**Google’s response to the Committee on the Rights of the Child consultation**

**15 May 2019**

**Contacts:**

Claire Lilley and Alicia Blum-Ross, Public Policy Leads for Kids & Families

clilley@google.com & ablumross@google.com

Google welcomes the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s call for evidence on the topic of children’s rights in relation to the digital environment. We believe deeply in technology’s ability to support children and young people by unlocking creativity, fostering civic participation, and learning skills that help build futures. In order to do this, we design our products and outreach with the understanding that users of all ages need to have the tools and knowledge to make responsible choices online, and that the digital environment needs to be built with safeguards in place to minimize risks to children in order to promote positive opportunities.

***Google’s approach***

At Google, we consider children’s rights in terms of three interrelated questions: 1) how can we build *protections* into the services and outreach we provide that will help children safely explore online? and 2) how can we support young people’s *participation* in online services that may have benefit to them? 3) how can we work with others - including children’s caregivers and educators and the institutions and organizations that support children - to help provide an ecosystem that supports kids?

The actions we take to protect children’s rights and empower them to get the most out of their digital experiences can be summarized as:

* **Technological innovation -** we build certain products specifically for children and their families, employing specialist research and product development teams. For example, Family Link is an app, now available by default in the latest Android operating system, that helps parents stay in the loop as their child explores the internet on a compatible device. The app lets parents set digital ground rules for their family - like managing the apps their child can use, keeping an eye on screen time, or setting a bedtime and daily limit for their child’s device. YouTube Kids is an app that provides a restricted, age-appropriate version of YouTube designed especially for children, that parents can control. The app uses a mix of filters, user feedback and content moderators to keep the videos in YouTube Kids family friendly, allowing children to explore a catalog of content in a safer environment. Because no family is the same, our apps provide meaningful parental controls that allow each parent to design their level of comfort with their kids’ online exploration. Both Family Link and YouTube Kids also were designed to respect children’s privacy and to strike a balance between respecting children’s agency and autonomy, and giving parents tools to help them guide their child’s online experience.

We also draw on our world-leading teams - from engineers to subject-matter specialists - to create technology and policies that help deter, detect, remove, and report (when appropriate) content that attempts to abuse or exploit children, whether or not they are direct users of the service. For example, Google developed the Content Safety API and CSAI Match, which use artificial intelligence to help organizations better identify and prioritize child sexual abuse material (CSAM) for review. We offer these services for free to NGOs and private companies to support their work protecting children.

* **Policy development -** Our dedicated trust and safety teams enforce our content policies and determine what content or behaviours are acceptable in a given service, often going far beyond what is legally mandated. For example, YouTube publishes a set of Community Guidelines aimed at helping users understand the ‘rules of the road’ when it comes to using our service and how we enforce these. These include policies that specifically prohibit content that may endanger children, for example content that sexualizes minors or promotes harmful or dangerous activities that may be replicated by minors. We work with in-house and external experts to update our policies when new potential violations emerge - for example when young people are taking part in a viral challenge (e.g. the Tide Pod challenge) that may endanger their health. We publish a quarterly Transparency Report that details the content that we remove.

We also have strict policies governing the practices exhibited by and content of advertisements that can be presented to children under the applicable age of consent, when we know they are using our services. For example, on YouTube Kids, advertisements must be clearly labeled and cannot be integrated into children’s online activity in a way that disguises their commercial purpose. Further, we limit the types of advertisers that can serve ads to children on our network to keep the content age-appropriate and relevant to a child audience. We utilize a mix of human review and machine learning to ensure that ads served to children comply with these supplemental restrictions.

* **Outreach and education** - working with external experts, we have created a series of educational programmes for young people so they are empowered to live positive lives online. This includes information about internet safety and digital citizenship as well as outreach aimed at building digital literacy skills like learning to code. These are detailed below.

***Involving children and caregivers in product development***

Google has demonstrated an industry-leading commitment to human-centered design across our products and services. Directly consulting children and young people, along with parents and caregivers, in the design of the products they use is one of the most impactful ways that we can take into consideration children’s views and experiences. The teams who develop products for children and families have developed specific expertise in conducting research with parents and children. This includes commitments to:

* **Understanding evolving capacities -** Our internal teams include researchers who come from child development, child psychology and children’s media backgrounds. This informs the design of research protocols and the implementation of child-centred research by relevant teams. These researchers work closely with the product teams to conduct studies and provide in depth analyses to ensure that the design of Google’s products reflects an understanding of children’s unique needs and abilities and how they evolve over time. We also work extensively with external experts.

Before Google introduced Family Link and the ability for children to have their own Google Account in 2017, we wanted to ensure that the experience we were offering for children and the tools we were making available to their parents met the needs of our users. So we conducted extensive qualitative and quantitative research with parents, children and teens, in 30 countries, to help inform the design of Family Link and the experience of a child signed in with a Google Account.

Specialist research teams work to bring children’s voices into our product development through research and consultation. As another example, as part of the development of YouTube Kids we interviewed hundreds of children of different ages, and in multiple countries. This iterative research has been used to develop features - for example the inclusion of a voice search functionality which allows for pre-literate children to more easily find information.  All across Google we continue to conduct research and iterate based on results, in an effort to better design for child users, make complex concepts accessible to young children, and help children build digital literacy skills.

In addition to surveying and interviewing children and young people when we develop specific products, we also seek opportunities to develop more consistent relationships with children and young people and their parents - who inform existing and new products and services. For example, numerous children between the ages of 7-12, participated in a co-design team at Google, that helped inform the design of the Assistant for Families features, the development of Blockly (coding for kids) and Google’s Science Journal app. Additionally a dedicated panel of teenagers meet on a regular basis to discuss YouTube’s features with our research teams and helped us understand how teenagers create a sense of community online, which fed into the development of the messaging service Reactr on YouTube.

* **Working with caregivers -** alongside consulting directly with children, we also involve parents and caregivers (including educators, where appropriate) in our research and product development process. Especially for young children, parents and caregivers are often heavily involved in shaping children’s experiences online.

As mentioned above, the design of Family Link, Google’s parental controls app, was informed by the research conducted with over 150,000 parents globally.  Additionally, the new Family Link and Digital Wellbeing features we recently announced with the Android Q operating platform, were created and refined with the help of research conducted with over 16,000 parents, children and teens in 11 countries.

In order to develop family experiences with apps, we developed a user research program that gathered insights by surveying, interviewing, and product testing with more than 13,000 families. This helped us understand the range of different ways that parents determine what apps are appropriate, and therefore what information they needed in order to help their children.

***Educational outreach***

Google both initiates our own educational outreach initiatives, and facilitates initiatives run by external organizations. Our outreach is focused in two areas. First, building children and young people’s digital literacies, by which we mean the skills to use digital technologies in order to find, evaluate and create information. Second, fostering children and young people’s digital citizenship, by which we mean their ability to build healthy relationships with technology, use technology to engage with the issues that matter to them, and to responsibly and safely communicate online. Our flagship educational programs include:

* **‘Be Internet Awesome’** is a global educational programme designed by Google to empower children to use the web more safely and wisely. The programme includes ‘Interland’, an online game that teaches the key lessons of Internet safety through games; a resource pack for teachers that includes lesson plans and activities; useful, easily scrollable tips for parents, and a downloadable code for parents that outlines ways to be safer online that the whole family can commit to. Be Internet Awesome has reached millions of users in 11 languages and across 16 countries.
* **‘Be Internet Citizens’** which teaches 13-to-15-year-olds media literacy, critical thinking and digital citizenship with the aim of encouraging them to have a positive voice online. Teaching resources include five lesson plans, a complete set of resources and handouts, plus additional guidance and presentation slides to support delivery.
* **Computer science and digital literacy programs -** Google runs a range of different initiatives that give children and young people direct experience learning how technology is created. More than 65% of young people will work in jobs that don’t exist yet—building new technology, advancing artificial intelligence, and designing better ways to analyze data. To succeed in careers across industries, all students need a solid foundation in computer science skills and experience using technology today. For example, **CS First** has reached over a million students in 75+ countries teaching students programming basics and **Made with Code** is an initiative that specifically encourages teen girls to learn to code.
* **Media literacy programs -** In collaboration with the Google News Initative, Google.org has committed $10M to support global media literacy efforts. This includes a specialized program, developed by experts at Stanford, to equip over a million teens with the skills needed to assess fact from fiction online, and extensive support for international organizations to develop their own initiatives to help children and young people understand how the information they encounter online may be produced.

***Working in partnership***

It is essential that all organizations who bear responsibility for children and young people work in partnership to foster children’s rights. Whereas we once may have been able to distinguish between children’s lives online versus ‘the real world,’ these distinctions are increasingly eroding, with so many aspects of children’s lives containing both online and offline components. It is therefore vital that all those who play a role in supporting and creating environments for children - industry, civil society, governments, educators and parents and caregivers - work in partnership to support children and young people who are growing up in an increasingly digital world. Google engages in these partnerships in several ways:

* Google provides **financial and in-kind support** for organizations that work to keep children safe online. For example, we work to prevent the spread of CSAM and to protect children who may have been impacted by CSAM through our financial and in-kind support of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in the US, the Internet Watch Foundation in the UK, the Canadian Center for Child Protection, FSM in German and CSAM reporting hotlines all over the world, including via financial support for their representative body, INHOPE. Google’s support for NCMEC, for example, has included the provision of a Googler-in-residence, an engineer who helped increase the organization's technical ability to receive ‘cybertips’ from across industry, along with a $1m grant. Google has also provided financial support and specialist personnel to the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) to run trainings for law enforcement in countries that receive remitted reports of child abuse via NCMEC. Google also provides AdGrants that donate free advertising worth millions of dollars to organizations that help keep children safe online.
* Google initiates and supports **expertise-sharing** that helps build a better digital ecosystem for kids. Google was a founding member of the Technology Coalition, which was founded in 2006 to sponsor the development of technology solutions that disrupt the ability to use the Internet to distribute abusive images of children. Together with Facebook, Google has hosted an annual conference that brings members of industry, NGOs and civil society from across the globe together to discuss how to help children stay safe online, and build compassionate online relationships. This event has brought together experts in cyberbullying, mental health, and digital resilience. Our 2018 event included sessions focused specifically on children’s rights in digital environments. Google works with governments via convenings such as the WePROTECT Global Alliance and the UK Council on Internet Safety. These collaborations focus on topics such as technical expertise, capacity-building, best practices, operational efficiency and resiliency.
* In addition to the educational resources for children and young people, referenced above, Google also provides education and support directly for teachers and parents. The **Google for Education Teacher Center** offers a Digital Citizenship and Safety Course especially designed to help teachers equip their students to have a safe and positive online experience. The course consists of five self-paced interactive units with videos, reading materials and quizzes. **Be Internet Awesome** also includes resources designed specifically for teachers and parents, and provides grants to US schools via a donation to the National Parent-Teacher Association, to run hands-on workshops for parents using our resources.
* **Supporting parents.** Parents have the duty and the right to educate their children and we recognize the need for families to have a level of control over what their children can do online, consistent with their age and abilities. As different families have different preferences, we believe some level of personalisation amongst families is needed. We therefore build products for families with flexibility in the settings, in order to preserve the ability of families to responsibly make choices that meet the needs of their child or their family expectations. For example, Family Link gives tools for parents to create supervised experiences that work for their family and to set digital ground rules, supported by a parents’ guide. YouTube Kids works by offering parents the ability to customize the experience via ‘parent approved mode,’ which parents and caregivers can use to limit the experience to content they have pre-selected.

Google’s founding mission is to organise the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful. We and many others recognise the social, educational and communication benefits that access to online information can provide, in particular to children and young people. We also recognize the risks that this access to information may bring to children and young people, who are developing the skills needed to safely access valued resources. We welcome the opportunity to partner in this initiative to elevate the ways in which children’s rights to protection, participation and provision can be realized in the digital environment.