



Digital Safety Risk Overview

For Children and Adolescents

Curated by AQ'S Corner LLC

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Introduction

Digital safety extends beyond screen time limits and cyberbullying. Global public health agencies, child protection organizations, cybersecurity professionals, and regulatory bodies recognize multiple categories of digital risk affecting children and adolescents.

These risks involve what children see online, who they interact with, how platforms are designed, how personal data is used, and how digital environments impact emotional and developmental well-being.

The following overview compiles digital risk categories identified by recognized public health and child protection authorities.

1. Online Exploitation and Grooming

Children may be targeted through digital platforms for manipulation, coercion, sextortion, trafficking, or exploitation. Offenders often use social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps, and live streaming services to initiate contact.

Recognized by:

Federal Bureau of Investigation

<https://www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/safety-resources/scams-and-safety/common-scams-and-crimes/sextortion>

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

<https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/onlineentice>

2. Cyberbullying and Digital Harassment

Cyberbullying includes repeated harassment, threats, humiliation, or exclusion conducted through digital platforms. Unlike traditional bullying, digital harassment can follow children into their homes and persist at all hours.

Recognized by:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/yrbs>

World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe

<https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/27-03-2024-one-in-six-school-aged-children-experiences-cyberbullying--finds-new-who-europe-study>

3. Mental Health Impacts

Heavy or problematic digital use has been associated with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, body image concerns, and exposure to self-harm content. While not all youth are affected equally, public health officials emphasize caution due to widespread exposure.

Recognized by:

United States Department of Health and Human Services – Office of the Surgeon General

<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/youth-mental-health/social-media/index.html>

American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use>

4. Problematic or Compulsive Use Patterns

Some youth experience difficulty limiting digital engagement. Excessive or compulsive use may interfere with sleep, school performance, and emotional regulation.

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5. Exposure to Harmful Content

Children may encounter violent material, sexual content, hate speech, extremist messaging, or self-harm content. Exposure may be intentional or algorithmically recommended.

Recognized by:

United Nations Children’s Fund

<https://www.unicef.org/harmful-content-online>

6. Privacy and Data Exploitation

Digital platforms collect, track, and monetize user data. Children may not fully understand how their information is gathered or shared. Weak privacy settings can increase vulnerability.

Recognized by:

Federal Trade Commission – Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule

<https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/rules/childrens-online-privacy-protection-rule-coppa>

7. Identity Theft and Financial Scams

Children’s identities are valuable targets for fraud because misuse may go undetected for years. Financial scams targeting youth have increased across social platforms and gaming environments.

Recognized by:

Federal Trade Commission – Child Identity Theft

<https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/how-protect-your-child-identity-theft>

8. Algorithmic Amplification and Persuasive Design

Many digital platforms use engagement-driven algorithms designed to maximize attention. These systems can amplify emotionally charged or harmful content and may contribute to compulsive use patterns.

Recognized by:

United States Department of Health and Human Services – Office of the Surgeon General

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>

9. Offline Safety Risks Linked to Online Activity

Digital interactions can lead to offline safety concerns, including risks related to meeting unknown individuals, sharing location information, and unintended in-person contact.

Recognized by:

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children – NetSmartz®

<https://www.missingkids.org/netsmartz/resources>

Parents' Guide to Smartphone Safety (NetSmartz® Tip Sheet)

<https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/netsmartz/downloadable/tipsheets/Parents%207%20Guide%20to%20Smartphone%20Safety.pdf>

Conclusion

Digital safety requires awareness across multiple categories of risk, including exploitation, harassment, mental health impacts, privacy concerns, identity theft, harmful content exposure, algorithmic influence, and offline safety threats.

Protective strategies must address not only individual behavior, but also platform design, supervision practices, and informed digital literacy.

Digital safety is a layered responsibility shared by families, educators, communities, technology companies, and policymakers.