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GLOBAL COALITION

to Promote Comprehensive Sexuality
and Personal Safety Education

6th QUARTERLY MEETING

## Adolescents on Navigating the Digital Maze : What, When & How

9th April 2025

OVERVIEW

The 6th Quarterly Meeting of the Global Coalition was held on **9th April 2025**, with a timely and urgent theme:

Adolescents Navigating the Digital Maze. This online convening brought together a legal expert, a cyber safety professional, a parent, and an adolescent to explore how digital spaces are impacting adolescents' identity, mental health, and safety. The panelists were from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India.

The event was hosted in collaboration with Point of View, a Mumbai-based nonprofit working at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and digital rights. The session was moderated by Swarali, psychotherapist and lead facilitator at Point of View.
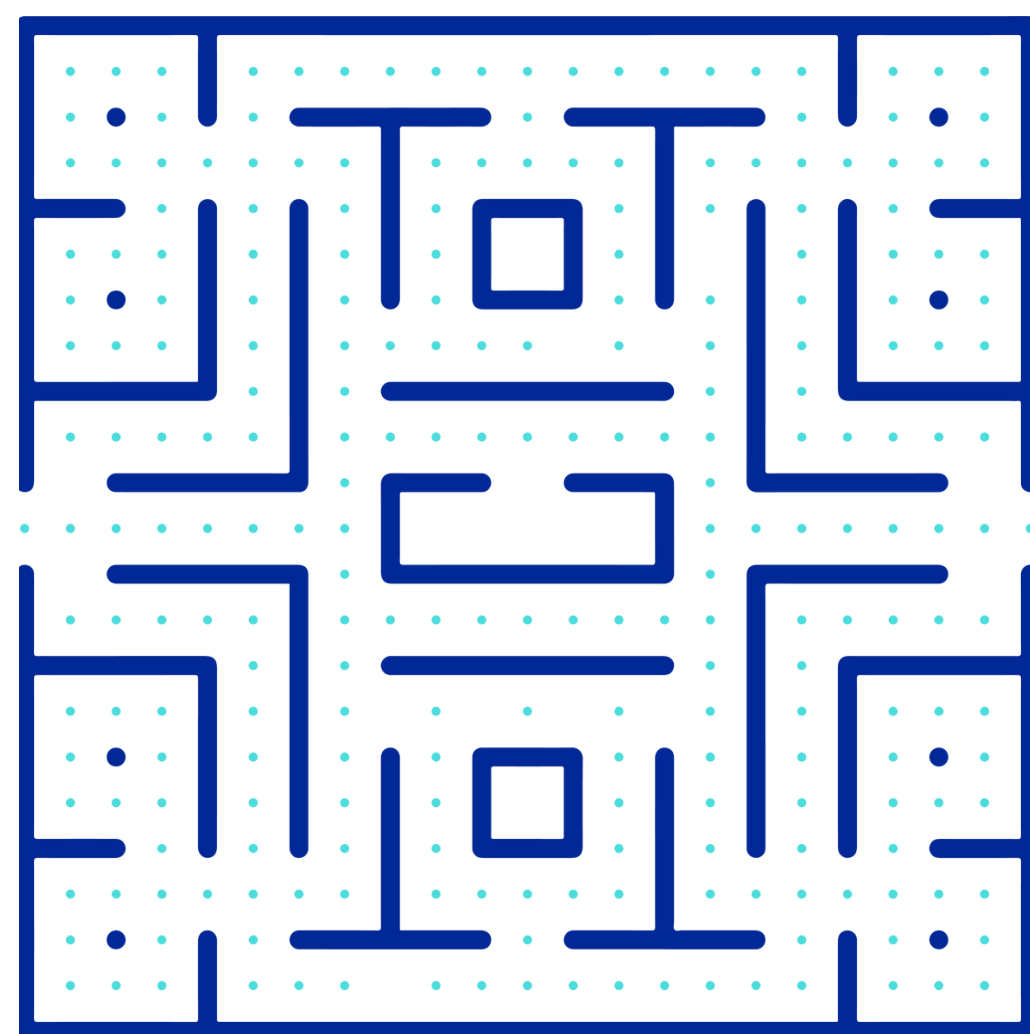
THEMES
EXPLORED

How social media algorithms influence behavior, content exposure, and addiction.

1

Understanding digital rights, laws, and safety policies.

2

What do adolescents want from adults to navigate online spaces?

3

How digital interactions (smartphones, AI-driven apps, virtual reality, online games) affect mental health, self-esteem, and relationship with self and others.

4

Strategies for self-regulation, digital literacy, and responsible social media use.

5

PANEL INSIGHTS

Illeen shared that her experience taught her valuable lessons: what appears on social media is often far from reality. She observed that while people may post pictures with captions like "best friend forever," "bloodline," or "love," the truth behind those images is often very different, and coming to terms with that reality can be emotionally overwhelming.

> **What we see on social media isn't real, behind the likes and captions is a reality we don't know, and that can really hit you.**

ILLEEN,
An adolescent, India

Ileen also emphasized that making mistakes is a part of life, but what truly matters is the willingness to reflect, learn, and move forward. She expressed the **importance of not letting others' judgments define one's path, and encouraged young people to pursue what brings them joy and aligns with their aspirations.**

Through her journey, she learned to prioritize her mental health and not let others' opinions affect her self-worth. She became more intentional about protecting her emotional boundaries, no longer allowing people who hurt her to remain in her life. Instead, she focused on personal growth and self-care.

PANEL INSIGHTS

Nappinai provided a critical legal perspective on the vulnerabilities and protections available to adolescents in digital spaces. She emphasized the importance of understanding online risks and vulnerabilities in the same way we approach safety in the physical world. According to her, **a screen should not be mistaken for a shield**; while it may offer a sense of distance, it does not eliminate the potential for harm. However, she noted that digital harm often carries the weight of real psychological and emotional impact, and in many cases, feels just as violating as a physical crime.

She made a powerful case for legal awareness, especially among youth, and called for urgent reforms in Indian data privacy laws. She also highlighted a major gap in India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act, namely, the clause that removes legal protection for self-posted content. **While global standards support a "right to be forgotten," Indian adolescents do not yet enjoy this right fully**, making education and platform literacy even more essential.

> You don't deserve to be punished, and you shouldn't allow the perpetrator to get away. You're not the only victim, the person who harmed you has likely done it to someone else and will do it again.

N. S. NAPPINAI,
Senior Advocate,
Supreme Court of India

PANEL INSIGHTS

Dr. Rakshit Tandon emphasized the growing toll that digital habits are taking on the mental and emotional health of young people. He urged parents, educators, and community members to actively recognize and respond to these challenges, rather than dismissing them as trivial. According to him, digital behaviours, shaped by algorithms and peer dynamics can often overwhelm adolescents, impacting their sense of identity, focus, and self-worth.

> You are not just a user online, you are the product. The more time you give the algorithm, the more it controls your feed, and your feelings.

DR. RAKSHIT TANDON,
Intl. Cybersecurity Expert, India

He emphasized the concept of a **"digital diet"**, **encouraging young users and parents to actively curate their content ecosystems and report or block harmful content**. Dr. Tandon also stressed the absence of structured digital safety education in school curricula and urged for its immediate integration.

PANEL INSIGHTS

Buddhini stressed the importance of fostering open communication at home and in schools. **Teenagers should feel safe to express their online experiences, including mistakes and vulnerabilities, without fear of blame or judgment**. Too often, when young people don't find that support from adults, they turn to the internet for validation and guidance, which can expose them to greater risks. By building trust and listening with empathy, adults can create a supportive environment that empowers adolescents to navigate the digital world with awareness and resilience.

> **If we tell our children to keep their phones down, but don't do the same ourselves, the message won't land. We have to model the behavior we want to see.**

BUDDHINI WITHANA,
Parent of 2 teens,
Senior Technical Advisor - Child Protection and Child Rights, Save the Children, Sri Lanka

She also shared that **parents can model positive digital behaviour and can have open conversations with their children** about what they're doing online, and can use strategies like co-viewing, and screen-time family time and transparency about digital habits. They can also teach soft boundaries, like no locked rooms during screen time, and prioritize trust-based communication over strict surveillance.

PANEL INSIGHTS

D r. Aftab Hussain, highlighted the profound psychological effects of excessive social media use on teenagers, particularly concerning self-esteem and relationships. He explained that constant exposure to idealized online personas can make teens feel inadequate, especially as they navigate their own identity. Unrealistic beauty standards, fueled by filters and photo-editing, often lead to body dissatisfaction and anxiety. The pervasive fear of missing out (FOMO) contributes to compulsive online behavior, disrupting real-life interactions and increasing vulnerability to cyberbullying. He also emphasized the risks associated with online gaming platforms and the serious impact of disrupted sleep on teens' mental and academic well-being.

To help young people recognize when their digital habits are harmful, Dr. Aftab stressed the importance of self-reflection and adult intervention. **Warning signs include increased anxiety after screen time, withdrawal from offline relationships, and sleep disturbances.** He called on parents, educators, and communities to foster open, judgment-free communication with teens.

> We must create safe spaces where teens feel comfortable discussing their online experiences, instead of turning to others on the internet for support.

DR. AFTAB HUSSAIN, Chairman & CEO, Safe Care Trust Intl., Pakistan

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Digital and Offline Worlds Intertwined: Adolescents perceive the digital realm as an integral part of their lived experience and identity, necessitating a holistic understanding of their interconnections.

Empathy in Adult Interactions: Providing a safe, judgment-free space for teens to share their thoughts fosters trust. Active listening without immediate reaction demonstrates support and validation, empowering adolescents to navigate their experiences confidently.

Collective Responsibility in the Digital Space: It is imperative for tech companies to be accountable for fostering safe environments. Establishing robust intermediary guidelines and addressing grievances swiftly can help protect users effectively.

Empowering Young People: Adolescents should be equipped with knowledge of their online rights and responsibilities, including how to report abuse and protect themselves against harm. This empowerment can foster resilience and awareness.

Balanced Digital Diet: Education should prioritize not just technological skills but also critical thinking, privacy awareness, and well-being. Encouraging healthy digital habits from an early age will nurture informed users who can engage responsibly online.

> Digital spaces need to be reclaimed with empathy, knowledge, and collective accountability.

RESOURCE
LAUNCHED

Guideline for Caregivers of Children Under 7 years

A guideline document was launched, focused on supporting early conversations about gender, sexual development, personal safety, and digital safety, and how to answer questions of young children in an accurate, respectful, and age-appropriate manner.

You can access the Guideline Document here or on our website.

Become a member and find more information & resources [here](#) or

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