

Children and young people with vulnerabilities online

As most of the world went into various lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the internet and social media provided a lifeline for many, enabling people to keep in touch with others who weren't living with them, to carry on their education, and to be able to work from home. This blog by the [Better Internet for Kids](#), discusses the opportunities and challenges of creating an inclusive online world for children and young people with disabilities and their views on how the digital environment can be both empowering and challenging.

[One in three internet users](#) are under the age of 18 and special attention has to be paid to this group in order to ensure that they are able to use the internet safely, while also feeling empowered to actively participate in all that it can offer. UNICEF estimate that there are around 93 million children with [disabilities in the world](#) but acknowledges that this figure could be far higher. Significantly more are vulnerable for a range of other reasons and it is important that, like other children and young people, they are able to benefit from all that technology can offer but do so safely and with the proper support that they might need. Making provision for young people with disabilities cannot be seen as "one size fits all" as their needs can be diverse depending on their disability or vulnerability.

Indeed, an important study into the lives of children and young people with disabilities online was published by the Council of Europe in 2019. [Two clicks forward and one click back](#) found that while life online for children with disabilities was similar to life online for those without disabilities, there were some important differences which needed to be highlighted. The report also found that grouping children and young people with disabilities under one heading was not helpful as "their use of digital media and experiences vary significantly across and within different types of disabilities" and that seeing them as a homogeneous group does them a disservice.

Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Draft General Comment [Children's rights in relation to the digital environment](#) states that:

The digital environment opens new avenues for children with disabilities to engage in social relationships with their peers, access information, and participate in public decision-making processes.

It also recognises that children with disabilities can encounter barriers when they are online. These can include policies which can have a discriminatory impact on them such as a ban on technology in some settings despite the fact that these individuals may rely on personal devices in order to communicate and access information. While it is clear that technology can facilitate access to information for many young people, and particularly so if they have a visual impairment for example, it is often the case that when they go to school the very technology that can help them is either not available or not allowed (due to rules about the use of technology within the school). Similarly, too many websites, applications, games and other digital services fail to meet universal design requirements to ensure accessibility.

While there is a growing awareness of the [importance of inclusivity and accessibility](#) of online services and platforms, this is by no means universal and there is considerable disparity between different online environments. A good example is in the terms and conditions for social networking sites. Few people read these for a variety of reasons, not least that the language used is too complex and that they are too long. For an individual with an intellectual disability this becomes even more challenging and there are calls to make these terms and conditions (which provide important information about the data that sites will be collecting) more accessible to all, with some suggesting that they need to [be written in a more child-friendly way](#) to enable users to really understand them.

It is clear that, like all children and young people, vulnerable groups are spending increasing amounts of time online but as [Adrienne Katz found in her research](#), "the support networks around vulnerable children have not yet caught up with the reliance many of them have on their devices and the connectivity it brings them". Some of the existing challenges include [insufficient support and guidance](#) for children to navigate the online world safely and the lack of funding to purchase equipment and provide the training and support needed to use it effectively.

Hearing from young people on how technology can empower them

The recent [Safer Internet Forum](#) (SIF) focused on the opportunities and challenges of creating an inclusive world for children and young people online. In addition to hearing from experts from academia, civil society, policy and industry, young people presented their views on how technology can empower them, but equally on the barriers which need to be addressed to enable a fully inclusive online experience.



Joao is an 18-year-old from Portugal where he attends the University of Coimbra. Joao has had glaucoma since he was born and spoke at the Safer Internet Forum about how he uses technology and the benefits that it can offer him. Clearly, technology provides many opportunities for Joao and he talks about how this has changed over time. The computer has made a significant impact on his life and the use of voice software and screen readers has meant he can access his schoolwork and a lot of other information much more easily.

However, Joao also added *“sometimes it is difficult to use some websites when using shortcuts and a screen reader because the sites are not explaining what is actually written there. You are trying to learn something which could be easier for you and it could open new possibilities, but it is not as easy as it could be. The screen reader is great, but websites need to be designed in a way that the screen reader can make sense of what is there.”*



It is clear that technology can open up a wide range of opportunities for all users and, of course, this includes vulnerable users. Alessandro, a student from Italy was also interviewed ahead of the Safer Internet Forum and noted that the internet allows him to communicate with people from all over the world which would have never been possible otherwise. As a music student, he benefits from being able to access huge amounts of content online which he enjoys exploring.

Alessandro comments *“I really liked it when my singing teacher gave me the chance to find online videos, because I didn’t stop after that. I got the chance to explore new areas that I really liked, discovering songs from Frank Sinatra and Michael Bublé that I loved, and I’m so glad that this relationship with the internet allowed me to do so.”*



Similarly, Joao spent three months in Prague as part of a school exchange and access to technology enriched the experience. He said that technology was really important for almost everything while he was on the school exchange because he used it to contact his family and friends, to work at school and to find his way around the city: *“Technology was present in almost everything!”*

The role of technology during lockdown

The young people who took part in the recent Safer Internet Forum gave interesting perspectives on the COVID-19 situation and, in particular, how technology had helped them during that time. Maya from Austria talked about a practical implication – she didn’t need to worry about transporting her wheelchair from home to school so during lockdown it was much easier for her to get around. Several young people talked about how online learning allowed them to work at their own pace and manage their time more effectively, but they also recognised the potential to be distracted by tech. Research is still emerging about the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on different groups but there are clear advantages when using tech, and young people have reported feeling less isolated in particular when [playing online games with friends](#).

Joao felt he had an advantage over some of his classmates during lockdown. He has been using a range of different technologies for some time but, for some of his peers, lockdown forced them to use new applications and programs which wasn’t always easy for them.

For someone with a hearing impairment, a classroom or a meeting room can be a challenging environment with people talking over each other and lots of background noise making it difficult to follow the conversation. With a video conference it can be a lot easier. Everyone has a microphone and people don't tend to talk over others – there are rules which are communicated ahead of the meeting/lesson about the etiquette that should be observed – muting a microphone or raising a hand before speaking are all quite familiar to many of us now but have perhaps had untold benefits to some.

Challenges of being online

No matter what the vulnerability, [typical online safety risks](#) such as cyberbullying, sexting, online harassment, misinformation and fake news can affect anyone. However, research has shown that some young people with particular vulnerabilities can be more susceptible to a range of online harms.

For example, a [study published by the Ruderman Foundation](#) in 2019 found that students with disabilities were almost twice as likely to be cyberbullied than their peers without a disability. It also found that students who were involved in cyberbullying were more likely to experience depression as a result compared to their peers without a disability (45 per cent compared to 31 per cent).

The [International Telecommunication Union \(ITU\) Child Online Protection \(COP\) Guidelines](#), published in 2020, stated that *“children and young people with disabilities often face exclusion, stigmatisation and barriers in participation in their communities and this in turn can lead to them being at higher risk for incidents of grooming, online solicitation, and/or sexual harassment.”*

Testimonies from young people at the recent Safer Internet Forum seem to back up some of these concerns. Alessandro from Italy stated, *“I do think that disabled people can encounter issues using the network, that's why I think that they should be supervised either by an adult or a competent individual.”*



Sunna from Iceland was asked whether she thought that people with disabilities were safe on the internet. She immediately answered no and explained that *“it’s difficult to be disabled on the internet because people try to take advantage of you and will take advantage of your disability, particularly if it is an intellectual disability.”* She went on to say that people with disabilities *“are humiliated online”* and need help.

Digital technologies and the rights of children with disabilities

Professor Laura Lundy, who delivered the keynote speech at the Safer Internet Forum, explained that a key issue in much of the work on children’s rights in the digital environment was the little or no attention to the views of children and young people with disabilities. She also explained that many young people with disabilities feel that they are the *“safest kids on the planet”* due to their parents perhaps over-protecting them. Indeed, this was also highlighted in the ITU COP Guidelines which noted that *“some parents of children and young people with disabilities may be overprotective because of their lack of knowledge on how to best guide their child’s use of the internet or protect them from bullying and harassment.”* Equally, in a study on children’s online participation, [Professor Sonia Livingstone found that](#) *“some parents (...) may share information or media (photos, videos) of their child in pursuit of support or advice, placing their child at risk for privacy violations both now and in the future.”* In brief, well-meaning parents can sometimes add to the difficulties that are faced by vulnerable children and young people when they are online.



Many people talk about a digital divide and often quote Marc Prensky saying that [adults are digital immigrants whereas children are digital natives](#). This idea was echoed by some of the young people at the Safer Internet Forum, particularly by Ammar from Austria who said that *“a lot of teachers are stuck in the analogue world”*, and that the *“school system has to adapt better to the new way of teaching and learning.”*

Policy response

The Council of Europe report referenced earlier states that *“the digital environment can be an enabler that brings significant ‘added value’ to children with disabilities in terms of the realisation of their rights.”* For example, voice-activated technology is used by many, but for children and young people with visual or intellectual impairments, it has significant benefits allowing them to access information and communicate with others much more easily. Closed captioning, subtitles and text that can be magnified or read out to the user can easily be incorporated into many platforms and services online.

The [W3C Web Accessibility Initiative \(WAI\)](#) aims to provide standards, strategies and resources to make the web accessible to people with disabilities. It includes a free online training course on web accessibility which explains how to make websites and apps work well for people with disabilities, as well as how to meet international standards around accessibility.

Speaking at the recent Safer Internet Forum, June Lowery-Kingston, Head of Unit, Accessibility, Multilingualism and Safer Internet at DG CONNECT of the European Commission, is clear that the *“European Commission is genuinely committed to creating a Europe of equality. The disabilities strategy for the next ten years will be published in 2021 and also the strategy around children’s rights. There is diversity in disability and children’s rights need to be embedded within that.”*

Joao tells us that *“technology helps us to be at the same level as people who have no problems so just try to understand that if you are not able to use it, it would be very difficult for you to do a lot of things.”* A range of stakeholders all have an important role to play in helping to ensure that children and young people with disabilities are able to benefit from what the internet and online services offer. Governments, industry, educators and health care providers all need to be aware of the risks and opportunities that the internet and online services can offer, and it is important that children and young people with disabilities are involved from the outset. Waiting until a product has been developed and then giving consideration to how to make it more accessible and usable is unhelpful, costly and ineffective. The internet industry has long talked about safety by design but now it is imperative that inclusion and accessibility by design are seen as the cornerstones of development.

As Professor Lundy said in her closing remarks at the Safer Internet Forum, *“we need to involve children and young people with disabilities in decisions that affect them and, if we are unsure of how to involve them, then we should ask them for advice.”* What we need to do is harness the benefits of technology and provide support for the most vulnerable, but not exploit their vulnerabilities.

Notes

This text was originally published on the [Better Internet for Kids blog](#) and has been re-posted with permission and small edits. This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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