

# Safeguarding childhoods from online harm during COVID-19 and beyond

As we celebrate Safer Internet Day, let's analyse impact of the powerful medium on India's children as the opportunity not only provides uninterrupted learning and let children explore a wide range of interests amid the pandemic but also exposes them to several online risks

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It was the COVID-19 pandemic that introduced Vanshika and Rohan to online games. Confined to their homes in the northern suburbs of Indore city during the long months of the lockdown and with no scope for outdoor recreation, the two kids, completely cut off from the real world, started spending hours on their mobile phones.



A particular game attracted their attention, where the contestants have to kill each other to survive on an island. As it happened, the two friends started to play the game, and before they knew, became competitors to each other. Rohan was agitated and furious that he often lost to Vanshika in the game.

This continued for months and Rohan's anger against his little contender only kept growing. In August, 2020, the rivalry took an ugly turn as the young boy hit Vanshika to death in a nearby field, when the latter reportedly had teased him and killed his pet rat.

The local media widely reported the development; that is how AAs (Hope), a grassroots-level organisation working on children's protection and psycho-social well-being came to know about the incident. It followed up the case with the investigating officer of the local police and provided psycho-social support to Rohan's family for three months) until he was released from the observation home.

This is just one case among many, which have come into circulation over the past two years, and serve as an eye-opener to how over-exposure to the online games during the pandemic have deeply impacted children's psycho-social wellness and left a scar on their behavioural patterns.

These two childhood friends, were the victims of extensive use of internet, and I am sure that many parents have similar concerns about their kids as they leave them exposed to internet for extensive hours of the day. And this is not just a localised phenomenon — as per a report by Internet Watch Foundation, a UK-based watchdog, finds that [the year 2021 was the worst on record for child sexual abuse online](#).

[CRY 'Online Safety and Internet Addiction' study](#) conducted in 2020 revealed that closed to half of the respondents (48 per cent) displayed some level of addiction to the Internet, and severe internet addiction was observed in one per cent of the respondents.

Children spending more time in internet for accessing education and other communication purposes also become more vulnerable to multiple risks — particularly in the contexts of online



sexual abuse, grooming / sexual solicitation, sexting, exposure to pornography, production and circulation of child sexual abuse material, cyber-bullying, online harassment and cyber-victimisation, and many other privacy-related risks.

According to the latest NCRB (2020) data, there is a sharp increase (more than 400 per cent) in cyber-crimes (registered under Information Technology Act) committed against children, in comparison to the last year.

While 164 cases cyber-crimes against children were reported in 2019, the number stands at 842 in 2020. Among the 842 cases of online offences, 738 cases were about publishing or transmitting of materials depicting children in sexually explicit act.

There's no denying the fact that internet has increasingly become an integral part of children's lives, as a major method for consumption of information and daily communication, and for exploring a wide range of interests.

However, as internet has contributed in opening up their universe, it has also exposed them to online risks, which include content-related risks (where the child is the recipient of mass produced content), contact-related risks (when they are victims of adult-initiated online interactions requiring the child to participate, possibly unwittingly or unwillingly) and conduct-related risks (where the child becomes an actor or interactor within a wider peer-to-peer or networked interaction).

A recent Interpol report analysed how the COVID-19 pandemic is currently affecting the trends and threats of child sexual exploitation and abuse offences around the world. It claimed offenders who usually operate online are likely to increase the amount of time they spend online and continue to adapt and change their online environments to avoid detection and to target platforms based on popularity with children.

Economic hardship of families from COVID-19 and limited access to community support and services that are instrumental in addressing child sexual exploitation, may have rendered children more susceptible to being exploited online.



To avert online risks and spread awareness about cyber trends, Child Rights and You (CRY) with its project partners are conducting regular sessions to build awareness about cyber-safety, wherein screen-time and its repercussions, and how children can be safe online are covered. We are also studying online trends and risks faced by children due to extensive dependency on smartphones and internet.

However, though awareness and education are crucial, they alone cannot resolve a sea of challenges the online world brought us to. There is a need for cohesion and synergic action taken by different forums for internet governance policy and child protection services, and ensure children's digital rights.

The Union Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) has a crucial role to play, in facilitating this discourse. This will help in addressing the gaps in legislative and policy measures on several cyber safety issues such as criminalisation of cyberbullying and sexting among peers and categorisation of self-generated images as Child Sexual Abuse Materials (CSAM).

Along with child-centric and child-friendly laws and policies in place and being adhered to, another important aspect is ensuring supportive supervision and guidance from parents and caregivers at home in promoting opportunities and benefits and curbing risks and harms among the adolescents.

Lastly and most importantly, there should be adequate budgetary allocations to implement a robust mechanism towards ensuring children's online safety. Though child protection budget has marked an increase of 44 per cent, from Rs 1,089.36-1,573.82 crore (Budgetary estimates for 2022-23), there is no clarity in terms of what portion of that will go to address online safety of children, since there is no such component under the child protection umbrella.

To sum up, all the concerned stakeholders including the government, the civil society and the parents cannot abdicate their responsibility in safe-guarding children's safety as they spend more time in the online space, and we all need to make sure well-protected from any online harm.



Whether the pandemic will end or stay for long, children's exposure to online space will surely increase day by day. In such a scenario, can we really afford to let their childhoods slipping away?

Sources: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/health/safeguarding-childhoods-from-online-harm-during-covid-19-and-beyond-81463>