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Implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

> The present report, which is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 75/153, contains information on the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2024 and an analysis of the impact of new technologies on families. The report is also focused on the potential of digital technologies to help to enable the achievement of work-family balance and on the role of such technologies in promoting and facilitating parenting education.

I. Introduction

1.   In its resolution 75/153 of 16 December 2020, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report to the Assembly at its seventy-seventh session, through the Commission for Social Development and the Economic and Social Council, on the implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes, including the preparations for observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year in 2024.

2.   In the previous report (A/76/61-E/2021/4), submitted to the General Assembly at its seventy-sixth session, the modalities for the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year were proposed. Also in that report, a focus on mega trends was recommended, starting with families and new technologies, in 2021. Accordingly, the present report follows up on the recommendations contained in the previous report and addresses the topic of families and new technologies. It focuses mainly on the impact of new technologies on families, with a special emphasis on work-family balance and parenting education.

3.   Although the topics of new technologies in general and digital technologies in particular have been the focus of several reports issued by the United Nations, they have not been addressed from a family perspective.[1] The present report constitutes an attempt to narrow this gap and thereby contribute to the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2024.

4.   The continuing impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on families is highlighted in the present report; and, as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 75/153, a description is provided of the activities undertaken by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat as part of the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year, with a focus on both the research carried out and the awareness-raising events held at the international level.

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[1] It is to be noted that in 1999, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat issued a paper entitled "Technology and its impact on the family" (ST/ESA/266) (United Nations publication, Sales No. 99.IV.6).

II. Continuing impact of the coronavirus disease pandemic on families[2]

5.   Over the course of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to impact families around the world and it is bound to have long-term consequences for family and child well-being. The impacts have been especially pronounced in the areas of education, health, technology use and work-family balance. The pandemic has brought forth new challenges to effective parenting and put into sharp focus the need to invest in parenting education.

6.   The pandemic has had a primarily negative impact on children's education. Although distance learning has been provided in four out of five countries with school closures, remote learning remained out of reach for at least 500 million students in 2020. The sheer magnitude of school closures is bound to set back progress on ensuring access to education. Absences from school lasting months are likely to impact education outcomes, as prolonged school non-attendance is associated with lower retention and graduation rates and poorer learning outcomes. Slowing of progress in school completion is also likely to worsen. Moreover, steady progress in early childhood education has been brought to a halt by the pandemic.

7.   The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified children's risk of exploitation, with the figure for child labour having risen to 160 million in 2020, the first such increase in 20 years. The impacts of the pandemic threaten to push an additional 8.9 million children into child labour by the end of 2022, as families send children out to work in response to job and income losses. With an estimated 142 million additional children having fallen into poverty in 2020, the aftershocks of the pandemic are likely to negatively impact children's well-being for years to come.

8.   The COVID-19 pandemic has put girls at higher risk for early marriage owing to a mix of economic shocks, school closures and interruptions in reproductive health services. It is estimated that up to 10 million more girls will be at risk for early marriage owing to the pandemic. While most child marriages owing to the pandemic are projected to occur in the near term, their impact is likely to be felt for at least the next decade, with the negative consequences including the cutting short of girls' education; a lack of financial and personal independence; a higher likelihood of exposure to violence; and early and more frequent pregnancies, resulting in a higher

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[2] The data in the present report are drawn from the following sources: *The Sustainable Development Goals Reports 2020 and 2021*, available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/ The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf and https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/ 2021/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2021.pdf, respectively; *State of the World's Children: On My Mind – Promoting, Protecting, and Caring for Children's Mental Health* (New York, United Nations Children's Fund, October 2021); Susan K. Walker, *Technology Use and Families: Implications for Work-Family Balance and Parenting Education* (background paper prepared for the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, Division for Inclusive Social Development, May 2021), available at www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2021/05/Technology-Families-Background.pdf; European Union update on digital technologies: new European Union strategy on children's rights, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en; Theresa Lorenz and Olaf Kapella, "Children's ICT use and its impact on family life: literature review", DigiGen working paper series, No. 1, available at www.digigen.eu/focus-areas/; Sara Ayllón, Halla Holmarsdottir and Samuel Lado, "Digitally deprived children in Europe", DigiGen working paper series, No. 3, available at https://digigen.eu/results/digitally-deprived-children-in-europe/; and Common Sense Media resources, available at www.commonsensemedia.org/research.

risk of maternal mortality and disability, as well as a higher likelihood of depression and suicide.[3]

9.   The pandemic has impacted the mental health of children and youth, with rises in anxiety over possible illness, lockdowns and school closures. Lockdowns have given rise to behavioural problems and have had a greater impact on children with autism and attention and hyperactivity disorders.

10.   As regards access to technology, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the imperative need to provide all households with an Internet connection so as to enable parents to work and children to study from home. Many families have experienced difficulties in securing Internet access or the devices required to ensure that children keep up with their schooling. Even in Europe, 5.3 per cent of school-age children are digitally deprived. Children's digital deprivation is closely related to being poor and having low-educated parents. Other risk factors include living in large family or single-parent households and having immigrant parents.

11.   There remain major challenges associated with ensuring access to the Internet and to higher-speed Internet and to devices that facilitate communication and efficient task management. As technology access and use have an impact on the achievement of many Sustainable Development Goals – and targets for employment, health, gender equality, job quality, innovation and education, to name but a few – there is an imperative need to look more closely at the impact of new technologies on families.

III.   New technologies and families[4]

12.   There has been an unprecedented technological transformation over the past decades. Fast-moving improvements in big data, machine learning, the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence and cloud computing have been the biggest technology trends of recent years. Among the most recent developments are distance learning and working, which have become prevalent in a context where the COVID-19 pandemic has been drastically changing the ways in which people teach, learn and work.

13.   Technology assists families in the areas of work and school participation, establishing and maintaining social connections, sustaining close and long-distance relationships and accessing a range of resources including health care, education, financing and a variety of social services. Fast access to information, time saving devices and digital assistants make lives simpler and allow more time for family interactions.

14.   Technology use in families may foster connectedness and cohesion through facilitation of new means of communicating and spending time together. Videoconferencing apps can keep members of an extended family who do not reside together connected in ways that were previously unavailable. Although new forms of communication such as texting and videoconferencing are preferred by younger generations, some surveys indicate that parents view these new forms of communication as a means of strengthening family cohesion. One quarter of parents have reported that thanks to cell phones and the Internet, they feel closer to their family than they did in their childhood. Grandparents who reside in nursing homes

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[3] Save the Children, "The global girlhood report 2020: how COVID-19 is putting progress in peril" (London, 2020), available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/global_girlhood_report_2020_africa_version_2.pdf.

[4] The term "new technologies" refers mainly to digital technologies powered by the Internet, cloud computing, big data and artificial intelligence. As such technologies evolve, their impact on families is evolving as well, as is research in this field.

and other family members experiencing mobility issues feel less isolated when using the newer communication tools.

15. Digital technologies can be especially useful in addressing speech communication-related complications within families whose members include children with disabilities. The benefits associated with new technologies can be applicable as well to extended families and families with non-resident members. In families where divorced parents are engaged in practising effective co-parenting, new technologies can help them to achieve a greater degree of organization.

16. Notwithstanding the advantages of the new technology-enabled means of communication, concerns have been raised that older family members who lack technology skills may experience a sense of social exclusion. Working parents may experience some negative impacts from the utilization of electronic devices stemming from the perceived pressure to be available at all times. Moreover, family conflict may very well arise from technology-related differences among household members with respect to their particular technology-related skills and interests, or their reasons for using technology or their level of comfort with it.

17. The most common information and communications technology (ICT)-related family activities, besides communication and connecting with friends or family members, include learning through exploration of the Internet and the playing of computer and video games. Such activities often contribute to family bonding. While mothers are more likely to engage with children on social media, fathers are more likely to engage with their children through video games.[5] Both types of activities have a potential to foster closeness and provide opportunities for communication and for monitoring of both the content and the quality of children's online engagement.

18. While playing video games together, children experience an appreciation of their parents' interest in the media important to them, while parents can both evaluate the games their children are engaged in playing and discuss sensitive issues associated with game content. Moreover, since parents tend to learn from children who are able to demonstrate their skills, gaming activity thus becomes a source of satisfaction experienced by both. Although gaming is believed to be capable of generating some positive benefits for executive functions, when gaming platforms are used by children alone, they tend to be exposed to cyberbullying and violence, which can foster an acceptance of aggression and a lack of empathy.

19. Digital activities engaged in jointly by family members may promote a sense of togetherness, which in its turn contributes to family cohesion. On the other hand, individual engagement in ICT-related activities, while serving as a source of entertainment and relaxation, may lead to conflict within families arising from concerns related to proper use of new technologies, diminished family time and risk of addiction (for example, to online gaming), as well as potential exposure to online predators and cyberbullying. Furthermore, the increase in the use of video games and school-related use of technology, as well as overall screen time, have triggered alarm among physicians and parents with respect to rising levels of stress and anxiety experienced by children.

20. By way of illustration, in Europe, on average, 20 per cent of children aged 9 to 11 years, 27 per cent of children aged 12 to 14 years and 34 per cent of children aged 15 to 16 years had negative online experiences in 2019, which were usually associated

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[5] Sonia Livingstone and others, "In the digital home, how do parents support their children and who supports them?", Parenting for a Digital Future, survey report No. 1" (London, London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Media and Communications, 6 February 2018). Available at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/87952/1/Livingstone_Parenting%20Digital%20Survey%20Report%201_Published.pdf.

with inappropriate or harmful content or cyberbullying. As many as 14 per cent of children aged 9 to 16 years were exposed to victimization online, with 5 per cent reporting bullying (characterized by longer experiences of victimization) with no significant age differences. Moreover, recent research indicates that 1 to 10 per cent of adolescents suffer from Internet addiction, which often leads to social, psychological or academic difficulties; a feeling of loss of control; feelings of anger; symptoms of distress; social withdrawal; and family conflicts.

21. With more and more children using digital devices at an early age, concerns have been raised over the fact that young children are often targeted as consumers. Regulations are needed to protect and mainstream children's rights in the digital world. Indeed, digital technology can expose children to harm both online and offline. Already vulnerable children may be at greater risk of harm, including through loss of privacy. Concerns have arisen regarding threats posed by overuse of screens by children, especially young children and those in middle childhood. Children for the most part do not have the cognitive abilities needed to handle online threats. Concerns are also focused on negative health consequences of excessive use of technology such as obesity, sleep deprivation and bad posture.

22. As regards guidelines for technology use for young children, limited exposure to digital devices of up to 60 minutes per day for children aged 3 to 4 years is recommended, provided that such use is accompanied by adult interaction. [6] Nevertheless, research in the United States of America indicates that despite such guidelines, young children's screen time is just under one hour for children up to age 2, and 2 hours 39 minutes for children aged 3 to 5 years, with most of that time spent watching television. Moreover, young children's exposure to digital technologies may begin too early, even months after birth. Research indicates that in 2020, nearly half of children under age 5 used a tablet and 55 per cent used a smartphone.

23. For older children, aged 6 to 12 years, interest in online activities is growing as is parental acceptance of use of screens, with 73 per cent of parents in the United States agreeing that it is proper for children aged 12 years or over to have their own smartphone and 67 per cent of parents accepting of children's use of a tablet. Eighty per cent of children in the United States are using a tablet on social media and 64 per cent are using a smartphone.

24. The time spent by adolescents using technology varies from approximately 2.5 hours per day to (among heavy users) 13.3 hours per day. Concerns regarding adolescents' overuse of technology focus, as they do for children in middle childhood, on psychological effects associated with social comparison, anxiety, low self-esteem and exposure to bullying. These effects are more prevalent among vulnerable adolescents. Adolescents aged 13 to 17 years who scored lowest on the socioemotional well-being scale reported a level of importance of social media in their lives that was higher than the level reported by other adolescents. Those adolescents are more likely to report having been bullied and feeling bad and left out. Additionally, problematic behaviour associated with technology use tends to have negative consequences for relationships with parents and friends. Importantly, parents lower the degree of monitoring of their children's use of technology as the children

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[6] World Health Organization, *Guidelines on Physical Activity, Sedentary Behaviour and Sleep for Children under 5 Years of Age: Web Anne - Evidence Profiles* (WHO/NMH/PND/19.2), 2019, available at https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/311663; and Francesca Gottschalk "Impacts of technology use on children: exploring literature on the brain, cognition and well-being", OECD Education Working Paper, No. 195 (Paris, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019), available at www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/impacts-of-technology-use-on-children_8296464e-en.

grow older, which may contribute to adolescents' overly intensive use of digital devices.

25.   Overall, the potential impact of ICT on children's mental health and well-being is a matter for growing public concern. Cases in point are the recent revelations of findings derived from focus groups, online surveys and diary studies in 2019 and 2020. All of the findings were associated with Instagram research indicating that the company was aware of its products' impacts on the mental health of teenagers, including increased rates of anxiety and depression related to body image issues among teenage girls. Despite those findings, the executives at the owner company (Facebook) "have consistently downplayed [Instagram's] negative impacts on teenagers".[7] The private sector – especially the technology and telecommunications industries – therefore has a special responsibility and a unique ability to invest in research, make the results public and shape the impact of digital technology on children and youth.[8]

26.   It is important to emphasize that although some research does exist on certain shared family ICT activities, such as gaming, it is difficult to examine the effects of the latest trends, such as those involving smart homes, language assistants and Internet-connected toys, on families. While creation of digital content, such as digital art or music, can be potentially beneficial for family cohesion, for the most part research has provided no enlightenment regarding the impacts of such activities on family life. Further, there is little attention being paid to how artificial intelligence systems will affect children and their rights. This is especially concerning, as children are less able to fully understand the implications of artificial intelligence technologies and often have neither the opportunities to communicate their opinions nor the support of the proper advocates. Often, children lack the resources needed to respond to instances of bias or to rectify any misconceptions affecting their data. Parents provide guidance in the area of children's ICT consumption through restrictive mediation with respect to the time spent online as well as through supervision of children's access and the application of control software. While only a minority of parents in Europe use parental control programmes, many parents of children aged 9–16 years do check browsing history after ICT use, social network profiles, social network contacts and messages received by children (46 per cent, 40 per cent, 36 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively). On an overall basis, parental mediation begins when children start using ICT. As noted above, parents control technology use of young children more restrictively and this pattern of control continues into early adolescence. Teenagers, on the other hand, experience less parental control.

27.   Parents in lower-income and less educated families, who tend to show greater concern regarding the effects of digital technologies, use a set of rules that are ad hoc and more restrictive rather than a negotiated and agreed upon routine. They also tend to use rules as part of a reward and punishment strategy. Parents in higher-income and more educated families tend to deploy active mediation strategies that entail

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[7] It is to be noted that the sample size was small and not nationally representative. See Damien Gayle, "Facebook aware of Instagram's harmful effect on teenage girls, leak reveals", 14 September 2021,available at www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/14/facebook-aware-instagram-harmful-effect-teenage-girls-leak-reveals; and Anya Kamenetz, "Facebook's own data is not as conclusive as you think about teens and mental health", 6 October 2021, available at www.npr.org/2021/10/06/1043138622/facebook-instagram-teens-mental-health.

[8] According to the 2019 report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, entitled "The age of digital interdependence" (available at www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf): "Digital technologies should promote the best interests of children and respect their agency to articulate their needs, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Online services and apps used by children should be subject to strict design and data consent standards" (p. 16).

discussion of online risks, suggestions on how to use the Internet safely and demands for more information on what children are doing online.[9]

28.   Overall, despite attempts to participate in children's lives online, parents are struggling with the issue of technology use mediation and tend to know very little about what their children are doing online. Many parents are overwhelmed and lack knowledge on how to deal with their children's use of the new technology. Often, children influence their parents' digital media use. For instance, the 2019 European Union Kids Online survey indicated that 69 per cent of all children aged 9 to 16 years help their parents to address the difficulties associated with using new technologies. In disadvantaged families, it is the children who introduce their parents to new technologies, as the gap in this case between children's knowledge and that of their parents is especially pronounced.

29.   A child's screen time, especially the amount of time spent on smartphones, is among the biggest sources of conflict in families. Use of digital devices at shared family activities, such as meals, is considered to be an especially disturbing type of behaviour. Importantly, if parents spend a large amount of time on smartphones, children will start to question the legitimacy of the rules that they are supposed to follow and will experience disappointment if such behaviour leads to a reduction in family time. Moreover, conflicts arising from the competition for access to devices seem to be more frequent in large families. That conflicts also occur with greater frequency in families where children are more knowledgeable regarding new technologies can stem from the fact that parents may have difficulty accepting a potential shift of authority, while children may become frustrated by their parents' lack of technology skills.

30.   Although the concerns described above are valid ones, the fact remains that digital technologies do dominate the personal and school lives of young adults and are a part of the life of most adolescents and adults. Surveys indicate that most teenagers do not report negative outcomes from technology use. Moreover, research shows that although interactions based on digital technologies, for example, texting or use of social media, are common, teenagers still prefer to interact with their peers in person. Importantly, technology use both impacts identity formation and serves to instil a sense of agency, autonomy and academic achievement. For youth worldwide, proficiency in technology use signifies preparedness for jobs relying on automation.

31.   One conclusion that may be drawn from research on the relationship between use of new technologies and children's well-being is that parents should focus more on what children are doing online and less on how much time they spend there. Through such an approach, parents can better protect children and help them to make the most of their screen time. Some scholars maintain that the issue of how much screen time is filling up the lives of children is less important than whether it takes too much time away from sleeping, playing, talking, physical activity and participation in family and community life. Families are thus encouraged to set guidelines and shared rules for use of technology.[10] Adequate parental mediation and

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[9] These observations are based on a study conducted in seven countries, including England, Finland, the Russian Federation and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. See Sonia Livingstone and others, "How parents of young children manage digital devices at home: the role of income, education and parental style" (London, London School of Economics and Political Science, EU Kids Online, 2015). Available at https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/63378/1/__lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_EU%20Kids%20Online_EU_Kids_Online_How%20parents%20manage%20digital%20devices_2016.pdf.

[10] See, as examples, the guidance for creating a family media plan provided by the American Academy of Pediatrics, available at www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx; and the family media plan information available through the Government of Western Australia (https://www.natureplaywa.org.au/digital-wellbeing/strategies-to-reduce-screen-time/family-media-plan).

basic digital competencies designed to mitigate the adverse effects of children's and young people's activities online are needed to enable online risks to be faced. Parenting education is key to increasing parental confidence and ensuring that the tools needed to monitor technology choices and keep children safe online are available.

IV. New technologies and parenting education

32. As highlighted in the previous report of the Secretary-General, parenting education is a useful tool for achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets, especially the targets under Goals 3 and 4. Parenting education has been identified as a means of reducing health problems and learning deficits in children. Progress over decades in the implementation of parenting education has resulted in high-quality, well-tested programmes yielding positive results.

33. As noted above, new technologies bring forth new opportunities and challenges for all family members, especially parents and caregivers. While parents influence their children's access to and use of technology to a large extent, surveys indicate that they are finding parenting more difficult, attributing this to the presence of technology in their children's lives. Moreover, faced with new technology trends and increased usage of technology by children ever younger, parents often do not feel confident in their parenting skills.

34. Research in the United States indicates that nearly all parents (98 per cent) believe that they are responsible for their children's protection from online content. Nevertheless, 65 per cent of parents expect the government or technology companies to bear that responsibility. Seventy-one per cent of parents believe that widespread use of smartphones might be harmful to their children's socio-emotional learning. They are also concerned by the issues of exposure to online predators, sexually explicit content and violent content as well as cyberbullying.

35. Parents tend to use technology to improve their parenting knowledge and skills. For example, recent data indicate that 40 per cent of parents in the United States and 65 per cent of parents in Australia with children under age 17 use Internet resources for assistance on those topics. Those with a higher socioeconomic status and those who have children with disabilities rely to a greater extent on online help, as a complement to other providers of support such as members of their extended family, educators and paediatricians.

36. Digital tools are also used to connect with other parents in the pursuit of advice and parenting information. Parents value participation in discussion forums on social media, as it offers them emotional validation, a means of normalizing their concerns, and advice on problem-solving and decision-making. Technology design, including podcasts, websites, blogs, social media and a variety of applications, helps parents to meet their parenting needs. Surveys indicate that parents use discussion forums and other platforms to acquire knowledge related to child development, to secure emotional support and validation and to strengthen community connections. The level of use of online resources is higher among younger parents, especially mothers. Online interactions with other parents and professionals contribute to the creation of digital social capital and to the building of greater confidence of parents in their parenting-related knowledge and skills acquisition capacities.

37. There is growing recognition that the subject of the impact of technology on children's development deserves to be a core component of parenting education. In this context, parents can be empowered to help to frame their children's relationship

with digital media and discuss online etiquette, empathy, ethics, Internet safety, personal boundaries and how to regulate their own media habits.

38. The tools of parenting education focus on the provision of information relevant to children's areas of development and age stages to help parents to understand children's capabilities and responsibilities as they manage their online presence and navigate digital platforms, while facing potential threats and amassing creative and collaborative skills.

39. Parents need help in navigating digital spaces. As they become more aware of the impacts of new technologies and maintain a realistic perspective, and as they become more comfortable with using technologies in a variety of ways, they are more likely to develop an interest in mediating the use of those technologies by their children. Discussions in parenting education settings can help parents to transition to the role of caregiver. In the safety of these virtual spaces, they can look forward to support and personal growth rather than criticism and unwelcome self-exposure. Media education organizations such as Common Sense Media offer parents online access to guidance on age-appropriate media use.[11]

40. Technology tools are useful in enabling the delivery of parenting programmes and helping to reduce the cost of their delivery to large numbers of parents. The evidence available early on indicates that parenting programmes utilizing electronic delivery, such as texting, audio, video and interactive components distributed via the Internet, produce good outcomes with respect to time efficiency through savings on costs of travel and implementation.

41. There exist an array of learning technologies that facilitate content delivery and social platforms that enable interactions both between educators and parents and between the parents themselves. They can be used on a one-on-one basis or by large groups with a view to fostering interactions among the participants. Thus far, there are no standards for technology integration, for content or for the training of parenting educators to enable them to fulfil the relevant competency requirements.

42. In some countries, parenting education is mandated for parents who have neglected their children or who have been abusive, as well as for divorcing parents. In such cases, convenient online delivery has made compliance with such requirements feasible. Research on adaptation to face-to-face programmes demonstrated positive results, albeit over the short term. When, for example, Triple P – Positive Parenting Program incorporated social media and gaming features in outreach to vulnerable families, there were better outcomes in reducing both child behavioural problems and permissive or overreactive parenting.[12] Parents have also experienced less stress. Moreover, evaluations have indicated that participants appreciate the flexibility, anonymity and sharing associated with engagement with the online community.

43. Although research on technology integration in parenting education is in its early stages, adapting and testing new modes of communication – through which to convey information to parents, conduct assessments and encourage a sense of community among parents – has generated valuable information on costs and benefits from both the educator and the learner perspective. Establishment of the professional standards needed to guide the process of preparing parenting educators for practice remains an issue to be addressed.

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[11] See www.commonsensemedia.org/.

[12] Triple P – Positive Parenting Program, which was developed at the University of Queensland, Australia, is currently used in 30 countries, with over 91,000 practitioners trained in programme delivery. The programme has been credited with helping approximately 4 million children and families worldwide.

44.   There is a growing number of online resources that provide parenting education and offer parenting educator networking worldwide for those seeking access to scholarship and professional development. Notable in this regard are Zero to Three,[13] the National Council on Family Relations,[14] the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA)[15] and the Erikson Institute Technology in Early Childhood Center.[16] Another positive development is that courses in family life education are available at an increasing number of universities, with some offering a graduate degree in the field of parenting education.

45.   Parenting education can offer information on how to achieve a healthy use of media which promotes child and adolescent learning and creativity. A growing number of guides for parents exist at the international level (produced, for example, by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)), the regional level (produced, for example, by the Council of Europe) and the national level (produced, for example, by the Singapore Media Literacy Council). Such resources – the ones named directly above are but a few of those currently available – encourage reflection on parenting style and offer guidance on safeguards against cyberbullying and misinformation; online privacy; and other issues, with a view to promoting safe use of media. Platforms such as Schoology provide information on the subject of schoolwork with links to additional resources. These tools are useful for addressing issues related to children and media and enable parents to keep abreast of the status of their children's education.

46.   To sum up, new technologies have a dual importance – in terms of both content and delivery – for parenting education. The information offered by new information and communications technologies helps parents and families to learn how to use technology to benefit their children. Moreover, new technologies offer tools, including new methods for effective delivery, as well as a virtual environment through which to bring parenting education to wider audiences.

47.   Parenting education has policy implications: it should rightly be perceived as a useful strategy for enabling parents to improve their skills in further support of their family's and children's needs. Furthermore, as noted in the previous report of the Secretary-General, parenting education constitutes a strategy for preventing negative behaviours, such as corporal punishment, and should be an integral component of a set of strategies for the creation of an infrastructure for parents. Moreover, parenting education constitutes a strategy towards realizing several of the Sustainable Development Goals and associated targets, especially those related to health and education, as noted in the present report.

V. New technologies and work-family balance

48.   It is widely expected that technology will continue to impact individuals and families which are bound to rely more and more on digital connections for social interactions, work, education, health care, finances and shopping. Some experts describe this as characteristic of a "tele-everything" world, likely to improve the quality of life for families and workers as more flexible working arrangements become permanent and individuals, families and communities adjust to them. Some experts predict that in 2025, there will be more people working from home as well as more virtual social and entertainment interactions and the numbers will keep increasing. Technology enhancements in virtual and augmented reality and artificial intelligence are likely to

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[13] www.zerotothree.org/.

[14] www.ncfr.org/.

[15] www.eecera.org/.

[16] https://teccenter.erikson.edu/.

allow people to live more informed, safer and more productive lives, often enabled by "smart systems" in key areas of health care, education and work.[17]

49.   In an increasingly mobile society, work is no longer bound by time and place. Thanks to the Internet, cloud services and mobile devices, work can be performed at any time and in any place. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, less than 5 per cent of the labour force in the United States and 2 to 9 per cent in Europe reported working exclusively from home, that is, "teleworking".[18] Currently, owing in large measure to the pandemic, most professional work is carried out from home, with the trend likely to continue.

50.   As flexible working arrangements become a norm and are seen even as a permanent fixture of the realm of work, new concerns are arising regarding work-family balance, with early meta-analysis of the research on technology integration indicating an increase in worker productivity and worker perception of autonomy. However, new ways of working bring forth new challenges, including work-family interferences related to the tackling of more work at home, shared or inadequate space and inflexible work schedules.

51.   New flexible working arrangements and digital-work exigencies impact individual and family well-being, affecting perceptions of one's competence as an employee and as a parent. Research on such impacts and overall sense of work-family balance as well as productivity has indicated mixed outcomes. Some studies show that the use of technology increases workload and perceived stress but does not alter the ability to balance work and family. Older studies report reduced stress but a higher level of feelings of being overworked.

52.   The experience with respect to work-family balance may vary. For instance, recent research indicates a somewhat limited benefit for women from working from home. Often, women do not indicate greater job satisfaction even if they perceive that they exercise more control and enjoy greater flexibility. Moreover, some studies indicate that although she is working, a mother's presence at home may increase children's expectation of her availability. During lockdowns, mothers who share childcare responsibilities with their partner had a more positive work-family balance experience, compared with mothers who shouldered the majority of the childcare responsibilities.[19] Further, employers' attitudes contribute to teleworking success: managers who are reluctant to trust employees to be productive can diminish their feelings of autonomy and the sense of being recognized for accomplishments.

53.   Flexibility and availability of employees at any time, including after working hours and on weekends, are other issues of concern within the context of telework and work-family balance. Parents may perceive the need for constant work involvement as inducing them to compromise their parental role. The use of technologies that enable flexibility may contribute to conflict and possibly weaker performance at work. Social isolation is yet another concern, with some studies indicating that face-to-face communication diminishes through deployment of the various types of online communications.

54.   Parental working from home has a direct effect on families and flexible working hours can have both positive and negative impacts on family life. On the one hand,

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[17] See Janna Anderson, Lee Rainie and Emily A. Vogels, "Experts say the 'new normal' in 2025 will be far more tech-driven, presenting more big challenges" (Pew Research Center, 18 February 2021), available at www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/02/18/experts-say-the-new-normal-in-2025-will-be-far-more-tech-driven-presenting-more-big-challenges/.

[18] 2018 data from Eurostat.

[19] See, for example, Sara Martucci, "He's working from home and I'm at home trying to work: experiences of childcare and the work-family balance among mothers during COVID-19", *Journal of Family Issues*, 1 October 2021. Available at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0192513X211048476.

parents may be able to reconcile their private and professional life obligations more easily. At the same time, telework poses challenges to work-life balance and children's well-being may be affected when parents are unable to set clear boundaries between work and family life and find themselves distracted by work demands during their parenting time.

55.   It is therefore important for employees to be assisted in acquiring the personal awareness, motivation and skills (often referred to as "digital cultural capital") needed to manage technology use at work and at home. These acquirements include boundary management, which technology can facilitate or invasively hinder. Employees could be offered training both on how to use (but not overuse) smartphones, deploy privacy management tools and practise digital good citizenship and online self-presentation and on how to set boundaries in order to lower personal stress and enhance family satisfaction and well-being.

56.   One of the most tangible supports provided to employees engaged in telework during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a stipend for purchasing home office equipment. Employees, however, also need adequate and reliable technology support and education. In this regard, it is important that clear technology-related policies be set up regarding use of digital devices, data sharing, privacy and security, time management and expectations related to work performance.

57.   Within the context of policy, recommendations on promoting work-family balance have so far been focused on the creation of more flexible working arrangements and adequate parenting leave policies as well as childcare and child education-related support. Such policies promote high-quality early childhood education and care and help to address several targets under Sustainable Development Goal 4. New actions and strategies are needed as well to address issues related to digital capital and other concerns noted above.

VI.   Status of the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2024

58.   In 2021, the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family focused on new technologies, the first mega trend identified in the previous report. The background paper entitled *Technology Use and Families: Implications for Work-Family Balance and Parenting Education* was launched online.[20] Advocacy and awareness raising activities focused on the analysis of some issues related to the impact of new technologies on families. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat organized two major online events in 2021: a side event held during the fifty-ninth session of the Commission for Social Development focused on new technologies and work-family balance and the annual observance of the International Day of Families 2021 which included a focus on new technologies and parenting education.

59.   The online side event, entitled "Digital technologies and families: focus on work-family balance", emphasized the centrality of childcare provision to any consideration of work-family balance. In line with the "make time" approach, achievement of that balance requires a focus on flexible working arrangements, which would entail making them more efficient and helping parents to manage time efficiently. A focus on cognitive, physical, relational, emotional and spiritual aspects of well-being is essential. Importantly, while technology can help to facilitate the achievement of work-family balance, it may also result in greater isolation, as working remotely during the

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[20] Available at www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2021/05/Technology-Families-Background.pdf.

COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated. Thus, it is imperative to be on the alert for unintended consequences of technology use in the context of work-family balance, keeping in mind that the notion of what constitutes work-family balance will continue to change over time. The experts recommended that existing work-family support mechanisms, capitalizing on and including technology, be continued, as well as fostering healthy and effective workplace cultures for technology use; keeping family impacts in mind as workplace technology innovates; promoting healthy individualized work capacity; and expanding research to represent the range of family and work configurations, and technology integration for work-family balance.[21]

60.   The observance in 2021 of the International Day of Families focused on families and new technologies. It was emphasized that the effects of technology will be determined by technical capabilities and by how technology is used and how individuals, organizations and policymakers prepare for and respond to shifts in the economic and social landscape. Inequities in access to the Internet and digital devices was emphasized as well.[22]

61.   Opportunities stemming from the deployment of new technologies have been noted, as attested, for example, by new forms of learning and engagement; the rise in creativity, collaboration and connectivity; new possibilities for personal expression; and new means of cultivating new skills. At the same time, concerns have been raised regarding rising disparities and the continuing digital divide among different households as well as between generations. Some human development concerns related to the negative impact of new technologies have also been noted, including sleep deprivation; interference with learning and socialization; possible addictions, for example, to Internet gaming; obesity; cyberbullying; and exposure to harmful images and online predators, as well as security and privacy breaches.

62.   By equipping them with the appropriate tools, parenting education has been deemed to have great potential to help parents achieve better parenting in general and to navigate new technologies in particular. As globally the approach to parenting education is highly fragmented and decentralized, with no guidelines or work requirements specific to technology competence in parenting education, investments in parenting education utilizing new technologies is needed. While direct supports such as parenting education with technology integration are necessary, they must be accompanied by indirect supports such as parenting educator preparation and support within the macro context of Internet equity, online safety and digital rights.[23]

63.   At the International Day of Families event, the focus group on families and technology presented the conclusions drawn from its deliberations. It stated that the universal coverage of the Internet should be considered a human right, as access to the Internet is increasingly essential for education, communication, business, health care, employment, public services, civic participation and global cooperation. In addition to access, investments in infrastructure and training to increase citizens' digital literacy are essential. The group focused on the best indicators for measuring households' access to new technologies which went beyond broad measures of access to the Internet and digital devices to encompass measures of digital skills and knowledge as well as social norms related to access. The need to learn from the remote learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic was noted, as was the need for training of educators, innovations based on pedagogy and better digital inclusion of all generations. With regard to policies

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[21] Further information is available at www.un.org/development/desa/family/2021/01/28/59th-commission-for-social-development-8-17-february-2021/.

[22] Further information on digital inequities is available in the report of the Secretary-General on promoting social integration through social inclusion (A/76/184).

[23] Further information is available at www.un.org/development/desa/family/international-day-of-families/2021-2.html.

capable of helping to bridge the intergenerational digital divide, it was deemed important to provide access and training for older generations, education for family professionals and investment in further research.[24]

64. As noted in the previous report, Member States had expressed support for the preparations for and the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, indicating plans to hold events at the national level, mainly in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as civil society, including awareness-raising events and public education campaigns. While the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to carry out some in-person activities, certain events were organized online to disseminate information on the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the Year and encourage stakeholders to focus on family-oriented policies.

65. Looking ahead, in 2022, the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the Year will focus on migration and urbanization; in 2023, on demographic trends; and in 2024, on climate change. In addition to the issuance of background papers focused on the impact of these trends on families and policy implications, awareness-raising events will be organized at the upcoming sessions of the Commission for Social Development. Moreover, International Day observances, as well as the international and regional expert group meetings to be held in the near future, will address the topics noted above. The Secretariat will seek information from Member States and relevant stakeholders on the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the Year at the national and regional levels, which will be included in future reports.

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Conclusions

66. The COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdowns, closure of workplaces, schools and care services and pushed families into a new reality and exposed their vulnerabilities. At the same time, the pandemic illustrated the indispensable role of families as social safety nets and caregivers in the unpaid economy.

67. Families have been subjected to the effects of rapid technological changes, with projections indicating more and more instances of the impact of the applications of technology on the everyday operation of private and professional domains. Rapid changes in digital technologies in the last decades have changed the ways families function and interact and have enabled faster and more efficient communication. The performance of household tasks has been made more efficient through the introduction of "smart" technologies.

68. Yet, owing to the lack of access to the Internet and to digital devices, not all families benefit from these positive technological changes. The growing digital divide disproportionately affects low-income and vulnerable families and intensifies the challenges that they face. Inequities in access to technologies by vulnerable families can result in "knowledge gaps", especially among children, and can exacerbate already existing gaps and disparities in income, education, employment and access to housing and health services. Now more than ever, it is necessary to ensure that no family is left behind in a rapidly digitalizing world.

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[24] Further information is available at www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2021/05/Jessica-Navarro.pdf.

69. As children's digital deprivation is closely linked to socioeconomic characteristics, current and future policy that targets and supports children in materially deprived families is key. Urgently expanding income support and social protection coverage are likely to offset the rise in child labour and early marriage accelerated by the pandemic.

70. Importantly, access to technology helps individuals and families gain access to social services, including the child benefits and birth registration indispensable for social inclusion. Access to technologies is especially important for transnational families whose members live in different countries, migrant families and those separated owing to employment, divorce or other factors.

71. Alarmingly, overuse of new technologies has been associated with some negative impacts on family well-being, especially children's physical and mental health, ranging from obesity, sleep deprivation and addiction to privacy issues, cyberbullying and overall screen fatigue. There are signs of compromised family cohesion owing to conflicts arising from the overexposure to technologies of children and adolescents.

72. Parents, who often feel overwhelmed by the rapid changes in technology and the application of new technologies, need support in managing their children's use of technologies effectively. As modern parenting is increasingly challenged by technological changes, effective response to these new challenges requires an increase in the resources needed to assist parents in caring for their children. Investments in development of parenting skills as well as parental awareness and knowledge is indispensable if parents are to tackle these challenges successfully.

73. Parenting education is an investment in family and children's well-being, offering access to both resources and social supports. It focuses on child development and affirms the importance of close intrafamilial relationships. Increasingly, parenting education and support have been recommended to stave off the potential consequences of parental stress generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including child maltreatment and neglect.

74. Digital tools for parenting education can be of help in this regard. Technology can serve both as a vehicle for assisting families in learning how to choose appropriate technologies for children and as a tool for the delivery of parenting education within the context of a virtual environment. Parents need support in building an understanding of the healthy use of media by their children, especially for purposes of learning and expressing creativity, and as regards developing an awareness of potential areas of conflict and possible solutions to such conflicts. Technology can help facilitate the formation and delivery of the content of parenting education. Well-informed parents can, in turn, contribute to social cohesion at family and society levels.

75. In overall terms, however, parenting education, despite its importance, has still not been applied or deployed as a strategy in family support. As evidenced by research, parenting education can be adopted more widely in policy decisions. It can address family needs especially in the context of children's well-being, learning and education, health and mental health and gender equality, thereby contributing to the achievement of relevant targets under several Sustainable Development Goals.

76. Owing to the COVID-19 crisis, the transition to flexible working arrangements has accelerated and the trend is likely to continue. As a good work-family balance contributes to family cohesion and well-being, fair and flexible work-family balance policies in the digital world are needed more than ever. Such policies should not only support digital decent work but also recognize the realities faced by families, including responsibilities for caring, which are still carried out overwhelmingly by women.

77.   Examination from a gender and family perspective of the impact of technologies on women, children and parents in general makes it clear that new technologies have a potential to facilitate work-family balance. However, vigilance is required to ensure that the boundaries between work and family life are not blurred. Since employee perceptions of balance and employee preferences are important determinants of their ability to adapt and ensure a sense of balance, it is important for employees to be allowed to exercise flexibility in arranging work schedules and work locations so as to meet the needs of work and family.

78.   A focus on technology impacts on work-family balance and parenting education can help both parents and policymakers address the challenges arising from increased technology use. As the use of technology keeps evolving with diverse impacts on adults and children, it is vital to support research on both technology's impacts on families and its role in furthering learning and education. Moreover, it is necessary to expand research on work-family balance and technology integration.

79.   From a wider perspective, it is worth noting that the pandemic has jeopardized the production of data central to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The lack of data limits Governments' ability to reach children and their families and ensure that they have access to services and opportunities. For an average of 74 per cent of child-related Sustainable Development Goal indicators, there are insufficient data or there is inadequate progress shown towards meeting the global targets by 2030. Investments in data and innovation are therefore key to responding to the crisis and supporting acceleration of achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

80.   The preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2024, offer an opportunity to focus on mega trends and their impact on family functioning and well-being. Expanding research on mega trends and families is indispensable to designing responsive family-oriented policies for responding to the new challenges faced by families. Urbanization and migration, demographic change and climate change are the new trends to be examined pursuant to the exploration of the impact of new technologies on families. Future reports on the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family will present current research on mega trends and offer recommendations on policy action needed to ensure the well-being of families around the world.

B.   Recommendations

81.   **Member States are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:**

(a)   **In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, offer support to working parents through, inter alia, expanded child and family benefits, paid family leave and sick leave, improved flexibility of working arrangements and investments in parenting education;**

(b)   **Improve access to the Internet, higher-speed Internet and digital devices for families, especially those in vulnerable situations, and invest in digital literacy skills of family members;**

(c)   **Invest in parenting education, including through the use of technology, as a valuable preventive strategy for reducing child neglect, and support healthy development of children either alone or as a component of wider family-oriented policies and programmes;**

(d)   **Promote work-family balance in the digital world, grant workers with family responsibilities flexibility in work schedules to enable them to meet the**

needs of work and family, and invest in reliable technology support and education;

(e)   Expand evidence-based research on the impacts of new technologies on families, work-family balance and parenting education design, delivery and implementation with technology integration in order to develop adequate policies to support workers with family responsibilities;

(f)   As part of the preparations for the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, support research, awareness-raising activities and policy actions, at the national, regional and international levels, on the impact of technological, urbanization, migration, demographic and climate change trends on families.[25]

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[25] For detailed recommendations, see Susan K. Walker, *Technology Use and Families: Implications for Work-family Balance and Parenting Education*, background paper prepared for the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, May 2021. Available at www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2021/05/Technology-Families-Background.pdf.