Terre des Hommes Netherlands

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN

A Double-Edged Sword

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1 Introduction

In the last few years, artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly expanded, with its availability, accessibility and use now infiltrating everyday life around the world (Dubrosa et al. 2024). AI defines technological computer systems and programmes, designed to perform certain tasks, such as decision-making, problem-solving, learning, reasoning, translation or creative production, that would regularly require human intelligence (Anjila 2021; IWF 2023; Cahill et al. 2025; High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence 2019; Stockhem 2020). This includes generative AI, where completely novel outputs can be created at scale, including text, image, audio and/or video content (eSafety Commissioner 2023; Thorn 2024; IWF 2023). Please see Annex I for an overview of different AI systems.

This technological advancement has introduced exciting, new opportunities across society, to enhance productivity, creativity, innovation and education (Anjila 2021; Stockhem 2020; 5Rights 2025). However, such technologies have also **amplified the risk of child sexual exploitation and abuse**, both online and offline (IWF 2023; 5Rights 2025). Offenders are using AI tools to scale the production and spread of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), and to facilitate grooming, sexual extortion, and trafficking of children (Thorn 2024; Barassi 2025). A well-known example of this and a risk of generative AI is a "***deepfake***", which defines hyper-realistic content created either from scratch or by manipulating pre-existing content, that is basically identical to real-life conversations and depictions (IWF 2024; Barassi 2025; Garris and DeMarco 2023). This misuse of AI technologies poses serious threats to children's rights, safety, and wellbeing, impacting their physical, mental and emotional health, education, future opportunities and relationships (Kokolaki and Fragopoulou 2025; Parti and Szabo 2024).

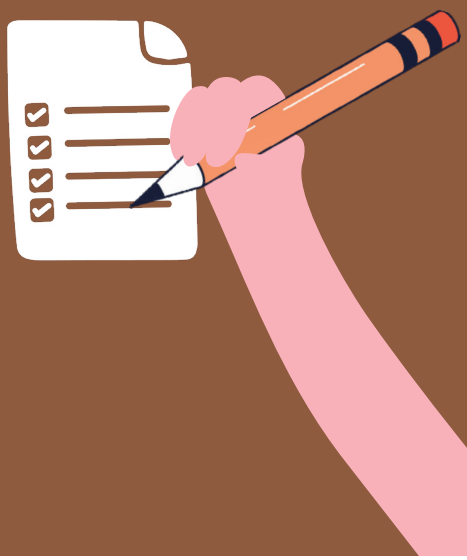
The development and public release of AI technologies is significantly outpacing official laws and regulations around the ethical development and use of such technologies around the world (Olson 2022; Thiel et al. 2023). This legal delay has resulted in increased impunity of offenders misusing AI for child sexual exploitation and abuse purposes, and technology companies that are complicit in their AI platforms

facilitating harms against children (ibid). Given the rapid spread of AI technology, its potential to escalate child sexual exploitation and abuse, and the current legal grey areas surrounding its misuse, urgent action is needed from governments, policymakers, tech companies, law enforcement authorities (LEAs - including police departments, judicial authorities, courts, judges, prosecutors and so on), children's rights NGOs, and civil society to address this growing threat (Barassi 2025; Thorn 2024; Dubrosa et al. 2024).

While AI introduces new risks around scaling the perpetration of child sexual exploitation and abuse, it likewise presents **key opportunities** to help detect, prevent and address instances of child sexual exploitation and abuse (Babu et al. 2024; Olson 2022). Child sexual exploitation and abuse offences have exploded to a point where solely human intervention is not enough to address the scale and scope of the issue (Cahill et al., 2024). AI holds great promise to develop innovative ways to investigate and disrupt such crimes, to support the currently overtaxed children's rights NGOs and LEAs (Thorn 2024; Wolbers et al. 2025).

This report will explore **the double-edged sword that is AI**. It will begin by discussing the three-part methodology implemented to conduct this research report. Then, key findings from the primary data will be presented in the form of key messages that children across all countries have shared with us, touching on use, conceptualisation and perceptions on risks and benefits. In the conclusion, we will summarise the main findings and compare them to current debates in literature. Finally, key recommendations around how to prevent and respond to AI-driven child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as how to develop AI-led interventions to prevent and address child sexual exploitation and abuse, will be discussed.

2 Methodology



This study followed a qualitative research design with three components; a desk review, interviews with AI/tech experts, and focus group discussions with key stakeholders and children. The different methods will be explained below.

2.1 Systematic desk review

Existing research on this topic was identified and synthesised, to provide a comprehensive overview of how AI technologies can both amplify and help prevent and address child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as an exploration of key research, advocacy and programme recommendations to respond to the malicious use of AI for child sexual exploitation and abuse, and how AI solutions to address child sexual exploitation and abuse should be developed and deployed.

A total of 47 sources were reviewed for this report, including both academic and grey literature, such as NGO reports, policy documents from EU institutions, and newspaper articles. Google Scholar, JSTOR and EBSCO were used as databases to find academic literature, while the general Google search engine was used to find grey literature. The method of backward snowballing was also implemented as part of the search strategy. This entailed looking at the bibliographies of key sources found that discuss other literature on this topic, and then bibliographies of those sources, and so on.

2.2 Semi-structured interviews with experts

To conduct the second part of the methodology of this research, technical/ AI experts with work experience in the field of online children's rights and safety were contacted to participate in interviews for this study. AI experts with this specific work background were sought after to ensure interviewees had well-rounded, in-depth understanding of both the technological aspects of AI, as well as the reality of risks facing children online due to such technological advancements.

Thirteen experts were contacted and followed up to participate in this study. A total of six experts responded and volunteered their time by participating in semi-structured interviews and sharing their insights and expertise on the intersection of AI and child sexual exploitation, both in terms of such technologies amplifying the issue, and their potential to prevent and address the issue. Two interviewees are based in the EU, two in the U.S.A, and two in the U.K. These six experts consulted for this study are anonymised to protect their privacy. Data retrieved from these interviews is incorporated throughout

this research report, to further compliment and nuance findings from the available literature.

2.3 Focus group discussions with children and stakeholders

The third part of the research consisted of focus group discussions with children and stakeholders in five contexts: Nepal, The Philippines, Cambodia, Kenya and children displaced from Ukraine (conducted in Poland and Slovakia). The Institute for Human Rights and Peace Studies of Mahidol University in Thailand reviewed the research protocol and research tools and assessed that the project meets ethical standards for research conducted in the target countries on 7 October 2025.

The first four countries are part of Terre des Hommes Netherlands' Safety for Children and their Rights OnLine (SCROL) programme, working with adolescents aged 12 to 17 years old and engages with a variety of stakeholders i.e. youth, caregivers, teachers, social workers, law enforcement and government representatives. These project participants were sampled for this research. The sampling for children displaced from Ukraine was organised by KIND Europe that has contacts with schools and organisations, in addition to having a regional stakeholder group that participated in this research. In each context, at least two focus groups with children and one focus group with stakeholders was organised. In Kenya, researchers decided to work with four smaller groups of children in three locations where SCROL was implemented that were split based on age (12-14 years old and 15-17 years old). Across all five contexts, 209 participants were engaged in this part of the research, of which 142 children and 67 stakeholders. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample per context and in total.

Countries	Child Participants			Number of stakeholders	Total number of participants
	Number	Age	Gender		
Nepal	31	12-17	Girls (13, 42%) Boys (18, 58%)	15	**46**
The Philippines	22	12-17	Girls (13, 59%) Boys (9, 41%)	9	**31**
Cambodia	37	13-16	Girls (34, 92%) Boys (3, 8%)	14	**51**
Kenya	38	12-17	Girls (20, 53%) Boys (18, 47%	15	**53**
Children displaced from Ukraine	27	14-21	Girls (13, 48%) Boys (14, 52%)	14	**28**
Total	**155**	**12-21**	**Girls (93,60%) Boys (62,40%)**	**67**	**222**

Focus group discussions with children

In each country, child participants for this study attended participatory consultations with five interactive and collaborative activities and discussions on AI. These consultations sought to engage and understand children's perspectives on AI, including how they use, understand and feel about these technologies. They also aimed to capture their perceptions of any concerns, risks or impacts AI is having on children's lives. The child consultations were facilitated in the most practical and commonly spoken local language, including adaptations and accommodations to ensure all children can participate. Parental consent and children's assent was required for all children participating in the child consultations.

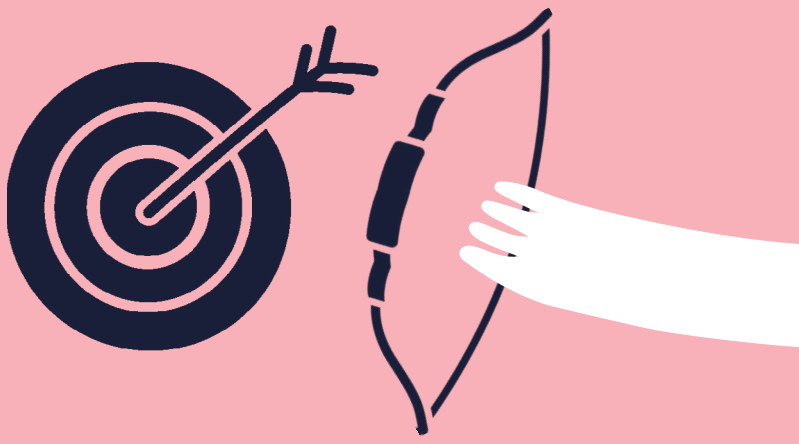
Focus group discussions with stakeholders

Diverse stakeholders in each country that work across child protection, social welfare and justice sectors were identified and contacted to participate in this study. These included government officials, children's rights NGOs and CSOs practitioners, social and youth workers, educators, psychologists, mental health specialists, law enforcement authorities (LEAs) and private sector technology companies. These consultations aimed to engage the perspectives of stakeholders across diverse professional backgrounds on AI technologies, and their use, impacts and potential safety and wellbeing risks amongst children. They also sought to understand the current state of responses in place for each country to protect children's privacy, wellbeing and safety in relation to AI, as well as key gaps and recommendations for action in this area. These consultations in each country included four participatory, interactive and collaborative activities to gather participants' perspectives and facilitate cross-sectoral discussion and debate. Informed consent was obtained by all stakeholders prior to their participation in consultations.

Analysis

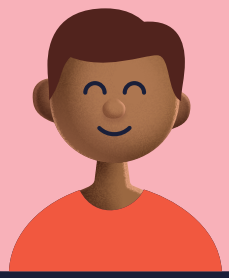
Data was collected by taking notes in a data capturing template, supplemented by listening back to the audio recording before it was deleted. For the children, pictures of the creative outputs were translated to English and included there. All templates were carefully screened to see if there is no identifiable and solely pseudonymised information. This was later analysed by the TdH NL research team using ATLAS.ti Web software. A codebook was made and followed, with broad codes that matched the research questions and sections of the report. Coders read through the document and applied codes from the codebook where they recognised it. After everything was coded, researchers analysed each code group by going through the quotations and noting any patterns. These final themes and patterns were contrasted to the findings of the systematic literature review that was described above.

3 Results

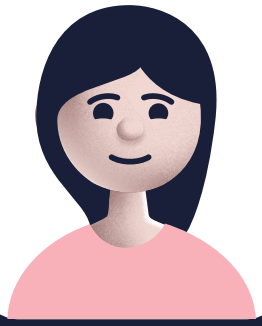


The following sections will present the findings of this research on the following topics. These will be done through the most prominent themes that we uncovered, transformed in main messages from children:

"We frequently use AI and for many purposes, depending on where we live, our age and gender."

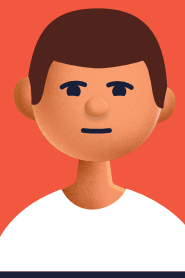


"We define AI as technology that is designed to serve humans."



"We are unsure how AI relates to humans or social media."

"We have differing feelings about AI, some of us are excited, some worried, and others are mixed."



"We don't fully understand how AI works and this limits our ability to oversee consequences."

"Current initiatives are not enough to protect us from AI risks."

"We are worried about AI risks, but we mostly want to enjoy the benefits."

3.1 We frequently use AI and for many purposes, depending on where we live, our age and gender

Children use many different AI apps, with **ChatGPT, Gemini, Siri** and AI functions of different social media apps mentioned often across all countries. A full list of the apps mentioned by children and stakeholders can be found in Annex II. Children said to frequently use AI, although the frequency varied a lot. Many children said they use it a few times per week, with smaller groups saying they use it daily, weekly, monthly, or never. Some children also noted that they are also frequently exposed to photos or videos that are AI generated.[1]

From analysing the answers, children **mainly use AI for educational, creative and entertainment purposes**. Most frequently and across all countries, children use AI for their school or studies, making use of the information that AI can provide. Children indicated that they use AI "*to increase [their] knowledge*,"[2] by "*searching for up to date information*,"[3] "*check results or to explain topics I missed at school*"[4] and "*getting clarifications*."[5] In that, AI was often used as a translation tool, making international information more accessible to them.[6] Some children indicated that AI has helped them get insights on specific topics, such as a child from Nepal: "*I love football and I can learn new football skills through AI, which helps me move ahead in life*."[7]

Some children specifically mentioned getting **health information**: "*For small or minor illnesses, we can ask AI first. We don't necessarily need to go to the hospital immediately. It helps us research or check symptoms before consulting a doctor.*"[8] This also applied to mental health, where children used AI chatbots "*express [their] emotions and feelings*"[9] and for emotional support, as children indicated that they would "*ask [AI] for advice or help with personal problems.*"[10] This was an especially prominent theme for children displaced from Ukraine. One child shared that AI "*can help you in a difficult moment and it can improve your mood.*"[11] One girl now living in Poland said she used ChatGPT to discuss her mental health but would now advise against using this, as *"AI is not a specialist with [human] experience."*[12]

Others linked this informational aspect more to their **studies**, using AI *"to do homework"*[13] for "*solving exercises or assignments,"*[14] *"performing math calculations,"*[15] "*tutoring*"[16] or *"as a virtual teacher or learning assistant."*[17] Children praised AI for increasing their learning opportunities (*"you don't need to go to the library and go through many books, just a click of the button!"*)[18] and curiosity, as ChatGPT, for instance, would always ask to provide further information on adjacent topics that they hadn't thought about before.[19] Children in Nepal also noted that *"due to AI, many students' lives have changed, especially those who could not study before can now learn. Those who never did homework have started doing it, and our knowledge has increased."*[20] Learning was also thought to be easier as you would only have to face an AI bot, which could reduce social anxiety of asking silly questions.[21]

1 Children consultation 2 and 3 in Kenya, child consultation with children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
2 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
3 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia, child consultation with children displaced from Ukraine in Poland and Slovakia
4 Children consultation children displaced from Ukraine in Slovakia
5 Children consultation 1 in Kenya
6 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia and 1 in the Philippines
7 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
8 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
9 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
10 Children consultation 1 in Kenya
11 Child consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
12 Child consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
13 Children consultation 2 in Kenya , consultation for children displaced from
14 Ukraine in Poland
Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
15 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines
16 Children consultation 1 in Kenya
17 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
18 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
19 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
20 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
21 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia

The second biggest type of use was for **creativity**. Children mentioned that they use AI for generating images,[22] editing images,[23] graphic design,[24] changing or cloning voices,[25] drawing,[26] writing stories[27] or scripts,[28] mixing music[29] and creating slide presentations.[30] This was closely related to gaming, where children used AI to "make characters more smart."[31] Other usage of AI was related to **social aspects**, where AI was used to "boost motivation or encouragement"[32] and help communicate with others.[33] In Kenya, children noted that AI could be used by people with a disability with their learning and problem solving.[34] In Cambodia, children shared that AI would be valuable *"if you never had a picture with your grandparents or parents, [to] use Gemini AI to create a family photo as a memory."*[35] Lastly, social isolation was a big theme for children displaced from Ukraine that were currently located in Poland, missing many of their friends from home. One child shared that *"if you don't have friends, chatGPT can be your friend."*[36]

Usage of AI was dependent on a few factors, namely age, place of residency and gender. First, in terms of age, the use of AI was said to increase with children getting older.[37] There didn't seem to be a fixed age when children first started AI. Some stakeholders and children mentioned that children started as young as five years old start using AI,[38] with more common answers of a start age between ten and fourteen years old.[39] Usually, children said to be introduced to AI by peers and would like to try it out for homework or entertainment.

Second, stakeholders noted that usage of AI depends largely on whether you live in an urban or rural area. Children in cities *"usually have smartphones", "follow trends more easily"* and therefore *"are more exposed to AI."*[40] Children in Nepal indicated that they also thought that children in developed countries would use AI more than in countries like Nepal.[41] Lastly, AI use is gendered. In Cambodia, stakeholders noted that boys mainly use AI for gaming, while girls use it to study, research and assignments.[42] In Nepal, girls are more influenced by videos, photos, and movies, using AI primarily for entertainment and editing. Boys are more involved in online gaming, exploring tools like proxy servers and technical modifications.[43]

22 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
23 Children consultation 1 and 2 in Cambodia
24 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
25 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
26 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
27 Children consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
28 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
29 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
30 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
31 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
32 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
33 Children consultation 2 in Nepal and children displaced from Ukraine in Slovakia
34 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
35 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
36 Children consultation with children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
37 Stakeholder consultation in Nepal
39 Stakeholder consultation in Nepal,
39 Stakeholder and child consultations in Kenya, Poland and Cambodia
40 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia
41 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
42 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia
43 Children consultation 1 in Nepal

3.2 We define AI as technology that performs tasks to serve humans

In addition to its use, it is important to understand how children conceptualise AI. All children's groups **correctly identified that AI stands for Artificial Intelligence**. Within the children's groups, however, there was variance in familiarity. Some children confessed that they don't really know what AI is, while others seemed more confident in conceptualising it.

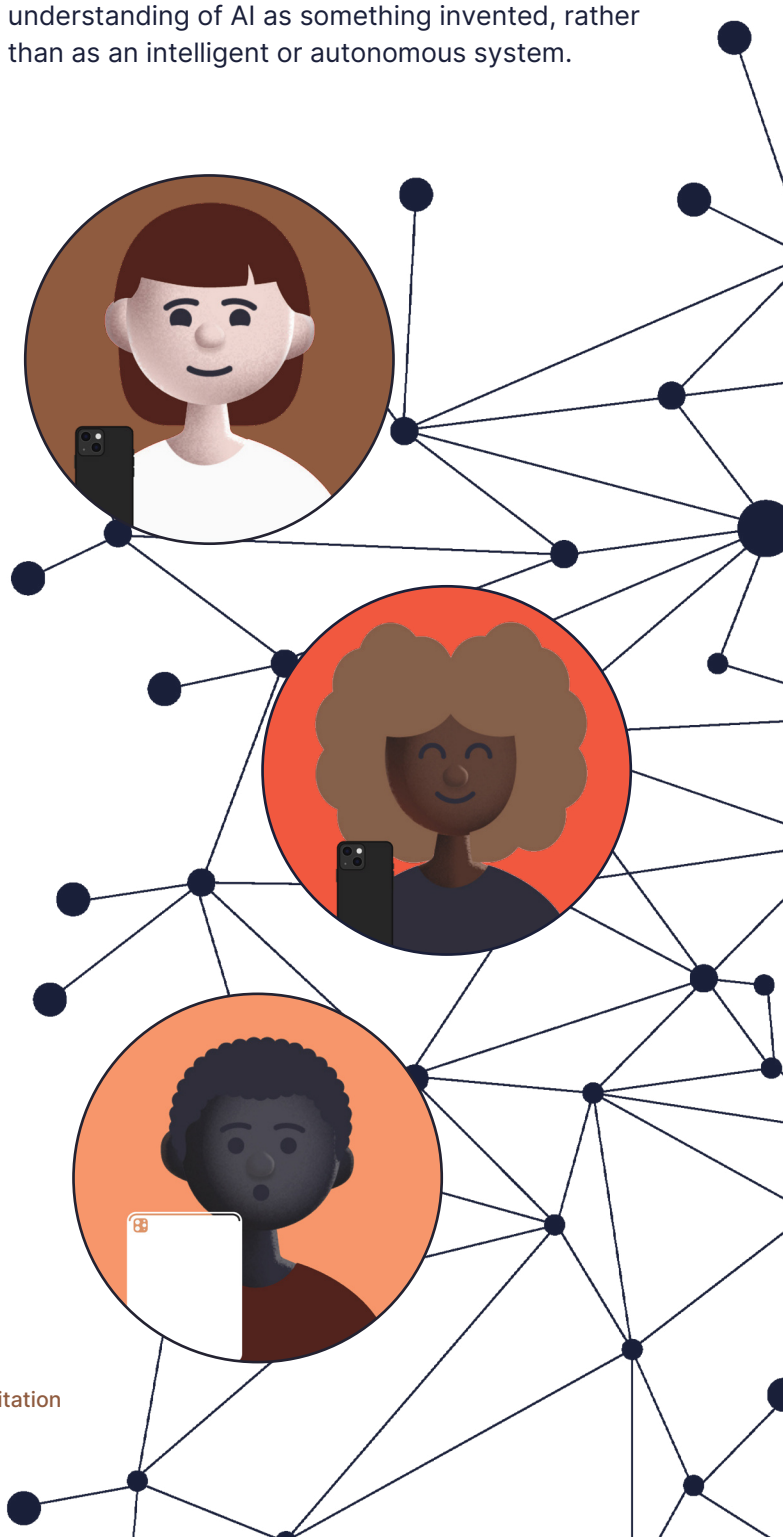
Children defined AI in different ways, with common definitions centering around three elements:

1. Some form of technology, such as *"an application"*[44], *"software"*[45], *"programme"*[46], *"a smart computer"*[47], *"robot"*[48] or a *"machine."*[49]

2. The capabilities of that technology, such as that it *"finds answers to questions we don't know,"*[50] *"writ[es] texts, generating voices, translating languages,"*[51] *"helps with homework"*[52] and can be used for *"communication"*[53] and *"video editing."*[54]

3. And the purpose of the technology to serve humans, with children mentioning *"help[ing] people"*[55], *"solving human issues,"*[56] and making *"life faster"*[57] and *"easier."*[58]

These elements identified by children resemble the definition of AI we presented in the introduction, where AI was defined as technological computer systems and programmes, designed to perform certain tasks that would regularly require human intelligence (High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence 2019). Only the last element around human intelligence was less consistently articulated, as most children tended to frame AI in **functional or service-oriented terms** rather than in relation to human-like cognition. Children from Cambodia noted that the translation of AI in Khmer was "*artificial invention*", showing that local translations can shape children's conceptual understanding of AI as something invented, rather than as an intelligent or autonomous system.



44 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
45 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
46 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
47 Children consultation 4 in Kenya
48 Children consultation 1 in Kenya
49 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
50 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
51 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
52 Children consultation 4 in Kenya
53 Children consultation 1 in Kenya
54 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
55 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
56 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
57 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
58 Children consultation 2 in Nepal

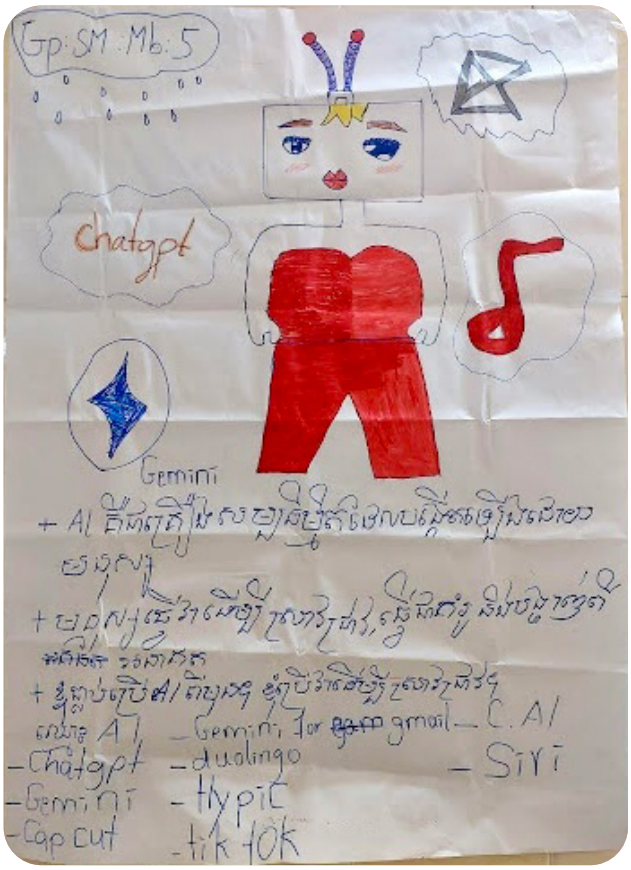
3.3 We are unsure how AI relates to humans or social media

A small number of children did explicitly describe AI as thinking,[59] learning or reasoning like human beings,[60] coming closer to the cited element of replicating aspects of human-like cognitive processes. But, the opinions of what AI is and how it compares to humans differed widely among children. Some children described **AI as equal to humans** and, in some cases, even **viewed it as a friend**. Children valued their interactions with AI,[61] highlighting qualities such as its constant availability,[62] advise-giving[63] and the ability to learn from it,[64] attributes they also associated with friendship. In Poland and Slovakia, children displaced from Ukraine had a discussion whether AI could be a friend, with some children saying it could because of aforementioned characteristics. Others said that AI cannot be your friend, since "*it doesn't feel anything*" and *"can only describe emotions"*[65] because *"it just learned to speak that way from the internet"*,[66] or only "*if you give AI certain conditions, like seeing your smile [and then] it can interpret emotions."*[67] Children displaced from Ukraine indicated to understand very well that AI was trained to interact like humans, such as *"ChatGPT studying jokes and generating them. But it doesn't understand them."*[68] This discussion highlights the different importance that children place on the ability of AI to have genuine emotions versus simulated interactions. Stakeholders in Cambodia also held the view that children view AI as a *"friend"*, or *"their go to companion."* They expressed worry about this replacing human interaction.[69]

Other children were very clear that AI is not a friend or even human-like, positioning **humans as fundamentally distinct from and superior to AI**. One child explained that AI *"is controlled by human beings through the instructions we provide"*,[70] emphasising the service provision aspect from the definition that children commonly used. Children mentioned shortcomings such as *"humans can instantly distinguish colour. You have to prompt or give additional details to the AI."*[71] or AI doing *"only things related to thinking, not physical."*[72] Children noted that it *"cannot do humanly activities like bathing"*,[73] *"walking, eating,"*[74] or *"express[ing] emotions."*[75] One child even stated that AI *"cannot perform all tasks performed by a human being"* and that comparing humans to AI would be like *"equating humans to God."*[76] In similar vein, this group of children also didn't think that AI could be a friend, as you cannot *"go out and play"* with AI[77], *"it does not help with house tasks like fetching water,"*[78] and *"it keeps evolving and changing. Friends need to be themselves all the time."*[79]

59 Children consultation 2 and 3 in Kenya
60 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
61 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
62 Children consultation 1 in Kenya
63 Children consultation 2 in Kenya and children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
64 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
65 Child consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
66 Child consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
67 Children consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Slovakia
68 Children consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Slovakia
69 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia
70 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
71 Children consultation 2 in the Philippines
72 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
73 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
74 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
75 Children consultation 4 in Kenya
76 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
77 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
78 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
79 Children consultation 3 in Kenya

Picture from children consultation 2 in Cambodia, visualising AI as a robot



A last group of children felt that **AI transcends human intelligence**, noting capabilities that go beyond what humans can do, with statements such as AI *"is more powerful than a man"*[80], it *"does more than what a real person can do"*[81], *"AI works 24 hours"*[82], *"it can do tasks humans cannot do"*[83] and that *"no real person can be that quick."*[84] In the Philippines, one child shared *"it can help us make our jobs or projects easier. Just one click and the problem is already solved"*[85], combining both the speed and capabilities that children often seem to value. In some of the focus groups, children were worried about these evolving capacities of AI, for instance in Poland, where I children from Ukraine were worried that this would limit future job opportunities[86] or in the Philippines, where children feared *"AI can take over the work of artists and songwriters."*[87]

Lastly, there was confusion about what constitutes AI, with the term sometimes used **interchangeably with social media platforms**. For instance, children defined AI as technology that *"helps us to connect with friends and family who live far away"*[88] or thought social media or gaming was the same as AI, such as thinking that *"the game Free Fire itself is kind of AI, because it connects [them] to friends and provides entertainment."*[89] These responses reflect limited conceptual clarity around AI, as children's understanding is shaped by everyday use rather than technical definitions. As such, distinctions between social media, gaming, and AI may be analytically meaningful, but may not necessarily be important in children's everyday digital experiences and their conceptualisation of it.

80 Children consultation 1 in Kenya
81 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
82 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
83 Children consultation 1 in Kenya
84 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
85 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines
86 Children consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
87 Child consultation 2 in the Philippines
88 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
89 Children consultation 2 in Nepal

3.4 We have differing feelings about AI, some of us are excited, some worried, and others are mixed

Children in our research were **divided on how they feel** about AI on a spectrum from excited to worried. A **gendered pattern** was discovered in this, where boys were more likely to be happy and excited about AI and girls expressed more concern. In three of the children's consultations, all the boys were feeling excited and/or curious towards AI. On the *"excited"* part of the spectrum, children said to be very happy with AI.[90] This excitement was mostly due to all the capabilities of AI. For instance, children noted that it *"teaches you things,"*[91] *"it helps me"*[92] and *"it has made me do my homework easy."*[93] The excitement was usually paired with trust in the technology. Children that felt happy or excited about AI usually held the belief that AI is not *"harmful or can cause us any problems."*[94] Some groups reflected further on this trust, where children drew on their own experiences to conclude that there is nothing to worry about, such as a child from Kenya that noted *"So far, after using for more than three years, I have never encountered any danger sign."*[95]

On the other end of the spectrum, there were children that expressed concern about the technology. These **worries were mostly centered around different safety issues and risks**, such as privacy issues,[96] misinformation,[97] *"morphing photos to explicit content"*,[98] scams[99] and blackmailing.[100] These risks will be further discussed in Section 3.6. In addition, children in Poland and the Philippines emphasised the environmental impact of AI, needing water to cool down the machines.[101] Stakeholders, and interestingly children themselves, expressed worries because they feel children lack the capabilities to safely navigate AI. Children noted that *"children are naive,"*[102] *"children lack the ability to clearly distinguish what is good and what is bad,"*[103] *"childen are not knowledgeable yet,"*[104] *"I am scared that I might rely on it too much,"*[105] and that *"children do not fully understand things yet."*[106] In their reasoning, this would lead to consequences such as *"when AI tells them to instruct them to do something, children might immediately follow without thinking about the possible consequences or future impacts of their actions."*[107] Children therefore often recommended to have a minimum age for when children could start with age, often mentioning ages of 10[108] or 13[109] years old as a good starting age. In the Philippines, children would like to see age verification to *"make AI adapt to a specific age range."*[110]

With similar reasons, stakeholders generally had low confidence in children's ability to know how AI works and worried about safety issues as a consequence.[111] It is important to note, however, that difficulties in understanding AI is not only an age-related issue. Adult stakeholders, some of which work in the tech sector or on digital rights, often expressed they experienced difficulty in fully grasping how AI functions. In this sense, AI represents a rapidly evolving technology that

90 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia, consultation 3 in Kenya, and children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
91 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
92 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
93 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
94 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
95 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
96 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
97 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
98 Children consultation 1 and 2 in Nepal and 1 in Cambodia
99 Children consultation 1 and 2 in Nepal, 1 in the Philippines
100 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
101 Children consultation 2 in the Philippines and children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
102 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
103 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
104 Children consultation 2 in Philippines
105 Children consultation 2 in Philippines
106 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
107 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
108 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines
109 Children consultation 2 in the Philippines
110 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines
111 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia and Poland

neither children nor adults fully understand, challenging traditional parent-child dynamics in which adults are expected to guide and protect. Instead, stakeholders emphasised that a collective approach might be needed, where children and the parents should *"learn together to recognise online dangers"*[112] related to AI, figuring it out on the go.

A third group of children expressed mixed feelings about AI, as they could both see the positive and the negative sides that were mentioned before. One child in Nepal expressed that this led to confusion: *"AI is doing both good work and bad work in different situations, so I am confused."*[113] A large segment of the children expressed caution, with a general sentiment that *"AI is not bad, but we must learn how to use it wisely."*[114] For children, wise use of AI was usually defined as only asking AI education related questions and not sharing any personal details.[115] In Kenya, some children thought it would be okay to share things like *"name, date of birth, and others"*,[116] *"so that AI knows that it is interacting with humans."*[117] Others actually encouraged sharing personal information, because *"this enables AI to have customised applications that suit your profile. It can be more fun if you have games that relate with you."*[118]

Our rules around information sharing
from children from Cambodia

Children in Cambodia elaborately discussed what topics you should and should not share. Children shared that it was okay to discuss anything for educational or school purposes to learn, but also to take requests around solving exercises, learning new languages, writing, researching, and sharing general topics. Children cautioned against sharing any personal information, such as your full name and advised to use a nickname instead. They also said not to share your home address, emotions or feelings, family secrets, identifiable photos, your social media, age or birthday and any inappropriate language.

Moreover, they didn't only discuss what rules apply to children, but also to AI. They mentioned that they would like AI to share ideas and new knowledge and some specific information such as warning about inappropriate language and lessons around health. They would not like AI to share any personal information with other people, any personal photos or videos, personal preferences or interests, sexual and violent content, family related information and relationship status. This indicates that children feel that safe information sharing is a two way street, diminishing the full responsibility to be on children but also of the design of the technology.

112 Stakeholder consultation in the Philippines
113 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
114 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
115 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia and 1 and 3 in Kenya
116 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
117 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
118 Children consultation 3 in Kenya

The mixed feelings were usually paired with a dose of curiosity, as many children confessed that they do not yet know enough about AI to fully know what it is, how it was created, how it operates and how information is stored.

What questions do we have about AI?

Children described AI in ways that were close to the actual definition of AI. However, children, similar to the stakeholders engaged in this study, still expressed difficulty in fully understanding and grasping AI. Here are a few of the common questions that children had about AI, which would be helpful for them to have clarified.

- *"How was AI created?"*[119]
- *"Is AI human or something else?"*[120]
- *"Where does AI get its information?"*[121]
- *"What does AI do exactly?"*[122]
- *"How did AI get so smart and knowledgeable?"*[123]
- *"How can AI think so fast?"*[124]
- *"How can they programme AI to be so advanced?"*[125]
- *"What are the mechanics behind AI?"*[126]
- "Why does AI never get confused when we ask questions?"[127]
- *"How can AI answer different questions on a specific topic and how can it connect these answers?"*[128]
- *"Can AI get tired?"*[129]
- *"How can AI alter photos?"*[130]
- *"Is using AI for homework good or bad?"*[131]
- *"What more can AI do for humans?"*[132]
- *"Is there a human controlling AI?"*[133]
- *"What is the difference between real photos and AI-generated photos, as well as movements in videos and AI-generated videos?"*[134]

119 Children consultation 1 and 2 in Cambodia and 1 in the Philippines
120 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
121 Children consultation 2 and 3 in Kenya
122 Children consultation 1 in Kenya
123 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
124 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
125 Children consultation 2 in the Philippines
126 Children consultation 1 of Children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
127 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
128 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines
129 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
130 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
131 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
132 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines
133 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines
134 Children consultation 2 in the Philippines

3.5 We don't fully understand how AI works and this limits our ability to oversee consequences

In the focus groups, we presented different scenarios to children where AI was used. Children were asked to reflect on the privacy and safety aspects of that scenario. The discussions around these scenarios largely followed a similar pattern, where children usually correctly identified who could see information on social media, but forgot that when you use an AI application that there are privacy risks there too. In addition, children mostly worried about hackers and scammers that accessed their information, instead of reflecting on how information was stored within apps.

One exemplary scenario was one where a child used an AI drawing app to alter an image before sharing it on social media. Children were asked to reflect on potential benefits and risks of these actions. Usually, children mentioned aspects related to social media only, such as *"getting many likes"*[135] or *"cyberbullying."*[136] In terms of privacy, most children only reasoned that there are issues when you post a picture on social media publicly, where strangers,[137] scammers and fraudsters[138] could see your photo. In Cambodia, children were worried that their picture would be used to *"trick [their] family or make them believe something that is not true."*[139] Children in Kenya and Cambodia usually advised to remove the photo from social media, not mentioning any dangers relating to uploading the photo to an AI app. Some children did mention that AI app owners[140] or designers[141] could potentially see this information, but in general there was a big emphasis on the dangers of social media, making it seem like the dangers of AI might be overlooked.

In another scenario, children were asked about the benefits and dangers of asking AI a very personal question. Children gave similar answers as in the previous scenarios, where children talked about the risk of their information being taken, leaked,[142] disseminated[143] and misused.[144] Children feared mostly that they would lose control over their information or photos that could lead to inappropriate use.[145] Children advised not to share personal information like this in the first place, or avoid doing so in the future.[146] While this is generally good advice, it overlooks the fact that with everything that children feed AI, they leave a digital footprint.

While the children displaced from Ukraine in Poland did not do this exercise, the digital footprint came up as an important topic. One girl recalled that she got scared of AI, when *"one time ChatGPT wrote information about me. It knew information about me. That was scary."*[147] Her friend in the group reminded her that she told ChatGPT that information prior and that the technology will remember that. They both agreed that this is scary. The theme of privacy was of particular importance for children displaced from Ukraine, as concerns about data, visibility and being "*known*" by technology are closely linked to safety in a displacement context.

135 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
136 Children consultation 4 in Kenya and 1 in the Philippines
137 Children consultation 1 and 4 in Kenya
138 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
139 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
140 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
141 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
142 Children consultation 2 and 3 in Kenya
143 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
144 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia and 3 in Kenya
145 Children consultation 1 in Nepal, 1 in Cambodia and 3 in Kenya
146 Children consultation 2, 3 and 4 in Kenya, 1 in Cambodia and 1 in Nepal
147 Children consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland

3.6 Current initiatives are not enough to protect us from AI risks

In each country, stakeholders and children mentioned various laws and regulations that were essential puzzle pieces to protect children from AI risks. Usually, countries have certain laws in place around children's safety and online safety, but lack those that have a specific focus on AI. Stakeholders mentioned that since AI is still relatively new, but is developing so fast that policies and safeguards cannot keep up. Stakeholders mentioned the following to be in place:

Cambodia

Child Online Protection guidelines for the digital technology industry; Digital Media, Information and Literacy Competency Framework; AI Nation - AI Readiness Assessment Methodology Program, still in draft phase and nearly finalised for assessment; Personal Data Protection Law; draft Cybersecurity Protection Law; draft AI National Strategy and Roadmap; Responsible Ministries: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications; E-Commerce Law; Consumer Protection Law; Civil Code; Inter-ministerial proclamation involving around 170 ministries and institution; Law on suppression of Human trafficking and sexual exploitation; Draft Personal Data Protection; National Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Violence against Children.

Nepal

The Electronic Transactions Act, 2063 (2006); the Act Relation to Children, 2075 (2018); Rules Relating to Children, 2078 (2021); Nepal Constitution 2027 (2015), Article 39; SOP Draft on Online Safety; UN Guidelines on Child Protection (1989), the AI policy, the Cybersecurity Policy (2013, updated in 2021).

Philippines

RA 11930 (Anti-online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation on children, Implementing Rules and Regulations, and Strategic Plan); RA 11313 (Safe Spaces Act); RA 10173 (Data Privacy Act); RA 9208 as ammended (Anti Trafficking in Persons); CICC (Cybercrime Investigation and Coordinating Centre); ACG (Anti-Cybercrime Group).

Europe

Digital safety education at school and for parents, apps obtaining consent for users under 13 years old, campaigns of NGOs and organisations on AI-related risks.

Kenya

Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, ODPC.

Stakeholders in most countries indicated that these laws, regulations and policies are helpful, but that there are only loose elements that do not capture the issue of AI-related harm fully. Therefore, stakeholders in most countries indicated that a specific legislative framework around AI-related risks needs to be developed,[148] including regulations around the design of AI apps and what kind of information can be fed into AI.[149] The stakeholders also identified a lack of AI-specific efforts in existing actions or responses in child protection. They found that there are many ongoing initiatives, for instance on online safety, but they lack a specific application to AI. Stakeholders think that the lack of specific AI regulations might be due to the novelty of the topic, as well as many professionals not being confident about the topic.[150]

Another big gap that was mentioned across countries was the lack of reporting mechanisms.[151] Children in the focus groups often mentioned that they wouldn't know where to report cases of harm caused by AI.[152] Stakeholders mentioned that they do not have these specific mechanisms in place, but stakeholders in Cambodia did mention that child helplines could always be used, or to make a report to the Telecommunication Authority.[153] Children never mentioned this as an appropriate response.

Stakeholders in Cambodia questioned the support around the disclosure or report of AI-related harm stating that children may hide issues from their parents, are fearful of their reaction, feel ashamed and therefore do not seek parental support. If children did disclose AI harm, they may be met with victim blaming or discouragement of reporting by parents due to fear of familial shame. Other stakeholders note that information and guidance systems specifically on AI risks are currently missing, so that support systems are running behind and are not so up to date that they can guide children to the right referral mechanisms and subsequent support.

148 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia, Nepal, and Kenya
149 Stakeholder consultation in Kenya
150 Stakeholder consultation in Kenya
151 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia, Poland
152 Children consultation 1 and 4 in Kenya
153 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia

3.7 We are worried about AI risks, but we mostly want to enjoy the benefits

The identified gaps in these protection systems leave room for harm to occur to children. In the paragraphs above, we already described risks that were mentioned around privacy, misinformation and online scams. Children were particularly concerned about how their information, pictures and videos might be used or misused. They confessed that they weren't really sure how AI worked and who could see this information, but some children worried that *"AI can misuse our photos and videos so it can morph our images and even be used by others to blackmail us by showing those edited photos and videos."*[154] Similar fears were shared in Cambodia and Nepal, showing children's awareness of the risks of AI. On other occasions, children mostly echoed warnings of others rather than showing an internalised fear, with children sharing *"the teacher said it could be worse, because it limits creativity and learning from our own work"*,[155] *"my parents said that it is sometimes dangerous"*[156] and *"we use AI like ChatGPT to complete our homework, but on social media, we also see that AI is used for bad purposes. So, we are confused whether using AI for homework is bad."*[157]

Both stakeholders and children noted the risk of overuse of AI. Stakeholders mostly phrased this as being fully dependent on AI,[158] and children said they get addicted.[159] The dependency would in their reasoning mostly lead to *"people los[ing] their own creativity"*[160] and a decrease in intelligence.[161] With the latter, children and stakeholders described this differently. With children using the word *"lazy"*[162] or that *"AI is making your brain rot"*[163] and stakeholders saying that *"it diminishes children's ability to think critically"*[164] because AI can be an echochamber,[165] both in how it responds, what content it suggests and who it links children to.[166] In Cambodia, stakeholders linked this to getting tunnel vision.[167] Stakeholders mostly worried that children were not able to differentiate between right and wrong information, but in a few of the groups it was explicitly mentioned that children know that AI is designed to agree with you, that *"AI's answers are about 50% correct and 50% wrong"*[168] and that *"sometimes it is accurate, but sometimes it can be misleading or false."*[169] In the Philippines, children shared mostly how you can identify AI-generated images, for instance that there are errors in anatomy, such as a *"third leg"*[170] or more commonly in videos, with unnatural movements or unpredictable actions, such as *"in the middle of talking, the character somersaulted."*[171]

Another often heard risk is that AI could expose children to inappropriate content. Children were mostly concerned about seeing sexual[172] and violent content.[173] In the Philippines, one child shared that they *"wouldn't recommend Character AI because it has bots that generate images or characters that are often sexually explicit or violent."*[174] In a few of the groups, children spoke about AI-related sexual harm, mostly about deepfakes. In Cambodia and Nepal, children

154 Child consultation 1 in Nepal
155 Children consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
156 Children consultation 2 in Kenya
157 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
158 Stakeholder consultation in Nepal, Cambodia, Kenya, Poland
159 Children consultation 3 in Kenya, children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
160 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia, Stakeholder consultation in Nepal and Kenya
161 Stakeholder consultation in Nepal, Kenya and Cambodia
162 Children consultation 1, 2 and 3 in Kenya, 1 in the Philippines
163 Children consultation of children displaced from Ukraine in Slovakia
164 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia and children consultation 2 in Cambodia
165 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia
166 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia
167 Programme Manager NGO, Stakeholder workshop in Nepal
168 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
169 Children consultation 2 in Cambodia
170 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines
171 Children consultation 2 in the Philippines
172 Children consultation 1 and 3 in Kenya
173 Children consultation 3 in Kenya
174 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines

mentioned deepfakes spontaneously, with one child stating: *"I just learned about an app called deepfake,"*[175] and another saying that *"someone might take our photo, edit it to make it look like we're not wearing clothes and then send it to our parents or family. They might believe that they actually took such a photo."* These quotes show growing awareness and worry about AI-related online sexual exploitation. In Poland, children displaced from Ukraine alluded to the topic when a boy shared that AI *"can make nice videos from pictures."* When a girl asked to see these, the boys laughed and said that *"you can make someone dance and make a reel."* The facilitator asked if they had ever heard about deepfakes and although they indicated without words that they did, they didn't want to say anything about it. These insights illustrate a tension between children's realities of exposure to AI-enabled sexual harms and difficulties in speaking about these.

Relatedly, children and stakeholders often mentioned the risk of AI being used for bullying. Participants shared that the sharing of personal information or deepfakes led to offline consequences, for which children were bullied about the shared content.[176] In some focus groups, children and stakeholders recalled that bullying with AI-generated images even led to suicide.[177]

Fourth, only stakeholders identified that this would also have an impact on emotions and the social fabric of society. For emotions, they worried about becoming emotionally detached,[178] becoming more aggressive[179] or getting depressed.[180] Related to that, they thought overuse of AI would lead to social isolation[181] and withdrawal from society.[182] Stakeholders mostly worried that AI would replace real interactions, because AI is always readily available and is agreeable.[183] In Nepal, a stakeholder shared about *"the concept of a virtual girlfriend or boyfriend. In this generation, anime is very popular and [children] are influenced by it. The AI creates a persona or girlfriend as prompted per their liking in every aspect. It has caused people not to get into a real relationship as their needs are being fulfilled by them."*[184] In Cambodia, this concept was even taken further and compared to *"a sex doll, which was safer due to no retaliation and emotions. Now AI fulfills every need, providing emotional support, available all the time, always listening. It fulfills very idealistically, that the person gets detached from the real world."*[185] Stakeholders in Cambodia were also worried that children are getting *"emotionally less dependent on adults in terms of getting answers"*, disrupting a natural parent-child dynamic.[186]

The worries of stakeholders mostly pertained to AI setting unrealistic expectations about the real world, mainly in the agreeability and availability of AI in comparison to human contact, ultimately affecting relationships.[187] While these concerns weren't addressed in all focus groups, the children displaced from Ukraine in Poland mentioned they knew many *"Chat-GPT-a-holics,"* and friends that are in relationships with AI. In their recommendations, they said that you shouldn't be in a friendship or romantic relationship with AI, as *"real friends are always better than AI."* For parents, they cautioned against using AI for child rearing advice, as *"AI can give wrong information and raising children*

175 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia
176 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia, Kenya, Philippines, Nepal, Poland, children consultation 1 in the Philippines
177 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines and 4 in Kenya, stakeholder consultations in Poland, Kenya, Cambodia
178 Stakeholder consultation in Nepal
179 Stakeholder consultation in Nepal
180 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia, Kenya and Nepal
181 Stakeholder consultation in Nepal, Cambodia and Kenya
182 Stakeholder consultation in Nepal
183 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia and Nepal
184 Stakeholder consultation in Nepal
185 Psychiatrist, stakeholder workshop in Nepal
186 Stakeholder consultation in Cambodia
187 Data M&E Specialist, Stakeholder workshop in Nepal

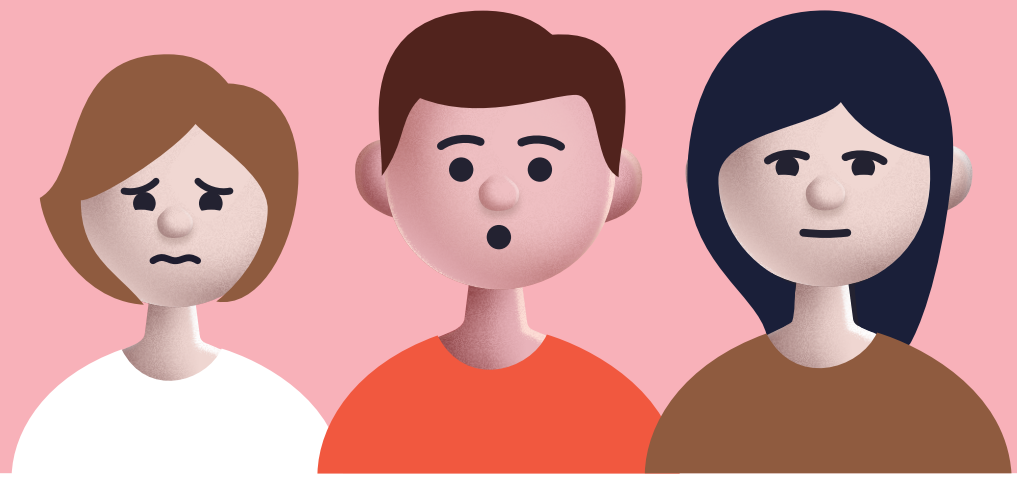
is very important." [188] These notes from children, although not shared globally, demonstrate that concerns about emotional dependency are already recognised by young users themselves, challenging assumptions that children are unaware of these relational risks.

Overall, this section shows a consistent pattern where adults often foreground risk, especially longer-term developmental and relational harms and children foreground benefits, while r ecognising certain risks in practical, everyday terms, such as overuse and misleading information.

Specific themes for children displaced from Ukraine

While many of the risks described above were raised across countries, some themes were more prominent in certain contexts and in particular for children displaced from Ukraine. Stakeholders working with children displaced from Ukraine raised specific concerns that were closely linked to experiences of war and displacement. These included the use of AI-generated images and content to bully or stigmatise Ukrainian children in host countries, for example through material portraying them as "*Nazis*" or spreading war-related misinformation. Stakeholders also described cases in which children were targeted or pressured to create or disseminate AI-generated war-related content.

In addition, stakeholders emphasised how displacement and social isolation can amplify risks associated with AI use. Children who are separated from familiar support networks, experience language barriers, or feel excluded in host communities may be more likely to turn to AI for information, emotional support or advice. Stakeholders and children expressed particular concern about children seeking emotional or psychological advice from AI tools, where stakeholders worried about children not wanting to seek offline help, exacerbating isolation. These insights illustrate how children and stakeholders' concerns around AI are shaped by local experiences, vulnerabilities and protection systems.



188 Children consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland

4 Conclusion

4.1 Summary of findings

In this report, we shared how children and stakeholders view AI and its associated benefits and risks. Across countries and contexts, we see that children described widespread and diverse use of AI for education, creativity, entertainment, and social connection. AI was valued for its accessibility, speed and non-judgmental nature, enabling children to learn independently, explore interest, overcome barriers and cope with loneliness or stress. These perceived benefits were strongly shaped by age, gender and place of residence, with older children, boys, and children in urban settings reporting more frequent and varied use.

The findings also highlight significant gaps in understanding, protection and oversight. Children's conceptualisations of AI were largely functional and service-oriented, with considerable confusion around how AI differs from social media, how data are stored, and how AI systems learn and retain information. This limited understanding constrained children's ability to foresee longer-term consequences, particularly in relation to privacy, digital footprints and misinformation.

While children did recognise certain risks, such as misleading information, inappropriate content and overuse, these were typically framed in immediate and practical terms rather than as cumulative or structural harms. In contrast, stakeholders more often foregrounded longer-term risks, including dependency, emotional detachment, social isolation, and sexual abuse and exploitation. Together, these differing perspectives illustrate how children tend to prioritise perceived benefits and "wise use" of AI, while adults focus on potential future harms, pointing to a disconnect that has important implications for safeguarding and regulation.

4.2 Linking participants' perspectives to the online sexual exploitation landscape

This study identified a number of shared patterns in children's and stakeholders' perceptions and use of AI across diverse contexts in Africa, Asia and Europe. Across countries, children commonly described AI as useful, service-oriented technology, while stakeholders more often emphasised risk. In addition, children only sometimes mentioned topics like deepfakes and image manipulation. Comparing these insights to current literature, there does seem to be a disconnect between the children's self-expressed concerns and the magnitude of threats, especially of online sexual exploitation, by literature. This silence, discomfort, and limited articulation should not be interpreted as evidence of low prevalence, but rather as highlighting the limits of self-reporting, as sexual harms are often difficult for children to

articulate due to shame, fear of blame, and lack of language (Parti & Szabo 2024).

This interpretative gap underscores the need to analyse the themes that children brought forward in section 3 through the lens of online sexual exploitation. The existing literature and expert evidence demonstrates that AI technologies significantly amplify online sexual exploitation, highlighting three critical areas where children's findings intersect with the systemic risk.

Conceptual gap with amplified risks

Children tended to view AI as a neutral, functional tool or servant, while admitting that they do not always fully understand how AI works. This limited conceptualisation prevents them from grasping certain risks that are unique to generative AI. Because children see AI as a helpful service, they might be less likely to employ the necessary caution, such as protecting personal data, required to guard against the platform's capacity to be misused for mass creation and dissemination of abusive content.

On the contrary, existing literature and expert evidence demonstrate that AI technologies can significantly amplify child sexual exploitation and abuse, both online and offline. Research highlights three key ways in which AI escalates these harms: by proliferating the creation of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), including highly realistic AI-generated 'deepfakes'; by scaling grooming, sexual extortion and trafficking through automation, impersonation and coercion; and through the ways AI systems are designed, trained and released, often without adequate safeguards to prevent misuse (IWF 2023; Thorn 2024; Parti and Szabo 2024; Wolbers et al. 2025). Generative AI has drastically lowered technical barriers to producing CSAM, enabling offenders to create, customise and disseminate abusive content at scale, often without any direct contact with children, while also increasing the realism and perceived legitimacy of such material (IWF 2024; Thorn 2024).

Legal vacuum and design flaws

Children reported using AI most frequently for educational, creative and entertainment purposes, and notably, for emotional support. While these uses highlight the benefits of AI, they simultaneously create vulnerability. The literature confirms that offenders are increasingly using AI to scale grooming and sexual extortion through automation, impersonation and coercion (Thorn, 2024; Barassi, 2025). A child's reliance on AI for emotional support could be exploited by an AI-powered conversational agent or an offender using generative AI to create a personalised, long-term relationship, leading to highly effective and tailored grooming. These risks of online sexual exploitation are possible through the rapid, unregulated deployment of AI (Dubrosa et al., 2024). Major generative AI tools were released in the public market before any regulations or ethical codes of conducts have been established (Butler, 2023; 5Rights 2025). This reality, which children implicitly acknowledge by their fears, has created a dangerous legal vacuum where the development of AI significantly outpaces the establishments of laws, legislation and legal frameworks (Olsen, 2022; Dubrosa et al., 2024). This has resulted in increased impunity around malicious uses of these technologies. This legal vacuum creates fertile ground for misuse and abuse, as there is increased room for impunity around malicious uses of these technologies, given such legal grey areas (Dubrosa et al. 2024).

Furthermore, the design choices present dual risks of online sexual exploitation. Open-source AI, while promoting transparency and innovation, increases risk because the code can be easily accessed and manipulated to create new models that carry out harmful functions (IWF, 2023; eSafety Commissioner, 2023). Closed-source AI, while offering more control, compromises the transparency needed for external ethical assessment and oversight, potentially allowing companies to use the tools in harmful ways (eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

AI as a preventative mechanism of harm

Lastly, throughout the discussions with stakeholders and children in the country, AI was rarely discussed in terms of prevention of harm for children. As discussed thus far, AI brings undeniable risks in terms of amplifying child sexual exploitation and abuse perpetration, and associated harms for children. However, such technologies likewise provide some promising opportunities to address child sexual exploitation and abuse. Experts and the literature confirm that the current scale and scope of child sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly online, has reached a point far beyond solely manual, human-led interventions to effectively manage the problem Wolbers et al. 2025). AI technologies can ultimately play a key role in augmenting and automating human efforts to address child sexual exploitation and abuse (Babu et al. 2024).

At the same time, AI technology is not a panacea and cannot replace human intervention (Wolbers et al. 2025; Dubrosa et al. 2024). Experts emphasised the need for caution around errors and false positives, as well as biases that may reproduce unequal protection for children from minority groups, depending on the data models are trained on. There are also legitimate concerns around privacy and the handling of sensitive data when AI is used for detection and enforcement (Van der Watt 2023; Singh and Nambiar 2024; Stockhem 2020). Yet, the literature suggests that more privacy-preserving approaches are possible, including client-side or automated scanning that avoids storing content and only escalates high-risk cases for human review, and interventions that prioritise prevention and support (e.g., warnings, referrals, and deterrence) rather than always reporting users (Levy and Robinson 2022; Gajula et al. 2024; eSafety Commissioner 2023). This points to a broader gap in the discussions: while risks were frequently raised, there was far less attention to how AI could be governed and designed to strengthen prevention and response to child sexual exploitation and abuse, alongside wider efforts to address its root causes.

4.3 Recommendations

Taken together, these findings underscore the need for child protection frameworks, legislation and AI governance to be informed not only by children's expressed concerns, but also by robust evidence on the scale, mechanisms and impacts of AI-driven sexual exploitation and abuse. It is critical to note that the responsibility for navigating these harms does not rest with the child. This limited understanding is common, even among adults, and is a consequence of the rapid, system-level deployment of technology. The duty lies with technology companies, governments and regulators to establish legal and ethical safeguards that ensure AI is designed to serve all users' rights and wellbeing, rather than being exploited to their detriment. The following sections provide some concrete recommendations for policymakers and governments, law enforcement and justice, schools and teachers, parents and caregivers, and civil society.

What we advise to safely use AI

Children in all countries were aware of various risks of AI, but agreed that there were more good things to benefit from. They had a lot to say about how their peers should use AI safely, of which their main point was that AI should predominantly be used for learning, information gathering and research and not to discuss personal or private matters.[189] Here are some other concrete tips that children have about the use of AI:

- *"Avoid sharing AI generated images or videos publicly on social media."*[190]
- *"Avoid playing or misusing AI for fun only."*[191]
- *"Avoid asking inappropriate or harmful questions to AI."*[192]
- *"If you plan to use AI tools, opt for the popular ones that are most widely used. If you use new apps or unfamiliar ones, they may not be reliable."*[193]
- *"Don't fully trust AI, be cautious."*[194]
- *"Verify the users' age to make AI adapt to a specific age range."*[195]
- *"If anything happens through AI, we should tell parents or teachers immediately."* [196]
- *"Do not use AI for therapy."*[197]
- *"Don't be a ChatGPT-holic."*[198]
- *"Do not have a romantic relationship with ChatGPT."*[199]
- *"Do not make AI your friend."*[200]
- *"Always let your parents know which AI source you use."*[201]
- *"Be careful sharing your thoughts with AI."*[202]
- *"Always check information with other sources, because there are situations where AI is completely wrong."*[203]
- *"Avoid plagiarism. You can borrow ideas, but don't claim them as your own."*[204]

189 Children consultation 1 in Cambodia, 1 and 2 in Nepal, Children displaced from Ukraine in Poland, 1 in the Philippines
190 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
191 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
192 Children consultation 1 in Nepal
193 Children consultation 2 in the Philippines
194 Children consultation 1 in Nepal, 1 in the Philippines and Children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
195 Children consultation 1 in the Philippines
196 Children consultation 2 in Nepal
197 Children consultation 1 in Ukraine
198 Children consultation 1 in Ukraine
199 Children consultation 1 in Ukraine
200 Children consultation 1 in Ukraine
291 Children consultation 1 in Philippines
202 Children consultation 1 in Philippines
203 Child consultation for children displaced from Ukraine in Poland
204 Child consultation 1 in the Philippines

Policymakers and governments

Children and stakeholders consistently called for an AI-specific regulatory framework with an explicit child-safety focus, including clearer rules for AI apps and games, and stronger reporting pathways. Current legal approaches are fragmented and often fail to explicitly criminalise AI-generated CSAM and other AI-facilitated CSEA offences, limiting cross-border enforcement and accountability.

Priorities

1. **Criminalising AI-generated CSAM** (creation, possession, distribution) and the **use of AI to facilitate grooming, sexual extortion and trafficking**;

2. Mandating **Child Safety by Design** requirements for AI developers and hosting platforms across the full product lifecycle (design, deployment, maintenance), including transparency, testing and independent review;

3. **Strengthening reporting mechanisms** that are child-friendly and AI-specific, and ensuring cases are acted upon; and

4. Embedding **meaningful child participation in policy-making and AI governance**, as children in the consultations emphasised that they must be included with adult support in decision-making.

Stakeholders also emphasised **enforcement**, including penalties for misuse and ethical certification or auditing approaches for AI companies operating in child-facing contexts.

Tech platforms and AI developers

Consultations and the literature converge on the need for p**rotective mechanisms, stricter enforcement, and shared accountability**.

Practical Actions

1. Robust **reporting tools** that children can use;

2. **Filters and safeguards** to reduce exposure to sexual/violent content;

3. **Watermarking and provenance signals** to support detection of deepfakes; and

4. **Preventing features that enable sexualised manipulation of children's images** (e.g., disabling high-risk image editing functions).

These measures should be implemented as Child Safety by Design, meaning guardrails are built-in proactively (not retrofitted), with ongoing monitoring and external evaluation. Detection and moderation systems should support human review rather than fully outsourcing decision-making to AI, while still enabling platforms to act faster and at scale. Finally, both consultations and literature emphasise that platforms should collaborate with governments, CSOs, teachers and parents, and include children's perspectives in co-design so safeguards reflect children's real experiences of risk.

Law enforcement and justice actors

Stakeholders recommended **strong reporting mechanisms and clear police capacity**, including specialised child protection units trained on AI-related harms. Effective enforcement requires updated legal frameworks (including explicit coverage of AI-generated CSAM and AI-facilitated grooming/extortion), alongside training for investigators and prosecutors to interpret AI-driven evidence and respond proportionately. The literature also underscores that LEA responses must be supported by scalable tools (e.g., triage and prioritisation systems), but with robust safeguards, human oversight, and attention to bias and false positives.

Schools and teachers

Children and stakeholders recommended that schools expand online safety beyond social media to include AI, and that teachers be trained to recognise AI-related risks and guide children in safe use. The literature reinforces that education should be age-appropriate, practical, and cover how to recognise, respond to and report AI-related harms, including grooming patterns and deepfakes, without relying on restrictive bans alone. Teacher training should also support safe classroom practice (e.g., addressing plagiarism constructively, building critical thinking about AI outputs, and creating non-judgemental spaces for disclosure).

Parents and caregivers

Consultations emphasised relationship-based prevention: spending quality time, staying engaged with children's daily activities, noticing behavioural changes, using boundaries ("no Wi-Fi zones"), and encouraging critical thinking so children can better judge misinformation. Parental training is needed that helps adults understand AI risks (including AI-facilitated CSEA), build safe disclosure environments, and reflect on family digital practices that may increase risk (e.g., sharing children's images publicly). AI challenges traditional parent–child dynamics making the goal not perfect adult control, but supported, ongoing learning and open communication.

Child rights organisations and civil society

Stakeholders recommended awareness raising, behaviour strategies, and targeted support for children affected by AI-related harms, including ensuring **offline mental health and psychosocial support** so AI is not seen as the only option.

Recommendations

1. Developing and evaluating **interventions that combine prevention with response**;
2. **Supporting child victims with tailored services (**with careful exploration of anonymous reporting tools where appropriate, while not replacing human support); and
3. Conducting **participatory research** that centres children's perspectives on AI-driven risks, particularly where children's silence or discomfort may hide exposure to harm.

4.4 Limitations

The findings of this study should be seen in the context of the limitations. As this study employed a qualitative approach, prioritising the depth of the insights over the generalisability, the findings are not intended to be representative of all children's views globally. They only provide context-specific perspectives of the five contexts studied and even within those contexts, the small number of participants per country does not allow to speak for the entire country. This is especially important to consider in the light of internet connectivity and access to technology, as the results are highly influenced by local access to technology, socio-economic factors and context.

Another challenge of the choice for a qualitative approach, in particular focus group discussions, is the potential apprehension of children to share about sensitive topics such as sexual exploitation. As we have seen in the findings, related topics such as deepfakes were mentioned, but not discussed elaborately. It was clear that children were aware of the risk of sexual harm related to AI, but the sensitivity of the topic and the group setting could have impacted the extent and way in which these were discussed.

4.5 Conclusions

Across this study, children's and stakeholders' perspectives consistently showed that AI is experienced by children primarily as a tool for learning, creativity, connection and support, while risks, particularly sexual exploitation and abuse, were less visible in children's own accounts and more strongly articulated by adults. These silences, discomforts and mismatches do not indicate an absence of harm, but rather highlight gaps in awareness, language, protection systems and supportive spaces for disclosure. At the same time, the findings underscore that children do not want to disengage from AI, but instead seek guidance and safeguards so that they can fully benefit from these technologies.

With AI fast evolving, current safeguards are not keeping pace. This study highlighted many gaps in protection systems that leave children vulnerable. A whole-of-society approach is therefore required, bringing together governments, tech companies, law enforcement, child rights organisations, researchers, educators, parents, and children. Only through coordinated, child-centred action across these actors can AI be shaped in ways that protect children from harm, while preserving the benefits they value and actively seek.

5

Annex I
Overview of Key AI systems

Machine learning (ML) is a key application of AI technology, whereby systems are equipped with the ability to learn, act and improve their function, without being explicitly programmed (Thorn 2024; Butman et al. 2020; Expertsystems 2020; Babu et al. 2024). ML algorithms build a model, based on a (preferably large) training dataset, to make predictions, decisions or generate wholly new content (Thorn 2024; Butman et al. 2020; eSafety Commissioner 2023). They process data using mathematical systems structured like the human brain, called **artificial neural networks**, to find statistical patterns in data, to correspondingly learn skills (eSafety Commissioner 2023).

AI technology can be wholly software-based, meaning it occurs on devices in virtual environments, or it can be hardware-based, meaning it is embedded within machinery or equipment in the physical world, such as with autonomous driving cars, drones or advanced robots (Stockhem 2020). Further, such technology has in fact existed for decades, as a research field of computer science (IWF 2023). Yet, it gained major prominence and public attention in November 2022, after the release of ChatGPT, a popular text generation AI programme, developed by Open AI (ibid).

AI technology that exists today is extremely fast and accurate, and is only getting stronger (IWF 2023; Thorn 2024). The advance of such technology brings great promise for society, to increase efficiency, accuracy, productivity and performance across various tasks, and to enable humans to explore new, imaginative horizons that were previously inconceivable (Anjila 2021; Stockhem 2020). Yet, it likewise brings certain uncertainties and risks, which will be touched on in the following section. Key benefits and risks of AI in relation to child sexual exploitation and abuse will be explored in detail later in this paper. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to delve into the broader benefits and risks of AI in relation to other topics.

Traditional vs. generative AI

Traditional AI defines earlier approaches of such technology, that do not necessarily employ ML, or draw upon data to carry out functions, but rather are programmed with specific rules, logic and knowledge, to perform more recognition or classification based tasks (Expertsystems 2020; High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence 2019; eSafety Commissioner 2023). They carry out their function in more predictable ways, following explicit instructions set in place

(Expertsystems 2020). Some examples include voice assistant programmes, such as Siri or Alexa, autonomous driving vehicles, or face recognition technologies (Singh and Nambiar 2019).

Generative AI is a more experimental form of such technology, defined by its capacity to create completely new outputs, including text, image, audio or video content, or a combination of these modalities, using ML technology, instead of merely making predictions or classifications (eSafety Commissioner 2023; Thorn 2024; IWF 2023). The artificial neural networks used for generative AI are trained on especially large datasets (eSafety Commissioner 2023). Further, the quality of generative AI has rapidly advanced in recent years, due to increased data availability for training models, computing power and enhanced capacity of artificial neural networks (ibid). In light of such improvements, various generative AI tools have recently escalated in popularity and use, with leading services often funded and/or engineered by major tech companies, such as Microsoft and Google (Butler 2023). Some main examples of generative AI applications are named below, along with an explanation of their function and key examples in use today.

Type of generative AI	Function	Examples
Text generators	These text-based programmes or chatbots use ML and natural language processing (NLP) models, trained on large quantities of textual data, to understand, interpret and generate human language (IWF 2023; eSafety Commissioner 2023; Kokolaki and Fragopoulou 2025). They can translate, answer questions and perform other language based tasks, such as editing, summarising and explaining concepts (IWF 2023; eSafety Commissioner 2023).	Chat GPT (developed by Open AI) PaLM (developed by Google) LLaMA (developed by Meta) My AI (developed by Snapchat)
Image generators	These tools draw upon ML models, mainly what is termed diffusion models, to produce unique, hyper-realistic images in response to textual, image or audio prompts, depending on how the model is developed (Thiel et al. 2023; IWF 2023). Most common image generators today operate as text-to-image generators, yet there are also widespread tools that can alter pre-existing images (IWF 2023). Such technology is so advanced today that many applications can produce images that are indistinguishable from real photos (Olson 2022; Kokolaki and Fragopoulou 2025; IWF 2023).	DALL-E (developed by Open AI) Midjourney (dewveloped by Midjourney Inc.) Stable Diffusion (developed by Stability AI)

Voice generators	These tools combine ML, neural networks and NLP models to understand, interpret and generate human language, to convert text into realistic sounding human speech (eSafety Commissioner 2023; Theil et al. 2023).	VALL-E (developed by Microsoft) Murf Studio (developed by Murf AI)
Video generators	These applications use ML and NLP models to create video content, from textual, image or audio inputs (Thiel et al. 2023; IWF 2023). This technology is still being refined however, and many tools are currently closed source (this concept is explained in more detail below), given development and review are still underway (Thiel et al. 2023). Yet, the ability to create hyper-realistic full-motion video content within seconds is a possibility in the foreseeable future (IWF 2023).	Stable Video Diffusion (developed by Stability AI) Sora (developed by Open AI) Veo (developed by Google)

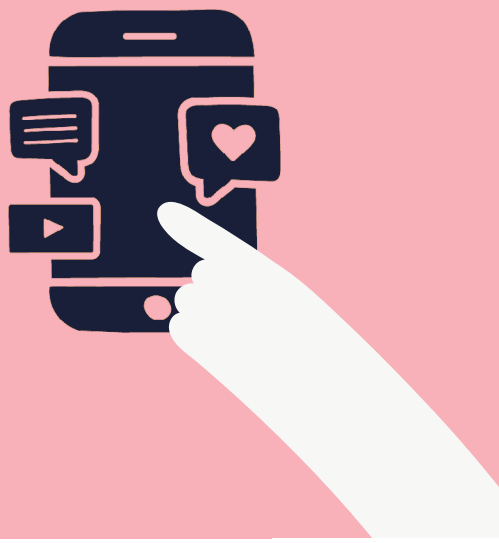
Today, these generative AI applications and tools are extremely user-friendly and easy to use, allowing people to create hyper-realistic, human-like content at scale, regardless of their level of technical expertise (Thorn 2024; Thiel et al. 2023). Such applications evidently have legitimate uses to help people learn, explore creativity, produce novel content, streamline tasks, and experience materials across different media (Thiel et al. 2023).

The future of AI

There is persistent uncertainty around how exactly AI technologies will continue to develop and advance into the future. All types of AI discussed so far come under what is termed Narrow AI. This signifies applications that are designed to perform a single, specific function or task (Stockhem 2020). Some thinkers proclaim that AI is moving towards human-level, or human-competitive intelligence, known as General AI, which is theoretically capable of performing any intellectual task (eSafety Commissioner 2023). Yet, no real examples of this type of AI exist so far, as it is still under research. There is also the hypothetical Super Intelligent AI, whereby such technologies are able to fully surpass human capabilities and intelligence, across all areas (Aithal 2024). However, these ideas around AI potentially replacing human capacity remain speculative, as thus far these tools cannot function completely autonomously (Van der Watt 2023; eSafety Commissioner 2023; Halpern and Brown 2021). They still largely rely on human intelligence, input, training and moderation to a degree. Nevertheless, at this point in time, the complete capabilities of AI technologies into the future remain unknown, inconceivable to current human perception and comprehension (Kokolaki and Fragopoulou 2025).

6

Annex II
AI Apps Used by Children



App	Description	Cambodia	Nepal	Philippines	Kenya	Children from Ukraine
180 Score	An AI-powered sports app, primarily for football (soccer), that offers live scores, real-time updates, news aggregation, and detailed statistics, leveraging AI for match predictions and analysis				●	
Anara	An AI-powered research platform designed for scientists, students, and researchers to find, understand, organise, and summarise scientific documents.			●		
Apple Intelligence	Personal AI system integrated into Apple products and functions (e.g. iPhone, Siri).				●	
AskAI	An AI-powered question-and-answer platform to provide users with quick responses to their inquiries.				●	
Blackbox AI	An AI-powered coding assistant and software development platform designed to accelerate coding workflows by generating, debugging, and explaining code in real-time.			●		
Buddy	A voice-based AI tutor app designed for children to learn English. Focusing on vocabulary, pronunciation and communication skills through interactive and playful games and cartoons.				●	
Canva*	A cloud-based graphic design tool with integrated AI features, designed to enable users to easily create social media graphics, presentations, posters, and various other types of visual content.	●		●		

* Applications that use AI features, not true AI apps.

App	Description	Cambodia	Nepal	Philippines	Kenya	Children from Ukraine
CapCut*	A user-friendly video editing app for social media that leverages AI to automate complex tasks for content creators.	●				
CharacterAI	An interactive AI platform where users chat with and create characters with distinct personalities.	●		●	●	
ChatGPT	A generative AI chatbot developed by OpenAI that uses large language models (LLMs) to understand and generate human-like text, code, and images in response to user prompts. It is a versatile tool for writing, coding, brainstorming, and answering questions, available in free and paid versions.	●	●	●	●	●
Dola	A free AI chatbot developed by ByteDance (formerly known as Cici). It is a multifunctional assistant for writing, coding, translation, image generation, managing schedules and summarising documents through a conversational, chat-like interface. It focuses on personalised interactions, including emotional support.			●		
Claude	An AI assistant developed by Anthropic, designed for high-level reasoning, coding and language conversations. It has a core focus on safety.				●	
DeepSeek	An advanced AI powered search and data intelligence platform that develops powerful and cost-efficient open-source LMMs (large language models).	●	●		●	●
Discord AI*	AI technologies integrated into the Discord platform to enhance user experience, a utomate server management and facilitate content creation.	●				
Duolingo AI*	AI integrated into the language learning app Duolingo to create personalised lessons, explain mistakes and enable conversational practice.	●				
FaceApp*	A photo editing app that uses AI to transform images by applying various filters, effects, and age filters.				●	
Fin	An AI agent for customer service. Focused on resolving complex queries and delivering higher resolution rates.	●				
Gamma*	An AI powered platform designed to create presentations, documents and webpages using simple text prompts.			●		

* Applications that use AI features, not true AI apps.

App	Description	Cam-bodia	Nepal	Philip-pines	Kenya	Children from Ukraine
Gemini (AI)	An AI assistant integrated into Google to assist with brainstorming, coding, analysis and content creation. Also a generative AI chatbot.	●	●	●	●	●
Google AI	Integrated AI technologies and models developed by Google. It powers Gemini and AI overviews in Chrome, Workspace, Translate, Youtube, etc.	●	●		●	
Gram-marly*	A writing assistant that uses generative AI to go beyond basic grammar checking.			●		
Grok	An AI powered conversational assistant developed by xAI which is directly integrated into X.				●	
Hairapp*	A mobile app that uses AI to provide realistic, virtual and real-time hair styling, colour, and cut transformations.				●	
Hypic*	An AI power photo editing app designed to enhance, edit and stylize images using AI tools.	●				
Indrive*	A peer-to-peer ride-hailing app with integrated AI to optimise operations, enhance safety and accelerate user onboarding.		●			
Kiwi*	An AI powered platform that creates autonomous AI agent teams to automate and optimise labor-intensive workflows.				●	
LeoMind	AI platform focused on mental wellness and cognitive performance often used by professionals and students to release stress and prevent burnout.	●		●		
Lola	AI-powered assistant integrated in DotActiv, an management software, designed for planning, analysing, etc.			●		
Looka*	AI-powered design platform designed to create professional, customised logos and branding materials.				●	
Many-chat	AI chat marketing and automation platform designed to help businesses automate conversations on social media and messaging apps.	●				
Meta AI	AI assistant developed by Meta built directly into Meta's apps (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger, etc.).	●		●	●	
Micro-soft Co-Pilot	AI-powered assistant built directly into Windows, the Edge browser and Microsoft 365.	●		●		
Mobile Le-gends*	Advanced bot system used for practice, offline play and matchmaking assistance integrated into the mobile online battle arena application.	●				

* Applications that use AI features, not true AI apps.

App	Decription	Cam-bodia	Nepal	Philip-pines	Kenya	Children from Ukraine
Pathao*	AI-powered infrastructure that runs the Pathao app. Pathao is an app primarily operating in Bangladesh and Nepal handling services such as ride-sharing, food delivery, etc.					
Per-plexity	Answer engine that combines a search engine with the conversational abilities of AI. Especially used by researchers, students and professionals to help write cited summaries.					
Photo-shop*	An AI-powered co-pilot which uses prompts to make professional edits.					
Pomo-doro AI	An umbrella term for AI versions of the Pomodoro tool which adapt to a person's specific schedule and unique brain.					
Roblox*	AI tools integrated directly into the Roblox platform to help creators build games faster and players communicate more easily.					
Scoore. AI	Advanced AI-powered sports app, primarily for football (soccer), that offers predictions, interactive chat and advanced metrics.					
Sider	AI assistant that lives in a person's web browser. It combines ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini into a sidebar that follows you as you browse the web.					
SimiSimi	AI chatbot designed purely for entertainment. One of the oldest chatbots, launched in 2002.					
Snap-chat's My AI	A friendly chatbot integrated directly into the Snapchat app. Besides being a tool it is designed to be a 'friend'.					
Sora	A text-to-video AI model designed by OpenAI.					
Summa	Family of AI tools focused on high-speed transcription and summarisation.					
Suno	An generative AI platform that creates high-quality, full-length songs including lyrics, melodies and vocals using simple text prompts.					
Talking Tom*	A virtual pet using AI to create a deeper, more realistic companion.					
Tele-gram*	Messenger app using AI functions to summarise chats, translate messages and filter out spam.					
TikTok*	AI tools integrated in the short-form video platform, designed to (help) create videos and drive the content a person sees.					

* Applications that use AI features, not true AI apps.

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Terre des Hommes Netherlands is an international non-governmental organisation based in The Hague, Netherlands, and working globally with local partners.

Our mission is to **protect children by preventing and stopping child exploitation**, and by empowering them to make their voices count. We envision a world where **all children can flourish** free from exploitation. We are guided by values that are human-centred, playful, bold, and responsible.