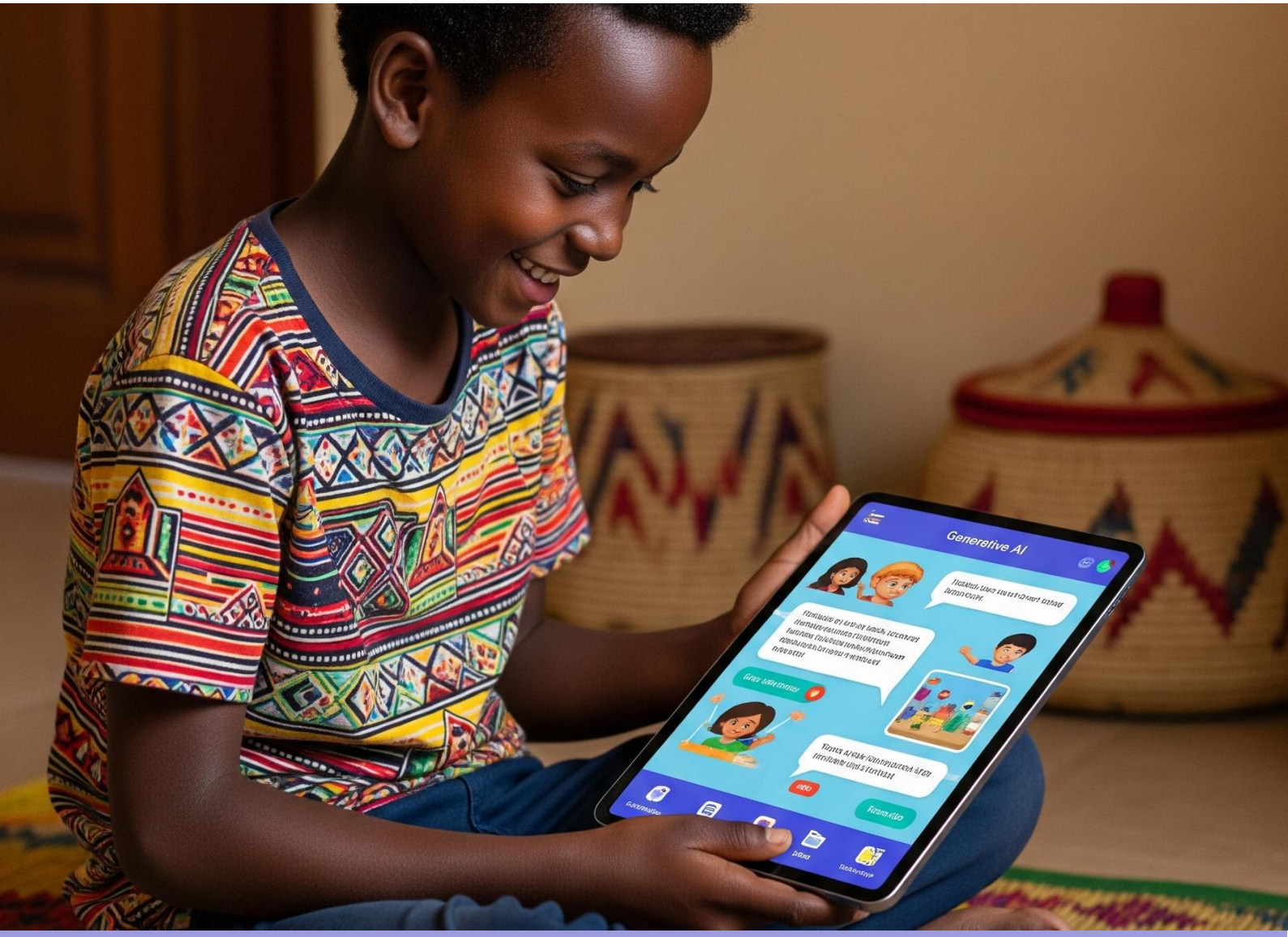

RIGHTS.AI: Children's Experiences of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Kenya

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September 2025

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LSE THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
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5RIGHTS FOUNDATION

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Acknowledgements

This report is a collaborative effort by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Mtoto News. Led by Sonia Livingstone, Mariya Stoilova and Jennifer Kaberi, the research team included: Amandla Busisa, Rosebella Njeje, Atulo Joseph, Pheza Otieno, David Kabata and research associates Patience Wanjohi and Audrey Nafula. Special thanks to Joshua Baru for copyediting the report and Brian Omondi for the design outline.

We would like to thank the reviewers of this report, Joy Matheka, Roseline Olumbe and Kate Tilleczek, for their thoughtful and constructive feedback, which helped strengthen our analysis. We are grateful to the children who participated in the research for generously sharing their time, experiences and insights. The work of the Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC) is a partnership with and largely funded by the 5Rights Foundation.

Preface

Around the world, children and young people are increasingly encountering technologies based on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) at home, school and elsewhere via apps, bots and other digital products and services. GenAI can answer questions or respond to prompts to create new kinds of content. It can be found in dedicated apps such as ChatGPT and Copilot, or it is embedded in familiar platforms such as Snapchat, WhatsApp and Google Search. Schools may also deploy AI-enabled educational technology (EdTech), and mental health services are experimenting with GenAI chatbots, among many other emerging applications.

Such technological innovation stimulates children's curiosity as well as raises public concerns. As GenAI technologies evolve rapidly, policymakers are scrambling to keep up and find ways to balance innovation with protections. We have witnessed a range of international and regional AI regulations and policies being introduced, primarily from the Global North, calling for responsible and ethical development and use (e.g., by the Council of Europe, European Commission, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, and the World Economic Forum). Yet, very few of these focus on children.

At the Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC), we are committed to recognising children's experiences across diverse circumstances, especially in the Global South, which is underrepresented in research. We are delighted to have partnered with researchers in Brazil, Kenya, India and Thailand to explore children's experiences of and perspectives on GenAI. With a methodology designed in cooperation with the EU Kids Online network, this is one of several reports presenting the research, in answer to four overarching questions:

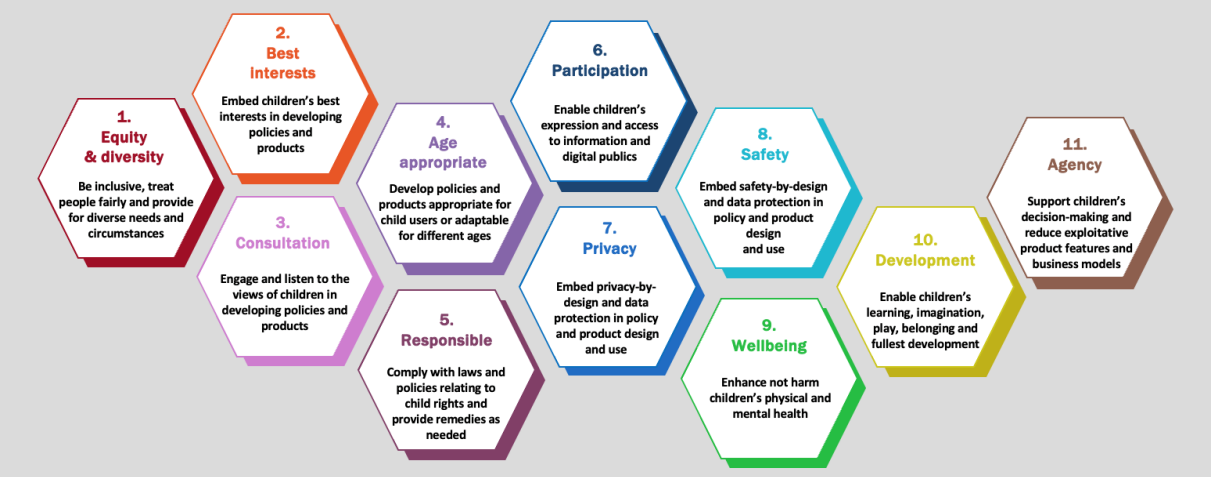
1. What are children's experiences with and perceptions of GenAI?
2. What is the potential impact of GenAI on children's rights?
3. What do children want to see in terms of GenAI regulations and protections?
4. What insights are offered by cross-country comparisons?

This work is framed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)[1] and General Comment No. 25 on the digital environment. Our child rights

[1] UNICEF (1989).

approach is encapsulated in the 11 principles of Child Rights by Design.[2] Taken together, these provide a holistic framework to understand children's encounters with GenAI.This work is framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and General Comment No. 25 on the digital environment. Our child rights approach is encapsulated in the 11 principles of Child Rights by Design (Livingstone and Pothong, 2023). Taken together, these provide a holistic framework to understand children's encounters with GenAI.

Figure 1: The 11 principles of Child Rights by Design[3]



We hope the findings are of value to the policymakers, educators, regulators and others now designing policies for GenAI that impact children, as well as the civil society actors and other organisations who advocate for children's rights. Ultimately, our role is to contribute to an evidence base that can be used to empower children, parents and educators by increasing awareness and understanding of GenAI technologies.

Prof Sonia Livingstone

Digital Futures for Children centre

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[2] Livingstone & Pothong (2023).
[3] Livingstone & Pothong (2023).

Executive summary

Children are growing up in a fast-evolving digital world, with the usage of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) doubling since 2022, driven by the introduction of user-friendly conversational interfaces.[4] Kenya stands at a unique and paradoxical intersection in the global digital landscape. The nation has cultivated a reputation as Africa's Silicon Savannah, a hub of technological innovation and rapid digital adoption. This is evidenced by the fact that Kenya ranks number one globally in ChatGPT usage, with 42.1 per cent of internet users aged 16 and above having accessed the platform in the past July, 2025.[5] Over half the population own a mobile phone, and mobile data subscriptions experienced a significant increase of 1.9 per cent in the first quarter of 2025.[6] This increase in usage and ownership has been further driven as a result of the affordability of mobile phones, which has resulted in over 53 per cent of Kenyans over three years owning a mobile phone in 2024.[7]

Kenya has made strides in regulating the technology through legal frameworks such as the Children Act 2022, which provides statutory protections for children against exploitation, harmful content and online abuse, as well as the Data Protection Act 2019, which sets clear requirements for safeguarding children's personal data in digital spaces. However, these legal frameworks don't explicitly cover artificial intelligence (AI) and child rights, and this 'regulatory lag' is a critical vulnerability. It means that as GenAI evolves at breakneck

[4] Bick et al. (2024); McKinsey & Company (2024); Thomson Reuters Institute (2025
[5] Kemp (2025).
[6] CA (2025).
[7] CA (2025).

speed, children are navigating a largely unregulated space, exposed to new and unaddressed harms.

To understand children's experiences of GenAI, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining desk research, key informant interviews and participatory engagement with children and young people to capture both quantitative insights and lived experiences. This study sheds light on the rapidly growing, yet underexplored, use of GenAI among children in Kenya as a lens into the broader realities of Africa and the Global South. It took place between January and June 2025, using in-depth interviews of 15 children from different socioeconomic backgrounds (selected through snowball sampling) in Kenya between the ages of 13 and 17, seeking their experiences of GenAI. The in-depth interviews used a semi-structured guide, encouraging open-ended responses while covering the following core set of themes: GenAI use; child rights; literacy; emotional/playful interaction; mediation; hopes and fears; and remedies. The findings were analysed using a coding framework developed by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). To ensure that we had views from children in lower-income communities, we used data from It's A Fact research,[8] which seeks to understand digital competency among African children.

Key findings

The participants defined GenAI as an advanced technological tool that simplified their tasks, generated content and provided information. They primarily used GenAI for a variety of purposes, including schoolwork, creative projects, emotional support and self-

[8] https://mtoto.news/tag/its-a-fact/

expression. Although a substantial number were using GenAI, this usage was heavily influenced by their socioeconomic circumstances.

The older participants (16-17) were more frequent users than the younger participants (13-14), who found the language and content less age-appropriate. There were also distinct gender differences in usage, with girls favouring creative and emotional applications and boys leaning towards technical and exploratory tasks. Socioeconomic disparities were evident, as urban and private school students had greater access to devices and premium features, while their rural and public school peers were limited to free versions and shared computers.

A violation of identity and culture. The participants expressed deep frustration with the Global North biases they encountered, particularly in image generation tools – for example, Nygel (14), who prompted for an 'African child with powers', received an image of 'a white child' and, even worse, a stereotype of 'a poor African child … during a drought'. Furthermore, the language barrier is a critical component of this bias. The participants reported that GenAI tools 'do not understand my home language well' and failed to accurately translate or contextualise local languages like Swahili. The consistent request from the children to 'decolonise' AI datasets is a demand for digital self-sovereignty and cultural affirmation. They are calling for a fundamental shift that moves beyond tokenistic translation to an authentic and respectful digital affirmation of their identities.

Tension between convenience and competence. The participants consistently described GenAI as a tool that made learning faster and easier, with Jules (17, F) saying that it provided a clearer explanation than a human teacher. The participants used it for everything from brainstorming and essay generation to creative projects and coding.

However, this convenience was accompanied by a profound self-awareness of GenAI's potential downsides – Imani (13, F) confessed that GenAI 'has made me more lazy in thinking' and Oisa (16) expressed a fear that overreliance would 'lower my critical thinking'. The current GenAI model, prioritising immediate answers and convenience, directly conflicts with the developmental need for children to engage in intellectual struggle and problem-solving. This tension is particularly acute in educational settings, where some children feel compelled to use AI for shortcuts to achieve a good grade, knowing they are not truly learning the material. As Oisa (16, F) articulated, 'if you're just copying AI … you're not learning'. The children's desire for an AI that provides 'an explanation so I can at least get the answer … not the answer' demonstrates an understanding that the tool should enable learning rather than be a replacement for it.

The illusion of influence. A recurring and powerful demand throughout the participants' testimonies was the urgent need for a 'kids' mode' or specific child-centric versions of GenAI, such as Gemini Kids AI or ChatGPT Kids. The participants are a key user base, possessing clear, actionable suggestions for improving the technology, yet they felt they had 'little to no influence on the design'. Their proposals demonstrate their capacity for innovative, user-driven design. For example, one participant proposed a feature where a 'kids' mode' would simplify complex concepts into terms a younger user could understand. Another suggested a parental notification system for sensitive image prompts, thereby reframing parental oversight from a prohibitive measure to a collaborative safety feature. The fact that these valuable ideas are not being proactively incorporated into platform design reveals a systemic issue. The current approach is reactive, forcing children to adapt to

platforms built for adults. This imbalance of power prioritises corporate objectives like speed-to-market and profit over a child's right to have their voice heard and to be protected by design, which is a significant failure of the best interests principle.

Lack of accountability and responsibility. The participants also recognised the need for multiple agents to ensure the improvement of AI regarding their welfare, calling on AI companies to make restrictions, such as password protections, strengthened parental controls and the refusal of inappropriate prompts to safeguard children. They were also cognisant of the guiding role that parents and teachers played, recommending mechanisms that would inform them of any suspicious activities that children might experience on GenAI platforms. They also understood personal responsibility to be important, calling for caution in regards to sharing information, advocating for a more constructive, appropriate use of GenAI.

Key recommendations

While the study is limited by a small sample size of 15 interviews with children aged 13-17, the findings speak powerfully. They surface lived experiences, ethical concerns and strong recommendations from children themselves:

- They want age-appropriate, child-friendly AI that uses simple interactive language, offers tailored versions like ChatGPT Kids, and includes age-gating with content restrictions for safety.
- They call for strong privacy and data security in AI through encryption, data control, transparency, parental oversight and safeguards against sharing personal or sensitive information.

- They want transparent and accurate AI that prevents misinformation and harmful content, promotes originality and critical thinking, provides sources and includes feedback mechanisms for improvement.
- They see GenAI as a tool for inclusive learning, supporting education, accessibility for disabilities, overcoming language barriers and ensuring fair, non-stereotypical representation.
- They emphasise shared accountability for GenAI developers, governments, parents and users to ensure responsible use, with strong content moderation to prevent harm.
- They call for decolonising AI by ensuring dignity and fair representation through locally curated African data, multilingual AI development and active efforts to detect and eliminate cultural, racial and gender biases.
- They would like to be involved in (and be paid for) co-creation in AI design through a Pan-African Youth AI Council, with mandatory product reviews and transparent reporting to ensure products are safe, relevant and accountable to young users.
- Data sovereignty and radical transparency could be upheld by giving young Africans clear, accessible information, local data storage options and user-friendly tools to control how their data is collected and used.
- Technology companies and developers in Africa should prioritise child-friendly, Afrocentric AI by involving young people, training local developers, ensuring safety and privacy by design, and providing inclusive, accessible tools that reflect African cultures.

- African governments and regional bodies should enforce Afrocentric AI policies, raise public awareness and strengthen child participation structures to ensure AI respects, protects and empowers children.
- Parents and educators should guide children's responsible use of GenAI by providing oversight, approving safe apps and promoting ethical learning practices.
- Researchers and academia should generate child-focused evidence on GenAI's impacts, covering safety, privacy, learning, development and societal change, to guide policies, design child-friendly tools and ensure accountability.
- Civil society and child rights advocates should push for child-centred AI that prioritises safety, privacy, inclusivity, ethical standards and meaningful child participation in design, access and policymaking.

Country context

Children and GenAI in Kenya

More than half of Kenya's population consists of children, who are the largest consumers of digital technology. The current generation of children in Kenya is the first 'digital natives', a term that associates them with being the first generation to grow up with technology. From birth, they are exposed to technology directly and indirectly, with 53.7 per cent of Kenyans aged three and above owning a mobile phone and usage increasing with age before it starts to decrease for the older groups, as shown in Table 1. Internet use follows a similar pattern.

Table 1: Mobile phone and internet use[9]

Age group	Mobile phone use			Internet use		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
3-4	13.6	13.5	13.7	6.2	6.8	5.6
5-9	19.8	19.4	20.2	8.9	8.5	9.4
10-14	27.6	29.0	26.3	11.5	11.7	11.2
15-24	69.2	69.4	68.9	46.6	48.5	44.7
25-34	93.2	93.7	92.8	59.3	54.5	64
35-44	93.3	93.3	93.3	47	42	52
45-54	93.2	93.8	92.7	40	36	44
55-64	90.8	92.8	88.9	31	24	37
65-74	82.8	86.1	79.9	16	11	22
75-84	70.6	79.0	63.5	7	–	12
Over 85	48.0	57.4	41.1	–	–	1

The report further shows urban ownership was at 64.6 per cent compared to just 48.6 per cent in rural areas, which is a result of a lack of supporting infrastructure, such as electricity, with less than half (49.2%) of rural households connected to any form of electricity source.

Although Mobile data/internet subscriptions are expected to grow by 1.9 per cent in the coming years, leading to more households and children engaging with technology, the number increased from 56.1 million to 57.2 million in the preceding quarter. This number is

[9] CA & KNBS (2025).

likely to be used on the internet. This explains why in 2025 Kenya was ranked number one globally in ChatGPT usage, with 42.1 per cent of internet users aged 16 and above having accessed ChatGPT in June 2025, suggesting a high national exposure to GenAI tools and potentially greater familiarity among children compared to peers in other countries.[10]

Despite this increase in internet and mobile phone access, inequalities persist in access to technology among children in Kenya, based on socioeconomic background, age, digital competencies and geographic location, among other factors.[11] Children from well-connected urban settings are more likely to explore and benefit from GenAI tools, while those in rural or marginalised communities face limited access to infrastructure, devices and meaningful online engagement.[12] The digital divide continues to widen among children; moreover, when it relates to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), which require higher digital competencies and connectivity to use safely and effectively.[13] Without deliberate interventions, we risk broadening the digital divide, leaving less fortunate children excluded from the benefits of GenAI.[14] Understanding how children in Kenya are experiencing and interacting with GenAI is therefore critical to ensuring that the digital world is inclusive, ethical and responsive to the realities of all children.[15]

Globally, there is growing concern over the spread of AI-generated misinformation and deepfake content, with UNESCO, the African Union and Kenyan media watchdogs warning of its potential to influence public opinion during elections.[16] This risk is particularly relevant in Kenya's digital environment, where political discourse is often vibrant and widely accessible through social media.

Policy and legal framework on AI in Kenya

As Kenya is known as the Silicon Savannah, to keep up with this reputation, the government has developed a legal framework to regulate the tech industry.[17] The Kenya Information and Communications Act Cap. 411A and the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, Cap. 79C of 2018 serves as the main legislation for regulating tech.[18] The Children Act Cap. 141 of 2022 provides for the protection of children in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),[19] the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

[10] Kemp (2025).
[11] Indeje (2025, 16 January).
[12] Nylund (2022).
[13] Vesna et al. (2025).
[14] McKean (2023).
[15] Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Digital Economy (2025).
[16] Maina, J. (2022).
[17] SMC (2023).
[18] National Council for Law Reporting (2018).
[19] UNCRC (1989)

(ACRWC)[20] and the Kenyan Constitution. The Data Protection Act 2019 addresses the collection and use of various kinds of data, protecting the constitutional right to privacy. In addition to laws, the government, through various agencies, has developed policies, guidelines and strategic plans, such as the Communications Authority's (CA) *Industry guidelines for child online protection and safety*.[21] The Directorate of Children Services launched a five-year strategy to protect children from online sexual abuse and exploitation.[22] Finally, the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner has developed guidelines on how to handle Kenyan children's data both within and outside Kenya.[23] While these laws provide a robust framework for the online protection of children, they do not include AI.

AI legal framework

The African Union, in an attempt to address this gap among member states, developed the Continental AI strategy in 2024, which aims at 'Addressing the risks associated with the increasing use of AI'. The *Continental artificial intelligence strategy*'s 10th action specifically provides for the following, which are related to this study:

> ***Promotion of the protection of children in the face of AI, as Africa is fast becoming a young continent.***[24]

A draft *Kenya artificial intelligence (AI) strategy 2025–2030* was developed,[25] a framework that emphasises ethical and responsible AI development, promotes innovation and economic growth, and ensures that AI benefits all Kenyans. The strategy focuses on three key areas: AI digital infrastructure, data, and AI research and innovation. Related to this research, the strategy provides the following:

> ***Protection against Negative Impacts of Externally Developed AI Solutions: By developing local AI capabilities and frameworks, AI solutions can be rooted in Kenyan values and contexts, rather than solely relying on external solutions that may not align with the country's unique needs and challenges.***

Furthermore, it is a national expression of the continent-wide ambition to build digital sovereignty and a competitive knowledge economy. This draft paved the way for the development of the *Kenya national artificial intelligence (AI) strategy 2025-2030*.[26]

[20] ACRWC (1990)
[21] CA (2025, April).
[22] www.socialprotection.go.ke/downloads
[23] SMC (2023).
[24] African Union (2024).
[25] Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Digital Economy (2025a)
[26] Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Digital Economy (2025b).

GenAI and child rights in Kenya

There are five guiding principles underpinning the implementation of the 1989 UNCRC: best interests of the child, developmental rights, participation rights, survival rights and protection rights.[27]

Best interests of the child

'Best interests of the child' is often considered primary in the Kenyan context. The ACRWC further incorporates this principle, which places a child's well-being above all other considerations. Article 53 of the Kenyan Constitution provides for taking the best interests of the child in all matters concerning them. This is expounded in Section 8 and Schedule 1 of the Kenya Children Act 2022 to emphasise that all actions involving children, whether by courts, government agencies, private organisations or lawmakers, must prioritise the best interests of the child. Judicial and administrative bodies, as well as individuals acting on their behalf, must ensure that every decision or action taken under this or any other law places the child's interests first and foremost. This duty must align with actions that are intended to protect and promote the child's rights and welfare.

Developmental rights

The impact of GenAI on children's social, moral, physical and cognitive development is yet to be fully understood.[28] Initial evidence shows that children are using GenAI for education, creative projects and learning new skills.[29] They are also using GenAI for digital play and entertainment, and to communicate and form connections with people online. In addition, GenAI is being used to provide mental health support to children and to support teachers in developing teaching plans as well as creative and more dynamic teaching materials.[30] Parents' knowledge of the technology and their opinions regarding their children's cognitive development affect how they view AI's role in education.[31] Many teachers agree with parents who see the potential advantages of using technology in the classroom.[32] Further, AI is a useful supplementary tool for improving academic performance,[33] with parents reporting

[27] UNICEF (1989).
[28] Machidon (2025).
[29] Jauhiainen & Guerra (2024).
[30] Hashem et al. (2025).
[31] Mogaka et al. (2025).
[32] Fearn (2024).
[33] Adams (2025).

improvements in their children's comprehension and attitudes when using AI in educational programmes.[34]

On the flip side, GenAI also has its negative effects on child development. The early years for children are critical because it is at this stage that they get to develop cognitively, physically, emotionally and socially.[35] Young children learn a great deal from social interactions and play, and AI tools cannot replicate the nuances of human interaction.[36] Overreliance on technology may limit opportunities for children to develop critical social skills and emotional intelligence, which are foundational for their overall development, as well as critical thinking.

Participation rights

Children in Kenya are increasingly using GenAI tools as part of their learning journeys, particularly under the competency-based curriculum (CBC). Learners have reported using GenAI to support research, improve writing, generate ideas for projects and even code using platforms such as Scratch.[37] These experiences reflect a growing digital confidence among children and a willingness to explore emerging technologies independently.[38] This right has begun to be realised in Kenya through child-focused initiatives that incorporate digital and AI-enhanced tools to amplify children's voices and support their participation in matters affecting them. For example, Childline Kenya has embraced AI with the launch of a chatbot designed to provide a secure and confidential platform for children to seek help and express themselves. They have leveraged AI to create a safe, private and child-friendly environment where children feel empowered to report abuse, discuss sensitive topics and seek guidance on issues they may be hesitant to voice to adults.[39] However, current practice shows that while children are using GenAI tools, their participation is not formally supported or guided.[40] This leaves them to navigate complex tools independently, limiting the depth and quality of their engagement.

Survival rights

The digital spaces created through GenAI are becoming lifelines for children, especially in places where talking about emotions is still taboo or where human support is hard to find. AI tools play a vital role – for instance, some chatbots communicate with users in English and Swahili, helping them breathe through stress and offering emotional support at any time.[41]

[34] Statista (2024).
[35] Fearn (2024); Jauhiainen & Guerra (2024).
[36] UNICEF (2024).
[37] Scratch (2007).
[38] UNICEF (2021).
[39] https://childlinekenya.co.ke
[40] UNESCO (2023).
[41] Kenya Red Cross (2024).

Other digital tools support teenagers' mental health in school settings.[42] In rural parts of Kenya, AI apps offer a safe space for children to talk about their feelings.[43] Additionally, GenAI-powered chat systems are able to offer companionship and emotional safety to children in vulnerable situations, including during school closures or family disruptions such as divorce and separation. However, not all children have such access. Some don't have smartphones or a stable internet; some don't know these tools exist; others worry about privacy or getting into trouble. While many children are reaching out to technology for support, not all of them are being reached in return. Still, their voices are clear. They're using what they have, in the best ways they can, to take care of themselves. That, too, is survival. Furthermore, most GenAI platforms are built on OpenAI or Meta AI models, which means the data used to train these models is not local and results in bias and can even impact the health of the children and their parents.[44]

Protection rights

The CA has released child online protection guidelines,[45] mandating digital platforms to include features like age-appropriate settings, reporting tools and privacy protections. Complementing this, the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) launched the Parents' Digital Literacy Programme (PaDiL), empowering caregivers to guide their children online, with a special focus on awareness around AI tools.[46] Organisations like Childline Kenya also play a vital role, offering a 24/7 helpline for children to report and escape abuse or distress. In recent years, Missing Child Kenya Foundation has been leveraging AI to unite children with their families – using GenAI, they are able to create photographs of missing children at their current age.[47]

Children themselves are increasingly driving their own protection. During the development of CA's guidelines and child protection policy, young people shared their fears: exposure to online predators, data misuse and content that was beyond their emotional maturity. Their voices carried through.[48] Despite these steps, many children still face risks. Online privacy is often overlooked in classrooms, teachers lack sufficient training on GenAI safety, and rural areas struggle with limited reporting mechanisms. But with laws in place, active community involvement and children's voices now part of policymaking, Kenya is building a protection system that is stronger and more grounded in reality.

[42] Muthomi (2024).
[43] Eco Clubs of Kenya: https://ecoclubsofkenya.co.ke; Ongea (2025).
[44] Mozilla Foundation (2024).
[45] CADE (2025).
[46] KFCB (2023).
[47] Amunga (2023).
[48] Indeje (2025, 30 April).

Methodology

Study overview

This qualitative study is part of a multicountry research initiative coordinated by the Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in collaboration with the EU Kids Online network.[49] It investigated how 15 children aged 13-17 experienced and understood generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), focusing on their usage practices, rights awareness and digital agency. The qualitative research approach was selected because it provided an in-depth understanding of how the children interacted with GenAI, focusing on their usage patterns, awareness of digital rights and development of digital agency. By utilising semi-structured interviews and observational elements such as photographs and video recordings of the children using various GenAI tools, the research effectively captured nuanced perspectives on the benefits and challenges of GenAI from the children's viewpoints.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the LSE Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 439180), and the study adhered to institutional, national and international ethical guidelines for research with children. Age-appropriate informed consent procedures were followed: both child participants and their guardians provided signed consent after being informed about the study's purpose, their rights and the voluntary nature of participation. Safeguards were in place to ensure child protection, privacy and data security, in compliance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2019.

All researchers were trained in ethical practices and child safeguarding protocols, with additional support available from the DFC team. In addition, all children had consent from their parents and a recorded assent from the child to participate in the research. The children were informed that participating in the study was voluntary, and they were free to withdraw at any time.

Crucially, this research was led and conducted by a Kenyan team deeply embedded in the local context. This African-led approach ensured a high degree of cultural sensitivity, mitigated the risk of an extractive research model often seen in studies of the Global South, and allowed for a rapport with the participants grounded in a shared understanding. This methodology

[49] Stoilova et al. (2025).

ensured that the children's voices were not only heard but interpreted through a lens that respected their lived realities.

Sample and recruitment

Table 2: Country sample (Kenya)

Participant (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Residence	SES	Type of school	GenAI used
Imani	13	Female	Urban/city	Middle Class	Public	ChatGPT, Question AI
Pinkie	13	Female	Urban/city	Middle Class	Private	My AI, ChatGPT
Ultra Tings	13	Male	Urban/city	Upper Class	Private	ChatGPT, Monica
William	13	Male	Urban/city	Middle Class	Private	ChatGPT, Roblox AI assistant
Ella Novella	14	Female	Rural/town	Middle Class	Private	Aria, ChatGPT
Nygel	14	Male	Rural/town	Middle Class	Public	ChatGPT
Ceci	15	Female	Rural/town	Middle Class	Public	ChatGPT
Varisha	15	Female	Urban/city	Middle Class	Private	Leonardo AI, NightCafe, Copilot
Oisa	16	Female	Urban/city	Middle Class	Public	ChatGPT, Grammarly, Character.AI, Math AI
Blue	17	Male	Rural/town	Middle class	Public	ChatGPT, Canva
Jules	17	Female	Rural/town	Middle Class	Public	ChatGPT, Asper AI
Mitch	17	Male	Urban/city	Middle Class	Public	My AI, ChatGPT, Copilot
Jamai	17	Male	Rural/town	Middle Class	Public	ChatGPT, Roblox AI assistant
Carl	17	Male	Rural/town	Middle class	Public	ChatGPT
Vegas	17	Female	Urban/city	Middle Class	Public	ChatGPT

The study included 15 children aged 13-17, all of whom reported having at least occasional experience using GenAI tools. The sample was purposively constructed to ensure diversity

across gender (with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls), age group (13-14, 15-16, 17), socioeconomic status (SES) (inferred through school type and area of residence) and GenAI experience. Recruitment strategies varied depending on local context (city or town/rural areas) but included snowball sampling through personal networks, outreach to schools and teachers, community-based organisations, youth clubs and social media forums. Initial screening conversations were held with interested participants to confirm eligibility and variation in experience with GenAI tools.

The SES of the children was not as diverse as hoped, reflecting the more limited access to technology, including GenAI, of children from lower-income classes. Therefore, the insights obtained from the study largely reflect those of the middle and upper classes. Still, the sample included participants with varying levels of experience, from occasional to frequent users, thereby capturing a comprehensive understanding of their interactions and perceptions of these tools. We also drew on insights from a separate study with participants from a lower-income class, to provide insights from different groups of children.

Research tools and local adaptation

All research materials, including consent forms, information sheets and interview guides, were developed in collaboration with LSE. Mtoto News identified and incorporated local resources on child online safety and rights to share with the participants. Showcards and interview aids from the GenAI Showcards booklet were adapted to fit the national context.

Data collection

Thirteen of the 15 individual interviews were conducted in person at the Mtoto News offices, while two interviews were conducted virtually with two individual children. Conversations were designed to last approximately one hour, with breaks allowed as needed. Interviews followed a semi-structured guide, encouraging open-ended responses while covering the following core set of themes: GenAI use; child rights; literacy; emotional/playful interaction; mediation; hopes and fears; and remedies.

Where appropriate and with consent, screen interactions with GenAI apps were recorded or documented through photographs. Care was taken to anonymise all identifiable information. The participants were encouraged to demonstrate their use of GenAI tools, and interviews included observational elements to capture interaction patterns, skills and reactions. Interviewers followed up on responses using non-leading prompts and were trained to monitor the child's comfort and well-being throughout.

Data management

Audio recordings were securely stored and uploaded to a protected folder provided by the DFC on LSE's OneDrive. Interviewers also completed post-interview background forms and field notes. Transcripts were produced through GDPR-compliant automated transcription services, and translations into English were provided where necessary. Personally identifiable data (e.g., consent forms) were stored separately from research data and stored in the Mtoto News online drives for sensitive information.

Analysis

Thematic analysis of the data collected through the coding framework revealed a series of rich and interconnected themes that reflect the participants' nuanced interactions with GenAI technologies. Following a structured coding process, researchers systematically reviewed and organised qualitative data, including summaries and direct quotations, across demographic groups and country contexts. Emerging patterns were grouped into overarching themes such as GenAI as a tool for creative self-expression, uncertainty and mistrust in AI outputs, privacy and control anxieties, and limited opportunities for meaningful participation in AI design. These themes were refined to ensure internal coherence and grounded interpretation.

The report is supported by illustrative quotes that highlight diverse lived experiences. Furthermore, variations in thematic prominence were also examined across gender, age groups, SES and national settings, enabling a deeper understanding of how social and contextual factors shape children's engagement with GenAI. This thematic synthesis provides a foundation for recommendations aimed at making AI technologies more inclusive, ethical and responsive to children's rights and developmental needs.

Coding framework overview

The coding framework that was used as part of the qualitative data collection and analysis was based on the 11 Child Rights by Design principles,[50] and their application to the research data was refined through collective feedback and pilot coding. In addition to the coding framework, we also analyzed GenAI usage of children based on their age, gender, SES and AI literacy.

[50] Livingstone & Pothong (2023).

Limitations

The study sought to better understand and describe the views and experiences of children on GenAI. The method of the study was an in-depth interview, which meant working with fewer children who were selected through snowball sampling. This therefore, means that the study may not be representative of all children, but rather a richer description of their experiences and nuances.

The study also assumed that all children who participated in the research had used GenAI before, and that they knew what GenAI was.

This study represents the voices of children and hence may not represent the views of adults, especially parents and teachers, regarding child rights and GenAI.

The participants did not include children from a wide SES, that is, from impoverished backgrounds and the lower-income class. Therefore, we added information from our ongoing research on digital literacy and online safety that captures the views of children in the lower-income areas of Teso North in Busia County and Kapenguria in West Pokot County.

Findings

Children's use and understanding of GenAI

Definition of AI

The participants defined GenAI as applications or bots that can answer questions or respond to prompts by creating new types of content. They noted that this content may include images, text or even videos. Some described GenAI as an invention designed to make their work easier, while others referred to it as a programmed platform. This indicates that the participants recognised GenAI as a technological tool.

Analysis of the interviews revealed a wide perception of Gen AI as an advanced technological tool that simplified the participants' tasks, generated content and provided information, with the participants often using it for schoolwork, research, creative projects like image or music creation, and even for entertainment or personal assistance. Blue (17), for instance, defined AI as 'a series of AI that have been there in the past and that are being improved daily to make things easier', highlighting how integrated AI has become into the participants' hobbies and academic tasks

Most of the participants said that Gen AI gathered information from vast online sources, like the internet:

> ***I think Gen AI came from a simple idea of software engineers. It was a group of people who knew how to code, and I think they used like a lot of stuff from the internet since it was there till now.***

Other participants cited Wikipedia and existing research, learning to respond based on user questions and continuous data input. However, the depth of this understanding varied, as some acknowledged that humans controlled and fed information to AI. Vegas (17), for example, expressed a more human-like view of AI mechanisms, stating:

> ***I'm not sure how it works, but I usually think it's a person... And when you type, the question reaches that person... And maybe that person has a high IQ... And he immediately types your answer back.***

App usage

All the participants who used GenAI reported having interacted mostly with ChatGPT, followed by Grammarly and Character.AI. They noted that apps like Gemini and ChatGPT proved useful for information retrieval and educational purposes – Grammarly for text-based corrections and Character. AI for entertainment and creativity. ChatGPT was widely cited as the most preferred app, with the participants finding it to be a reliable tool for managing research and schoolwork, although those in the 13-14 age group tended to use it more for entertainment purposes.

The other apps most frequently used by the participants were more niche, varying widely depending on the user's goals. For instance, Canva, used by a few, proved useful for image creation and presentations, while other apps such as Aria and Leonardo AI proved useful for creative tasks.

Most of the participants indicated that they used GenAI for homework, helping them understand complex concepts better. Vegas (17), for instance, stated that learning with AI had more clarity in comparison with human teachers:

> ***It' s for schoolwork only ...compared to a teacher, to a human teacher. It is a better teacher compared to a human teacher.***

In addition to education, other children like Ella Novella (14) used ChatGPT for more creative tasks and entertainment:

> ***I use it for ChatGPT and Aria for schooling, business, making music. Also just chatting and also most of the time I generate videos.***

In contrast, Varisha (15) described using GenAI for more creative endeavours and using gaming as an avenue for coding skills, painting a picture of more sophisticated uses of GenAI in older children:

> ***So, I use Leonardo AI to try and create images which I can put in the book as illustrations.***

The fundamental purpose, however, was almost universally perceived as making tasks faster and easier.

Purposes of AI use

Academic and schoolwork assistance proved to be a primary use of GenAI, as most of the participants attended school. Research and information gathering helped them find information and learn new concepts, often replacing traditional search engines such as Google due to AI's ability to provide straightforward, fast and comprehensive answers. Concerning Gen AI, Ella Novella (14) opined that

> ***It's easier to research about things, like you just ask it something and it gives you the answer instead of going all the way to search it.***

The automatic responses allowed for quick incorporation of automatic problem-solving capabilities in homework tasks, study aids, essay generation and grammar correction.

Creative content generation was also a commonly cited reason for AI usage for personal or school projects using tools such as Leonardo AI, Starry AI, Night Cafe, Midjourney and Canva's AI features. The participants stated that AI was useful for drafting stories, comic books, poems and scripts, acting as a blueprint for their creative endeavours. Mitch (17) portrayed his use of GenAI for story generation: 'I used AI to generate a story where I could grasp the concept of the way that I wanted to write the book and told the AI to sort of help me out with a base, like a foundation of a story', while Varisha (17) explored AI usage for larger creative projects: 'I love writing books; I'm currently writing a novel as well as children's books for the younger kids. So I use Leonardo AI to try and create images which I can put in the book as illustrations…'

The use of GenAI tools also varied significantly based on school type, which was linked to socioeconomic status (SES) and age. Students from public schools predominantly used general-purpose tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly and occasionally My AI (Snapchat). In contrast, private school students tended to explore a wider and more specialised range of GenAI applications, often for creative and hobby-related projects in addition to academic tasks.

The younger participants (13-14) primarily engaged with foundational tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly and Canva for basic information retrieval, writing assistance and simple creative tasks. The older participants (15-17) used more integrated and advanced applications like Canva Magic and Character.AI, hinting towards a deeper embedding of AI into personal and social creative content generation. The older participants also demonstrated a higher degree of sophisticated and diverse applications of GenAI compared to younger participants, such as integration of different GenAI apps for creative writing and in-depth research, or handling both script and image generation, and simultaneously employing Copilot and ChatGPT for in-depth debate research, showcasing a strategic and multifaceted integration of AI into complex projects.

Means of access

The participants primarily accessed GenAI tools via personal digital devices and integrated platforms. Smartphones were a very common access point for apps such as My AI (Snapchat), Meta AI (embedded on WhatsApp) and the browser-based version of ChatGPT, allowing for easy accessibility and even daily use. Laptops and computers were also used, especially by those with more extensive tasks like school assignments, presentations or activities requiring a larger screen and keyboard, such as game scripting or detailed creative work.

Jamai (17), a boarding student, pointed out how schools acted as a bridge for AI access for education, where access to devices may be limited:

> ***It is a boarding school... I don't use my phone, I use the school's laptops or computers. So the laptops are for the teachers, and the teachers give us [homework] during the weekend so that you can use or go to the computer lab; the school provides the gadgets.***

Web-based platforms were a key access method, with tools like ChatGPT often being used directly through a web browser on either a phone or computer, while integrated features within existing popular applications were also significant. The participants accessed these Gen AI functionalities built into apps like Snapchat (My AI), WhatsApp (Meta AI) and Canva. Some participants, such as Ella Novella (14), reported using browser-integrated AI like Aria in the Opera browser.

AI literacy skills

Most of the participants found Gen AI easy to use. Carl (17) highlighted how easily accessible Gen AI apps were, stating,

> ***GenAI can be used by anyone, even aged six years and above. Anyone can use it actually, because it's easy...***

However, some initially found it challenging because of the sheer volume of information or complex language. Jamai (17), for example, reflected on his initial experiences with GenAI, saying, 'The first time I used it, yes, it was difficult because there was a lot of information'.

AI literacy among the participants was primarily self-taught. Most learned using YouTube tutorials, while others learned from their peers and siblings. Blue (17) noted, 'I watched tutorials on YouTube to learn the best prompts'. Participants like Ultra Tings (13) mentioned familial involvement in learning: 'My brother showed me how to prompt it for homework.'

A few of the participants reported being taught by teachers to use AI. Coupled with limited formal integration of AI into the curricula, most teachers adopted a cautious, often prohibitive, stance towards direct AI use for assignments. However, some, especially from public institutions, tacitly or explicitly encouraged it for research and conceptual understanding. Vegas (17), for instance, described a vivid instance of her first encounter with GenAI:

> ***Our math teacher came to class and said, if you don't understand any question and there is no one around at home to show you, you can just download this app called ChatGPT, just type what you want, type your question and it's going to bring you the answers.***

The participants also consistently highlighted the importance of effective prompting to achieve desired outputs, often requiring multiple iterations and employment of critical thinking and verification from adults or varied sources, as many recognised that GenAI 'can make mistakes' and should not be trusted blindly. Concerns about potential bias, misleading information and privacy issues were also commonly reported, indicating an evolving critical understanding of AI's limitations and implications. As Nygel (14) concisely put it:

> ***The downside is you have to be aware that it can make mistakes. So, like, after you're done with it, you have to also confirm.***

The participants called for an intentional literacy program to teach on AI – ' We should have a Kid AI class where we learn safely' (Pinkie, 13) –as they said AI was the future. They recommended basic training for children: 'Start with basics for younger kids, then advanced stuff for older teens'(William, 13). They also recommended experiential learning: 'Run AI hackathons for students to experiment'(Jules, 17). They also called for the need to train their parents on AI so that they could support them: 'Parents need to know AI too, so they can help us' (Blue, 17).

Children's approaches to AI

The participants' attitudes in regards to AI varied, sometimes based on their perception of its role. More cautious children, such as Mitch (17), restricted AI's role to a 'servant' or 'assistant', preferring it for more formal and educational tasks:

> ***GenAI has never really been … alive … to me, it's like it's like a tool. I don't think of it as a friend; I think of it as a subordinate. It's more of for GenAI, it's more of get things done.***

Some, however, perceived Gen AI as a 'best friend' and felt comfortable using it for communication and interaction. Younger participants (13-14) were generally more likely to create an emotional connection with GenAI, with some discussing its non-judgmental nature. Varisha (15) described her relationship with GenAI:

> ***We are good friends… GenAI is beautiful, annoying, but good. And it's there for you; they won't get tired of you.***

Girls reported more social and emotional engagement with GenAI, seeing it as a safe space for support and conversation. Vegas (17) also considered ChatGPT a safe space, and Ceci (15)used Meta AI for conversing with friends and family. Despite there being an overlap in usage tendencies, boys tended to express a more functional boundary with AI, reserving it for tasks such as game creation and project idea generation, with nuanced trust, as exemplified by William (13), who stated,

> ***I trust Gen AI when it comes to my daily life, but I don't trust it with my personal issues.***

While some younger participants reported high trust, the overall sentiment was mixed, with many embracing cautious interaction and consistently highlighting the importance of verifying AI-generated information.

The older participants also demonstrated a more complex and critical understanding of AI's broader societal and ethical implications, including concerns about deepfakes, AI's potential to replace human labour and inherent biases. Ceci (15), for instance, was worried about how AI could impact society:

> ***I feel as if the GenAI leads to unemployment as we go. It replaces human labour.***

Ceci, along with most of the older participants, was more likely to articulate and practice self-regulation, advocating for discipline in AI use and taking responsibility for her actions with AI and actively teaching others on AI ethics. Age appropriateness was also a concern, especially among the girls (Imani, Ella Novella, Pinkie, Ceci, Varisha, Oisa, Jules and Vegas), who

consistently articulated the need for age-appropriate design, simpler language and child-specific versions of GenAI.

GenAI and socioeconomic status

The participants attended a public school in both rural and urban areas. The findings reveal clear socioeconomic disparities in digital access. In urban areas, the participants demonstrated higher digital literacy practices, noting, for instance, that they had taught friends how to write using a computer or how to block strangers online. Such reflections illustrate both skill acquisition and peer-to-peer knowledge transfer in contexts where access to computers and the internet is more consistent.

By contrast, accounts from rural areas pointed to structural barriers. One participant reported not having a phone and being denied access to a sibling's device, highlighting device dependency and restricted access within households. Others emphasised institutional gaps, with suggestions that schools should provide opportunities to access computers and build familiarity with digital devices.

Despite these constraints, the participants still enacted agency by sharing lessons with siblings and peers, such as explaining how to detect fake news. However, compared to their Eldoret City counterparts, they remain digitally marginalised, with limited opportunities to build the foundational skills necessary for engaging with advanced tools such as GenAI.

Many of the participants used GenAI tools to help with education and for information seeking. They used it when needed and relied on free versions. Further, those in private schools and those in the city had some level of AI literacy that was provided in school, compared to the children in public schools and rural areas who accessed GenAI at home and had to teach themselves how to use it:

> ***Some tools cost money, and I can't always afford premium features. (Blue, 17)***

The participants from lower-income communities did not really use GenAI in school, because their access to the internet and hardware was limited:

> ***Since I'm in public school, we don't really, because we don't really have phones or gadgets in school, so we don't necessarily use AI in school. (Mitch, 17)***

Furthermore, the participants from the middle-income class engaged in creative, supportive and development activities, compared to those from the lower-middle class who relied on GenAI for information seeking and academic assistance.

Our ongoing research into digital literacy in Kenya, titled It's A Fact, has revealed that children in Teso North and Kapenguria, primarily low-income areas, only accessed the internet in

cybercafes and community resource centres, as opposed to in school or at home. The participants from this area mainly attended public schools, yet in comparison to their peers, they had limited access to devices that allowed them to access online spaces, much less GenAI tools. A 13-year-old child from Kapenguria told us that her parents did not allow her to use a mobile phone at home, limiting her access to technology.

Compared to their peers in upper-income communities living in cities who used GenAI daily, their use went beyond information seeking or education, and it included creativity. As Blue (17) said,

> ***I rely on AI to research my debate topics and then use Canva Magic to design my slides; it's part of my daily routine.***

To further understand the impact of GenAI on children, we have captured the children's voices in relation to the 11 principles of Child Safety by Design, which we now discuss.

Equity and diversity

This principle emphasises the importance of ensuring equal access to digital technologies, such as GenAI, for all children, regardless of their backgrounds, cultures, circumstances and abilities. It highlights the need for inclusive, non-discriminatory design, ensuring that technology benefits all children, without exacerbating inequalities.

In Kenya, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have more limited access to digital technologies overall, which, in turn, restricts their opportunities to engage with GenAI. This digital divide was reflected in our study sample, where those from better-resourced households were more represented among GenAI users. In addition, the children interviewed were of the view that AI and GenAI tools were biased. Oisa (16) highlighted inequity in GenAI image generation, especially when trying to create an African child character: 'I would say ChatGPT is worse because sometimes it gives biased information'. The participants also shared that most GenAI tools were unable to respond in their local language: 'GenAI only works in English and doesn't understand my home language well' (Imani, 13). This was corroborated by Oisa (16), who said, 'I once tried to translate a Swahili book into English on ChatGPT and it gave me something totally different'

The participants also noted that GenAI was biased in its outputs, for instance, an output of white children or stereotypically poor African children, despite detailed prompts:

> ***Nothing came out … it gave us a white child with a green necklace … or like a 'maskini' [poor] African child. (Oisa, 16)***

Mitch (17) noted that GenAI could be racist, particularly in its representation of African settings,

> ***… because Africa is not the same as it used to be. It's not like a place where we 'don't have water' or a 'place where everyone is one specific', which is a bit racist.***

This suggests that the training data for these AI models may lack diverse representation or contain underlying stereotypes.

The participants' experiences from our ongoing research highlight how language gaps and cultural misrepresentation limit their meaningful access to GenAI – they reported that current tools only recognised their languages in very limited ways. For example, Ijakait, a 14-year-old from Teso North, noted, 'The only thing Teso ChatGPT can do is the basics like 'eyalama', which means thank you, and it even gives the wrong meaning of Teso words and it cannot have full conversations and give correct contexts like it does in Luo. This makes my classmates isolate me.'

This illustrates the urgent need to develop GenAI in native African languages that go beyond basic words and affirm children's cultural identity while countering racial and ethnic bias. Children also stress the importance of fairness and respect in AI systems. Training African developers to embed child safety and privacy by design, alongside regular audits of AI outputs, is crucial to detect and correct stereotypes, misrepresentations or exclusions that can undermine self-esteem and belonging.

However, this perception directly contrasted with the lived experiences of other participants. Pinkie (13) noted that

> ***… not biased unless you ask it to be biased, in one way or another you ask it to be biased, but by default it is not biased.***

This indicates a discrepancy between user expectations of neutrality and the AI's actual performance. The participants perceived algorithmic bias not as a simple technical flaw, but as a fundamental misrepresentation of their reality. When Oisa (16) prompted AI for 'an African child with powers' and instead received 'a white child' or a stereotype of 'a poor African child … during a drought', this reflects a denial of their identity in the digital space, highlighting a digital world where their culture and language are marginalised.

The disparity in access manifests not only in cost but in the very nature of the tools children use. The participants from the cities and middle-income communities attending private schools were more likely to access more advanced AI tools compared to those living in rural areas attending public schools. For instance, Varisha (15), a homeschooled student, demonstrated a high level of creative engagement, using specialised platforms like NightCafe

and Leonardo AI to create illustrations for her books. This contrasts with the experience of many other participants, like Carl (17) and Nygel (14), whose primary interaction was with the free version of ChatGPT for more pragmatic tasks like homework. This suggests that socioeconomic and educational contexts directly influence whether GenAI is perceived as a basic utility or a sophisticated creative suite.

Looking at accessibility for children with physical disabilities, the participants expressed that some AI tools, such as transcription for deaf children, helped them access information. Jamai (17) explained,

> ***In primary school, we used to have a worker with a hearing impairment. I used to interact with him using KSL [Kenyan Sign Language], but other people could not understand him … [referring to translation tools] it would be of help, like, if he wanted to instruct people, for example…***

Intersectionality in equity and diversity cuts across various aspects of the participants' circumstances and identities, such as their age, school environment, SES, gender and cultural backgrounds.

The school environment also played a role in exposing the equality and exposure of GenAI based on the type of school a participant attended. Nine out of the 15 participants attended public schools and often relied on the free versions of GenAI tools for their school work, with varied attitudes from their teachers, most of whom did not encourage the use of AI. Six of those attending private schools enjoyed paid features of GenAI tools in comparison to the free versions, also having a more structured integration of AI into their school curriculum, with teachers embracing and encouraging them to use AI for schoolwork.

For the participants, financial wellbeing in the context of GenAI was not about present income, but about *access to opportunity* and the *perceived impact of AI on their future economic security*. Their views were complex, identifying AI as both a potential engine for future prosperity and as a significant source of financial anxiety.

The most immediate barrier to financial wellbeing was the cost of access to the most effective AI tools. The participants were acutely aware that a digital divide existed between the capabilities of free and premium services. This was a recurring theme, with Carl (17) noting that paid versions of AI tools 'give better outputs if you subscribe'. This has created a system where those with financial means can access superior educational and creative tools, potentially widening existing inequality gaps.

This concern is most poignant when it comes to assistive technologies. Nygel (14), considering an AI tool for a child with a hearing impairment, passionately argued that a key change should be to 'make it free … not many can pay for it', highlighting his awareness that financial barriers

could exclude the most vulnerable from tools essential for their development and participation.

At the same time, some of the participants viewed proficiency with GenAI as a direct pathway to future financial wellbeing. They saw it as a tool for entrepreneurship and participation in the digital economy. Jamai (17), who aspired to be a content creator, articulated this clearly, envisioning a future where he could use AI to

> ***… market my project or my goods to the world. And for instance, I will receive maybe big money from the markets, from what I sold to them.***

For Jamai, AI was not just a toy; it was a potential instrument for economic empowerment.

However, this optimism was tempered by a significant and pervasive anxiety about future job displacement. The participants were not naive to the disruptive power of AI. Vegas (17) echoed conversations he had heard from adults, noting the fear that AI was 'taking away all the jobs'. This anxiety was even more personal for those like Nygel (14), who wanted to be a software engineer. He wrestled with the paradox of his chosen career, recognising that while he wanted to build technology, 'GenAI might replace software engineers', posing a direct threat to his future financial stability.

Best interests

This section reinforces the importance of treating children with care, prioritising their needs above all, and making decisions that positively shape their development and future. It emphasises a child-centred approach in all legal, administrative and social matters. In 2013, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child articulated seven specific elements for assessing a child's best interests: (1) the child's views; (2) the child's identity; (3) preservation of the family environment and maintaining relations; (4) the care, protection and safety of the child; (5) a situation of vulnerability; (6) the child's right to health; and (7) the child's right to education.[51] While applying the Best Interest of the Child (BIC) model in the digital age, it is important to ensure that BIC is not misunderstood, or even misused, and is not a replacement for other or all children's rights.[52]

There is a huge gap between the best interests of the child and having the views of the children heard. Children are not only the majority of users of AI tools, they are also the faster adopters, yet the current ecosystem does not include them in the design, development and regulation of AI. As Mitch said,

[51] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013).
[52] Livingstone et al. (2024).

> ***... and most of the time, actually not most, every single time we've talked and we've said, most of us children have talked and we've said, we want, like, a specific AI for us, us guys, us children...I mean, yeah, you have GenAI, you have Gemini, why not have Gemini Kids AI?***

This frustration shows that neither tech companies nor regulators are listening to children, hence failing to prioritise their views in the process, thus failing in the BIC model. This stands in stark contrast to the existing models, where enhanced features and, by extension, potentially better safety, are often tied to payment, and where the fundamental design appears to prioritise adult usage over the unique developmental needs and vulnerabilities of children. This creates a clear conflict, with children holding developers accountable for prioritising their broader business objectives over extensive Child Safety by Design.

A key aspect related to BIC is the ambivalence that GenAI is supporting children's social connections and relationships, which can be both a risk and a benefit. For instance, a risk of GenAI was highlighted by Pinkie (13), who viewed GenAI as a 'best friend' and confidant for emotional problems, preferring it because it 'wouldn't, like, say something bad about you', and Vegas (17), who said that, 'It is a better teacher compared to a human teacher'.This type of relationship with GenAI causes unhealthy attachment with both software and hardware.

Considering the benefits of GenAI for children, Ceci (15) reported using GenAI to connect with family and friends, thus strengthening relationships: ' So I use it first for family and friends...' As noted by Pinkie (13) and Nygel (14), GenAI supports their wellbeing and connection with friends and family. However, on the flip side, this close attachment with GenAI can result in children failing to form connections with their friends and families, which is not in their best interests.

The participants had different experiences when interacting with GenAI tools based on several factors such as their age, socio-economic background, ability, language and health, among others, and hence GenAI provided both opportunities and risks. For instance, some participants felt that GenAI aided children with a disability to learn. As Jules (17) said, 'I think Gen AI has broken the barriers of inclusivity because this child now can participate.'

Some participants felt that a risk presented by most GenAI was that they were not transparent in where they got the information from and their output, making it not trustworthy:

> ***I do trust it, but not 100 per cent, because sometimes it can give you false information and also sometimes, through the hackers, it can leak your information to other people and it can lead to discrimination and other things. (Ceci, 15)***

Prioritising BIC in GenAI involves designing and training data in a way that does not perpetuate bias or make children less than they are. The participants told us that GenAI made them doubt their identity. Mitch (17) stated, 'I feel like [AI] can be a bit racist when generating some images'.

The potential for AI to create and share 'funny images' or 'deepfakes' of peers, as discussed by Blue, Ceci, Ella Novella, Jamai, Jules, Mitch and Vegas, directly led to 'a whole level of bullying on levels so far' (Mitch, 17). This suggests that the data Gen AI is trained on, or its algorithms, perpetuate harmful stereotypes and lack a nuanced understanding of global diversity.

GenAI was also having a mixed impact on the participants' education – it was positively supporting their education, but at the same time, compromising their learning. Vegas (17) spoke for many when he noted that GenAI helped him brainstorm and understand difficult concepts. However, she immediately followed this by identifying a key harm: 'If I overuse it, it's going to lower my critical thinking'. This sentiment was echoed by Imani (13), who admitted AI had made her'... more lazy in thinking'. This reveals that the participants were aware that what served their immediate interest (completing homework) might undermine their long-term developmental interest (learning to think critically).

In addition to the classroom, GenAI provided an opportunity for the participants to learn other skills. Mitch (17), for instance, used GenAI to write a book, and Blue (17) used it to generate artwork.

However, overreliance on AI for anything, such as school work or getting information on careers like medicine or law, could be detrimental to the participants' best interests, as it might cause them to chase grades and not actually learn:

> ***If you're just copying AI ... you're not learning. (Oisa, 16)***

GenAI could also encourage shortcuts and be an avenue to misinformation for children.

The participants recommended that for GenAI to be in their best interests, it should act as a guide rather than providing direct answers. As Ella Novella (14) said,

> ***And instead of it giving me the answer, it will give me an explanation so I can at least get the answer by the ... I can get what it means, but not the answer, so that's not cheating.***

In addition, the participants recommended that GenAI should be more child-friendly. As Mitch said, 'to help the children in teaching if there was a way to make the teachers the AI act specifically like teachers, yeah, that would be top tier', which Jules (17) added to by saying,

'what they should add is emotional support. If a robot is there to teach you, let it understand you emotionally'. Thus, for GenAI to be truly in the best interests of the child in education, it should be child-responsive by reducing overreliance, promoting academic integrity, critical thinking and creativity.

Using these measurements/determinants of best interests of the child, it is obvious that the designers and developers of GenAI are not including them in their process. As Blue (17) said,

> ***AI can give you anything you want, but without discipline and values it can harm you in future, especially if you depend on it fully while studying things like law or surgery...***

Hence, for GenAI to act in the best interests of the child, there is a need to have a systematic change, where children's views are put at the centre of AI design. Further, there is a need for GenAI developers and designers to evaluate bias in their models that leads to the misrepresentation of children, especially African children. This calls for robust training of the models with data beyond where the companies are registered, or better, building localised models.

Consultation

This principle suggests that children need to be consulted in the development, use and integration of AI in policies or products. Children are rarely, if ever, consulted on matters that affect them directly or indirectly, despite international frameworks like the UNCRC advocating for their participation.[53] This exclusion stems from the often-held misconception that children lack the maturity and capacity to contribute meaningfully to decisions about their own lives, such as those related to education, health and community planning.[54] Consequently, there is a significant gap between the principle of child participation and its practical implementation, undermining their right to have their views heard and given due weight based on their maturity.[55]

The participants' call for consultation is deeply rooted in the concerns of the design of child-friendly versions of GenAI, safety, privacy and age-appropriateness of GenAI designs. GenAI needs to include age-appropriate design in terms of language and content being generated for children's consumption. The participants felt they had little to no influence on the design of GenAI, because they were never consulted, as expressed by Jules (17), a girl from a

[53] Article 12 of the UNCRC, Article 7 of the ACRWC, Section 28(3) of the Children Act Cap. 141 of 2022, Laws of Kenya.
[54] Lansdown (2001).
[55] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009).

public school, who was enthusiastic about GenAI for education, self-expression and entertainment:

> ***I decide what to use, but I can't change how it works.***

Mitch (17) added that, 'we want, like, a specific AI for us, us guys, us children', emphasising creating a children's version of AI tools, such as Gemini Kids AI or ChatGPT Kids AI. These sentiments underscore the participants' perspectives on creating GenAI that truly serves their best interests. The repetition of having a 'kids' mode' or 'child-friendly' versions of AI indicates a perceived gap in the lack of children's consultations in the design of GenAI. This also creates the perception that responding to these concerns is reactive rather than a proactive, integrated approach to child safety.

Beyond simply stating a desire for inclusion, the participants offered concrete, actionable design suggestions for making GenAI tools more child-centric. Ella Novella (14) provided a clear feature request:

> ***I would want to change, like, when you type 'kids' mode' to ChatGPT, it turns into kids' mode. So when … a child asks a question, it puts it in simple terms.***

This call for age-appropriate modes was a recurring theme. Similarly, Jamai (17) articulated a principle for collaborative creativity, suggesting that AI should 'first allow you to give your opinion before they add', rather than simply replacing the user's input. Varisha (15) expressed her wish that 'the people who make GenAI would ask kids what features to include'. These specific recommendations demonstrate that children are not just stakeholders to be consulted, but are a source of valuable, user-driven innovation.

Age appropriate

This issue of age-appropriateness goes beyond complex vocabulary and directly impacts a child's sense of safety and comfort. Imani (13) recounted a particularly telling experience where, seeking information for a school assignment on the menstrual cycle, she found the content from GenAI was presented in a way that was not suitable for her age: 'it brought, like … adult information that I did not like … then I showed it to my mom'. This example provides a clear case of how unfiltered, adult-centric information can be jarring and unhelpful for a young user.

The ACRWC and UNCRC[56] incorporate the concept of children's evolving capacities, recognising that as children grow, they become more capable of expressing their views and

[56] Article 5 of the UNCRC.

opinions and taking on responsibilities.[57] The principle of evolving also means that as children's capacities evolve, the level of protection they require may decrease, and their ability to participate in decisions affecting their lives increases.[58] An important aspect of this study is that the concept acknowledges that children in diverse environments and cultures may develop these capacities at different ages.[59]

The repeated sentiments by the participants that GenAI was 'made for adults … not children' (Blue, 17), the demand for simplified language suitable for their age, and child-friendly designs are a growing testament to the need for age-appropriate GenAI tools. The existing tools are not developmentally appropriate. The older participants expressed a protective concern for their younger peers, with Mitch (17), for example, worrying that a 'six-year-old or a seven-year-old asking for information' might receive content designed for ' university level', which he believed they were not 'supposed to be using'. This demonstrates a clear, child-led demand for tiered, age-aware content delivery.

Further, the majority of AI tools mentioned and used by the participants tended to use complex language, making it difficult for them to comprehend:

> ***They should stop using complex words because it's hard for children to understand. (Jules, 17)***

Pinkie (13) added to this, saying that ' ChatGPT uses words I don't understand… It should simplify language for kids'. Blue (17) expressed the complex language of ChatGPT, saying that it was '… very complex, not very friendly for children' and 'it has very complex terms that someone in the low grades won't understand'. Imani (13) wished for a setting that '… knowing your age and summarising it in a way you can understand'.

Oisa (16) and Pinkie (13) also wished for age-adapted outputs while using GenAI, stating that:

> ***This was made by an adult … there's no child who would've made this. (Oisa, 16)***

> ***ChatGPT uses words I don't understand … It should simplify language for kids. (Pinkie, 13).***

All the participants agreed that GenAI was not sensitive to the cultural nuances of Africa. Oisa's experience was incredibly potent: 'we were given a white child in a green shirt with a green what we wanted was like if you can imagine it's like a black child green eye green glowing eyes they're floating the ground beneath them is slightly cracked like you can see they have powers visibly a white child with a green necklace' (Oisa, 16) or, even more tellingly,

[57] Children's Act 2022
[58] Lansdown (2024).
[59] Gerison Lansdown, 2005. "The evolving Capacities of the child," Papersinnins05/18, Innocenti Insights.

'there's a time we're creating stuff, images for organization and we wanted a space like an African child... who's doing something and then you know what it creates a black child... who's wearing traditional clothes and then it's like in a very dry area and then it's the kid is there with like a jerry can with water' (Mitch, 17)**.** This is not a simple glitch; it's the algorithmic encoding of a colonial gaze. Mitch (17) explicitly named it: 'I feel like AI can be a bit racist'. This is a profound finding about the need for digital self-representation.

Oisa (16) described ChatGPT failing to translate a Swahili book accurately, which speaks to a broader Pan-African concern: the risk of digital platforms marginalising Indigenous languages and, by extension, cultures. The consistent request for AI to understand local languages is a demand for digital inclusion and respect. This shows the current mismatch between AI's output and children's evolving cognitive and linguistic capacities.

As discussed, the participants made numerous suggestions for having child-centric modes of GenAI, with Mitch (17) adding that he needed 'a specific AI for children'. An additional solution presented by Imani (13) and Blue (17) was the introduction of an age-verification setting to filter information appropriate for children of different ages, which was simplified. Ella Novella (14) further proposed a setting for parental notifications for certain images.

Using these intersectionalities of age appropriateness or evolving capacity, that is, developmental stage, agency, context and parental role, the participants revealed that, as most GenAI tools' age of sign up was 13 years and above, they didn't take into account children's evolving capacity. By showing that while GenAI tools set a minimum age (usually 13), they failed to account for the varied developmental stages and capacities of children within that age range. The study's findings highlight that the participants experienced these tools differently depending on their maturity, context and support systems. Therefore, applying a one-size-fits-all age restriction overlooks children's evolving abilities and needs, which can affect how safely and effectively they engage with GenAI. This underscores the need for age-appropriate, flexible design and parental guidance that aligns with the children's real-world experiences revealed in the study.

Responsible

This principle seeks to examine the compliance standards of GenAI products and policies with child rights laws and policies. Article 31 of the ACRWC confers responsibilities to the child towards a child's family, society, the State, legally recognised communities and the international community.[60] Part III of the Children Act lists the duties and responsibilities of the child in relation to their rights in Part II of the Act. However, these responsibilities are not in direct relation to GenAI but of a general nature in relation to their family and community.

[60] African Union (1990).

GenAI products and policies must ensure accountability, transparency and ethical practices in their models, from tech providers, educators and guardians.

This approach to the principle aligns with the approach of the African Children's Charter and the Children Act. In contrast, the original Child Rights Framework interprets the roles of children, parents and teachers through the principles of agency and development, rather than responsibility.[61] The participants expressed that multiple stakeholders, such as developers of GenAI products and policies, the government and parents, should share responsibility for these products and policies: a 'triangle of stakeholders who regulate, guide and correct AI use' (Jamai, 17). When things went wrong, someone must be held accountable.

The children identified the responsibilities as follows.

Tech companies' responsibility

When asked to assign responsibility for harms caused by GenAI, the participants consistently and decisively identified technology companies as the primary accountable party. This view was held across different age groups and was often the first and most forceful point made. Their reasoning was rooted in the principle that the creator of a tool was responsible for its function and impact.

Mitch (17) was unequivocal on this point, framing it as a matter of negligence:

> ***the ones who are most at guilt is the technological companies... You created this. You knew the flaws it had, but yet you didn't take enough time to fix those flaws...You report it, the technological company doesn't do anything about it. You don't fix the flaws. You don't even take time to listen to your viewers' feedback. So, possibly, the ones to blame are definitely the technological companies.***

This perspective, which implies that companies knowingly released imperfect and potentially unsafe products, was a shared sentiment. Jules (17) reinforced this by placing companies at the apex of the responsibility hierarchy:

> ***I think everyone in that category holds their responsibilities, starting with the very top, the technology companies, because they're the ones who developed these platforms.***

Carl (17) and Imani (13) held a unified view of holding tech companies responsible for how GenAI was used. Carl thought, 'it's the tech company because they are the ones who made it

[61] Livingstone & Pothong (2023).

and they are the ones who understand how it works' Imani added that 'the companies that make AI' should be blamed when something goes wrong.

Beyond just assigning blame, the participants articulated specific duties they expected these companies to fulfil. Vegas (17), after identifying tech companies as the responsible party, immediately pivoted to a solution, stating that they must take an active role in content moderation:

> ***They should control what their invention shares... If maybe I want to search for something negative, there should be restrictions. Like this is sensitive information and cannot be shared.***

This demonstrates a clear expectation for built-in safety features, shifting the burden of safety from the end-user to the developer. The collective view of the participants was clear: corporate responsibility did not end at product launch; it included an ongoing ethical obligation to correct known flaws, control harmful outputs and ensure the fundamental safety of their users.

Further, prioritisation of profits over safety, tech companies would rather maximise profits and the increasing demand for market share than be concerned with the safety of children as they use their applications.

Government's responsibility

The government, as the primary duty bearer, has a responsibility for upholding children's rights in the digital environment. This includes ensuring that technologies introduced into the public domain are safe, age-appropriate and ethically designed, especially where children are concerned.

The participants saw a clear regulatory role for the government. Jamai (17) specifically questioned,

> ***The government, what have you put in place so that if the children use it in a bad way, they shall correct it?***

In the hierarchy of those responsible, Jules (17) said,

> ***The second one should be the government, for them to allow the technology companies to pass these platforms to people, so they're accountable.***

Another responsibility placed on the government was the participants' desire for the creation of awareness of GenAI tools in the school curriculum. As Oisa (16) said,

> ***you can also blame ... the government for not actually putting it into, like, a proper curriculum or, like, a proper basis of awareness for all citizens.***

However, like many African governments, Kenya has limited power in holding Big Tech companies based in the US or China accountable for the flaws in their technologies. Kenya's legal and regulatory frameworks are weak in comparison to countries like Australia or Brazil, which mandate Big Tech to comply with local laws to keep their operations in their countries. African states have weak bargaining power due to geopolitical and structural challenges. This eventually creates a power imbalance between the two factions, which paves the way for global platforms to continue operating without strong local oversight, and the result is exposure of children to unwarranted digital harms.

Parents' and teachers' responsibility

Article 20 of the ACRWC places responsibility on parents or other persons responsible for the child to have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. Further, the Charter also places responsibility on the State Parties to take all appropriate measures to assist parents or other persons responsible for the child in various ways, such as providing material and programmatic support.

Parents play a crucial role in supporting a child's evolving capacities by adjusting the level of guidance and support they offer, moving from direction to reminders.[62] Parental roles, according to the Children Act[63] include the duties, rights, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and the child's property in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.

The children told us that the role of their parents is supervision and guidance, with Ella Novella saying that 'all parents should be [able to see what] there and what their child is doing so they can certify... what app they're using and it won't bring harm' (Ella Novella,14), teaching children how to use AI, where Jamai posed 'parents from your end, have you taught your child how to use it well?' and keeping GenAI safe for their children to use '... and even parents must play a role in keeping GenAI safe.' (Jamai, 17).

Parental guidance was identified as a key component of the safety net, with children articulating a clear set of expectations for their parents' involvement. Their perspectives outline a multi-faceted parental role that includes granting initial access, providing ongoing moral guidance, and acting as a trusted authority when digital interactions become confusing or harmful.

[62] Kilkelly (2021).
[63] Section 31 of the Children Act 2022.

First, children see parents as the initial gatekeepers of access. In his systematic breakdown of responsibility, Mitch (17) logically places parents as a crucial link in the chain, questioning their role in the decision to 'let me use the AI' in the first place. This implies an understanding that the first act of parental responsibility is the decision to introduce these powerful tools to their children.

Second, parents are expected to be active supervisors and moral educators, particularly in preventing their children from causing harm to others. Vegas, in the context of AI-generated images being used for bullying, stated, 'I think the parents should be more concerned about what their children are doing with the Gen AI', because they might be doing it to harm others' (Vegas, 17). This perspective positions the parent not just as a protector of their own child, but as a guide responsible for ensuring their child is an ethical digital citizen.

Third, some participants tend to view their parents as a crucial safe harbour when they encounter confusing or inappropriate content, while others highlighted the protective role parents play in providing accurate information, especially when AI might give misleading advice on sensitive topics; Jamai (17) suggested that 'if someone is bullying you in the internet you can tell your parents maybe they can know what to do from there'. This action demonstrates a level of trust and an established pattern of turning to a parent for clarification and safety when the digital world proves inadequate or unsettling. However, we note that this may not be the case for other children in the country due to complicated relationships with their parents.

Finally, some participants envision a role for parents that is deeply integrated into the technology itself. Ella Novella proposed a sophisticated safety feature where the AI would be designed to actively involve parents in the moderation process. When a user attempts to generate a potentially sensitive image, the AI should be required to 'Connect... to your mom's probably email or something, send it a message. So your parent can come and check it out' (Ella Novella, 14). This innovative suggestion reframes the parent from a passive supervisor to an active co-regulator within the digital platform, highlighting a desire for safety systems that are collaborative by design.

The participants interviewed view teachers as part of a broader group responsible for GenAI's ethical use. They view teachers as stakeholders who encourage and guide their use of GenAI for research and learning. Imani's social studies and creative arts teachers advised students to 'you should go and research more using the AI... because maybe he doesn't know most of the things' (Imani, 13). Vegas's maths teacher even suggested directly, 'if you don't understand any question and there is no one around at home to show you, you can just go, download this app called ChatGPT, just type what you want, type your question, and it's going to bring you the answers' (Vegas, 17).

On the other hand, Ella explicitly stated that responsibility can fall on a 'teacher in case she told you to use it and she's not supervising you' (Ella Novella, 14). Mitch also acknowledged that 'the teachers, the school is to blame to some extent' (Mitch, 17) if something goes wrong with AI usage.

Children's responsibility

In line with the principles of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which identifies that children have responsibilities in the enjoyment of their rights, the participants in this study demonstrated a strong sense of personal accountability in their use of GenAI. They did not position themselves as passive victims of technology but as active agents who must make conscious and ethical choices.

This sense of responsibility was most clearly articulated in their approach to the information AI provides. Nygel argued that when faced with harmful advice from an AI, responsibility is shared, falling partly on 'the person for listening to something that doesn't even exist' (Nygel, 14). This displays a critical understanding that AI-generated content should not be accepted without question and that the user has a duty to apply their own judgment.

This duty extends deeply into the educational context, where the children articulated a need for self-discipline to avoid the pitfalls of dependency. Blue showed a mature, long-term perspective, warning that a lack of personal discipline could have severe real-world consequences: 'If you use AI to study something like law and surgery, you might harm someone in future since you're depending on it fully' (Blue, 17). This sentiment is echoed by Oisa, who recognises that simply copying answers for a grade is a hollow victory, stating, 'if you're just copying AI... you're not learning' (Oisa, 16).

Furthermore, the children see it as their responsibility to protect their own creativity from being diminished by the ease of AI. Jamai framed it as an active choice, asserting that 'it's more vital to embark on your own creativity because AI can sometimes limit what you think of' (Jamai, 17). This responsible use is put into practice by participants like Vegas, who describes his process not as blind acceptance, but as active curation: when AI provides a large volume of information, her role is to 'filter it out and only pick the ones that are helpful to me' (Vegas, 17). Collectively, their testimonies reveal a clear understanding that while AI is a powerful tool, its ultimate value and safety are determined by the critical engagement and ethical choices of the children who use it.

Participation

This principle alludes to the fact that children are in a position to use GenAI to express themselves, access information and participate in digital publics by sharing their work with

society. Meaningful participation, as defined by the Lundy model, requires not just a voice, but also a safe space to express it, a receptive audience and the potential to influence outcomes.[64]. The discussions with the children revealed a complex and varied landscape of participation across these four domains.

The participants described GenAI not just as a tool, but as a new kind of *space* for thought, creativity and problem-solving. These spaces were often private and individualised, allowing for experimentation free from immediate social judgement. For Mitch (17), the My AI chatbot on Snapchat served as a private writing room where he could brainstorm and iterate on complex story ideas. For Varisha (15), platforms like Roblox Studio, augmented by GenAI scripting tools, became personal innovation labs where she could engage in game development:

> ***I also play Roblox. I use GenAI to create Roblox games because sometimes, because there's something when you're creating the Roblox games, you have to do some scripting… I use GenAI to script Roblox games…***

For others, like Blue (17), ChatGPT and Canva created a functional space to design things like logos for his teen book club:

> ***I almost use ChatGPT and Canva every day … since I study every day, ChatGPT is, like, my guide.***

The key finding was that AI provided personalised, on-demand creative and intellectual spaces that were previously inaccessible, allowing the participants to engage in activities that might otherwise require formal training or resources.

Within these digital spaces, the participants were using GenAI to find, shape and amplify their creative *voice* in remarkably sophisticated ways. This went far beyond simple Q&A. Mitch (17), for instance, used AI to refine his narrative voice, prompting it not just for a story, but one in the specific literary style of author Rick Riordan, and then directing the plot by demanding a 'tragic end' Varisha (15) developed her technical voice by using AI to generate code, allowing her to 'speak' the language of game development. Meanwhile, Ella Novella (14) used AI to give her written voice a musical dimension, turning her lyrics into full songs. These participants were not merely asking for content; they were actively directing, curating and collaborating with the technology to express a specific, personal, creative vision.

Audience: The question of the audience reveals a significant tension in the children's participatory experience. While they were creating prolifically, they were often hesitant to share their AI-assisted work with their most immediate audience: their peers. This hesitation

[64] European Commission (2007).

was rooted in a fear of social stigma and judgement. Jamai (17) captured this fear perfectly, worrying that his friends would diminish his work by saying, 'Ah, bro, how can you do that?' Pinkie (13) recounted feeling guilty and lying about using AI for a school project that received praise, highlighting the social pressure to present work as entirely her own. While some, like Varisha (15), had successfully engaged a public audience by posting AI-generated art on Instagram and receiving 'many likes', the primary audience for much of this creative output remained themselves. The creative space was safe, but the social space for sharing the output was often perceived as risky.

Influence: The children's participation had the most tangible *influence* on their sense of empowerment and skill development. For Varisha (15), AI had a direct, enabling influence, helping her overcome a skills gap: 'I'm not a coder, so it helps'. For Blue (17) and others, it had a clear influence on their academic work and grades. However, their ability to influence the platforms themselves, a key component of meaningful participation, was perceived as minimal. The recurring desire for a 'kids' mode', for simpler language or for better privacy controls represented a plea for their user experience to have a tangible influence on the technology's design. The frustration that AI tools felt 'made by adults' reflected a gap where the participants had the space and voice to participate *with* the tool, but lacked the perceived power to influence the rules and structure *of* the tool itself.

Privacy

This principle looks to ensure that no child experiences interference with their freedom from public attention from GenAI companies, as well as protecting their dignity within those spaces. Privacy within Gen AI apps is essential, as most of the prompts made are either directly or indirectly tied to the personal lives of the children who use them. In Kenya, the right to privacy is enshrined in the Constitution[65] as well as embedded in various pieces of legislation such as the Children Act,[66] the Kenya AI Strategy, the Data Protection Act[67] and the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act,[68] among other legal frameworks.

The European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) defines privacy as the lawful handling of personal information. Handling involves the organisation, collection, storage, structuring, use, consultation, combination, communication, restriction, destruction or erasure of personal data. Privacy has the following characteristics: purpose limitation; fairness, lawfulness and transparency; data minimisation; storage limitation; accuracy;

[65] Article 31 of the Constitution of Kenya 2010.
[66] Section 27 of the Children Act 2022.
[67] Sections 3 and 25 of the Data Protection Act 2019.
[68] Sections 3, 52 and 53 of the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act 2018.

confidentiality and integrity; and accountability. The children's experiences and concerns provide a powerful, real-world commentary on each of these principles.

Purpose limitation: This principle dictates that data should only be collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes and not be further processed in a manner that is incompatible with those purposes. While the participants did not use this legal term, their anxieties reveal a deep-seated concern about purpose limitation. When a child asks AI for homework help, the legitimate purpose is to receive educational assistance. However, the fear, as articulated by Mitch (17), was that the data from this interaction, their questions, their intellectual struggle and their creative ideas were being repurposed for an entirely different, unstated purpose: surveillance by unknown entities. His worry about being spied on by a 'geezer … in the United States of America … spying on my information' is a raw expression of what happens when purpose limitation is not clearly communicated or trusted. This ambiguity forces children to assume their data might be used against their interests.

Fairness, lawfulness and transparency: This principle requires that data processing be transparent to the individual. The participants' testimonies highlight a significant transparency gap. They were operating in an environment where the rules were unclear, and they were left to guess who might be on the other side of the screen. The lack of transparency directly fuelled the fear and mistrust evident in their responses. When Blue (17) stated that he had to research ChatGPT's privacy measures and was warned 'you should never put something that is very confidential', it shows that transparency was not the default; it was something the user must actively seek out, and even then, the conclusion was to be wary. A truly transparent system would not require a child to conduct their own investigation to feel safe. Further, transparency calls for the service provider to ensure the user understands the terms and conditions. However, as noted by many of the participants, GenAI was not child-friendly, and the language was complex, which made it difficult for them to understand the privacy policies of GenAI companies.

Data misinformation: This principle asserts that personal data collected should be adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary for the purposes for which it is processed. Interestingly, where platforms fail to practice data minimisation by design, children develop their own intuitive strategies to enforce it. Varisha (15) provided a perfect case study. She described a nuanced relationship with her Snapchat AI, treating it like a 'best friend' but consciously withholding specific details. She explained that she might tell it she went to 'a café, but not which specific one'. This is a masterful act of user-led data minimisation. She provided enough information for the social interaction to function, but deliberately omitted the precise, sensitive location data that was not necessary for the purpose of the conversation, thereby protecting her own privacy. But this was not always the case; there

were instances where the participants provided too much information, which might then be misused or misinterpreted.

Storage limitation: This principle requires that data be kept in a form that permits the identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary. The participants' comments reveal a lack of trust that companies were adhering to this. This distrust led them to take matters into their own hands. Nygel (14) offered a starkly practical solution born of this scepticism. When asked about sharing confidential information with AI, he concluded that the best course of action was to 'just delete the chat after'. This was a user-driven attempt to enforce storage limitations because the platform's own data retention policies were either unknown or not trusted. The participants were also concerned about where the data was kept. Oisa (16) and Varisha (15) noted that it was not safe to share lots of information, in case someone was reading or accessing their information: 'Our privacy and data isn't really kept. So that means other people are actually viewing our data' (Varisha, 15). Most of the participants in this category reported feelings of shame at the thought of their information being leaked, suggesting that the data shared was very sensitive, and GenAI took the role of a confidant in their lives.

Accuracy: The principle of accuracy is crucial, as the data processed and generated by AI must be correct to be safe and useful. The participants' experiences show frequent and concerning failures of this principle. The most alarming examples emerged in the context of health. This issue of inaccurate exaggeration was also raised by Jules (17). The problem extends to academic and cultural information, as noted by Oisa (16), who found ChatGPT provided a completely incorrect summary and author for a Swahili book. This demonstrates that a failure of data accuracy is a direct threat to children's emotional wellbeing and their right to receive correct information.

Confidentiality and integrity: This dual principle, ensuring data is protected from unauthorised access (confidentiality) and is accurate (integrity), is at the heart of the children's privacy concerns. Their testimonies reveal a stark divide in their belief that platforms could ensure confidentiality. Pinkie (13) exhibited high trust, stating she believed 'ChatGPT does not give out your information, I wouldn't be worried'. In sharp contrast, Nygel (14) expressed a fundamental lack of trust, arguing it was always 'person because with AI, 'your data can be lost and exposed'. This spectrum of trust dictates how the participants engaged, with some sharing freely and others, like Mitch (17), resorting to 'self-encryption' to protect themselves. The participants expressed caution and even hesitated to share personal information online for fear that their personal information would end up in the wrong hands. Ceci (15) expressed that 'the internet never forgets, and information is never confidential.' They preferred to use ChatGPT for more non-personal reasons, such as education or general information retrieval

and recreational chatting. They remained highly cognisant of hacking risks that existed while using Gen AI, as well as the potential of information leaks to lead to abuse.

Accountability: The accountability principle holds that the data controller is responsible for and must be able to demonstrate compliance with all the other principles. The participants were clear and unified in their view on this: accountability rested firmly with the technology companies. They saw these companies as the ultimate data controllers who must be held responsible for the safety and privacy of their platforms. Carl (17) insisted that the privacy features should be strictly adhered to 'they should enhance them more.' This is a direct call for companies to demonstrate accountability through better design.

Safety

This principle is aimed at ensuring that all measures are taken by GenAI companies to protect children from all forms of violence, negligence and abuse. In addition, protective measures must be taken by these companies and platforms to provide the necessary support for the child and aid their recovery from any form of abuse or neglect within these systems.

The principles of online safety can be distilled into several key areas: integrity, authenticity and non-repudiation and availability.[69] These pillars form the foundation of cybersecurity, and the participants' testimonies provide a powerful, real-world illustration of how each is being challenged in the age of GenAI.

Integrity: the danger of inaccurate and exaggerated information

The principle of Integrity, ensuring data is accurate and has not been tampered with, was severely undermined by the participants' experiences, particularly in the critical domain of health. A recurring and potent safety concern was GenAI's tendency to provide inaccurate and dangerously exaggerated medical advice.

Varisha (15) shared a distressing story where an AI doctor app wrongly suggested her mother had cancer, causing significant fear. This was not an isolated incident. Nygel (14) voiced the same anxiety, noting that AI might escalate a simple flu into a diagnosis of ' cancer or something like that', causing undue stress. Jules (17) confirmed this, stating that when it comes to health, 'AI tends to exaggerate…I think AI should stop exaggerating symptoms because it puts stress on people.'

The aspect of inappropriate content came out strongly, where Varisha (15) noted that while she liked using it for her schoolwork, the AI sometimes generated inappropriate content:

[69] Witcher (2025).

'Some AI apps allow explicit content … parents worry, "Is this what my child should use?"' 'This failure of informational integrity and appropriateness for children highlights a dangerous vulnerability where children, seeking accessible answers, are exposed to psychologically damaging information and misinformation.

Authenticity: the weaponisation of AI for bullying and misinformation

Authenticity, verifying the identity of users and the origin of information, is directly threatened by GenAI's capacity to create convincing fakes. The participants unanimously identified the use of AI-generated images for bullying as a major safety violation. They described how this lack of authenticity was weaponised to inflict real-world harm. Ceci (15) recounted how a friend felt so bad that she left the group after her photo was maliciously edited using AI, while Jamai (17) spoke of seeing a boy's image altered to really lower his self-esteem.

This fear extends beyond personal bullying to societal misinformation. Oisa (16) expressed a profound unease with the power of deepfakes, stating,

> ***I find it scary how even the smallest of your online footprints can be used to make these things. I have seen videos of dead politicians dancing or even being dressed as the Pope … that means that as long as you have an enemy, they can use it against you.***

This demonstrates a sophisticated understanding that a failure of authenticity in AI outputs posed a threat not only to individual dignity but also to social and civic trust.

Non-repudiation and availability: the call for accountability and equitable safety

The principles of non-repudiation (ensuring a user cannot deny their actions) and availability (ensuring access to safe systems) are central to the participants' calls for a safer digital environment. Their demands for reporting strategies and content restrictions are, in essence, a call for systems that enforce non-repudiation, ensuring that those who create harmful content are held accountable.

Furthermore, the participants recognised that safety was not equally available to all. The fact that better, safer or more private versions of AI tools were often behind paywalls created a system of tiered safety. Varisha (17) touched on this when she insisted that 'The paid ones are better compared to the ones that you don't pay for'. This implies a belief that safety and accessibility should be universal rights, not premium features. True safety is only achieved

when its core principles are available to every child, regardless of their (parents'/guardians') ability to pay.

Wellbeing

This principle aims to ensure that GenAI companies prioritise the right to life for all children and provide them with access to a decent standard of living through the facilitation of essential healthcare and freedom from economic exploitation. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), wellbeing is not just an individual experience but is also influenced by social and environmental factors.[70] It identifies the following pillars of wellbeing: *intellectual wellbeing* – pursuing stimulating and challenging activities for growth and development; *vocational wellbeing* – feeling a sense of purpose and satisfaction in one's work or activities; *inner/spiritual wellbeing* – connecting with one's values and beliefs, and finding meaning and purpose in life; *environmental wellbeing* – a healthy and safe environment, both built and natural; and *financial wellbeing* – having financial security and stability. In relation to the digital world, WHO emphasises that digital wellbeing is about using technology in a way that supports overall health and happiness, rather than hindering it.

There are also mixed benefits in relation to children's wellbeing. While providing useful information and emotional support, GenAI's current capacity for health advice also poses substantial risks to children's physical and mental health due to inaccuracies, a lack of age-appropriateness and emotional distress. Pinkie (13), for instance, detailed an instance where Gen AI was beneficial for health advice:

> ***So it was I was in grade six … we were doing KPSEA [Kenya Primary School Education Assessment], I had some headache, my stomach was paining, I did not want to do anything at all … when I asked my parents, they told me that it was because of capsaicin. So I went to the GPT and asked what is going on and it told me that I was stressed because of my exams or maybe I was being pressured to pass my exams; it explained more on what I was feeling.***

Pinkie found GenAI to be a useful tool for managing difficult feelings, explaining that she talked to AI about her 'emotional problems' and that it could 'just calm me down'. The diversity of how the participants viewed their relationship with GenAI was unequivocal, where some viewed it as an emotional support, while others expressed a detachment from it. Pinkie said that ChatGPT made her feel happy, sad, bored and irritated, and made her laugh, among other emotions. She explained that,

[70] WHO (2020).

> ***I'm literally so happy because it gives me a lot of knowledge and, like, it helps me when I'm, like, confused of something, like, what I'm feeling... Am I happy? Am I sad? I literally tell it. Today, this and this happened. I don't know if to be happy or sad. And it will literally tell me, because this happened, you should be sad. Because this happened, you should be happy.***

Jamai (17) also had this view, where he saw GenAI 'like a friend who knows what I want and will just give me what I want, the way I want it'.

As noted by William (13), GenAI had become a medical assistant, especially in communities that could not afford healthcare support,

> ***... it's a faster way to know more about your health and it's good, like, if you're in a situation that you probably don't have money to get the doctor for consultation, it is a free way in.***

However, the participants also noted that using GenAI for medical support could be dangerous and might lead to misdiagnosis. As Nygel (14) said,

> ***AI can make mistakes. So it will even be a minor mistake that changes a lot, because maybe you actually have the flu, but it says, let's say, you have cancer or something like that, you can get really stressed. And I think even if that happened to some people, they can decide to commit suicide or something like that.***

Further, the participants noted that as GenAI tools were not child-friendly, they generated adult information on health-related matters. As Ella Novella (14) noted,

> ***So we were told to go and learn more about the menstrual cycle. So when I Googled, it brought like ... more, like, it's, like, adult information that I did not like.***

The participants noted that GenAI could not be trusted when it involved their health. As Nygel (14) put it,

> ***In terms of the health GenAIs, they should tell you the AI can make a mistake. And you shouldn't trust it 100 per cent. And even after you get the description, you should still go to an actual doctor.***

Intellectual wellbeing

The participants consistently described GenAI as a powerful engine for their intellectual wellbeing, viewing it as a stimulating tool for growth. For them, AI was an advanced intellectual partner that made learning more dynamic and accessible. Ella Novella (14) found

that it expanded her capabilities, appreciating that 'it can teach complex things like coding … it also makes research very easy'. This sentiment of AI as an expansive knowledge tool was shared by Pinkie (13), who marvelled that 'it's so creative, thoughtful, and has more knowledge; you can literally ask anything'. The speed and clarity with which it delivered this knowledge was key to its value. Nygel (14) highlighted this efficiency, noting, 'I like that it gives quick responses, and you can also tell it to explain something in simple words'. This transformed AI into what Blue (17) called an indispensable resource you could use to 'think through with you. It gives you ideas and then you can come up with one thing'.

Vocational wellbeing

Beyond general learning, GenAI contributed to the participants' vocational wellbeing by enabling them to pursue specific projects that provided a sense of purpose and accomplishment. It acted as a practical tool that bridged skill gaps, allowing them to participate in creative and technical activities that aligned with their interests. This was most evident with Varisha (15), an aspiring game developer, who found immense satisfaction in overcoming her limitations with AI's help, explaining, 'I use GenAI to create Roblox games… I'm not a coder, so it helps'. This act of creation provided a tangible sense of achievement. Similarly, Imani (13), a young writer, used it to move her personal projects forward. She explained, 'Sometimes, like, I love writing stories. So … I just find a topic and maybe prompt it. Then it gives me an example of a story now. I take some of what I've learned from that story. I write it also in my story', demonstrating how AI helped her build a foundation for her vocational aspirations.

Inner and spiritual wellbeing

This pillar, which concerns a connection to one's values and sense of meaning, is where the participants' relationship with AI became most complex. For some, AI provided a source of connection and emotional support, contributing positively to their inner wellbeing. Varisha (15) described her relationship with her Snapchat AI as being like a 'best friend' with whom she could share details about her day, finding it to be a reliable and non-judgmental companion. However, this search for connection was complicated by a deep internal conflict over the values of authenticity and honesty. The participants were actively negotiating the meaning of their own creativity in the age of AI. This was felt acutely by Pinkie (13), who recounted feeling a sense of guilt after using ChatGPT for a school project, admitting, 'that time I was lying because I did not … use most of my creativity'. This contrasts with the philosophical stance of Mitch (17), who believed his own work was inherently more valuable because 'to be genuine, it needs to come from the heart, from the soul', an emotional depth he felt AI could not replicate.

In addition, other participants only saw GenAI as a tool to get things done, and not to be too emotionally invested in it. GenAI was incapable of understanding human emotions. Nygel (14) advised that '… it's better to just talk to a real person because the real person has emotions and could understand you better'. Ultra Tings (13) expressed his wariness against using AI for emotional support, specifically mental health support, citing 'I heard of a child who ended his own life because of AI, it's not safe'. He added that humans should talk to other humans and not AI, revealing that AI had no emotional capacity to understand how humans felt. As GenAI evolves and more tools come up, there is need for clear ethics to enable children to distinguish between human connections and machine connections.

Environmental wellbeing

Besides their digital environment being a conducive space for children to learn and explore different ideas, the use of GenAI significantly impacts how children respond to environmental issues. The participants viewed GenAI as a tool with the potential to positively impact environmental wellbeing, primarily through providing information and suggesting solutions. Blue (17) actively used ChatGPT for research related to the environment, seeking to understand how Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 (clean water and sanitation) was connected to 'human and the environment'. Ceci (15) used GenAI to ask 'What are some of the environmental impacts under the industry sector?' and found the results to be positive and informative. She also inquired about the impact of GenAI on the environment, believing that 'if they use renewable energy to use the GenAI, it's going to be quite positive' for the environment. This suggests a perceived link between AI development/use and sustainable energy. William (13) imagined that in the next 10 years, GenAI would bring 'a lot of changes, like, there will be new ways of transportation, energy saving and many more' concerning the environment.

These perspectives highlight a hopeful view among some of the participants that GenAI could be a valuable resource for learning about environmental challenges and contributing to solutions, particularly in areas like climate change, resource management and sustainable development.

Mental wellbeing

For many children, the GenAI platforms were also a significant source of stress and anxiety. The risk of receiving inaccurate health information was a primary concern. Jules (17) warned that AI's tendency to 'exaggerate … puts stress on people with depression'. This fear was viscerally realised by Varisha (15), who experienced severe distress when an AI app incorrectly suggested her mother had cancer based on her symptoms. This potential for AI to cause psychological harm, combined with the internal conflict expressed by children like Imani (13)

over becoming 'more lazy', shows that the relationship between daily AI use and mental wellbeing is complex and fraught with risk.

Development

This principle seeks to ensure GenAI platforms uphold and do not interfere with a child's holistic development. Child development is often understood across five interconnected domains: cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual, mental and physical. It also includes the right to play, to culture and to education. All are crucial for a child to become a well-adjusted adult. The participants' testimonies reveal that GenAI is a powerful force that is actively shaping their development in each of these areas, presenting both profound opportunities and significant risks.

Cognitive development

The most significant impact of GenAI is on children's cognitive development. The participants viewed it as a sophisticated tool that accelerated their learning far beyond traditional methods. Jamai (17) highlighted its efficiency, noting,

> ***GenAI is special because if you look at Google you have to sort through a lot of information … but [GenAI] just gives you the explanation … it saves your time.***

This sentiment was shared by Vegas (17), who felt AI was a superior educational tool, stating,

> ***… it sometimes, it knows what humans do not know and it has more information than we have… I think it is a better teacher compared to the human ones.***

Critically, the participants were using it not just for answers, but as an educational 'scaffold' to build their understanding. Ella Novella (14), when using AI for homework, deliberately sought an 'explanation so I can at least get the answer by the … I can get what it means', showing a desire to learn the process, not just the result. However, this cognitive support was coupled with a clear-eyed awareness of the risk of dependency. The participants themselves articulated a fear of their own mental development being stunted, with Vegas (17) worrying that overreliance would 'lower my critical thinking' and Imani (13) confessing that at times, 'it has made me more lazy in thinking'.

Social development

GenAI was actively reshaping the participants' social development by providing new avenues for interaction while also posing risks to their social skills and safety. For some, AI offered a less intimidating way to engage. William (13) felt it was a 'better way to socialise' because it

provided clear information without the social complexities of human interaction. This was echoed by Ella (14), who described her interactions with Aria similar to that of a friend or companion.

However, this digital companionship existed alongside the threat of AI being used as a tool for antisocial behaviour. The participants' testimonies were rife with examples of AI-facilitated bullying, which poisoned their social environment. In one scenario, where the participants were asked about 'funny' images of new students shared using GenAI, Blue (17) noted,

> ***That is a misuse of a resource. And it is not something that should happen. It should have consequences for that.***

Carl (17) added that,

> ***My thoughts about this, it will be some kind of bullying. So people may use it to bully others, like, for creating a weird picture of you, of using a picture, and edit it with AI bot and then sharing it to many people so that they can see it.***

This highlights a critical challenge to healthy social development: navigating a world where technology can both simulate relationships and be weaponised to destroy them.

Emotional development

The participants' emotional development was profoundly impacted by their interactions with GenAI, which served as both a source of comfort and a catalyst for significant distress. For some, it was a tool for emotional regulation. Pinkie (13) explained that she turned to AI with her 'emotional problems' and found that it could 'just calm me down'. The non-judgmental nature of AI, as described by Jamai (17), made it a safe space to explore feelings without the fear of the 'superiority' or judgement they might face from a human teacher. Conversely, the use of AI could also trigger intense negative emotions. The guilt and confusion over academic integrity were strong themes, with Pinkie (13) admitting she felt she was 'lying' when praised for AI-assisted work. More acutely, the threat of misinformation posed a direct risk to emotional stability. Varisha (15) recounted the severe anxiety and fear she experienced when an AI app wrongly suggested her mother had cancer, a danger Jules (17) identified explicitly, noting that AI's tendency to exaggerate health symptoms 'puts stress on people with depression.'

Spiritual development

In the context of spiritual development, connecting with one's values and finding meaning, the participants were using GenAI to navigate complex questions of authenticity, creativity and integrity. Their engagement with AI-generated art and text had sparked a deep, internal

debate about the value of human creation. This was most powerfully articulated by Oisa (16), who felt that human creativity and emotion are superior to AI, particularly in writing and art. She prefers human work because 'there's a way a human knows how to connect with their audience or how they know how they're feeling that they want to evoke'. This reflects a deep connection to the value of the human spirit in creation. This moral and ethical reasoning demonstrates that the participants were not just using a tool; they were grappling with its implications for their personal values and what it meant to be a creator in the modern world.

Physical development

While the participants did not spontaneously discuss the direct impacts of GenAI on their physical development (such as issues related to increased screen time or a sedentary lifestyle), this remains a critical domain within a holistic view of child development. The immersive and engaging nature of many AI platforms, from creative tools to gaming worlds like Roblox, implies extended periods of digital interaction. As recognised in broader child health research, parents, educators and platforms need to consider and encourage a healthy balance between digital engagement and physical activity to ensure this domain of development is not inadvertently neglected.

GenAI is a powerful force in supporting children's cognitive development, but it presents a direct risk of fostering dependency over critical thinking. Further, it offers new avenues for social interaction while simultaneously posing a threat through AI-facilitated bullying. It presented an internal conflict in participants' emotional and spiritual development by questions of authenticity and integrity.

Agency

The principle of agency, in this context, refers to children's capacity to act independently and make their own free choices in their engagement with GenAI, protecting themselves from manipulation and exploitation. The discussions revealed that agency was not a fixed trait but a dynamic practice. The participants were not passive recipients of technology; they were actively negotiating their independence, employing a spectrum of strategies that ranged from commanding the AI as a subordinate tool to consciously resisting its potential to foster dependency.

At the apex of this spectrum is the child who asserts mastery over the tool. Mitch (17) exemplified this high level of agency, conceptualising his relationship with AI through a powerful metaphor of control. He viewed AI as his 'subordinate' or 'servant' to whom he could give commands like 'Chop chop, get this done for me'. This framing established a clear hierarchy where he was the master and the AI was the tool, a mindset that informed his

interactions. He further demonstrated this agency through a deliberate strategy of 'self-encryption' when seeking advice, carefully phrasing his prompts so that 'whoever's spying on your information doesn't know that you're doing it'. This was not just use; it was a strategic manipulation of the system to serve his needs while actively mitigating its risks.

Many of the participants exercised their agency by setting clear boundaries and using AI as a scaffold for their thinking, rather than a replacement for it. They were wary of overreliance and consciously worked to prevent it. Blue (17) articulated the philosophy behind this approach, stating that the use of AI

> ***… needs discipline… If you don't have values, it can harm you in future. If you use AI to study something like law and surgery you might harm someone in future since you're depending on it fully.***

This discipline was put into practice by children like Ella Novella (14), who used AI for homework but ensured it supported, rather than supplanted, her learning process. She prompted for an 'explanation so that I get the answer afterwards', deliberately seeking to understand the method rather than just obtaining the final answer. Similarly, Imani (13) asserted her agency by cross-verifying the AI's output, noting that when ChatGPT provided unfamiliar terms, she made the choice to 'confirm with Google on its meaning', refusing to be a passive recipient of information she didn't understand.

However, the participants admitted that maintaining this agency was an ongoing struggle against the convenience of AI. The platform's design made it easy to offload cognitive work, posing a constant threat to their critical thinking. Imani (13) candidly expressed this internal conflict, admitting,

> ***I think it has made me lazier in my thinking because let's say, I'm given homework … there's no need to think; I'll just use the AI, you know…***

This candid admission reveals how the ease of using AI can directly challenge a child's will to engage in difficult intellectual work. This demonstrates that a child's agency is not a given; it is a critical faculty that must be consciously exercised and supported in an environment designed for ease and dependency.

In addition, the participants noted the commercial nature of GenAI apps as a result of limited agency due to lack of access – they had to pay to access advanced features. Ultra Tings (13), Carl (17) and Vegas (17) expressed their disappointment with this setback, implying that GenAI apps aimed to make a profit through the paid versions:

> ***The one I use is free, and it also answers in English … the only thing I don't like about it is that you have to pay. (Carl, 17)***

Further, Varisha (15) pointed out the credits/lumens systems within image and music generation apps and how they pressured people into paying for upgrades. She believed that this process was exploitative and wished for a change in this aspect.

Still, the participants had a strong sense of agency and responsibility for their GenAI use, which was most clearly articulated in their approach to the information AI provided. Nygel (14) argued that when faced with harmful advice from AI, responsibility was shared, falling partly on 'the person for listening to something that doesn't even exist'. This displays a critical understanding that AI-generated content should not be accepted without question, and that the user has a duty to apply their own judgement.

Furthermore, the participants saw it as their responsibility to protect their own creativity from being diminished by the ease of AI. Jamai (17) framed it as an active choice, asserting that 'it's more vital to embark on your own creativity because AI can sometimes limit what you think of'. This responsible use was put into practice by participants like Vegas (17), who described this process not as blind acceptance, but as active curation: when AI provided a large volume of information, her role was to 'filter it out and only pick the ones that are helpful to me'. Collectively, the participants' testimonies reveal a clear understanding that while AI is a powerful tool, its ultimate value and safety are determined by the critical engagement and ethical choices of the children who use it.

Further, the participants expressed varying opinions about how GenAI got its information; most believed that the information was sourced from the internet, with some thinking that users themselves fed information to the AI, which it then used for its responses. Children like Ella Novella (14) reasoned that vast amounts of human knowledge were coded into the AI by developers, which thus explained the intelligence present within GenAI:

> ***How it knows everything is mostly about, it's mostly coding and data, the database … a lot of people come up together and start to code all the questions … everything humans know are put within the code of the GenAI, so they don't have to, like, code every word that it's supposed to respond to, which leads to how that AI is that smart.***

It was this aspect of human-based information sourcing that brought about mixed views on who controlled GenAI, with some believing that users controlled it by feeding it information, while others thought it was controlled by the tech companies that created it, or even that it had control over itself. Mitch (17), for instance, attributed ownership to the users, highlighting the significant role prompts played in shaping the output: 'I guess you could say that [the] person controls the AI, but it's more of, it's been programmed to answer in a specific way according to a specific way that you prompt it' – while others like Ceci (15) attributed

ownership to GenAI companies: 'It does not control itself. I think it's the tech company that made it, which is not yet truly identified who made it.'

Summary of findings

The participants used GenAI for diverse purposes, including schoolwork, creative projects and emotional support. The older participants (15-17) were more frequent users than the younger participants (13-14), who found the language and content less age-appropriate. There were distinct gender differences in usage, with girls favouring creative and emotional applications and boys leaning towards technical and exploratory tasks. Socioeconomic disparities were evident, as urban and private school students had greater access to devices and premium features, while their rural and public school peers were limited to free versions and shared computers.

Equity and diversity. The participants perceived GenAI tools to be biased, particularly in their inability to generate culturally accurate images or to process local languages effectively. The disparity in access to premium AI features and structured support was widening the digital divide, with children from rural and low-income backgrounds being digitally marginalised.

Best interests. The participants expressed a conflict between the immediate benefits of convenience and the long-term risk of a decline in their critical thinking and creativity. The use of GenAI for health advice was a concern due to a high risk of misinformation and psychological distress. While some found emotional support in AI, there was a risk of unhealthy attachment.

Consultation. The participants felt excluded from the design and regulation of GenAI. They articulated a clear desire for a 'kids' mode' or specific versions like ChatGPT Kids and Gemini Kids AI, suggesting that current tools were not built with their needs in mind. They believed their views should be considered in the development process.

Age appropriate. The language and content of GenAI tools were often too complex and adult-focused for children, leading to confusion and discomfort, particularly with sensitive topics like health. The participants believed platforms should adapt to their evolving capacities and provide content in a simplified, accessible manner.

Responsible. The participants believed that responsibility for the ethical use of GenAI was shared among a 'triangle of stakeholders': technology companies, governments and parents/educators. They placed the primary burden on tech companies for knowingly releasing flawed products and on themselves for practising self-discipline and caution.

Participation. The participants used GenAI as a new 'space' to express their creative 'voice' in sophisticated ways, such as generating stories or code. However, they faced a conflict with the 'audience', fearing social stigma if their AI-assisted work was discovered. They perceived their ability to influence the platforms' design and rules as minimal.

Privacy. The participants were deeply concerned about data privacy and the transparency of GenAI platforms. They feared that personal information shared with AI could be misused or spied on. They developed their own strategies to mitigate these risks, such as deleting chats or withholding specific details.

Safety. The participants' experiences reveal key safety risks, including the generation of inaccurate and exaggerated health information that could cause psychological distress. The potential for GenAI to create convincing deepfakes and manipulated images was a major concern, as it could be weaponised for bullying and misinformation.

Wellbeing. GenAI contributes to intellectual wellbeing by providing a stimulating learning environment and enabling vocational pursuits like game development. It can also offer emotional support, although this is tempered by the risk of emotional detachment from human relationships. Misinformation and inappropriate content from AI were significant sources of stress and anxiety for the participants.

Development. The technology is a powerful force in children's cognitive development, but it presents a direct risk of fostering dependency over critical thinking. It offers new avenues for social interaction while simultaneously posing a threat through AI-facilitated bullying. The participants' emotional and spiritual development was challenged by questions of authenticity and integrity.

Agency. The participants actively exercised agency by treating GenAI as a 'subordinate' or 'servant', consciously setting boundaries to prevent overreliance. They employed strategies like cross-verification and 'self-encryption' to mitigate risks. However, they acknowledged a constant internal struggle against the platforms' design, which promoted ease and could threaten their will to engage in difficult intellectual work.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of the participants in Kenya. They highlight a strong desire for AI tools that are more appropriate, safe and beneficial for younger users, while also addressing concerns around privacy, misinformation and responsible use.

For technology companies and developers operating in Africa

- The participants want AI to use **simpler, more interactive language**, with **child-specific AI versions, like ChatGPT Kids, designed with their input** and tailored to their age, abilities and needs, featuring fun tools like cartoon keyboards and games, and **age verification and content restrictions** to protect them from harmful or frightening information.

- The participants call for **stronger safety and privacy features, including end-to-end encryption, data deletion capabilities and face-blurring tools** for deepfakes. **They refused to share personal information and provided limited responses on sensitive topics** to protect their privacy. **AI companies should be transparent about data practices, with clear verification displayed** on their platforms.

- The participants want GenAI to **avoid biased or false information**, especially in sensitive areas like health, with **disclaimers, fact-checking and reporting tools** for misinformation, **strict content controls to prevent misuse of images**, suggesting **face-blurring for generated images**, and refusals to create harmful or inappropriate content. They want GenAI to **encourage originality and critical thinking** rather than giving full answers to schoolwork; **provide sources for its responses** so users can verify the information; and give mechanisms for **feedback and reporting** to help improve the accuracy and usefulness of AI tools.

- The participants advocate for the tools to be **free** and suggest **sign language from robots** to make learning more interesting for the hearing impaired, ensuring 'the same quality, the same type of education'.

- The participants believe that **technology companies hold the primary responsibility if something goes wrong with GenAI**, arguing that developers 'made it' and 'knew the flaws but didn't fix them', and suggesting that tech companies should **control what their invention shares, especially to prevent sharing negative or sensitive**

information. They advocate for **'content moderation features like TikTok's troll filters'**.

- **Datasets and algorithms should be decolonised to uphold dignity and representation** through supporting African-led institutions in **collecting and labelling high-quality, contemporary African data** to train AI models; African creatives, youth and scholars should be incentivised to **test and expose racial, cultural and gender biases** in pre-launch AI products; and, most importantly, there must be a move beyond basic translation to **build advanced Natural Language Processing (NLP) systems for key African languages** to ensure AI systems communicate respectfully and effectively with all users, given that less than 1 per cent of Africa's over 2,000 languages are represented in existing AI models.
- **Child co-creation (paid) should be embedded as a standard design practice**, with the establishment of a paid advisory council of young Africans (13-19) to advise companies on product design, safety policies and emerging technologies.
- **Children's product reviews** should be institutionalised by making it mandatory for any AI product intended for children and young people to undergo a formal review with the advisory council prior to launch, with updates regularly shared on how their input has shaped product design and decision-making, to promote transparency and accountability.
- **Visual, age-appropriate versions of privacy policies** should be developed to explain what data is collected, stored and how it is used; dashboards built that allow all users, including children, to view, delete or opt out of having their data used for AI training; and the option provided to host user data within the continent, being transparent about storage locations.

More specific recommendations for technology companies and developers operating in Africa:

- **Establish youth advisory councils in Africa** to involve children in creating child-friendly AI tools. Collaborate with children, parents, educators and cultural leaders **to co-design AI systems that respect and reflect cultural values, traditions and everyday realities**. This will ensure that children feel seen and included in the digital space. Companies should ensure datasets capture diverse cultural realities from rural to urban, rather than defaulting to Western-centric representations.
- **Develop Afrocentric GenAI apps in native African languages** that accurately reflect African cultures and counter racial and ethnic bias.

- **Train African developers to build GenAI tools with child safety and privacy by design**. This would aim at **implementing safeguards against cultural bias** by regularly auditing AI outputs to detect and correct stereotypes, misrepresentations or exclusions that may harm children's self-esteem and cultural identity
- **Prioritise child safety over profit** to ensure inclusive, accessible GenAI apps for all children, including those with disabilities, with free versions offering advanced features.

For African governments and regional bodies

- Develop **and enforce Afrocentric AI policies** that respect, protect and empower children, with regional bodies guiding adoption into national laws.
- **Raise public awareness of existing AI-related policies and initiatives**, such as Kenya's AI policy and national digital masterplan.
- **Strengthen children's national leadership structures**, like Children's Assemblies, to enable meaningful child participation in shaping Afrocentric GenAI tools that will ensure meaningful consultations with children in AI design and policy decisions.
- **Introduce stricter security measures**, strong data protection standards and privacy features to protect confidential and personal data, particularly advocating for better laws on privacy, with restrictions that bar the creation and sharing of harmful content, and provide disclaimers for errors to users.
- **Make GenAI tools free and accessible**, especially for children with disabilities. The participants highlighted the potential of GenAI to assist children with disabilities, such as converting 'sound into writing' for deaf children. They saw this as breaking 'barriers of inclusivity'. However, some noted that such tools were 'very expensive' and advocated for them to be 'free'. There are also suggestions for hand signatures from robots to make learning more interesting for the hearing impaired.
- **Incorporate age verification settings** in AI tools. The participants suggest age verification mechanisms within GenAI apps, which would prevent children from accessing 'scary health information' or 'harmful content'. They advocate for 'restrictions' on sensitive information and 'minimised' access to certain features and images based on age.

For parents and educators

- The participants highlight a **'triangle of stakeholders', parents, government and developers, all sharing responsibility** for guiding, regulating and correcting AI use. Parents should implement **'parental oversight mechanisms'**, such as alerts or notifications, if a child attempts to access or generate questionable content, and should **certify what apps their child is using** to ensure safety.
- Educators should **encourage learners to use GenAI responsibly for research and learning, and not for cheating**, which will help them acknowledge sources and understand right from wrong.

For researchers and academia

- **Conduct child-focused research**, particularly in the Kenyan context, to build robust evidence on child-led interactions with AI and the societal and economic changes AI will bring, preparing younger generations for future challenges.
- **Investigate effective age-gating and age-verification mechanisms** to protect children from inappropriate content while maintaining privacy.
- **Generate evidence on the impact of GenAI from children's perspectives**, including literacy levels, socioeconomic factors and geographic influences, cognitive development and explore the design of more interactive, child-friendly AI interfaces (e.g., 'kids' mode') and **the psychological effects of GenAI overuse**, such as potential addiction, reduced critical thinking and impacts on social interactions and emotional health.

For civil society and child rights advocates

- Advocate for **AI systems and content to prioritise children's rights, safety, privacy and developmental needs**, with special attention to inclusivity for children with disabilities, and **meaningful inclusion of children's voices in AI design, development and regulation**.
- Support **age-gating and age-verification tools** to ensure children access suitable content, alongside parental oversight mechanisms such as alerts for risky behaviour or inappropriate content use, and **strict content moderation to block harmful, biased or inappropriate outputs**, including deepfakes and cyberbullying.

- Promote **equitable, affordable access to AI tools**, particularly for education, and implement digital literacy programmes for children, parents and educators on safe and informed AI use.
- Children believe that **users need 'discipline' and to 'stick to good morals'** when using AI, as it can harm them in the future. They suggest **educating users on proper AI use**.

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Appendix 1: User case studies and journeys

These case studies were developed from four of the children and young people interviewed in this study. We closely examined their responses to the questions and prompts of the study, to provide the reader with further insights into the different case studies.

Mitch, the critical co-creator

Mitch was a sophisticated and critical user. A 17-year-old student leader, he was articulate, technically adept, and viewed GenAI as a powerful, if flawed, tool to be commanded. He used it for complex tasks like creative writing and debate preparation, but was deeply sceptical of the motivations of tech companies. His journey highlights the tension between creative empowerment and deep-seated anxiety about data sovereignty.

Mitch's journey often began with a clear creative objective. For a writing project, he opened My AI on Snapchat and prompted it not just for a story, but for one in the specific literary style of a real-world author, later commanding it to pivot the narrative with a 'tragic end' to align with his vision. In this phase, he felt empowered and in control, viewing the AI as a 'subordinate' or 'servant' there to execute his commands. While satisfied with the creative output, his journey concluded with a post-use reflection steeped in suspicion. He was left to wonder about the personal creative ideas he shared, a concern he powerfully articulated. This journey from empowerment to anxiety underscores the urgent need for prioritising data sovereignty and radical transparency.

Oisa, the guardian of representation

Oisa was the passionate young creative who was highly attuned to issues of identity and cultural dignity. A 16-year-old writer, she engaged with AI as a space for imaginative exploration. Her journey reveals the profound emotional and psychological harm caused by algorithmic bias and the deep desire for authentic self-representation in the digital world.

Oisa's journey started with inspiration, collaborating with friends on a project to create an image of a powerful, super-powered African child. They turned to an image generation AI, which crafted an image that was far from the true depiction of an African child. Her second attempt at creating another image of an African child, the GenAI tool produced a more harmful stereotype. For Oisa, this was not a simple technical error; it was a moment of digital

invalidation. Her journey ended in disengagement from the tool, feeling it was fundamentally incapable of seeing her or her culture authentically. This experience is a direct and compelling testament to the critical importance of decolonising datasets and algorithms.

Imani, the pragmatic student

Imani represents the everyday reality of millions of students navigating academic pressures. At 13, she was a pragmatic user for whom GenAI was primarily a homework helper, an instant and accessible solution. Her journey illustrates the central conflict between the immediate utility of AI and the long-term challenges of dependency and ethical use.

Imani's journey began with a common challenge: a difficult homework assignment that felt overwhelming. Influenced by her peers, she turned to ChatGPT for a quick solution, feeling a sense of relief as the AI generated a perfect, detailed answer. However, this relief was quickly mixed with anxiety, as she recognised that the advanced language did not sound like her own. The journey culminated in a moment of embarrassment when her teacher easily identified the work as AI-assisted. Imani was left with a conflicted understanding of the tool, reflecting that while it had helped her learn more, it had also 'made me more lazy in thinking'. This common dilemma highlights the urgent need for new educational strategies and underscores the importance of building and delivering a critical Pan-African AI literacy curriculum.

Varisha, the emerging innovator

Finally, Varisha embodies the immense creative and entrepreneurial potential of Africa's youth. As a 15-year-old homeschooler, she saw GenAI not just as a source of information but as an essential part of her creative toolkit. She leveraged it to build tangible projects, overcome technical barriers and participate in the global creator economy.

Varisha's journey as an innovator began with an ambitious concept for a new game on the Roblox platform. After designing the world and characters, she hit a significant technical barrier: she lacked the formal coding skills to make her game functional. Instead of abandoning the project, she turned to GenAI as an enabling tool, prompting it to generate the necessary code. She stated, 'I use GenAI to create Roblox games because sometimes scripting … is very difficult and I'm not that much of a coder. So using GenAI to create a script for you … is much easier'. By successfully integrating the AI-generated script, she transformed her idea into a functional reality. This journey from a creative concept to a finished product, made possible by AI acting as a 'skill accelerator', powerfully illustrates the need for investing in building a sovereign, homegrown AI ecosystem to nurture and scale this nascent talent.

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The Digital Futures for Children centre acknowledges funding from the 5Rights Foundation.

This joint LSE and 5Rights centre facilitates research for a rights-respecting digital world for children. The Digital Futures for Children centre supports an evidence base for advocacy, facilitates dialogue between academics and policymakers, and amplifies children's voices, following the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General comment No. 25.

Please cite this report as: Kaberi, J., Busisa, A. and Kabata, D. (2025). *RIGHTS.AI: Children's Experiences of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Kenya.* Digital Futures for Children centre, LSE and 5Rights Foundation.

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