

How to Ensure Children Are Effective Digital Citizens Equipped to Engage Safely Online

For consideration to include in the Global Digital Compact

In the more than 30 years since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the United Nations General Assembly (1989), the implementation and advancement of children's rights through the Convention and its Optional Protocols have provided the foundation for improving the lives of millions of children globally.

Children, recognized as individual rights-holders, are guaranteed the right to special protections and safeguards from the duty-bearers in their communities.

While the Convention highlights the enduring international standards for ensuring the realization of the rights of every child, we recognize that with evolving digitalization and communication technologies the protocols to ensure the safety, well-being and empowerment of children must be updated/modernized. The Global Digital Compact is of great significance due to its goal to "outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all."

Children account for an estimated one-third of all Internet users, with millions more dependent on online systems and platforms that provide essential access for social and educational interactions. The COVID-19 pandemic further magnified the existing digital divide created by economic gaps and lack of access to digital technology and tools.

Noting that General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, adopted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in March 2021, presents the challenges, risks, opportunities, and recommendations for children to engage safely online, **ChildFund Alliance calls for the following commitments to be included in the Global Digital Compact:**

- Make explicit mention of "children" as a distinct group of human beings and rights-holders within society – so that children's specific needs are taken into account in the formulation of policies and legislation—both of which impact children in very specific and different ways than adults;
- Create a safe digital environment where children are able to acquire skills, learn, and share ideas with their peers and duty bearers through civic engagement and specific channels of participation designed for children and with children;
- Listen to and consider the broadest and most inclusive representation of children's voices, opinions and solutions, and meaningfully include children in the design, delivery and evaluation of legislation, policies, products and services that impact their safety and the realization of their rights in the digital environment;
- Provide all children from an early age with high quality online and offline digital literacy resources and education adapted to their age and diverse abilities, including in school curricula, parenting programs, early childhood development programs, and programs for out-of-school children. This is to help develop children's digital skills; facilitate their

- autonomous and safe use of digital tools including mitigating risk; support their development as active and responsible citizens in an increasingly digital society; and increase their own understanding of online safety, their rights, and the complaints mechanisms and support services available to them in case of violations of these rights;
- Provide parents, caregivers and educators with information and support to use digital
 tools so that they can better help their children safely and effectively navigate the
 Internet as well as understand and realize their rights while simultaneously limiting their
 exposure to harmful content;
- Increase the development of child rights-respecting parental control tools installed by default on devices and operating systems, while incorporating safety and privacy by design products into digital platforms;
- Support greater transparency from major digital platforms regarding their internal efforts
 to identify, prevent, and respond to online harm and violence that children may experience
 by using their services. This includes through the publication of annual reports conducted
 by independent third-party entities that outline how platforms identify and assess risks,
 and what their mitigation strategies are to address these risks and prevent their
 reemergence in the future; and
- Encourage creation and access to high-quality, reliable content, including information content while addressing manipulations of information (such as "fake news") and supporting greater transparency from major digital platforms with regard to their content selection, moderation and distribution methods, the data gathered, and its use.

Further, ChildFund Alliance urges for inclusion in the Global Digital Compact the following calls to stakeholders:

- We call on all governments, intergovernmental organizations, the United Nations, the private sector, International Non-Governmental Organizations and other relevant organizations to protect children's rights in the digital environment, and to make their safety and security in this environment a priority;
- We call on governments to provide each child with effective, affordable, easily accessible, meaningful, and reliable access to the Internet, essential digital tools, accessible and inclusive public and digital health services, online learning and virtual vocational training. These will help bridge digital divides, including gender and socio-economic digital divides, within and between countries, with particular attention paid to children in vulnerable situations, and encourage the healthy development of their cognitive and digital skills while avoiding over-exposure to screens at a young age;
- We call on governments to provide age-appropriate digital literacy and digital citizenship training, giving special attention to preventing and eradicating digital sex crimes against underage children;
- We call on governments to advocate for girls' digital education in the least-developed and conflict-affected countries to achieve digital education equity and gender equality;
- We call on governments to collaborate with private sector stakeholders, specifically technology companies and service providers, as well as civil society to develop mandatory codes for the online/digital space based on international best practices in order to prevent abuses and address gaps in the protection of children. Such codes should take into account children's rights and safety when products and internal policies are designed and implemented, or when updated and modified. They should also meaningfully include children in the creation and evaluation processes to help mitigate online harms, including

- technology-facilitated grooming, online sexual exploitation and abuse, exposure to ageinappropriate, harmful and untrustworthy content, as well as excessive use;
- We call on governments to foster relevant collaboration between law enforcement and the private sector, specifically technology companies and service providers. We call on them to proactively conduct child rights due diligence, expedite the identification of and the immediate and effective removal of child sexual abuse or cyber harassment material through transparent processes; immediately report identified materials to appropriate authorities; and address the ways in which uses of digital technologies may facilitate or impede the investigation and prosecution of crimes against children, while fully upholding international human rights law;
- We call on governments to provide free, inclusive, accessible, victim-centered and traumainformed support services to victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation and sexual
 abuse be it offline or online –, including physical and mental health, counseling, case
 management, legal and housing services. Further, governments should allocate adequate
 resources for young people to develop life skills and practical strategies to navigate their
 healing process and support self-advocacy;
- We call on governments to regularly consult with survivors of child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, including through the establishment of survivors' councils, and meaningfully consider survivors' experiences, ideas and solutions in the development and evaluation of relevant legislation, policies, products and services;
- We call on governments and the private sector, specifically technology companies and service providers, to commit to fight against any form of economic exploitation, including child labor – online and offline – and thereby to exercise the utmost vigilance regarding new and emerging forms of forced child labor in the digital environment;
- We call on governments and the private sector, specifically technology companies and service providers, to convene deliberations regarding the next version of the internet ("internet 2.0"). Specifically, we urge governments and the private sector to devise and implement clear rules, regulations and guardrails for the internet 2.0 whether that be the metaverse, virtual reality (VR), or a mix of these and/or other innovations. This is to ensure that protections are put in place proactively to reduce the risks of bias, digital violence and other forms of online abuse. In doing so, regulators and private industry would be tackling these risks proactively at this critical point in time when the next version of the internet is still in its developmental stage. If this does not happen, the world will most likely find itself in the same situation as it does with today's internet namely scrambling reactively for ways to protect human beings (especially women, girls and boys) from online violence;
- We call on governments, the private sector and other key stakeholders to protect
 children from online harm by safeguarding privacy and preventing and responding to
 sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as other forms of violence, including physical,
 mental and psychosocial violence, bullying and targeted hate speech;
- We call on governments, the private sector and other actors to employ a child rights and
 participatory approach to data collection, protection and management, as well as
 strengthening child-sensitive indicators and increasing the disaggregation of data by sex,
 gender identity, age, and disability;
- We call on governments to promote girls' access to digital tools and digital educational opportunities from an early age – to close the gender-related digital divide and combat gender-based prejudices that discourage and prevent them from accessing technology, studying ICT, or pursuing or exercising digital technology careers; and
- We call on governments and the private sector to address exploitative digital marketing practices that violate children's right to privacy.