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| Contribution by SWGfL | |
| ADVANCING TECHNICAL STANDARDS FOR PARENTAL CONTROL INTEROPERABILITY (PARCEP) | |
| **Purpose**  This contribution outlines progress since the 2024 CWG COP meeting in the field of child online protection, with a particular focus on the development of a proposed global interoperability standard for parental controls: the Parental Control Enforcement Protocol (PARCEP).  **Action required**  The Council Working Group on child online protection is invited to **note** this contribution.  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  **References**   * IETF Proceedings 122 – <https://datatracker.ietf.org/meeting/122/proceedings> * IETF Proceedings 123 – <https://datatracker.ietf.org/meeting/123/proceedings> * IGF 2025 (main site) – <https://www.igf2025.no/> * IGF 2025 Workshop 241: *Balancing Acts 2.0: Can Encryption and Safety Co-Exist?* – <https://intgovforum.org/en/content/igf-2025-ws-241-balancing-acts-20-can-encryption-and-safety-co-exist> * IGF 2025 Schedule – <https://www.igf2025.no/igf2025_schedulle.html> * PARCEP concept note (IAB/W3C Workshop on Age-Based Restrictions, August 2025) – <https://www.iab.org/activities/workshops/age-based-content-restrictions/> * CWG-COP-22 materials – <https://www.itu.int/en/council/cwg/cop/Pages/default.aspx> * ITU-T Study Group 17 (Cybersecurity, including Special Correspondence Group on COP) – <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/studygroups/2022-2024/17/Pages/default.aspx> | |

**Background:**

In recent years, SWGfL has made several contributions to this Council on the challenges of safeguarding children in increasingly encrypted digital environments. At the 2024 CWG-COP, we highlighted the complex relationship between end to end encryption and the ability of child protection organisations and law enforcement to detect harm. We argued that while encryption strengthens privacy, it also diminishes the effectiveness of existing parental controls, filtering tools, and reporting mechanisms. This was followed by the Council’s decision to establish the Special Correspondence Group on Child Online Protection (CG-COP) under ITU-T Study Group 17, with a mandate to identify gaps in standards and propose actionable solutions.

The work of the CG-COP, alongside our continued engagement at the IETF and IGF, has informed the latest stage of thinking: the proposal of a new interoperability protocol for parental controls, PARCEP (**PAR**ental **C**ontrols n**E**tworking **P**rotocol). This is a direct response to the growing fragmentation in parental control systems, which has been further exacerbated by the spread of encryption, limiting the scope for existing safeguards to operate effectively. PARCEP represents a constructive solution, strengthening family-based protections without undermining the core principles of privacy and secure communications.

**Why Now: Encryption and Fragmentation:**

End to end encryption is increasingly embedded across consumer messaging, storage and platform services. While essential for privacy and security, it reduces the feasibility of legacy safeguards that relied on platform side visibility or network interception. In parallel, families now manage a larger mix of devices and services than ever before. Together, encryption and fragmentation make it harder to implement consistent household rules, leaving gaps that children can unintentionally or deliberately exploit. In many countries this difficulty is contributing to the growth of smartphone free childhood movements, where the perceived complexity of managing devices drives some parents and schools towards prohibition or removal rather than effective management. This trend underlines that solutions must be made simpler and more accessible if parents are to be empowered rather than overwhelmed.

PARCEP addresses this gap by enabling user side, standards based coordination between parental controls on devices and services, without weakening encryption or creating backdoors, so that protections remain effective in modern, privacy preserving environments.

**Problem Statement:**

Today’s families often rely on multiple, non-interoperable parental control systems, including Apple’s Family Sharing, Google’s Family Link, and Microsoft’s Family Safety. These tools are essential for managing screen time, content access, and healthy digital use. Yet, because they are proprietary and fragmented, there is no standard way for parents to manage their children’s online experiences across the multi device households that are now the norm. This fragmentation reduces parental visibility, forces families to navigate multiple inconsistent systems, and increases the likelihood of gaps that can expose children to harm. For many families, especially those with lower digital literacy, this represents an almost insurmountable challenge.

**Technical Proposal: What PARCEP Is and What It Does**

PARCEP is a proposed interoperability protocol that enables coordination between different parental control tools and platforms. Modelled on successful IETF efforts like MIMI (messaging interoperability) and MLS (secure group messaging), it aims to provide the foundational technical standard for cross vendor family device management. Key features include:

1. **Shared Data Model:** A vendor agnostic schema for screen time settings, application restrictions, content filters, age ratings, and purchase permissions.

2. **Policy Synchronisation**: A standard protocol for issuing, updating, and revoking family control rules across all compliant devices and apps.

3. **Role Delegation**: Support for multi household families, enabling roles and permissions for parents, carers, and guardians.

4. **Privacy and Security by Design**: Built in safeguards for data minimisation, consent, and protection of children’s personal information.

5. **Transparency and Auditability**: Interfaces for guardians to review usage data, override requests, and receive alerts, with visible signals on children’s devices when restrictions apply.

**Scope and Non-Goals:**

PARCEP defines how parental control systems interoperate; it does not prescribe a single user interface or business model. It explicitly does not require content scanning, weakening of encryption, or any form of universal backdoor. It does not create a centralised database of children’s data. The standard is designed for data minimisation, consent-based operation and vendor autonomy. Content taxonomies, rating schemes and filtering lists remain vendor or jurisdiction specific; PARCEP supplies the “plumbing” that allows compliant systems to express and enforce policies consistently across devices and services.

**Impact:**

**Practical Benefits for Families:**

From a parent’s perspective, the standard would enable a much more coherent and straightforward experience. Instead of having to configure different rules on every device or app their child uses, families would be able to set clear expectations once and have them applied consistently across all compliant systems. For example, a rule that no social media should be accessible after 9 p.m. would automatically apply across a child’s phone, tablet, laptop, and games console. Screen time limits, purchase permissions, or content restrictions would no longer require multiple dashboards with conflicting terminology, but would operate in harmony regardless of platform. Parents and carers would also be able to share management roles across households, ensuring continuity when children split time between parents, guardians, or extended family. By simplifying management, PARCEP empowers parents to spend less time navigating settings and more time supporting their child’s safe and positive engagement with technology.

**Illustrative scenario:**

Emma sets weeknight “homework hours” from 18:00 to 20:00 with messaging and social media paused, educational apps allowed, and YouTube permitted for 30 minutes total. Through PARCEP, that single rule is enforced across her son’s iPhone, school Chromebook and games console. On alternate weekends, the co-parent can grant a one off extension from their own dashboard; the child’s devices display a clear on screen reason when an app is blocked (“Paused during homework hours”) and the same usage log appears in both households.

**Benefits for Device and Service Providers:**

For device manufacturers and service providers, PARCEP reduces the pressure to build fully comprehensive parental control suites in isolation. Instead, vendors can integrate their existing tools with the shared protocol, ensuring compatibility and enhancing user satisfaction without sacrificing their unique user experience. This interoperability strengthens trust with families, making it more likely that parents will recommend or remain loyal to a device or service that aligns with their wider household controls. Trust is particularly important as parents seek consistent, ubiquitous solutions across multi-vendor platforms.

Public debates in many countries around smartphone free childhood movements, already noted earlier in this document, further highlight the difficulty parents face in managing access and screen time, and reinforce the need for simpler, more effective parental empowerment. By making it easier for parents to manage technology confidently, PARCEP delivers a direct advantage to families and an indirect but significant advantage to device and service providers whose offerings are seen as safe, reliable and family friendly. It also positions providers ahead of regulatory trends that increasingly emphasise consistency, transparency, and child protection.

By adopting PARCEP, vendors demonstrate leadership in online safety, contribute to levelling the playing field across the industry, and benefit from reduced reputational risk when safeguarding expectations are met through common standards. Early adopters can differentiate on trust, reduce support burden from complex multi device households, and minimise churn by aligning with families’ real world needs.

PARCEP does not replace existing tools but acts as a neutral bridge that allows them to work together. This ensures that protections are consistent regardless of device or platform, that parents can manage rules more easily, and that vendors can maintain their own user experiences while aligning with a shared interoperability framework.

**Recent Developments:**

PARCEP will be tabled during the October 2025 IAB/W3C Workshop on Age Based Content Restrictions and, in preparation for this, is already moving into wider technical engagement with interested parties. The next stage of work after the IAB/W3C workshop will include opportunities to begin socialising the proposal with the standards community at forthcoming IETF meetings, beginning with initial discussions at the Montreal meeting in late 2025, with the intention of building towards formal consideration within the IETF standardisation process.

The authors of the PARCEP proposal envisage the likely next steps in the standardisation process to include presentation at the IETF 126 meeting in Vienna (July 2026) and a potential BoF (Birds of a Feather) session at the IETF 127 meeting in San Francisco (November 2026).

**Proposed Role for SG17 CG COP and CWG COP:**

SG17’s CG-COP is well positioned to steward the user and safety driven requirements for PARCEP while the detailed protocol work matures in the technical standards community. We propose that the CG-COP: (i) maintains an ITU COP requirements note for interoperable parental controls; (ii) establishes a liaison with the relevant IETF areas to exchange updates; (iii) convenes a joint workshop to surface implementer questions and regulatory considerations; and (iv) explores a conformance profile to support testable, vendor neutral interoperability in due course.

**Conclusion:**

SWGfL invites the CWG-COP to take note of PARCEP as the latest evolution in balancing encryption, privacy and child safety. The protocol offers a realistic pathway to strengthen protections for children online in privacy preserving environments, anchored in interoperability and trust. The ITU, and particularly the SG17 Special Correspondence Group, can play a pivotal role in ensuring alignment between policy goals and the emerging technical solution, helping parents everywhere to manage technology simply and confidently across multi-vendor ecosystems.

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