# PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ONLINE GROOMING

## Cross-cultural, qualitative and child-centred data to guide grooming prevention and response

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https://content.savethechildren.org/safe-digital-childhood/


## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we extend our deepest gratitude to the 604 children and young people from Australia, Finland, Philippines, Cambodia, Colombia, Kenya and South Africa who gave their time to share their views and experiences of online grooming with us. Their contributions, their creativity and their resilience have inspired us to do more to support a better future for them and the generations to come. We stand by them as allies in the fight against online grooming.

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# FOREWORD

## Save the Children

At Save the Children, we envision a world that no longer tolerates violence, where every child, regardless of their background, can thrive in a safe and nurturing environment – both online and offline. As the digital landscape evolves, so do the challenges it presents, particularly the insidious threat of online grooming and exploitation. Our mission is clear: to unite children, civil society, and governments in a collective effort to protect children's rights in the digital environment and ensure their participation and wellbeing. We are committed to creating a digital environment that is not only safe but also enriching, allowing children to explore, learn, and grow without fear.

The issue of online grooming is one that has garnered limited attention in research, especially in a way that fully captures the diverse experiences of children across different cultural contexts. This report is groundbreaking in its approach, placing children at the centre of the research process. By partnering with the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund, the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University, and involving Save the Children offices, we have gathered invaluable insights directly from children themselves. This child-centred methodology is not just innovative; it is essential for developing interventions that truly reflect the realities children face in the digital environment.

The findings and recommendations presented in this report are powerful and far-reaching, providing a crucial foundation for future work in protecting children from online harm. As we look to the future, this research will be instrumental in shaping policies, programs, and technologies that protect children and empower them to navigate the digital landscape safely. It is our hope that this report will not only inform but also inspire collective action across sectors to ensure that every child can enjoy the benefits of being online without compromising their safety.

This report is more than just a collection of data; it is a call to action! The recommendations contained within have the potential to drive significant change, offering practical solutions that are both culturally sensitive and globally applicable. As we move forward, we remain steadfast in our commitment to protecting children from online grooming and other forms of digital harm, and we invite you to join us in this vital mission.

**Steve Miller**

Global Director, Child Protection
**Save the Children International**

## Western Sydney University

The impacts of online grooming affect growing numbers of children around the world, posing new risks to their health, economy and futures. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, there has been a sharp increase in cases of online grooming and financial sextortion.

An approach that centres the needs, entitlements and aspirations of children will be vital if, collectively, we are to combat online grooming globally.

Western Sydney University is proud to present this research, alongside Save the Children and the Tech Coalition. In this engaged research, the Young and Resilient Research Centre and Save the Children listened deeply to what matters most to children from seven countries, and then worked with key stakeholders to co-produce a set of detailed recommendations for ready uptake by individuals, communities, governments, NGOs and industry. These recommendations reflect children's insights on interacting with unknown others online, as well as how they would like to be protected from online grooming.

This report's findings and the recommendations seek to ensure that the actions of adults, and children alike, address the challenge of online grooming in ways that acknowledge, respect and positively impact the rights and lived experiences of children.

This report reflects what children across international borders have made clear matters to them. It expresses their concern about the risks they face in the online world and their desire for governments, technology companies, NGOs and trusted adults to take urgent action. Nonetheless, the report also underscores how important the digital environment is for children, and their hope that online safety challenges, such as online grooming, can be better prevented.

I hope that this report inspires decision-makers to be led by the vision and willpower of younger generations; to mobilise across all levels of government, citizen groups and industry; to work collaboratively and inclusively with diverse children; and to take urgent and impactful action to address online grooming. I encourage governments, institutions, industry and NGOs, as well as parents, families and educators, to take seriously what children say in this report, and to stand together with them, united in the ambition to make the internet not just safe for children but optimal.

**Professor Deborah Sweeney**

Senior Vice Chancellor and Vice President
**Research, Enterprise and Global**

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# KEY MESSAGES

1. Children routinely interact with unknown others in the spaces where they gather to socialise and play online. They tend to only fully trust those they also know face-to-face and treat all others with a degree of suspicion.

2. While they generally recognise the risks of harm associated with engaging with unknown others online, children derive enormous benefit from these interactions.

3. Online safety education, strategies and features should build upon and fortify children's existing ways of identifying and managing their interactions with unknown others.

4. Online safety education, strategies and features should target the needs of children aged 9-12, particularly those in low- and middle-income countries, as they transition to increasingly social uses of digital technology.

5. Parents and caregivers urgently need targeted education, resources and support to ensure they can guide their children to protect themselves from online grooming.

6. Technology can and must be part of the solution to online grooming. Thoughtful, age-appropriate design that leverages the power of artificial intelligence and emerging capabilities will be a critical part of responses to online grooming.

7. Keeping children safe from online grooming requires a whole-of-community approach. Governments, NGOs, technology platforms, teachers, parents and caregivers, and children all have a role to play.

8. Children across diverse contexts experience digital interactions differently and thus responses to online grooming must work with children across cultures to develop effective responses.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents the findings of a study with 604 children in seven countries, primarily in the global South, to understand how they think about unknown others online; how they make decisions about whether to engage with them; and how they want to be supported to protect themselves from potential harm associated with online grooming. Children's insights and suggestions have been distilled into key recommendations for governments, technology platforms, NGOs and the many other adults who support children to be safe online and to maximise the benefits of their digital engagement.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Study Overview

In the aftermath of the pandemic, incidents of online grooming and child sexual and financial exploitation are at an all-time high (Thorn, 2022; Finklehor et al, 2024). While the number of children who have access to an online device continues to increase around the world, so does their risk of being harmed (Marwick et al., 2024).

While online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) occurs at scale, across diverse settings and contexts, research exploring the issue generally involves participants from single geographic or cultural contexts. Moreover, existing research tends to focus on victim-perpetrator interactions, with the result that, internationally, there is little evidence to show how children – in all of their diversity – make decisions about who to engage with and why, as they navigate fast-paced, often socially-oriented, digital platforms and services. Cross-cultural data sets and analyses that document children's decision making in relation to engaging with unknown others are urgently needed to enable governments, businesses and NGOs to design effective strategies to mitigate the various forms of child exploitation that originate online.

With funding from the **Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund**, in 2023-24, **Save the Children** partnered with the **Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University** and six Save the Children offices, primarily in the global South, to explore how children from diverse backgrounds experience the various pleasures and pressures of engaging with unknown others online, and what steps they take to protect themselves from potential harm. By listening carefully to children, the study aimed to identify how governments, technology platforms, services, educators, and parents might channel children's insights into the design of more effective policies, programming, product features, and systemic change to better support children to prevent, respond to, and report OCSEA.

To generate in-depth, granular insights into children's engagement with unknown others online, we deployed the Young and Resilient Research Centre (Y&R)'s unique distributed data generation methods (DDG). A primarily qualitative approach that configures children as partners in the research process, DDG entails in-country child-facing organisations – in this instance, Save the Children offices – co-designing creative and participatory workshops with Y&R and then implementing them with diverse children in multiple different cultural contexts simultaneously. Data is shared via a General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)-compliant process with Y&R and co-analysed by Y&R and in-country partners using visual and discourse analysis techniques to ensure that analysis is faithful to cultural context.

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**In total, this project worked with 604 children aged 8–18 years in Colombia, South Africa, Kenya, the Philippines, Cambodia, Finland and Australia to explore the following questions:**

- How do children in different contexts judge whether it is safe or unsafe to connect with an unknown other?
- What tools and strategies do they use to keep themselves safe? What tools and strategies do they use to keep themselves safe?
- To what extent do gender, age, and culture affect children's online engagements with unknown others?
- What might prompt children to report unwanted contact from unknown others online?
- What do children need from governments, technology platforms, NGOs, educators and parents to enable them to prevent or respond effectively to incidents of online grooming?

## What did we learn from children?

1

### Children routinely encounter unknown others in the spaces they congregate to socialise online

Children primarily interact online with those they know in their face-to-face settings. However, they also routinely encounter unknown others in online spaces where they congregate to socialise with peers. Indeed, 66% of study participants interact with unknown others daily, predominantly via social media and gaming platforms. Online safety advice to avoid interacting with strangers online thus needs updating to address the reality of children's interactions online.

Children interact with three kinds of others online: a) Genuine Friends: those people they know face-to-face, including casual acquaintances; b) Known Unknowns: those they know of through their friends' and families' face-to-face and/or online social networks; and c) Unknown Unknowns: those they meet exclusively through online interactions. In general, children only fully trust Genuine Friends.

2

### Children regard all those online connections they have not met face-to-face with a degree of suspicion

Children tend to treat online connections they do not know face-to-face – both Known Unknowns and Unknown Unknowns – with a degree of suspicion: 86% say they approach strangers online with caution. Children find it easier to assess the identities and intentions of unknown others in face-to-face over online settings. The risk of harm children associate with interacting with unknown others online depends on their context. Children in middle-income countries are more likely to consider unknown others online as a threat to their physical safety, compared with children in high-income countries, who often fail to see online others as a physical threat. This reminds us that young internet users form perceptions about the potential dangers of interacting with unknown others online through comparison with their experiences of safety in their face-to-face environments.

3

## Children are motivated to interact with unknown others by a strong desire for friendship and to expand their networks and opportunities

As they mature and become more social, children are more inclined to connect with unknown others online. Children are particularly curious about pursuing interactions with Known Unknowns. They are motivated to do so primarily by a genuine desire for friendship, fun and play, followed by a desire to stay informed about trends and events, to connect over shared interests, and to expand their networks. Concerningly, the potential to derive financial benefits is an incentive for children in middle-income countries to connect with unknown others online, potentially compromising their safety online. Children want adults in their lives to understand that engaging with unknown others is normal when engaging online and can be both enjoyable and beneficial, particularly for those who experience loneliness or who find it challenging to nurture face-to-face friendships. Children's interactions with unknown others may be short-lived or evolve into longer-term friendships, and they may stay online or eventually develop face-to-face dimensions.

4

## Children weigh up the risks of harm and the potential benefits when assessing whether to interact with unknown others online

Children generally know that engaging with unknown others online can be risky. They are concerned unknown others might expose them to online bullying; physical harm; inappropriate requests for personal information; data and privacy risks; inappropriate sexually-oriented exchanges; or criminal activities. Certain platform features exacerbate the potential to be harmed by unknown others online, including private messaging, geotagging , anonymity, and in-app purchases (Kuzma, 2012; Witzleb et al, 2020). Children also worry that consistent exposure to violent, sexually explicit and other age-inappropriate content can normalise inappropriate behaviours online and increase potential harm. Children in middle-income countries (63%) were more likely than those in high-income settings to report feeling afraid, anxious or uncomfortable when unknown others contact them. Importantly, being aware of the risks of harm rarely deters children from engaging with unknown others online.

5

## Children use relational verification and targeted investigation strategies when interacting with unknown others online

Children's existing networks function as a safe foundation from which they can explore relationships with Known Unknowns. They are much more likely to accept a friend request from someone they have seen or met in real life. Not having face-to-face contact or strong social reference points for new contacts tended to trigger negative feelings and greater levels of suspicion. Children's decision-making about interacting with unknown others is shaped by two ongoing practices: relational verification and targeted investigation. Relational verification involves scrutinising and evaluating whether unknown others have existing face-to-face or online connections with other trusted connections. Children's targeted investigation practices include conducting background checks, asking questions, or requesting proof of identity to determine if it is safe to engage with an unknown other online.

6

## Children observe new online connections over time to determine their authenticity and to monitor whether they are trustworthy

Far from blindly trusting unknown others online, children are constantly evaluating interactions, events, and behaviours to determine who is authentic and safe to engage with across online and offline spaces. They monitor unknown others' modes of online self-representation and behaviours towards others over time, looking for signs of authenticity to guide their decisions about whether to engage and to what extent an unknown other merits their trust. Children report that it is often difficult to ascertain the motives of unknown others. However, a series of red flags signal a contact cannot be trusted and, in some instances, are reason to block or delete contacts from their online friendship networks. Red flags include comments on their body or appearance; questions about where they live, go to school, or work; requests for personal information, such as date of birth or identity documents; and questions about their personal life, such as their relationship status.

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## Children prioritise protective strategies that are easy to implement inside the flow of their fast-paced digital media engagement

Children protect themselves from potentially harmful interactions with unknown others using a combination of preventive and responsive strategies. Their preventive strategies include restricting the personal information they share with unknown others; not accepting connection requests from unknown others; using privacy settings and strong passwords; and always being vigilant and careful. Children's responsive strategies include ignoring and rejecting requests, blocking and reporting, responding to unknown others by asking them to stop, asking questions, changing topic and ultimately disconnecting from the platform and device. Children tend to mobilise responsive strategies that are easy, routine, accessible and which do not require them to step outside the flow of their digital media activities. Not surprisingly, then, the most common protective strategy used by children is to ignore unwanted contact from unknown others online, which prevents further interaction. A total of 82% of participants found it easy to block unknown others online, and older children found it significantly easier to block people than younger children.

8

## Children experience significant barriers to reporting online grooming incidents

Children believe that formal reporting mechanisms are a key to a robust online safety ecology. However, while they assert the value and relative ease of formal reporting processes, many are nonetheless reluctant to report unknown others through formal channels. It appears that the barriers to reporting are primarily attitudinal and differ across cultural contexts. Our analysis suggests that reporting is thus regarded as a 'serious' step and a sign that a situation has significantly escalated. Formal reporting often requires children to step outside the flow and familiarity of their routine digital practices into a process that is often opaque to them. They are not always sure what reporting processes entail and whether they are confidential. Nor do they always know what happens to their report once they lodge it, who looks at it, how it is assessed, and what kinds of actions might ensue. For these reasons, they are much more likely to report an incident to a friend (80%) than to the platform (54%) or to an authority (54%). In middle-income countries, in particular, children reported a reluctance to report to authorities such as police.

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## Children regard their online safety as a responsibility shared by government, NGOs, technology platforms and their broader communities

Children assert that their online safety is a whole-of-community responsibility. They highlight the important role of parents and caregivers, governments, technology companies, and schools to keep them and their peers safe online. Children urge governments to work with and direct industry to provide protections against harmful users and accessible mechanisms to respond and report potentially harmful experiences. They urge governing bodies and decision makers to consider ways to ensure that their digital participation is age-appropriate – for example, by designing and enforcing rules that mandate age restrictions for social media use, regulate online content, or limit access to devices by age. Children call for legal systems to be strengthened to facilitate justice for those who experience online grooming, and for police to increase security around community internet facilities, such as internet cafés, kiosks, and pisonets . Children say, above all else, they need parents and other family members to supervise their digital practices, and to establish and enforce clear and rigorous rules to protect them online.

10

## Children want clear avenues for guidance and support to strengthen their online interactions

Where children go to for help and advice about online safety is heavily dependent on who they trust – and therefore differs according to geographic, cultural, political, and social context. Children from high-income countries are more likely to seek help from formal structures of support, such as services, helplines and police or other authorities, while those in middle-income countries are more likely to seek out community structures of support, such as community leaders, community elders, and community organisations. Across countries, children's number one source of help and guidance is a trusted adult –usually a parent or guardian – followed by their friends, NGOs, counselling services, and child protection services. Very few children said they would be confident about turning to teachers or police, due to fear of being misunderstood or punished, or because they are unsure about the confidentiality of seeking help via these avenues.

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## Children want to turn to parents and caregivers for support but feel they are underequipped to guide their children

Children believe that skilling parents and caregivers needs to be a key focus for future online safety efforts. In their experience, parents and caregivers do not understand the dangers children face online and/or lack knowledge and confidence about how best to support, guide, or respond to potential online risks and harms. Children feel parents and caregivers are also insufficiently appreciative of the benefits of online contact and communication. Children want their parents and caregivers to understand the platforms they use, who they interact with, what they share, and how they might be harmed online, and they call for education targeting trusted adults. Children suggest that such education should teach parents and caregivers about the benefits of their digital technology use; how to support children to avoid potentially harmful behaviours; how to respond to strangers; what content is appropriate to share; and how to block and report inappropriate behaviour.

12

## Children are calling for widespread, accessible and targeted education about safe interaction with unknown others online

Across countries, children highlight an urgent need for online safety education to be accessible to every child across the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence, regardless of where they live. They call specifically for education about methods to identify risk online; what information is appropriate to share online; how to appropriately respond to unknown people; where they can go when they need help; and how to report inappropriate behaviour online. Children want educational initiatives to take place in accessible and familiar contexts, within schools and communities, as well as online platforms, apps and games. They call for platform- and site-based education to leverage popular digital formats, such as video, to deliver online safety information. Children say that governments and technology companies should partner to develop, activate, and deliver education programmes, not only to all children, but also to all adults.

13

## Children believe technical innovations can profoundly improve their online safety

Children are alert to the potential for technical capabilities to be leveraged to strengthen their online safety. In particular, they urge companies to use artificial intelligence to improve the discovery of online safety information, education, and tools; to implement automatic blocking and banning; to increase the security of personal information; and to ensure interactions are age-appropriate. Children urge technology platforms to use algorithmic tools to target online safety information and education to best effect and to better immerse online safety information and features in the platforms, apps, and games they use. Children want technology platforms to consider implementing additional mechanisms to protect their data; to prevent their inadvertent contact with ill-intentioned adults; and to minimise their exposure to age-inappropriate content. Children also suggest default privacy settings for minors; automated warning systems to alert them when they interact with someone whose intentions may not be genuine; AI-powered, appropriate, relatable, just-in-time guidance about possible and safe responses, to help them decide if or how they will engage with unknown others; and automated blocking and reporting processes for young users. Children want safe online spaces to discuss or report potentially harmful behaviours and content. They want companies to better communicate how reporting and other online safety processes work; to be confident about the outcomes of reporting; and to be told when and how community guidelines are enforced.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Better support children to manage their relationships with friends and a range of unknown others online, including those with whom they have a mutual connection and those who are completely unknown to them.

2. Encourage children and the adults who support them to block and report bad actors online.

3. Strengthen pathways to support services to support young users to address online grooming and other online safety challenges.

4. Strengthen and increase the accessibility of online safety and digital literacy education for children, regardless of location or age, to support their management of interactions with unknown others.

5. Strengthen education for parents, carers, teachers, and community leaders to equip them to better communicate with and support their children to interact safely with unknown others.

6. Equip decision-makers to take informed decisions about how to strengthen responses to online grooming.

**7**

Strengthen and enforce legislation and mechanisms of justice for children who experience online harms.

**8**

Consider developing a default industry standard around online privacy and security for children to minimise the possibility that they inadvertently share personal information with bad actors in ways that compromise them.

**9**

Reduce the likelihood that children will encounter violent, sexually explicit, or other age-inappropriate online content.

**10**

Reduce the likelihood that children will unwittingly interact with adults and those who might be bad actors in online spaces, and ensure that children can engage in age-appropriate interactions.

**11**

Consider implementing AI-driven warning systems to alert young users about the characteristics and prior practices of unknown others with whom they interact online.

**12**

Ensure platform features do not exacerbate the risk that children might be exposed to bad actors online.

# INTRODUCTION

This report presents analysis and outcomes from research undertaken with 604 children in seven countries, primarily in the global South, to understand how they think about the pleasures and pressures of engaging with unknown others online. The research was conducted by the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University (Y&R) in partnership with Save the Children, with funding from the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund.

# INTRODUCTION

**Online grooming is a pressing, rapidly escalating and transforming challenge to safe and constructive online engagement of children across diverse cultural contexts. WeProtect's Global Threat Assessment 2023 warns that incidents of online grooming and child sexual and financial exploitation are at an all-time high, and that episodes of financial sexual extortion increased by 7200% in the period 2021-2022 (WeProtect, 2023). It has arguably never been more urgent for the global community to come together to tackle this deep and persistent challenge to the wellbeing of children in relation to the digital environment.**

To support government, NGO and corporate efforts to tackle the growing prevalence and impacts of online grooming, the research reported herein set out to work with children from different regions and cultures to understand how they experience and respond to interaction with unknown others online. The project began from the premise that, by better understanding children's own views on their decision-making about how and when to connect with unknown others online, governments, NGOs and the technology sector can identify how to develop genuinely effective policies, regulation, education and technical mechanisms to prevent, respond to and report online grooming and solicitation associated with online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA).

With funding from the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund, the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University (Y&R) partnered with Save the Children to deliver in-depth, qualitative and cross-cultural research with 604 children aged 8-18 years living in seven countries, primarily in the global South, about how they encounter, make sense of and make decisions about whether to connect with unknown others online.

Using a unique distributed data generation methodology developed by Y&R, in this research, children from Australia, Cambodia, Colombia, Finland, Philippines, Kenya and South Africa, took part in creative and participatory research workshops, facilitated by local Save the Children offices[2]. Y&R and Save the Children office representatives co-analysed the data and developed recommendations, with the close guidance and support of a Technical Advisory Board comprising representatives of the key technology platforms used by children internationally.

The report demonstrates how children in these countries perceive and experience unknown others online, and showcases their ideas and aspirations about how to ensure children can participate safely and constructively online. The report is intended to help inform stakeholders including governments, technological industry, and other civil society organisations, about children's experiences and perceptions in their own words, and contextualised for their local and regional environments. Acknowledging the collective responsibility to deliver safe and engaging online experiences for children of all ages and backgrounds, this report presents a series of detailed recommendations for consideration and potential implementation by technology companies, NGOs, frontline child workers, governments, and parents and caregivers.

[2] Save the Children led all engagement with children in this project, except in Australia, where workshops were conducted by Y&R.

# BACKGROUND

Online grooming is a significant, growing and transforming challenge to children's online safety internationally. While some excellent research sheds light on the dynamics of perpetrator behaviours, little is known about the ways that children living in diverse locations around the world make decisions about who to connect with online and under what circumstances. This section summarises key findings from the international literature.

# BACKGROUND

While the number of children who have access to an online device continues to increase around the world, so does their risk of being harmed. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, incidents of online grooming and child sexual and financial exploitation are at an all-time high (WeProtect, 2023). Following the pandemic, there has been an 82% rise in online grooming crimes against children (NSPCC, 2023) and, since 2021, a 129% increase in reports related to imagery which had been created of children aged 7-10 who were tricked or groomed into performing sexual acts on camera by an online predator (Internet Watch Foundation, 2023). An average of 20% of children have been subjected to online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) since 2020 (Disrupting Harm, 2022). In a recent report by WeProtect Global Alliance, data analysed from 2021-22 showed a 7,200% increase in reports of financial sexual extortion (WeProtect, 2023).

Online grooming is "the intentional use of the internet to manipulate and/or coerce someone into participating in sexually explicit interactions or exchanges" (Thorn, 2022, p. 3). Common online grooming behaviours include online sexual conversations, sending sexual pictures to victims, and using online pornography to show victims how to perform sexual acts (Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2005, p. 54).

**Constraints on cross-cultural data:** Although online grooming occurs at scale and across diverse settings and contexts, research exploring the issue generally involves participants from single geographic or cultural contexts. Moreover, existing research tends to focus on victim-perpetrator interactions, meaning that internationally, there is little evidence to show how children – in all of their diversity – make decisions about who to engage with and why, as they navigate fast-paced, often socially-oriented, digital platforms and services. Given the ease with which online technologies can provide children worldwide with access to strangers (referred to as unknown others in this report) and vice versa, and the increasing problem of online grooming as an specific instance of OCSEA, cross-cultural data sets and analyses that document children's decision making in relation to engaging with unknown others are urgently needed to enable governments, businesses, and NGOs to design effective strategies to mitigate the various forms of child exploitation that originate online.

**Need for child-centred research:** Megele and Buzzi argue that effective defence against online grooming "requires an understanding of risks and resilience from children's perspective… Close and effective communication and partnership with children lies at the heart of any effective practice and intervention" (2018, p.160). As reinforced in the 2022 Disrupting Harm report, it is imperative that research and guidance are drawn directly from the accounts of children (ECPAT International, 2022). Even so, recent scholarship on online grooming tends to focus on perpetrators and their strategies (e.g., de Santisteban et al. 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Megele & Buzzi, 2018) or perpetrator-victim interactions (e.g., Chiang & Grant, 2017; Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017; Winters et al., 2017). This focus is often grounded in misconceptions relating to children's experiences of abuse and its contexts (ECPAT International, 2022, p. 16). Moreover, despite established research that perpetrators are most often known to the victim (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Finkelhor et al, 2005; Harald Dreßing et al., 2014; Sutton & Finklehor, 2023; Wolak et al., 2018; ECPAT International 2022), drastic measures such as preventing all young people from communicating with adults or peers online are frequently proposed (Given, 2024). Such approaches are misguided given that digital platforms have been shown to improve children's knowledge and to inculcate good citizenship (Oden & Porter, 2023, p. 7).

Despite the prominent focus on victim-perpetrator interactions, some studies have looked at how children use digital platforms (Oden & Porter, 2023). However, the evidence on how children decide on who to engage with and why is still unclear. Where children's insights and experiences have been canvassed, research has generally focussed on teen and young adult victims (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Wood & Wheatcroft, 2020). While country-specific research has begun to examine how children of varied ages identify and protect themselves from online grooming (e.g., Thorn, 2022; ECPAT International, 2022), such work is still mainly quantitative and so largely excludes detailed perspectives, insights, and ideas expressed by children in their own words.

Research also generally involves participants from single rather than multiple countries (Thorn, 2022; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Oden & Porter, 2023), limiting the ability to consider data and analyses across contexts and cultures. Moreover, underrepresentation of children's voices, expertise, and perspectives in such research means important data is commonly not captured or evaluated, limiting the development of effective prevention strategies. This project complements and extends the emerging quantitative work on online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) and grow and diversify the relatively narrowly-focussed knowledge base about OCSEA by generating cross-cultural data sets containing in-depth qualitative perspectives, insights, and ideas about online grooming from children in their own words. The goal is for insights from this project to be channelled directly by members of the Tech Coalition into the design of products and services to minimise the risks that children will be groomed online.

# METHODS

Conducting meaningful research with children in diverse settings about sensitive topics is challenging. To document children's diverse experiences of interacting with unknown others, and to create space for them to brainstorm solutions to online grooming, this project opted to implement in-depth, qualitative methods. Supported by local facilitators, children in seven countries participated in creative and participatory workshops to explore the issues, develop their ideas and find ways to express them.

# METHODS

To gain an in-depth, cross-cultural understanding of children's interactions and experiences online, this research deployed the distributed data generation (DDG) methodology. DDG was pioneered by the Young and Resilient Research Centre (Y&R), and has been successfully implemented in over 80 countries with more than 6,000 children, primarily in the global South. Grounded in a child-centred and rights-based approach, DDG equips trusted child-facing organisations in multiple international locations to conduct participatory and creative workshops with diverse children to generate rich qualitative data documenting their insights and experiences. The Y&R team works collaboratively with child-facing organisation representatives throughout the process to culturally adapt the primarily qualitative, workshop-based research methods; to implement the workshops with diverse children; and to validate, analyse, and to interpret the resulting data and channel it into policy and practice outcomes. This methodology enables children's needs, desires and rights to inform policy and practice, and it seeks to capture the experiences of children in minority groups, who often go unheard in decision-making.

## Partner collaborations

**Save the Children Hong Kong** were project managers, coordinating the efforts of the **Y&R team** and six **Save the Children offices**, who supported implementation of the research by conducting participatory research workshops with diverse children in urban and rural locations. The Y&R research team worked closely with Save the Children offices throughout the project's research co-design, data generation and analysis stages.

A **Technical Advisory Board**, comprising representatives from key technology platforms (Snapchat, Google, YouTube, Meta, Microsoft, Yubo, TikTok and Apple) supported implementation through participation in regular meetings (approx. once every two months) over the life of the project to identify emerging trends; to brainstorm key issues the research should explore; and to develop detailed, practical recommendations. Members of the Technical Advisory Board with relevant expertise also reviewed the research instruments.

## Research co-design

Y&R led the design of the research instruments (workshop-based methodology), with detailed input from Save the Children offices and personnel from Save the Children colleagues with expertise in child protection, protection from digital harm, advocacy, child rights and participation, and others. The research team also sought input on the key issues to be explored through the study from members of the Technical Advisory Board.

Because the issues to be explored in workshops are sensitive, the research co-design was guided by a positive, strengths-based approach. Some workshops activities elicited how children protect themselves both online and offline. Other workshop activities explored the challenges of interacting with strangers online and entailed, for example, children reflecting on scenarios involving fictional characters. Local child protection experts ensured the study's ethical procedures were contextualised to local settings.

## Sample

Overall, 604 children aged 8-18 years and from seven countries participated in the study (See Table 1).

Workshops were conducted in urban and rural locations in Australia, Cambodia, Colombia, Finland, Kenya, Philippines and South Africa . Participants included children from high-income, middle-income and low-income settings.[3]

**Workshop locations:**

**Table 1. Participants by country (including priority groups of children)**

| Country | Total | Male | Female | Non-binary | Gender not reported | Under 9 | 9-12 | 13-16 | 16+ | Age not reported |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **High-income** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Australia | 46 | 27 | 19 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 23 | 23 | 0 | 0 |
| Finland | 37 | 19 | 18 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 37 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Middle-income** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cambodia | 115 | 57 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 38 | 77 | 0 | 0 |
| Colombia | 112 | 40 | 72 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 41 | 65 | 5 | 0 |
| Kenya | 102 | 45 | 57 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 41 | 58 | 1 | 1 |
| South Africa | 93 | 40 | 45 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 22 | 68 | 3 | 0 |
| The Philippines | 99 | 34 | 61 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 30 | 62 | 7 | 0 |

[3] Participating countries were classified based on categorisations suggested by the World Bank [WDI - The World by Income and Region (worldbank.org)]- as shown in Table 1

## Priority Groups

Save the Children offices were encouraged to run workshops with a diverse representation of children. In addition, where possible, offices were invited to engage specific populations of children, who are considered to be priority groups for in-country programming and other interventions. Doing so ensures that workshops can directly inform in-country policy and programming initiatives. Three countries (Cambodia, Philippines and South Africa) chose to work with children from priority groups as part of their in-country sample. These priority groups are summarised in Table 2. Local child protection experts ensured that appropriate support for priority group participants was in place.

**Table 2. Priority groups**

| Country | Characteristic | Gender breakdown | Age breakdown | Total number of children |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cambodia** | Children living with disabilities; children with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics; migrant children; and children who work on the street, such as scavengers. | 11 males<br>11 females | Average age:<br>Male: 14 years<br><br>Average age:<br>Female: 14 years | 22 |
| **Philippines** | Sexually exploited girls<br><br>Girls-at-risk as neighbours of sexually exploited girls | 5 females | Average age:<br>14 years | 10 |
| **South African** | Youth living in peri-urban areas (including informal settlements), which are characterised by high rates of crime and poverty along with barriers to quality education and other essential services such as healthcare, and violence against children. | 14 males<br>6 females | Average age:<br>Male: 15.5 years<br><br>Average age:<br>Female: 15 years | 20 |

## Facilitator training, support and cultural adaptation

Y&R supported in-country partners to implement research activities in their local contexts by providing:

» An **online training and cultural adaptation session** to brief Save the Children office representatives and any local partners on the ethical and practical requirements of workshop implementation and to identify how workshop activities might need to be adapted to meet local requirements or priorities. Save the Children offices were given flexibility to adapt key concepts and identify examples that will resonate for children locally.

» A **detailed workshop facilitators manual**, which outlines ethical procedures; recruitment and consent process; instructions for imple¬menting workshop activities; checklists to aid workshop planning; tips for working effectively with children; processes for facilitators to seek support from Y&R; and instructions for sharing workshop outputs with the research team for analysis.

» **Ongoing support via email, phone or online conference** for the duration of the implementation phase.

[4] Save the Children Finland sponsored their own participation in the study and thus worked with a smaller sample of children aged 9-12.
[5] Participants in South Africa were actively involved in Child Participation Groups at Save the Children.

## Recruitment

As a qualitative methodology, DDG makes no claims about results and outputs being nationally representative. Rather, DDG aims to surface a range of deep and diverse experiences that may usefully guide policy, programming, and practice. As such, the project purposefully sought to recruit a diversity of children, prioritising those from communities who might not ordinarily take part in research or have the opportunity to directly influence policy and practice outcomes.

Save the Children offices recruited children, including those from priority groups, via their existing programming networks, using text and recruitment procedures detailed in the workshop facilitators manual. Following standard practice, all participants and their caregivers provided informed consent prior to the workshops. Participants from some countries received an honorarium for taking part to compensate for their time and expertise. Where they were offered, honoraria amounts were determined by Save the Children offices, in alignment with local youth sector standards.

## Workshop implementation

Save the Children delivered the workshops in all countries except Australia, where they were conducted by Y&R researchers. Children each participated in one five-hour face-to-face workshop at a venue in their local community. Workshops were conducted in age groups (9-12 years and 13-16 years) to ensure the content and discussions were age-appropriate. Workshops were delivered in local languages in all participating countries.

During the workshops, children participated in a range of creative and participatory activities, which required them to work individually, in pairs and in small groups. Activities explored:

- How children perceive the practices, pressures and pleasures of online relationships, focusing on how children conceive and manage unknown others online;
- How diverse children determine when an online relationship is unfolding inappropriately and how they respond; and
- Children's suggestions for better supporting them to prevent or respond to online grooming threats.

Due to the diversity in the participant sample, and their varying levels of literacy and comprehension (particularly in rural and multi-lingual areas), workshop activities were appropriately modified to suit each context. Although the mode of delivery and structure of activity sometimes varied, analysis revealed there was no significant difference in findings.

## Co-analysis

Data was translated into English by Save the Children offices prior to secure transfer to the Y&R team for analysis and presentation. The Y&R team cleaned, coded, and generated the first analysis of the data. Using discourse, visual and thematic analysis techniques, this analysis distilled key overarching themes and synthesised insights relating to the project's research questions. The Y&R team then met one-on-one with representatives from each participating Save the Children office to validate and undertake a deep dive into the data. Resulting analyses were then shared again with Save the Children offices for cross-checking and further validation to ensure accuracy of interpretation. Some Save the Children offices also conducted separate validation activities with children in-country.

## Co-development of recommendations

Y&R used the findings of the co-analysis process to generate the first set of draft recommendations. These were then shared with Save the Children offices and other Save the Children child protection, child participation, and child rights advocacy experts, as well as members of the Technical Advisory Board, for review. Y&R integrated written feedback from Save the Children representatives. Additionally, Y&R and Save the Children representatives met with each representative of the Technical Advisory Board to brainstorm further recommendations and ensure that all recommendations are actionable.

## Representing children in this report

Quotes from participants illustrate findings and analyses in this report. In some instances, quotes have been lightly edited for clarity; for example, minor corrections to spelling or grammar have been made to aid readability or to correct transcription errors. Content has not otherwise been altered. Quotes are identified by gender and age of the child, location, and country of origin.

## A Snapshot of Participants' Digital Media Use

**Approximately 66% of our participants access the internet every day, using a personal or shared device. Digital media use is a routine feature of their everyday lives. Children in all countries use online platforms to build and maintain their social connections. The most common social media sites used by participants in all seven countries were Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat (See Figure 1).**

**Figure 1. Word Cloud showing platforms commonly used by participants**


Figure 1. Word Cloud showing platforms commonly used by participants

## Child Safeguarding

The project received ethics approval from the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. H15367) in April 2023 and via Save the Children's internal research ethics clearance process in June 2023.

To ensure rigorous child safeguarding, our workshop activities were carefully designed to mitigate the various potential risks of harm to children associated with their participation. Recognising that the workshops had potential to raise sensitive issues, and that in-country partners would administer workshop activities onsite and interact directly with participants, it was critical that all facilitators were adequately briefed and supported to ensure the highest level of child safeguarding.

We drew on Save the Children's established safeguarding procedures to develop project-specific child safeguarding guidance, which was included in the facilitators' manual. Online training sessions with all Save the Children office facilitators also covered ethical requirements and procedures relating to all aspects of the research, from project background; research ethics and safeguarding; workshop planning and logistics; participant privacy, confidentiality, and consent; activity design and delivery; and research data management. During training, the research team and in-country partners discussed how to ensure child safeguarding in their particular context, providing guidance ranging from how to establish a safe environment for child participants through to procedures for managing disclosures. Among many other measures, children were provided with the details of local support services in the workshops. Save the Children office representatives had opportunities to comment on and feedback about methods and processes during and after training, and to contact the Y&R research team at any stage during the project if safeguarding questions or issues arose.

No child safeguarding issues or concerns were reported during the study. In formal feedback collected after workshops, children reported feeling safe and empowered to participate.

# WHAT CHILDREN SAID ABOUT THE WORKSHOPS

**A total of 335 children provided feedback on their participation in the workshops using an optional open-ended questionnaire. Out of the 320 children who reported gender, 55% were females; 44% were males and 1% were non-binary. Approximately 80% of the participants were aged between 10-15 years.**

Almost all the children provided positive feedback on the workshops using words like "happy" (49%), "empowered" (19%), "good" (13%), "nice" (4%), and "fun" (5%). Children reported that the workshops were avenues to learn more about online safety and empowered them with knowledge and strategies to manage online interactions effectively. Children said that the workshops were safe spaces in which they could express their knowledge and feelings, without judgement. They also reported making new friends during the workshops. Some children reported a sense of peace and wellbeing, and others were motivated towards future advocacy, e.g. by working to advocate on behalf of other children. We summarise their views below.

## Positive Environment

Children viewed the workshops as spaces for open and constructive discussions and the children from all countries generally felt positive during the workshops.

*"It made me open up and be comfortable and safe because they didn't judge us on how we feel and they made us feel calm."*

**Female, 14, urban, South Africa**

*"Comfortable – I don't really speak up to answer questions but I did here."*

**Female, 11, urban, Australia**

*"Everything was very comfortable and in confidence."*

**Male, 17, urban, Colombia**

*"Good and safe because there's other people with me I can trust."*

**Male, 11, urban, Australia**

## Empowering

Children reported to have felt empowered by being valued and gained confidence due to the workshops.

*"It makes me feel happy that there are people who care."*

**Female, 12, urban, Australia**

*"Good, because they make me take notice of real life."*

**Participant from Colombia, age and gender not provided**

*"Many realisations just like being more careful in adding friends, because I actually have many friends on Facebook."*

**Small group, Philippines, age and gender not provided**

*"These workshops made me feel empowered and made me know that I can make a diffeence in this generation."*

**Female, 15, urban, Kenya**

## Improving knowledge

Children from all countries reported that they increased their knowledge about online safety by participating in the workshop activities.

*"It made me feel comfortable and I was ready to learn on the dangers of online. I would make sure that I educate my friends."*

**Female, 15, urban, Kenya**

*"Happy, because it teaches me things that I don't know."*

**Female, 12, urban, South Africa**

*"It made me feel more aware with what goes on online because of what we all learned today."*

**Male, 14, urban, Australia**

*"I feel so happy because this workshop adds more idea and knowledge to each of us."*

**Participant from Philippines, age and gender not provided**

*"It made me feel happy, confident and motivated. This is because it help me to know more about online grooming and how you can treat your online issues."*

**Male, 16, urban, Kenya**

*"I am very happy because I can get more knowledge and play."*

**Female, 9, rural, Cambodia**

## Safe and inclusive space for sharing information

Children viewed workshops as safe and inclusive spaces in which to express their opinions. Children from all countries reported that they could trust their peers and facilitators and were able to share their thoughts in a non-judgemental environment.

*"I felt comfortable because you can express your feelings and they understand you."*

**Female, 15, urban, South Africa**

*"Good, a nice environment, something new, quite creative, interesting activities and something in which we can be united and share our ideas."*

**Male, 17, urban, Colombia**

*"The workshop made me feel involved and heard because it gave me opportunities to share what I know about social issues that affect the children such as online grooming."*

**Female, 15, rural, Philippines**

*"I felt comfortable because I got no judgements."*

**Female, 15, urban, South Africa**

## Meeting peers

Workshops provided a safe space to meet others of similar age and to learn from them.

*"I felt happy to meet new kids my age."*

**Male, 11, urban, Australia**

*"It made me feel happy because it was fun and I made new friends."*

**Male, 11, urban, Kenya**

*"I am very happy because can meet with friend."*

**Male, 11, rural, Cambodia**

## Advocacy

Children reported that they gained knowledge and confidence to represent children's needs and aspirations to decision-makers.

*"They made me feel like I'm making a change.Why? It's because you are going to use this information to better other people's lives."*

**Female, 13, urban, Kenya**

*"It made me feel confident to speak for children facing online problems."*

**Female, 11, urban, Kenya**

*"I am very happy because I can protect myself, child rights, and protect from online grooming."*

**Female, 15, urban, Cambodia**

## Sense of peace and wellbeing

Some children reported a sense of peace and wellbeing due to the workshops.

*"The workshops made me happy and gave me life."*

**Female, 12, urban, South Africa**

*"It makes me feel good, because I was not good but when I met the teachers my soul felt better."*

**Female, 15, urban, South Africa**

*"It makes me feel better."*

**Male, 10, urban, Kenya**

# KEY FINDINGS

This section lays out key observations generated through careful analysis of the contributions of children in seven countries to the research. We document key differences between the experiences and views of children in different social, cultural and economic contexts. However, the research shows that children living and growing in diverse contexts share many experiences, challenges and aspirations, providing important guidance about the actions that can be taken to secure their safety online.

# KEY FINDINGS

## 1 Children routinely encounter unknown others in the spaces they congregate to socialise and play online

### Routine interaction with unknown others

**Advice to avoid interacting with strangers online needs updating to address the reality that children and young people routinely encounter unknown others when engaging online, and to reflect the benefits of interacting with unknown others.**

Children use digital technologies to forge and maintain relationships with others, both near and far (See for example, Third & Moody, 2021; Third et al., 2017; Third et al., 2014). Indeed, developmentally, as they move through adolescence and their everyday worlds expand, their engagement with digital technologies becomes increasingly socially motivated (Li et al, 2017). They are driven to connect primarily with peers of a similar age to themselves.

Not surprisingly, then, children from all countries participating in this study reported that they use online platforms to develop and sustain relationships with others – both known and unknown. While children primarily engage online with peers and trusted adults they know face-to-face, they also reported that they routinely interact online with people they do not know "IRL" (in real life). Participants across all countries, regardless of gender or age, told us that they commonly receive online friend requests, exchange direct messages and comments, or play online with people they do not know face-to-face.

*"Strangers are a norm online, so we need more options on how to deal with them."*

**Female, 16, priority, South Africa**

*"It is common to add each other, even though we have never known each other."*

**Small female group, 9-12, urban, Cambodia**

*"[Encountering unknown others is] normal because it always happens to me, it's not the first time."*

**Male, 16, rural, Colombia**

*"We meet online people when chatting, we meet strangers on games and online websites."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Australia**

*"I meet new people online by commenting, playing with each other and putting reactions to each other. I meet strangers on the internet [while on social media] and games etc. I interact with them by talking with each other."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"[I meet unknown others] almost every day in [online] games."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

Children are calling on adults – parents and caregivers, educators, governments and technology platforms – to acknowledge that they meet and interact with unknown others when they go online, and to update their advice about how children and young people should best manage their engagement with unknown others in online spaces. In particular, they want adults to acknowledge that interacting with unknown others can be beneficial.

*"Adults need to know about the children of today are highly computer-savvy… To be able to support and protect the children, adults need to understand that children are comfortable with using the internet which pushes to interact with strangers. They may feel a sense of belonging when talking to their co-netizen [fellow habitual internet user] even if they do not know them personally."*

**Small group, 15-17, urban, Philippines**

*"I think that adults need to know about the dangers of children as they interact [online] and also some of the benefits like finding lifelong friendships."*

**Female, 15, urban, Kenya**

## Where children and young people encounter unknown others online

**Children interact with unknown others in those online spaces where they are most likely to congregate to socialise with others.**

Overall, children reported that they are most likely to encounter and interact with unknown others on social media platforms (78%), followed by gaming platforms (14%) and messaging services (6%).

### Figure 2. Where do children meet strangers online?

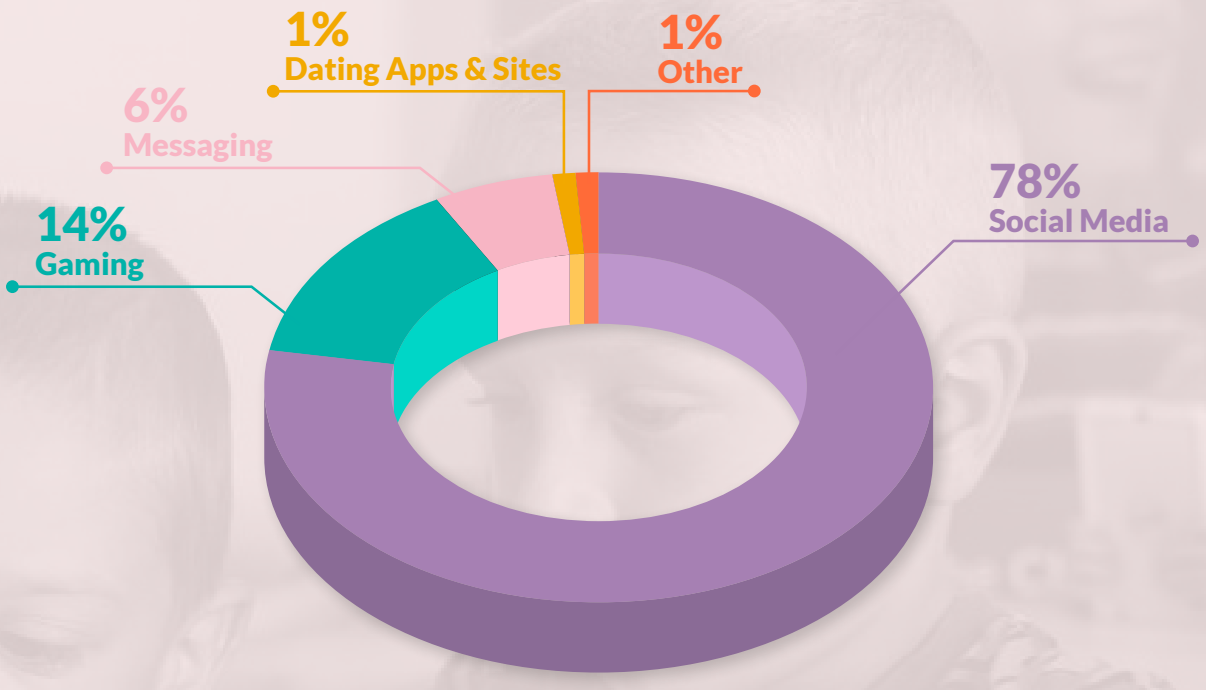


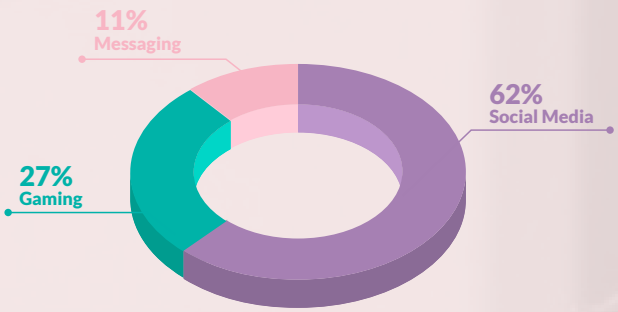

Figure 2: Where do children meet unknown others online?

Remembering that our data is not nationally representative and should be regarded as indicative only, a higher proportion of participants in Finland (49.3%), Australia (27.3%), and the Philippines (14.2%) reported that they encounter unknown others in online games. Indeed, children in Finland reported that they are more likely to encounter unknown others while gaming (49%) than when using social media platforms (39%). Two factors help us make sense of this differential: firstly, gaming is a very popular activity among children in Northern European countries (VideoGamesEurope, 2022), and higher numbers of children from Finland in this study reported that they regularly game online (50%) than in any other participating country.[6] Secondly, children in Finland were, on average, younger than other participants in the study (age 9-12 years), which means that they are less likely to use social media platforms regularly. Overall, then, our data suggests that children are most likely to report they encounter unknown others in those online platforms where, developmentally, they most frequently socialise.

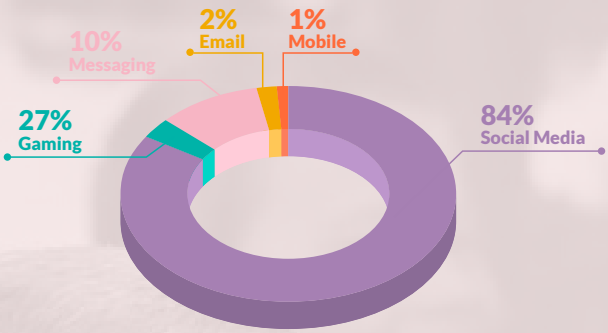
[6] Participants in Finland reported the highest rate of gaming among participating countries (Australia, 27.3%; Cambodia, 3.16%; Colombia, 4.82%; Kenya, 4.65%; Philippines, 14.19%).

## Where do children meet strangers online?

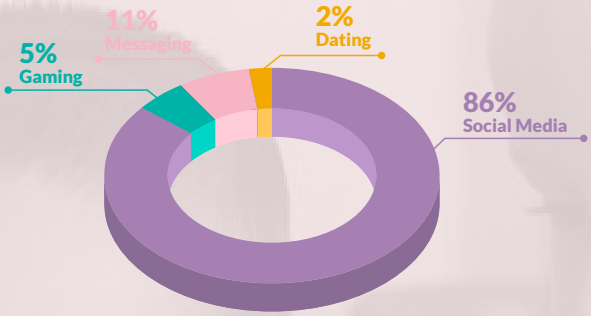
### Australia



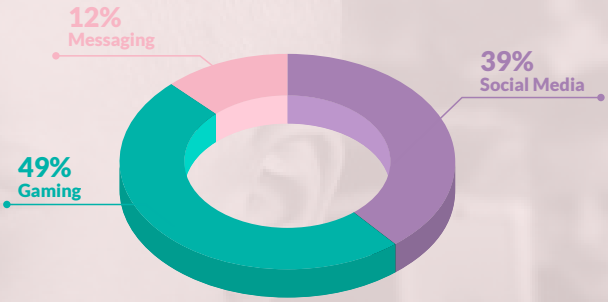

### Cambodia



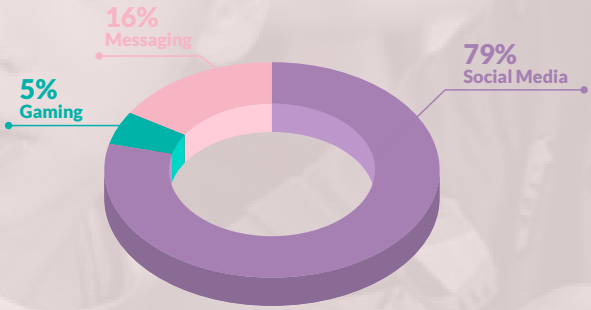

### Colombia



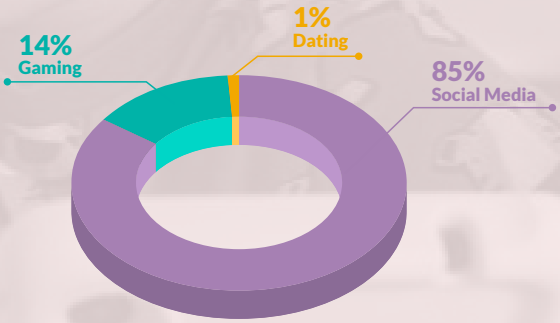

### Finland



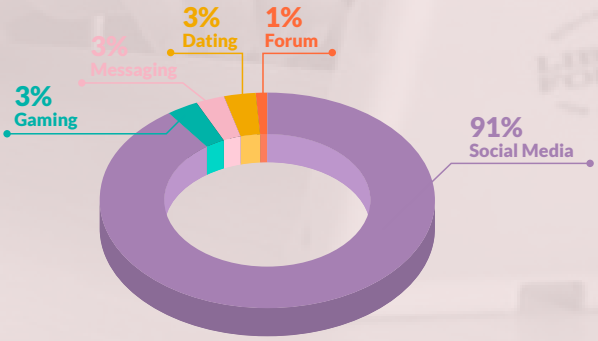

### Kenya




### Philippines




### South Africa



## Who children interact with online

**In general, children distinguish clearly between different kinds of known and unknown others online: a) Genuine Friends: People they know face-to-face, including casual acquaintances; b) Known Unknowns: Those who are connected to friends' and families' existing face-to-face and/or online social networks; and c) Unknown Unknowns: Those they meet exclusively through online interaction.**

In workshops, it emerged that children generally have developed detailed mental rubrics for classifying the different kinds of relationships they nurture online. In general, children distinguish between those they know face-to-face, whom they regard as 'genuine friends'; people they know of but have never met face-to-face, who appear in their friends' and families' face-to-face and/or online social networks; and those they meet exclusively through interacting online. For the purposes of this report, these categories are described respectively as Genuine Friends; Known Unknowns; and Unknown Unknowns.

When engaging online, children connect most often with those they know face-to-face – or those they consider 'genuine friends'. However, as we explain in more detail below, they also connect and interact with known unknowns, as well as unknown unknowns.

Platforms currently do not enable users to give different labels to the variety of online connections they nurture, classifying them all as 'friends' or 'followers' for example. It is perhaps worthwhile for platforms to explore mechanisms to enable users to identify the different kinds of online connections they nurture, in the way, for example, that LinkedIn hierarchises first-, second- and third-level connections in users' professional networks. However, implementing this kind of feature would need to be carefully weighed up against the potential for such categories to be weaponised by users with malicious intent (e.g. in the context of online bullying).


### GENUINE FRIENDS

Pre-existing face-to-face relationship

Includes casual, face -to-face acquaintances

### KNOWN-UNKNOWNS

Some prior knowledge but have never met face-to-face

Mutual connections via friends' or families' networks

### UNKNOWN-UNKNOWNS

No prior knowledge or interaction

Connection initiated exclusively through online interactions

Figure 4. Who do children engage with online?

## How children encounter unknown others online

Children report that they participate in interactions with a range of both known unknowns and unknown unknowns, by acting on algorithmically-generated friend suggestions and accepting requests to connect from unknown others. Children also sometimes search for or follow new contacts and send requests to connect with known unknowns.

*"You can meet people online by adding them as a friend or requesting them or accepting their request or mutually adding them."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"Social networks give you friendship suggestions and that way you find new people, also through videos or sometimes when you search for a person, your profile appears and they can send you messages."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"[If you accept] the request… they start sending you messages."*

**Small group, 13-17, urban, Colombia**

That said, children are generally cautious about initiating contact with known unknowns online. Indeed, many reported that they rarely reach out to known unknowns. Moreover, when it comes to connecting with unknown unknowns, many adhere to self-imposed rules about never reaching out.

*"They reach out to me and I never reach out to people I don't know."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Some strangers chat to us, but we don't reach out to people who are [completely] unknown."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Australia**

The above shows that children mobilise sophisticated frameworks for making sense of and responding to different kinds of others online, distinguishing clearly between 'genuine friends', known unknowns and unknown unknowns. Our findings reflect an urgent need for children to be empowered to manage their online connections, networks and privacy at a time when their lives are increasingly "digital by default" and much of their self-expression and socialising occurs online (Stoilova et al 2020). Current literature suggests that children view online spaces as "'personal space' for self-expression and socializing" and are lacking awareness about the future implications and potential harms of their online activity (Stoilova et al 2020. 199). Our findings suggest that children are aware of these harms and are seeking strategies to navigate and respond to them.

### Key Takeaways

Children primarily interact online with those they know in their face-to-face settings. However, they also routinely encounter unknown others in online spaces where they congregate to socialise with peers. Indeed, 66% of study participants interact with unknown others daily, predominantly via social media and gaming platforms. Online safety advice to avoid interacting with strangers online thus needs updating to address the reality of children's interactions online.

Children interact with three kinds of others online: a) Genuine Friends: those people they know face-to-face, including casual acquaintances; b) Known Unknowns: those they know of through their friends' and families' face-to-face and/or online social networks; and c) Unknown Unknowns: those they meet exclusively through online interactions. In general, children only fully trust Genuine Friends.

# 2 Children regard all those online connections they have not met face-to-face with a degree of suspicion

## Who children trust online

**Children generally only fully trust online friends that they also know face-to-face.**

When asked to identify who they regard as a genuine friend online, children across cultures and age groups in this study were most likely to cite those they know, talk to, and spend time with face-to-face. Indeed, children generally regard only those they know face-to-face as 'genuine friends', and therefore as trustworthy.

Children are more likely to trust those online friends they know face-to-face because they can verify who they are and observe their behaviours across different contexts and over time, thereby alleviating concerns about those online friends' identities and intentions.

*"Offline friends are the ones we can really trust since we already met and saw them in person."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

*"I trust friends offline more because I know them face-to-face and know they aren't faking their true identity."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"A friend offline is someone we walk with, know them offline [and] I could trust them easily."*

**Male, 14-16, rural, Cambodia**

*"Online friends are different than other friends because you might not know the people who are online."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Finland**

*"There is a difference between friends online and offline because you can't see your online friends physically and determine whether they are real or not. While you can meet your offline friends physically and you can identify if they are real, and if they are someone that can be trusted."*

**Small group, 15-17, urban, Philippines**

*"[Compared with online friends,] offline friends can be better because they are trustworthy."*

**Female, 13, rural, South Africa**

**By contrast, children tend to treat all online connections they do not know face-to-face – both known unknowns and unknown unknowns – with a degree of suspicion.**

The vast majority of participants (86%) reported that they treat anyone who is not a close friend face-to-face with suspicion. While they may form online friendships with people they do not know face-to-face, children told us they remain wary about their trustworthiness.

*"Friends on the internet are behind a screen and are not the same as friends in your community that you already know and know their intentions."*

**Small group, 13-17, rural, Colombia**

*"We can't trust those people that we only met online that much. We can label them as our friends [but] we know little information about them [because] we don't know them personally."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

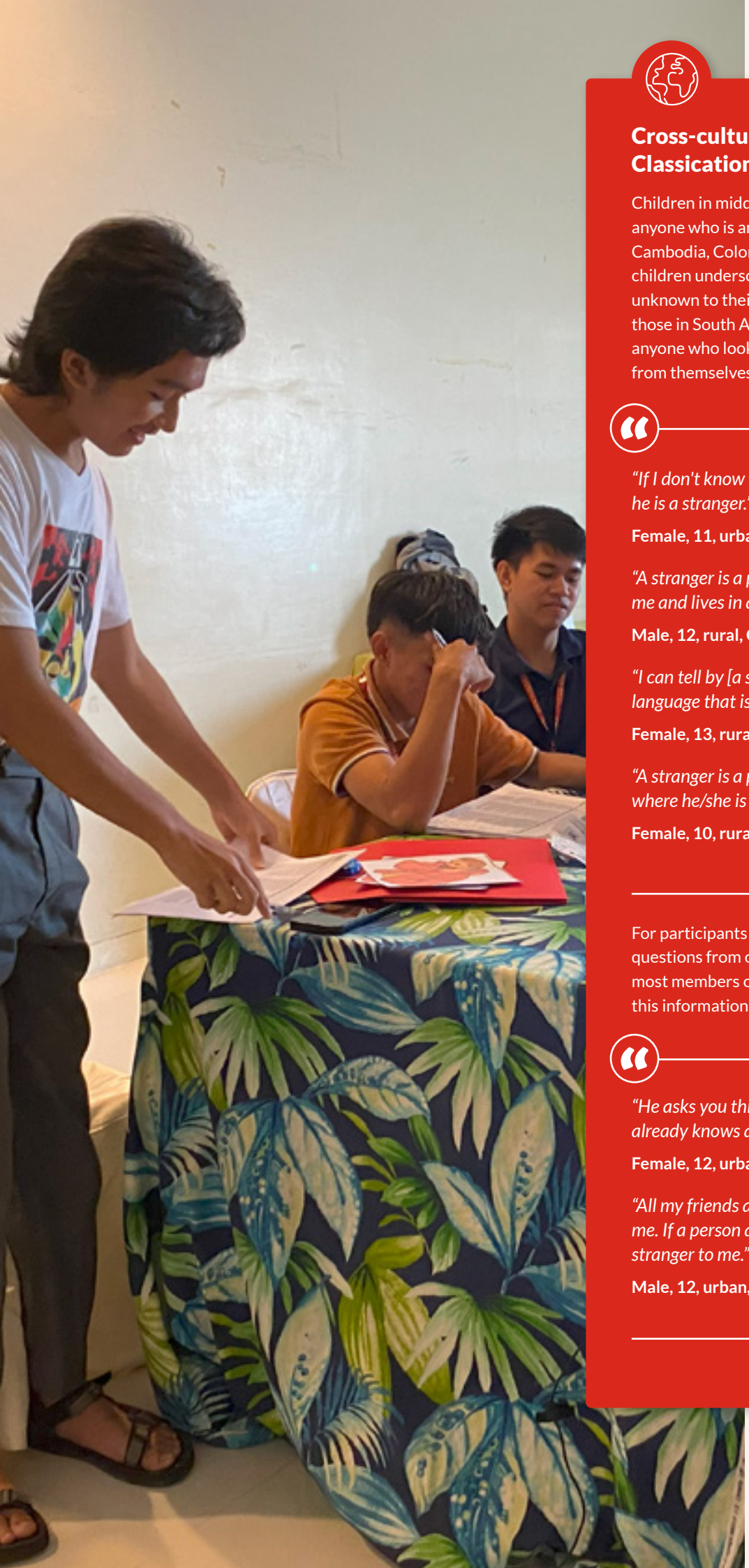
*"We don't really trust people who we [only] know online."*

**Male, 14-16, rural, Cambodia**

*"Online friends are not trustworthy because they can post any discussion you had with them. Online friends cannot feel/see each other because they are in different countries."*

**Female, 13, rural, South Africa**

This highlights that children are already exercising caution when socialising online. These findings present an opportunity for governments, NGOs, technology platforms, teachers, parents, and caregivers to support safe online engagements by reinforcing children's intuition about who it is safe to connect with online.



## Cross-cultural differences: Classication of unknown others

Children in middle-income countries classify anyone who is an outsider as a stranger. In Cambodia, Colombia, Kenya and the Philippines, children underscored that anyone who is unknown to their community is a stranger, while those in South Africa reported that a stranger is anyone who looks or sounds different from themselves.

*"If I don't know him and neither do my friends, he is a stranger."*

**Female, 11, urban, Colombia**

*"A stranger is a person who never studied with me and lives in another village."*

**Male, 12, rural, Cambodia**

*"I can tell by [a stranger's] face and their language that is different from ours."*

**Female, 13, rural, South Africa**

*"A stranger is a person that you don't know where he/she is coming from."*

**Female, 10, rural, Kenya**

For participants in these contexts, personal questions from others raise their suspicion as most members of their community already know this information and have no need to ask.

*"He asks you things that almost everyone already knows about you."*

**Female, 12, urban, Colombia**

*"All my friends and family know a lot about me. If a person asks me where I live, they are a stranger to me."*

**Male, 12, urban, Colombia**

Our participants were most prudent when engaging with people with whom they have no prior knowledge or connection – that is complete strangers or unknown unknowns. Participants said they rely on being able to observe the physical attributes, body language, and tone of speech to evaluate the identities and intentions of unknown others. Interacting through a screen limits their ability to assess the safety of an unknown unknown, making it difficult to judge their character.

*"It is not the same to see and speak without knowing who you are talking to, and you do not have the same confidence either."*

**Small group, 13-17, urban, Colombia**

*"They can be fake, stab you in the back, talk bad about you and [not be] who you thought they were."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"[When face-to-face, you can take] notice of… when they speak [and whether they make] eye contact."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"You don't know the character of the online strangers but you can see the character of the offline strangers."*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

This was noted in particular by children from middle-income countries, who were generally of the view that it is not easy to form deep connections with unknown others via online platforms. They argued that spending time together in person, through activities such as chatting, playing games, and sharing food is a critical element of genuine friendship.

*"Friends online are friends who we interact with on the internet only and we cannot have any [face-to-face] activities together. Friends offline are friends who we play with… and can have activities together."*

**Female, 13-14, rural, Cambodia**

*"The difference between a digital friend is that you cannot see or meet them in person. A friend from my community is the one I can get to know best and you can play in person."*

**Small group, 13-17, urban, Colombia**

*"Offline friends are friends you know physically and know more about them, while online friends are friends you don't know physically and know less about them."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Kenya**

*"Friends online don't know you physically. They only know you by what you let them see on your profile. Friends offline know the real you, like in real life."*

**Small group, 13-15, priority, South Africa**

Given the challenges around ascertaining the identities and intentions of unknown unknowns online, children across participating countries said that they are inclined to treat them as untrustworthy and potentially dangerous.

*"Internet friends can scam and groom you, because he/she can lie… as you are not physically with the person. [Face-to-face] friends (i.e. those who do things with you) are better."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"Strangers are sometimes dangerous and can ruin our lives. We cannot trust strangers at all."*

**Female, 13, urban, Kenya**

In general, then, children regarded online friends that are known to them face-to-face as more reliable, more predictable and more trustworthy than online friends.

*"Online friends are less predictable than real friends are. An individual builds more trust with a real friend than with an online friend. They are more reliable in terms of sharing information and are more predictable than online friends."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"In [online] networks we really don't know who it is or who they are. [Face-to-face] friends are easier and safer because we know more about them."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

Here, we note that children highlight consistency of behaviour as crucial to their capacity to trust online friends. We will return to this idea again a little later in this report.

## Perceptions of unknown others in online versus face-to-face settings

In workshops, participants compared their experiences of encountering unknown others face-to-face and online. **Children in middle-income countries reported that unknown others in face-to-face contexts are more dangerous than those they encounter in online settings.**

While children in middle-income countries believe it is easier to evaluate the kind of threat an unknown other poses when interacting in face-to-face situations, they nonetheless regard the strangers they meet in person as more threatening than those they meet online. In general, they tended to regard the potential harms that can be caused by unknown others face-to-face as more serious than those they might encounter online. Children in middle-income countries noted that unknown others online might seek to obtain personal information through deception or bullying, while offline strangers might threaten their physical safety, by stealing or kidnapping.

*"[A] stranger offline can hurt you physically [while] a stranger online can't easily touch you without meeting you. Strangers online can be blocked and reported [while] strangers offline can mug you or kidnap you."*

**Small group, 14-17, priority, South Africa**

*"Online strangers can cyberbully you while offline strangers can harm you."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

There are two important observations here. Firstly, it appears that children have the perception that harm that originates online is less severe than physical harm. Secondly, children's observations remind us that children form perceptions of the relative dangers associated with interacting with unknown others online through comparison with the conditions of safety that are prevalent in their immediate face-to-face environments.

### Cross-cultural differences: Threat

Some children in high-income countries do not regard unknown others online as a threat to their safety, whereas many children in middle-income countries associate unknown others online with a potential threat to their physical safety. While Australian children sometimes suggested that they view people they do not know online as harmless, some Cambodian, Colombian, and South African children discussed their fear of how sharing personal information online may lead to extreme consequences, such as being kidnapped.

*"[We have a] fear of being deceived and sold and afraid of being sent our picture to other people and afraid of being taken it to do something stupid."*

**Small male group, 9-11, rural, Cambodia**

*"[Sharing personal information might result in being] stolen, kidnapped or harmed."*

**Female, 13, urban, Colombia**

## Key Takeaways

Children tend to treat online connections they do not know face-to-face – both known unknowns and unknown unknowns – with a degree of suspicion: 86% say they approach strangers online with caution. Children find it easier to assess the identities and intentions of unknown others in face-to-face over online settings. The risk of harm children associate with interacting with unknown others online depends on their context. Children in middle-income countries are more likely to consider unknown others online as a threat to their physical safety, compared with children in high-income countries who often fail to see online others as a physical threat. This reminds us that young internet users form perceptions about the potential dangers of interacting with unknown others online through comparison with their experiences of safety in their face-to-face environments.

# 3 Children are motivated to interact with unknown others by a strong desire for friendship and fun, and to expand their networks and opportunities

## Friendship, fun and play

**Children and young people across different cultures and age groups are keen for adults in their lives to understand that engaging with unknown others can be beneficial.**

**As they mature, reflecting their increasingly social orientation, expanding networks, and curiosity about the world, children are more inclined to connect with unknown others.**

*"[Children] want to know more people and socialise globally. They see new opportunities."*

**Small group, 15-17, priority, South Africa**

It is commonly assumed that children accept friend requests from unknown others to build their audience and, thereby, to build their profile and standing online. Certainly, children in the workshops raised this as a possible motivation, but they regarded it ambivalently. Children generally agreed that increasing one's followers drives more reactions on social media and can positively influence their perceived popularity. However, whilst some viewed this as a standard and acceptable practice, others did not see it as a valid motivation, and still others condemned practices of collecting large numbers of followers or friends or accepting requests from unknown others for superficial reasons.

*"Some boys and girls [accept requests from unknown others] just to have more followers and sometimes to meet new people."*

**Female, 18, rural, Colombia**

*"[People accept requests from unknown others] to gain more follows. They might want to have more reactions or likes on their posts to feel popular… so that they will have a lot of people reacting to their posts [and] to gain more social media reaction."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"[Children add those they don't know] due to curiosity, peer pressure or for popularity and [being] desperate for followers."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Kenya**

*"[Children add those they don't know] in order to have more followers and friends. They are greedy. They are used to taking friend requests."*

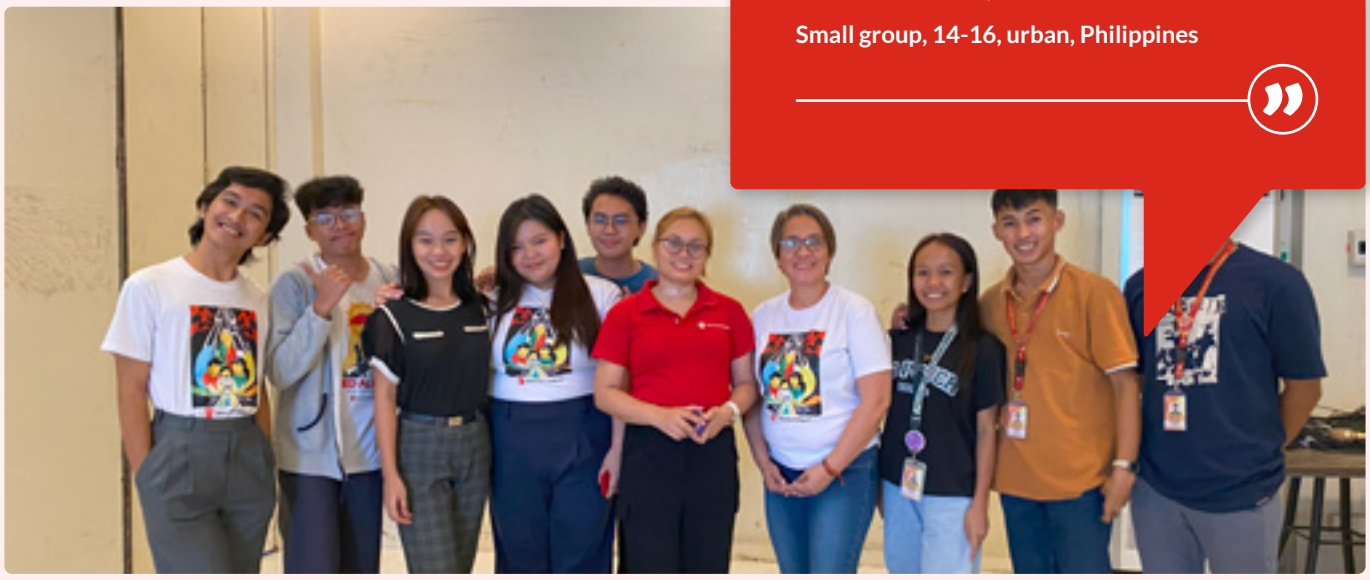
**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"[Some children] want more people added on their account because it's socially acceptable."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"Some children accept friend requests from strangers [just] because the person is handsome/beautiful."*

**Small group, 14-16, urban, Philippines**



**A genuine desire for friendship, fun and play is children's primary motivation for connecting with unknown others online.**

While children's motivations for interacting with unknown others online vary somewhat between middle-income and high-income countries, a genuine desire for friendship – finding people to play with and talk to – is a key motivation across participating countries, and particularly in middle-income countries. In particular, children highlight that being online presents them with opportunities to explore new relationships with people they might not otherwise get to know.

*"[Children] are interested in the person or they accept them because they want to talk to someone."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"[We want to] meet people and be friends."*

**Male, 14, urban, Colombia**

*"Kids interact with strangers to play with them because playing games with people is ten times more fun than [playing] by yourself."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"Children go through online platforms to have someone to play with."*

**Male, 15, urban, Philippines**

Children noted that it is considerably easier to interact with strangers online than in face-to-face settings.

*"It's easier to contact people on the internet and you don't need to be as brave to talk online."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"Online you can talk to them more not knowing who they are, but if you're walking along the street you most likely won't have a conversation with them."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"We want to gain lots of online friends, and we want someone to talk to online. We also find it comfortable sharing to [friends online] our problems sometimes."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"The difference between [unknown others] online and [unknown others] offline is that [it is] easier to know each other online than offline."*

**Small male group, 13-15, rural, Cambodia**

**Indeed, children reported that the capacity to develop friendships with unknown others online is particularly beneficial for those who find it challenging to nurture friendships in face-to-face contexts, or for those who experience boredom or loneliness.**

*"[Children] want to make new friends and socialise [online] because they are lonely and can't make friends easily offline due to criticism and bullying/being antisocial/to be creepy and torment the other person."*

**Small group, 13-15, priority, South Africa**

*"[I] would be so happy if I will be able to have someone I could talk to."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

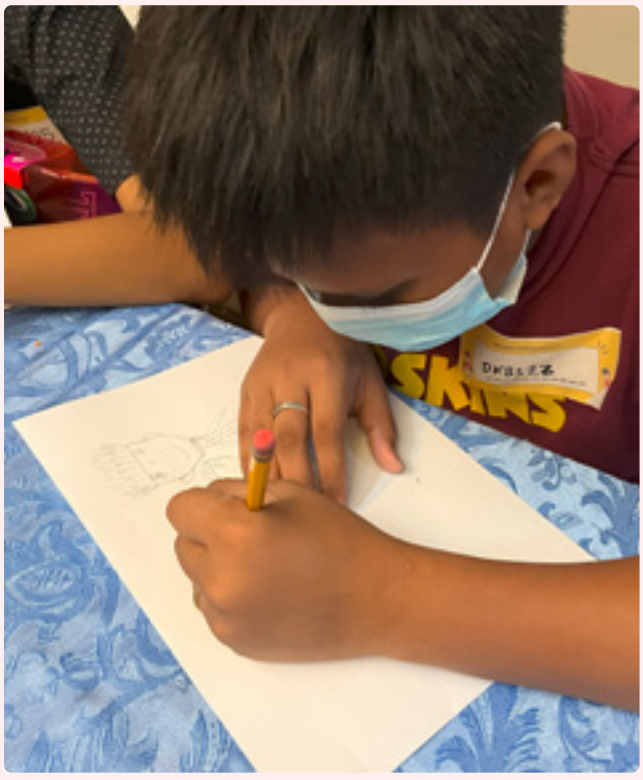
*"Some of my peers are introverted and can't socialise, that's why they're finding friends… online."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"Sometimes, when we get bored, we think of interacting with strangers."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

Interestingly, if some children say that loneliness is a key driver of their desire to connect with unknown others online, this raises the question of whether children have enough spaces in face-to-face settings to socialise with each other and to reap the wellbeing impacts of meaningful friendship.



## Staying informed, expanding networks and pursuing curiosities

Beyond the desire for friendship, **children reported that their other motivations for engaging with unknown others online include staying informed about new trends and events; connecting with others who share similar interests; forging bonds across diverse contexts; and expanding their networks beyond their immediate locality.**

*"The benefit of talking to strangers is that you might know what the trends are these days, news or what's popular."*

**Female, 16, urban, Philippines**

*"[Children] engage [with unknown others] to have fun because most people prefer to have a good time, follow trends, or go along with what's popular."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"[Children engage with unknown others online] because they want to express their interest and build relationships."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

**Curiosity is a key driver in children's desire to connect with unknown others.**

Children reported that exploring the identities of unknown others and their broader social and cultural context can be very exciting and alluring. They are driven by curiosity to develop new relationships and explore others' ways of being in the world.

*"[Children engage with unknown others online] because they are curious about this person's intent. They want to further grow their number of friends online, because they think they are [being] friendly, but they don't know the harms at the online world."*

**Small group, 15-17, urban, Philippines**

*"[We interact with unknown others] out of curiosity and starting a conversation."*

**Female, 16, urban, Colombia**

### Reasons for befriending unknown others


**Friendship, fun and play**

**Information about new trends & events**

**Shared interests**

**Expanded networks**

**Curiosity**

**Life opportunities**

**Financial benefit**

**Even so, children are most likely to pursue interactions with 'known unknowns' with whom they share mutual friends.**

Connecting with known unknowns is an opportunity for children to explore relationships and extend their local networks, based on trusted connections.

*"Because my friend says good things about [someone online], it makes me curious and I am interested in establishing a conversation."*

**Female, 14, urban, Colombia**

*"I accept [a friend request from an unknown other] because I want to know more about his story, whether he is as good as they say."*

**Small female group, 13-16, rural, Cambodia**

*"My friends compliment him in nice ways who knows him better that's why I'm excited to have a new friend by accepting his friend request."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

## Motivations in middle-income countries

Children and young people in middle-income countries commonly noted that interacting with unknown others potentially offers them opportunities and benefits beyond those afforded by their immediate face-to-face contexts, by sharing helpful information, building their networks, and increasing their exposure to new groups of followers. Children and young people in middle-income countries were of the view that these things can help to build their educational opportunities and career prospects, increase their social capital and enhance their lives.

*"I interact with some strangers due to networking – to build a future for myself. Sometimes it is dangerous, especially when they ask for personal information."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Kenya**

*"Sometimes children aim to have a relationship to an older stranger because they think it's cool."*

**Small group, 15-17, urban, Philippines**

*"[I sometimes connect with unknown others because] they might have something important or an opportunity to share."*

**Small group, 12-14, urban, South Africa**

*"[She connected with an unknown other] because she thought it might help her at school."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

**Children in middle-income countries, including the Philippines, Cambodia, Colombia, and Kenya reported being aware that, for some children in their contexts, the potential to derive financial benefits is an incentive to connect with unknown others online.**

Children reported that the desire for a better future motivates some children in these locations to take risks online and befriend unknown others with whom they might not otherwise wish to connect.

*"[Children] think [unknown others] will give them a lot of money after they follow them."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"Well, sometimes… [children] are offered money or other types of things in exchange."*

**Male, 16, rural, Colombia**

*"Children [are at risk of harm] because of grooming and the money given to the children."*

**Small male group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

The benefit children in middle-income countries perceive to be associated with engaging with unknown others online highlights the challenges of supporting children in diverse contexts to avoid potentially harmful contact with unknown others online and reminds us that children's **socio-material circumstances powerfully shape their exposure to risk of harm in the digital environment.**

## Key Takeaways

As they mature and become more social, children are more inclined to connect with unknown others online. Children are particularly curious about pursuing interactions with known unknowns. They are motivated to do so primarily by a genuine desire for friendship, fun and play, followed by a desire to stay informed about trends and events, to connect over shared interests, and to expand their networks. Concerningly, the potential to derive financial benefits is an incentive for children in middle-income countries to connect with unknown others online, potentially compromising their safety online. Children want adults in their lives to understand that engaging with unknown others is normal when engaging online and can be both enjoyable and beneficial, particularly for those who experience loneliness or who find it challenging to nurture face-to-face friendships. Children's interactions with unknown others may be short-lived or evolve into longer-term friendships, and they may stay online or eventually develop face-to-face dimensions.

# 4 Children weigh up the risks of harm and the potential benefits when assessing whether to interact with unknown others online

## Children's perceptions of harm

**Children acknowledge that engaging with unknown others online can expose them to risks of harm.** Across participating countries, children were concerned about the potential to be deceived or tricked by unknown others online. Children in middle-income countries are particularly conscious that they can be deceived by unknown others online. While they are curious and keen to explore relationships with unknown others, they nonetheless recognise that this desire for friendship can put their safety at risk.

**Children in middle-income countries (63%) were more likely than those in high-income settings (46%) to feel afraid, anxious or uncomfortable when unknown others contact them.**

*"We felt distrustful because we never knew each other and never talked to each other, just hearing from people we knew."*

**Female, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"I feel a little frightened because [an unknown other] may have bad intentions for us."*

**Female, 13-16, rural, Cambodia**

*"I feel frightened [when unknown others ask] personal questions… [They] make me uncomfortable and they make me question their intentions."*

**Small group, 15-17, priority, South Africa**

*"[I feel] nervous, uncomfortable, scared [when unknown others contact me]. You don't know what their intentions are when [unknown others] ask those kinds of [personal] questions."*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Philippines**

Children acknowledge that the effects of engaging with unknown others can be serious – and potentially catastrophic – for the individuals involved. **In particular, children are concerned that contact with unknown others may expose them to online bullying, potential physical harm, inappropriate requests for personal information or images, and interaction with the dark web or other online spaces in which their data, privacy, and safety are vulnerable.**

**Children were particularly concerned that unknown others may request personal information or nude pictures, draw them into inappropriate sexually-oriented exchanges, or expose them to criminal activities.**

*"We are afraid that [unknown others will] post those sexy pictures or copy and share them."*

**Female, 9-12, rural, Cambodia**

*"Young people's interactions with strangers online can … expose them to potential dangers like cyberbullying, grooming and exploitation."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

*"People online can turn out to be not good people and can fake their identity/personality."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"[We fear] being deceived and sold [by unknown others] and we are afraid of our picture being sent to other people."*

**Small male group, 9-11, rural, Cambodia**

*"Don't [interact with unknown others] because they could be criminals or something similar."*

**Female, 12, rural, Colombia**

*"I feel confused or frightened because what if he/she takes me to another place? I don't know him/her well yet."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

Above all, however, children note that it is very difficult to ascertain the intentions of unknown others online.

## Risk factors

**A range of platform features exacerbate the risk of harm associated with engaging with unknown others, including age, peer pressure, direct messages, contextual values, exposure to inappropriate content, and fear** (Kuzma, 2012; Witzleb et al, 2020).

### Platform features that exacerbate risks of harm

**Private messaging**

Encrypted messaging, in particular, enhances children's exposure to risks associated with bad actors by enabling direct, unmonitored contact.

**Geotagging**

Location services that enable unknown others to identify children's physical location.

**Anonymity**

The capacity to obscure one's age, gender, or other features that make it hard to verify someone's identity.

**In-app purchases**

The capacity to exchange in-platform collateral enables unknown others to coerce children into complying with their demands.

**A perceived lack of accessible reporting features**

Being unable to identify reporting pathways or avenues for support.

In this study, the older age group of participants across different cultural contexts asserted the idea that younger children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by unknown others because they have had less opportunity to be exposed to the internet and, therefore, may not have developed the digital literacy to enable them to interact safely with unknown others online.

*"Some younger children might not understand what's going on."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"They might not be aware of whether it's dangerous or not because they are still young and may not fully understand the concept of privacy."*

**Small group, 13-16 years, urban, Philippines**

*Younger students in Year 4 and below, who have not received cybersafety education, are more vulnerable to falling into traps set by strangers. These younger students can be easily influenced, potentially leading them to perceive instructions from strangers or requests for explicit pictures as typical behaviour."*

**Small male group, 12-16 years, urban, Cambodia**

Indeed, given that participants from the older age group were highly sensitised to the needs of younger children, strategies to foster supportive peer relationships between different age groups of children might help to prevent online grooming and/or support young users to more effectively seek help when they need it.

Children also pointed to peer pressure as a factor in their willingness to engage with unknown others, despite the risks of harm associated with doing so.

*"[Even if] he would not want to send [a picture of himself], he did it probably from peer pressure."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Kenya**

*"[Children are] in need of friends and sometimes [when they interact with unknown others] it's peer pressure."*

**Small group, 15-16, urban, South Africa**

[7] We note here that the range of platforms that children in this study regularly use all provide reporting features. We discuss the range of barriers to children's use of reporting features later in this report.

## Contexts for risks of harm

Children drew attention to three different ways in which online social norms and broader contexts impact their potential exposure to harm associated with online grooming.

First, children told us that they are deeply invested in fostering civil and supportive online spaces in which to interact with others and express a commitment to treating others respectfully. These are admirable sentiments and, in theory, should help to create positive online environments for children. Indeed, educational initiatives targeting children's online behaviours commonly encourage treating others respectfully online. Paradoxically, though, **children told us that their commitment to civility online can impede their capacity to decline requests from and to effectively manage interactions with unknown others online, making them vulnerable to pressure from bad actors.**

For children in middle-income countries, who place high value on politeness and respecting elders, saying no to an unknown adult online may cause significant discomfort. Children in these locations reported that fear of upsetting a stranger or causing them to lash out in anger may lead them to comply with inappropriate requests against their better judgment.

*"I think [a child] might send his picture to [an unknown adult] because he [...] was afraid that [they] would be angry [if he didn't]."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*[If a child doesn't comply, they] might be misinterpreted as rude for ignoring [the adult]."*

**Female, 15, urban, Philippines**

*"[A child would] feel uneasy and uncomfortable sending [a] photo but I think [they would] still send it so that [the adult] won't get offended."*

**Small group, 15-17, urban, Philippines**

*"Maybe he sent [a picture of himself] out of fear that something would be done to him [if he didn't]."*

**Female, 15, urban, Colombia**

*"[A child] did not want to send [a picture], but he sent it because he was suddenly afraid that if he did not, it might threaten his family."*

**Female, 12, rural, Colombia**

It appears there are opportunities for governments, NGOs, technology platforms, educators, parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults to support children to distinguish when it is appropriate to decline an approach from an unknown other and when they should give an unknown other the benefit of the doubt.

Second, across countries, **children highlighted how consistent exposure to violent, sexually explicit, and other age-inappropriate content can operate to normalise inappropriate behaviour and potentially desensitise them to the potential threat of inappropriate requests from unknown others.** They suggested that continued exposure to age-inappropriate content may contribute to online grooming by setting expectations about the kinds of behaviours that are normal and accepted online and thereby make them more susceptible to exploitation by strangers with harmful intent.

Children are calling on technology platforms to more effectively monitor the content that is shared online, proactively remove this content, and block or ban associated users/accounts before children can be exposed to them.

*"[Government and technology platforms] should control more of the content online and who it's shown to because a lot of negative content is being shown to young children, which is inappropriate for them to see."*

**Female, 15, urban, Australia**

*"Remove from the social network the obscenities that many people upload, since young people are aware of these publications and download the app to see this kind of things."*

**Male, 14, urban, Colombia**

## Decision-making about unknown others

**Although they acknowledge the risks of harm associated with interacting with unknown others online, children report that this knowledge does not necessarily deter them from pursuing relationships with unknown others.**

Indeed, given that many children are curious about unknown others online, they are inclined to engage with them, albeit cautiously and with due attention to preserving their safety and wellbeing.

Reflecting the routine nature of encountering unknown others in online spaces, approximately one quarter (27%) of children in the study – primarily those in high-income countries – reported that they are rarely troubled by requests to connect and other contact from unknown others.

Interestingly, some children do not perceive unknown others online as harmful, emboldening them to interact online with people they don't otherwise know.

*"Strangers online are harmless and possible friends."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"We just add [unknown others] as normal and it does not affect us."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Strangers online can't easily touch you without meeting you."*

**Small group, 14-17, priority, South Africa**

*"I feel normal [responding to unknown others] is not a big deal to me."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

Some children reported that they are inclined to give unknown others the benefit of the doubt. While taking calculated risks opens opportunities to develop meaningful relationships, children acknowledge such practices can also potentially expose them to harm.

*"I won't be able to know [an unknown other] is for real unless I give him a chance."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"[We make friends with unknown others because we] want to know more after chatting for a while."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"[I interact with strangers] because I want to build relationships online, I want to get to know new people."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

As noted earlier, **children place high value on friendship, and the benefits they perceive from connecting with broader networks can outweigh the perceived risks of harm, potentially endangering their safety.** Furthermore, some children enjoy the excitement and risk associated with learning about an unknown other. Here, we should remember that risk-taking is a normal feature of adolescent development and can, under the right circumstances, lead to opportunities and benefits. Children must make often fast-paced decisions about what threshold of risk is appropriate and safe for them, and whether interactions with others might expose them to potential harm. Figure 5 represents the complex range of factors that impact children's decision-making about whether, and on what terms, to engage with unknown others.

As we discuss in the remainder of this report, **there is opportunity to intervene more constructively to strengthen the protective behaviours and strategies they already implement, and to create safer environments in which they can socialise.**

# Figure 5: How do children decide whether to connect with unknown others?

## WHERE

Children meet unknown others in the spaces where they socialise online

SOCIAL MEDIA

GAMING PLATFORMS

MESSAGING PLATFORMS

## HOW

Children are invited to connect with unknown others via a range of platform functions

- FRIEND REQUESTS
- FRIEND SUGGESTIONS
- PROFILE VIEWING
- CHAT FUNCTION
- SEARCHES

MANY CHILDREN NEVER REACH OUT TO UNKNOWN OTHERS

## WHO

Children interact with three kinds of others online

1 GENUINE FRIENDS
Those they know face-to-face

SAFE TO CONNECT

2 KNOWN UNKNOWNS
People connected to friends or family

3 UNKNOWN UNKNOWNS
People with no mutuals

86% CHILDREN TREAT UNKNOWN OTHERS WITH CAUTION BECAUSE THEY...

- Are difficult to verify
- Might have bad intentions
- Might trick or deceive

## PROTECTIVE BEHAVIOURS

When deciding to connect or interact with unknown others, children apply the following protections:

Children follow their INTUITION OR GUT FEELING about whether it is safe to connect

**RELATIONAL VERIFICATION**
Children scrutinise whether unknown others have connections with trusted connections in their networks.

**TARGETED INVESTIGATION**
Children conduct background checks, ask questions, and occasionally ask for proof of identity.

USING PRIVACY & SECURITY SETTINGS AND STRONG PASSWORDS

NOT ACCEPTING REQUESTS FROM UNKNOWN OTHERS

RESTRICTING PERSONAL INFORMATION THEY SHARE

LEARNING ABOUT ONLINE SAFETY RISKS

CHILDREN ARE MOST LIKELY TO CONNECT WITH UNKNOWN OTHERS WITH MUTUAL CONNECTIONS

JUST BEING AWARE OF THE RISKS OF HARM IS NOT NECESSARILY A DETERENT TO CONNECTING WITH UNKNOWN OTHERS...

CHILDREN CONSTANTLY **WEIGH UP** THE POTENTIAL RISKS OF HARM AND THE BENEFITS OF CONNECTING AND INTERACTING WITH UNKNOWN OTHERS

BENEFITS

RISKS OF HARM

## WHY CONNECT?

(BENEFITS)

Children are motivated to interact with others by a range of perceived benefits:

- FRIENDSHIP
- FUN & PLAY
- STAYING INFORMED
- CONNECTING WITH THOSE WITH SHARED INTERESTS
- EXPANDING NETWORKS
- PURSUING CURIOSITIES
- LIFE OPPORTUNITIES*

## WHY NOT?

(POTENTIAL HARMS)

Children worry that ineracting with unknown others might expose them to:

- DECEPTION
- ONLINE BULLYING
- PHYSICAL HARM
- INAPPROPRIATE REQUESTS FOR PERSONAL INFORMATION
- DATA & PRIVACY BREACHES
- INAPPROPRIATE SEXUALLY-ORIENTED EXCHANGES
- CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES
- VIOLENT OR SEXUAL CONTENT

CHILDREN DO NOT AUTOMATICALLY TRUST UNKNOWN OTHERS ONLINE

RATHER, THEY WATCH UNKNOWN OTHERS OVER TIME, LOOKING FOR SIGNS OF

AUTHENTICITY = TREATING OTHERS WELL + CONSISTENCY OF SELF-REPRESENTATION

## RED FLAGS

Children regard these red flags as reasons not to trust online connections and, in some instances, as reason to block or delete contacts from their online friendship networks

- REQUESTS FOR OR SHARING OF SEXUALISED IMAGES
- COMMENTS ABOUT BODY OR APPEARANCE
- REQUESTS TO SHARE ADDRESS OR LOCATION
- QUESTIONS ABOUT AGE OR DATE OF BIRTH
- GIVING AWAY MONEY
- QUESTIONS ABOUT LIVING ARRANGEMENTS
- REQUESTS TO MEET FACE-TO-FACE
- REQUESTS TO INTERACT VIA PRIVATE CHANNELS
- REQUESTS TO SHARE PASSWORDS
- QUESTIONS ABOUT RELATIONSHIP STATUS OR HISTORY
- QUESTIONS ABOUT PARENTS OR CAREGIVERS
- QUERIES ABOUT WORK OR SCHOOL

## RESPONSIVE STRATEGIES

To deal with unwanted contacts, children:

- IGNORE
- BLOCK
- UNFRIEND
- REPORT
- SEEK HELP

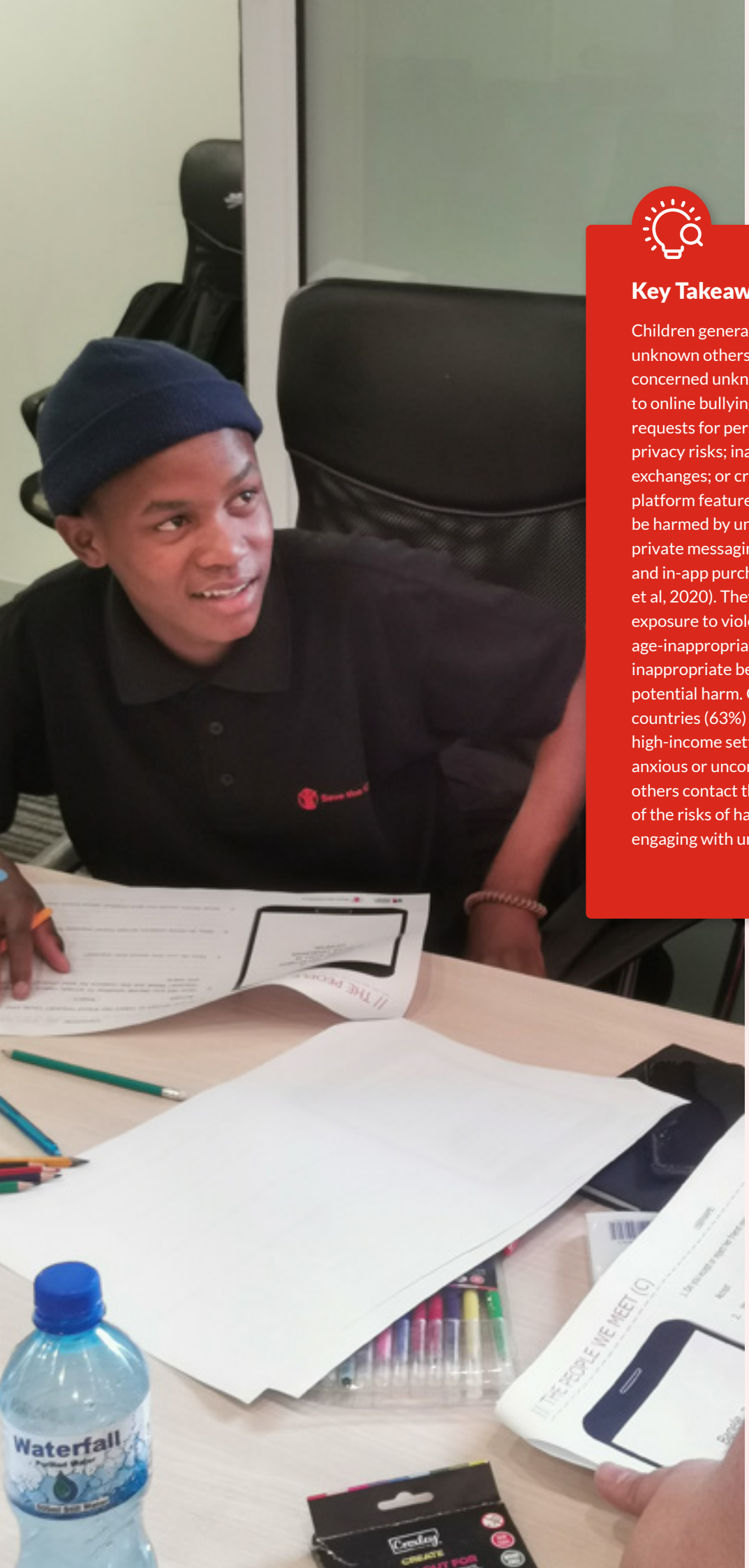
Children favour responsive strategies that they can apply in the flow of their (fast-paced) digital media activities, while scrolling or playing games.

SO...

80% CHILDREN ARE MOST LIKELY TO REPORT AN INCIDENT TO A FRIEND

CHILDREN ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO IGNORE THAN TO REPORT

CHILDREN WANT TO REPORT TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS BUT WORRY THAT THEY ARE ILL-EQUIPPED TO SUPPORT




## Key Takeaways

Children generally know that engaging with unknown others online can be risky. They are concerned unknown others might expose them to online bullying; physical harm; inappropriate requests for personal information; data and privacy risks; inappropriate sexually-oriented exchanges; or criminal activities. Certain platform features exacerbate the potential to be harmed by unknown others online, including private messaging, geotagging , anonymity, and in-app purchases (Kuzma, 2012; Witzleb et al, 2020). They also worry that consistent exposure to violent, sexually explicit, and other age-inappropriate content can normalise inappropriate behaviours online and increase potential harm. Children in middle-income countries (63%) were more likely than those in high-income settings to report feeling afraid, anxious or uncomfortable when unknown others contact them. Importantly, being aware of the risks of harm rarely deters children from engaging with unknown others online.

# 5 Children use intuition, relational verification and targeted investigations to decide whether to connect with unknown others online

**Across diverse cultural contexts, children's decision-making processes about engaging with unknown others online are complex and multi-layered.** They rely on a combination of intuition and targeted strategies to guide their decisions about whether to connect with unknown others online (See Figure 5).

## Intuition and deciding whether to connect

Children overwhelmingly report that their decisions about connecting with unknown others online are guided by 'intuition' or their 'gut feeling'. While this sense of intuition plays a key role in decisions about whether to initiate contact with an unknown other, it also guides children's ongoing evaluative practices as relationships with unknown others unfold online.

*"How you respond to an unknown other] really depends on how comfortable [you are] with the questions being asked."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"Some will give their information because they kind of feel comfortable already because they think they already know each other very well since they have been chatting for couple of weeks."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

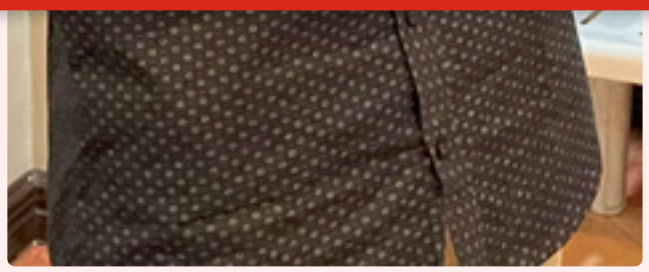
Children reported a range of different intuitive responses to invitations to connect and/or participate in interactions with unknown others online: positive, neutral; negative and mixed, as shown overleaf (Figure 6).

Children reported that, when their gut feeling about an unknown other is negative or mixed, they are extra cautious about engaging.

**Online safety education, in combination with platform features and 'nudges',[8] might usefully reinforce children's predisposition to treat unknown others as untrustworthy when their gut feeling is negative or ambiguous.**


### Cross-cultural differences: mutual friends

How much trust children place in their friends' decision making is dependent on where they live. Children in Cambodia and the Philippines were much more likely to trust an unknown person with whom they had mutual friends than participants in other countries.



[8] Nudges are small behavioural interventions that prompt users to behave in particular ways, challenging but not overriding their capacity to exercise autonomy.

**Children reported a range of different intuitive responses to invitations to connect and/or participate in interactions with unknown others online, as shown in Figure 6.**

## Positive intuition

Children experience trust, happiness, excitement, and curiosity in relation to connecting with an unknown other.

*"I feel good knowing that he is asking about me, my parents and other things about me."*

**Small group, 14-16, urban, Philippines**

*"John [an unknown other featured in a scenario] seems nice because I've heard about him, he is my friend's cousin so I feel I can trust him."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"I accepted the friend request from [an unknown other] because I thought she was a normal person and did not post anything bad."*

**Female, 13-16, rural, Cambodia**

*"[It is safe to share personal details with this unknown other] because he thinks they are good people."*

**Male, 11, rural, Colombia**

## Neutral feeling

Children are largely indifferent about connecting with strangers, primarily because they regard connecting with unknown others online as the norm.

*"I feel normal. It's not like it's a threat or that person is holding a gun."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, South Africa**

*"I feel normal because we do not think critically about her or cannot evaluate her."*

**Female, 13-14, rural, Cambodia**

*"I'm neither happy nor sad, it's a person I don't know."*

**Male, 8, rural, Colombia**

*"[I] don't really feel much towards [an unknown other featured in a scenario]."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

## Negative intuition

Children say negative intuition is grounded in feeling unsure about the motives of an unknown other, sensing possible negative consequences, and a general distrust of unknown others.

*"[She gives me] bad [vibes] because she doesn't know me and I don't know her and, if she doesn't know me, why does she want to be my friend?"*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"I rejected [an invitation from an unknown other] because the message was suspicious."*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

*"I feel uncomfortable and unsafe. The [unknown others'] questions have instantly made me cautious about [his] intentions."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"[I feel] angry [about an invitation from an unknown other as] I don't like people asking about my things."*

**Female, 12, rural, Colombia**

## Mixed intuition

Children report that they often feel conflicted, confused or unsure whether it is safe to connect and interact with unknown others.

*"[I get a] little confused because it's strange [when] they ask you personal things."*

**Female, 16, urban, Colombia**

*"I answer [an unknown other] according to the facts because he is friendly and sounds trustworthy. But I don't want to answer [his question] about my class because I am afraid that he will come to my class and I worry about my safety."*

**Female, 9-13, urban, Cambodia**

Figure 6 Categories of intuition about unknown others

Children reported that their intuition, and therefore their decision-making about whether to initiate contact with an unknown other, is shaped by two key ongoing practices: relational verification and targeted investigation, which we now explain.

## Relational verification

In their practices of relational verification, children marshal social and relational dynamics to ascertain the extent to which an unknown other might be trustworthy.

**Children scrutinise and evaluate whether unknown others have existing face-to-face or online connections with other trusted connections in their networks.**

The most important factor in children's decision making about whether to connect and engage with an unknown other was pre-existing knowledge of and mutual connections. Having mutual friends could mean that children were more comfortable accepting a friend request from an unknown other and willing to give them a chance, even though they might not have any prior face-to-face interaction. Children thus appeared to place a high level of trust in their friendship networks.

*"I trust my friends, and some level of trust is transferred over to mutuals."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"The person is not just anybody but my friend's cousin."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"We should look at the relationships of that person with others and his profile online."*

**Female, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

**Children's existing networks function as foundations of safety and security from which they can explore the possibility of expanding their social connections through engagement with known unknowns.**

Children are particularly inclined to accept invitations to connect with unknown others if trusted others in their networks speak positively about those unknown others.

*"If your cousin recommended them and you have some knowledge about their personality, it can make accepting them as an online friend feel more comfortable and secure. It's always good to have some level of familiarity or reference before connecting with someone online."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"I accept because I always hear my friend tell me about his good attitude that he is a good and trustworthy person."*

**Female, 13-16, rural, Cambodia**

*"Friends always speak well of him, he is at my age, so I accept."*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Cambodia**

*"If my friend says nice things about [the unknown other], I feel I can trust my friend's judgement on him and befriend him."*

**Small group, 15-17, priority, South Africa**

**Children are more likely to accept a friend request from someone they had physically seen or met in real life.**

The second most important factor influencing children's decision-making about whether to connect with unknown others online was having prior face-to-face interaction.

*"Strangers online you don't always know their face whereas strangers offline you know their face."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"He should also see him in person so that he believes he is helping him."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"I rejected the invitation because one shouldn't trust a person one has never seen before."*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

*"It is not safe at all because he does not know them IRL [in real life]."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Australia**

*"Because we don't know him and we didn't see him in person and he can be dangerous."*

**Male, 11, urban, Colombia**

By contrast, **not having face-to-face contact or strong social reference points and relational validation for new contacts tended to trigger negative intuition and greater levels of suspicion.** Children often regarded such unknown others as a threat, and many reported that they have a policy of refraining from making such connections.

*"I really don't know her. Stranger danger; It has always been my practice to never accept friend requests if I do not know them."*

**Small group, 15-17, urban, Philippines**

*"Because I had never known her, I felt frightened."*

**Male, 9-13, urban, Cambodia**

*"Do not accept requests from people you do not know because it can be dangerous."*

**Male, 12, urban, Colombia**

*"Don't accept if you don't know the person."*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

*"A stranger you have seen is more trustworthy than a stranger online."*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

While using relational verification is a protective factor, we note here that research shows that perpetrators of online grooming are sometimes connected to children's existing social networks. Further checking for mutual connections to evaluate whether to connect with unknown others is not fail-safe. Ill-intentioned unknown others can still infiltrate children's networks and potentially place them at risk of harm. It is important to also educate children about the limitations of some of their strategies and to remind them that even those they feel they know are potentially untrustworthy.

Further, while placing high value on face-to-face interaction is broadly protective, some children reported that their desire to verify the identities of unknown others face-to-face might prompt them to arrange a face-to-face meeting with unknown other, potentially exposing them to heightened risk of harm.

*"Hi there. We must meet each other first."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

*"[I am] confused. I need to interact personally."*

**Male, 14, urban, Colombia**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Relational verification** | Face-to-face interaction |
| | Mutual friends and connections |
| **Targeted investigations** | Ask questions |
| | Background checks |
| | Request proof of identity |

Figure 7: Children's practices of relational verification and targeted investigation

## Targeted investigation

Targeted investigation entails children performing different kinds of checks and/or triangulating information they find about an unknown other from a variety of sources.

**Children commonly conduct background checks, ask questions, and occasionally ask for proof of identity to determine if it is safe to engage with an unknown other online.**

Children reported that they commonly research unknown others that reach out to them. These background checks include checking the unknown other's profile picture, perusing the content on their account, and searching for and scanning through other social media accounts under the person's name. In some cases, they also undertake an online search of the person's name.

*"We have to clearly see the profile and see their posts and shares."*

**Female, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Investigate who he was, if it was true or reliable what he said."*

**Male, 17, urban, Colombia**

When assessing whether to engage with an unknown other online, children also took steps to determine their credibility by asking questions that explore the unknown other's intentions, their personal information and their attributes.

*"[I] ask what's his/her age."*

**Female, 10, urban, Finland**

*[They] should ask [the unknown other] clearly why [the unknown other] wants [them] to make such a video."*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Cambodia**

*"He could have asked him questions about [the unknown other] before giving him his details."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Kenya**

Some children, mainly from Australia and Finland, assessed whether to trust a stranger by asking for a proof of identity from the stranger before they interact on a deeper level.

*"I would say something like 'I don't know you fully yet' and probably face call him to see if he isn't lying about his identity"*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

### Key Takeaways

Children's existing networks function as a safe foundation from which they can explore relationships with known unknowns. They are much more likely to accept a friend request from someone they have seen or met in real life. Not having face-to-face contact or strong social reference points for new contacts tended to trigger negative feelings and greater levels of suspicion. Children's decision-making about interacting with unknown others is shaped by two ongoing practices: relational verification and targeted investigation. Relational verification involves scrutinising and evaluating whether unknown others have existing face-to-face or online connections with other trusted connections. Children's targeted investigation practices include conducting background checks, asking questions, or requesting proof of identity to determine if it is safe to engage with an unknown other online.

# 6 Children observe new online connections over time to determine their authenticity and to monitor whether they are trustworthy

## Observation over time

Children's social and relational verification and investigative practices are strengthened, validated and complemented by an overarching process of ongoing observation of unknown others' behaviours and self-representations over time.

**Children closely observe unknown others' modes of online self-representation and behaviours towards others in search of signs of authenticity in order to guide their decisions about how to interact online with someone they do not know face-to-face.**

When children encounter or add someone – known or otherwise – to their friendship networks online, they do not automatically assume that new connection merits their ongoing trust. Rather, they tend to carefully monitor new contacts' self-representation and behaviours over time, watching for consistency. Children tend to only regard new online contacts as trustworthy if they meet a threshold of authenticity and integrity by exhibiting consistent self-representation and acceptable behaviour over an extended period of time.

Children, especially those in Cambodia, placed significant emphasis on observing the person's behaviour and personality as a method of ascertaining whether they have honest intentions and, hence, whether they were trustworthy. They pay close attention to what the person says, what content they upload and how they act online.

*"I make friends with someone by observing their attitude, character and their action."*

**Female, 15, urban, Cambodia**

*"I need to wait to see, what kind of character he is and whether we can be friend or not."*

**Small female group, 9-13, urban, Cambodia**

*"[I watch] their profile and the way they treat each other in the game."*

**Female, 14, urban, Philippines**

If the unknown person is a mutual friend of others in their face-to-face networks, children also report that they observe how the unknown other treats their friends.

*"Because she is a good person and there are other people [who] admire her, such as friends or acquaintances, so we can accept to be friends."*

**Small female group, 11-12, rural, Cambodia**

*"The reason why I accept him is because he is honest with my friends."*

**Small male group, 14-16, rural, Cambodia**

That is, children tend to engage in subtle processes of surveillance, both online and face-to-face, observing interactions and looking for signs of coherence, which help to build their trust, or signs of inconsistency, which undermine the credibility of the new contact.

## Markers of genuine friendship

**Children consider those relationships that nurture and support them over time as genuine and trustworthy online friendships.**

They associate genuine friendship with characteristics such as reliability, openness, kindness, care, understanding, and reciprocity. Most often, genuine online friendships are grounded in face-to-face friendship, evidencing the ways that children use their digital interactions to nurture and sustain face-to-face connections with peers.

*"[A friend is someone who cares about me, someone who's helped me through any tough times, and someone who has always supported me. He/she is always there for you during your highs or lows and will always correct and support you."*

**Male, 14, urban, Kenya**

*"Having someone who is always there for you and listens when you feel down, and someone you can trust with your secrets."*

**Female, 15, urban, Philippines**

*"[A friend is] a person who loves me, is sincere to me, with whom I can share good or bad moments. How do I know if he is a good friend? It is very relative, it depends on what each person considers what it means to be a friend."*

**Female, 16, urban, Colombia**

*"For me, a friend is someone we know, with whom we share, also with whom we chat, play, laugh and dance, etc."*

**Female, 14, rural, Colombia**

*"[A] friend is a good person who helps us when we have a problem and always stays beside us and encourages us. I make friends by going to school and [living] next to each other."*

**Female, 15, priority, Cambodia**

They also believe genuine friendships hold them accountable by giving them honest opinions; calling out disagreements and differences in views; and sharing robust feedback.

*"A friend is [some]one you know, trust and confide in. A friend sticks with you in the good and bad times. A friend doesn't forsake you. A friend is there to guide you in the correct path. They love you for who you are and don't force you to be someone you're not. A friend is ALWAYS there."*

**Female, 16, urban, Kenya**

*"A friend is someone who is always there for me, who always sticks with me, who gives me advice. A friend is someone who understands your background, who won't leave your side even if you're doing bad things. Who keeps on telling you that "dude what you're doing is wrong."*

**Male, 15, priority, South Africa**

*"A friend is someone I can trust and someone who is honest. I know that because of the good things they do."*

**Male, 13, rural, South Africa**

In short, children associate genuine online friendships with authenticity exhibited over time. This is the baseline of authentic friendship against which children evaluate their interactions with unknown others online.

### Characteristics of genuine friends

- Someone I know, talk to, and spend time with face-to-face
- Talks about their feelings and shares their experiences
- Supportive, reliable and trustworthy
- Engenders love and comfort
- Friendly, kind, and like family
- Corrects and guides
- Understanding, caring, and empathic
- Honest

Figure 8: Characteristics of genuine friends

Unknown others – both known unknowns and unknown unknowns – online, by contrast, are often opaque to children. **Children report that it is difficult to ascertain the motives of unknown others and these contacts must be watched more closely for signs that they merit children's trust.** A lack of prior connection to children's existing networks signals to children that they need to be regarded with extra caution, until they demonstrate that their intentions for connecting are bona fide. Put differently, children told us that they build trust in online connections over time.

*"Trust is built, so you look at how they behave; [and] at their character and personality."*

**Small group, 12-14, urban, South Africa**

*"I accept [the friendship request], because of what the friend says, but if the good things are not true, I block it."*

**Female, 16, rural, Colombia**

## Perceptions of unknown others

- Someone you do not know or have not met
- Unknown to friends and family
- Outsider to the community
- Unknown intentions/ulterior motives
- Untrustworthy
- Engenders discomfort
- Potentially dangerous

Figure 9: Perceptions of unknown others

Since the pandemic, online grooming practices have been transforming rapidly. WeProtect's Global Threat Assessment Data 2023 reports that episodes of financial sexual extortion increased by 7,200% in the period 2021-22. While conventionally the key concern has been the sexual solicitation of female children, the current fastest growing form of online grooming targets young men for the purposes of financial extortion. Reports indicate that perpetrators of this form of online grooming initiate contact and cultivate interactions with young men over an average period of 45 minutes, soliciting compromising information or images followed by a demand for payment. The Office of the eSafety Commissioner in Australia (2022) advises, "these criminals use proven emotional tactics and fake profile pictures of attractive women to ensnare young men in online chat which quickly turns sexual, then elicit intimate images before flipping the conversation into a nasty game of chicken. They'll flood their target's phone with aggressive messages, threatening to share their intimate images unless they pay up" (eSafety Commissioner, 2022). Such practices appear to be the result of organised, offshore operations rather than individual perpetrators. Boys and young men are thought to be particularly vulnerable to these practices because they tend not to think of themselves as the potential victims of such exchanges and are therefore ill-inclined to report. The Australian eSafety Commissioner, which recorded an increase of 55% of reports of image-based abuse in 2021-22, reported that 76% of these reports targeted young men aged 18-24.

There is a clear need for education targeting children of all genders, but particularly young men, to alert them to this pressing new threat. Education might usefully build on children's existing protective attitudes and behaviours by affirming that not all unknown others can be trusted and that anyone who initiates contact and rapidly escalates to a request for personal information or images of a sexual nature should be immediately blocked and reported. Technology platforms might also consider implementing AI-powered solutions to detect when new connections of children engage in intense interactions that solicit information and images that might be compromising.

## Red flags

Children identified a range of observable signs – or, red flags – that they use to evaluate whether a new connection's intentions are appropriate and warrant their trust. **Red flags include comments on their body or appearance; questions about where they live, go to school, or work; requests for personal information, such as date of birth or identity documents; and questions about their personal life, such as their relationship status.** Below are some examples of inappropriate behaviours, which were consistently identified as warning signs across all countries.

### Requests for or sharing of sexualised images sent or requested and/or comments about body or appearance

Across all countries, requests for intimate images and videos (e.g. photos/videos of the body) or comments relating to appearance are major red flags for children. Children perceive such requests and comments as indicators of grooming and exploitation.

*"[They would] start to be uncomfortable when [the stranger] sent them a photo without a shirt."*

**Small male group, 9-13, urban, Cambodia**

*"[When they ask] are you alone? You're pretty. Send me a photo of yourself."*

**Female, 12, urban, Colombia**

*"[They would feel uncomfortable] [w]hen the [person] asks her to send [them] her pictures without her shirt on... Because it isn't good to share out such kinds of pictures to people."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] can you give me your photo?"*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

*"[It's a red flag when] they ask for nude pictures, what are you wearing and ask to meet up with you."*

**Small group, 13-15, priority, South Africa**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] can we do a video call? Can you send me a picture?"*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Philippines**

*"[It's a red flag when] they ask about nudity or my body, I will no longer entertain [them] and I'll immediately block [them]."*

**Small group, 15-17, urban, Philippines**

### Requests to share address or location

Overwhelmingly, questions relating to the location or address of the young person is the most common 'red flag' children mention.

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] where do you live? What's your address?"*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"[It's a red flag when they] ask personal questions, such as...[w]here do I live?"*

**Small male group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

### Questions about age or date of birth

The second most common question children classify as a red flag is questions about their age or date of birth.

*"[A red flag is when they ask] how old am I."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"[When they ask] how old are you? It's a red flag."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Kenya**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask your] date of birth."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Australia**

### Giving away money

Some children mention that messages they receive relating to winning prizes or being sent money constitute red flags for grooming and fraud.

*"If someone calls to us and says we won a big prize and they ask us to send him money, that is [a sign] of fraud."*

**Male, 15, urban, Cambodia**

### Questions about living arrangements

Questions about living arrangements, such as who they are living with and what relationship they have with other household members, are considered a red flag for some children.

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] where you live, who you live with."*

**Female, 15, urban, Colombia**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] where do you live? Who do you live with and how many family members do you live with?"*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Cambodia**

### Requests to meet face-to-face

Children consider requests from strangers to 'meet up' as indicating that the unknown other may have more dangerous intentions.

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] are you alone? Where do you live? Would you like to see us? There may be double intentions."*

**Female, 14, urban, Colombia**

### Requests to share passwords

Some children report that they understand requests for passwords and debit card/credit card PIN numbers as indications that the unknown other may be engaging with them for fraudulent means.

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] for your debit card PIN code..."*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

## Inquiries about relationship status or history

Questions relating to the young person's relationship status and background is a red flag for many children.

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] do you have a boyfriend?"*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] have you dated anyone?"*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

*"[It's a red flag when they] ask me about my sexual life or about my likes and dislikes. [It makes me feel] uncomfortable. I feel disturbed."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Kenya**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] are you single; if not are you dating; are you a virgin; what is your sexuality?"*

**Small group, 15-17, priority, South Africa**

## Inquiries about work or school

Questions about the young person's schooling, such as what school they attend, the grade they are in and what they are studying, and questions about their work, such as their occupation and how much they earn, are perceived as red flags.

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] what grade are you in?"*

**Small group, 10-12, rural, Philippines**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] where do you study, what school do you study at?"*

**Female, 16, urban, Colombia**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] about things I do for a living... [it makes me feel] uncomfortable, nervous, confused [and] pressured."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] about what is your job and how much you earn per month...*

**Small male group, 11-12, rural, Cambodia**

## Questions seeking information about parents or caregivers

Across most countries, children treat requests for information about their parents as red flags. This includes information about their parents' names, their occupation and work address, their phone number and the background of their relationship with their parents.

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] what our parents do."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] how are you doing with your parents?"*

**Male, 12, urban, Colombia**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] where do your parents work?"*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Kenya**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] what is your mom's phone number."*

**Small group, 9-12, rural, Kenya**

*"[It's a red flag when they] ask us… what your parents' names are."*

**Male, 14, urban, Colombia**

## Requests for other personal identifying information

Another prominent red flag for children is questions requesting their own or their parent's/carer's name, phone number or car registration.

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] what's your full name?"*

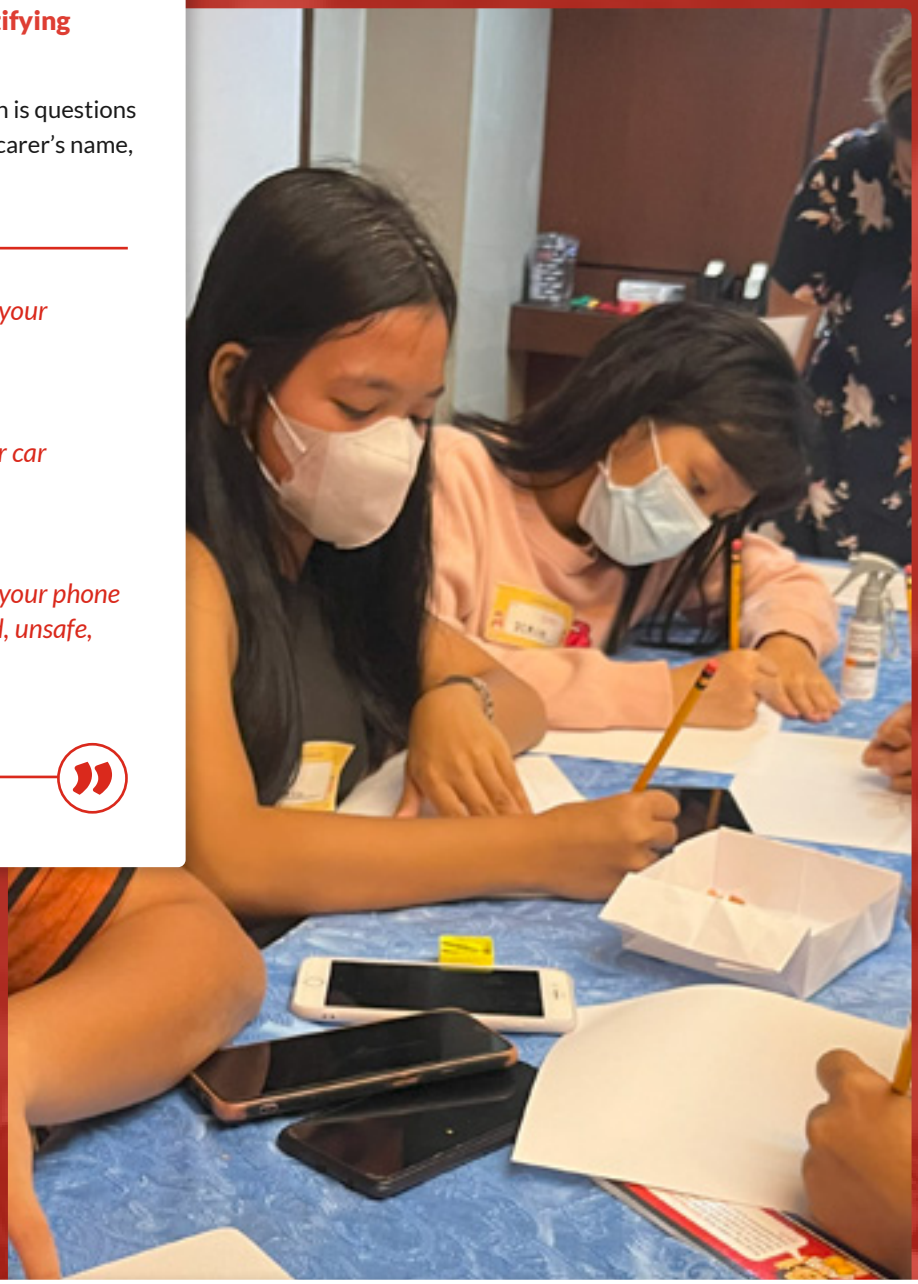
**Small group, 9-12, urban, Australia**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] for your car registration number."*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] what's your phone number?... [It makes me feel] confused, unsafe, don't know what to do."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Australia**



## Requests to interact via private channels

For a few children, the fact of a stranger initiating a conversation with the young person via private channels in and of itself constitutes a red flag.

*"[The discomfort starts] from the moment the [unknown other] asks [the young person] to have a conversation through [private] networks."*

**Small group, 13-17, urban, Colombia**

Figure 10 Requests for information or images that children regard as red flags

## Open-ended interactions

Children are constantly monitoring their 'gut feeling' as their connections with unknown others unfold over time. As such, their intuitive responses to a specific unknown other can shift and change over time.

**Children imagine their interactions with unknown others as open-ended: These online interactions may be short-lived or potentially evolve into longer-term friendships. So too, they may stay online or potentially extend into face-to-face relationships.** How friendships evolve depends on the value they derive from such friendships, and whether children judge it is safe to explore a friendship.

Children thus indicated that their friendship networks are not fixed but fluid and changing. Many construct unknown others as friends on a probation period.

*"I accepted the invitation because my friend knows him, but if he starts sending me weird messages I will delete him."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

Children cited instances in which unknown others – particularly known unknowns – had met the threshold of authenticity and become close and trusted confidantes online.

*"We accept [a known unknown] as a friend because we like and trust him. Because my friend told me about him that he was meek and gentle."*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Cambodia**

*"I accepted [a friend request from a known unknown] because I saw that we could establish a relationship since she has quite a few of my acquaintances on her friends list."*

**Male, 15, urban, Colombia**

Similarly, children highlighted instances when previously trusted friends had become 'strangers' because they had betrayed their trust, had arguments, or had simply grown apart.

*"Friends can become strangers if they do the wrong thing."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, South Africa**

*"Friends can be strangers because some are not trustworthy, some friends only show us one side of their lives and we don't really know much about them."*

**Small group, 14-16, priority, South Africa**

*"[Online friends] can… turn out to be the complete opposite to who you thought they were."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"Your friend can become a stranger. For instance, you had a fight with your friend and ended up not getting along with each other anymore which will cause you two to become strangers."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

Many of children interactions with unknown others remain strictly online, especially when such friendships sustain their engagement in online environments for a strategic purpose, such as playing online games together or chatting to pass the time. Such friendships can be fleeting, such as when children team up to play an online game, in an environment where there are limited opportunities to learn much about each other.

*"I meet strangers online while playing video games; I'll play a game online with a stranger, but never meet up again."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

Sometimes these friendships reach a natural conclusion when other connections or interests become dominant. However, a small number of children enter relationships with unknown others and are open to the possibility that that their online friendship may eventually develop into a face-to-face friendship.

*"[We] want to feel as though we have friends and, if [we] discover that someone has things in common with [us we] may potentially become offline friends."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"[They connect] so that the someone whom they chat with [can] come to their house or attend their home."*

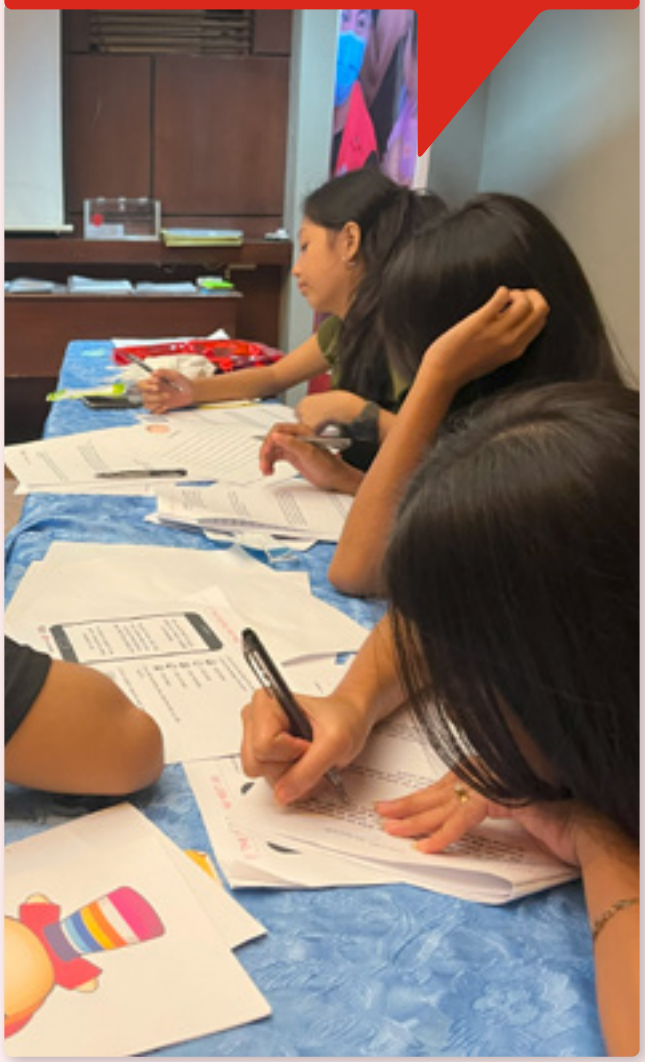
**Small group, 9-12, rural, Kenya**

The above indicates that, far from blindly trusting unknown others online, **children are constantly evaluating interactions, events, self-representations, and behaviours to determine who is authentic and safe to engage with across online and offline spaces.**

**This suggests there may be previously untapped opportunities to develop platform features and online safety education and other initiatives that reinforce children's surveillance of connections with unknown others over time, thereby strengthening children's capacity to protect themselves from potential harm.**

## Key Takeaways

Far from blindly trusting unknown others online, children are constantly evaluating interactions, events and behaviours to determine who is authentic and safe to engage with across online and offline spaces. They monitor unknown others' modes of online self-representation and behaviours towards others over time, looking for signs of authenticity, to guide their decisions about whether to engage and to what extent an unknown other merits their trust. A series of red flags signal a contact cannot be trusted and, in some instances, are reason to block or delete contacts from their online friendship networks. Red flags include comments on their body or appearance; questions about where they live, go to school, or work; requests for personal information, such as date of birth or identity documents; and questions about their personal life, such as their relationship status.



# 7 Children prioritise protective strategies that are easy to implement inside the flow of their fast-paced digital media engagement

**Children in all participating countries suggested that they protect themselves from potentially harmful interactions with unknown others using a combination of preventive and responsive strategies.**

## Preventive strategies

Notwithstanding the constant changes to the platforms and networks with which they engage, and the diverse contexts in which they use digital technology, **children in all participating countries reported that they employ the same preventive strategies to ensure they can enjoy the benefits of social interaction online while avoiding discomfort and potential harm.**

**These preventive strategies include restricting the personal information they share with unknown others; not accepting connection requests from unknown others; using privacy settings and strong passwords; educating themselves about potential online harms; and always staying alert and being careful.** They say that implementing these preventive strategies form part of the norms and conventions of participating online, and are as common as practices such as liking, commenting, and following others. This suggests that digital literacy is beginning to strengthen across contexts and is contributing to children's capacity to effectively navigate interpersonal connections online.

1

### Restricting the personal information they share

Participants in all countries reported significant concern about how their personal information can be used to identify, harass, bully and exploit them. They told us that they are careful to protect their personal information in interactions with unknown others.

*"The only way to keep children from getting hurt is not to share personal details, not to interact with [unknown others] too closely, not to give our home location, and not to send [unknown others] photos."*

**Male, 16, rural, Cambodia**

*"Do not share personal details, such as children's names, parents, addresses, or phone numbers."*

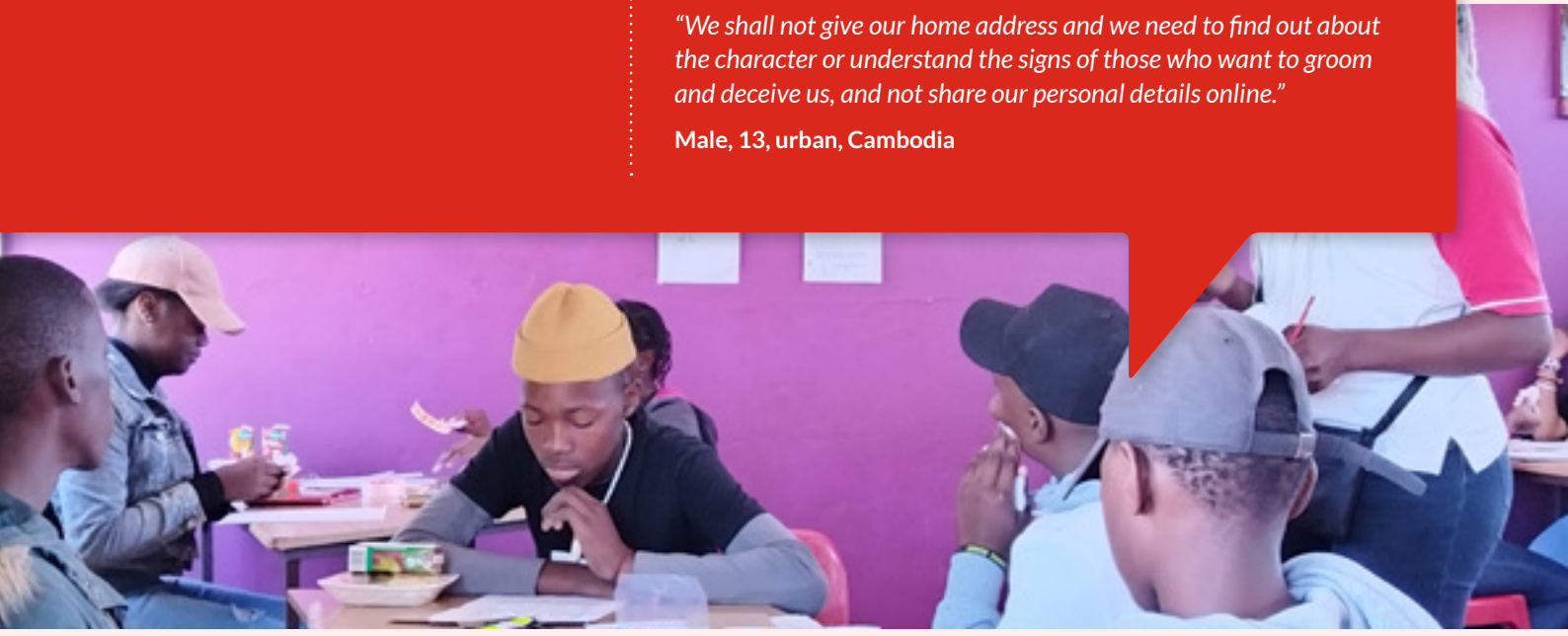
**Small male group, 9-11, rural, Cambodia**

*"Only share… basic data, like [first] name and age, or just maybe… likes and dislikes. From then on, it's more risky."*

**Female, 15, urban, Colombia**

*"We shall not give our home address and we need to find out about the character or understand the signs of those who want to groom and deceive us, and not share our personal details online."*

**Male, 13, urban, Cambodia**



2

## Not accepting requests from unknown others

As noted earlier in this report (See Key Findings: Section 1), many children reported that they self-impose rules around ignoring or declining requests from unknown others.

*"[Do not] send a message [to] or call a stranger except if you both know each other."*

**Female, 10, urban, Finland**

3

## Using privacy and security settings and strong passwords

In most countries, children reported that they set their accounts to private and take other steps to ensure the security and privacy of their data to protect themselves and their personal information from misuse by unknown others.

Children reported that they would benefit from enhanced accessibility of privacy and security settings on the platforms and apps they use and greater transparency about how they work.

*"[Children] simply need to have private accounts and know not to expose themselves to danger [people they don't know]."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"Set [your] social media accounts to private."*

**Female, 15, urban, Philippines**

*"Use hard passwords, face passwords [facial recognition security measures], fingerprint technology."*

**Female, 12, urban, Kenya**

*"I recommend to not share your private info or personal info or turn on private mode to strangers because it might cause harm to you and, also, you need to know the stranger well so you're safe to be his friend. There is a need to set the account to private so that it wouldn't just be randomly shared by anybody."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

4

## Educating themselves about online safety risks

Children are acutely aware that, while their online safety is a collective responsibility, they have a key role to play in ensuring they can interact safely online. They reported that it is important for them to be educated about the risks of harm associated with online grooming.

As we discuss later in this report (See Key Findings: Section 10), children see significant opportunities to strengthen online safety education, particularly in relation to the risks of harm associated with online grooming.

*"[Children] need to get oriented on how to protect themselves on social media platforms so that can identify what is dangerous to them. They need to get educated."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"I just want younger people who are online to be educated about how to keep safe and to have some sort of caution when actively [using technology]. I want for them to learn how to spot 'fishy' behaviour when chatting to strangers, and to know when to stop sharing information about themselves with [unknown others]. I also wish for them to learn to listen to their heads and pay attention to how they're feeling when interacting online, since I know people who feel like they don't have a choice when interacting with people online. I want this because, again, I know people who have experienced bad things online while talking to strangers, and stories of people who had to pay the price of doing so."*

**Female, 15, urban, Australia**

5

## Staying vigilant

As noted earlier in this report (See Key Findings: Section 2), children across age groups in this study reported that they tend to treat all those they don't class as friends with caution. This includes casual acquaintances, people they might know about but not know personally, and complete strangers.

*"Be careful who you talk to, don't just talk to anyone and don't trust users."*

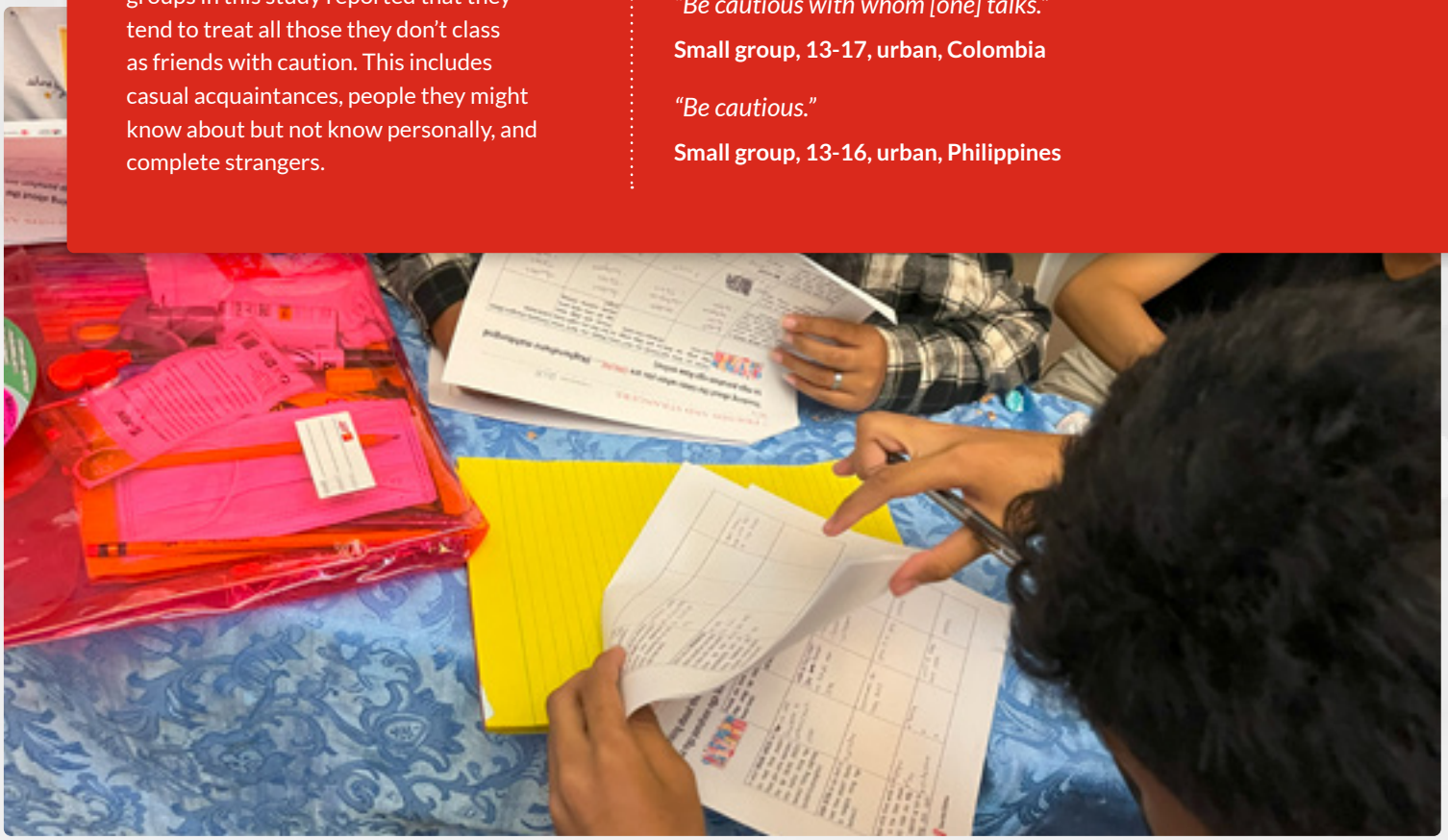
**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"Be cautious with whom [one] talks."*

**Small group, 13-17, urban, Colombia**

*"Be cautious."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**



## Responsive strategies

Participants in the study reported a range of often quite inventive strategies to respond to unknown others and to defend themselves from inappropriate contact. These strategies include **ignoring and rejecting requests, blocking and reporting, responding to unknown others by asking unknown others to cease and desist, asking questions, changing topics, and disconnecting from the platform and device.**

Measures they implement in the context of their engagement with unknown others in fast-paced digital media flows include ignoring and rejecting requests from unknown others, blocking and reporting, asking questions and saying no, giving false information, using private accounts and strong passwords, and taking screen shots. Steps they take to manage unknown others, which require stepping outside the routine flow of their engagement in social media, gaming, and other social spaces online include reporting to peers and trusted adults, and disconnecting from devices and online spaces.

1

### Ignoring unwanted contact

**By far the most common strategy used by our participants around the world is to ignore friend requests and direct messages from unknown others online.** In most cases, ignoring an initial unwanted contact prevents further interaction and allows the child or young person to continue their activity on the platform without the unknown other's knowledge.

Children noted that they most often simply scroll past or overlook unwanted approaches. However, some platforms provide an 'ignore' button, which children appreciate.

*"Click ignore unless you know the person in real life."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"Ignore or they would keep bothering you with requests."*

**Small group, 10-11, urban, Australia**

*"They're a stranger so don't accept."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"[Cease] all contact."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

2

## Declining requests to connect

The second most popular responsive strategy is declining the request and moving on.

*"I reject [the request from an unknown other] because they are a complete stranger."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"I reject [the request from an unknown other] because they are random."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"It says on the cell phone she is a stranger, so I don't know her and I can't receive her, so I reject her."*

**Female, 14, urban, Colombia**

*"I don't know her. I don't know who she is and therefore I reject her [request to connect]."*

**Male, 13, urban, Colombia**

*"I reject him [because] I don't know him in person, nor do I know what he is like."*

**Female, 11, urban, Colombia**

3

## Blocking

Children report that, when they encounter unknown others who make them feel uncomfortable, they largely resort to blocking these individuals to prevent further contact. Our analysis found that **82% of participants found it easy to block unknown others online, and older children found it significantly easier to block people than younger children.**

In general, older children tended to be more tech savvy, aware of, and willing to use in-platform protective mechanisms to ensure they can engage safely with a range of others online. This suggests that education and other efforts to foreground platform safety features need to focus on the younger age bracket of 9-13, to provide them with just-in-time support, as their digital practices become increasingly socially oriented.

*"Children would block them so that person won't come in their way again and feel uncomfortable."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"Do not… respond, just block it."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Some people would block the people they feel are untrustworthy."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"Block [an unwanted contact] and no longer talk… to him."*

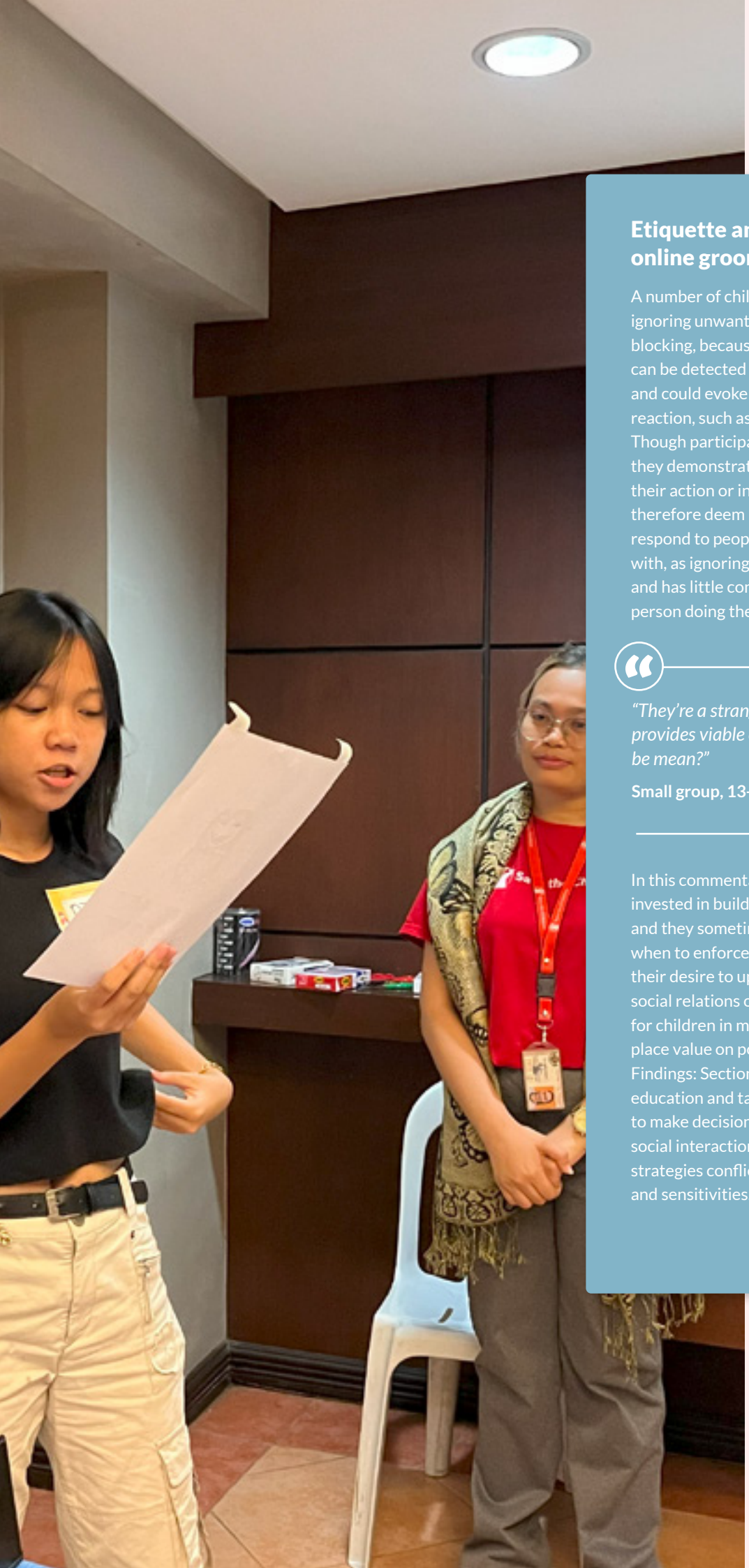
**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"I would block [an unwanted contact]."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"I will block [an unwanted contact's] text messages and his number."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**



## Etiquette and protection against online grooming

A number of children reported that they prefer ignoring unwanted contact over declining or blocking, because the act of declining or blocking can be detected by the person being rejected and could evoke negative feelings or a negative reaction, such as repeated attempts to connect. Though participants may not want to connect, they demonstrate a sensitivity to the feelings their action or inaction could generate. They therefore deem ignoring to be a safer way to respond to people they do not wish to connect with, as ignoring prevents further interaction and has little consequence for the child or young person doing the ignoring.

> *"They're a stranger so don't accept; ignoring provides viable excuses; rejecting could be mean?"*
>
> **Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

In this commentary, it is clear that children are invested in building positive online communities and they sometimes find it difficult to weigh up when to enforce personal boundaries against their desire to uphold good etiquette and social relations online. This is particularly true for children in middle-income countries who place value on politeness (as discussed in Key Findings: Section 4). Priority should be placed on education and targeted tools to support children to make decisions about how to manage these social interactions, especially when protective strategies conflict with their relational desires and sensitivities.

4

## Asking the unknown other to cease communication

Signalling their willingness to stand up to inappropriate behaviour, children often suggested they could respond to unwanted communication with an unknown other by asking them to cease communication or desist from making inappropriate requests that cause discomfort.

*"I don't think it's appropriate for us to be discussing my personal life or myself. Can you please stop?"*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"I would say that I don't feel comfortable answering this and not respond to his questions."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"It is necessary to be direct, telling her that such things are not said to anyone, least of all to a little girl who is a student."*

**Small group, 13-17, urban, Colombia**

*"Make things clear and let him know that it is inappropriate."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"Tell him that he shouldn't say that."*

**Female, 16, urban, Colombia**

*"[I would say:] Could you leave me alone please and stop sending me messages?"*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

5

## Disconnecting

A small percentage of children across all participating countries indicate that disconnecting from a platform, their devices, or from the internet is one of the most effective strategies for dealing with unwanted approaches.

While disconnecting is an effective strategy, if used consistently, it could impede children's routine participation in the digital environment, potentially negatively impacting their longer-term opportunities to benefit from digital engagement. There is scope to strengthen children's repertoires of responsive strategies, and the structures that support them, to prevent them from having to take the decision to disconnect.

*"Get… off the platform and take your mind off things."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"Turn off the phone or disconnect from [them] and never talk to [them] again."*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Cambodia**

*"Do not continue to use the same platform or talk to any person."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"Remove the apps so that this wouldn't happen."*

**Female, 10, urban, Finland**

*"I will shut the phone [off]."*

**Small group, 9-12, rural, Kenya**

*"Don't go online."*

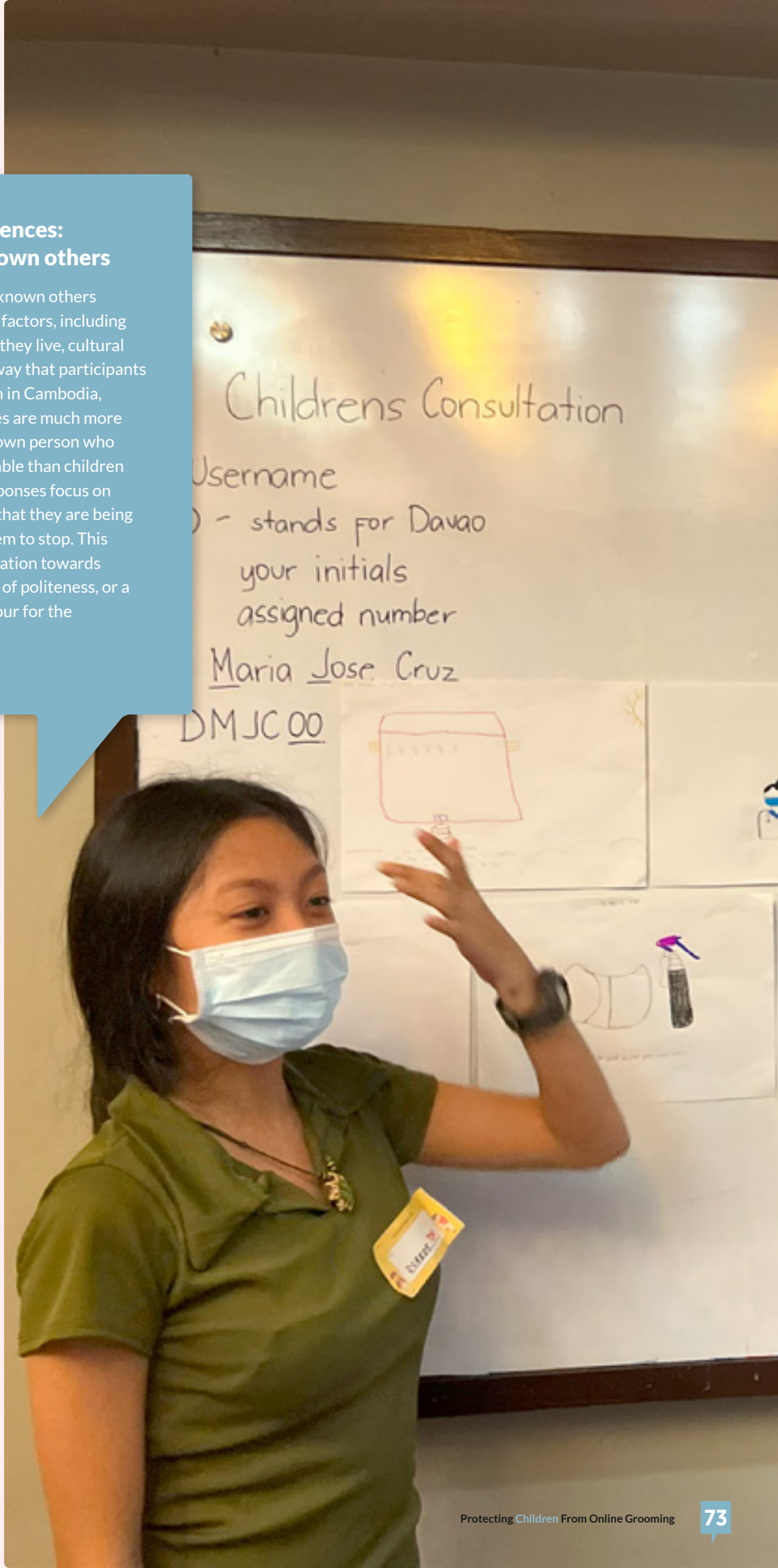
**Female, 11, urban, Kenya**

*"Just stop going online."*

**Male, 15, urban, Philippines**

## Cross-cultural differences: Responding to unknown others

How children respond to unknown others online is influenced by many factors, including culture. According to where they live, cultural and social norms affect the way that participants engage with others. Children in Cambodia, Colombia, and the Philippines are much more likely to respond to an unknown person who makes them feel uncomfortable than children in other countries. Their responses focus on telling the unknown person that they are being inappropriate and asking them to stop. This may be due to a social orientation towards relationship, a cultural value of politeness, or a desire to correct the behaviour for the sake of others.



## Asking why

Some children push back on questions that make them feel uncomfortable and determine whether it is safe to engage by inquiring why the unknown other is asking inappropriate questions.

Drawing on processes of relational verification, children also noted that they would ask others in their networks about an unknown other, in order to verify their identity and to triangulate around whether or not it is safe to interact.

*"Don't answer them and ask why they want to know."*

**Small group, 10-11, urban, Australia**

*"Ask why he needs to know these personal questions."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Australia**

*"I ask him why he asks me that, and that those things are personal."*

**Female, 16, urban, Colombia**

*"Ask [an unwanted contact] why he's asking [such questions] and not give him any answers."*

**Small group, 9-11, urban, Finland**

*"I will ask [an unwanted contact] why he is asking me these questions."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"Why do you keep asking? I won't tell you because I don't know you."*

**Small group, 9-12, rural, Philippines**

*"I ask why they want to know this."*

**Small group, 12-14, urban, South Africa**

*"Ask other [friends] if that was true."*

**Female, 15, urban, Colombia**

*"I'll ask someone if anyone knows [the unwanted contact]."*

**Small group, 14-16, urban, Philippines**

## Avoiding or redirecting questions

Some children suggest that avoiding the questions or changing the subject enables them to navigate personal questions when interacting with unknown others online, such as while playing a multi-player online game with unknown others.

*"I would ignore the question… or change the subject."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"I change the subject or I simply don't respond."*

**Male, 15, urban, Colombia**

*"I answer them because of the superficial nature of the topic or I don't answer; I change the subject."*

**Female, 14, urban, Colombia**

*"I would try to avoid the question because I don't trust him."*

**Female, 14, urban, Colombia**

*"Ignore the question and change the topic."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"I think I'd avoid [the question] or bypass it somehow."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"Ignore and find a way to change the topic of discussion."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Kenya**

8

## Giving false information

Children across all countries reported giving false information in response to prying questions from unknown others as a way to protect themselves in these interactions.

While this is an inventive workaround for some of the challenges of interacting with unknown others online, there is perhaps cause for concern that children do not feel safe enough to uphold standards of honesty and integrity in online spaces, indicating that more needs to be done to accentuate their baseline online protection.

*"Tell a white lie; try to avoid the conversation."*

**Small group, 14-17, priority, South Africa**

*"I give a false address."*

**Small male group, 11-12, rural, Cambodia**

*"I will introduce myself to them, but do not tell the truth."*

**Small male group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Some questions can be answered [truthfully] and others can be answered [with] a lie."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"We would give wrong information [that] would not answer [the unknown other's] questions."*

**Female, 11, urban, Colombia**

*"I lie or I don't tell [the unknown other the answer] because I don't know him."*

**Male, 15, urban, Colombia**

*"I would respond [to inappropriate questions from an unknown other] by lying to them about some things they asked."*

**Female, 16, urban, Colombia**

*"I'll just tell [the unknown other] a lie."*

**Small group, 14-16, urban, Philippines**

9

## Collecting evidence for a potential report

Children in Finland suggested that it is important to collect evidence of inappropriate exchanges online, in the event that the situation escalates, indicating that this group had a high level of digital literacy.

*"Take a screen cap of all the chats and send them to the police."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

It appears there is room to educate children in diverse locations about practices that support and enable them to take action to address serious cases of online grooming.

The responsive strategies discussed in workshops suggest that children prefer protective strategies that can be easily implemented in the context of their everyday digital media use. Children's decision-making and protective strategies regularly unfold against a fast-moving stream of digital media interactions, such as when they are scrolling through social media and video sharing platforms, or when they are playing multi-player online games. Moreover, these social, digital experiences often call on children to make split-second decisions about how to protect their own safety. Consequently, **children mobilise responsive strategies that are easy, routine, accessible in context and which fit with the often rapid flow of their digital media activities.** In this respect, it is no surprise that ignoring and declining unwanted contacts are the most commonly cited strategies for managing unwanted contact across diverse cultural contexts. Such responses enable children to deal immediately and effectively with low-level potential threats to their online safety, without disrupting their ongoing interactions in and enjoyment of the digital environment. That said, these measures are not adequate defence against more serious incursions on their safety and must be supported by other practices, such as reporting, which we discuss in the next section.

## Key Takeaways

Children protect themselves from potentially harmful interactions with unknown others using a combination of preventive and responsive strategies. Their preventive strategies include restricting the personal information they share with unknown others; not accepting connection requests from unknown others; using privacy settings and strong passwords; and always being vigilant and careful. Children's responsive strategies include ignoring and rejecting requests, blocking and reporting, responding to unknown others by asking them to stop, asking questions, changing topics, and ultimately disconnecting from the platform and device. Children tend to mobilise responsive strategies that are easy, routine, accessible. and which do not require them to step outside the flow of their digital media activities. Not surprisingly, then, the most common protective strategy used by children is to ignore unwanted contact from unknown others online, which prevents further interaction. A total of 82% of participants found it easy to block unknown others online, and older children found it significantly easier to block people than younger children.

# 8 Children experience significant barriers to reporting online grooming incidents

## The importance of reporting

Across participating countries and age groups, **children believe that formal reporting mechanisms are key to a robust online safety ecology, chiefly because they help prevent inappropriate interactions from escalating into situations that might cause serious and/or long-term potential harm.**

*"Reporting it early is important otherwise it will get worse the longer… it goes on."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Australia**

*"It's advisable to report [unwanted contact] because things might escalate negatively."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"[If you] report [an unwanted contact] this situation would not happen again."*

**Female, 15, urban, Colombia**

Many children talk about blocking and reporting as complementary protective measures to be mobilised in combination. They suggested that blocking prevents an unknown other from contacting them, and reporting ensures appropriate action can be taken and other children will not be exposed the same bad actor online.

*"For me, if [an unknown other attempts to harm me], I will block the account immediately or tell the authorities."*

**Female, 14, urban, Cambodia**

*"We have to block those who send us strange messages."*

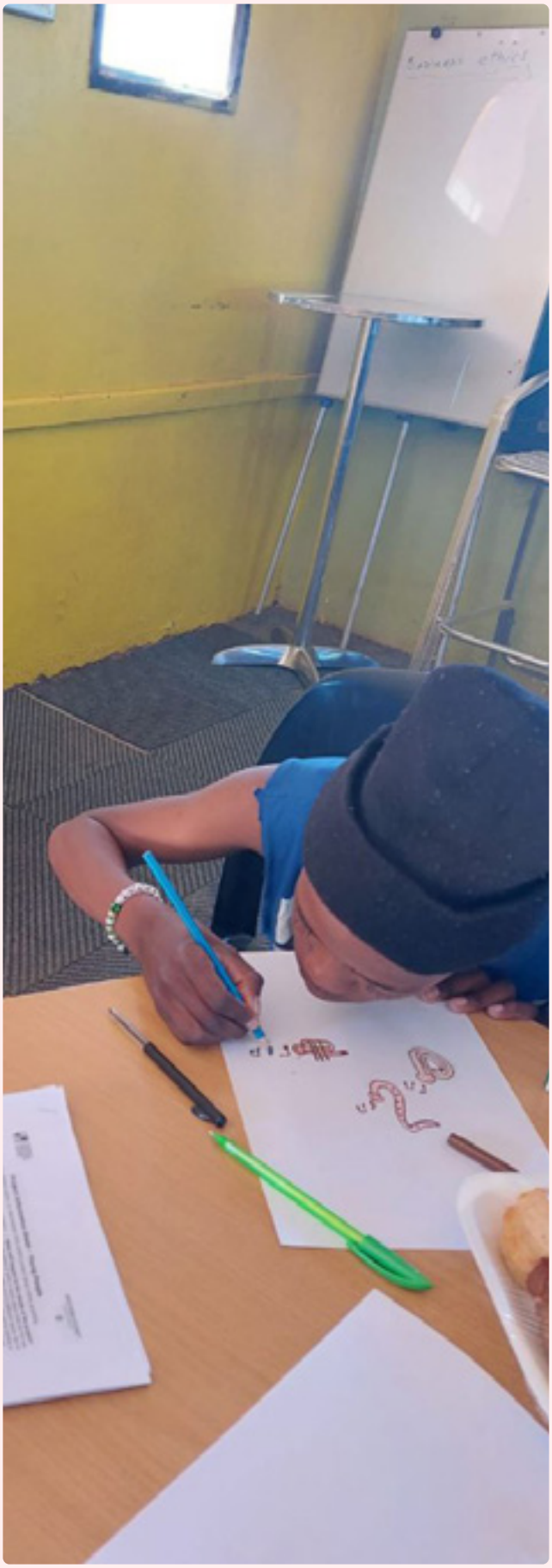
**Small male group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Block, ignore and report; block [an unwanted other] and cut off those people you're not comfortable with."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

*"Speak to a trusted adult and report or block [unwanted contacts]."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**



## Who children want to report to

The majority of children (80%) reported that they are most likely to report an incident to a friend.

*"[Report to] close friends because he feels comfortable with [them]."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Kenya**

*"She can tell her friends because she trusts her friends."*

**Small female group, 11-12, rural, Cambodia**

*"[Children] should tell a loyal friend who won't judge [them] and keep it secret."*

**Small group, 15-16, urban, South Africa**

Given children prefer to report to peers, it is worth governments, NGOs, and technology platforms exploring how they might leverage peer relationships to support children to undertake low stakes reporting to one another.

**After friends, children say they are most likely to report breaches against their online safety by unknown others to their parents and caregivers, followed by community leaders.**

*"[I would] report [an unwanted contact] to my parents."*

**Female, 15, urban, Philippines**

*"She should tell her mother and report it to the authorities."*

**Female, 12, urban, Colombia**

*"Report [the unwanted contact] to… parents."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"File a complaint to the barangay [local authorities] so they can have a proper conversation regarding their actions."*

**Female, 14, urban, Philippines**

Children's preference for reporting to friends, parents, and caregivers shows that they highly value being able to seek advice from those with whom they have a pre-existing close connection and trust.

**Children also suggest reporting to trusted adults and authorities such as the police, and the online platform.** They recognise the need to escalate situations to these adult actors in order to stop the inappropriate behaviour and prevent others from getting hurt. In total, **54% reported that they find it easy to report through these channels, with older children finding it significantly easier to report to an authority or an online platform than younger children ($p<0.0098$).**

*"She should have stopped conversation and reported to trusted adults."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Kenya**

*"Report to the police."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"She could have reported her to the police."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"Report [inappropriate interactions] to an online platform."*

**Small group, 15-17, priority, South Africa**

*"We have to… report them to the authorities or companies."*

**Small male group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Inform the platform owners or report the user [to the authorities]."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"Report it to the authorities or report it to an online platform."*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Cambodia**

## Willingness to report

**Despite asserting the value and ease of reporting, children and young people related that they are disinclined to report through formal mechanisms.** While children in diverse contexts identified police as an option for reporting, those in middle-income countries in particular said they were much less likely to report to police than to other actors. Indeed, only a small percentage of children overall said they would be confident about reporting to the police (See Key Findings: Section 10). Reflecting on children's contributions to this study, we suggest there are several key reasons for their reluctance to use formal reporting processes.

First, in contrast to declining or blocking unwanted contacts as they interact in social media, gaming, and the other online spaces in which they socialise, **formal reporting frequently requires children to step outside the immediate flow of their media consumption into a 'formal' process that plays out in settings that are less familiar to them.** Even where platforms provide a readily accessible report button, clicking on it often diverts the child or young person out of the immediacy of their social interactions, which is a key motivation for their participation in the digital environment. Put differently, the momentum of children's digital engagement mitigates the likelihood of reporting.

Second, this friction helps to perpetuate the idea that reporting is a 'special measure' that is to be reserved for the most serious of negative experiences. Indeed, our analysis suggests that reporting is generally viewed by children across age groups and participating contexts as a major, 'high stakes' step, and a marker of a significant escalation of potential harm. Given these observations, it is thus perhaps worth exploring how to enable low stakes forms of reporting, such as flagging bad behaviour using an ignore button, within the flow of children's interactions online.

Third, it is not always entirely clear to children what formal reporting processes, ranging from clicking on the report button or raising a complaint with the police, entail.

Our analysis suggests that children may be unsure how such reporting processes work, whether they are confidential, and whether reporting to the police might land them in even more trouble. Children appear to perceive reporting as an escalation of response to an incident. However, they do not always know what happens to their report once they lodge it, who looks at it, how it is assessed, and what kinds of actions might ensue.

There is clear scope to strengthen children's understanding of reporting processes. In particular, **there is work to do to ensure that police and other authorities provide confidential, trustworthy and child-/youth-friendly processes that support children to deal with online safety issues such as online grooming. Further, industry might consider exploring how to standardise reporting processes across diverse platforms so that they become more transparent to and predictable for young users.**

Fourth, because it is deemed as a major step to take, children are reluctant to report through formal structures without the guidance and support of a close friend or trusted adult, such as a parent/caregiver or teacher. In this respect, **it is vital that authorities take steps to ensure that peers and trusted adults are aware of reporting processes, how they work and when to use them.**

Finally, the terrain across which children make moment-to-moment decisions about whether and how to interact with unknown others is somewhat murky. It appears that children do not always know how to assess the seriousness of unfolding situations and when to take the decision that the risk of harm warrants formal action. **Clearly, there are opportunities to fortify children's existing practices around evaluating different kinds of relationships online (See Key Findings: Sections 1 and 2) to ensure they can draw clear lines between the appropriate and inappropriate behaviours of unknown others and take the necessary action to protect themselves and others.**

## The need to clarify what reporting means

The question of how to ensure more children report inappropriate behaviours has long been a key concern of Trust and Safety teams inside platforms and child protection experts working in the NGO and government sectors. Results from this study suggest that there is a need to clarify what is meant by reporting. For children, there is a fine line between seeking help and reporting. This is evident in their desire to both seek help and report to peers and/or parents and caregivers. It appears that, alongside formal reporting mechanisms, there is great scope to develop stronger informal reporting processes that are connected into informal support and support services. However, it is also unclear to children when they should report; that is, what threshold of breach warrants reporting. Government, NGOs, and technology platforms could usefully work together to better define what kinds of reporting data would be useful and to be clear with children about what, when, how, and why to report. Analysis of our data suggests that communicating to children that reporting helps ensure that the whole online community is protected may strengthen reporting behaviours.

### Key Takeaways

Children believe that formal reporting mechanisms are a key to a robust online safety ecology. However, while they assert the value and relative ease of formal reporting processes, many are nonetheless reluctant to report unknown others through formal channels. It appears that the barriers to reporting are primarily attitudinal and differ across cultural contexts. Our analysis suggests that reporting is thus regarded as a 'serious' step and a sign that a situation has significantly escalated. Formal reporting often requires children to step outside the flow and familiarity of their routine digital practices into a process that is often opaque to them. They are not always sure what reporting processes entail and whether they are confidential. Nor do they always know what happens to their report once they lodge it, who looks at it, how it is assessed, and what kinds of actions might ensue. For these reasons, they are much more likely to report an incident to a friend (80%) than to the platform (54%) or to an authority (54%). In middle-income countries, in particular, children reported a reluctance to report to authorities such as police.

# 9 Children regard their online safety as a responsibility shared by government, NGOs, technology platforms and their broader communities

**Although acknowledging the necessity and role of personal responsibility, our young participants assert that keeping children safe online is a collective, whole-of-community responsibility.** They say that people in their immediate communities, cultures, and societies, as well as the broader international network of individual and organisational actors, all bear some responsibility for keeping children safe online.

**Young participants in this study highlight the particular responsibility of parents and caregivers, governments, technology companies, and schools to keep them and their peers safe online.**

Of these actors, our participants identified parents and caregivers as being most responsible, followed by governments, and then technology companies and schools.

## Participants' identification of actors responsible for children's online safety

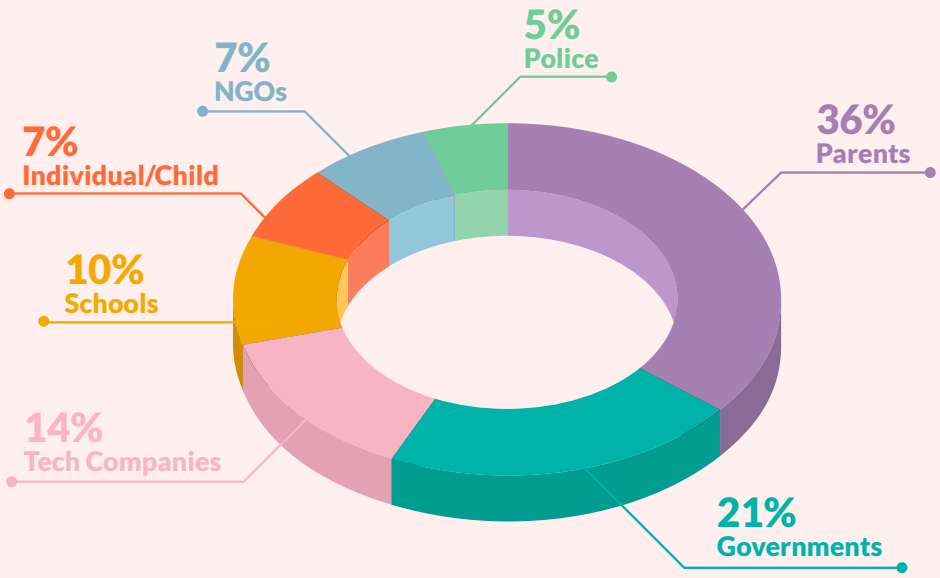



Figure 11: Participants' identification of actors responsible for children's online safety

At the same time as children recognise and assert their own agency to keep themselves safe online, they also call for strong guidance and appropriate protection from potential risks and harms. As we documented earlier in this report, our young participants use a range of strategies to protect their online safety and they want more and improved information, knowledge, and skills so they can better help themselves safely navigate the online world (See Key Findings: Section 7). Nevertheless, the resilience and agency of children when it comes to navigating online contexts must not mask the importance of making necessary transformations in the digital world to keep children safe online and offline. Children emphasise that there is a call and duty for responsible actors such as adults, governments, institutions, industry, and other decision-makers to develop and implement safeguards that prevent children coming into contact with unsafe unknown others online. Put another way, children identify the need to balance their own online autonomy and empowerment with appropriate regulation and online protections prescribed and enforced by relevant and competent authorities. Moreover, the children who took part in this project emphasise the criticality of meaningful partnerships between developers of technology and other decision makers to ensure protections are practical and effective.

## The role of government in online safety

Across all countries our young participants highlight development and enforcement of regulation by government and other executive authorities as crucial for the creation of safe online environments for children. For example, **children urge governing bodies and decision makers to consider ways to ensure that their digital participation is age-appropriate. Some suggest, for example, designing and enforcing rules that mandate age restrictions for social media use, regulate online content, or limit access to devices by age.**

*"Mr. President Petro, I ask you to prohibit the use of cell phones by minors, that the police take more care of children, that you prohibit some applications that are not for minors. I ask you to close the applications where there are many strangers. Take more care of the children."*

**Female, 10, urban, Colombia**

*"I suggest all websites are age restricted and require proof when putting in age. People should be kept safe when interacting with strangers online, because one message, video or post can have a great impact on a child's mind. As you know many young children are getting assaulted online and many of the children can't stand up for themselves, so here I am standing up for all those kids who got assaulted."*

**Female, 12, urban, Australia**

*"I would like the government to remove the issue about parents buying phones for children. It is not real[istic] for all children to be bought smartphones. [I ask for] children under 18 years to not be bought for smartphones kindly. Please the government should warn parents to buy phones for their children only after finishing their studies."*

**Female, 16, rural, Kenya**

*"To Mayor: [I ask you] to conduct a seminar to children [and] strictly close all the computer shops so that the minors cannot play during that time."*

**Male, 13, rural, Philippines**

Our participants are also acutely aware of the potential risks some online users can pose for children. Mirroring their views about access, content, and use, **children see a strong role for government in working with and directing industry to provide protections against harmful users and accessible mechanisms to respond and report if they do have experiences with harmful users.**

*"I believe that the government should make an app that only has access to children from 5-12 where no online creeps can talk to them or make them do things they don't want to do. And they can have fun while playing video games."*

**Male, 13, urban, Australia**

*"Restrictions on the content e.g., kid-friendly content on their page and ban on adults coming to that page to lure the kids into 'more fun' stuff of their age."*

**Female, 16, urban, Kenya**

**Children also expressed the need to have a stronger legal system to facilitate justice for victims of online grooming.** A particular focus of children in middle-income countries is the prosecution of individuals who intend to cause harm. Participants in Cambodia, Colombia, Kenya and the Philippines ask governments to monitor and regulate children's online activity in order to convict individuals who try to deceive and harm children.

*"I want the government to take action against those who deceive online because doing so makes you and others and children safer and not to be deceived. There are measures such as: catching people who deceive or cheat online."*

**Male, 15, urban, Cambodia**

*"I want the government to crack down on fraudsters involved in online scams because I do not want children and young people to be worried or afraid of other accounts being hacked."*

**Male, 14, urban, Cambodia**

*"I want the government to be able to catch strangers who might want to have personal details of a person or a child."*

**Female, 12, urban, Kenya**

*"Regulate interactions between children and people they don't know. Keep restrictions to help the children have child-safe content. Implement laws to protect the children on online spaces. Lawmakers to take charge on those who violate children's rights online."*

**Female, 16, urban, Kenya**

In countries where the internet may be more commonly accessed in locations and on devices outside the home, **children also urge police to take action against unsafe people online. Some suggested increasing security around community internet facilities – such as internet cafés, kiosks, and pisonets – and sending individuals who behave inappropriately online to jail.** A small number of participants go so far as to suggest curfews to prevent children digital technology use at certain times.

*"Children say that [police] should demand respect and denounce… unwanted behaviour or sexual solicitation, [and] can send them to jail."*

**Small group, 13-17, urban, Colombia**

*"The police… can help, [when] what [an unknown other] is doing is very wrong and they [can] put him in jail."*

**Female, 12, urban, Colombia**

*"Mayor, I ask that there be more security for children, that strangers no longer steal from children, that they not talk to strangers, that social networks be prohibited for children, that the police arrest criminals, so that children and people's things are not stolen, and that there be justice."*

**Female, 11, urban, Colombia**

## The role of parents and caregivers in online safety

Alongside government-industry relationships, collaborations, and partnerships to ensure design and enforcement of effective online protections, the core theme of parental responsibility was also commonly raised by the children who took part in this project. Indeed, **children say, above all else, they need parental supervision, monitoring, and controls to keep them safe online.**

*"Monitor children's online activities and help prevent any acts, activities, or sending bad pictures and stop the bad activities that are advertised online."*

**Female, 15, urban, Cambodia**

*"I would tell the adults what is happen[ing] online with strangers and young kids and what they are saying. Adults need to supervise children and young people because there might be a situation going on and the parents [are] too busy doing something that's not supervising their children."*

**Small group, 10-11, urban, Australia**

Children see parental and caregiver responsibility as broad and overarching, encompassing the need to be aware of how they are using digital technologies, what they are doing while they are online, and the potential risks and dangers that they may encounter online. Across all countries, children want parents and caregivers to supervise and monitor their children's online use and interactions. They believe that effective, regular parental supervision will help keep children generally safe from encountering risks or harms – or help mitigate the effects of such encounters.

*"[Adults need to know] what they [children] do online and what they're messaging. [Parents] need to track what [children are] doing, and [parents] need to be notified/ interacted [with]. Don't let kids have social media [when they are] underage."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Australia**

*"Adult supervision is what children need and education on the internet."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"Adults should know why children interact with strangers online. They should supervise children who use online platforms and must know how children are more comfortable using online platforms. They should educate their children the right things to do and how they can avoid harmful people."*

**Small group, 15-17, urban, Philippines**

*"Parents should always check what their children are doing on social networks."*

**Female, 12, urban, Colombia**

*"[Parents should be involved in and familiar with] safety measures on children's phones; educate children on online safety; check on children's devices routinely; parents must know their child's PIN [personal identification number]."*

**Small group, 12-14, urban, South Africa**

Children also say that parental awareness and ongoing supervision will prevent them from experiencing specific risks or harms related to interactions with unknown users online and help them effectively deal with those harms.

*"Adults should know that children interact with strangers, monitor them, and read their chats."*

**Small female group, 11-12, rural, Cambodia**

*"I want adults to know when children interact with strangers online, when they are asked for phone numbers, and when they are being deceived."*

**Female, 14, priority, Cambodia**

*"Dear parents, please do whatever it takes to protect us from those people we do not personally know online. Always check our [social media and messaging services to see] if there are strangers messaging us, and if possible block/unfriend them. There should be a limitation in terms of using social media platforms, and advise us proper way of ignoring strangers."*

**Female, 14, priority, Philippines**

*"To parents, they should be checking their social networks so that they do not get to the point of talking to strangers."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

**Young participants commonly articulated the idea that parents and caregivers should establish and enforce clear and rigorous rules to protect children online.** For example, children say parents and caregivers should oversee or manage children's online accounts, use parental controls, and/or restrict access to devices and platforms as strategies to protect children from potential harm.

*"Help teach children not to trust strangers too much. Children should not be quick to believe the persuasion of others. Do not allow underage children to use personal accounts."*

**Small male group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"When you see me talking to someone you don't know, I want you to take my cell phone away or check my conversations."*

**Female, 14, urban, Colombia**

*"About the management of social network accounts, supervise who they talk to, ask more questions about who they talk to on the internet, and do not normalise the use of cell phones."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"Adults should control some of the kids' devices while also taking care of privacy. They should discuss some issues that may arise. They should have additional screening measures and stricter policy."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

Placing limits on children's access to devices and time online was a particularly popular protective strategy in the minds of many of our young participants.

*"Children might be in danger and interacting with strangers so maybe give the children to play on the devices for about 30 minutes."*

**Small female group, 10-11, urban, Australia**

*"Children need guidance from parents and adults to know about the internet and what can be found there. To protect themselves they also need guidance, accompaniment from parents and adults and that children only access the internet for educational and non-risky things."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"Do not let children have much time online."*

**Female, 12, urban, Kenya**

*"Schedule being online."*

**Female, 10, urban, Philippines**

While parents or primary caregivers are the main group identified as being responsible for protecting their children online, **for some children, the desire for supervision and protection also includes assigning responsibilities to extended family members more broadly – including, for example, older siblings, grandparents, uncles and aunts.** This reminds us that extended families and – for some children – non-traditional caring relationships play key roles in shaping children's expectations and practices in relation to engaging online.

*"I want my brother to create an account for me to play online and let him see what happens so that I can be safe in the future."*

**Male, 15, urban, Cambodia**

*"Adults need to know when children interact with strangers, and when we play with them, parents and grandparents need to know who the children are playing with."*

**Female, 12, urban, Cambodia**

More broadly still, children also highlight the important roles that other trusted adult authority figures like teachers can play in implementing protection strategies. The fact that children say extended family and other trusted adults should be responsible for their online safety further aligns with the clear and consistent theme throughout the data that children principally view online safety as a collective responsibility.

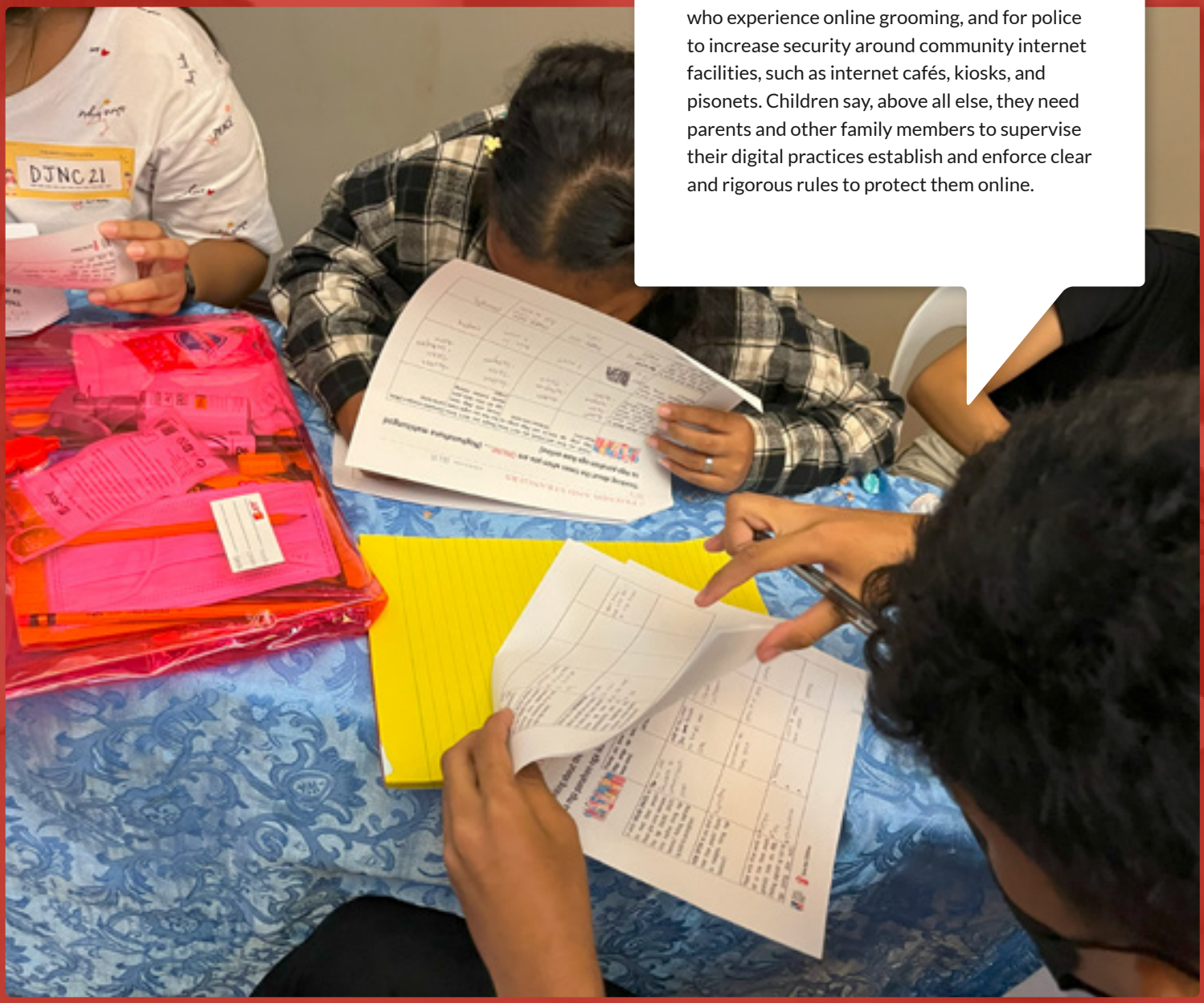
## The role of technology companies in online safety

Children acknowledge the key role that industry actors have in ensuring safer online environments and experiences for children. Technology companies design, create, and operate the technologies, devices, and platforms that children use to go online, and they want those companies to leverage their resources, knowledge, and expertise to facilitate their responsibilities to support children's online safety. They suggest a range of technical innovations and educational strategies for technology providers to consider for implementation (See Key Findings: Section 11 and 12).

In summary, children believe in a broadly ecological model of online safety. That is to say, they assert the role and value of personal, social, and institutional responsibility for helping ensure they and their peers can participate safely online.

### Key Takeaways

Children assert that their online safety is a whole-of-community responsibility. They highlight the important role of parents and caregivers, governments, technology companies, and schools to keep them and their peers safe online. Children urge governments to work with and direct industry to provide protections against harmful users and accessible mechanisms to respond and report potentially harmful experiences. They urge governing bodies and decision makers to consider ways to ensure that their digital participation is age-appropriate – for example, by designing and enforcing rules that mandate age restrictions for social media use, regulate online content, or limit access to devices by age. Children call for legal systems to be strengthened to facilitate justice for those who experience online grooming, and for police to increase security around community internet facilities, such as internet cafés, kiosks, and pisonets. Children say, above all else, they need parents and other family members to supervise their digital practices establish and enforce clear and rigorous rules to protect them online.



# 10 Children want clear avenues for guidance and support to strengthen their online interactions

Children across the globe identify a range of individuals and organisations they can approach to help them when they feel unsure or unsafe online. **Where children go to for help and advice in unsafe and uncomfortable situations is heavily dependent on who they trust – and therefore fundamentally differs, depending on the different geographic, cultural, political, and social context/setting.** For instance, for many participants in middle-income countries, NGOs and child protection services offer an important source of education, safety, and security.

*"Children need the help of those who have enough knowledge of the online system to protect us from strangers who come to cheat and hack into our accounts."*

**Small female group, 9-12, urban, Cambodia**

Among different sources of support cited by children in the study, a trusted adult (like a parent or guardian), peers, as well as formal and community structures were among those most frequently highlighted. **The preference for one form of support over another differed from high-income to middle-income countries, with children from high-income countries being much more likely to seek help from formal structures of support than those living in middle-income countries.** Children living in the latter preferred assistance from community structures of support. Even so, children from all countries expressed an urgent need for guidance and support in their online interactions. Further, they also call for clear avenues to seek justice when their safety online is compromised.

## Role of parents and caregivers in helpseeking

**The number one source of help and guidance for children in all countries is a trusted adult, usually a parent or guardian.** Children in all countries say that parents and caregivers are the most responsible for keeping them safe online. They believe it is their parents' and caregivers' duty to educate them about online safety, to supervise and limit their activity online, and to support and guide them through their interactions with others online.

*"The people who can help children to be safe in their interactions with strangers online are their parents."*

**Female, 9-13, urban, Cambodia**

*"To keep children safe when using the online system, I want parents to take care of their children, and not let their underage children use personal accounts, because they want their children to be safe."*

**Male, 12, rural, Philippines**

*"[Because] interactions with strangers online can be both beneficial and risky... the safest thing to do is that the parents will monitor their child's social media platform."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

*"As children, we want adults to know when we interact with strangers and to guide us through the advantages and disadvantages of interacting with strangers."*

**Small female group, 9-13, urban, Cambodia**

However, as discussed later in this report (See Key Findings: Section 12 and 13), **children reported that their parents and caregivers are ill-equipped to guide them in their online interactions, and that skilling parents and caregivers needs to be a key focus for future online safety efforts.**

## Role of peers in help-seeking

Children across all countries also reported that they rely on peer-to-peer structures of support. Often, friends and peers were listed alongside parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults. Peers were seen as a safe and non-judgmental source of help, as they had sometimes been through similar experiences and possessed the knowledge to help remedy problems. Hence, children overall perceived their friends as trustworthy and responsible, and would go to their friends for help, guidance and advice when faced with an online issue.

*"[A child in need could seek the support of his] parent or one of the close friends because he feels comfortable with the person."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Kenya**

*"[A child in need] can tell his friends because he trusts his friends and eliminates the fear of these things."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"[If one felt uncomfortable about a situation, one could speak to one's] best friend or sibling because [they] would understand the problem."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"[A child in need could talk to] his online trusted friend to ask for advice on what to do."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

## Formal and informal support structures

Children expressed an urgent need for formal and community structures of support to keep them safe online. However, children in different kinds of communities expressed different preferences for the type of structures they thought could best support them. **Children in high-income countries are more likely to seek out formal structures of support, such as counselling services, helplines and police or other authorities. By contrast, children in middle-income countries are more likely to seek out community structures of support, such as community leaders, community elders and community organisations.**

*"Police, put a safety thing into the web."*

**Male, 10, urban, Finland**

*"[People who are responsible include] child online services, child offices, adults, parents, guardians, teachers."*

**Female, 11, urban, Kenya**

**Children identify the following reasons for seeking support from peers.**

## Trustworthy

*"She can tell her friends because she trusts her friends."*

**Small group, 9-12, rural, Cambodia**

*"[He should ask] his online trusted friend... for advice on what to do."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

## Safe

*"A friend is someone you feel safe with and can talk to when you need."*

**Female, 11, urban, Australia**

*"[He should talk] with a friend, because he might not feel safe to talk to his parents about it."*

**Male 15, urban, Colombia**

## Non-judgemental

*"[He should talk with a] trusted friend because he feels comfortable with him and ready to enclose his details."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Kenya**

*"[One] can tell... close friends... because they are... willing to help honestly, and have a lot experience."*

**Small group, 9-13, urban, Cambodia**

## Problem solver

*"When strangers chat with us, we need to discuss the matter with... friends, and siblings to help find a solution."*

**Male, 13, urban, Cambodia**

*"He could tell his... friends... because they can solve it."*

**Small group, 9-12, rural, Cambodia**

## Advisor

*"Friends... can help children by introducing knowledge information and sharing experiences with children."*

**Male, 15, rural, Cambodia**

*"[He] can tell his close friends because they can give good advice for him to help explain his problems. And give him some good advice not to trust someone online too much."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

Figure 12 Characteristics of a peer and reasons for approaching peers to seek help

## Cross-cultural difference: seeking help

Who children feel comfortable approaching for help depends on their context. While children in Finland feel very comfortable approaching formal structures of support such as the police for help, children in Kenya hardly mention the police as a source of help. This may reflect a lack of access to formal structures of support, or a varying structure of authority in each culture and context.

Specifically, children from Australia, Colombia, and Kenya consider helplines dedicated to children as a useful source of support they can turn to when confronted with an online safety issue. Helplines were likely an attractive option for children because they offer confidentiality and the advice is usually given by a trusted adult, such as a counsellor.

Participants in most countries said they could go to the police for help when they feel unsafe online. Many children considered the police to be a trustworthy source of help.

**However, only a small percentage of children overall said they would be confident about turning to teachers or police. Possible reasons for this lack of confidence may be a fear of being misunderstood or punished or concerns over confidentiality.**

*"[One can seek help from] friends, kids' helpline. com.au, family, parents."*

**Small group, 10-11, urban, Australia**

*"[One can seek help from] parents, helplines, police, etc. They are trustworthy."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"I think [someone who is in trouble] can tell the authorities because they can help him."*

**Small group, 9-12, rural, Cambodia**

*"[I would advise someone who is experiencing online grooming] that they don't want to send [a] picture; to block [the unknown other], take a screen shot of all the chats and send them to the police."*

**Small group, 11-12, urban, Finland**

*"Tell the police to protect [the young person affected by online grooming]."*

**Small group, 15-16, urban, South Africa**

*"[An online grooming situation should be taken to] the police, because they have the resources to help."*

**Female, 13, urban, Colombia**

## Local community leaders

Some children in the Philippines cite Barangay Captains as a source of help they can turn to when encountering an online issue. Barangay Captains are community leaders who are highly respected and wield significant power and authority within their community. Hence, children place high value on their advice and their ability to enact change in respect of an online safety issue.

*"Support from the barangay [community leadership] and support from my family."*

**Female, 15, urban, Philippines**

*"I want my decision makers, such as the authorities to arrest online scammers and educate them to make sure that children and young people can be kept safe when interacting with strangers online."*

**Male, 12, rural, Philippines**

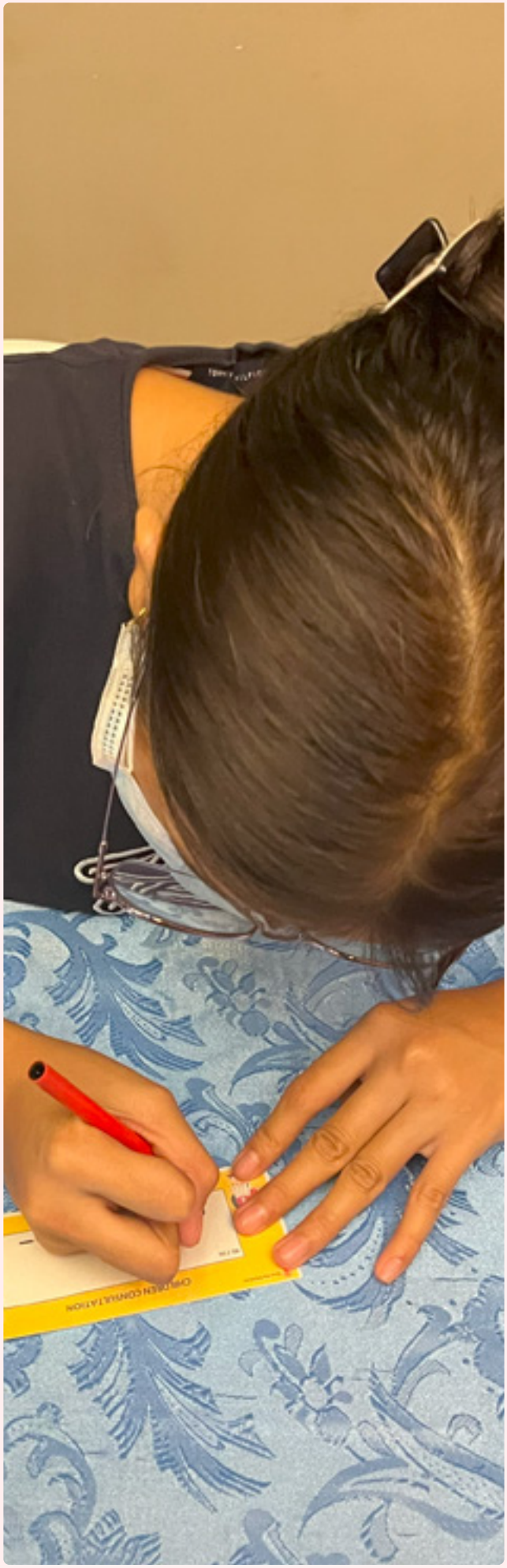
Similarly, **children in lower middle-income countries such as Cambodia and the Philippines prominently mention community elders as sources of support for online safety issues, such as online grooming.** Like community leaders, the opinion of community elders is highly respected and trusted and hence, is sought out by children to help them stay safe online.

*"What the children need to be safe is to ask advice from the elders because they are the ones who knows what is right and wrong. [Other sources of support include] parents; relatives, police; Soldiers."*

**Small group, 10-12, rural, Philippines**

*"The person who can help children to be safe in their interactions with strangers online is the commune chief because he reports to the higher levels."*

**Female, 10, rural, Cambodia**



## Child-friendly organisations

Children considered child-friendly organisations to be an important avenue for seeking help when confronted with an online safety issue. Children from middle-income countries reported a higher need for support from child-friendly organisations compared with high-income countries. For children, community organisations and services offer an important source of education, safety and security. Specifically, children mention the following:

*"Child education groups"*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Child rescue teams"*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Organisations that can help with counselling and child protection"*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Save the Children"*

**Participants from Cambodia, Philippines, and Kenya**

*"[Child-friendly] foundations"*

**Small group, 13-17, urban, Colombia**

*"Child protective services"*

**Participants from Finland, Philippines, and Kenya**

*"United Nations organisations"*

**Participants from Kenya and Philippines**

Of all the organisations, **NGOs, counselling services, and child protection services were the top three entities viewed as an important for ensuring safety online.** NGOs as well as counselling and child protection services were an important avenue of help for children when faced with online issues and dangerous interactions with strangers online.

*"The UNCRC, Save the Children, [and] the Child Protection Committee [can support children's online safety]."*

**Female, 14, urban, Philippines**

*"[One could speak to] a counsellor, because they are able to help you when you have a problem or issue."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

*"[One could speak to] child protection services… because they are in charge of child protection and related cases."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Kenya**

Children from all countries felt the need of support to keep them safe online. Despite identifying numerous external supports to seek help and guidance to keep themselves safe online, children acknowledged their own role in maintaining transparency in their online activities and reaching out for help, when required. While the preference of type of support (formal versus communal) was different for children from different countries, it was evident that children need a multitude of accessible, and well-equipped avenues of support to help them navigate their online interactions and stay safe online. A variety of support systems were identified by children – the top ones being trusted adults like parents and caregivers, peers, and certain formal and communal organisations. A preference for support from community organisations was country-specific, indicating the influence of culture on the preferred choice of support system. Police played an important role not only in keeping children safe online, but also as a support structure that could facilitate justice.

## Key Takeaways

Where children go to for help and advice about online safety is heavily dependent on who they trust – and therefore differs according to geographic, cultural, political and social context. Children from high-income countries are more likely to seek help from formal structures of support, such as services, helplines and police or other authorities, while those in middle-income countries are more likely to seek out community structures of support, such as community leaders, community elders, and community organisations. Across countries, children's number one source of help and guidance is a trusted adult – usually a parent or guardian – followed by their friends, NGOs, counselling services, and child protection services. Very few children said they would be confident about turning to teachers or police, due to fear of being misunderstood or punished, or because they are unsure about the confidentiality of seeking help via these avenues.

# 11 Children want to turn to parents and caregivers for support but feel they are underequipped to guide their children

## Parents' and caregivers' capacity to support their children's online safety

Although they place enormous importance on advice and education from parents and caregivers to interact safely online (See Key Findings: Section 10), **children reported that their parents and caregivers are ill-equipped to guide them in their online interactions and that skilling parents and caregivers needs to be a key focus for future online safety efforts.**

In line with findings from previous work (see Third & Moody, 2021, p. 73, 76, 78; Third et al., 2019, p. 162; Third et al., 2014, p. 42), many of our **young participants believe parents and caregivers do not understand the dangers children face online and/or lack knowledge and confidence about how best to support, guide, or respond to online risks and harms.** They feel that their parents and caregivers are not aware of what dangers children face online.

*"Adults need to know about how children interact with strangers online. There are many scammers who are fraudsters deceiving children online in our society."*

**Male, 16, rural, Cambodia**

*"We would like the caregivers to be aware of the social networks, of all the processes that the children do with cell phones and guide them on how to use them."*

**Small group, 13-17, rural, Colombia**

Moreover, **children and young people feel parents and caregivers are also insufficiently appreciative of the benefits of online contact and communication.** They report that they wish parents and caregivers could understand and acknowledge both the challenges and the opportunities.

*Adults need to understand that children and young people's interactions with strangers online can be both beneficial and risky. In the digital age, youngsters often navigate social media, gaming platforms, and chat rooms, forming connections with other globally. While this interaction can form and foster creativity, learning and positive socialiation, they also expose them to potential dangers like cyberbullying, grooming and exploitation."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

Children thus say there is an urgent need for parental education and awareness.

## Parent and caregiver education

Accordingly, many of our young participants say parents and caregivers themselves need education before they can help their children to safely navigate online interactions. This contention further evidences children's view of online safety as a collective responsibility. **Children recognise the urgent need for parents and caregivers – and, indeed all members of the community – to be aware and educated about online safety.**

*"Give parents more information about what their children talk about with strangers on social networks so they can explain to them that they can be dangerous."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"They should be trained to give us an example on how to use them properly so we don't talk to strangers on the internet."*

**Small group, 13-17, urban, Colombia**

**Children want their parents and caregivers to understand the platforms they use, who they interact with, what they share, and how they might be harmed online.** While they are wary of having their devices taken away or their time online curbed in other ways, children across cultural contexts want their parents and caregivers to know who they're connecting with and why, so that they can help to keep them safe.

*"Adults should know how children and youth really interact with strangers on the internet. Parents should have access to our social networks, allow us to play but they should be aware of our conversations and what we do on the internet. Adults should be aware of how children and youth interact with strangers on the internet."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"[Children] want their parents to know which people they are interacting with, and on what platforms, as well as what information is being shared with who. They believe that their parents should be in the know about who they're speaking to and what they're speaking about."*

**Small group, 13-15, priority, South Africa**

*"Adults need to know that children and young who are interacting with strangers [are] not safe because interacting with strangers can lead to becoming close, and when you're close with the strangers online, you wouldn't be able to notice that you already gave away all your personal information that will lead to your destruction."*

**Small group, 13-16, rural, Philippines**

Children are particularly anxious to bring their parents and caregivers up to speed given that they perceive a generation gap, whereby the ways that children are using technology is different from the ways their parents and caregivers would have used it.

However, children do not believe the onus for raising awareness about their digital technology use and the attendant online safety issues rests only with trusted adults; they view themselves as responsible for keeping their parents and caregivers informed on their activities and interactions online.

*"[Parents need to know what chidlren do online] so that they can be alert to what may happen."*

**Small group, 9-12, urban, Colombia**

*"Don't let your kids talk to strangers; parents need to understand the difference between their social media times and now."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

*"I want my dad to be aware of what I do on social networks and teach me about social networks."*

**Male, 13, urban, Colombia**

**Children are calling for education targeting trusted adults, and in particular parents and caregivers, including: how to respond to strangers; what to share; and how to block and report inappropriate behaviour. Such education would also extend to helping children avoid risky behaviours online, and raising awareness of where and how to report an incident online.** In a nutshell, children look to parents and caregivers to educate children on how to protect themselves online and avoid interactions with strangers that could potentially put them at risk of harm. Importantly, children say that parents and caregivers have a responsibility to educate their children, and to have ongoing dialogues about technology use, from the moment children first interact with technology.

*"[Children] need to learn how to guard themselves or how to protect themselves and how to avoid strangers or any kind of harm for them."*

**Male, 17, urban, Philippines**

*"Dear parents, please do everything to protect us youth from the wrong doings of strangers online. Attending seminars are a great help for us youth so that we will know the things we should do on how we deal with the strangers."*

**Female, 14, priority, Philippines**

*"[Adults] need to have a safety talk when they are young and keep having talks that get progressively more [in-] depth each time."*

**Small group, 13-15, urban, Australia**

These insights from children demonstrate both the fundamental value they place on education about online safety and their concomitant perception and experience that adequate education is not available, both for themselves and for the important others they would like to turn to for guidance support. Drawing on their own and their peers' perceptions and experiences online, children identify an urgency for systemic, broad-based education about online safety (e.g. about basic digital literacy, generally applicable online safety and security best practices) as well as targeted education about specific online safety risks and harms (e.g. identifying and responding to online bullying or grooming attempts). Similarly, children say they want targeted education for parents and caregivers; training about the specific platforms they and their peers most use; and that such materials should be tailored to and embedded in platforms themselves.

## Key Takeaways

Children believe that skilling parents and caregivers needs to be a key focus for future online safety efforts. In their experience, parents and caregivers do not understand the dangers children face online and/or lack knowledge and confidence about how best to support, guide, or respond to potential online risks and harms. Children feel parents and caregivers are also insufficiently appreciative of the benefits of online contact and communication. Children want their parents and caregivers to understand the platforms they use, who they interact with, what they share, and how they might be harmed online, and they call for education targeting trusted adults. Children suggest that such education should teach parents and caregivers about the benefits of their digital technology use; how to support children to avoid potentially harmful behaviours; how to respond to strangers; what content is appropriate to share, and how to block and report inappropriate behaviour.

# 12 Children are calling for widespread, accessible and targeted education about safe interaction with unknown others online

**Children in all participating countries highlight a longstanding, urgent need for online safety education, both for themselves and other children.**

*"[There is a need] to give adequate information on this topic in order to have a good training on this subject because with more information, [children] can be more sure that we are very careful because we do not know who we can meet and their intentions."*

**Female, 12, urban, Colombia**

*"Children need to be educated about what is right and wrong on the internet. To have positive interactions with strangers, they must know how to differentiate genuine and bad intentions. We can achieve this by holding seminars that focuses on how should children act online and how will they manage perpetrators/groomers if they encounter one."*

**Small group, 15-17, urban, Philippines**

## Education on online safety from younger age

One of the key protective measures children request from those they identify as responsible for keeping them safe online is wide-spread education for all children from a very young age. **All of our participants agree it is critical that online safety education is accessible and available to every child across the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence, regardless of where they live.**

*"I believe that children and young people need to be kept safe online and one way to do this would be to require teachers to teach kids about cyber safety from a young age and help protect the future generation."*

**Male, 13, urban, Australia**

*"Education [is important]. Having young children educated about the safety of technology and the dangers. Adults only start this education for older kids on social media when the problem can be on video games played by young kids. They're more impressionable. Parents being educated to help keep their kids safe too. [Parents should be] warned on the risks their child faces to better help and keep them safe."*

**Female, 14, urban, Australia**

## What children want to learn

Young participants in all countries want knowledge and skills about how to identify risk, what constitutes safe and unsafe content or behaviour, and how to respond to potentially risky or harmful online experiences. **They are calling specifically for education that teaches them:**

- **Methods to identity risk online**
- **Safe and unsafe information to share online**
- **Where they can go when they need help**
- **How to appropriately respond to unknown people**
- **How to report inappropriate behaviour online**

*"Children need to understand what info can be shared and what info shouldn't be shared. This can be learnt through talks and presentations."*

**Small group, 12-16, urban, Australia**

*"Children should be taught and educated on how to be smart online and on how to report to the relevant authority."*

**Female, 16, urban, Kenya**

*"Educate the children about what to and not to do online so that they will know how to protect themselves."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

They also highlight the importance of specific education to enable children to stay safe when encountering unknown others online, such as:

*"Having enough education about online safety to be able to politely decline interactions with stranger[s]."*

**Small group, 15-17, priority, South Africa**

*"Sensitisation on how to be safe online. Be smart online not to give out personal information about yourself online. Have talks on online grooming."*

**Female, 16, urban, Kenya**

## How children want to be educated

Children strongly believe that education is the most powerful tool to fight online childhood sexual exploitation and abuse. Our young participants contend that training and education programs delivered both online and offline – and in formal and informal settings – can help safeguard them, their peers, and their communities. Moreover, **while highlighting the role and responsibility of governments, they say that partnerships between governments and tech companies can and should help develop, activate, and deliver education programs to all children, and that delivery of programs and other educational activities should be available and take place in accessible and familiar contexts within schools and communities themselves.**

*"I want them to educate children on the dangers online and how they should keep themselves safe. Because it is their duty. If children are not informed now they would struggle in the future."*

**Female, 13, urban, Kenya**

*"Online platforms are helpful tools in the education of the Filipino children. Unfortunately, these platforms pose threats to the security of children, one being their interaction with strangers. As the head of the education in the Philippines, I urge you to develop and implement project and programs that entertain the needs for education about internet safety to avoid the negative effects of the internet."*

**Female, 15, urban, Philippines**

*"I want the Royal Government to help educate, give good advice, share good activities online."*

**Female, 16, urban, Cambodia**

When asked how tech companies and platforms can help safeguard children online, our young participants have clear perceptions and opinions about the nature and role of platforms and possible ways platforms can operationalise online safety education. For example, **children believe online safety education should be delivered across contexts and platforms and online in apps and games.** Many participants suggest online platforms should offer in-app education about how to participate safely and how users can respond if they encounter experiences that cause discomfort or distress.

*"Those who created the social networks should make a manual so that children and young people, even adults, do not go through any difficulty."*

**Female, 15, urban, Colombia**

*"When one downloads [a messaging app], there could be avideo, which would tell how to use [it] safely."*

**Female, 10, urban, Finland**

*"You should help [children] with online safety, because [there are many] ways [to] communicate with strangers online, and they [children] don't know about consequences of chatting with strangers online. We would like for you to create an app to raise awareness on online child safety. The app should also provide children with information on online safety."*

**Female, 14, priority, South Africa**

Children believe that online platforms are deeply integrated into their lives and those of their peers, enabling, influencing, and acting as mediums for interpersonal, familial, and social engagement and interaction. Recognising that online social media and platforms play a key role in children's lives and are effectively the new "children's playground" (Male, 15, urban, Philippines), our participants recommend a myriad of site-specific ways that tech companies can include online safety education in their platforms. **They conclude that platform- and site-based education to keep children safe online should leverage the digital features people most commonly engage with directly (e.g. online videos) as mechanisms to deliver information.**

*"[It is a good idea] to create a video about the dangers and benefits from interacting with strangers online. So that lots of people will see the video and think twice about what they are doing online. This will make lots of people not give away their personal information."*

**Male, 14, urban, Australia**

**Children elevate the role of schools as physical sites where formal online safety education should take place,** most likely reflecting their day-to-day understanding and experience of school environments as places of learning and the generally respected role of educators as conveyers of trustworthy information. Participants in every country discuss the duty of governments to direct schools, and the role of schools and school personnel themselves (e.g. principals, teachers, school administrators) to teach children how to stay safe online in general.

*"I would want the Government to have all websites have a report function, have better restrictions on security. The Government should also have a course on cyber safety at school for all students and also have chats that have been reported to be monitored. They should ban all users who are dangerous."*

**Male, 14, urban, Australia**

*"I would ask for a one-day programme/course all students would attend that addresses issues surrounding online safety. The program would have to be attended and completed by all students, so that they are better educated before making silly decisions online."*

**Male, 16, urban, Australia**

*"Dear teacher, I am writing this letter to inform you [t]hat a lot of children are facing online problems. I would like you to tell the class when you come to teach to tell them about online safety."*

**Female, 11, urban, Kenya**

While children in all participating countries talk about schools, Cambodian participants in particular focus on the role of teachers in helping children to safely navigate their online interactions.

*"People who can help children to be safe in their interactions with strangers online are teachers, siblings, family, and the government who can help keep children safe by providing information, advice, and knowledge."*

**Male, 11, rural, Cambodia.**

*"I want them to be responsible for the use of the [internet] of children to keep them safe from grooming on the online system, monitor the use of the [internet] to help educate them on the use of the [internet], and advise on how to use the [internet] more effectively."*

**Female, 16, rural, Cambodia**

*"Teachers can help children play online safely. Teachers need to help explain to children not to interact with strangers online."*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Cambodia**

## Informal learning at home

Although young participants highlight governments, online platforms, and schools as important actors for the provision of formal or systematic education about online safety, parents and caregivers were identified as having the most overall responsibility for keeping children safe online and teaching children how to keep themselves safe online. Parents and caregivers and were seen as being the most trusted sources of help, support, and response to children's experiences of online risk or harm.

In contrast to institutional or industry actors, education by parents or caregivers can be viewed as informal, taking place in familial or social contexts and through regular day-to-day interactions and engagements. That is not to say parental/caregiver education cannot be purposeful; it can include spontaneous, unplanned conversations between adults and children and/or discrete or regular parent-child interactions to specifically address online safety needs. Children value both types of engagements with their parents and caregivers as potentially crucial pathways to assist them in being safe online.

In summary, children themselves want more and better training and education to help stay safe, but they also want education to be accessible and available to the significant adults and communities in their lives so people and communities can better understand online opportunities and risks and provide more relevant and useful guidance and support to children. Further, children assign responsibility for developing and deploying online safety education broadly to government, institutional, and industry actors working in partnership to create the most effective information and education materials. They see a particular benefit in involving schools, teachers, and other trusted educational providers and personnel in the delivery of formal education about online safety. At the same time, they value informal education received from parents and caregivers, but recognise that many parents are not sufficiently equipped to deliver such guidance.

### Key Takeaways

Across countries, children highlight an urgent need for online safety education to be accessible to every child across the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence, regardless of where they live. They call specifically for education about methods to identity risk online; what information is appropriate to share online; how to appropriately respond to unknown people; where they can go when they need help; and how to report inappropriate behaviour online. Children want educational initiatives to take place in accessible and familiar contexts, within schools and communities, as well as online platforms, apps and games. They call for platform- and site-based education to leverage popular digital format, such as video, to deliver online safety information. Children say that governments and technology companies should partner to develop, activate, and deliver education programs, not only to all children, but also to all adults.

# 13 Children believe technical innovations can profoundly improve their online safety

**Our young participants were keenly aware of the potential for technologies to be leveraged to strengthen their online safety.** They highlight the algorithmic tools available for platforms to target and deploy information and education, information, resources, and tools to best effect, and urge platforms to make use of that technology. Our participants also call for better immersion of safety information and features in apps and games.

Children identify a range of specific features or functions they want technology companies to employ to help keep children safe online. Five themes recur prominently in children's responses to workshop activities. **Across all countries, children ask companies to use algorithms to improve the discovery of online safety information, education and tools; implement automatic blocking and banning; increase security of personal information; provide in-app education; and to ensure interactions are age-appropriate.**

## Using artificial intelligence to improve discovery of online safety information and resources

Children demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the indirect mechanisms or processes that platforms use to influence the types of content and experiences they have online (e.g. algorithms). They argue such indirect mechanisms of influence also have a key role to play in online safety education and urge their better use towards online safety goals and outcomes. For example, **our young participants suggest flooding algorithms with educational content to highlight or feature instructional videos at platform entry.**

*"I want them to maximise online platforms. We know the online platforms nowadays are children's playgrounds. Most children spend most of their time online. With this, decision makers can use online platforms to share tips to young people how they can be safe when interacting with strangers online."*

**Male, 15, urban, Philippines**

*"The majority of [video sharing platform] viewers are children. These platforms play a major part in the upbringing of young children. I think you should put more cyber security videos in your algorithm so children all around the world will be aware of the threats online."*

**Male, 15, urban, Australia**

## Age restrictions

Children say they want strict age restrictions, particularly in games, so they can play only with other users around their own age rather than with adults. **They ask online platforms to develop mechanisms to better verify the age of users so that they cannot come into contact with adults or view content that is inappropriate for their age.**

*"I want them to make a better system making the same age group playing with other people their age."*

**Male, 11, urban, Australia**

*"Make age limits, [so] that an older person cannot talk to younger people."*

**Female, 12, urban, Finland**

*"I have a few suggestions for making sure that kids can be kept safe when interacting with strangers online. It must be mandatory for underage kids to have an account set up by their parents to avoid kids lying about their age. Their ID number should also be asked for."*

**Female, 16, priority, South Africa**

In line with the idea of protecting children from adult users, some **children also suggest automatic privacy settings for children or different models of authentication and use for children and adults.** More pointedly, other children say online platforms should be banned for children under a certain age and companies should do more to ensure such restrictions should be better enforced.

*"The creators of [social media platforms] should have privacy for underage children and have an application that verifies all adults who write to children."*

**Female, 18, urban, Colombia**

*"There should be difference of standards between child and adult, proof of age before the registration, and restrictions."*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Philippines**

*"Influential [social media] to [invest] further into making sure no predators are harming children online. They also need to be making sure no children under the age of 13 are using these platforms."*

**Female, 14, urban, Australia**

*"Apps should put more effort into verifying whether someone is 18 (such as asking for the user's age, and not allowing them if they are under the age of 18). The app should be locked for anyone under the age of 25 to stop teenagers from using it."*

**Female, 15, priority, South Africa**

## Automated warning systems

To help children decide about and manage potentially safe and unsafe online interactions, they ask tech companies to design and implement warning systems in games, other apps, platforms and forums most commonly used by children. **Children want automated warning systems to alert them before or when they are interacting with someone older than them online, and offer appropriate, realistic guidance about possible and safe responses, to help them decide if or how they will proceed.**

*"Maybe you could add warnings when someone sends a request and they have to answer them."*

**Female, 10, urban, Australia**

*"If the conversation sounds suspicious, the app would warn the person whom the suspicious messages are being sent to."*

**Male, 9, urban, Finland**

*"There should be a warning that says "are you sure you know this person? It might be dangerous or scam."*

**Female, 16, urban, Philippines**

*"Young children's social media should be checked on a weekly basis. They should be asked how it is on social media. A monitoring app should be created that alerts them in case they are in trouble."*

**Male, 17, priority, South Africa**

## Automated blocking and banning

Children want companies to better utilise their technological capabilities and prowess to offer automated processes that create safer environments, as well as accessible, effective options they can use if they encounter potential risk or harm. Children want tech companies to monitor their online activity and automatically block friend requests and messages from adults, and they want tech companies to ban people who share violating content or engage in potentially harmful or upsetting online behaviour. Children do recognise their ability to block and report other users online and, indeed, encourage each other to use these safety features. What's more, **children specifically want tech companies to build functions into their platforms and apps that appropriately automate blocking and reporting processes for young users, and effectively educate young users about how, when, and why those processes are deployed. Further, they want appropriate sanctions or consequences applied to those who infringe online safety rules and community guidelines.**

*"I want the [social media] headquarters [to] monitor accounts and chats. For example, with the accounts they should ban fake accounts that people get friended with. And monitoring chats they should monitor them because of the bullying and some assault that occurs."*

**Male, 13, urban, Australia**

*"Technology platforms can protect gamers like Vanak by blocking and notifying the police."*

**Small female group, 9-13, urban, Cambodia**

*"I would like a little more research to crack down on fake profiles and scammers."*

**Female, 13, urban, Colombia**

*"Hi. You should know that some [children] face strange people online and don't always tell to adults. Person who ask personal questions should be removed from applications. With reporting there could be a permission to someone trustworthy to see messages between them."*

**Female, 12, urban, Finland**

*"They should ban people who post explicit content. Try and make the platforms child-friendly."*

**Female, 13, urban, Kenya**

*"Yes, he has something he can do to protect himself, and the online platform can assist him by using blocking and restricting features to safeguard himself."*

**Female, 15, urban, Philippines**

*"The children of this country are uneducated to the point that we become irresponsible online. We are unaware of certain policies and regulations, and the consequences of our reckless behaviour. We want the SAG [South African government] to include online safety practices as part of our curriculum, to educate everyone on the dangers online so that we can learn from them. We also want severe punishments for those who break the law. Arrest those who share pornography, ban pornographic content, and make sexual games (such as Summertime Saga) inaccessible to the country. Any accounts that are reported should be thoroughly checked to ensure that they pose no threat. Those who are dangerous should be banned permanently."*

**Female, 15, priority, South Africa**

## Restricting content

Children are deeply aware of risky, inappropriate, and potentially harmful content online and our young participants call for tech companies to do more to protect children from encountering such content (See Key Findings: Section 13). While concerns about harmful content were particularly acute in Colombia, children in all countries ask companies to remove inappropriate or violating content, but they are agnostic about how that should be done. Some seem to suggest automated solutions while others do not specify mechanisms. All children, however, identify technology companies as having responsibility for removal and argue companies must do more.

*"Increase security with multimedia in the app, leaving aside the rights of content creation, so that there are fewer publications and bloody videos."*

**Male, 17, urban, Colombia**

*"[Children] should not send out sexy or nude videos. And there should be a programme to prevent further sharing, in case [children] send out a video."*

**Small group, 13-16, priority, Cambodia**

## Privacy and security

In Colombia, in the context of conversations about engaging with unknown others and the threat of online grooming, children raised concerns around the privacy and security of their data. They also expressed concern about their physical security, suggesting the potentially broader significant contextual/societal factors at play. **Children said that safeguarding their data is very important to them and say that they would feel less vulnerable to unknown others if tech companies do more to protect their personal data online.**

*"Protecting personal data [is important to feeling safe online]."*

**Female, 14, urban, Colombia**

*"Improving cybersecurity [would make me feel safer from threats posed by unknown others]."*

**Female, 16, urban, Colombia**

While concerns about privacy and security are particularly high in Colombia, children elsewhere similarly express views about online privacy. Children in a number of countries note how tech companies could improve account security as a way to help ensure their protection from online grooming and shore up their online safety more generally. For example, rather than setting platform accounts as private being optional, children say they want their accounts to be set to private by default, thereby limiting the ability for them to be found and contacted by unknown others online.

*"He can protect himself from something like this happening again by being careful or responding to messages from strangers online or blocking them. The online platform can protect him by setting private account, unfriending, or blocking."*

**Small female group, 13-16, urban, Cambodia**

*"Limit the information that can be shared."*

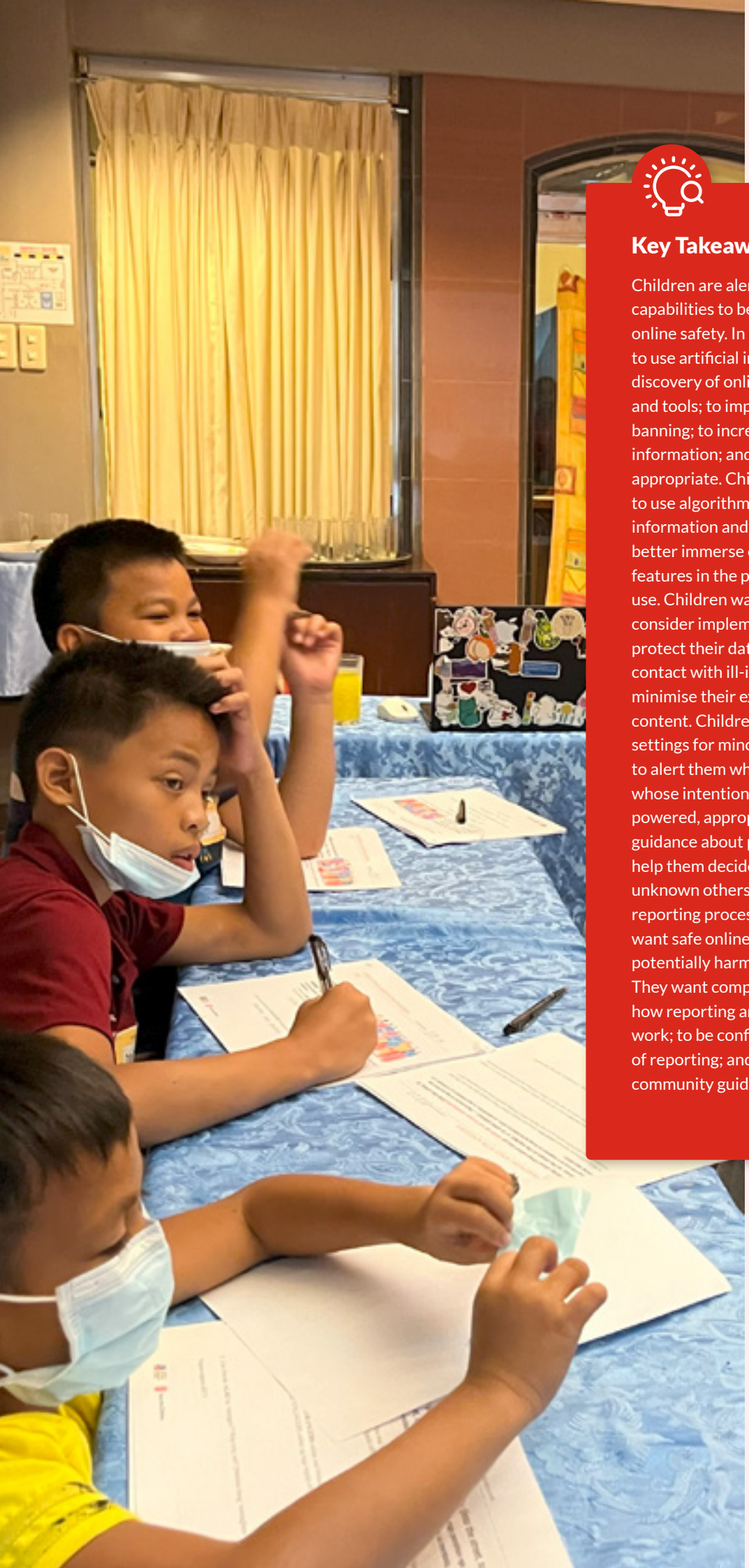
**Female, 15, urban, Colombia**

*"Make the account private."*

**Small group, 13-16, urban, Philippines**

*"Private his username/personal things and information."*

**Male, 14, urban, Philippines**



## Key Takeaways

Children are alert to the potential for technical capabilities to be leveraged to strengthen their online safety. In particular, they urge companies to use artificial intelligence to improve the discovery of online safety information, education and tools; to implement automatic blocking and banning; to increase the security of personal information; and to ensure interactions are age-appropriate. Children urge technology platforms to use algorithmic tools to target online safety information and education to best effect and to better immerse online safety information and features in the platforms, apps, and games they use. Children want technology platforms to consider implementing additional mechanisms to protect their data; to prevent their inadvertent contact with ill-intentioned adults; and to minimise their exposure to age-inappropriate content. Children also suggest default privacy settings for minors; automated warning systems to alert them when they interact with someone whose intentions may not be genuine; AI-powered, appropriate, relatable, just-in-time guidance about possible and safe responses to help them decide if or how they will engage with unknown others; and automated blocking and reporting processes for young users. Children want safe online spaces to discuss or report potentially harmful behaviours and content. They want companies to better communicate how reporting and other online safety processes work; to be confident about the outcomes of reporting; and to be told when and how community guidelines are enforced.

# CONCLUSION

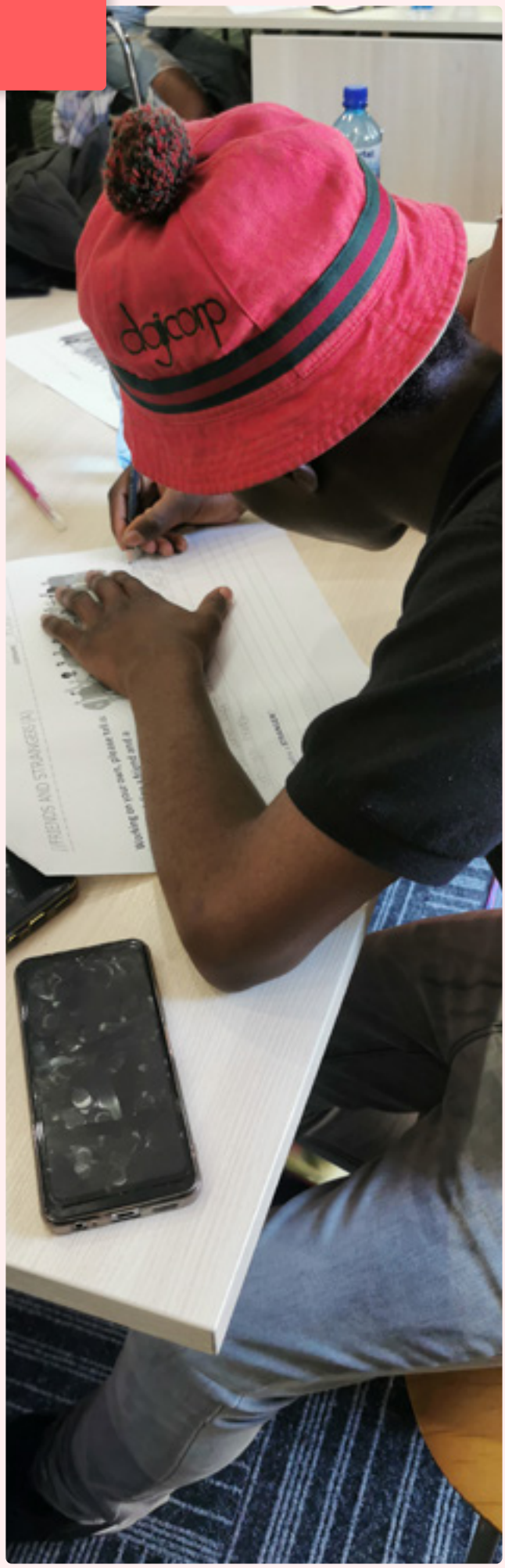
# CONCLUSION

Interacting with unknown others is a routine part of many children's daily experience online. Indeed, meeting and engaging with strangers online can be rewarding, enriching, helpful, and fun for children. At the very least, most such interactions may be relatively transitory and harmless. On the other hand, real and serious risks and harms can and often do arise if children engage with unknown others online without thought for their safety. Our research shows that when children encounter an unknown person online, they do employ a complex process of decision-making to determine whether the person is safe or unsafe.

Although children in all countries are acutely aware of the potential to be deceived or harmed by people they do not know online, they also recognise the potential benefits of making connections with unknown others. The capacity of digital platforms to foster human connection is one of the great triumphs of technology, and children around the world celebrate and enjoy this capacity. Accordingly, rather than attempting to shield them from all potential harm by eliminating their ability to forge connections online, children ask for appropriate intervention from parents, governments, technology companies, and schools to facilitate their ability to safely connect with others.

Achieving the right balance between creating online safety tools and processes that will resonate with their own experiences, that they will actually adopt and follow, and that are practical and effective is becoming increasingly critical. As the places that children are exposed to and access to online technologies and platforms grow – and as incidences of online childhood sexual exploitation and abuse continue to rise across the globe – there is an urgent need for widespread online safeguarding in children's homes, their schools, and their communities, and most importantly, in the online platforms they commonly use day-to-day.

Although children in every country already demonstrate an advanced toolkit of strategies that they employ to keep themselves safe, they desire practical familial and institutional support to navigate their interactions online. They ask governments and technology companies to take seriously both the challenges and opportunities the online environment can offer. Children want to be protected from online threats and harms, and to know how to protect themselves. They also want key actors and decision-makers to equip children to thrive, and to alter the online environment so that children can participate without fear. As the children in this study declare it is our duty to keep them safe online.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Lifting out of the research with children, the research team worked with key stakeholders, including technology platform representatives, to develop recommendations to guide policy, regulation, education, and product design. This section presents a set of principles to guide implementation of the recommendations, followed by detailed, child-centred recommendations designed to empower decision makers to take concrete steps to address the issue of online grooming. The implementation of these recommendations is a shared responsibility across government, corporate and NGO sectors internationally.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

**User-centred:** Work with children, young people and the adults that support them to design and evaluate child- and youth-friendly technologies and services, and interventions that foster their online safety, including protection from online grooming.

**Socially-oriented:** Design for and implement online grooming interventions in the spaces in which children routinely interact with unknown others.

**Benefits-focused:** Target strategies to not only mitigate potential risks of harm but also to augment the benefits of children's and young people's engagement with the digital environment.

**Diversity:** Target solutions to meet the needs of diverse children and young people living and growing in different locations, cultures, family structures and with varying degrees of access to technology and the internet.

**Targeted:** Target protections to address the needs of those children and young people who are most vulnerable to infringements of their rights to protection and participation as a consequence of their online engagement.

**Strengths-based:** Build upon the strengths of existing technological architectures and capabilities, policies, programming and children's and young people's own protective behaviours and skills repertoires to strengthen their protection from online grooming.

**Age-appropriate:** Draw on, for example, age-appropriate design principles to design for different ages and stages and ensure that strategies respond to children's and young people's evolving capacities.

**Digital solutions:** Explore how existing technologies, platforms and apps, as well as emerging technology trends, such as generative AI, can be maximised to ensure children and young people are safe from online grooming.

**Collaborative:** Work collaboratively across government, corporate and community sectors to deliver on the collective responsibility to keep children and young people safe online.

**Holistic:** Take an ecosystemic approach to the implementation of safety measures to ensure that protections from harm are as effective as possible and do not negatively impact children's and young people's access to the benefits of digital engagement.

**Who is responsible for taking action to protect children from online grooming?** Responsibility for implementing each of the following recommendations is allocated to government (Gov); non-government organisations (NGO); and corporate entitites (Corp).

# DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

## ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS

### 1 Better support children to manage their relationships with friends and a range of unknown others online, including those with whom they have a mutual connection and those who are completely unknown to them.

*Rationale: Children report that they treat all online connections they do not also know face-to-face with some degree of suspicion. There are opportunities to build upon and reinforce these instincts to better protect them from potential harm.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strengthen efforts to target the online safety needs of children age 9-13 to provide them with support as their digital practices become increasingly social in orientation. | X | X | X |
| Design platform features and educational strategies to build upon and reinforce children's instincts to treat those they don't know face-to-face with suspicion. | X | X | X |
| Explore the potential for technical features and educational strategies to support, reinforce and extend children's existing capabilities to manage online interactions. For example: | X | X | X |
| Consider implementing features to enable children to judge the authenticity of unknown others by observing cues and monitoring the behaviour and self-representation of unknown others over time. Such features might include activity logs, consistency indicators, and alerts for suspicious activities. Activity logs might give users visibility over the following characteristics of a potential connection: how long they have been engaging with the platform; age and gender of the people with whom they primarily interact; sample posts or categories of content they share. Such features would need to balance privacy and openness and be couched in clear guidance for users about how to interpret the information provided. | - | - | X |
| Explore mechanisms to enable users to categorise different kinds of online connections, similar to professional networking platforms. However, implementing this kind of feature would need to be carefully weighed up against the potential for such categories to be weaponised by users with malicious intent (e.g. in the context of online bullying). | - | - | X |
| Consider developing features to highlight the strength of mutual connections and provide metrics that contextualise potential connections, enabling children to make informed decisions about potential connections. | - | - | X |
| Explore the application of algorithmic solutions to provide children with real-time suggestions about how to respond to requests from and interactions with unknown others online. | - | - | X |
| Reinforce for children that they should trust their gut instincts about when it is safe to engage with an unknown other online. | X | X | X |
| Support children to evaluate when they should give a potential connection the benefit of the doubt, when it is appropriate to decline an approach from an unknown other, and suggest to them how to decline unwanted approaches effectively. | X | X | X |

## 2 Encourage children and the adults who support them to block and report bad actors online.

*Rationale: Though children are generally aware of blocking and reporting features, they are disinclined to use such features out of fear that they will offend others online (blocking) or that such processes will fail to appropriately protect them (reporting).*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ensure that children have ready access to seamless blocking and reporting processes. These features should be as visible and easily discoverable as functions such as 'liking' content. | X | X | X |
| Encourage children to block unwanted contacts by developing child-friendly education about how blocking processes work, whether unwanted contacts can see they have been blocked, whether blocking is reversible, and the consequences are for those who are blocked. | - | - | X |
| Consider prompting all those who block unwanted contacts to also report the behaviour. | - | - | X |
| » Collaborate to clearly define what thresholds of unwanted contact it is important to act on, and what kinds of reporting data will empower key actors to respond to incidents of online grooming. Communicate clearly with children about what kinds of behaviours they should report, why, and to whom. | X | X | X |
| » Consider collaborating across platforms to standardise reporting processes to maximise accessibility and reduce barriers to their use. | - | - | X |
| » Experiment with reporting mechanisms to enable children to take quick decisions to report while engaged in scrolling or other fast-paced activities online, without interrupting their routine use. | - | - | X |
| » Normalise reporting by exploring the value of 'low stakes' reporting mechanisms, such as flagging inappropriate behaviours using an ignore button or raising them with an AI-driven online 'ally'. When implementing enhanced blocking and reporting features, the potential for these measures to be weaponised should be considered. | - | - | X |
| Affirm the choice to report by reiterating the role it plays in protecting the entire online community. | X | X | X |
| To increase children's confidence in reporting mechanisms, develop clear, easily accessible and relatable information about reasons to report, how reporting processes work, how complaints are processed; who will be able to see the information they provide; what protections are available to them; and what the possible outcomes are. | - | - | X |
| Educate trusted adults about when and how children should report to enable them to better support children to respond to online grooming. Platforms might usefully partner with government and NGOs to ensure they can effectively reach parents, caregivers and other trusted adults. | X | X | X |
| To build user confidence in platform safety measures, consistently enforce community guidelines and communicate regularly with users about actions taken to protect user safety. | - | - | X |
| Ensure that platforms and authorities such as police provide confidential, trustworthy, and child-friendly processes that support children to deal with online safety issues such as online grooming. | X | X | X |

## 3 Strengthen pathways to support services to support young users to address online grooming and other online safety challenges.

*Rationale: Though children are generally aware of blocking and reporting features, they are disinclined to use such features out of fear that they will offend others online (blocking) or that such processes will fail to appropriately protect them (reporting).*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Where not already available, consider offering direct links to credible, evidence-based support services when a user blocks or reports unwanted contact in-platform. | - | - | X |
| Explore ways to leverage peer relationships – particularly between older and younger children – to enable children to seek help when they need it. | X | X | X |
| Encourage parents and caregivers to have frequent, non-judgmental conversations with children about what they do online and why, to create open dialogue that will increase the likelihood that children reach out to them for help. | X | X | X |

## EDUCATION

# 4 Strengthen and increase the accessibility of online safety and digital literacy education for children, regardless of location or age, to support their management of interactions with unknown others.

*Rationale: Children are highly aware of the potential to be deceived by unknown others online but feel underequipped to determine which profiles and accounts are authentic and which individuals have genuine intentions.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ensure every child and young person can access high-quality, evidence-based and relatable online safety education. Explore how to leverage algorithmic tools to target online safety information and education to best effect. | X | X | X |
| Deliver programming and other educational activities in readily discoverable and familiar contexts, including schools, communities, and within online platforms, games, and apps. | X | X | X |
| Design and deliver in-app online safety education, such as instructional videos, to be featured among the content that children ordinarily consume, rather than in a separate youth or family safety centre. | - | - | X |
| Educational materials should reinforce children's pre-existing inclinations to treat all those they meet online that they do not know face-to-face with suspicion. Platform features would usefully reinforce these dispositions by nudging children before they connect with someone new. | X | X | X |
| Comprehensive educational content should cover various aspects of online safety, including how: to identify risks of online grooming; to use relational verification and targeted investigation strategies; to respond to requests to connect; to manage interactions with unknown others online; to detect escalating situations; to effectively respond to risky behaviours; to decline inappropriate requests for personal information; to determine safe information to share online; to report violative behaviours; and to seek help and support. Education should also discuss how children can balance the need to manage unwanted contacts with the value they place on upholding the civility of platforms. It should also be explicit about the limitations of protective strategies. For example, while relational verification is a robust strategy, an ill-intentioned user can nonetheless infiltrate a child's network and pose as a friend. | X | X | X |
| Reinforce that risks of harm can stem both known and unknown others online and that effectively managing online interactions requires vigilance. | X | X | X |
| Educate children – and particularly boys – that relationships with unknown others that escalate quickly (average of 45 minutes[9]) to requests for personal information or images are highly risky and can expose them to financial extortion. Education might usefully advise children not to share deeply personal information or photographs with new online friend until some time has passed and they have been able to assess their intentions. | X | X | X |

[9] https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-23/data/

## 5 Strengthen education for parents, carers, teachers, and community leaders to equip them to better communicate with and support their children to interact safely with unknown others.

*Rationale: Children want to turn to trusted adults – in particular, parents and carers but also community leaders – for support and guidance in relation to their interactions with unknown others. However, they also believe parents are significantly underequipped to provide such support.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Update advice for parents, carers, teachers, and community leaders about online grooming to acknowledge that children routinely encounter unknown others online, and that children can potentially be harmed online by both known and unknown others. | X | X | X |
| Share children's insights from this report with parents, carers, teachers, and community leaders, highlighting how they manage their interactions and relationships online and how they want to be supported to protect themselves from online grooming and other online risks of harm. | X | X | X |
| Educate parents, carers, teachers, and community leaders about how to use privacy and security settings to help prevent unwanted contact, to enable adults to support children with those features. | X | X | X |
| Strengthen the provision of quality information and educational resources for parents and carers of children, as well as for community leaders. These should cover topics such as identifying online grooming risks; using relational verification and targeted investigation strategies to verify the identities of unknown others; responding to requests to connect form unknown others online; detecting escalating situations; managing online interactions with unknown others; dealing with risky behaviours; declining inappropriate requests for personal information; determining appropriate information to share online; and methods for blocking and reporting unwanted contact. | X | X | X |
| Develop and promote parental/caregiver tools and resources, including everyday conversation starters about online grooming protection to support parents, carers, teachers, and community leaders to have meaningful conversations with children about how to stay safe online. | X | X | X |
| Educate parents, carers, teachers, and community leaders that relationships with unknown others that escalate quickly (average of 45 minutes) to requests for personal information or images are potentially highly risky and can expose children to financial extortion. Advise children not to share deeply personal information or photographs with new online friend until some time has passed and they have been able to assess their intentions. | X | X | X |
| Deliver educational materials through readily discoverable and familiar contexts, such as schools; community, cultural, and religious organisations; parent groups; government outlets; and various online and legacy media channels. | X | X | X |
| Acknowledging that many parents source online safety information from social media and mainstream media outlets, make efforts to work with journalists to ensure that news stories point parents to high-quality, evidence-based information and resources to support their children's online safety. | X | X | X |

## 6 Equip decision-makers to take informed decisions about how to strengthen responses to online grooming.

*Rationale: Given the rapidly evolving landscape, it is essential to bring decision-makers up to speed about new developments so that policies, regulation, and other measures are fit for purpose.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Update advice for governments, technology platforms, NGOs, and other stakeholders to openly acknowledge that children routinely encounter unknown others online. | X | X | X |
| Educate key decision-makers about children's views on their desire to be protected from online grooming, the value they derive from being online, and opportunities and barriers to strengthen their protective behaviours and strategies. | X | X | X |
| Educate key decision-makers about both the possibilities and limitations of technical mechanisms for protecting children from online grooming. | X | X | X |

## 7 Strengthen and enforce legislation and mechanisms of justice for children who experience online harms.

*Rationale: Children are clear that their online safety is a responsibility shared by governments, technology platforms, NGOs, and other adult stakeholders. Children call for these actors to work together to secure their protection from online grooming and maximise their digital participation.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Explore collaborative mechanisms for governments, NGOs, and private enterprise to strengthen legislative and regulatory environments to enhance children's protection from online grooming. | X | X | X |
| To build trust, explore how to enhance accountability mechanisms, such as transparency reporting. | X | X | X |
| Encourage governments to sign up for INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database. | X | X | - |

## 8 Consider developing a default industry standard around online privacy and security by default for children to minimise the possibility that they inadvertently share personal information with bad actors in ways that compromise them.

*Rationale: Children believe that fortifying their privacy and the security of their personal information will help to minimise the possibility that they inadvertently share personal information with bad actors in ways that may compromise their safety.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Implement privacy by default for all accounts and profiles of children under the age of 18 to ensure that children have control over their visibility online. | - | - | X |
| Educate children and their parents and caregivers how data and privacy protection mechanism work. | X | X | X |
| Explore the extent to which offering child-only, age-gated, and monitored online spaces for children strengthens their sense of online privacy and security. | X | X | X |
| Explore new ways to strengthen children's privacy and security online. | X | X | X |
| Explore specific mechanisms for better protecting children from online grooming in the context of encrypted, private messaging contexts. | X | X | X |

## 9 Reduce the likelihood that children will encounter violent, sexually explicit, or other age-inappropriate online content.

*Rationale: Children report that exposure to sexually explicit, violent, and other inappropriate content constitutes part of the legitimising environment in which inappropriate practices, such as online grooming, can take root.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Establish a taskforce to enable industry and government representatives to collaborate closely with experts in child online protection, child and adolescent development, and youth cultures in diverse locations. This could be delivered as a collaborative effort between the WeProtect Global Alliance and the Tech Coalition. The taskforce should develop industry-wide classifications of different kinds of sexually explicit, violent, and other age-inappropriate content, enabling platforms to better monitor and respond to children's exposure to age-inappropriate content. | X | X | X |
| Closely monitor content that is shared online with children and proactively block gratuitous, sexually explicit, violent and other age-inappropriate content, especially for younger children. Accounts that share this material with minors should also be blocked. | - | - | X |
| Ensure that older teenagers have access to high-quality and ideally evidence-based content that enables them to explore issues of sexuality, violence, and other sensitive topics in a safe manner rather than through other means, such as pornography. Such measures must take diverse social and cultural norms into account. | X | X | X |

## TECHNICAL INNOVATION

### 10 Reduce the likelihood that children will unwittingly interact with adults and those who might be bad actors in online spaces, and ensure that children can engage in age-appropriate interactions.

*Rationale: Children wish to have opportunities to extend their friendship networks outside the bounds of their face-to-face networks but they want to connect with trustworthy peers and do not wish to connect with adults.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Explore and refine the application of algorithmic solutions to prevent children's exposure to unsafe unknown others online. For example, consider implementing strategies to block or ban suspicious users before children are exposed to them. | - | - | X |
| Consider the evidence base to evaluate the efficacy of age gating and age assurance as approaches to curb online grooming. The value of using these measures needs to be weighed carefully against the potential to use other, possibly more effective strategies to achieve the same ends. | X | X | X |
| Consider designing technical features that might slow or delay interactions that have characteristics of financial extortion (which typically occurs over an average period of 45 minutes but can happen in as little as 19 seconds ) or other suspicious activity. This would require triangulation of a range of different identifying markers of potential online grooming perpetrators. | - | - | X |

## 11 Consider implementing AI-driven warning systems to alert young users about the characteristics and prior practices of unknown others with whom they interact online.

*Rationale: Children call for technical features that enable them to better ascertain the identities and prior histories of unknown others with whom they come into contact.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Experiment with AI-driven warning systems, particularly in private messaging, that alert children when they may be engaging with a risky unknown other. Consider applying warnings to the following behaviours and characteristics: | - | - | X |
| » They are contacted by someone outside their existing networks or geography. | - | - | X |
| » Someone of a significantly different age contacts them (NB: This will be dependent on age verification and does not prevent online grooming by peers) | - | - | X |
| » They engage intensely with new contacts over a short period (45 minutes, which is the average period of time over which financial extortion typically plays out). | - | - | X |
| » They are contacted by someone who has been blocked by multiple other users. | - | - | X |
| » They are contacted by someone who has sent a high volume of contact requests to other children. | - | - | X |
| » They are contacted by someone that is using a profile photo that has been sourced from an image bank. | - | - | X |
| » A new contact shares or asks a child to share sexually explicit, violent, or other age-inappropriate content. | - | - | X |
| Consider also implementing automated warnings to alert children to potential dangers of opening a private message; supply real time instructions on how to block or report inappropriate contact; and direct them to local support services. | - | - | X |

## 12 Ensure platform features do not exacerbate the risk that children might be exposed to bad actors online.

*Rationale: Private messaging, anonymity, in-app purchases and gifting, and geotagging have been identified as features that my increase risks for children online.*

| | Gov | NGO | Corp |
|---|---|---|---|
| Limit anonymity features for accounts interacting with minors. | - | - | X |
| Explore specific mechanisms for better protecting children from online grooming in the context of encrypted, private messaging contexts. | - | - | X |
| Consider restricting or closely monitoring in-app purchases and gifting for accounts belonging to minors to prevent financial extortion. | - | - | X |
| Disable geotagging by default for minors. | - | - | X |
| Conduct child rights and risk assessments for new features, monitor how features are used, and regularly review the features of each platform, considering the potential misuse for online grooming or other forms of violence against children. | - | - | X |
| Actively elicit the views and feedback of young users and their guardians and incorporate their insights into online safety improvements. | - | - | X |


[10] https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-23/data/

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