

Children are at increased risk of harm online during the global COVID-19 pandemic, says UNICEF

UNICEF Venezuela

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NUEVA YORK, April 15, 2020.— Millions of children are at increased risk of harm at a time in their lives when they are increasingly using the internet due to confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF and its partners said today.

"The coronavirus pandemic has led to an unprecedented increase in screen time for children," said Executive Director of the Global Alliance to End Violence, Dr. Howard Taylor. "School closings and strict containment measures mean that more and more families are relying on technology and digital solutions for children to learn, be entertained and connect with the outside world; however, not all children have the knowledge, skills, and resources to stay safe online."

More than 1.5 billion children and young people are affected by school closures around the world. Many of these students take their classes and socialize more and more through the internet. Spending more time on virtual platforms can further expose children to sexual exploitation and harassment online, as predators seek to take advantage of the situation created by the pandemic. The lack of personal contact with their friends and partners can lead to them taking greater risks, such as sending sexualized images, while the

unstructured time they spend on the internet can expose children to potentially harmful and violent content, as well as to an increased risk of cyberbullying.

UNICEF, together with its partners, the Global Alliance to End Violence against Children, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Office of the United Nations on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Global Alliance WePROTECT, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Childhood Foundation USA, has published a new technical note aimed at exhorting governments, industries information and communication technology, educators and families to remain vigilant, take urgent action to mitigate potential risks, and ensure that children's online experiences are safe and positive during COVID-19.

“In the context of COVID-19, millions of children are temporarily confined to their homes and in front of their screens. We must help them navigate this new reality,” said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. “We call on governments and industry to join forces to keep children and youth safe online by offering better safety features and new tools to help parents and educators teach their children. children to use the internet safely”.

Recommended preliminary steps to mitigate online risks to children during COVID-19 include:

- **Governments:** Strengthen basic child protection services to ensure that they remain open and active throughout the pandemic; train health, education, and social service workers on the effects of COVID-19 on the well-being of children, including increased risks online;

intensify awareness and education initiatives on child safety online, and ensure that social service providers, schools, parents and children are aware of local reporting mechanisms and hotline support numbers helplines and local hotlines.

- **Information technology industry, including social media platforms:** Ensure online platforms have better security and protection measures, especially virtual learning tools, and are clearly accessible to educators, parents, and children; promote and facilitate child safety referral services and hotlines; develop standard restraint policies that are responsive to children's rights; employ built-in safeguards, while innovating as appropriate, and provide internet connectivity to improve access for disadvantaged children living in low-income households.
- **Schools:** Update protection policies to reflect the new realities of children learning at home; promote and monitor good behaviour online and ensure that children have ongoing access to school-based counselling services.
- **Parents:** Ensure that the devices used by children have the latest updates in terms of computer programs and antivirus programs; maintain a frank open dialogue with children about how and with whom they are communicating online; work with children to establish rules about how, when, and where the internet can be used; be vigilant to see if online activity is causing signs of distress in children, and be familiar with school district policies and local reporting mechanisms, and have access to easy-to-use helpline and telephone assistance numbers access.