European Parliament

The new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+)

SUMMARY

The way children use digital technologies has changed a lot over the past decade. Most children go online using a smartphone, and do so almost twice as much as 10 years ago. They also use the internet at an earlier age than did children 10 years ago. Although the internet provides many opportunities for kids to learn and explore, to be creative or to interact with their friends and family, it also entails many risks such as cyberbullying, age-inappropriate content, disinformation and sexual abuse.

On 11 May 2022, the European Commission published a new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+). The strategy builds on its predecessor with the same name, adopted in 2012. The new strategy contributes to the vision for the EU's digital transformation by 2030 and reflects the principle, 'Children and young people should be protected and empowered online'.

The BIK+ strategy is built around three topics focused on children: safe digital experience, digital empowerment and active participation. It includes concrete actions that the Commission plans to support such as media literacy campaigns and the EU code of conduct on age-appropriate design to ensure privacy, safety and security for children online.

Within the European Parliament, the file has been attributed to the Committee on Culture and Education (CULT). The committee plans to deal with this file together with the proposal for a regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse. It plans to submit to the Commission a question for oral answer with debate in plenary followed by a resolution. The Commission plans to carry out an evaluation of the strategy every two years and publish regular reports.

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Introduction

The way children use digital technologies has changed significantly over the past decade; they are now more active online than ever before. According to the EU Kids online 2020 survey, done among children aged 9–16 from 19 European countries (data collected 2017-2019), the majority of children spend time online daily. The average time that children reported spending online each day in the EU Kids 2020 survey had almost doubled since 2010 (for example, from about 1 to 3 hours per day in Spain and from almost 2 to nearly 3 hours in Czechia). In the survey done by the Joint Research Centre among 10–18 year old children from 11 countries in Europe between June and August 2020 (survey published in 2021), children reported spending on average 6.5 hours online on a typical weekday during lockdown (3.8 hours of this was spent for school purposes only).

Figure 1 – Time children aged 10-18 spent on average online in a typical weekday during lockdown

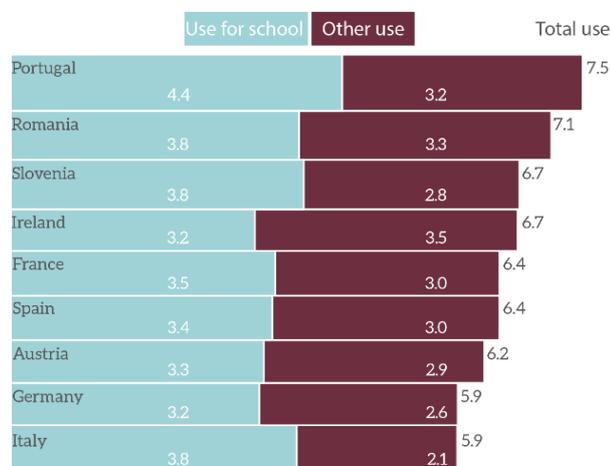Source: How children (10-18) experienced online risks during the COVID-19 lockdown, JRC, 2021.

Children's and young people's experience online has also changed considerably. For most of them, the preferred ways to go online is using a smartphone. According to a 2020 Eurobarometer survey, 99 % of respondents aged 15-24 had a personal mobile phone. Another survey done in Germany[1] revealed that 7 % of children aged 6-7 years, 27 % of children aged 8-9 years and 54 % of children aged 10-11 years owned a smartphone in 2020. Furthermore, children are going online at earlier ages. As the digital technologies constitute an increasingly bigger part of children's lives, more and more everyday activities are carried out online (such as doing homework, communicating with friends, listening to music, and playing games).

There are also some gender, age and country differences. In most countries covered by the EU kids online 2020 survey, twice as many boys as girls play online games daily. The older the children, the more diverse the range of activities they do online and the more frequently they go online. Country differences were especially big in the EU Kids online 2020 survey in watching videos (82 % of 9-16-year-old children in Lithuania watch videos daily, compared to 43 % in Slovakia) and in communicating with friends and family (77 % of 9-16-year-old children in Romania communicated online with friends and family daily, compared to 14 % in Germany).

Access to digital technologies or digital skills among children varies as well. According to a 2021 research paper, around 5 % of school-age children in the EU are digitally deprived, meaning they live in a household that cannot afford to have a computer, and/or live with adults who say they cannot afford to have an internet connection for personal use at home. There are big differences among the Member States: while only 0.7 % of Estonian children are digitally deprived, in Romania this is true for 23.1 % of children.

Digital technologies offer many opportunities for children to learn and explore, to be creative or to interact with their friends and family. At the same time, the online environment can also prove risky and harmful for children. According to the EU Kids online 2020 survey, about one in 10 children never feels safe online. More negatively, some children (for example, 44 % of children in Spain) never find people that are kind and helpful on the internet. Every month, about one in 10 children becomes a victim of online bullying. Many children are in contact with age-inappropriate or harmful

content online. For example, 48 % of children in Poland see hate messages at least once a month or more. Many children are sexually abused online. The 2021 *Economist* impact global survey found that more than one in three respondents had been asked to do something sexually explicit online during their childhood.

Preparation of the strategy

The European Commission did not carry out a specific stakeholder consultation to update the 2012 European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK). Instead, it took into account the results of other consultations on relevant topics carried out in 2020 and 2021: for example, a public consultation on the rights of the child and another on digital principles, a #DigitalDecade4YOUth consultation, an online survey among EU citizens on benefits and challenges in the digital world, the results of the annual Safer Internet Forum and targeted consultation workshops with various stakeholders.

Respondents in the consultation process generally supported the idea of updating the European strategy for a better internet for kids. Stakeholders highlighted the importance that the internet plays in almost every aspect of children's and young people's lives. Overall children and young people who participated in the consultation had a good understanding of the positive and negative sides of the internet. They were aware that the internet is not completely safe and entails risks such as cyberbullying, hateful and harmful content, fake news and disinformation. Privacy and data protection, improved media literacy as well as inclusiveness were also mentioned during the consultations. Teachers highlighted industry's lack of accountability and called for the development of age-appropriate standards and measures to keep online platforms safe. They also mentioned difficulties in keeping up with the technological developments.

In the online survey on benefits and challenges in the digital world, carried out between September and October 2021 and gathering more than 800 replies, respondents indicated that the biggest challenges online were unwitting personal data collection, bullying, harassment and stalking, violent and hateful content, identity theft, scams and blackmail. To address these risks they suggested:

➢ improving privacy and data protection;
➢ improving media and online safety education in schools and at home;
➢ ensuring good-quality, reliable internet access;
➢ asking service providers to take more action to keep users safe on their platforms.

At the same time, respondents recognised that the internet offers also various opportunities and benefits as regards searching for information, supporting teaching and learning as well as connecting with friends and family.

The participants in the Safer Internet Forum 2021 pointed out that relevant legislation had progressed a lot since the launch of the 2012 BIK strategy, for instance, with the adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation and the Audiovisual Media Services Directive in 2018. They emphasised that implementation is the most important issue now. They also called for stepping up efforts to improve media and digital literacy, with special focus on vulnerable groups. Finally, they highlighted the importance of cooperation with-like minded countries and organisations.

In September 2021, the Commission published a roadmap for the revision of the BIK strategy. In the roadmap consultation held between 30 September and 28 October 2021, stakeholders[2] broadly supported the idea of updating the BIK strategy. They drew particular attention to the importance of finding a balance between protecting children and young people online and empowering them. Among the other points they raised were that:

➢ educators and teachers should be equipped and ready to give children and young people digital skills;
➢ safer internet centres in the EU should be given funding and support;
➢ well-functioning age-verification mechanisms should be put in place;
➢ platforms should apply more 'safety-by-design' principles.

Parliament's starting position

In the past, the Parliament has been a strong advocate for a safer internet for kids. For example, in its reaction to the first BIK strategy (November 2012 resolution on protecting children in the digital world), the Parliament highlighted how important it is for children to better understand the digital world and be aware of the existence of hotlines combating illegal content.

In its March 2021 resolution on children's rights, the Parliament called on the Commission to develop an EU action plan for online service providers and tech companies to keep children safe online. It also highlighted the importance of digital literacy and education for children as well as regretted the digital divide that still hampers many children's possibilities to take advantage of digital technologies.

Furthermore, in its March 2021 resolution on digital education policy, the Parliament underlined the challenge of harmful and illegal content and activities in the digital environment (such as cyberbullying, dangerous online games and child pornography), including in terms of mental health and well-being.

The Parliament has also protected minors in the digital world through its legislative work. For example, the Parliament advocated strengthening the child protection provisions of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (which also covers video-sharing platforms), and prohibiting in the new Digital Services Act (DSA)[3] targeted advertising based on minors' personal data or on sensitive data (such as sexual orientation, religion and ethnicity). The Parliament also emphasised the importance of protecting personal data of children in the recently adopted Digital Markets Act (DMA).[4]

Council starting position

In its June 2021 recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, the Council recommended that Member States ensure that children have adequate digital education tools. The recommendation also puts emphasis on the importance of ensuring high-speed connectivity.

The Council also paid attention to minors in its November 2021 position (general approach) on the DSA. Namely, it added that providers of intermediary services should explain the conditions and restrictions for the use of their services in a way that minors can understand. It also strengthened provisions to limit risks that minors access harmful content. Providers of very large online platforms were called upon to take measures to protect the rights of children, including age verification and parental control tools as well as tools to help minors report abuse.

Views expressed in the Conference on the Future of Europe

Protecting children online was also high on the agenda of the Conference on the Future of Europe, where the European Citizens' Panel called for increased protection of minors online. More concretely, Citizens' Panel 1 called upon[5] the EU to raise 'more awareness about the dangers of the internet and digitalisation for young people through the creation of a mandatory subject in elementary school'. Citizens' Panel 1 also recommended[6] stepping up actions to ensure access and a healthy use of the internet, including via training on the risks of the internet for all age groups.

The Conference on the Future of Europe's final report proposed that 'everyone in Europe should in practice have access to the internet and to digital services' and children (among other vulnerable groups) should be made a priority when it comes to access to the internet. Lastly, the report emphasised the importance of developing children's digital skills and digital education.

Proposed strategy

As one of the flagship initiatives of the European Year of Youth 2022, the European Commission published a communication on 11 May 2022, in which it laid out the new European strategy for a

Better Internet for Kids (BIK+). As mentioned above, the strategy builds on the 2012 European strategy for a Better Internet for Children (BIK), which brought together the Commission, Member States and industry (such as providers of social networking services and mobile phone operators) to deliver concrete solutions for a better internet for children. The 2012 strategy was built around four pillars: 1) stimulating quality content online for young people; 2) stepping up awareness and empowerment; 3) creating a safe environment for children online; and 4) fighting against child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Since its adoption, it has influenced national policies and given impetus to numerous events and resources on topics such as deep fakes, cyberbullying, privacy concerns and harmful content.

The update of the strategy was announced in 2021, when the Commission adopted the EU strategy on the rights of the child. This new strategy contributes to shaping the vision for the EU's digital transformation by 2030, as laid out in the Commission's communication on a Digital Compass. The communication sets out concrete targets for 2030, such as reaching 20 million employed ICT specialists in the EU, at least 80 % of all adults having basic digital skills, covering all European households with 5G and having all key public services available online.

The Commission published the strategy at the same time as the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and the Council laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse. The proposal has already received criticism from some stakeholders. For example, the European Data Protection Board and the European Data Protection Supervisor have expressed serious concerns about the impact of the proposal on individuals' privacy and personal data.

The BIK+ strategy reflects the following principle laid down in the Declaration on European Digital Rights and Principles: 'Children and young people should be protected and empowered online'. It also takes into account previous European Parliament and Council opinions on the topic (such as the Parliament's 2019 resolution on children's rights). The main aim of the strategy is to complement and support existing actions to protect children online, develop their skills and enable them to safely enjoy digital technologies.

The BIK+ strategy has three pillars. The first pillar focusses on **safe digital experiences for children**, aiming to protect them from harmful and illegal online content and conduct. As part of this pillar, the Commission will facilitate a comprehensive EU code of conduct on age-appropriate design[7] to ensure privacy, safety and security for children online (based on the rules of the DSA). Although adherence to this code of conduct remains voluntary, there will be audits carried out on the commitments that have been made.

The Commission will also support safe and privacy-preserving age verification methods. In that sense, the planned European digital identity wallet could be useful to enable children to prove their age online without disclosing other personal data. In addition, the code of conduct will include a specific section targeting adult-only content, to limit sharing of non-consensual intimate images that might involve children.

The strategy aims to ensure that various child helplines and hotlines can continue to offer help to children who encounter harmful and illegal content online. Therefore, the Commission will continue to co-fund the safer internet helplines and hotlines in the EU. If these helplines or hotlines are granted trusted flagger status in accordance with the DSA, it will be possible to take down illegal online content much faster. Moreover, the strategy seeks to improve cooperation between various helplines and hotlines. The Commission also plans to map research on the impact of commercial influencing techniques on children. Finally, an expert group will be created to provide policy recommendations related to (cyber)bullying and well-being at school.

On several of these objectives the Commission will need the support of the Member States and industry. For example, industry will be actively involved in the development of the EU code of conduct on age-appropriate design.

The second pillar focuses on **children's digital empowerment**; having such empowerment would allow them to make sound choices and express themselves safely and responsibly in the online environment. The strategy proposes, for example, to develop and distribute teaching modules (MOOCs) for teachers through the EU-funded betterinternetforkids.eu portal and EU co-funded network of Safer Internet Centres (SIC). It also promotes exchanges of good practices for national curricula on media literacy and the drawing up of plans to organise media literacy campaigns. Moreover, the Commission is developing together with the OECD a financial competence framework for adults and children.

The strategy pays particular attention to children with special or specific needs, or from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds (for example migrant or Roma children). To this end, it envisages stepping up support for the Member States' SICs to enable them to offer non-formal education and training to children in vulnerable situations.

Member States and the industry are called upon to monitor the impact of the digital transformation on children. Furthermore, Member States are also invited to reduce the digital divide by ensuring (with the help of EU funds) everyone access to an affordable and reliable internet connection.

The third pillar promotes the **active participation of children**. To respect children's views and enable them to make their voices heard in the digital environment, children will be actively involved in the creation of the EU code of conduct. The Commission will support more experienced children teaching other children about online opportunities and risks, as well as organise a child-led evaluation of the strategy every two years. Lastly, the role of existing BIK youth ambassadors and BIK youth panels will be expanded.

Finally, the strategy takes stock of the international actions that support children in the online environment. For example, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the rights of the child published in March 2021 guidance on how to effectively implement the UN Convention on the rights of the child and its optional protocols (general comment 25). In this general comment, the committee highlights that the rights of children must be respected, protected and fulfilled in the digital environment.

The betterinternetforkids.eu portal has published a child-friendly version of the new BIK+ strategy that explains the strategy in an accessible way to children. The new BIK+ strategy will be also the main topic of the Safer Internet Forum scheduled for 27 October 2022 in Brussels.

> ### The US Kids Online Safety Act
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> In the US Congress, Senators Richard Blumenthal and Marsha Blackburn introduced, in February 2022, the Kids Online Safety Act which aims to enhance children's safety online. The bill was introduced after a series of hearings with social media companies and advocates on the repeated failures of tech companies to protect children online.
>
> The bill would oblige social media platforms to prevent and mitigate forms of harm to minors including self-harm, sexual exploitation and deceptive marketing practices. Platforms are required to provide readily accessible and easy-to-use parental tools to help support children and identify harmful behaviour. Platforms should also give minors options to protect their information, disable addictive product features, and opt out of algorithmic recommendations.
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> Source: US Congress, 2022.

Prospects

Within the European Parliament, the file has been attributed to the Committee on Culture and Education (CULT). The CULT committee plans to deal with the issues presented in the strategy in its opinion on the proposal for a regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse (the rapporteur for opinion for the CULT committee is Niyazi Kizilyürek, The Left, Cyprus). It also plans to submit a question for oral answer with debate in plenary followed by a resolution.

On 15 June 2022, the CULT committee discussed the two files with Commission representatives. Members' questions were predominantly about the proposed regulation and only a few about the

BIK+ strategy. Among other topics, Members raised the issue of how to protect children in the [metaverse](#).

The Council has not published its position specifically on the BIK+ strategy. However, in its June 2022 [conclusions](#) on the EU strategy on the rights of the child, the Council called on the Member States to invest in reducing the digital divide and support digital, media and information literacy. It also called on them to focus on privacy and online safety, while providing help to children who are victims of online abuse.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EEESC) adopted an [opinion](#) on the Combating child sexual abuse online package on 21 September 2021. The EESC welcomes the educational dimension of the BIK+ strategy as well as the idea to organise media literacy campaigns. It also supports the idea of involving children in the actions promoted by the strategy.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SUPPORTING ANALYSIS

Kiss M., Negreiro M, Niestadt M., Nijenhuis C. M. and van Lierop C., [Demographic Outlook for the European Union 2022](#), EPRS, European Parliament, May 2022.

Madiega T., [Digital services act](#), EPRS, European Parliament, April 2022.

OTHER SOURCES

[The new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+)](#), European Parliament, Legislative Observatory (OEIL), European Parliament.

ENDNOTES

1   Data collected between August and October 2020.

2   Nineteen stakeholders (mostly non-governmental organisations) gave their responses in the roadmap consultation.

3   The DSA is awaiting publication in the *Official Journal of the European Union*.

4   The DMA is awaiting publication in the *Official Journal of the European Union*.

5   See recommendation 33 on page 43 of the EPRS [study](#) on Citizens Panel recommendations (Panel 1).

6   See recommendation 47 on page 59 of the EPRS [study](#) on Citizens Panel recommendations (Panel 1).

7   This code of conduct could include, for example, best practices of child-friendly terms and conditions or simple mechanisms to report harm.

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