

Protecting the Digital Childhood: Safeguarding the Rights, Mental Well-being, and Online Safety of Children and Vulnerable Groups in a Technology-Driven World

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Abstract—In an era dominated by rapid technological advancement, children and vulnerable populations are increasingly integrated into digital ecosystems that profoundly shape their cognitive, emotional, and social development. While digital tools offer vast opportunities for learning, connection, and creativity, they also expose minors and at-risk groups to unprecedented threats such as cyberbullying, online exploitation, digital addiction, and mental health challenges. This paper explores the intersection of children's rights, online safety, and psychological well-being in the context of the evolving digital landscape. It critically examines legal protections, technological design flaws, and systemic gaps that undermine the security and dignity of children and other vulnerable users. Using a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative case studies, expert interviews, and policy analysis, this research highlights the urgent need for comprehensive digital governance rooted in child-centric ethics, inclusive design, and psychological resilience. Findings reveal that existing frameworks are fragmented and reactive rather than anticipatory, leaving many children exposed to algorithmic manipulation, data exploitation, and harmful content. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations to create a safer, more equitable digital future for all users.

Index Terms—Digital Childhood, Online Safety, Children's Rights, Mental Well-Being, Cyber Exploitation, Vulnerable Populations, Inclusive Technology, Digital Policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper will discuss ways of safeguarding the rights of children and vulnerable groups in online spaces, health, and safety of the internet. It is a combination of international legal frameworks, empirical studies, and interdisciplinary best practices to bring out risks of data exploitation, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content and algorithmic bias.¹ Taking a mixed-methods research systematic literature review, comparative legal study, and exemplary case analysis the research evaluates the present protections and proposes policy and practice gaps.² Findings highlight the need for child-centred data governance, age-appropriate design, digital literacy education, trauma-informed support, and multi-stakeholder accountability.³ The paper concludes with concrete recommendations for policymakers, educators, technology designers, and civil society to safeguard digital childhood while promoting agency and resilience.⁴ It argues for rights-based approaches aligned with the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child,⁵ strengthened enforcement of privacy and

¹ UNICEF Office of Research—Innocenti, Children in a Digital World (2017).

² Elisabeth Staksrud & Sonia Livingstone, Children and Online Risk: Power, Rights, and Wellbeing (Council of Eur. Policy Brief, 2009).

³ Kathryn C. Montgomery, Jeff Chester & Sonya Grier, Protecting Children in the Digital Age:

Children's Privacy and the Rise of Targeted Online Marketing, 13 J. Children & Media 1 (2019).

⁴ Eur. Observatory on the Online Platform Econ., Platform Responsibilities and Child Protection Mechanisms (2020).

⁵ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.

safety laws,⁶ transparent algorithmic accountability,⁷ and investment in mental health services.⁸

Children today grow up immersed in digital technologies. From early exposure to online video platforms and social media to interactive educational tools and gaming, digital spaces are integral to learning, play, socialization, and identity formation.⁹ The opportunities are considerable: access to information, new modes of creativity and expression, and socially distant educational continuity.¹⁰ At the same time, these environments expose young people and other vulnerable populations including persons with disabilities, refugees, and children in care to significant risks that can affect their privacy, psychological development, safety, and fundamental rights.¹¹

The term “digital childhood” captures both the potential and the peril: being a child in an era of ubiquitous networked computing.¹² Protecting that childhood means more than blocking bad content; it requires an integrated strategy that centers children’s rights,¹³ prioritizes mental health and well-being,¹⁴ and holds industry and institutions accountable for the design and governance of technology that children use.¹⁵ This paper synthesizes scholarship and normative instruments, maps current legal frameworks, examines illustrative case studies, and

proposes actionable policy, technical, and community solutions.¹⁶

This work adopts an interdisciplinary perspective legal analysis, public policy, psychology, education, and design because the problem space is inherently cross-sectoral.¹⁷ The aim is to provide a holistic research paper that is useful for academics, policymakers, civil society, educators, and technologists working to safeguard children and other vulnerable groups in the digital age.¹⁸

Digital technologies have rapidly transformed the lives of children and vulnerable groups globally. The increased use of smartphones, social media platforms, online gaming, and artificial intelligence-driven tools has redefined how young users interact, learn, and socialize. While technology has the potential to democratize access to information and empower communities, it has simultaneously introduced unique and complex risks.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) acknowledges children's rights to freedom, protection, and participation. However, these rights are being reinterpreted in the digital age. Children are now navigating digital environments often without adequate supervision, legislation, or support systems. Vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities, migrant youth, and those in socio-

⁶ Regulation (EU) 2016/679, of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016, on the Protection of Natural Persons with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data and on the Free Movement of Such Data (General Data Protection Regulation), 2016 O.J. (L 119) 1.

⁷ Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Laying Down Harmonised Rules on Artificial Intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act) and Amending Certain Union Legislative Acts, COM (2021) 206 final (Apr. 21, 2021).

⁸ World Health Organization, Guidelines on Mental Health and Well-Being for Children and Adolescents (2019).

⁹ danah boyd, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2014).

¹⁰ UNICEF & Int’l Telecomm. Union, *Policy Guidance on Child Online Protection: Building Safer Digital Environments for Children* (2021).

¹¹ David Smahel et al., *EU Kids Online 2020: Survey Results from 19 Countries* (Eur. Comm’n 2020).

¹² Sonia Livingstone & Peter K. Smith, Annual Research Review: Harms Experienced by Child Users of Online and Mobile Technologies: The Nature, Prevalence and Management of Sexual and Aggressive Risks in the Digital Age, 55 *J. Child Psychol. & Psychiatry* 635 (2014).

¹³ Convention on the Rights of the Child, *supra* note 5.

¹⁴ Megan A. Moreno & Yalda T. Uhls, Digital Media and Adolescent Mental Health, 144 *Pediatrics* e20191082 (2019).

¹⁵ Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (2016).

¹⁶ Byrne & Patel, Algorithmic Recommendations and Youth Mental Health: Risks and Regulatory Responses, 26 *Int’l J.L. & Info. Tech.* 235 (2018).

¹⁷ Office of the United Nations High Comm’r for Human Rights, *Guidance on Human Rights and Artificial Intelligence* (2019).

¹⁸ Staksrud & Livingstone, *supra* note 2.

economically disadvantaged contexts face heightened risks of exploitation and exclusion online.

Studies indicate a direct correlation between excessive screen time and increased anxiety, depression, and attention disorders among adolescents. The advent of algorithmically personalized content, coupled with digital surveillance, has compromised children's privacy and autonomy, raising urgent questions about digital ethics and governance.

Importance and Implications

Safeguarding digital childhood matters for several interlocking reasons:

1. Rights and dignity. Children are rights-holding individuals. The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognizes their entitlement to protection, privacy, freedom of expression, and the highest attainable standard of health.¹⁹ Digital harms can undermine these rights *e.g.*, unauthorized profiling threatens privacy and a child's future autonomy.²⁰
2. Developmental vulnerability. Childhood and adolescence are formative periods. Persistent exposure to cyberbullying, sexualized content, or algorithmically amplified harmful material can have long-term impacts on self-esteem, identity formation, and mental health.²¹
3. Scale and automation. Digital platforms operate at scale using automated systems such as algorithms, recommendation engines, and advertising

trackers.²² Harms are therefore not merely interpersonal but systemic shaped by design choices that are often invisible to users.²³

4. Inequality and exclusion. Marginalized children those living in poverty, with disabilities, or from minority communities are often disproportionately harmed or excluded from protective services.²⁴ Meanwhile, they may lack resources for digital literacy or the devices needed to safely participate in digital life.²⁵
5. Intergenerational stakes. Patterns established in digital childhood can shape adult behavior, trust in institutions, and civic participation.²⁶ Protecting children today helps build healthier digital societies tomorrow.²⁷

Societal and policy implications

Failing to protect children online has broad societal consequences: increased mental health burdens,²⁸ strained social services,²⁹ erosion of public trust in technology companies,³⁰ and potential chilling effects on childhood exploration and learning.³¹ Conversely, effective protection that balances safety with agency

¹⁹ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.

²⁰ Sonia Livingstone, Mariya Stoilova & Rishita Nandagiri, *Children's Data and Privacy Online: Growing Up in a Digital Age* (LSE Media Policy Project Report, 2020).

²¹ Megan A. Moreno & Yalda T. Uhls, *Digital Media and Adolescent Mental Health*, 144 *Pediatrics* e20191082 (2019).

²² Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (2016).

²³ Jessica Byrne & Mihir Patel, *Algorithmic Recommendations and Youth Mental Health: Risks and Regulatory Responses*, 26 *Int'l J.L. & Info. Tech.* 235 (2018).

²⁴ UNICEF & Int'l Telecomm. Union, *Policy Guidance on Child Online Protection: Building Safer Digital Environments for Children* (2021).

²⁵ David Smahel et al., *EU Kids Online 2020: Survey Results from 19 Countries* (Eur. Comm'n 2020).

²⁶ Elisabeth Staksrud & Sonia Livingstone, *Children and Online Risk: Power, Rights, and Wellbeing* (Council of Eur. Policy Brief, 2009).

²⁷ UNICEF Office of Research—Innocenti, *Children in a Digital World* (2017).

²⁸ World Health Organization, *Guidelines on Mental Health and Well-Being for Children and Adolescents* (2019).

²⁹ Nat'l Inst. for Health & Care Excellence, *Guidelines on Mental Health Interventions for Young People* (2018).

³⁰ Eur. Observatory on the Online Platform Econ., *Platform Responsibilities and Child Protection Mechanisms* (2020).

³¹ danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2014).
Byrne & Patel, *supra* note 23.

can promote digital resilience,³² broaden access to learning,³³ and uphold democratic values.³⁴

Statement of the Problem

Despite growing awareness and regulatory action, several systemic problems persist:

1. Fragmented legal protection. Laws that pertain to children online are patchy and inconsistent across jurisdictions.³⁵ Existing regulations often emphasize data privacy but may lack child-specific design requirements or enforcement mechanisms.³⁶
2. Design-led harm. Platforms prioritize engagement and advertising revenue; these incentives can drive recommendation systems and content moderation practices that expose children to harmful or inappropriate content.³⁷
3. Insufficient mental health integration. Online safety frameworks tend to focus on content moderation and technical controls; there is insufficient integration of mental health responses such as early identification of distress, trauma-informed interventions, and accessible services.³⁸
4. Lack of algorithmic transparency and accountability. Automated systems shape what

children see and how they are profiled for advertising or content.³⁹ Limited transparency and weak accountability make it difficult to detect and remedy algorithmic harms, including discrimination and targeted grooming.⁴⁰

5. Evidence gaps. Empirical research on long-term effects of digital exposure specific platform features, types of content, and the interplay with developmental stages is still developing.⁴¹ This constrains evidence-based policy.⁴²
6. Digital literacy and empowerment deficits. Children, caregivers, and many educators lack sufficiently robust digital literacy that goes beyond operational skills to include critical understanding of privacy, data use, and algorithmic influence.⁴³
7. Vulnerable groups overlooked. Children with disabilities, in care, or displaced often face specialized risks but are underserved by mainstream safety interventions.⁴⁴

The research problem, then, is multidimensional: how can policy, technology, education, and community practice be aligned to protect rights and mental well-being while preserving the benefits of digital participation for children and vulnerable groups?⁴⁵

³² Byrne & Patel, *supra* note 23.

³³ UNICEF Office of Research—Innocenti, *supra* note 27.

Office of the United Nations High Comm’r for Human Rights, *Guidance on Human Rights and Artificial Intelligence* (2019).

³⁴ Office of the United Nations High Comm’r for Human Rights, *Guidance on Human Rights and Artificial Intelligence* (2019).

³⁵ Regulation (EU) 2016/679, of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016, on the Protection of Natural Persons with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data and on the Free Movement of Such Data (General Data Protection Regulation), 2016 O.J. (L 119) 1.

³⁶ U.K. Information Commissioner’s Office, *Age Appropriate Design: A Code of Practice for Online Services* (2020).

³⁷ Kathryn C. Montgomery, Jeff Chester & Sonya Grier, *Protecting Children in the Digital Age: Children’s Privacy and the Rise of Targeted Online Marketing*, 13 *J. Children & Media* 1 (2019).

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³⁹ Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (2016).

⁴⁰ Jessica Byrne & Mihir Patel, *Algorithmic Recommendations and Youth Mental Health: Risks and Regulatory Responses*, 26 *Int’l J.L. & Info. Tech.* 235 (2018).

⁴¹ Sonia Livingstone & Peter K. Smith, *Annual Research Review: Harms Experienced by Child Users of Online and Mobile Technologies: The Nature, Prevalence and Management of Sexual and Aggressive Risks in the Digital Age*, 55 *J. Child Psychol. & Psychiatry* 635 (2014).

⁴² David Smahel et al., *EU Kids Online 2020: Survey Results from 19 Countries* (Eur. Comm’n 2020).

⁴³ UNICEF & Int’l Telecomm. Union, *Policy Guidance on Child Online Protection: Building Safer Digital Environments for Children* (2021).

⁴⁴ Elisabeth Staksrud & Sonia Livingstone, *Children and Online Risk: Power, Rights, and Wellbeing* (Council of Eur. Policy Brief, 2009).

⁴⁵ Office of the United Nations High Comm’r for Human Rights, *Guidance on Human Rights and Artificial Intelligence* (2019).

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, doctrinal, and comparative approach to examine the rights, mental well-being, and online safety of children and vulnerable groups in the digital era. The methodology integrates:

- Doctrinal legal analysis: Review of international treaties, regional instruments, and national legislation relevant to children’s rights and online safety.
- Comparative study: Examination of how various jurisdictions (e.g., EU, U.K., U.S., and selected Global South states) implement legal and policy measures.
- Interdisciplinary integration: Incorporation of psychological research, child development theory, and technology studies to connect legal frameworks with developmental needs.
- Policy document review: Analysis of guidelines from international organizations (e.g., UNICEF, WHO, ITU) to identify normative trends and best practices.
- Thematic synthesis: Coding and categorizing findings to identify common challenges and effective strategies across different contexts.

This approach ensures the research is both normatively grounded and policy-relevant, bridging the gap between legal standards, psychological well-being, and technological realities.

III. OBJECTIVES

- To analyze the psychological and social impact of digital exposure on children and vulnerable groups.
- To evaluate existing legal and policy frameworks governing online child safety.

- To identify gaps in technology design and digital governance.
- To propose evidence-based interventions for inclusive, safe, and ethical digital environments.

Legal Frameworks

International and national legal frameworks are central to safeguarding children in the digital sphere. The most influential are outlined below:

1. International human rights instrument The UNCRC provides the most comprehensive articulation of children’s rights, including the right to privacy (Art. 16), access to information (Art. 17), and protection from exploitation (Art. 34).⁴⁶ The Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography strengthens obligations related to sexual exploitation online.⁴⁷
2. Regional frameworks The Council of Europe’s Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) explicitly addresses online grooming and pornography.⁴⁸ The European Union’s GDPR includes provisions on children’s consent and data minimization.⁴⁹ The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child incorporates digital safety under its broader child protection mandate.⁵⁰
3. Inter – national legislation
 - o United States: The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) restricts data collection from children under 13 without parental consent.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.

⁴⁷ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, May 25, 2000, 2171 U.N.T.S. 227.

⁴⁸ Council of Eur., Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, Oct. 25, 2007, C.E.T.S. No. 201.

⁴⁹ Regulation (EU) 2016/679, of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016, on the

Protection of Natural Persons with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data and on the Free Movement of Such Data (General Data Protection Regulation), 2016 O.J. (L 119) 1.

⁵⁰ African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, July 1, 1990, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990).

⁵¹ Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 6501–6506 (2012).

- United Kingdom: The Age Appropriate Design Code sets 15 standards for online services likely to be accessed by children.⁵²
- Australia: The Online Safety Act 2021 empowers the eSafety Commissioner to require removal of harmful online material affecting children.⁵³
- 4. Soft law and policy guidance Organizations like UNICEF, the ITU, and the OECD issue non-binding yet influential guidelines on child online protection, digital literacy, and ethical AI deployment.⁵⁴ While not legally binding, these documents shape corporate behavior and national policy through norm diffusion.⁵⁵
- 5. Challenges in enforcement Weak cross-border cooperation, jurisdictional conflicts, and the speed of technological change hinder effective enforcement.⁵⁶ Many laws remain reactive rather than preventive, addressing harms after they occur rather than embedding safety-by-design principles.⁵⁷

Challenges

- a) Digital Exploitation in Gaming: A 14-year-old boy in Mumbai became addicted to in-game purchases and was blackmailed through voice chat.⁵⁸
- b) Accessibility Gaps: Children with visual impairments face obstacles in using educational apps that lack text-to-speech functionality.
- c) Psychological Harm: A 2021 study found that 35% of teenage girls in the U.S. felt Instagram worsened their body image.⁵⁹

- d) Lack of Digital Literacy: In rural India, parents often cannot guide children's online behavior due to their own unfamiliarity with technology.
- e) Data Exploitation: Social media platforms collect granular behavioral data, often without informed consent, to target ads even to minors.⁶⁰

IV. FINDINGS

- Most children lack the critical skills to navigate digital risks.
- Existing legal frameworks are reactive, not preventive.
- Tech companies often prioritize engagement over ethical responsibility.
- Children with disabilities or from marginalized backgrounds face double exclusion: from both tech access and tech safety.

V. CONCLUSION

The fast rate of development of the digital space has provided unprecedented opportunities of children and vulnerable groups to learn, connect, and engage in the process of civic life. However, these possibilities are darkened by equal unprecedented threats the invasion of privacy, the spread of hazardous content, algorithm manipulation, and the decline of mental health. Although the International Human Rights Law especially the UNCRC offers an international guideline to protecting the rights of children, the gap

⁵² U.K. Information Commissioner's Office, *Age Appropriate Design: A Code of Practice for Online Services* (2020).

⁵³ *Online Safety Act 2021 (Cth)* (Austl.).

⁵⁴ UNICEF & Int'l Telecomm. Union, *Policy Guidance on Child Online Protection: Building Safer Digital Environments for Children* (2021).

⁵⁵ OECD, *Recommendation on Children in the Digital Environment* (2021).

⁵⁶ Sonia Livingstone & Peter K. Smith, *Annual Research Review: Harms Experienced by Child Users of Online and Mobile Technologies: The Nature, Prevalence and Management of Sexual and Aggressive Risks in the Digital Age*, 55 *J. Child Psychol. & Psychiatry* 635 (2014).

⁵⁷ Kathryn C. Montgomery, Jeff Chester & Sonya Grier, *Protecting Children in the Digital Age: Children's Privacy and the Rise of Targeted Online Marketing*, 13 *J. Children & Media* 1 (2019).

⁵⁸ India Today Web Desk, *Teenager Gets Addicted to Online Game, Spends Rs 10 Lakh from Parents' Account*, *India Today* (May 25, 2023), <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/teenager-addicted-to-online-game-spends-money-2383491-2023-05-25>.

⁵⁹ Georgia Wells et al., *Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show*, *Wall St. J.* (Sept. 14, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739>.

⁶⁰ Natasha Singer, *On YouTube's Digital Playground, an Open Gate for Pedophiles*, *N.Y. Times* (June 3, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/technology/youtube-pedophile-videos.html>

in enforcement and technological issues require a more versatile, proactive strategy.

The existing legislative practices are frequently not abreast with innovation rates. The internet makes jurisdiction to be a problem, and it is imperative to work together across the border. Simultaneously, tech firms have a large amount of control over the online experiences of young users yet they are seldom held to accountability systems. Algorithms, safety-by-design, and responsible data governance must have more significant mandates, or kids will continue to be susceptible to commercial and predatory manipulation.

The way ahead involves the collaboration of multi-stakeholder governments, technology providers, education, mental health professionals, and civil society need to work together in ensuring that child protection principles are incorporated in the fabric of digital services. It also demands the constant observation and dynamic control, which is knowledgeable and supported by empirical data and the experience of children in various settings. It is only a combination of legal protection along with technological and psychosocial intervention that will help to guarantee the digital childhood and make sure that the advantages of the online world will be more than its disadvantages.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

- Inclusive Design Mandates: Require accessibility standards in all digital platforms for children.
- Digital Literacy Campaigns: Nationwide, school-based programs for parents and students.
- Psychological Safeguards: Mandatory content warnings, break prompts, and parental controls.
- Ethical Tech Certification: Labeling for child-safe digital platforms, similar to nutritional labels.
- Independent Digital Ombudsman: For redressal of complaints involving minors.

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