Growing up in a connected world

Growing up
in a connected
world

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Foreword

The internet is becoming a natural part of children's lives across the globe, but we still lack quality and nationally representative data on how children use the internet and with what consequences. In 2017, UNICEF's flagship report, *The State of the World's Children: Children in a Digital World* made clear that the available evidence is not yet where it needs to be.

However, this report, *Growing up in a connected world* underscores that it is possible to collect quality data if the right strategies and investments are in place. Over the past 4 years, the Global Kids Online network has worked with UNICEF and partners around the world to improve the global evidence base on the risks and opportunities for children on the internet.

This report provides a summary of the evidence generated from Global Kids Online national surveys in 11 countries. Importantly, most of the evidence comes from children themselves, because it is only by talking to children that we can understand how the internet affects them. By bringing children's own voices and experiences to the centre of policy development, legislative reform, advocacy, and programme and service delivery, we hope the decisions made in these spheres will serve children's best interests.

The report shows that children who participate in more online activities tend to have better digital skills compared to those who engage in fewer activities. This means that parents should facilitate rather than hinder children's internet use, by helping them discover new exciting things to do online that will enable learning and personal development. But the results also show that children who participate in more online activities tend to experience more risks as a result. To minimize adversity, we need to be ready to support children as they explore the digital environment, because learning how to deal with risk is also an important part of growing up.

Continued data collection about children's online experiences on wider scale is imperative to put governments, parents, teachers, and everyone else concerned with children's well-being in a better position to respond to challenges for children in a digital age. Enabling and supporting such robust data collection and balanced research is the main purpose of the Global Kids Online project and network.

Psdele

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Introduction

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How can we best advance children's rights in the digital age? The starting point must be children themselves – asking about the barriers they face in accessing the internet, the opportunities they are discovering online and the digital skills they are acquiring. Children can also report on the online risks they have encountered and the possible harms, as well as on the support and protection they receive from family, friends, teachers and wider society.

To gather the necessary evidence, the Global Kids Online network is committed to listening to children and generating cross-nationally comparable and robust evidence that directly reflects their voices, experiences and concerns.

The Global Kids Online network has developed a toolkit for this purpose, which has been used in 18 countries to date. This summary report is based on the survey results of 11 countries, from across which more than 14,000 internet-using children were interviewed about their online experiences. As well as conducting research, the Global Kids Online network works with national partners around the world to consider policy options and suggest practical solutions based on the data it generates.

The Global Kids Online toolkit
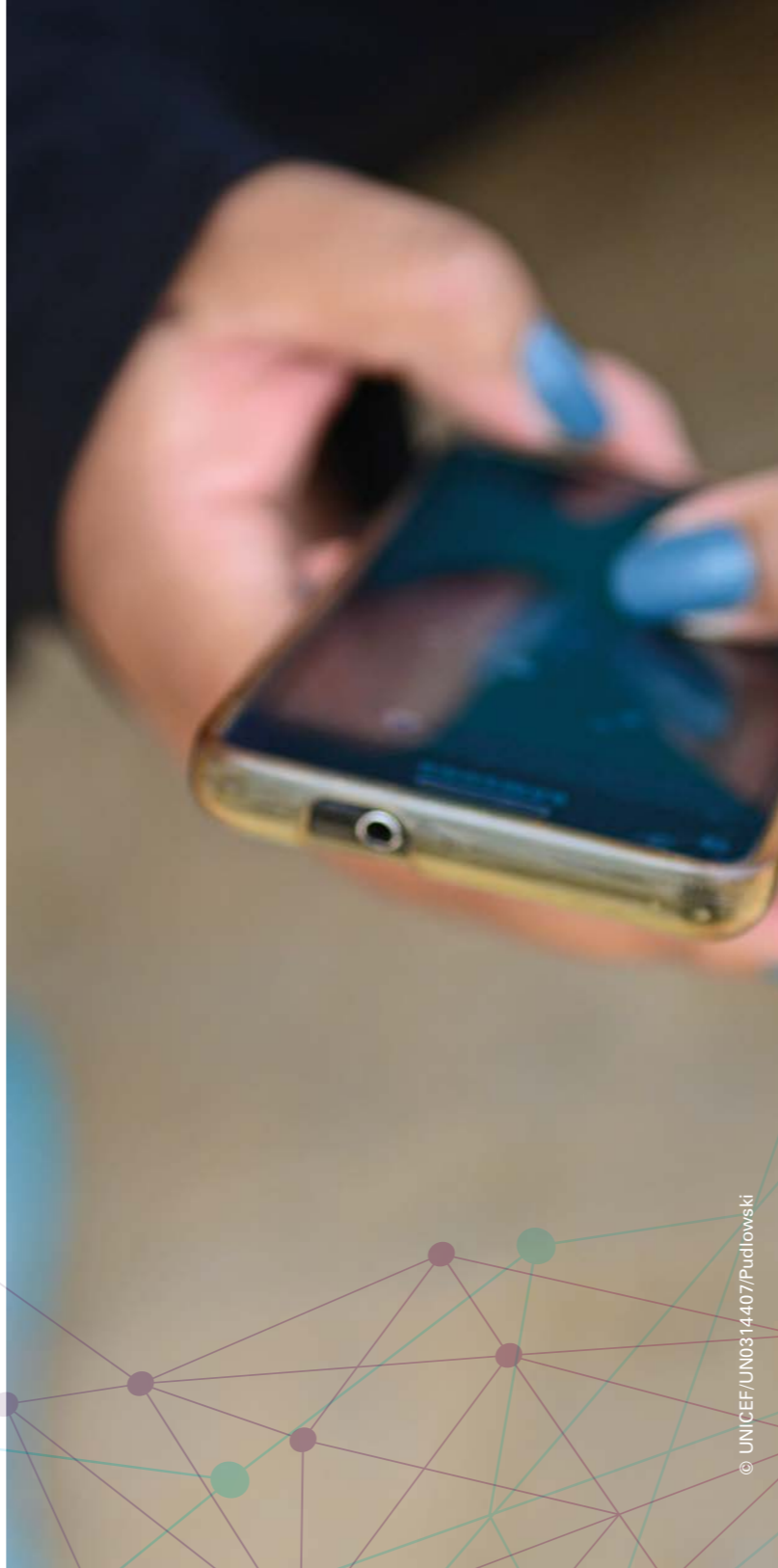
GLOBAL KIDS ONLINE

The Global Kids Online network is a collaborative initiative between UNICEF, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the EU Kids Online network. The network has developed a toolkit based on a question-naire that researchers can use to frame discussions about what children like to do online and the skills and competences they acquire in the process. It also asks about the online risks and potential harms that children face. The toolkit views parents as mediators and sources of support.

The Global Kids Online toolkit can be used in any country to generate inter-nationally comparable data. From 2016 to 2018, it was used in 11 countries: Albania, Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Ghana, Italy, Montenegro, the Philippines, South Africa and Uruguay. In total, researchers surveyed 14,733 children aged 9–17 years who use the internet – together with one parent of each child. This summary report is based on the survey results from these 11 countries. In addition, researchers led focus group discussions with children in eight countries: Albania, Argentina, Ghana, Italy, Montenegro, the Philippines, Serbia and South Africa. All data from Argentina is based on internet users aged 13–17 years. The quotations from children in this report come from these discussions.

This report is based on data from internet-using children only. The findings therefore do not enable conclusions to be drawn about any potential digital divide between internet users and non-users. Wherever gender or age differences are discussed, these pertain only to children who have used the internet within the previous three months.

Use of the Global Kids Online toolkit enables policy, legislation and service delivery to be guided by children's own voices and experiences. Further information about the network and the toolkit can be found on the Global Kids Online website at www.globalkidsonline.net. The full technical comparative report that forms the basis for this summary is also available on the website.

Children from around the world share their online lives

Children in different countries have been talking to Global Kids Online about growing up with the internet – about their enthusiasms and their fears. Even tech-savvy children need guidance from parents, teachers and other caregivers if they are to maximize the benefits and avoid the harms.

The internet can transform children's lives – for better or for worse. It can open up a new world of entertainment and information and allow children to learn in new and unexpected ways. At the same time, it may also expose them to unknown and unprecedented dangers. There are concerns, for adults and children alike, that the internet can be used to invade personal privacy, peddle disinformation and pornography, and even threaten democracies.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes that children have the rights to freedom of expression, to information and to play, but also the rights to privacy and to protection from harm. There is no specific right to access the internet, since the Convention was established when the internet was in its infancy.

But with more children around the world gaining access every day, the fulfilment of their rights will increasingly be shaped by what happens on the internet. And given the extent to which opportunities are now made available online, restricted internet access can be seen as an indirect infringement of children's rights.

For parents, teachers and all those with a duty of care to children, the first priority will always be their protection. But it is not yet clear what form that protection should take in regard to online risks. There are relatively few reliable findings on the risks to children of using the internet or the harms they may experience as a result. Public and parental responses therefore tend to rely more on instinct than on evidence – with the risk that efforts to fend off the worst of the internet may also stifle access to the best it has to offer.

Importantly, protection alone is not enough. Children want to participate in the digital world, and doing so effectively requires adult provision of access and support.

Children in a connected world

At the global level, it has been estimated that already one child in three is an internet user, and that one in three internet users is a child under 18 years of age. In 2017, half of the world's population used the internet; among the 15–24 age group, the proportion rose to about two thirds.

Among children, the most popular device for accessing the internet is the mobile phone. This represents a notable shift over the past decade. In Europe and North America, the first generation of internet users logged on via desktop computer, but the pattern in the global South has clearly been 'mobile first' *(see Figure 1)*.

> **The phone is somehow simpler. We can carry it anywhere, it's smaller and it's easier to work on it. I like it better in this way [using it] by fingers and not with the keyboard.**
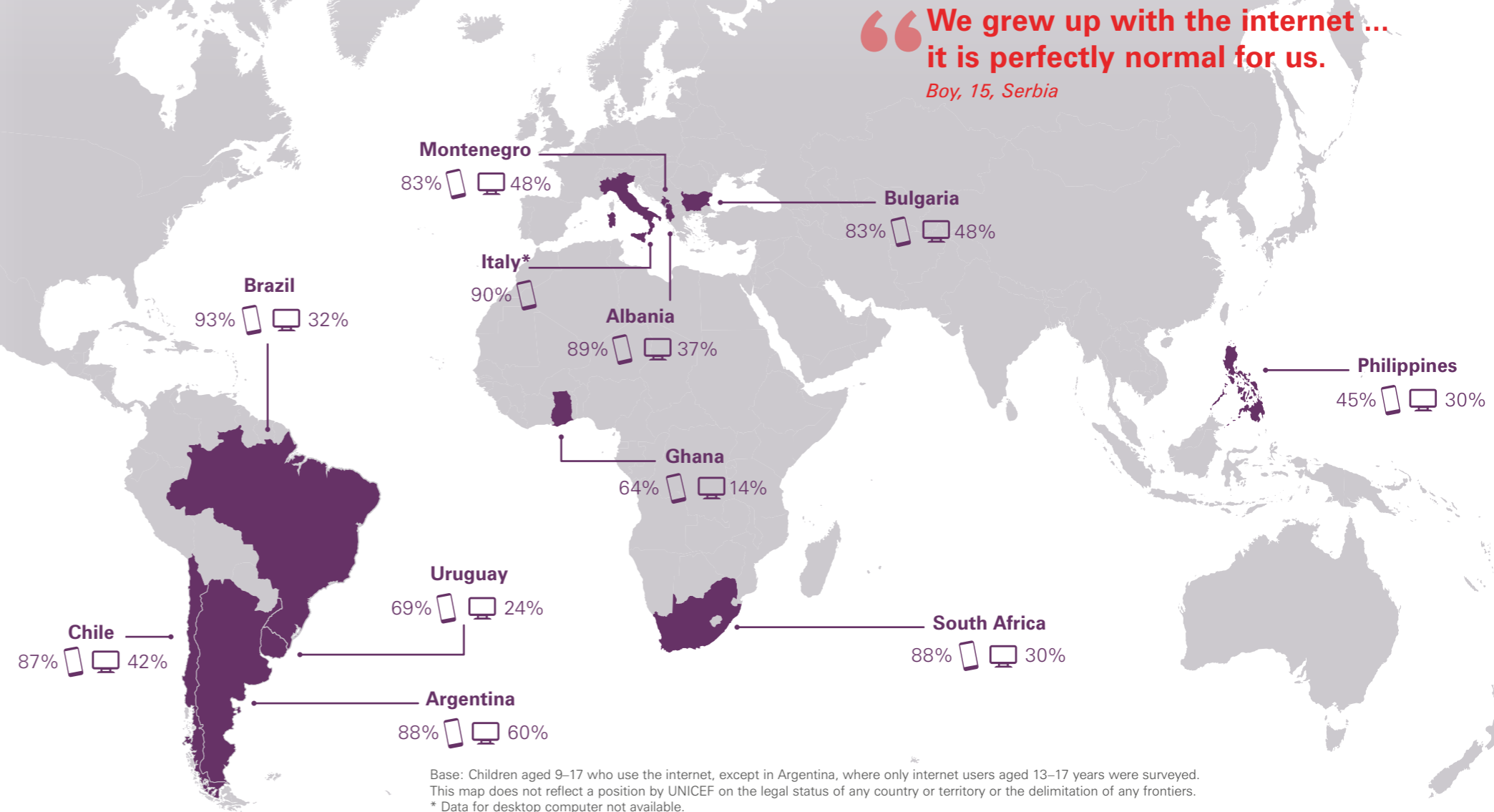> *Girl, 12, Serbia*

In Argentina, for example, children say they prefer using a mobile phone because they can carry it around everywhere; they do not have to share it with other household members; it can fulfil several functions at the same time, such as texting, talking, taking and sharing pictures, and surfing; and it is always on.

Among children who already have access to the internet, mobile phones are used for going online to the same extent by girls and boys. Desktop computers, in comparison, are typically used more by boys. This is the case in the Philippines, for example, probably because boys use desktop computers in internet cafés and 'pisonets', which tend to be male-dominated spaces. When it comes to laptop computers, girls and boys use them to a similar extent and older children more than the younger ones.

A notable difference among the 11 countries surveyed is Uruguay, where it is the youngest children – those aged 9–11 years – who are most likely to use a laptop to go online, probably because of the government's Plan Ceibal, which provides a laptop to every child. Perhaps as a consequence, younger children in Uruguay have a relatively higher level of digital skills than their counterparts in many other countries. This shows how government policy can influence children's opportunities in the digital world.

> **We grew up with the internet … it is perfectly normal for us.**
> *Boy, 15, Serbia*

Montenegro 83% 📱 🖥 48%

Bulgaria 83% 📱 🖥 48%

Italy* 90% 📱

Albania 89% 📱 🖥 37%

Philippines 45% 📱 🖥 30%

Brazil 93% 📱 🖥 32%

Ghana 64% 📱 🖥 14%

Uruguay 69% 📱 🖥 24%

South Africa 88% 📱 🖥 30%

Chile 87% 📱 🖥 42%

Argentina 88% 📱 🖥 60%

Base: Children aged 9–17 who use the internet, except in Argentina, where only internet users aged 13–17 years were surveyed. This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.
* Data for desktop computer not available.

In practice, most children who use the internet access it through more than one device: Children who connect at least weekly sometimes use up to three different devices to do so. Older children and children in richer countries generally use more devices, and boys use slightly more devices than girls in every country surveyed.

Children who use the internet in the 11 countries spend on average about two hours a day online during the week and roughly double that each day of the weekend. Some feel permanently connected. But many others still do not have access to the internet at home – or have only restricted access.

❝I go to a café because we don't have a computer in the house.... We don't have access to the internet at school.
Boy, 15–17, South Africa

Access to the internet is far from taken for granted in many parts of the world, and children face multiple barriers and inequalities in this regard. In lower-middle-income countries, children's internet access at home is notably lower than in high- and upper-middle-income countries. Children say that this is due to the high costs of connectivity and data, but also in many cases because parents will not let them use the internet as much as they would like.

❝[I'm connected] All day, but it's not that I use it all day long.
Boy, 13–14, Argentina

In our research, we found that the nature and extent of internet access seems fairly similar for girls and boys. This is probably because the survey was confined to internet-using children. Other reports suggest significant differences by gender, especially in terms of access. For example, the EQUALS Research Group's inaugural report, published in 2019, shows that in every region except the Americas, male internet users outnumber female users. In many countries, girls do not have the same access opportunities as boys, and even where they do, girls are often monitored and restricted in their internet use to a much greater extent.

❝They have the cell [mobile] phone stuck to them.
Parent, Argentina

A world of fun

Children often go online for a variety of positive and enjoyable reasons. Across the 11 countries surveyed, the most popular activity – for both girls and boys – is watching video clips. More than three quarters of internet-using children say they watch videos online at least weekly, either alone or with other members of their family.

> **When my mother bought the laptop, we started to spend more time together, since every weekend we chose a movie and watched it with my grandmother.**
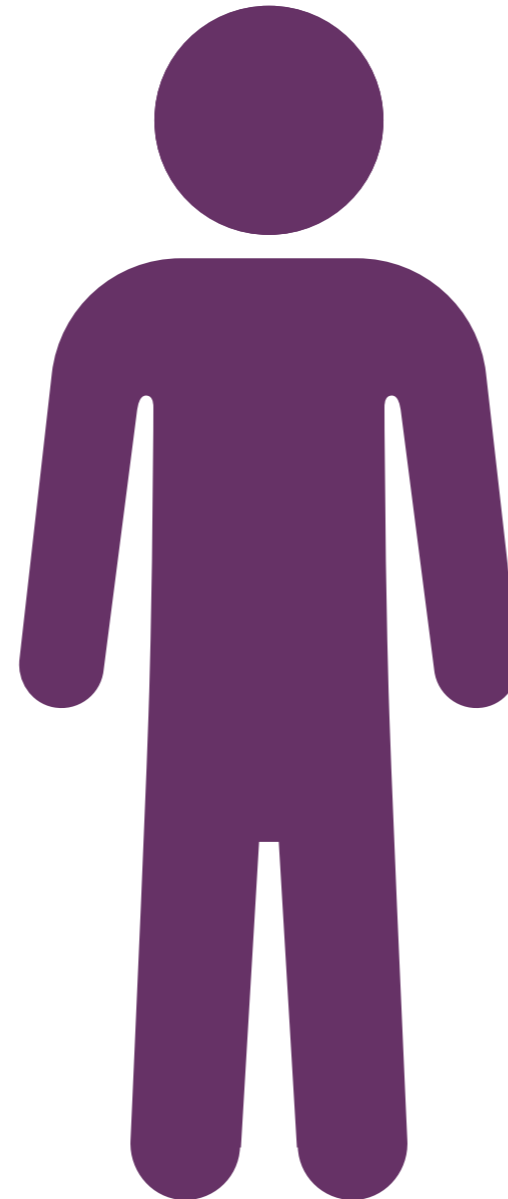> *Girl, 15, Uruguay*

Children also love playing games online – now a major way of exercising their right to play and sometimes also the right to learn. Boys are much more likely to play games online in every country in which this question was asked. Nevertheless, many girls who use the internet do play games –

in Bulgaria, for example, more than 60 per cent of girls play games online, and in Montenegro, more than 80 per cent of girls do so *(see Figure 2)*. As with watching videos, children are more likely to play games online when they have easier access to the internet – so this activity tends to be more popular in higher-income countries.

Adults worry about children's excessive screen-time or believe that children are just wasting time on online entertainment. But our data suggest that these mainstream entertainment activities may be useful entry-level opportunities for the youngest children, which can help them to develop the interest and skills to progress further – towards more educational, informative and social online experiences.

> **I play online games and make money from them.**
> *Boy, 17, the Philippines*

Figure 2. Children who play games online at least weekly, by gender

100%

Boys		Girls
85%	Montenegro	82%
84%	Bulgaria	62%
82%	Brazil	55%
73%	Chile	55%
66%	Albania	51%
58%	South Africa	46%
61%	Uruguay	36%
64%	Italy	28%
58%	Philippines	28%
35%	Ghana	26%

0%
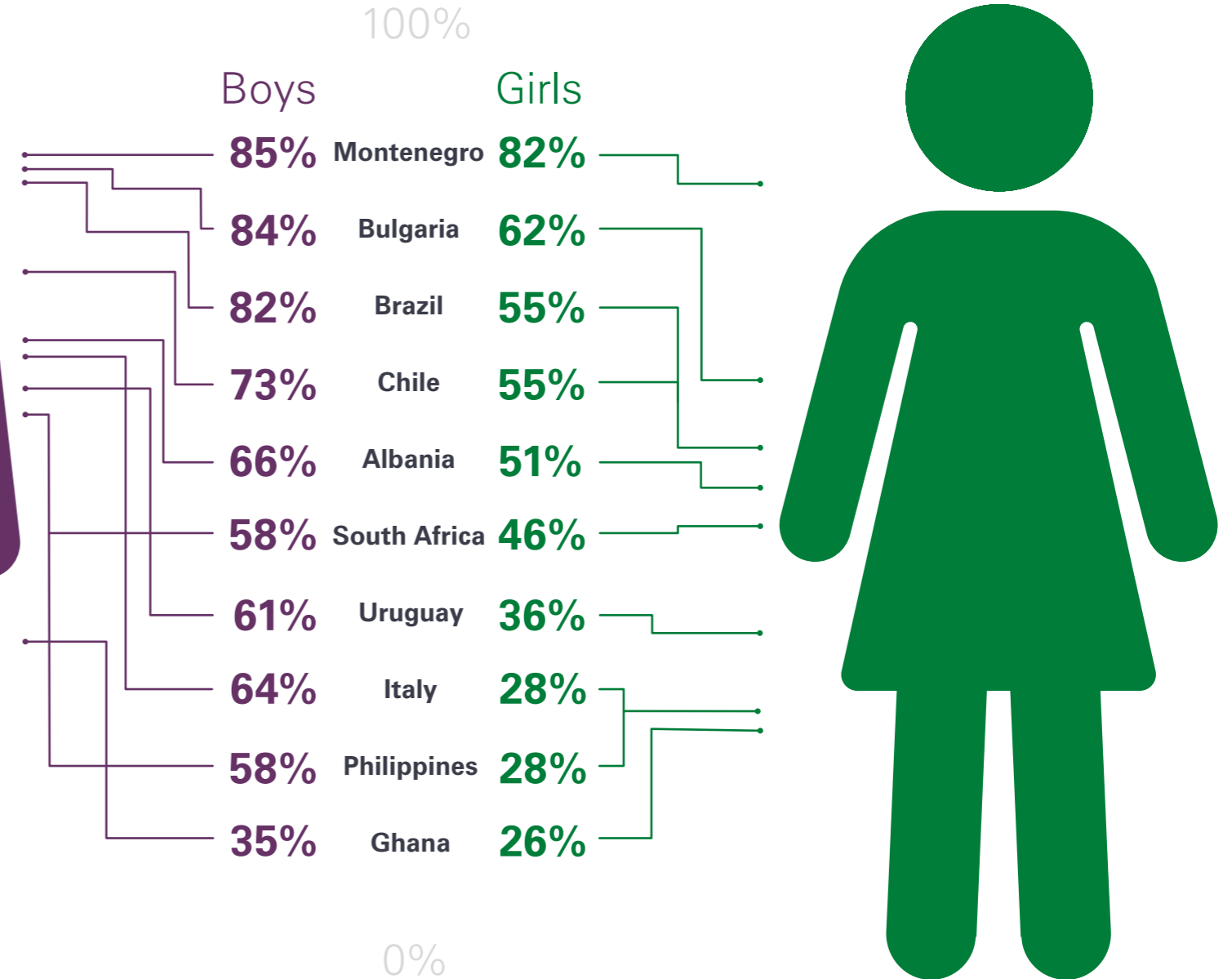
Base: Children aged 9–17 who use the internet.
Note: Argentina has missing data and is therefore not included in this figure.

Making new connections

The internet, with its instant messaging tools and social networks, has become a crucial meeting place where children can exercise their right to freedom of expression by connecting with friends and family and with other children who share their interests. In the 11 countries surveyed, many children can be considered 'active socializers', in that they take part in a range of social activities online each week – such as chatting with friends and family, using various messaging tools and networking with people who have similar interests. Some children also report that they find it easier to express their true selves online.

> **Online, I can show my true self, there are no rules … I have more than 5,000 friends online.**
> *Boy who identifies as gay, 15, the Philippines*

But more children connect and socialize online in some countries than others. Among the 11 countries, Albania and Brazil have more active

socializers than the other countries. It is difficult to say why this is the case. Perhaps children in some countries need more encouragement or support to socialize online, or maybe they face restrictions related to the cost of data or to social norms around how children should or should not spend their time.

> **In a party, they're sitting at a table. The 10 of them are each with their little devices.**
> *Parent of adolescents aged 15–17, Chile*

There are some differences between girls and boys: in Brazil and Chile, more girls interact socially online; in Albania and South Africa, more boys do so. Online social interactions also increase markedly with age, perhaps because some social media websites have a minimum age limit or maybe because children typically gain more freedom – online and offline – as they grow older *(see Figure 3)*.

Clearly, the internet opens up new dimensions for socializing, though

parents often complain that children's online interactions are at the expense of personal contact in the real world.

Such behaviour is not exclusive to young people. Some parents make phone calls or browse the internet during social gatherings – something that bothers many children.

With greater access to the internet, children can widen their horizons, gather information and extend their relationships. With more social interactions, whether online or in person, they build their experience and skills. Our research suggests that children who socialize more actively on the internet are better at managing their online privacy, which helps to keep them safe.

> **At the table, when we are eating, and Papa is using his telephone. That is the only time when we are all together, and it really annoys me.**
> *Girl, 14, Uruguay*

Figure 3. Children who do three or more different social activities online at least weekly, by age

Key
- 9–11 years
- 12–14 years
- 15–17 years
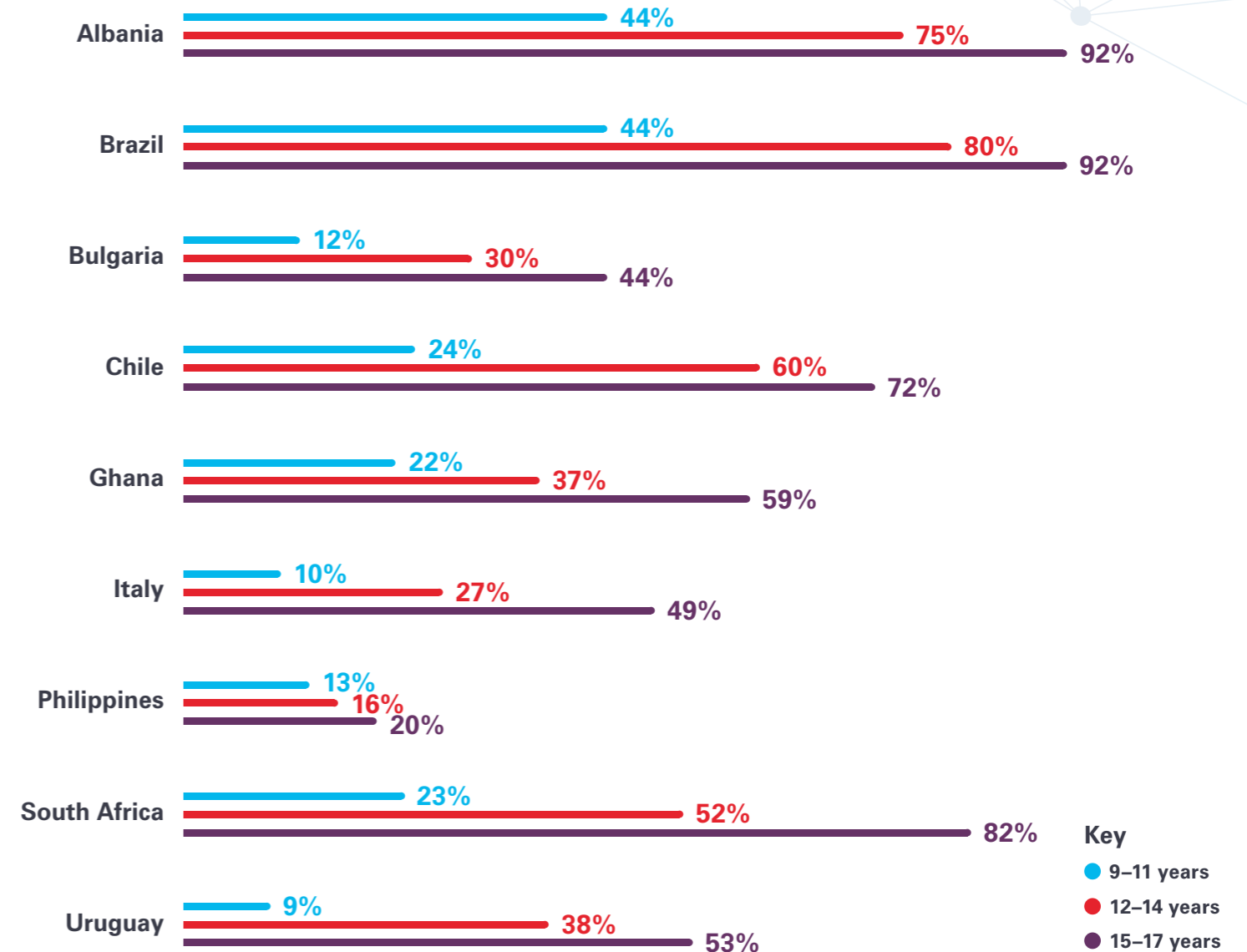
Base: Children aged 9–17 who use the internet.
Note: Argentina and Montenegro have missing data and have therefore been excluded from this figure.

The joy of creating

Some of the online content that children find and value has been produced by other children. Typically, in the 11 countries surveyed, 10 to 30 per cent of children create and upload their own video or music each week, or write a blog, story or create web pages on a weekly basis.

"I have a blog and regularly update it.
Girl, 15–17, the Philippines

In all 11 countries, older children are more likely to engage in the creative activities that we measured.

"You can share videos and games. You can share music. You can also share pictures, ideas, games.
Girl, 9–11, Ghana

The children uploading and sharing material online tend to be those with access to more digital devices, who engage in a wider range of online activities and who face fewer parental restrictions on their internet use.

10–30% of internet-using children engage in creative online activities on a weekly basis

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> **On the internet, we can search for all the things we need for school, and we cannot find in the books.**
> *Child, 9, Serbia*

An appetite for learning

Like adults, children are taking advantage of the internet to enjoy their right to information. Between one fifth and two fifths of children can be considered 'information-seekers', in that they carry out multiple forms of information searches online each week – to learn something new, to find out about work or study opportunities, to look for news, to source health information or to find events in their neighbourhood. The research shows some variation in information-seeking between girls and boys, but clear age differences in all 11 countries. Older children seem to have a greater appetite for information than younger children, who may lack sufficient interest, skills or opportunities in this area.

> **I watch the foreign news, because I like to see how a country is looking at a situation and how another country is looking at the same situation. Because there are always two sides. For example, America can see something differently and Russia may see something differently.**
> *Girl, 16, Serbia*

Many children of all ages use the internet for homework, or even to catch up after missing classes.

> **They asked us to look for names of ministers in Ghana, to search about countries and their currencies. You can get news about other countries.**
> *Girl, 12–14, Ghana*

Some children are more likely than others to use the internet to search for information. Our data show that the children who use the internet for a wide range of information-seeking activities tend be older, engage in a broader range of online activities generally and have parents with a supportive and enabling attitude towards their internet use. This suggests that as children get older and gain more online experience, and if they have the right kind of parental support, the internet can become a useful repository of information that is right at their fingertips.

With so much information available online, it is vital that children have the necessary skills to find the right content and check the truth of what they discover. More children report

having the ability to choose the best keywords for online searches in Bulgaria and Montenegro (over three quarters of children), compared with children in Ghana and, especially, the Philippines (where only one third or less have this skill). This could reflect children's more limited access to the internet in these two countries compared with the others – a barrier that may prevent children from developing the necessary information-seeking skills through experience.

> **Sometimes, as no one speaks our language in this school, I type something in Romanian into YouTube and hear our voice, and that's nice, I can understand all.**
> *Roma boy, 12, Serbia*

There are few differences between girls and boys in this regard, but children do get more expert at finding what they need online in their teenage years. Children who watch more video clips online seem to have better information-seeking skills, perhaps because they learn how to find what they need by searching for online content more frequently.

> **I failed maths, so I watched a couple of vids [videos] where they explained what I had to study.**
> *Boy, 15–17, Argentina*

The quality and quantity of information that children gather online will depend on their interest and motivation to seek it out. But what they find will also be affected by the extent of the available information, which will be greater for the most widely spoken languages. Still, minorities can also benefit from information-seeking opportunities – even if they are more limited in number.

Being adept at seeking information on the internet is one thing; being able to check whether information found online is true is quite another. Compared with the proportion of children who reported strong information-seeking skills, fewer children said they were good at critically evaluating the information they found.

> **If we don't go to school, you can talk to your friend and find out what you missed and stuff. So it's important to, like, have your friend's WhatsApp.**
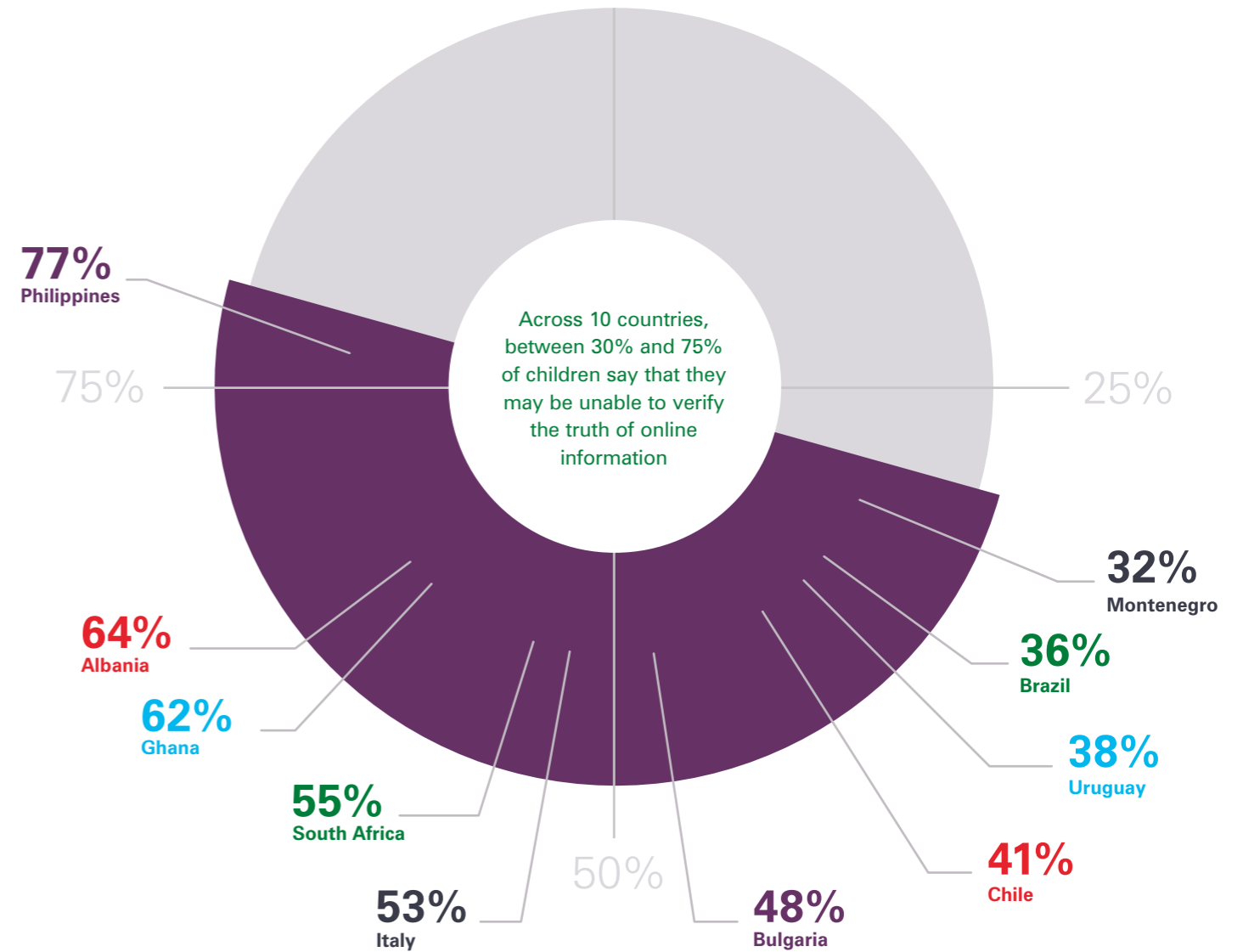> *Girl, 16–17, South Africa*

Across ten countries, between one third and three quarters of children said that they may be unable to verify the truth of online information *(see Figure 4)*. As may be expected, older children tend to have higher critical evaluation skills than younger children. In Italy, for example, only one fifth of children aged 9–11 years said that they find it easy to check that information they find online is true, compared with about three quarters of adolescents aged 15–17 years.

> **There is so much fake news online.**
> *Boy, 15, the Philippines*

Overall, children do not yet seem to be taking full advantage of the opportunities for finding and checking information online. To do so, younger children especially will need more support – whether from parents, schools or digital providers – to encourage and help them to advance their rights in the digital world.

Figure 4. Children who say they may be unable to verify the truth of online information

Across 10 countries, between 30% and 75% of children say that they may be unable to verify the truth of online information

77% Philippines
75%
25%
32% Montenegro
64% Albania
36% Brazil
62% Ghana
38% Uruguay
55% South Africa
41% Chile
53% Italy
50%
48% Bulgaria

Base: Children aged 9–17 who use the internet.
Note: Argentina has missing data and has therefore been excluded from this figure.

Becoming active citizens

Beyond seeking information and creating content, children can also engage in civic or political activity via the internet. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have civic rights, including the right to be heard, to express themselves and to meet others. But it is clear from our research that relatively few children are taking advantage of civic engagement opportunities online.

> **Politics… perhaps she does not look for it specifically. But my daughter, for instance, reads about it on Facebook.**
> *Parent of child aged 13–14, Argentina*

Older children are the most likely to engage politically online, and about a quarter of adolescents aged 15–17 years do so in Brazil and South Africa, but levels of civic engagement among children elsewhere are much lower.

Using the internet to express opinions on civic or political issues is perhaps the most mature form of online participation. Recalling the notion of entry-level activities as building blocks for other online activities, we suggest that children can be seen as climbing a 'ladder of online participation'. This ladder generally starts with enjoying video clips and online games and using the internet for schoolwork, moves on through social networking and the

creation of blogs and other content to post online, and culminates in becoming involved in civic or political matters and other forms of self-expression via the internet *(see Figure 5)*.

The precise nature of the ladder of participation and the online activities involved will likely vary from country to country and according to children's individual interests. Reflecting on our finding that many children do not climb far up the ladder – especially younger children, and those with fewer digital skills – it is worth policymakers and practitioners asking themselves just what it is that they hope children will do online and what support children may need to go further in the digital age.[1]

What support do children need to go further in the digital age?

1. Livingstone, Sonia, et al., 'Is there a ladder of children's online participation? Findings from three Global Kids Online countries', Innocenti Research Briefs 2019-02, United Nations Children's Fund, Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, 2019. Available at: <www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1019-ladder-of-childrens-online-participation-findings-from-three-gko-countries.html>, accessed 26 September 2019.

Figure 5. Ladder of online participation

Participating in campaigns
Talking about politics, Creating a blog, story or website
Looking for resources about neighbourhood
Looking for news
Talking to family or friends
Looking for health information
Posting photos or comments online
Playing online games
Learning by searching, Instant messaging
Schoolwork, Social media, Watching videos

Running risks and suffering harm

When online, children are exposed to new risks that could lead to harm. They may come across information on how to self-harm or commit suicide. They can also be confronted with hate speech or material of a violent or sexual nature. Our findings show that the children who engage in a wider range of online activities tend to experience more online risks – perhaps as a consequence of their heightened exposure or their more confident exploration of the internet *(see Figure 6)*.

It is important to keep in mind that risk does not always lead to harm. Children exposed to online risks may not suffer harm if they have the knowledge and resilience to cope with the experience.

❝There are ugly comments about other people.
*Girl, 13–14, South Africa*

To effectively protect children online without unduly limiting their opportunities, it is important to understand how a risk can translate into harm – and to know which children are most vulnerable to being harmed online.

Overall, about 20 per cent of children surveyed on the issue said they had seen, in the past year, websites or online discussions about people physically harming or hurting themselves, while about 15 per cent of children had seen content related to suicide. More children had been exposed to hate speech: the highest proportion was about 40 per cent of children in Albania; the lowest, at about 10 per cent, was in the Philippines and in Ghana, though children in these countries also have less internet access, which may reduce their exposure to online risks generally *(see Figure 7)*.

❝I am worried about
cyberbullying because it
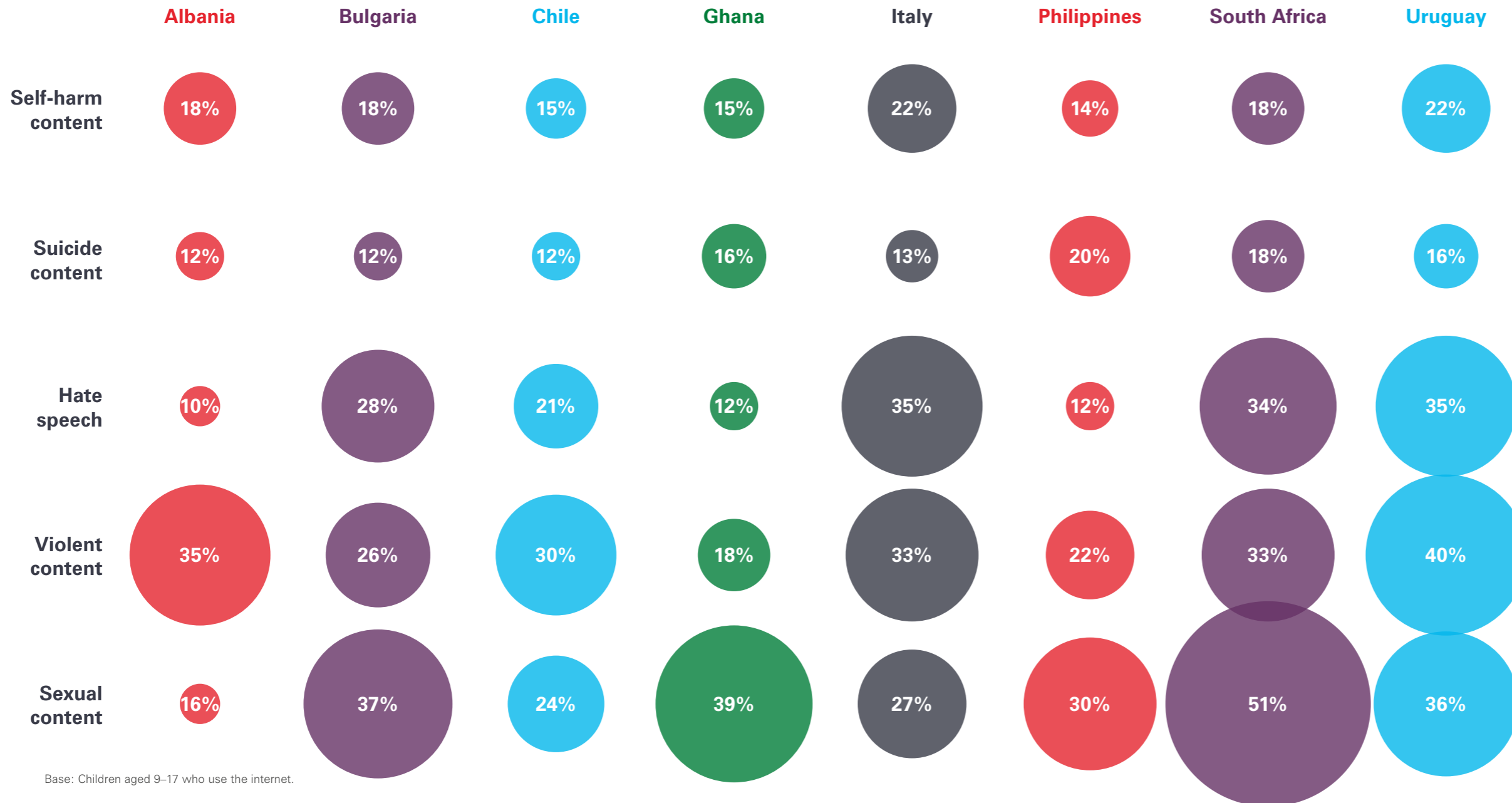can cause me a lot of
emotional damage.

Girl, 14, Uruguay

Figure 6. Relationship between engaging in online activities and experiencing online risks

Average number of weekly activities

% who experienced one or more online risks
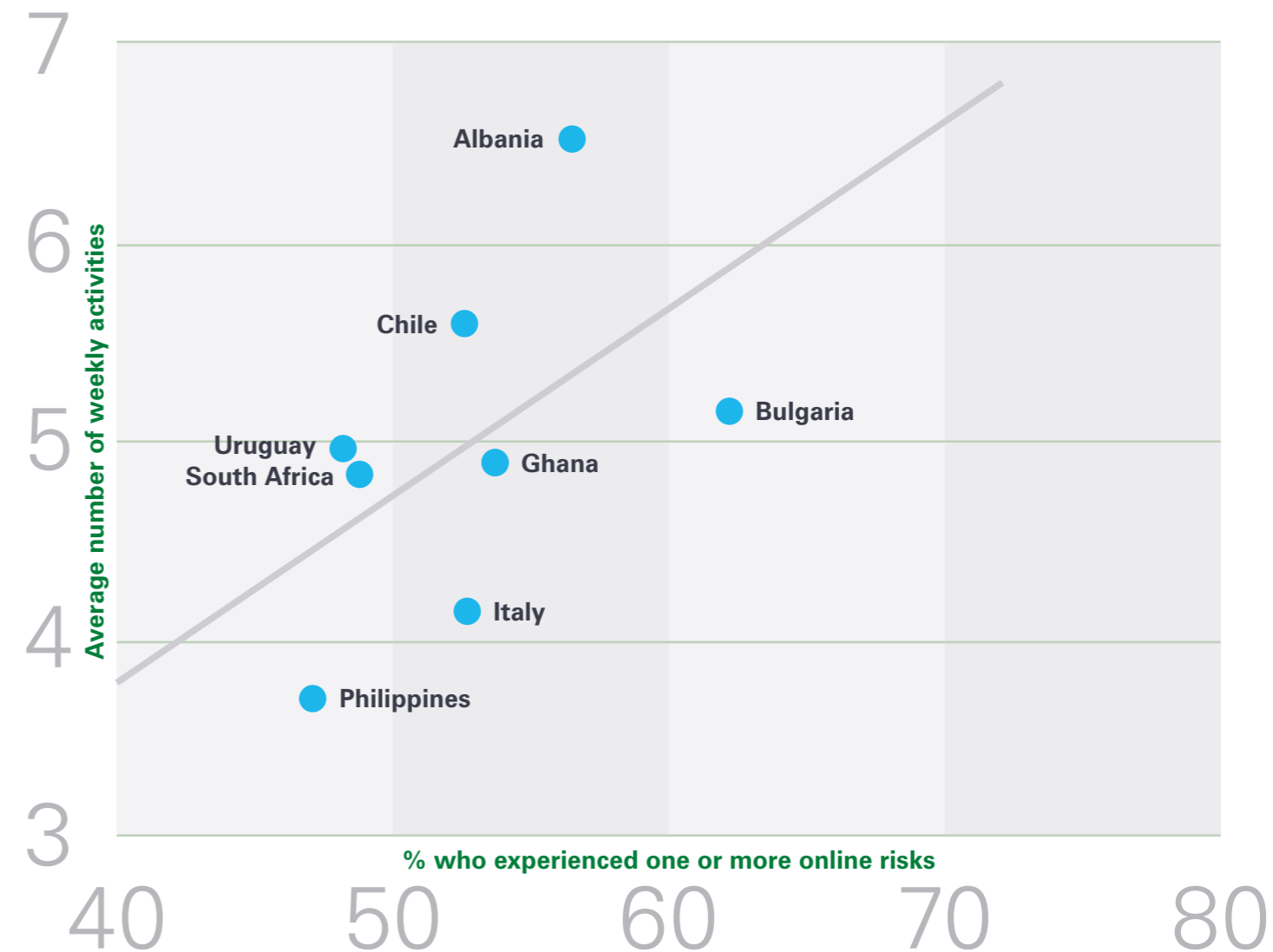
Base: Children aged 9–17 who use the internet.
Note: Argentina, Brazil and Montenegro have missing data and are therefore not included.
Refer to the comparative report for a full list of online risks and activities used in this analysis.

Figure 7. Percentage of children who have been exposed to various online risks

	Albania	Bulgaria	Chile	Ghana	Italy	Philippines	South Africa	Uruguay
Self-harm content	18%	18%	15%	15%	22%	14%	18%	22%
Suicide content	12%	12%	12%	16%	13%	20%	18%	16%
Hate speech	10%	28%	21%	12%	35%	12%	34%	35%
Violent content	35%	26%	30%	18%	33%	22%	33%	40%
Sexual content	16%	37%	24%	39%	27%	30%	51%	36%

Base: Children aged 9–17 who use the internet.

In Chile, almost half of adolescents aged 15–17 years report something happening online in the past year that had bothered or upset them. When asked to elaborate, they mentioned a wide range of issues, including internet scams, pornographic pop-up adverts, hurtful behaviour, unpleasant or scary news stories or pictures, discrimination and harassment. In Bulgaria, children are at risk from websites that promote rapid weight loss, which had been viewed by one quarter of survey respondents.

> **Everyone started teasing and playing jokes on a boy. He ended up leaving the group.**
> *Boy, 13–14, Argentina*

Between one quarter and one third of children surveyed on the issue had been confronted with violent content online or sexual content in any form of media. Sometimes children came across content of a sexual nature by accident; on other occasions, friends had recommended sexual content or they had been sent it by others, including strangers. Some children had asked for sexual images from others.

In several countries, many children have experienced a variety of online risks, but far fewer report feeling harmed as a result. The findings vary by country, and older children are somewhat more likely to experience harm than younger children, probably because they spend more time online and tend to be involved in a wider range of online activities.

> **I once experienced a stranger asking for 'my price' – meaning how much would it cost to perform a sexual activity.**
> *Boy, 16, the Philippines*

Children can be treated in hurtful ways both online and offline. Online, the damage can be done by hurtful or nasty messages, by being excluded from group activities, or by being threatened – experiences often termed 'cyberbullying'. But children can be similarly hurt in their day-to-day interactions offline. For those children who are treated in hurtful ways by others, roughly equal proportions experience this in person and online, though in Bulgaria and Italy far more of the hurtful behaviour happens offline.

> **I love horses, everyone knows that. I was searching for some pictures for my wallpaper and stumbled on a gruesome picture of a man cutting a horse.**
> *Girl, 10, Serbia*

Again, the results vary by country – only about 10 per cent of children in Italy have been treated in a hurtful or nasty way in the past year, but in Bulgaria the proportion is almost 30 per cent. In the Philippines, 15 per cent of children admitted to bullying others online.

> **I was really upset when the guy sent me pornographic pictures.**
> *Girl, 12–14, Ghana*

How do children respond to hurtful experiences online? Generally, they turn first to their friends or siblings. Then they may tell their parents. Very few children in any of the countries surveyed will seek support from their teachers. Although older children encounter more risks than younger children, they do not suffer from correspondingly greater harm – suggesting that with experience comes resilience.

It is worth noting that children do not always recognize 'online' and 'offline' as distinct spaces. For children, online experiences – whether good or bad – are intertwined with the rest of their lives.

> **I was on Instagram and I clicked on a comment and it was so funny, so I wanted to see what other people had to say and I clicked on a link and suddenly naked women popped up.**
> *Boy, 10, Serbia*

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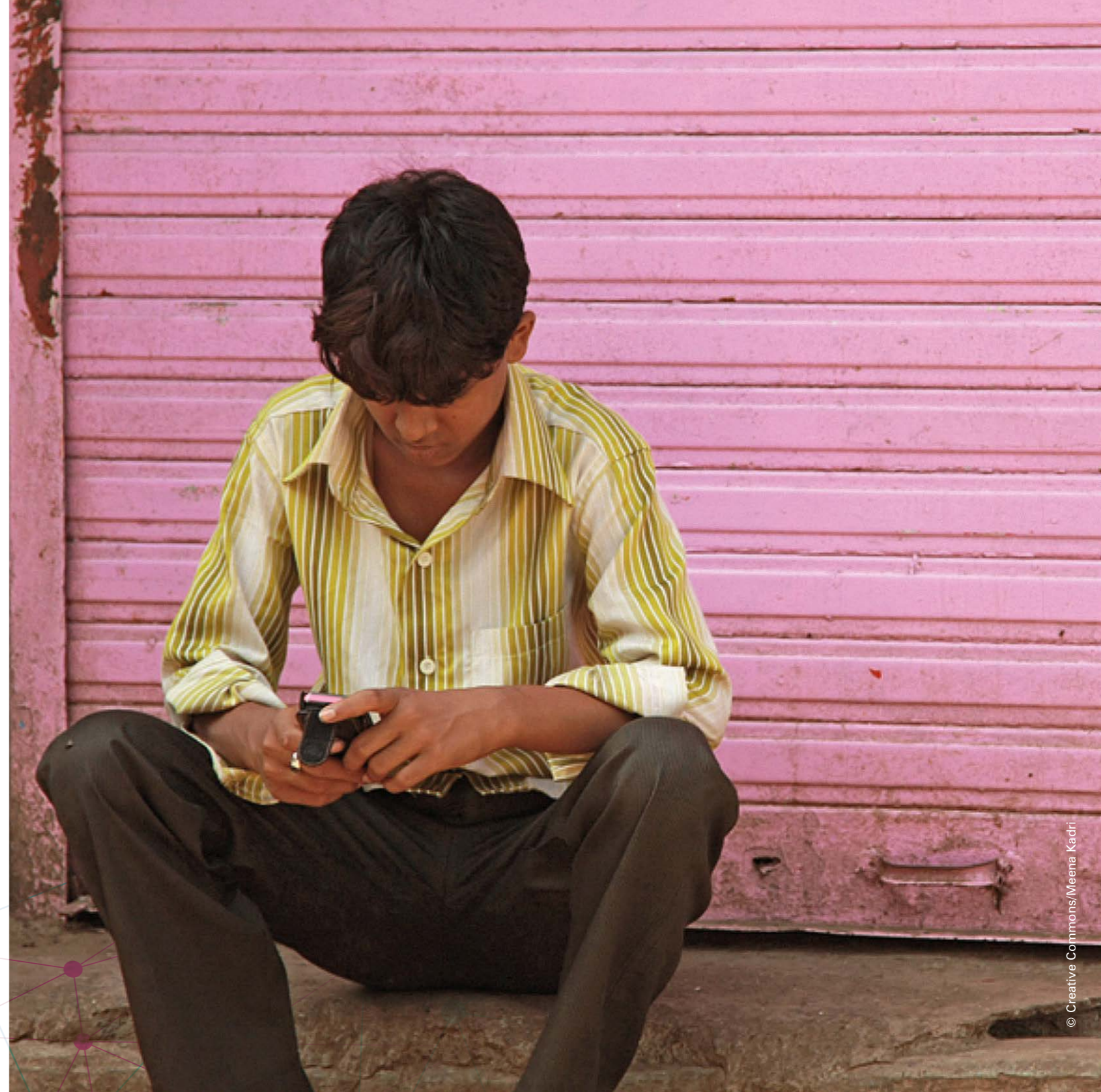
Privacy is a priority

Children can help to protect themselves from hurtful activities by carefully managing their digital identities and securing their online privacy. Children need to manage their digital identities and protect their personal data as far as possible, both to safeguard their privacy and avoid exploitation. Privacy is a right in itself according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and it is also important for autonomy and self-determination. It has consequences for children's rights to information, to freedom of expression and to participation.

Many children report strong privacy skills in managing their interpersonal relationships online – for example, saying that they are aware of the information they should and shouldn't share online, or that they know how to change their social media privacy settings or remove people from their contact lists. This suggests that early efforts to promote internet safety among children have been fairly successful. Many children have developed strategies to protect themselves online and are aware that they need to consider certain risks when using the internet.

More problematically, children online may expose their private information, photographs and communications to potential abuse and to inappropriate, unwanted contact. In Bulgaria, 4 out of 10 Facebook users aged 12–14 years keep their accounts public.

> **I have one Facebook account for my real friends and another for friends that I just meet online.**
> *Girl, 14, the Philippines*

Children may also make contact with people online who they subsequently meet in person, though this is still relatively rare. Fewer than 25% of children across all countries have met someone face to face who they had first got to know online. Such encounters are much more likely among older children.

Perhaps surprisingly, children mostly enjoy these face-to-face meetings and report feeling happy afterwards – suggesting that they are benefiting from growing their circle of friends in this way. In the small number of cases where children report being upset by these encounters, there is clearly cause for concern.

Home is where the Wi-Fi is

One way to ensure that online risks do not result in harm to children is to improve guidance on children's internet use for parents and others.

In principle, parents are in a strong position to support children's internet use since children primarily access the internet at home. In most of the 11 countries surveyed, more than 90 per cent of internet-using children access the internet from home at least once a week.

But faced with complex and fast-evolving technologies, many parents do not feel sufficiently confident or competent to supervise their seemingly tech-savvy children. Parents are also influenced by popular worries about 'screen-time', 'internet addiction' and 'stranger danger'. The temptation is therefore for parents to focus more on restricting their children's internet use – for instance, by limiting their time online or by forbidding the use of digital devices in bedrooms, during mealtimes or after bedtime – than on enabling or guiding them to participate more

productively online. In fact, in both Albania and Ghana, children said that the main reason why they cannot always access the internet when they want to is not down to problems of cost or connectivity, but because their parents stop them from doing so.

> **Adults have a lot of influence over younger people and have to give a good example for them to follow.**
> *Girl, 13, Uruguay*

In most countries, parents are most involved in younger children's internet use, helping them to navigate the digital space while at the same time imposing more restrictions on them than on older children. They tend to intervene less as their children grow older, although teenagers would surely still benefit from constructive parental guidance on online opportunities as well as risks.

One reason why parents hesitate to get involved in their children's internet use is that they themselves lack expertise. In Argentina, for example, 9 out of 10 adolescents say they know more about smartphones than their parents do. In Brazil, the majority of children report that their parents lack the capacity to help or guide them in using the internet and so are not seen as 'online role models'. In Albania, Bulgaria, Montenegro and South Africa, parents' digital skills are roughly equivalent to those of children aged 12–14 years, making it more difficult for parents to support their children's online behaviour. But even children who appear to be tech-savvy and streetwise may nevertheless benefit from support in the digital world – though they may be reluctant to share their life experiences with their parents. In Albania, parents who never use the internet reported digital skills equivalent to those of children aged 9–11 years, suggesting that parents too would benefit from more experience of using the internet.
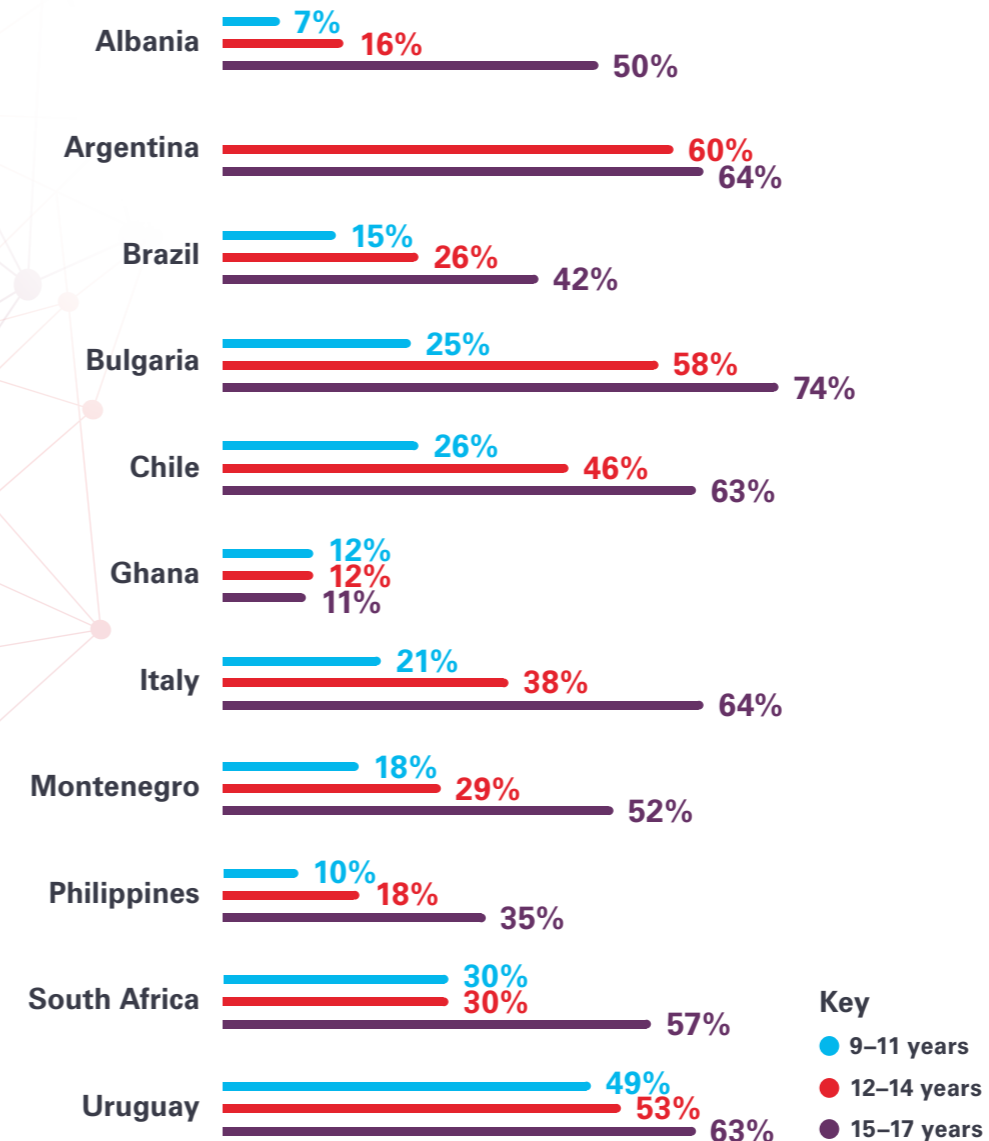
Connecting in the classroom

There should also be opportunities for constructive support by teachers since another important location for connecting to the internet is at school or college – especially for older children. In Bulgaria, for example, only one quarter of children aged 9–11 years go online at school compared with almost three quarters of children aged 15–17 years, and the age difference is even more apparent in Albania *(see Figure 8)*. This variation may result from secondary schools having better information and communication technology (ICT) facilities than primary schools.

Schools should offer opportunities for teachers to guide children in how to use the internet to search for information and how to critically evaluate the truthfulness of what they find – these

seem to be important skills for children in the digital world. Teacher support would particularly benefit younger children since they tend to enjoy less internet access or fewer online opportunities at school, even when they are already used to going online at home. This, however, requires that teachers themselves are supported to build the necessary skills to be the guides that children need – which could be a focus for future education policy and programmes.

Connectivity is a prerequisite for a digitized school, but connectivity alone cannot build children's digital skills; teachers need to be empowered, trained and properly supported to provide this guidance as part of their classroom practice.

Figure 8. Children who use the internet at school or college at least weekly, by age

Albania
- 7%
- 16%
- 50%

Argentina
- 60%
- 64%

Brazil
- 15%
- 26%
- 42%

Bulgaria
- 25%
- 58%
- 74%

Chile
- 26%
- 46%
- 63%

Ghana
- 12%
- 12%
- 11%

Italy
- 21%
- 38%
- 64%

Montenegro
- 18%
- 29%
- 52%

Philippines
- 10%
- 18%
- 35%

South Africa
- 30%
- 30%
- 57%

Uruguay
- 49%
- 53%
- 63%

Key
- ● 9–11 years
- ● 12–14 years
- ● 15–17 years

Base: Children aged 9–17 who use the internet, except in Argentina, where only internet users aged 13–17 years were surveyed.

> **[The internet is good for] finding pictures and information for school, it's even better than teachers.**
> *Child, 16, South Africa*

Downsides to restrictions

Given the risks to children, some parents and teachers – especially those who are less confident in using the internet themselves – may attempt to control children's time online or the activities they engage in. In most of the countries surveyed, about one third of parents restrict their children's activities at times, not allowing them to use a web or phone camera, for example, or download music or films or visit social networking websites. Parents are much more likely to place restrictions on younger children's internet use.

In Argentina, a group of parents said they try to limit their children's time online by taking away their mobile phones or turning off the Wi-Fi signal. Parents may prohibit access if they think they are ill-equipped to successfully manage their children's internet use.

> **[I] explained to my daughter that there are troubled persons on the internet and pointed out that someone's photo on the internet means nothing and that she should not accept strangers as friends.**
> *Parent, Montenegro*

Our findings suggest that, although parents are motivated by safety considerations, such efforts can be counterproductive, by hampering children's opportunities to build digital skills and online resilience. Importantly, when parents impose restrictions, children engage in fewer online activities overall and tend to have weaker digital skills. In Montenegro, children say that such restrictions can jeopardize some of the chief experiences in their lives.

> **Sometimes you're left with no choice but to take that phone. And then I also teach them what to do with the phones and what not to.**
> *Parent, South Africa*

The aim, therefore, should not be to restrict the quantity of screen-time or the activities children engage in, but rather to improve the quality of children's online experiences – by focusing on what children are viewing or doing online, and on helping them to become more critical and knowledgeable in their internet use. This is where parents can exert a lot of positive influence.

Beyond entertainment

Rather than limit or restrict their children's internet use, parents can encourage children to explore and learn from the internet or suggest ways to use the internet safely. More positive parental intervention of this nature can strengthen children's digital skills and capacities by leaving them reasonably free to explore the online environment – even if that means encountering risks or problems that they must learn to deal with, with parental support.

By taking a more positive and supportive stance, parents can help their children to develop resilience while also reducing conflict between parent and child. In most of the 11 countries surveyed, such enabling mediation helps children to engage in a wider range of online activities and slightly reduces their exposure to risk.

For younger children, playing games online is an appealing initial activity when first starting to use the internet. Our findings show that time spent having fun playing games or watching videos, or immersed in social media, will help to build children's digital capacities – enabling them to develop the interest and skills to progress further, both individually and together.

"The five of us will play at the same time, I will invite them... we play as an ally.
Boy, 9–11, the Philippines

Whether such activity leads to a narrow absorption in game playing alone or expands to also include other online activities may depend less on the individual child and more on her or his family, existing support networks and the prevailing digital culture. While playing games and watching videos are good entry-level activities, children should be encouraged and supported to engage in more than entertainment activities alone – and to develop both their technical and critical capacities. This is where parents can, yet again, play an important guiding role.

Children with less restrictive parents are more likely to engage in diverse activities online, not only playing games and watching videos, but also creative and information-seeking activities. In practice, in all of the countries surveyed and particularly in the high-income countries, parents tend to engage in both restrictive and supportive practices, especially with younger children. Children should be allowed to explore the internet more freely as they grow older, however, to enable them to take full advantage of the opportunities of the digital age.

Across the 11 countries, the proportion of parents supporting their children's use of the internet in this positive way ranges from less than one fifth to almost three quarters. Positive support is most common in two of the Latin American countries surveyed – Chile and Uruguay. Parents in Ghana, the Philippines and South Africa are much less likely to support their children's internet use in a positive way, perhaps because parents in these countries typically have less online experience themselves.

Policymakers should try to help both parents and children to develop their digital skills. But they face a dilemma. The findings of this study suggest that as children participate in more online activities, they improve their digital skills and gain more online benefits. At the same time, however, they are more exposed to risky – and potentially harmful – content, contact and conduct.

How we resolve this dilemma will have significant impacts on children's lives in the digital age. What we find, however, is that simply imposing restrictive measures may have the unintended consequence of making the internet a less valuable resource for children.

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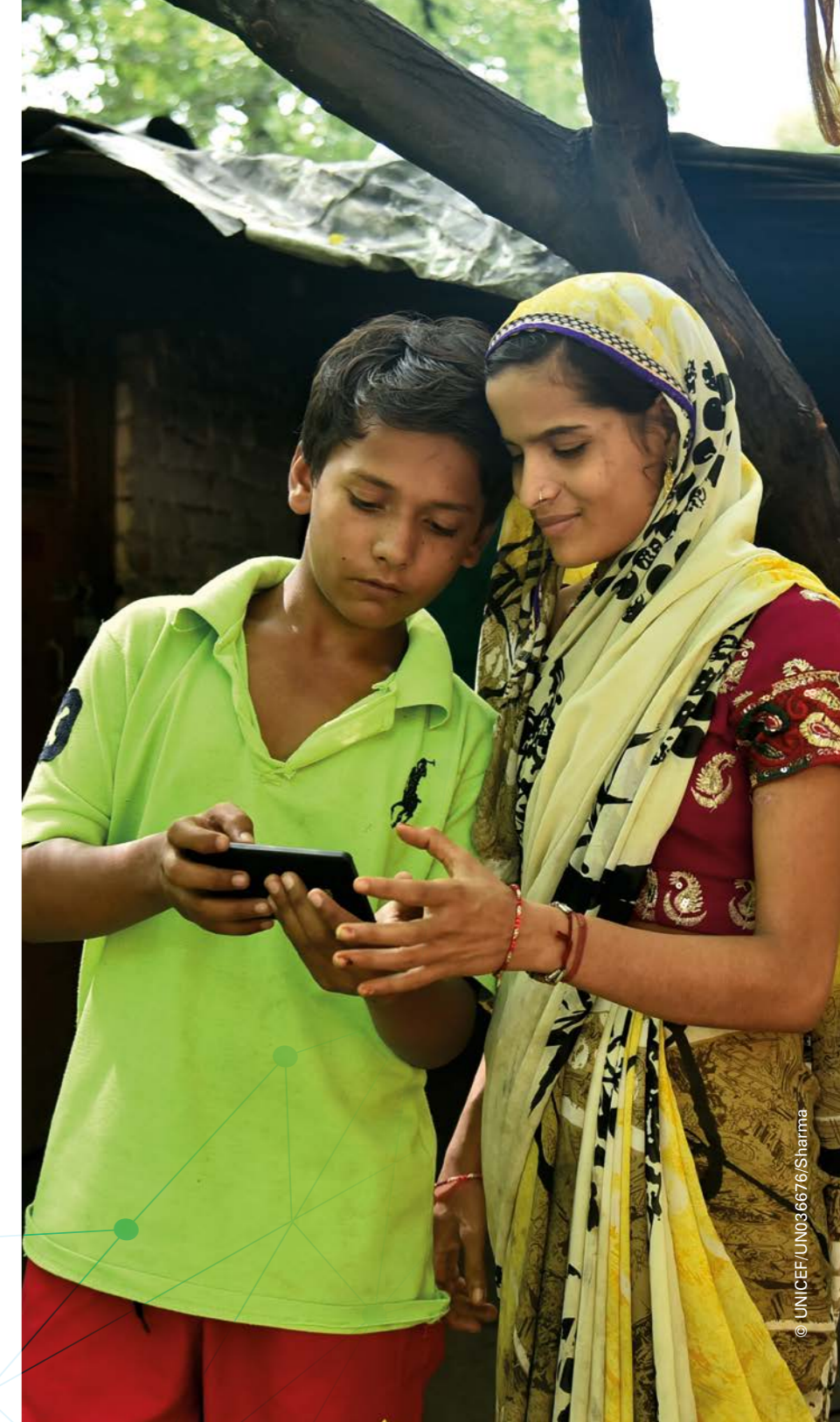
Learning by listening

Talking to children and their parents has revealed significant variation between countries at different stages in their digital development, but the exercise has also pinpointed certain conclusions concerning:

Access
Internet access is fundamental to the realization of children's rights – but children's access is very uneven, both within and between countries.

Horizons
With greater access, children can broaden their horizons by taking advantage of opportunities to gather information and grow their relationships.

Risks
Increasing access and horizons will also increase exposure to online risks.

Harm
Exposure to risks need not cause harm; much depends on parental guidance and other support.

Content
The aim should not be to restrict children's screen-time or forbid certain activities, but rather to improve their online experiences – by focusing on what children are viewing and doing, while helping them to become more critical and resilient internet users.

Skills
Time spent on entertainment activities, like playing games or watching videos, or immersed in social media, helps children to hone important digital skills.

Capacities
Children should be encouraged from an early age to extend their online activities beyond entertainment alone – to enable them to develop a range of technical and critical capacities.

Engagement
Children can then use these capacities to widen the scope of their online lives still further – by gathering and evaluating factual information, creating their own content, asserting their rights and engaging in civic or political action.

As the evidence shows, using restrictive measures to protect children from harm online can have drawbacks – such efforts may deny children opportunities to achieve important rights. Our discussions with children suggest that being upset by something online depends not on children's online activity per se, but on whether that activity results in their exposure to certain content or conduct. Instead of restricting children's time online, the aim should be to address problematic online content or encounters, either through legislation or by explaining to children what they mean.

Parents can and do succeed with a lot of this, but they have many other pressures on their time and may find that keeping up with the complexity and pace of technological innovation to support their children's internet use is a challenging extra burden.

As for schools, there is clearly considerable room for improvement, starting with increasing internet access for children of all ages. Schools can also teach digital skills and enhance children's capacity for critical evaluation. Digital literacy will be increasingly important for realizing children's right to education (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, articles 28–29) as well as for realizing their other rights – notably the rights to information, to freedom of expression, to privacy and to participation.

Worldwide, governments, industry and civil society are making huge investments in internet infrastructure and services that should boost household and individual access, which is a step in the right direction. Overall, however, this report's findings suggest that policymakers should take a balanced and integrated approach to children's online participation – one that reduces children's exposure to harm without limiting their chances to benefit from online opportunities. This is not the time to restrict children's internet access. Instead, we must encourage them as they take their first steps into the digital world and stand by to support them whenever they encounter adversity. To be able to do so, it is important to keep talking and listening to children, and to keep learning from their voices and experiences.

"The internet is like a book without the cover we can search for information, we can have fun when we have a bad day!

Boy, 13, Serbia

Acknowledgements

for every child, answers

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