



Children's Rights, COVID-19 and Preparing for Digital Disasters

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Abstract: Experts have been ringing the alarm bells about children's privacy online for some time, but the pandemic exacerbated the need to focus on children as right bearers in the digital age. So, what steps need to be taken in order to ensure that children are treated as such and we can build a society resilient to the digital crises of the future?

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, life for many millions of people around the world has been impacted dramatically and, to a large degree, shifted to the digital space. This is particularly true for the more than 2.3 billion children globally, who are [disproportionately affected by the hidden effects of the pandemic](#). For example, inequalities in access to education were dramatically

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exacerbated as [more than 500 million children and youth](#) worldwide were excluded from distance learning provisions for public schools. But lack of access to (remote) learning was not the only way in which [children's rights](#) were affected during the pandemic. Instances of [child labour and child marriage increased](#), for example, as did the risk to children's safety at home and online. A 2020 [Council of Europe report](#) thus summarised it aptly:

Children's rights must be prioritised as an area of investment. What we are dealing with now is what was poorly addressed before the pandemic.

In line with this thinking, the Global Campus of Human Rights in recent years has expanded its activities relating to children's rights in order to strengthen the value of these rights and empower the changemakers of tomorrow.

One of the Global Campus' recent projects was the creation of the first-ever [massive open online course \(MOOC\) on children's rights and technology in the digital age](#). There is a wide knowledge gap in relation to children's rights and technology as well as a disconnect between users and experts when it comes to the rapidly evolving technologies that permeate both public and private spaces. The MOOC was aimed at better educating parents, teachers, government officials and other key stakeholders about how technology can positively and negatively influence children, ultimately hoping to create a more informed debate on critical next steps for how we choose to shape and protect the future of our society. Such a debate is particularly needed when considering to what extent these technologies are encroaching on everyday life. While technological advances will certainly be useful to [help prepare](#) for pandemics or other emergencies [going forward](#), they come with their own problems that have already led to digital disasters, such as [widening digital divides](#) and [election interference due to misinformation](#), and might create further crises in the future. Shoshana Zuboff, for example, warns of the all-encompassing effects of [surveillance capitalism](#), which depends on the commodification of personal data. Others are raising awareness of what they call the [digital fragmentation of the right to education](#), an argument that could also be extended to other rights of the child, such as the right to health.

Accordingly, the MOOC addressed four main themes looking at the pros and cons of technology within each one: children's rights to data protection and privacy; early-childhood development; education; and health and safety. Each of these themes can also be viewed through the prism of the pandemic. For example, in addition to its huge [impact on children's right to education](#) as a result of school closures and the shift to online learning, the pandemic also increased children's data collection by private companies since they started spending many more hours online. Early-childhood development was equally affected as many daily activities of young children also moved online, be it for attending 'virtual kindergarten' or parents using digital tools and toys as babysitters while

they struggled to balance child rearing with working from home. [Children's health](#) and [safety](#) in relation to spending much of the day online due to the pandemic also raised many concerns. For instance, the relationship between [mental health](#) and screen time as well as social media has gained further scrutiny. [Studies](#) have shown that as a result of the pandemic and the accompanying increase in screen time, children are also at a higher risk for [online sexual abuse](#).

The most foundational cross-cutting theme, however, is children's right to data protection and privacy. Experts have been ringing [alarm bells](#) about [children's privacy online](#) for some time, but the pandemic exacerbated the need to focus on children as rights bearers in the digital age. So, what steps need to be taken in order to ensure that children are treated as such and we can build a society resilient to the digital crises of the future?

Adopting a rights-based approach: In this context, adopting this approach would mean ensuring all digital tools aimed at children focus on the realisation of the rights of children as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In March 2021, the Committee on the Rights of the Child published its [General comment no. 25](#) further detailing how to guarantee a rights-based approach to children's rights in the digital environment. This should include consideration by all stakeholders, from tech engineers to governments, about how to create child-friendly design, implementation, participation, public policies and legislation, as well as looking out for the best interest of the child.

Crafting policies and guidelines on privacy and data protection: We need to set standards on how to generate, access and store personal data in safer ways. These policies can help to prevent digital tools and platforms from being used in a way that exploits children and their privacy. Digital privacy and protection needs to start at an early age, when children might start playing with so-called [smart toys](#) that are prone to data leaks or, in the case of [toys using emotional AI](#), might contribute to [surveillance culture](#) in the long term. This continues in school, where a child's [data footprint](#) is growing faster, and can be tracked more easily, than ever before. Education has become [one of the most data minable industries](#), and many parents and educators are unaware of the potential harms and consequences. Having such policies and guidelines in place will not only save time on discussions and information gathering when the next emergency situation occurs, it will also improve digital literacy and promote societal resilience.

Improving digital literacy: During the pandemic, deficits in digital literacy have become visible and tangible. Especially in education, the impact of the pandemic on the privacy and data protection of children was and still is immense, as schools often made use of free online programmes with [unclear policies](#) on if

and how children's personal data would be used. Improving the digital literacy of children, parents and educators is key to fostering human rights preparedness in the digital age. This is something which cannot be achieved with sporadic training sessions. Instead, digital literacy has to become an integral part of public school curricula and governments' strategies for nurturing an informed citizenry.

Investing in digitalisation and digital rights protection: It is important to keep up with constantly evolving technologies and online platforms. New tools, issues and regulation discussions emerge on a regular basis as technology advances increasingly faster. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven that many sectors did not keep up with developments in this field until they were forced to do so. This led to exposure of digital security loopholes, vast data breaches and half-baked online policies. Investing in safe and sustainable digitalisation with a rights-based approach in mind is therefore important for being prepared for the next crisis.

Youth and child participation: Last but not least, in order to educate and empower the next generation of decision makers, it is vital to involve the citizens of the future, i.e. the children and young people of today, in creating the tools, regulations and discussions on these issues in a meaningful way. The talent, insightful perspectives, creativity and tenacity of youth needs to be utilised, especially considering that these challenges have yet to be resolved by any adults. We mustn't forget that the children of today bear the consequences of tomorrow, and they have the right to be involved in the decision-making processes that affect them. Furthermore, we shouldn't be so bold as to think that we can solve the crises of tomorrow without them.