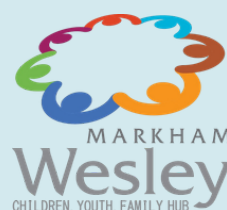


AUG 2026

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE THROUGH KIDS' EYES

A COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH ON
CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Community Researchers: Heidi Chan, Charlotte Kwok & Erica Lo
Supporting Organizations: Kids Rights Canada & Markham Wesley Center



01 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Children as Digital Citizens

Children of this generation are digital natives, growing up with technology integrated into every aspect of their lives. Their lived experiences are unique, shaped by an interconnected environment that no generation before them has ever had to navigate (Muppalla et al., 2023). While digital technologies profoundly affect the daily lives of all children, they rarely possess genuine agency in determining how the digital world is constructed (Ayalew et al., 2024). Instead, these digital ecosystems are predominantly operated and monopolized by major tech corporations, often reducing individuals to mere consumers of pre-determined architectures (Djeffal, 2022). However, despite this structural lack of agency, we must fundamentally recognize that children are active digital citizens. Their fundamental rights inherently extend into the digital environment, and it is imperative to ensure that they can participate within it safely, meaningfully, and with true agency

1.2. Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to bridge the gap between adult-led tech policy and children's lived digital realities. First, it introduces an accessible, game-based engagement strategy tailored to simplify complex digital rights concepts for children (aged 8-17). Second, it presents the direct findings from these participatory workshops, offering a peek into what children themselves identify as the strengths and weaknesses of AI. By amplifying these children's perspectives, this report aims to provide stakeholders with the insights needed to co-design a more empowering and inclusive digital future.

02 BACKGROUND

2.1. The Current Canadian Narrative and the Protection-Only Paradigm

Recently, a significant debate has emerged across Canada regarding online child protection. The dominant narrative frequently frames digital platforms, and increasingly AI, as public health hazards and as inherent threats to children's development and growth.

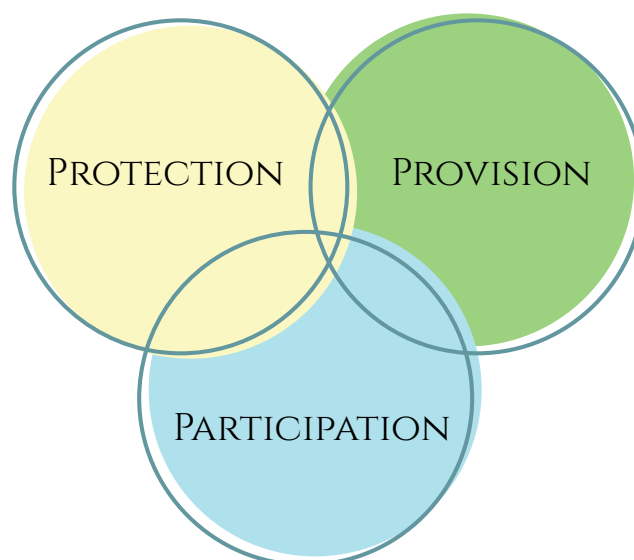
This protectionist narrative is evidenced by recent multi-billion-dollar lawsuits launched by major Canadian school boards against tech giants, framing social media as a public health crisis that disrupts learning (Stober, 2024). Furthermore, legislative efforts like the federal Online Harms Act, alongside public health advisories equating digital platforms to health hazards, solidify a discourse that views technology almost exclusively as an inherent threat to healthy development. This is not just a localized issue; globally, we see this protectionist trend intensifying, most notably with the recent Australian legislation implementing a mandatory social media ban for users under the age of 16 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2025).

However, these discussions lean heavily toward a "protection-only" strategy. The intense fear surrounding digital platforms often manifests as a panic-driven, rather than an evidence-driven, phenomenon (Walsh, 2020). Most importantly, while safeguarding children is important, operating exclusively from a deficit-based model fails to capture the full picture of children's digital realities (Odgers, 2019). By reacting primarily to anxieties rather than empirical evidence of how children actually use and benefit from technology, we risk limiting their digital agency (MediaSmarts, 2022).

2.2. A Holistic Approach to Digital Safety with a 3P model

Under the protectionism framework, a child is viewed merely as an object of adult concern, charity, and intervention. It relies on a paternalistic, deficit-based mindset where adults assume they know what is best, focusing entirely on insulating the child from the world to prevent harm (Morley et al., 2021). The alternative is to shift away from this purely defensive strategy and adopt a "Participation-Led Approach." We start recognizing children as active subjects with distinct civil and human rights. The adult role shifts from paternalistic to collaborative; we determine what is best with children, not just for children (Kirk, 2019).

It recognizes a child's evolving capacity - as their competence and maturity grow, the need for restrictive adult protection naturally decreases, and the space for autonomous participation expands (Livingstone & Sylwander, 2024). True digital safety is achieved when we provide children with the digital literacy to understand the platforms they use (Provision), the necessary tools to navigate them securely (Protection), and a meaningful voice in shaping them (Participation). Instead of merely sheltering them from danger, this holistic framework focuses on equipping them to exercise agency safely within the digital world.



2.3. UNCRC General Comment No. 25

This participatory approach is firmly grounded in international human rights frameworks, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment. General Comment 25 explicitly recognizes that children both need and want access to the digital world to realize their right to participate at local, national, and international levels. It mandates that State parties must help children express their views about the digital environment on an equal basis with adults (United Nations, 2021). Furthermore, the Comment emphasizes that while governments bear the responsibility to protect children's rights online, they are equally obligated to listen to youth during policy-making processes, actively encouraging States to utilize the digital environment to consult with children on measures that affect them (Livingstone et al., 2023).

2.4. The Canadian Context

Applying these principles to the Canadian context reveals a clear readiness among youth to engage. Current data indicates that 95% of young Canadians desire an active role in ensuring their own online safety (Steeves, 2014). They are not asking to be passive beneficiaries of adult-led regulation; rather, they want to embrace their rights and responsibilities as digital citizens, collaborating with stakeholders to build a safer online community (Helsper et al., 2025).

03 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Overview and Core Principles

This research utilized a grassroots, participatory methodology designed to capture children's perspectives on AI. The primary objective was to facilitate an environment characterized by "children speaking for children," ensuring that the research methods remained highly accessible, engaging, and developmentally appropriate for children within the 8-17 age demographic.



3.2. Phase 1: Play-Based Rights workshop

To avoid didactic lectures and complex jargon, the workshop utilized a play-based approach to introduce foundational rights frameworks. Participants engaged in a scenario-based game consisting of three steps:

1. **Scenario Identification:** Children were presented with cards detailing specific, relatable AI scenarios (e.g., "AI Chatbots keep harmful content away from me").
2. **Rights Categorization:** Participants analyzed the scenario to determine which fundamental right it pertained to, choosing from four core categories: survival, protection, development, and participation.
3. **Active Play:** Children selected a color-coordinated toy car corresponding to their chosen right and launched it into a designated target box.

Through this experiential learning model, children developed a working understanding of the four rights and naturally began connecting those rights to their personal experiences with technology.



Step 1: Pick one of the scenario-based card on everyday AI situations



Step 2: Categorize the scenario into the type of children's rights



Step 3: Shooting Game!

3.3. Phase 2: Open Conversation and Concept Introduction

Following the game, facilitators initiated semi-structured, open-ended conversations. Inquiries were kept simple and neutral, such as:

- What AI do you use?
- What do you use it for?
- Do you like it?

Crucially, if younger participants demonstrated no prior knowledge or experience with AI, facilitators deliberately refrained from pushing the topic. The methodology prioritized the child's comfort and developmental readiness, actively avoiding the introduction of technical concepts they were not yet prepared to navigate.

3.4. Phase 3: Creative Expression and Capability Building

For children familiar with AI, the session transitioned into a creative expression exercise. Participants were provided with worksheets and invited to delve deeper into their digital experiences using three targeted prompts:

- "What I like about AI..."
- "What I don't like about AI..."
- "I think AI should help me..."

The final prompt was strategically designed to shift children from being passive consumers of technology to active thinkers. It encouraged them to exercise their agency by articulating exactly what they need from technology and what adult developers should be building to support them.

3.5. Creative Methods - A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

The decision to prioritize drawing, play, and open conversation over traditional surveys or formal interviews is rooted in the need to build a truly child-centered research environment. Creative methods unlock a significantly broader spectrum of expression, allowing youth to communicate complex experiences that verbal or written methods alone might constrain. By providing crayons and open creative space, this methodology acknowledges that a picture is often worth a thousand words, ultimately allowing children to express their realities on their own terms.

The image shows two identical blank cards side-by-side, designed for children to express their thoughts on AI. Each card has a light green border and is decorated with colorful, stylized hand-drawn shapes in the corners (pink, yellow, and teal). The left card contains the following text:

Name: _____

WHAT I LIKE ABOUT AI:

WHAT I DON'T LIKE ABOUT AI:

The right card contains the following text:

I THINK AI SHOULD HELP ME...

3.6. Participant Demographics

The study engaged approximately 20 children ranging in age from 8 to 17 years old. While Kids Rights Canada's primary programming typically targets elementary school children between the ages of 6 and 12, observational data from these sessions indicated that participants generally began to grasp the conceptual meaning of AI around the age of 8.

The research was conducted in collaboration with a local community center, Markham Wesley Center, and the resulting dataset is particularly rich as the sample predominantly consisted of youth from recent immigrant families in Toronto.

To ensure that language was never a barrier to participation, the workshops were facilitated bilingually in both English and Cantonese. This inclusive communication strategy allowed the children to articulate their hopes and concerns about AI in whichever language felt most natural to them. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on drawing and visual expression effectively bypassed remaining linguistic hurdles, enabling all participants to fully capture and communicate their experiences.



3.7. Research Limitations and Operational Challenges

While this participatory, play-based approach yielded profound qualitative insights, it is important to transparently acknowledge the limitations and operational challenges of the methodology:

- **Sample Bias and Generalizability:** Due to the localized nature of the community center partnership, the research was conducted almost exclusively with immigrant children in the Toronto area. Consequently, this is a specific sample that does not represent the entirety of the youth population across Canada. Children in different geographic regions or from different demographic backgrounds may have vastly different experiences and concerns regarding AI. Therefore, this research does not aim to generalize these experiences as a universal representation of all Canadian children. Instead, it adopts a diagnostic approach: by deeply analyzing the viewpoints of children within this specific population, we can begin to identify and examine the wider structural problems and design flaws currently present in AI ecosystems.
- **Ethics and Consent Frameworks:** The project heavily prioritized ethical engagement and participant protection. Child-friendly consent forms were prepared and mandated for signature by both the children and their parents or guardians prior to the commencement of any activities. However, because the organization operates as a self-funded grassroots organization rather than an academic institution, this specific research initiative did not undergo a formal approval process through an academic institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee.
- **Facilitation Demands:** The methodology required researchers to concurrently fill the roles of workshop facilitator and qualitative interviewer, which presented unique operational challenges. Balancing the rigorous task of probing for detailed, nuanced answers while maintaining the high energy required to sustain children's attention across a wide range of play-based activities proved highly demanding.

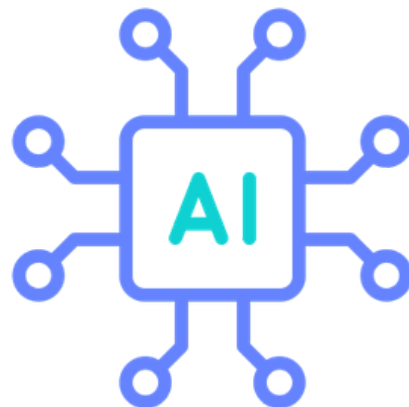
Ultimately, while the play-based methodology successfully unlocked a broader spectrum of child expression, the approach relies heavily on the developmental age of the children, their individual ability to articulate their experiences, and their comfort level in revealing those thoughts to facilitators.

04 RESULTS & ANALYSIS



4.1. Defining AI on Children's Terms

Prior to initiating the activities, the research design intentionally avoided imposing a rigid, adult-centric or technical definition of Artificial Intelligence. While technical definitions of AI encapsulate a vast array of unseen systems and algorithms, the objective was to understand the children's subjective definitions. Facilitators used the term "AI" broadly, allowing participants to operate from their own frameworks. Notably, every child participant defined AI exclusively as Large Language Model (LLM) chatbots, most commonly citing platforms such as "ChatGPT" or "Gemini."

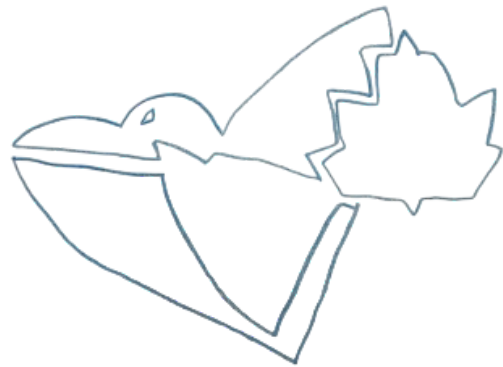


4.2. Nurturing Digital Capabilities: The Strengths of AI

Our research reveals that children actively leverage these tools to build their own digital literacy and agency.

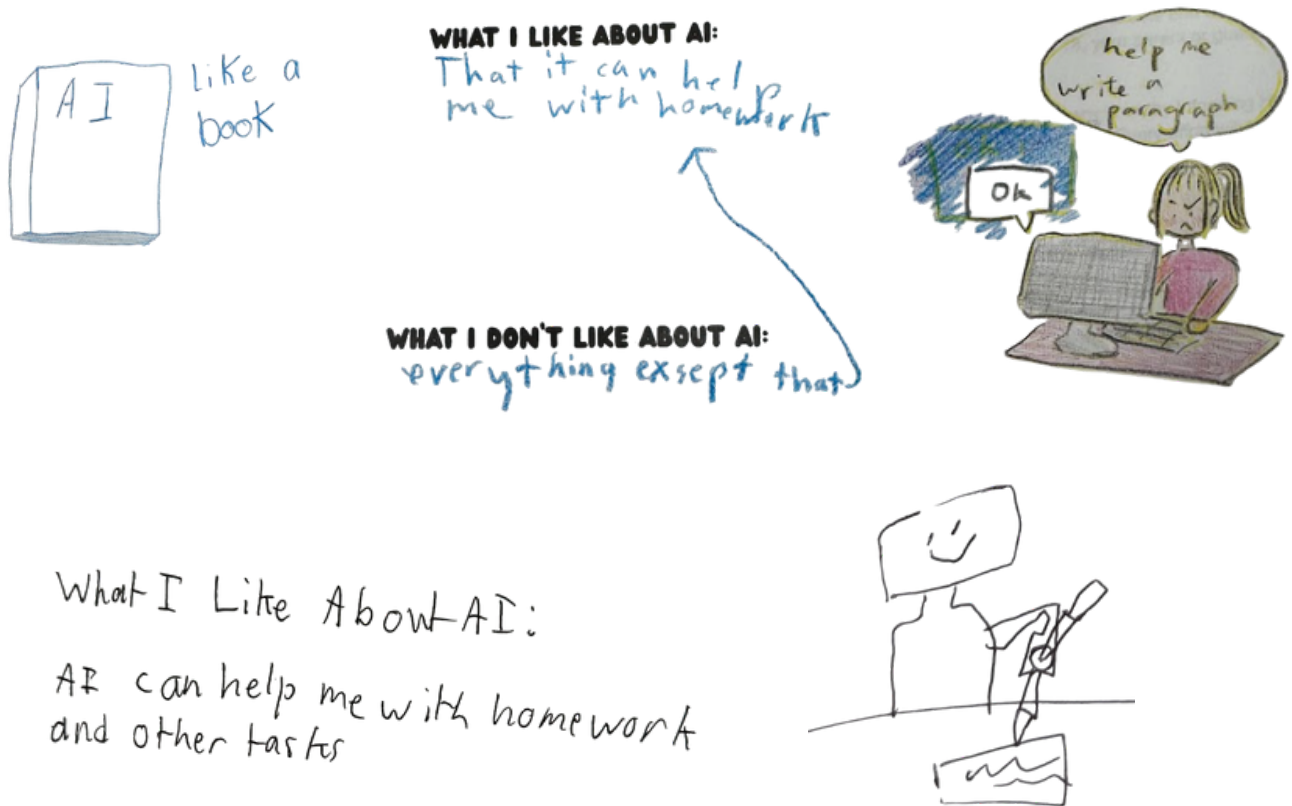
- Creative Expressions: Children frequently identified AI as a collaborative partner for their imagination. Written feedback highlighted that AI assists "with craft ideas for school" and helps "turn my drawing smoth [smooth]."

with craft ideas
for school



I Helps me Turn
my drawing smoth

- Homework Assistance: Participants heavily emphasized AI's utility as an educational companion. One child conceptually illustrated AI "Like a book," while another drew a scenario of a user instructing a computer to "help me write a paragraph," with the system simply responding "Ok." One participant noted under the prompt "What I don't like about AI" the phrase "everything except," drawing an arrow directly to the homework benefit.



- Fact-Checking and Verification: Children view AI as a tool to verify information and "make sure the info is right before giving answers."

It can fact check and make sure
all the info is right before giving
answers

4.3. Critical Concerns and Areas for Protection

Children demonstrated a profound awareness of the technology's flaws, identifying several significant concerns.

- **Inaccuracy and System Hallucinations:** The data revealed a strong, recurring theme of skepticism among the youth. Participants explicitly noted that AI provides "not always accurate information" and, quite bluntly, "doesn't tell the truth." Youth inherently recognize system blind spots and the problem of AI hallucinations.

- not always accurate information

AI would not
always correct.

can give false information

- doesn't tell the truth

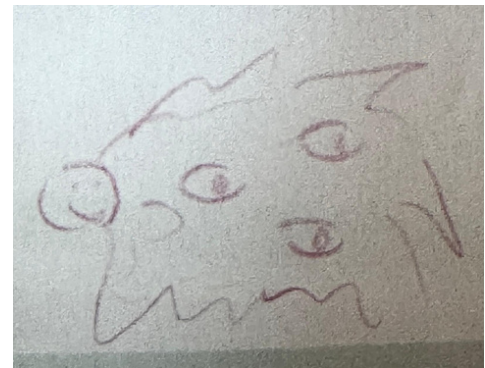
AI can sometimes give the wrong answer

When I give AI a
hard question AI would
not be correct.

- Safety of Humans and Long-Term Impact: Children in this study expressed severe anxiety regarding long-term, existential threats. Participants wrote that AI is "take ing over the world" and "It take's over The World and It's creepy." One child accompanied a drawing of an imaginary monster representing AI with the fear that it "might takeover our jobs and they might kill us." Participants noted that these science-fiction-like, dystopian anxieties were largely fueled by content consumed on YouTube and in movies.

I don't like about AI because
if we keep researching about AI,
they might takeover our jobs and they
might kill us!

Because it is take ing
Over the world



I will rely on it

It take's over The
World and It's creepy

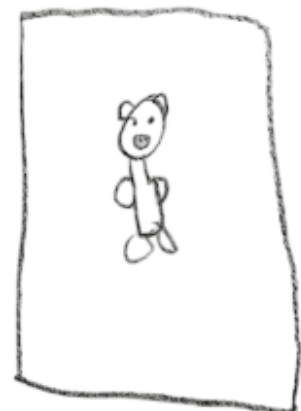
- **Inaccessible and Unfriendly Interfaces:** Children articulated that current AI systems are fundamentally unfriendly to their demographic. One participant noted, "The answers are using too fancy words (too hard to understand)." When systems default to complex, adult-level jargon, they create an immediate barrier to participation. Additionally, another child noted that platforms "HAVE Bad WORD." While the participant could not recall a specific example during facilitation, the perception of encountering inappropriate language remains a significant barrier to their comfort and safety.

The answers are using
too fancy words
(too hard to understand)

HAVE

Bad
WORD

- **Abusive Use and Cyberbullying:** One participant shared a highly personal experience of an individual feeding her photograph into an AI tool to maliciously edit a pig's face over her own. The deep discomfort and violation expressed by this participant serves as a stark reminder that AI-enabled cyberbullying is not a hypothetical risk, but an active threat currently harming youth.



05 RECOMMENDATIONS & CALL TO ACTIONS

The insights gathered from these young participants highlight the urgent need to move beyond purely defensive online safety strategies. To foster true digital agency, we must actively integrate the perspectives of children into the very structures that govern their digital lives. To achieve this, we propose the following actionable recommendations for policymakers, researchers, and technology companies:

5.1. Mandate Child Participation in AI Policy Drafting

Policymakers must move beyond paternalistic regulatory frameworks and actively invite youth to the legislative table. When drafting policies concerning online safety, digital privacy, and AI, governments and regulatory bodies must establish formal, accessible, and developmentally appropriate channels for children to express their views. Digital policy should not merely be enacted for children; it must be developed with them. This ensures that legislation addresses their actual, lived experiences rather than relying solely on adult assumptions.

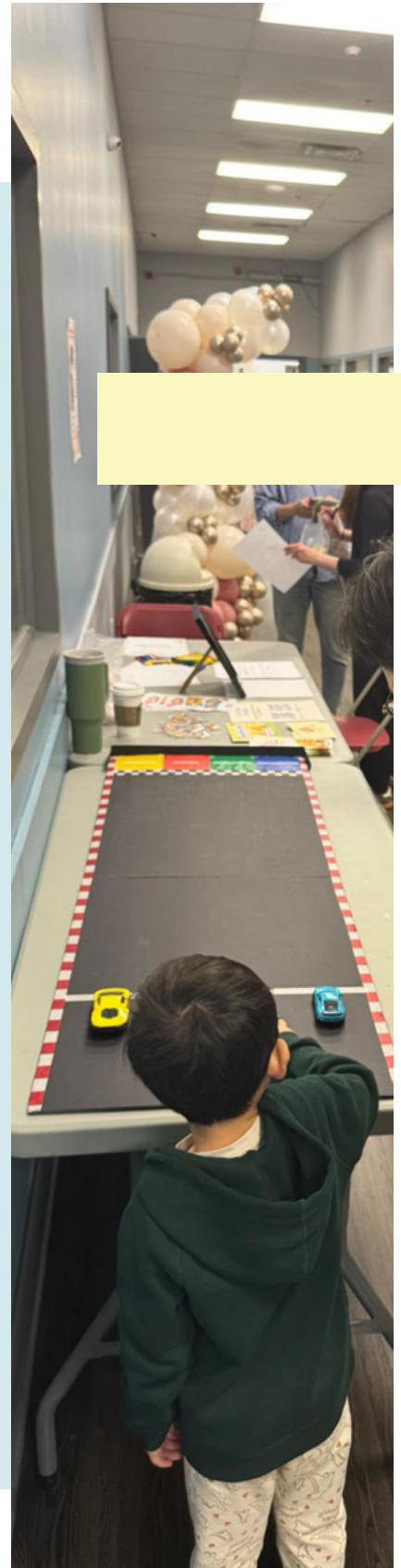


5.2. Co-Design Child-Friendly Artificial Intelligence

Platforms Tech industry leaders must embed child participation into the earliest stages of product development. By prioritizing the co-design of AI platforms with youth, developers can ensure that user interfaces, vocabulary choices, and safety features are genuinely age-appropriate and user-friendly. This participatory approach moves away from locking children out of digital spaces and instead empowers them to safely exercise their digital literacy. Co-designing systems directly with children proactively mitigates critical blind spots and promotes safety by design.

5.3. Implement Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs)

Prior to the public deployment of any new AI technology or the passing of digital policy, both the public and private sectors must conduct comprehensive Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs). These assessments must systematically evaluate how a proposed system or legislation impacts a child's fundamental rights under the UNCRC (Erwin-Rose et al, 2025). Mandating CRIAs holds AI development accountable to the specific needs, capabilities, and vulnerabilities of youth (Livingstone & Pothong, 2025).



06 CONCLUSION

The qualitative insights provided by youth are not merely anecdotal; they serve as an essential blueprint for the development of more inclusive, effective, and secure AI systems. Furthermore, the critical concerns articulated by these young participants—spanning data inaccuracy, existential safety, and the potential for abusive use—closely mirror the legitimate anxieties of the broader adult population. An AI ecosystem that is misleading, unsafe, or easily weaponized against a child is fundamentally flawed for society at large. Consequently, centering child perspectives extends far beyond the scope of youth protection; it is vital for building a safer, more transparent, and ethical digital environment for all users.

Stakeholders across all sectors must actively embed direct child participation into their future initiatives. Children are not passive subjects waiting to be insulated from the digital world; they are capable, highly insightful partners ready to co-design a better, more equitable digital future.



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