

# Children's Safety in the Digital Environment

Study Results from Moldova

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September 30, 2024



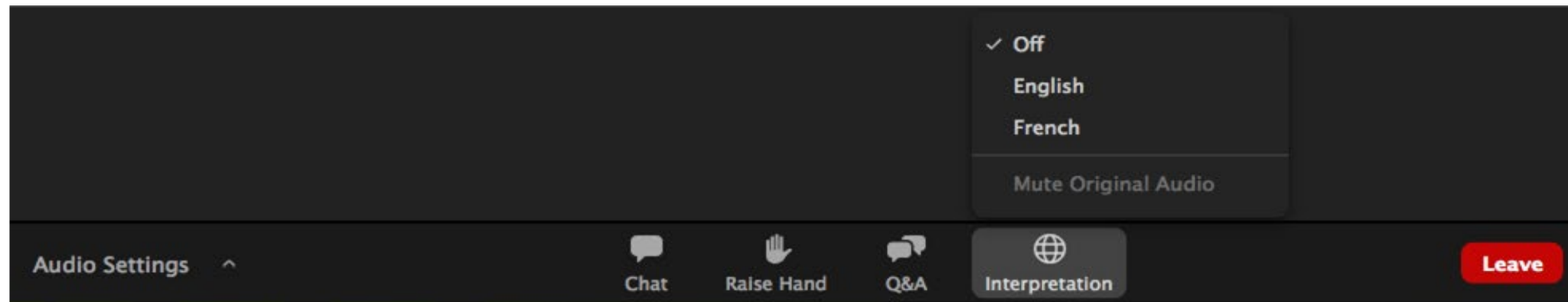
2024 Centrul Național de Prevenire a Abuzului față de Copii (CNPAC/NCCAP)/Moldova





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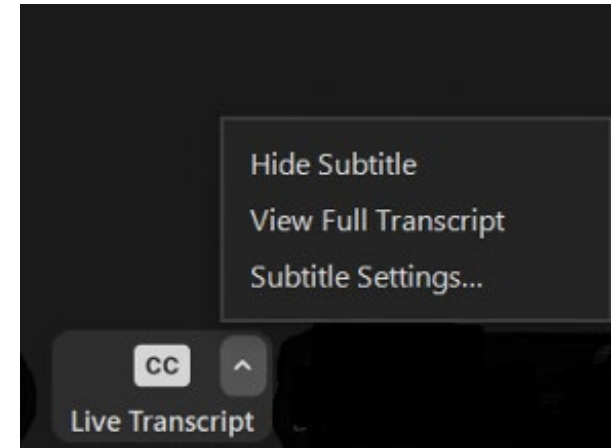
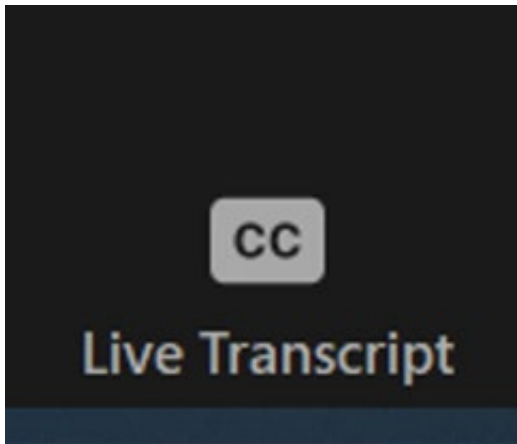
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# Webinar Agenda

| Session  | Presenter(s)  |
|--|---|
| Welcome Remarks<br>Introduction to D4I and Study | Jessica Fehringer, D4I Director<br>Meg Langley, D4I Child Protection Portfolio Lead<br>Camelia Gheorghe, D4I Moldova Chief of Party<br>Mattito Watson, USAID Senior Technical Advisor,<br>Children in Adversity |
| Study Methodology and Findings                   | Diana Cheianu-Andrei, Sociopolis Consultancy<br>Researcher  |
| Study Recommendations                            | Veronica Maevschi, La Strada Program Director   |
| Questions and Discussion                         | Diana Cheianu-Andrei, Veronica Maevschi, and<br>Camelia Gheorghe<br>Moderated by Meg Langley  |



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# D4I's Work



## Generate Evidence

Use routine and other existing data and generate new data through rigorous methods tailored to budget, timeline, and context



## Integrate Gender

Integrate gender throughout the project to ensure high-quality data for assessment of health and gender outcomes



## Strengthen Capacity

Strengthen capacity through fostering collaboration, experimental learning, mentoring, and peer networks tailored to partner's needs



## Promote Data Use

Visualize and communicate data in ways that are compelling, user-friendly, and actionable



## Ensure Data Quality

Focus on ensuring high-quality data for effective decision making and program outcome improvement



## Learn

Encourage collaboration, improved results, and timely progress updates through idea exchange and shared learning





# Study Goal and Objectives

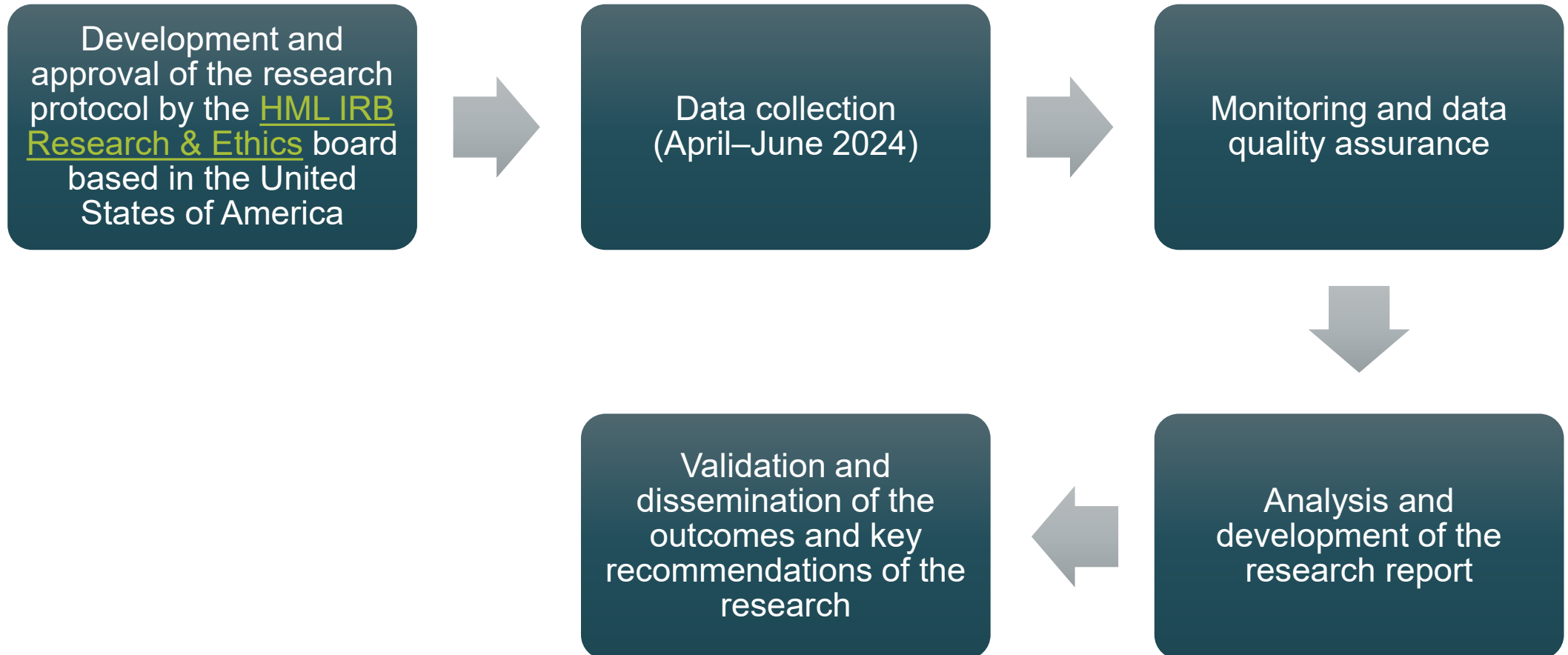
**The goal** of the study was to identify specific risks faced online by vulnerable children from the Republic of Moldova and develop recommendations to improve the response of national authorities in securing a safe and inclusive digital environment for all children.

## **Objectives:**

- Identification of methods used by children to access and use the internet
- Analysis of children's behaviors, practices, and experiences in the digital environment
- Assessment of children's knowledge and awareness of risks in the digital environment
- Identification of risks children face online and factors that could reduce their online vulnerability
- Analysis of measures taken by parents, educational staff, and other specialists to maintain children's online safety
- Development of recommendations for the authorities from the Republic of Moldova to ensure a safe and inclusive digital environment



# Research Phases



## Research Partners



- International Center (IC) "La Strada" — local and international expertise in the field of online safety

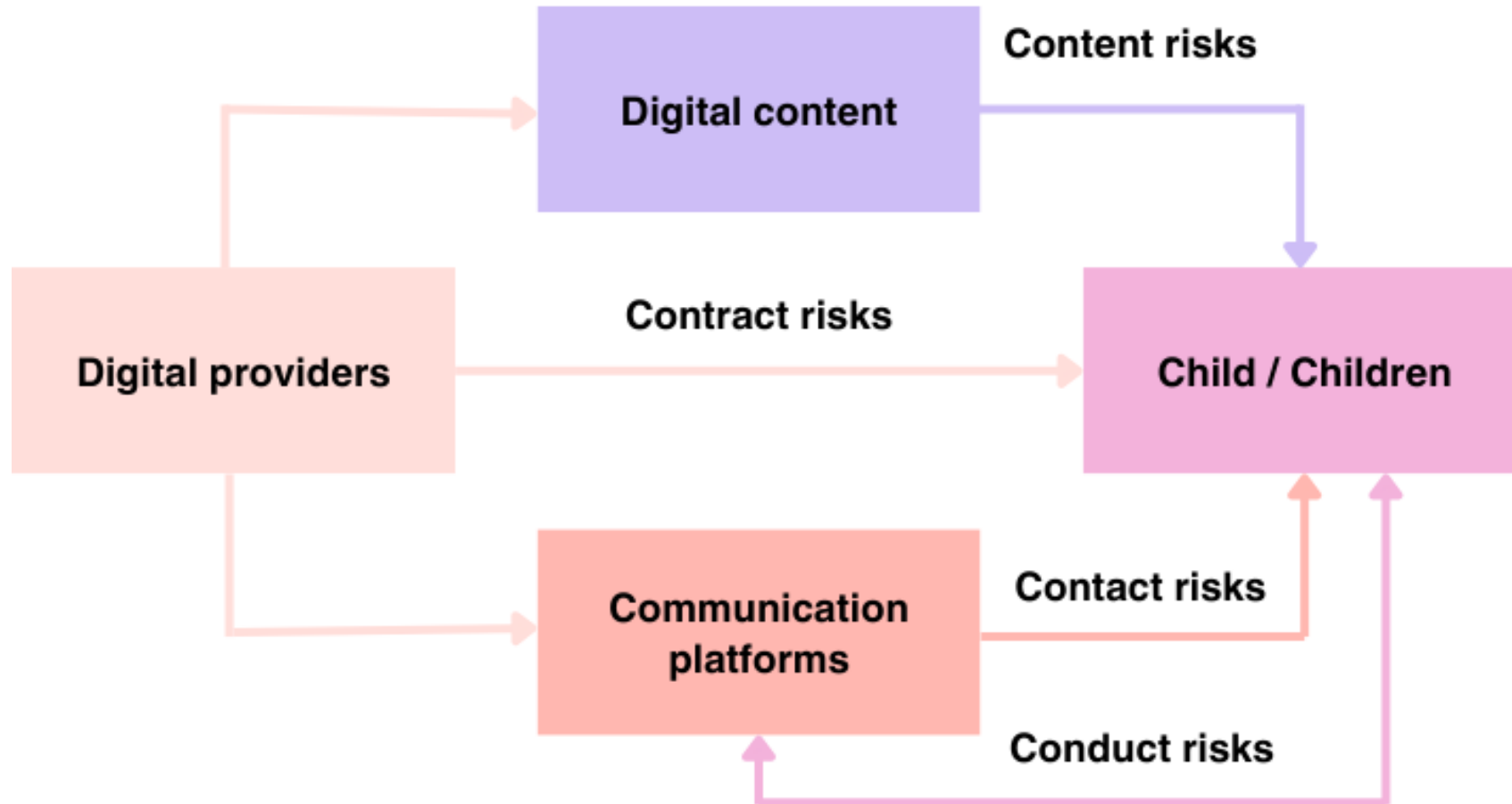


- Sociopolis Consultancy — sociological company which conducted the data collection, analysis, and report writing





# Conceptual Framework — 4C Classification of Risks Proposed by the EU Kids Online



Source: Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M. (2021). *The 4Cs: classifying online risk to children*.



# Conceptual Framework — Revised Typology of Risks by UNICEF and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

| Risk categories            | Content risks  | Conduct risks                       | Contact risks                | Contract/consumer risks    |
|----------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Transversal risks</b>   | Privacy risks (interpersonal, institutional, and commercial)     |                                     |                              |                            |
|                            | Advanced technology risks (AI, predictive analytics, biometrics) |                                     |                              |                            |
|                            | Risks on health and well-being                                   |                                     |                              |                            |
| <b>Risk manifestations</b> | Hateful content  | Hateful behavior                    | Hateful encounters           | Marketing risks            |
|                            | Harmful content  | Harmful behavior                    | Harmful encounters           | Commercial profiling risks |
|                            | Illegal content  | Illegal behavior                    | Illegal encounters           | Financial risks            |
|                            | Disinformation   | User-generated problematic behavior | Other problematic encounters | Security risks             |

Source: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2020). *Children in the digital environment: Revised typology of risks*. OECD Digital Economy Papers, No. 302.

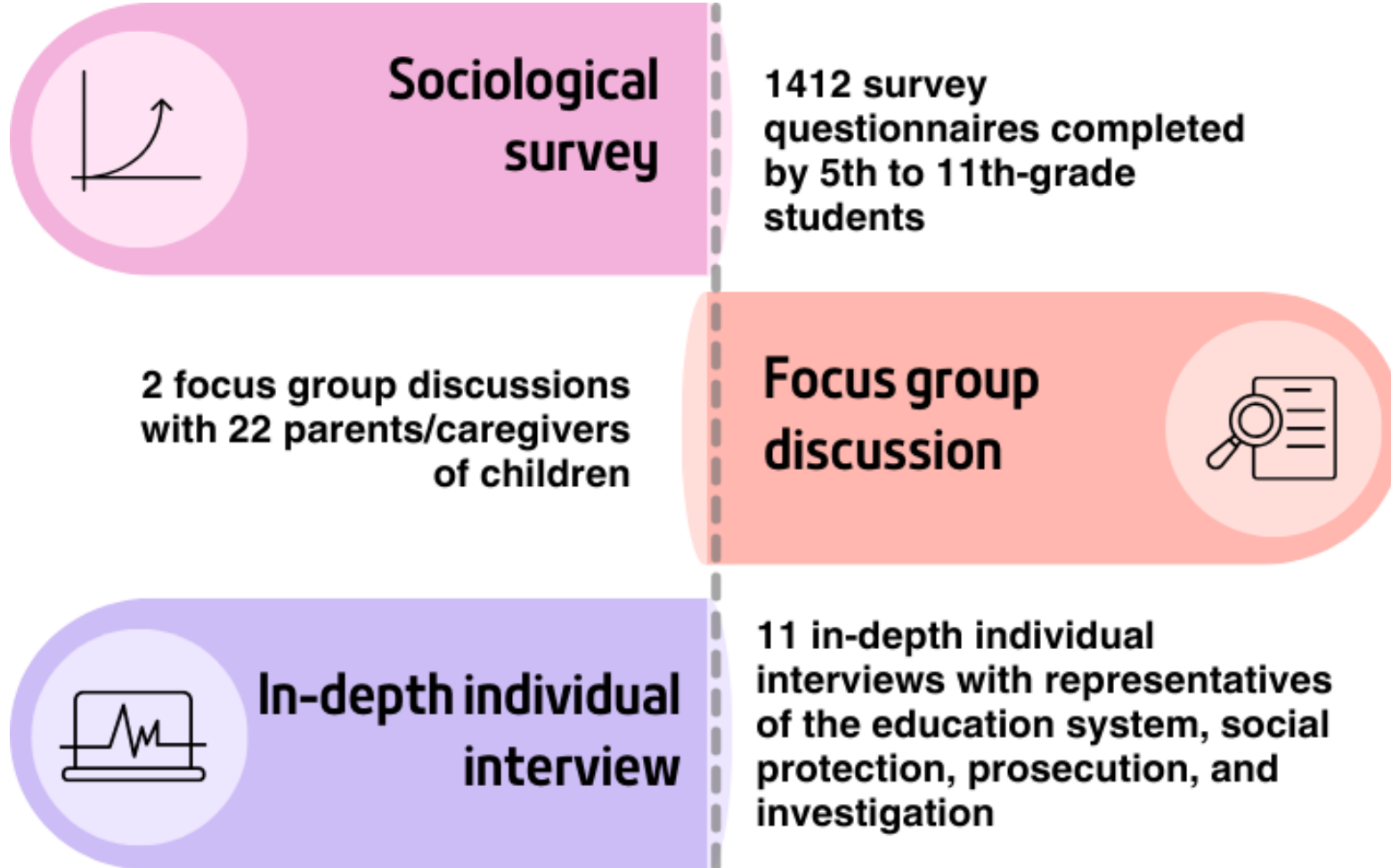
# Conceptual Framework — Children from Vulnerable Groups in the Republic of Moldova



- Children from low-income families
- Children with limited parental communication and support
- Children with disabilities or special education needs (SEN)
- Children who speak a different language at home than school



# Research Methods



# Quantitative Survey

## Five regions

- Chisinau, Northern region, Center region, Southern region, and Autonomous Territorial Unit Gagauzia

## School grade

- The sample was designed for the **lower secondary cycle** (grades 5–9) and upper **secondary cycle** (grades 10–11), including **children with Romanian and Russian languages** of instruction

## Purposive sampling

- **Purposive sampling** was used to ensure a final sample with a high percentage of vulnerable children

## Specific schools

- **Specific schools within a geographic region** which met one of the following criteria were first sampled:

- (i) Small rural communities with a high poverty rate
- (ii) Localities where there are placement centers for children
- (iii) Localities with a large number of children in alternative family-type care (foster care)
- (iv) Localities with a high percentage of Roma people
- (v) Localities that have accommodation centers for Ukrainian refugees



# In-Depth Individual Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

**Individual in-depth interviews** — 11 specialists, experts, and service providers in the field of online safety, child psychology, and education

- **Purposive selection** — both national and local-level participants possessing specific knowledge, expertise, and information.

**Focus group discussions** — 2 with 22 parents/caregivers (17 women and 5 men)

- One focus group discussion was with **parents/caregivers from urban areas** and another focus group discussion was with **parents/caregivers from rural areas.**

# Findings





## Access to the Internet and Time Spent Online



- An estimated **99% of students without social vulnerability** and **96% of students from vulnerability categories** are **online daily**.
- On their **days off or on vacation**, the number of children with **restricted access is insignificant (1%)**.
- **93%** of all children have at least **one social media account/profile**.





## Internet Access Points



- A greater proportion of children without social vulnerability access the internet at home (92%) and school (35%) compared to **children from vulnerability categories (89% and 33%, respectively).**
- Children from vulnerability categories access the internet slightly more than non-vulnerable children via WiFi in public spaces and mobile internet.



## Children's Behaviors, Practices, and Experiences Online



**Potentially risky actions are almost twice as prevalent among vulnerable children** versus those not classified as vulnerable:

- **Looking for new friends in the digital environment** (32% to 38% from vulnerability categories compared to 21% of the non-vulnerable)
- **Buying games online and game credits** (21% to 22% compared to 14% of the non-vulnerable)
- **Sending photos or videos of themselves to strangers** (17% to 19% compared to 9% of the non-vulnerable)
- **Exchanging personal data with people they only know online** (8% to 12% in comparison with 5% of the non-vulnerable)



# Children's Negative Experiences Online

| Category of children  | Yes | No  |
|---|-----|-----|
| <b>Total</b>  | 57% | 43% |
| <b>Boys</b>   | 62% | 38% |
| <b>Girls</b>  | 52% | 48% |
| <b>Children without social vulnerability</b>                          | 43% | 57% |
| <b>Children from low-income families</b>                              | 67% | 33% |
| <b>Children with limited parental communication and support</b>       | 62% | 38% |
| <b>Children with disabilities or with SEN</b>                         | 65% | 35% |
| <b>Children who speak a different language at home than at school</b> | 60% | 40% |



## Cross-Cutting Risks: *Data Privacy*



- **21%** of 1,312 children (93% of the sample) with a social media account **have publicly displayed their date and year of birth.**
- **41%** of children posted the **real date and year of their birth on social media.**
- In **60%** of cases, children's social media accounts **show their real name and surname.**
- **5%** of children posted their **contact information (home address, phone number) on their social media account.**
- In **43%** of cases, children's social media accounts **have a photo that clearly shows the face of the owner.**



## Cross-Cutting Risks: *Health and Well-Being*



- **19%** of children reported that the **internet negatively affects their school performance.**
- **13%** of children reported that the **internet affects their nutrition and sleep.**
- **13%** of children reported that the **internet leads to conflicts with family or friends.**



# Content Risks

| Category  | I accidentally saw or accessed online images with sexual content | I involuntarily accessed/viewed images or videos with sexual content while browsing the internet searching for other information | I received inappropriate images, messages or images with sexual content, etc., on Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp, Discord, forums, chat rooms |
|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Total</b>  | 12%  | 11%  | 11%   |
| <b>Boys</b>   | 15%  | 11%  | 13%   |
| <b>Girls</b>  | 9%   | 10%  | 9%  |
| <b>Children without social vulnerability</b>                          | 8%   | 6%   | 7%  |
| <b>Children from low-income families</b>                              | 17%  | 14%  | 14%   |
| <b>Children with limited parental communication and support</b>       | 15%  | 14%  | 13%   |
| <b>Children with disabilities or with SEN</b>                         | 17%  | 13%  | 13%   |
| <b>Children who speak a different language at home than at school</b> | 10%  | 12%  | 11%   |

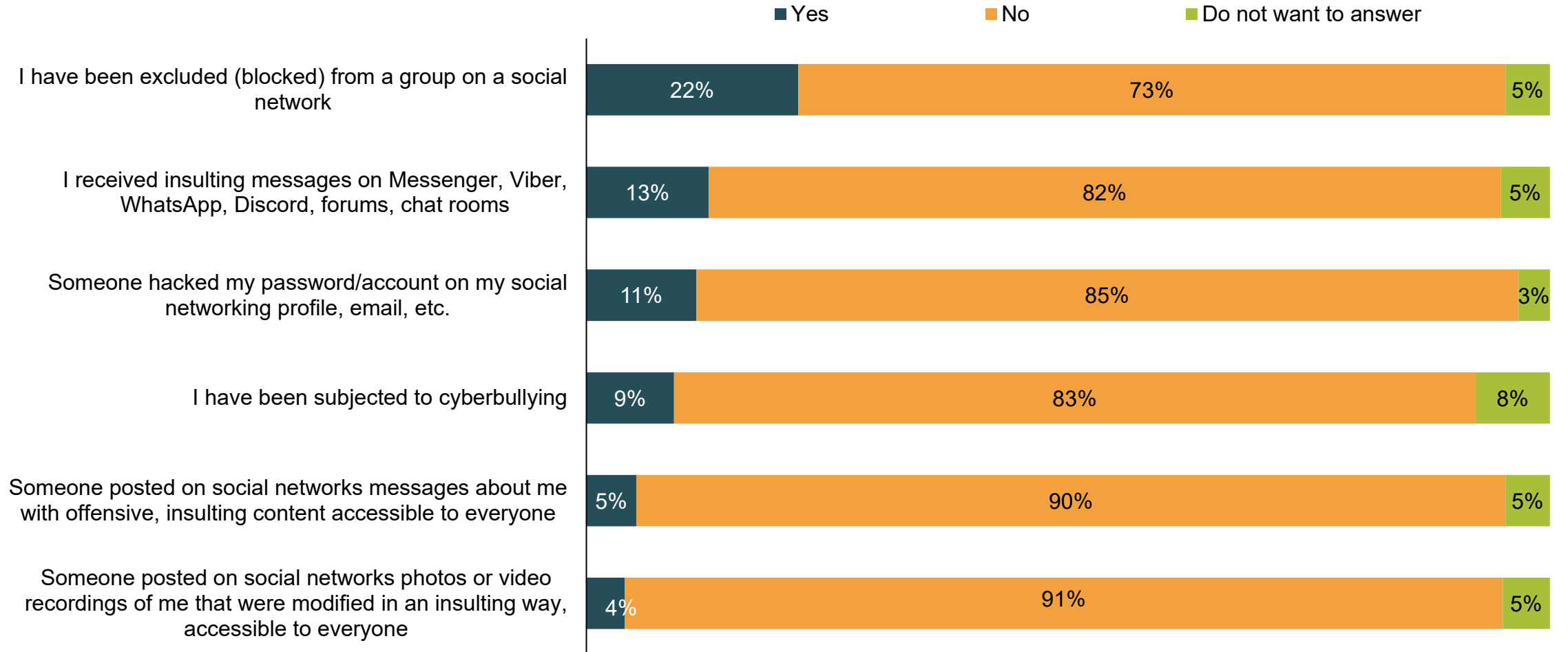


# Contact Risks

| <b>Vulnerability Category</b>   | <b>I exchanged photos and various information through social networks, Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp, Discord, forums, chat rooms, or email with a person I don't know personally</b> | <b>Other people asked me to show them images or videos of myself containing intimate parts of my body while chatting on Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp, Discord, forums, chat rooms</b> |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Total</b>  | 12%  | 6%  |
|   |  |   |
| <b>Children without social vulnerability</b>                          | 6%   | 2%  |
| <b>Children from low-income families</b>                              | 16%  | 9%  |
| <b>Children with limited parental communication and support</b>       | 13%  | 8%  |
| <b>Children with disabilities or with SEN</b>                         | 16%  | 10%   |
| <b>Children who speak a different language at home than at school</b> | 12%  | 6%  |



# Conduct Risks





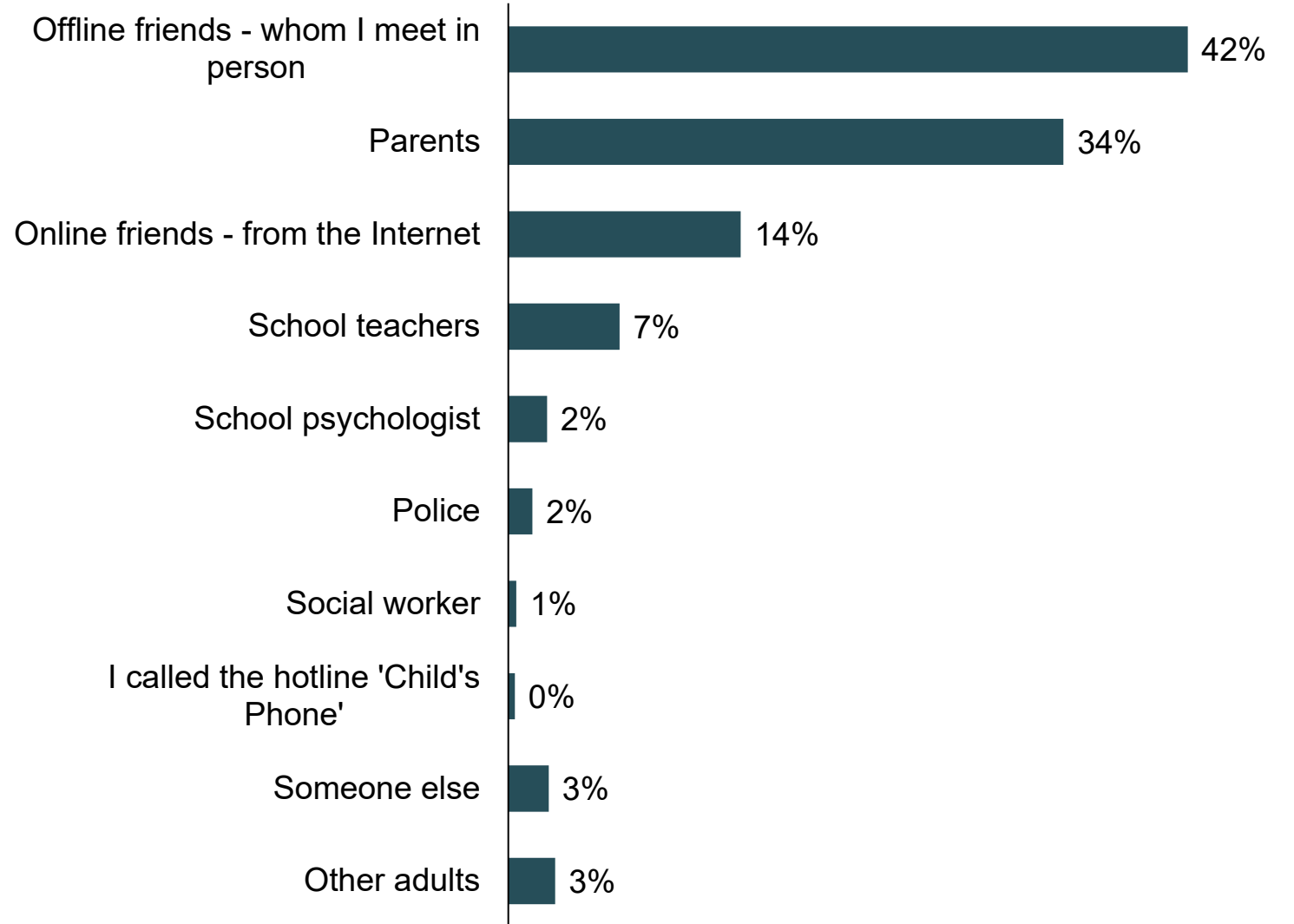


# Contract Risks (Situations When Children Spent Money Online Unknowingly)

| Category  | Yes | No  | Do not want to answer |
|---|-----|-----|-----------------------|
| <b>Total</b>  | 7%  | 90% | 3%                    |
| <b>Boys</b>   | 8%  | 88% | 4%                    |
| <b>Girls</b>  | 5%  | 93% | 2%                    |
| <b>Children without social vulnerability</b>                          | 3%  | 92% | 5%                    |
| <b>Children from low-income families</b>                              | 9%  | 88% | 3%                    |
| <b>Children with limited parental communication and support</b>       | 6%  | 91% | 3%                    |
| <b>Children with disabilities or with SEN</b>                         | 9%  | 88% | 3%                    |
| <b>Children who speak a different language at home than at school</b> | 8%  | 88% | 4%                    |



# People with Whom Children Discussed Problems Encountered Online (%)





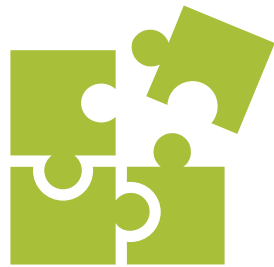
# Identified Strengths in Existing Measures to Ensure Children's Online Safety



- Approval of the *Online children/students' safety standards* by the Ministry of Education and Research and implementation by educational institutions.
- Information provided to children about online safety, including activities promoting children's rights implemented by non-profit organizations.
- Training provided to the educational staff by IC La Strada on the implementation of *Online children/students' standards*.
- Delivery of support tools for educational staff (guidelines for primary and secondary education teachers) by the IC La Strada.
- Availability of services for children, parents, and teachers ([www.siguronline.md](http://www.siguronline.md), 12plus, etc.), as well as for the Psychopedagogical Assistance Service (PAS), Youth-Friendly Health Center (YFHC), etc.
- Engaging various actors in identifying perpetrators and assisting children and families in cases of online abuse (educational institutions, local education authorities [LEA], PAS, police, specialized services, etc.)



# Identified Weaknesses in Measures to Ensure Children's Online Safety



- Few awareness-raising and information campaigns about children's online risks.
- Few training classes for children, parents, and specialists.
- Some educational institutions are not familiar with and do not implement the *Online children/students' safety standards*.
- Some teachers lack awareness of risks, including inappropriate attitudes and practices related to intervention and assistance of children.
- Lack of ongoing training of the educational staff, PAS representatives, representatives of the child protection system, police officers, prosecutor's office, and law enforcement agencies.
- Lack of multidisciplinary approaches and interventions in preventing online risk.

# Recommendations



LA  
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# Ensuring the Digital Inclusion of Vulnerable Children

- Develop strategies for the digital inclusion of vulnerable children, ensuring equal access to learning.
- Build capacity for PAS and child protection specialists to prevent and address online abuse, with a focus on vulnerable groups.
- Share successful practices to prevent online risks across diverse communities and adapt resources to their needs.
- Implement school policies to integrate technology, motivating safe and effective use by staff, students, and parents.



## **Promoting a Multidisciplinary Approach at the National Level to Prevent and Combat Online Risks Based on Integrated Evidence**

- Approve the *Online Children's Safety Action Plan* to ensure a child-safe online environment through interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Integrate online safety as a cross-cutting theme in all Ministry of Education and Research curriculum initiatives.
- Develop guidelines for implementing intersectoral cooperation on online abuse cases as outlined in Government Decision No. 270/2014.



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## Implementation of Online Children Safety Standards by Educational Institutions

- Develop a monitoring mechanism to track the implementation of online safety standards by educational institutions and use the data to inform evidence-based policies.
- Involve local education authorities in promoting and monitoring the implementation of these safety standards.
- Ensure an inclusive approach by providing information on online risks to marginalized groups in multiple languages.
- Integrate transversal skills like communication, collaboration, and critical thinking into the digital education program.





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## **Changing Attitudes and Practices of Community Members Toward Better Prevention of Online Risks**

- Conduct awareness campaigns for parents, caregivers, and child protection specialists to change attitudes toward online child abuse.
- Develop age-specific parenting programs to promote open, trust-based communication about online safety.
- Empower local child protection specialists to support vulnerable families and prevent online risks.



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## Ensuring Children's Access to Information Resources, Reporting Tools, and Support Services

- Launch national awareness campaigns on lesser-known online risks like exposure to abusive content, peer risks, and online shopping dangers.
- Empower youth to engage in peer-to-peer communication and raise awareness about online safety.
- Develop children's critical thinking skills and abilities to recognize online risks through practical activities in school and informal education.
- Improve digital literacy for all children, especially vulnerable ones, by offering educational programs outside of school (libraries, youth centers, etc.).



## **Awareness Raising of Private Sector Information and Communications Technology to Prevent and Combat Online Violence Against Children**

- Approve guidelines for online service providers to prevent and combat illegal content and harmful behavior.
- Develop and promote reporting mechanisms for illegal content on providers' platforms.
- Advocate for child protection principles in digital products and services, ensuring safety measures in provider policies and designs.



# Q&A





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