



Preventing Incident of Sexual Cyberbullying in Intellectual disability

POSITION PAPER



**THE PR.I.S.C.I.LLA PROJECT POSITION ON DIGITAL
INCLUSION AND ONLINE SAFETY FOR PEOPLE
WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES**



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safety for people with intellectual disabilities**

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INTRODUCTION

The PR.I.S.C.I.LLA project is a European initiative funded by the Erasmus+ programme, with the primary objective of **developing and testing educational resources** to help **young adults with intellectual disabilities use social media and the Internet safely and responsibly**.

There are societal risk factors that heighten the chances for this target group of experiencing cyberbullying and online sexual harassment, such as inadequate sexual education, which inhibits individuals from understanding personal boundaries. Furthermore, a lack of digital literacy training often provided by educational institutions or families before granting young people access to the internet and social media results in increased susceptibility to being victimized by online offenses.



The PR.I.S.C.I.LLA project aims to promote a **responsible use of digital tools**, as their proper application can enhance social connections and assist young adults with intellectual disabilities in cultivating positive, self-determined identities. The project is structured into **two complementary learning programmes**. The first is aimed at **young people**, with the goal of equipping them with the digital skills and critical awareness necessary to navigate social media independently and safely, while seizing the opportunities these tools offer. The second course is designed for **professionals** who work with young individuals, fulfilling dual objectives:



improving their professional growth in digital skills and allowing them to implement the educational program within their own intervention settings. Additionally, the course is accessible to **informal carers**, equipping them with specific strategies and practical insights to assist those they care for in utilizing social media both independently and thoughtfully.

We consider access to the digital world a **fundamental right** for young adults with intellectual disabilities, as well as a tool for social inclusion and self-determination. The PR.I.S.C.I.LLA approach demonstrates that protecting young people with intellectual disabilities from the systemic risks of the internet, such as cyberbullying and sexual harassment, requires investing in targeted and inclusive learning programmes that foster awareness and control. With the support of policymakers, this programme can be integrated across various institutional and educational levels, providing young people, professionals, and caregivers with high-quality training that delivers a meaningful impact on their personal and professional skills.



CONTEXT

The PR.I.S.C.I.LLA project emerged against a backdrop where the internet and social media have become an integral part of everyone's daily life, serving as spaces where people continue to experiment with their identity and social relations. Today, an individual's **social identity** is also shaped through online interactions (Holmes & O'Loughlin, 2012). While individuals with intellectual disabilities are frequently identified only by their diagnosis, and the disability becomes a defining characteristic of their social recognition, social media engagement and interaction provide users the chance to show themselves to the online world while **concealing aspects of their subjectivity that they do not want to disclose**, allowing them to highlight qualities that are often neglected in real life.

The internet and social platforms **foster** new friendships, **facilitate** forum participation, and **enable** users to follow interest pages, chat, play games, and research new topics. The digital world can act as a **positive mediator**, enabling people with intellectual disabilities to experience new forms of socialization outside of their daily routines, to feel free to explore topics that interest them, and to stay in touch with friends and family, thereby reducing the social isolation that these individuals often experience (Eriksson et al., 2019). People with intellectual disabilities report a greater sense of **freedom** when using social media because they are not monitored or supervised by the adults who assist them in other daily activities, allowing them to feel more independent and capable of **self-determination** (Sallafranque-St-Louis & Normand, 2017). Despite these positive aspects, hazardous uses of social media and the internet can occur, which can have repercussions on people's offline lives as well.

The vulnerability of people with intellectual disabilities often manifests as a failure to recognize the **risks** they face, an inability to understand the malicious intentions of some people met online, and a lack of awareness that certain actions can affect themselves and others, putting them in danger. These risk factors are amplified when adequate sexual education and media literacy are not provided. Cyberbullying, online sexual harassment, and online exploitation are just some of the dangers they may encounter. The consequences of these threats cross over into the lives of the individuals and their families, taking the form of scams, overexposure to sensitive, violent, or fake content, grooming, emotional manipulation, dangerous real-life meetings, and targeted victimization due to their disability.





POSITIONS

1. Internet safety and abuse prevention

Digital technologies and social media offer people with intellectual disabilities **unprecedented opportunities** to build friendships, participate in communities, express their identities, and access education and employment. However, these benefits can only be fully realized when individuals are equipped with **the knowledge, skills, and support** necessary to navigate online environments safely. Research consistently shows that people with intellectual disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable to online risks, including sexual grooming, coercion, image-based abuse, financial exploitation, and cyberbullying. Factors contributing to this vulnerability include limited access to comprehensive sexuality education, difficulties recognizing manipulative online behaviours, reduced digital literacy, and challenges in interpreting social cues in online interactions (Normand & Sallafranque-St-Louis, 2016).

The PR.I.S.C.I.LLA. partnership believes that **online safety should not be achieved by restricting access to digital technologies, but by empowering individuals with intellectual disabilities to become confident, informed, and autonomous digital citizens**. Excessive protection or limiting internet use can unintentionally increase exposure to risk by preventing people from gaining the experience and digital competencies needed to recognize and respond to online threats. Instead, inclusive education should combine digital literacy, media literacy, relationship and sexuality education, and self-advocacy skills in accessible formats that respect the rights and autonomy of learners, consistent with the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**, particularly Article 24 (Education), Article 21 (Freedom of expression and access to information), and Article 16 (Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse) (United Nations, 2006).

Within the PR.I.S.C.I.LLA project, **practical educational resources** have been designed using accessible language, visual support, interactive scenarios, and real-life case studies that reflect the online experiences of young adults with intellectual disabilities. Participants learn to recognize warning signs such as requests for private photos, pressure to keep online conversations secret, manipulation through compliments or gifts, and attempts to move conversations to private platforms. They also practice strategies such as verifying online identities, setting privacy controls, blocking and reporting abusive users, preserving evidence



of harmful interactions, and seeking support from trusted adults or professionals when something feels uncomfortable. The project further strengthens the capacity of professionals and informal carers to facilitate open discussions about online relationships and sexuality while promoting informed decision-making rather than surveillance or restriction.

By adopting a rights-based, inclusive, and preventive approach, PR.I.S.C.I.LLA contributes to creating safer digital environments where young people with intellectual disabilities can enjoy the opportunities offered by the internet while being better protected from online sexual abuse and exploitation.

Recommendations

- Provide comprehensive training for youth workers, educators, and informal carers on identifying and responding to online sexual abuse.
- Develop easy-to-read and accessible digital safety resources using visual support, interactive activities, and real-life examples.
- Ensure that safeguarding policies explicitly address online sexual abuse affecting people with intellectual disabilities and include accessible reporting mechanisms.
- Encourage collaboration between disability organizations, schools, families, online platforms, and policymakers to create inclusive and safer digital environments.
- Embed accessible online safety and relationship education into lifelong learning programmes for people with intellectual disabilities.

2. Inclusion and equal opportunity

Young people with intellectual disabilities have the same right as everyone else to participate safely, independently and meaningfully in the digital world. Access to digital technologies, social media and online communication must therefore be understood not merely as a chance for learning and social participation, but as a **fundamental right** that promotes inclusion, self-determination and equal opportunities. Digital technologies can reduce social isolation and create new opportunities for communication, friendship and community participation. Restricting access because of disability may unintentionally increase social isolation and reduce occasions for personal development, social interaction and active participation in community life (Holmes & O'Loughlin, 2012; Eriksson et al., 2019)



Through the implementation of the PR.I.S.C.I.LLA project across the partner countries, it became evident that **digital inclusion** is achieved most effectively when accessible **educational resources** are combined with **awareness-raising activities** and continuous **support** for both individuals with intellectual disabilities and the people who care for them. Through training sessions, workshops and community awareness events, the project consortium observed that young people with intellectual disabilities are able to develop the knowledge, confidence and practical skills needed to navigate the online environment safely when learning opportunities are adapted to their individual needs and delivered using accessible and interactive methods. These observations are consistent with research showing that appropriate support and guidance strengthen autonomy and confidence in the use of digital technologies (Sallafranque-St-Louis & Normand, 2017)

Our experience also demonstrated that meaningful digital inclusion cannot be achieved by focusing only on young people with intellectual disabilities. Families, carers, psychologists, youth workers, social service providers and public authorities all have a shared responsibility in **creating supportive environments** that encourage safe, responsible and independent participation in the digital world. When these stakeholders work together, young people are better equipped to recognise online risks, make informed decisions and benefit from the educational, social and communication opportunities offered by digital technologies (Eriksson et al., 2019)

Ensuring equal opportunities in the digital environment requires coordinated policies that combine accessibility, digital literacy, inclusive support services and lifelong learning. Policymakers should adopt a rights-based approach that recognises the abilities, autonomy and potential of people with intellectual disabilities while ensuring that appropriate safeguarding measures are available to protect them from online risks without unnecessarily restricting their independence. Digital inclusion should therefore become an integral part of disability, youth, education and digital transformation policies at European, national and regional levels.

Recommendations

- Recognise digital inclusion as a fundamental component of equal opportunities and social inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities.



- Integrate accessibility and digital inclusion measures into national and European disability, youth and digital transformation policies.
- Ensure the availability of accessible digital literacy programmes using easy-to-read materials, adapted methodologies and inclusive learning environments.
- Invest in the continuous training of professionals, psychologists, youth workers, carers and social service providers to strengthen their capacity to support safe and responsible digital participation.
- Promote cooperation between public authorities, disability organisations, social service providers, families and local communities to develop coordinated support systems for digital inclusion.
- Allocate sustainable funding for accessible digital resources, awareness-raising initiatives and inclusive educational programmes that empower young people with intellectual disabilities to participate confidently and safely in the online environment.
- Encourage the development of accessible digital platforms and public online services based on universal design principles, ensuring equal access for all citizens.

3. Education and training

The PR.I.S.C.I.LLA partnership holds that **education and training are the only sustainable path towards safe, inclusive, and meaningful digital participation for young people with intellectual disabilities**. Education and training are essential pillars in promoting the safe, inclusive, and meaningful participation of young people with intellectual disabilities in the digital environment. The PR.I.S.C.I.LLA project has demonstrated that young people with ID should not be excluded from social media and online interactions due to perceived risks; instead, they should be empowered with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to navigate digital spaces safely while benefiting from the opportunities they offer for social inclusion, friendship, and the development of interpersonal relationships (Seale & Chadwick, 2017; Adamek et al., 2023).

To address this need, PR.I.S.C.I.LLA developed and tested a **non-formal educational programme for young people with intellectual disabilities aged 18–25**. The programme equips participants with practical skills to use social media more safely, recognise risks related to sexual harassment and cyberbullying, and make informed decisions online. Based



on the principles of positive risk-taking, self-determination, independence, and personal control, the programme supports young people in balancing online opportunities with appropriate risk awareness, fostering their digital citizenship and autonomy (Adamek et al., 2023; Thirumanickam et al., 2025).

At the same time, PR.I.S.C.I.LLA recognised that effective support requires skilled professionals. Therefore, the project developed a **blended training programme for youth workers, professionals, and volunteers** working with young people with ID. This programme strengthens their capacity to understand both the risks and opportunities associated with social media use, identify indicators of digital sexual harassment, provide appropriate support when abuse is suspected or occurs, and replicate the educational programme with their own clients.

Together, these two training programmes demonstrate that **empowering** both young people with intellectual disabilities and the professionals and carers who support them is essential for creating a **safer, more inclusive, and rights-based digital environment** (Thirumanickam et al., 2025; Seale & Chadwick, 2017). On this basis, the partnership calls on policymakers to embed this dual model of education and training structurally within lifelong learning, disability, and digital policy frameworks across Europe.

Recommendations

- Integrate digital safety, cyberbullying prevention, and online relationship education into lifelong learning and non-formal education programmes for young people with intellectual disabilities.
- Ensure that accessible, adapted digital literacy training is available across all EU Member States for young people with intellectual disabilities.
- Support the development and dissemination of evidence-based educational programmes that promote safe and positive use of social media while respecting autonomy and self-determination.
- Invest in continuous professional development for youth workers, educators, carers, and support professionals on online safety, digital sexual harassment, and positive risk-taking approaches.



- Encourage organisations working with people with intellectual disabilities to adopt structured training programmes and protocols for preventing, identifying, and responding to online abuse.
- Promote cooperation between education, youth, social care, and digital policy sectors to ensure coordinated support for young people with intellectual disabilities in the online environment.
- Allocate dedicated funding for inclusive digital citizenship and online safety initiatives targeting both people with intellectual disabilities and the professionals who support them



CONCLUSION

The project's pilot activities confirm that young people who took part in the structured digital education became more confident and aware of the online risks involved, which supports the conclusions that had already been drawn from the evidence: it is not possible for restrictive or excessively protective measures to offer a sustainable solution to cyberbullying, online sexual harassment and exploitation. Preventing young people from using social media may reduce certain immediate risks, but it can also reinforce isolation, limit autonomy and prevent them from developing the skills needed to navigate online situations independently. A more effective approach is to **equip them to recognise warning signs, understand personal boundaries, make informed decisions, protect their privacy and seek help when necessary**. This responsibility should not lie solely with young people; professionals, youth workers, teachers, families and carers also need practical training so that they can talk openly about online relationships and sexuality, spot the signs of abuse and respond in an appropriate way without automatically turning to surveillance or restriction. The dual educational model developed by PR.I.S.C.I.LLA - supporting both young people and those around them - offers a practical basis for achieving this balance. The tools developed within the project, including the e-learning course, the educational programme, the awareness raising campaign and this position paper, provide a concrete starting point for putting this approach into practice.

The partnership therefore calls on policymakers to embed accessible digital literacy, online relationship education and abuse prevention within disability, education, youth and lifelong-learning policies, in line with the objectives of the EU Disability Rights Strategy 2021-2030. **Sustainable funding, continuous professional development and cooperation between public authorities, service providers, families and disability organisations are equally necessary**. Finally, a safer digital environment cannot be achieved by restricting participation but only by making sure that **young people with intellectual disabilities are able to take part with greater knowledge, confidence, autonomy and support**.



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