

Childhood in Transition: Safeguarding Children in a Changing Socio-Digital World

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Abstract: Childhood is rapidly transforming within interconnected physical and digital environments, creating new opportunities alongside complex risks to children's safety and wellbeing. While digital technologies enhance learning, communication, and participation, they also expose children to cyberbullying, online exploitation, misinformation, privacy breaches, and adverse mental health outcomes. Simultaneously, changing family structures, urbanisation, and social isolation increase children's vulnerability. This article argues that safeguarding must extend beyond physical protection to include emotional, social, and digital wellbeing. It highlights the pivotal role of social work in promoting child rights, digital literacy, family engagement, school-based interventions, and multidisciplinary collaboration to build safer, inclusive, and resilient socio-digital environments for children.

Keywords: Childhood, Transition, Safeguarding, Socio-Digital World

Childhood is constantly evolving with changes in families, societies, technologies, and cultural values. In the twenty-first century, children grow up in both physical and digital environments, where smartphones, social media, gaming platforms, and online content shape their daily lives. While digital technologies provide valuable opportunities for education, creativity, social connection, and access to information, they also expose children to significant risks. These include cyberbullying, online grooming, exploitation, misinformation, violent content, privacy breaches, body-image pressures, and excessive screen use. Such challenges extend beyond traditional child protection concerns and require safeguarding approaches that address children's physical, emotional, and digital wellbeing. A renewed social work perspective integrating child rights, mental health, family support, digital literacy, and community responsibility is therefore essential. As UNICEF (2024) emphasizes, online risks can significantly undermine children's safety, healthy development, and overall wellbeing, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive and coordinated protective strategies.

The psychological impact of digital risks is substantial. Exposure to cyberbullying, harassment, misinformation, phishing, and appearance pressures is associated with depression, anxiety, and poor self-rated health among adolescents (Lathi et al., 2024). Safeguarding must therefore address emotional, cognitive, and relational wellbeing alongside physical safety. Beyond the digital world, migration, urbanisation, family stress, and social isolation further increase children's vulnerability, particularly among those facing poverty, disability, trauma, or discrimination. Social work must respond by strengthening policies, practice, and multidisciplinary coordination to address both online and offline risks.

Preventive social work should promote digital literacy among children and caregivers through education on online safety, privacy, consent, healthy screen use, and responsible digital behaviour. Schools must strengthen cyberbullying prevention and digital citizenship initiatives, as online bullying affects one in three young people and contributes to school avoidance (UNICEF, 2019). Safeguarding should adopt a rights-based approach that emphasises guidance, safer digital platforms, accountability, and digital literacy rather than blanket restrictions on technology (Livingstone et al., 2023).

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In India, the challenge is especially significant because of rapid smartphone penetration, a young population, educational digitisation, and uneven digital literacy. Children may access devices before they develop judgment regarding privacy, consent, or manipulation. Simultaneously, many parents are first-generation digital users. This creates an urgent role for community-based social work through schools, Anganwadi-linked systems, NGOs, urban local bodies, and youth clubs. Interventions must be multilingual, culturally sensitive, and inclusive of rural as well as urban realities.

Safeguarding children in a changing socio-digital world ultimately means preserving the essence of childhood: safety, play, attachment, curiosity, dignity, and hope. Technology should expand these possibilities, not erode them. The profession of social work is uniquely positioned to humanise the digital transition by centring empathy, justice, prevention, and resilience. Childhood is in transition; our systems of care must transition too.

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