



**KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE ONLINE  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC  
AND RECOVERY**

**GUIDANCE FOR MOBILE OPERATORS AND  
ONLINE CONTENT PROVIDERS**

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating impact across the world. Measures implemented to contain the coronavirus are vital to the health of the world's population, but some also pose potential increased risks to children.

A third of the global population is on COVID-19 lockdown, and school closures have impacted more than 1.5 billion children. Restricted movement, loss of income, social isolation, and overcrowding that can contribute to higher levels of stress and anxiety are increasing the likelihood that children experience and observe physical, psychological and sexual abuse at home – particularly those children already living in violent or dysfunctional family situations. And while online communities have become central to maintain many children's learning, support, and play, they are also increasing their exposure to cyberbullying, risky online behavior, and sexual exploitation.<sup>1</sup>



In Cambodia, with all public and private schools closed since March and physical distancing imposed, many children and young people are spending most, or all, of their time at home. Much of that time may be spent online, and often for longer periods than usual. Before the crisis began, Cambodia already had high internet usage: active social media users were estimated at 8.4 million persons from a total population of 16.36 million while the number of internet users had increased by 56 per cent between January 2018 and January 2019 and was estimated at 12.5 million. When restrictions were announced, usage was expected to increase significantly.

Facebook remains the platform of choice for Cambodians – with 7,810,000 Facebook users (April 2019), which accounts for 46.5% of its entire population. The majority of Facebook users in Cambodia are between 13 and 34 years old. Other social media platforms in order of influence are: YouTube (1,900K users); Instagram (720K users); TikTok (500K users); LinkedIn (330K users); Twitter (200K users); and Telegram, for which there is no data available but it is the messaging medium of choice for the Cambodian government employees. Instagram and TikTok are on the rise, appealing to a younger audience, while LinkedIn and Twitter attracts educated young professionals and the development sector.<sup>2</sup>

1. Leaders' statement: Violence against Children: A hidden crisis of Covid-19 pandemic, 8 April 2020.

2. <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-cambodia/2019/04/>; <http://geeksincambodia.com/cambodias-2019-social-media-digital-statistics/>



They may be sent sexual content or be asked to share pictures and videos of themselves with sexual content. Adults may build a relationship with them with the intention of sexually abusing them (so called 'grooming'). Chat rooms, including those marketed for children, can particularly pose risks to children since many are poorly regulated. Reporting to the US Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) in Phnom Penh from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) from January to November 2018 shows a 490% increase of Cambodian Child Sexual Abuse Materials reporting (from 25,332 in 2017 to 123,896 in the first 11 months of 2018).<sup>4</sup>

- **Cyberbullying:** Children may receive or be the subject of mean comments, messages and posts. They may be left out of groups online. This can increase stress and feelings of isolation. They may also engage in bullying online themselves.
- **Risk-taking online behaviour:** Physical distancing and lack of face to face interaction with friends and a related reduction in empathy may lead to them take risks or do things they might otherwise not do online - for example, through sexting (sending sexually explicit messages) and sharing nude and sexual photos and videos. Their image may then be shared by others without their consent. And they may be at risk of extortion, revenge porn, harassment and humiliation. Sending and receiving pornographic content can also risk criminal consequences. The generalized lack of awareness about privacy settings and safety rules as well as shame felt by children when receiving unsolicited pornographic materials, answering inappropriate video calls or being asked to share pictures, is likely to heighten risks.
- **Potentially harmful content:** This includes accessing, being sent, and sharing harmful content such as: incitement to suicide and self-harm; violent or xenophobic content; and marketing that is not appropriate for children. They may also be exposed to misinformation about COVID-19 that may make them more fearful, anxious and confused about their world.
- **Children's privacy may also be at greater risk:** While e-learning, and teaching remotely through applications like Zoom, or through Google, offer fantastic opportunities for children to maintain some level of formalized curriculum delivery and completion, many of the apps used for schooling pose privacy risks to users, and may result in their data being compromised, or in personal details and information that may not usually be shared online, becoming easily accessed and exploited. Video applications provide a view into home environments – whether bedrooms, living rooms, or anywhere in the house that sessions might occur – that would not otherwise be shared with others in class, or adults who might be part of the sessions. Unsafe and misleading links can also allow another user to gather information on the user, including the IP address of the computer.

These risks do not only come from strangers, but also people that children may already know online or offline.

Given the heightened risks of online harms, mobile operators can play a key role in prevention, monitoring and response for child online protection and they should do everything they can to keep children safe online. Companies should put into place measures to detect and stop harmful activity against children online, including grooming and the creation and distribution of child sexual abuse images and videos.

4. Cambodia National Council for Children, 'Initial Situational Analysis on Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE) in Cambodia', Cambodia, 2019.

1. **Educating children, parents and teachers about children's safety and their responsible use of ICTs:** Increase and facilitate access to learning platforms on child safety and online protection including by disseminating and sharing messages on child online safety and practical information on reporting channels for when children need help. Some of these important helplines and hotlines are:
  - ◇ **1288:** Police hotline number. (24/7)
  - ◇ **1280:** Child Helpline Cambodia (CHC). CHC operates free helpline services (24/7) by delivering professional phone counseling and educational information services and connecting children and young people to access essential services based on their needs and decisions.
  - ◇ **017 222 372 / 089 666 325 / 097 9111 918** or [www.facebook.com/tpocambodia](https://www.facebook.com/tpocambodia): NGO TPO's mental health and psychosocial support hotlines for children, parents and caregivers.
  - ◇ **092 311 511** or <https://aplecambodia.org/reportabuse/>: NGO APLE's Internet hotline reporting online child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse materials online. You can report anonymously. (24/7)
2. **Creating a safer and age-appropriate online environment:** Promotion of safe and creative space for children online, including facilitation and support of the aforementioned hotlines and online reporting of problems. This includes providing access to cost-free child helplines, age-appropriate services and safe e-education platforms and using their platforms to share child online safety advice and digital parenting.
3. **Developing standards processes to handle child abuse material:** Robust collaboration between private industry and law enforcement is key to ensure early detection of cyber cases and the effective blocking and removal of child sexual exploitation material online. The Anti-Cyber Crime Department and the Anti-Trafficking and Juvenile Protection Unit under the Ministry of Interior are law enforcement agencies with a mandate to protect children from online abuse and exploitation in cooperation with regional and international bodies such as the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Clear protocols and processes to support law enforcement will enhance capacities of law enforcement agencies to investigate and suppress online abuse and exploitation of children.
4. **Integrating child rights considerations into all appropriate corporate policies and management process:** Development and implementation of a child online protection policy within organizations. More information on how to develop these policies and processes can be found on Children's Rights and Business Website <https://www.unicef.org/csr/ict.html>
5. **Promoting digital technology as a mode for increasing civic engagement** – Companies can support child and youth participation through creative and positive engagement on important topics for protection, including promotion of digital literacy to children and their parents. Companies can help to promote sharing of ideas and talents among children on how they manage their time during physical distancing, on various ways to cope with stress, on how to build better relationship in the families, and on how children can take action to support society during the COVID-19 outbreak, including through sharing information to help themselves and other children to deal with online threats they may encounter or what to do if they become aware of any abuse of their friends and family members. There is a number of platforms and initiatives promoting engagement of adolescents and youth in Cambodia, such as Voice of Youth (<https://voicesofyouthcambodia.com/>), Child Rights Coalition Cambodia (<https://crc-cambodia.org/>) and the Children Advocate Network (<https://www.facebook.com/childadvocatenetwork/>).

**Some useful resources:**

- COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online, April 2020:  
<https://www.unicef.org/documents/covid-19-and-implications-protecting-children-online>
- Guideline for Mobile Industry on child online protection (2015 edition):  
[https://www.unicef.org/csr/css/Mobile\\_Operators\\_COP\\_Guidelines\\_English1.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/csr/css/Mobile_Operators_COP_Guidelines_English1.pdf)
- [Tips for Parents and Caregivers – Keeping Children Safe Online During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Tips for Young People – Staying Safe Online During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- ECPAT Resources on Sexual Exploitation of Children for COVID-19 Situation:  
[https://ecpat.exposure.co/covid19?utm\\_source=Website&utm\\_campaign=Hero](https://ecpat.exposure.co/covid19?utm_source=Website&utm_campaign=Hero)
- NGO APLE's online resource center: <https://www.internethotlinecambodia.org/>



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