Innocenti Publication

Child Safety online: Global challenges and strategies

PRESS RELEASE
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Threats & Opportunities on today's Net for children

Florence-Geneva, 13 December 2011 – Although offering more opportunities for education and information than at any time in history, the Internet has also amplified the scale and potential of threats to children, says a new report from UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre.

Child Safety online: Global challenges and strategies aims to provide a better understanding of the risks faced by young people online, and presents a framework for protecting them from the triple-headed dangers of child abuse images, online grooming and cyberbullying.

"The rapid growth of the online world has not created crimes involving sexual abuse and exploitation of children, but it has increased their scale and reach for potentially causing harm," says UNICEF's Director of the Office of Research, Gordon Alexander. "We need to recognise this, and take as many appropriate measures as possible, while still respecting the rights of children to explore the new environment and potential that the technology provides."

Child Safety online: Global challenges and strategies stresses the enormous benefits of the Internet in terms of education, socialisation and entertainment, and the rights of children to access those advantages.

The research, conducted in partnership with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) in the UK, pinpoints four areas that need to come together to create a safer environment for children on the net: empowering children to protect themselves; removing the impunity of abusers; reducing the availability and access to harm; and support for the recovery of victims.

The first line of defence – empowering children – is fundamental to tackling the problem, not least because children are generally considerably more Internet-savvy than their parents and teachers, and have a different perceptions from adults of the risks they face.

Many children know how to block or firewall their sites, and it is friends who are the first ports of call when difficulties arise, rather than adults, who have less understanding of the fast-changing technology and may curtail online freedoms.

Mobile phones are overtaking personal computers as the favoured gateway for Internet access for children, illustrating the point. But the advancement in technology, with faster broadband and cheap webcams as well, also provides added opportunities for abusers.

The report notes that effective global legislation and enforcement are vital elements of protection, but at national level, implementation of laws has been slow in many countries, and where it has

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been enacted, it often lacks harmonisation, particularly in areas such as the definition of a "child", and of pornography. Of 196 countries reviewed, only 45 have legislation sufficient to combat child abuse image offences. Removing abusers' impunity should be another focus of attention; a challenge made harder by the borderless nature of the crimes.

Legislation is, however, only one part of the answer and parents, teachers, social workers, the police and industry all have a role to play in supporting children's endeavours to protect themselves, says the report.

Industry also has a role to play in removing inappropriate material from servers and providing child-friendly hardware and software that enables offensive images to be blocked or filtered.

As of 2011 there were an estimated 16,700 websites globally that depicted child abuse images, with millions of such images online, depicting "tens of thousands" of children. The age of child subjects is also getting lower, with 73 percent of victims appearing to be under ten-years-old; and images are becoming more graphic and violent.

The figures demonstrate the enormity of the challenge, but the report is pragmatic: "It is not possible to remove all risks that exist in the online environment. It is a space too huge, ungoverned, evolving, growing ad creative to ever be subject to the type of controls that would be necessary to fully protect children. Nor is it desirable that such control is sought, because total control would destroy the essence of the Internet and its many benefits."

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The full report can be downloaded on UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre's website
www.unicef-irc.org

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