Supporting Schools to Provide a Safe Online Learning Experience
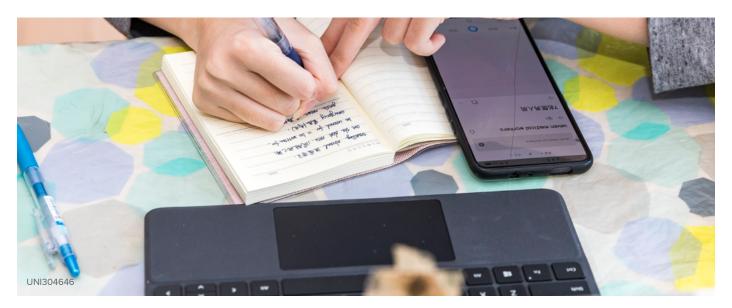
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The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted widespread school closures and physical distancing measures and made online platforms and communities essential to maintaining a sense of normalcy. More than 1.5 billion children and young people have been affected by school and university closures worldwide. Many of these students are now taking classes as well as socializing more online. While digital solutions provide huge opportunities for sustaining and promoting children's rights, these same tools may also increase children's exposure to online risks.

Increased internet use can put children at greater risk of online harms such as sexual exploitation and abuse, and cyberbullying. Not all risks will translate into actual harm, but children facing other issues in their lives may be more vulnerable. Girls, children with disabilities and those perceived to be different or at greater risk of catching or spreading COVID-19 may be at increased risk of online harms, including online bullying and discrimination. It is important that measures to mitigate risks should be balanced with children's rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy. Keeping children informed and engaged and empowering them with the skills to use the internet safely is a critical line of defence.

With the rush to set up distance learning, schools may not have proper child safeguarding policies in place to govern student and teacher conversations via private networks and other online tools. Parents and caregivers may not be aware of school district policies, if they exist, and may be unfamiliar with new technologies, limiting their ability to engage their children in a discussion about keeping safe online.

It is important that children are safe to learn regardless of the type of distance learning they engage in. This note was specifically developed for online learning, but there are other, low tech, distance learning platforms that will have their own challenges and opportunities; those also have to consider child safeguarding issues in their design and implementation and might find some of the approaches presented in this note applicable.

We urge all education ministries to use this guidance to support schools to mitigate the risk of online harms and provide a positive and safe online learning experience.

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The below guidance is specifically directed at education ministries and outlines how schools can mitigate those risks and promote positive online experiences for children when learning online.

1. Schools should create or update their current safeguarding policies to reflect the new realities for children learning from home. One-to-one online interactions between school staff and students should be transparent and regulated. Specific safeguards may include requiring schools to share online schedules; advising children not to connect to their teachers or virtual classrooms from bedrooms; to wear appropriate clothing when in front of webcams; and to refrain from using private instant messaging services in teacher-student communications or asking for consent from parents for such sessions. Schools should also seek digital protection mechanisms to ensure only authorized individuals are able to access the platforms through which online learning is delivered.

2. Schools should promote and monitor good online etiquette. Schools should be aware that the younger children (especially) may not have developed these skills and could be hurtful in their communications. Schoolyard bullying amongst classmates may easily transpose into cyberbullying, and school authorities need to ensure anti-bullying rules and policies are adapted to online spaces.

3. Schools should ensure that children have continued access to school-based counseling services. In the absence of the face-to-face contact with counselors, children in distress need to have safe and confidential means of reaching out to counsellors online or by phone. There may be increased need for counselling services in the context of COVID-19, where children may be experiencing family problems and heightened feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Children with disabilities may be experiencing increased anxieties requiring additional support. In the absence of school-based counselling services, in many countries there remain functioning helplines or online counselling platforms that should be promoted to children and parents. Schools should also update guidance for teachers on identifying and reporting child abuse or neglect via their virtual communications.

4. Schools should clearly communicate online safety policies and provide resources and information on digital safety to support parents and caregivers in creating a positive distance learning experience. Some comprehensive resources are available online (e.g. Interland, internetmatters.org, NSPCC and Childnet International). Equally, schools should clearly communicate with all learners the expected standards of use of digital platforms and communciations, just as would be expected with codes of conduct for 'in person' behavior.

This guidance for supporting schools to provide a safe online learning experience is drawn from the *COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online* technical note developed by UNICEF, End Violence Global Partnership, UNESCO, WePROTECT Global Alliance, International Telecommunication Union (ITU), WHO, UNODC and World Childhood Foundation, and is supported by Safe to Learn partners. The technical note outlines additional relevant areas that education systems should focus on – such as empowerment of children, working with parents, and making online platforms safe and accessible. It provides comprehensive guidance outlining how governments, industry, educators, parents and caregivers can help children learn how to use the internet safely.