



## UNDERSTANDING THE ONLINE SERVICES THAT CHILDREN AND YOUTH USE TO BE SAFE

Through the Internet children and young people can realize many of their rights, including their rights to express themselves, access information, and peacefully associate. The right to be protected from all forms of violence, can be both hindered and enhanced online. The following proposal is centred around *understanding how the online world is currently being used by children and youth to be safer, including accessing helplines, support systems, and protection services.*

It is important to keep in mind that:

### **Children are increasingly accessing the Internet at younger ages, and spending more time online.**

This has been particularly affected with COVID-19, which has increased children's time spent online, and affected in-person protection services<sup>1</sup>. Many of children's offline interactions were moved to online<sup>2</sup>, including accessing helplines and support systems on violence prevention, reporting, and mental health.

### **Online peer networks are helping address violence against children and youth, complementing professional driven services.**

During 2020 the OSRSGVAC conducted a mapping exercise to better understand how children were taking forward participation, in order to make recommendations to Member States to channel children's actions into decision making. Mapping findings revealed the critical role that peer networks play in regard to preventing and reporting violence. Evidence showed that: children are instrumental in connecting other children with reporting services and protection resources, and that children are being able to access reporting means and referrals largely through online means. Additionally, children and young people are taking

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-causes-disruptions-child-protection-services-more-100-countries-unicef>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.unicef.org/media/67396/file/COVID-19%20and%20Its%20Implications%20for%20Protecting%20Children%20Online.pdf>

the lead to fill in the gaps of lack of resources and solutions in staying safe. A median of 83 per cent of young people aged 15–24 in 21 countries believe it is better to address mental health issues by sharing experiences with other people and seeking support than by going it alone. Creation of online protection resources led by young people, particularly in grassroots spaces have emerged to provide peer-to-peer support.

### **Contact to helplines is increasing, and services are expanding support to online channels.**

Evidence is showing how the number of contacts to child helplines seems to have drastically increased since the beginning of the pandemic<sup>3</sup>. Child Help International’s latest report “Voices during the COVID-19 pandemic” revealed that during 2020, helplines members received 25% more contacts in 2020 as compared to 2019. The report also evidenced that violence and mental health continue to be the main reason for contact, but access to services emerged as a new trend in 2020. Child Helpline International member organizations also had to extend online support times, and recruit more digital volunteers, given the increase of online channels, as result of protection services being disrupted in over 100 countries according to a UNICEF survey<sup>4</sup>.

### **Children and youth are taking actions to address violence, and mental health: there’s a need to reinforce connection to services.**

In May 200, the SRSG held an interactive dialogue with children taking forward actions around mental health (active on advocacy and peer-to-peer support). The need for accessing services and being able to connect with professional support in a timely manner, were put forward by children. As highlighted in the report published by UNICEF, there is a significant gap between adolescents and access to mental health professionals. In response to this, many young leaders and innovators have created youth-led digital initiatives and taken part in online volunteering to meet this gap. Additionally, Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space, which documented lived experiences of 500 youth in civic space worldwide, found that threats experienced in online spaces and in a young person’s physical environment are often closely related and that young people have highlighted the inefficiency of existing mechanisms to report online harassment and abuse, and the need to understand and improve these systems.

### **Increasing multi-sectoral partnerships around online protection**

Recognizing that protecting children and young people against all forms of violence is a shared responsibility, including the private sector’s, child protection entities are increasingly partnering with private sector companies to combine efforts to better protect children online. The GPEVAC<sup>5</sup> recently partnered with Microsoft, Facebook, Google, Twitter, Roblox, to promote safe internet use for children isolated at home and a higher risk of online harms. Multiple campaigns are looking to make the online world safer, but there’s **limited information around how children and young people are being able to access safety through online means.**

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<sup>3</sup><https://data.unicef.org/resources/violence-against-children-during-covid-19-assessing-and-understanding-change-in-use-of-helplines/>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-causes-disruptions-child-protection-services-more-100-countries-unicef>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/2020%20Annual%20Report%20%283%29.pdf>

## WHAT DO WE WANT TO DO?

Identify and disseminate means through which children (under 18) and young people (under 25) are using the Internet *'to be safer'*, by helping prevent, protect, and respond to violence, for themselves or for their peers. This includes, using online channels to contact helplines, access protection services, creating peer-to-peer support systems and networks, and coming up with innovative solutions for reporting different forms of violence.

Following, the project aims to have a better understanding of these systems, including good practices, lessons learned, and challenges.

## WHY DO WE NEED TO DO THIS?

Because protecting children and young people is a shared responsibility, and evidence is showing that **children and young people are increasingly turning to the online world to access safety and protection** - including helplines, support networks, and resources - yet there's a need to make that information widely available to child protection entities, and to better understand how these systems work to make effective recommendations for implementing them.

## HOW DO WE WANT TO DO THIS?

### Phase 1

- Convene a group of relevant stakeholders (UN agencies, CSOs, and children and young people themselves) to outline a strategy for convening the ICT industry to collaborate during the mapping stage (many of these referrals and resources are active through social networks).
- Put together a permanent group of child and youth advisors for the different stages of the project.
- Invite the ICT industry to internally map inside their platforms such protection referrals, helplines, resources, and make them available in a format that respects data privacy.
- Publish a digital map outlining all the available information and widely disseminate for children, CSOs, agencies, and any protection stakeholder to access the information.

### Phase 2

- POP will lead on analysing the available information to identify common ingredients within the information. Group members are invited to join this stage of the process according to their capacities.
- Publish an online report outlining findings, lessons learned, and recommendations for developing and making these systems available.

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