

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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Topics

Topic A: Efforts to eradicate online child exploitation and abuse.

Topic B: Age restrictions for online platforms.

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Introduction to the committee

- The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) was established by the United Nations General Assembly on December 11, 1946, originally to provide emergency food and healthcare to children in countries devastated by World War II. Today, UNICEF is one of the most widely recognized humanitarian organizations in the world, operating in over 190 countries and territories with a mandate centered on promoting the survival, protection, and development of children.
- UNICEF's work is anchored in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, which affirms children's rights to protection from exploitation, access to education, and participation in society. UNICEF operates under the authority of the UN General Assembly and reports to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It is funded entirely by voluntary contributions from governments and private donors.

Responsibilities

- Advocating for the protection of children's rights at the national and international level.
- Providing technical assistance and policy guidance to governments on child welfare legislation and programming.
- Collecting and publishing data on the state of children's rights worldwide.
- Facilitating international cooperation and resource-sharing to address threats to child welfare.
- Convening member states and stakeholders to negotiate norms and standards related to child protection.
- UNICEF does not possess enforcement authority. It cannot compel member states to adopt specific legislation or punish those that fail to meet international child protection standards. Its influence depends on diplomatic engagement, the persuasive power of evidence, and the political will of member nations. Resolutions passed in

this committee take the form of recommendations; their implementation depends on national governments.

- As of April 2026, UNICEF continues to respond to a rapidly accelerating digital landscape. Reports from the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children indicate that reports of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online reached record highs in 2024, with over 36 million images and videos reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). AI-generated CSAM has emerged as a rapidly growing sub-category, outpacing legislative and enforcement responses.
- Simultaneously, debates over minimum age requirements for social media and online platform access have intensified. Australia passed landmark legislation in November 2024 setting the minimum age for social media use at 16, prompting heated international debate. The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) and the United States' ongoing legislative debates reflect deep divisions over how to implement age verification without compromising privacy or access to information.

Topic Overview

Topic A: Efforts to eradicate online child exploitation and abuse.

- Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) refers to a spectrum of harms against children facilitated by digital technologies, including the production and distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), online grooming, live-streaming of child sexual abuse, sextortion, and the use of encrypted platforms to organize exploitation networks. The global scale of the problem is staggering: technology platforms receive tens of millions of reports of suspected CSAM annually, with cases spanning every region of the world.
- The international community faces a complex set of interrelated challenges: coordinating law enforcement across jurisdictions with differing legal definitions and extradition frameworks; balancing child safety imperatives with privacy rights and end-to-end encryption debates; addressing the role of technology companies in detecting and removing harmful content; and ensuring that survivor support and rehabilitation systems are adequately resourced. This topic asks delegates to develop frameworks that are both technically feasible and politically achievable across diverse legal systems.
- CSEA is inherently transnational. Content is produced in one country, hosted on servers in another, consumed in a third, and financial transactions processed in a fourth. This requires international legal cooperation that current frameworks struggle to deliver effectively. The Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001) provides a baseline, but it is not universally ratified, and its provisions on CSAM are interpreted differently across signatory states.
- End-to-end encrypted platforms, while critical for privacy and free expression, present significant challenges for law enforcement seeking to detect CSAM. The debate over whether platform providers should be required to scan encrypted content for CSAM sometimes called "client-side scanning" is one of the most technically and politically contested issues in this space. Proposals such as the EU's "Chat Control" regulation have faced fierce opposition from privacy advocates and technologists.

- The proliferation of generative AI tools has enabled the creation of synthetic CSAM photorealistic imagery depicting child abuse that does not involve an actual child victim. While legal frameworks in many countries are still catching up, there is broad consensus within UNICEF and child protection organizations that AI-generated CSAM causes severe harm to child protection ecosystems and must be addressed with urgency.
- Technology companies vary enormously in their commitment to detecting and removing CSAM. Industry self-regulation through tools such as PhotoDNA (a hash-matching technology) and the NCMEC CyberTipline system has achieved significant results, but coverage is uneven, and smaller platforms often lack the resources or incentives to implement robust detection systems. Delegates must consider what mandatory obligations, if any, should be imposed on platforms.

Topic B: Age restrictions for online platforms.

- The question of minimum age requirements for access to social media and online platforms has moved from academic debate to urgent policy priority in recent years. Mounting evidence on the mental health impacts of social media on adolescents, particularly research by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and longitudinal studies from the UK and EU — has intensified calls for stronger protections. At the same time, critics argue that overly restrictive age limits may infringe on children's rights to information and expression, disproportionately affect marginalized youth, and are technically difficult to enforce without invasive age verification systems.
- Delegates must navigate a complex landscape: defining what constitutes an "online platform" subject to age restrictions; determining appropriate minimum age thresholds that vary across national contexts; evaluating available age verification technologies and their privacy implications; and establishing accountability mechanisms for platforms that fail to enforce restrictions. The challenge is to develop internationally coherent standards that genuinely protect children while respecting their agency and rights.
- A growing body of research links excessive social media use in adolescence to increased rates of anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, and body image issues, particularly among girls. UNICEF's own State of the World's Children 2021 report

highlighted digital technology as both an opportunity and a risk for children's mental health. The evidence base, however, remains contested, with some researchers arguing that association does not imply causation and that benefits of social media community, information access, political participation must also be weighed.

- National approaches to age restrictions vary widely. The United States' Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA, 1998) sets 13 as the minimum age for data collection from children, effectively making 13 the de facto social media minimum age, a threshold widely criticized as inadequate. Australia's Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 raises the bar to 16. The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) sets 16 as the default age of digital consent, with member states permitted to lower it to 13. This fragmentation creates significant compliance challenges for global platforms.
- Effective enforcement of age restrictions requires age verification, which in turn raises serious data protection and privacy concerns. Methods range from self-declaration (easily circumvented) to document-based verification (raises privacy risks) to AI-based age estimation (accuracy concerns) to digital identity systems (raises surveillance concerns). UNICEF and civil society organizations have emphasized that age verification systems must be privacy-preserving, data-minimizing, and accessible to avoid excluding children from legitimate online resources.
- Beyond age gates, advocates argue that platform design itself must change to protect young users. Algorithmic amplification, infinite scroll, notification systems, and engagement optimization tools are designed to maximize time-on-platform in ways that disproportionately harm younger users. Delegates should consider whether regulations should address not only who may access platforms, but how platforms are permitted to operate when young users are present.

Suggested Tools for Further Research, Documents of Significance, and Guiding Questions

Documents of Significance Topic A:

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989 Articles 19, 32, 34, and 36 on protection from exploitation.
- Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (OPSC), 2000 UN Treaty Series, A/RES/54/263.
- Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (Council of Europe Treaty Series No. 185), 2001 Article 9 on CSAM.
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 16.2) Target to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children, UN General Assembly Res. 70/1 (2015).
- WeProtect Global Alliance Model National Response, 2022 Framework for national action plans on CSEA.
- UNICEF Report: "Disrupting Harm" (2020) Cross-national evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Eastern and Southern Africa.
- INTERPOL Notices on Child Sexual Exploitation ongoing series of international law enforcement cooperation instruments.

Topic A guiding questions:

- How can the international community harmonize legal definitions of child sexual exploitation and abuse material (CSAM) to enable effective cross-border law enforcement cooperation?
- What obligations should technology companies bear in detecting, removing, and reporting CSAM, and how can compliance be enforced across jurisdictions with differing regulatory environments?
- How should the international community address the tension between child protection imperatives and the privacy rights associated with end-to-end encryption?
- What specific measures are needed to address AI-generated CSAM, and how should liability be allocated between developers, platforms, and users?

- How can UNICEF and member states better support the identification, recovery, and rehabilitation of child survivors of online exploitation?

Documents of Significance Topic B

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989 Articles 13, 16, and 17 on children's rights to information, privacy, and access to media.
- UNICEF, "Policy Guidance on AI for Children" (2021) framework for child-centred AI design principles including age-appropriate defaults.
- EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), 2016, Article 8 conditions applicable to a child's consent in relation to information society services.
- EU Digital Services Act (DSA), Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 Articles 28 and 35 on protection of minors and risk mitigation for platforms.
- US Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), 15 U.S.C. 6501 et seq., 1998 foundational framework on children's digital privacy.
- Australia: Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 sets minimum age of 16 for social media access.
- UK Children's Code (Age Appropriate Design Code), ICO, 2021 15 standards for services likely accessed by children.
- US Surgeon General's Advisory: "Social Media and Youth Mental Health," 2023 advisory on association between social media use and youth mental health harms.

Topic B guiding questions:

- What should constitute the appropriate minimum age for access to different categories of online platforms, and should this threshold be uniform globally or vary by national context?
- How can age verification systems be designed and implemented in a manner that is both effective and consistent with children's rights to privacy and information access?
- What responsibilities do online platforms bear in proactively designing their services to protect younger users, beyond simply enforcing age gates?

- How should the international community address the digital divide implications of age restriction policies, which may disproportionately affect children in low-income countries with different regulatory and technological contexts?
- What enforcement mechanisms and accountability frameworks should apply to platforms that fail to uphold agreed minimum age standards?

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