



# Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to the following advisors for their guidance and input through discussions.

1. **Prof. Beulah Shekhar** - Chair Professor of Criminology at National Forensic Sciences University, Delhi.
2. **Dr. Eesha Sharma** - Assistant Professor in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, NIMHANS.
3. **Ms. Linda Burch** - CEO, Alice Waters Institute (Ex Co-founder, Chief Strategy and Development Officer, Common Sense Media).
4. **Mr. Pulkit Jain** - Co-founder, Vedantu Innovations Pvt Ltd.
5. **Mr. Sameer Desai** - Video games industry specialist (Ex Country Head India, THQ Nordic).

The authors would also like to thank key teams for their valuable contributions to this report. They thank:

1. Omidyar Network India team
2. Space2Grow's Research and Analysis Team
3. How India Lives team
4. Kabuki Writers' Team

We also share our special thanks to the children, parents, educators, schools, law enforcement officers, media professionals, mental health professionals, academicians, industry representatives from gaming and edtech, representatives from regulatory bodies and policymakers, judges and lawyers who participated in our interviews and discussions for their valuable contributions towards the enrichment of the report.

We would also like to thank every single person within the ecosystem who is striving to empower tomorrow's digital citizens. One Safe Click At a Time!

If you would like to extend the conversation on digital safety and discuss this report, please contact the authors:

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# Before We Begin This Journey

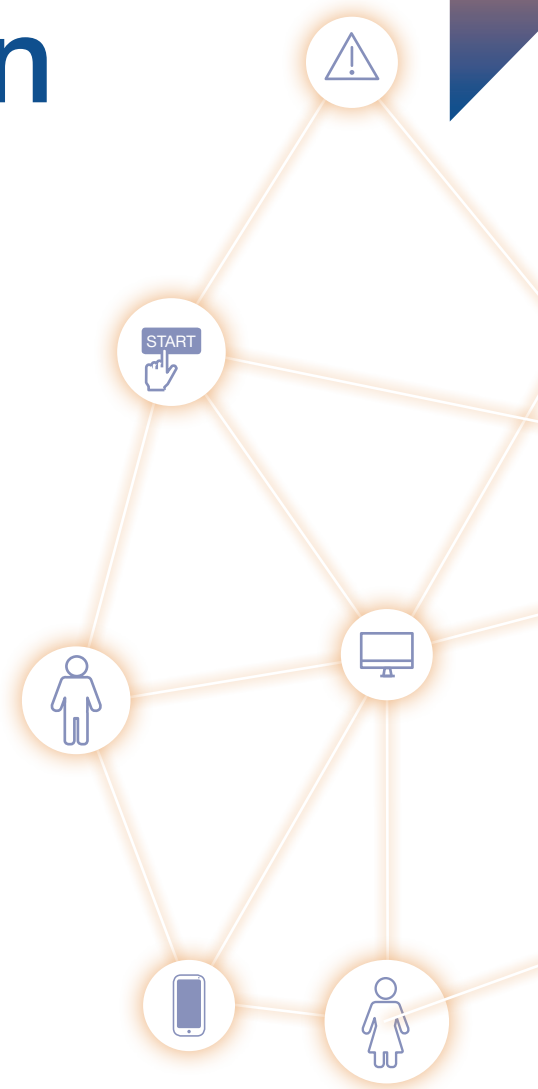
*“A friend of mine hatched up a friendship with a stranger on the internet. They would talk regularly. The person would express their desire to meet her very often. He was keen. A plan was almost made when she found out that the person had been lying about his identity. He, in fact, was a much older person. She blocked him immediately, but he stalked her by calling her on her mobile.”*

– 15 year old girl, Delhi

In embarking on this research endeavour, we ventured into the world of teens and preteens, seeking to understand their experiences in the digital realm. The narrative shared above is just one of the myriad of stories that unfolded during our interviews — a poignant reminder of the internet’s dual nature. While on one hand, it represents joy and opportunity, on the other hand, it presents significant risks and harm.

Often, in the pursuit of rigorous analysis, researchers tend to rely on academic terminology such as ‘sample size’, ‘target group’, and ‘case study’. While these terms serve a crucial purpose, they can inadvertently create a certain emotional detachment from the very subjects we seek to understand. In doing so, the starkness of statistics and data might overshadow the very real impact they hold for the lives of children.

It is imperative, therefore, to consistently remember that behind every statistic is a child. These numbers encapsulate the intricacies of their digital journeys, where risks encountered in the online spaces can profoundly shape their existence. As we dived into our findings, we made it our mission to maintain a grounded and compassionate approach to our research. We believe every child’s experience is a narrative worth acknowledging, even if it amounts to a single data point. The suffering of one child is, and always will be, one too many.



# Executive Summary

*“Every child has the right to feel safe no matter where they are. We must not ignore the growing risks they face online: violence, bullying, harassment & exploitation.”*

– Antonio Guterres, Secretary General, UN

In an era where the digital world seamlessly intertwines with the lives of ‘Digital Natives’ — children growing up in an era of ubiquitous internet usage — new opportunities as well as risks emerge. As online threats, including those of violence and exploitation loom, it becomes imperative to understand children’s online experiences and navigate the evolving digital landscape they inhabit. This is the idea with which the research project ‘Digital Safety of Children: Creating Safe Online Spaces’ was initiated.

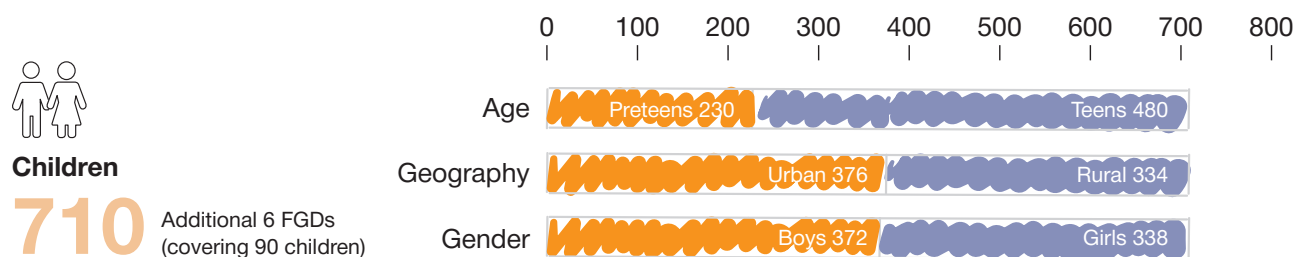
This study, by Space2Grow, supported by Omidyar Network India, aims to provide a holistic understanding of children’s online behaviour patterns. It incorporates the perspectives of other key stakeholders (parents, teachers, law enforcement, technology companies, academicians, judiciary, lawyers, and government officials) who shape the digital safety ecosystem of children. It also provides insights on actions that can be taken to promote safer internet usage by children.

## Research Methodology

The methodology was designed to encompass diverse perspectives and ensure an inclusive evaluation of the online safety landscape for children. It incorporated both qualitative and quantitative research methods, involving focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews with over 700 children and over 100 parents, to gather valuable insights. This allowed for a deeper exploration of the experiences and viewpoints of the participants (Figure ES1).

Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted with other critical stakeholders, including teachers, law enforcement/government officials and judiciary, as well as industry experts, mental health professionals, academicians, and journalists. Additionally, existing knowledge and findings on the digital harms and safety of children at national and international levels were reviewed to complement the findings from the primary data.

Figure ES1: Research methodology



Children

**710** Additional 6 FGDs (covering 90 children)



Parents

**116** Additional 4 FGDs (covering 40 parents)



Teachers

**72** (from 16 schools)



Other stakeholders

**50+**



Locations

● Urban: Delhi, Bengaluru  
● Rural: Raisen, Tumkur

Source: Space2Grow research

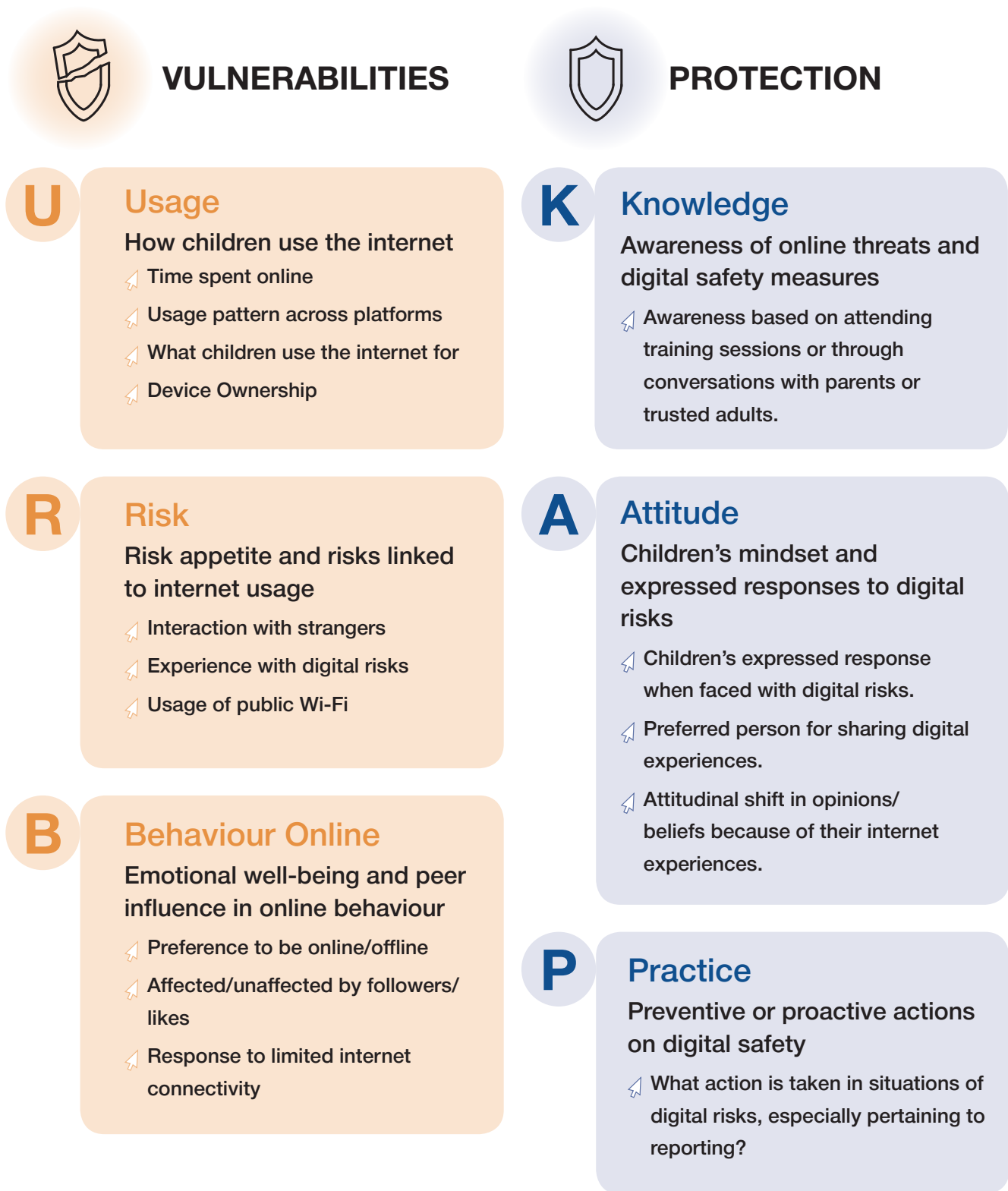
## URBKAP Digital Safety Analysis Framework

As part of this study, Space2Grow has developed the ‘URBKAP’ framework. The framework offers a structured approach to assess the digital safety of children by employing a vulnerability versus protection matrix.

The vulnerability factors include children’s internet usage, risks, and behaviour, whereas the protection factors include their preparedness and ability to address vulnerabilities in digital spaces, through knowledge, attitude, and practice. Additionally, it takes into account the response from parents and teachers as first responders and the perceptions of other key stakeholders — including the judiciary, police, lawyers, mental health professionals, non-profits, academia, media and government bodies.

The URBKAP Framework enables a holistic evaluation of the current state of child digital safety. It aims to empower policymakers and stakeholders to identify risks, address knowledge gaps, and make informed decisions regarding policies and interventions aimed at safeguarding children in the digital landscape (Figure ES2).

Figure ES2: URBKAP Framework



# Key Findings

## 01 Usage

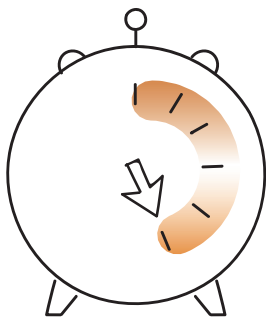
### Striking similarities in internet usage by children and ineffective age-gating

The research findings on children’s internet usage patterns reveal striking similarities among genders and across rural and urban environments. Despite concerted efforts within the industry, establishing effective age-gating measures is a persistent challenge.

#### Time on the Internet

70%

1 to 5 hours daily



Source: Space2Grow research

#### Preteens accessing online platforms



Notes/definitions:

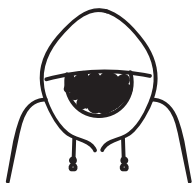
1. As per the guidelines set by social media companies, the age to have an account is 13 years.
2. In accordance with the Indian legal frameworks Real Money Gaming requires the user to be 18 years and above.

## 02 Risk

### Increasing online interactions with strangers coupled with a lack of safe spaces

Pre-teens and teens often interact with unfamiliar individuals on the internet. This exposes them to potential manipulation, harassment, abuse, deception, and even solicitation. Significant number of children have experienced a range of digital risks, whether while gaming, using social media, or engaging with educational technology platforms. Unfortunately, the absence of secure safe spaces hinders their capacity to effectively navigate and address these risks.

#### Interactions with Strangers



60%

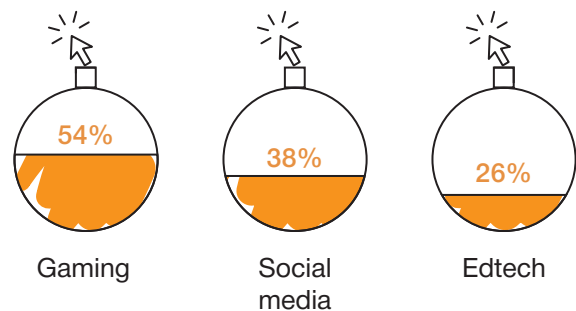
of the teens who interacted with strangers online have later met them offline.

Notes/definitions:

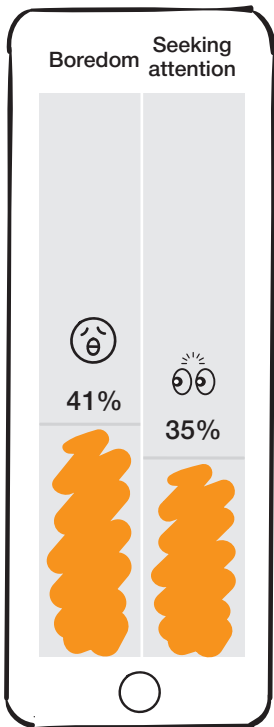
3. Digital Risks: Any form of harm/risk/abuse faced by children on the internet (See Figure 1.5).

Source: Space2Grow research

#### Digital risk faced by children across platforms



### Top motivators to be online



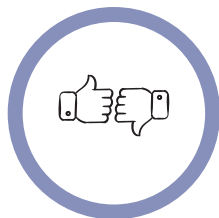
Source: Space2Grow research

## 03 Behaviour online

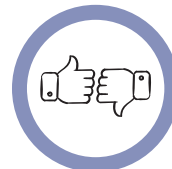
### Curiosity and the need for social validation are key drivers for digital exploration

Children’s online behaviour has seen a surge in digital exploration and risk-taking, driven by a combination of boredom and curiosity to venture into restricted content. The quest for validation in online spaces has resulted in children devoting a significant amount of time to internet activities. This trend has raised concerns among mental health professionals, who have observed an increasing impact on the mental well-being of children.

### Social Validation



**52%** Actively discuss followers / likes with peers



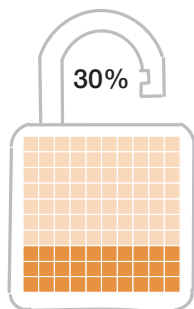
**31%** Affected negatively by a lack of social media validation

## 04 Knowledge

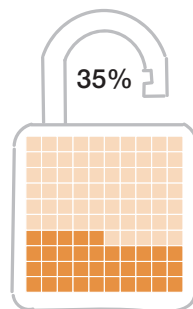
### Limited knowledge and awareness regarding digital safety are causes for concern

There is a notable deficiency in children’s understanding of how to safeguard themselves from digital risks, raising significant concerns. Parents and teachers also display limited awareness of digital safety, further compounding the issue.

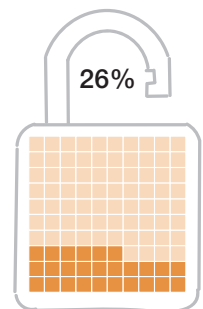
### Awareness of Digital Safety



Children



Parents



Teachers

Source: Space2Grow research



## 05 Attitude

### Reliance on peers and self-intervention to manage risks

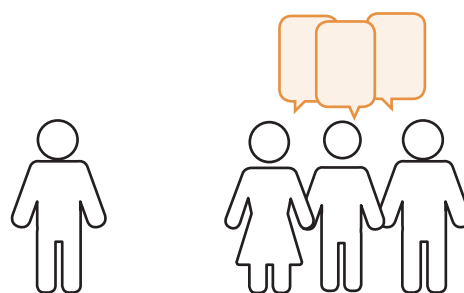
Parents believe children would feel most comfortable discussing issues relating to digital harms with them or their guardians. However, when faced with risky situations in online spaces, children either seek assistance from their peers or address the situation on their own. This highlights a gap in the role of parents and teachers as the primary responders to digital risks faced by children.

#### Seeking Support

**79%**

of children prefer self-intervention or seek help from peers over involving caregivers or authorities

Source: Space2Grow research



## 06 Practice

### Lack of enabling strategies and limited recourse to law enforcement for redressal

Children tend not to make formal complaints or seek help from law enforcement and other official forums when faced with digital risks on account of low levels of knowledge on digital safety and fear of repercussions. Even when complaints are made, there is often a lack of coordinated response from stakeholders.

#### Complaints and Redressal



3%

Parents employ active techniques, like giving advice or diverting their child's attention to other activities, to manage their internet usage.

Source: Space2Grow research



16%

Educators in school proactively reported digital risks faced by children to law enforcement

Notes/definitions:  
Preventive Actions: Counselling, training and awareness sessions.  
Proactive Actions: Reporting to law enforcement, reporting to platforms and taking action against perpetrators/accused.

# Key Recommendations

## Children



- Develop interactive resources / tools that enable children to self assess their digital risk exposure.
- Aggregate and provide learning tools for easy access and use by primary stakeholders: children, parents and educators.
- Create and promote safe spaces for children at home and in schools where they can share their experiences and learn about safety.
- Building capacities of young leaders who advocate for digital safety and support their peers

## Law Enforcement and Policy Makers



- Organising state-level multi-stakeholder round tables and establish an awareness and redressal chatbot managed by the Women and Child Development (WCD) department.
- In addition, establish a one-stop online redressal centre where individuals, especially children, can easily report incidents and seek immediate support.
- Explore partnership with the cybercrime department to research and enhance the effectiveness of online reporting mechanisms. Along with this, make child counselling services a part of the redressal process of the cybercrime unit.
- Develop SOPs and guidelines to enhance reporting and redressal practices for law enforcement (LE), accompanied by user-friendly handbooks and training resources for LE personnel.

## Parents / Teachers



- Mass awareness campaigns in collaboration with government entities such as MeitY and MWCD, targeting first responders to raise awareness and promote online safety.
- Aggregate learning resources and create an easy-to-use tool that can be integrated within the existing infrastructure for teachers to help with creating awareness and redressal for children. In partnership with state governments, these apps can be internalised within state teacher training programs.

## Industry



- Proactively engage with industry stakeholders such as edtech and gaming companies, and self-regulatory bodies to advocate for the development of product solutions related to age-gating and verification.
- Design a digital child safety assessment tool and compliance playbook for the technology companies that have child facing apps and products.
- Create a due diligence checklist that investors can use to evaluate companies that work with children.

## Others (Mental Health Professionals, Media, etc.)



- A collaborative attempt to conduct in-depth research to explore the connections between digital risks and mental health, and develop solutions endorsed by esteemed mental health institutes.
- Initiate collaborations with media houses to spotlight the issue through impactful editorials, articles, case studies and video documentaries.

## I Conclusion

In summary, this research underscores the urgent need to address the safety of children in the digital space. The concerning surge in risk exposure, such as encounters with strangers, and an increased risk appetite among young internet users, coupled with a limited knowledge of reporting mechanisms and difficulty in seeking resolution, present significant challenges.

Children need knowledge, tools, and support to safely navigate the digital world, which requires collaboration between parents, educators, and digital platforms. Additionally, various stakeholders, including law enforcement, policymakers, media, mental health professionals, lawyers, and the judiciary, all play pivotal roles, as emphasised by their shared perspectives. The digital landscape will continue to evolve, and so will the challenges and concerns. What is important is the commitment to child safety as an integral component of tech innovations.

The report hence focuses on collaborative and proactive efforts that can establish a safe online environment for children, nurturing their responsible and protected online experiences.



