# ChildFund Brief:
# Online Safety for Children



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**Alliance**

# ChildFund Alliance

Eleven child-focused development agencies are part of the global ChildFund Alliance network, which helps children and their families overcome poverty and the underlying conditions that prevent children from reaching their full potential.

Together we reach nearly 23 million children and family members in 70 countries. Members work to end violence and exploitation against children; provide expertise in emergencies and disasters to ease the harmful impact on children and their communities; and engage children, families and communities to create lasting change.

Our commitment, resources, innovation, knowledge and expertise serve as a powerful force to transform the lives of children around the world.

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ChildFund Alliance
545 Fifth Avenue
Suite 1402
New York, NY 10017

+1.212.697.0859
info@childfundalliance.org
childfundalliance.org

Image opposite: Through ChildFund International, Gisella, age 14, in Ecuador has received a tablet which allows her to undertake online studies at home.

# Contents

# Creating a better digital world with children

**One in three internet users today is under the age of 18[1], and every day more than 200,000 children go online for the first time.**

More than 800 million children actively use social media.[2] In WeProtect Global Alliance's Global Threat Assessment 2021, 54% of respondents (aged 18-20 years, 57% girls, 48% boys) had experienced at least one online sexual harm during childhood.

The online world has dramatically transformed in the last decade and even more so during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Changes have increasingly pushed children and their parents online[3] in search of education, information, employment, social connections, recreation, sport, and even health advice.
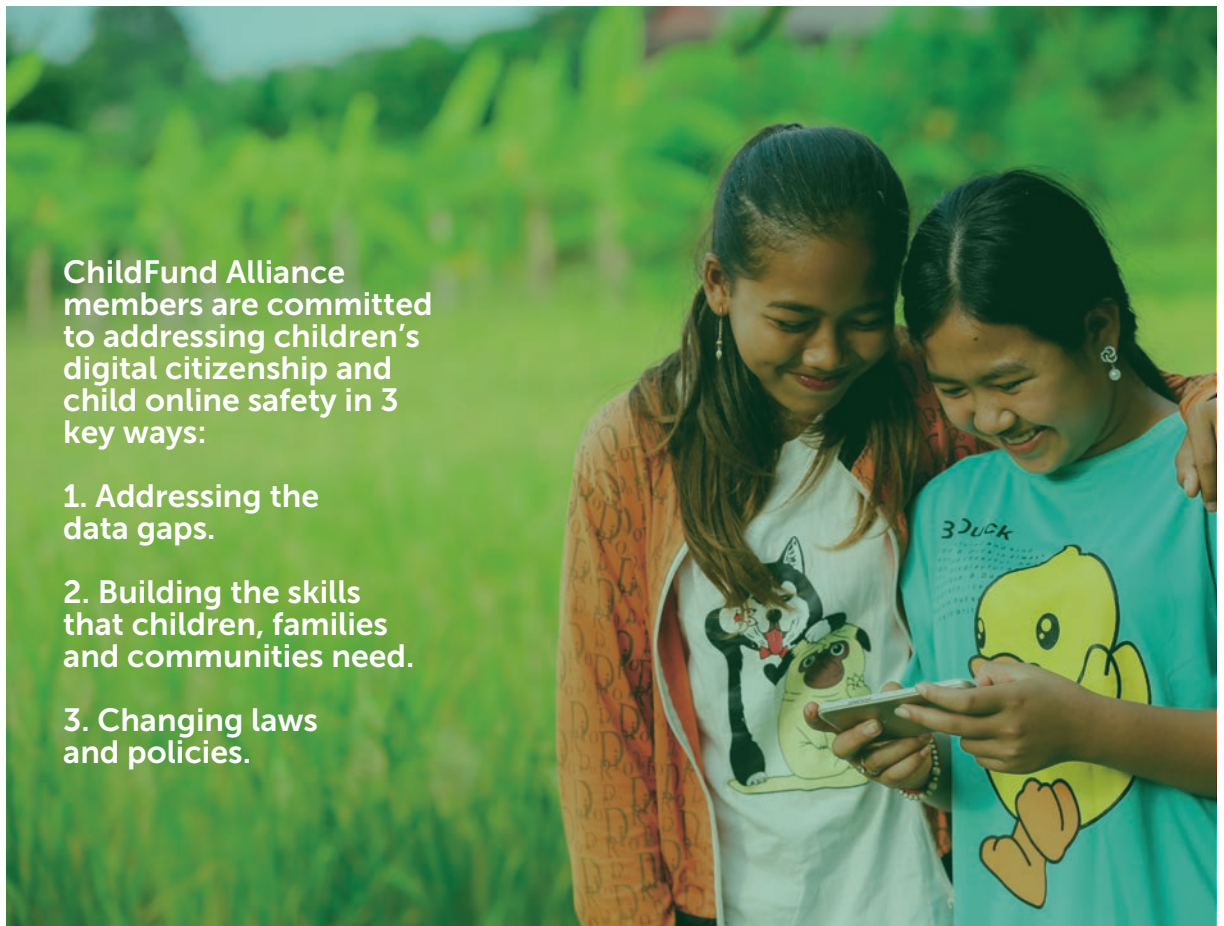
Unfortunately, children are often ill-equipped to address potential risks and threats, or to fully realize the opportunities and activities that exist in the digital space.[4]

This reality makes clear that addressing online safety and digital citizenship needs to be part of day-to-day development programming. In countries where safety nets, laws and policies, and corporate oversight are the weakest, the most vulnerable have the greatest need of protection.

They also are most at need for the knowledge and skills to navigate online systems safely.

To address these needs, ChildFund Alliance members committed to member programming through a unified campaign, *WEB Safe & Wise: Creating a better digital world with children*.

The campaign seeks to improve protections for children from online threats, including sexual exploitation and abuse, while also helping them learn to safely navigate the digital world.



**ChildFund Alliance members are committed to addressing children's digital citizenship and child online safety in 3 key ways:**

**1. Addressing the data gaps.**

**2. Building the skills that children, families and communities need.**

**3. Changing laws and policies.**

In Cambodia, ChildFund Australia is helping young people navigate the online world safely

# 1. Addressing the data gaps

There is increasing research regarding online safety needs for children in the developing world. However, there remains a huge gap between understanding their online experiences versus the threats they face.

Equally challenging is identifying the most effective practices and understanding the needs of children and their trusted adults to ensure they are safe and confident online. In response, ChildFund Alliance members have been conducting research to gain insights as well as to highlight these gaps in information. For example, there are still many needs for research in the Latin America region, as well as detailed research on the risks faced by children with disabilities.[5]

As with most ChildFund Alliance initiatives, the participation of children and young people is a key component of our online safety work. Here are some of the things that children and their families have been telling us.

## Who gets access to technology?

Although phone ownership and networks are increasing in many countries, gender plays a part in access. For example, research in Bangladesh[6] showed 63% of male respondents versus only 32% of female respondents owned their own device.

Gender also plays its part in the risks children face. The Bangladesh research showed an average of 5-11 percentage points' difference between boys and girls relating to different harmful experiences using the internet, with boys facing greater abuse. However, due to the many barriers to access devices, girls had much lower digital skills than boys did. Similar gendered results were found in ChildFund Korea's research in Cambodia[7]: 43% of all respondents perceived that boys were experiencing additional protection-related risks because of COVID-19, and 36% perceived the same for girls, suggesting an increase in risks during the pandemic.

Nonetheless, the recently published *Disrupting Harm* research[8] notes that girls and boys face abuse online in fairly equal proportions.[9] Children with disabilities face increased online abuse, with ChildFund International's research in the Philippines finding that deaf and hard of hearing children had higher levels of use of mobile phones and the internet, and physically disabled children in particular had more exposure to online abuse.

## Parents also struggle with new technology

Co-authored research by ChildFund Australia conducted across the Pacific Islands found that parents expressed concerns about monitoring children's online use and perceived their children as more technologically adept than them.[10] This type of finding surfaced in many other research studies across the globe.

## Children don't know where to get reliable information and ask their peers first

It's important to research problems and design solutions *with* children because children often default to asking their peers for advice, in part because they perceive parents as unable to lend support. When parents increase their digital skills, children increasingly talk to them (e.g., an 11.7% difference in the final evaluation of the Swipe Safe project in Vietnam). In the *Disrupting Harm*[11] research (funded by the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children) conducted across 13 countries, 65% of children said they would talk to their friends first, and less than 3% indicated that they had contacted professionals/helplines after experiencing abuse.

# 2. Building the skills that children, families, and communities need

ChildFund Alliance members across the globe are developing training tools and materials to support children, their parents and caregivers, and key community stakeholders to act safely and confidently online.

These resources and programs are developed with the participation of the key target groups, especially children, to make sure they are relevant to the challenges they face and the ways they learn and act online.

In Korea, for example, child participants helped develop a digital citizenship education program. Called Good Online Life for Children, the program was rolled out for teachers with teaching materials and expert inputs. It started at two pilot schools and later expanded to a wider audience. To date, the project has reached more than 12,000 people with strong positive feedback from children and teachers.

Schools are an important entry point for raising awareness and teaching children about online safety and digital citizenship. In Vietnam, ChildFund Australia developed a pilot project Swipe Safe that has been evaluated and developed for further extension into a new regional project across Cambodia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste.

A language lab in Ethiopia, supported by ChildFund International, gives girls like Finote the chance to improve their English skills

## SWIPE SAFE: Empowering children and youth, their parents and communities with core competencies to be safe online

**The Swipe Safe project was developed in Vietnam by ChildFund Australia and funded by the End Violence Fund.**

From 2017-2020, the project developed curriculum and training materials for use with children and young people, parents, teachers and in the Vietnamese context, internet café providers.

It is a key part of the country's ongoing child protection programming and is designed to help children and young people identify core risks online and to understand how to navigate the digital environment safely.

Results from the pilot were encouraging[12], reaching 13,748 young people (aged 11-18), 3,352 parents, 686 teachers, 210 Youth Union members and 70 internet café owners with significant improvements in children and youth's knowledge and their capacity to take steps for their own protection.

Engagement from parents, teachers, and other appropriate adults increased as a result of the project, with adults also indicating changes in knowledge and behavior to support young people to be safe online.

Based on an evaluation and feedback from stakeholders, a second phase was developed and is being implemented from 2022–2025 with funding from the Australian government.

This further strengthens features such as advocacy, youth/peer facilitation, and participation and partnerships with technical experts and commercial stakeholders.



Diep and her brother Du use the computers at their school in Vietnam, which is supported by ChildFund Australia

Key messages include:

**PUBLIC:** Any information you post or share online, even if you do it privately, has the possibility to be shared or accessed.
**PERMANENT:** Whatever we post on the internet will remain on the internet forever.
**CONNECTIONS:** The internet allows us to connect with people all over the world, but not everyone is trustworthy.
**ANONYMITY:** The internet means that people online can hide who they are. Some people might do this to harm or take advantage of someone.
**SOURCES OF INFORMATION:** We have access to a lot of information, but it is important to think about whether it is accurate and reliable.
**RESPECT:** When engaging via our screens, we can forget that we are connecting with other people. It is important to be respectful to others, and ourselves.

## SWIPE SAFE: The App

ChildFund Australia is developing an app for use by children and youth to educate themselves to be safe online. Based on a gaming approach, each child can choose their own learning pathway.

Research conducted by the team demonstrated that children need to apply the skills to real scenarios to acquire the safety knowledge, so children practice the skills by doing and getting instant feedback on their learning. This is particularly important in developing country contexts where children may be going online for the first time and experience is acquired in un-supervised situations using adults' devices (with adult settings and materials).

The Swipe Safe App will be rolled out in eight countries with strong potential to be scaled for use in other countries and languages, through a systematic localization process developed in partnership with tech company S1T2, participating countries, and informed by research from Western Sydney University.

The localization process includes a phase of participatory research with children and young people and then testing with youth peer facilitators and users to ensure relevance to the specific country and community context.

# 3. Changing laws and policies

With a long history of working with the formal child protection and education systems in countries, ChildFund Alliance members have well-established mechanisms to work with country-based civil society networks, local government, and national ministries to revise policies and laws to address online safety for children.

Many of the basic elements of a child protection system are key to protecting children online as well as offline. We also know that children must be supported to be agents of their own protection.

As ChildFund Alliance members are well-embedded in their national child protection systems, they are well-placed to tackle online child sexual exploitation and abuse and call for changed laws, policies, and practices. In particular, the community presence of ChildFund members and their local partners allows them to work with local governments and other community-based organizations to tackle issues at the grassroots level and take those insights to national networks for advocacy.

The nature of online abuse is constantly evolving. For example, during COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, particular forms of child abuse increased rapidly, such as a 77% surge in child self-generated child sexual abuse material (from 2019 to 2020).[13]

In the Philippines, citing data from the US-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), the Office of Cybercrime of the Department of Justice reported a 264.6% increase in the number of online sexual exploitation and abuse of children (OSEAC) cases. These were reported during the imposition of an enhanced community quarantine from March to May 2020, compared to the same period the previous year.

Empowering children and youth and their families and communities to make better informed choices about their online behaviors is therefore critical and urgent.

Similarly, by integrating child online safety work with ongoing engagement from education stakeholders, ChildFund Alliance members are well-positioned to support teachers, school management, and local and national education authorities to build children's digital citizenship skills.

As well as potentially mainstreaming awareness-raising tools, ChildFund Alliance members are working with governments, NGO networks and other key stakeholders to identify critical changes that will improve the quality of education and protection policies and practice around child online safety. This has led to several new policies:

## New Policies to Drive Change

- Guatemala: Initiative on Sexual Cybercrimes against Children now outlaws online grooming and sextortion.

- Indonesia: The Law on Sexual Violence (May, 2022) tackles 19 forms of sexual violence including electronics-based sexual crimes (e.g., non-consensual video recording) and electronics-based sexual crimes with the intention of misleading, misdirecting, or defrauding the victim.

- Kenya Children's Act 2022 protects children from any form of "online abuse, harassment or exploitation, including cyberbullying, grooming, transmission of obscene materials and cyber-stalking."

- Philippines Republic Act 11930 expands the definition of criminal acts including the live streaming of sexual abuse, and the production, sale, and distribution of child sexual abuse materials.

## Advocacy in Action

In Ecuador, ChildFund Alliance member ChildFund International-USA has been working on pilot projects in coordination with the Ministry of Education, National Council for Intergenerational Equality, Inter-American Children's Institute (IIN), and local networks to provide and test training for teachers and children in 15 pilot schools (see image on right).

Research outputs are expected in early 2023, which will inform policy and practice for further uptake by the Ecuadorian government.

# What can you do?

→ Engage with our campaign – partner with us for advocacy.

→ Fund multi-member/country child-participatory research to inform effective policy and programming.

→ Support country-based programs using evidence-based approaches (or testing approaches).

→ Support the scale up and use of the Swipe Safe App in new countries.

→ Fund children-led activities, for example ChildFund Alliance's WEB Safe & Wise Children's Advisory Council.

# Notes

1. Issue and Response, Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children: www.end-violence.org/node/7939

2. ibid

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4. Web Safe & Wise Policy Brief, ChildFund Alliance:
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5. Intelligence briefing 2021: The sexual exploitation and abuse of deaf and disabled children online, DeafKidz International, We Protect Global Alliance, World Childhood Foundation:
www.weprotect.org/library/sexual-exploitation-abuse-deaf-disabled-children-online

6. Assessment of digital literacy in adults and children – Regarding Online Safety to Protect Children from Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in Selected Region of Bangladesh 2021, ChildFund Korea, Educo, Inspira Consulting.

7. OSEC research: Online Safety for Children in Digital Environments during Covid 19 Outbreak 2021, ChildFund Cambodia, ChildFund Korea

8. Disrupting Harm, ECPAT International, Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, INTERPOL, UNICEF:
www.end-violence.org/disrupting-harm

9. Disrupting Harm Data Insight 1 – Children's Experiences of Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in 12 Countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia, Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti: www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/DH-data-insight-1_Final%281%29.pdf

10. Online Safety in the Pacific, ChildFund Australia, Plan International, Young & Resilient Research Centre Western Sydney University: www.childfund.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Online-Safety-in-the-Pacific.pdf

11. Disrupting Harm Data Insight 2 – Children's Disclosures of Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse 2022, ECPAT International, Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti:
www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/DH-data-insight-2_FinalB%282%29.pdf

12. The project was carried out in 37 secondary and high schools in 6 cities and districts of 3 provinces, ChildFund Australia Endline Evaluation.

13. Global Threat Assessment 2021, WeProtect Global Alliance: www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/#report

Marisol, age 20, lives in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Through ChildFund International's online safety programs, young people are provided with resources and tools so they understand and can protect their digital rights.

Lao children learning to use technology as part of
ChildFund Australia's education programs

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**Every child deserves to live a life free from violence.**