



# Generation Connect Podcast

## Episode 7: Protecting Children and Youth Online

With Fanny Rotino, Lucha Sotomayor, Tayma Abdalhadi, and Athanase Bahizire

Hosted by Lujie Gu

## Transcript

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**Intro:** Hi Everyone! Welcome to the Generation Connect podcast co-designed with youth for youth. The ITU Generation Connect initiative aims to engage global youth alongside the leaders of today's digital change by empowering youth voices in the digital development dialogue. Tune in every month to listen to inspiring stories of youth all across the world on the power of technology for sustainable development. Get involved by joining our global community of future leaders shaping the world of tomorrow.

**Lujie Gu:** Hi everyone and welcome to the 6th episode of the Generation Connect Podcast, co-designed with youth and for youth.

I am Lujie Gu - I'm part of the Generation Connect Team from ITU, and I will be your host for today.

Children's presence online has never been more pronounced. However, as the explosion in digital technologies has created opportunities for children and the youth to communicate, connect, learn, and express themselves, several concerns arise about the potential dangers and harm for children on the Internet. Therefore, the topic of how to better empower children to fully benefit from online opportunities has become the focus of this episode.

To talk about this today, I am joined by four incredible guests. Through their personal experiences and professional knowledge, our guests will share with us how they view the potential risks children encounter on the Internet, how to seize new opportunities, and how the Child Online Protection team can help develop children's digital resilience and digital literacy.

Welcome everyone and thank you for joining me today to discuss this important topic. Today we are going to talk about child online protection. Your personal experiences and advice could be of great help and support to all the young people tuning in today to listen to our stories.

So, to start off, it would be nice if you could introduce yourselves in a few words for all our listeners.

**Fanny Rotino:** Yes, thank you so much. And it's a pleasure to be here with you today. My name is Fanny Rotino. I am the focal point at ITU on Child Online Protection. Focal point means that I

am in charge for all kinds of activities, programs, projects, and events related to child online protection at ITU.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you! Nice to meet you.

**Lucha Sotomayor:** It's great to be with you all. I am Lucha Sotomayor. I work for the office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence Against Children. I lead the work related to children's participation. That means how children are part of the solutions when it comes to preventing, addressing, and reporting violence against children, which they are, they are globally taking actions. And I also work on the issue of violence online. Therefore, I work a lot with ITU also on children's participation in the digital environment.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you for joining us.

**Tayma Abdalhadi:** Thank you so much, everyone. And it's a pleasure being here. My name is Tayma Abdalhadi. I'm a Generation Connect Youth Envoy, and I'm studying international relations and computer science here at Palestine. And I'm looking forward to all the amazing ideas that will flow from this.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you!

**Athanase Bahizire:** It's a great pleasure to be here. I am Athanase Bahizire. I'm a student in computer science and a Generation Connect Youth Envoy from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And I hope to learn more about it.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you so much and it's a great pleasure to meet all of you!

As we have witnessed, with the development of digital technology, broader and more readily available access to online services offer children with opportunities to access information, learn, communicate, and express themselves. In 2021, ITU's data revealed that globally, 71% of the world's youth are using the internet, compared with 57% of other age groups. However, it also poses significant challenges to children's safety. Sexual abuse, misinformation and privacy infringement are among other harms they face.

So, I would be very curious to hear about your personal experiences or observations of this issue.

To begin with, Athanase, could you please tell us more about your personal internet usage behaviors, including what you use the internet for, or do you feel safe while surfing the internet?

**Athanase Bahizire:** Yes, thank you. For my personal point, I do use the internet every day. And I do believe the internet is a common good. But we have to orient the usage of it for a safe usage. Basically, I'm not really safe on the internet. I do believe we can get to that point where still people are not embracing others on the internet. Basically, getting into many troubles on the internet, what is not really safe as a common good. So, we still have a way to go, but I do believe we can get there.

**Tayma Abdalhadi:** I think the answer to the first question is simply everything right? Right now, the internet is a part of pretty much every application at the service. If you'd like to make a note, you're going to do it on the internet. With pictures, Internet. Any messaging or calling service is also over the internet. And this lead in using the internet just causes it to be very vulnerable, right? So many risks are entitled to it, from privacy to security risks, to that of bleachers. And I think the most important problem here is that we don't really get it right. Even computer scientists

are not really following up with what goes under the hood of the internet, and we're still struggling to understand its implications. The problem is that not everyone feels unsafe using it, and not feeling safe means that maybe they're a little bit oblivious or ignorant to what could happen. I think that's more dangerous than not feeling safe because when you're feeling unsafe, then you can do something about it, right?

**Lujie Gu:** Yeah, thank you. And I agree with that. As a matter of fact, some children are experiencing embarrassing situations online, such as uncomfortable information or verbal abuse. So, I wonder, have you experienced that as well? And how was it for you?

**Tayma Abdalhadhi:** So fortunately, I'm a 2000 baby. So, when I was that young, we didn't have the internet. We had it pretty much when I was a teen or a little bit further, and we didn't have our lives on Facebook yet. But I see lots of kids now growing up on Facebook, literally being born, and then the Facebook is also born with their Facebook account. In the case of kids and I'm staying here about the children, I think they would face embarrassing moments without them realizing it was embarrassing, like, over mistakenly opening the camera or voice, or like the voice control when they're playing a game. And it's usually embarrassing for adults, right? For their parents. When they wake up one day and say they can see their pictures accidentally shared on Facebook.

And the other end, we see mostly teens having maybe a normal picture that turns into a meme, or accidentally some classmate taking a video of them that goes wider. And here, I think it's mostly dangerous because now when something violently completely takes it off. So, efforts now are being taken to minimize at least spreading awareness of not taking pictures or media of people without them knowing. And kids' kind of controlling how they share their pictures, their media, their information, having no restriction on the games they can play and the things the controls they can open and so. So, I think in my time, fortunately, no. But nowadays, unfortunately, it's happening a lot. And usually, kids don't know how to be a deal with it, and they keep it hidden until parents discover it later. And it's too big of a trouble to fix by then.

**Lujie Gu:** Definitely. Athanase, do you want to add something?

**Athanase Bahizire:** I didn't really go through it by myself, but I've got friends - sisters actually, who go through troubles, and it is really embarrassing. When people are sharing videos of others, we see you take from class or you've got people who are able to capture you on camera and get your photos around social media without your consent. All these issues, sometimes it's your friends or your relative people who are also doing so and it's truly embarrassing. And for kids, sometimes when something is done to you, you try to do the same. You try to replicate by doing the same, and then things are a bit more complicated. Because they try to be like replicating - so when someone shares his or her video and contents, they think 'I will share. I will put it on social media, or I'll make it public. So that she can pay, or he can pay for what has done to me.' And that's really making it again much more complicated. So, I do think awareness will be a great solution for this one. We've got to get information to people that this is not fair, and it is not right. And when this has been done to you, you don't really have to replicate. There is this and this way for you to handle it and keep calm, you know. And I hope that next time it will not happen again.

**Lujie Gu:** Yeah. I agree with that. And also, I wonder, for Fanny and Lucha, since you have a lot of contact with children during the events and programs, as you observed and concerned, what are the dangers or risks that children may face online today?

**Fanny Rotino:** Well. There is a number of risk. In academia and research, building on evidence, we categorize them in the so-called 4Cs. C, because each category starts with a letter C. So, we

do have, for instance, content risks that describe those where a child engages with or is exposed to potentially harmful content. So, this includes things like violent, gory graphic or racist, hateful, or extremist information and communication. It can also include sexual risks, like pornography, for instance, sexualization of culture or oppressive body image norms. There is risk linked to values, like mis- and disinformation, age-inappropriate marketing.

Then we have the contact risks that describe those where children experience or are targeted by potentially harmful adults contact. So, this describes things like harassment, stalking, unwanted or excessive surveillance, for instance. It can also describe sexual harassment, sexual grooming, extortion, or the generation and sharing of child sexual abuse material. And there was mentioned already the example of risk where children actually you know explore their identity through generating materials, visual, or testing self-generated materials. We call them intimate materials that then are misused often by trusted partners or people for other purposes. And this is what we also consider abuse and exploitation of children and linking also to what was said that often children are not aware of the misuse of this material. This is indeed something that we consider a high risk.

And then we have conduct risks which describe where a child is witnessed or participates or is a victim of potentially harmful peer conduct. So, when basically another young person is the perpetrator of harmful conduct. This describes things like bullying, hostile communication, trolling, exclusion, shaming. But it can also be sexual harassment among peers among young people, among children, or the non-consensual, sexual messaging.

And then we have contract risks. So contractual risks where a child is party to or is exploited by potentially harmful contract. So, this describes things like identity theft, fraud, scams, hacking, blackmail. It can also be trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, paid for child sexual abuse. And then we have physical and mental health issues. For instance, excessive screen use, isolation or anxiety, but also inequalities and discrimination, like exploitation of vulnerability, but also algorithmic bias and predictive analytics.

So, you see the list is very, very long. Now, what do we actually perceive as risks or as harm depends also very much on the person. Because something that you know a 5-year-old may see or may perceive as harm, for an older child may not necessarily be in harm, even though we consider it a risk.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you. I can see that it is really a long list. And it is also very concerning. So, I want to ask, what are the remaining challenges in terms of child online protection today?

**Lucha Sotomayor:** So before answering that question, I want to add something you know that to Fanny's response, because she did provide a great overview of those the lists related to the 4Cs. And I just want to tell you guys that until a couple of years ago, we only talked about the 3Cs- content, conduct and contact, and then the 4Cs that was 2017, the contract was added to the list, which just tells us that the number of risks are growing, and that it's so urgent to address these from the protection community.

So, the challenges, I think. You know a lot realize on education, educating children around these risks, but not only on which are these risks, but also on why they happen and what to do when they encounter risks. Right? And under why it happens, I think there's a lot of we do need to educate children on how the internet works, the rules of engagement of the online world, which are not exactly the same as the rules of engagement in the offline world. But sometimes, under the false assumption that children are digital natives, we forget to explain the differences. So, because children know how to use devices very well, right? Adults sometimes forget that they don't necessarily know what happens in the backend of the technology and why we relate to

people in the way that we do online. And in my experience, when telling children about the history of how the internet was born, how technologies work, how that makes people feel and react and behave themselves online, that actually helps a lot in the prevention side.

And then, again, the online world seems to be a bit confusing in this regard, because we use the same words as the offline world, but they don't always mean the same. My favorite example is cloud. And when you tell children that their information is in the cloud, you know you could look outside your window and ask which one. Where's my magical cloud with all the, with my information? When in fact, the cloud is the building full of computers that store data. So, we need to start creating this critical thinking with children. So, education should be beyond these risks.

Finally, I think that there's a challenge in understanding how children are being part of the solutions when it comes to protecting others online and offline. We always talk about how the online world is a place of risk. But it's also a place of opportunity and protection. Many rights can be fulfilled online like accessing information, expressing yourself, connecting to others. How do we enhance child protection from the online world? So, there's a big challenge also in understanding how children are doing this, how they're using digital platforms to create solutions and how themselves, they are being part of the solutions. We need to better include them when it comes to response and programs and policies.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you. And we can see that in today's online world, children do encounter certain dangers and risks. So, the next thing I'm curious is, how do children deal with these problems? And how do representatives from institution help children solve this problem? So first of all, let's turn to the youth envoys. So, what did you do to solve these embarrassing situations? And what could be improved to make you safer online?

**Athanase Bahizire:** First of all, when you are facing such situations where you are getting fooled, being embarrassed or someone else in your neighborhood is facing these situations, the great thing is to keep calm. Because sometimes those reactions generate much more problems when you react offensively. So, the first thing is not to react. You try to calm down. When it's about hackers getting into your system, you have to try to find an expert who can help you to delete those contents from the internet or stop those accounts, like when you report them, can stop the accounts and everything.

But the key thing is not to be oppressive, not to be like I have to react also, I have to post this too. I have to search for this one, or next time I have to make it for someone else. So, we have to first calm down and be like 'k, this is happening to me, I understand but let me first try to get it out of the internet. And after then, okay, now I've got it next time. I shouldn't behave like this. This content, I shouldn't send to this person because sometimes it's someone you trust who is making it to you, so you've got to know. Ok I don't have to really trust them much. Or for some content, I don't have to. Even if I do trust the person, I don't have to give this to the person. So, I think that's the matter.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you. And also, I want to ask Tayma, like, have you found any resources beneficial to learn more about online safety?

**Tayma Abdalhari:** Yeah, so I think the reality of kids or children, they use Tik Tok and Instagram for tips and resources on online safety, which can be a good thing, because now we're seeing lots of people who are actually experts on the matter moving and making the tips simplified and useful, but also can be a dangerous thing because anyone can create it and anyone can make it fun.

Personally, I think we need to go back to the old style of actually seeing a verified website or book

or something that you can actually rely on. And maybe try to. And this is also, it might also reflect to the experts that we have here. People like the ITU or big tech can also provide. And we've seen some examples when Facebook and Instagram start to pop those tips of like, be careful, there's an ongoing election or something like that. So, they're starting to actually provide tips within the platforms. So, people don't go, and so children especially don't go and look for them anywhere else.

I want to also maybe add on the previous questions on how to react. It's something from a personal experience, but I think the most important thing is to first document it. Right? So, the first thing that when you face maybe a threat or someone sends you a voice note or anything like that, just document, take a screenshot, forward it somewhere. So, when you want to take action, you can actually find evidence. And I think our experts here can maybe comment on that and provide further instructions on it, because it's very important to take action and to have some sort of punishment or some sort of law taken in regard to it.

And the second thing, always tell a grown person. I know we love our peers. I know we love our best friends and our friends, but usually we're in the same way of learning, and we need someone from, kind of from a higher perspective to look at the matter. And here I think it's important to go and to talk to parents as well. To say you need to be more talkative with your kids and children and just casually ask them about their experience online. Because without that, they might not be able to spot where things went wrong. And that might be a dangerous thing, but you can, because you kind of have that adult perspective.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you. And I believe it might be useful for the children or the parents who are listening to our podcast right now. And then I want to ask Lucha and Fanny, so what is institution and organization doing now to support child online protection? And what types of policies do you think can make the biggest difference in creating safe online spaces for children?

**Lucha Sotomayor:** At our office, at our mandate, we report twice a year, two countries, two member states of the UN. One of those times is the General Assembly, and then the other one is the Human Rights Council. And that means that we develop reports about a specific issue and also about what we have done in the last year to meet our goals of ending violence against children. And our report to the Human Rights Council, which is presented early in March, will focus on violence against children and the digital environment. We have been conducting research on collecting evidence on where we are at with the different risks, and what kind of measures are needed from industry, from governments, from CSOs, from regulators on how to address these risks.

So, the first thing that we're doing is providing the needed information for governments and other agencies to take forward actions. Also, in order for children to take action, they need to have the same information. There's sometimes an imbalance in the kind of information that adults have versus the kind of information that children handle in order to take forward change. So, we are creating a child-friendly version of our report in order to transmit to children the relevant data and the relevant evidence that they need to support their own actions.

Also we are collaborating with ITU and this initiative called COP, protection through online participation, which looks to better understand how children and young people are using the internet to access safety and protection because during COVID, during lockdown, helplines and services had to take much of their work online with an increase of 20% in helplines needing to activate online services. We also saw a trend on children and young people taking forward actions that are using the internet to create protection. For example, a Polish girl developed a fake cosmetics website to report violence, right? Depending on the kind of product that you're buying, the type of violence that you're reporting. A girl in India taught herself how to code to

create an app to bridge students who are reporting bullying and school counselors. So, children and young people are using the internet to build a safer system for their peers. We are trying to better understand how online support systems work when it comes to child protection and how children are using digital means to take forward protection solutions.

And finally, we are taking forward broader advocacy action when it comes to child protection. We are recommending governments and adult stakeholders mostly to create programs and policies that have children at the center and to integrate with different sections inside their governments to protect children.

**Fanny Rotino:** Thank you so much! Yes, about policies. But also, since there were so many important points also raised by Tayma and Athanase, I think it is so important to listen to children and young people, because what you provided is guidance on what to do. If something happens online, this is exactly what we would put in a training and you know who else and your best place to provide these tips, because we are not understanding the complexity of the usage and the behaviors online, the communities that exist on Tik Tok. And we are not even, you know, ready to see all the new evolving platforms that may already be used. So, this is what we do. We listen to children; we co-create with children and young people. And this goes with education, for parents and caretakers, for educators, because we see in many countries that parents and caretakers have no idea of what the platforms are, their children use or whatever they do online, really. And then they turned to the educators who then as well have no idea. So, there is actually a total gap between the knowledge of children or the usage of children and those who are in charge of protecting them and guiding them. So not only do we co-create with children, program solutions, educational tools for educators, carers, but also for children themselves.

So, at the moment we are kicking off a piece of work where we will co-create training for children, with children, developing a game for children, with children, and an APP for teenagers, with teenagers. But we also involve them not only on co-creation and consultation, but also on policy. Because this is where the frameworks will be built. And this is where some accountability needs to be built in to work with children and to consider what is relevant to them, fully aligned with what Lucha just shared. So, we will work with national task forces in several countries to influence policymaking around child online protection. And what does that include? So, the digital environment is everywhere, and it is so full of opportunities and risks, but it goes through all the different sectors. It goes through all the different ministerial authorities. So, we as ITU work with the ministries of ICTs in the countries whom we support to develop national strategies and child online protection, but that then give roles and responsibilities, capacities, and resources to individuals, stakeholders at the country level that have also a role to play in this. And this includes the ministries of education, ministries of family and social welfare. It includes the justice sector, law enforcement, and police. It includes all different sectors. So, child online protection is really an overarching theme that needs to be involved in all these different types of policies, regulatory frameworks and legal frameworks as well.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you. So, the final question is for Tayma and Athanase. So, after today's talk and discussion, is there anything else do you expect from international structures and institutions in terms of raising awareness about child protection online?

**Tayma Abdalhadi:** The most important thing and I think it's something that's crossed and will come up in almost every day product is to make account for other languages and other cultures, because that is kind of this product that was made to one size fits all. It's not really the case when we were talking about risks. There are so many platforms that the risks vary by culture and vary by language. Also, the kids and how they deal with their parents and their relationship also varies by country and by language. When instructions are given in English but not well interpreted, for

example, in Arabic, parents will not be able to deal with the risk or understand the full expand of what the APP is trying to say.

So, the only person that can deal with the pop-up message or whatever is the child, because they kind of, they are fast learners, they can bypass systems, they can enter the code, they can do it even better than parents. So, when parents aren't given understandable kind of proper materials for them to be educated on without them, seeming like they're outsiders or they're forcibly learning it. They will face struggle and we will continue to have the gap. When we kind of get stuck in that echo chamber where we listen to one viewpoint and one culture or one, some sort of type of way that kids use phones. Then we kind of miss all the other categories and our products go on and they are misused in 100,000 million ways, and then more risks emerge on the platform.

And one other thing is that it's very, very important to make restrictions or parental use fit parents who are non-technical backgrounds, because we see it requires an email, and so much, so much of the at least previous generation don't even know how to deal with emails. It requires several pin codes. It requires some sort of knowledge of how the screen ends and how it starts. It requires lots of time investment. And so, parents oftentimes don't prefer to use it. And so built-in functions. And this is for big tech needs to be parent-friendly and adult-friendly, and elderly-friendly even. And from, for the international organizations, awareness campaigns, and all the reports and all the inputs of those reports need to be represented in major categories and not just at least the common one.

**Lujie Gu:** Thank you, Tayma.

**Athanase Bahizire:** So, about awareness, I do believe that children should be informed as soon as they get in contact with these devices. As soon as they go online, they should be informed about 'this is right to do online and this is not right to do'. This is good to do when you are in the online spaces and this is not good to do. So as soon as the kids are in contact with these devices or with these services, they have to understand. And once they're using it, they are facing issues or challenges that are directing them which way to go or which other way to go, cause they're just going early in the matters. There is no awareness at the early stage. So, I think they should be informed. About also the institutions and big techs, I think they should take into consideration children when designing services, when designing applications.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to our podcast! You can find all the podcast episodes on the ITU Generation Connect website. And if you don't want to miss an episode, subscribe to us on Soundcloud, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts. Thanks again and see you next month for a brand-new episode of the Generation Connect Podcast.