LED PROJECT

Understanding Digital Risks

Livingstone's 4Cs Framework - An Introduction for Youth Digital Leaders

Why this document

Before exploring any specific type of digital risk, it helps to have a shared map. This short document introduces the **4Cs Framework**, the theoretical backbone of the entire LED training. Every module, activity, and case study you will encounter is organised around this model.

Think of it as a compass: once you understand how it works, you can orient yourself in any digital safety conversation, whether it concerns misinformation, grooming, cyberbullying, or data exploitation.

The 4Cs Framework

Developed by Professor Sonia Livingstone and the EU Kids Online network, the 4Cs Framework classifies digital risks according to *the nature of the interaction* between the young person and the digital environment. Originally focused on three categories (Content, Contact, Conduct), the model was expanded to include Contract risks, reflecting the growing importance of data privacy, commercial exploitation, and algorithmic influence (EU Kids Online, 2020).

The framework does not rank risks by severity. Instead, it reveals that the same digital environment can present qualitatively different types of risk depending on the young person's role in the interaction.

Risk Category	What It Means	Youth's Role	Examples
Content	Mass-produced material young people encounter as receivers	*Recipient*	Violent imagery, misinformation, pornography, deepfakes, hate speech, AI-generated content, self-harm material
Contact	Interactions initiated by others that may expose young people to harm	*Participant*	Grooming, cyberbullying victimisation, unwanted contact from strangers, online stalking, AI chatbot manipulation
Conduct	The young person's own behaviour contributes to risk, for themselves or others	*Actor*	Cyberbullying perpetration, oversharing, compulsive screen use, posting regrettable content, sharing harmful material
Contract	Young people agree to terms, share data, or engage in	*Consumer*	Accepting invasive Terms of Service, in-app purchases, data

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	commercial transactions, often without full understanding		harvesting, targeted advertising, loot boxes

Three key insights from the framework

1. Young people are not always passive victims. Sometimes they are recipients of harmful content (Content), sometimes participants in risky interactions (Contact), sometimes actors whose own behaviour creates risk (Conduct), and sometimes consumers agreeing to exploitative terms (Contract). Recognising these different roles helps you respond appropriately.

2. Different risks require different responses. Content risks call for media literacy and critical thinking. Contact risks need communication safety and boundary-setting. Conduct risks demand self-regulation and ethical reflection. Contract risks require understanding of data rights and digital economics. There is no one-size-fits-all intervention.

3. Risks interact and compound. A young person exposed to extreme diet content (Content) may join a pro-anorexia community (Contact), begin posting body-check photos seeking validation (Conduct), while the platform collects data on their vulnerability for ad targeting (Contract). One environment, four types of risk, and the harm compounds. As a Digital Leader, part of your role is to see these intersections. If any of this feels close to your own experience, or to that of someone you support, see “If you need support” at the end of this document.

A note on language

Throughout these modules, you will notice we use cautious language: *can, may, might, tends to, is associated with, increases the likelihood of*. This is deliberate. Digital risks are **factors of risk**, not equations. Exposure to misinformation does not automatically produce radicalisation. Social media use does not inevitably cause body dissatisfaction. Context, individual resilience, protective factors, and community support all play a role.

This precision matters: it models the nuanced thinking we want Youth Digital Leaders to develop and to pass on to their peers.

> *“The biggest digital risk right now is the division of people.”* (Youth, 25–30, Czech Republic)

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How the modules are organised

Each module in the LED training addresses one of the 4Cs in depth. Together, they provide a comprehensive understanding of the digital risk landscape.

Module	Title	Core Framework	Focus
1	Content Risks & Media Literacy	Algorithms, prebunking & critical consumption	What young people encounter
2	Contact Risks & Peer Support	Bridge Metaphor & SWIM methodology	Who young people interact with
3	Digital Conduct & Responsible Citizenship	9 Elements of Digital Citizenship	How young people behave online
4	Digital Rights, Contracts & Identity	UNCRC Three Ps (Protection, Provision, Participation)	What young people agree to

Each module follows the same structure: an opening scenario, risk categories explained with youth voices, a core framework, practical guidance for your role as Digital Leader, escalation criteria, and curated resources.

Your role as Youth Digital Leader

Traditional approaches position adults as *gatekeepers* (controlling access) or *monitors* (surveilling use). Youth Digital Leaders operate differently. You are **critical mediators**:

- Bridge-builders: connecting peers to safer digital experiences without condescension
- Translators: explaining complex issues (algorithmic bias, manipulation techniques) in relatable ways
- Skill-developers: teaching verifiable methods peers can use independently
- Culture-shapers: modelling critical engagement and helping shift peer norms

This is leadership, not policing. You are not here to tell peers what they can or cannot do online. You are here to help them develop the capacity to make informed, thoughtful choices themselves.

What you can and cannot do

You CAN	You CANNOT (and should not try to)
Recognise warning signs and patterns	Investigate or verify allegations of abuse
Facilitate critical thinking conversations	Provide therapy or clinical support

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Offer non-judgmental peer support	Carry the emotional weight alone
Connect peers to appropriate resources	Replace professional intervention
Model healthy digital habits	Make safeguarding decisions without adults
Build protective peer cultures	Force peers to change behaviour

Knowing your limits is not a weakness but a core competence. Every module includes clear guidance on when and how to escalate to professionals or trusted adults.

The Prevention–Response pattern

In every module, the "Your Role as Digital Leader" sections follow the same pattern:

Prevention - proactive education, skill-building, and culture shaping before risk manifests

Recognition - identifying warning signs and patterns in peers or environments

Response - supportive action when risk manifests, using appropriate methods

Escalation - involving adults or professionals when the situation exceeds peer support

Prevention comes first for a reason. The most effective Digital Leaders do not wait for problems to emerge: they build environments where risks are less likely to take hold.

> *"Be present in the digital space. We cannot be alien to that world, otherwise alienation grows and young people will turn to whatever support they find - and often it is toxic."* (Youth worker, LED Event 3, Czech Republic)

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Policy Context

The LED training is grounded in European and international policy frameworks that recognise children's rights in digital environments. Here is a brief overview; each module provides specific connections relevant to its topic.

UNCRC General Comment No. 25 (2021) establishes that the Convention on the Rights of the Child applies fully in the digital environment. It introduces the "Three Ps" - Protection, Provision, and Participation - as a balanced framework ensuring children are safe, have access to information and services, and can actively participate in shaping digital spaces.

UNCRC General Comment No. 25 - Full text

Better Internet for Kids Plus (BIK+) Strategy is the European Commission's approach to creating safe, empowering, and age-appropriate digital experiences for children and young people. Its four pillars are: safe digital environments, age-appropriate experiences, empowerment through digital literacy, and active participation.

BIK+ Strategy - European Commission

Digital Services Act (DSA) introduces obligations for online platforms regarding algorithmic transparency, content moderation, and protection of minors. It requires very large platforms to assess and mitigate systemic risks, including risks to children's well-being.

Digital Services Act - European Commission

DigComp 3.0 (2025) is the fifth edition of the European Digital Competence Framework. It integrates AI literacy across all 21 competences and identifies media literacy, critical evaluation of information, and responsible digital engagement as core competences for all citizens.

DigComp 3.0 - Joint Research Centre

How to use the training materials

Each module's Resource Centre is organised into four categories of material:

Category	What It Contains	How to Use It
A	Theoretical Foundations: Deep-dive PDF, infographic, glossary	Read for comprehensive understanding. The deep-dive PDF is the document you are reading now, together with its four module-specific counterparts.
B	Case Studies: real-life scenarios (anonymised) from LED co-creation events	Use for group discussion and critical analysis. Multiple perspectives, no single "correct" answer.
C	Activity Guides: step-by-step facilitation for workshops and peer sessions	Follow the guide to run the activity with your group. Includes timing, materials, adaptation tips.

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D	Additional Resources: curated games, films, toolkits, external links	Explore to deepen your knowledge or find engaging resources to share with peers.

You do not need to read everything before starting. Each module's deep-dive PDF is self-contained. The case studies and activities are designed for practical use in your community.

If you need support

Working with digital risks can sometimes bring up difficult feelings, either your own or those of the young people you support. If you or someone you know needs help:

116 111 - Pan-European helpline for children and adolescents, available in most EU countries

116111.eu - Find country-specific services

You are never expected to manage a crisis alone. Every module includes specific guidance on when and how to involve trusted adults and professional services.

Key references

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