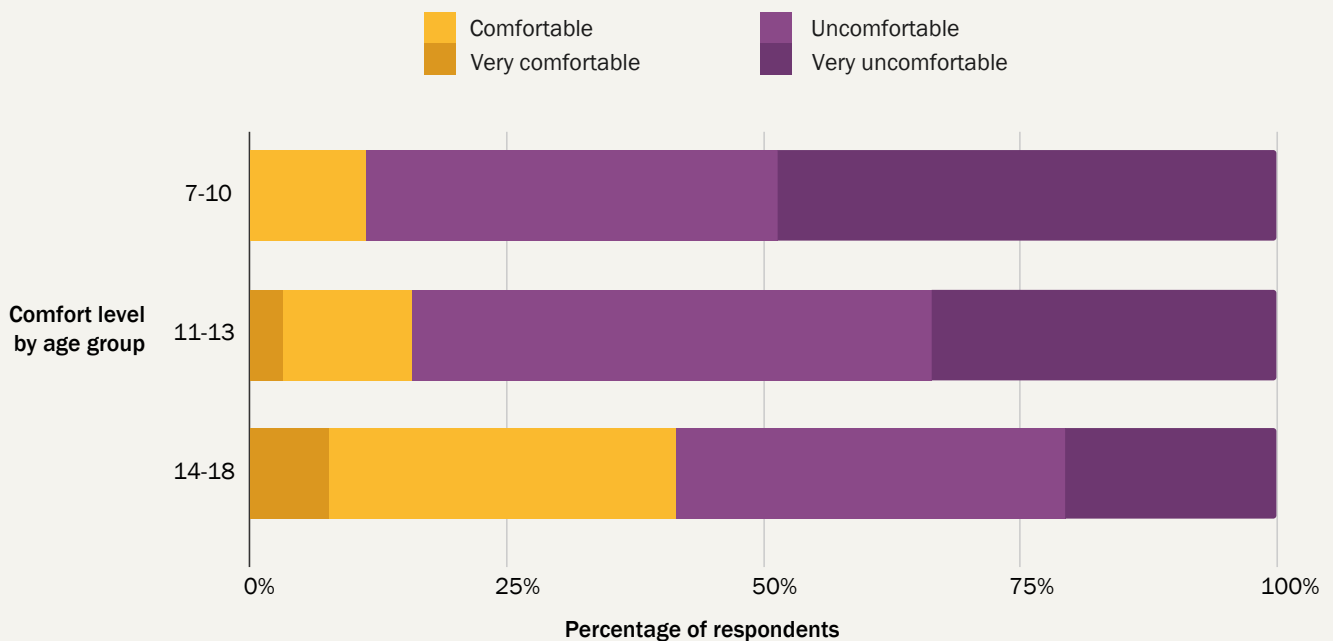
As children grow older, they feel more at ease sharing information online

The children surveyed found sharing images, videos or personal information with people they have only met online quite an uncomfortable concept with almost 7 in 10 of the total poll respondents (69%) indicating that their age group feel 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' sending images, videos or information about themselves to people they have only met online.

This is particularly noticeable among younger children, over 89% of children aged 7-10 and nearly 84% of those aged 11-13 reported feeling uncomfortable or very uncomfortable sharing personal information online.

A shift can be observed in the 14 to 18 age group, where a third (34%) of respondents in fact feel comfortable or very comfortable sharing personal media online, compared to just 11% of the 7-10s and 13% of the 11-13s. As age increases, so does in many cases children's autonomy to explore the internet. These findings indicate the importance of increasing the amount of support and tools to children as they grow up, fostering an environment that enables autonomy while also ensuring that they have a strong understanding of risks and effective tools to tackle harm.

How comfortable do you think people your age feel sending images, videos or information about themselves to people they have only met online?



Children feel that the biggest online risk is being asked to do something sexual they are uncomfortable with; girls feel this more acutely than boys

In the poll, participants were asked to select what they thought posed the biggest risk to children and young people when meeting new people online from: interacting with someone who is pretending to be someone they are not; having private information stolen or shared without their permission; experience bullying, harassment or discrimination; being asked to do something sexual they are uncomfortable with, or having sexual images or videos of themselves being shared without their permission, and; seeing or hearing content that is violent. When meeting new people online, children and young people across different age groups and genders perceive sexual exploitation and abuse as the most significant risk by a significant margin (45% of the total responses). Interacting with someone who is pretending to be someone they are not (18%) and having private information stolen or shared without their permission (15%) are highlighted as the second and third most significant concerns.

This concern surrounding being asked to do something sexual that they are uncomfortable with, or having sexual images or videos of themselves being shared without their permission is particularly high among 11-13 year olds (47%) and 14-18 year olds, as well as girls (52%) and those of unspecified gender (46%). Despite this also being the top concern for boys, the worry is to a lesser extent (35%) and their concerns are more disparate. Boys are the most concerned of about interacting with someone who is pretending to be someone they are not (20%), having private information stolen or shared without their permission (19%) and experiencing bullying, harassment, or discrimination (19%).

The poll results also suggest that children's concerns surrounding having private information stolen or shared without their permission increase with age (from 9% among the 7-10 age group to 17% for the 14-18 age group), while concerns about interacting with someone who is pretending to be someone they are not simultaneously decrease with age (from 31% among 7-10 age group to 16% among the 14-18 age group).

“ Personally, I want to see a decrease in the amount of predatory messages being sent specifically by people over 18 to those who are still children. I think it's becoming too frequent, and too normalised. I for one, don't use any social media with my name or pictures on it, and try to stay as inactive as possible, as messages from strangers (especially those asking for sexual pictures etc.) scare me a lot, and situations like those increased my anxiety. - Girl, 14 ”

When meeting new people online, which of the following do you think is the biggest risk to children and young people?



Bullying, discrimination, or discrimination reported as the biggest risk in gaming environments across age groups and regardless of gender

In gaming environments more specifically, children and young people perceive experiencing bullying, harassment, or discrimination as the biggest risk (30%) when playing online games, with secondary concerns varying by age group. Other significant concerns across the poll when it comes to online gaming are interacting with someone who is pretending to be someone they are not (21%) and having private information stolen or shared without their permission (19%).

Bullying and harassment is the most significant concern for children aged 7- 10 (46%) but this decreases as children age with only 28% teenagers aged 14 - 18 highlighting this risk. Across the gender groups, experiencing bullying, harassment, or discrimination is the main worry while gaming, with those of unidentified gender displaying the most concern (46%). Girls display more concern than the others regarding having private information stolen or shared without their permission (20%) and interacting with someone

who is pretending to be someone they are not (22%), while boys show the most concern about violent content (15%).

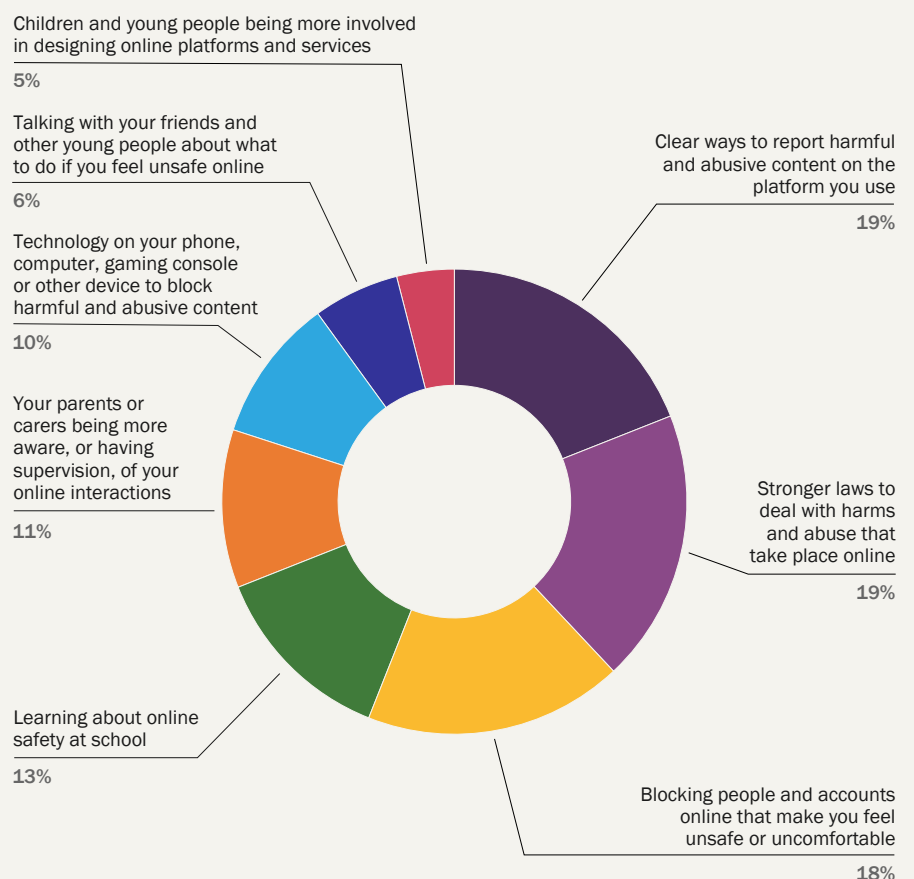
“ There are... a lot of girls and women that when playing online video games with strangers experience sexist remarks or are hit on. Similarly, there is a lot of racism and homophobia. Girl, 16 ”

Children want to see clear ways to report harmful content, tools to block potentially harmful accounts/content and stronger laws to help them feel safer online

Responses to online harm are being developed at every level of society. When asked what would be most helpful to make children and young people feel safer when interacting online, 1 in 5 of all respondents stressed the importance of having clear ways to report harmful content on platforms, 19% called for stronger laws and 18% underlined the importance and role of tools to block people and accounts that make them feel unsafe. These three responses were the clear leading priorities across the poll.

Learning about online safety at school was identified across the poll (13%) as helping to make children and young people feel safer with little variation in the age and gender data. Although parents and caregivers having more awareness and supervision is popular safety reassurance among 7-10 year olds (18%), the perception of the role of parents decreases as children get older with 14% of 11-13 year olds and 9% of 14-18 year olds indicating that such measures would make them feel safer online. Involving children in the design process (5%) and talking to friends and peers (6%) were not considered to be helpful in making children and young people feel safer online, although this option was ranked higher (10%) for those of unspecified gender.

Which of the following do you think would be most helpful to make you feel safer when interacting online?



Type of preventative measures that would make children feel safer online (participants chose up to 3 each)

Clear reporting mechanisms for harmful and abusive content are valued as one of the most helpful safety measures when interacting online. Although clear reporting tools are largely popular among all age groups, poll data indicates that this is considered most helpful in helping 7-10 year olds feel safe online (22%), but the perceived helpfulness of reporting tools marginally decreases with age to 20% among 11-13 year olds and 18% among 14-18 year olds. Clear ways to report harmful content on platforms is considered the most helpful response mechanism for boys (19%), while girls (18%) and those of unspecified gender (15%) also demonstrate strong support. This reiterates the need for robust and user-friendly reporting systems on online platforms.

Almost 1 in 5 of the poll participants (19%) would like to see stronger laws to regulate the online space and make them feel safer online. Together with clearer reporting tools it was the most popular response. Stronger laws are increasingly supported by age group. Stronger laws were also the top priority among those of unidentified gender (19%) and girls (18%) to make them feel safer online. Those who provided additional thoughts, many respondents expressed strong support for stricter regulations on online platforms as a means to protect younger users. They underscored the necessity for more stringent age verification protocols and harsher penalties for posting harmful content. They also accentuated the importance of improved mechanisms to report offensive content and block or ban accounts responsible for such infractions.

The third most popular way in which children and young people across the poll feel safer online is tools to block people and accounts online that make them feel unsafe or uncomfortable. This is the most popular response among 7-10 year olds (24%) and remains a high priority for 11-13 year olds (20%) and 14-18 year olds (17%), demonstrating decreasing support with increased age. Almost 1 in 5 girls and boys (18%) identify this as something that makes them feel safer online, while only 14% of those of unspecified gender feel this way.

“

When I report abuse... we are ignored and told to just block the person and the situation - Girl, 14

Easier reporting systems - Respondent of unspecified gender, 13

A group or organisation should be established to report harmful and abusive content on the internet - Girl, 12

Establish [a] strong reporting centre - Girl, 18

”

“

Children and young people being more involved in designing laws - Boy, 15

We need to make stronger laws and actually follow them, unlike right now - Girl, 17

Stricter laws and stronger ways to identify dangerous people online and keep them off the internet - Boy, 17

”

“

We need to be blocking and restricting people harassing [children] or bullying them and ... report them - Girl, 12

Be able to block accounts and people that are inappropriate and not let them view kids' profiles. - Girl, 14

I think people posting harmful stuff should be immediately blocked and their account deleted. - Girl, 15

Young people should feel like they have control over their social media platforms. Therefore, having more regulations or functions to block users or report harmful profiles would be best. - Girl, 17

”

Recommendations

In order to better respond to children and young people's needs and improve the international response, we need to understand how the use of technology manifests in their lives and what safety means to them.

The results of this poll shows that far too many children feel unsafe online, signaling a clear need for governments, technology companies and wider society to adapt and expand their strategies to tackle online harms.

This poll has identified several areas for improvement based on the feedback, responses and voices of the children and young people who participated:

■ Technology companies should prioritise sexual exploitation and abuse when tackling online harms

Children and young people across different age groups, genders, and geographical regions perceive sexual exploitation as the most significant risk when meeting new people online.

Reporting and blocking mechanisms are important tools for children; they should be designed with child safety in mind. When it comes to what helps to make children safer online, children perceive tools that they can use themselves as most helpful.

Reporting mechanisms are seen as important across the globe. It is therefore essential that companies use Safety by Design principles when building their tools to ensure reporting tools are accessible, easy to understand and designed for all children to use.

This should include clear and simple language, age-appropriate images and videos as guidance and larger text, buttons and menus that are easier – particularly for younger children – to navigate.

Content flagging systems should keep children informed of the action taken and be responsive, fast and effective so that children feel safe and heard. In addition to this, being able to block accounts is seen as an important safety measure for roughly a quarter of all respondents across the age groups.

Other [research](#) shows that children tend to end up dealing with online harms by themselves rather than reaching out to trusted adults or peers for help. Technology companies therefore need to consider what extra tools they can embed in their services to support children, while also taking on a more proactive responsibility to prevent harm from happening in the first place.

■ A shift in perception of possible perpetrators is required to increase awareness and understanding that offenders more often than not are known to children

The survey demonstrates that children perceive unknown adults as the people who pose the greatest risk to their online safety, with online environments where interactions with strangers are more common, such as chatrooms and livestreaming, also being considered least safe.

Despite this perception, research shows most child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the victims know – we therefore need to do more globally to address this common and entrenched myth.

In [NCMEC's 2022 Impact Report](#), data that investigates the relationship of offender to child in actively traded images and videos of child sexual abuse material found that 24% of those identified were a neighbour or family friend, 21% were a parent or guardian, 12% were another relative, 7% were a babysitter, mentor, coach or teacher and under 5% of perpetrators identified were unknown to the child.

Action is needed from governments, tech companies and civil society organisations to raise public awareness of this particularly challenging topic.

■ More robust and effective legislation is urgently needed to keep children safe online and children need to be involved in the process

The older children are, the more supportive they are of stronger laws to help make them feel safer online.

Governments should communicate how laws will impact and improve children's online experiences and involve children in the legislative process to gather their valuable insights into the challenges and risks they face, enabling an improved response.

New legislative proposals should be accompanied by child-friendly documents that explain the ambition and logic of the new rules in clear language that avoids overly legalistic terms. Visuals and videos can be included to enhance engagement, accessibility and interactivity.

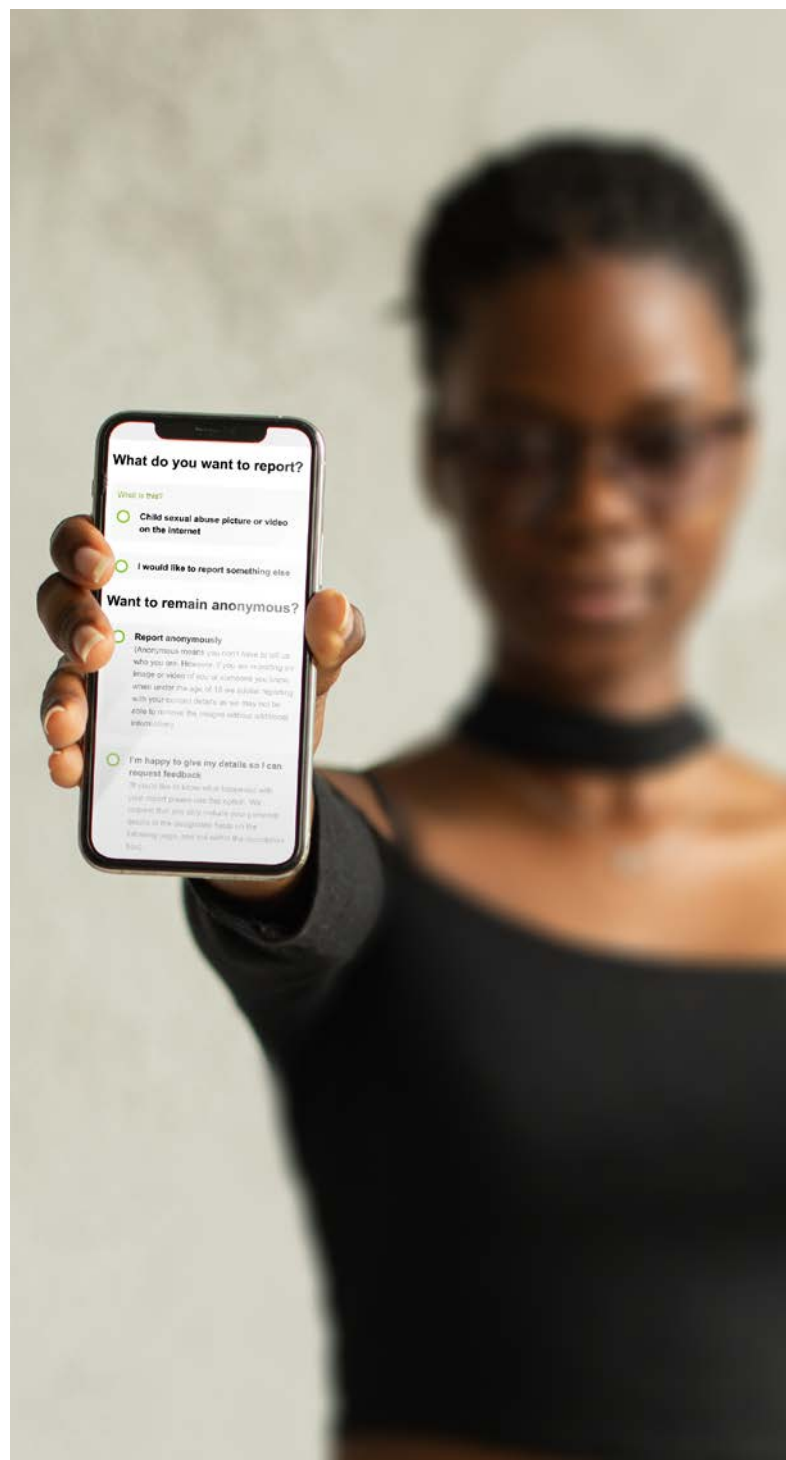
■ Comprehensive online safety education – at school and at home – is essential, particularly among younger children

In the safety measures section of the report, the 7-10 age group identified learning about online safety at school and parents and carers having more awareness as crucial factors in making them feel safer online.

It needs to be ensured that age-appropriate and targeted educational interventions are delivered to each age group, both at school and at home.

Much has been done to improve this in recent years and yet there is a continued need for improved education of digital safety and digital citizenship around the world with age-appropriate education resources and tools provided by schools.

Parents and carers also have a responsibility – and need to be supported with the right tools and skills – to talk to children about online safety and risks as soon as their children begin exploring the internet.





WeProtect Global Alliance brings together experts from government, the private sector and civil society. Together, they break down complex problems and develop policies and solutions to protect children from sexual abuse online.

www.weprotect.org

The UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children is an independent local advocate of the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children mobilising action and political support.

violenceagainstchildren.un.org

WeProtect Global Alliance and the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children would like to thank all the children and young people who took the time to share their views and perspectives in this consultation, and the organisations and Alliance members who promoted the poll to children around the world.

Photo credits: Norma Mortenson, Ron Lach, Monstera Production / Pexels.com