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Online Safety in 2026: The Work of Catching Up



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Every year seems to come with a new digital learning curve. Just when it feels like we've figured out one app, another tool quietly becomes part of daily life. By the time adults are ready with guidance, kids have often already moved on...

That dynamic shaped much of 2025. Children's digital lives continued to deepen, with technology influencing how they learn, connect, and express themselves. New tools quickly became familiar, and online spaces further blurred the lines between education, entertainment, and social life. This raises an important question: not whether online safety still matters, but how does our approach need to evolve?

As we move into 2026, it is clear that some of our most important online safety conversations are still forming. This reflects the reality that technology is advancing faster than our shared language, guidance, and norms. In several fundamental areas, we're still learning how to make sense of what children are experiencing online and what meaningful support actually looks like.

AI and children's digital lives



AI quickly moved from novelty to normal. What once felt experimental now shows up in everyday moments, helping kids with homework, answering late-night questions, and shaping how they explore ideas. In 2025, generative AI became less of a tool on the sidelines and more of a quiet presence in how young people think and comprehend.

FOSI's [Generative AI in Uncertain Times](#) research shows just how embedded these tools already are; 45% of teens surveyed report using a generative AI tool more than once a week. For many children, AI is not something they experiment with occasionally. It is part of their regular digital routine.

Yet, our conversations about AI are still catching up. Questions about accuracy, emotional connection and the line between human and machine are new for everyone, not just kids. Many adults are learning alongside young people, which makes these discussions less about having perfect answers and more about navigating that grey area together.

This uncertainty is not a failure. It is an opportunity. When guidance is still taking shape, families and educators have space to explore these tools together, ask better questions, and set expectations rooted in shared values and safety. Catching up means recognizing how central AI already is in teens' lives and helping them engage with it thoughtfully and confidently.

Gaps in online safety for non-normative families

Much of today's online safety guidance still assumes a narrow version of family life. Two parents in the household. Reliable access to devices. Time and resources to supervise technology use. For many families, that picture does not reflect daily reality.

Previous estimates suggest that around [30% of children ages 0 to 17](#) live in households with one or no parent present. Many children also move between caregivers, share devices with additional family members, or grow up in lower socioeconomic environments that shape how and why they go online. For some, online spaces provide connection, continuity, or support that may be harder to find offline. At the same time, expectations around monitoring, screen time, and device use may be harder to meet or applied unevenly across households.

When online safety frameworks do not reflect these realities, gaps can and have appeared. Advice that works well for one family may be unrealistic or inaccessible for

another. The issue is not a lack of care, but a mismatch between guidance and lived experience.

Catching up here means broadening how we define online safety. It requires acknowledging that children's digital lives are shaped by their offline circumstances and placing equity at the center of the conversation from the start.

Children's rights and the push for bans

Concerns about online harm led to increased calls for broad bans in 2025. Proposals to restrict access to platforms or features are often driven by a genuine desire to protect children. At the same time, they raise important questions about rights, access to information, and participation in digital spaces.

Children are not only consumers of content. They are learners, creators, and active participants in cultural and civic life. When conversations move too quickly toward blanket restrictions, there is a major risk of oversimplifying complex challenges and overlooking how children actually use digital spaces.

This is not an argument against safeguards. Protections and guardrails matter. But decisions about bans should be grounded in evidence, proportionality, and an understanding of children's rights alongside their well-being. Catching up means understanding one-size-fits-all solutions may feel decisive, but they can carry lasting consequences.

Looking ahead

What connects these conversations is not a lack of concern, but the speed of change. Technology continues to evolve faster than our shared frameworks for understanding it.

In 2026, catching up does not mean having every answer. It means staying curious, resisting overly simple solutions, and taking children's lived experiences seriously as we shape what comes next.









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Kaylin Peete is the Public Affairs Coordinator for the Family Online Safety Institute. Her role involves monitoring and analyzing trends in online safety legislation, researching and reporting on safety topics, and supporting FOSI events and programs. Prior to joining FOSI, she spent several years teaching in Washington, D.C. Public Schools, enhancing the achievements of marginalized students via the Teach for America nonprofit organization. Additionally, Kaylin holds a B.A. in Foreign Affairs with a Minor in French from the University of Virginia as well as a Master's in Education Policy from Johns Hopkins University.



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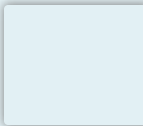
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