

Open letter to the European Union

Civil Society and Child Rights Organisations Call to Action: We must make the Internet a Safe Place for Children

November 18, 2022 - European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse

Every child should have the chance to be safe, curious, and happy – to simply be a kid. Unfortunately, the reality of childhood is very different for a growing number of children who experience sexual abuse and exploitation. Recent surveys show that [more than half of children](#), both boys and [girls](#), experience sexual harms online during childhood. This includes being sent sexually explicit content from an adult or unknown persons, being asked to keep part of their sexually explicit online relationship a secret, having sexually explicit images of them shared without their consent or being asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with. In extreme cases, grooming for child sexual exploitation may lead to child disappearances.

The horrors of abuse are cruel enough. But as the internet has evolved and grown, so has the viral spread of child sexual abuse materials, and the evidence of that abuse: [85 million of images and videos](#) were reported globally in 2021 – with [Europe hosting over 62 %](#) of this material. This material is often re-shared multiple times online, with children being re-victimised over and over.

The proliferation of abuse materials makes it hard for those children to live normal and healthy lives. In a [survey conducted in 2017](#), nearly 70 % of respondents indicated they worry constantly about being recognised by someone who has seen images of their abuse, 83 % had suicidal ideation, 60 % attempted suicide.

The spread of child sexual abuse material is not the only harm that children experience as a result of their abuse. For example, chat functions allow perpetrators to groom children online, either to meet in real life or to solicit sexually explicit imagery from them and extort them with it afterwards to continuously provide more. And livestream technology is used to stream the abuse of children while criminals watch and guide the abuse from around the globe.

Every single day, children’s rights to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation are violated. Overwhelming as this may seem, we are far from powerless to act. And we have a moral as well as legal responsibility to stop this heinous crime, as recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Today, on the European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, we want to explain why this moment is so critical for Europe and the world.

We are *not* helpless. Advances in technology and law enforcement, along with a strong child protection ecosystem, could provide the tools we need to eradicate child sexual abuse materials from online platforms. All of this could be applied proportionately, with strictly regulated technologies that respect the privacy of internet users.

What has been done to date by the entire child protection ecosystem, including technology companies, merits applause. All voluntary actions must be continued with a solid legal basis and regulatory framework. But, when looking at the exponentially growing scope of the problem, it's clear that this won't be enough. **The European Union must live up to its promise to make the internet a safe place for children.**

Earlier this year, the European Commission proposed [legislation](#) to do exactly that. This legislation is currently being reviewed and considered in the European Parliament and by Member States in the Council of the European Union. We, the signatories of this letter, thank all parties involved for their hard work and high ambitions. This is an opportunity that EU policy-makers can't afford to miss. Citizens across the EU have expressed widespread support ([68 %](#)) for the EU to introduce long-term legislation that will keep children safe online and for the use of automated tools to identify child sexual abuse materials. **We call on everyone with a stake in fighting this problem to concentrate on effective solutions to strengthen the Commission's proposal and ensure it brings tangible outcomes for child protection online - *read our concrete recommendations below****.

We all bring different expertise to the table. Together, we can find solutions that will help us build a world where children can be safe, curious, and happy – one in which every child is free to simply be a child.







List of signatories:

1. Association Camerounaise pour la Promotion des Droits de l'Enfant (ACPDE)/
Cameroonian Association for the Promotion of Children's Rights (Africa)
2. Association Meilleur Avenir pour Nos Enfants (AMANE) (Morocco)
3. ASTRA - Anti-trafficking Action (Serbia)
4. Augusta Associates, LLC (United States)
5. BeBraveFrance (France)
6. Brave Movement (International)
7. Bund Deutscher Amateurtheater (BDAT) (Germany)
8. Canadian Centre for Child Protection (International)
9. Centro integrado de apoio familiar (CIAF) - Intergrated Centre for Family Support (CIAF)
(Portugal/Brazil/France)
10. Cesta z krize, z.ú. (Czech Republic)

11. Child Helpline International (International)
12. Child Rescue Coalition (International)
13. Child Rights Centre Albania (Europe)
14. Child10 (Europe/International)
15. ChildFund Alliance (International)
16. Childnet International (United Kingdom/International)
17. Defence for Children - ECPAT the Netherlands (Netherlands)
18. Defence for Children International Greece (DCI Greece) (Greece)
19. Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk / German Children's Fund (Germany)
20. Different & Equal (Europe/Albania)
21. ECPAT Austria (Austria/Europe)
22. ECPAT Belgium (Belgium)
23. ECPAT Bulgaria - Neglected Children Society (Bulgaria)
24. ECPAT Germany (Germany)
25. ECPAT International (International)
26. ECPAT Luxembourg (Luxembourg/International)
27. ECPAT Norway (Norway)
28. ECPAT Sweden (Sweden)
29. ECPAT Türkiye (Türkiye)
30. Empowering Children Foundation (Poland)
31. Eurochild (Europe)
32. Fondazione SOS - Il Telefono Azzurro Onlus (Europe)
33. Friends-International (International)
34. Hıntalovon Child Rights Foundation (Hungary)
35. "Hope For Children" CRC Policy Center (International)
36. Igazgyöngy Alapítvány/ Real Pearl Foundation (Hungary)
37. Instituto de Apoio à Criança (Portugal)
38. International Centre on Sexual Exploitation (International)
39. International Child Development Initiatives (iCDi) (International)
40. International Falcon Movement – Socialist Educational International (IFM-SEI) (International)
41. International Justice Mission's Center to End Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (International)
42. Internet Watch Foundation (International/United Kingdom)
43. Kindernothilfe e.V. (KNH) (International)
44. Lasten perusoikeudet - Children's Fundamental Rights ry (Finland)
45. Lightup Norway (Norway)
46. Linka detskej istoty, n.o. (LDI) / Child Safety Line Slovakia NGO (Slovakia)
47. Marie Collins Foundation (Europe/International)
48. Missing Children Europe (Europe)
49. Montessori Bundesverband Deutschland e.V. (Germany)

50. Montessori Europe (Europe)
51. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (International)
52. National Center on Sexual Exploitation (International)
53. National Network for Children in Bulgaria (NNC), NNC's Legal Aid Network (Bulgaria)
54. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) (United Kingdom)
55. Network for Children's Rights (NCR) (Greece)
56. NGO "Internet Safety Center "Stop sexting" (Ukraine)
57. PFAD Bundesverband der Pflege- und Adoptivfamilien e.V. / PFAD e.V. Association of Foster Care and Adoptive Families in Germany (Germany)
58. Sentinel Foundation (International / Latin America)
59. SOLWODI Deutschland e.V. (Germany)
60. Spine (Netherlands/International)
61. Stiftung Digitale Chancen / Digital Opportunities Foundation (Germany/Europe)
62. Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry. (PC) (International/Finland)
63. SWGfL (International)
64. Tacteenaeil - ECPAT Korea (Korea)
65. Terre des Hommes (International)
66. The Global Partnership and Fund to End Violence Against Children (International)
67. The International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) (International)
68. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation (United Kingdom/International)
69. The National Child Protection Task Force (International)
70. Thorn (International)
71. Together for Girls (United States/Europe/Asia/Africa/Latin American Countries)
72. UK Safer Internet Centre (United Kingdom)
73. Vatra Psycho - Social Centre (Albania)
74. WAVE Network (Women Against Violence Europe)
75. WeProtect Global Alliance (International)
76. Women's World Summit Foundation (WWSF) (International)
77. World Vision EU Representation (International)

*** Read our priority areas of support and concerns regarding the European Commission's proposal:**

- [Brave Movement](#)
- [Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#)
- [Child Helpline International](#)
- [Child Rescue Coalition](#)
- [Defence for Children - ECPAT the Netherlands](#)
- [ECPAT International \(International\) with ECPAT members in the EU](#)
- [Empowering Children Foundation](#)
- [Eurochild](#)
- [International Justice Mission's Center to End Online Sexual Exploitation of Children](#)
- [Internet Watch Foundation](#)

- [Missing Children Europe](#)
- [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#)
- [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#)
- [Stiftung Digitale Chancen / Digital Opportunities Foundation](#)
- [Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry. \(PC\)](#)
- [Terre des Hommes](#)
- [The Global Partnership and Fund to End Violence Against Children \(International\)](#)
- [Thorn \(International\)](#)
- [WeProtect Global Alliance](#)