

EU Children’s Participation Platform

Child Safety Online and Offline – Insights and Recommendations from Children Across the EU

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents key findings and recommendations from children across the European Union (EU) on the topics of bullying, cyberbullying, and online safety. Drawing on the report on [Child Safety](#)¹, which summarised the results of EU-wide consultations conducted through focus groups, interviews, and a large-scale survey, this report supports European Commission initiatives in the areas of bullying, cyberbullying and online safety. In the consultations, children expressed a clear demand for stronger digital education, improved adult guidance, and meaningful participation of children in decisions affecting their safety online and offline.

Children highlighted that bullying and cyberbullying impact their well-being, a sense of safety, and trust in adults. They provided actionable suggestions on how to prevent harm and how to respond when harm occurs, and how to ensure sustainable support. This report emphasises children's agency and promotes their inclusion in shaping the digital and educational environments.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CHILDREN

For the European Commission:

- Invest in digital education initiatives that promote resilience, digital literacy, and emotional well-being.
- Develop EU-wide standards for age-appropriate content, age verification systems, and child-friendly reporting tools.
- Support youth-led initiatives and include children in the co-design of safety policies.
- Promote EU-wide campaigns on bullying, cyberbullying and online safety.

For education systems:

- Establish well-being and digital literacy classes across all age groups.

¹ The report draws on the consultation with children conducted in the context of the EU Children’s Participation Platform. See: Janta, B., Bannister Curran, L., Hirani, H., Vigliola, A. (2024) EU Children’s Participation Platform, Findings from the consultation with children on Integrated Child Protection Systems. Available at: https://eu-for-children.europa.eu/system/files/2024-03/ConsultationReport_ICPS_FINAL_08.03.2024.pdf
Between May and October 2023, 1,095 children from 21 countries of the European Union participated in the consultations.

- Introduce anti-bullying workshops and peer-led support networks.
- Create inclusive, student-led councils to advise on bullying, cyberbullying and online safety policies.
- Ensure dedicated mental health professionals are available and accessible in every school.
- Provide clear, accessible reporting mechanisms and follow-up procedures.
- Train teachers in mental health support and child-sensitive communication.

For parents and caregivers

- Participate in training on online and offline safety, respectful communication, and recognising signs of distress.
- Maintain open, trust-based conversations with children about online and offline safety risks.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents key findings and recommendations from children across the European Union (EU) on the topics of bullying, cyberbullying, and online safety. It draws from the evidence from consultations with children implemented between May and October 2023, where 1,095 children from 21 countries of the European Union participated sharing their views and suggestions related to child protection mechanisms. The consultation was guided by the Lundy model of child participation² and children were actively involved in designing the consultation process and content. The consultation process was conducted through focus groups, interviews, and a large-scale survey, where children shared their experiences and ideas about staying safe at school, online, and in public spaces.

The report on [Child Safety](#)³ presents the findings from this consultation. This current report discusses the findings on issues related to bullying and cyberbullying, with a specific emphasis on digital safety and education.

2. CHILDREN EXPERIENCES OF BULLYING, CYBERBULLYING AND ONLINE DANGERS

2.1 Online safety

Children recognised that they spend much of their time online. They were also very interested in discussing it and sharing their observations and recommendations, with an emphasis on the request for more information on how they can prevent harm and stay safe. Children are **aware that social media can contribute to bullying and cyberbullying**. For example, children from Bulgaria were aware that **online spaces can have some risks**, and some children already experienced cyber bullying and encountered dangerous situations when browsing online. As noted in the *Child safety* report:

Children interviewed in Romania discussed social media with contrasting views on how to cope with online comments. Some children felt safe as they did not post on social media; if they did, they felt they would have to struggle with worrying about what people such as friends and peers may say. Other children said that they simply ignore all the ‘opinions’.

² https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/lundy_model_of_participation_0.pdf

³ Janta, B., Bannister Curran, L., Hirani, H., Vigliola, A. (2024) EU Children’s Participation Platform, Findings from the consultation with children on Integrated Child Protection Systems. Available at: https://eu-for-children.europa.eu/system/files/2024-03/ConsultationReport_ICPS_FINAL_08.03.2024.pdf

2.2 Safety at schools

School is one of the places in which children spend the most of their time, and feeling safe at school is essential. Children tended to feel safe at school when they felt listened to and had their needs respected; when their health was looked after (mental and physical); and, when they were provided with an education in a safe environment.

However, children identified physical and cyberbullying as a barrier to feeling safe in school. Experiences reported included peer bullying, intimidation by older students, and the lack of an appropriate response by teachers. While many children valued supportive teachers, others described educators as passive or dismissive. Children reported feeling unsafe when their problems were not taken seriously or when teachers acted inconsistently.

As noted in the *Child safety* report:

Whether children experienced or were aware of bullying incidents, it was often noted as a key component in how children viewed schools' safety. For instance, children in Romania felt that school was not a safe place as they faced significant **bullying and cyberbullying**. And although these children have groups of friends and feel safe within these, they still viewed the school environment as unsafe. A similar sentiment was shared in a focus group where Cypriot children stated that to improve Integrated Child Protection Systems (ICPS), *'more needs to be done to look at reasons for bullying and address the issue'*.

In addition to teachers' presence and influence, children also felt safer from bullying when they were in a group of friends, as *'that way they don't worry that something bad could happen to them.'* (Interviews in Romania).

3. PROCESSES AND REGULATIONS TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM BULLYING AND ONLINE RISKS

Children are aware of the importance of rules and regulations that foster a culture of no bullying and want to be involved in designing these processes. For example, **active involvement of children in the creation of rules** was mentioned by an interviewed child from Lithuania, who was disappointed that *'his classmates and himself were not involved in the creation of such agreements at school'*. Anti-bullying measures can include reporting structures, school councils, and workshops.

Children's views on increasing regulations for online safety diverged significantly. While some children provided suggestions such as establishing age limits, other children were in favour of 'softer' measures, such as education and awareness raising.

The survey results from the *Child safety* consultation suggest that overall, children agree that it **is important to set up systems or rules to prevent children being unsafe online** (83% gave a rating of either 4 or 5 stars indicating that they consider this to be an 'important' or 'very important' issue). This is reflected in the interview and focus group discussions, where children suggested concrete measures, such as changing the appearance of social media to make it less appealing and enforcing stricter age restrictions. For example, children from the Netherlands asked that **social media be made 'more unattractive for children'** and suggested that this could be achieved with a similar approach as for commercials on unhealthy food. Similarly, children from Hungary also noted the dangers of social media platforms, in particular for younger children. They suggested that there should be more strict **age limits** for social media apps. For instance, TikTok should be only available to children over the age of 16 years, and the registration process should include the age verification (e.g. by showing an ID).

Nonetheless, children from Denmark **doubted whether ‘efficient online regulations that keep children safe online’ are possible**. They believed that even if measures are in place to keep children safe, some forms of cyberbullying are *‘unavoidable’* and will still take place, e.g. involuntary sharing of pictures, scamming. Other children noted that age limits can be circumvented. Yet, children were positive that more actions can be put in place, e.g. more education on online safety at schools, to prevent and address these risks. In short, **while many children acknowledged that they have already experienced digital attacks through inappropriate content, their suggestions were less towards ‘examining and banning everything’ and more towards education and resilience training in order for them to be equipped to deal with it confidently.**

4. INITIATIVES TO PREVENT AND ADDRESS BULLYING AND ONLINE RISKS

4.1 Education on peer violence and respect (bullying and cyberbullying)

Children advocated for **education on peer violence, bullying and cyberbullying**. This could take the form of **workshops and guidance** in schools and parental guidance. For example, teachers should organise classes during which all children are taught and reminded of the importance of safe and respectful behaviour with each other. Children from Romania⁴ also shared the need for more information: *‘different workshops, courses to find out useful information, beyond the usual subjects they do at school’* so they can *‘be better prepared for life’*. They specifically mentioned topics such as *‘emotional health, bullying, cyberbullying or how to face problems at school’*.

One interviewed child in Lithuania commented that **information and social campaigns** on the topic of bullying and violence prevention are **most effective when delivered in an active format in a small setting**, e.g. during lessons in school, during afterschool activities etc. when children can share between each other their direct experiences, ideas and suggestions. Related to that, children from **Hungary observed that ‘adults should talk to children about how to build relationships’ and that parents have an important role to play in this respect**. Yet, they also suggested that both parents and teachers should have discussions with children on why it is important to have friends, and that schools should introduce **wellbeing classes**.

Children stressed the role that teachers have in ensuring a safe environment between children at school and strong bonds between children and adults at schools. This fosters a culture of no bullying. For example, children from Croatia⁵ suggested that **schools should reduce the atmosphere of competition between children**. Instead, schools should **motivate children to work together in groups as this would teach children to connect and collaborate with peers**.

Croatian children also highlighted the importance of **peer support**. Peer groups were consistently identified as important sources of emotional safety. Older children often turned to friends instead of adults, which reinforced the **need to equip young people with the skills to support each other** while ensuring access to professional help.

4.2 Education on staying safe online and cyberbullying

Children strongly advocated for effective, age-appropriate digital education. In an open survey question about what adults should keep doing, there were respondents who thought that adults should **keep informing children of risks and dangers (and what to do if they face problems)**, including those encountered on the Internet. **Consulted children repeatedly expressed a desire to be provided with**

⁴ Focus group 2 in Romania.

⁵ Focus group 2 in Croatia.

more information on how to keep themselves safe on the internet and social media, with a focus on prevention, not mitigation. Generally, requests for more guidance on how to operate safely online and more efficient regulation to keep children safe online were common themes raised by children across consulted countries.

Education for both adults and children

Adults in charge of children's safety need to be prepared and equipped to protect children from possible online threats and abuse. Children in both Croatian focus group and interviews agreed that 'online settings' are one of the key areas where they feel most unsecure. They felt that the adults in charge of their safety do not know enough to protect them from possible online threats and abuse; and that children do not know enough to protect themselves online/are not aware of the possible threats. Furthermore, children from Hungary also provided a suggestion that parents should be more involved in explaining the social media safety rules to children. Others suggested workshops and courses at schools. As such, **both adults (teachers and parents) and children require education and information on online safety.**

Children in Romania⁶ want to spread the message that '*cyberbullying is as painful as bullying*' and asked for more education to prevent children becoming victims online and their data being stolen.

How to use the internet safely

Children from Bulgaria asked for more information on how to be safe online while browsing. Likewise, children in the Romanian focus group stated that education on **well-being in the digital environment** is lacking. Children believe that **prevention is more important than 'combating'**, and the children **want workshops and courses in school to teach them about the possible problems online.**

Safety while browsing can include risks associated with accessing websites, social media, age-appropriate content, 'cookies', scams, dangerous strangers, among others. In more detail:

- Children noticed that a lot of information on social media is not **age appropriate** and not suitable for children, in particular younger children. Children in Denmark also believed that **children can too easily lie about their age**, thus avoiding age restrictions and can then get access to apps and content that is not appropriate.
- Children desire greater clarity on the use of their **personal data**. This includes 'cookies' while browsing and on social media, other tracking software and scams that seek to steal data.

'Children want to be more educated in order not to be victims on the internet and their data to be stolen.' (Consultation report from Romania)

- **Awareness of strangers with bad intentions and how to avoid and manage such situations.** One of the participants explained that he feels unsafe on the internet as 'people with bad intentions are at every corner' (an interviewed child from Romania). Children from Hungary also proposed more outreach campaigns for children not to befriend strangers on social media platforms.
- How to have a '**safe social media account**': The interviewed Romanian children expressed the importance of knowing all the measures they can take to be safe on internet. For example, how to have a 'safe' account on Instagram and Facebook. Some Danish children were aware of safety measures on apps social media such as terms of agreement, age limits on apps, and parental guidance on apps. However, they requested more clarity on the use of their personal data and noted that age restrictions can be circumvented.

⁶ Focus group 2 in Romania.

Some children felt they were already well informed

Some **children felt they were already well informed on online safety**: During the Bulgarian focus group discussion, when prompted about their knowledge of the dangers of browsing the internet and communication on social channels, the children seemed very confident that ‘nothing bad could happen to them’. The children had discussed the topic of online safety at home with their foster parents (who try to limit their time in internet), and with the social workers and at school as well. However, based on this discussion, the facilitator concluded that online browsing is an area that may warrant more attention. The Bulgarian report concluded that children communicate on several different social channels, and it means that **they need to be more aware of the dangers in the online environment** and need to have **more discussions about how to be safe when browsing online**.

4.3 Education on mental health

Children also supported mental health education. There is a connection between bullying, cyberbullying and mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and feeling isolated. Children suggested that schools should normalise mental health conversations and introduce regular thematic days to address mental well-being. They advocated for the creation of safe environments where students feel comfortable discussing their mental health and stressed the need for teachers to be trained in mental health support, just as they are in first aid. Some children also suggested that every school should have a trained psychologist or counsellor who is genuinely accessible and trusted by students. This professional should offer confidential support without judgment and be available as a regular presence in schools.

4.4 Other attitudes to prevent and address bullying and cyberbullying

Children suggested additional measures to empower and encourage them to seek help from their teachers and caregivers about issues such as bullying and cyberbullying. These include respectful, approachable adults who listen, communicate clearly and take prompt action; supported by appropriate training.

Children value adults who listen, respect and support them

Approachable and trustworthy adults empower children. When children feel respected and listened to, they are more likely to speak up about experiences of bullying whether online or in-person. Children stressed that adults should devote time to genuinely hear them out, take their concerns seriously and not dismiss or downplay their experiences and concerns. As one child from Croatia put it: *‘They should stop ignoring what children have to say and actually hear them out.’* As described by a child from Romania, the type of adult who makes a difference are:

‘Adults who are friendly, positive, who have the patience to listen to their [children’s] opinions and views, understand their [children’s] feelings make the place and activity they are in safer and more accepted’. (Child from Romania).

Proactive communication and mutual respect build trust. Children highlighted that by initiating conversations, communicating frequently and building trust through respectful dialogue can prevent bullying and create a more inclusive culture. As one child noted⁷, peer violence *‘happens every day and all day [and] all teachers should be aware and participate in the solution of the problem and the fight against violence’*.

Mutual respect is essential. Children also requested mutual respect from teachers, asking them **to not judge the children or make assumptions based on their backgrounds**. This was clearly expressed by

⁷ Please note that we have not included the child’s country in order to protect confidentiality.

children with experience of alternative care and children from Romania, who asked adults not to judge children because of the way children ‘behave, speak, dress, act in public with other people or do their activities’. In the interviews in one Member State⁸, most children agreed that teachers should be more attentive and empathetic to each child’s individual situation. Similarly, when performing conflict resolution, teachers should endeavour to **not be biased**.

When schools foster a culture of trust and zero tolerance towards bullying, children are more likely to carry those values into their online interactions. Just as importantly, children who feel they can trust the adults around them are more likely to seek help with bullying and cyberbullying.

Clear communication on how and where to seek help

Children called for **clear, open and effective communication** between themselves and adults. Suggested approaches include **drawings** to express feelings non-verbally and **anonymous boxes** in schools and child-centred places. For example, one child interviewed in Lithuania explained that there are ‘bullying boxes’ in their school to report on difficulties a child may experience. Other children used anonymous boxes to post questions and seek advice.

Children also asked for clear **signposting to identify which adults they can approach for help in different setting and for different issues**. For example, this could include signpost to adults able to assist with online safety, cyberbullying and/or bullying. As noted in the *Child Safety* report, 68% of children in the online survey agreed that adults should tell children who they can ask for help and support.

Importantly, **children wanted to know what will happen after they report a bullying or cyberbullying incident**. As children from Denmark observed, some children may be ‘scared to reach out for help’ because they do not know what would happen next⁹. They suggested that children should be provided with clear information on steps and actions that would be undertaken when they ask for help.

Action is taken promptly

Once informed, children want **adults to take the appropriate steps** and either step in or offer support depending on the individual circumstances¹⁰. Some children described cases where concerns from children were ignored until they escalated into physical violence or emotional distress. They emphasised the need for adults to act fairly, transparently, and without judgement; to maintain confidentiality; and to involve children in deciding on the next steps, and involving parents where appropriate.

Teachers and caregivers receive the necessary training

To effectively support children, teachers and adults should help **foster a culture of respect** between children (and adults), build trust, actively listen without judgement, communicate clearly and respond promptly. When these conditions are met, teachers and adults are better positioned to prevent bullying and cyberbullying and address them appropriately if they occur.

To support this role, children suggested that teachers receive training to develop relevant skills, including elements of counselling or therapeutic communication. Children felt that this training should also include education on bullying, cyberbullying and online safety.

⁸ Please note that we have not included the name of the country in order to protect confidentiality.

⁹ The child may have been discussing non-bullying related reports. However, this still serves to highlight the need to explain ‘what would happen next’ in bullying and cyberbullying related incidents.

¹⁰ While some children want teachers to step in immediately, others prefer to resolve issues among themselves, citing that involving teachers could worsen the situation.