

Supporting Families in the Digital Era: How to ensure safe and enriching online experiences for children and their families?

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1. Introduction

Background

Most children in Europe today live in media-rich households where digital technologies are part of their everyday lives.¹ Nevertheless, the ways children and their families engage with digital technologies are complex and have varying effects. On the one hand, digital technologies offer unique opportunities for all family members. Digital technologies support children in their education and leisure activities, for example, but also make it easier for family members to stay in touch with each other or to play together. On the other hand, children – and adults – face online risks and challenges. Some of these risks include, but are not limited to, cyberbullying, mis- and disinformation, harmful and illegal content, and online child sexual abuse. These risks have a major impact on a child's safety, and the mental and physical well-being of both children and their families. Some families may face additional challenges in the digital environment due to specific vulnerabilities linked to poverty, disability or discrimination. Digital inequality is not only related to access to digital technologies, but also to the development of digital skills and the use of technologies, as well as to the benefits of technologies for overall personal well-being.²

COFACE Families Europe approach and activities

COFACE acknowledges that families are diverse and that family settings may even change over time, resulting in children experiencing different settings during their childhood.³ COFACE uses a multigenerational approach based on the interrelated well-being of children and their families. This whole family approach is developed in the COFACE Child Compass 2030, which describes five priority and interrelated areas that affect the health and well-being of the individual child and their family: education, community, digital technology, economy and environment.⁴ In addition, COFACE adopted 13 Digitalisation Principles for creating a better internet for children and their families, managed and maintained by reconciling and balancing the roles and responsibilities of end users, and private and public actors.⁵ The negative effects of technology need to be addressed through a mix of strong legal frameworks that create inclusive and accessible online environments, appropriate self-regulation by the industries concerned and support for educators (formal and non-formal), parents and carers in their digital literacy.

COFACE brings its multigenerational and pluralistic approach to different European and international working groups and coalitions working on digital citizenship and safer internet.

- COFACE is a member of the Digital Citizenship Working Group (DCWG)⁶ which is a group of stakeholders from civil society, industry and researchers. The group comes together to exchange best practices, discuss topics and activities around digital citizenship, and hear from other multistakeholder experts from Europe and other world regions. The work of the group is based on five pillars of digital citizenship: digital foundations, digital well-being, digital engagement and media literacy, digital empowerment and digital opportunities.
- Additionally, COFACE is part of the European Child Sexual Abuse Legislation Advocacy Group (ECLAG) to address the specific challenge of child sexual abuse which is increasingly taking place

¹ O. Kapella, E.M. Schmidt, M. Sisask, [DigiGen policy brief](#): Recognising digital technologies as a key part of 'doing family' in the digital era, 2022.

² H. Holsmarsdottir, "The Digital Divide: Understanding Vulnerability and Risk in Children and Young People's Everyday Digital Lives" in H. Holsmarsdottir et al. (eds.), *Understanding The Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People*, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-46929-9_3.

³ OECD, [Policy brief on child well-being](#): Treating all children equally? Why policies should adapt to evolving family realities, 2019.

⁴ COFACE Families Europe, [Child Compass 2030](#): Shaping a healthy society, environment and economy fit for children, 2020.

⁵ COFACE Families Europe, [Digitalisation Principles](#), 2018.

⁶ More information on the group's website: <https://dcwg.eu/>.

online.⁷ The coalition advocates for a robust EU framework to end child sexual abuse and exploitation (see below). It has welcomed the Proposal for a Regulation to prevent and fight child sexual abuse proposed by the European Commission in May 2022. Some of the coalition's key demands are to ensure that platforms design their services with children's rights and needs at the forefront, and to require online service providers to prevent, detect, report and remove child sexual abuse online, while putting in place strong safeguards to prevent the misuse of any detection technology and protect the privacy of all users.

Activities by the European Commission

One of the main political priorities of the current European Commission (2019-2024) is to deliver “a Europe fit for the digital age”.⁸ Some of the policies and legislations put forward under this priority are the following: the Digital Services Act (DSA), the New European Strategy for a Better Internet for Kids (BIK+ Strategy), the EU Digital Identity (EUDI) Regulation and the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act). In its digital strategy of 2020, the Commission put forward three key objectives to create a Europe fit for the digital age: technology that works for people, a fair and competitive economy, and an open, democratic and sustainable society.⁹ The 2030 Digital Compass builds further on this strategy and sets concrete targets and objectives to guide Europe’s digital transformation.¹⁰ In 2022, the Commission proposed a Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for human-centred digital transformation.¹¹ It builds on and complements the European Pillar of Social Rights, and states, among other things, that everyone should have access to digital technologies, products and services that are safe, secure and privacy-protective by design. Additionally, the principle that “Children and young people should be protected and empowered online” is recognised in this Declaration.

About this policy brief

This COFACE policy brief highlights the importance of digital technologies for children and their families, presents some activities that are in place or in current debate at EU level and draws some findings for further measures to support families in the digital era. To do this, the first section will analyse some of the EU frameworks which include measures to ensure safe and empowering digital experiences for children, and whether they integrate a families perspective. The second section will spotlight some practices of COFACE member organisations from 9 different European countries. The practices are diverse, ranging from boosting digital parenting skills to tackling and preventing specific risks, such as child sexual abuse online. Finally, the concluding section brings key messages and recommendations for EU policy makers.

⁷ More information on the website: <https://www.childsafetyineurope.com/eclag/>.

⁸ See website European Commission: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age_en.

⁹ European Commission, *Shaping Europe’s Digital Future*, 2020.

¹⁰ European Commission, *2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade*, 2021.

¹¹ European Commission, *European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles* for the Digital Decade, 2022.

2. EU Policy and Legislative Frameworks

Children’s rights online are covered by both EU and international frameworks. All EU Member States have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and children’s rights are further recognised in Article 3(3) of the Treaty on the European Union and Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Furthermore, the General Comment No. 25, adopted in 2021 by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, states that the rights of the child must be equally respected online and offline.¹² The General Comment explains to States parties how to implement the UNCRC in relation to the digital environment and how to ensure compliance with their obligations under the UNCRC and its Optional Protocols. Among other things, it mentions that parents and caregivers need support to develop the necessary technological understanding, skills and capacity to help their children navigate the digital environment. Additionally, it states that particular attention should be given to parents and caregivers of children in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.

This brief uses the definition of “a child” as stated in the UNCRC, which means “*every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier*”.

The following section further examines EU frameworks for children’s rights in the digital environment and considers whether these frameworks take into account the afore mentioned General Comment No. 25 and take a whole-family approach.

EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child

In 2021, the European Union adopted a comprehensive Strategy on the Rights of the Child, committing to putting children and their best interests at the heart of EU policies.¹³ Together with the adoption of the European Child Guarantee, this framework puts into action Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights “Childcare and support to children” – which states that children have the right to early childhood education and care and to protection against poverty.¹⁴

Digital and information society is one of the six thematic areas under which the Strategy proposes a series of targeted actions so that children can safely navigate the digital environment and harness its opportunities. It recognises that the development of the digital environment and technologies have opened many opportunities, but also that children’s online presence increases their exposure to harmful or illegal content. In that regard, it refers to the EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse (see below).¹⁵ Additionally, over-exposure to screens and online activities is highlighted, as well as the increase of screen-time during the COVID-pandemic, the importance of data protection and privacy rules, and the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on children and their rights. The Strategy on the Rights of the Child sets out some key actions to be taken by the Commission, Member States, and ICT companies, such as the adoption by the Commission of an updated Better Internet for Kids Strategy in 2022 (see below).

There is no specific mention of support to families for seizing the opportunities and mitigating the risks of digital technologies. However, in the introductory part of the Strategy, the need to support families and communities in ensuring their children’s well-being and development is mentioned. Additionally, social protection and support to parents is specifically mentioned in the second thematic area of the Strategy to strengthen the socio-economic inclusion of children and fight child poverty. The 2021 Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, which complements the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, calls for specific measures for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion through

¹² United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment No. 25](#) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment, 2021.

¹³ European Commission, [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#), 2021.

¹⁴ Council of the European Union, [Council Recommendation](#) establishing a European Child Guarantee, 2021; European Commission, [The European Pillar of Social Rights](#), 2017.

¹⁵ The strategy was adopted in 2020: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/child-sexual-abuse/eu-strategy-more-effective-fight-against-child-sexual-abuse_en.

guaranteeing access to children and their families to a set of key services.¹⁶ In Article 7 (g) and (h) of the Child Guarantee the access to digital tools, services and skills is mentioned. However, the role of digitalisation is only specifically mentioned in the context of education, and not in relation to facilitating access to other key services.¹⁷

Combating violence against children and ensuring child protection is another thematic area under the Strategy on the Rights of the Child. Violence can happen both offline and online. The Strategy recognises that promoting integrated child protection systems is inseparable from the prevention and protection of violence. There should be a child-centred approach, better cooperation between all relevant authorities and services, and preventive measures, including family support mechanisms. In line with the key actions proposed in the Strategy, on 23 April 2024, the European Commission published a Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child.¹⁸ The Recommendation states that Member States should take measures to ensure that children are and feel safe in online spaces. According to the text this should include measures to improve digital literacy and safe use of digital technologies among children ensuring that children can thrive in the digital environment. This also includes awareness raising and training towards families, carers and at school (starting at an early age) which can be supported by relevant experts, such as the Safer Internet Centres (see below).

EU Strategy for a Better Internet for Kids

The New Better Internet for Kids Strategy (BIK+ Strategy) is the digital arm of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child. On 11 May 2022, the European Commission adopted the BIK+ Strategy to improve age-appropriate digital services, with no one left behind and to ensure that every child is protected, empowered and respected online, in line with the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles.¹⁹ The BIK+ Strategy proposes actions around three pillars: safe digital experiences, digital empowerment and active participation, and aims to inform policy development across EU Member States.

As age assurance has been identified as one of the solutions to protect children online, the European Commission recently published a study under the BIK+ Strategy to outline both the legal and practical aspects of age assurance.²⁰ It maps out ten main methods of age assurance and examines key requirements for age assurance systems. Building on the Commission's research report the BIK+ initiative launched an age assurance self-assessment guide to support digital service providers.²¹ It is important to note that age verification is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but it is one of the tools that can help keep children safe online and reduce the burden on parents and caregivers.

The BIK+ Strategy emphasises that adults responsible for children, such as parents, caregivers and teachers, need skills to support, advise and guide children. One of the initiatives under the BIK+ Strategy is a BIK portal which includes a public awareness hub with information specifically targeted to parents and carers. Among other things, the hub includes guides on topical issues, but also a guide to some of the most popular apps, social networking sites and other platforms commonly being used by children. Additionally, BIK+ supports large-scale media literacy campaigns, to reach children, families and teachers.²²

The Commission co-funds Safer Internet Centres (SICs) in Member States under the Digital Europe Programme.²³ The SICs usually offer three kinds of services: a national awareness centre and helpline (both

¹⁶ COFACE Families Europe, [Paving the way for a disability-inclusive Child Guarantee](#): Assessment of the European Child Guarantee National Action Plans from the perspective of children with disabilities and their families, 2023.

¹⁷ H. Shorey, EU Policy Reflections on the Intersections Between Digital and Social Policies Supporting Children as Digital Citizens, in H. Holsmarsdottir et al. (eds.), *Understanding The Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People*, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-46929-9_3.

¹⁸ European Commission, [Recommendation](#) on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child, 2024.

¹⁹ European Commission, [A Digital Decade](#) for children and youth: the new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+), 2021.

²⁰ European Commission, [Research report](#): Mapping age assurance typologies and requirements, 2024.

²¹ Better Internet for Kids, [Self-assessment tool on age assurance: Manual](#), 2024.

²² Find out more about the different campaigns: <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/policy/campaigns-and-events>.

²³ More about the Digital Europe Programme: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/digital-programme>.

are organised by the Insafe network), and a hotline that is organised through the International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE).²⁴ Under BIK+, the Commission strengthens the support of the SICs to help address the digital divide, particularly in imparting digital skills to people in vulnerable situations. Some of these SICs work closely with parents and caregivers, however this is not the case for all of them as this is not mandatory. On the other hand, each centre is obliged to include youth participation services.

EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse

One of the specific risks children increasingly face online is child sexual abuse. 1 in 5 children in Europe become victims of some form of sexual violence, and in recent years reports of child sexual abuse online have dramatically increased.²⁵ The rapid development of technology has led to new forms of sexual abuse against children, with the abuse increasingly occurring online or being facilitated by technologies. This includes, for example, grooming and the distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

In July 2020, the European Commission presented the EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse for the period 2020-2025.²⁶ The aim of the strategy is to provide a framework for developing a strong and comprehensive response to child sexual abuse, both in its online and offline form. Eight concrete initiatives are set out in the strategy, with a focus on a more effective law enforcement response, better support for victims, and improved prevention. The strategy brings both actions focused on legislation and actions focused on coordination and funding. The following section looks in more detail at three legislative actions.

1. Temporary Derogation from certain provisions e-Privacy Directive

In July 2021, the European Union adopted the Temporary Derogation from certain provisions of the e-Privacy Directive.²⁷ The e-Privacy Directive concerns the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the electronic communications sector. Since December 2020, number-independent interpersonal communications services (NI-ICS), like WhatsApp, Instagram Direct and Facebook Messenger, fall under the scope of the e-Privacy Directive, meaning that those providers could not continue to voluntarily detect online CSAM without authorisation by national or EU legislation. The adopted Temporary Derogation gives those providers the legal basis to continue their voluntary actions until 3 August 2024. The Regulation allows NI-ICS to use “*specific technologies for the processing of personal and other data to the extent strictly necessary to detect online child sexual abuse on their services and report it and to remove online child sexual abuse material from their services*”. Audio communications are out of the scope of the Regulation. With the deadline approaching and no long-term legal framework in place yet, Council and Parliament agreed to extend the derogation until 3 April 2026.

2. Proposal for a Child Sexual Abuse Regulation

As the European Commission shares the belief that voluntary actions and self-regulatory measures alone will not solve the problem, it envisages a long-term framework with mandatory actions. On 11 May 2022, the European Commission adopted, together with the BIK+ Strategy, its proposal for a Regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse (CSA Regulation).²⁸ The new Regulation would place

²⁴ More about the SICs and find the SIC in your Member State: <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/policy/insafe-inhope>.

²⁵ Council of Europe, [About one in five children in Europe are victims of some form of sexual violence](#).

²⁶ European Commission, [EU Strategy](#) for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, 2020.

²⁷ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, [Temporary Derogation](#) from certain provisions of the e-Privacy Directive, 2021.

²⁸ European Commission, [Proposal for a Regulation](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse, 2022.

obligations on online service providers to prevent, detect, report, and remove child sexual abuse materials online.

The proposed CSA Regulation builds further on the horizontal framework provided by the Digital Services Act (see below), which addresses all illegal content in general, and will complement it by setting out specific rules needed to combat online child sexual abuse. The proposal lays down uniform rules for digital service providers offering services in the EU, namely hosting services and interpersonal communication services (such as messaging services), app stores and internet access providers. It covers the detection, removal and reporting of online CSA, which includes the dissemination of previously known and new child sexual abuse material, and the solicitation of children (grooming). In addition, it foresees in the establishment of an EU Centre to prevent and combat child sexual abuse.

If the Regulation were approved, service providers would have to assess the risk of their services being misused for online child sexual abuse and adopt mitigation measures to address those risks. By requiring risk assessments and mitigation measures, the focus of the Regulation is on prevention. The preamble of the proposal refers to "parental control tools" as one of the possible measures to address the risk identified in the risk assessment. As with age assurance, it is also important to note here that parental control tools are not a one-size-fits-all solution.

The Commission further proposes that if, despite mitigation measures, there is evidence of a significant risk of child sexual abuse, judicial authorities or other independent administrative authorities could issue a detection order that leads to an obligation for the service providers to operate targeted technologies to detect, report and remove the material. The Commission considers the mandatory detection orders as a last resort and states that they follow a fair balance of all fundamental rights at stake.

Member States will have to designate a Coordinating Authority, which are primary national authorities in charge of the consistent application of the Regulation. They will be independent bodies and be required to perform their tasks in an impartial manner. Among other powers, they may request the competent judicial or independent administrative authority to issue a detection order when the conditions are met.

Since its publication, the proposal ignited a strong debate on how to reconcile child safety without hampering privacy and fundamental rights. At the time of writing, the European Parliament adopted its position²⁹, but it is still waiting for the general approach of the Council of the EU, before the institutions can go into trilogues in order to adopt the proposed Regulation. The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU is currently working on a compromise.

3. Recast Child Sexual Abuse Directive

On 6 February 2023, the Commission furthermore proposed the recast of the 2011 Child Sexual Abuse Directive³⁰, which will update the minimum rules on definitions and sanctions in the light of the increased use of evolving technologies in relation to this offence, as well as the increased presence of children online. It also puts forward more specific requirements for prevention and assistance to victims. Through the whole text a shift in terminology is made in line with the 2016 "Luxembourg Guidelines", which provides recommendations on terminology to use in documents and actions for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. An example of this is the use of "child sexual abuse material" instead of "child pornography".³¹ Another change proposed is an update of the definitions of criminal offences to cover new phenomena, such as AI-generated CSAM, and virtual or augmented CSAM. It is important that the Directive is technology-neutral and future-proof, and enters into force simultaneously with the CSA Regulation as both legislations are interdependent.

Among other things, the recast proposal states that the EU Centre – which should be established through the abovementioned CSA Regulation – shall proactively support Member States' prevention efforts and

²⁹ European Parliament, [Report](#) on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse, 2023.

³⁰ European Commission, [Proposal for recast of 2011/93/EU](#), 2024.

³¹ Interagency Working Group in Luxembourg, [Terminology Guidelines](#) for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, 2016.

efforts on assistance to victims. Within the provision on assistance and support to victims, there is no specific mention of assistance and support to survivors. Support for family members of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse is acknowledged in the preamble of the Directive, but not in the actual provisions of the Directive. The preamble states that “*assistance and advice should be considered to be extended to parents, carers or guardians of child victims where they are not involved as suspects in relation to the offence concerned*”.

Further focus is also put on more specific requirements regarding prevention. The recast proposal includes provisions for Member States to take appropriate measures to prevent child sexual abuse, such as education, training, information and awareness campaigns, and the possibility for persons who fear that they might commit related offences to have access to dedicated and effective intervention programmes or measures. Additionally, it states that Member States shall take appropriate measures to enhance the prevention of child sexual abuse in community settings, including schools, hospitals, social care services, sports clubs or religious communities. It also mentions that “*prevention measures shall devote particular attention to the need to protect children who are particularly vulnerable, including children with mental or physical disabilities*”. The provision does not specifically require Member States to promote education and awareness-raising of parents and carers to support them in preventing and recognising child sexual abuse.

On the date of writing this policy brief, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament still need to adopt their positions on the recast proposal of the Commission.

Horizontal legislation affecting children’s rights online

The above-mentioned frameworks interact with other EU legal and policy frameworks which influence the digital experiences of children and their families. This next section will focus on the Digital Service Act and the Artificial Intelligence Act. However, there are other EU initiatives that play a role, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) and the European Digital Identity Regulation (EUDI). Regarding the latter, this regulation was proposed by the Commission in 2021 establishing a framework for a European Digital Identity and amending the Regulation on electronic identification and trust services (eIDAS). It puts forward the EU Digital Identity Wallet which will allow EU citizens to digitally identify themselves or to store and manage documents in digital form. The Parliament and the Council agreed on the regulation in November 2023.³² In addition to public services and some private services, Very Large Online Platforms designated under the Digital Services Act (see below) will have to accept the EU Digital Identity Wallet for logging into their online services. The EU Digital Wallet will allow children to prove their age without revealing other personal data. However, it remains to be seen how this will be implemented, as the rules on ID cards vary between Member States and not all children are required to have an ID card.

1. Digital Services Act

In 2022, the Digital Services Act (DSA), including EU rules for a safer and more accountable online environment, was adopted and entered into force.³³ Since the end of August 2023, these rules have already applied to platforms with more than 45 million users in the EU (equivalent to 10% of the EU population), the so-called Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) or Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs). Since 17 February 2024, the DSA rules apply to all platforms. The rules under the DSA regulate online intermediaries and platforms such as marketplaces, social networks, content sharing platforms, app stores and online travel and accommodation platforms. The rules include new responsibilities to limit the spread of illegal content and products online, improve the protection of minors and give users more choice and better information. In general, the DSA protects the fundamental rights of users in the online environment and requires online platforms to design their services with the rights of children in mind.

The main provision for the online protection of minors is Article 28 which states that “*providers of online platforms accessible to minors shall put in place appropriate and proportionate measures to ensure a high*

³² European Commission, Press Release: [Final agreement on EU Digital Identity Wallet, 2023](#).

³³ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, [Digital Services Act, 2022](#).

level of privacy, safety, and security of minors, on their service". The recitals of the DSA describe that a service is accessible to minors in the following cases: "when its terms and conditions permit minors to use the service, when its service is directed at or predominantly used by minors, or where the provider is otherwise aware that some of the recipients of its service are minors, for example because it already processes personal data of the recipients of its service revealing their age for other purposes". Article 28 furthermore prohibits providers of online platforms to show any adverts based on profiling, if they are aware with reasonable certainty that the recipient of the service is a minor. Additionally, Article 14 provides that intermediary services should make a special effort to explain their terms and conditions in a way that is easily understandable to minors.

According to Article 34 and 35, every year, VLOPs and VLOSEs need to identify and assess the potential online risks for children and young people using their services (Child Rights Impact Assessment). Therefore, platforms must put measures in place to mitigate these risks, such as age verification and parental control tools, and tools aimed at helping minors signal abuse or obtain support.

The Commission may issue guidance on the application of certain provisions of the DSA. It has already published guidelines to ensure compliance with the obligation of VLOPs and VLOSEs under Article 35 for the mitigation of systemic risks online for elections.³⁴ At the time of writing, the Commission is also planning to adopt guidelines with regard to Article 28 on the protection of minors online.

The Commission enforces the DSA together with national authorities, who supervise the compliance of the platforms established in their territory. The Commission is primarily responsible for the monitoring and enforcement of the additional obligations applying to VLOPs and VLOSEs, such as the measures to mitigate systemic risks.³⁵ If the Commission suspects an infringement of the DSA rules, it may open an investigation and even a formal proceeding. If, after the procedure, the Commission adopts a decision of non-compliance, it may adopt a decision imposing fines of up to 6% of the worldwide turnover of the VLOP or VLOSE concerned and requiring the provider concerned to take measures to remedy the infringement within a time limit set by the Commission.³⁶ An example of the Commission's oversight is the opening of a second formal proceeding against TikTok under the DSA.³⁷ In this case, it concerns the launch of TikTok Lite in France and Spain.

2. Artificial Intelligence Act

AI systems are increasingly intertwined with the digital experiences of children and their families. Furthermore, it has been shown that AI is increasingly being used to create child sexual abuse imagery online.³⁸ Therefore, it is important that this is properly being regulated. The Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act) sets uniform rules for AI in the EU and seeks to create a single market for trustworthy AI applications that can be used in full respect of fundamental rights, including children's rights. In March 2024, the AI Act was passed by the European Parliament³⁹ and in May 2024, it got approved by the EU Council.⁴⁰ However, it will not be fully applicable until 2026. There are a few exceptions, such as the provision on bans on prohibited AI systems, which will apply six months after the date of entry into force. At the time of writing, it is still awaiting official publication in the EU's Official Journal.

The AI Act introduces a risk-based approach (different from a rights-based approach), which means AI systems are divided in different categories according to their level of risk: unacceptable risk (prohibited AI

³⁴ European Commission, [Commission Guidelines](#) for providers of Very Large Online Platforms and Very Large Online Search Engines on the mitigation of systemic risks for electoral processes pursuant to Article 35(3) of Regulation (EU) 2022/2065, 2024.

³⁵ See list of designated VLOPs and VLOSEs: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/list-designated-vlops-and-vloses>.

³⁶ Article 73 and 74 of the Digital Services Act.

³⁷ European Commission, Press Release: [Commission opens proceedings against TikTok under the DSA](#), 2024.

³⁸ Internet Watch Foundation, [How AI is being abused to create child sexual abuse material \(CSAM\) online](#), 2024.

³⁹ European Parliament, Press Release: [Artificial Intelligence Act: MEPs adopt landmark law](#), 2024.

⁴⁰ Council of the European Union, Press Release: [Artificial intelligence \(AI\) act: Council gives final green light to the first worldwide rules on AI](#), 2024.

systems), high risk, limited risk and minimal risk. The Regulation establishes harmonised rules for the placing on the market, putting into service and use of AI systems in the EU. It also prohibits certain AI practices and sets out specific requirements for high-risk AI systems and harmonised transparency rules for certain AI systems. Additionally, it lays down rules for the placing on the market of general-purpose AI models, rules on market monitoring, market surveillance governance and enforcement, and measures to support innovation.

Article 5 on prohibited AI practices provides a ban on any “*AI system that exploits any of the vulnerabilities of a natural person or a specific group of persons due to their age, disability or a specific social or economic situation*”. Children are not specifically mentioned in this provision, but they fall under “specific group of persons due to their age”. There is also a ban on emotion recognition systems in the workplace and educational settings. However, this also means that it is still allowed in other contexts, such as law enforcement and border and migration contexts. The Regulation makes several exceptions for law enforcement and migration authorities. The question then becomes whether the fundamental rights of all are reflected in the Regulation.

For high-risk AI systems⁴¹, it is specifically mentioned in Article 9 that providers shall consider “*whether in view of its intended purpose the high-risk AI system is likely to have an adverse impact on persons under the age of 18*”. In general, there is a lack of explicit reference to the best interests of the child and to other rights of the child. The recitals emphasise that children have specific rights and refers to UNCRC General Comment No. 25 in relation to the digital environment, but this is not fully reflected in the text of the Regulation itself.

Transparency requirements for high-risk AI systems can be found in Article 13. In Article 50, the Regulation establishes transparency obligations for providers and deployers of certain AI systems. In the case of deepfakes and other AI-generated material, it needs to be disclosed that the content has been artificially generated or manipulated.

⁴¹ Article 6 of the [Artificial Intelligence Act](#).

3. COFACE Members Spotlights

COFACE Families Europe has a membership of over 50 family organisations in Europe. These member organisations have an extensive experience in advocating for and supporting families on different levels. While regulatory frameworks are needed to ensure that the responsibility of preventing online risks does not fall entirely on families, there is a shared responsibility in protecting children online and non-profit organisations have developed a wide range of tools to support education and awareness-raising of families. This section highlights some practices of COFACE members that contribute to developing more safe and empowering online experiences for families. Some of the practices focus on boosting skills and opportunities related to the use of digital technologies for children and their families. Other practices focus more on preventing and tackling specific challenges, such as violent gaming content, cyberbullying and child sexual abuse online. The practices show the interplay and interconnectedness between the offline and online environments.

In 2020, COFACE published a Digital Families Map which provides a European snapshot of innovative practices from member organisations representing and/or supporting families.⁴² Some of these practices are still in place today and are regularly evaluated and updated, such as the online safety initiatives from the Gezinsbond and Ligue des Familles, COFACE members in Belgium.

Belgium – Safe Online Initiative and Webetic Programme

The Gezinsbond (Flemish League of Families), together with Child Focus (Belgian Safer Internet Centre), set up a training programme “Veilig Online” (“Safe Online”) for families. It aims to develop parents’ and caregivers’ skills and knowledge on a range of topics to increase their understanding about opportunities and risks of online activities and thus better inform their children.⁴³ In the longer term, parents will talk more openly to their children about the internet, apply parenting tips within their family, and become stronger in the media education of their children.

The programme has a website on which it provides interactive modules related to the following thematic areas: digital toddlers, social media, internet & privacy, gaming, cyberbullying, online relationships & sexuality. The modules include information related to the thematic area, testimonials from children, parents and experts, tips for parents, quizzes and games. These online modules are used during workshop-style training sessions for parents. The initiative started in 2007 and was updated in 2017 to reach more parents in vulnerable situations. In 2023, 220 trainings were done and 3,220 parents were reached. The initiative also includes webinars on more specific topics such as ‘Autism & Gaming’ and ‘AI for Parents’.

The Ligue des Familles (Walloon League of Families) collaborated with Child Focus to adapt the Safe Online initiative for the French speaking part of Belgium. The Webetic programme supports parents and caregivers in managing digital technologies within the family.⁴⁴ They can choose one or more modules according to their needs and interests.

Because of the demonstrable results of the Flemish Safe Online initiative, the initiative is further applied to the larger context of the European Union through the European Safe Online Initiative.⁴⁵ The focus is on improving the media literacy of children and young people through the comprehensive media literacy education of their parents. The initiative was adopted by organisations in Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Romania. Additionally, the European Safe Online Initiative provides a toolkit to implement the initiative in different national contexts by other potential European stakeholders. The toolkit includes the prototype and a book to provide the methodology and the process to enable the use of the project results.

⁴² COFACE Families Europe, [Digital Families Map](#): How to harness the full potential of technology, 2020.

⁴³ More information about the Safe Online initiative: <https://www.veiligonline.be/>.

⁴⁴ More information about the Webetic programme: <https://liguedesfamilles.be/webetic>.

⁴⁵ More information about the European Safe Online Initiative: <https://europeansafeonline.eu/the-project/>.

Bulgaria – Building partnerships and Sure Start Programme

The Tulip Foundation is a Bulgarian organisation that promotes cooperation among civil society, the corporate sector, national and local authorities in order to improve the quality of life and development opportunities for the people of Bulgaria. The organisation is an active member of the Learning Action Partnership (LAP), which is an informal network of civil society organisations and institutions with various duties and activities working together for the prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation in Bulgaria.⁴⁶ The network was created in 2013 and holds regular meetings, organises trainings, exchanges practices, runs campaigns and publishes various materials for families and professionals.

For the last 7 years Tulip Foundation runs the Sure Start programme aimed at supporting the development of parenting skills of families with young children (from birth to preschool) in family community centres. It is implemented in cooperation with local partners in different municipalities. Sexual abuse is one of the topics being discussed and the focus is on making parents and children aware of what child sexual abuse and its different forms are. Special attention is paid to risks online. As part of the programme Tulip Foundation has funded and disseminated two series of books: a first series called “My personal body – respect and self-respect” – including “My personal body” and “Every child has the right to be touched with love” – and a second series called “Talk with the child, give them strength!”, which includes 6 books for children aged 3-7 years, 7-13 years and young people over 14 years and their trusted adults (parents, close family members and professionals). Both series are developed by specialists in the field: PULS Foundation and Right to Childhood Foundation.⁴⁷ The local teams are supported with the necessary trainings on how to use the books. It is an essential part of the approach to prevent child sexual abuse by providing age-appropriate sexual health education for children at different ages with the involvement of their parents and/or trusted adults. The Tulip Foundation believes that initial prevention on family and community level is best for children and young people.

Croatia – Child Assault Prevention Programme

Step by Step Parents Association in Croatia promotes the rights of children and their families through different programmes. One of those programmes is the Child Assault Prevention Programme (CAP Programme). The CAP programme is one of the most comprehensive and innovative prevention programmes for child abuse in the world. The original CAP programme was launched in the United States in 1978. The International Centre for Assault Prevention (ICAP), founded in 1985, has expanded the programme to other countries around the world. This central organisation does not exist anymore, but the programme continues to be implemented in Regional Training Centres.

COFACE member, Step by Step Parents Association, is such a Regional Training Centre in Croatia where they train facilitators to implement the CAP programme. The CAP programme exists already for 25 years in Croatia and it equips children with effective prevention strategies to reduce their vulnerability and exposure to various forms of violence. Additionally, it ensures better support for parents, guardians, and educators. The programme has several variants that are intended for children of different ages and needs: preschool, kindergarten, teenagers, and children with disabilities.

Since violence and abuse are increasingly taking place in the digital environment, Step by Step Parents Association is updating its CAP programme with the latest evolving digital technologies in mind. To this end, COFACE and Step by Step co-organised a European study seminar in Zagreb on child abuse in the digital

⁴⁶ Learn more about the network: <https://learningactionpartnership.net/en/>.

⁴⁷ More about Puls Foundation and Right to Childhood Foundation: <https://pulsfoundation.org/bg/> and <https://www.childhood.bg/page.php?id=4>.

world.⁴⁸ Family organisations, Safer Internet Centres, survivors, and CAP facilitators came together to discuss how to prevent and tackle child abuse in the digital world.

Finland – Research on digital well-being in families

Väestöliitto, the Family Federation of Finland, improves people's well-being and the connection between people through research, advocacy and services. In the years 2019-2020, the organisation conducted research on digital well-being of Finnish families.⁴⁹ Within the “Digital Well-being in Families” project, Väestöliitto, the Finnish Society on Media Education and Demos Helsinki collaborated and studied the effects of digitalisation on close relationships and well-being in general. The research provides information to recommend action points and concrete materials on how to respond to the challenges and opportunities of technologies.

The “Digital Well-being in Families” project has compiled a systematic research review of the impact of digital media on family relationships and produced new information on digital communication in Finland. Studies show that time and social relationships have experienced a transformation in the 2010s. Digital media have made it easier to communicate, but at the same time created challenges for close relationships. There are also indications that the disadvantages and benefits of digitalisation increase inequalities.

The project produced material for individuals and educators to support balanced media everyday life and developed a road map for digital well-being for Finland in cooperation with a broad stakeholder base. The road map proposes 17 solutions to the challenges of digital well-being in politics, communities, services and technology. Based on the research and road map work, the project stakeholders recommend that a body be established in Finland to promote research and understanding of citizens' digital well-being and social responsibility in the technology sector.

France – My Child and Screens Initiative

Union Nationale des Associations Familiales (UNAF France) is a pluralist organisation which brings together 70 family movements and 6,500 family associations of great diversity across France. UNAF is a member of different committees and networks, such as ARCOM's Committee of Experts on Young Audiences, the complaints committee for the PEGI rating system and CNIL's EducNum collective.

When using screens and digital tools within families, parents have a fundamental role to play in protecting and guiding their children. To support and guide parents in their families' digital practices UNAF has created the “Mon enfant et les écrans” (“My child and screens”) website, which offers clear and practical information that is regularly updated.⁵⁰ With practical advice, easy-to-implement tips, expert opinions and decoded digital news, “My child and screens” helps parents to take back control and to find a balance within their families around the use of screens. The advice is broken down by topic and helps parents to get the most out of screens while protecting their child from the worst. The different topics are families, health, instructions for use and risks. Under the “Families” section of the website, advice is given on which place screens can have within the family. The “Health” section looks at the impact of screens on children's health and well-being. Under “Instructions for use” parents can find information about new social media and trends. Finally, the “Risks” section informs parents about how to prevent or respond to certain challenges,

⁴⁸ More information about the 2024 study seminar: <https://coface-eu.org/event/study-seminar-on-child-abuse-in-the-digital-world/>.

⁴⁹ More information about the research: <https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/en/research/family-well-being/digital-well-being-in-families/>.

⁵⁰ More information about the initiative: <https://www.mon-enfant-et-les-ecrans.fr/home/>.

such as catfishing and online hate. The initiative also has a Facebook page full of resources, with over 11.000 subscribers.

Germany – Bringing the families perspective in digital policies

The Family Organisations that form the Association of German Family Organisations (AGF) jointly developed principles and guidelines for families in the digital world in a lifespan perspective.⁵¹ They put children, parents and the role of digitalisation in elderly care in the centre. The family organisations support families on different levels, i.e. by family counselling and education. They put a high emphasis on the networking and mutual learning of the counselling. In the AGF they work together with other stakeholders and policymakers to promote dialogue and to shape family policies. Additionally, they bring their families perspective to the table when discussing other policies beyond family policy, such as digital policies. AGF is member of the advisory board of the Federal Agency for Child and Youth Protection in the Media.

Recently the EU Regulation on Child Sexual Abuse has been playing an important role in AGF's work. Together with the COFACE Secretariat, AGF organised a roundtable of experts on this Regulation. Around 25 experts representing several perspectives discussed the objectives, content, and next steps of the current proposal in a hybrid European expert discussion in February 2024 at the AGF office in Berlin.

In the discussion, the intended objective of the regulatory proposal was particularly emphasised. It became clear that, particularly in Germany, there is a high level of sensitivity for the protection of personal data and the right to privacy. Even though this was appreciated by the participants, especially as these are also rights of the child, the group also acknowledged this should not lead to losing sight of the goal of preventing and combating child abuse on the internet. The German Family Organisations will continue to stand up for finding a well-considered balance of different rights and the necessary intensification of child protection, especially against the background that the proposed Regulation contains numerous other items that are in danger of falling behind in view of the highly polarised debate.

Greece – Project on Child Sexual Abuse Prevention and Education

KMOP is one of the oldest civil society organisations in Greece and has extensive experience in education, research, policy and social action. One of the initiatives of KMOP is “Live Without Bullying” to stand up against bullying within schools and the online environment. It includes trainings for teachers and parents, an educational online game for teenagers, and an anti-bullying app.⁵² In addition, KMOP is partnering in a project of the European Union Internal Security Fund (ISF) called “Child Sexual Abuse Prevention and Education” (CSAPE 2022-2024).⁵³ The project is linked to the right of the child to grow in a safe environment and to enjoy the best possible health, including well-balanced sexual health. The aim of the project is to help prevent child sexual abuse by increasing the knowledge and skills of professionals, children (5-11 years), young people (11-17 years) and parents through an evidence-based sexual education programme.

As part of the project, they conducted a survey to map the attitudes and practices of children and youth concerning their online behaviour, ability to recognise potentially dangerous situations online, and awareness of available reporting and support mechanisms in case of online abuse in their respective countries. So far, the CSAPE project delivered several outputs: a synthesis of the training package for professionals, a brochure for children, a brochure for young people with a sexual interest in children and material for parents.

The CSAPE training package is addressed to professionals working with children. It aims at making them aware of and able to address the topic of child sexual abuse with children and to support the children in acquiring awareness, skills and knowledge of their bodies, emotions, boundaries and consent. It is

⁵¹ AGF, [Digital Change and its Impact on Families](#).

⁵² Learn more about the initiative: <https://livewithoutbullying.com/en/home-en/>.

⁵³ Learn more about the project: <https://www.kmop.gr/projects-vf/news-child-sexual-abuse-prevention-and-education/>.

comprised of five modules, named: “What do you know about sexual rights?”, “Human body”, “Emotional and Communication Skills”, “Boundaries and consent”, “Protection of children from sexual abuse”.

Luxembourg – Learning Platform co-created with persons with disabilities

APEMH is an organisation in Luxembourg which offers support to people with an intellectual disability and their families to improve their quality of life by combining personalisation, self-determination and inclusion. The organisation has introduced a learning platform (“Lern Plattform”) in French and Luxembourgish with a variety of subjects explaining in a friendly way daily topics that will make the life of persons with disabilities easier.⁵⁴ It is noteworthy that this project of the Learning Platform was co-constructed from start to finish with persons with disabilities, who are also involved in the podcasts of the Platform.

For example, there are sections on how to set up and use social media and get familiar with their terminology. It is also interesting to know that the project includes podcast episodes analysing the significant issue of cyberbullying on social media and other topics such as “social media traps”. In this Learning Platform, users can also find cooking suggestions and instructions to explore their creativity. On the other hand, there are short videos that touch upon current issues giving an idea to the users about how to be involved in social and political affairs. For example, you can find information regarding the election procedure and how you could vote, or you can learn what the rules on waste separation are.

Spain – Risk Behaviour Prevention and campaign tackling stereotypes in videogames

COFACE Spanish member, Unión de Asociaciones Familiares (UNAF Spain) implements a Risk Behaviour Prevention programme focusing on different topics, including school failure, sexuality, abuse of technologies, drugs consumption, violent behaviour and eating disorders.⁵⁵ Within this programme, they work with parents and carers, tweens and teens, and families through workshops, provision of materials, and campaigns. Related to their work on digital technologies, UNAF Spain has initiated the campaign “Choose Your Role, Act or Not?” (“Elige Tu Rol, Actúas O No?”) aimed at raising awareness among families about the significance of guiding children in the use of video games to prevent the adoption of sexist stereotypes and behaviours.⁵⁶

Given the crucial role of video games in socialisation and their significance as pedagogical tools, it is essential to examine the models they portray and transmit to children and youth. Additionally, the research presented in “Gender, Gamers, and Video Games: An Examination through a Gender Lens on Video Game Consumption and the Status of Female Players in the Industry”, supported by the Telefónica Chair at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in collaboration with the CajaCanarias Foundation and La Caixa, showed that more than 70% of surveyed women acknowledge encountering sexism in video games. Within multiplayer online sessions, 36.4% report instances of insults during gameplay. UNAF has launched the campaign to urge parents to pay attention to sexist stereotypes in certain video games. The campaign provides general recommendations and key considerations for parents, emphasising the importance of reviewing recommended age ratings and content labels (PEGI codes), discussing game content with children, observing their reactions, and promoting family gaming.

Through three game-styled videos on social media, UNAF highlights common stereotypes associated with male and female characters, aiming to raise awareness and prevent children from learning and reproducing these stereotypes.

⁵⁴ Learn more about the platform: <https://coface-eu.org/an-inclusive-learning-platform-for-persons-with-disabilities/>.

⁵⁵ More information about the programme: <https://unaf.org/materiales/prevencion-de-conductas-de-riesgo-infografias/>.

⁵⁶ Learn more about the campaign: <https://coface-eu.org/choose-your-role-unaf-spain-launches-campaign-to-combat-sexist-stereotypes-in-video-games/>.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

When it comes to digital technology, the negative effects of technology need to be addressed through a mix of strong legal frameworks as well as strong and “low-threshold” evidence-based support and prevention measures for families. This means on the one hand to create inclusive and accessible online environments, including through appropriate self-regulation by the industries concerned. On the other hand, it means supporting educators (formal and non-formal), parents and carers in their digital literacy, but also promoting work-life balance, so that parents and carers have time to support their children. All families should be given support and guidance to access and navigate the digital environment in a meaningful way. It is important to reduce children’s exposure to harmful risks online, without compromising their opportunities to benefit from the positive impacts of digital technologies.

Particularly in regard to the needed legal frameworks, the EU has launched a significant number of EU initiatives to safeguard families, and continues to work on consolidating regulatory frameworks to ensure that digital platforms and products are safe for children. These are essential to ensure the burden and responsibility does not fully fall back on children and families. It has become clear that self-regulation of the industry alone will not work. So, it is up to EU policy-makers to regulate the online environment with the best interests of all children in mind and ensure that technology companies create digital services and products that are designed to protect and promote children’s rights. A clear interplay between the different frameworks, such as the CSA Regulation proposal, the DSA, the AI Act and the GDPR, is needed.

With specific regard to online child sexual abuse, a holistic response is needed to tackle this. Evidence-based and comprehensive sexuality education is one of the responsibilities of parents and carers as first educators, but they need to be equipped with the right skills and information and supported by professionals. Member States should promote education and awareness-raising of parents and carers to prevent and recognise child sexual abuse, by supporting non-profit family organisations to develop programmes in schools and communities. Additionally, online child sexual abuse should be prevented, detected, reported and removed by tech companies. Having a mandatory EU framework would create safeguards and legal certainty for consolidating technologies, as well as an incentive for innovation.

While the frameworks mentioned in this policy brief are generally extremely positive for families, it is hard to assess the real impact of the EU initiatives on families on a community level. It is crucial for the EU institutions to conduct monitoring and evaluation of their policies to understand the impacts (positive and negative) on families, in order to review and consolidate existing policy and legal frameworks. Therefore, research and evaluation should be a priority for the EU institutions in order to create a culture of policy impact evaluation. Research programmes like Horizon Europe should support this through continuous assessments and research on the positive and negative impacts of digitalisation on children and their families.⁵⁷

Implementation of the European legal and policy frameworks mentioned in this brief is key, and these should be strengthened and continued under the new 2024-2029 European Union mandate following the June 2024 European elections.⁵⁸ Besides the State level and the ICT industry, action is also needed at community level, involving all key stakeholders close to the lives of the families and children. Such community-level actions, for example, can be strengthened by channelling funding to key stakeholders (e.g. local authorities, non-profits, schools), through a mix of operating and project grants. Family organisations, like the ones united in COFACE and its members are among those stakeholders. They strive to bring a strong UNCRF-led voice of families to discussions at EU and national level on safer internet and the impact of digital technologies.

Empowering all types of families without discrimination to be aware of the risks of online threats (such as grooming and child sexual abuse) goes through education and awareness-raising opportunities in schools

⁵⁷ See for instance the 2019-2022 DigiGen research project: <https://digigen.eu/>.

⁵⁸ COFACE, *State of the European Union for families*, 2024.

and communities. This is what COFACE members (non-profit family organisations) strive to do across different countries to help families and children to be better equipped to detect and prevent harm in the first place, and to learn to have key conversations (on child sexual abuse, on sex education, on safe internet use). This prevention work is implemented through a variety of approaches such as awareness-raising campaigns on sexism in video games, digital parenting programmes, developing tools to boost sex education, (cyber-)bullying prevention and more. COFACE members tend to have a nuanced approach to new technologies, really looking at the pros and cons, trying to empower children and their families to harness the full potential of this digital transition.

Such programmes aiming to boost life skills and digital skills of families should be identified as a priority for EU funds such as Erasmus+ to support adult education and life-long learning of parents and carers. These funds can also help evaluate, upscale and consolidate good practice such as the ones highlighted in this brief. Any opportunities for boosting the capacity of these organisations should be seized through public-private funding partnerships and also through different EU funds which are flexible and tailored to the realities of civil society organisations working locally.

COFACE will continue to monitor closely the various EU initiatives impacting families, using the COFACE Digitalisation Principles as the key compass for assessing them.

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