Preliminary research finds children already exercise caution online but also calls for stronger safety measures

February 6 2024

Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Children routinely interact with people they don't know online and respond with caution when approached, but they want tech companies and governments to do more to keep them safe according to preliminary research findings released on Safer Internet Day.

Following workshops with 597 children and young people aged between 9–16 across various countries including Australia, the preliminary findings of the "Protecting Children from Online Grooming" study revealed that children primarily use intuition and informal background checks rather than seeking help from trusted adults to manage their online interactions with people they don't know.

The research was led by a team from the Young and Resilient Research Center at Western Sydney University and Save the Children.

While children are more often abused or exploited online by people they know, the internet creates additional opportunities for people they have never met to engage with them. The data also showed that children distinguish people they know well in person from those they do not, with 86 percent approaching the latter with caution. Yet despite this wariness, children are still three times more likely to ignore or decline an inappropriate or unwanted request than they are to report or block it.

Professor Amanda Third, Co-Director, Young and Resilient Research Center at Western Sydney University, notes that children want to be protected from unknown people online with measures including verifying accounts, in-app education and enforcing age restrictions.

"Children are growing up online and need support to safely navigate their constantly changing digital landscape. Children are not passive participants because they often know at least as much about technology as their parents and have creative solutions," said Professor Third.

"This research plays an important role in helping us to understand their perspective and to design innovative solutions that draw on their insights. Children are telling us that parents, teachers, governments and technology companies need to do more to keep them safe online. It's so important that we listen and act," said Professor Third.

The study also shows online violence doesn't affect all children equally, with a stark difference between children in high and low-income families. Initial analysis shows that children from high-income families in any country were twice as likely to use privacy settings to protect themselves from unwanted contacts compared to children from low-income families. Children from low-income homes were also nearly 35 percent less likely to block inappropriate or unwanted contacts.

When children do speak to someone about their online safety, the preliminary findings show that more than half were likely to speak to their parents, highlighting the importance of supporting caregivers with online safety education. Only 10 percent of children would consider speaking to their teachers or the police.

Governments also play a critical role in holding tech companies to account and ensuring laws and policies are aligned with the constantly evolving digital landscape.

"Children have high hopes for digital technology, but the internet wasn't created with their safety in mind. We urgently need to reimagine a safe digital environment with and for children, to give all children the access to the future they are expecting. This involves collaboration between children, parents, governments, tech companies, and educators to prevent and respond to the multifaceted challenges of online safety," said Steve Miller, Save the Children's Global Director of Child Protection.

Methodology

Face-to-face and online participatory workshops took place in Australia, Cambodia, Finland, Philippines, Kenya, South Africa and Colombia between July and October 2023. The study divided participants into two age groups, 9–12 and 13–16, and included children from both rural and urban settings.

The gender breakdown of the groups was about 44% male, 55% female and 1% non-binary. The research results presented are preliminary, so subject to change as more data is incorporated and analyzed.

Provided by Western Sydney University