# HOW TO CREATE A BETTER INTERNET FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

There's no doubt the internet provides a wide range of opportunities for young people all over the world. Still, there are two sides to every coin. So while many organizations try to maximize those opportunities, they also work towards minimizing the risks that come with exploring online possibilities. But it's not a one person job. **Educators, governments, researchers and the (media) industry** all play a vital role in creating a better internet for every child out there, each in their own way.

This policy brief was designed to help you make a difference. The recommendations are based on findings of the Belgian Better Internet Consortium, after setting up a series of **labs** to gather opinions from experts **on challenges in the digital era** that young people face today. In addition, a **survey** was conducted among children between 6 and 18 years old to get a realistic view of their media use, both in the Flemish community (Apestaartjaren 8) and the French community (#Génération2020). This resulted in 3 topics worth taking a closer look at, which we'll discuss in this brief.

# 1. HOW TO GET ONE STEP AHEAD OF FAKE NEWS

## THE NUMBERS

Research shows that nearly **70% of children use social media as a news source**, at least once a week. Around 87% use their smartphone for that. However, only a minority (around 40%) thinks it's important to keep up with what's happening in the world and **most are unsure whether they can correctly assess the quality of a news source or recognize fake news.**

## HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

To reduce the impact of fake news and all kinds of information disorders, an **educational approach** is preferred over a legislative framework. The challenges of fostering curiosity about information and diversity of information sources are part of a global educational strategy: the more young people know about news and the way it works, the better they're able to critically reflect on the information that reaches them.

**1.** It is highly encouraged for **parents and educators** themselves to increase their own knowledge on the matter, so they can help children assess the reliability of information and diversify their information environment. Simple tips and tricks as well as accessible tools to feel more confident on this issue could come in handy here. While platforms like MediaNest and ParentsConnectés can provide useful tips for parents, educators and other professionals can rely on training programs like Mediacoach or other lifelong learning courses.

**2. Governments** should strengthen the partnerships between schools, youth organizations and civil society on the one hand and media professionals on the other hand, so that children can directly question people working in the media industry. Nieuws in de Klas, Ouvrir mon quotidien and Journalistes en classe are good examples of this. And of course, being a role model is the first step. Which is why we invite government members to take care of the spreading of erroneous information or desinformation.

**3.** Because, **journalists** often find themselves working to strict deadlines and with few resources, there is a wide spread of superficial content. Still, they can help by bringing less sensational news with clickbait titles and be more transparent with the mention of sources. The (media) industry should guard the spread of fake news items and remove content that is fake or inducing anxiety at the source. It would also be of great value to highlight the importance of media education in articles or reports and incorporating fact-checking tools in news content.

**4.** It would be helpful if **researchers** who study the subject make their work better known to media education practitioners and work on possible educational strategies to deal with fake news and misinformation issues. Research funding for projects dedicated to information disorders connected to media education issues should be increased.

# 2. HOW TO FIND A BALANCE BETWEEN ON- AND OFFLINE

## THE NUMBERS

In just 2 years time, the average age for children to get their first smartphone has shifted from 11-12 years to 9 years in Flanders (in the French community: still 11 years). Over 90% of teenagers use their smartphone every single day, and half of them say they could no longer go without. On the other hand, rules or agreements with parents on their media use are far less common: for just 50%, there are limits to when they can use media, whereas 54% mentions boundaries on the length of screen time. No more than 29% says there are rules on what they can share online and only 20% can't be in touch with whoever they want on the internet.

## HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Whether we're talking about children or adults, finding a balance between online and offline activities is never easy. Nonetheless, doing so from an early age will help children to use media in a healthy way, now and later in life.

1. A tip for **parents and educators** would be to increase their knowledge on the media use of children, set clear rules for young children and start talking about their online activities early on. When children get older, this type of transparent communication with no taboos becomes even more important. It is the core of the media literacy education parents have to offer their children. What children do online and who they're in touch with is of equal importance as the time they spend on their screens. As always, communication is key and will leave the door open for children to approach adults or initiatives like AWEL or CyberSquad when something strange happens. As this may all seem easier said than done, platforms like MediaNest and ParentsConnectés can provide useful tips to adults on this topic too. Last but not least, let's not forget to set the right example: according to over 70% of children in the French-speaking region, their parents use their phones way too often.

2. As a healthy digital balance is different for all individuals, official guidelines won't do much good. That doesn't mean **governments** should leave the subject untouched: they can launch campaigns to help people, and moreover vulnerable families, to find out what works for them and their family and spread some basic tips and tricks.

3. Just like governments, they can help raise awareness through campaigns as well. In addition, content creators can use tools designed for parents to help them decide what content is appropriate for their children, or to prevent harmful content, like PEGI or Kijkwijzer/Signalétique jeunesse du Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel de la FWB.

4. **Researchers** are encouraged to study the impact of digital media on the (physical and mental) health of children and young people, taking into account the contexts, specificities, variety and meanings of the users' practices, without jumping to general conclusions.
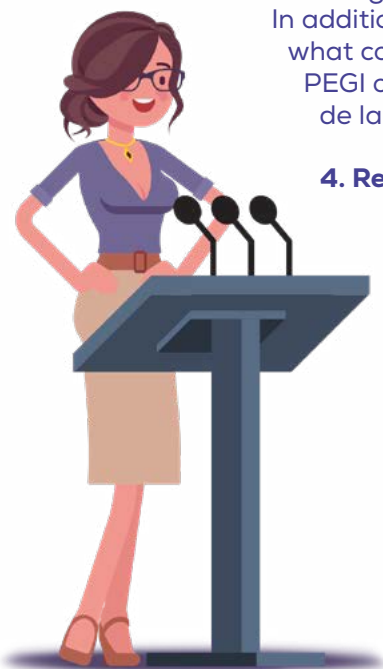
# 3. HOW TO MOVE SEXTING AWAY FROM VICTIM BLAMING

## THE NUMBERS

Sexting is a thing, and it's not that unusual among teenagers: 16% of those in the third grade of secondary school have already sent someone an intimate picture of themselves. Nearly 30% of girls say they were pressured to do so, contrary to just 8% of boys. 30% of teens have ever seen or received a (partially) nude picture without the person on the photo knowing about it. Afterwards, 12,5% sent the picture to other people.

## HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

While there's nothing wrong with sexting itself, it is concerning that a large number of teens mention they've experienced being pressured into sending (partially) nude pictures of themselves. Therefore, prevention is crucial.

1. It's a good idea for **parents and educators** to teach children about respect for each other's wishes. Making someone do things they don't feel comfortable doing, including sending intimate pictures, is never okay. Another thing worth discussing with children, is the importance of privacy: pictures should never be shared without the consent of the person portrayed. This too should be contextualized and part of a global education strategy in relational, emotional and sexual life, as a media education approach about deconstructing gender stereotypes.

2. In terms of non-consensual intimate images, **governments** can take action to provide a better framework for sexting between young people. Firstly, to raise awareness on those issues among the police workers for a better consideration for minor victims of online harassing or sexting. Secondly, on the legislative level, sexting with mutual consent should be made legal and pictures of underaged people should not be considered as child porn when both minors have reached the age of sexual consent, when the material is only meant for personal use and when the person portrayed has consented to creating and spreading the picture. Hotlines and helplines that offer help to victims of sexual exploitation, like Child Focus and the institute for equality between men and women, as well as projects that raise awareness, like sexting. be, should be sufficiently supported. Additionally, even though sexting is not only about women, the topic should be integrated in a global plan of women's rights.

3. **(Media) companies** can help prevent sexual images from being shared without consent and make it easier to report acts of sexual intimidation online. We should strive towards a clear policy in the Code of Conduct.

### GOOD TO KNOW

Consent is not only important when it comes to intimate images. Every picture of a person is a type of personal data. Agreeing to pose for a picture is a different matter than agreeing to share it with others. When any image is shared without consent, data are being processed without consent. If a picture was distributed without someone's permission, he or she can always file a complaint with the Data Protection Authority.

# LASTLY, OUR BEST ADVICE

Some of the recommendations above may be easier to implement than others. But there's one thing all of us can do to keep our children safe, online as well as offline: **letting them know we're there.** Research tells us that children and adolescents barely approach adults when they need help with technical or personal issues concerning their media use.

Often, a lack of communication about the topic keeps youngsters from approaching those who can help them best to ask for tips or advice. In most cases, they turn to peers for advice, yet the information they get from each other is not always correct. It's good for parents and teachers to be aware of this, as they can teach children to encourage each other to seek help from an adult. A little push from peers could help make them feel more comfortable.

Yet **communication requires information**: sufficient training and guidance for anyone involved in the education of children (including underprivileged children) is an absolute must. Media education centers, media literacy programs and helpful resources for parents and teachers are a good starting point. However, finding exactly what you need may seem like a challenge, as there is a large number of resources available. The Betternet platform helps to gather all useful tools and information in one place: it serves as a one stop shop, where anyone can look for topics, target groups and types of content. Using this database will allow **media to be frequently talked about at home, at school or elsewhere, so problems can be discussed before they arise or turn into bigger issues.**