

Are kids safe online?

For a child, operating a mobile phone is like learning to crawl. Nobody teaches a child to crawl, but the child still adapts to the skills, falls flat a few times (hits the wrong buttons at first) and eventually gets the hang of it. The same is the case with a phone.

Children are digital natives while my generation is made of digital migrants. Unlike our children, we were introduced to the world of the internet and easy access to it through our smartphones after years of having experienced life. We had seen the good and the bad of the world, and were then introduced to digital tools and the internet. It is probably for that reason that many in our generation and generations before us feel apprehensive about the “intrusion” of technology in almost all our day-to-day activities. Children, on the other hand, are introduced to smartphones first and the nitty-gritty of life later. As they grow, they begin to find varying contextual relevance of the device—from playing games, completing class assignments and connecting with friends to expressing their opinions, looking up information on topics of interest and finding digital solutions in their everyday life—often unsupervised.

This is extremely worrisome. While the internet holds plenty of opportunities for all age groups, it also poses risks and challenges for everyone who’s going online. On one side, the internet opens up new avenues of learning and social inclusion. On the other, it creates room for cyber-bullying and misuse of personal information. It is thus imperative to ensure that the internet is maintained as a safe space for children, and for this purpose, collective efforts by children, parents, teachers, civil society groups and the government are required.

According to a recent report released by Unicef, titled *The State of the World’s Children 2017: Children in a Digital World*, one in three internet users worldwide is a child. “A growing body of evidence indicates that children are accessing the internet at increasingly younger ages. In some countries, children under 15 are as likely to use the internet as adults over 25,” says the report.

The same report states that youth (ages 15-24) are the most connected age group. Worldwide, 71% of people in the age group of 15-24 are online compared with 48% of the total population online. Yet, one-third of the world’s youth (or 346 million persons) are not online, “exacerbating inequities and reducing children’s ability to participate in an increasingly digital economy”, the report states.

In India, the percentage of those online is even more skewed. It’s not just children and youth who are missing out on opportunities available online but also rural and marginalized groups. Women, too, are largely excluded from Digital India. Only 29% of all internet users in India are females, thanks to deep roots of patriarchy that pose social and economic challenges to women when it comes to mobile ownership and access to the internet.

At Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), we have been advocating equitable access to the internet since 2002. Access to the internet not only enables marginalized sections of the society, including children, to access information online but also helps them access socio-economic and cultural benefits, thereby potentially enabling them to break from circles of poverty that their parents and their grandparents have been subjected to.

Today, children in Alwar (Rajasthan) are accessing the internet to travel the world through Google Images; kids in Nagaon (Assam) are looking up information on issues that affect their communities to create awareness and find solutions; school kids in Musiri (Tamil Nadu) are using digital tools for better learning experiences; and tribal youth in Baran (Rajasthan) are raising their voices against bonded labour to improve their lifestyle. These are stories of impact—that DEF has come

across at its regional centres where it provides access to digital tools and digital literacy—that reflect on the opportunities that children are leveraging on the internet while being open to a range of risks online. Therefore, we have made a conscious decision to ensure that our training includes sessions that create awareness of the negatives of the online world.

We believe all children must be provided affordable and enabling access to edutainment resources. At the same time, collective efforts must be put in place to protect children from the negative effects of the internet. The idea is not to discourage children and adults from using the internet, but to transform internet consumers into conscious netizens who not only consume positive content but also contribute positively to the internet. I would, thus, like to make an appeal to all parents, schools and other computer learning centres to ensure that digital literacy is not imparted to children and youth without hands-on training on basic digital security and awareness about privacy of data.

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