As Uganda joins the rest of the world to celebrate the International Day of the African Child, Kellen Owente has explained the different ways in which children’s rights can be protected in the digital age.

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Ensuring Children are Known, Loved, and Protected in the Digital Age

As the world celebrates the Day of the African Child, Compassion International aims to promote child rights in a rapidly evolving digital environment. This year’s theme, “The Rights of the Child in a Digital Environment,” underscores the need to protect and empower children as they navigate the complexities of the digital age.

Compassion International has made significant strides in addressing the digital world’s challenges and risks, from digital literacy to online child protection, privacy and data protection for children, and access to online opportunities for youth. In collaboration with Frontline Church Partners (FCPs), Compassion International has established an effective child protection strategy that leverages internal online platforms such as Resolver. Resolver is an incident reporting system specifically designed to promote child protection by offering a wide range of reporting options and fostering the participation of various stakeholders. As part of the commitment to safeguard children’s rights in the digital era, Resolver has been instrumental in addressing child abuse cases. Resolver has a hotline available in English and Luganda to facilitate reporting, reachable at 0800 113428. This hotline ensures that anyone accessing the link or contact number can report abuse allegations. By utilizing this user-friendly system, Compassion aims to make reporting accessible and efficient for all stakeholders involved.

Since its implementation in October 2022, Resolver has successfully processed and addressed a total of 1542 cases. These cases encompass a variety of child protection concerns, highlighting the importance of these efforts. Among the reported cases, 1 was related to abduction, 129 cases involved emotional abuse, 135 cases involved exploitation, 4 cases were connected to harmful cultural practices, 1135 cases were related to sexual abuse, 135 cases were linked to physical abuse, and three cases involved violations of the organizational policy. These statistics demonstrate Resolver’s significant impact in identifying and responding to child protection issues. By promptly addressing these cases, the safety and well-being of the children is ensured.

Compassion International firmly believes parents and caregivers are vital in guiding children through the digital landscape. Compassion emphasizes children’s rights and protection that ensure their safety and well-being. In an era where online exploitation, harmful content, and cyber-bullying are prevalent, parents and caregivers must actively engage with their children’s digital lives and shield them from potential dangers.

Compassion International collaborates with regulatory bodies, partners, and stakeholders in the NGO and child protection sectors, including the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Uganda Child Rights NGO Network (UCRNN), and the media fraternity. The goal is to raise awareness about children’s rights in the digital environment, focusing on online safety, privacy, data protection, freedom of expression, access to online opportunities, and protection from exploitation together.

Compassion International remains dedicated and committed to championing child rights in Uganda while fulfilling the mission to release children from poverty in Jesus’ name.

About Compassion International:

Compassion International is a leading child advocacy organization dedicated to the holistic development of impoverished children. Compassion International partners with local churches and provides needy children with educational opportunities, healthcare, nutrition, and spiritual guidance. With a focus on child rights, the organization aims to break the cycle of poverty and empower children to reach their full potential. For more information, visit www.compassion.com.

On this Day of the African Child, we urge everyone to recognize the importance of safeguarding children’s rights in the digital environment. We are dedicated to empowering children and ensuring their safety and well-being in an increasingly interconnected world. Together, we can create a digital environment where every child’s rights are respected, and children are known, loved, and protected.

Lenny Mugisha
National Director
Compassion International
HOW TO GET CHILDREN OFF TV, MOBILE PHONES

By Ritah Mukasa

Today, Uganda joins the world to commemorate the International Day of the African Child. This year’s theme, The Rights of the Child in the Digital Environment, intends to ensure that children’s rights are protected in this era.

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM GADGETS

The Internet, smartphones, and TVs have become an integral part of children’s lives in modern times. They are exposed to new technology every day, making them more tech-savvy than their parents.

Some parents complain that raising children is too demanding. They hence give the children gadgets to keep them engaged. Nsimbi adds that in some families, children spend most of their time on TV as opposed to playing or engaging in physical activities like chores. However, what they watch is sometimes depressing. They see and admire things like cars, homes and toys they cannot have, hence slipping into depression.

“Parents should make deliberate efforts to take their children off phones, computers and TV,” she advises.

WE TOOK OUR CHILD OFF TV

Lilian Bukaayi Tibasisima, a teacher, and Isaac Kiiza Tibasisima, a lecturer at Makerere University, took their daughter off TV and mobile phones.

“Esther Mugisa Murungi, 8, is in Grade Three at Vine Makerere University, took their daughter off phones, computers and TV,” she advises.

TIPS ON PARTING CHILDREN FROM GADGETS

Teacher Lilian Bukaayi Tibasisima, tips parents on mitigating gadget addiction.

- Set rules and limit the time children use the gadgets. Be strict and consistent in enforcing them.
- Learn how to use the gadgets and follow the kids on their social media platforms to see what they share there. It is embarrassing to limit something that you don’t know how it operates.
- Only allow them to use the phones, tablets or laptops in the living room and not in the privacy of their bedrooms. This will protect them from consuming pornography.
- Trust your instincts when you feel something is wrong. Seize the bull by its horns and save the situation. Young people will never accept that there is a problem and they need help. Pay attention to non-verbal communication, but ensure the interaction is not condemning.
- Withdraw or remove the gadgets which take up most of their time. You can also deny them particular programmes and explain why they are not good for them, but endeavour to provide alternatives to keep them busy.
- Where necessary, watch programmes together or use parental controls to stop certain apps or programmes on gadgets.
- Avoid installing gadgets in children’s bedrooms.
- Most important, be exemplary because children learn by imitation. Be mindful of the time you spend on your phone and what you watch in their view. Children see and do like monkeys.
EXPANSION IN ONLINE TECHNOLOGIES IS EXPOSING CHILDREN TO THREATS, MADE WORSE BY INSUFFICIENT POLICIES

By Vision Reporter

In the vast landscape of the digital era, screens glow and information flows. However, a new frontier has emerged: the protection of children in the virtual realm. Gone are the days when playgrounds and classrooms were the primary arenas for a child’s exploitation and growth. Today, children across the globe navigate an intricate maze of online platforms, social media networks and virtual communities. With each click, tap and swipe, they enter a world where boundaries are blurred, where their voices are amplified and where their vulnerability to risks is heightened.

“From cyber bullying, exploitation, exposure to inappropriate content, the digital world presents a multitude of threats that can infringe on a child’s rights, stifle their development and scar their futures,” Moses Otai, the country director of ChildFund International Uganda, says. ChildFund is an international child-focused development organisation that works to connect children and young people, resources and institutions they need to grow up safe, healthy, educated and skilled wherever they are.

While technology alone cannot be blamed for some of the challenges children face, Otai says it is important to take proactive measures to protect children in the digital era. “All children have a right to be safe online and that is why we are committed to building an accessible, safe and inclusive digital world for all children and young people, based on a framework that requires governments, industry, community members and families to take action,” Otai says.

THE DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD

To raise more awareness on digital safety, this year’s Day of the African Child, celebrated every June 16, will be celebrated under the theme: Promoting and Protecting Children’s Rights in the Digital Era.

The Day of the African Child is celebrated in honor of children who participated in the 1976 Soweto Uprising. It also raises awareness about the need for improvement of education provided to African children. Whereas digital connectivity is a key factor in improving the well-being of children and youth, increased access to information, learning resources and expanded opportunities for social and civic engagement, the rapid expansion in online technologies is exposing children to an increasing range of threats. This is even made worse by the insufficient and inconsistent laws and policies globally to keep young people safe online.

MORE CONNECTIONS AND RISKS

According to the Uganda Communications Commission 2022 First Quarter (January-March) Market Performance Report, there are 23.5 million broadband (internet) connections in the country. The report further reveals that the number of devices (phones, tablets, car trackers and all SIM card-using devices) accessing the telecommunication network grew from 34.1 million in December 2021 to 35 million in March last year.

Among the devices, there were 10.48 million smartphones in the country. Contrary to the feature phones (kabiriti), smartphones are multipurpose and can be used to download software, browse the Internet, watch television, take pictures and videos, as well as organise or participate in virtual engagements.

“The downside of this, however, is that there is an alarming increase in online child sexual exploitation and abuse,” Dillis Ekany, a child protection specialist with ChildFund Uganda, says.

Lydia Jean Akite, the ChildFund Uganda child protection and advocacy manager, explains that limited safeguards on children’s access to the Internet, coupled with limited supervision by the parents and caregivers as they utilise digital devices, has led to children interacting with wrong elements on different social platforms and sites who eventually manipulate and abuse them.

Akite also advises parents and guardians to continuously educate their children about the dangers that come with utilising digital platforms.

“They should also report suspicious individuals to any trusted adult or authority, including the Police or Sauti 116 child helpline,” Akite says.

Ekany says while important strides have been made in protecting children online through legislation and policies, online child sexual abuse and exploitation and harmful content is not always adequately defined, and identification of perpetrators too often relies on community policing.

INTERVENTIONS

ChildFund Uganda, together with its alliance partners, are currently implementing a campaign dubbed Web Safe and Wise. The initiative, launched in May last year, focuses on addressing the risks emerging in new technologies, while empowering children and young people to become effective digital citizens empowered to participate online safely, ethically, and responsibly. Among the key objectives of the campaign is advocacy for new or strengthened laws and policies to protect children while online, support for children in raising awareness about child rights violations in the digital era as well as to holding their duty bearers accountable.

“ChildFund is working with all stakeholders including the Government, private sector, civil society organisations, development partners at all levels to build an accessible, safe, and inclusive digital world for all children based on a framework that requires us all to take action on the rights of the children in the Digital era,” Ekany says.

Children’s access to the Internet should be supervised by parents

Jean Akite, ChildFund Uganda’s child protection and advocacy manager

A child using a tablet. Using internet-enabled gadgets without safety knowledge makes them vulnerable

The Digital era refers to a period in human history characterised by the shift from traditional industry to an economy based on information and communications technology. Online safety, on the other hand, refers to the awareness and understanding of the threats that exist in the digital environment. It involves having the requisite skills and knowledge to identify the threats and engage in preventative measures to stay safe. The digital revolution and internet access and usage have increased drastically.

As of May last year, there were about 590 million users (43% internet penetration) in Africa. These figures include children, who represent a third of all internet users in the world. It is also estimated that more than 1.7 million children go online for the first time every day.