

# SAFE DIGITAL SPACE FOR CHILDREN

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DIGITAL RIGHTS INTENT

## Preamble

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Digital rights constitute an essential part of the Digital Economy. In a world where technology serves as an accelerator of social and economic progress, the way digital rights are recognized, exercised, and safeguarded is of critical importance.

Digital rights constitute the safeguards and entitlements that individuals should have in the digital domain. The concept stands on the principles of an open and diverse online environment that is free from harm and discrimination. Digital rights could be understood as an extension of the broader human rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, as applied to the online world.

Making digital rights central to the digital economy entails a framework of principles that should guide the understanding, interpretation, and approach to these rights. These principles include innovation, inclusion, data privacy and security, user-centricity, ethical use of technology, data ownership and control, and transparency and accountability.

- 01 **Innovation** plays a key role in fostering creativity, progress, and the development of new technologies, serving as an enabler of economic growth and societal progress.
- 02 The **principle of inclusion** is foundational to a prosperous digital economy. Access to digital technologies and the opportunities they offer represents a significant contribution towards minimizing the digital divide and for promoting digital literacy.
- 03 Any framework for digital rights should encompass the **principle of data privacy** and security as a cross-cutting axis of development and a fundamental element of trust in the digital ecosystem. This principle is of utmost relevance not only for individuals but also for the organizations that are part of and constitute the digital societies.
- 04 **The principle of user-centricity** implies that in designing digital products, services, and solutions, there should be a focus on meeting the needs and preferences of users and creating positive user experiences.
- 05 **The principle of ethical use of technology** highlights the importance of establishment and adherence to ethical standards in the development and deployment of digital technologies, considering their societal impact and ethical implications.
- 06 **The principle of data ownership and control** is of paramount significance. This principle should be robustly implemented to enable individuals to exercise ownership and control over the storage, processing, and use of their personal data.
- 07 And finally, it is important to consider the **principle of transparency and accountability**. This principle is particularly relevant for holding digital platforms, service providers, and other entities responsible and accountable for their actions and adherence to the digital rights.

These foundational principles of digital rights are integral to the DCO's vision of a safe, ethical, and inclusive digital economy. They also reflect a strong commitment and dedication of the DCO Member States and partners to upholding the digital rights within their areas of influence.

Considering the global nature of emerging technologies and low access barriers that characterize the digital space, the need for a global approach to addressing the challenges facing the digital rights is vital. Privacy, online security, misinformation and disinformation, risks posed to individuals, especially the most vulnerable such as children, threats to intellectual property, are some of the challenges that need enhanced global attention.

The purpose of the DCO Digital Rights Intents is not only to strengthen existing commitment to safeguarding the digital rights, but to also reinforce their protection through effective multilateral cooperation and robust global advocacy.

## Safe Digital Space for Children

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The concept of a safe digital space encompasses various dimensions concerning how individuals should be protected in the online world whilst mitigating online risks that can lead to real world harm. Overall, a **'safe digital space'** refers to an online environment where individuals, especially children and vulnerable users, can interact, communicate, and engage in various digital activities without the risk of experiencing harm, exploitation, or abuse.

Globally, approximately one-third of the internet's user base comprises children under the age of 18 , highlighting the significant presence of young individuals in the digital realm. An increasing amount of evidence suggests that children are gaining access to the internet at progressively younger ages.

The proliferation and abundance of online information sources is especially affecting the younger generation. Understanding what is right or wrong, or recognizing a threat or risk, are aspects that children struggle to identify. Children are especially susceptible to misinformation and disinformation due to their evolving maturity and cognitive capacities, including the development of diverse psychological and physiological motivations.

The commitment of the DCO to promoting a safe digital space for children is enshrined in the DCO Strategic Roadmap 2030, where the Goal 3 specifically emphasizes **"promoting a safe digital space for children and the most vulnerable segments of society"**. In line with this strategic goal, the DCO hereby presents this principles-based **Digital Rights Intent** with an aim to promote the harmonization and enhancement of national, regional, and global policies and efforts to ensuring a **"Safe Digital Space for Children"** across its membership and beyond.

Through this Digital Rights Intent, the DCO Member States and partners, that are signatories to this intent, do hereby endorse and adopt the following 10 fundamental principles to demonstrate their unwavering commitment towards safeguarding children's digital rights within their jurisdictions and areas of influence, and help creating a safe digital space for children.

## The Intent – Safe Digital Space for Children

As Member States and Partners of the Digital Cooperation Organization, we recognize the critical importance of safeguarding children's rights in the digital sphere. With a shared commitment to creating a safe digital space for children, we hereby endorse the following principles through this digital rights intent.

### *Principle 1*

#### **Appropriate Access Control**

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Children's digital rights encompass a set of entitlements and protections designed to ensure a safe and empowering digital environment for young individuals.

Adequate protection measures are essential for fostering children's well-being, development, and participation in the digital space.

Given the numerous challenges facing children's safety online, appropriate age thresholds should be defined as criteria for accessing new technologies and/or the internet. This should be implemented through national guidelines that are in-line with expert studies and the social, cultural, and political contexts of the Member States.

To achieve this goal, robust parental controls and age verification tools should be developed and deployed to ensure safe internet use by children. Regular updates and audits of parental control tools should be implemented to stay current with evolving technologies and emerging risks.

### *Principle 2*

#### **Safe Access to Online Information**

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The right of children to safely access online information refers to the entitlement of young individuals to seek, receive, and impart information through digital platforms and the internet in an age-appropriate manner.

Children have the right to safely access a diverse range of information online, including educational resources, information diversity, cultural and recreational content, as well as awareness of the risks associated with the use of new technologies and the internet.

For children to appropriately exercise this right, multiple stakeholders especially parents, guardians, educators, curators, and entities who are actively involved in shaping the digital space should play an effective role in ensuring well-balanced and responsible use of digital environments by children. Deployment of safe search tools that are regularly updated, curated content platforms, effective deployment of parental guidance mechanisms, availability of digital libraries and resources geared towards children, and robust feedback mechanism embedded in the digital platforms are some of the measures that should be encouraged and adopted. Dynamic content filtering systems could be deployed that can adjust to a child's age and level of maturity, ensuring a personalized and safe online experience. This should be done in-line with the social, cultural, and political contexts of the nations.

### **Principle 3**

#### **Right to Digital Literacy**

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The right of children to digital literacy is recognized, referring to the ability of young individuals to use digital technologies, devices, and online platforms effectively and responsibly.

Digital literacy encompasses a range of skills and competencies that empower children to navigate the digital landscape, engage with digital content, and understand the ethical and safety considerations associated with online activities.

Various stakeholders including governments, educational institutions, technology companies, parents, NGOs and international organizations, should collaborate to ensure children's right to digital literacy. Governments should establish policies and funding for comprehensive digital literacy programs in schools, while educational institutions should integrate digital literacy into their curriculum, adapting it to each stage of learning. Technology companies should develop age-appropriate educational tools and platforms, and parents should support their children's learning by providing guidance and monitoring online activities. NGOs and international organizations should advocate for digital literacy initiatives and provide resources and training to communities.

### **Principle 4**

#### **Online Privacy Protection**

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The principle of online privacy for children aims to ensure the protection of children's personal information and safeguard their activities in the digital space. It entails the implementation of measures to secure their privacy and create a secure online environment, preventing unauthorized access or data breaches.

This principle is an aspiration of governments and private entities, as exemplified by online platforms, service providers, and organizations, which must uphold its spirit within the scope of their functions.

Entities that have access to children's data must adhere to data minimization, limiting the collection of personal information to what is necessary for the intended purpose, thereby avoiding excessive or unnecessary data collection.

Governments, technology companies, educators, parents, and privacy advocates, should collaborate to ensure children's right to online privacy protection. Governments should enact and enforce privacy laws specifically addressing children's data protection, while technology companies should design and implement privacy-by-design features in their platforms and promote the use of advanced technologies and secure communication channels to further safeguard children's personal information. Compliance with established privacy standards should be ensured through continuous monitoring and auditing of data privacy practices. Educators and parents should educate children about online privacy risks and safe digital practices, and privacy advocates should advocate for strong privacy standards and transparency in data collection and usage.

### **Principle 5**

#### **Robust Online Safety**

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Ensuring the online safety of children revolves around establishing a secure digital space that shields them from potential risks and dangers linked to use of online and digital space.

In addressing the risks to the online safety of children, particular attention should be given to the policies developed for the prevention and combating of cybercrime; cyberbullying; online harassment; illegal, inappropriate, and harmful content; as well as any form of online abuse directed at children.

The objective of ensuring online safety of children is a goal that should be shared amongst governments, technology companies, educators, parents, and law enforcement agencies. Governments are encouraged to develop holistic national strategies on protecting children's rights, and adopt laws and policies that ensure the safety of children online. Technology companies should enhance safety by providing effective parental controls, age-appropriate content filters, as well as real-time monitoring and reporting tools that can detect and flag harmful behavior or content. Educators, parents, and caregivers should play a vital role in guiding children on safe online practices, while the Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) should work closely with other stakeholders to effectively address and prevent online threats such as predatory behavior and cyberbullying.

Additionally, governments could consider creating dedicated units for child online protection within the LEAs, as they provide the legal authority and specialized expertise needed to address serious threats, ensuring comprehensive protection for children online.

### ***Principle 6***

#### **Effective Family Support**

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Families play a crucial role in ensuring a safe digital space for children by providing guidance, establishing clear rules and boundaries for internet use, regularly discussing online safety and privacy with their children, monitoring their online activities, and fostering open communication so children feel comfortable discussing their digital interactions and report on the issues they may face.

Families should therefore be always considered and involved while shaping the strategies and initiatives aimed at protecting children in the online world.

Parents and guardians should be provided with appropriate training, as well as the tools and features that offer them insight into their children's online activities. These resources should enable them to monitor and manage their children's online activities effectively, including setting restrictions and filters to ensure that online content, services, and interactions are age-appropriate and aligned with the child's developmental stage.

### ***Principle 7***

#### **Collaboration with Digital Platforms and Technology Providers**

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The collaboration with digital platforms and technology providers to protect children online should be guided by prioritizing user safety and well-being. This involves placing a strong emphasis on the safety of children using online platforms and establishing mechanisms to identify and address potential risks to children, such as cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, and online predators. Leveraging cutting edge technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) can significantly enhance these efforts. For instance, AI-powered tools can monitor digital communications for signs of distress or harmful behavior, providing timely interventions to protect children, making the digital environment safer and more responsive to emerging threats.

Digital platforms and technology providers should adhere to the principle of Age-Appropriate Design, considering the implementation of age verification mechanisms to ensure that children are not exposed to content or features that are not suitable for their developmental stage, thereby minimizing potential harm.

Furthermore, these entities should strengthen privacy measures to protect the personal information of children, and should consider obtaining explicit consent from parents or legal guardians before collecting, processing, or sharing children's data.

Digital platforms and technology providers should collaborate with law enforcement agencies to share information and best practices for protecting children online, demonstrating engagement in industry-wide initiatives to collectively address online child safety challenges.

#### ***Principle 8***

#### **The Role of Schools and Educators**

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Educational institutions and educators engaging in activities in digital environments with children have the obligation of protecting children's best interests and fundamental rights, especially their rights to privacy, honor, personal image, communication confidentiality, and personal data protection.

In this context, educational institutions and educators should be committed to providing appropriate digital literacy and education, equipping children with the skills and knowledge to navigate the digital world responsibly.

The integration of responsible digital education into school curricula should be prioritized to equip students with essential skills in online safety, critical thinking, and responsible digital citizenship. Collaboration with parents and the community to reinforce these lessons at home and in everyday life can further enhance the impact of these educational efforts.

Additionally, schools and educators should cultivate a culture of respect and empathy, actively discouraging cyberbullying, and promoting positive, responsible online interactions.

Awareness programs should be developed to address cyberbullying, and other online risks to children's well-being, while promoting safe and responsible digital engagement.

#### ***Principle 9***

#### **Protection Against Inappropriate Advertising and Marketing**

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Children should not be subject to targeted advertising and marketing that make use of their personal data. Protection of children's privacy in advertising and marketing practices should be ensured, with a commitment to strict adherence with the privacy standards, and not to collect personal information from children without explicit parental consent.

The entities responsible for advertising and marketing should ensure that advertisements are age appropriate, and are in line with the social, cultural, and political contexts of the nations. Advertisements and marketing activities should be tailored to suit the cognitive and emotional development of the target age groups, while avoiding content that may be manipulative, inappropriate or harmful.

Advertising and marketing entities should also provide transparent and clear communication in advertisements related to children. This includes clearly disclosing the nature of the advertisement, distinguishing it from other content, and avoiding misleading or deceptive tactics.

Advertising and marketing entities must avoid exploiting children's trust, vulnerability, or lack of experience, refraining from using manipulative techniques or creating unreasonable expectations.

### **Principle 10**

#### **Capacity Building for Key Stakeholders**

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Digital literacy should extend beyond children to encompass other key stakeholders. Therefore, governments, NGOs, and technology companies should work to expand digital literacy programs to include parents, educators, and public officials, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to safeguard children's right to digital literacy and their online safety.

### **Principle 11**

#### **International cooperation**

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International cooperation is one of the most crucial factors for promoting a safe digital space for Children. This can be achieved using the principles of collaboration and information sharing, standardization of policies, cross-border law enforcement cooperation, regional and global awareness campaigns, as well as the establishment of public-private partnerships, and technology industry engagement.

The promotion and adherence to international conventions and treaties that emphasize the protection of children's rights in the digital space should be considered. Encouraging countries to ratify and enforce conventions that address online child protection is essential for fostering a unified global commitment.

International cooperation is particularly relevant for advocating child-centric design and development practices in the digital industry, encouraging global standards that prioritize the safety, well-being, and age-appropriate design of digital products and services for children.

## *Conclusion*

This Digital Rights Intent represents a landmark commitment by the DCO Member States and partners to prioritize the safety and well-being of children in the digital age. By endorsing these eleven principles, we affirm our dedication to fostering a secure online environment that empowers children to harness the benefits of digital technology while safeguarding their rights to privacy, safety, and access to information. Through collaborative efforts and ongoing vigilance, we strive to create a digital landscape where children can thrive, learn, and explore with confidence and security, ensuring 'digital prosperity for all'.



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