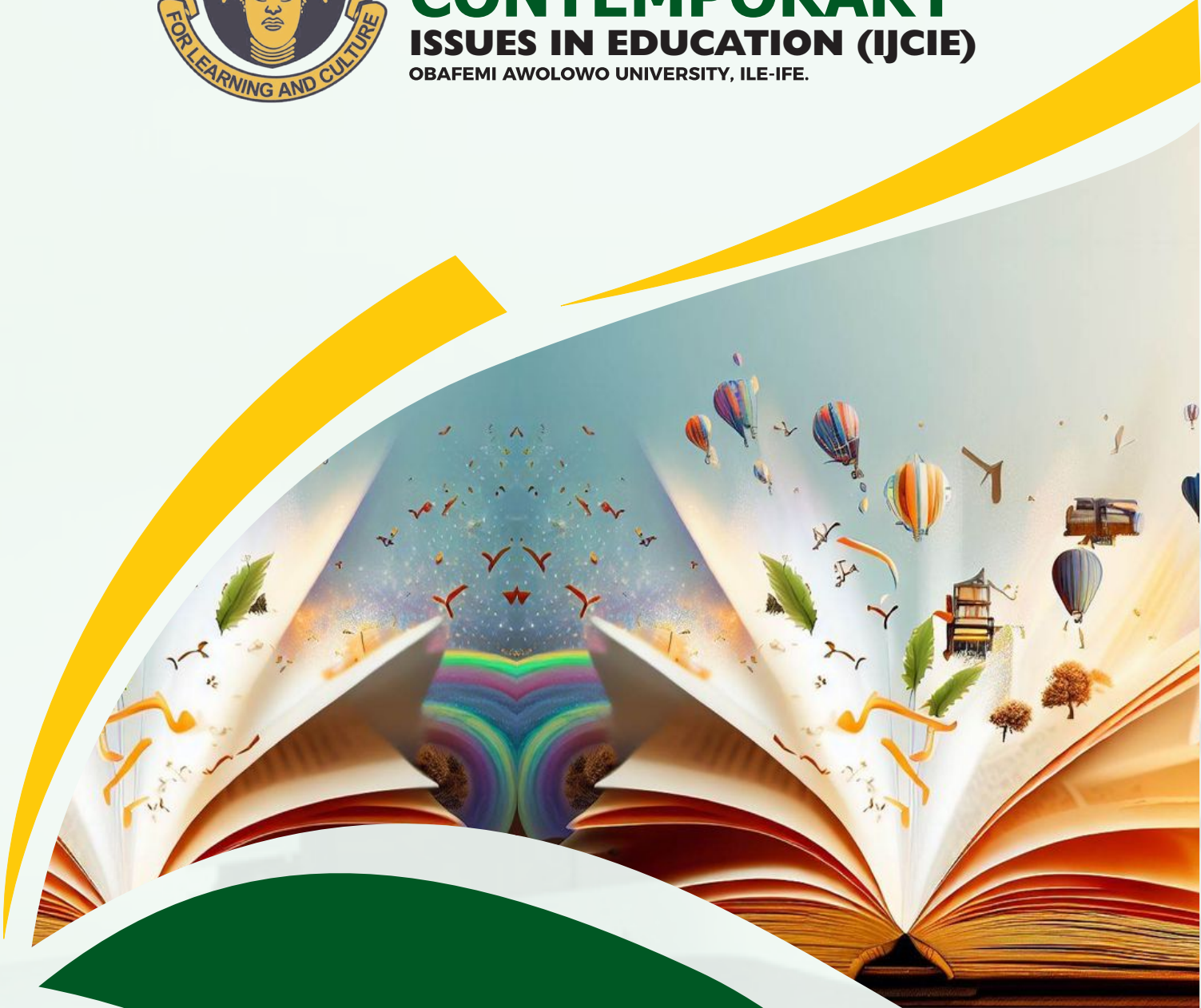




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DIGITAL INSECURITY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

Nigeria, like other developing countries, is fast growing in the use of digital to the extent that the country is rated as one with the largest Internet connectivity in Africa and mobile phones usage (UNESCO,2022; Ajayi, Okewole & Salami, 2021). Various digital devies such as learning management systems (Moodle, canvas), video conferencing tools (Zoom, Microsoft teams, slacks, Google classroom), interactive learning tools (Kahoot, Nearpot), STEM and coding platforms (Stratch, Tinkercad), educational resources and content (Khan academy) and many others are in use. Every sector is embracing these digital technologies for effectiveness in services, productivity and connectivity among other reasons (UN, 2020). In the education sector also, the tools are gaining ground, especially since COVID-19 pandemic when schools were shut down for some time. Most schools resulted to digital schooling in order to avoid knowledge diminishing among learners, though there was still disparity in the level of access. The early childhood education level is also not exempted in the use of digital technologies with the notion of enhancing learning and preparing the children for a digital future (Hatzigianni, et. al. 2023). In spite of the benefits of digital technologies to teaching-learning process even at early years, one of the challenges that is not being taking seriously, is the insecurity connected to digital technologies. This paper therefore, examined the insecurity posed by digital technologies not only to the learning but also the well-being of children. The theories on which the paper was premised were discussed emphasising the relevance to the issue. It also reiterated the role all stakeholders in early childhood education play in curtailing digital insecurity.

Keywords: Digital, Technologies, Early

Childhood Education, Insecurity, Stakeholders.

Introduction

Insecurity has been identified as one of the banes of education and development in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2021, 2020; World Bank,2021; Save the Children, 2021; Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2020; Adebayo, 2019). In the real sense of it, insecurity is increasing the rate of out of school children in Nigeria. For instance, in 2010, it was 10.5 million and this rose to 13.2 million by the end of 2015 which was the timeline for Millennium Development Goals year (MDGs) (Adekoya, 2018; The Guardian, 2018; Augustine, 2018). Ten years after, the number has risen to 18.3 million (Agwam, 2024). Many a time the focus is always on the insecurity caused by Boko Haram, terrorism and kidnapping for ransom syndromes in Nigeria. It has to be pointed out that there are other insecurity points that should also be given attention to ensure that children grow, survive and thrive in a safe and secure environment.

Insecurity is the inhibition of free expression of oneself or group of people to bring about development and actualisation of potential of individual or group(s) of people. Kessler (2024) explained insecurity as complex emotional state characterized by feelings of self-doubt, lack of confidence, and a heightened sense of vulnerability. There are different types of insecurity that may therefore hamper education of learners. Some examples are social, relationship, financial and so on (Adegbami, 2013; Itumo, Udeuhele, & Aro, 2017; Winfred-Bonse & Itodo, 2022; Obasa, 2023; Kessler, 2024). These have been researched into as they affect the development and education of children (Kouros, Merrilees & Cummings, 2008; Perez-Escami la, 2012; Brock, & Kochanska, 2015; Aurino & Giunti, 2021;), however, digital insecurity has not

received adequate attention probably because digital technologies are just gaining ground in developing countries like Nigeria. One of the few existing works explored young children and digital technology and discovered that 45% of children between the age of four to ten go online as at 2020 when COVID-19 pandemic struck (NCC, 2020). By now (2025), there would likely be an increase in the percentage of exposure and use. This trend then calls for sensitisation of all stakeholders for decisive actions towards safeguarding of children.

This paper therefore, examined digital insecurity as it is connected to early childhood education and development. It is imperative to give attention to this issue as early childhood level is a critical period of development and education. Any challenges for children at this period are likely to span through the lifetime of children. Studies have shown that any experience children are exposed to at childhood between 0 to 17 years, either positive or negative would influence them later in life (Coley, 2015; Daines, et. al., 2021; Downey, & Crummy, 2022; Ajayi, 2025), the negative experiences are known as adverse childhood experiences. It is against this backdrop that this study is embarked upon to probe into digital insecurity and early childhood education and development.

Theoretical Framework

The implications of digital insecurity on young children can be explained through several interrelated theories to show the connection of digital environment to the all – round development of children. One of the prominent theories is ecological system theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner, (1979). A key assumption of the theory is that the child is influenced by the various systems within the child's environment. There are five systems in the theory, however, the third system known as exosystem is the focus of this paper. It involves media, that is digital environment around the child. If children are exposure to inappropriate content, online violence, or lack of parental digital guidance, it will result in digital insecurity and all levels of this ecological model will be affected. So, when this happens, the psychosocial development of children would be hampered.

Digital Insecurity

Digital Insecurity is the risks and vulnerabilities embedded in the online world faced by individuals and organisations using digital technologies. This encompasses various threats like cybercrime, data breaches, cyberbullying, privacy violations, and credential theft (UNICEF, 2022; Shires & Wikinson, 2023). This implies that as good as digital technologies may be, there are risks and threats attached to the use that one should be conscious of, and most especially when it involves young children. It is important for children also to be digital literate in this technological dispensation; more importantly, with the experience during COVID-19 pandemic, it should be embedded in the process of educating children.

Initially, the notion about digital was that it is safe unless one does something stupid but in the recent time the song has changed to “the internet is fundamentally insecure, a dangerous neighbour in which one safety is always at risk” (Weber & Cooper, 2017). Various unpleasant experiences have been reported from hacking attacks of personal documents to cyberbullying and so on. The situation is becoming intense to the extent that Bochman (2018) stated that there is no amount of spending that can shield one from hackers. He therefore called for another approach to be embarked upon to salvage oneself from the hackers' efforts. It is therefore expedient to be more cautious when the issue has to do with children so as not to do more damage to children than good being envisaged.

Digital Technology and Early Childhood Education

Every level of education, early years and above, is beingbarraged with the need for the incorporation of digital technologies into the pedagogical process. Though, it is said to still be fluid at early childhood level, it is already being engrained in the educational practices at this level. By digital technology, it refers to online learning platform, educational apps and digital resources have facilitated access to knowledge (Smowltech, 2025). Interactive media on smart devices such as phones, televisions, tablets, and gaming systems are various digital technology that children are exposed to in order to facilitate learning; promote creativity and curiosity in

children. Many scholars (NAEYC, 2012; Ajayi, Okewole and Salami; 2021; Lynn, 2025; Brightwheels, 2025; Education Development Centers, nd; have identified the benefits of incorporating digital technology into children's learning. For instance, Brightwheel (2025) highlighted the following:

- Support the development of fine motor skills
- Strengthen coordination and reaction time
- Improve social and emotional development
- Promote collaboration and relationships
- Build multi-cultural awareness
- Help language development
- Offer opportunities for information processing

It may also be fun and arouse the innovative and creative mind of children. These and many more are the benefits that young children may derive when the devices are introduced to teaching and learning procedure. As

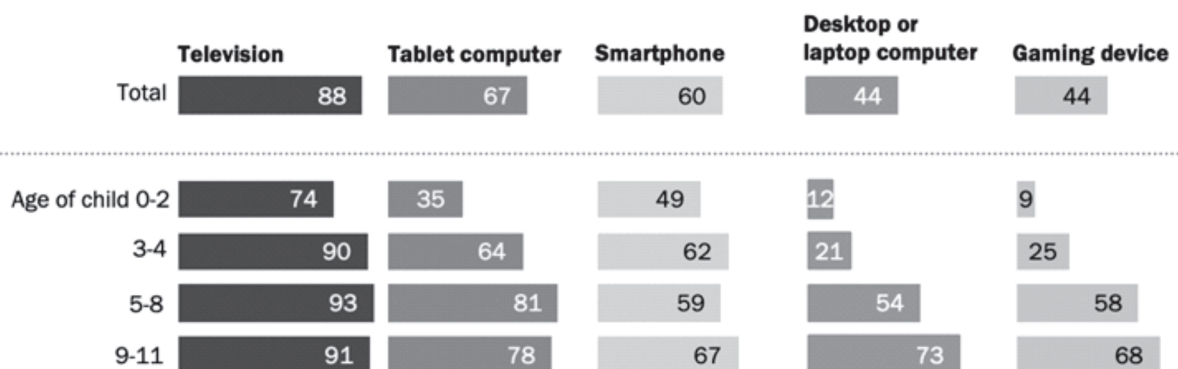
good as the tools are, there are subtle danger connected to their use for children which ought to be considered in order to protect children in this age of technological. It has to be pointed out that there are threats posed not only adults but also children when using digital, it is not only when searching through the internets. Some of the digital insecurity for children are explored:

Digital Insecurity for Children

Many children are exploring the internet on daily basis. It has been identified that on a normal day, seven out of 10 children go online (Lwin et al., 2012). In another study in United States of America, 44% of parents indicated that their children use or interact with a desktop or laptop computer or a gaming device, 88% of parents stated that their children use or interact with a television, 67% said their children use or interact with a tablet computer while 60% indicated the use of a smartphone. This is shown in Table 1.

Children’s engagement with certain types of digital devices varies widely by age

% of U.S. parents of a child age 11 or younger who say that, as far as they know, their child ever uses or interacts with a ...



Note: If parent has multiple children, they were asked to focus on one child when answering this question. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 2-15, 2020. "Parenting Children in the Age of Screens"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Furthermore, the ages of children interacting with the devices are shown with the devices they interact with. Similar study carried out in Nigeria

by the Nigerian Communication Commission in 2020 revealed the age cohort of 4 – 16 interaction with digital devices.

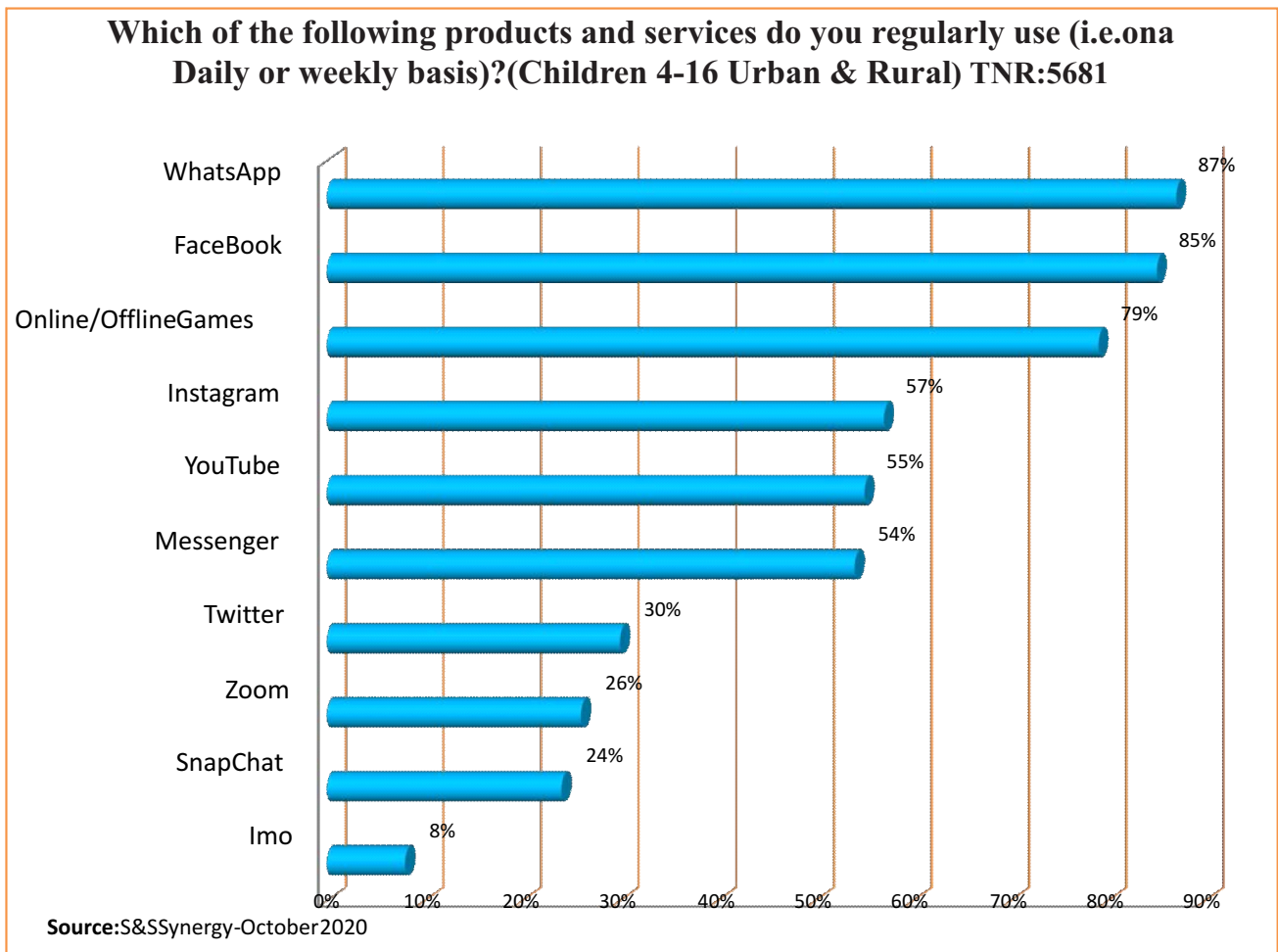


Fig 2: Children interaction with Digital Devices

It can be inferred that children as young as four years of age are interacting with digital device, hence, necessary attention should be focus on this area in the best interest of children. This is because studies have established that the Internet poses a high level of security risk to the behaviour to children (Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Andrews et al., 2020). The Nigerian Communication Commission (2020) indicated that the online risks children are exposed to may be classified into four namely: content, contact, conduct and contract. These move from the level of risks to insecurity when they are experienced by children in the process of using digital. These shall be considered in details.

Privacy concerns

Privacy concern is a contact risk. It is not only adults that can experience attacks on privacy matters, children as well can. This is because they are yet to understand the concept of privacy. Innocently sharing their personal information

online can make them vulnerable to internet thefts. Many Apps and websites do gather data from users and this can result in unauthorised access or misuse of the information. Studies indicated that children fall prey through various online games, visiting social networking sites (Kim et al., 2017; Kokolakis, 2017; Andrews et al., 2020). Alkhalifah and Alghafis (2022) stressed that privacy concerns had effect on children's behaviour on the internet. So, if children are not guided, they can inadvertently supply sensitive information online which may be disastrous to them and others around them. UNICEF (2018) pointed this out that children are more vulnerable to intrusions into their privacy as their capacity to understand the long-term impacts of sharing personal data is still developing. Other contact risks are children involvement in an adult initiated online activity such as grooming, stalking, sexual exploitation. Grooming is when a sexual predator takes advantage when a child discloses vulnerability

online. The predator would pretend to be an understanding and supporting adult ready to help. By this establishes and a manipulative relationship with the child inviting the potential victim even when the adult's sexual intentions are evident to the child (Rosen, et. al., 2014; <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/2025>). Many children may not be able to back off due to the established relationship. Hence, it is necessary that children be helped in the appropriate use of digital to avert any form of insecurities to them.

Exposure to Inappropriate Content

In the process of using digital platforms, children can be exposed to inappropriate or harmful content such as pornography and other unwholesome behaviours. It has been emphasised that the possibility is high that children might encounter violent, explicit or otherwise unsuitable materials which can have negative effects on their development, learning, their understanding of relationships and emotional well-being (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Baker, 2020). Global Alliance, (2025) pointed out that children can be exposed to content that is sexually explicit, extremely violent or inappropriate for their age and cognitive and development stage. In the process of interacting with digital devices, children can encounter other potentially damaging content from sites which encourage or normalise harmful behaviour such as eating disorders, self-harm or terrorism, age-inappropriate social networks, playing games and using apps that are not age-appropriate. Children can join unregulated chat rooms and watch livestreams which may show inappropriate content or may result in a child to taking part and being exploited without them knowing. Why it is serious matter is that a study stressed that most children are at liberty to watch, view or use sexual sites notwithstanding the risks involved (van Geel M, et.al., 2014) because they are introduced to digital devices early.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying simply refers to the use of digital technologies to harass or intimidate others online. It is a conduct risk that children, like adults, experience online. There are different ways this act occurs such as sending hurtful or threatening messages, spreading rumors or lies

online, posting embarrassing photos or videos without consent and/or impersonating someone to send mean messages (Child Mind Institute, 2024; UNICEF,2025). As children engage in digital communication and social media, they can become targets or perpetrators of cyberbullying. Young children may struggle to understand the implications of their online behaviour, and the anonymity of online interactions can lead to negative behaviours. This can escalate to psychological harm, mental harm, physical harm in terms of loss of sleep, eating disorder, and at the same time affect children's social dynamics (O'Keeffe, G. S., & Clarke-Pearson, K. 2011; UNICEF, 2025).

Addiction and Screen Time Risks

The engaging nature of digital technologies can lead to excessive screen time, which may contribute to various physical and mental health issues, such as eye strain, poor posture, and reduced physical activity. This dependency can interfere with important play-based learning and face-to-face interactions with peers, which are essential for social and emotional development (Wartella, E., & Jennings, N. 2000). Too much screen time can lead to children keeping to themselves, which may be a sign of bigger problems.

Online Predators

Children using the internet are susceptible to online predators who may try to exploit their naivety. These individuals might groom children through seemingly harmless conversations or by exploiting their trust, making it essential for caregivers to educate children about recognising suspicious behaviour and establishing boundaries (CGF Global, nd; UNICEF, nd). Statistics have shown that 20% of children have been sexually solicited online, 75% of them did not tell their parents about it, and as much as 90% of parents will never know of such inappropriate contact, 14% of kids have met online predators in person, and nearly 75% of them did so more than once. It is further revealed that 85% of online predators are hands-on abusers of children (Nikolovska, 2023).

Digital Footprint Awareness

Children may not fully comprehend the

permanence of their online actions. The concept of a digital footprint, which refers to the trail of data and information left behind when using the internet, can be difficult for young children to grasp. This lack of understanding can lead to future consequences as their online activities remain accessible and can affect their reputations (eLearning Industry 2024).

Inadequate Digital Literacy Education

Many early childhood education programmes may not incorporate comprehensive lessons on digital literacy, leaving children ill-prepared to navigate digital environments safely. Without proper education about online behaviour, security practices, and critical thinking regarding digital content, children may be at a higher risk of encountering security issues online (Baker, S. 2020).

Stakeholders Role in Safeguarding Children in the Face of Digital Insecurity

All stakeholders in children's development and learning have unprecedented part to play in safeguarding and protecting children from digital insecurity in this dispensation. Safeguarding children from digital insecurity is multidimensional and it requires active involvement of various stakeholders, including parents, educators, policymakers, technology developers, and community organizations. All efforts must be put together to create an enabling and safe digital environment for children and promoting responsible use of technology among children.

Parents and Guardians

Parents and guardians are often the first line of defence in safeguarding children from digital insecurity. In many homes, digital tools are used to keep children busy and prevent any disturbance whatsoever. Therefore, parents and guardian should of a necessity educate their children about online safety, privacy issues, and the importance of not sharing personal information. They should engage in discussions about the digital world to help children develop critical thinking skills regarding online content.

Parents should also set boundaries by establishing rules around screen time, usage of devices, and the types of content children can

access is essential. Parents should also utilise parental controls and monitoring tools to manage their children's online interactions. Parents are the strong model for their children in everything. Even in the digital world, they should be a good role model by demonstrating healthy digital habits themselves that can influence children's behaviour. When parents practice safe online behaviour and maintain a balanced relationship with technology, children are more likely to imitate these behaviours.

Educators and Schools

Since children spend many hours in school and digital has become part of educational system, schools therefore will play a pivotal role in fostering a safe online environment for children. These have to be done by creating digital literacy curriculum. The implementation of a robust digital literacy programme will help to educate children about online safety, cyberbullying, and the implications of their digital footprints. By integrating these topics into the curriculum, children can become more informed consumers of technology.

Schools and teachers should create safe spaces for children to discuss their online experiences and concerns. If there are support from teachers and access to counselling, that can help children navigate difficulties they encounter online. There should be professional development for educators on the risks associated with digital technology and effective strategies for teaching digital citizenship. This will equip teachers with the tools necessary to guide young learners in responsible technology use.

Role of Policymakers

Policymakers are responsible for creating regulations and frameworks that can protect children in the digital landscape. Therefore the roles expected of them should include developing legislation to protect children's rights online, such as data protection regulations and age restrictions on social media platforms. These laws can ensure that children's online privacy is safeguarded. Hence, the existing child online protection documents in Nigeria should be implemented, and monitored for effective results. Regular evaluation and updating of situations should be carried out.

There should be investment in educational programmes that will promote digital literacy in schools and community settings which can empower children and parents to navigate digital world. Government initiatives can provide resources to educators and facilitate public awareness campaigns in this regard. Policymakers should also work with tech companies, educators, and community organizations to establish best practices and standards for child safety in digital environments. Encouraging multi-stakeholder collaboration can enhance the effectiveness of protection measures.

Role of Technology Developers

Technology companies and developers have a great part to play in shaping the digital orientation of children. The responsibilities for them should include the designing of safer products that are age-appropriate in applications as well as platforms that incorporate child safety features, such as strong privacy settings and content filters. The tech companies and developers should ensure user-friendly interfaces can help children navigate technology safely. Inappropriate content and cyberbullying should be addressed. There should be a means of implementing mechanisms for reporting and addressing cyberbullying and inappropriate content is essential. Technology developers should work to create systems that protect users and promote positive digital interactions. Tech developers should provide clear information about their products and services, including data collection practices, privacy policies, and tips for safe usage. Regular education should be provided for parents and children on how to utilize their platforms securely is vital.

Community Organizations and Advocacy Groups

Larger community, organizations and advocacy groups also can support the efforts to protect children online by conducting awareness campaigns. This type of initiatives will help to inform parents and children about digital risks. They can as well promote safe online practices by providing resources available for assistance. Workshops, informational sessions, and counselling services can help to empower families with the knowledge and skills necessary

to navigate the digital world safely. Advocacy groups can influence policy changes at local, national, and international levels to promote children's rights and enhance protections against online dangers.

Conclusion

It must be emphasized that there are various insecurities that can affect learning and development in children. This paper has focused on digital insecurity as it affects children. The collective efforts of parents, educators, policymakers, technology developers, and community organizations are vital in safeguarding children from digital insecurity. By working together, these stakeholders can create a supportive and safe digital environment that empowers children to explore technology responsibly while minimizing risks to their safety and well-being. This collaborative approach is essential for fostering a culture of safety, awareness, and resilience in the digital age.

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