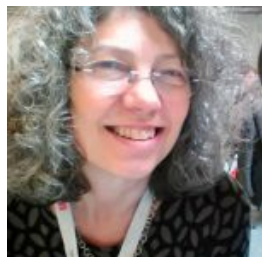


Children's rights and parental responsibilities in a digital world



In the growing debate over children's rights in relation to the digital world, parents may wonder about their role. As technology gets more complex, seemingly the burden of responsibility on parents' shoulders gets even heavier. Or can a child rights approach also benefit parents? For www.parenting.digital, [Prof Sonia Livingstone](#) discusses the benefits and limits of parental responsibility and how best to support parents in mediating their children's digital engagement.

In February 2021 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published its [General Comment 25](#), a [game-changer](#) for children's rights in relation to the digital environment. In the General Comment, parents and caregivers are mentioned 51 times. What is said about them?

1. Parents' digital responsibilities as children become more independent

How best to [balance online risks and opportunities](#) is a key theme of the General Comment, for much depends on the child's maturity and development, as well as the context. This tends to be something that parents know best and that they are best positioned to take into account in their actions. At the same time, the tension is clear – generally, children want their freedom earlier, parents want to protect them longer.

A child rights approach seeks both to enable children to enjoy their civil rights and freedoms as soon as they can, while also protecting them from dangers they may or may not know about till they are 18. States should respect

the evolving capacities of the child as an enabling principle that addresses the process of their gradual acquisition of competencies, understanding and agency [... and this] has particular significance in the digital environment, where children can engage more independently from supervision by parents and caregivers (General Comment para 19).

To square the circle, the General Comment advocates coordinated support for parents from the government, civil society and, especially, from digital providers in designing services in ways that are [age-appropriate](#) so that children's rights to participation, privacy and protection are respected and parents' task is thereby eased. This includes consulting children and parents about digital policy and design, and explaining to them how services really work and what remedies are available if needed.

2. When the state must step in – absent or problematic parents

There's been huge attention to [sharenting](#) as a parent-shaming way of highlighting how parents' actions regarding their children's digital lives can be problematic. Far less attention is paid to other, arguably more serious ways in which parents can endanger their children online as offline. I vividly recall a government minister telling me that, while calling out "stranger danger" is helpful, the public was not ready to learn that parents can pose a much more likely risk to their children. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has not shied away from this issue, fortunately:

forms of digitally facilitated violence and sexual exploitation and abuse may also be perpetrated within a child's circle of trust, by family or friends or, for adolescents, by intimate partners (para 81).

Further, "protecting a child's privacy in the digital environment may be vital in circumstances where parents or caregivers themselves pose a threat to the child's safety or where they are in conflict over the child's care" (para 77).

States are called on to recognise how the [design or use of digital technologies](#) may place children at risk from "parents or other family members or caregivers, whether physically present or distant" (para 88). Because of such circumstances, "providers of preventive or counselling services to children in the digital environment should be exempt from any requirement for a child user to obtain parental consent in order to access such services" (para 78).

On the other hand, the General Comment also recognises how important it can be: “that children separated from their families have access to digital technologies [... since] digital technologies are beneficial in maintaining family relationships, for example, in cases of parental separation, when children are placed in alternative care, for the purposes of establishing relations between children and prospective adoptive or foster parents and in reuniting children in humanitarian crisis situations with their families” (para 87).

3. Providing the support that parents want and need

The General Comment calls strongly for [greater support for parents](#) on mediating and managing technologies in the lives of their children – something that [parents call for too](#). This should include the promotion of parental digital literacy so that they gain in knowledge and expertise, and an awareness of children's rights so that parents respect their children's privacy and growing autonomy as well as promote their safety. Children's views are specifically represented here, since in the [children's consultation](#) that informed the drafting,

some children reported wanting more support and encouragement in their digital activities, especially where they perceived parents' and caregivers' approach to be punitive, overly restrictive or not adjusted to their evolving capacities (para 85).

As researchers have [long known](#), parental mediation is more effective if it prioritises “mutual empathy and respect, over prohibition or control” (para 86).

What matters is not only *what* advice is provided for parents but also *how* it is provided. The General Comment insists that it should be timely, and that it should reach parents from all walks of life, in the languages that they and their children speak at home. Relatedly, it should be transparent to parents how digital services engage with their children, how they [process their data](#), and what parents can do if they consider there's a problem or injustice. For example, parents of very young children should have the right to object to routine digital surveillance of their child in commercial settings and educational and care settings (para 76).

Parents are stakeholders too

As parents are often only too aware, society can be quick to criticise them for supposedly failing to meet the challenge of adequately mediating their children's digital engagement. But this task cannot be undertaken in a vacuum. Parents parent in circumstances largely not of their own making. If internet governance is insufficient, if digital businesses are unsupportive or exploitative or the education system out of date, then parents are likely to be overwhelmed. Technological innovation is fast, complex, opaque and largely unresponsive to parental concerns – unless it spies a new market.

So while parents are stakeholders too, and should be both consulted on children's rights in the digital environment as well as apportioned their fair share of the responsibility, it is important that a General Comment is primarily addressed to governments, as the primary duty-bearer with obligations to realise children's rights. General Comment 25 also has implications for businesses, as well as law enforcement, educators, health professionals and many others who, together, can help to respect and protect children's rights in relation to the digital environment. Their combined actions, assuming necessary resourcing, training and coordination, could make a huge difference to both children and their parents.

First published at www.parenting.digital, 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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