

WHAT IS YOUR CHILD WATCHING ONLINE?

BY RITAH MUKASA

No home is immune. Children as young as two are glued to smartphones for hours on end. The addiction is real. A smartphone seems to be your child's best friend.

TikTok, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have all become teachers and stress-busters. But be it as it is, do you know what your child is watching on the Internet?

Irene Kayongo got the shock of her life when she went through her son's phone. She narrates; One Saturday morning, my 15-year-old kept dodging home chores. His elder sister had assigned him to wash dishes after breakfast, but he stayed inside his bedroom. His other siblings called him out in vain. They begged and threatened to report

him, but nothing moved him. I was in my bedroom and heard whatever was taking place. I was furious. I stormed into his bedroom, thinking he had slept off. But to my surprise, I found him lying on his bed, eyes glued to the phone. And when he saw me, he flinched and fidgeted to hide the phone, but I did not leave him. I asked him to hand it over and while he was hesitating, I grabbed it. The look on his face was enough to tell that what he was watching was inappropriate. By the way, I had no idea he had an iPhone because at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, his dad had bought them a tablet to attend the online classes. Not a smartphone. I interrogated him, but he was cagey.

A few slaps forced him to open up. A friend had gifted it to him, loaded with



Internet comes with excitement for most children

20GB of data. His friend's parents had bought him the latest iPhone at that time. Next, I asked him to remove

the passwords and at that point, he burst into tears, pleading for forgiveness. Little did he know that the tears were another red flag for me? Why was he crying? I got more curious and stuck to my guns. He put in a very complicated pattern and the phone opened. I went straight to WhatsApp and the first chat I saw was enough to drive me nuts. My son, whom I looked at as a little boy, had been having sex. In fact, he had two girlfriends and had just broken up with one. As if that was not distressing enough, when I scrolled further, it became apparent that he and his friends had been sharing porn videos. In one group chat, he intimated to a friend that he was bored and that friend, a girl, told him to watch porn. That was too much for me to take in.

RESTRICT

Racheal Kalinaki, a medical doctor, swears by phone

CAMPAIGN BACKGROUND

Vision Group is running a national multimedia campaign aimed at addressing the rising risks faced by children online. Titled "Keep Children Safe Online: Addressing Online Safety for Children." The campaign will run throughout this holiday season, across Vision Group's print, broadcast and digital platforms. It aims to remind parents, educators, researchers and policymakers to treat children's digital safety with the same seriousness as physical child protection.

Vision Group Editor-in-Chief Barbara Kaija said today's children "live in digital streets, they are digital citizens," whether the adults acknowledge it or not. She said restricting device access does not eliminate exposure. "Even when you have hidden all the phones, remote controls, their good uncle or best uncle will walk in and give them the phone and they will end up online," she said.

Kaija said the content will run in

New Vision and Bukeedde newspapers, broadcast on Bukeedde TV channels, TV West, Wan Luo, TV West, ETOP, Radio West, XFM, Arua One FM, Kabalega FM and Radio Rupiny, as well as circulate digital safety information across all Vision Group online platforms.

A 2022 study titled *Disrupting Harm in Uganda*, conducted jointly by UNICEF, ECPAT International and INTERPOL, revealed that nearly 40% of Ugandan children between 12 and 17 years are active internet users and a sizable proportion face direct online harm. The report indicates that about 10% of these children had been offered money or gifts in exchange for explicit photos or videos, while 9% said sexual images of them had been shared without their consent. Researchers noted that most cases happened through smartphones and internet-enabled devices within domestic spaces, a trend intensified during periods when children spend long hours unsupervised.

Expert views

DICKSON TUMURAMYE, PARENTING COACH

When you discover that your child is watching inappropriate content, don't react harshly or immediately. Stay calm during the first encounter, no matter how disappointed you feel. Create space to understand why they are doing it, especially if it is something you have stopped them from watching or something your family does not approve of.

JOYCE ATIMANGO, FOUNDER TRAILBLAZERS MENTORING FOUNDATION

Parents should teach their children to hide their identity while online. Information about them, their families, pictures, where they go to school and where they stay, should never be shared online.



and TV restrictions, saying, "They have helped to protect my seven nieces and nephews from inappropriate content." The children are between 3-11 years. Kalinaki's parents, Monica Nabiry Namugaya and

Abraham Kalinaki, both retired headteachers, are also strict on what their grandchildren watch. There is a specified time for watching TV. "I still live with my parents, but they are very keen," Kalinaki says.

WHAT OTHERS SAY

SIMON KAYIWA, DIRECTOR KINDER ICON SCHOOL

I am a teacher, engineer and father of children aged 3-14 years. I safeguard them with age-appropriate strategies like limiting screen time for the youngest, setting clear rules for middle ages and open conversations for teens.



KINDER
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EMILY KYOSHABIRE, A HOMEMAKER

In June 2025, I found out that my seven-year-old son watches music videos of scantily dressed women. He was using our male worker's phone. He even started miming those songs whenever I was away. I warned both of them. Thankfully, the worker listened and left shortly after. Our children have access to phones, but they know what they are supposed to watch. Also, we block apps that display inappropriate content.

SARAH MPIRIRWE, LECTURER

Three of my children are young adults and it's difficult to police them. When they were younger, I would confiscate the phones. We called it phone arresting, but now that they are older, I talk to them relentlessly about the good and bad of the phone. I keep reminding them that their generation, unlike ours, is so challenging. I also realised, their language when chatting is difficult to understand and they complicate it more when they realise that you are policing them.