

Title: Parent Zone’s comment on the concept note of the General Comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment

Introduction

As experts in digital families, Parent Zone is well positioned to respond to this consultation. We are the leading providers of expert information on all of the issues caused or amplified by the internet. We deliver projects that reach around the globe, working with parents and families on new and emerging issues and partnering with technology companies to stay ahead of complex challenges. Our work reaches more than 15 countries, and millions of parents and families every year.

Parent Zone’s work takes an evidence-based approach to online risks and harm. In thinking about how to protect children’s rights in a digital environment, Parent Zone acknowledges the tension between the ‘best interests of the child’¹ and respect for parental ‘rights, responsibilities and duties’². Our view is that the priority should always be to put children’s rights - and their best interests - first. To do this, it is essential to encourage and facilitate authoritative parenting because, without that, children will not be able to exercise their rights effectively.

Structure, limitations and argument

Given that the General Comment has extracted rights from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and applied them to a digital environment, our response will do the same, emphasising the existing obligations on states to create environments which support parents and enable children to exercise their rights. We acknowledge tensions between specific rights and their content, such as freedom of expression and right to privacy; we will not be exploring these tensions in the scope of this response. Instead, we will focus on the need for states to realise their obligations to children’s rights in a digital environment and how the General Comment should treat the role of parents and other caregivers.

We believe that states have obligations to provide assistance to parents when it comes to the performance of child rearing in the digital age, referencing the existing obligation of states that have ratified the UNCRC, enlisted in Article 18.³ We will offer some domestic and international best practice examples of our Parent Zone projects, demonstrating how to fulfil these obligations by promoting and supporting authoritative parenting and so nurturing digital resilience, allowing children to exercise their rights effectively.

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Res 44/25, signed 1989 and ratified 1990, article 3.

² *ibid* art 5.

³ *ibid* art 18.

Existing legal principles in the UNCRC and an evidence-based approach to digital resilience and parenting

Parent Zone’s mission is to improve outcomes for children in a digital age. We want children to flourish; and evidence⁴⁵ consistently tells us that to improve outcomes for children it is important to support parents. This remains true across a wide range of outcomes and in different contexts.

International Law and Sustainable Development Goals

The UNCRC refers to the family as the “fundamental group of society”,⁶ which is to be assisted by the state. Article 18 of the UNCRC further states that “to guarantee the promotion of children’s rights, states must render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and must ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children”.⁷ These articles ratify the importance of the role of parenting when looking to protect children’s rights and meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁸

Evidence-based approach: why supporting parenting helps children exercise their rights

The legal premise of the centrality of parents to children’s rights is supported by a range of compelling evidence-based research. In 2007, the World Health Organisation developed a framework⁹ that outlined the best forms of parenting to affect adolescent wellbeing positively:

- Connection (building a positive, stable, emotional bond between parent and child)
- Behaviour Control (including supervision and guidance of children’s actions without a trusting relationship)
- Respect for individuality of the child, especially as an adolescent
- Modelling appropriate behaviour (since children identify with and emulate their parents)
- Provision and protection (by parents and also the wider community).¹⁰

This framework aligns with the idea of authoritative parenting.¹¹ In our work, we encourage and promote authoritative parenting, which includes being highly supportive, with high expectations, and offering a balance of rules and boundaries that are clearly explained, with plenty of opportunities to develop. A practical example of how we promote authoritative

⁴<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/>

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3924445/>

⁶ United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Res 44/25, signed 1989 and ratified 1990, preamble.

⁷ *ibid* art 18.

⁸ [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#).

⁹ World Health Organisation ‘Helping parents in developing countries improve adolescents’ health’ World Health Organisation 2007 -

https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43725/9789241595841_eng.pdf;jsessionid=831B543FF55E2258E9A4FFC9A05249D6?sequence=1.

¹⁰ Sourced from: Livingstone, S., & Byrne J., ‘Challenges of parental responsibility in the digital age: a global perspective - Evidence for action’, UNICEF Blog -

<https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/challenges-of-parental-responsibility-in-the-digital-age-a-global-perspective/>.

¹¹ Baumrind D., (1991) ‘Parenting styles and adolescent development’ SAGE Journals.

parenting is Parent Info,¹² our service delivered in collaboration with the CEOP command of the National Crime Agency in the UK. Parent Info provides support and guidance for parents on all issues caused or amplified by the internet and is embedded on nearly 5,000 primary, secondary and SEN schools. By providing parents with evidence-based information from experts alongside clear guidance on how to apply that knowledge in their own family contexts, we are able to build parents' confidence and encourage them to be more authoritative.

What are States currently doing to encourage authoritative parenting and why is it not enough?

From a UK perspective, various government-led initiatives have been introduced to help support parenting techniques, including the 2014 [CANparent campaign](#) which aimed to “improve parenting skills and address the everyday issues that can arise when raising children”.¹³ Despite occasional steps in the right direction, however, initiatives have not kept up with the challenges of parenting in a digital age, and have failed to de-stigmatise parenting support at a time when it has never been more crucial. The UK Government's recent Online Harms White Paper included an important reference to digital resilience and the need for further support for parents, but provided no clarity about the form that might take. More needs to be done from a domestic and international legal perspective to place a responsibility and duty on states to encourage authoritative parenting if we are to nurture children's digital resilience and allow them effectively to exercise their rights. The current situation has led to an environment in which parents receive little, if any, parenting support and find themselves surrounded by some scattergun well-intentioned interventions, as well as policy that nudges authoritarian, permissive and uninvolved parenting styles.¹⁴

Digital Resilience, Parent Zone and UK Best Practice

In the UK, Parent Zone has taken a leadership role in advocating digital resilience. Its groundbreaking research with the Oxford Internet Institute and other leading experts has built a compelling evidence base.¹⁵ True digital resilience means “thriving in an online environment, avoiding harm and recovering from setbacks while making the most of the opportunities technology can bring”.¹⁶ Our work has helped inform government policy, as demonstrated by our position as both a member of the Executive Board of the UK Council for Internet Safety and co-chair and secretariat of the Digital Resilience working group. The expansion of scope entailed in the reorganisation of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) into the UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) has broadened the understanding of online harms, “in addition to maintaining a focus on the needs of children”.¹⁷ Parent Zone provides essential support to ensure that robust solutions are offered while providing an expert lens into the intersection of parenting, digital resilience and children's rights. Most recently, we have

¹² <https://parentinfo.org/>.

¹³ [The Guardian 'Free parenting classes scheme in meltdown' 2013.](#)

¹⁴ <https://parentzone.org.uk/article/what-kind-parent-are-you>.

¹⁵ Przybylski, A., Mishkin, A., Shotbolt, V., Linington, S., 'A shared responsibility: building children's online resilience' Parent Zone, Oxford Internet Institute - <https://parentzone.org.uk/sites/default/files/Building%20Online%20Resilience%20Report.pdf>

¹⁶ Ziarati, M., 'Parent Zone and the Rise of Digital Resilience' -

<https://parentzone.org.uk/article/parent-zone-and-rise-digital-resilience>)

¹⁷ *ibid.*

worked with stakeholders to produce a Digital Resilience Framework, which was referenced in the Online Harms White Paper.¹⁸ The Digital Resilience Framework is the first example of domestic best state practice, demonstrating what environments, contents, services and policies are needed to help children build resilience and enable them effectively to exercise their rights in a digital environment.

Parent Zone has also been working closely with the Home Office on a ‘Resilient Families’ programme, designed to deliver four key aims¹⁹: to facilitate conversations about online radicalisation and extremism between parents, children and professionals; to promote an understanding of online risks; to enable young people to recognise and challenge online extremism when they see or experience it; and to support professionals working with families. So far, this programme has been delivered in 22 local authorities, online and through face-to-face training, and reached over 16,000 children and young people, as well as over 2,000 parents and professionals, in 2017-18. In our experience, children do not make a significant distinction between their online and offline lives - relationships, friendships and social interactions take place in both spaces simultaneously. For these reasons, the workshops we provide which focus on critical thinking around the potential risks of **online** interactions also help to protect children **offline**. Helping a young person build digital resilience encourages them to understand the online risk of interactions and ‘fake news’, and how this could lead to radicalisation or extremism both on and offline. The outcomes of our sessions have helped support children and build confidence in their ability to be digitally resilient, all of which helps them effectively practice their digital rights. ‘Resilient Families’ is a further best-practice example from which states could learn, in particular about how to encourage authoritative parenting, build digital resilience, and make sure children have the safest, most positive digital environment to exercise their rights.

Digital Resilience, Parent Zone and International best practice

The international engagement and government requests for Parent Zone’s projects signal that international state practice is favouring the encouragement of authoritative parenting and digital resilience as a way to protect children’s rights. Below are the listed examples of Parent Zone’s international projects, which reach thousands of children all over the world. They should be regarded as exemplary when thinking about the responsibility of states to assist parents, and how this helps children exercise their digital rights.

Telenor and Parent Zone - Digiworld

As a result of the partnership between Parent Zone and Telenor, Digiworld is a free, interactive self-guided curriculum designed to support children’s digital resilience. It was initiated by Telenor Global to contribute towards SDG 10, addressing child inequality in a digital context by ensuring that children have the information and parental support they need.²⁰ It helps

¹⁸ UK Government Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, ‘Online Harms White Paper’, April 2019 p 37.

¹⁹ Local authorities include Barking and Dagenham, Barnet, Bradford, Brighton, Camden, Croydon, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, Hounslow, Islington, Lambeth, Leeds, Luton, Manchester, Newham, Redbridge, Southwark.

²⁰<https://www.telenor.com/media/announcement/avoid-catfishing-trolling-or-fake-news-telenors-digiworld-teaches-children-to-stay-safe/>

children and their families to develop the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the online world in a safer and more confident way, using a digital resilience model to help families flourish online. Launched in March 2018, Digiworld has so far been localised in two of Telenor's markets. The online curriculum has reached just under 8,000 children and young people worldwide. Heavy promotional activity in Bangladesh has reached [400,000 children and 50,000 parents](#).

With international engagement from countries such as Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar and Bangladesh, Digiworld has already been translated into Urdu and Thai. Working closely with international experts and regional NGOs to localise the resources, we ensure the resources are sensitive and responsive to local needs of children and families while providing a high-quality, consistent approach based on digital resilience and authoritative parenting. International enthusiasm for Digiworld demonstrates how digital resilience could become a widely accepted global norm, one that will help children exercise their rights by having the safest experience online.

Parent Zone and Vodafone Global - Story Time and Digital Life Skills

Parent Zone has partnered with Vodafone Global to deliver two complementary international projects: 'Story Time' and 'Digital Life Skills'. Story Time focuses on Key Stage 1 and 2 age groups, while the Digital Life Skills workshop is designed to support a child's digital experience by working with parents. Both programmes encourage authoritative parenting as an important factor for building children's digital resilience, and they have been translated into nine languages.²¹ Digital Life Skills, in particular, helps parents learn how to help their children be confident communicators, capable tool-users and critical thinkers. The international reach of these projects demonstrates that there is near-universal interest in building children's digital resilience to help them exercise their rights.

Conclusion

Parent Zone acknowledges the tension between parental rights and children's rights in a digital environment. We always take an evidence-based approach, and will continue to place the best interests of the child at the centre of our work. To do this, we look to ways in which we can encourage authoritative parenting techniques to help children build digital resilience and effectively exercise their rights. When applying this to the UNCRC General Comment on children's rights in a digital environment, we recommend that

- i) states should develop infrastructure that supports authoritative parenting
- ii) the UKCIS Digital Resilience Framework and Resilient Families should be seen as exemplary to assist state policies and practice

²¹ English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Italian, Romanian, Hungarian and Czech

iii) Parent Zone's international projects should be used as best-practice examples for how states can support authoritative parenting to help children exercise their rights.

We hope that this General Comment will address the significance of parenting and digital resilience as a core consideration for how states can act in the best interests of the child and improve outcomes for children.