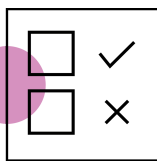# ySKILLS

Realising children's rights in the digital age: The role of digital skills

Principle 3: Consultation

Engage and listen to the views of children in product development, design and policy.

- Consultation is vital to respect children's voices and experiences in digital innovation. The right to be heard assures children opportunities to 'freely' express their views and have these views given 'due weight' 'in all matters affecting [them]'.[1] This right is crucial to counterbalance social and cultural biases against recognising children's views.

- While engaging children in designing and developing digital technologies is an already established design practice, it is often only used for products and services intended for children. Yet many children use products and services not intended for them, and consultation matters here, too.

- To be meaningful and effective, consultation with children should be 'transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant [to the child], child-friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and accountable'. Policy makers and innovators should flexibly use the forms of communication that work best for children, bearing in mind their age (or 'evolving capacities') and circumstances (including digital inclusion or barriers to participation). Crucially, it should include communicating to children how their views 'influence the outcome of the process' in practice.

"We don't want to seem too hard, like school. It has to be enjoyable. Getting together with other peers, with other like-minded souls." (digital skills workshops organiser, Belgium) (8)

Consulting children on matters that affect them – which nowadays definitely includes their digital lives – lies at the heart of Article 12 of the UNCRC. Indeed, from a research and policy-making perspective, it is important for children's right to be heard to consider whether adults are paying enough attention to what the young people have to say, and to seek ways to incorporate their voices actively into research and policy making related to children and young people's engagement with digital technologies (13). This does occur in certain areas of policy making regarding digital literacy – for example, in the Better Internet for Kids Plus programme (EC, 2022a), and the work of the Council of Europe (European Parliament and the Council of Europe, 2005). It is less evident in the European Commission's 'Digital agenda' (European Parliament, 2023), its 'Year of Skills 2023' (EC, 2022b), or until recently, its work on DigComp (Vuorikari et al., 2022).

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[1] UNCRC, Article 12.

The ySKILLS research was not primarily focused on ways that digital skills could enable the process of consultation itself, although the research has prioritised consultation with children and other stakeholders in a range of ways. Other research exists on the purpose, value and practice of child consultation (Livingstone et al., 2023b; McNally et al., 2016; Mukherjee & Livingstone, 2020), and could be built on in future research in this field. ySKILLS research did find that **digital skills are not a priority topic in home–school communication; such communication most often takes place in the context of special projects and events, with the initiative coming from school more than parents** (4). This suggests a route to encourage further communication and consultation, recalling the principle of consultation emphasises both listening to children's views and taking them into account in making decisions that affect them.

More positively, ySKILLS consulted children in seven countries (Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and the UK) for the creation of a child-friendly synthesis of the findings and a participatory toolkit. This involved pilot and validation sessions, as well as co-design jams with children aged 14–17 from a diverse range of backgrounds. The practical end result is a publicly available hands-on participatory toolkit (see Zaman et al., 2023) and an educational toolkit available in several languages (see https://sites.google.com/fcsh.unl.pt/yskillseducationtoolkit). In addition, the ySKILLS researchers followed up with young people facing mental health difficulties, during and after the research, consulting them about the findings, the stakeholders who should know of them, and the resulting policy recommendations. The result was a richer set of findings, a more tailored set of recommendations, and their more compelling dissemination (17) (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2023). From the consultation, an online resource for young people about mental health in the digital environment was developed (available in English, Portuguese, Dutch, French, Norwegian, Finnish, Polish, German and Italian).

Additional data

- The EU Kids Online network surveyed 25,101 children across Europe, asking questions about their online experiences and concerns. This contributed substantially to unfolding policy developments in many countries: according to the *Better Internet for Kids policy map* report (O'Neill et al., 2020), **24** of 30 countries say that such evidence has influenced the design of public policies for a better internet for children.

- However, the evidence base must be kept up to date given the pace of technological innovation, and use of the evidence by policy makers is uneven and could be strengthened, notably by now drawing on ySKILLS research to inform further policy and practice.