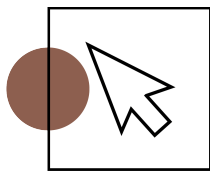


# Realising children's rights in the digital age: The role of digital skills

## Principle 11: Agency

Support child users' decision-making and reduce exploitative features and business models that harm their agency.



**Please cite this report as:** Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M., & Rahali, M. (2023). *Realising children's rights in the digital age: The role of digital skills*. KU Leuven: ySKILLS.

For full version of the report see: <https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.10201527>

Having agency means children can decide freely how they want to engage with the digital environment. This includes being able to start and stop using digital products and services of their choice easily, without feeling they are losing out, and knowing and getting precisely what they have signed up for, while not being tempted, manipulated or nudged into doing anything that undermines their safety, privacy, development and wellbeing.

The principle of agency draws together two sets of children's rights:<sup>1</sup>

- Protection against economic exploitation: the right not to be subjected to unfair exchange.
- Protection against other forms of exploitation: the right not to be subjected to treatment that undermines children's decision making and welfare.

Economic (or commercial) exploitation in the digital environment extends beyond the traditional notion of economic exploitation centred on child labour, and manifests in various forms. It includes persuasive design to maximise children's attention and monetisation of personal data as well as dark patterns and other features crafted to manipulate users' choices. It also includes processing data for commercial purposes such as advertising without considering children's vulnerabilities or profiting from children's data unfairly.

**“TikTok has a nice function – there are three dots, and you can click ‘Not interested’. It does something with the algorithm... You can take some control over some posts.” (teenager with mental health difficulties, Norway) (17)**

Digital skills and literacies cannot only be understood as the capacity of the individual user or group of users; they are also intrinsically entwined with the design of the digital environment. **The more complex or opaque the digital environment, the more skilled the user must be if they are not to be deceived or manipulated.** The more transparent and fairer that environment, the more the user can exercise their digital skills and literacies to engage in ways of their choosing and to achieve outcomes that benefit

<sup>1</sup> [UNCRC](#), Articles 32, 33, 34, 35, 36.

them. The principle of agency, therefore, concerns what children can do online in particular contexts, faced with particular design challenges, and it is also surely aided by what they know about the digital environment, including the business models, attention economy and data ecology that increasingly drive it ([Lukoff et al., 2021](#); [van der Hof et al, 2020](#)).

Do they know what they need to know? In the ySKILLS performance tests, children were asked to take a close look at the textual and visual information of three social media posts, representing an advertisement, fake news and a phishing scam. After each post, they were asked about the intention of the creator of the post. On average, **63% of the children and young people were able to successfully identify the social media post** ([22](#)). Here considerable differences also emerged across the countries: **in Italy, 78% of the children and young people successfully identified a post as an advertisement, while in Poland this was 48%** ([22](#)). Nonetheless, adolescents are often optimistic, and in the experience sampling method (ESM) research they reported to ySKILLS researchers a moderate sense of self-determination in their daily ICT use, with a sense of importance and belongingness ([15](#)).

However, in regulatory and child rights debates, **there is growing concern that the digital environment is designed to be risky in ways that prioritise profit over children’s rights and best interests** ([5Rights Foundation, 2021](#); [Federal Trade Commission, 2022](#); [Norwegian Consumer Council, 2018](#)). Are children’s growing digital skills and literacy proof against such pressures? To answer this question, **we need to consider new and emerging dimensions of digital literacy including ‘data literacy’** ([Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2020](#); [Stoilova et al., 2021](#)) or ‘algorithm literacy’ (Bucher, 2018; [Selwyn, 2022](#)). While this was not the primary focus of the ySKILLS research, we can draw some conclusions, although undoubtedly research on digital skills and literacy must continue to track innovations in business practices and digital design, along with the policy and regulation that affects them.

The qualitative report on children and young people with mental health difficulties explored how they are developing digital skills and literacy that encompass but also transcend the dimensions of technical, informational, communication and creation skills – for example, the adolescents described the skill of identifying a callous algorithm, recognising an extreme space or a dangerous person or, more positively, knowing how to game the algorithm to make their feed positive or locate ‘safe’ spaces or trustworthy people ([17](#)). In such ways, they hoped to exercise agency to shape their online experiences in ways that serve rather than undermine them, although in this regard they were not always successful:

**Algorithms can act as a distorting mirror, magnifying problematic content and pushing young people with mental health vulnerabilities down a spiral of ever-more overwhelming, upsetting or extreme content that they find hard to break away from. ([17](#))**

After all, the power of platforms, hosted by global corporates, is inevitably greater than the capacity of even skilled young people to manage. No wonder that **platform algorithms are often ‘out of sync’ with and insensitive to the young person’s state of mind or ability to cope, leading to experiences of ‘triggering’** (when particular online content proves upsetting because of prior mental health difficulties), unwanted re-exposure to such content, and setbacks in their mental health. In other ySKILLS qualitative studies, similarly, **information skills (e.g., seeking information about their country of origin on social media) mean being exposed to harmful content (e.g., violent war content) that makes them anxious, or awareness of different technological affordances means that they skilfully make choices that are also risky** ([3](#)).

#### Additional data

EU Kids Online findings for 9- to 16-year-olds in 19 countries showed that:

- Across countries, an average of 7% of children said they spent too much money on in-app purchases or online games.

- Ten per cent said they had tried unsuccessfully to spend less time on the internet. However, measured using five criteria of excessive use, one in four children reported at least one criterion, but fewer than 2% of children reported all five.