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Children’s Rights in Society - Sweden

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Comments on the draft General Comment on Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment

Bris would like to thank the Committee on the Rights of the Child for the opportunity to comment on the draft General Comment on Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment. In our comments below we have chosen to include some general observations. We also have some suggestions or additions to the paragraphs set out in the draft, which are included in red. Our comments are based on answers from children in a survey carried out by Bris in connection with preparing these comments.

1. **About Bris**

Children´s Rights in Society (Bris) is a politically and religiously independent children's helpline in Sweden. Every day, 365 days a year, we listen to and support children who contact Bris with various problems and challenges. Bris also works to enhance the rights of children through local activities, group counseling via chat and web-based forums and political advocacy. Bris is one of the best known and most trusted children’s rights organisations in Sweden, and in 2021 Bris will celebrate its 50th anniversary. The Bris helpline is staffed by professional counselors, who have approximately 30,000 contacts with children every year.

The right for children to live free from physical abuse has been a cornerstone for the organisation since its inception. Bris national helpline offers a highly digital, anonymous and free way to email, chat, or call a counselor. Anyone under the age of 18 is welcome to contact Bris. Today, the most common reason children seek support from Bris is mental health issues. Issues of violence and abuse against children is the third most common reason as to why children seek support from Bris. A growing number of contacts from children centers around violence and online-abuse.

In addition to being a national helpline, Bris is also Sweden’s representative member of CHI (Child Helpline International). CHI is a global network of approximately 190 helplines for children in 145 countries. Together, the network’s helplines receive more than 14 million contacts per year from children and young adults who are in need of support and protection. The helpline number to Bris is 116 111, which is a uniform European helpline number for children. The European Commission reserves this number for professional children’s rights helplines who provide children with professional support across the European continent.

1. **Child participation**

We are glad to read that 709 children have participated in the Committee’s process of drafting the General Comment, as children’s rights to express their views is a central right and also central to our work.

In the survey Bris carried out we asked four questions with open answers. The questions were 1. “What is good about the internet?” 2.“Are there any problems with the internet?” 3.“When might children need support from adults? 4.” How can adults best give support and advice?”. Bris received 38 answers from children seeking support from our helpline, quotes from them are integrated in our response. Most children responded that the predominant positive aspect of the internet is friendships. In a digital environment you can be less lonely, you can be who you really are and you can find new friends.

”…My closest IRL-friends are not as close in areas where it matters. They don’t dare to talk about certain things, they are cowardly and afraid in a way that you aren’t with friends you trust online”[[1]](#footnote-1)

To the question of problems with the internet, most children answered that it is easy to harass others and to be harassed because you are anonymous and there is harmful content such as violence. Children also testify that the internet creates a fear of missing out and that the internet can contribute to low self-esteem.

”Cyberbullying, exclusion, you are online instead of hanging out with friends, you might end up connecting with people you shouldn’t be with, you might find photos and videos of naked people and porn that you don’t want to see.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

To the question of how adults can support children in a digital environment, most children answered that adult presence is important. Several children said that it is important that adults are not judgemental, that they do not lash out against their children because of things that have gotten out of hand on the internet. Instead they say it is important that adults show that they care and that they try to be active in their children’s lives on the internet.

”Adults should give support and protection by trying to talk with children and trying to understand and identify themselves with children’s lives online. To care and to be active in children’s lives is a great advantage. A lot of things happen online, so it is good to have someone to talk with about them”[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. **The importance of anonymity in helplines for children**

When a child is given the opportunity to protect their privacy in the digital sphere, it enables the child to make decisions that keeps their rights intact. This balance of support and privacy is important to recognise in all aspects of vulnerable and private digital support contacts between adults and children.

When contacting the Bris helpline, every child can be anonymous. Bris does not know the child’s number; the number is free and invisible on the telephone invoice. From the perspective of the child, this anonymity is often the very reason why the child has summed up the courage to contact Bris. Bris therefore welcomes that the draft specifically addresses the importance of privacy (paragraph 77) when children access helplines in a digital environment.

1. **Balancing risks and opportunities in a digital environment**

**Recommendations on positive action regarding children’s opportunities in the digital environment**

”Yes, the internet is a really good way to get friends around the world and you can look up anything (but you have to be critical of the sources)”.**[[4]](#footnote-4)**

It is challenging to balance children’s opportunities and the risks that can arise for children in a digital environment. Children’s lives in and outside the internet are connected and it is important to understand that children’s lives on the internet are not isolated from the rest of what is happening in a child’s life. Many children find it difficult to talk to adults about challenges they face in the digital environment.

The references in the draft to the importance of awareness of the risks for children in digital environments are necessary (among others paragraphs 14, 16, 91 and 100). They also include many important suggestions and recommendations on what states should do to prevent children from being harmed in the digital environment. However, Bris considers there is a lack of recommendations on positive action regarding the opportunities in the digital environment. Bris would want to see more recommendations on positive action regarding children’s opportunities in the digital environment such as in paragraph 15. This paragraph could also include that children are entitled to receive support and guidance in their discovery and use of the digital environment.

C. Right to life, survival and development (art. 6)

Para. 15. Online experiences and opportunities provided by the digital environment are of crucial importance for children’s development, and may be vital for children’s lives and survival, especially in situations of emergency. Children are entitled to receive support and guidance in their discovery of and use of digital environments.

**How can adults be supportive?**

”I think the best way to be supportive is to show that you are there no matter what, that you don’t judge and that you show that you trust the child. I think it would be good if you spoke to your child at least once a week about how they are and if anything has happened. To be honest, I think those moments can be crucial.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Answering what adults can do to support children, most children said that adults should be curious, not judgemental, take time with children and be interested in what children are doing on internet. Paragraph 92 in the draft highlights the importance of positive parenting over prohibition and control. Based on the support and advice that children seek in relation to the internet, it is quite apparent that children need supportive adults. We would therefore like to see that a supportive relationship between adults and children be identified as one of the central principles in the beginning of the draft.

I. Introduction

Para. 3. Children’s rights must be respected, protected and fulfilled in the digital environment. States should take into account that support and guidance provided to parents and caregivers should be based on an understanding of the specificity and uniqueness of the parent-child relationship (from para. 92)….

**Regarding prohibitions and filters**

*”Be there and, like, don’t judge”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

”Know more about what children do online, try to gain trust so that children have faith to talk about things.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

We are also concerned that this new trend of prohibiting information with filters might cause public institutions, such as schools, but also at home, to prohibit the use of certain social media or online information instead of discussing this topic and having a constructive dialogue, supporting the child. Filters or certain prohibitions are not necessarily wrong, but Bris wants to underline the importance of supporting children while exploring their rights in the digital environment rather than protecting them from exploring their rights.

1. **Gender discrimination in a digital environment**

Diversity among people who study and work with technology is vital. There are specific challenges regarding girls’ participation in the development of digital environments in the world. For instance, access to education in technical programmes is very gender-biased. In Sweden, only 2 out of 10 children applying for technical programmes in upper secondary school are girls, according to the Swedish National Agency for Education.[[8]](#footnote-8) Bris sees a lack of specific recommendations in this area in the draft. Bris would welcome guidance from the Committee as to how states should protect and advance the interests of children who identify themselves as girls in order to combat this.

XI Right to education (arts. 28, 29)

Par. 114 It is of increasing importance that children gain an understanding of the digital environment including its infrastructure, business practices, persuasive strategies, uses of automated processing and personal data and surveillance. It is especially important to highlight the challenges regarding gender balance in relation to children’s access to the digital environment and children forming digital environments.…

1. **Cyberbullying in school**

”That adults are aware of and understand the impact of the internet. This is where bullying goes on, it doesn’t show in school if you are cyberbullied, and if you tell your teachers, they don’t understand. A photo of you being spread can ruin your life, but they just say that the photo disappears”.[[9]](#footnote-9)

As stated in the draft, the digital environment can enable and enhance children’s access to quality education. Many children witness that they are bullied, harassed and sexually harassed in a school environment. In a survey conducted by Bris and the Swedish Internet Foundation, as many as 61 percent of the respondent children answered that they had been offended on the internet.[[10]](#footnote-10) As children’s education becomes more digital and children are connected to digital environments during school hours, we see that it is important to highlight that public institutions such as schools have a responsibility to prevent cyberbullying in school. Bris sees a lack in the draft of specific recommendations regarding the government’s responsibility to prevent cyberbullying in school environments, and would welcome recommendations in the section regarding education.

XI Right to education (arts. 28, 29)

Par. 112 …These standards for digital educational technology should ensure that uses of these technologies enhance children’s rights and do not expose children to violence, discrimination, misuse of their personal data, commercial exploitation or other infringements of their rights, including the use of digital technology to document a child’s activity and share it with parents without the child’s knowledge or consent. States must ensure that schools recognise their responsibility in preventing cyberbullying, when connected to a child’s school environment.



Magnus Jägerskog

Secretary General

1. Part of an answer from a child who participated in Bris’ survey on what is positive about the internet (respondent 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Answer from a child who participated in Bris’ survey on the problems with the internet (respondent 24) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Answer from a child who participated in Bris’ survey on how adults can best be supportive (respondent 4) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Answer from a child who participated in Bris’ survey on issues regarding children’s digital rights. This is the answer to the question regarding what is good about the internet. (respondent 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Answer from a child who participated in Bris’ survey on how adults best can be supportive (respondent 9) . [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Answer from a child who participated in Bris’ survey on how adults best can be supportive (respondent 19) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Answer from a child who participated in Bris’ survey on how adults best can be supportive (respondent 14) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.teknikforetagen.se/nyhetscenter/nyheter/2019/ny-statistik-fran-skolverket--fortfarande-fa-tjejer-till-teknikprogrammet/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Answer from a child who participated in Bris’ survey question 3 on when children might need support from adults in a digital environment (respondent 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://internetstiftelsen.se/guide/motverka-natmobbning/hur-vanligt-ar-det-med-natmobbning/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)