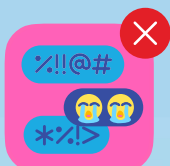# Protecting children in the online world

Reshaping the digital world for Aussie kids
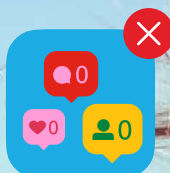
Cyberbullying

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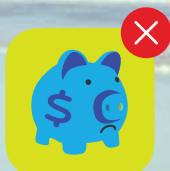
Privacy

Social Media

Harmful Content
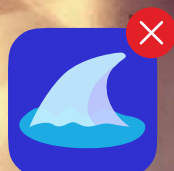
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Predators

Screen Time

Contents

UNICEF and the digital world

UNICEF is working around the world to deliver cutting-edge research and programming to improve digital environments and keep children safe online. We are a trusted advisor to governments everywhere, a partner with the private sector who wield so much influence in the digital space, and a bridge between the two in a way that few organisations can be. As the United Nations agency for children, we also represent a trusted brand and source of information, which can be mobilised to engage and inspire the public to take action. Flowing through all our work are the voices of children themselves, ensuring our efforts genuinely make a positive impact on their lives. We are bringing this same approach to Australia to help make it the best place in the world for children to go online.

UNICEF is the United Nations Children's Fund, the world's leading organisation for children and families. We work in more than 190 countries and territories around the globe. Our mission is to ensure that every child has the opportunity to survive and thrive – regardless of who they are, where they live, or what they believe.

UNICEF Australia's vision is a fair chance for every child. As an Australian NGO we work in partnership with governments, local organisations, and the private sector to protect and enhance the rights and wellbeing of children here in Australia and around the world.

Children and the online world

The current generation of children are the first true digital natives. They will never know a world without smartphones, tablets or laptops. Constant connectivity is their norm. From a young age they will learn how to code and how to use artificial intelligence (AI) to study. They will have an online presence almost immediately after birth, and they already occupy online spaces disproportionately more than any other group.

Globally, it is estimated that one in three internet users is a child under the age of 18,[1] and that 75% of young people around the world use the internet, 10% higher than the rest of the population.[2] In Australia, 84% of children will have a social media presence by the age of two,[3] and by age 12 every single child in Australia will be online.[4]

To put it simply, the online world is a young person's domain. As children engage with digital environments at higher rates compared to other age groups,[5] the changes to those environments stand to have a comparatively greater impact on them. This is important, because just as children are uniquely vulnerable in the offline world, they are also uniquely vulnerable in online worlds.

Childhood is a time of important development, and the experiences, relationships, and environments of that crucial period set children up for the rest of their lives. But as children are still growing, they may not have developed the

1 in 3
internet users globally is a child

coping mechanisms and responses that allow them to be as resilient as an adult might be in the face of adversity. Given their young age, the impacts of any adversity will also be felt for longer than an adult, impacting them as they grow and develop throughout their lives.[6]

Children's ubiquity in the online world is evidenced through the way the internet has become intertwined with so many of the key facets of childhood. For many children around the world, the internet and learning are synonymous with each other, and the digital realm has unlocked so many new possibilities when it comes to education. In the online world, children access important information and vital supports, but it is also where they play, socialise, create, express themselves, explore new worlds and make friends. Being online has become critical to the healthy development and wellbeing of children.

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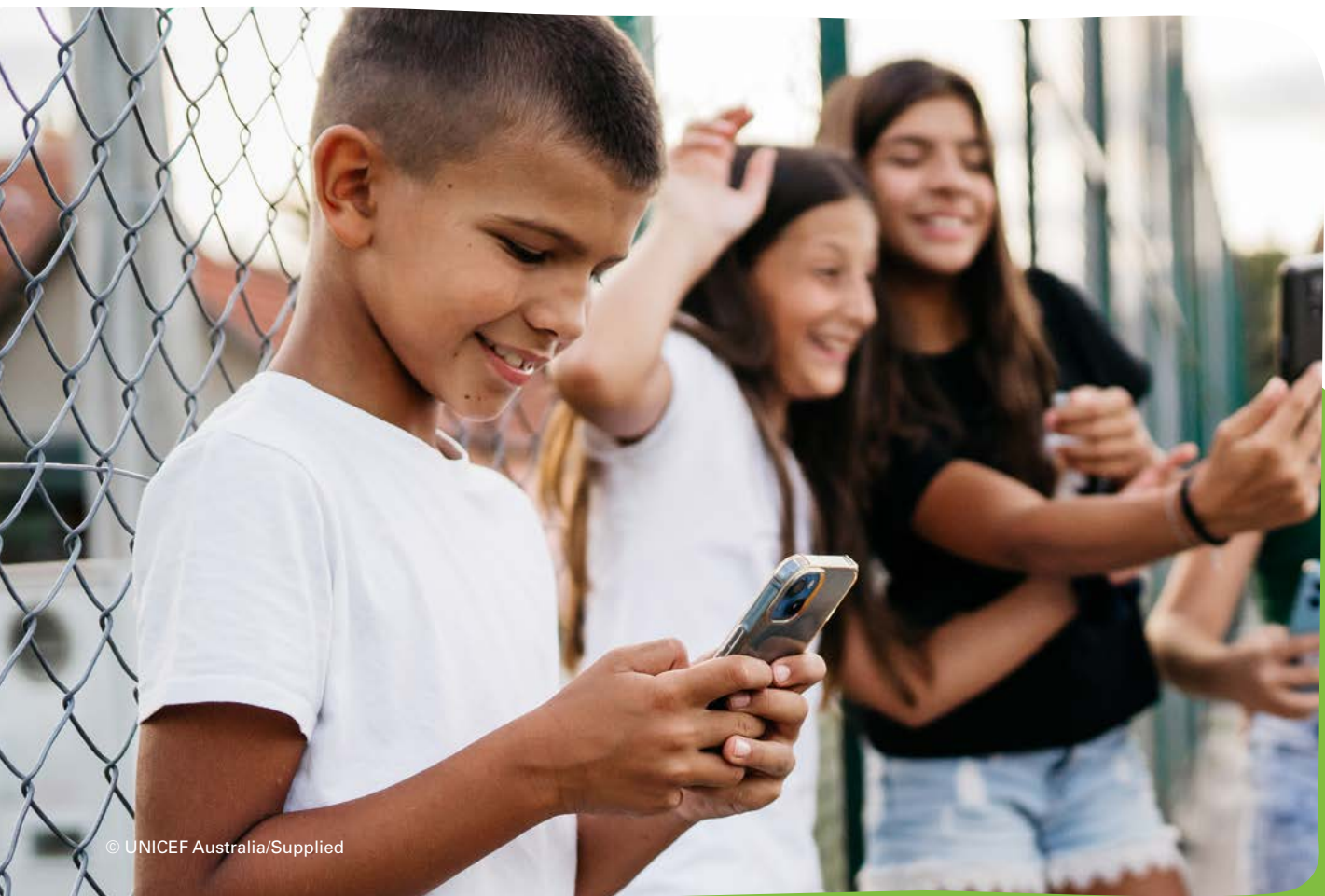
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" The few numbers available are staggering - it is estimated that by age 13, advertisers will have collected 72 million data points on a child. "

Of course, there is a broad appreciation that children also face risks online. Some of the better-known ones include issues like bullying, exposure to harmful content, exposure to inappropriate content designed for adults, addiction, and the associated negative physical and mental health impacts that come with these risks. At its worst, there are forms of online abuse, extortion and exploitation, that threaten the very lives of children.

Then there are more recently identified risks like those relating to data and privacy including through data monetisation, microtargeted advertising, profiling and automated decision-making.[7] The few numbers available are staggering - it is estimated that by age 13, advertisers will

have collected 72 million data points on a child.[8] For young children, concepts like privacy can be difficult to understand, and they may unwittingly divulge information to third parties that places them at risk. The digital ecosystem is so complex and seamless that often neither children or their adult guardians are fully aware of how their data is being captured and used, nor what the potential benefits and risks are.[9] And while an individual's data tends to be treated the same way regardless of who they are, children's data is different[10] - children are less able to understand the long-term implications of consenting to their data being collected.[11]

Finally, there are those newly emerging threats and opportunities, be it through the dawn of virtual and augmented reality environments in the metaverse, to mis/disinformation, deep fakes, and the role that AI could play in both accelerating and reducing these risks and benefits. In the face of these challenges, there are a myriad of emerging solutions, but first we will take a deeper look at the online world for children in Australia.

The online world for Aussie kids

14.4 hours
on average spent online a
week by teens[12]

62.4%
have access to their own
mobile phone[13]

8 in 10
use the internet weekly
for schoolwork[14]

48%
look online for health
information[15]

6 in 10
have been in contact
with someone they
first met online[16]

45%
have been treated in a
hurtful or nasty way[17]

62%
have been exposed to harmful
content including hate speech
and violent imagery[18]

71%
of teens have seen
sexual images[19]

But only

34%
of parents are
aware of this[20]

Additionally, UNICEF Australia surveyed 1000+ young Australians aged 15 – 17 in November 2023 and found:[21]

81%
of social media users say it has a positive influence on their lives

67%
of those that read the news say it has a positive influence on their lives

84%
of those that play video games say it has a positive influence on their lives

75%
know what to do when seeing someone get bullied online

82%
say they will take action when seeing someone being bullied online

47%
say mobile phone use should be banned at school

71%
have seen hate speech online with 62% of them taking action against it

60%
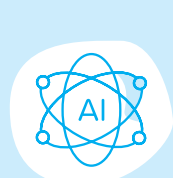have seen violent/gory content online with half of them taking action against it

39%
have seen self-harm content online with 61% of them taking action against it

69%
have used a generative AI chatbot like ChatGPT

45%
have used a gen-AI chatbot to generate ideas for schoolwork, the most common use

20%
have used a gen-AI chatbot to write an assignment or do schoolwork for them

UNICEF Australia asked 1000+ young Australians aged 15 – 17 to envision a better online world, and they told us:[22]

Ideally based around user experience and what people want/need from the platform instead of based on whatever will get the giant corporations more money

A free place to express yourself but with enough monitoring to ensure everyone is able to use it happily and safely

It will be accessible to everyone and become an extension of humanity

Honestly it's never gonna be perfect and people are always gonna bully each other especially online. But I guess I'd like to see more people celebrating each other

After the confinement of the COVID-19 pandemic, I've personally cherished how real in-person interactions enrich our lives more than any 0s and 1s can ever. Instead, I envision a better online world which seeks to exist within the physical world

The future online world will be more inclusive in which people can communicate their ideas and beliefs while respecting each other and with no discrimination against a particular group

I imagine it to be just as diverse but more positive and welcoming online, with more information to sufficiently protect users from details and information which may breach their privacy or potentially endanger them

I think that in the future, the online world will be what brings us together. Through the internet we find friends and connect with family

When content creators and people post to talk, connect, to share their interests instead of degrading others. When filters stop being the norm, when bullying and hate speech are eliminated. When we feel safe posting and being online

Content is followed by more positive and encouraging comments, meaningful conversations and debates, people challenging their negative thoughts, kindness, more monitoring and more reporting on hateful comments

More privacy, fewer internet trolls, less widespread hate speech and racism, linking the digital world with physical world, but not being reliant on the digital world for interactions in the real world

I see an online world which is more democratised, where media amplifies less of corporate sponsors and more of the informed popular majority

What does it all mean?

There is much we can learn from this data and evidence, including directly from the voices of children. Clearly children in Australia are ever-present in digital environments. Every day they use the internet to learn, to play, and to access information crucial to their physical and mental health. The general sense from young people is that whether it is social media, news media, or videogames, these various aspects of the online world are having a positive influence on their lives.

Risks of course remain, be it from bullying, contact with strangers, or exposure to harmful content. On the positive side, children generally know how to respond to these risks and indeed do so, say by using the tools that platforms provide or speaking with trusted adults in their lives.

However, there is clearly a gap between the amount of risk perceived by parents versus the actual risk faced by children, as well as a percentage of children and parents lacking the tools to respond to online adversity. Hotbed issues like mobile phone bans are divisive amongst young people, and data on the use of generative AI at school shows that children are often some of the earliest adopters of new technologies.

All told, children in Australia desire a much more positive online world than the one that currently exists, and recognise that some kind of significant change needs to take place. Be it their online safety or the privacy implications of the collection of their data, the evidence is telling us that these are issues which need to be addressed.

> **" All told, children in Australia desire a much more positive online world than the one that currently exists, and recognise that some kind of significant change needs to take place.. "**

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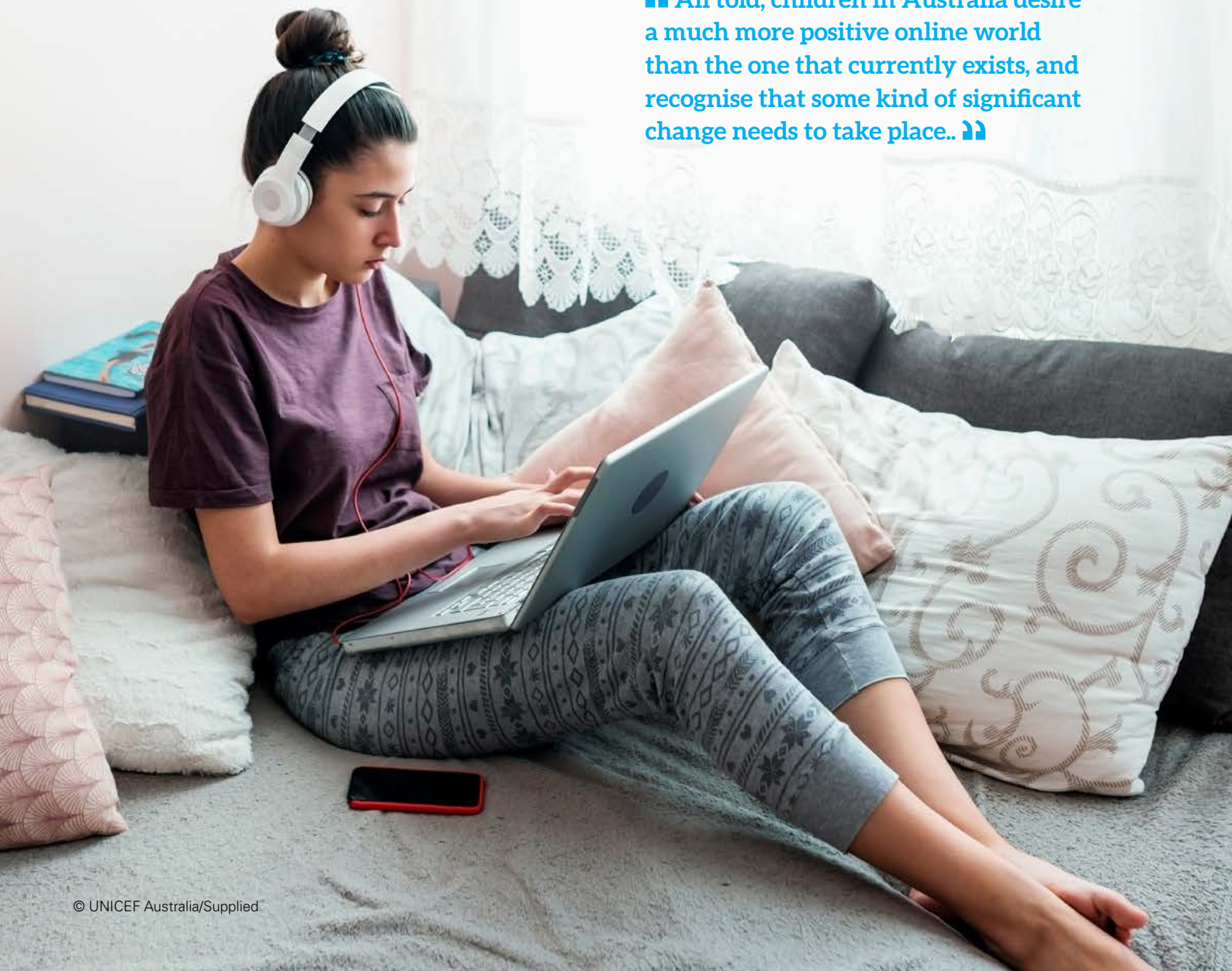
In doing so, we should be guided by some key concepts which will help us realise a better online world for children.

1

The first is shifting our conception of how positive or negative the online world really is for children. While we have canvassed several online risks to children in this paper, the overwhelming consensus from children themselves is that the online world makes a net-positive contribution to their lives. Our approach to reshaping the online world should mirror this – we can be alert to dangers without being disproportionately alarmed, and we can reduce risk while ensuring that the benefits of digital participation are maintained.

2

Second is the notion that we cannot simply band-aid our way to a better digital environment for children by treating problems after the fact. Whether it is children's data and privacy or their online safety, we need to respond at the source in the very design of digital environments and the regulations that shape and govern them. Schools of thought using the language of safety-by-design and privacy-by-design go to the heart of this – only an approach to reshaping the online world which seeks to fundamentally change its very makeup, will result in the level of change needed to truly make an impact for children.

3

Third is developing a more sophisticated understanding of what the healthy development and wellbeing of children means in the digital age. We have guidance from the United Nations on child wellbeing in the broad sense, meaning when their basic material, physical, educational, and emotional needs are met, as well as their needs for affection and safety.[23] But our understanding of wellbeing in digital environments is less understood. UNICEF is endeavouring to address this gap through our global Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children project, which has created a preliminary framework for child wellbeing in the digital age. Refining our understanding in this area is important, because ultimately we want the changes we make to the online world to improve children's wellbeing, and need to ensure the decisions we take are actually achieving their desired intent.

4

Finally, underlying all of our endeavours are children's rights, both as legal entitlements that need to be upheld, and as a principled approach for working to improve their lives. There is an emerging but well-established understanding of how children's rights can be upheld in the digital age, including most notably through the Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment 25.[24] The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most ratified treaty in the world and its forward-looking principles remain deeply relevant today. Particularly pertinent in this space is a child's right to participation[25] - to having their voice heard. Perhaps nowhere is this more relevant than in digital policy. Children know the online world better than anyone, and that innate sense for how it works is invaluable if we are designing new solutions to the challenges we face.

What needs to change?

UNICEF's global research tells us that Australia is undoubtedly a world-leader when it comes to many aspects of providing a safe online world for children. But in this rapidly evolving digital environment, responsive innovation and change is constantly needed to stay ahead of the game.

UNICEF Australia envisions an online world which minimises risks and harms to children's safety and wellbeing, at the same time as providing all the positive benefits that allow children to thrive in an increasingly digital world. We believe we can make Australia the best place in the world for children to go online through change in three key areas:

Online Safety

This means getting more safety tools into the hands of more children and parents, but also changing platforms and strengthening our laws to make sure they provide the highest level of protection for children possible, without unduly limiting their rights.

Data & Privacy

Data is the currency of the online world, and children's data is collected, traded and sold at unprecedented scales. We need new laws which provide better protection of children's data, so it is only collected and used in a way which is in their best interests.
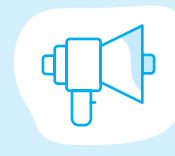
Children's Voices

Children have an innate sense for the online world - we all know a parent who has sought digital help from a child. We can replicate that approach in our digital reform. Put simply, given children know the online world better than anyone, they're the best people to ask for advice about what will actually work. Routinely capturing their advice will help us design better solutions.

Thankfully, there is tremendous opportunity and momentum for change in Australia at the moment. From the government-led reforms to our Online Safety Act, to the modernisation of our privacy laws, and backed by an active and engaged private sector across all of this work, the chance to improve the online world for every Australian child is one that cannot be missed. UNICEF Australia is ready to work with all involved to make it happen.

How you can help

We want to make Australia the best place in the world for children to go online and you can help us on this journey in **three simple ways:**

1 Follow

FOLLOW us across our social media channels to stay updated about our work to improve the online world for Aussie kids

2 Learn

LEARN more about how you can keep yourself or your child safe online at unicef.org.au/parents/online-safety

3 Share

SHARE with your networks tips and information from our website on how to keep children safe online to help spread the message.

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