

SOUTH AFRICA
SNAPSHOT

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ONLINE GROOMING

Cross-cultural, qualitative and
child-centred data to guide
grooming prevention and response

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Acknowledgement of Country

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the pandemic, incidents of online grooming (Thorn, 2022; Finkelhor et al., 2024) and child sexual and financial exploitation are at an all-time high (Thorn, 2022). While the number of children who have access to an online device continues to increase around the world, so does their risk of being harmed (Marwick et al., 2024).

While online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) occurs at scale, across diverse settings and contexts, research exploring the issue generally involves participants from single geographic or cultural contexts. Moreover, existing research tends to focus on victim-perpetrator interactions, with the result that, internationally, there is little evidence to show how children – in all of their diversity – make decisions about who to engage with and why, as they navigate fast-paced, often socially-oriented, digital platforms and services.

With funding from the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund, in 2023-24, Save the Children Hong Kong partnered with the Young and Resilient Research Centre (Y&R) at Western Sydney University and six Save the Children offices, primarily in the global South, to explore how children from diverse backgrounds experience the various pleasures and pressures of engaging with unknown others online, and what steps they take to protect themselves from potential harm.

This report presents analysis of data generated with children aged 10-18 in South Africa, as part of the broader study with children from Australia, Cambodia, Colombia, Finland, Philippines, Kenya and South Africa.



The study addressed the following key questions:

- » How do children in different contexts judge whether it is safe or unsafe to connect with an unknown other?
- » What tools and strategies do they use to keep themselves safe?
- » To what extent do gender, age, and culture affect children's online engagements with unknown others?
- » What might prompt children to report unwanted contact from unknown others online?
- » What do children need from governments, technology platforms, NGOs, educators and parents to enable them to prevent or respond effectively to incidents of online grooming?

By listening carefully to children, the study aimed to identify how governments, technology platforms, services, educators, and parents in each country might channel children's insights into the design of more effective policies, programming, product features, and systemic change to better support children to prevent, respond to, and report OCSEA. We hope that the data contained herein can productively inform policy and practice targeting children's online safety in South Africa.



METHODS

To maximise cross-cultural understanding of children's experiences online, creative and participatory workshops were conducted with children in multiple locations in each country. The study deployed Y&R's innovative Distributed Data Generation (DDG) methodology. DDG equips trusted partners in multiple international locations to work collaboratively with researchers to adapt methods to be culturally relevant, to engage with young participants to generate primarily qualitative data concurrently across multiple countries and contexts, and to facilitate collaborative development and presentation of analyses.¹

Young participants in each country took part in a five-hour, face-to-face workshop completing a series of structured activities, either individually or in small groups. Multiple workshops were held in each country, typically with around 20 young people taking part in each workshop. Save the Children Offices led data collection in all countries except Australia, where workshops were facilitated by Y&R.

South African workshops were conducted with 93 children and young people (henceforth referred to as children in this report) (40 male, 45 female and, 8 unknown gender). Between August to October 2023, 4 workshops were held: 2 in rural region of Bochum in Limpopo; 1 in urban region of Orange Farm in Gauteng, and 1 workshop in peri-urban Gauteng. The sample also included a priority group with 20 children (14 male and 6 female) with an average age of 15 years. The youth in this priority group came from peri-urban areas (including informal settlements), which are characterised by high rates of crime and poverty along with other social issues – barriers to quality education and other essential services such as healthcare, and violence against children. They were also part of the Child Participation Network with Save the Children. It is worth noting that some children in this study have undergone training in online safety as part of programs run by in-country partner organisations on behalf of Save the Children, prior to participating in this study. So, their responses may reflect the education they have already received from these programs. This may significantly impact their answers and may not reflect the general experience/responses among children in the country.

Due to the diversity in the participant sample, and their varying levels of literacy and comprehension, particularly in rural and multilingual areas, workshop activities were appropriately modified to suit each context. For example, there was no direct translation of the word 'stranger' in the local language. Although the mode of delivery and structure of activities sometimes varied, we found there was no significant difference in findings.



For more information on the methodology, see [Protecting Children from Online Grooming: Cross-cultural, qualitative and child-centred data to guide grooming prevention and response](#) | Save the Children's Resource Centre.



¹For further information about DDG, see: Third, A., Lala, G., Moody, L., & Theakstone, G. (2021). Children's Views on Digital Health in the Global South: Perspectives from cross-national, creative and participatory workshops. In *Creative Approaches to Health Education* (pp. 173-189). Routledge.

A snapshot of South African participants' technology use

We asked young participants in South Africa how and when they went online. Around half (51%) of South African children access the internet at least once every day, and 59% do so on a personal device such as a smartphone, tablet, or console.

Table 1. Devices used by children

Please note: Total % does not equal 100 as participants could choose more than one option.

Device	%
My own smartphone or tablet	47% (n=44)
My own computer or laptop	2% (n=2)
My own gaming console or device	10% (n=9)
A shared gaming console or device at home	24% (n=22)
A school device like a computer or tablet	10% (n=9)
A shared smartphone or tablet at home	40% (n=37)
A shared computer or laptop at home	30% (n=28)
A public device like at a library	3% (n=3)

Table 2. Frequency of device usage

Frequency of usage	%
Multiple times a day	25% (n=18)
Once every day	26% (n=19)
A couple of times a week	26% (n=19)
About once a week	6% (n=4)
Less often	1% (n=1)
Don't know/prefer not to say/unanswered	3% (n=2)
Multiple responses	13% (n=9)

Figure 1. Online platforms used

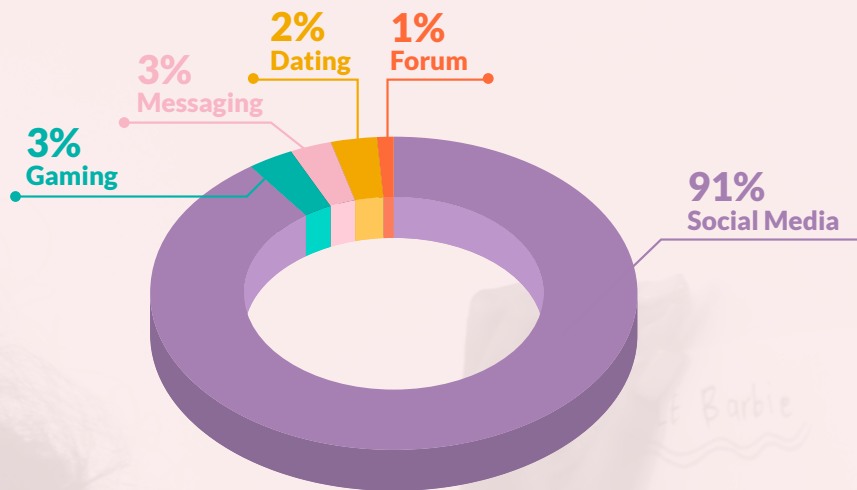


Figure 2. Social media platforms used



Compared with other countries, our data suggests that our young South African participants have reasonable access to online technologies, with over 50% using their own devices to go online. Use of shared devices is also relatively common, although that overwhelmingly involved private device sharing at home rather than use of shared devices in public spaces like libraries. Young South African children go online fairly regularly, with more than half of our participants going online at least once every day. As in other countries, when they are online, using social media is by far their most common activity. While their social media use encompasses a range of platforms, Facebook dominates, followed by TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. These overall patterns of access and use broadly align with that of most other countries in the wider project.



KEY FINDINGS

1 Children routinely encounter unknown others in the spaces they congregate to socialise online.

Children across countries in the study primarily interact online with those they know in their face-to-face settings. However, they also routinely encounter unknown others in online spaces where they congregate to socialise with peers. South African children were no different.

This suggests that online safety advice to avoid interacting with strangers online needs updating to address the reality of children's interactions online.

While children in the broader study interact with unknown others predominantly via social media and gaming platforms, South African participants use and encounter unknown others almost exclusively on social media sites, mostly via Facebook, but also through TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat.

Children across participating countries interact with three kinds of others online: a) Genuine Friends: those people they know face-to-face, including casual acquaintances; b) Known Unknowns: those they know of through their friends' and families' face-to-face and/or online social networks; and c) Unknown Unknowns: those they meet exclusively through online interactions.

In general, children only fully trust Genuine Friends and regard all other with suspicion.



"The friends we meet online cannot be trusted because we cannot talk to them face to face whilst we can trust and speak to offline friends face to face."

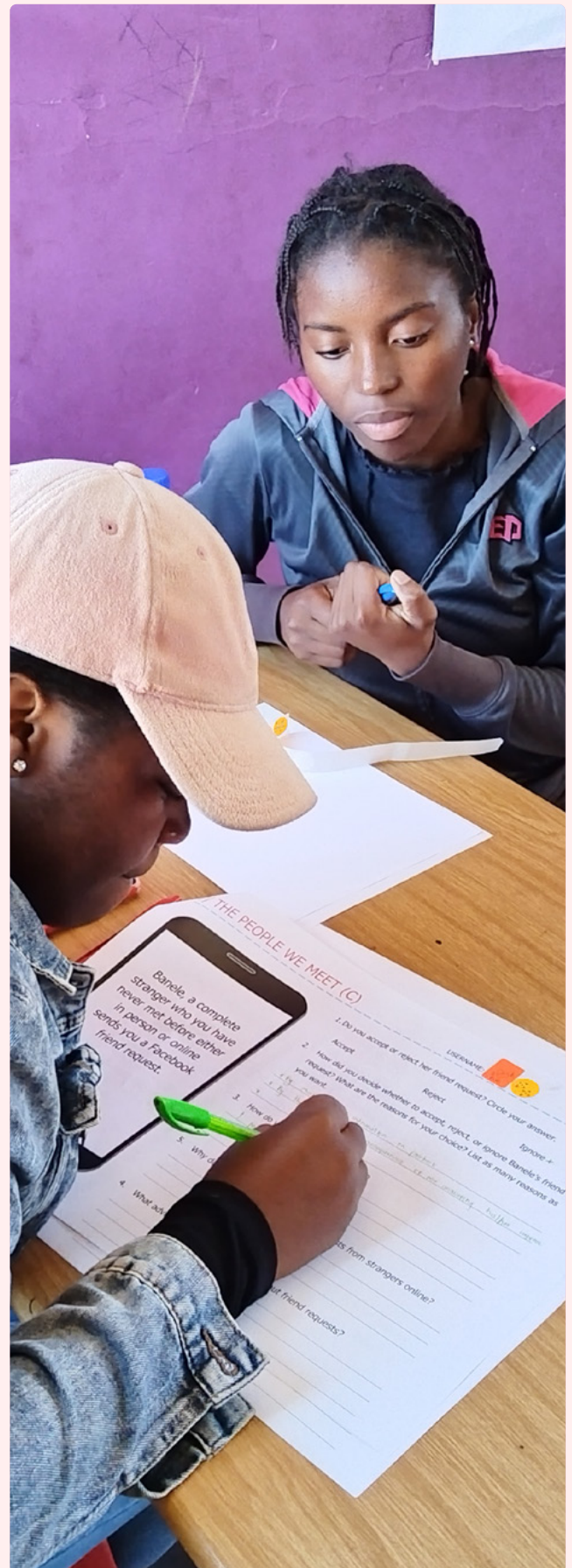
Male, 16, Rural, South Africa

"An online friend is not trustworthy, because they can be a [unknown other] and can pretend to be your friend and tell you things you want to hear; Offline friends are friends you know in real life and are trustworthy."

Female, 14, Rural, South Africa

"I can't trust [unknown others]."

Male, 13, Rural, South Africa



2 Children regard online connections with those they have not met face-to-face with a degree of suspicion.

Across the study, children tend to treat online connections they do not know face-to-face – both Known Unknowns and Unknown Unknowns – with a degree of suspicion: 86% say they approach unknown others online with caution.



“An [unknown other] is not trustworthy, they are not friendly, and they are strange.”

Male, 10, Rural, South Africa

“[A friend request from an unknown other makes me feel] confused...I've never spoken to him, why is he inviting me?”

Full workshop group, 12-14, Urban, South Africa

“[An unknown other is] someone you do not know or [are not] familiar with. Just a random face you once saw but [you] shouldn't trust because you don't know their background and motive (agenda/thoughts about you).”

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa

“[They are] suspicious because you don't know what they want to do with the information and their intentions.”

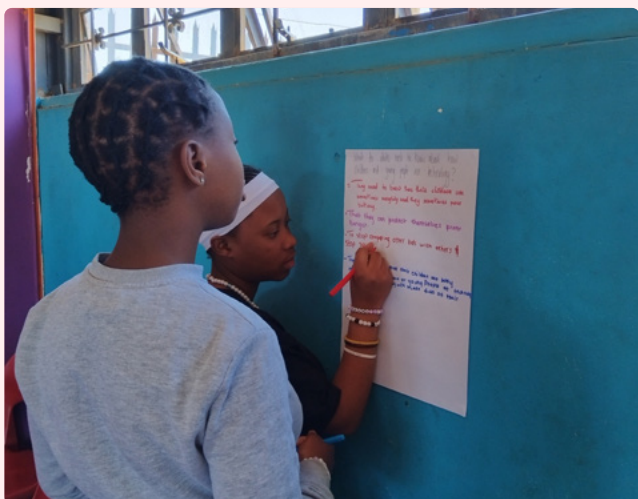
Small group, 14-17, Peri-urban, South Africa

“[I feel] frightened, as these questions make me uncomfortable and they make me question their intention.”

Small group, 15-17, Peri-urban, South Africa



South African children find it difficult to assess the identities and intentions of unknown others irrespective of the nature of the setting, whether face-to-face and online.



For children in South Africa, a friend is someone they feel close to and spend time with face-to-face on a regular basis, 'hanging out', playing together, sharing food, going out and travelling with each other to and from school.



“A friend is someone who walks with you to school and home, and who always plays with you.”

Gender not identified, 13, Rural, South Africa

“A friend, you can tell they are a friend, because they always come to your house.”

Male, 12, Rural, South Africa

“A friend is someone you know, who has been kind to you and takes his/her time to play or comfort you when you're lonely or when you make a bad decision, he/her will help yourself get over it.”

Male, 14, Priority group, South Africa



Not having face-to-face contact or strong social reference points for new contacts tended to trigger negative feelings and greater levels of suspicion. South African children characterise an unknown other predominantly as someone they don't know much about and with whom they don't nurture a face-to-face relationship.



“[An unknown other is] someone you do not know or [are] familiar with. [They are] just a random face you once saw but shouldn't trust because you don't know their background and motives (agenda/thoughts about you).”

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa

“An unknown other is someone you don't know and can't be trusted.”

Female, 14, Rural, South Africa

“[An unknown other is] a person whom I totally know nothing [about], not even a percent of him/her. Someone whom I would never risk my life for.”

Female, 16, Priority group, South Africa



More so than children in other countries, South African participants emphasised that unknown others come from outside their local community and can be identified because they have a 'different' face from them or spoke a different language.



"I can tell by their face and their language that is different from ours."

Female, 13, Rural, South Africa

"[They are an unknown other] because they aren't talking in Sepedi [language] and we [can] see their face [is different to ours]."

Male, 10, Rural, South Africa

"[An unknown other is] a person who does not stay where we stay and we don't know where they stay."

Female, 11, Rural, South Africa

"[An unknown other is] someone from another place."

Male, 16, Rural, South Africa



South African children regard such unknown others from outside their immediate communities as inherently untrustworthy and dangerous.

Geographic proximity has a large influence in determining how children in South Africa assess their relationships with others. South African participants consider peers in their local community, who they spend time with face-to-face, as friends. By contrast, they describe unknown others as outsiders to their local community, who appear physically or linguistically diverse from them and their peers. While they expressed caution about interactions online, there may be opportunities to increase children's knowledge and skills around decision making about unknown others online outside the bounds of their local context and community.



3 Children are motivated to interact with unknown others by a strong desire for friendship and to expand their networks and opportunities.

As they mature and become more social, children are more inclined to connect with unknown others online. Children across countries are particularly curious about pursuing interactions with Known Unknowns. However, South African children also expressed interest in interacting with Unknown Unknowns.



"[I am] curious... [I accept the unknown other's request because] they might have something important or an opportunity to share."

Whole group, 12-14, Urban, South Africa

"[I feel] neutral [about accepting a request from an unknown other because] even though there's dangerous people on the internet, there are people who just want to socialise."

Small group, 14-17, Priority group, South Africa

[I accept the unknown other's request] because I want to know them and what if she needs help."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa



Children in South Africa, as in other countries participating in the study, are motivated to connect with unknown others primarily by a genuine desire for friendship, fun and play, followed by a desire to stay informed about trends and events, to connect over shared interests, to gain followers and to expand their networks.



"[Children interact with unknown others online] because of a lack of friends and being eager to meet new people."

Small group, 14-16, Peri-urban, South Africa

"They want to know more people and socialise globally. They see new opportunities."

Small group, 15-17, Priority group, South Africa

"[They accept friend requests from strangers] to gain followers; to socialise; to gain likes."

Small group, 15-16, Urban, South Africa



The broader study showed that children's interactions with unknown others may be short-lived or evolve into longer-term friendships, and they may stay online or they may eventually develop face-to-face dimensions. Moreover, and concerningly, the potential to derive financial benefits is an incentive for children in middle-income countries to connect with unknown others online, potentially compromising their safety online. While South African children did not explicitly mention these things in the research, decision makers in South Africa might further test these findings with South African children and/or bear these factors in mind when implementing child online protection strategies.

As with children across countries, South African children want adults in their lives to understand that engaging with unknown others is normal when engaging online and can be both enjoyable and beneficial, particularly for those who experience loneliness or who find it challenging to nurture face-to-face friendships.



"They want to make new friends and socialise because they are lonely and can't make friends easily offline due to criticism and bullying/ being antisocial/ to be creepy and torment the other person."

Small group, 13-15, Priority group, South Africa

"[I accept an unknown other's friend request] because I don't have any friends; it would be nice to have more friends I can trust; communicating with other people."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa



That said, some South African children also noted that they also connect with unknown others to increase their followers.



"Yes, he would have been 8 years old and would do anything for popularity as a child."

Small group, 15-17, Priority group, South Africa





As with children across diverse cultural contexts, children in South Africa connect with unknown others online out of a genuine desire to socialise and make friends. While they say they are reticent about trusting people outside their local communities, some children in South Africa said that a desire to expand their networks and increase their followers could motivate them to interact with unknown others online. This trend was observable in several participating countries and likely reflects children's natural curiosity and sociability, particularly as they mature. While the desire to socialise and form connections is a positive motivation, it is nonetheless important that South African children are equipped with knowledge about how to safely manage their interactions online, including what information is safe to share with unknown others.



4 Children weigh up the risks of harm and the potential benefits when assessing whether to interact with unknown others online.

Children in South Africa, as with those across other participating countries, generally know that engaging with unknown others online can be risky. However, the risk of harm children associate with interacting with unknown others online depends on their context. Children in middle-income countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Philippines and Cambodia are more likely to consider unknown others online as a threat to their physical safety, compared with children in high-income countries.

South African children are particularly concerned about being physically attacked, stalked, scammed and even trafficked. They also expressed concern about being pressured to send inappropriate information to an unknown unknown.



"The person is dangerous and can traffic you. She should have stopped talking to [the unknown other] when she found out he is 28, because he can do whatever he wants to her."

Full workshop group, 15-16, Urban, South Africa

"You often hear people talk about them saying they will stab your legs with a fork, and the more people talk about [unknown others], the more we get scared."

Female, 14, Rural, South Africa

"[I rejected the friend request because] you don't know the person... [you are] trying to protect yourself from stalkers."

Small group, 14-17, Peri-urban, South Africa

"I don't trust [unknown others]... He might be a catfisher."

Small group, 15-17, Peri-urban, South Africa

"I feel bothered... I think he's digging up things about me that are intimate."

Small group, 15-17, Priority group, South Africa

"[I feel] uncomfortable because she could be a scammer."

Small group, 13-15, Priority group, South Africa



This reminds us that young internet users form perceptions about the potential dangers of interacting with unknown others online through comparison with their experiences of safety in their face-to-face environments.

Across the study, children in middle-income countries (63%) were more likely than those in high-income settings to report feeling afraid, anxious or uncomfortable when unknown others contact them, and this was true also in South Africa.



"[When an unknown other asks personal questions, the feeling is] confused (They are suddenly acting weird); unhappy (Why do they want that info?); uncomfortable (That info is personal); frightened"

Full workshop group, 12-14, Urban, South Africa

"[I feel] very horrible and confused about what he wants to do with my info."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa



Many South African participants also acknowledged how children often choose to engage or share personal information with unknown others online because they do not understand the risks and dangers involved in such interactions, particularly child grooming.



"We think that he would have agreed since he knew nothing about sexy dance moves and since he is still a child, he would have thought that it is normal dance moves and that nothing is wrong with them."

Small group, 14-17, Priority group, South Africa

"Some are not aware of the things that might affect them while making such decisions."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa





While not explicitly mentioned by children in South Africa, children from other countries participating in the study also worry that consistent exposure to violent, sexually explicit and other age-inappropriate content can normalise inappropriate behaviours online and increase potential harm.

Importantly, being aware of the risks of harm is not enough to deter children from engaging with unknown others online when they perceive the benefits of interacting to outweigh the potential harms.



5 Children use relational verification and targeted investigation strategies when interacting with unknown others online.

Across countries, children's existing networks function as a safe foundation from which they can explore relationships with Known Unknowns. They are much more likely to accept a friend request from someone online that they have seen or met in real life.

Children's decision-making about interacting with unknown others is shaped by two ongoing practices: relational verification and targeted investigation.

Relational verification involves scrutinising and evaluating whether unknown others have existing face-to-face or online connections with other trusted connections to ascertain the extent to which an unknown other might be trustworthy.

Children in South Africa generally felt more comfortable accepting a friend request from an unknown other when a trusted mutual connection spoke positively about the unknown other.



"[I accept] because my friend said nice things and I trust them."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa

"He's my friend's cousin and since she says nice things about him, I feel I can trust my friend's judgement on him and befriend him."

Small group, 15-17, Priority group, South Africa

"People are saying good things about him. I want to meet him."

Full workshop group, 12-14, Urban, South Africa



Children's **targeted investigation** practices include conducting background checks, asking questions, or requesting proof of identity to determine if it is safe to engage with an unknown other online. Interestingly, children in middle-income countries, including South Africa, were more likely to confront the unknown other directly by asking questions.



"Do a thorough background check, make sure you know the person."

Small group, 14-17, Peri-urban, priority group, South Africa

"Only accept people you know. Since people pretend to be other people, you should ask questions about them to know that it's really the person you know."

Small group, 14-17, Priority group, South Africa

"[I decide whether I can trust the unknown other] when I am able to talk to them and get information from them (name, who they are, where they are from)."

Small group, 13-16, Rural, South Africa



The study shows that children are deploying some robust mechanisms to ascertain whether an unknown other merits their trust. Technology platforms, decision makers and practitioners could usefully explore opportunities to strengthen and extend children's existing repertoires of protective skills and behaviours.

6 Children observe new online connections over time to determine their authenticity and to monitor whether they are trustworthy.

Far from blindly trusting unknown others online, children are constantly evaluating interactions, events, and behaviours to determine who is authentic and safe to engage with across online and offline spaces. They monitor unknown others' modes of online self-representation and behaviours towards others over time, looking for signs of authenticity to guide their decisions about whether to engage and to what extent an unknown other merits their trust.



"Trust is built, so you look at how they behave; Look at their character and personality."

Full workshop group, 12-14, Urban, South Africa



Children report that it is often difficult to ascertain the motives of unknown others. However, they told us that a series of red flags signal a contact cannot be trusted and, in some instances, is reason to block or delete contacts from their online friendship networks. For South African children, the key red flags include requests for personal information (name, age, address, school, health information, sexuality, religious beliefs); questions about their relationship status or history; requests for information about their parents or caregivers; questions about personal interests and experiences (hobbies, personal strengths, aspirations); enquiries about their living arrangements; comments about their physical features, appearance or their body; and requests for video chats or physical meet ups.



"[It's a red flag when] they ask for nude pictures, what are you wearing and ask to meet up with you."

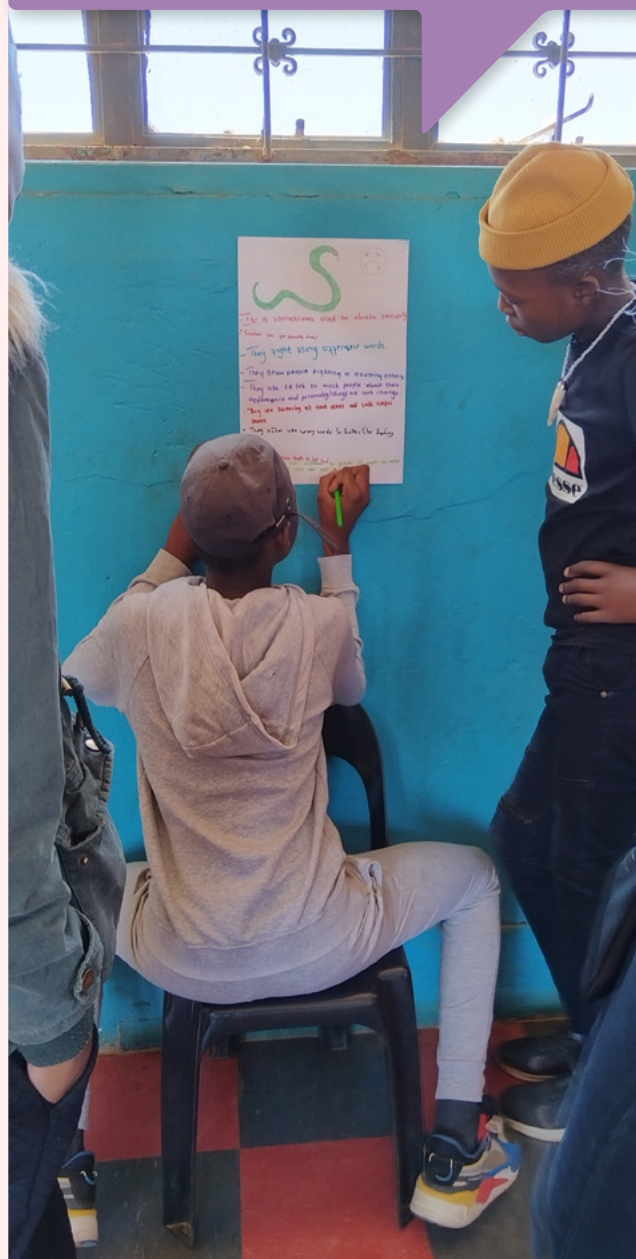
Small group, 13-15, Priority group, South Africa

"[It's a red flag when they ask] are you single; if not are you dating; are you a virgin; what is your sexuality?"

Small group, 15-17, Priority group, South Africa



Understanding the key factors that children identify and experience as red flags in online relationships can help guide content and contextualise education initiatives designed to safeguard children's actions and reactions to others online. Strategies that build on these protective instincts and behaviours could strengthen children's online safety.



7 Children prioritise protective strategies that are easy to implement inside the flow of their fast-paced digital media engagement.

As with children across countries, South African children protect themselves from potentially harmful interactions with unknown others using a combination of preventive and responsive strategies.

Children's **preventive strategies** include restricting the personal information they share with unknown others; not accepting connection requests from unknown others; and always being vigilant and careful.



"Don't accept requests from [unknown others]. You might find yourself in danger."

Small group, 15-17, Priority group, South Africa

"Stop giving strangers your number."

Full workshop group, 12-14, Urban, South Africa

"It is important to be cautious and only accept requests from people [you] know and trust. Children should learn to not share personal info."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa



We note that South African children did not mention that they might deploy privacy settings and strong passwords, suggesting an opportunity to strengthen their awareness of these measures.



Children's **responsive strategies** include ignoring and rejecting requests; blocking, reporting and seeking help from a trusted adult; responding to unknown others by asking them to stop; asking questions; changing topic; and ultimately disconnecting from the platform or device.



"[I would] block him, report him, ignore him [and] find an adult to come and see [the] abuse."

Full workshop group, 15-16, Urban, South Africa

"[You] bring up new topics as a form of ignoring them; you ask why they are asking for personal info."

Small group, 14-17, Priority group, South Africa

"[He] could have just said "no" to what [the unknown other] had asked him to do and further explain the reason behind disagreeing and maybe [he] would realise his mistake."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa



Interestingly, among all children in participating countries, only South African and Cambodian children mentioned giving false information as a strategy to protect themselves in scenarios where they were asked personal questions by an unknown other online.



"Tell a white lie."

Small group, 14-17, Priority group, South Africa

"I lie on every question [posed by an unknown other] as I don't know how they will use this info."

Small group, 15-17, Priority group, South Africa



Children tend to mobilise responsive strategies that are easy, routine, accessible and which do not require them to step outside the flow of their digital media activities. Not surprisingly then, the most common protective strategy used by children, including in South Africa, is to ignore unwanted contact from unknown others online, which prevents further interaction.

A number of South African participants also mention confronting inappropriate or potentially harmful individuals online. In a scenario whereby an adult makes an inappropriate comment, many participants in South Africa opted to communicate directly to the unknown other, telling them to stop or explaining that they felt uncomfortable.



"It's none of your business. Why do you care? Stay in your lane."

Small group, 14-17, Peri-urban, Priority group, South Africa

"I ignore him or her; I tell him what or how I feel about him or her; I tell him to buzz off."

Small group, 15-16, Peri-urban, South Africa

"Tell them I'm uncomfortable with answering and cut ties."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa



Participants also emphasised the importance of telling a trusted adult when an unknown individual makes them feel uncomfortable online:



"[She] should speak to her parents. They care for us, protect us and advise us."

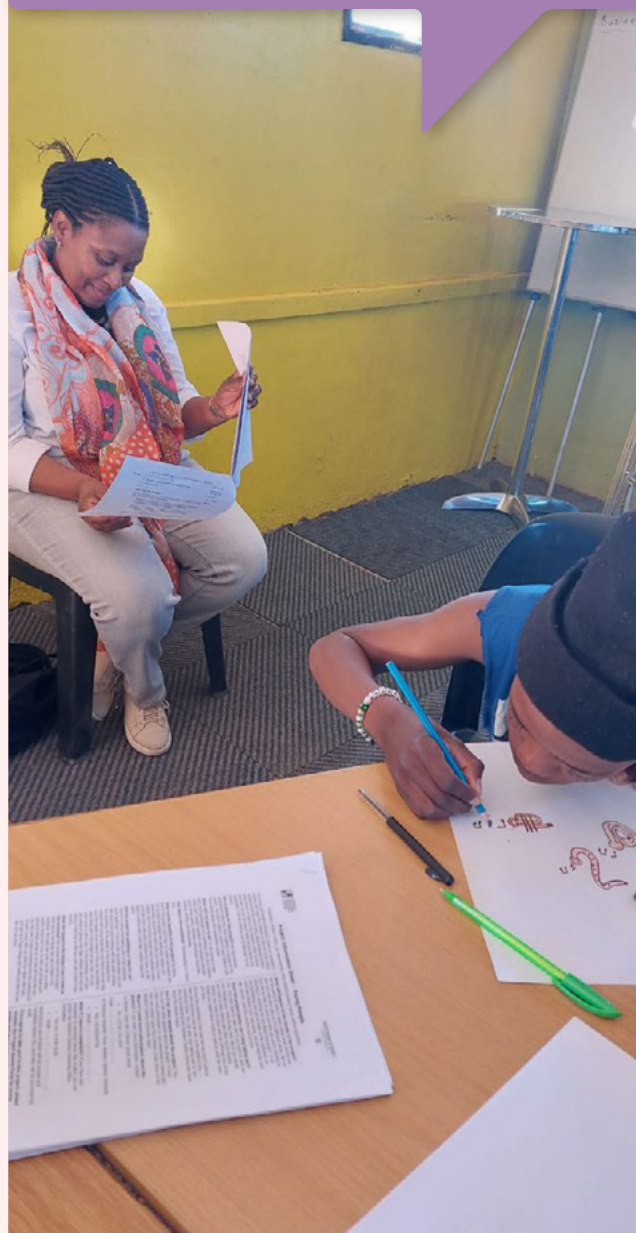
Full workshop group, 15-16, Peri-urban, South Africa

"Tell an adult about the situation before it gets worse."

Full workshop group, 15-16, Peri-urban, South Africa



South African children deploy a range of protective strategies to keep themselves safe online, including blocking and ignoring unknown others, diverting requests for personal information, confronting unknown others when they make inappropriate requests and reporting these interactions to a trusted adult. We cannot definitively say why some participants feel the need to respond to unknown others when they feel uncomfortable - by asking them to stop, for example. This response may reflect certain cultural values such as being polite, or a desire to correct the unknown person's inappropriate behaviour. Further investigation is needed, and this may be a fruitful avenue for future research.



8 Children experience significant barriers to reporting online grooming incidents.

Children from all participating countries believe that formal reporting mechanisms are a key to a robust online safety ecology.



“Report (the suspicious online person) and say no; warn others about him.”

Whole group, 12-14, Urban, South Africa



However, while they assert the value and relative ease of formal reporting processes, many are nonetheless reluctant to report unknown others through formal channels.

Across countries, it appears that the barriers to reporting are primarily attitudinal and differ across cultural contexts. Our analysis suggests that reporting is thus regarded as a ‘serious’ step and a sign that a situation has significantly escalated.

Formal reporting often requires children to step outside the flow and familiarity of their routine digital practices into a process that is often opaque to them.

They are not always sure what reporting processes entail and whether they are confidential. Nor do they always know what happens to their report once they lodge it, who looks at it, how it is assessed, and what kinds of actions might ensue.

For these reasons, they are much more likely to report an incident to a friend (80%) than to the platform (54%) or to an authority (54%). In South Africa, when asked whom they would approach for support if they came across a suspicious unknown other online, the most common answer was a peer or trusted adult (e.g. best friends, parents, siblings, and other extended family members such as cousins, aunts and uncles). They highlighted that, if they report to trusted adults, those adults can then decide whether to also report via a formal channel.



“Her Guardian/Mother because they could report this to the police probably.”

Small group, 13-15, Priority group, South Africa



In middle-income countries especially, South Africa included, children reported a reluctance to report to authorities such as police.



9 Children regard their online safety as a responsibility shared by government, NGOs, technology platforms and their broader communities.

Children assert that their online safety is a whole-of-community responsibility, highlighting the important role of parents and caregivers, governments, technology companies, and schools to keep them and their peers safe online.



“Children shouldn’t be exposed to very bad things online, because they start being afraid and isolate themselves. Children should be educated and given rules. Like: never share something you are not comfortable sharing with a stranger. If a child is a minor, then the account should be managed by an adult.”

Female, 14, Priority group, South Africa

“Children are suffering. Children are being scammed, and it is your duty to guard our phone to see what we are searching/watching, and who we are talking to.”

Male, 15, Priority group, South Africa



Children say, above all else, they need parents and other family members to supervise their digital practices, and to establish and enforce clear and rigorous rules to protect them online. Children in South Africa were no different, emphasising the duty of parents and caregivers to monitor and supervise their child’s interactions.



“Young children’s social media should be checked [by parents and caregivers] on a weekly basis. They should be asked how it is on their social media. A monitoring app should be created that alerts them in case they are in trouble.”

Male, 17, Peri-urban, Priority group, South Africa

“Parents should manage their children’s accounts and [monitor] what app their children are using, so that they can help identify suspicious things and keep their children safe.”

Small group, 14-17, Priority group, South Africa

“Some children don’t know the signs of grooming, which is why adults need to know about how young people and children interact with strangers online.”

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa



Children urge governments to work with and direct industry to provide protections against harmful users; to provide accessible mechanisms to respond and report potentially harmful experiences; and to ensure that their digital participation is age-appropriate – for example, by designing and enforcing rules that mandate age restrictions for social media use, regulating online content, or limiting access to devices by age.



“The Government should intervene to make sure that children are being kept safe when interacting with strangers online. I want you to make sure there are no catfishers. People online should also only talk to people they know, and not strangers. You should create a social media platform to raise awareness of sexual exploitation and online safety. There should be restrictions for people under the age of 18 for some social media platforms.”

Female, 13, Priority group, South Africa

“Arrest those who share pornography. Ban pornographic content and make sexual games (such as Summertime Saga) inaccessible to the country.”

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa



Children also call for legal systems to be strengthened to facilitate justice for those who experience online grooming.



“We... want severe punishments for those who break the law.”

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa

“I’m writing this to plead for your assistance in terms of our safety when we’re interacting with strangers. As children, we sometimes find it difficult to say we’re safe to be in contact with strangers, then found it necessary for the government to ensure our safety by strengthening legislation.”

Female, 16, Priority group, South Africa

“Please make sure that every account is legit. If an account was reported before, please investigate the person to make sure that they don’t scam or do bad things to children.”

Female, 14, Priority group, South Africa



Children believe technology companies are responsible for monitoring and removing inappropriate content on their platforms. Consistent with the broader findings, South African children generally felt technology companies were not taking an active enough role in addressing online harms, particularly in relation to minimising exposure to pornographic and exploitative content.



"[We need] apps that are safe and secure can make children more comfortable in media and can reduce the complaints about sexual abuse and exploitation. Personal information should not be shared or exposed in your personal messages. Complaints from children and young people should also be taken more seriously."

Male, 16, Priority group, South Africa



Children in South Africa highlight that parents and caregivers, technology companies and governments are collectively responsible for keeping them safe online. They believe parents and caregivers have a duty to monitor children's interactions and activity online. South African participants strongly felt that technology companies need to take decisive action to ensure they are protected from bad actors online. Furthermore, children in South Africa emphasise the role played by governments in ensuring their safety online, highlighting the need to mandate compulsory online safety education; to mandate platforms' proactive monitoring of harmful accounts and communications; and stronger regulation of younger users' access to social media platforms.



10 Children want clear avenues for guidance and support to strengthen their online interactions.

Where children go to for help and advice about online safety is heavily dependent on who they trust – and therefore differs according to geographic, cultural, political, and social context. Children from high-income countries are more likely to seek help from formal structures of support, such as services, helplines and police or other authorities, while those in middle-income countries are more likely to seek out community structures of support, such as community leaders, community elders, and community organisations. Interestingly, children in South Africa – a middle-income country – bucked this trend, highlighting that they would seek help from a wide range of both formal and informal sources, including from parents and caregivers, educators, peers, mental health professionals, child safety organisations and online safety support provided by technology platforms.



"[Children] need motivation/encouragement from adults like teachers, parents, NGOs, etc. who can educate them on online safety. The adults should also practice positive interaction."

Small group, 13-15, Priority group, South Africa

"Speak to [your] parents, [and] if [you're] not comfortable then speak to therapist or teacher. Speak to a person who has had the same experience. Therapists will keep your response confidential and understand; Teachers won't judge you and parents are better than friends because friends might influence to do something and then judge you."

Full workshop group, 15-16, Urban, South Africa

"[Children can seek help from] the owner of the platforms, as well as parents and child safety organisations."

Small group, 13-15, Priority group, South Africa



The most common source of help identified by South African children was a parent or caregiver. Parents and caregivers are valued for their knowledge and life experience and are trusted to give meaningful advice about dealing with online safety issues, such as inappropriate interactions with unknown others. Children also say that they generally feel comfortable raising online safety issues with their parents and caregivers, and that they are a source of non-judgmental support.



"[She can seek help from] her parents because she doesn't know him and they can advise her on doing the right thing."

Small group, 12-14, Peri-urban, South Africa

"She should speak to her parents because they are the ones who could probably help her since they are adults."

Small group, 14-17, Priority group, South Africa

"[She should tell] her parent because they are her caregivers and she should vent to them."

Small group, 15-17, Priority group, South Africa

"[She should tell] her guardian or her most trusted friend because she feels more comfortable talking about the matter with that person. [She] could tell someone she trusts most."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa



Formal support structures, particularly social workers, were also mentioned by many as sources of help and support when confronting online harms.



"He should have spoken to a social worker or an adult that they trust because they trust that they'd be wise enough to know what to do."

Small group, 13-15, Priority group, South Africa

"[He should talk to] someone who will not judge him; Social workers (could advise him)."

Small group, 12-14, Peri-urban, South Africa





Very few children said they would be confident about turning to teachers or police due to fear of being misunderstood or punished, or because they are unsure about the confidentiality of seeking help via these avenues.

Overwhelmingly, children in South Africa rely on parents and caregivers for support with their interactions online. Parents and caregivers are seen as trustworthy, non-judgmental, and wise sources of counsel. Some South African participants also mention formal structures of support such as social workers. Future online safety education initiatives in South Africa could focus on increasing awareness of, and access to, formal avenues of support including those offered by online platforms, particularly in relation to reporting inappropriate behaviour to authorities. Moreover, considering young South Africans' strong connection to families and community, it is vital that these sources of support know how and are well equipped to effectively respond if approached by their children and peers with questions about or experiences of online risk or harm.

11 Children want to turn to parents and caregivers for support, but feel they are underequipped to guide their children.

Children believe that skilling parents and caregivers needs to be a key focus for future online safety efforts.



“Some children don’t know the signs of grooming, which is why adults need to know about how young people and children interact with strangers online.”

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa

“Parents should manage their children’s accounts and about what app their children are using, so that they can help identify suspicious things and keep their children safe.”

Small group, 14-17, Priority group, South Africa

“[Children] want their parents to know which people they are interacting with, and on what platforms, as well as what information is being shared with who. They believe that their parents should be in the know about who they’re speaking to and what they’re speaking about.”

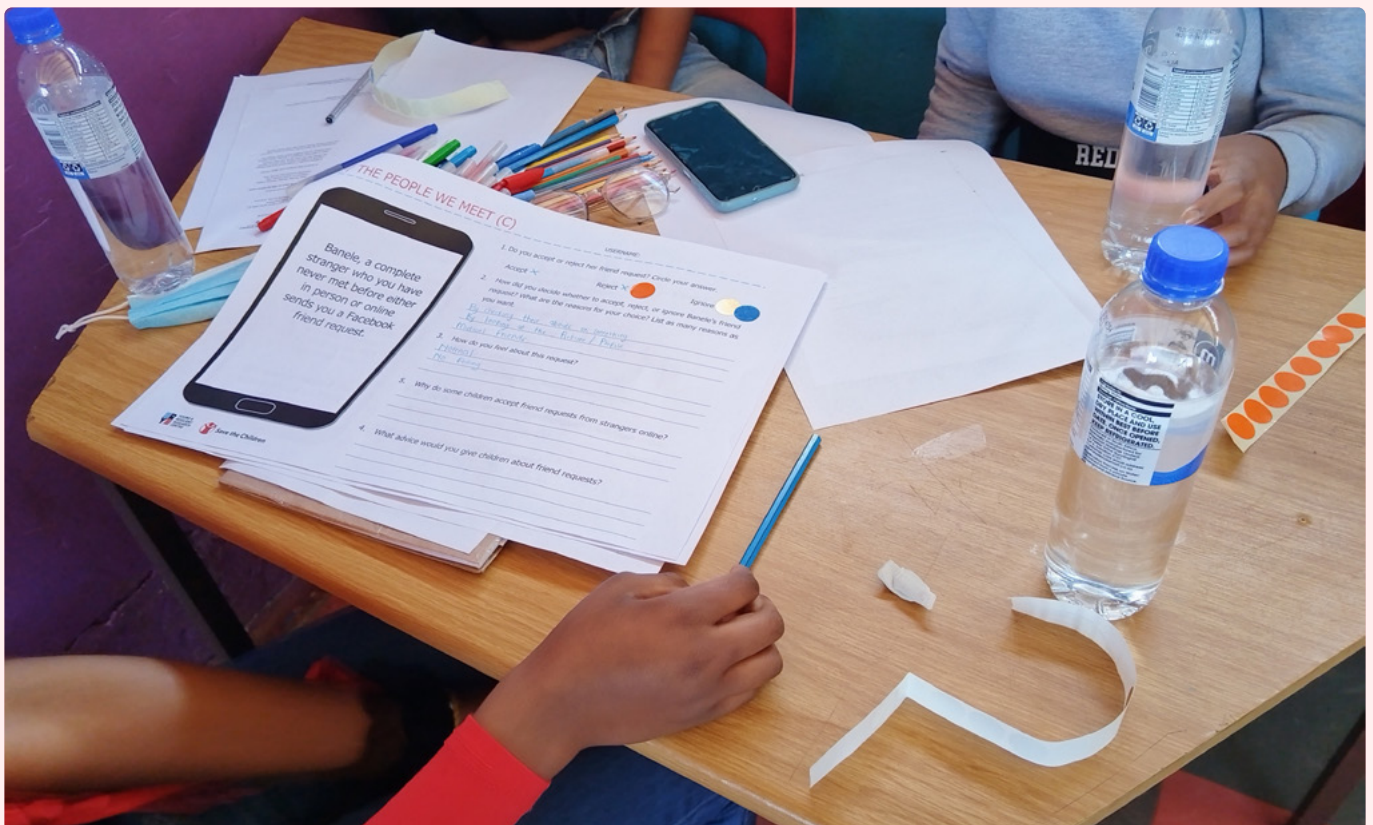
Small group, 13-15, Priority group, South Africa



While they trust parents and caregivers to support them, in children’s experience, these adults do not always understand the dangers children face online and/or lack knowledge and confidence about how best to support, guide, or respond to potential online risks and harms. Children feel parents and caregivers are also insufficiently appreciative of the benefits of online contact and communication.

Across all countries, children expressed their desire for their parents and caregivers to understand the platforms they use, who they interact with, what they share, and how they might be harmed online, and they call for education targeting trusted adults.

Children suggest that such education should teach parents and caregivers about the benefits of their digital technology use; how to support children to avoid potentially harmful behaviours; how to respond to strangers; what content is appropriate to share; and how to block and report inappropriate behaviour.



12 Children are calling for widespread, accessible and targeted education about safe interaction with unknown others online.

Consistent with other countries, South African children highlight an urgent need for online safety education to be accessible to every child across the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence, regardless of where they live.



"The children of this country are uneducated to the point that we become irresponsible online. We are unaware of certain policies and regulations, and the consequences of our reckless behaviour. We want the South African government to include online safety practices as part of our curriculum, to educate everyone on the dangers online so that we can learn from them."

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa

"[Governments and technology companies] should help with online safety because children always communicate with strangers online, and they don't know about the consequences of chatting with strangers online. We would like for you to create an app to raise awareness on online child safety. The app should also provide children with information on online safety."

Female, 14, Priority group, South Africa



They call specifically for education about methods to identify risk online; what information is appropriate to share online; how to appropriately respond to unknown others; where they can go when they need help; and how to report inappropriate behaviour online.



"[We need] enough education about online safety to be able to politely decline interactions with [unknown others]."

Small group, 15-17, Priority group, South Africa

"[Children] ASDEF need to know more about online grooming, sexual exploitation, and online safety so that they know when a stranger online might have a dangerous interaction with them."

Small group, 14-16, Priority group, South Africa



Children want educational initiatives to take place in accessible and familiar contexts, within schools and communities, as well as online platforms, apps and games.



"I would like the Minister of Education to implement online safety sessions/lessons, and to make them compulsory. That way, schools will be forced to teach kids about how to be safe. Even in schools we use social media to study, that requires personal info to login, such as contact details that your teachers can see, which is also a problem since, nowadays, you can't even trust your teachers. The Minister should also inform their parents to monitor their social media accounts."

Female, 14, Priority group, South Africa

"The organisation(s) should host school events that educate others on online safety, because in townships the people aren't educated on certain topics, like online grooming, sexual exploitation, and so on. The organisation could also post flyers in the town to educate people on this. The flyers should also have contact information for those who would like to know more about online safety."

Female, 16, Priority group, South Africa



They call for in-app/platform-based and site-based education to leverage popular digital formats, such as video, to deliver online safety information.

Children say that governments and technology companies should partner to develop, activate, and deliver education programmes, not only to all children, but also to all adults. Promoting online safety awareness in both young people and their key adult supporters – especially parents and caregivers – may strengthen the efficacy of children's range of preventive and responsive online safety behaviours and outcomes.

13 Children believe technical innovations can profoundly improve their online safety.

Children are alert to the potential for technical capabilities to be leveraged to strengthen their online safety.

In particular, they urge companies to use artificial intelligence to improve the discovery of online safety information, education, and tools; to implement automatic blocking and banning of fake accounts or accounts that share pornographic/sexual content; to increase the security of personal information; and to ensure interactions are age-appropriate.



"App owners should also block people who post pornography on social media and ban them."

Female, 14, Priority group, South Africa

"Any accounts that are reported should be thoroughly checked to ensure that they pose no threat. Those who are dangerous should be banned permanently."

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa

"Any accounts that are reported should be thoroughly checked to ensure that they pose no threat. Those who are dangerous should be banned permanently."

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa



Some South African children explicitly called for age verification technologies to be implemented in the platforms they use.



"I have a few suggestions for making sure that kids can be kept safe when interacting with strangers online. It must be mandatory for underage kids to have an account set up by their parents to avoid kids lying about their age. Their ID number should also be asked for."

Female, 16, Priority group, South Africa

"Apps should put more effort into verifying whether someone is 18 (such as asking for the user's age, and not allowing them if they are under the age of 18). The app should be locked for anyone under the age of 25 to stop teenagers from using it."

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa



Children urge technology platforms to use algorithmic tools to target online safety information and education to best effect and to better immerse online safety information and features in the platforms, apps, and games they use.



"[Technology companies] should help with online safety because children always communicate with strangers online, and they don't know about the consequences of chatting with [unknown others] online. We would like for you to create an app to raise awareness on online child safety. The app should also provide children with information on online safety."

Female, 14, Priority group, South Africa



Children want technology platforms to consider implementing additional mechanisms to protect the privacy and security of their data; to prevent their inadvertent contact with ill-intentioned adults; and to minimise their exposure to age-inappropriate content.



"Technology platforms should make sure that children and young people are protected on social media, since they're always involved in updates or inventing new social media apps. Having apps that are safe and secure can make children more comfortable in media and can reduce the complaints about sexual abuse and exploitation. Personal information should not be shared or exposed in your personal messages. Complaints from children and young people should also be taken more seriously."

Male, 16, Priority group, South Africa

"[Technology platforms should] verify every account to check for catfishing; check the ID of every person on the app; stop suggesting strangers to people; [and] block someone when they post nudity/ sexual content."

Male, 14, Priority group, South Africa



Children also suggest default privacy settings for minors; automated warning systems to alert them when they interact with someone whose intentions may not be genuine; AI-powered, appropriate, relatable, just-in-time guidance about possible and safe responses, to help them decide if or how they will engage with unknown others; and automated blocking and reporting processes for young users.



"A monitoring app should be created that alerts [children] in case they are in trouble."

Male, 17, Priority group, South Africa

"Please make sure that every account is legit. If an account was reported before, please investigate the person to make sure that they don't scam or do bad things to children."

Female, 14, Priority group, South Africa

"I want [technology platforms] to make more bots to protect people in social media platforms. These bots should help kids or young people in social media, protect them from harm on the internet and also guide them from creating social media accounts and also help them and guide them from harmful content."

Male, 17, Priority group, South Africa



Children want safe online spaces to discuss or report potentially harmful behaviours and content. They want companies to better communicate how reporting and other online safety processes work; to be confident about the outcomes of reporting; and to be told when and how community guidelines are enforced.



"[Technology platforms should] create posts about where they can go or who they can inform when they are violated online. Inform users that strict and harsh measures will be taken if they violate these rules."

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa



Overall, children want companies to better utilise their technological capabilities and prowess to offer automated processes that create safer environments, as well as accessible, effective options they can use if they encounter potential risk or harm.



"[Technology platforms should strengthen their app's security. Children usually struggle with privacy due to hackers, so they should have the ability to recognise when there is a hacker. They should be more active and look for posts that violates others' rights."

Female, 15, Priority group, South Africa



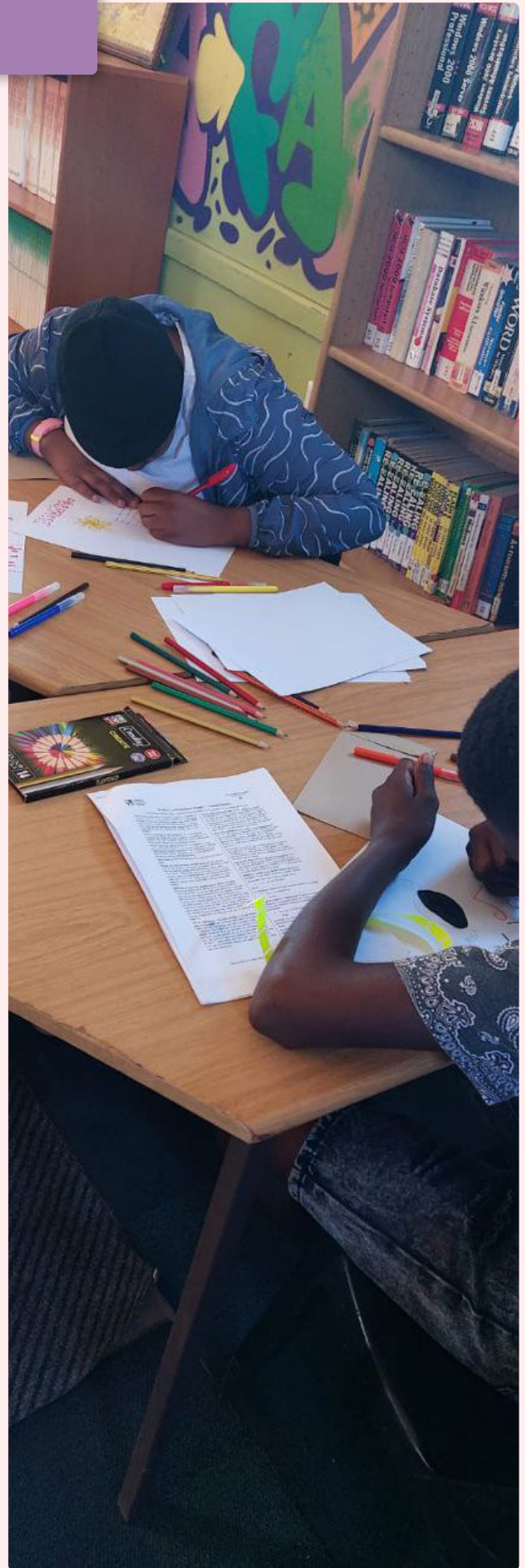
CONCLUSION

Interacting with unknown others is a routine part of many children's daily experience online. Indeed, meeting and engaging with strangers online can be rewarding, enriching, helpful, and fun for children. At the very least, such interactions may be relatively transitory and harmless. On the other hand, real and serious risks of harm can and do arise if children engage with unknown others online without thought for their safety. Our research shows that when children encounter an unknown person online, they employ a complex process of decision making to determine whether it is safe or unsafe to interact.

Although children in all countries are acutely aware of the potential to be deceived or harmed by people they do not know online, they also recognise the potential benefits of making connections with unknown others. The capacity of digital platforms to foster human connection is one of the great triumphs of technology, and children around the world celebrate and enjoy this feature of the digital environment. Accordingly, rather than attempting to shield them from all potential harm by eliminating their ability to forge connections online, children ask for appropriate intervention from parents, governments, technology companies and schools, to facilitate their safe connection with others online.

Achieving the right balance between creating tools and processes to support children's safety, which are relatable, practical and effective is becoming increasingly critical. As the online spaces in which children socialise expand and transform, incidences of online childhood sexual exploitation and abuse continue to rise across the globe. There is thus an urgent need to strengthen the safety of the digital spaces in which children interact with unknown others; to enhance the efficacy of educational and behaviour change initiatives across generations; and to ensure that legal systems are fit for purpose and can deliver justice in a timely manner.

Children in this study have been clear in their desire for familial, community, institutional and private sector support to ensure their online interactions are age-appropriate and constructive. Children are calling on governments and technology companies to take seriously both the challenges and opportunities the online world offers them. Children want to be safe from online threats and harms and, as the children in this study declare, *it is a whole of community duty to keep them safe online*. However, for far too long, the conversation has focused only on protecting children from harm. To genuinely reflect the contributions of children and young people in this study, it is time to turn attention to not just keeping children safe online but ensuring their online experiences are optimal.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Support children and young people to manage their relationships with friends and a range of unknown others online, including those with whom they have a mutual connection and those who are completely unknown to them. Build upon and reinforce children and young people's instincts to treat those they don't know with suspicion and protect themselves from harm.

2

Encourage children and young people – and the adults who support them – to block and report bad actors online, and make it easy to do so.

3

Strengthen and increase the accessibility of comprehensive online safety and digital literacy education for children and young people to support their management of interactions with unknown others.

4

Strengthen education for parents, carers, teachers and community leaders to equip them to better communicate with and support their children to interact safely with unknown others.

5

Strengthen and enforce legislation and mechanisms of redress/justice for children and young people who experience online harms.

6

Consider developing an industry standard around online privacy and security by default for children and young people to minimise the possibility that they inadvertently share personal information with bad actors in ways that may compromise them.

7

Reduce the likelihood that children and young people will unwittingly interact with adults and those who might be bad actors in online spaces while ensuring that children and young people can engage in age-appropriate interactions.

8

Reduce the likelihood that children and young people will encounter violent, sexually explicit, or other age-inappropriate online content to encourage positive norm-setting online.

9

Consider implementing AI-powered warning systems to alert young users about the characteristics and prior practices of unknown others with whom they interact online.

10

Ensure platform features do not exacerbate the risk that children and young people might be exposed to bad actors online.



For detailed recommendations and the responsibilities of key stakeholders, please see [Protecting Children from Online Grooming: Cross-cultural, qualitative and child-centred data to guide grooming prevention and response](#) | Save the Children's Resource Centre.

“[Children and young people] want their parents to know which people they are interacting with, and on what platforms, as well as what information is being shared with who. They believe that their parents should be in the know about who they’re speaking to and what they’re speaking about”

Small group, 13-15, Priority group, South Africa

