

Children's rights in a digital world – Can COVID-19 move governments from evidence to action?



In this blog, [Sonia Livingstone](#), [Kristen Hope-Burchill](#) and [Konstantinos Papachristou](#) examine the significant impact of the pandemic on children's digital lives and how governments can develop and implement policies to protect their rights.

COVID-19 has catapulted society into a wholesale reliance on digital technologies. Almost overnight, children's lives became [digital-by-default](#), as schools were hastily replaced by online learning, friends could be contacted only via social media, screen time rules were promptly discarded, and children's interest and expertise in all things digital were [suddenly valued](#) by the adult world. The pandemic accelerated a series of digital transformations already underway, making it all the more urgent that society addresses the [consequences for children's lives](#), whether beneficial or harmful, a task that governments have been putting off as seemingly too difficult.

Among the multiple responses from policymakers, practitioners, academics and the public, we here highlight two intersecting initiatives which, taken together, document the importance of children's digital lives and point the way to better realise their [rights in a digital world](#). The first was a global advocacy project to gather evidence and children's calls for change regarding the impact of COVID19: the [#CovidUnder19 project](#) has focused on consulting children in lower income countries, within the framework of children's rights. The second was a formalisation of how the digital environment impacts on children's rights in the form of General Comment 25 by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, an authoritative document [setting out the obligations](#) of states and the responsibilities of other duty bearers also.

Among the many children's rights issues intensified by the pandemic, digital technologies play an [ambiguous role](#). Most media attention was probably concentrated on the consequences for [education](#). #CovidUnder19 found that while most survey participants thought that their education had been better before the pandemic (61%), children with no internet access (74%) or poor access (63%) were more likely to say that they were getting a good education before the outbreak, while children with regular internet access saw little change. Similarly, children with no internet access were much more confident of getting good grades before the pandemic compared with those with regular internet access (63% vs 38%), in part because the former felt that teacher support was much better before the pandemic, compared with the latter (68% vs 40%), and that their views were more taken into account (60% vs 20%). Education during a pandemic clearly relies on internet access for opportunities to study, teacher support and school-student engagement.

Since the distribution of internet access is hardly random, at stake is not only the right to education (article 26, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) but also the right not to be discriminated against (article 2). Consider that while only 13% of all children said that they had hardly any or no access to internet, and more than half (55%) had regular access, children identifying as migrants and asylum seekers had significantly lower access (38% and 27% respectively). And 62% of children in detention centres, refugee camps and homeless centres said they had no access or hardly any access to internet. Differences exist not only within countries but also between countries, of course. #CovidUnder19 learned of major regional differences in who could access the internet often or very often – 20% of children in Africa, 35% in Asia-Pacific, 61% in Latin American and Caribbean, 77% in Western Europe and Other, and 86% in Eastern Europe. As a 14 year old boy from Nepal observed:

Some are not getting to join online classes because of no internet access and even some [who] are getting to join it they are not having good studies as before.

Also the focus of considerable media attention was the impact of the pandemic on [children's safety](#). In relation to digital technologies, the right to protection from violence and other harms too often leads to calls to limit or monitor children's internet access. But as we have just seen, such access is vital to their learning and, in fact, their other civil rights and freedoms, including access to quality information (about health, their community, politics, and a host of other issues of their choice) and the opportunity to stay in touch with family and friends. During COVID-19, children have relied on social media to keep in touch with family and friends using WhatsApp (75%), Facebook (41%), Instagram (33%), Snapchat (12%), Text (10%), none of these or other means asked about (10%). Social media use is often disparaged by adults, but children urge us to rethink:

Now, more than ever, teenagers are suffering from anxiety. We have to do too much work for school... I have no internet connection and can't talk to my friends; that makes me feel very depressed. (Girl, 14 Costa Rica)

Interestingly, the majority of children reported feeling safer (14%) or as safe (70%) online during the pandemic, although 17% reported [feeling less safe](#). The risks seemed particularly high for those new to the internet – those who rarely went online before the pandemic were much more likely to report feeling unsafe online since the beginning of COVID-19, compared to children who went online very often (28% vs 11%). While again noting that other factors are likely to account both for the lack of internet access and for the risks facing children, it also seems that [digital literacy](#) and [resilience](#) matter, and cannot be gained in an instant. Thus, children who hardly ever (14%) or never had access to the internet (26%) were much more likely to say they didn't know how to seek help if they feel unsafe or worried, compared to children who went online very often (7%). A 15 year old girl from India pointed out that:

The online is sometimes unsafe and there are many anonymous messages who speak vulgar to you. I know how to report or block them but many don't. We need to make a change.

To the children surveyed by #CovidUnder19 and those consulted for the drafting of General Comment 25, internet access is now a human right. Expert deliberations continue on this point, with some high level statements that access should indeed be [considered a right](#). Beyond doubt is that human rights apply online as offline, and that internet access (and the digital literacy to go online beneficially) is a vital gateway to exercising one's rights in the digital age. For a 17 year old girl from the Philippines, digital and other resources now go hand in hand, and all are vital:

'A huge number of children are more and more becoming victims of the insensitive digital learning and of poverty. During these times, the parents of children are losing their jobs, many households are unable to have food to eat, many do not afford to even support their families' needs, and many do not have access to the internet and technological devices. Many children will be left behind!'

In this short piece, we have interleaved the normative language of rights with social science evidence. Each is vital to bring about change, and our two initiatives are founded on their interdependencies: #CovidUnder19 uses a social survey to advocate for government action on children's rights; General Comment 25 is a UN document framed in normative terms, but grounded in [social science evidence](#). A General Comment is primarily addressed to governments, as the primary duty-bearer with obligations to realise children's rights. But importantly, 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 children's lives. While the pandemic has made these issues more visible, what matters is what happens next. Digital access, and the use of digital technology for education, is not going to go away.

Notes

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