

The VOICE project is a collaboration between three child rights organisations towards a common goal to strengthen children's digital rights and online safety: ECPAT International, Eurochild and Terre des Hommes Netherlands on behalf of the Down to Zero Alliance.

Netherlands, Romania, Italy, Spain, Austria, Portugal
Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Malta, Bangladesh,
The Philippines, Thailand, Bolivia, Brazil

It aims to listen to the views of children and caregivers and share their insights and opinions about online child safety to inform policy at the national and EU level, as well as globally.

Using a mixed-method approach across 15 countries, the VOICE partners consulted a total of 316¹ children through focus group discussions and surveyed 6618 caregivers. As we start to delve into what children are telling us, this insights brief offers a preview of the valuable perspectives of parents and caregivers on online safety, along with some initial reflections from children. It's important to note that the insights presented are preliminary as the children's perspectives from all participating countries have not been fully collected and analyzed at this stage.

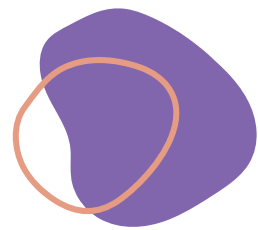
By exploring the nuanced aspects of children's online safety, we're setting the stage for meaningful discussions, paving the way for the in-depth report to be presented in March 2024.



We would like to express our gratitude to the organisations working in the field that are currently implementing focus group discussions with children and providing reports on their findings. This project would not be possible without the contributions and expertise provided by our implementing partners in the 15 countries involved.

¹ Please note that the participation count of children in the focus group discussions is preliminary and subject to increase as additional discussions take place. The reported number pertains to the 12 out of 15 countries included in the ongoing research project.





* KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Embarking on a comprehensive exploration of children’s, parents’ and caregivers’ perspectives on child safety online, our key findings shed light on crucial insights resulting at this stage of the consultations. Particularly, we delve into the challenges parents and caregivers face addressing online child sexual abuse and highlight their call for increased awareness on automated tools for protecting children online.

BEHIND THE SCREENS: CAREGIVERS’ VIEWS ON CHILD SAFETY ONLINE IN EUROPE AND BEYOND

In the digital age, technology has both a great and pervasive impact on children’s lives. In the 12 countries analysed until now, children indicate dedicating a significant portion of their time to the online world, and we see the average age to go online decreasing. While digital platforms provide learning, social and entertainment opportunities for children, they also expose them to high risks including online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

The online environment seems to lack adequate comprehensive child safety measures and we see a significant gap in existing laws and regulations designed to protect children on the internet. The responsibility of child protection online often falls too heavily on the shoulders of caregivers who may not be equipped with the right knowledge and skills. **VOICE partners believe that governments must step up and do more to ensure children’s safety online, including by holding tech companies and online platforms accountable.**

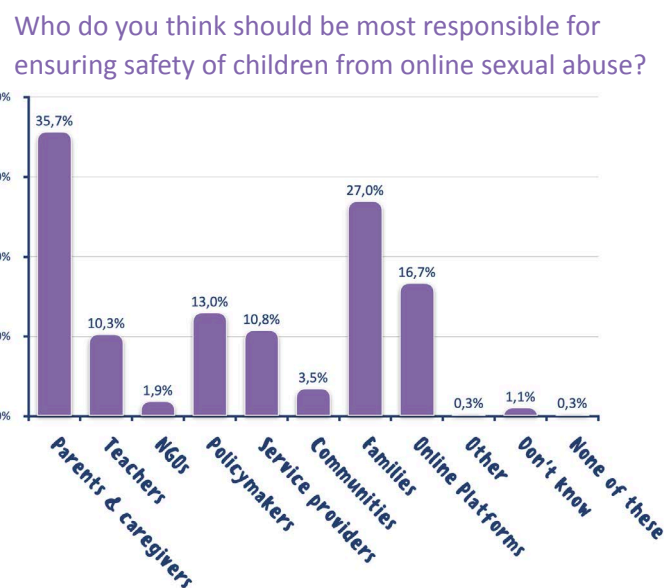
The VOICE project, exploring children’s, parents’ and caregivers’ experiences with child safety

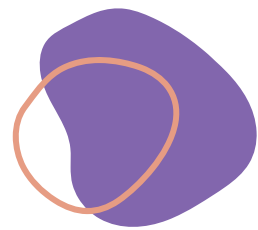
online, seeks to inform political debates so that policies reflect children’s insights and parents’ and caregivers’ views on the matter.

Parents and Caregivers Feel Alone in Ensuring Child Safety Online

According to the findings of the VOICE parental and caregivers survey on their views on child safety online, caregivers predominantly consider themselves or the family most often responsible for children’s safety online, followed by online platforms, policymakers, and online service providers in that order (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Responses to the question of who should be most responsible for child safety online (participants could choose multiple options).



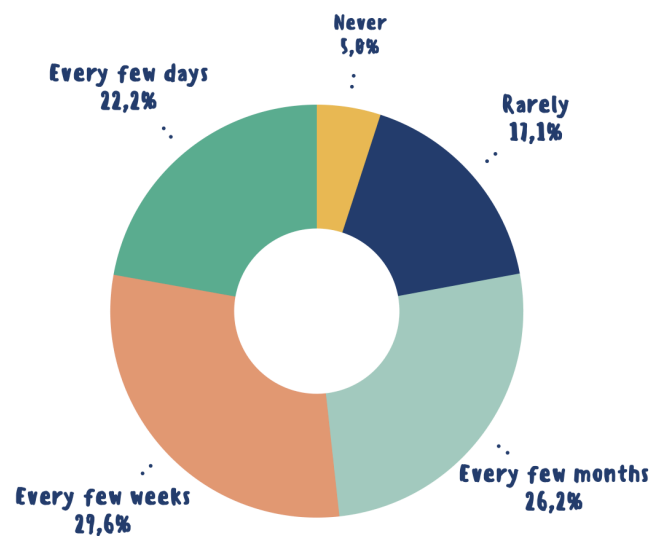


As caregivers point out this perceived responsibility, interesting reflections and insights come to the surface, highlighting some of the structural challenges attached to this perception. For example, the rapidly changing pace of technological advancement could hamper the effectiveness of caregivers' individual efforts for child safety online, potentially leaving gaps in their understanding of online activities and therefore their ability to talk and support children effectively.

discusses it every few months (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Responses to the question regarding how often caregivers discuss protection from online sexual abuse with their children.

How often do you talk to your children about safety from online sexual abuse?



The data reveals a shared acknowledgement of the importance of addressing online harm. However, it also highlights a palpable gap in knowledge and confidence in engaging in these discussions.

"If parents are more sensitive and talk to their children about the online risks, they will be more prepared how to react in such situations."

Quote from a child participant in one focus group in Bulgaria when discussing how easy it is to talk to their parents about online safety.

To protect children online, we need to recognize the crucial role of caregivers while acknowledging the shared responsibility of the state, private sector, and the broader community in ensuring a safe online environment for children.

Parents and Caregivers Experience Challenges in Talking with Children about Online Child Sexual Abuse

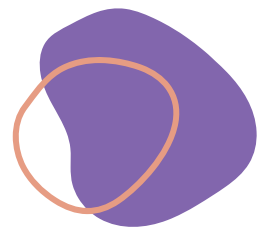
When asked about how often caregivers talk with their children about safety from online abuse, about half of parents and caregivers sampled say they discuss the topic with children frequently, every few weeks or every few days.

Almost a quarter of caregivers say they never or rarely talk to their children about safety from online sexual abuse and another quarter

"I feel mixed. It is important to share with the family, but I am also fearful of potential consequences, such as having my cell phone confiscated."

Quote from a child participant in one focus group organised in The Philippines when discussing if they talk with their parents and caregivers about online safety.



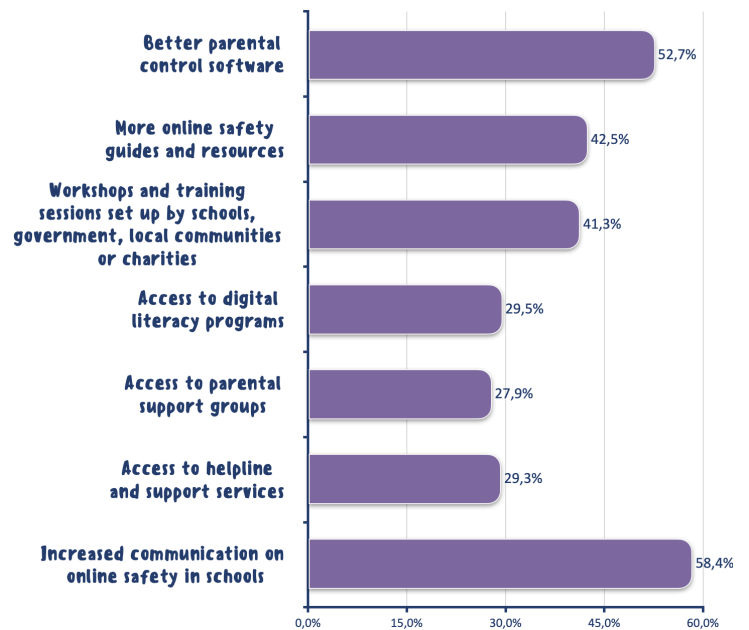


When asked what caregivers would need to better protect child’s safety online, **59% believe that having more frequent conversations with children on the topic could strengthen the safety of children online**, reducing the risks of abuse. However, **ongoing discussions with children suggest a challenge in approaching parents on this matter**. Interestingly, the parental and caregivers’ survey indicates that only 6.8% of caregivers perceive their children finding it difficult to communicate about online experiences. These differences in approaching conversations about online safety between caregivers and children may signal the need for a better understanding of what children need from a safe space to discuss online protection from child sexual abuse.

Parents and caregivers also had the opportunity to indicate what they need to better support their children to keep them safer. As is shown in Figure 3, this includes increased communication on online safety in schools, better parental control software, as well as more online safety guides and resources, and workshop and training sessions.

Figure 3. Responses to the question on would better support parents and caregivers in protecting children from online sexual abuse.

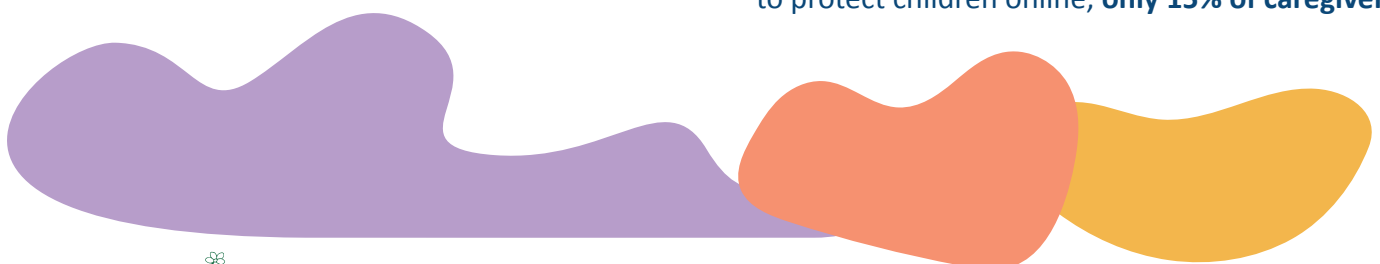
What, if anything, do you need to better support your children when it comes to safety from online sexual abuse?

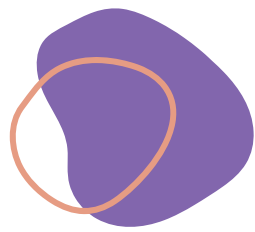


The call for increased awareness and guidance coming from parents and caregivers underscores a critical need for resources and skills to address the issue and acquire the knowledge to navigate conversations about online safety with children. Empowering both children and caregivers with the necessary tools to discuss child sexual abuse and exploitation online for the safety of children is key to contributing to a safer online environment for children.

Parents and Caregivers Call for Enhanced Online Safety Measures for Children

When asked about the safety measures in place to protect children online, **only 15% of caregivers**

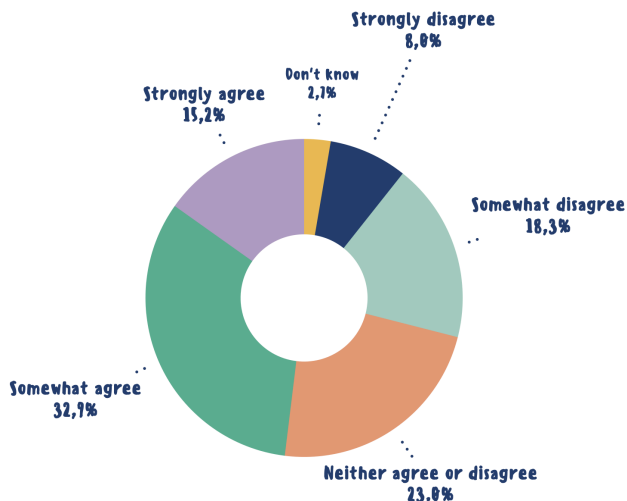




strongly agree that current overall safety measures are sufficiently protecting children online (Figure 4). One could argue that this low level of satisfaction underscores the inadequacy of the existing online framework in meeting the needs and expectations of caregivers in safeguarding children online.

Figure 4. Responses to the question on the level of agreement or disagreement on current safety measures sufficiently protecting children from online sexual abuse.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that current overall safety measures are sufficiently protecting children from online sexual abuse?



These findings underscore the pressing need for a thorough reassessment and improvement of current online safety mechanisms, considering the evolving online threats and vulnerabilities faced by children.

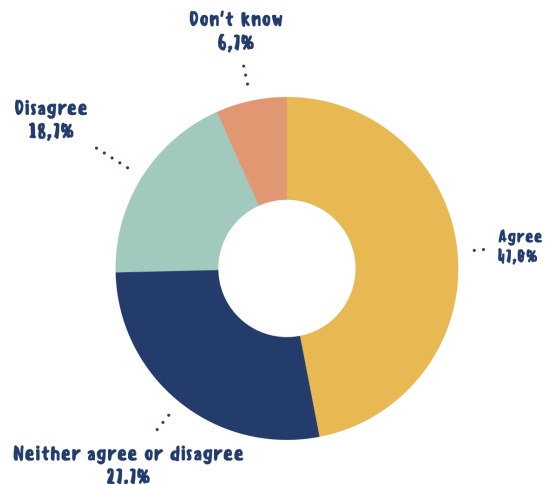
“Apps need to have a more accessible way to secure accounts. It is a tedious task to delete a Facebook account, where it only takes a few minutes to open one.”

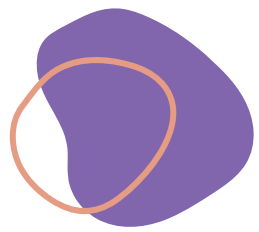
Quote from a child participant in one focus group in Malta when discussing problems and solutions with being protected online.

When asked whether safety measures, such as detection technologies, could infringe on their privacy online, 46% of parents and caregivers surveyed felt neutral or did not see it as an infringement on their online privacy (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Responses to the question on the level of agreement or disagreement on safety measures infringing online privacy.

Europe: To what extent do you agree or disagree that safety measures, such as these detection tools, can infringe on your privacy?

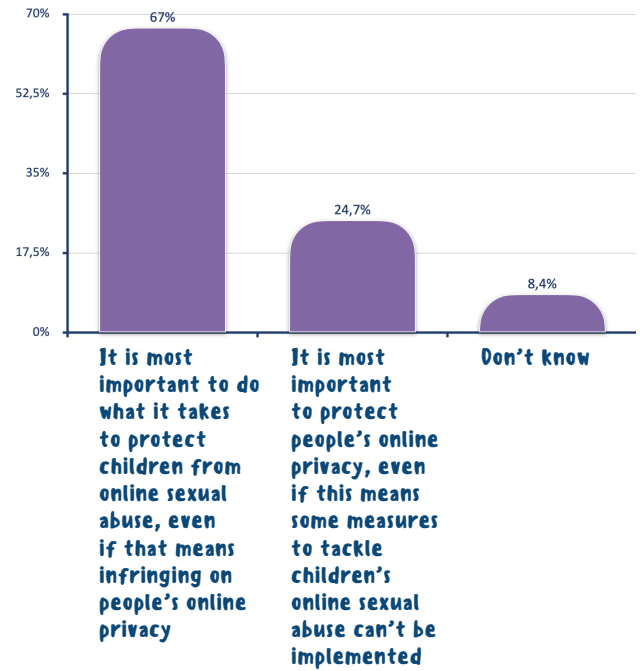




Survey results show that when asked to choose, the majority of parents and caregivers, about two-thirds, consider child protection from online sexual abuse to be more important (Figure 6), with interesting regional variations: South American caregivers are most likely to prioritise child protection online (69.2%), closely followed by European caregivers (68.7%), and a smaller percentage of Asian caregivers (59.2%).

Figure 6. Responses to the question on the prioritisation between child protection and personal privacy online.

Prioritisation: which of the statements do you agree with?

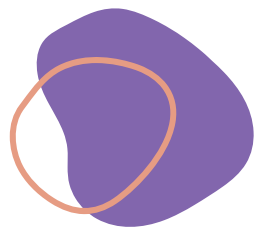


"It should not be a choice between both. It should be privacy AND safety"

Quote from a child participant in one focus group in The Netherlands when discussing privacy and protection.

Considering children's early statements on this topic, some of them express the view that privacy and safety are equally significant and should go hand in hand.





FINAL REMARKS

In navigating the complex landscape of online safety, caregivers take on a significant responsibility, demonstrating their commitment to protecting children against online sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the insights presented in this paper underscore a pressing need for additional support.

The call for more accessible forms of assistance, combined with the expressed uncertainties about navigating online safety, highlights an opportunity for education and awareness initiatives tailored to caregivers. However, the responsibility cannot be placed solely on parents and caregivers.

To truly protect children online, it is imperative for governments and online service providers to play a more practical role, easing the burden on parents and caregivers. Safety-by-design approaches and robust regulation is needed to ensure safer experiences for children online.

As children and caregivers voice their need for support, the pathway forward involves both equipping caregivers while advocating for systemic changes in the digital landscape.

