



## **Creating safe digital experiences for children and adolescents**

Modern society is grappling with the conundrum of how children should engage with digital services without falling victim to dangers presented by using technology unwisely. With their strong brands and wide reach, telcos can help to tackle this social issue. This will bring positives to society, and draw telcos closer to their customers in a clear win-win.

Marina Koytcheva, Research Director

## Protecting children in the digital world

Digital natives' lives are intertwined with their smartphones in a way the generations before them can barely comprehend. Parents, grandparents and guardians who remember the historic times "before smartphones" might worry that young people get addicted to devices, spend too much time on them, or disclose too much information.

When it comes to digital services, legislation to create a safe internet, especially for children and young adolescents, exists in many countries. An example is the [Online Safety Act](#), introduced in the UK in late 2023.

Regulations also include devices that allow young people to consume these services. The UK government's official website [warns](#): "By the age of 12, 97% of children own a mobile phone, but the use of mobile phones in school can lead to distractions, disruption and can increase the risk of online bullying." Earlier in 2024, the UK government issued guidance that schools "[should prohibit the use of mobile phones](#)". France banned mobile phones in schools for children under the age of 15 in 2018.

But there is a softer way of protecting children and young people from the dangers of digital life. Here are two examples of telecom operators acting on their corporate responsibility to make the digital world safer for the younger generation.

## Urging adolescents to consider the consequences

A great example of a telco engaging directly with the young audience comes from the Dutch operator KPN. In February 2024 it launched an impactful campaign: [a song](#) by young musician MEAU about the painful consequences of forwarding intimate videos. Check it out – you do not need to speak Dutch to understand the message! The song became a hit in the Netherlands and has since been translated into other languages.

The approach has been successful thanks to the involvement of someone young people look up to – a local pop star; this way they do not perceive the message as "nagging" or "preaching".

Importantly, such initiatives do not need to aim for the stars. KPN's research suggests that 33,000 young people had been victims of the unsolicited forwarding of intimate messages within a period of six months. This does not sound like many, but for each of them the impact on their personal life might have been profound.

## Helping adults navigate parenting in the digital world

Vodafone has taken a different approach, directed at parents. Its [Digital Parenting](#) hub is a free resource, aiming to help parents (or other carers of young people) find the right balance between encouraging children to embrace technology and protecting them from the traps along the way. Resources include articles on how to decide when a child is old enough for their first phone, help with limiting screen time, material about scams targeted at young people, detecting deepfakes and more. The topics are not limited to the digital world and are mixed with other subjects like fussy eating, engaging young people in politics or helping them get their first job.

This approach creates closeness with the parents rather than with children directly, and that is equally valuable. It also establishes a relationship with the individuals who make purchasing decisions for phones and service plans.

## Why should telcos invest in such initiatives?

There are two significant reasons for telcos to choose to invest in such resources.

First, telcos are large and influential companies, with strong brands. Importantly, they provide an essential service in the modern world. With this privilege comes significant social responsibility. It can be argued that the main duty to ensure a safe digital experience lies with those who provide services: Meta, Alphabet, Apple,

ByteDance and others. But telcos can also choose to have a positive role in helping people deal with the unintended consequences of rapid technological changes.

Second, telcos need to find ways to engage more closely with consumers. Hyperscalers hold close relationships with their audiences, but telcos will want to be seen as more than just data pipes to earn the place of a preferred supplier of services beyond connectivity.

Clearly, the first reason is altruistic, while the second is less selfless. But there is nothing wrong with considering both when deciding whether to invest in initiatives similar to those discussed here. Business cases usually need a clear return on investment. If building closer links with consumers can justify activities that can lead to safer digital experiences for children and adolescents, that is a winning idea for both telcos and society.

**Marina Koytcheva is a Research Director at STL Partners specialising in strategy, consumer services and sustainability.**

Get in touch with the author to learn more

[marina.koytcheva@stlpartners.com](mailto:marina.koytcheva@stlpartners.com)

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