

Our Digital World, Our Say.

Children's Perspectives on their Rights in the Digital Environment

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER
Digital Futures For Children
LSE THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
5RIGHTS FOUNDATION

Foreword

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees every child the right to be heard in matters that affect them, and to have their views given due weight. Nowhere is that right more tested today than in the digital environment, where the rules have been written by adults, and where children are too often treated more as a user base than as rights holders. This report takes a different starting point. It asks children, across 32 countries and widely differing circumstances, how their rights are faring online, and it lets their answers stand for themselves. What emerges is a picture that is different in important ways from the one adults have drawn: in what children value, in what worries them, and in what they are asking of us. These nuances matter, and they are at the heart of children's right to be heard — which exists not to confirm what adults already think, but to change it.

Governments, companies, educators and parents will each find in these pages something they did not expect. The question this report demands is whether we will fulfil our responsibility to children and act on what they are telling us.

– Volker Türk, High Commissioner for Human Rights



Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC)

Before the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General comment No. 25 five years ago, it listened to children. Five years on, this consultation asks children what has changed. Much remains strikingly familiar – children still describe access as vital, they have still not been told where their data goes despite years of data protection regulation, and they continue to ask adults for trust rather than surveillance.

Yet much has also changed. Artificial intelligence (AI), a speculative prospect in 2019, is now part of children's everyday lives. They are increasingly critical of attention-grabbing features such as infinite scroll and personalised feeds, and demand that companies be held accountable and provide them with remedy when things go wrong. Although they are more cautious of Big Tech, they still want to exercise their civic rights and freedoms in digital spaces. Consequently, children call for technology provision and digital policy that respects *all* of their rights, according to their growing autonomy and best interests. General comment No. 25 set the road map to realise children's rights in a digital world. Now, children have told us, both eloquently and forcefully, how much work remains to be done.

– Professor Sonia Livingstone, Director of the Digital Futures for Children centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science

5Rights Foundation

In 2019, we noted how remarkably consistent children's digital experiences, needs and asks were across otherwise highly disparate cultures and societies. As technological change continues to gain speed, children's online worlds continue to merge, with smart devices and AI increasingly mediating and shaping their learning, creativity, play, civic engagement, relationships and emotions. From Brazil through Uganda to Romania and South Korea, they describe an engagement which is "essential", but too often "exhausting", characterised by exploitation, manipulation and a loss of agency. Their digital experiences and needs are misunderstood by adults and ineffectively managed by policymakers. The scale of the challenges faced by billions of children seems immense, but the consistency of their concerns, the services they use, and their highly concrete recommendations provide a coherent and workable plan of action. If we are to deliver for children today and for generations to come, it is high time we listen, and act accordingly.

– Leanda Barrington-Leach, Executive Director at 5Rights Foundation

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Most of all, we would particularly like to thank the many children who contributed their ideas, experiences and insights to this consultation. We hope this report will help amplify their voices and serve to advance their rights in a digital world.

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Executive Summary

Five years after the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General comment No. 25, affirming that children's rights apply fully in the digital environment, *Our Digital World, Our Say* has returned to children to ask: how are your rights faring in the digital world?

Through workshops conducted by 23 research partners organisations between November 2025 and January 2026, 545 children and young people aged 8–18 across 32 countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe shared their experiences of living in an increasingly digital world. A complementary survey by Save the Children reached a further 429 young people, providing additional evidence on children's interactions with artificial intelligence (AI). The consultation was led by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and 5Rights Foundation, with civil society and academic research partners.

What children told us is striking in its consistency, its nuance, and its urgency.

Children's digital lives are varied and complex.

Children use digital technologies for communication, learning, creativity, entertainment, emotional support and civic engagement. The smartphone has become an essential infrastructure for social participation. AI has entered children's lives in ways not anticipated when *General comment No. 25* was adopted – children use AI chatbots not only for homework and creative projects but increasingly for emotional support, health advice and navigating relationships. Yet persistent digital divides along lines of gender, income, geography, language and disability mean that access to digital tools and services remains deeply unequal, and that children already facing disadvantage or discrimination are often less protected from risk.

Significant gaps exist between children's rights and their digital realities, with the risks and harms experienced by children shaped by the design of digital products and services.

Children identified safety measures that are ineffective or counterproductive – easily bypassed, hidden in settings rather than enabled by default, or restricting access without providing genuine protection. Privacy is valued but poorly explained to children and it is inadequately protected – children navigate consent mechanisms they cannot meaningfully understand, while their data is collected and used in ways they neither comprehend nor control. Children described algorithmic systems designed to maximise engagement as undermining their agency and wellbeing, pulling at their attention and

limiting meaningful choice. The children's experiences surface acute safety concerns around their rapid adoption and use of AI tools and chatbots not designed with their rights in mind. The consultation found that children encounter harmful and unsafe content through AI chatbots – including advice related to self-harm, violence and risky health behaviours – and that existing safety settings are ineffective and easily circumvented. Children's accounts suggest that many of the harms they experience are consequences of design choices that prioritise engagement and data extraction over children's best interests.

Adults misunderstand children's digital experiences.

In every region, children described a fundamental disconnect between how adults perceive children's online lives and their own lived experience. They describe how adults tend to see digital engagement as wasted time, assume children are passive and naive, and equate restriction with protection. Children want dialogue rather than dictated rules, and guidance that builds their capacities rather than surveillance that substitutes adult judgement for their own.

Online safety systems are failing children.

Children's views also challenge current assumptions underpinning online safety frameworks, which often presume that children will report harm if given the tools to do so. Fear of blame, punishment or having their access restricted were the most frequently cited barriers to reporting across every region. Children also described reporting systems, both on digital services and in their offline lives, that were complex or inaccessible, or where their reports were simply ignored, leading many to conclude that reporting was futile. The consequence is a hidden landscape of harm: children managing problems alone, adults unaware of the scale of what children are experiencing, and safety systems – including helplines and reporting mechanisms – failing to reach the children who need them most. The evidence suggests that these barriers are not just technical, but also relational and systemic, as children are unlikely to use existing reporting mechanisms if they believe they will be ineffective, or that the consequence could be punishment or restrictions rather than support.

Children's experiences and recommendations point to clear priorities for the adults shaping their digital world.

For policymakers:

- ☐ Hold companies accountable for the actual and potential impacts of their digital products and services on children's rights.
- ☐ Ensure that products and services likely to be accessed by children are age-appropriate, safe and respectful of children's rights by design and by default.
- ☐ Ensure all children can access and benefit equitably from safe and rights-respecting digital environments.
- ☐ Ensure that digital and AI systems and products protect children's rights, safety and wellbeing and support their agency.
- ☐ Ensure children's views and perspectives meaningfully inform regulatory and policy debates and processes.

For technology companies:

- ☐ Make digital products and services safe by design and by default.
- ☐ Provide accessible and effective reporting, support and remedy mechanisms.
- ☐ Stop profiling children for advertising or other commercial purposes.
- ☐ End manipulative design practices.
- ☐ Consult children meaningfully on the design, development and governance of digital products and services.
- ☐ Set high privacy protections by default and explain privacy settings in clear, age-appropriate language.

For parents, caregivers and educators:

- ☐ Listen to children without judgement.
- ☐ Respond supportively when problems arise.
- ☐ Provide guidance and support rather than surveillance.
- ☐ Build trusting relationships so children feel able to seek help and support when they need it.

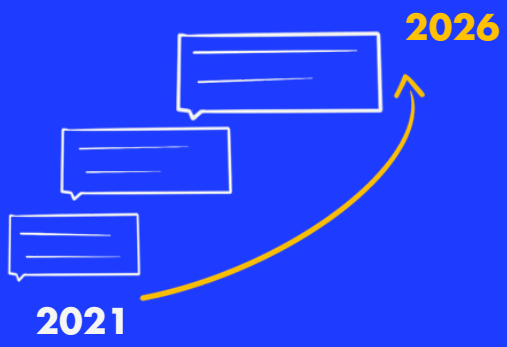
The policy debates shaping children's digital futures are happening without them.

Children in this consultation showed how much policymakers stand to learn from listening to their insights. They articulated tensions between protection and participation, privacy and safety, adult guidance and child autonomy, and age-based restrictions and individual capacity. These tensions do not lend themselves to a simple resolution, but children's lived experiences can help society navigate them. Yet in every region, children described how their perspectives were not sought, valued or understood. Most had never heard that they have rights in the digital world before participating. Once introduced to these rights through the child-friendly version of General comment No. 25, they engaged with remarkable sophistication and clarity.

This report carries direct implications for the implementation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child's General comment No. 25, and for the broader regulatory and design landscape shaping children's digital world. The children who contributed their voices have done their part. They shared their experiences, analysed complex tensions and articulated powerful recommendations with clarity and conviction. The responsibility now lies with adults – in governments and technology companies – to demonstrate the courage, empathy and commitment to listen and to act.

Chapter 1

Introduction



1.1 Five Years on from General comment No. 25

In 2021, the Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment,[1] affirming that the full range of children's civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights apply in digital contexts as they do offline. The General comment was itself shaped by children's participation: 709 children aged 9–22 across 27 countries on six continents contributed to the drafting process through workshops conducted in 2019, in a process documented in the report *Our Rights in the Digital World*.[2] That consultation identified access, privacy, safety, freedom of expression and the perception gap with adults, as children's central concerns.

Five years on, those concerns remain largely unchanged; indeed, the findings of the present consultation echo them with striking consistency. What has changed fundamentally is the prominence of the global digital business model, and the emergence of AI as a pervasive feature of children's digital lives.[3] Together, this continuity and change carry an important message: the structural problems children identified in 2019 remain unresolved, while a powerful new set of technologies and commercial practices has been added to the landscape without adequate rights-based governance and safeguards.[4]

In that time, the digital landscape has been transformed. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools have entered mainstream use, including among children.[5] Digital products and services have proliferated and evolved. Regulatory debates on age assurance, content moderation and platform accountability have intensified and are increasingly translated into legislation around the world. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Global Digital Compact* in September 2024,[6] committing States to "strengthen legal and policy frameworks to protect the rights of the child in the digital space, in line with international human rights law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child".[7] In the Compact, States also commit to "prioritize the development and implementation of national online child safety policies and standards"[8] and call on social media platforms to "establish safe, secure and accessible reporting mechanisms…adapted to children".[9]

These developments provide an important governance context in which to understand the consultation's findings.

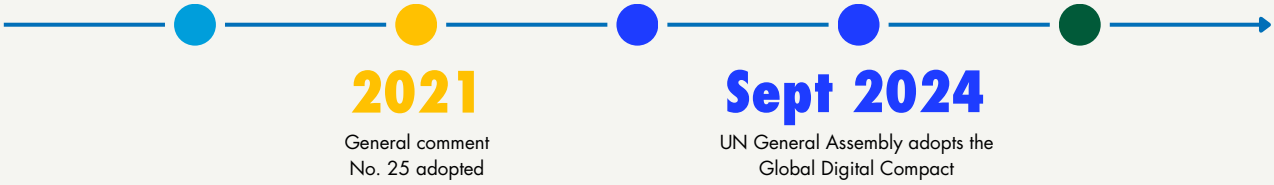
The United Nations Human Rights Council has adopted several resolutions addressing children's rights in the digital environment, most recently Resolution 56/6[10] mandating the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to identify options for a global framework on the safety of the child in the digital environment, based on cross-regional consultations to be carried out through 2026. In January 2026, 13 UN entities and international organisations, led by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and UNICEF, issued the first global *Joint Statement on Artificial Intelligence and the Rights of the Child*,[11] signalling growing cross-system attention to the implications of AI for children.

Children's concerns: 2019 → 2026

Access | Privacy | Safety | Freedom of expression | Perception gap with adults

Identified by children in 2019 and echoed with striking consistency seven years later.

Meanwhile the landscape has transformed, without adequate rights-based safeguards.



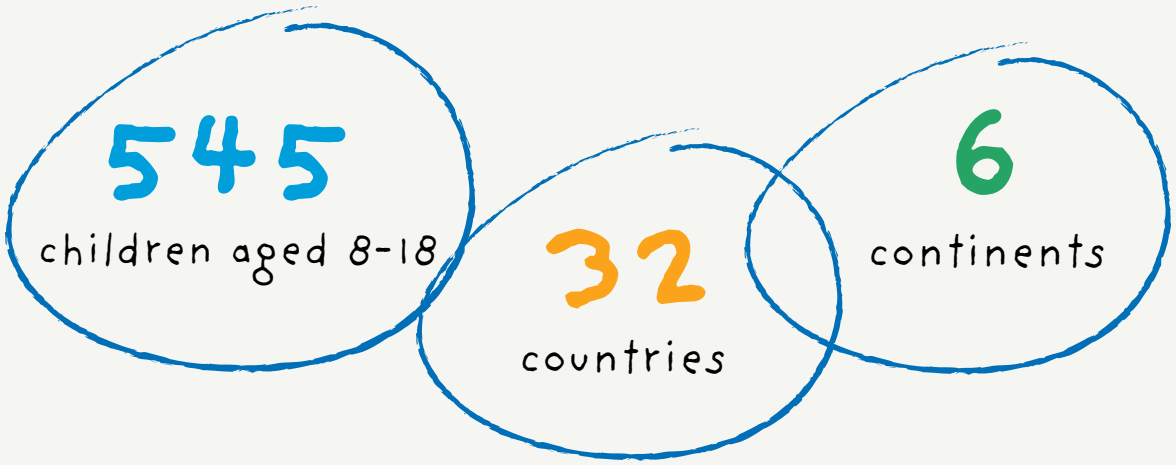
Internationally, the Global Digital Compact required the establishment of an Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, and the Global Dialogue on AI Governance convened by the UN Secretary-General. These ongoing negotiations on AI safety standards reflect an accelerating governance landscape in which children's rights remain insufficiently addressed. In its preliminary report, the Independent International Scientific Panel found that AI is reshaping children's rights at a systemic level, documenting the rapid proliferation of areas of particular grave concern, including the rapid proliferation of AI-generated child sexual abuse material and emerging risks from socially interactive AI products, and found that AI governance frameworks largely do not explicitly consider children.[12]

Against this backdrop, the present consultation returned to children to ask: how are your rights faring in the digital world? What has improved, what has worsened, and what needs to change?

1.2 About this project

Our Digital World, Our Say is a global consultation with children on their rights in the digital environment, led by the OHCHR, the DFC at the LSE and 5Rights Foundation. Together with research partners worldwide, the project conducted 38 workshops with 545 children aged 8–18 across 32 countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe. A complementary survey and focus group study by Save the Children, reaching 429 children and young people in South Korea, provided additional evidence on their interactions with AI-powered chatbots.

The consultation reached children in diverse circumstances: urban and rural, high-connectivity and low-connectivity, children with disabilities, neurodivergent children, children from marginalised communities, and children who had never previously heard that they have rights that apply in the digital world. Workshops were conducted in-person and online, in Arabic, English, French, Spanish and multiple other local languages.



Research partners included non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on child rights, child protection and digital safety; academic institutions; national human rights institutions; and international organisations with country-level operations. Research partners were recruited through child rights networks, an open call and direct invitation. Partners were vetted ahead of conducting the workshops for adequate safeguarding protocols and a proven child rights record.

1.3 Methodology

The consultation used a structured two-hour workshop designed by the lead partners, guiding participants through a sequence of activities: from grounding in their everyday digital lives, through rights-based reflection drawing on the 11 principles derived from the Child Rights by Design framework;[13] to critique adult assumptions about their digital experiences; and finally,

to offer forward-looking messages about accountability and change. This structure is reflected in the structure of this report, grounding the analysis in what children were actually asked and how they responded.

The eight Child Rights by Design principles[14] used as discussion prompts were: equity and diversity, age appropriate, participation, privacy, safety, wellbeing, development and agency (see Table 1 in Annex A). The remaining three principles from the full framework of 11, namely, best interests, consultation and responsible, are embedded in the methodology itself and surface throughout the findings.

Workshops were held online and in person, led by trained facilitators following a structured manual and using the child-friendly version of General comment No. 25.[15] Partners documented the findings through notes, recordings (where consented to) and photographs of workshop materials, and submitted them through a structured online form.

All partner organisations agreed to and implemented child rights-based ethical and safeguarding procedures defined by the lead partners, including parental or caregiver consent, children's informed assent, context-appropriate safeguarding protocols and clear reporting routes for concerns. The children were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without consequence, and that their contributions would remain anonymous.

The findings presented in this report were developed through thematic synthesis of partner submissions, informed by a Child Rights by Design approach.[16] The analysis identified recurring themes across submissions, while accounting for variations by context, age, country and region – where possible. The children's own words are presented throughout as illustrative testimony.[17] Where quantitative data is cited, it is drawn from the complementary survey conducted by Save the Children, which followed a distinct methodology and is clearly indicated in the text.

This consultation offers a window into how children across diverse contexts experience and understand their rights in the digital environment. Article 12 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* affirms children's right to be heard and to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with due weight according to their age and maturity. In *General comment No. 12*, the Committee on the Rights of the Child elaborates this as a right held by children – both individually and collectively – and sets out what genuine consultation requires: that it be voluntary, inclusive, child-friendly, safe and accountable. *General comment No. 14* on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration recognises that while children's views must be given due weight, they constitute one important element in the assessment of a child's best interests alongside other considerations.

This report presents, as accurately as possible, what children told us. Their views are an essential input into decisions about their best interests – which requires that the policy response weighs these perspectives alongside other considerations within the framework that the UNCRC provides, including children's safety, development and wellbeing.

1.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. The consultation's reach was shaped by the networks and locations of participating partners, with the result that urban settings are over-represented in many countries; self-selection is inherent in partner-facilitated workshops; children without digital access or familiarity with online platforms were not represented (particularly relevant in the Indonesian consultation, where only children familiar with Zoom could participate); and there are variations in the depth and quality of documentation provided by different implementing partners. As a result of self-selection, countries with large populations, such as China, were not represented in this consultation.

Other notable omissions should also be acknowledged. Children living in poverty are represented in some workshops (e.g. Cambodia, Ecuador, and Timor-Leste) but not systematically across the consultation. Although certain inequalities between children in different countries are depicted, the workshops do not fully reflect inequalities within and between countries. Children with disabilities participated in the São Paulo workshop with neurodivergent children, and two neurodivergent children were included in one Singapore group, but the consultation does not capture the diversity of disabled children's digital experiences. Children in alternative care, children in conflict with the law and children in street situations – groups specifically identified in General comment No. 25 as requiring particular attention – are not represented.

These omissions matter: the children most excluded from the digital environment are often those whose rights are most at risk, and their absence from this consultation should inform the design of future participatory processes and the interpretation of findings presented here.

It is also important to note that the data provided by Save the Children, while rich, is drawn from a survey of young people who had already used AI chatbots and is not representative of all South Korean children.

These limitations are further acknowledged throughout the analysis.

Chapter 2

Children's digital lives today



2.1 Devices, platforms, and how children use them

Across the large majority of contexts in this consultation, the smartphone has become the primary device through which children access the digital world. Whether in Brazil or Uganda, Cambodia or Romania, many children described smartphones as central to their daily lives – used for communication, entertainment, education, creative expression and social connection. In many lower-income settings, children share devices with parents or caregivers or siblings, whereas in high-income settings, such as Canada, smartphones can be handed down from parents to children. In Ecuador, several children accessed the internet through a parent's phone or a borrowed computer. In some households in rural Cambodia and Mongolia, smartphones were handed over to children for a specific task and then taken back afterwards.

Beyond smartphones, children reported using laptops, tablets, gaming consoles (particularly Nintendo Switch, PlayStation and Xbox), smart TVs and desktop computers. A device's use was defined by its function: for example, laptops and tablets for schoolwork, gaming consoles for leisure, and smartphones for practically everything. Children in higher-connectivity, higher-income settings, such as Singapore and Canada, also mentioned wearable devices, including smartwatches and fitness trackers.

The landscape of digital products and services children use is dominated by a small number of technology companies. YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp and Instagram were among the most frequently mentioned across all regions. WhatsApp served as the children's primary communication tool with family, friends, teachers and community groups, while TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat were widely used for entertainment, information, creative expression and social connection. ChatGPT and other AI chatbots were used across different settings (see Section 2.2).

In Indonesia, the children described social media as a means for personal branding and organisational profiles tied to school and youth forums. Facebook was widely used by children

in Burundi, Cambodia, Mongolia, Timor-Leste and Uganda, but did not appear in many other settings. In data-scarce settings, where connectivity was scarce or patchy, Phoenix Browser, Movie Box and Xender were used for download-to-watch rather than streaming. Gaming products, particularly Roblox, Minecraft, Fortnite and FIFA, featured prominently among younger children's accounts. Educational services and tools, including Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams and school-specific learning management systems, have become compulsory digital infrastructure that children navigate daily alongside their recreational use. In Cambodia, the children described using Telegram as their primary tool for school-related communication and group assignments, and some said that they use AI tools to collaborate on academic projects.

Children's relationship with these digital products and services is purposeful and multifaceted, and shaped by circumstances of access and connectivity. They described using digital technologies to research schoolwork, communicate with distant family, learn new languages through Duolingo, listen to music on Spotify, follow current events, create and share content, develop skills, earn money and participate in youth organisations and civic activities. A young person participating in a multi-country DFC/5Rights workshop captured this breadth of use: "I use the digital world for learning, coding, research and connecting with people". Some children engaged in commercial enterprising activities – one child in Uganda described using the internet "to learn and also to sell shoes to customers online". Another child from Kenya described doing freelance work via Upwork and Fiverr. Social media was also described as important for social recognition and expression, particularly where the children experienced limitations in other settings, with a Romanian 12-year-old describing "my identity on YouTube or Instagram is more accepted than who I am in real life, where my family and friends don't accept me for who I am. So, I like my digital life more than my real one". A Romanian child said, "I feel that the internet and digital life are important for relationships with other people".

> **"Whether you like it or not, sometimes you end up spending time on your phone without realizing it, on social media platforms and you can end up getting addicted.**
>
> – A child from Brazil

Yet children also described a relationship with technology marked by tension between its perceived benefits and negative effects. As a Romanian child said: "I think the phone distracts me, but also helps me". The addictive, compulsive quality of platform design surfaced repeatedly, with children across Brazil, Romania, Singapore and elsewhere describing difficulty stopping, spending more time online than intended, and feeling pulled back to their devices. Children in Romania were concerned about impacts on eye health and wasting time.

Several children in a multi-country workshop described the feeling of being constantly connected as "exhausting", while also recognising that disconnection carried social costs. As a young person put it: "I think it's a main part of my life, I use devices and apps a lot. I feel like it's difficult to not be in the digital world nowadays".

Other concerns raised included worrying about content such as consuming negative news or violent or sexual content, as described by a child in Romania: "Why are there apps with physical or sexual violence that are SO explicit? Why is it so easy for minors to find such videos?" Children engage in self-regulation practices, with Brazilian children describing forms of digital detoxing, Cambodian boys putting their phones away to "stay fully present in the moment", and others describing quitting social media altogether. Sensitivity to intense digital technology use differed across vulnerabilities, with a group of neurodivergent children in Brazil described as experiencing "intense digital engagement, heightened sensitivity to visual and auditory stimuli, and challenges with self-regulation".

2.2 The rapidly expanding role of AI in children's lives

A finding that did not surface in the global child consultation in 2019, but that cuts across multiple countries in this consultation, is the extent to which children are now actively using AI tools in their daily lives – not as a novelty, but as everyday infrastructure. In January 2026, 13 UN entities and international organisations issued a Joint Statement on Artificial Intelligence and the Rights of the Child, urging that AI be "designed, developed, deployed and governed in a way that respects, protects and promotes child rights".[18] The Joint Statement acknowledges that most AI-supported tools and applications "are not designed with children and their well-being in mind", and calls explicitly for AI that mimics human interaction to include "specific in-design safeguards to prevent unhealthy emotional attachment by children". The findings from this consultation provide vivid, cross-regional evidence of the challenges the Joint Statement anticipates, and of children's own sophisticated understanding of what needs to change.

ChatGPT was among the most frequently mentioned digital products in this consultation, named by children in Brazil, Cambodia, Ecuador, Greece, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Romania, Singapore and Uganda, and a multi-country workshop involving participants from 14 countries across Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe. Gemini, Meta AI and Copilot were also mentioned across multiple settings. In some Romanian groups (aged 14-15), ChatGPT and Gemini ranked among the most frequently cited platforms overall. Children described using AI for homework assistance, creative writing, translation, information-seeking and exam preparation. A 15-year-old boy in South Korea described photographing textbook pages and asking AI to rewrite them in an engaging tone; another described building sophisticated translation prompts in Gemini for a game localisation hobby, instructing it to "preserve the emotion of the English original". In Uganda, one child said simply: "I use ChatGPT to understand my school work and learn new skills". In Cambodia, a class group leader described using AI for school group activities. In the multi-country DFC/5Rights workshop,

participants described how standalone GenAI chatbots like ChatGPT, but also those embedded in search engines, have become the main way to do research and find information. One participant described spending four hours daily on ChatGPT for learning and research.

AI use is, however, not uniform across age groups or geographies. In Cambodia, the pattern was stark: older adolescents in Phnom Penh described using ChatGPT and Gemini for research and health questions while younger children across all three research sites, including rural areas, mentioned no AI tools at all. In Canada, children aged 9–15 discussed ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini, with older children demonstrating conceptual awareness of what distinguishes these tools from search engines. In Romania, facilitators noted that ChatGPT did not emerge spontaneously during the activity on children's digital lives, yet surfaced clearly in subsequent activities – suggesting that children may not automatically frame AI tools as part of their everyday practices even while actively using them. This methodological observation has implications for how future consultations ask about children's technology use, and potentially for how parents or caregivers and educators understand the extent of children's AI engagement. One group of older Romanian students (aged 14-15) acknowledged submitting AI-generated assignments without reviewing the content, indicating a gap between usage and critical evaluation. The Joint Statement explicitly identifies the lack of AI literacy among children, teachers and parents as a challenge requiring urgent attention.

More strikingly, the Save the Children data, drawn from a focus group discussion of 13 adolescents aged 14-18 in Seoul conducted in November 2025 and a survey of 429 adolescents with AI chatbot experience conducted in September 2025, documents that children in South Korea are turning to AI chatbots for emotional support, health advice and relationship guidance. They use AI to vent frustration, seek advice on conflicts with parents or friends, ask questions about health and dieting, and process difficult emotions.

> **"Emotionally, I can't make a friend an emotional dumpster, so I take my anger out on AI.**
>
> – 15-year-old girl from South Korea

Another described asking AI about parental conflicts "because it's hard to get clear advice from friends since it's about parents". Children valued the perceived privacy and non-judgmental quality of AI interactions, seeing chatbots as a safe space for topics they felt unable to discuss with peers or adults. In the South Korean survey, 26.8 per cent of respondents (115 out of 429) reported having used Zeta, a Korean character AI service that allows conversation with virtual characters, the use of which some participants described as carrying stigma among peers. The Joint Statement specifically warns that "AI that mimics human interaction must include specific in-design safeguards to prevent unhealthy emotional attachment by children".[19]

Some differences by gender were visible in how focus group participants in South Korea described

their AI use, with girls more often describing emotional and relational uses and boys more often describing gaming, hobby and creative uses. However, the survey by Save the Children did not disaggregate by gender, and the global consultation workshops do not allow gendered patterns to be assessed. This is an area for future research.

The South Korean survey also revealed significant safety concerns around children's AI use that align directly with the harms identified in the Joint Statement. In the survey, 15.9 per cent of respondents reported direct or indirect experience of receiving AI responses related to self-harm methods (direct: 6.8 per cent; indirect: 9.1 per cent), with 27.7 per cent of those who encountered such content reporting some inclination to try what was suggested. 17 per cent encountered AI responses explaining or recommending potentially dangerous behaviours, including methods of violence against others, with 19.1 per cent expressing some inclination to try the actions described. 21 per cent reported encountering content glamorising harmful behaviours, such as drinking alcohol or smoking, with 30.9 per cent of those who encountered it expressing interest in the suggested actions. On health and diet content specifically: 10 per cent of respondents reported receiving AI responses about methods to lose weight rapidly that may carry medical risks, and among these, 57.5 per cent expressed interest in trying what was recommended. The Joint Statement specifically identifies "content promoting self-harm, eating disorders, use of drugs or other harmful substances" as harmful content requiring prevention and address.[20] The data from South Korea demonstrates that such content is already reaching children through AI systems that are not designed with their rights in mind.

> **"With ChatGPT, you can kind of get around it if you just convince it that what you're asking isn't over the limit.**
>
> – A survey participant in South Korea

Children across both the global consultation and the South Korean data described circumventing AI safety filters – and doing so with ease. A South Korean survey participant noted: "With ChatGPT, you can kind of get around it if you just convince it that what you're asking isn't over the limit". In the global consultation, children similarly described peers sharing methods for bypassing content restrictions. In the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland), children said that young people will always find a way around systems that block them, and in Greece that banning something made it more attractive. In Brazil, children noted that AI-based moderation in platform reporting systems could penalise the reporter rather than the perpetrator. Children's opinions in the global consultation and in South Korea converge: current safety filters are inconsistent and easily defeated. The Joint Statement calls for AI systems to embed "child safety filters that restrict access to violent or harmful material" and for AI models to be "developed, built and trained incorporating iterative stress-testing strategies and proactive safeguards against adversarial misuse".[21]

Some children demonstrated sophisticated awareness of AI's limitations and risks. A 17-year-old boy in South Korea reflected: "I actually tried it. I had a fight with a friend and asked AI what to do, and I treated my friend based on what the AI analysed. But it completely went wrong – almost to the point of cutting ties".

> **"It's nice because it helps me put my thoughts into words. But at the same time, it kind of feels like I'm losing my ability to do things on my own.**
>
> – 15-year-old from South Korea

The same child articulated an important principle: "AI is not a friend; it's a tool. So we should learn how to use it properly instead of getting too emotionally attached. This is something that definitely needs to be taught". In the multi-country DFC/5Rights workshop, children noted that "AI is being promoted to them, yet they are not taught to use it", and called for "a very simple opt-out of all AI – we should be able to say NO to AI using our data for itself, we should be able to say NO to seeing AI-generated content, and we should be able to say NO to seeing AI chatbots on websites and apps". In South Korea, a younger participant described school digital safety education as "more useless than anything – we hear the same stuff over and over, and it just gets boring". Indonesian children reflected dynamically over the usefulness and risks of AI use, setting its usefulness in improving efficiency and supporting idea generation against explicit worry about overreliance, misinformation and using AI "as a shortcut rather than a learning aid". What children want instead is practical guidance on how to use AI critically and safely.

The Joint Statement calls for AI literacy to be integrated into school curricula so that "all children, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to understand how AI works and how it relates to their rights",[22] with special emphasis on supporting marginalised groups. The children who contributed to this consultation are already articulating what that education should look like.

2.3 The digital divide

The children who engaged in this consultation did not experience the digital world equally, and the contrast between different settings was stark. In Singapore, children described switching between multiple personal devices, accessing school-issued tablets and maintaining near-constant connectivity through home Wi-Fi and mobile data. In Timor-Leste, most children shared one single family phone and described rationing data. In rural Canada, children in one group noted that their internet connection "isn't the best". In Mongolia, children described accessing the internet primarily at home through Wi-Fi, with limited mobile data funded by parents. In Indonesia, children described how some lacked devices or working hardware, and would miss online school exams or experience other forms of exclusion based on a presumption of device ownership.

Access inequality operates at multiple levels: whether a child has a device at all, and whether it is their own or shared. Then there is the question of connectivity – its availability, accessibility, reliability and cost. There is also the question of the quality of the device, with children in Indonesia noting that some peers' phones could not support essential applications. And there is the question of digital literacy – the skills, knowledge and guidance needed to use digital tools safely and meaningfully.

Children's access to the internet was unequal and uneven across and within countries. Home Wi-Fi is common and the default among children in diverse settings such as Brazil, Chile, India, the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland), Romania, Singapore, and urban Kenya. For other children access is unequal, uneven and rationed, influenced by household resources, parental support and school infrastructure. Children in Uganda described how their parents bought data bundles, used internet cafes or school Wi-Fi: "My mum buys data for me, but sometimes I go to the internet cafe when I run out. I watch comedy and share my dance videos on TikTok. At school, the Wi-Fi helps me do research for my project". Children in Mongolia described how their families could afford data day-by-day, whereas Ecuadorian children reported relying on municipal Wi-Fi points. In Timor-Leste, where most participants shared a family device, children described rationing their online time around data costs: "Data is expensive so I only watch at night". A group of children from different Asian countries connected to the internet via hotspots from family members' and friends' phones.

Children recognised these disparities clearly. A young person from Kenya who participated in a multi-country workshop described the inequality as "a little bit extreme", observing that urban children "have tablets in schools" while "in rural areas, the kids are still struggling with the poor network and they share gadgets and they have zero digital literacy". Children in Ecuador observed that "not all children have the same opportunities, financial conditions and access". In Romania, the children noted that "in the countryside, many people still do not have access to the internet".

The consultations were not necessarily representative of children in diverse circumstances. For instance, the consultation with Indonesian children was able to reach 55 children from more

than 20 cities and districts through Zoom, but this excluded children who had never used or heard of the platform. This limitation is shared, to varying degrees, across the consultations.

Language exclusion compounds the access divide. The dominance of English-language content and interfaces creates barriers for children whose first language is not English, limiting their ability to access information, participate in online communities and benefit from safety features and reporting tools that may only be available in a limited number of languages. It should also be noted that children in countries that did not take part, including some with very large child populations and their own domestic platforms and regulatory frameworks, are absent from this evidence base. Digital inequality thus operates in ways this consultation does not fully capture.

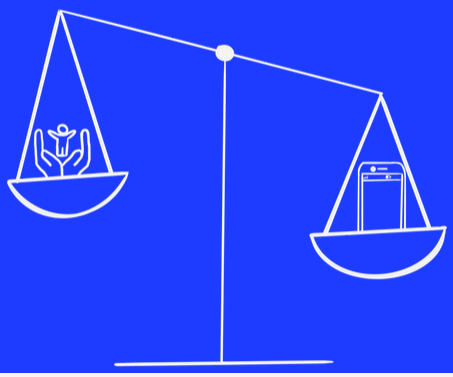
2.4 Children's digital lives

Children's digital lives in 2026 are characterised by deep integration of digital technology into nearly every aspect of daily experience, from education and socialisation to creative expression and emotional regulation. The smartphone has become the main portal through which children access a complex ecosystem of platforms, services and tools. AI has entered children's lives in ways that were not anticipated when General comment No. 25 was adopted. And the digital divide remains a fundamental challenge, with access, connectivity, affordability, device quality and digital literacy creating unequal conditions for the enjoyment of their rights in the digital world.

This landscape sets the stage for the rights analysis that follows, which examines the extent to which children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled in the digital environment.

Chapter 3

Rights vs. realities



Five years after the Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General comment No. 25, how are children experiencing their rights in the digital environment? The consultation asked children to reflect on eight principles derived from the Child Rights by Design framework,[23] and to consider how their daily digital experiences align with or fall short of these standards.

What emerged was not a simple story of children's rights being fulfilled or ignored, but rather, a textured account of the deep tensions, trade-offs and gaps between what children are entitled to and what they actually experience in their digital world. Many of the participating children demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of these complexities, often articulating the core dilemmas that decision-makers are presently grappling with.

3.1 How children engage with their rights

A striking finding across the workshops was that most children had not previously heard that they have rights that apply in the digital environment, nor had they ever had the opportunity before to discuss this with adults in any structured way. As a Romanian workshop facilitator noted, while some initial responses appeared "well-aligned with expected or 'correct' answers", deeper discussion revealed authentic engagement and genuine discovery. Only one participant in Greece reported that they had encountered the concept at school. Children in India said they had never had a discussion like this before.

Yet, once introduced to the framework, and with the help of a child-friendly summary of General comment No. 25 developed by the lead partners,[24] many children engaged with it substantively – and, in many cases, with sophistication. For example, children connected abstract principles to concrete experiences, identified tensions between competing rights and articulated policy implications that reflected their developing analytical capacity. A facilitator of the Romanian workshops reflected that the children discussed their rights in a mature and balanced way, "often linking them to responsibility, development and protection rather than absolute freedom". This pattern itself carries a message for decision-makers: children can engage meaningfully with

complex rights questions when given the tools and invitation to do so.

When asked to prioritise principles for deeper discussion, privacy, safety and wellbeing consistently emerged as among the most frequently selected, alongside agency and age-appropriate design, although the specific combination varied by group and context. This pattern suggests that these are the areas where children feel the gap between their rights and their digital experience most acutely.

3.2 Safety and wellbeing

Safety and wellbeing were among the principles children most frequently prioritised when asked to select which of the principles mattered most to them. Their reflections revealed that these concepts are neither simple nor separable, and that current approaches often fall short on both counts.

Children described digital environments that generate both positive and negative effects on their wellbeing, often simultaneously. For example, children in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) observed that platforms like Pinterest felt positive for wellbeing – spaces for inspiration and creativity that according to children were "less in your face" than Instagram or TikTok – and the ability to meet new friends online and receive invitations to take part in things as something that helps with positive emotional development and feeling connected. Children across different contexts described using digital technologies to relax, connect with friends, access communities of shared interest and regulate their emotions. A child in Romania noted feeling good "when I pass a level that I struggled with" in an online game. Some children in Mongolia described watching "short, positive videos that show friendliness, generosity and love". In Singapore, children associated wellbeing with emotional safety and feeling supported online.

3.2.1 Platform design and children's experiences of online harm and distress

The same platforms that provide connection and enjoyment also generate distress.

Where the risks come from

Harmful design features

- Gambling mechanics in games
- Repetitive advertising
- Persuasive design, such as infinite scrolling, that makes it "hard to stop"
- Recommendation systems that amplify distressing content and exacerbate abusive behaviour

Safeguards that fail

- Age checks that are ineffective or easily bypassed
- Content filters that fail to block inappropriate content and advertising
- Reporting systems that produce no result
- Lack of effective moderation, allowing hateful comments or harassment

In Canada, children found that having fun online, such as gaming, could generally contribute to their wellbeing, but not when specific exploitative design features were present. A nine-year-old described that he liked games, "except that there are a couple of gambling [things] in it". Repetitive and aggressive advertising produced emotional fatigue, negatively affecting otherwise enjoyable online activities: "the only reason I got Simply Piano is to stop getting ads".

Children in Brazil spoke of the "problem of comparison between people that is generated by the use of social media, which encompasses feelings of envy, harms to mental health and self-esteem". A child in Chile wrote: "I don't feel well, because there are people who harm your self-esteem or mental health without knowing you". Children in Cambodia described a range of negative emotional impacts from digital engagement, including stress and worry triggered by exposure to violent content, frightening stories, and videos promoting discrimination and bullying. As one workshop facilitator summarised: "Adolescents report that the internet has a strong emotional impact, both as a source of stress and a tool for relaxation". Two Brazilian participants observed that wellbeing depends less on duration than on purpose, with intentional use feeling good even over long periods and aimless scrolling leaving them feeling depleted. Girls raised particular concerns around the sexualisation of girls on social media and experiencing sexual harassment from both peers and adults.

The persuasive design of digital platforms surfaced repeatedly, with children describing difficulty stopping, feeling pulled back and spending more time online than they had intended. As one child put it: "It's hard to stop because I like it, and I get distracted easily". Another directed a message to companies: "Instead of designing the website to make us addicted, purely just make a good platform where people can have fun safely".

Sometimes it feels hard to stop.

In Indonesia, the children discussed the distress felt as a result of algorithmic amplification of disaster imagery, violent content and narratives that invalidate education, producing sadness, FOMO (fear of missing out) and a sense of hopelessness for the future.

The relationship between safety and wellbeing proved complex. Children identified real risks in their digital environments: cyberbullying, contact from strangers, exposure to inappropriate content, scams and, in some contexts, grooming and exploitation. A child in Chile noted that "almost no digital technology is appropriate because of the kinds of people who use it". Children in Uganda described awareness of "cyberbullying, scams, and harmful users". One child in Brazil noted that the internet is not a safe environment and that "you always need a trusted adult around to help you manage this". Children in Indonesia reported frequent encounters with gambling advertisements, pornographic content and online loan advertising, and reported having experienced these on social media, browsers, editing tools and streaming services, despite activating content filters and protection settings. Children in Kenya described their sophisticated awareness of grooming and kidnapping risks, while also valuing safety features such as Roblox's age verification. Ecuadorian children similarly named being aware of the risk of abduction facilitated through certain apps and the danger of posting photographs in school uniforms due to the risk of being located. A girl in Chile described being contacted online at eight years old by a man asking for her address. A participant in Delhi recounted a friend whose image was used to make a deepfake for blackmail. In Romania, children understood wellbeing was conditional on the absence of adverse experiences online: "On the internet I generally feel okay, but if I receive a mean or threatening message, it makes me feel uncomfortable".

When children discussed safety in policy terms, they framed it as a structural issue, pointing both to the design of platforms and the lack of company accountability. Participants in a small town in Canada proposed that gambling platforms without age verification should be shut down and their creators prosecuted. In Mumbai, a participant argued that companies "should take accountability in case of any breach instead of rolling out random age-verification updates". Children in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) and Singapore assigned responsibility for platform design to technology companies rather than children's online conduct.

Yet children also pushed back against safety measures that felt excessive, ineffective or counterproductive. Age restrictions were the most frequently cited example: children across multiple countries described how easily these are bypassed, with several noting that entering a false birthdate was usually all it took. As one child observed: "Sometimes people may enter fake age or fake details". Content filters were described as inconsistent – failing to catch genuinely harmful material while sometimes blocking content that children found useful or harmless. Reporting systems, discussed in detail in Section 5.1, were widely described as producing no visible result, which undermines children's confidence in the safety infrastructure around them.

Taken together, children's accounts of experiencing different kinds of risks and harms point to the design of platforms as a central issue, with harmful features such as gambling mechanics in games, repetitive advertising, persuasive design such as infinite scrolling that makes it "hard to stop" and recommendation systems that amplify distressing content and exacerbate abusive behaviour by others. The design of digital products is therefore key to ensuring children have age-appropriate and safe experiences online. Age checks that are ineffective or easily bypassed, content filters that fail to block gambling, pornographic content and advertising, contact features that allow adults to reach young children, lack of effective moderation allowing hateful comments or harassment – all leave children exposed to risks that are preventable.

General comment No. 16 requires States to ensure that businesses exercise child rights due diligence to identify, prevent and mitigate their impacts on children's rights,[25] while General comment No. 25 specifically addresses the digital environment, requiring States to mandate businesses to prevent their products and services from being used in ways that cause or contribute to violations of children's rights, and to undertake child rights impact assessments (CRIAs) that are disclosed to the public.[26] The children's testimonies show that, in practice, the burden of managing those risks largely falls on children, rather than those who design, deploy and manage the digital products and services they use. They are asking for safer platforms, for reporting systems that work for them, and for companies to be held accountable when their rights are violated.

3.2.2 Children's reluctance to seek help online

This insight points to a deeper tension in how online safety is addressed, which has direct consequences for whether children seek help when things go wrong. Children want to be protected from genuine harms, they want platforms that are designed to be safe, and for perpetrators of harm, as well as companies, to be held accountable. But they also want to develop the capacity to protect themselves and build judgement through experience rather than having all risk removed by external controls. When safety approaches are experienced as punitive rather than supportive – when the consequence of disclosing a problem may be losing access to the device or platform – children learn not to disclose. The challenge, as many children see it, is not choosing between protection and autonomy, but finding approaches that provide genuine safety while respecting children's evolving capacities and keeping the door open for children to seek help without fear.

> **"I got cyberbullied... Roblox don't do anything. They just block the chat, but the account still exists.**
>
> – A Singaporean child in a low-income setting

Across countries, settings and circumstances, children expressed a lack or loss of confidence in obtaining redress when something went wrong. A Singaporean child in a low-income setting described ineffective reporting mechanisms: "I got cyberbullied… Roblox don't do anything. They just block the chat, but the account still exists". A Chilean girl highlighted the lack of access to effective support mechanisms: "there's no one who can help you directly with these issues". In Cambodia, fear of not being believed by authorities had a chilling effect on reporting and on civic engagement more broadly. Children in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) said that telling a trusted adult often did not help because the adult did not "get it", with shame and fear operating as barriers to disclosing.

General comment No. 25 recognises this tension, emphasising that digital environments should support children's wellbeing while requiring that any limitations on rights be provided by law, necessary and proportionate. Children's testimonies suggest that many current approaches fail on both counts: providing inadequate protection against real harms while imposing restrictions that feel neither necessary nor proportionate to the children experiencing them.

3.3 Privacy and agency

Privacy emerged as a principle children cared about deeply, but felt they had limited power to protect. They framed agency as a sense of control over their digital engagement and experience, and it was closely intertwined with privacy, with children frequently describing the feeling that choices were being made for them rather than by them. Children highlighted issues to do with privacy – from parents or caregivers and siblings (e.g., on shared devices), as well as in online spaces relating to the protection of data and sensitive information.

Many children demonstrated awareness of data collection practices, even when their understanding was incomplete. For example, a child in Romania observed: "We know about cookies on websites, but we never really read what information we give when we accept them". Children in South Korea expressed anxiety about data storage and potential misuse:

> **"Anyway, AI learns from the conversations I have with it. It feels a bit strange that even what I talk about gets learned.**
>
> – A child from South Korea

A child in Indonesia noted concerns about photos being used for other purposes, including deepfakes. Children in Canada reacted alarmed when informed that trackers monitor their online activity: "Do you mean that we're being stalked?" This was followed by clear rejection: "No! I don't *wanna* be tracked".

One young person who participated in a multi-country online workshop, and who had been actively engaged in trying to secure children's rights in the digital environment for seven years, captured a telling reality.

> **"I don't really have a clue about where my data goes, who uses it and that's slightly terrifying.**
>
> – A young person in a multi-country online workshop

If a child with such advanced awareness of their rights still lacks understanding of how their data is used, the gap in understanding for the broader population of children is likely far wider.

Language is also a barrier to privacy and access to information with children who do not have English as their first language at a disadvantage when reading privacy policies and terms and conditions of use. Indonesian children cited the length and complexity of English-language terms and privacy policies as reasons why they do not read them.

The desire for privacy extended beyond data protection to encompass control over their personal boundaries and the information others hold about them. Children in South Korea described using AI chatbots precisely because conversations felt private: "things I can't confide in others" could be shared with AI because "no one else will know anyway". Yet this sense of privacy coexisted with awareness that it might be an illusion – the same children exercised self-censorship in their AI inputs, with one noting: "I'm worried that the personal information I put into AI might spread, so I don't write things in too much detail".

Privacy tensions with parental oversight surfaced repeatedly. Many children understood that their parents or caregivers may monitor their digital activity out of concern for their safety, but nonetheless experienced this monitoring as more invasive than protective. A child in Singapore captured a common sentiment: "When parents take your phone, you have more secrets". This illustrates how confiscation as a response to online concerns can push children toward concealment rather than disclosure. Another child observed: "The more you restrict, the more we hide things from you". In Timor-Leste, most children said that their parents could readily see their information, although several simply did not know whether this happened, because the phone they were using was not theirs. The paradox is clear: surveillance intended to protect children may instead drive them toward concealment, undermining the trust and communication that genuine safety requires. In Indonesia many children reported feeling neutral or even positive about parental controls where rules were explained, mutually agreed and framed as guidance, and associated them with parental care and trust.

Privacy was also linked to the risk of being publicly exposed online, as described by children in Singapore: "Everyone can see everything". Privacy was discussed as fragile and difficult to maintain once information was shared online.

Children pointed both to how information could be used by other people, but also by online systems through tracking cookies, affecting their sense of privacy and openness online. A young person involved in a multi-country workshop added: "A child should not be constantly monitored by apps; this could lead to exploitation". In Ontario, Canada, some children were concerned about commercial data extraction:

> **"Do you mean we are being stalked [by companies]?**
>
> – A child in Ontario, Canada

Children's reflections also suggested a link between surveillance and help-seeking: several who described feeling under surveillance also described withholding concerns from the adults monitoring them, which can create a false sense of security for parents while leaving children to manage difficulties without support. In Indonesia, children expressed concern over having to provide their national ID numbers to access online entertainment services, describing feeling both discomfort and confusion.

Agency – broadly, the sense of having meaningful control over one's digital experiences – emerged as significantly constrained, primarily by design rather than rules. Children described algorithmic systems that shaped what they saw in ways they neither chose nor fully understood. Participants in Brazil, Ecuador, the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) and Singapore in international workshops identified algorithmic recommendation and infinite scroll as the main problem. For example, a child in Romania expressed their uncertainty: "I don't think I have the power to choose, because I don't know if my account is being used. I don't know what to do, and I don't trust myself". Other children in a multi-country workshop added: "We cannot control the content we are exposed to. The algorithm is always recommending us content to keep us on the platform". Brazilian children extended this conceptually, arguing that agency was not only autonomy granted by parents but the autonomy the platform itself conceded over one's own time.

Some children described strategies for reclaiming their sense of agency – for example, by adjusting their settings, curating feeds, limiting their use and taking breaks. One teenager reported quitting social media entirely: "I am on day 30 and I've noticed my brain getting sharper and my memory has gotten better". However, Indonesian children emphasised that individual coping should not replace systemic protections. Such individual strategies place the burden of managing platform design on children themselves, requiring effort and digital literacy that children may neither adequately possess nor be in control of acquiring.

The concept of meaningful choice proved particularly fraught. Some children specifically recognised that platform terms and conditions are nominally consensual but practically coercive – that is, they are required to agree or cannot use the service. One directed a specific request: "Tech companies: stop making privacy settings complicated, put them in front and centre when we sign up". Another called for simplicity and greater respect for their rights calling for a simple opt-out of all AI.

3.4 Equity, participation and inclusion

Many children recognised that digital environments are not experienced equally. Access varies dramatically, and even among those with access, the quality and conditions of digital participation differ in ways that reflect and reinforce broader inequalities.

> **"Not all kids have the same shot online.**
>
> – A young person in Uganda

The digital divide surfaced most starkly in discussions of access to devices and connectivity, as described in Section 2.3. Inequality extended beyond access to encompass the conditions of digital participation. Singaporean participants distinguished equity from access, naming device quality, racism and religious discrimination online and barriers facing disabled users. In one online workshop, children discussed how offline inequalities increase the risk of online harm, and how wealthier children can pay for greater access and engagement online. Children in Uganda noted that children with disabilities "are scared to share because of how people treat them". Discrimination based on race, religion, nationality and language was described by children in multiple settings. A young person spoke about this from direct experience: "I do not think everyone has the same opportunities to be included and this is because there's mass discrimination online. And me, personally, I have experienced that too from just simply what country are you from, what language, your race".

Another young person in the same session observed that offline inequalities translate directly into online risk: "Not all kids have the same shot online. Some have good devices, steady internet, and adults who teach them how to stay safe. Others are out there sharing one phone in the house, dealing with slow networks or navigating spaces where no one protects them from bullying, scams or creepy behaviour".

Participation – the ability to express opinions, access information, and be heard – was valued by children but experienced unevenly. Children described using digital products and services to connect with friends, share creative content, participate in civic activities and access information. Some children were highly active as youth ambassadors, campaigners and content creators. In Cambodia, girls described using CapCut to create and share video content. In Kenya and the multi-country workshop, children described using digital tools for activism, freelancing and civic engagement – exercising their rights to information and expression. But participation also carried risks: for example, some cited fear of negative reactions, cyberbullying and hostility when expressing their opinions online. Children described how their ability to participate online is constrained by social and gender norms, reporting not feeling free or safe expressing opinions when their views differ from the dominant perspectives. These barriers are often gendered. In Cambodia, girls who spoke out against child marriage online

reported being threatened with not being able to marry in the future, whereas a boy in the same group described: "if boys post about child marriage, they generally get less confrontational comments". The chilling effect of such responses limits the very participation that digital products and services can enable.

Participants in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) also pointed to the importance of online spaces for finding community, including for LGBTQIA+ young people, alongside their experiences of homophobia online.

In the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland), children discussed the implications of barriers to activism and freedom of speech, with some raising concerns that, in some contexts, content from certain movements may be blocked or "shadow banned" online when it runs counter to the views of governments or to what is politically popular. The cost of online participation was highlighted in discussions on limits children experience to their freedom of expression online, set either by social norms or institutional or platform-enforced barriers. Romanian teenagers said they can speak "but with limits… I might get banned from servers". A Brazilian participant said she does not believe in freedom of expression online because "either you are excluded or treated as a charlatan". Mongolian children feared negative reactions and worried about the influence of their words on younger siblings. In Indonesia, children described how they could confidently participate in small, moderated, online environments, whereas they felt they were hesitant, self-censored and avoided sensitive topics on public social media, for fear of hostility from adults and strangers.

Misinformation emerged as a significant barrier to meaningful participation across multiple countries. Children in Brazil, India, Romania and elsewhere described difficulty distinguishing reliable from unreliable information, with one Brazilian child observing that adults themselves often believed things they saw online without checking on facts, and "even more so when it comes to politics". This finding indicates that the interaction between misinformation and children's ability to exercise their right to access information deserves greater attention.

3.5 Development and age-appropriate design

Overall, digital technology was valued by the participants as a tool for learning, creativity, identity and self-development. Across contexts, they described using the internet to research schoolwork, learn new languages and skills, explore hobbies, access educational content and prepare for exams. Their understanding of age-appropriateness reflects a developmentally informed approach that recognises children's evolving capacities[27] with different needs at different stages of development.

Singaporean children rejected adult assumptions that young people's digital use was "mindless". Children in Ontario, Canada, insisted that digital play itself is developmentally legitimate and asked for the right to play to be recognised. Children in Cambodia described using AI tools to deepen their understanding of school lessons. A child in Romania noted: "Technology helps you develop as a person". In Uganda, children described using the internet for learning, creative projects and entrepreneurship. In Indonesia, younger children identified educational games, word puzzles, drawing applications and literacy and numeracy tools as suitable, and as supportive of their curiosity, creativity and foundational skills, without exposing them to harmful content, whereas older children described age-appropriate applications as enabling creativity, self-expression, critical thinking and future-oriented skills, including applications that support design, language learning and content creation.

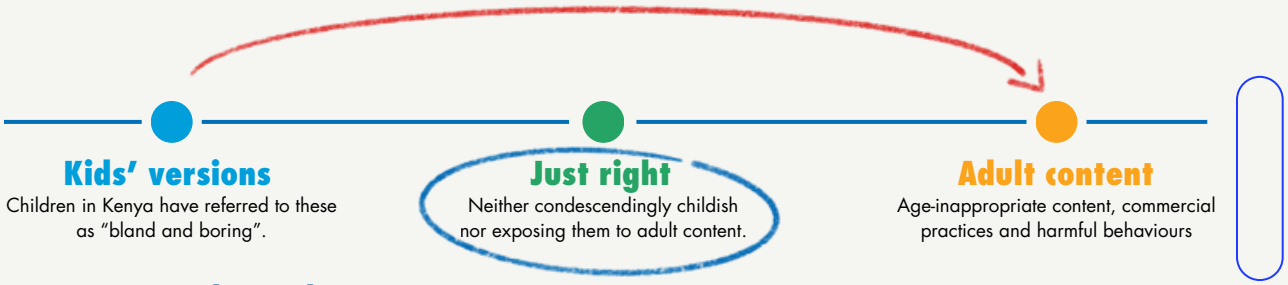
Children across the workshops expressed concern for how digital technologies may adversely impact child development. Brazilian children worried about overreliance on AI tools, and specifically ChatGPT, for their development and learning; Singaporean participants worried about loot boxes[28] and monetisation of children's online activities, pointing out that technology "should help you grow, not just make money from you".

Educational technology has become embedded in schools across many settings, with platforms like Google Classroom and other school-mandated learning management systems functioning as essential infrastructure. Yet some children also challenged the assumption that all educational technology supports development equally. They discussed how the educational platforms that schools require them to use can feel burdensome and described screen fatigue from compulsory online learning. In Brazil, a child described the exhaustion of doing homework online: "When there is a lot of homework and I need to watch video lessons, I need to search for a lot of subjects and, whether I like it or not, it must be on the internet, so I ended up being tired, causing headaches".

Age-appropriate design emerged as a principle many children understood intuitively but found poorly implemented. Children expressed their concerns about age-inappropriate content, commercial practices and behaviour. They wanted digital products that felt "just right" for their age – neither condescendingly childish nor exposing them to adult content. In Kenya, children offered a particularly telling critique: "kids' versions" of apps are "bland and boring", which pushes children toward adult content rather than protecting them.

Children want digital products that feel just right

Kids' versions that are "bland and boring" push children toward adult content



Age is not the only measure

Children argued that capacity also depends on:



> *It doesn't mean that the same age is the same.*

Age restrictions were widely seen as ineffective. Children across multiple countries described how easily they could be bypassed – with some noting that a false birthdate was usually all it took. In Canada, the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) and Singapore, as well as in the international workshops, children rejected age as the operative variable, arguing capacity depends on life experience, disability/ability and mental health, and that "it doesn't mean that the same age is the same". This echoes the principle of children's evolving capacities. Some participants raised concern about social media bans for children under 16 years of age (following developments in Australia), with participants in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) and Brazil opposed to it, arguing that bans would remove access to sex education, recovery forums, healthcare information and news, and that "young people will always find ways around a system that tries to block us off".

However, some positive examples were also shared, and children in many settings supported age-gating and other measures to ensure age-appropriate online experiences. Children in Kenya valued teen account protections on some platforms. Children in Singapore nonetheless felt that the burden of staying safe fell primarily on them: "I don't feel like I'm protected by the platforms. It's me that needs to do the stuff". The overall picture was one of systems that neither adequately protect younger children from inappropriate content nor respect older children's growing capacity for autonomous engagement.

3.6 Where the gaps are widest

The principles children most frequently identified as unfulfilled – safety, privacy and agency – point to a common underlying problem: a fundamental asymmetry of power between children and the platforms they use. Children are expected to navigate complex systems designed by adults, for commercial purposes, with safety and privacy treated as features to be added rather than foundational rights to be built in by design.

Reporting systems emerged as a consistent concern. The detailed findings on barriers to reporting and help-seeking, presented in Section 5.1, reveal a systemic pattern: children across contexts described reporting mechanisms as confusing, inaccessible or ineffective, while fear of punishment for disclosing problems prevented many from seeking help at all. The cumulative effect is that many harms remain invisible to the safety systems designed to address them, and that children are not reaching out to the adults to seek help when needed.

Adult capacity is lacking. The Cambodian partner observed that teachers face capacity gaps across every risk category. Participants in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) said trusted adults often did not understand. Ecuadorian children did not ask for fewer limits to their digital engagement, but for adults with better digital literacy who could support them without prejudice and notably pointed out that adults should set limits to their own use.

Experiences differed by context. Many children in lower-connectivity settings focused on access, affordability and basic digital literacy. Children in higher-connectivity settings tended to focus more on algorithmic manipulation, data privacy and the quality of their digital experience. Gender, age, disability and minority status further shaped children's digital experiences in ways the data illuminates but does not fully analyse. Gender shaped both access and use – for example, girls in rural Cambodia had their use restricted by mothers while boys described more autonomous habits, and in South Korea girls described emotional and relational AI use more prominently than boys. Age shaped autonomy, with younger children (aged 8-12) describing more mediated and shared device access than older adolescents. Neurodivergent children described more intense engagement with digital content and heightened self-regulation challenges, and children from minority groups described online discrimination not equally present in other groups. These intersections reflect broader inequalities in the realisation of rights, and future consultations and policy frameworks should be designed to capture and address them more fully. But across these differences, a core message was consistent: children's rights in the digital environment are not being adequately realised, and the gulf between their rights and their digital experiences demands the urgent attention of adults.

Chapter 4

What adults get wrong



Children had much to say about the adults who shape their digital lives, and they said it with precision, humour and force.

4.1 The adults who matter

When asked to identify which adults impact their digital lives, children named parents or caregivers and family members first in virtually every setting. Teachers were the second most frequently mentioned group. Beyond these, children identified tech company executives, platform designers, content creators and influencers, policymakers, the police, religious leaders and community leaders, with the specific mix varying by context. In Uganda and Romania, children mentioned step-parents and grandparents alongside parents. In Uganda and Timor-Leste, religious leaders, community leaders and the police were identified – categories absent from the European and North American workshops.

Commercial and political actors were named particularly by older children and by children who had previously discussed their rights in the digital environment. In the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland), "Meta bosses/tech company bosses", influencers, broadband providers and politicians were identified. In Canada, children identified game developers, advertisers, policymakers and governments and the "Roblox CEO" as important actors. In the multi-country workshop conducted by DFC/5Rights, children identified adults who "control the platforms and make the rules", adults who post content online and "adults who make AI" as powerful but often invisible actors.

4.2 The perception gap

Across every region, children described a fundamental disconnect between how they think adults perceive their digital lives and what they actually experience. This pattern was remarkably consistent across the countries.

Adults, children reported, tend to believe that they (children) use the internet only for playing, gaming or "wasting time"; that they do not understand online risks; are unable to self-regulate or make responsible decisions online; are constantly exposed to danger; and that they do not care about privacy or safety. One child in Greece observed:

> **They think they know everything and forget that we were born into the age of social media.**
>
> – A child in Greece

Children's corrections of adult assumptions were often emphatic. Many wished to clarify that they use digital environments not only for entertainment, but to learn, access information, communicate, earn money, create or feel socially connected. Many are aware of online risks and often experience fear or insecurity. They try to follow rules and develop their own strategies to deal with uncomfortable or risky situations they perceive in their digital engagement. They care about privacy, safety and the consequences of what they share online.

> **Our life online is not just scrolling and wasting our time. It is a way of communication and learning about the world.**
>
> – A young person in Greece

Children identified a specific pattern that is worth highlighting for decision-makers: adults tend to worry too much about the quantity of screen time while overlooking the quality of the children's digital experience. What concerns many children over and above how many hours they spend online is what happens during that time – the manipulative design features they encounter, the algorithmic amplification of harmful content, the lack of real control over their digital experience. While some children were critical against adult monitoring, surveillance and restrictions of their online activities, other children expressed trust in adults' guidance and restrictions. One child expressed that "my parents are just trying to protect me from abuse, violence and exploitation". Another child in Romania said that "adults need to supervise their child", and a group of Kenyan children identified that adult restrictions on children's digital engagement "comes from love".

Children in India offered an important nuance, pointing out that adults themselves did not always model good digital behaviour. One child in Chile observed that parents "often do not model appropriate use and tend to exceed screen time". Children in Brazil described adults as overly trusting things they see online, such as being convinced by AI content, "searching for remedies and cures on the internet and stopping going to the doctor", and "believing a lot of things they see on the internet, even more so when it comes to politics". In the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland), children were concerned that parents and teachers were unable to identify AI-produced content and fake news. Ecuadorian and Greek children described guiding adults through digital devices and environments rather than being guided by them. One child in Romania felt that adults close to them viewed the way they present themselves online as forced, while their friends had helped them understand who they are. For some, the digital world was an important refuge from stresses they experienced offline, including in their relationships with their parents, as a child in Romania, described: "The digital world is sometimes a way to escape stress, even from parents".

The disconnect between how adults perceive children's digital lives and what children experience is strongly linked to their willingness to seek help. Children who feel that adults do not understand their digital lives – who anticipate judgement, overreaction or punishment – are far less likely to turn to those adults when something goes wrong. The misunderstanding itself becomes a barrier to protection: adults often remain unaware of children's problematic or harmful digital experiences precisely because children do not trust their response.

4.3 What children want adults to understand

Children's message to adults was not that they should leave them alone or disengage. On the contrary, children consistently ask for more adult engagement, but of a different quality. Some expressed their need for the adults in their lives to "listen more and judge less", and as a Singaporean child said, "Listen first, rather than reacting immediately…ask what we are doing and why before judging". Others want dialogue rather than punishment, or adults to ask before assuming. Many children want adults to recognise that the digital world is a real and meaningful part of their daily lives, relationships and identities – and not simply a distraction from the "real" world. As a young person said: "Dear adults, I want to tell you that spending time in my room surfing the net is my own way of feeling free and I am not addicted".

Many also want to be trusted with increasing autonomy as they grow, which requires adults to recognise their evolving capacities – not to grant unlimited freedom, but to provide guidance proportionate to their development and age. A young person summed this up: "Age-appropriate means being trusted to make decisions, not constantly being monitored". One child asked for guidance rather than surveillance: "Adults think monitoring is the same as protecting but surveillance doesn't teach us judgement".

Children want to engage in meaningful dialogue and find solutions together with adults rather than simply having restrictions imposed on them. One child asked for guidance rather than surveillance:

Adults think monitoring is the same as protecting but surveillance doesn't teach us judgement.

Mongolian children said that talking was better than confiscation "because trust helps us use the internet more responsibly", and Brazilian children asked that adults explain rules rather than impose them. Children described different ways they circumvent restrictions, with one child in an international workshop observing that "teachers thinking banning phones solves the problem, but actually we just get better at hiding them". In Singapore, children described using friends' phones if theirs were taken away. A Romanian child described device restriction as harmful for their mental health as it cuts them off from contact with close friends. Singaporean workshop facilitators noted that children described monitoring as leading to increased secrecy rather than openness. Ecuadorian participants said that limits imposed without explanation "generate distance", making it harder to raise concerns or ask for help.

Some groups also reflected on where responsibility lay for children's adverse online experiences, and emphasised that children should not be blamed. One participant noted that asking young people to leave social media placed the burden of safety on children rather than on companies and governments. A Brazilian participant pointed out that adult content creators should be aware of how their content shaped children's development, pointing to the negative impact of short-form video formats.

Where adults did engage constructively – explaining rather than banning, listening rather than assuming, providing guidance rather than surveillance – children described feeling safer, more supported, and critically, more willing to seek help when things went wrong online. In Kenya, children described how those with trusted parental relationships found it easy to report problems: "I'll just block that person and go tell my mom".

These findings illustrate how the quality of relevant adult–child relationships may matter far more to children's safety online than technically sophisticated parental control tools. And if trust is an indispensable precondition for help-seeking, children are telling us that it can be built if the adults in their lives provide the kind of engagement they are asking for.

4.4 Reflections on relationships

The perception gap children describe is not merely a matter of factual misunderstanding; it reflects and reinforces a relationship characterised, in many cases, by limited communication, unilateral decision-making and mutual frustration. Children who feel misunderstood become less likely to share concerns with adults. Adults who don't understand children's digital lives make decisions that feel arbitrary or punitive. Trust erodes on both sides, and with it, the possibility of the very protection that adults are trying to provide.

The input of the children who commented on different aspects of this dynamic points to a different kind of relationship – one characterised by dialogue rather than dictation, by curiosity rather than assumption, by graduated autonomy rather than binary restrictions.

> **"If we are going to progress into adulthood and have our own self-control, we need to do that ourselves and not have it forced upon us.**
>
> – A child in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)

This does not imply that children want adults to abdicate responsibility. For example, many participants recognised that younger children need more guidance than adolescents, that some risks require adult intervention, that they themselves are still learning. But overall, children expressed that they want to be partners in navigating their digital world, not passive recipients of adult decisions.

The gap between what adults think and children's lived realities online is not merely a communication problem to be solved with better information. It reflects deeper questions about how adults relate to children, how children's capacities are understood, and whether they are treated as rights-holders whose views matter, or as objects of adult concern whose perspectives are optional.

Chapter 5

Taking action: accountability and children's key asks



5.1 Barriers to reporting and help-seeking

Children were asked what made reporting difficult when something went wrong online. Their responses reveal a pattern that carries profound implications for the design of online safety systems, helplines and child protection responses and infrastructure: when children experience harm online, the systems intended to help them are often the last place they turn to.

Fear of consequences was the most frequently cited barrier across all regions, and the consequences many children fear were not from the perpetrator but from the adults who were supposed to help. Children in India described fearing that "if we share anything wrong with the parents, they might take away our mobile phones and our happy time". Children in Timor-Leste reported "fear that their phone will be confiscated by adults as a punishment". Children in Mongolia described being afraid of being blamed, not believed, judged by peers or punished by having their internet use restricted. Children in Brazil described the difficulty of reporting when facing threats or coercion. A child in Romania captured the emotional weight: "I'm afraid I'll be scolded, and I feel ashamed". And a child in India articulated a striking paradox: "Sometimes when something goes wrong, they don't blame the person that did it, they blame the person the wrong was done to". As a Romanian child said: "If something unpleasant happens online, I try to solve it myself because I'm afraid parents will be overprotective and stop me from using social media".

The pattern is consistent, and its implications are serious: children who experience some form of harm online frequently face a secondary harm when they seek help, including punishment, restriction or blame. This creates a rational calculus for children: managing the problem alone, however imperfectly, feels safer than seeking help and risking the consequences. The result is a hidden landscape of harm that remains largely invisible to parents, educators, platforms, helplines and policymakers alike.

Distrust that anything will change was equally prominent. Children across multiple countries described platform reporting as a waste of time – reporting systems that were complex and opaque – and feeling misunderstood or simply ignored by them. Children in Burundi stated: "We do not see any feedback whenever we ask questions. In addition, we do not know whom to report to or who is responsible". Children in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) felt that reporting processes had "been intentionally designed this way so that people feel less inclined to report". Children in Singapore noted: "Reporting doesn't work" and "They just make another account". Children in one multi-country workshop described the predefined categories in reporting forms as inadequate – the reason for their concern often didn't fit any available option. In another multi-country workshop, they reported observing racism and hate speech going unpunished, or with slight penalties, and described long response times and no transparency, with the children concluding that reporting was a waste of time. A child in Brazil described a further frustration: when platform reporting was handled by AI systems, "Sometimes you report something, the AI believes you reported it unnecessarily, and you're the one who ends up being affected".

Fear of consequences

Most cited

Not from the perpetrator, but from the adults that are supposed to help.

> *I'm afraid I'll be scolded, and I feel ashamed.*
>
> – A child from Romania

Distrust that anything will change

Reporting systems are complex and opaque with no visible feedback or result.

> *...been intentionally designed this way so that people feel less inclined to report.*
>
> – A child from the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)

Shame and embarrassment

Especially when incidents involve personal content, bullying within peer groups or sexual material.

> *Embarrassment or fear of shame, particularly if private content like images are involved.*
>
> – A child from Uganda

Fear of retaliation

Fear of retribution from those reported (Indonesia) and platforms notifying the reported person create a direct safety risk (Kenya).

Children in Canada offered a further dimension: they believed that reporting and moderation systems were now run by AI rather than humans, which reduced their confidence that reports would be meaningfully assessed. This perception, whether or not accurate in different cases or contexts, shapes children's willingness to seek help.

Shame and embarrassment also prevented reporting, particularly when incidents involved personal content, bullying within peer groups or sexual material. Children in Romania described "the shame of telling and people laughing at you". Children in Uganda noted that "embarrassment or fear of shame, particularly if private content, like images, is involved" inhibits disclosure. Fear of retaliation surfaced prominently in the Indonesia findings, where children described being afraid of retribution from those they reported. In Kenya, children noted that platforms notify the reported person, creating a direct safety risk: "that person might hack your account".

The cumulative effect is a system where many harms go unreported – invisible to adults, invisible to platforms, invisible to policymakers. Children manage problems privately, with varying degrees of success, while adults assume the relative absence of reports indicates the relative absence of problems, which, considering the foregoing analysis, is a potentially dangerous assumption. It strongly implies that the data on which online safety interventions are designed – including the integration of helplines, reporting tools and moderation systems – systematically underestimates the harms children actually experience online, because the children experiencing those harms have assumed or learned that reporting is unlikely to help, and may well make things worse for them.

For those designing safety systems, this points to a fundamental design challenge: reporting and help-seeking mechanisms cannot be effective if children fear the response as much as, or more than, the harm. The implication is not that reporting systems are unnecessary, but that they must be designed and embedded within a broader ecosystem of trust – one in which children believe that seeking help will lead to support rather than punishment, that their reporting will be taken seriously and acted on in a way that feels safe to them, and that the process will not expose them to any further risks in the form of blame, shame or punishment.

5.2 Who is responsible, and how?

Many children were clear that the responsibility for making digital environments safer does not rest primarily with them. They identified multiple actors and were specific about what each should do.

To technology companies, children's messages were direct and often indignant. One participant in a multi-country workshop wrote: "TAKE US SERIOUSLY. Tech companies only see us as merely a number. Our rights should be taken seriously, yet currently it is just being pushed aside". Many called for safety by design, that is, building protection into products from the outset rather than adding it on as an afterthought. They demanded simpler, more accessible privacy settings, more effective content moderation, and reporting systems that produce visible results. Many also called for being meaningfully consulted on the design of the rules, regulations and products that shape their digital lives. A child in Brazil delivered what may be the consultation's most compelling message to industry: "If you don't even let your own child use it because you know what it's capable of causing, why don't you have the same care for children all over the world?"

> **"TAKE US SERIOUSLY. Tech companies only see us as merely a number. Our rights should be taken seriously, yet currently it is just being pushed aside.**

To policymakers, some children asked for effective and enforceable legislation. For example, one participant wrote: "POLICE AND LAWMAKERS: laws without enforcement are just suggestions – create authorities with real power and resources to act". Children in Brazil called for "a universal law, one that works in all countries and not just in one country, and that truly works, not just in writing". Children in Uganda called for tech companies to "open offices here so we can report problems easily, and policymakers should enforce strict laws to protect us online". Children in Timor-Leste asked for "cheaper internet for students".

> **"POLICE AND LAWMAKERS: laws without enforcement are just suggestions – create authorities with real power and resources to act.**

To parents or caregivers and teachers, children often asked for less punishment and more dialogue, less surveillance and more guidance, less assumption and more listening. They asked parents to respect their boundaries while remaining available for support: "Don't scold, talk properly", as a child in Singapore put it. They asked teachers to integrate digital literacy rather than simply banning devices. They asked parents to model the digital behaviour they expect from their children. And, notably, they wrote:

> **PARENTS: Ask permission before posting photos of us.**

5.3 Children's hopes for change

Children's hopes for change are neither vague nor unrealistic. Many of the children consulted expressed their desire for platforms designed with their safety, privacy and wellbeing as foundational principles rather than add-on features. They want to be consulted in the decisions that affect their digital lives. And they want adults to understand that the digital world is not separate from the "real" world, but has become a fundamental dimension of their experience of childhood. Having been made aware of their rights in the digital world, children want the rights they are entitled to under the UNCRC to be implemented, not merely affirmed.

> **I would like to tell Big Tech not to see us, the users, especially young people and children, as statistics, but as human beings.**
>
> – A young person in Brazil in a message to both industry and the UN

5.4 Children's reflections on participating in the consultation

The consultation workshops concluded by asking children to reflect on their experience of participating. Their responses suggest that the process itself held value beyond the information gathered. Children described feeling heard, usually for the first time, on these issues. Children in Ecuador reported feeling "happy" and "listened to" in a space that felt safe for sharing. Children in Romania observed that participation helped them "understand more about technology" and "learn about other perspectives regarding my rights on the internet".

"This workshop made me realise that I'm not alone and everyone else goes through the same things online.

– A child from India

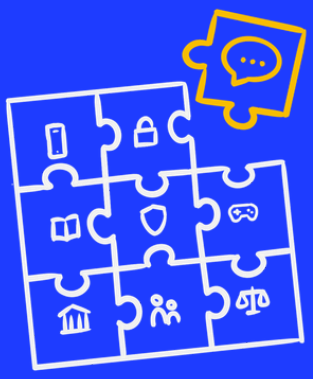
Children across multiple countries described the experience as valuable and empowering, and appreciated having the opportunity to share their views. A child in Uganda observed: "It feels good to have our voices heard. Policies shouldn't just be made by planners; they should include what children experience online".

For many, the consultation was their first encounter with the concept of their rights in the digital world. Learning that international standards exist – that their experiences connect to recognised legal frameworks – appeared to be meaningful to many. A child in Romania noted "I learned that we have rights" as a key takeaway. Children in India described planning to "share all the information that I got from this workshop to everyone".

Children also offered feedback on improving future consultations. Children in Kenya suggested reaching more children through social media platforms directly rather than only through organised groups. Some noted that online formats, while enabling broad participation, were less engaging than in-person discussion. These observations can help inform the design of subsequent child participation processes. The process reflected that children's experiences of participating – being asked, listened to and taken seriously – is itself significant, and that consulting children is not only a means of gathering information, but a form of recognition that their views matter.

Chapter 6

Conclusions and the way forward



6.1 What children have told us

Across the 32 countries and vastly different circumstances, one finding stands out above all others: children are able and willing to participate in the decisions that shape their digital lives – but the systems, institutions and adults around them usually do not create meaningful opportunities or spaces for them to do so.

This consultation has produced a body of evidence that speaks to the depth and urgency of children's experiences in the digital environment. Five years after the adoption of General comment No. 25, digital technology is deeply integrated into children's lives, generating both significant opportunities and serious cause for concern, often simultaneously. Children are active, critical agents – not passive recipients of content. AI has entered their lives at an unanticipated scale, raising new questions about their safety, empowerment, emotional wellbeing and the adequacy of existing protections. The gap between the rights children are entitled to under the UNCRC and their lived realities online is substantial, particularly in relation to their safety, privacy, agency and equitable access. Current safety measures and reporting mechanisms are widely perceived by children as ineffective, inaccessible or counterproductive. And the adults who make decisions about children's digital environments, such as parents, teachers, platform designers and policymakers, frequently act on incomplete or inaccurate understandings of what children actually think and experience.

These findings invite comparison with the children's consultation that informed the drafting of General comment No. 25: in 2019, 709 children in 27 countries told researchers that they valued digital technology for communication, learning and self-expression, but were frustrated by unsafe conditions, lack of privacy, barriers to access and their exclusion from the decisions that shaped their digital lives.[29] The continuities across the five years that separate these two consultations are striking. Children still call for access as a precondition for the enjoyment of their rights. They still call for privacy that is meaningful rather than nominal. They still describe being excluded from the decisions that shape their digital lives. They still report a perception gap with the adults around them. What has changed is the addition of AI – a technology

entirely absent from the 2019 data – and a governance landscape that has accelerated substantially, with the Global Digital Compact, the Joint statement on Artificial Intelligence and the Rights of the Child and mounting national regulation. Whether that governance acceleration is translating into better outcomes for children is precisely what this consultation tests. The answer, across both reports, is that implementation and accountability lag far behind what children's rights demand.

Another change, is that children are asking what is wrong with the product itself, including identifying and articulating the potential harms of algorithmic recommendation systems, short-form videos, advertising, loot boxes, monetisation of children's data and designs that "keep you scrolling".

Age assurance was also a theme, with children reflecting critically on age-verification systems, age-appropriate design and age-gated access. Where social media bans and other age-based restrictions were discussed, children predicted circumvention and identified ways in which restrictions may affect their rights.

The proliferation of educational technologies following the COVID-19 pandemic was also evident in 2026, with children globally experiencing increasingly technology-saturated and technology-dependent learning environments, bringing new challenges and impacts on children's rights across all domains of life and development.

Perhaps most critically, when children experience harm online, they often do not seek help – deterred by fear of punishment, distrust that reporting will make a difference, shame and the rational calculation that disclosing a problem is likely to make their situation worse rather than better. This finding has direct implications for the design and effectiveness of online safety frameworks, helplines and reporting mechanisms, which are premised on children being willing and able to come forward.

6.2 Policy tensions

The views and experiences children expressed through this consultation surface policy tensions that demand careful, rights-based analysis rather than simple solutions. These tensions run through the current regulatory and design debates shaping children's digital environments, and children's lived experiences offer essential grounding for navigating them.

The tension between protecting children from online harms and preserving their access to the benefits and connections that digital environments provide is perhaps the most fundamental. Many children expressed that they want both – safety from harms and adverse experiences online, and the ability to continue learning, connecting and expressing themselves in digital spaces. Approaches that sacrifice one for the other would fail those expectations. Age-based restrictions for teens to access social media, for instance, may protect some younger children

from inappropriate content, while excluding older adolescents from communities, information and support that are important to their development and wellbeing. The principle of evolving capacities, enshrined in Article 5 of the UNCRC, demands approaches that adjust to the developmental reality of individual children rather than imposing uniform restrictions based on age alone.

Privacy and safety exist in tension when monitoring and surveillance are treated as synonymous with protection. Children's inputs consistently suggest that excessive monitoring drives behaviour underground, eroding trust and reducing the likelihood that children will seek help when they need it. Effective child protection in the digital environment requires approaches that respect children's right to privacy while ensuring effective safeguards against exploitation and harm.

The tension between punitive and supportive responses to online harm emerged as particularly consequential. Current online safety approaches – from platform reporting systems to parental responses to school policies – often appear to function in ways that children experience as punitive and ineffective. The evidence from this consultation suggests that punitive responses do not make children safer; rather, they silence children. Any safety framework that relies on children reporting harm must grapple with the evidence that children assume, or have learned from experience, that reporting is more likely to result in punishment or adverse consequences than in the type of help they feel they need. This has direct implications for how helplines are integrated into online safety ecosystems, how platform reporting mechanisms are designed, and how parents and educators are supported to respond constructively when children come to them with concerns.

AI presents a new and distinct tension. Many children are turning to AI chatbots for emotional support, health advice and relationship guidance – often because, for different reasons, they feel unable or less willing to access human support. This is not simply a technology issue, and reflects gaps in the support systems around children, and the accessibility or adequacy of their human relationships. Yet the AI systems many are turning towards are not designed with children in mind, and the safety-related information from this consultation demonstrates that these systems can cause real harm, including significant minorities of children encountering self-harm content, violence-related responses and risky health advice from chatbots. The challenge for policymakers and companies is to ensure that AI systems are made safe for the many children who already access them, while strengthening the human support systems that children need.

The best interests of the child, as a primary consideration in all actions concerning children under Article 3 of the UNCRC, along with Article 12 on children's right to be heard, require decision-makers to undertake a rigorous, holistic assessment that gives due weight to children's views while also considering their safety, development and wellbeing. This consultation presents what children told us, and – within the broader framework that the Convention provides – has clear implications for integrating their perspectives into policy responses.

6.3 From consultation to sustained participation

Meaningful child participation in digital governance requires sustained mechanisms. Children need ongoing opportunities to contribute to policy development as technologies evolve, to engage with decision-makers, and to hold adults accountable for commitments made.

The findings in this report underscore why technology companies, policymakers and all organisations working on digital governance should make meaningful consultation with children a standard practice rather than a dispensable exception, consistent with children's right to be heard under Article 12 of the UNCRC and the Committee on the Rights of the Child's General comment No. 12. This means budgeting and allocating time and resources, building child-friendly participation mechanisms into governance structures, and actively reaching children whose voices are often excluded – including younger children, children with disabilities and children living in poverty, or in rural or remote areas. Adults should demonstrate how children's input has influenced decisions and provide feedback to those who participated.

6.4 Recommendations and opportunities for action

The findings in this report create specific opportunities for action.

For policymakers & regulators

- ☐ Embed children's rights by design and default across the product lifecycle.
- ☐ Establish mandatory child-rights impact assessments (CRIAs).
- ☐ Require high privacy and age-appropriate settings.
- ☐ Set out design standards consistent with General comments No. 16 and 25, as well as the Global Digital Compact.
- ☐ Invest in digital infrastructure to address the access barriers many children face.

For tech companies

- ☐ Respect children's rights throughout the design and development of digital products.
- ☐ Assess the impact on children's rights before products are launched and throughout their lifecycles.
- ☐ Ensure products and services are safe by design.
- ☐ Redesign reporting systems to be accessible, responsive and visibly effective.
- ☐ Ensure children have genuine influence over design decisions.

For caregivers & educators

- ☐ Build a relationship based on trust.
- ☐ Avoid punitive responses such as confiscating devices and restricting access.
- ☐ Create room for dialogue and guidance that builds on children's own judgement.
- ☐ Create a protective environment for children rather than a restrictive one.

For policymakers and regulators

For policymakers and regulators, children's perspectives provide an evidence base for legislation on online safety, data protection and AI governance, grounded in their lived experiences rather than limited to adult assumptions.

- The problems children identified most consistently originate in the design choices, default settings and business models of digital products and services rather than in children's own conduct. Children's testimony therefore points to regulation that moves responsibility away from children and parents or caregivers towards the States and businesses that shape the digital environment, and that requires children's rights to be embedded by design and by default across the product lifecycle, including through mandatory child rights impact assessments (CRIAs), high-privacy and age-appropriate default settings, and design standards consistent with General comments No. 16 and 25, as well as the Global Digital Compact. Reporting mechanisms and content moderation remain necessary, but they cannot compensate for products that are unsafe or rights-infringing by design.
- The evidence on children's reluctance to report – and the reasons behind it – should inform the design of reporting systems, helpline integration and safety frameworks to ensure they account for the reality that children tend not to use mechanisms or tools that they do not trust the responses or outcomes of.
- The evidence on AI safety, in relation to the growing population of children who use chatbots, largely unsupervised, the inadequacy of current safety filters, and their concerning exposure to potentially harmful AI-generated content calls for urgent regulatory attention to the AI systems that children are already using. Moreover, investment in the digital infrastructure required to address the access barriers that many children identify among their top concerns is essential to upholding their rights.

For technology companies

For technology companies, children's most consistent critique – that their safety was treated as an afterthought rather than a foundation – points to a clear design imperative.

- Companies' responsibility to respect children's rights applies throughout the design and development of digital products and services, not only once harm has occurred. This means assessing the impact on children's rights before products are launched as well as throughout their lifecycles. It means setting defaults that serve children's best interests rather than engagement metrics, and ensuring that services and products are safe by design.
- Reporting systems that children describe as futile should not be the primary means of respecting children's rights, and need to be redesigned to be accessible, responsive and visibly effective – and critically, they must ensure that children who report feel safeguarded from negative consequences as a result.
- Manipulative design features that exploit children's attention and undermine their agency are incompatible with a rights-based approach to product development.

- Meaningful consultation with children, in which they are invited and empowered to have a genuine influence over design decisions, is both a rights obligation and a source of insight that can be critically informative for designers.

For parents or caregivers and educators

For parents or caregivers and educators, the message from children is not that adults should step back, but that they should engage differently. The evidence is clear: when children feel that they can trust the adults around them, they are more likely to seek help when they need it.

- Punitive responses to online harm, such as confiscating devices, restricting access or blaming the child, tend to shut down the communication that their safety depends on. These findings imply that trust, dialogue and guidance that builds children's own judgement can be more protective than surveillance and restriction.

6.5 Children's hopes

Children in this consultation expressed their wish for what General comment No. 25 promised to become a reality: digital environments where their rights would be respected, protected and fulfilled. They hope for digital products and services built with their safety and wellbeing as foundational principles, for meaningful consultation on the decisions that shape their digital lives, because their views matter, and for adults to recognise that their digital world is not separate from their "real" world, as – for many – it is already a fundamental dimension of their experience of childhood.

The children who participated have done their part. They have shared their experiences, analysed complex tensions and articulated their recommendations. They took time from their lives to participate in these discussions, trusting that their contributions would matter. That trust creates a level of obligation, to bring the findings reflected here into the policy processes, design decisions and regulatory debates where they can eventually make a concrete difference in children's lives.

The question is no longer whether or not children have something to contribute. This report demonstrates that they do. The question, rather, is whether the institutions and individuals with the power to act will create the conditions for their contribution to matter.

Endnotes

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Annexes

Annex A

Methodology

1. Workshop methodology

The findings in this report were developed through thematic synthesis of submissions from 38 workshops and complementary research contributions from research partners across 32 countries, and include the inputs of 545 children and young people.

The two-hour structured workshops followed a five-activity structure designed to move children from grounding in their everyday digital lives through rights-based reflection to forward-looking accountability. Activity 1 introduced the project, children's rights and General comment No. 25. Activity 2 explored children's digital lives, devices, digital products and services, and patterns of use. Activity 3 – the core analytical activity – asked children to reflect on eight Child Rights by Design principles and select four for deeper discussion. Activity 4 invited the children to identify what adults misunderstand about their digital lives. Activity 5 explored barriers to reporting, responsibility and children's messages for change. Workshops were conducted both in-person and online, with adapted formats for each modality. The full methodology is available in the workshop manual.

The 11 Child Rights by Design principles mapped against the UNCRC and General comment No. 25

Principle	UNCRC Article	General comment No. 25 paragraphs	Rights the principle draws on
1. Equity and diversity	2, 9-11, 18, 20-23, 25, 27, 30, 35, 37, 38, 40	9-11, 87, 114-122	Non-discrimination; family and alternative care; special protection measures
2. Best interests	3(1)	12, 13, 88	Best interests as a primary consideration
3. Consultation	12	16-18	Right to be heard
4. Age appropriate	5, 18	15, 19-21, 84-86	Evolving capacities; parental responsibility and State support to parents or caregivers
5. Responsible	4, 42	22-27, 33, 35-39, 43-49, 123, 124	General measures of implementation; making the Convention known; remedy
6. Participation	7, 8, 13-15, 17	50-66, 79	Expression, thought, association, information access, identity
7. Privacy	16	67-78	Privacy and data protection
8. Safety	19, 34, 39	80-83	Protection from violence and sexual exploitation; recovery
9. Wellbeing	6, 23, 24, 26, 27, 33	14, 89-98	Life and development; disability; health; standard of living; protection from substance abuse
10. Development	28-31	99-111	Education, culture, play and leisure
11. Agency	32, 36	40-42, 112, 113	Protection from economic and other exploitation

2. Analysis and report drafting

The data analysis and first draft report was carried out by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC). The analytical approach followed the workshop structure, organising findings according to the activities children were asked to complete, while grouping the eight Child Rights by Design principles into four thematic pairs that reflect how the children themselves discussed and prioritised them: safety and wellbeing; privacy and agency; equity, participation and inclusion; and development and age-appropriate design. Cross-cutting policy tensions are woven through the thematic sections and drawn together in the conclusions, including on best interests, age assurance, evolving capacities and the role of parents or caregivers.

The analysis was qualitative, based on thematic synthesis rather than coding. It involved close reading of all partner submissions, identification of recurring themes and patterns, noting variations by context, age and region, the selection of illustrative quotes, triangulation across workshops, and assessment within the normative framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and General comment No. 25. The Save the Children survey data from South Korea was handled as a complementary evidence base to inform the chapter on AI and is clearly identified in the text.

Attribution

Data collection was carried out by research partners. Data analysis was led by the OHCHR. Workshop methodology development was led by the DFC, with contributions from the OHCHR and 5Rights Foundation. Partnership coordination was co-led by the OHCHR and DFC.

Annex B

Partner organisations and countries

The consultation was conducted with the following research partners (listed alphabetically, by country):

Brazil	Alana; Andreia Cristina Correia (independent practitioner)
Burundi	World Vision International Burundi
Cambodia	Child Rights Coalition Cambodia (CRC-Cambodia)
Canada	McGill University
Chile	Centre for the Well-being of Adolescents and Children in the Digital Age
Ecuador	ChildFund International Ecuador; Fundación Datalat / Consorcio Alza Tu Voz
Greece (online)	Network for Children's Rights
India	Times School of Media, Bennett University
Indonesia (online)	Indonesian Child Protection Commission
Kenya	Amnesty International; Mtoto News
Mongolia	World Vision International Mongolia
Romania	Asociația Techsoup
Singapore	Kids PlaySafer
South Korea	Save the Children
Timor-Leste	World Vision Timor-Leste
Uganda	Online Safety Foundation Uganda (OSFU)
The United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)	Children's Law Centre

Multi-country (online)	Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC) / 5Rights Foundation – participants from Belgium, Canada, Chile, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Jamaica, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Portugal, UK, USA
Multi-country (online)	World Vision South Asia and Pacific Regional Office – participants from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines and Sri Lanka
Multi-country (online)	Amnesty International – participants from Taiwan and Palestine

Annex C

Participant demographics

Total workshop participants	545 children and young people across 32 countries.
Complementary survey (Save the Children)	429 respondents in South Korea.
Age range	8–18, with the majority aged 10–17. The Save the Children survey data included respondents up to age 18, consistent with South Korea's legal definition of a "child".
Gender	Balanced representation across the workshops where reported. The Save the Children survey included both male and female respondents.
Geographic distribution	Urban, peri-urban and regional settings across Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe. Some workshops reached children in rural areas (Cambodia, Canada, Kenya and Mongolia).
Socioeconomic diversity	Varied, ranging from middle-income urban settings to lower-income communities. Some workshops specifically included children from marginalised backgrounds. The consultation's reach was limited by the requirement for digital access and, in some cases, familiarity with online services (e.g., applications, social media providers etc.).
Languages	Workshops were conducted in Arabic, English, French, Indonesian, Khmer, Korean, Mongolian, Romanian, Spanish, Tetun, among others.
Neurodiversity	At least one workshop (in São Paulo, Brazil) was specifically conducted with neurodivergent children, including participants on the autism spectrum and children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

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