Media Update

9 February 2021

_____

UNICEF

PRESS RELEASE

Growing concern for well-being of children and young people amid soaring screen time – UNICEF

Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore on Safer Internet Day

NEW YORK, 9 February 2021 – "Under the shadow of COVID-19, the lives of millions of children and young people have shrunk to just their homes and their screens. For many, being online quickly became the only way to play, socialize and learn.

"While technology and digital solutions provide significant opportunities to keep children learning, entertained and connected, these same tools may also increase their exposure to a myriad of risks. Even before the pandemic, online sexual exploitation, harmful content, misinformation and cyberbullying all threatened children's rights, safety and mental wellbeing.

"For children already experiencing harm or hurt – online or offline – the rise in screen time may have exacerbated their anguish. School closures, physical distancing, decreased services, and increased strain on already vulnerable families disrupted and reduced some of the protective measures available to them.

"At the same time, concern is mounting for children's physical and emotional health, with some evidence suggesting that more time online is leading to less outdoor activity, reduced sleep quality, increased symptoms of anxiety and unhealthy eating habits.

"As the pandemic enters its second year, there's no doubt that the Internet and technology will continue to play an elevated role in the lives of millions of

children. This Safer Internet Day, we have an opportunity to reimagine a safer world for children online, and one that prioritizes and protects their physical and mental well-being. Here's how:

·   By working with **governments** to train health, education and social service workers about the impact of COVID-19 on child well-being, including increased online risks, as well as bolstering core child protection and mental health services to make sure they remain open and active throughout the pandemic and beyond.

·   By ensuring the **tech industry, including social networking sites,** guarantees that online platforms have enhanced safety and safeguarding measures that are clearly accessible to teachers, parents and children.

·   By working with **public and private sector partners** to increase investments in safe technologies and content that promote quality learning and skills building, including through the Reimagine Education initiative and GIGA.

·   By supporting **parents** to help their children understand the risks presented by the Internet and digital technologies as well as being alert to signs of distress that may arise with online activity.

·   In **schools**, by granting children continued access to school-based counselling services – including virtually – and policies that respond to mental health and child protection concerns.

"For children and young people themselves, preparing for a kinder, more connected world post-COVID means helping strike a balance between their online and offline worlds, nurturing safe, positive relationships with those around them, and having access to the support they need.

#####

For further information, please contact:

Helen Wylie, UNICEF New York, Tel: +1 917 244 2215, hwylie@unicef.org

About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world's toughest places, to reach the world's most disadvantaged children. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone.

For more information about UNICEF and its work for children visit www.unicef.org

Follow UNICEF on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube