Protecting Our Children Online: The Digital Way Forward

by Azalina Othman Said

As we join the world in celebrating World Children's Day 2023 today, my heart is filled with a profound sense of responsibility toward our most precious members of society —children, who are the future of Malaysia.

I would like to take this opportunity to address a matter of paramount importance which is safeguarding our children in the ever-expanding digital landscape. Whether this is a unique Malaysian trend or a global phenomenon, I commonly witness children and toddlers engrossed in gadgets, be it a smartphone or tablet, at dining tables and at various public spaces, wherever my journey takes me.

Technology is advancing at a fast rate and 94% of Malaysian children today are active internet users[1]. Where their tiny footsteps resonate through the vastness of the digital realm, it becomes our collective responsibility to ensure that these steps are guided with understanding, empathy and unwavering protection. Our commitment lies in fostering a digital space where the innocence of childhood thrives, shielded from the potential pitfalls that come with the limitless possibilities of the online world.

In our quest for protection, empowering children's voices assumes a vital role. I urge all of us to take a moment to envision a space where our children feel not just seen, but truly heard. Let's cultivate a sense of ownership in our children for their online experiences. Instead of relying solely on adults for reporting and deterrence, let us equip them with the essential information and confidence to report any cybercrimes or incidents they or their peers may encounter. By fostering a culture where children feel empowered to voice their concerns, we contribute to a safer online environment for all.

Malaysia has highlighted the significance of cybersecurity in our digital age at the recent APEC Leaders' Summit last week. As part of this initiative, we are committed to integrating **child-centric cybersecurity measures** to ensure the safety of our young digital citizens. Their protection is integral to the success of our broader cybersecurity efforts.

Today, the children welfare reporting mechanisms available include Talian Kasih (dial 15999), complaint to be lodged to Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), and through independent efforts by SUHAKAM

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[1] ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2022). Disrupting Harm in Malaysia: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

and NGOs such as the https://www.childlinefoundation.com/report-abuse by The Childline Foundation, among others.

The implementation of **child-friendly reporting platforms** would be a gamechanger. Envision a world where reporting a concern mirrors seeking assistance from a trusted friend. Through the incorporation of intuitive features and design principles centred around children, these applications have the potential to revolutionise the reporting process, turning it into a positive and supportive experience that nurtures a child's sense of security and confidence. While these concepts are not novel, evidenced by existing platforms like https://cybertip.ca/en/ by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, https://www.thinkuknow.org.au/ by the Australian Federal Police, and https://report.cybertip.org/ by the United States National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, they underscore the effectiveness of utilising the digital space in a manner that empowers and safeguards children.

Acknowledging that our children are a generation raised in the digital era, our commitment should be shifted to amplify their digital literacy and capacity. It is essential to enhance their understanding through educational programs and initiatives and arm them with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the digital landscape. This involves empowering them to make informed decisions, identify potential threats, and safeguard themselves effectively in the online sphere.

Moving forward, it is important to include children in policy-making.In embracing the "nothing for us without us" concept, we recognize that the active participation of children in decision-making processes is fundamental to creating policies that genuinely meet their needs and concerns. In 2024, the Legal Affairs Division of the Prime Minister's Department, in efforts to improve Malaysia's Child Justice system, will be looking into more digital inclusiveness in the area of protecting children, especially by children themselves.

This Children's Day, let us commit to creating a digital space where our children not only thrive but are also empowered and safe. By incorporating child-centric approaches into our cybersecurity measures, we can foster a generation of digitally literate, confident, and protected individuals.

Safeguarding our children in the digital realm is not just a responsibility; it is a promise we make to the future of our nation.

Happy Children's Day to all children.