



DISRUPTING HARM

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# DATA INSIGHT 9



# THE ROLE OF CAREGIVERS IN PREVENTING ONLINE RISKS AND HARMS FOR CHILDREN



## About the *Data Insights* series from *Disrupting Harm*

*Disrupting Harm* is a research project conceived and funded by Safe Online. The project is implemented by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF and generates national evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This publication is part of a series of thematic briefs that explores pressing issues emerging from the research and recommends ways for key entities and individuals to improve prevention and response.

So far, new evidence about online child sexual exploitation and abuse has been collected through *Disrupting Harm* in thirteen countries: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Viet Nam). Up to nine primary research activities were undertaken in each country including surveys and interviews with more than 13,000 children, as well as caregivers, and other professionals with child protection mandates. Thirteen country reports were published in 2022, presenting the consolidated findings of all activities conducted within each country, along with targeted recommendations developed together with national stakeholders. Country reports can be found [here](#).

Data collected by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF are used as the basis for the *Disrupting Harm* Data Insights series. Authorship is attributed to the organisation(s) that produced each brief. While the *Disrupting Harm* project is a close collaboration between ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the three organisations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

## Introduction

Children face a range of challenges as they negotiate an ever-changing technological landscape. While the internet provides children with numerous opportunities for learning and development, it can also give rise to risks that may lead to harm, including online sexual exploitation and abuse. While efforts by governments and industry to avoid or mitigate harm are crucial, children too must be equipped to recognise and respond to risky situations that occur in the digital environment. Given their important influence in children’s lives, adults – and especially caregivers – can be sources of knowledge and support. This requires adults to be present in children’s lives, to form positive and trusted relationships with them, and ideally to have some insight into their internet use and the possible online risks and harms they might encounter.

This brief describes how caregivers in 12 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia engage with their children in respect of their internet use and support their online safety. It draws on several research activities undertaken for the *Disrupting Harm* project. These include nationally representative household surveys<sup>1</sup> conducted with 11,912 children and their caregivers across the 12 countries, surveys with frontline workers who manage cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, interviews with government stakeholders, and conversations with young people who have been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse.

1. Between December 2020 and April 2021, nationally representative random samples of approximately 1,000 children aged 12–17 who use the internet were obtained from each of seven countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and six countries in Southeast Asia. Data from South Africa were not included in this brief due to differences in the survey tool that prevented comparative analysis.

### Defining online child sexual exploitation and abuse

Situations involving *digital, internet and communication technologies* at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.

## Children’s perspectives on caregivers’ roles in keeping them safe online

Across the countries surveyed for the *Disrupting Harm* project, between 86 % and 100 % of children aged 12–17 years who use the internet reported that they did so from home. This means that caregivers have many opportunities to engage with children in respect of their internet use and to support their online safety in positive ways.

On average across the countries, 40% of children believed that their caregivers were the people most responsible for keeping them safe online. However, *as many as 39% of children on average believed that they themselves were the ones primarily responsible for staying safe online* (see Figure 1).

There are important variations between countries. For instance, 60% of children in Ethiopia believed that they themselves were most responsible for their online safety, while only 19% believed that caregivers were most responsible. The reverse pattern was observed in some other countries. In Thailand, for example, only 22% of children said that they were most responsible for their online safety, compared with 52% of children who said that their caregivers were most responsible. Regardless of such variations, children consistently identified caregivers as people with high levels of responsibility for keeping them safe online.

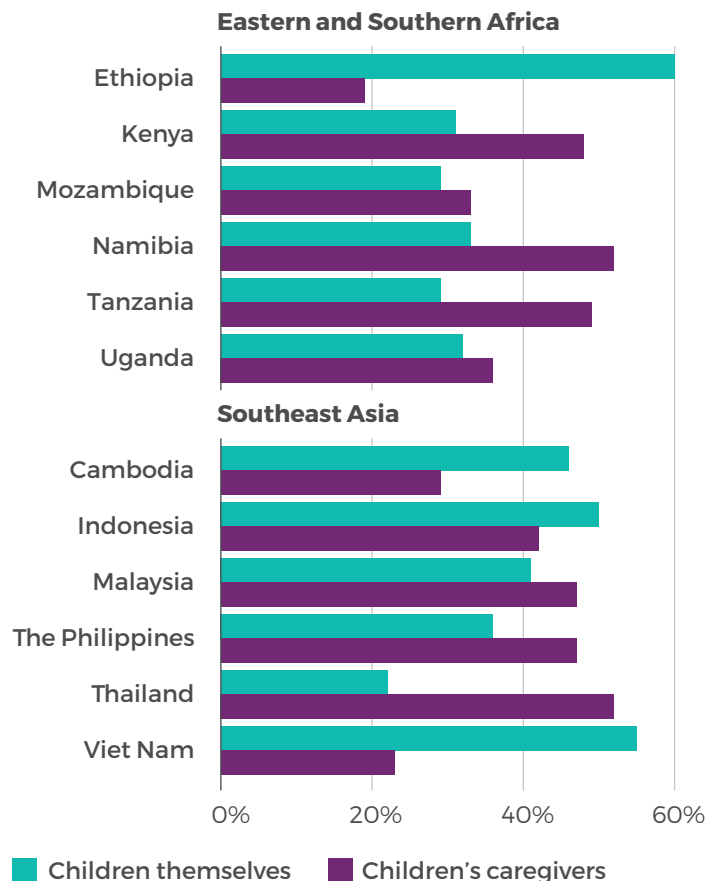
## Caregivers’ familiarity with the digital environment

Many caregivers feel ill-equipped to guide children’s internet use. Across the 12 countries included in this analysis, between 31% and 61% of caregivers felt that they knew less about the internet than their children. This was especially true for older caregivers: across the 12 countries surveyed, between 39% and 85% of caregivers aged 50 and above reported that they knew less about the internet than their children.

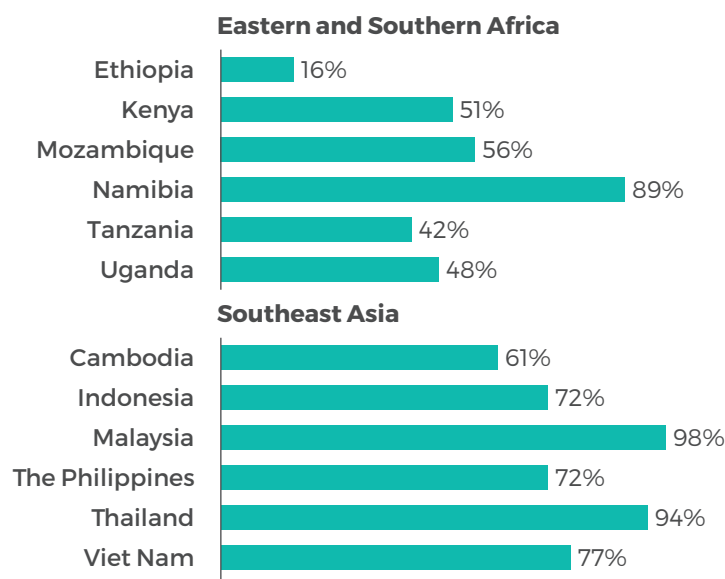
Caregivers’ knowledge about the internet differs substantially between countries, likely related to how frequently they go online. Only 16% of caregivers used the internet in Ethiopia, compared with 98% in Malaysia (see Figure 2). This could be one reason for why children in some countries feel that they are the most responsible for their own online safety, as they cannot solely rely on their caregivers.

How frequently caregivers use the internet is related to their age. Older caregivers were much less likely to use the internet than younger caregivers. On average across the 12 countries, 49% of caregivers *below the age of 40* used the internet every month. Among caregivers *aged 50 and above*, only 12% used the internet every month.

**Figure 1:** Who is most responsible for children’s online safety, according to children and their caregivers



**Figure 2:** Proportion of caregivers who also use the internet



Caregivers' lack of familiarity with the online environment is also reflected in their level of digital safety skills (see Table 1). Again, there are considerable differences across countries.

Gender differences were not consistently observed for caregivers' digital skills, but age differences were substantial. For example, on average across the 12 countries, 61% of caregivers aged 29 or below said that they knew how to change privacy settings, but only 38% of those aged 50 and above knew how to do so. Similarly, 55% of caregivers aged 29 or below said that they knew how to report harmful content on social media, compared with 36% of those aged 50 and above.

## Where do caregivers learn about online risks and harms?

Caregivers rely on various sources of information to learn about children's online safety (see Table 2). The most common sources of information for caregivers included their family or friends and their child's school. Most caregivers have received information about children's online safety at some point: on average, only 14% of caregivers said that they had not received any such information. In the African countries, radio was a frequent source of information for parents, while in most of the Southeast Asian countries social media was more common. Younger caregivers were slightly more likely to receive information from social media.

**Table 1: Digital safety skills among caregivers of internet-using children aged 12-17**

	Eastern and Southern Africa						Southeast Asia					
	Ethiopia	Kenya	Mozambique	Namibia	Tanzania	Uganda	Cambodia	Indonesia	Malaysia	The Philippines	Thailand	Viet Nam
Know how to change privacy settings	53%	64%	47%	75%	50%	51%	20%	38%	68%	42%	71%	57%
Know how to report harmful content on social media	45%	42%	44%	68%	24%	31%	34%	32%	66%	40%	71%	51%
Know how to check if a website can be trusted	45%	30%	44%	65%	39%	24%	18%	29%	59%	32%	64%	46%

**Table 2: Caregivers' most common sources of information about their children's online safety**

Source of online safety information	Eastern and Southern Africa						Southeast Asia					
	Ethiopia	Kenya	Mozambique	Namibia	Tanzania	Uganda	Cambodia	Indonesia	Malaysia	The Philippines	Thailand	Viet Nam
Family or friends	23%	31%	15%	31%	20%	28%	35%	65%	62%	58%	44%	65%
Child's school	41%	38%	31%	30%	29%	22%	35%	45%	41%	38%	47%	70%
Television	32%	35%	42%	33%	38%	19%	29%	32%	37%	23%	31%	40%
Social media	6%	15%	15%	16%	11%	17%	32%	16%	48%	22%	43%	19%
Radio	21%	26%	31%	32%	54%	32%	6%	0%	15%	9%	1%	2%

**Governments, educators and other experts can leverage the channels listed in Table 2 to share information about how caregivers can talk to children about online safety and other related life skills.**

Caregivers were also asked where they would *prefer* to receive information about keeping their child safe online. For the most part, they chose the same channels through which they already receive this information. One exception is in Eastern and Southern Africa, where 32% of caregivers would prefer to receive information from children’s schools; only 19% do so currently.

**Caregivers’ abilities and strategies to support their children’s internet use and online safety**

Keeping up with children’s digital lives can help caregivers learn about the potential risks they and their children may face online.

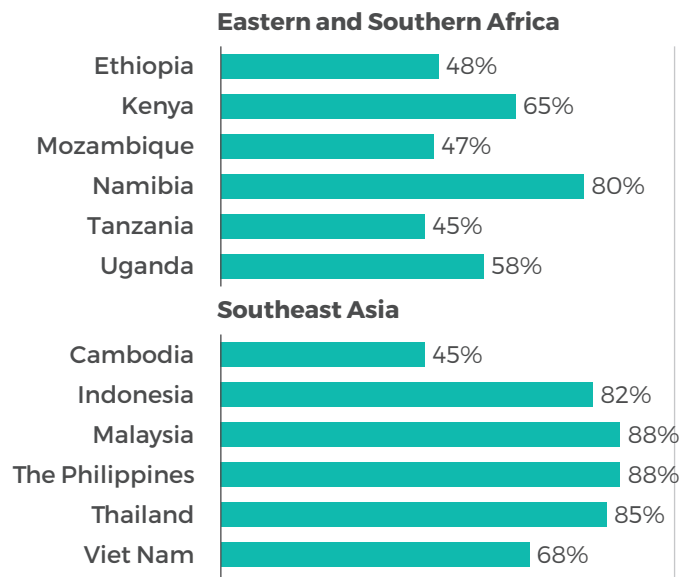
Caregivers’ responsibilities to engage in open communication with children about their online experiences, and to guide children’s internet use, were evident in conversations with young survivors of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. One survivor in Namibia said: “I think parents should have more open-mindedness and sometimes even if it’s not something one wants to hear, try and talk to the children more often to know what they are doing. In that way they can advise their children that this is safe, or this is not safe but in such a way that they don’t feel attacked or criticised or so, I think yeah, that’s it.”



Except for Namibia and Cambodia, caregivers in the countries in Eastern and Southern Africa were generally less likely to engage in shared online activities with their children, compared with caregivers in the countries in Southeast Asia. This could be because caregivers in the countries in Eastern and Southern Africa are less likely to be internet users, except in Namibia (see Figure 2). Not using the internet as much might also close off a potential space for caregivers to connect with their children and build trust while doing activities together in the online environment.

In general, our data show that in countries where caregivers use the internet less frequently, they are also less likely to suggest ways for their child to use the internet safely.

**Figure 3: Internet-using children aged 12-17 who say their caregivers suggest ways to use the internet safely**



Lack of engagement with children in respect of their online lives may in part affect how caregivers respond to online risks and harms. Between 9% (in Tanzania, Namibia, Thailand and Indonesia) and 43% (in Mozambique) of caregivers said that they could not help ‘much’ or ‘at all’ if their child was bothered by something online. This feeling of not being able to support children with issues that happen online was more common in the countries in Eastern and Southern Africa than in Southeast Asia, but with no major differences by caregiver’s age.

To protect children from online risks, caregivers may react in various ways. While few caregivers (16%) said that they would contact a helpline if their child was bothered by something online, 55% indicated that they would talk to their child about the incident. Yet, when faced with constant messaging that greater access to the internet increases the risk of harm, caregivers might instinctively react by restricting their children's internet use to protect them. On average, one third of caregivers said that they would restrict their child's access if the child was bothered by something online.


Several young survivors interviewed feared such restrictions. As one survivor from Namibia recounted: "I am scared that they will probably judge me, scold me and maybe they will give me some punishment like no watching TV or take my phone away, so that's why I am scared to be open with them." While a restrictive approach might reduce children's exposure to online risks in the short term, it can also reduce their digital skills and familiarity with the online environment in the long term.

Restricting access as a form of punishment for children who encounter online risks or harm might make them reluctant to disclose problems and seek out caregivers as a source of help and support. Such an approach can also limit children's opportunities to build digital skills and learn to overcome adversity.

## Conclusions

Caregivers can be an important source of support and help protect children from online risks and harms, including online sexual exploitation and abuse. However, *Disrupting Harm* research shows that caregivers themselves could benefit from further support and empowerment to be able to support their children. Guidance and training on how to navigate risky situations (both online and in person), how to talk to children about sex and sexuality, and how to positively engage with children's internet use could be incorporated into the health and parenting programmes that exist in many countries.

Talking to children about their online experiences and providing an open and supportive home environment can help children develop critical skills to navigate risks, both online and in person. It can also help build the trust needed to ensure children feel comfortable disclosing negative experiences without fear of judgement or reprisals. This is something caregivers can do even if they do not know much about the internet, as long as they build an open and trusting relationship with their child.



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## Recommended actions

### 1. Provide basic online safety education to caregivers and teach them how to support children's internet use.

A basic grasp of digital safety skills may help caregivers support their child's internet use more effectively. Governments and civil society actors should help caregivers become more familiar with the platforms their children are using and help them build confidence in their digital skills, as a pathway for engaging more actively and supportively with children. Targeted support should be offered to older caregivers and caregivers living in rural areas, who appear to be somewhat less familiar with the digital environment. When parenting in a digital age, it is important that caregivers are aware of the possible risks, as well as the benefits, of children being online.

### 2. Use existing parenting programmes to help caregivers build positive and trusted relationships with their children.

Caregivers who are not internet users or who go online less frequently than their children might worry that they do not have enough knowledge to guide them. However, this should not deter them from engaging in conversations with their children. In fact, protecting children from online harms requires many of the same life skills that are needed to protect children in general. Caregivers can also reinforce the message that it's not the child's fault if they are being abused online.


Children themselves believe in the importance of such guidance, as evidenced in conversations with survivors of online abuse. One young survivor from Malaysia said: "I just feel like people should talk about it more and like parents should like have these conversations with like, with their kids from like a younger age, like 'Don't ... when a guy starts doing, acting like this to you, it's not because they are being nice to you, it's not because they care. It's because they are trying to take advantage of you', and things like that."



### 3. Teach children to recognise inappropriate behaviour, both online and in person.

While the burden of staying safe from abuse should never rest solely on children's shoulders, they need to be equipped to recognise inappropriate behaviour by others, including when those close to them are exercising undue influence, and how to seek help. Most caregivers have the ability to teach children these skills, regardless of their own digital skills.

When children do not learn about sex and sexuality from trusted adults, offenders can use this lack of knowledge to their advantage. A lack of open and ongoing conversations about sex and sexuality means that when children seek help in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse, they might face significant barriers to talking about or disclosing their potentially traumatic experiences.<sup>2</sup>



Fostering an environment in which both caregivers and children can engage in sensitive conversations requires challenging some of the taboos that can make it difficult to have discussions about sex and sexuality due to the caregivers' own embarrassment or discomfort.

As one young survivor from Namibia said: "I tried talking to my mom about sex, she told me she is not having that conversation with me."

Governments and civil society organisations can support caregivers by providing age-appropriate and culturally relevant comprehensive sexuality education that is aligned with the international technical guidance<sup>3</sup> on sexuality education and centred on empowerment, critical thinking and the promotion of gender-equitable norms and power relations. This can encourage open dialogue about healthy relationships, both online and in person, and help children recognise the warning signs of predatory or harmful behaviours.

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2. ECPAT International and UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti. (2022). [Children's Disclosures of Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#). *Disrupting Harm Data Insight 2*. Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

3. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, World Health Organisation. (2018). [International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An evidence-informed approach](#). UNESCO, Paris.

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