

Every Day Needs to be a Safer Internet Day for Children

Meg Gardinier and Guillaume Landry

In an era defined by the rapid expansion of digital technologies, children find themselves navigating an increasingly complex online world. The consequences of this rapid evolution, and the lack of a robust protection framework, are significant and pose unprecedented threats to children. Among these are sexual exploitation and abuse and child sex trafficking. Alarming, new forms of abuse, such as AI-generated imagery and [financial sexual extortion](#), are drastically on the rise, with dreadful consequences including child suicide.

An estimated [750,000 individuals](#) are looking to connect with children online for sexual purposes at any one time—whether on social media, online gaming sites, or via email. Reports of online child sexual abuse material (CSAM) have increased [15,000% over the last 15 years](#). The Disrupting Harm research, led by ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF, revealed [as many as 20% of children](#) in some countries were subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online in 2021. In 2022, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) analyzed over 32 million reports of CSAM received from across the globe and reported [an 87% increase](#) from 2019. Last year, 9 in 10 victims were between the ages of 3 and 12 years.

Protecting children from online harms must be a global priority across all sectors. In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child coincided with the release of source code for the world's first web browser. In the more than three decades since, children's internet use has become ubiquitous, with children comprising an estimated [one-third of internet users](#) worldwide. Each day, more than [175,000 children go online](#) for the first time.

Today, the advancement of [WEB3](#)—a decentralized online ecosystem utilizing emerging technologies like AI and virtual reality—poses additional security risks due to the absence of oversight mechanisms, defined jurisdictional responsibilities, and clear accountability structures. Only a small number of countries, however, have legislation specifically addressing children's digital safety, leaving the majority of children vulnerable to various forms of online abuse.

Findings from a survey of children across the world, #MyVoiceMySafety, revealed that 8 in 10 young people, ages 7-18, think it is likely or very likely children will experience harm online. Children reported feeling safest in private messaging apps and least safe in social media platforms. The survey also suggests children are generally not aware that individuals *they know* can pose a *greater risk* to them than strangers online.

In the recent [Scale of Harm](#) report by the International Justice Mission (IJM), researchers found nearly half a million Filipino children in 2022 were trafficked online via live streaming, often by relatives or people they know in order to produce child sexual exploitation material. In fact, the Philippines is identified by UNICEF and the IJM as the [center of child sex abuse materials production](#). According to the IJM, this crisis, embedded in complex social structures, reveals that in some cases, mothers, influenced by a myriad of factors, are involved in the perpetration.

Child safety by design, child rights due diligence, and regulatory frameworks compliant with the highest standards of ethics, privacy and safety of children are needed more than ever. For this to happen, different sectors need to work together with the best interest of children as a guiding principle and legal frameworks must be stronger while maintaining a balance that respects the rights of all users.

The gap in legal protections and industry regulation reinforces the need for concerted efforts to prioritize the safety of our youngest digital citizens for whom online engagement rapidly expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Life online is the new normal for children for educational, civic, as well as socialization reasons. It is crucial therefore for children to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their digital activities and understand how to identify and report harmful content. Adults, parents and caregivers need to foster open communication, learn to keep up with their more tech-savvy children, and understand that children are not responsible for protecting themselves from people who seek to harm them online.

Child rights and child protection advocates are hard at work to develop resources and tools to [counter online threats to children](#) and help them [safely navigate the internet](#), as well as raise awareness through programs such as ChildFund's WEB Safe & Wise initiative. Fortunately, there are many organizations, including [law enforcement entities](#) and [support organizations](#) working to prevent and mitigate these horrific harms against children. The work of these organizations, however, do not replace a strong legal framework.

Further, adults need to recognize that young people are powerful agents of change who must be involved in all stages of the process—from identifying the problems all the way through to implementing solutions to further protect children online. With their active participation, we can shape effective policies and resources to drive transformation. The most successful advocacy transformations begin with small steps. Driving change at the local or national level can help create a groundswell of action aimed at ensuring the world's children can live a life free from violence—both off and online. On Safer Internet Day, let's commit to making every day safer for children online and end this global crisis that recognizes no borders.

Meg Gardinier is Secretary General of [ChildFund Alliance](#), a global child-focused development and humanitarian organization reaching nearly 36 million children in 70 countries. ChildFund launched WEB Safe & Wise to improve protections for children online and help them safely navigate the digital world. Guillaume Landry serves as Executive Director of [ECPAT International](#), a united movement of over 120 civil society organizations spread across over 100 nations, each passionately committed to the shared vision of eradicating the sexual exploitation of children.