Understanding online sexual exploitation and abuse of children with intellectual disabilities in Kenya

zana AFRICA

Safe Online

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Acronyms

CSAM	Child Sexual Abuse Material
CSEA	Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
DTSK	Differently Talented Society of Kenya
ECPAT	Every Child Protected Against Trafficking (NGO)
EVAC	End Violence Against Children
FGDS	Focus Group Discussions
IWF	Internet Watch Foundation
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
KNBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
FB	Facebook
OCSEA	Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SG-CSAM	Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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Thank you to all who played a role in making this research possible. Your efforts have made a lasting impact on the journey towards a safer online environment for all children in Kenya.

ZanaAfrica

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I. Summary

In 2023 ZanaAfrica, a Kenyan organization with 15+ years of experience in child protection and safeguarding, was awarded a grant from Safe Online to understand the experiences of children and youth with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities in Kenya when they interact with digital and online platforms, and to identify solutions to the online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) challenges they face as they navigate these spaces. This study collected qualitative data from 88 children, 48 parents and/or caregivers, 10 subject matter experts and a range of government and community stakeholders for validation. This research showed that children and youth with intellectual disabilities in Kenya commonly visit many online sites: Facebook, Google, shopping apps, Instagram, learning apps (Khan Academy), Netflix, Showmax, Snapchat, Telegram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Bad Lab, dating sites, shopping sites, Deaf OP, Firefox, Gaming platforms, IMO, LinkedIn, Microsoft Edge, OLX, Phoenix app, Spotify, Audiomack, Boomplay, Twitter (X), and YouTube among others. These online resources were used for diverse purposes: learning and education, creativity and imagination, social networking, and entertainment; parents and caregivers further engaged with certain resources for peer support.

All participants in the study acknowledged the existence of **substantial risks**, including online grooming, buildup to in-person sexual abuse or harassment, exposure to inappropriate content, subsequent mimicry of content viewed online, livestreaming of child sexual abuse, sexting and sharing of private information; cyberbullying and online harassment, online scams and fraud, gadget and content dependency, a tendency towards use in isolation, and significant caregiver burden that compounded risk.

The following measures for the tech industry:

1. **Ensure the full and meaningful participation** of children and youth with intellectual disabilities in all processes including co-creation of trust and safety programs for children with intellectual disabilities.
2. **Conduct additional targeted implementation research** on OCSEA to fill the existing gaps in available research. This includes better insight into the scale and scope of the problem; implementation research on what mechanisms can be used to teach children/youth with intellectual disabilities about OCSEA; and determining the best modalities to use and what form they would take. This research was a high level look into the problem. Required next steps include expanding the research coverage to facilitate further insights based on data disaggregation e.g. by age and sex, socioeconomic status, access to internet and apps, etc); disaggregating OCSEA vulnerabilities by intellectual disability; and studying the degree to which the policy environment in East Africa supports OCSEA for children with intellectual disabilities in order to generate recommendations for strengthening policies.
3. **Develop accessible protection and sensitization resources** that can easily be understood by children and youth with intellectual disabilities, their parents and caregivers.
4. **Improve age verification systems** to prevent children from accessing inappropriate content.
5. **Strengthen content moderation, trust and safety mechanisms on an ongoing basis** in order to to continuously detect, mitigate and prevent potential OCSEA risks.

6. **Develop apps that are specifically designed for children** and take into consideration the accessibility requirements of children with intellectual disabilities, ensuring that such platforms and apps are free from inappropriate content.
7. **Ensure that digital products and platforms adhere to universal design**: Developers should promote innovations that meet the requirements of children with different types of disabilities and ensure that digital products and services are designed for universal accessibility, so that they can be used by all children without exception and without the need for adaptation.
8. **Engage with and actively apply solutions that have been developed by local tech communities** working on these issues. For example, the Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI) EdTech for Quality Learning: Understanding Inclusion and Equity Pathways (EQUIP) framework has developed detailed guidelines for equity and safety considerations across three countries in East Africa.

More specifically, government authorities should take the following measures:

1. **Create awareness:** All key informants and validation stakeholders cited the role of the government through the relevant ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs, including Ministry of Gender and Affirmative Action, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Interior and National Administration) to create awareness, sensitise, empower and build the capacity of parents, caregivers, guardians and educators to address and minimise OCSEA for children with intellectual disabilities, and to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to protect children online.
2. **Develop laws, policies, guidelines, and standards on OCSEA:** In addition to creating awareness, key informants called upon the government to create an enabling legal and policy environment on combating OCSEA.
3. **Strengthen complaint, investigation and justice mechanisms on OCSEA:** The relevant government authorities including the Ministry of Interior and National Administration and the Judiciary should strengthen the existing complaint, investigation and justice mechanism on OCSEA. These mechanisms should be more easily accessible by children and youth with intellectual disabilities as well as their parents and caregivers.
4. **Strengthen victim support programs:** The government, through the relevant line ministry, should provide children and youth with intellectual disabilities who fall victim to OCSEA with integrated end-to-end support services to cope with the immediate and long-term impact of their exploitation and abuse. These programs should also target the parents, guardians and caregivers of the victims**.** ZanaAfrica's hotline and chatbot, promoted across learning materials and sanitary pad products sold in the market, combined with our SBCC expertise in sexual and reproductive health and rights, could be a powerful tool to expand awareness and increase reporting**.**
5. **Implement teacher training on child rights, child protection, and OCSEA through trauma-informed approaches**: ZanaAfrica's national teacher training program, currently being co-created and implemented in partnership with the Kenyan government through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, will serve as an excellent platform for this work.

To address OCSEA by engaging children, youth, families and broader communities, **the following initiatives were recommended**:

1. **Co-create sensitization programs with children and youth:** The sensitive and iterative development of social and behaviour change communications (SBCC) programs and materials designed for use by children and youth with intellectual disabilities should be actively undertaken by the tech industry. Implementation research and design focusing on more visual and easy to use materials, with enhanced trust and safety content (policies, practices, products and teams to ensure safety) and effective delivery mechanisms is necessary for development implementable solutions for communities and local stakeholders.

2. **Enhance parent and caregiver support:** While parents are often overwhelmed and under-equipped, they do whatever they can to help and cushion their children from online risks. Parents and caregivers called for more information, tools and techniques, and safer, more friendly and useful websites and apps.
3. **Develop peer engagement mechanisms:** Parents and key informants further suggested the use of peer mentors who can teach children and youth about safe online practices.
4. **Establish safe spaces and safe people in communities** through churches, mosques, sports grounds, marketplaces and street posters, among others.

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for a multi-sectoral approach to protect children and youth with intellectual disabilities from harm (OCSEA). Government and non-governmental agencies, the tech industry, and communities must work together to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place. This includes the development of policy frameworks that prioritise the online safety of children and youth with intellectual disabilities, the implementation of awareness programs, and the creation of safe online spaces tailored to the unique experiences of this vulnerable population. By implementing the recommended measures, Kenya can be a leader for East Africa to ensure that the internet remains a safe space for all children, including those with intellectual disabilities.

II. Background

Children and youth with intellectual disabilities encounter unique opportunities and risks in the digital space. Online engagement provides significant benefits for these children and youth, facilitating communication and socialisation, countering feelings of isolation, and offering opportunities to connect with communities of interest, engage in recreational activities, and access information and services. However, they also expose this vulnerable group to various dangers such as online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA). These children and youth may face exposure to inappropriate content and interactions with online predators, often without being fully aware of the risks. While all children and youth are vulnerable online, those with intellectual disabilities are disproportionately at risk due to their limited knowledge and skills to safely navigate digital platforms, which is compounded by the failure by developers to ensure accessibility of their platforms for users with intellectual disabilities.

Intellectual disabilities are characterised by a range of cognitive impairments that limit an individual's adaptive behaviour and intellectual functioning. Due to these limitations, individuals with intellectual disabilities often struggle to recognize and therefore avoid online threats and malicious intent and are consequently more susceptible to manipulation. Additionally, societal misconceptions and stigma surrounding intellectual disabilities may further exacerbate these vulnerabilities and hinder effective intervention efforts.

> This research was designed to understand the experiences of children and youth with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities in Kenya when they interact with digital and online platforms, and to identify and address the challenges that they face as they navigate these online spaces.

In Kenya, as in many parts of the world, children, including children and youth with intellectual disabilities are increasingly at risk of OCSEA. Such challenges are further compounded by the barriers that children and youth with intellectual disabilities face in accessing digital platforms, including lack of access and affordability of requisite tools and equipment, lack of access and affordability of assistive technologies and devices, inaccessible information on the platforms they use, and lack of appropriate knowledge and skills.

However, public awareness about this form of abuse remains low, efforts to prevent it are limited, victims receive minimal support, and few offenders are brought to justice. There is a critical need for the government, public institutions, frontline workers, the tech industry, and caregivers to enhance their response to this exploitation and abuse and mitigate the harm it causes to children in Kenya. Despite the growing global focus on these issues, there is a significant gap in research specifically addressing the experiences of children and youth with intellectual disabilities in Kenya and other parts of the global south. The current research aims to serve as a preliminary step towards closing this gap.

This research was designed to understand the experiences of children and youth with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities in Kenya when they interact with digital and online platforms, and to identify and address the challenges that they face as they navigate these online spaces. **The primary objectives of the study** were to broadly survey:

1. Which online platforms are commonly used by children with intellectual disabilities and how can the risks related to these platforms be mitigated?

2. How can children, youth and communities be engaged to ensure OCSEA is minimised and addressed?

3. What measures can be adopted by the tech industry to protect children with intellectual disabilities from OCSEA? What practical steps does the technology industry need to take to address online sexual exploitation and abuse of children with intellectual disabilities?

Alta Consult was contracted to undertake the data collection for this project.

III. Methodology

A. OCSEA in Kenya: an overview

Today's children are more interconnected than ever before. With over four billion internet users across the world, the limits of children's experiences are no longer bound by their bedroom doors, their classroom walls, or the borders of their nation. Though the internet is a web of knowledge, opportunities, and connectivity, it was not developed with children's safety in mind. One in every three internet users is a child, giving adults unprecedented and uncontrolled access to children across the globe.[1] At any one time, 750,000 individuals are estimated to be looking to connect with children for sexually exploitative purposes.[2] In Kenya, according to the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (2022),[3] 4.2% of boys and 3.8% of girls aged 10-14 use the internet; this increases to 40.8% of boys and 31.2% of girls accessing the internet by ages 15-19. These children almost certainly include children with intellectual disabilities.

The rise of the internet and digital technologies has been accompanied by an exponential growth in OCSEA, perhaps the worst manifestation of what can happen when children enter the digital world unprepared and unprotected. OCSEA manifests in many forms including online grooming, live streaming, consuming child sexual abuse materials, and coercing and blackmailing children for sexual purposes.[4] Child sexual abuse images generated using artificial intelligence is also a new form of OCSEA which is a growing area of concern. Recent research suggests that online interaction is now so ubiquitous that it is likely to feature in some form in almost all cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse.[5] The Disrupting Harm report found that up to 20% of children across 12 countries had experienced at least one form of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year. Scaled to the population, the data shows that tens of thousands, or even millions, of children in each country are being subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse each year.[6]

According to Disrupting Harm, children in Kenya are regularly confronted with the risk and consequences of OCSEA. This research found that 67% of children aged 12-17 in Kenya are internet users. Of a nationally representative sample of internet-using children, 7% had been offered money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of themselves, and 3% had been threatened or blackmailed online to engage in sexual activities in the past year. Threats and requests like these are made to both boys and girls, often via social media. While most children refuse these attempts, some children comply, and this can have serious consequences. The report noted that in the prior year, 7% of children had their sexual images shared with others without their permission. Most children who experienced some form of online sexual exploitation and abuse had also experienced in-person physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.[7]

1 End Violence Against Children: Child Online Safety. https://www.end-violence.org/safe-online
2 End Violence Against Children: Key Messages and Statistics. https://www.end-violence.org
3 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2022 - Key Indicators Report [PR143]." https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/PR143/PR143.pdf
4 Ibid
5 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (October 2021). Disrupting Harm in Kenya: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Global Partnership to End Violence against Children. https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/4111/file/DH-Kenya-Report-Nov-2022.pdf
6 Ibid
7 Ibid

ZanaAfrica's work over the past 15 years has revealed that adolescents are not taught topics of consent or rights - this has far-reaching consequences as they are unable to identify and name such risks, are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, and lack the vocabulary to identify these violations, much less the framework or confidence to report them which is amplified by the shame they feel. This is only amplified for children with intellectual disabilities.

> Many children in Kenya did not tell anyone about their OCSEA experiences; when they did it was usually only to someone they knew and trusted. Few turned to formal reporting mechanisms like helplines or the police.

In addition, children in Kenya have widespread access to pornography and related risks, including the use of school computers for watching pornography and taking part in gambling. A recent report in Kenya revealed that during COVID-19 a majority of children (55%) accessed adult pornography online[8]. The National Plan of Action to Tackle Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Kenya found that children have low levels of awareness of the risks posed by the internet and limited knowledge about how to get support or report concerns/disclosures. Most children do understand the risks in relation to cyberbullying but are less aware of the potential risks of sexual issues online. Children are reportedly widely engaged in 'online dating' (a term used by children) but tend to not view online grooming as abuse because there is no physical touching taking place.[9]

While the overall number of OCSEA cases reported to authorities could not be established, findings showed that the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Protection Unit of the Directorate of Criminal Investigations in Kenya handled 3,160 cases in 2018 and 4,133 in 2019. The unit also received an average of 13,572 cyber-tips per year via the US National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) between 2017 and 2019, mostly concerning the detection, upload, or dissemination of child sexual abuse materials on online platforms.[10]

According to frontline workers and children who were subjected to OCSEA, most offenders were people who were already known to the child. Among children who were subjected to OCSEA through social media, Facebook and WhatsApp were the most common platforms where this occurred. Caregivers were highly concerned about their children talking to strangers online or encountering sexual images on the internet. However, caregivers generally use the internet less than their children, and their ability to guide them may be limited. The Disrupting Harm in Kenya research showed that 66% of internet-using children have not been taught about how to stay safe online and their awareness of the risks varies.[11]

Many children in Kenya did not tell anyone about their OCSEA experiences; when they did it was usually only to someone they knew and trusted. Few turned to formal reporting mechanisms like helplines or the police. Children who went through the justice process noted several challenging and hurtful experiences, for example the need to go through in-person cross examination in the presence of offenders. When formal reports were made, the law enforcement, justice, and social services systems were often unable to shield victims from further distress in justice processes due to procedural impediments, financial resources, and lack of training for people dealing with these challenging cases. In addition, some important OCSEA-related legislation, policies, and standards have not yet been enacted in Kenya. For instance, some forms of OCSEA such as live streaming of child sexual abuse and sexual extortion are not explicitly criminalized in the Kenyan law and most incidents go unreported, often due to stigma.[12]

8 https://thekenyatimes.com/latest-kenya-times-news/concerns-as-report-reveals-55-of-kenyan-children-accessed-pornography-online/

9 National Plan of Action to Tackle Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Kenya, 2022–2026 - https://www.nccs.go.ke/sites/default/files/resources/National-Plan-of-Action-to-Tackle-Online-Child-Sexual-Exploitation-and-Abuse-in-Kenya-2022-2026.pdf

10 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (October 2021), op cit.

11 Ibid

12 Ibid

A. Defining intellectual disability

This research study focused on understanding the online sexual exploitation and abuse of children and youth with intellectual disabilities in Kenya, specifically targeting children with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities. For clarity, mild intellectual disability is characterised by an intelligence quotient (IQ) range of 52-69, while moderate intellectual disability has an IQ range of 35-51. Individuals with an IQ below 70 generally have a sub-average intellectual functioning, affecting their adaptive behaviours and ability to navigate complex environments such as the internet.

The term "intellectual disability" is used when there are limitations to a person's ability to learn and function in daily life at an expected level. It is defined by the following three characteristics:

(i) IQ of between 70-75 or below.

(ii) Significant limitations in adaptive behaviours (the ability to adapt and carry on everyday life activities such as self-care, socializing, communicating, etc.)

(iii) The onset of the disability occurs before age 18.[13]

> For clarity, mild intellectual disability is characterised by an intelligence quotient (IQ) range of 52-69, while moderate intellectual disability has an IQ range of 35-51.

As stated in Kenya National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD) (2024) report on analytical monograph on autism spectrum disorders and related developmental disabilities (an estimation by WHO), 1 out of 59 children (1.7%) are born with Autism and Related Developmental Disabilities (ACRDDs) which include Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, Epilepsy, and Intellectual Disabilities.[14] A national survey conducted by the Kenya Institute of Special Education and the Ministry of Education found that 2.5% of the population had intellectual disabilities.[15]

For many children, the cause of their intellectual disabilities is not known. Some of the most commonly known causes of intellectual disabilities – like Down syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, fragile X syndrome, genetic conditions, birth defects, and infections – happen before birth. Others happen while a baby is being born or soon after birth. Other causes of intellectual disabilities do not occur until a child is older; these might include serious head injuries, stroke, or certain infections.

Levels of intellectual disability vary greatly in children. Intellectual disabilities could cause a child to learn and develop more slowly than other children of the same age and it could take them longer to speak, walk, dress, or eat without help. They could have challenges learning in school, understanding social rules, seeing the results of their actions, remembering things, and solving problems.[16] Children and youth with intellectual disabilities might have a hard time letting others know their wants and needs and taking care of themselves. They are therefore at a higher risk of experiencing online sexual exploitation and abuse, including involvement in child sexual abuse material. Furthermore, children with emotional, behavioural, intellectual, or psychosocial disabilities are more at risk of violence, sexual abuse, neglect, and bullying than those with other disabilities.[17] Contributing factors include:

13 Kenya Disability Resource. https://www.kenyadisabilityresource.org/Intellectual-Disability

14 https://ncpwd.go.ke/download/analytical-monograph-on-autism/?ind=1706617318223&filename=ASDs%20&%20RDDs%20MONOGRAPH.pdf&wpdmdl=17282&refresh=67bc58b0e83231740396720

15 Kenya Institute of Special Education, Ministry of Education (2018) National Survey on Children with Disabilities and Special Needs in Education- https://kise.ac.ke/system/files/2022-01/National%20survey%20on%20children%20with%20disabilities%20and%20special%20needs%20in%20education%202018-min.pdf

16 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities (2022). Facts About Intellectual Disabilities -https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/media/pdfs/2024/12/intellectualdisability.pdf

17 United Nations Children's Fund (2022) Fact Sheet: Children with Disabilities - https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/GIP02115_UNICEF_Children-with-Disabilities-Factsheet-final%20-%20accessible.pdf

1. **Extensive time spent online:** Across the world, many parents and caregivers of children with disabilities shared that they use technological devices to support their children's social and other forms of engagement. Without concerted efforts empowering children with information and tools on digital safety, children may be at risk of being exploited by bad actors.[18]

2. **Barriers in accessing online platforms:** According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, children with different types of disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, face various barriers in accessing the digital environment, such as content in non-accessible formats, limited access to affordable assistive technologies at home, school and in the community and the prohibition of the use of digital devices in schools, health facilities and other environments.[19] Some websites, applications, games and other digital services that are accessed by children with disabilities fail to meet universal design requirements to ensure accessibility. An example is the terms and conditions for social networking sites which are provided in very complex language, which makes it even more difficult for a child with an intellectual disability to understand.

3. **Limited access to appropriate sex education and lack of sexual awareness:** Many children with intellectual disabilities will not realise that they are viewing harmful material or that they are being groomed or live-streamed as they are often denied access to online safety skills, life skills and education on sex and relationships. The situation is both complicated and compounded by the stigma that surrounds disability and sex. Some parents may not wish their child to access such education, and others may fear that sexuality education will promote and increase sexual behaviour.[20] However, youth with disabilities turn to the web to experiment sexually because they have nowhere else to go. Often experiencing little affection and sometimes not understanding sexual norms, they experiment online, and it is here that they can be vulnerable to online sexual advances that are both inappropriate and dangerous.[21]

4. **Loneliness and isolation arising from disability:** Many children with intellectual disabilities experience suspicion, stigma, and discrimination and experience higher levels of social isolation. Online spaces may therefore serve as avenues for children with intellectual disabilities to seek social validation or belonging given the stigma they experience offline. Children with low esteem may feel an especially strong need to seek more appreciation and validation and as such may respond readily to those who show an interest in them on social media or through other digital means.

5. **Targeted approaches:** Some perpetrators specifically target children with disabilities to satisfy their sexual needs, often in networks where they share images, fantasies, and, regrettably, stream videos and images of children they have managed to manipulate.[22] For some abusers, including adults with disabilities, the trading of abusive material featuring children with disabilities is a commercial proposition.[23]

6. **Poverty** is another factor that contributes to increased vulnerability and risk of OCSEA for children and youth with intellectual disabilities, who are often some of the poorest and most neglected members of society. In families fractured by the need to survive, exploiting a child by placing him or her online to perform a sex act for a stranger halfway around the other side of the world is a means to an end.[24]

18 We Protect Global Alliance, DeafKidz International, Childhood USA (2021). Intelligence Brief: The sexual exploitation and abuse of children with disabilities online

19 UN Committee on the Rights of the Chile, General Comment NO. 25, Para 90.

20 United Nations Children's Fund (2022) Fact Sheet: Children with Disabilities.

21 We Protect Global Alliance, DeafKidz International, Childhood USA (2021). Intelligence Brief: The sexual exploitation and abuse of children with disabilities online https://www.weprotect.org/wp-content/uploads/Intelligence-briefing-2021-The-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-of-disabled-children.pdf

22 Álvarez-Guerrero, G., Fry, D., Lu, M., & Gaitis, K. K. (2024). Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children and Adolescents with Disabilities: A Systematic Review. Disabilities, 4(2), 264–276. https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities4020017.

23 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment NO. 25, Para 90.

24 Maguire-Jack, K., & Sattler, K. (2022). Neighborhood Poverty, Family Economic Well-Being, and Child Maltreatment.

B. OCSEA and intellectual disability

There is a significant gap in the data on the online sexual exploitation and abuse of children with intellectual disabilities, which means that it is currently not possible to accurately know the global level of incidence or prevalence.[25] In 2021, the eSafety Commissioner of Australia commissioned research to better understand the online experiences of young people with intellectual disabilities and to identify how to support them to have safe, empowering experiences online. The research showed that parents, carers, educators, and young people all agree that digital technologies and the internet have a positive role and influence on the lives of young people. Connected devices facilitate learning and education, communication, social engagement, entertainment, and independence.

Young people with intellectual disabilities spend considerable time online, and for some it is their primary interface with the world. They use the full range of connected devices, including iPads, smartphones, laptops/PCs, and gaming devices such as Xbox and Nintendo including accessing multiple social media services. Parents and carers use these digital devices to engage young people while they get on with other activities such as housework.

> Young people with intellectual disabilities spend considerable time online, and for some it is their primary interface with the world.

However, young people with intellectual disabilities also face a range of online safety issues which include cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, contact with strangers, excessive screen time, online scams, sexting, accidental purchases, and sharing private information online. While these experiences are like those experienced by other young people, the response strategies adopted by young people with intellectual disabilities differed significantly. Rather than reach out and seek support, these young people responded to negative online experiences by shutting down and avoiding the use of a particular channel such as social media.[26]

Findings from another Australian study show that over three-quarters of teens with disability had seen sexual images online (77%, compared with the national average of 71%), and over half had received a sexual message (56% compared with the national average of 47%). Teens with disabilities were also more likely to have been asked for sexual information (26% compared with the national average of 18%) or sexual images of themselves (15% compared with the national average of 11%).[27]

As noted above, data detailing the incidence and scale of online facilitated sexual abuse of children with disabilities is glaringly absent. Child protection networks often fail to include the protection needs of children with disabilities in their strategic planning and operational implementation. There is a lack of disability-inclusive or disability-specific online protection measures by decision-makers. This is particularly evident when it comes to ensuring online safeguarding and protection work is inclusive of the needs of children with disabilities. Furthermore, a lack of developed social and legal infrastructures – clinical, social welfare, and criminal justice – means that perpetrators remain undetected and able to prey on more children and victims unsupported and mired in unresolved trauma. Globally, people with disabilities struggle to access these essential services that can protect them due to poor disability awareness, which is a failure by the system to include their respective access needs in service design.[28]

Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 38(5–6), 4814–4831. https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221119522

25 We Protect Global Alliance, op.cit.

26 eSafety Commissioner (2023). Online safety for young people with intellectual disabilities. Canberra: Australian Government https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-12/Online%20safety%20for%20young%20people%20with%20intellectual%20disability%20report.pdf?v=1730214054776

27 eSafety Commissioner (2023). A New Playground: The Digital Lives of Young People with Disability. Canberra: Australian Government

28 Clemente, K. A. P., Silva, S. V. da, Vieira, G. I., Bortoli, M. C. de, Toma, T. S., Ramos, V. D., & Brito, C. M. M. de. (2022). Barreiras ao acesso das pessoas com deficiência aos serviços de saúde: Uma revisão de escopo. Revista de Saúde Pública, 56, 64. https://doi.org/10.11606/s1518-8787.2022056003893

With more than 800 million children online, based on the WHO's proportional estimates, more than 120 million children with disabilities are digitally active. This high percentage (15%) implies that risk may be more amplified in children with disabilities who may be relatively more socially isolated and whose parents may be more prone to offer them digital tools. Accordingly, any activity seeking to safeguard and protect children online cannot succeed without deliberately targeting children with disabilities.[29]

C. Data collection and review framework

The qualitative research approach included a high level literature review, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and case studies. This methodological framework provided insights into the lived experiences of children and youth with intellectual disabilities, capturing both their engagement with online platforms and the risks they face.

Primary data collection entailed interviews with children and youth with intellectual disabilities and parents/caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities in FGDs, documentation of case studies from individuals who had experiences related to online sexual exploitation and abuse that they were willing to share, and KIIs with relevant stakeholders. Secondary methods involved a comprehensive review of relevant literature which complemented the use of the primary data. A qualitative approach enabled the research team to undertake in-depth discussions with more children and caregivers within a limited budget. Additionally, qualitative approaches allowed for reasonable flexibility in data collection, in line with the communication needs of the target respondents, especially children with intellectual disabilities.

Data collection was conducted in selected schools and community settings Nairobi and Kiambu counties, covering both urban and peri-urban settings where connectivity is greater than other parts of Kenya

Data collection was conducted in selected schools and community settings Nairobi and Kiambu counties, covering both urban and peri-urban settings where connectivity is greater than other parts of Kenya. The selection of these areas was informed by preliminary findings from key informants, including government representatives and teachers in institutions for children with intellectual disabilities who noted that Nairobi and Kiambu counties have the highest concentration of educational institutions for this population. Additionally, it was observed that children in these counties have more access to the internet and internet-enabled devices, making them relevant for this study.

The target population for the research was children and youth aged 14 to 22 years with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities. This age group was selected due to their increased exposure to technology and their critical developmental stage as they transition into adulthood. An ethical clearance was sought and granted by the African International University Ethical Review Board. Similarly, a permit to conduct the research was granted by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Additionally, the study design and data collection tools were peer-reviewed by a Research Advisory Group (RAG), constituted to provide technical guidance to the research processes. The RAG comprised government representatives, managers of institutions for children with disability and specifically children with intellectual disabilities, parents of children with intellectual disabilities, researchers, and other subject matter specialists such as psychosocial specialists. Data collection tools were piloted with children and youth with intellectual disabilities and caregivers. The feedback from the pilot exercise was used to fine-tune the tools and commence the data collection process.

A multistage approach featuring both random and purposive sampling techniques was used to identify the target sample. Nairobi and Kiambu Counties were purposely sampled given that they have high internet

29 "UNICEF: Make the Digital World Safer for Children – While Increasing Online Access to Benefit the Most Disadvantaged" <https://www.unicef.org/azerbaijan/press-releases/unicef-make-digital-world-safer-children-while-increasing-online-

penetration rates and that they represent urban and both peri-urban and rural contexts. This was informed by preliminary discussions with stakeholders. The primary unit of sampling was the existing parent/caregiver support groups in the two counties, which were affiliated with either Kenya Community Centre for Learning (KCCL), Kenya Association of Intellectually Handicapped (KAIH), and the Differently Talented Society of Kenya (DTSK). The three institutions also served as key informants in the preliminary discussions that helped shape the research design.

The study engaged 88 children and youth through eight FGDs and eight case studies. FGDs were conducted in two cohorts: 14-18 years and 19-22 years with participants drawn from schools or vocational training centers. Sessions allowed the participants to share their experiences and provided valuable insights into the challenges they face in the online environment. Participants were also sensitised on the issue of OCSEA to help them navigate online platforms more safely as part of ZanaAfrica's commitment to safeguarding.

The study also engaged 48 parents and caregivers of children and youth with intellectual disabilities through FGDs and key informant interviews. These parents and caregivers were drawn from established support groups in Nairobi and Kiambu counties. Their participation was crucial in understanding the extent of their awareness of OCSEA and their capacity to protect their children from online risks. Six teachers were also interviewed as key informants, with an additional 10 participating in an FGD and a sensitization session on OCSEA. The role of educators was examined, particularly in terms of their interaction with children with intellectual disabilities and their ability to monitor and guide online engagement in educational settings. Other key informants were teachers of children with intellectual disabilities, civil society organizations, government representatives, and tech industry representatives.

The draft findings were reviewed and validated by a wide range of stakeholders in the child protection and safeguarding, education, tech, people with disabilities, law enforcement and judiciary spaces. The state and non-state actors discussed the findings to ensure that they were an accurate representation of the risks facing children and youth with intellectual disabilities in Nairobi and Kiambu Counties. They strengthened the recommendations to ensure that they were responding to the issues raised and contextualized to the actual needs experienced by the respondents.

IV. Findings and recommendations

A. Online platform use, risks and mitigation

This research showed that children and youth with intellectual disabilities in Kenya commonly visit Facebook,shopping apps, Instagram, learning apps (Khan Academy), Netflix, Showmax, Snapchat, Telegram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Bad Lab, dating sites, shopping sites, Deaf OP, Firefox, Gaming platforms like minecraft, Roblox and Temple Run that are accessed on Google Chrome, IMO, LinkedIn, Microsoft Edge, OLX, Phoenix app, Spotify, Audiomack, Boomplay, Twitter (X), and YouTube among others.

Table 1: Reasons why children and youth like different platforms and how they use them.

Platform	What children/youth like about the platform (s)	Direct quotes from the interviewees
WhatsApp, Deaf OP, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook Messenger	Communication, connecting/chatting with family and friends (social engagement)	"Deaf OP; it deals with persons with hearing impairments for ease of communication" FGD_Children/youth (15-22yrs) "WhatsApp for chatting with friends, l also video call my dad." FGD_Children/Youth (14-18yrs)
Snapchat	Filters, connecting with friends	"I like Snapchat because of filters and also chatting and video calling with friends." FGD_Children/Youth (14-18yrs)
Google/ Chrome	Playing games	"I like Google because l play games like Minecraft; on Minecraft, l can chat with friends and other players." FGD_Children/Youth (14-18yrs) "Chrome for Playing games (temple run). FGD_Children/youth (15-22yrs)
TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, Bad Lab and Google	Learning different skills	"Googling answers to different questions." FGD_Children/youth (15-22yrs) "I learned how to bake from YouTube." FGD_Children/Youth (14-18yrs) "Bad Lab; is good because it has free beats which you can use to produce music." FGD_Children/youth (15- 22yrs)
Instagram	Connecting with friends, good quality images	"Using Instagram, you connect with friends…it gives you no pressure of building a following…you can write as much as you want, and it has quality images." FGD_Children/youth (15-22yrs) "I follow my cousins and friends on Instagram" FGD_Children/Youth (14-18yrs)

Spotify	Wide variety of music	"… and there is a lot of music on Spotify." FGD_Children/ youth (15-22yrs)
TikTok	Posting/sharing content (social engagement)	"I like posting on TikTok…" FGD_Children/youth (15-22yrs)
YouTube, Netflix, TikTok Instagram	Entertainment – watching football, movies, cartoons, dance moves, etc.	"I watch everything on YouTube like Ojojo, comedies." FGD_Children/Youth (14-18yrs) "I watch good movies on Netflix" FGD_Children/Youth (14-18yrs) "I watch funny stuff on TikTok, IG, and YouTube and they're all good" FGD_Children/Youth (14-18yrs) "I like TikTok because it has Fun Videos, comedy, and dance challenges" FGD_Children/youth (15-22yrs)

While a clear line could not be drawn between the sites visited by younger children and those visited by youth, findings suggest that younger children tended to commonly visit gaming platforms such as mine craft, Snapchat and other chat-enabled sites, learning apps, and WhatsApp, while older children and youth tended to commonly visit Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, Showmax, and Netflix among others. The FGDs with children and youth revealed that YouTube was a popular platform used for entertainment (watching movies, cartoons, football, playing games, watching, and listening to music, following other channels, and learning new skills such as playing guitar and piano, cooking, etc.), depending on individual interests. On the other hand, WhatsApp was popular for keeping in touch and regular communication with family and friends. Children and youth further used TikTok to watch dance videos and learn varied content, and Instagram for learning and following different passions and activities.

Patterns of use

All research participants opined that the internet has played a significant role in the lives of children and youth with intellectual disabilities. It has impacted children and youth with Intellectual disabilities at home and in school in the following ways:

- **Learning and education:** In the school setting, for example, educators increasingly use online platforms to create interest, engage, and facilitate faster learning for children and youth with intellectual disabilities. They are also able to access relevant content for teaching and for enhancing their skills in relating to children with intellectual disabilities. This improves the quality of learning for the children and youth. One teacher noted that "When teaching them, I use YouTube a lot. For example, if you want to teach letters or numbers, teaching them in class, while writing on the board will not have much impact compared to when you provide visual content in the form of a video or audiovisual content that they can see. The video they will be watching is in the form of numbers or a song and is colourful. Their numbers are coloured differently to make them appealing and attractive to them. The youth on the other hand use YouTube a lot for their learning. the older ones for example use Microsoft PowerPoint to choose the colours they are attracted to. YouTube provides them with tutorials." *KII_Teacher*

  According to key informants, children and youth with intellectual disabilities are mainly drawn to platforms that support visual interactions because it is easier for them to follow and understand visuals. Key among the apps they are attracted to include YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp among others that support images and videos. A teacher in a KII noted that "First of all, they love music, so they tend to watch music a lot. The other thing is because they are largely visual, they cannot read articles a lot, but they understand videos. They settle for it because it is what they understand best." This, therefore, increases the risk as they are likely to be attracted to inappropriate content commonly disguised in videos and images." *KII_Teacher of children with intellectual disabilities.*

- **Creativity:** Given their limited social skills, difficulties in communication, and lack of interaction with the wider population, the internet provides a platform for children and youth with intellectual disabilities to learn new skills and generate ideas. Children learn creativity from Instagram, YouTube Kids, and Google, where they learn different things including games, songs, 5-minute crafts, and basic skills such as knitting, and cooking, making toys among others. A parent noted, "On the positive side, it creates imagination like for my daughter. She told me she wanted to be a scientist so she asked me, "can a scientist go to the sky?" I asked her why, and she told me she was watching an astronaut…" *FGD_Parents*

  A child in an FGD for example reported that: "I googled some photos of areas which l would like to visit" *FGD_Children 14-18yrs.*

- **Social networking:** Children and youth with intellectual disabilities were able to make friends online and to keep in touch. This was noted to be particularly important because children and youth with intellectual disabilities seldom go out unsupervised, which limits their interaction with other people. Key informants further reported that children and youth with intellectual disabilities face challenges making friends in person due to varying speech difficulties; the internet fills this gap. Children also explained their excitement at having followers and friends on different platforms where they interact and have fun. "I got followers on Instagram, and I was excited!" *FGD_Children (14-18yrs)*

  Discussions with a children's counsellor indicated that children with intellectual disabilities generally feel that the internet is safe. As noted by the National Plan of Action to Tackle OnlineChild Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Kenya,[30] children are unaware of the risks posed by the internet. They interact with much more content in an environment devoid of the usual reactions of stigma, judgement, sympathy, or pity which people would ordinarily show towards them in physical spaces. "These children feel that the internet presents a safe space for them where they can freely do what they want to do without judgement. This provides an opportunity to do or become." *KII_Children's counsellor.*

  However, this also increases the likelihood that children and youth with intellectual disabilities will access sites with inappropriate content when they are not supervised and implicitly trust the content. "The biggest challenge however is that the learners emulate what they see, the internet influences their behaviour, and they easily copy what they see in advertisements. It would be unfortunate if they landed on pornographic content for example" *KII_Teacher*

- **Entertainment:** Children and youth with intellectual disabilities use the Internet to entertain themselves through movies and comedy shows on YouTube, Showmax and other platforms. They also listened to music and watched music videos on YouTube, Spotify, and Audiomack among others. Besides movies and music, children use online platforms to play games, watch football, cartoons, and other entertainment activities.

- **Caregiver support.** Parents and caregivers used connectivity to keep in touch with their children, by calling and communicating with them as necessary through their internet-enabled devices. They also used connectivity for behaviour management, noting that the internet could help calm down children who were seen as hyperactive. Not all parents are fully informed about online safety; however, those parents who were more aware noted that they were able to monitor the whereabouts of their children as well as the internet sites they visited. As a result, they were able to intervene when children and youth visited risky or undesirable sites using their devices. "From my device, I can know which site my daughter visits. I then take time to review and check what content is on those sites. This helps me know when she visits risky sites such as those with pornographic content." *FGD_Parents.* Caregivers and parents also used WhatsApp and other platforms to create support groups and experience-sharing. "...this gives us a platform to support one another, encourage and share ideas on how best we can raise and protect our children as they're vulnerable to abuse." *FGD_Parents.*

30 https://www.nccs.go.ke/sites/default/files/resources/National-Plan-of-Action-to-Tackle-Online-Child-Sexual-Exploitation-and-Abuse-in-Kenya-2022-2026.pdf

Devices

Almost all participating children in Nairobi and a majority of those in Kiambu County had internet-enabled gadgets. To access these platforms, children and youth use a wide range of devices such as tablets, smart TVs, iPads, desktop computers, laptops, smartwatches, smartphones and gaming devices such as PlayStation, and XBOX. Most of the children and youth participants reported that they own the gadgets; a few used a parent's or caregiver's gadget. It was noted that some children, especially those interviewed in Nairobi, had access to multiple devices including smartwatches, smartphones, iPads, laptop computers, and smart TVs in their bedrooms where they were completely unsupervised. They had access to an internet connection around the clock while at home. The duration spent on the internet depended on different factors including but not limited to how long they accessed internet connectivity, how much free time they had at their disposal, and whether there were any restrictions at the family level that regulated the use of electronic devices. Children with access to more stable internet and power supply tended to visit more platforms.

Teachers further noted that children with intellectual disability learned better with the use of devices, especially those that allow for touch interfaces as some may not be able to comprehend the keypad. Digital technologies have also made it easier for children and youth with intellectual disabilities to learn, communicate, and improve their speech. Instructions that are computer-assisted are a lot more valuable in helping children and youth with intellectual disabilities in word recognition, spelling, reading, and practice.

Risks

All participants in the study acknowledged the existence of substantial risks, including:

1. **Online grooming** where perpetrators manipulate, abuse and exploit vulnerable children. Children with intellectual disabilities may experience difficulties in identifying exploitative behaviour, challenges in communication, and a desire for social connections. A parent noted "…it comes in many ways maybe they are chatting on a video call and a child is just there being groomed, at first, they will be told it's okay to touch yourself and it is okay to touch me… the next thing, show me this, show me that and within no time that child is full-blown sexually abused. You as a parent will just be there not knowing a thing. You might realise that a child was groomed since he or she was five years and by the time he/she gets to ten years he/she will have been sexually abused." *FGD_ Parents*

2. **Buildup to in-person sexual abuse or harassment.** Despite the relatively small sample size, multiple in-person incidents were described by respondents. "We have a case of a girl with intellectual disabilities who was molested and is now pregnant. It all began with exchanging nude photos via WhatsApp and later on a physical meeting," *KII_Head Teacher.* In another case, "...a girl with intellectual disabilities who was sexually molested by an online 'friend'. The boy took advantage of the girl due to her trusting nature and inability to read social cues and he would ask her to stream sexual content as well as send nude pictures. The mother of the girl is so devastated." *KII_ Teacher*

   Even though the study did not identify any glaring differences in terms of online CSEA, key informants generally believed that girls were more prone to sexual molestation and harassment. In some cases, this has led to unplanned pregnancies when girls physically met with the friends they initially met online. "I used to have a friend. She used to tell me so many different stories. I even forgot some of them…she told me about a guy, and you know how some guys behave so she used to date this boy. So, the boy used to send "bad things" nudes. So, she told me she liked this boy. I told her she better be careful because you don't know what he might do to you, but she refused to listen to me. So, my friend and the boy started meeting up, they started sleeping together, my friend got pregnant and then the guy disappeared." *FGD_Children/Youth (14-18yrs)*

Some children and youth managed the risk of in-person abuse through avoidance. “People ask me to meet them…I don’t meet them…I tell them that I am not in Kenya…I am at work in Saudi Arabia or Germany…” *FGD-Youth (19-22yrs)*. This was not the case for other youth who were less aware of possible danger. “I met an online friend and we have been talking for almost 4 years. We have been exchanging pictures and next Saturday we will be meeting in person. I believe the blood of Jesus will protect me” *FGD-Children/youth, Boy (19-22yrs)*

3. **Exposure to inappropriate content** such as pornography, violence, or other materials unsuitable for children and young adult users. “Anonymous people send you photos of their nude bodies mainly via Facebook and Instagram or just nude photos into your inbox…people request you to send them nude photos, but I have never sent” *FGD_youth 19-22yrs.* “There are very many dangers, one is that their minds are exposed to something they are not ready for, or they were not looking out for. The idea has already been planted in their heads so some of them may go out there to look for more, perhaps even more gross versions of it, for example, if it is pornography.” *KII Nairobi.*

4. **Mimicry of content viewed online:** Other key informants further revealed that victims of such abuse could also end up being perpetrators. They tend to act out what they see online on other children, essentially taking advantage of and abusing other children in the process. Interviewees further noted that exposure to inappropriate content could lead to self-harm. “It might cause harm to them because depending on their level of understanding they might not know what is happening or what they are involved in is bad, they blame themselves, so they try to harm themselves, so you find cases of suicide which is a danger in itself…” *KII_Kiambu*

   Another teacher lamented the increased frequency with which sexual content streamed online, noting that children with intellectual disabilities were likely to pick and mimic such content when they see it online. “Children with intellectual disabilities often mimic what they see or watch. A while back we realised an inappropriate dance and bad language amongst our learners only to find that they picked it up from a song on YouTube” *KII_Teacher*

5. **Livestreaming of child sexual abuse** can be particularly damaging for children and youth with intellectual disabilities because they may struggle to report such abuse given their communication challenges. In addition, abusers may offer a false sense of attention to these children who often experience social isolation. In one of the discussions with children, a participant narrated: “Once when my friend and I were playing a game on the internet, a stranger who we had not met joined our game and said he wanted to play with us. After playing for a few minutes, he said there was something he wanted to show us and that we should not tell anyone. He then went into a room with a girl, and they removed clothes, and he told us not to tell anyone…” *FGD_Children 14-18yrs.*

6. **Sexting and sharing of private information.** Vulnerable children may be coerced into sharing explicit images or personal details. The research found that such sharing happens mostly on TikTok, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, other chat-enabled online platforms and via email. “There was a day I was not home chatting with friends on TikTok, then there was this stranger we had chatted with for a few days. Then he asked me to give him the house number and the location of where I stayed. But I lied to him that I stay in Kileleshwa, but we stay in Kiambu.” *FGD_Children 14-18yrs.*

   As a teacher noted, “Because they are innocent, they may not be quick to notice that they are being lured into something bad. They can be lured into sexual abuse, even verbal and it’s because most of them cannot express themselves the way we are expressing ourselves. You see, someone can just say hi, and they respond. Then this person reaches a point and starts asking what type of a person they are talking to, and they start abusing them, even sending them photos, and the child will start being interested and say “wow”, so the person thinks they are enjoying what they sent them, yet they don’t know the type of person they are dealing with, so it’s easy to abuse them…” *KII_Teacher*

7. **Cyberbullying and online harassment:** children with intellectual disabilities face elevated levels of cyberbullying due to social isolation, difficulty in understanding social cues, and challenges they face in communicating distress and defending themselves. They may be slow to understand the consequences of their actions and consequently feel ashamed, guilty, or confused after engaging in or being coerced into sexting. Should the messages be shared beyond the intended recipient, children with intellectual disabilities may experience bullying or ostracization from peers. "Cyberbullying let's say IG [Instagram] or TikTok are two major ones. If you maybe post a picture, they will start writing hateful comments, for example you are ugly! which affects self- confidence." *FGD_Children 14-18yrs.* "Sometimes you get hateful messages in the inbox telling me I'll never make it coz of my disability. This brings feelings of inadequacy and one can be suicidal if you have no one to talk to." *FGD-Youth 19-22yrs.*

8. **Online scams and fraud**, including financial scams targeting these vulnerable users. "For our children, especially the autistic children, they can be easily lied to, they are usually very honest and very obedient. They can easily be deceived, and this gives us butterflies in our stomachs. You don't know who they can meet online. That's our greatest fear..." *FGD_Parents.* Children and youth further reported receiving calls and texts from strangers asking them to send money due to the friendship or romantic relationship, or alternatively as payment for training or materials for a promised job, lottery or prize. Key informants further noted that children and youth also face phishing scams where scammers attempt to trick them into giving personal information like passwords or bank details. They may also be lured to making in-game purchases without fully understanding the financial implications.

9. **Gadget and content dependency,** which leads to a detachment from real-world interactions and reduced strength of relationships with parents, caregivers or other safe people. "In the first place, they don't know how to socialise, it's something they have to learn, it's something they have to be taught how to socialise because their communication is a bit difficult from the way me and you are communicating, they have a different way of understanding and relating to people, so if they spend so much time on the internet, they will lack the skills of how to socialize because their mind is not on the tasks to be done but on the internet…" *KII_Children's counsellor.* Another parent in an FGD posed, "…how can they come out of that relationship they have with the phone and learn to have a relationship with their age mates? That is the worst and most difficult thing not only to those with children with disabilities but also to caregivers with other children because it is affecting the larger society." *FGD_Parents*

10. **Tendency towards use in isolation:** While some participants indicated that they rely on someone else to get online, the majority access platforms and apps unsupervised. One participant observed that "I use the phone unaided because I know where or what l want to watch, l also don't want to be dependent on someone for assistance." *FGD_Children/youth (19-22yrs).*

A teacher noted that the "biggest challenge is accessing inappropriate content, most children with autism like to spend time alone." *KII_Teacher.* Similarly, a parent indicated that "My special needs boy is non-verbal and at 19 years he is as tall as me, sometimes you want him to watch what you think is important to him like to improve his speech, but for him, he wants to watch football. Instead of him sitting with you, he will just walk away; for me, that's a very big challenge." *FGD Parents.* Discussions with headteachers and key informants indicated that, while there are many

different applications one can use to monitor activities, most parents lack knowledge about them or how to use them. As a result, most children with intellectual disabilities navigate the internet mainly unsupervised.

11. **Caregiver burden:** A majority of parents who participated in FGDs across Kiambu and Nairobi revealed that it is difficult to control, around the clock, what their children do online. Most parents reported having a demanding work schedule which leaves them with limited time to spend with their children on a typical day. "Most parents nowadays work like 12 hours a day, so mostly they see their kids when they are leaving for school but when they leave school we are not at home. The only thing the parent does is to ask if they did their homework. Some are not even able to check the homework. The kid won't tell you how much time they spend on the phone and maybe it was the first thing they touched after school. And also, some kids delete history." *FGD_Parents*

B. Recommendations to tech industry to improve safeguarding for children with intellectual disabilities

To support the above measures and ensure the prevention and mitigation of OCSEA amongst children and youth with intellectual disabilities, the research proposes the following overarching recommendations:

1. **Ensure the full and meaningful participation** of children and youth with intellectual disabilities, as well as parents and caregivers, in all processes, including during the development of online apps and content creation to ensure that their views are taken into consideration and to take measures aimed at preventing and mitigating OCSEA. All respondents including children and youth agreed that children lack sufficient awareness on child protection and OCSEA and the knowledge and tools to keep themselves safe. However, children with intellectual disabilities need more support and supervision from their parents and caregivers while they access online platforms and when they interpret terms and conditions of use to enable them to identify and potentially avoid online risks effectively. As such, it is crucial to engage them for instance through dedicated consultations, user testing, and advisory panels. Ensure accessibility in these engagements by using plain language, visual supports, and assistive technologies. Findings from this research may inform more specific questions to better understand the unique challenges they face with certain platforms, features and/or processes.

2. **Conduct additional targeted implementation** research on OCSEA, with respect to the experiences of children and youth with disabilities in general, and in particular those with intellectual disabilities. This research was a high level look into the problem and requires expanding the research coverage to a bigger sample size to achieve several important insights and to fill the existing gaps in available research, including:

    - understanding the scale/scope of the problem better;
    - implementation research on what mechanisms can be used to teach children/youth with intellectual disabilities on OCSEA (what would be the best modalities to use and what does that look like?)
    - further views including those for rural families with children with intellectual disabilities;
    - data disaggregation e.g. by age and sex, social economic status, access to internet and apps etc;
    - disaggregating OCSEA vulnerabilities to different intellectual disabilities;
    - studying the policy environment in East Africa and the degree to which it supports OCSEA for children with Intellectual disabilities.

    Key informants called upon the tech industry, as well as other stakeholders such as academia, to support and invest in research to better understand OCSEA and develop innovative solutions to combat online predation against children, especially with respect to children with disabilities in general, and those with intellectual disabilities in particular.

3. **Develop accessible protection and sensitization resources** that can easily be understood by children and youth with intellectual disabilities, their parents and caregivers. To enhance accessibility, these resources can:
    - Be made available in alternative accessible formats such as easy-to-read and visual formats to enhance comprehension.
    - Provide explicit examples to help children with intellectual disabilities identify and understand online social cues and communicate their needs and concerns.
    - Leverage the popularity of online educational content, such as games, songs, and crafts, by partnering with content creators to develop accessible protection resources.
    - Be made available in multiple languages to enhance accessibility for children, parents, and caregivers who may have difficulty understanding English.
    - Equip parents and caregivers with practical steps to identify indicators of possible abuse and exploitation, prevention strategies, methods for discussing risks with children, reporting mechanisms, and where to seek support.
    - Inform parents and caregivers on how to detect signs of distress in their children, particularly since children with intellectual disabilities may struggle to communicate their needs.
    - Provide guidance for parents and caregivers on balancing the benefits and risks of internet use, considering the high caregiver burden and the need to manage challenging behaviors.
    - Roll out these materials widely through digital literacy programs and awareness campaigns, ensuring they address the unique challenges faced by children with intellectual disabilities and their families.[31]
4. **Improve age verification systems** to prevent children from accessing inappropriate content. Age verification should go beyond stating the age and or the year one was born to include additional questions or features that can further identify if users are minors or adults and add questions that can help determine cognitive age especially for children with intellectual disabilities.
5. **Strengthen content moderation, trust and safety** on an ongoing basis in order to to continuously detect, mitigate and prevent potential OCSEA risks. The following considerations are proposed regarding reporting mechanisms:
    - Reporting mechanisms should be child-friendly, accessible, understandable, and usable by children with intellectual disabilities.
    - Providing step-by-step guidance and clarifying what happens during reporting helps make the process more approachable to children with intellectual disabilities.
    - Tech industry may consider providing multi-format reporting options, for instance voice recordings, pictorial selections, multiple choice selections, or simplified text-based submissions.
    - Reporting mechanisms should be designed to allow children with intellectual disabilities to report abuse independently while also providing options for seeking assistance when needed. Ensuring that children are not solely reliant on adults to report abuse upholds their right to protection and acknowledges the communication and socialization challenges they may face.
    - Tech industry may also partner with child rights institutions to provide the necessary support as children go through the reporting process. For instance, Childline Kenya provides a confidential hotline for children and caregivers to report cases. However, this knowledge about this platform is not available to every child or parent and as such can benefit from wider awareness campaigns and integration into tech platforms.

31 National Democratic Institute. Preventing and Disrupting the Spread of Gendered Disinformation in the Context of Electoral Processes and Democratic Rollback: Conference Report Prepared by the National Democratic Institute (NDI). https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Conference%20Report%20from%20the%20Global%20Partnership%20Gendered%20Disinformation%20Conference_final.docx.pdf

6. **Develop apps that are specifically designed for children** and take into consideration the accessibility requirements of children with intellectual disabilities, to ensure that such platforms and apps are free from inappropriate content. This would also entail a safety-informed approach to the design of apps and platforms that children with intellectual disabilities use. Apps that are specifically targeted for use by children will also make it easier for parents and caregivers to apply parental controls. This safety-informed approach is particularly important given children with intellectual disabilities' tendencies towards internet use in isolation.
7. **Ensure that digital products and platforms adhere to universal design:** Developers should promote innovations that meet the requirements of children with different types of disabilities and ensure that digital products and services are designed for universal accessibility, so that they can be used by all children without exception and without the need for adaptation. To ensure accessibility, the digital platforms should adhere to web content accessibility guidelines[32]. Children with intellectual disabilities should be meaningfully involved in the design of these platforms
8. **Engage with and actively apply solutions that have been developed by local EdTech communities** working on these issues. For example, the Regional Education Learning Initiative EdTech for Quality Learning: Understanding Inclusion and Equity Pathways (EQUIP) framework has developed detailed guidelines for equity and safety considerations across three countries in East Africa.[33]

C. Recommendations for government

More specifically, government authorities should take the following measures:

1. **Create awareness:** All key informants and validation stakeholders cited the role of the government, through the relevant ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), to create awareness, sensitise, empower and build the capacity of parents, caregivers, guardians and educators to address and minimise OCSEA for children with intellectual disabilities, and to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to protect children online. These measures may be taken through regular training sessions and workshops in community-based platforms, learning institutions, and religious institutions, amongst others. The relevant authorities should also use mediums such as sporting events, street posters, small community groups, online platforms, and the media to disseminate information on OCSEA.
2. **Develop laws, policies, guidelines, and standards on OCSEA:** In addition to creating awareness, key informants called upon the government, through the relevant MDAs, to create an enabling legal and policy environment to combat OCSEA. Creating an enabling legal and policy environment involves, among other things, providing clarity on the mandates and responsibility of relevant stakeholders, for example: the development of community guidelines by developers; general guidelines by regulators; policy frameworks by relevant ministries and departments (for instance making OCSEA part of the school learning curriculum and integrating it in teacher professional development); and, reviewing/amending/enacting legislation by parliament.
3. **Strengthen complaint, investigation and justice mechanisms on OCSEA:** In addition to creating an enabling legal and policy framework, the relevant government authorities should strengthen the existing complaint, investigation and justice mechanism on OCSEA. These mechanisms should be easily accessible by children and youth with intellectual disabilities as well as their parents and caregivers. In particular, personnel who serve in these mechanisms should be sensitised on how to accommodate children and youth with disabilities, their parents, and their caregivers when they interact with these mechanisms. Children and youth with disabilities, as well as their parents and guardians, should also be made aware of the existing mechanisms and how to utilise them. Enhancing the effectiveness of

32 https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/
33 Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI). EQUIP project. https://reliafrica.org/equip/

the complaint, investigation and justice mechanisms may include the establishment or strengthening of specialised desks and departments or courts which have the knowledge, skills and tools to perform effective and successful investigations, convictions, and offender management.

4. **Strengthen victim support programs:** The government, through the relevant line ministry (The Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Gender and affirmative action and Ministry of Health), should provide children and youth with intellectual disabilities who fall victim to OCSEA with integrated end-to-end support services to cope with the immediate and long-term impact of their exploitation and abuse. These programs should also target the parents, guardians, and caregivers of the victims**.**

5. **Implement teacher training on child rights, child protection and OCSEA through trauma-informed approaches:** When children are not at home with their parents, guardians or caregivers, they are with their teachers at different levels of education. Teachers who have received this training will have the capacity to sensitise other teachers, identify and mitigate potential online risks for learners, and to educate learners on the same**.** ZanaAfrica's national teacher training program, currently being co-created and implemented in partnership with the Kenyan government through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, can serve as an excellent platform for this work.

D. Engaging stakeholders to reduce and address OCSEA

The research and validation processes revealed multiple ways in which children, youth, families and broader communities can be engaged. Overall, there needs to be an attitudinal, systemic, and procedural shift by the tech industry, government and other decision makers to see the disability community as a vital stakeholder to be consulted and engaged with so that children with disability can be safe and protected when online.

1. **Co-create sensitization programs with children and youth:** The sensitive and iterative development of social and behaviour change communications programs and materials designed for use by children and youth with intellectual disabilities should be actively undertaken. Implementation research and design focusing on more visual and easy to use materials, enhanced trust and safety content, and effective delivery mechanisms are all necessary in order to develop sustainable, implementable solutions for communities and local stakeholders. These could include school-based and online engagement programs for children and youth with intellectual disabilities, their caregivers, immediate and extended family members, religious institutions, and schools to support the protection of children and youth with intellectual disabilities. Existing educational platforms such as EDU TV and Elimika by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) could be used to disseminate general knowledge on how to identify, mitigate, prevent and report OCSEA. Sample materials developed during this project are shown in image 3 (right).

2. **Enhance parent and caregiver support:** While parents are often overwhelmed and under-equipped, they would like to do whatever they can to help and cushion their children from online risks. Parents and caregivers called for more information, especially on indicators to look out for to identify possible abuse. They asked for training on tools and techniques such as ways to limit screen time through parental controls. They also seek options for safer, more friendly and useful websites and apps such as Mental Up which offers brain exercise games like attention, memory, verbal intelligence, and word games, Otsimo which offers assistive matching, drawing, and ordering games, Connecting the Kids which supports families that have a child diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, and iAccessibility Solutions which features apps that support cognitive and intellectual accessibility. Discussions with key informants indicated that most caregivers, parents and teachers were not aware of the existence of such apps.

3. **Develop peer engagement mechanisms:** Parents and key informants further suggested the use of peer mentors who can teach children and youth about safe online practices. "The children [with

intellectual disabilities] will need assistance all the time because they don't know right or wrong. They need assistance from their siblings [and] other children can watch over those with intellectual disabilities to see what they are watching or tell adults so that they can be discouraged. Because they know what is right or wrong, they should be responsible for those children with intellectual disabilities…" *FGD_Teacher*

A parent narrated an experience that he encountered with his son's friends. "I have two sons, one of them who is 20 years old is the one with autism, but you wouldn't know just by looking at him, but I am the one who knows. You find that at their age they have many friends, especially because of the age. He has many friends, both girls and boys… You find that he doesn't have a phone, but they watch movies and music from their friends' place. They go to their friends, and you find them with a flash disk, all of them watching. This usually troubles me very much, but I talk to them. I usually try to talk to him and tell him this is not right. We try and talk to him with his brother who is the one who talks to him often. Because his friends don't want to carry around the flash disk, they tell him to carry it. So now I went and checked the pockets of my son's clothes only to find a flash disk. You know you have to check from time to time for cannabis and other drugs. At that age, you might find such things. Then when I played the flash disk, I found it had pornographic videos, when I asked who it was for, he didn't want to say until I threatened him that I would burn it. It is then that he told me it was for so and so. So, I took the responsibility to go and tell parents because some of those children are under 18 and in secondary school. When I went and asked the parents if the flash disk belonged to their home, they said yes but it had disappeared. They didn't know who took it, then I told them I found it in my home. I have told my son to leave those things, but I need your help so that he can stop watching those things…" *FGD_Parents.*

4. **Establishing safe spaces and safe people in communities:** Key informants also noted the role of the larger community to protect children and youth with intellectual disabilities. They observed that different community platforms such as churches, mosques, sports grounds, marketplaces, and street posters, among others, can be used to engage community members on OCSEA. Respondents called for community members to be sensitized on the rights of people with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, and how to look out for them within the community. "The community should be empowered. There are so many cyber cafes out there and our young adults go there, so they need to be aware that some of their clients have intellectual disabilities and may need assistance on a few issues when online, the community they say is Ubuntu where we all need to take care of each other, and this includes knowing the surrounding population with special needs." *KII_Nairobi.*

"Still by having those talks, how do you reach this generation, through the churches they can organise such talks, and even create small groups where these things can be discussed because foundations are laid at the community level before it goes out." *KII_Teacher*

V. Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for a multi-sectoral approach to protect children and youth with intellectual disabilities from OCSEA. Government, non-governmental agencies, the tech industry, and communities must work together to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place. This includes the development of policy frameworks that prioritise the online safety of children and youth with intellectual disabilities, the implementation of awareness programs, and the creation of safe online spaces tailored to the unique experiences of this vulnerable population.

This research provides a strong foundation for future efforts to protect children and youth with intellectual disabilities in Kenya from the dangers of the internet. By implementing the recommended measures, Kenya can ensure that the internet remains a safe space for all children, including those with intellectual disabilities.