



Children's experiences and language

Learning brief | December 2024

Introduction

Importance of understanding children’s experiences

To create safer online environments, it is crucial to consider the lived experiences of children. Their unique developmental, social, and emotional needs shape how they interact with digital spaces and perceive online risks. Children’s insights reveal nuanced patterns of behavior—such as how they balance risks with opportunities, or how they deploy protective strategies like blocking, avoidance, and even humor to navigate harmful interactions.

By listening to children’s voices, we can uncover gaps in existing safety measures and identify practical, child-centered solutions. This approach not only highlights the evolving nature of online harms, such as the transition from online to offline violence, but also ensures that safety tools and resources address the specific needs of marginalized groups, including children with intellectual disabilities. Understanding their experiences offers a pathway to designing interventions that are inclusive, accessible, and effective.

This learning brief draws on the innovative research conducted by four of the [Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund](#) projects seen below.



Cross-cultural, qualitative, child-centered data to inform grooming prevention and response was gathered from **604 children aged 8-18 across seven countries (Australia, Cambodia, Colombia, Finland, Kenya, Philippines, and South Africa)** in both urban and rural settings, representing high-, middle-, and low-income contexts.



A study on online sexual exploitation and abuse of children and young adults with intellectual disabilities **in Kenya collected qualitative data from 88 children (aged 14-22 with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities), 48 parents or caregivers, 10 experts,** and various government and community stakeholders. Conducted in schools and community settings in Nairobi and Kiambu counties, the research focused on urban and peri-urban areas with higher connectivity.



A cross-regional study on peer-to-peer sexual violence online, social norms, and youth-led prevention recommendations involved **147 young people aged 13-18 from Albania, Canada, and Kenya.**



The DRAGON project, Developing Resistance Against Grooming Online: Stories Strengthened Safeguards by Swansea University, examines **interactional dynamics and child communicative behaviors during online grooming.** Its innovative approach combines linguistic analysis of grooming chat logs with insights from children, lived experience experts and child safeguarding practitioners.



Key findings

Patterns of online activities

Children frequently interact with unknown individuals online, with 66% of participants in one study reporting daily interactions with strangers, primarily through social media and gaming platforms. These interactions are often driven by a desire for friendship and the opportunity to expand their social networks. In middle-income countries, children are further motivated by the potential financial benefits of online engagement (*Save the Children*).

Despite the associated risks, children emphasize that engaging with unknown individuals online can be enjoyable and beneficial, particularly for those who experience loneliness or struggle to form face-to-face friendships. They want adults to understand and respect this dynamic as a normal part of their digital lives (*Save the Children*).

This holds particularly true for children with intellectual disabilities, as the internet often offers a unique, judgment-free space where they can explore and express themselves without the stigma, pity, or judgment they often encounter offline. Social networking fills a critical gap for these children, who rarely go out unsupervised. As one counselor observed, “These children feel that the internet presents a safe space for them where they can freely do what they want to do without judgment” (*ZanaAfrica*).

The studies also uncovered two noteworthy trends: the prevalence of peer-to-peer online violence and the connections between online interactions and offline harm, explained below.



Peer-to-peer violence

Peer-to-peer violence is a significant concern in online spaces. Among surveyed youth, 23% reported experiences of online sexual violence perpetrated by peers (*Royal Roads*). These incidents frequently involve receiving unsolicited sexual or nude images, inappropriate comments, or revenge porn, especially after the end of romantic relationships. In Kenya, youth noted that “young lovers” often engage in online violence as a form of retaliation, with tactics such as blackmail and harassment. Alarmingly, half of respondents believe that peer-on-peer sexual violence (POSV) is normalized and accepted among young people (*Royal Roads*).



Online-offline pathway of violence

The risks of online interactions often extend offline, creating an online-offline pathway of violence. Online abuse can escalate into physical fights at school or lead to sexual abuse following manipulation initiated online (*Royal Roads*). For example, respondents described cases where girls were contacted and groomed online, later leading to sexual abuse in person. A notable case in Kenya highlights the compounded vulnerabilities of children with intellectual disabilities: a girl was groomed through WhatsApp, which led to in-person sexual abuse and pregnancy (*ZanaAfrica*). These cases demonstrate how digital interactions can have severe real-world consequences, emphasizing the need for integrated online and offline safety strategies.

Children’s balancing act

Children actively assess the risks and benefits of being online, making decisions based on their perceptions of safety and opportunities. Despite an awareness of potential harm, the internet’s benefits—emotional support, friendships, or new opportunities—often outweigh their concerns.

Children approach online interactions with caution, especially when they involve individuals they have not met face-to-face. In *Save the Children’s* study, 86% of children reported treating both "Known Unknowns" (acquaintances they recognize but haven’t met in person) and "Unknown Unknowns" (complete strangers) with a degree of suspicion. This is highlighted by a quote from a youth in Kenya, “*You must be discerning in who and how you trust.*” (*Royal Roads*).

However, the perception of risk varies across regions and groups. Children in middle-income countries are more likely to view strangers online as potential threats to their physical safety, while children in high-income countries are less likely to consider online connections a physical danger (*Save the Children*). This highlights how cultural and regional contexts influence children’s sense of safety in digital spaces. The broader sense of safety within a society may significantly influence how children perceive and navigate online interactions. Similarly, children with intellectual disabilities may struggle to recognize imminent harm given the challenges they face in interpreting social cues and online interactions (*ZanaAfrica*).

Children consciously balance the risks of engaging with unknown individuals online against the potential benefits, such as forming friendships or accessing opportunities. Importantly, being aware of these risks does not deter most children from interacting with strangers online.

Protective strategies and resistance

When navigating online spaces, children employ a range of strategies to assess the trustworthiness of unknown individuals and protect themselves from potential harm. These approaches reflect their resourcefulness and adaptability in managing digital risks.

Evaluating unknown connections

Children rely on relational verification and targeted investigation, explained below, to determine whether it is safe to interact with strangers online. These strategies help children gauge whether a stranger’s intentions are genuine or malicious (*Save the Children*).

Relational verification

Assessing whether a new contact has ties to trusted individuals, either in real life or within their online networks.

Targeted investigation

Asking probing questions, conducting informal background checks, or requesting tangible proof of identity.

Children also monitor new connections over time, carefully observing their behavior and interactions to identify red flags. Common warning signs include comments about a child’s appearance, inquiries about personal details like their location, school, or relationship status, and requests for sensitive information such as date of birth or identity documents (*Save the Children*).

Prioritizing easy and immediate protections

To stay safe in fast-paced digital environments, children gravitate toward protective measures that are simple to implement. Blocking unwanted contacts is the most commonly used tactic, with 82% of participants reporting it as an effective way to prevent further interaction (*Save the Children*). Older children generally find this strategy easier to use than younger ones. Ignoring inappropriate messages or avoiding certain online interactions also plays a crucial role in minimizing risk (*Save the Children, Royal Roads, ZanaAfrica, Swansea*).

Some children proactively reduce risks by lying or fabricating details about themselves to deter strangers. For example, a participant from Kenya shared that when a stranger on TikTok asked for their address, they provided a false location to avoid revealing their real whereabouts (*ZanaAfrica*).

Cultural differences in resistance

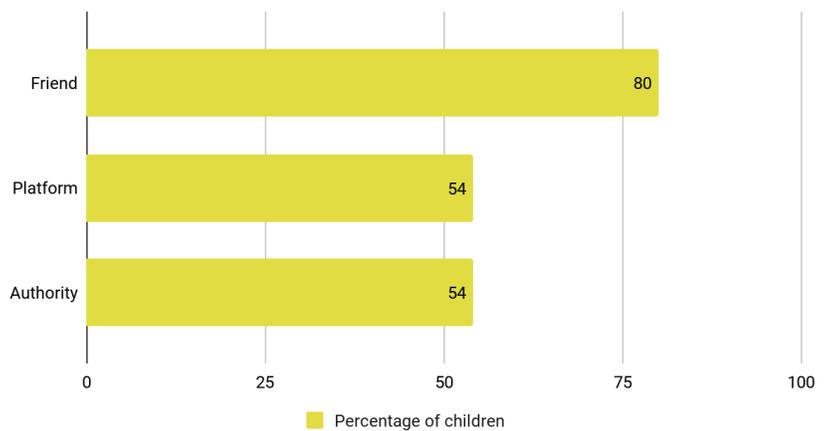
Children’s resistance strategies also vary across linguistic and cultural contexts. Swansea’s DRAGON project found that English-speaking children (from the UK) employ a fairly balanced mix of politeness and impoliteness-based strategies (explained below) when pushing back against groomers. In Spanish-speaking contexts (Colombia and Spain), children overwhelmingly rely on politeness-based strategies as they account for almost two-thirds of the Spanish language dataset.

Politeness-based resistance	Impoliteness-based resistance
<p>Children resisting groomers often seek to appease them by using affectionate language, humor (e.g., emojis, "haha"), and showing interest in their needs. They also use indirect strategies like hedging, apologizing, or self-deprecating to convey ambiguity and caution.</p>	<p>Children resisting groomers may respond abruptly to reject advances or show disinterest, push back by criticizing or distancing themselves (e.g., saying the relationship won't work), or create barriers by questioning requests or stating their intent to block the groomer. They may also express contempt or make direct threats, such as reporting the groomer to authorities.</p>

Reporting and seeking help

Children face significant barriers when reporting online harm, often viewing formal reporting as a last resort, only pursued when a situation has escalated significantly. Formal processes can feel unfamiliar and opaque, requiring them to step outside their usual digital routines. Many children are unsure whether reports are confidential and do not fully understand what reporting entails (*Save the Children*).

Where do children report online violence to?



As a result, children are far more likely to share incidents with friends than with platforms or authorities (see graph on the right) (*Save the Children*).

Similarly, Royal Roads’ findings highlight that youth prefer confiding in friends over adults, such as parents, teachers, or counselors. They believe older individuals often lack adequate understanding of online violence, making peer support their first choice.

What do children want?

The contents in this section are drawn from the findings of the four studies. Together, they highlight children's needs and expectations for a safer and more inclusive online environment, emphasizing practical solutions and resources that align with their lived experiences.

→ **Shared responsibility:**

Children see online safety as a shared responsibility that involves governments, NGOs, tech platforms, schools, and communities. In particular, cases where online violence escalates to offline violence require coordinated prevention and response strategies across these sectors, ensuring children are protected both digitally and physically.

→ **Guidance and education:**

Children need widespread, accessible, culturally relevant, and targeted education on navigating safe online interactions. This guidance should:

- ◆ Better equip children to manage relationships with friends and unknown others online, including those with shared connections and complete strangers. It should suggest ways to enhance and build upon the protective strategies children already use.
- ◆ Clarify what happens during the reporting process to reduce confusion and make it feel more approachable.
- ◆ Encourage children to report issues early, rather than waiting for situations to escalate.
- ◆ Present balanced messaging that acknowledges the value and benefits of online interactions while emphasizing safety.

→ **Resources for parents and caregivers:**

Despite children's belief that adults lack knowledge about technology platforms, they are eager to receive support from trusted adults (mostly parents and caregivers). As such, parents and caregivers need clear, actionable guidance on:

- ◆ Recognizing signs of online abuse or harm.
- ◆ Taking practical steps to intervene or support children when they report violence to platforms or authorities.
- ◆ Balancing their concerns for safety with an understanding of the positive role online interactions can play in children's lives.

→ **Peer support:** Given the challenges around peer-to-peer online sexual violence and the fact that children often report online safety concerns to peers, tech platforms can play a critical role in empowering peers to respond effectively. This can include providing tools and resources to help peers recognize harmful behaviors, encourage reporting, and guide friends toward seeking help. Platforms can also support initiatives that equip peers to challenge and shift social norms, fostering a culture where harmful behaviors like peer-to-peer violence are no longer normalized.

→ **Inclusion for disabilities:**

Children with intellectual disabilities require resources and platforms designed with inclusivity in mind. These should:

- ◆ Be easy to understand, using visual and multilingual formats.
- ◆ Follow universal design principles aligned with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.
- ◆ Actively involve children with disabilities in the design and testing of accessible platforms.

→ **Digital innovations:**

Children encourage tech platforms to integrate advanced tools for enhancing online safety and delivering education seamlessly. For example:

- ◆ Use AI-driven systems to provide targeted safety information and alerts about the behaviors of unknown contacts.
- ◆ Employ AI to improve the ease and ability of users to discover safety features, automate blocking and banning of harmful users, secure personal information, implement stronger age assurance mechanisms, and ensure interactions are age-appropriate.
- ◆ Embed online safety information and features directly within the platforms, apps, and games children use, making them an integral part of their digital experiences.

Sources

This learning brief is based on emerging evidence from across the four research projects highlighted. Find more information on the grantees' research below.



**Save the
Children.**

Publications:

Full report linked [here](#)

Executive summary linked [here](#)

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Publications:

DRAGON- Shield Report [here](#)

Children's Online Communication report [here](#)

Lorenzo-dus, N., Evans, C. and Mullineux-Morgan, R. (September 2023). Online Child Sexual Grooming Discourse. Cambridge Elements (Forensic Linguistics). Cambridge University Press.

Palmer, T, Mullineux-Morgan, R, McDonald, R, Hotham, T, Finney, P (November 2022) Strong at the Broken Places DRAGON-Shield Project report Nov 2022

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The Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund is investing in knowledge and research to end online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). The Tech Coalition and Safe Online joined hands in 2020 to collectively work to support knowledge and research towards ending digital harms against children. The Fund is continuing its focus on innovative research that produces actionable insights to impact product and policy development, with a priority given to research that can help inform the technology industry's approach to combating online child sexual exploitation and abuse.