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Children Need to Feel Safe Online

Children are one third of all Internet users. With the expansion of broadband connectivity in the near future, every second user of the Internet will be a child. If child online safety was one of the biggest concerns for this first generation of “digital natives” even before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is even more so today when even more and younger children are spending more time online than ever before.

In 2018, the UN Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development recognized the urgency of prioritizing children’s safety by establishing a Working Group on Child Online Safety. Co-chaired by Dr. Joanna Rubinstein (President & CEO of the World Childhood Foundation USA) and Mr. Scott Gegenheimer (CEO of Operations Zain Group), in 2019, together with world-renowned experts, the Working Group launched the [Child Online Safety: Minimizing the Risks of Abuse and Exploitation](#)¹ report. This report included an account of the risks and harm children experience online and defined a set of actionable recommendations on how to make the Internet safer for children and launched the [Child Online Safety Universal Declaration](#)².

Among the most important recommendations of the report are:

- Include child online safety strategies in national broadband/digital plans by 2021
- Prevent, detect and respond to Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
- Use age-appropriate design and data consent for all digital services for children
- Invest in research and development of technology-driven solutions
- Implement universal digital skills education

To date, the Broadband Commission Child Online Safety report has been translated into [Spanish](#) and [Arabic](#) in addition to its original [English](#) version. On the 30th of September Childhood Brasil, ITU and UNESCO regional offices for the Americas we will be launching the [Portuguese](#) version together with the Spanish version at the special virtual high-level event.

There continues to be few to no regulatory frameworks for child online safety, a paucity of safer-design services and platforms, and inadequate detection and reporting mechanisms. Children

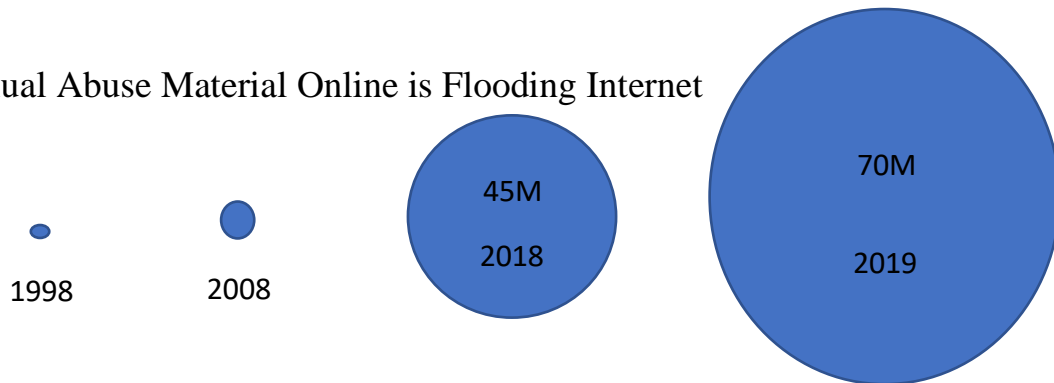
¹ <https://broadbandcommission.org/workinggroups/Pages/WG1-2018.aspx>

² www.childonlinesafety.org

today continue to be exposed to inappropriate content, bullying, radicalization, grooming, trafficking and child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) online. Children are also increasingly at risk of having their personal data stolen, developing gaming addiction or being exposed to misinformation. Of all these risks, the most severe, frequent and criminal form of violence against children is CSEA. This criminal activity, if unaddressed, has been scientifically shown to lead to lifelong health and mental health challenges, all of which generate major economic burden to society.

CSEA is not a new phenomenon. In 1998, 3,000 images and in 2008, 100,000 images of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) were reported by the major technology companies to the CyberTipline of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)³. Ten years later, in 2018, 45 million images and videos were identified online and, in 2019, close to 70 million (See figure 1). Clearly, it is not the technology that is at fault but its misuse has created a tsunami of CSAM online as reported by NCMEC⁴.

Figure 1:
Child Sexual Abuse Material Online is Flooding Internet



The rates of CSAM flooding the Internet are reaching epidemic proportions. To tackle this development we need to invest in development and scaling up of technology-driven solutions and collective action of key stakeholders.
Source: Numbers based on NCMEC statistics

The urgency of this challenge is clear because the harsh reality is that behind each image and video there is an actual child who has been abused. This is why the UN Broadband Commission both in its 2019 State of the Broadband report and the Working Group on Child Online Safety report recommended that by 2021 every country's broadband/digital plan should include strategies for child online safety. But neither report could have envisioned the deeply complicating factor that hit the world in the beginning of 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 Era

In a very short amount of time the COVID-19 pandemic upended global systems in unimaginable ways and we have yet to understand all the challenges that we will have to address in the aftermath. However, one bright aspect throughout this period has been our access to connectivity and its ability to enable for global collaboration unlike any time in history.

At first, connectivity was seen as one of the few obvious heroes in what has proven to be an unprecedented threat to our lives and economies. It permitted us to stay connected and allowed us

³ <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline>

⁴ <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline>

to work remotely. It gave children and their parents and caregivers access to crucial online services, not least education. But, insidiously, it also contributed to significantly heightened risk of abuse and exploitation of children. With stringent lockdown measures taken by almost every country – and especially with the school closings – more and younger children than ever before are spending more time online, learning, playing and socializing. Combining their vulnerability with the reality that more offenders are online as well, there has been a significant increase in the already horrific rates of CSEA. For the month of April 2020, NCMEC received more than 4.1M reports to its CyberTipline, compared to 1.2M in April of 2019⁵. For the first time, the majority of the CSAM consisted of videos. However, six months into the pandemic, the continued lack of awareness – or rather the lack of acknowledgment – of this problem and therefore effective mitigation efforts, are inexplicable.

As has been covered increasingly in the media, schools, teachers, parents, caregivers and children were unprepared for the abrupt migration of education to online platforms. There were few or no safety settings installed on devices used by children. The teachers were not trained in child online safety and children were not trained how to avoid the risks of digital life. Instead, the lack of public alerts combined with ignorant and unprepared caregivers and educators led to the sudden rise in CSAM. What COVID-19 also uncovered that even in the richest countries many children from marginalized communities lacked access to connectivity and thus were not able to continue education. In the US alone, 30% of children in public schools lack access to connectivity⁶, and thus were not receiving education and were not “seen” by their teachers. We also know that many minors are home with their abuser, while being cut off from traditional safety nets – teachers, coaches and other adults who are most likely to notice and report suspected abuse. This in turn led to significantly lowered reporting rates of disclosures by the mandatory reporters.

Global Responses and Required Actions

There is enough knowledge and evidence-based tools today to improve child online safety, but instead, we observe the dramatic rise of CSAM. Is it due to the lack of political will, leadership or resources? How will we achieve the SDG 16.2 calling for ending all forms of violence against children by 2030?

It is clear that we are not doing enough to protect children from online risks and harms and are failing to stop the proliferation of CSAM online. We urgently need to address this escalating problem by improving the safety of the devices and networks, providing mandatory training on child online safety for educators and children, and digital skills in online safety for parents and caregivers. The recommendations of the UN Broadband Commission and the Working Group on Child Online Safety need to be implemented with the highest urgency.

In the last few years, many important new initiatives were launched, including the WePROTECT Global Alliance, the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, the Child Dignity Alliance, and the appointment of the first e-safety commissioner in Australia. In 2019, The Economist Intelligence Unit with Childhood USA and partners launched the first ever index on 60 countries’ response to CSEA, *Out of the Shadows: Shining Light on the Response to Child Sexual*

⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/25/us/child-abuse-online-coronavirus-pandemic-parents-investigations-trnd/index.html>

⁶ Chandra, S., Chang, A., Day, L., Fazlullah, A., Liu, J., McBride, L., Mudalige, T., Weiss, D., (2020). *Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media, Boston, Massachusetts, Boston Consulting Group.

Abuse and Exploitation, including the actions of the ICT sector. The Index and the Broadband Commission's Child Online Safety report were presented at several meetings at the United Nations, the African Union, at the Vatican, in Abu Dhabi, at the Royal Palace in Sweden and the World Economic Forum in Davos. Industry leaders, child protection experts, religious leaders, academics and civil society came together to discuss the challenges of child online safety. Several reports and recommendations were issued. However, the implementation and scaling up of solutions requiring collective action by all the stakeholders is lagging behind and is not on par with the scale of the problem.

Measuring Progress on Ending Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse



The Economist Intelligence Unit index, [Out of the Shadows: Shining Light on the Response to Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation](#) measures the public and private sector response in 60 countries. The Index shows that today, only 9 out of 60 countries have legislation in place for mandatory reporting, content blocking, deleting and record keeping of CSAM.

Tracking government and ICT industry responses to child sexual abuse and exploitation is crucial for prevention for online sexual violence against children.

The UN Broadband Commission is uniquely positioned to help drive robust advocacy to accelerate the actions to protect children online. Also, the private sector needs to contribute by disseminating the report and supporting the adoption and implementation of its recommendations, so that partners and local actors can lead the call to action in their communities, countries and regions.

Since the launch of the Child Online Safety report on October 1st, 2019 at the UN, the Co-chairs of the working group and several of the commissioners have been promoting the report at the **World Economic Forum** in New York⁷ and Davos⁸, the **International Brightness Conference**⁹ in Stockholm, the **AI Roundtable**¹⁰ at the Royal Palace in Stockholm (an initiative of H.M. King Carl XVI Gustaf and H.M. Queen Silvia of Sweden), and at a UN event on child online protection and empowerment in the digital age around the integral role of AI¹¹. Commissioners Bocar Ba of the SAMENA Council and Joanna Rubinstein of Childhood USA, were speakers at the UN event along with Michael H. Keller¹², *The New York Times*' investigative journalist and co-author of the *NYT*'s series of articles exposing the staggering breadth – and horror – of CSAM that has reached epidemic proportions. And at the end of 2019, the report was presented at the **WeProtect Global**

⁷ <https://www.dqinstitute.org/news-post/global-launch-of-digital-intelligence-day-on-october-10th-co-creating-global-standards-for-digital-literacy-skills-and-readiness/>

⁸ <https://www.childhood-usa.org/news/2020/1/29/childhood-usa-at-the-world-economic-forum-in-davos-safeguarding-digital-spaces>

⁹ <https://www.netclean.com/2019/12/18/the-brightness-conference-2019/>

¹⁰ <https://www.globalchildforum.org/forum/ai-child-safety-roundtable/>; <https://www.childhood-usa.org/news/2019/12/19/hm-king-carl-xvi-gustaf-and-hm-queen-silvia-of-sweden-together-with-childhood-and-global-child-forum-host-roundtable-on-how-ai-can-prevent-child-sexual-abuse>

¹¹ <http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/watch/child-online-protection-and-empowerment-in-the-digital-age-%E2%80%93-the-role-of-ai/6113489440001/?term=>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/by/michael-h-keller>

Alliance Summit¹³ in Addis Ababa¹⁴ where government representatives, experts and technology companies, such as Microsoft and Facebook (Commissioners) discussed the challenge of CSEA. And on September 30th, Childhood Brasil together with the ITU and UNESCO regional offices for the Americas will be publicly launching the Portuguese and Spanish versions of the Broadband Commission's Child Online Safety report.

Earlier this year, on March 19th, Childhood USA convened a virtual meeting with experts from the UN system, the private sector, law enforcement, civil society and academia, entitled *Breaking the Bottlenecks to Child Online Safety* which for the first time discussed the potential negative impact of COVID-19 on child online safety. Childhood also participated in several webinars, and with its founder, H.M. Queen Silvia of Sweden on June 26th spoke at the launch of the [ITU 2020 Child Online Protection Guidelines](#). Most recently, the report was discussed at the **SAMENA Council Leadership Summit**¹⁵ on July 9th.

The Broadband Commission's [COVID-19 Agenda for Action](#), launched in April highlights the importance of child safety and includes the commitment to concrete actions for stakeholders, such as: providing training and digital safety tools to parents and teachers to keep children safe online and expanded broadcasting capacity for education and health to be made available for those with broadband access. As well as using networks and ISPs broadcasting capacity for health and safety information. These are essential steps to closing the gap on digital skills and increasing Internet adoption as recommended on the 2020 State of the Broadband report. We have yet to see visible engagement of the various social media platforms in alerting the parents and children to the online risks and how to report inappropriate contacts and content.

Leveraging the COVID-19 Agenda for Action, Childhood USA -together with partners- developed guidelines on child online protection for parents, caregivers, teachers as well as governments to minimize the risks to prevent CSEA. We expect to strategically disseminate the educational materials widely through the Commissioners platforms and networks.

Educational resources developed as part of Childhood and its partners response to COVID-19 include:

- A [one-pager](#) guide for keeping children safe online that has been translated into [90 languages](#).
- A [Technical Note](#) to help governments, ICT industry, educators and parents to be alert, take urgent measures to mitigate potential risks, and ensure children's online experiences are safe and positive during COVID-19 and after.
- The Global Online Safety Advice for Parents and Caregivers (translations in all UN languages available [here](#)) and the Early Years Online Safety Advice for Young Children, Parents and Caregivers. The resources are editable so anyone can add to the booklets their country's local helplines and support service links.

We continue to fight for getting children's rights onto the global digital agenda (i.e., Agenda for Action and the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation), but much more work needs to be done. Tracking

¹³ <https://www.weprotect.org/global-summit-to-tackle-online-child-sexual-exploitation>

¹⁴ <https://www.joannashields.com/blog/2019/12/12/address-to-the-african-union-at-the-weprotect-global-alliance-summit>

¹⁵ <https://www.samenacouncil.org/ls2020/>

government and ICT industry responses to child sexual abuse and exploitation is crucial for prevention. The perfect tool to do that is The Economist Intelligence Unit index, [Out of the Shadows: Shining Light on the Response to Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation](#) that measures the public and private sector response to this universal problem. While we strongly believe child sexual abuse and exploitation is preventable, we recognize that it will only be possible if all the stakeholders get involved and committed to working together.

Decade of Action

As the Broadband Commission celebrates its 10th anniversary and plans for the next decade of action, it is important to take stock of this year's unparalleled accomplishments of the ICT sector. The COVID-19 pandemic and the actions of the private sector and governments demonstrated that access to connectivity is **essential enabler** of the achievement of the 17 UN SDGs. This is why universal connectivity is a common global goal. In order to leave no one behind we have to leave no one offline.

The pandemic has demonstrated that access to connectivity and networks and platforms' capacity could be considerably scaled up in just a few months, by innovation, new investments and new previously unimaginable partnerships and collaborations.

We hope that in the months and years to come we find more cooperative ways to move forward to ensure we can provide our future generations a safer digital environment where they can take full advantage of opportunities connectivity provides them.

According to the Childfund Alliance *Small Voices Big Dreams* survey done in 2019¹⁶, children feel as unsafe on Internet as on the streets. As we work on connecting the other half of the world where most of the children live today, we must ensure they can take advantage of the bright side of connectivity and benefit from a positive experience. Now it's the time to change their perspective about digital spaces so they can feel safe and empowered rather than scared.

As we enter this decade of action, we invite all stakeholders to join our movement to ensure that all children can be safer online by demonstrating your commitment in your actions. Now is the time to step forward and sign the [Child Online Safety Universal Declaration](#).

¹⁶ Childfund Alliance. Small Voices Big Dreams 2019. Violence against children as explained by children. https://www.smallvoicesbigdreams.org/reports/Report_Small_Voices_Big_Dreams_2019.pdf