PARTICIPATE

Parents and Technology in Cyberbullying:
Intervention and Prevention for Future Experts

D4.3 – The Current and Future State of Parents' Needs for Digital Media Literacy to Support Young People: Recommendations for Government

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Executive Summary

Foundational Principles, Operational Recommendations

Digital ecosystems are increasingly shaped by privately-owned technology companies and profit-driven imperatives. In this environment, citizens' data turns into a valuable resource for companies and their targeted advertising. The digital landscape is developing at an extraordinary rate, bringing with it both recognised risks and emerging threats that require continuous attention and vigilance. Online bullying and extortion, the growing use of AI chatbots to establish deceptive or inappropriate relationships with children and young people, radicalisation into extreme ideologies, the creation of AI-generated child sexual abuse material, and the ability of artificial intelligence to spread and intensify harmful content are only some of the dangers currently identified. As technology continues to advance, further risks are likely to arise that are not yet fully understood or anticipated. As our awareness and understanding of these challenges evolve, our approaches to prevention and protection must also remain adaptable, proactive and focused on future developments.

Governments have a responsibility to ensure that children and young people's rights are upheld in the digital environment to the same extent as they are in the physical world. These rights include access to healthcare, privacy, safety, participation, freedom of expression, information and education, as well as protection from harm. According to the Final Report of the Online Health Taskforce in Ireland, 'All relevant Irish Government strategies, legislative frameworks, funding allocations, and delivery mechanisms must work coherently to ensure that all children and young people's spaces – online and offline – provide opportunities for them to be healthy and safe, to grow, to learn, to thrive, to explore and achieve.' Despite this, there is an increasing emphasis on digital safety as an individual responsibility, particularly for families and parents.

At the EU level, several major regulatory frameworks are designed to safeguard users' digital rights against the profit-driven tactics of tech companies and to ensure their accountability. These frameworks are designed to protect fundamental online rights such as privacy and data protection, access to information, transparency of online platforms and algorithms. However,

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the existing body of research indicates that, despite these regulatory frameworks intended to enhance digital safeguards and rights, these rights fall short in the face of tech companies (Hartung, 2020; Livingstone & Pothong, 2025; Stalford & Lundy, 2025). As a consequence, the anticipated benefits require more thorough examination and assessment. Moreover, these regulatory frameworks pose no challenge to the privately owned tech companies and their platform design, built on a profit-oriented attention economy.

Drawing on our project findings, this report presents recommendations that will challenge the growing power of technology companies and outline possible steps governments can take to combat it.

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1. Enactment Gap: From Regulatory Protection to Individual Responsibility

The Digital Services Act (DSA) is a regulation implemented by the European Union in November 2022 that applies directly across all member states. Its primary objective is to establish a digital environment that upholds the fundamental rights of citizens and consumers. The DSA is arguably designed to enhance the protection of these rights online, granting users increased control through features such as easy reporting of illegal content, improved safeguards for minors, and options that allow users to choose whether they want to view content based on algorithmic suggestions.

Similarly, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) establishes that data protection is a legal responsibility of data controllers and processors. Through principles such as data minimisation, privacy by design and special protections for children, GDPR recognises that safeguarding personal information should not depend solely on individuals' ability to navigate complex digital systems. In practice, parents are frequently encouraged to manage children's and young people's privacy through parental controls, privacy settings and monitoring practices. While these measures may provide some support, they risk shifting responsibility for data protection from technology companies to individual social actors, especially parents as they are primary caregivers. Such approaches assume that parents possess the time, resources and technical expertise necessary to oversee increasingly complex digital environments. This individualisation of responsibility obscures the role of platforms that collect, process and profit from children's personal data, despite being subject to existing regulatory obligations.

This is evident in contemporary debates surrounding smartphone bans and digital restrictions in schools. While such measures are often presented as solutions to concerns about children's wellbeing, attention, or online safety, they can reinforce the notion that digital risks are primarily the result of individual behaviours, parental decisions or device use. This framing risks diverting attention away from the structural conditions that contribute to these concerns, including persuasive platform design, algorithmic recommendation systems, commercial data extraction and the broader attention economy.

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Public debates frequently frame children as vulnerable victims, technologies as inherently harmful. While contemporary policy debates increasingly invoke children's rights as a guiding framework for digital governance, there remains a significant gap between rights-based rhetoric and the realities of children's everyday digital experiences. Policy discussions frequently emphasise children's rights to protection from online harms, yet these concerns are often operationalised through restrictive measures, increased surveillance or greater parental responsibility. As a result, the burden of implementing children's rights is frequently transferred to families, despite parents having limited influence over the design and governance of digital platforms. A genuinely rights-based approach would move beyond framing online safety as a matter of parental responsibility and instead address the broader social, economic and technological systems that shape children's digital lives. This requires not only supporting parents and children through digital literacy initiatives, but also strengthening regulatory enforcement and platform accountability to ensure that children's rights are realised in practice rather than merely recognised in policy.

Families express a desire for advice about children's engagements with digital media (Livingstone et al., 2018), but public discourses present conflicting messages. Much of the information provided to parents highlights potential risks, offering guidance on how to mitigate them without providing guidance on the possible benefits and how to maximise them. Developing critical digital literacy enables children and young people to engage thoughtfully with technology and to take an active role in shaping and redesigning it (Pangrazio, 2016). It also supports them in navigating the divisive aspects of online spaces, engaging in respectful disagreement, identifying and challenging misinformation and disinformation, and adopting strategies to safeguard themselves against diverse forms of digital harm (Ging and Castellini da Silva, 2022; Children's Rights Alliance, 2025).

Involving caregivers, including parents and teachers, is essential for ensuring the success of critical digital literacy. However, parents and carers need training and support in order to assist children and young people in navigating the digital environment and to keep pace with rapidly changing technologies (Doyle et al., 2025; Fox, Robertson and Lunn, 2025).

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2. Key Recommendations

1. Promote a shared responsibility approach to children and young people's digital well-being

The European Union should promote a shift in the public and policy narrative from one that places primary responsibility on families and carers to one that recognises children's online safety and well-being as a shared responsibility among governments, technology companies, educators, civil society, and families. This approach should clearly define the obligations of digital platforms while ensuring that parents are supported, rather than burdened, in navigating digital environments.

2. Safety by Design1 across Member States

European Union Member States should incorporate the principles of *Child Rights by Design* into national legislation and regulatory frameworks, ensuring that these principles become the foundation for the design and operation of digital products and services. This should build on the European Commission's Guidelines under the Digital Services Act, creating safer digital environments that reduce the reliance on parental monitoring alone. This is in line with the European Commission's guidelines under Article 28 of the Digital Services Act published in July 2025.

3. Strengthen platform accountability and enforcement under the Digital Services Act

The European Union agencies and Member States should ensure that online platforms implement effective measures to minimise the recommendation of harmful or age-

[1] Children´s rights-by-design is a framework that consists of 11 principles grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to UNICEF (Hartung P., The children's rights-by-design standard for data use by tech companies, in Issue brief no. 5 | November 2020 Good Governance of Children's Data project Office of Global Insight and Policy), a CRbD framework "would include the design, development and execution of online services or products used by children, in accordance with the CRC provisions and the primary consideration of children's best interests" (p.1).

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inappropriate content to children and young people. National regulators should be adequately resourced to monitor compliance and enforce obligations under the Digital Services Act, reducing the burden placed on parents to manage platform risks independently. Platform accountability should also include mandatory transparency assessments:

- Require social media platforms to publish plain-language summaries of how personal data is collected, used, shared and retained
- Require independent review of data-processing practices before integrating AI systems into the platforms (although this might be too late)

It should also entail stronger penalties for repeated violations of privacy and require platforms to use third-party moderators for fact-checking.

4. Invest in comprehensive critical digital literacy programmes for communities

Member States should develop and fund evidence-based digital media literacy strategies through a whole community-based approach that engages parents, caregivers, children, young people, educators and wider community Evidence-informed critical digital literacy campaigns and educational programmes should be translated and adapted to different contexts and implemented across Member States. This should focus on the promotion of health and well-being, ensuring online safety and protecting children and young people's rights. The campaign and educational programme should aim to support not only children and young people, but also those who have caring responsibilities for them in different capacities, including parents, carers, teachers, youth workers and relevant health professionals

5. Provide meaningful participation of parents and whole communities alongside children and young people in digital policy development

Policies, at both European and national levels, concerning children's and young people's digital lives should encourage collaboration and mutual learning between family members,

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rather than positioning parents and guardians as the authority figures, and children as passive recipients. Recognising parents as one of the key stakeholders will help ensure that policies reflect families' evolving needs, acknowledge diverse parenting experiences, and support effective collaboration between families, institutions, and digital service providers.

6. Limitations of Age Verification

Through the EU Kids Act Proposal, the European Commission has proposed expanded rules requiring mandatory, EU-approved age verification for access to social media and video platforms, with restrictions for children under 15 and safety-by-design safeguards. Mandatory age checks often rely on state IDs or biometric facial estimation, raising concerns about how tech companies and third parties use sensitive personal data. Verification tools should be state-supported, using a simple binary confirmation that can be shared with platform operators without exposing personal identity documents.

Many children's advocacy groups warn that strict age blocks can isolate marginalized teenagers (such as LGBTQI+ youth who rely on online communities for support) and push them toward less-regulated digital spaces. Critics have also argued that age verification is easily bypassed via Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), and suggest focusing instead on systemic fixes, such as turning off addictive recommender algorithms by default.

Under the Digital Services Act 2024, Designated Digital Services Coordinators have been granted the authority to perform their duties under the Regulation. This includes investigative powers, the ability to impose fines, and the authority to issue notices and orders to stop violations. We ask all officials to make full use of these powers to prioritise the protection of user data and to uphold the objectives of the EU's digital regulatory framework, rather than rely on an age-restriction policy that may drive young people to seek less secure avenues for access (Pasquale et al., 2020; Livingstone et al., 2024; Nansen et al., 2026).

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Conclusions

While European regulatory initiatives such as the Digital Services Act and the General Data Protection Regulation are important steps towards protecting users' rights, this report highlights that there are still significant gaps between regulatory ambition and the lived experiences of families. Responsibility for managing digital risks continues to be disproportionately placed on parents, despite their limited capacity to influence the design, governance, and logics of digital platforms.

The findings and recommendations shared in this report suggest that supporting parents cannot be reduced to providing advice on screen time, parental controls, or privacy settings. Parents require opportunities to develop critical digital media literacy that enables them to understand how digital infrastructures, algorithms, data extraction, and platform economies shape children's and young people's experiences online. At the same time, digital literacy alone cannot compensate for platform designs that prioritise engagement and profit over children's and young people's rights and well-being. Education must therefore be accompanied by stronger regulatory enforcement and meaningful accountability for technology companies.

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