Terre des Hommes

AGE ASSURANCE AND AGE VERIFICATION

What is age assurance and age verification?

Age assurance is an umbrella term for both age verification and age estimation solutions. The word 'assurance' refers to the varying levels of certainty that different solutions offer in establishing an age or age range.

Age verification refers to a system that relies on hard (physical) identifiers and/or verified sources of identification, which provide a high degree of certainty in determining the age of a user. It can establish the identity of a user but can also be used to establish age only.

5RIghts Foundation "But how do they know it is a child?" (2021)

Why do we need age assurance?

Age assurance can ensure online services and goods are delivered to the intended age groups, and can be used to tailor information, design features or content to the age of a user.

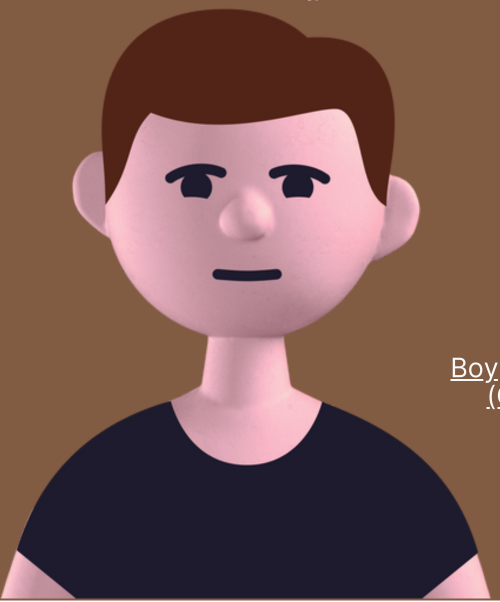
At the same time, age assurance can also be a useful tool to prevent online predators from trying to pass off as children.

Knowing the age of a child offers a framework for child safety by design, taking stages of childhood into account, and responding to the risks and opportunities online for children at all different developmental stages. It is not a one-stop-shop to ensuring children's complete safety online, but without it, there is no child safety by design.

"CHILDREN SHOULD HAVE TOOLS TO SECURE THEMSELVES

E.G. IF THEY MARK THEMSELVES UNDERAGE, THEY WILL GET ONLY SAFE CONTENT, SAFE FRIENDS.

ONLY PEOPLE THAT ARE KNOWN (VIA ID CARD OR PASSPORT) SHOULD USE THE SYSTEM"



Boy, 14, Estonia (Child Safety by Design)

The online world isn't always an appropriate or safe place for children

Children have **recognised needs and vulnerabilities** specific to their **age** and **developmental stage.**

We can see this in everyday life, such as with voting age limitations. These are not limitations set due to specific circumstances, but rather due to the virtue of being a child.

Online, children are routinely faced with information, behaviour, and pressures that they **do not have the developmental capacity to negotiate,** like being pressured to befriend unknown adults, nudged to make in-game purchases, targeted by sexualised content or bombarded with advertising and misinformation.

Normalising services designed by and for adults **creates an environment that is beyond a child's developmental capacity.**

These demands are **often damaging and sometimes dangerous** for children.

Why are current age verification mechanisms used by platforms ineffective?

- **Self-declaration of age** is used by most social media applications, which simply asks users their date of birth (DOB) to access their services. Though cheap and easily implemented, **it is ineffective because DOB is easy for children to lie about.** Most platforms require children to be 13 to access their services. However, children under the age of 13 are likely to lie about their age knowing that otherwise they would not have access to the platform.

- **A parental consent approach is also not necessarily efficient**, as it rarely includes verification of the guardian. Research also shows that some parents wish to have a final say on their children's access to online services and might help children circumvent imposed age restrictions.

Keeping children away from platforms does not make them safe.

Children find ways around being blocked and will **prioritise the benefits of socialising online over the risks.** Age verification and age assurance should be used **in combination with** designs aimed at **empowering children** to manage their own **safety** and that **preserve privacy.**

Boy, 13, Romania (Child Safety by Design)

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How age assurance and verification can be strengthened to be made effective:

Whilst keeping in mind that age assurance mechanisms **should always be privacy-preserving and proportionate to the level of risk,** mechanisms can be strengthened and made effective by:

Using multiple sources of data:

Age assurance can be strengthened by using multiple sources of data **whilst keeping privacy in mind.** Depending on what is proportionate to the level of risk, this can be done using combinations of data that are:

- **officially provided**
- **automatically generated**
- **user reported**
- **and third party data**

Age estimation methods:
With data, platforms can also age estimate based on content a user makes and watches, the connections they have, and the language they use.

Verifying age at two different stages:

1. **During registration:** to prevent children from circumventing self-declaration age verification to accessing platforms not intended to be used by them, by using officially provided data, such as passports, visas, or medical records; public databases.
2. **After registration:** platforms should check whether the registered age provided is correct by using: automatically generated data, such as user habits; user-reported data, such as data provided by child users, their parents, or other users of the app to verify their identity.

What can policymakers do?

Currently, neither the EU framework nor national laws provide (harmonised) legislative guidelines about what effective age verification is. For it to be effective, policymakers must require platforms to not only have age assurance mechanisms in place that are proportionate to the risk of harm relevant to the content, but to also ensure they are strong and can be effectively enforced.

For more information consult: Child Safety by Design 2022; 5RIghts Foundation "But how do they know it is a child?" (2021); Cansu Caglar and Abhilash Nair, "EU Member State Legal Framework" euCONSENT Project (2021).