Parenting
in the Digital Age

Salvați Copiii
Save the Children România

At national level, a real phenomenon has occurred around the connection of tragic events to the online challenge that targets children and adolescents, called "Blue Wale". Although these situations are not officially linked by the authorities, the impact at social level is very high and there is a feeling of fear especially among those with children in their care.

The general appeal seems to be blaming the parents, the teachers, or even the children. Our proposal is not to follow this provocation but to stop for a few moments to look in depth. We can transform this national context into an opportunity to open up more authentic discussions with children, to help them connect with life, the natural enjoyments of their age, the alternatives they have to socialize and, most importantly, to remind ourselves as adults that the relationships we cultivate with children are the basis for their development.

We invite you to ask your child or pupil what he or she understands from this massive promotion of the existence of dangerous challenges in the online environment. From our experience, this is the easiest way to understand how this information reaches children and how they relate to it. Regardless of his or her answer, you can use this discussion to get to a closer level with your child with more openness, curiosity and gentleness and to understand what his or her personal experience is.

How did children get so intimately connected to technology and smart devices?

We invite you to reflect at what age children first get acquainted with these devices, directly or indirectly, by seeing their parents absorbed by screens.

Often, technology becomes a nanny for situations where parents can not be with their children physically or emotionally. Receiving a device to distract him or her when the little one wanted to be with his parents, when he wanted to play with other objects or explore his space, when he was afraid or angry, determines him to take this association as an example and to continue replacing unfulfilled needs with various activities in the online environment.

Having such an experience in the early years of life can make the child equate technology with a way of getting rid of feelings he does not know how to manage, loneliness, the desire for exploration but with no clear direction, boredom and much more. In a scenario where this behavior persists in the long run, the little ones end up disconnecting from the reality inside of them, not knowing how to express real feelings or desires. Regarded with superficiality and without a real interest, the child might often seem in the eyes of the adults around him as being careless, confused, incongruent or negligent.

Paradoxically, the online environment is often treated as a remedy to loneliness in a world where more than 40% of the population has access to the Internet. Unfortunately, at the same time, a very suitable context is created for loneliness camouflaged by a lot of hours of navigating on social networks, taking selfies that hide sad eyes and promoting only some life sequences that do not capture the whole reality, seeming ideal.

With eyes absorbed by the screens, anyone, not just the child, can lose the connection with himself or herself and his loved ones, the child becoming quieter and more tempted to share intimate things with strangers. If you choose to see in comparative terms, it's easier for some people to get more confidence and more understanding from people on the Internet rather than deal with their close ones. It is not advisable to prioritize or to set ourselves in opposing teams because in reality each context has its own advantages and disadvantages, yet it depends on each individual's experience and, moreover, it tends overall to become rather complementary than exclusive. For digital natives, new technologies are part of the essential elements of their lives, and it is important for us to accept this and give children a good example on how to get them integrated in their lives in a balanced, useful and enjoyable way.

Technology is just a tool that makes real situation more obvious - children and teens present more often anxious and depressive manifestations and we, as adults around them, can contribute to changing this tendency by being more aware, more involved, more engaged by the desire to be close to them as they need us. The relationships children set up with their parents, with other family members, with friends and teachers are the foundation on which today's child will build upon in order to become an adult, partner, manager, colleague, politician, professional and so on. Starting from the understanding that children development is something that concerns each one of us, not just the parents, we invite you to ponder over children's needs for a few moments, needs fulfilled in the online environment in order to offer them more appropriate alternatives.

What attracts children and young people to the online environment?

The online environment is very generous in terms of options and children can easily let their natural tendency to explore run free, thus encountering very attractive online spaces or activities. They feel very often free and in control of their own decisions, they can learn almost anything in an interactive way, and this nourishes their self-confidence.

Through various specific activities that involve evaluation, through scoring systems or interaction with others, they can measure their competence, their own progress, get individual feedback quickly, they can express themselves, and often feel like „themselves". Many of the online spaces invite you to reflect, and from this place, kids get to better understand themselves. Their needs for contribution, to create original content and to be valued by others, are becoming more and more visible in the younger generation.

Moreover, some of the young people choose complex games and activities that stimulate higher elements of human potential such as critical and strategic thinking, creativity, personalized expression put into context, adaptation and spontaneity in order to make quick decisions. At the same time, it is encouraged to collaborate with other members of the online communities that young people are accessing.

Children and young people most often mention the social component of the Internet as important to them. The need to connect with people who share the same experience, interests, passions or curiosities is a deeply human need. Adolescents go through an essential period in their development process and it's not easy for them to sometimes feel alone and incomprehensible in this process, so the online environment becomes a resource, a place where they can feel „together" with others and take examples from their idols because of their need to belong to a community. On the threshold and during these years of inner revolution in which emotions are often very intense and not always very stable, in which they know that they are no longer children, but adulthood is not yet easily grasped, when the desire for new and expression is increasingly evident and family contexts, from school or even social ones do not encourage this type of development, online friends become very important.

Of course, all these aspects are rather beneficial and represent the opportunities of the digital age. Children may, however, be exposed to various dangers in their quest to know the world, and exploring and connecting in the online environment, a public and unregulated space, is no exception. Used in excess or without knowledge and experience, initially guided by an adult who has the overall view, the child is much more likely to get into unpleasant Internet situations and does not know how to react. Risks such as online harassment, grooming, harming online reputation, addiction, sexting, or personal data theft are just some of the dangers that Internet users can experience.

What can I do as a parent to maintain a close relationship with my child?

Whether we are talking about parents or teachers, Save the Children's invitation is to regard the child as an active participant in their own education. The role of adults is equally to support the child and also set healthy boundaries for him. The unconditional love and care the child receives from the adult will turn into self-love and trust, gentle boundaries that allow him occasional revolt, if managed well by the adult, will turn into a coherent value system and a balanced behavior. This empathetic type of interaction with the child in which we often try to see the world through the child's eyes, is an experience that requires practice and, for many parents and teachers, is something new because their parents' generations chose other methods of education.

In the absence of an analysis and reflection on our own life experience, the impulse is to educate children just as we were educated. Our invitation is to give yourself a moment of pause and think

sincerely about how your personal history might influence your parenting behavior or as a teacher, your relationship to your students.

If we stop at the family situation, the basis for the development of children, the existence of blood relations is a given but what is most important, the quality of the relationship, is something fluid that changes over time, develops, has moments of closeness and distance, and primordially it is carefully maintained with time and energy dedicated permanently.

Trust is the foundation of a close relationship, and children have a great deal of need to feel that they can get closer when they feel good, to celebrate success with the parent but also to get close when it's difficult in order to help them manage their emotions and make sense of their own experiences.

What you can do

What the child learns

What you can do	What the child learns
Assume your role as parent in the relationship with the child and offer them love, protection, guidance and support both in moments when they are exploring, as well as in moments of togetherness.	I have someone older, stronger, wiser and gentler with whom I feel safe.
Remember that there is no perfect parent and that you can fix it whenever you feel a break in the relationship with the child occurs or when you acted differently than what you would have wanted.	It is natural sometimes to act differently than I would have wanted, it is important to recognize what I could have done differently and contribute to restoring.
Your relationship develops according to how you walk together through life, day by day, with love, respect and empathy.	I feel loved, respected and understood, and I have a clear model of how I can act with love, respect and understanding towards others.
Talk more often with him than about him.	I am valued and loved, my parents are interested in me and my opinion.
Take more often decisions together, rather than deciding for him.	I am an active participant in what I experience, I am able to express my opinions in regards to what I consider suitable for me.
Listen to him or her more than talking to him or her	I am heard by those who love me when I express myself.
Get close to him because he is dear to you, not because he might be in danger or because you might feel scared or guilty.	I am appreciated by my parents, my parents rejoice with me and of me.
Consider his or her desire of togetherness as an invitation and as a sign that the relation is very close.	I am confident that whenever I need connection I can ask this from my close ones.
Take him seriously when he confesses a situation has been difficult for him even if you have the impulse to disregard the importance or seriousness of his problem.	All my emotions are valid and are shared with my close ones, both joys as well as difficulties.
Manifest your love towards him the way he wants and needs to feel loved and less the way you were taught that the love toward a child should be like.	I'm worthy of love, I'm loved and I feel that.
Maintain congruence in your behaviour towards the child, towards the limits set for the child.	I know what to expect from my parents, our relationship is predictable and I can trust them.

Regard with empathy and patience the teen standing in front of you and recall how you went through big changes during that period in your life.	I am in a process of developing maturity and I can choose how I want to act even when I do not quite understand what is happening inside of me.
Trust him and make sure that you are creating contexts that will help him develop abilities and competencies that are useful in the present time, but also prepare him for the future.	Certain values, abilities, behaviours and relationship skills ensure the basis of success in life, rather than achieved results at a specific point in time.
When you are worried, ask for the company of those close to you, contact a specialist and offer yourself help whenever you have the opportunity.	I can count on others and they can count on me, it is alright to ask and offer help.
Guide him to identify his personal needs and the method by which he can analyze the options which implies their negotiation and their prospect of success or fulfillment.	Most times, I can identify my needs and I can contribute to their achievement, I can discuss them with those involved in the decision process, and depending on the circumstances of each situation, I can decide to postpone them or to partially fulfill them.

Suggestions for Child Online Safety

Reflections on why you are introducing new technologies into the lives of children

Before you make the child acquainted with the virtual environment, make sure you identify the benefits of the Internet or the use of smart devices tailored to the developmental stage of your child. You know your child best and if you give yourself time to inform yourself, you will know what is best for him.

Remember that children learn by imitation and you are his first role model, including for balance in the use of the Internet

Although it may seem overwhelming, the child is the most vigilant observer and your behavior has a much stronger impact on him than any advice you give him. This is also valid in developing his perception and his relationship with technology. Share with him your real experience about how you decide to surf the Internet for a determined amount of time, and how you prepare to end the online activity when the time allocated to it is coming to an end. Show him how you reach safe online spaces for him and invite him to experience the same path.

Get informed from reliable sources and teach your child to do the same

Emphasize that the Internet is a public space where everyone can contribute and we need to develop critical thinking about what we find on the Internet and with whom we connect. Think aloud and tell him how you are accustomed to proceed before making a decision, how you get informed, how you verify sources, and how you use the information when quoting authors. Listen to him, and then see what he has comprehended. Your voice will become his inner voice and it is important to prepare him to make informed and assumed decisions.

Use parental control programs and guide his first online experiences

For young children, we recommend using parental control programs and presenting them to children as family allies for online security. These are tools that help but do not fill the importance of open and frequent communication on this topic. Gradually, as you learn that he has understood the basic principles to keep himself safe, you can lessen control and allow him more exploration.

Before letting them navigate online, make sure you've discussed with him how he can proceed if he encounters something that makes him feel uncomfortable

Children often think that their parents know everything about them, and when they come back home, in the little time left to talk, they often chose not to share their unpleasant experiences with their parents. Sometimes they do so for fear of their reaction, sometimes out of mistrust, sometimes because of lack of hope that they will be helped. Children sometimes chose to share their difficulties with unknown people, feeling more connected and better understood than in their own family. Make sure they know they do not have to go through difficult times alone and that you'll be there for him.

Provide support to develop skills and competencies for creative and safe navigation

Beyond school performance, the child needs you to nourish his confidence, critical thinking, creativity, to appreciate his effort and perseverance, to channel his desire for novelty, his creative energy, needs you to give him a model in regards to how to work with others, to teach him how to look inside himself, to give meaning to the emotional turmoil and to choose more consciously and responsibly what groups he wants to be part of. It's not always easy to have this important role in someone else's life, especially if you did not have the experience of being the one protected and guided, but there are many people, professionals, communities that can support you.

Ask for support when you need information and guidance as a parent or teacher in order to be more aware in your relationship with the child

The way we treat children is our shared responsibility as a society and, implicitly, of every person, institution, organization and corporation, regardless of the capacity of interaction with the child. It is important to understand that both the family and the school have the role of establishing a genuine partnership that allows them to create contexts adapted to the stages of development of a child and to both agree to them in order to raise a balanced physically and psychologically child.

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Do you have a concern, query or question related to your child's online activity?
Call our helpline specialists at **ctrl_AJUTOR**.

Did you find something on the internet that might be dangerous for a child or teenager?
Reporting to **esc_ABUZ** is the first step.
Email: abuz@oradenet.ro

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