Campaign

C4G

Good

Creativ*ity*
meets
pu*rp***ose.**

Childhood has gone digital — without a safety net

Today's children are the first generation to grow up with technology as a central part of their daily lives.
In Europe, 97% of children over 3 are online, and over 81 million children interact with digital products every day — games, social platforms, apps, learning tools. But unlike the physical world, where child protection is built into design, special tech companies have been allowed for too long to set their own rules and design digital spaces without meaningful accountability for children's rights and wellbeing.

These kids are stepping into systems that are deliberately engineered to:

- Track them
- Profile them
- Monetize their attention, content and relationships
- Shape their habits and behaviour

And all of this **by design.**

This isn't a glitch. It's the business model behind most online products children use.

As one designer explained: "Companies make their money from attention. Reducing attention will reduce revenue." Maximising time spent, reach and interactions are common core business objectives. Over a third (36%) of young people in Europe reported constant contact with friends online, with the highest rates among 15-year-old girls (44%). A third (34%) of adolescents play digital games daily, with more than 1 in 5 (22%) playing for at least 4 hours on days when they engage in gaming. In the UK, 4 in 10 adolescents think that their screentime is too high. Consistently, around half of children worry they are addicted to their devices.

These statistics reveal a troubling reality: children recognise the problem but feel powerless to address it. This is because persuasive design features deliberately built into platforms compel them to stay online longer and engage more intensively.

Children are being shaped by the systems they use

Europe's kids are growing up in a digital ecosystem that's advancing faster than laws, parenting tools, and even public awareness. While the Internet brings incredible opportunities for connection, learning and play, it also poses unregulated, underacknowledged risks, especially to young minds still in development.

> *"When you're not on your phone or social media you feel as if you don't know what's happening"* (aged 16).

These digital spaces are engineered to maximise time spent, activity, and reach: infinite scroll feeds that eliminate natural stopping points, game notifications engineered to trigger children at vulnerable moments, popularity metrics that fuel social comparison, algorithms that serve children "more and more" of whatever they think it will capture their attention the longest, and randomised reward mechanisms that mirror gambling psychology.

> *"I kept turning it off and then going back and still using it"* (Lara, 13). *"Once you start [scrolling], you can't stop"* (Jack, 14). *"Sometimes I get home from school and spend hours scrolling through my phone, and I find it hard to stop even when I'm not really interested anymore"* (aged 16).

Solutions currently being discussed like parental controls or age verification aren't inherently problematic, but they represent only one piece of a much larger puzzle. The fundamental challenge isn't limiting children's access: it's making sure platforms and services are designed without built-in threats. Just as the risk is designed in, so too can it be designed out.

Here's what we know:

Children's brains are uniquely vulnerable.

> *Neuroscientists have shown that children and teenagers are "particularly susceptible to habit-forming rewards and peer approval" due to their developmental drive to seek immediate gratification (Steinberg, 2008). This makes online gaming/entertainment platforms features like streaks, surprise loot boxes, and viral "brainrot" content extra effective — and extra dangerous. Children are increasingly missing critical elements of human connection and learning, with loneliness, anxiety, depression, body dysmorphia, ADHD and other mental conditions on the rise.*

Design decisions shape behavior.

> *What we call "addiction" is often persuasive design working exactly as intended. For example, digital products foster addiction using some of the same conditioning principles found in gambling, such as variable reward schedules and artificial scarcity. Children are not failing to self-regulate, they are responding to systems designed to bypass their cognitive defenses.*

Legal protections aren't keeping up.

While the Digital Services Act (DSA*) and other measures are steps forward, enforcement remains slow and tech companies continue to find new ways to optimise for engagement and profit over children's wellbeing. Children's rights – to safety, agency, rest, and play – are still being systematically eroded by design, even in apps that claim to be family-friendly.

In short: the Internet wasn't built to protect children. And it shows.

5Rights Foundation is an international NGO that works with and for children to build the digital world they deserve. Founded by Baroness Beeban Kidron, the organisation's mission is to ensure that digital products and services cater to children by design and default, moving beyond the current reality where tech companies primarily design with profit in mind. With work spanning research, advocacy, complaints and public outreach, children and young people are at the heart of every process at 5Rights. Our Youth Ambassadors network brings together more than 200 children from more than 60 countries and their voices are reflected across all organisational outputs.

5Rights has achieved significant policy victories that have fundamentally reshaped the global landscape for children's rights online. The organisation played a pivotal role in the development of the UN's General comment No. 25, which for the first time explicitly explains how children's rights apply in the digital world. 5Rights has also been instrumental in developing regulation for age appropriate design, with the latest success in Europe being the adoption of comprehensive guidelines under the Digital Services Act for children's privacy, safety and security.

Work:
Two of 5Rights' most impactful public awareness campaigns demonstrate the organisation's innovative approach to advocacy.
"**Risky By Design**" examines how common design features across digital platforms and services create systematic risks for children.

The provocative "**Twisted Toys**" campaign reimagines digital harms as physical toys. Featuring characters like Share Bear (who shares children's data with corporations), and Stalkie Talkie (which connects children with strangers, including adults).

From groundbreaking research such as "Disrupted Childhood" and "Pathways: How digital design puts children at risk" that expose how persuasive design harms children, to developing technical standards with professional associations like IEEE, 5Rights combines rigorous evidence-gathering with practical policy solutions that drive systemic change in how the digital world treats children.

THE CHALLENGE

Despite progress in the EU such as the Digital Services Act (DSA), public debate often addresses harms rather than root causes. Risks exacerbated by system design are often ignored, and consequently, solutions promoted by companies – content moderation, parental controls, digital literacy – shift responsibility from those building the internet back to law enforcement, teachers, parents, and children themselves.

Digital platforms aren't neutral spaces, but carefully engineered environments where every feature is optimised for maximum commercial output, while investing considerable resources to resist meaningful regulation.

DESIGN ACCOUNTABILITY
Stopping persuasive design strategies that exploit children's vulnerabilities, e.g. infinite scroll, push notifications, algorithmic recommendations.

LEGISLATIVE GAPS
Holding companies accountable for their impact on children, and demonstrating that their systems are private, safe and secure for children by design and default.

EDUCATION DEFICIT
Teaching parents that effective solutions exist beyond blocking and monitoring, and that we must require systemic change in how digital services are built.

COLLABORATION NEEDS
Building a 'safety by design' mindset: systemic protections in the architecture of digital products and services, with the collaboration of governments, NGOs, tech companies, and civil society.

THE INSIGHT

For too long, we have focused on educating parents and demanding Internet users in general to navigate exploitative systems rather than demanding those systems be designed with children's rights in mind from the start. We want to move beyond chasing illegal content and promoting digital literacy towards an approach that focuses on **prevention through responsible design.** By enforcing minimum standards for product safety for children, we enable innovation to refocus on providing value to society and supporting our children to thrive.

OBJECTIVE – THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPARK CHANGE

The EACA, the EACA Young Board and 5Rights invite young creatives to imagine a future where every child in Europe can explore the digital world safely and confidently –
by eliminating dangerous design in the platforms and services they access.

Your challenge is to design a campaign to raise awareness, drive action, and empower stakeholders to meaningfully protect children online.

Leveraging existing awareness of the problem, and widespread frustration at the inability to protect children, we want to inspire people to stand together, as citizens, to demand a fair deal for children.

Core Message: Stand up and demand companies to design with children in mind. Children have the right to digital spaces that enhance rather than exploit their development. Tech can be great when it's developed and deployed responsibly. Citizens and parents must unite to demand governments to develop and enforce standards for child-centered design.

We also need to create a perception shift in EU citizens: moving from "accepting the current system as inevitable" toward "demanding fundamental change in how digital services are designed".

CTA: "Sign the petition"* demanding your national and EU representatives regulate tech companies to design platforms and services with children in mind and hold companies accountable.

*note: petition currently being drafted by EACA and 5Rights.

TARGET
European Union Parents & Citizens who feel accountable for children's wellbeing and want to take meaningful action on their behalf.

More about parents
In general, parents perceive online safety as a salient issue across a number of EU countries. However, the term 'online safety' is still perceived as a fuzzy term they struggle to understand the depth of, leading to a belief that the issue might be too complex to solve.

Many parents across the EU feel ill-equipped to discuss the online environment with their children. Older parents with children aged 11-18 report the highest need for help, struggling with their tech-savvy children.

Few parents see themselves as activists. They want to help other parents and have a stronger appetite for systemic change, but don't know where to start.

TONE OF VOICE

Leverage and authentically represent <u>children's voices</u>, centering their perspectives and experiences. Maintain a positive and optimistic approach, ideally with light-hearted elements. Position this as a rights-based campaign that empowers children and their communities as active participants of the online world rather than passive recipients of advocacy. Create a sense of urgency for the issue through an optimistic lens: we want to inspire, empower, create a sense of community and enable collective action. Keep the message light and uplifting to encourage the audience with positivity and intrigue, rather than bring them down with negativity.

The language must also be accessible and age-appropriate for internet-aged children (aged 10-16). The tone should bridge generational communication styles, ensuring children feel represented while motivating parents and citizens to act on their behalf.

NOTES ON CONTENT

The campaign should avoid narrow focuses on CSAM, bans, social media exclusively or individual companies, instead emphasising that the entire digital ecosystem is systematically designed in ways to harm children. While targeted exploration of areas like gaming or AI could be valuable, the core message must highlight how persuasive and addictive design are common across the whole tech landscape.

MEDIA: The winning campaign will be brought to life and distributed pro-bono across European OOH spaces – both digital and physical.
In addition, we will be using digital display banner placements including national news sites and potentially platforms within each EU region.
It is highly unlikely that TV placements will be acquired pro bono.

CREATIVE: We are therefore asking that production effort must be kept to a minimum, as we need to see how your idea can be conveyed as a static image, particularly on large format OOH. While we may be able to provide pro-bono video production for VOD, this is not guaranteed so we are not expecting you to submit video files. If you wish to convey how your idea may come to life in video, storyboards are sufficient.

Entrants are encouraged to use stock material and graphic-only elements in your entry submission. GenAI use must be disclosed.

ENTRY DELIVERABLES:

Essential: 3 x Static Images that depict your core campaign concept
Example formats → OOH: 6x3, 1x1. DOOH: 9:16
Optional: 1 x animated graphic for DOOH and digital use
Example formats → DOOH: 9:16. Display banner: 300x250, 300x600
Optional: 1 x Storyboard for potential video production. (16:9, 30 seconds max)

FOOTNOTES

→ Official Campaign Page:
  EACA4Good - European Campaign on Minors Rights Online - EACA

→ CAN Children's Code Guide: Guidelines to follow when crafting the entry, to ensure responsible results for minors.

→ Past campaigns by 5Rights:
  Twisted Toys: https://twistedtoys.5rightsfoundation.com/
  Also featured in the New York Times
  Risky By Design: https://riskybydesign.5rightsfoundation.com/introduction)

→ 5Rights and EACA Logos and brand elements: click here
  5 Rights primary colour (RGB: 30.60.255 / HEX: 1E3CFF / Pantone: 2728c CMYK: 100.76.0.0)