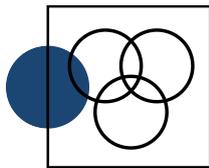


# Realising children's rights in the digital age: The role of digital skills

## *Principle 6: Participation*

Enable children's participation, expression and access to information.



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Innovating for child participation in a digital world means creating opportunities for children to form opinions, impart and receive diverse information, and freely join social and political activities. Although these are sometimes overlooked or sacrificed for safety reasons, children's civil rights and freedoms are vital for their participation in a digital society, no less than for adults.

The principle of participation draws together multiple rights:<sup>1</sup>

- Freedom of expression, including the right to free speech, opinions and political views: both for themselves and to engage with those of others, subject to the rights of others, national security and public order.
- Freedom of thought: the ability to form one's own opinion, decisions and choice of faith, and have this respected and supported, proportionate to the child's evolving capacities, and not be manipulated, nudged or punished.
- Freedom of association and peaceful assembly: the ability to participate freely and safely in social and political activities, including child-led activism, without surveillance or undue restrictions.
- Information access: meaning that children can both access and contribute to content of all kinds; this should be easy to find, in their native language, from a plurality of sources, and be beneficial in multiple ways; any restrictions should be transparent and in children's best interests.

**“I try learning general information and knowing about new things, so I follow channels that give new information and tell stories or narrate religious events.”  
(Syrian teenager, UK) (26)**

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<sup>1</sup> [UNCRC](#), Articles 7, 8, 13–15, 17.

**“A lot of people are making other people aware of problems in the world, for example, the things that happen in China. I used to know nothing, but then they make a video or post of it to explain what is happening there and I think it’s very important.” (teenager, Belgium) (13)**

The principle of participation encompasses children’s civil rights and freedoms. In relation to the digital environment, these include access to information and multiple forms of social, cultural, civic or political activities, both online, but also participating in non-digital activities, whether these are local, national or even transnational, insofar as these are facilitated by being able to access and use digital technologies. It is commonly supposed that gaining digital skills will enable children to participate more fully in a digital world.

**Online participation is not inevitably a positive experience** for children and young people, who report a wide range of concerns such as excessive social media use, increasing pressure to be constantly online and the fear of missing out, conflicts with peers such as misunderstandings, as well as more severe forms of online aggression such as cyberbullying or hate speech (13). Girls were particularly concerned about the potential reputational consequences of the content they shared online (13). Also concerning, children who encounter a negative online experience tend to report more mental health difficulties subsequently (23). Indeed, as examined further in relation to the principles of safety and wellbeing, online participation can expose children to online hate material, seeing explicit images or becoming the victim of cyberbullying, all of which were found to be associated with lower levels of wellbeing (23). The implication is that **gaining the skills to participate online is one thing, but then young people need to gain the skills to cope with the problems they find there**, or society needs to make the digital environment more supportive and less problematic, whether through regulation or other means.

More straightforwardly, the ySKILLS survey found a positive link between technical and operational skills and higher internet use, suggesting that **greater skills enable more online participation (18)**, although there is also evidence for the converse, namely that **greater internet use was linked to greater digital skills and knowledge, with the exception of programming (11)**, as discussed further in relation to the principle of development.

Beyond technical and operational skills, other dimensions of digital skills can also facilitate participation – for instance, secondary analysis of the EU Kids Online survey found that **information navigation and processing skills predict online information seeking and communication (19)**. Further, the ySKILLS survey found that **civic engagement was more common in children with higher content creation and production skills and greater digital knowledge (18)**. Relatedly, children reported that **social media is their main way of keeping up to date with current events, followed by television and online news sites**, even though social media is trusted the least as a source of reliable and credible information (24). This suggests that, in addition to trustworthy and reliable sources of information and news, tailored to their needs and competences, as is their right (UNCRC, Article 17; Howard et al., 2021), **information, news and critical literacies are also vital for children’s effective participation as young citizens growing up in a digitally mediated democracy**. Adult observers can be concerned that children gain their civic and news information from social media, yet ySKILLS research shows that in this regard, the children are not without the needed skills to navigate news on social media – participants estimated correctly the credibility of 12 news messages, rejecting false news as not credible, generally recognising genuine news (although some was regarded with excessive scepticism and so judged to be ‘fake’, and aware of the importance of gaining the skills to make such judgements) (24).

Overall, children reported being able to engage with important things and experience a sense of belongingness through their use of technology (15). They also attach importance to the different types of content they share online (e.g., pictures, video clips), and how this is perceived and received by others (13). However, **while digital skills enable participation, they are far from the only prerequisite for participation but rather, make their contribution, along with other factors**. For instance, sensation seeking, perceived informational digital skills, and both enabling and restrictive parental mediation (broadly indicative of parental engagement) were positively associated with social online activities (9). Intriguingly, **children use their skills socially, not only for individual benefit, but also to benefit others** – notably, socio-centric

network data collected by ySKILLS researchers found that students tend to ask for and seek advice from students with similar proficiency in digital skills; however, children and young people with high digital skill levels are often asked for advice – and frequently provide advice – to peers (6). Such findings point to the **benefits of implementing peer mentoring and peer learning structures and initiatives to capitalise on the personal and social network relevance of digital skills** (21).

We can conclude that, **to facilitate participation in a digital world, gaining multiple dimensions of digital skills is important**. Given that ySKILLS has also documented that self-reported technical and operational skills, as well as communication and interaction skills, are notably higher than either information navigation and processing skills or content creation and production skills, educational and policy initiatives are required (24). In short, **children’s communication and creative skills need effective, trustworthy and timely support for them to express themselves and to be heard in the digital world**. This matters not only to individuals but also to society: expert interviews conducted by ySKILLS reported that digital skills that support communication and collaboration are highly prioritised by labour market experts (12), presumably because they enable work-related forms of action and participation. These communication and collaboration skills are easily overlooked in our competitive society, yet they have wide value. Children and young people use a wide variety of digital tools with different audiences and for different purposes, with their choice of applications and online services used for communication purposes varying across countries, and in some cases also by age and gender (13). Such nuance is not a luxury: an interesting finding from the ySKILLS qualitative research is that young refugees are active and engaged communicators, often across different social media platforms, in ways enabled by their digital skills and motivated by their often-difficult circumstances and needs (3).

#### Additional data

EU Kids Online findings for 9 to 16-year-olds in 19 countries showed that:

- The use of digital devices and the internet are key enablers of children’s participation. More than half of the children reported using their smartphones or mobile phones ‘daily’ or ‘almost daily’, ‘several times a day’ or ‘all the time’ (average = 57%), although this percentage ranged between 39% in Slovakia and 71% in Norway, and was a little greater for girls than boys, and a lot greater for older than younger children. Greater use of smartphones is linked to more communication and entertainment activities.
- Using the internet daily to communicate with friends and families ranged between 14% (Germany) and 77% (Romania), while visiting a social networking site varies between 38% (Spain) and 73% (Serbia), and there were few gender differences. Using the internet to read or watch the news ranged between 9% (Germany) and 39% (Lithuania).
- Around one-third of children (37%) had contact online with someone they had not met face-to-face, thereby extending their circle of contacts. Fewer than half of these led to in-person contact (16% of children overall), and after almost all these experiences, children reported feeling positive or neutral, although 8% (of those who had a face-to-face meeting) reported being upset to some degree.
- Across the countries, most children aged 12–16 scored highly on operational and social skills. Information navigation and processing skills were found to be uneven across countries, and particularly low in Switzerland, Germany, Spain, France and Italy. Countries were also uneven for creative skills, although in most of them, fewer than half of the children said they could edit or make basic changes to online content.