THE ALLIANCE
FOR CHILD PROTECTION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

ADVOCACY BRIEF:

PRIORITIZING THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN ONLINE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 has prompted widespread school closures[1] and physical distancing measures, making online platforms and communities essential to maintaining a sense of normalcy. While children and their families are turning to digital solutions more than ever to support children's learning, socialization and play, ever-younger children are spending more time online, often without adequate supervision or access to protective services.

Digital technology provides significant opportunities for sustaining and promoting children's rights. When child safeguarding policies are limited or absent, however, these tools may increase children's exposure to online risks, including bullying, abuse and sexual exploitation; exposure to harmful content; inappropriate collection, use and sharing of data; and opportunities for risky behavior offline. Not all risk-taking is harmful, but children facing other challenges may be more likely to suffer harm. Efforts to mitigate online risks should be balanced with children's rights to privacy, access to information and freedom of expression.

Keeping children safe online during the pandemic requires concerted, urgent action by parents and caregivers, school authorities, digital technology companies, service providers, social service workers, governments and multilateral institutions.[2]

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1 As of 29 April 2020, COVID-19 has led to at least 186 country-wide school closures, impacting more than 70% of the world's student population.
2 This paper uses as a starting point the 'Advocacy Messages for Child Protection Actors: Prioritizing Child Protection in COVID-19 Response Plans.' Version 1, April 2020. Specifically, bullet under 'Emergency responses to COVID-19 can exacerbate risks to children's safety and wellbeing': 'Children under confinement orders spend more time online, often without supervision or access to protective services, which increases their exposure to online bullying, abuse and sexual exploitation'. Also see COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online, UNICEF, April 2020.

1.

Strengthen national efforts to prevent, respond to and seek justice for online threats

- Be aware of the potential increased online risks to children during the COVID-19 crisis and seek to address these risks through increased monitoring and enforcement of regulations.
- Use the latest data and models to monitor how containment measures and restricted movement exacerbate both online and offline violence against children during the COVID-19 crisis and to inform policy.
- Advance educational initiatives on child online safety, which should complement efforts to connect children to online learning and resources for socialization and play. These should be designed to raise awareness about online risks and resources, using media and other communications channels to spread key messages.
- Maintain center-based supports and home visiting for the most at-risk children and allocate sufficient resources to train, equip and adequately support core child protection workers so they may continue their efforts to keep children safe under COVID-19 containment orders.
- Train health, education and social service workers on the increased risks of online abuse and exploitation that children face during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Give specialized training to front line workers who offer mental health and psychosocial support so they can inform the most vulnerable children about online risks in ways that address children's anxiety and insecurity.
- Where in-person protection services are unsafe or inappropriate, adapt procedures to deliver protective services virtually or remotely.
- Where they do not already exist, install local helplines and hotlines to support children in distress. Direct the public to contact the police when there is imminent danger.
- Ensure that social service providers, schools, parents, caregivers and children are aware of local reporting mechanisms and that they have the support numbers of local helplines and hotlines.
- Strengthen law enforcement's ability to enforce existing regulations and to monitor and respond to increased online risks.

2.

Provide support to parents, caregivers and schools to implement online safety protocols

- Provide guidance and tools, including appropriate online safeguarding policies, that instruct parents, caregivers and schools on how to respond to and, if needed, report harmful contacts, conduct and content.

- Provide guidance for parents and caregivers to properly balance the need to protect children from online risks with the need to respect the appropriate right to privacy for a child's age and level of maturity.
- Programs should encourage parents and caregivers to become familiar with relevant policies as well as online and offline reporting mechanisms, including support helplines and hotlines.
- Governments should sufficiently resource safe online learning programs in schools and uninterrupted access to school-based counseling services.

3.

Make online platforms safe and accessible for children

- Work with technology companies to incorporate increased safety features into all devices and online platforms and to help children, parents and caregivers use online resources safely and access child safety referral and helpline services as needed.
- Work with technology companies to reduce inequality in COVID-19 response and recovery services by improving disadvantaged children's access to digital devices and internet connectivity.
- Privilege the use of free, open source digital services that respect data privacy and retention and limit children's expose to commercial messaging.
- Pool and share experiences, ongoing initiatives and innovative policy and regulatory measures that help children remain connected to each other and the communities that support them.

4.

Empower children online

- Government-sponsored programs should encourage parents and caregivers, school authorities, technology companies, media outlets, and social service workers to recognize that children are agents of change and must be equipped with information to safely navigate the internet during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.
- Programs should target messages, information and advice on safely navigating the digital world and how to seek help and support, using channels that resonate well with children.
- Government officials and social service providers should actively involve children in policymaking that affects them. Programs should encourage children to use their voices online to support other children in need during this crisis. Children's perspectives should inform improvements to platforms and other changes intended to keep children engaged and safe as governmental responses to the pandemic evolve.