

STILL INVISIBLE AND STILL NOT HEARD

AN ANALYSIS OF 2021 MEDIA COVERAGE OF CHILDREN

2021



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1. INTRODUCTION

The South African government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1995^[1] and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) in 2000.^[2] Since South Africa has committed to these conventions, the country is then responsible for ensuring the realisation of children's rights as outlined in both the human rights treaties. Some of these rights include children's rights to privacy and dignity and, rights to participate in issues that are related to them etc.

Furthermore, these and more children's rights are entrenched in Section 28 of the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of South Africa. There are deliberate efforts from the South African government to ensure that society is reminded of children's rights through annual commemorations of events such as Child Protection Week where commitments to addressing issues facing children are made.

Despite all these provisions and events for children to enjoy their rights, especially rights related to participation and, privacy and dignity, there are challenges encountered in realising these rights especially from the fourth estate.

The media, like other duty bearers, are duty bound to ensure that children's rights are not only protected but also promoted in media coverage. Ethics and indeed legal frameworks around reporting on children call for this. However, one look at the coverage of children in the media suggests otherwise and deliberate analyses over the years have proved that the media keeps failing to ensure children participate and are protected in coverage. This evidence has been revealed by media monitoring activities conducted by Media Monitoring Africa (MMA).

Since 2003, MMA has been monitoring the coverage of children in the media to check adherence to ethical and legal frameworks on reporting on children. Further, the monitoring has been to ascertain trends in coverage with particular focus on issues reported, whether children speak in this coverage as well as the quality of the coverage. Through analyses of the media's coverage on children, MMA has been able to identify the successes and gaps and, has used the findings to advocate for better coverage while at the same time providing the media with recommendations on what can be improved.

[1] <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRC/CRC30Pledges/Pages/SouthAfrica.aspx>

[2] <https://www.acerwc.africa/ratifications-table/>

Previous trends have shown that the media in South Africa more often than not failed to sufficiently adhere to ethical principles when reporting on children. This involved identifying children when the media was not supposed to in stories such as those where the children were victims, suspects or witnesses and, failing to give the children access when in the children's best interest thereby infringing on their rights to freedom of expression.

Has there been an improvement in media's coverage of children? This report presents findings from the 2021 monitoring activity in an effort to establish to what extent children's rights are being promoted and protected by the media and, to analyse the portrayal of children in the media.

The 2021 findings will be compared to the 2020 findings where necessary in order to show improvement in media coverage or the lack thereof. Further, a question as to whether the Covid-19 pandemic, the July 2021 unrest and the 2021 local government elections impacted how children were reported on in 2021 will be explored.

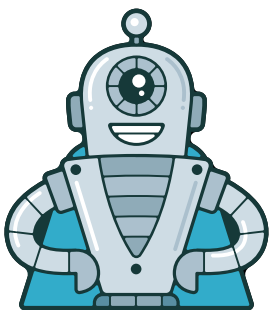


2. METHODOLOGY

This analysis covers a monitoring period of five months, from 1st May to 30th September, 2021. To collect articles that were used in the analysis, Dexter,[3] MMA's online media monitoring tool was used and keywords, learner/pupil, child/children, minor, baby, toddler, infant, teenager were inputted in the tool to scrape data. All those articles that did not relate to children were removed from the analysis. A total of 11, 502 stories were gathered and of those, 1, 187 were about children.

The stories were collected from 13 online and print media.[4] Broadcast media has been excluded from the monitoring due to the limitation of Dexter which only scrapes articles from websites.

After the collection of the articles, a team of trained and experienced media monitors looked through the data and monitored using a set criteria that checks aspects like topic discussed in the story, whether children are speaking, the role the children occupy in coverage, how the children are portrayed, the children's gender, the quality of the information in terms of, for example, whether an article is in-depth or discusses relevant legislation and policies, whether the children's rights are respected etc. The rights that MMA monitors in an article about children are rights to participation, freedom of expression, privacy and dignity. The best interest of the children as supported by Section 28.2 of the South African Bill of Rights of the Constitution is also monitored. Findings on these are presented and discussed in the report.



DEXTER
MEDIA MONITORING AFRICA INITIATIVE

[3] Access to Dexter can be granted upon request.

[4] Business Day, Cape Argus, Cape Times, City Press, Daily Sun, Mail & Guardian, Saturday Star, Sowetan, Sunday Times, Sunday World, The Citizen, The Star and The Sunday Independent

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Stories on children

Using all the scraped articles, we analysed the number of stories about children in order to determine how much space is allocated to children in media coverage. This is important because it provides a useful glimpse into whether the media gives children and their issues a priority.

In South Africa, children make up 39% of the population.[5] Despite commanding such a huge share of the population and of course being among the most vulnerable in society, the news does not adequately reflect their issues as can be seen in the graph below.

Percentage of stories on children in the media



Figure 1: Percentage of stories on children in the media

[5] <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022021.pdf>

The results above show that at 10%, there has been a decrease in the coverage of children when compared to 2020 results which showed media's coverage on children at 13%. In terms of actual numbers, during the monitoring period, there was a total of 11, 502 stories collected with only 1, 187 being about children. In 2020, stories on children amounted to 1, 710 out of the total 12, 693 from the same monitoring period of five months. This three percent drop in coverage could have been caused by various factors. The continued dominance and coverage of the ravaging Coronavirus could be one of the reasons for the decrease in the coverage of stories on children. Furthermore, the July 2021 unrest in South Africa occurred during the period of monitoring. The 2021 local government election period also began during the period of monitoring and this could have also contributed to the decrease in stories on children. While this could have been the case, the media could have used the opportunity to report how the unrest affected children and, whether children and issues facing them were part of the politicians' agenda during the election period.

The importance of the media reporting adequately on children cannot be over-emphasised as this is one the ways issues that affect children can attract the attention of policy makers for redress.



3.2 Media performance

The number of stories on children per medium helps us gauge how much attention is given to children and their issues by individual news outlets. To determine the performance of each media, the total number of stories on children was calculated by comparing it to the total number of all stories by that media. The table below shows how the monitored media performed when it came to giving space to children in their publications. The results have been tallied against the 2020 findings in order to show improvement or the lack thereof.

MEDIUM	2020	2021
Business Day	1%	2%
Cape Argus	21%	12%
Cape Times	24%	18%
City Press	6%	12%
Daily Sun	15%	9%
M&G	16%	13%
Saturday Star	7%	9%
Sowetan	17%	7%
Sunday Times	5%	12%
Sunday World		4%
The Citizen		12%
The Star	18%	15%
The Sunday Independent	3%	11%

Figure 2: Media performance

From the 13 media monitored, Cape Times scored the highest with 18% followed by The Star at 15%. However, despite both media having most stories, they have decreased their coverage of children. In 2020, Cape Times had 24% while The Star had 18% of coverage of children. The decrease in coverage by both media can be attributed to the fact that overall, there has been a decrease in the number of stories on children reported in the media in 2021 as has already been discussed in section 3.1 above.

The worst performing media in 2021 in coverage of children are Business Day and Sunday World, both receiving two percent and four percent respectively. However, for Business Day, this is a slight increase from the one percent recorded in 2020. The poor performance can be attributed to the uniqueness of their target audience. For example, Business Day is focussed more on business stories. MMA submits though that the media needs to report on children diversely and also deliberately in business stories especially to show the impact of business or the economy on children.



3.3 Origin of stories

In their coverage of issues facing children across the country, the media should constantly strive to be as equitably representative geographically as possible. MMA monitors origin of stories in order to ascertain areas that receive more coverage and areas that are neglected. The media coverage data is compared to the population data in individual provinces in order to ascertain over or underrepresentation. The population data below was obtained from the 2021 mid-year population estimates by Statistics South Africa.[6]

Percentage of stories vs. children's population

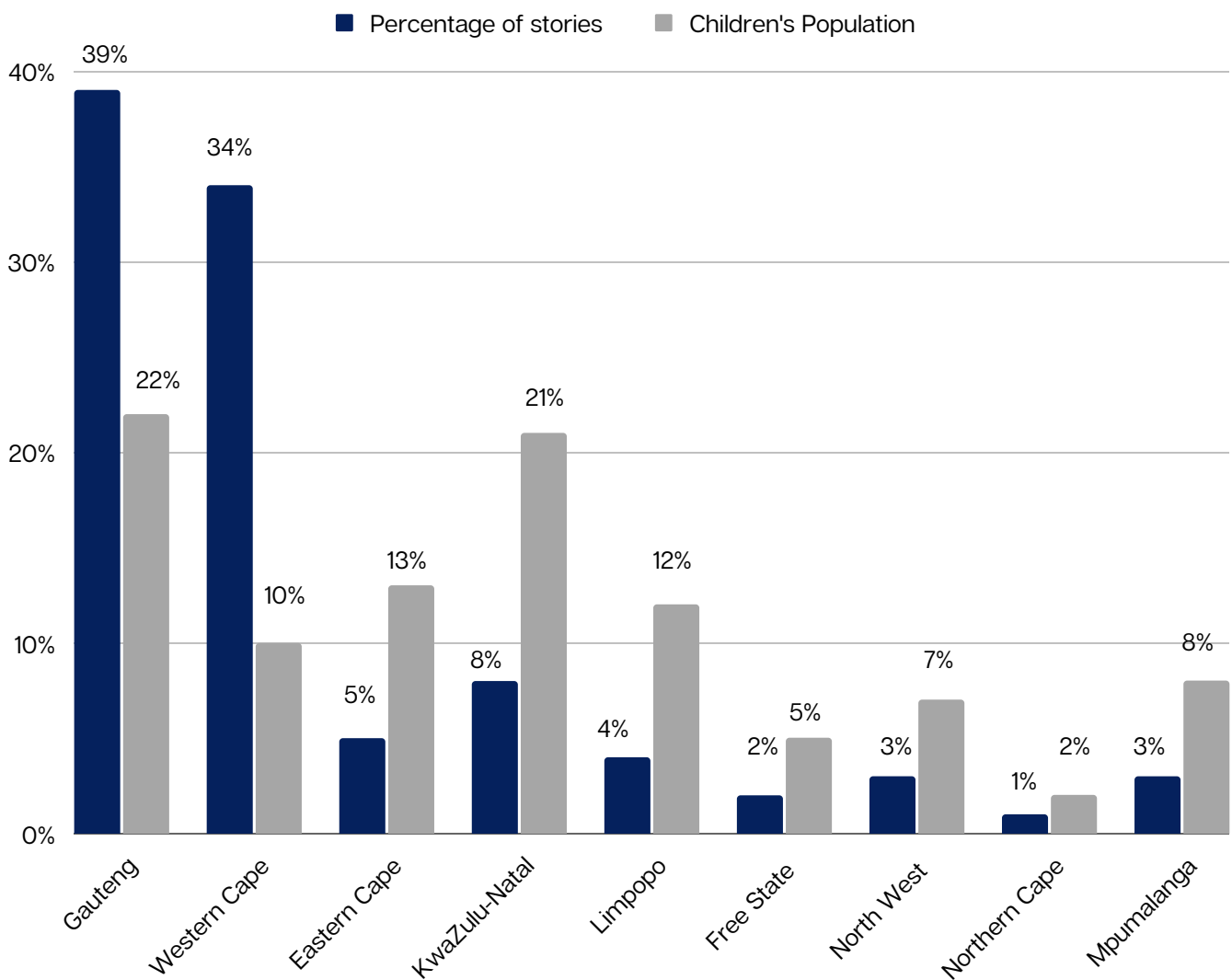


Figure 3: Percentage of stories on children versus children's population

[6] <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022021.pdf>

The figure above shows that Gauteng received a greater percentage of coverage at 39% followed by Western Cape at 34% and KwaZulu-Natal at eight percent.

Looking at the graph above, one might argue that there is a bias towards urban areas (Gauteng and Western Cape). This could, however, be attributed to the fact that most media houses are based in urban areas and therefore it is easy for the media to report stories in these provinces. The figures above show that children in Gauteng and the Western Cape were overrepresented in media coverage when compared to the population of the children in these provinces. Western Cape children were overrepresented by 24% while and Gauteng children by 17%.

The results indicate that children in these two provinces were given higher priority by the media than children in other provinces especially those such as KwaZulu-Natal, which had an underrepresentation of 13% and Eastern Cape which was underrepresented by eight percent. Limpopo was also among the provinces underrepresented in media coverage also with a discrepancy of eight percent.

The continued neglect of under-developed provinces like Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West has dire consequences for children in those provinces in terms of development and enjoyment of their rights. The media has a particular responsibility to bring to the attention of duty-bearers and policy makers the issues facing children in these provinces and this can be done through equitably representing children from all provinces in media coverage.



3.4 Most reported topics

In order to determine which issues involving children are deemed newsworthy by the media, we examine which topics frequently feature in the media. It is important to understand this as it shows which issues facing children are considered more important and consequently, helps give a picture of the state of governance and the media.

Previous monitoring findings have revealed that topics are mostly influenced by events in place of issues. This is explained below.

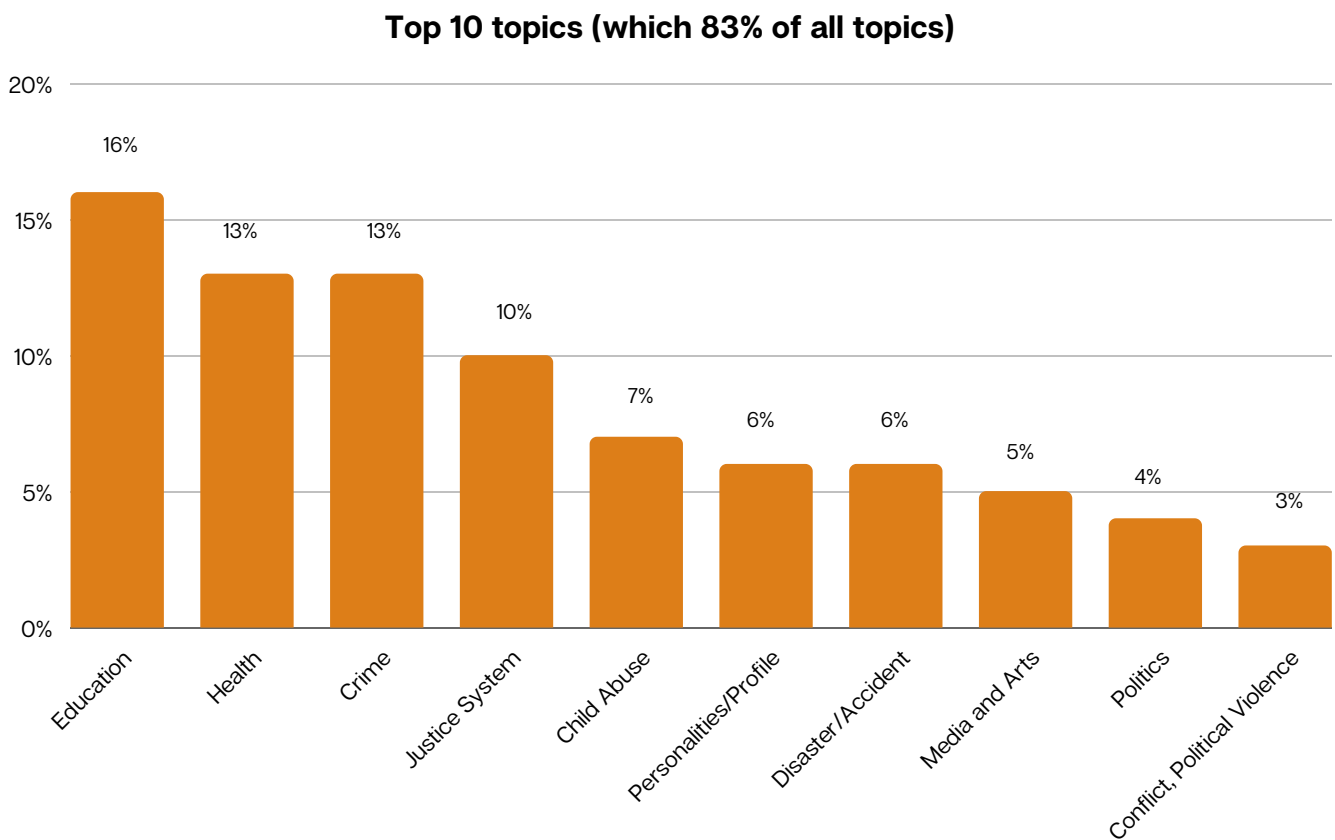


Figure 4: Top 10 topics

Over the years, media coverage of the top 10 issues has largely remained the same. Typically, these topics comprise a large percentage of the stories, and in 2021, the top 10 topics had a combined coverage share of 83%.

Education remained the most popular topic for the second consecutive year. This topic received 19% of coverage in 2020 and, as shown in the figure above, 16% in 2021. Despite a decline in the number of stories related to education, this topic continues to dominate. This could be because the monitoring period occurs during a time when matriculants are preparing for mid-year examinations. In the year 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic which was in its second year, created uncertainty around the matric exams, leading the media to focus more on it. Ultimately, the Department of Basic Education decided to cancel the 2021 mid-year exams.[7]

[7]<https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/naptosa-welcomes-decision-to-cancel-mid-year-exams-for-matric-learners/>

Health at 13% was the second most reported topic in 2021. There is a slight decline in coverage of health issues in the media compared to 2020 when a 14% coverage rate was recorded. It is concerning that the coverage of health related issues is decreasing albeit at a small rate, especially when South Africa and the rest of the world are dealing with challenges and impacts of Covid-19. As per Statistics South Africa, the impact of Covid-19 on the South African population went beyond health-related impacts, such as infection and death, but also included adverse effects on employment and living standards.[8]

Another topic worth noting is crime at 13%, which decreased from 19% in 2020. Media coverage shows crime decreasing, but that is not the reality the majority of children in South Africa face every day because according to crime statistics for July to September 2021, the rate at which children were murdered, for instance, increased by 31.7% when compared to the same period in 2020.[9]

While the media outlets are lauded for their coverage on topics in the top 10 list above, they are urged to put more effort in covering topics that have continuously received less attention year after year. The media needs to diversify their coverage of issues facing children to include, equitably, the topics shown in the graph below.

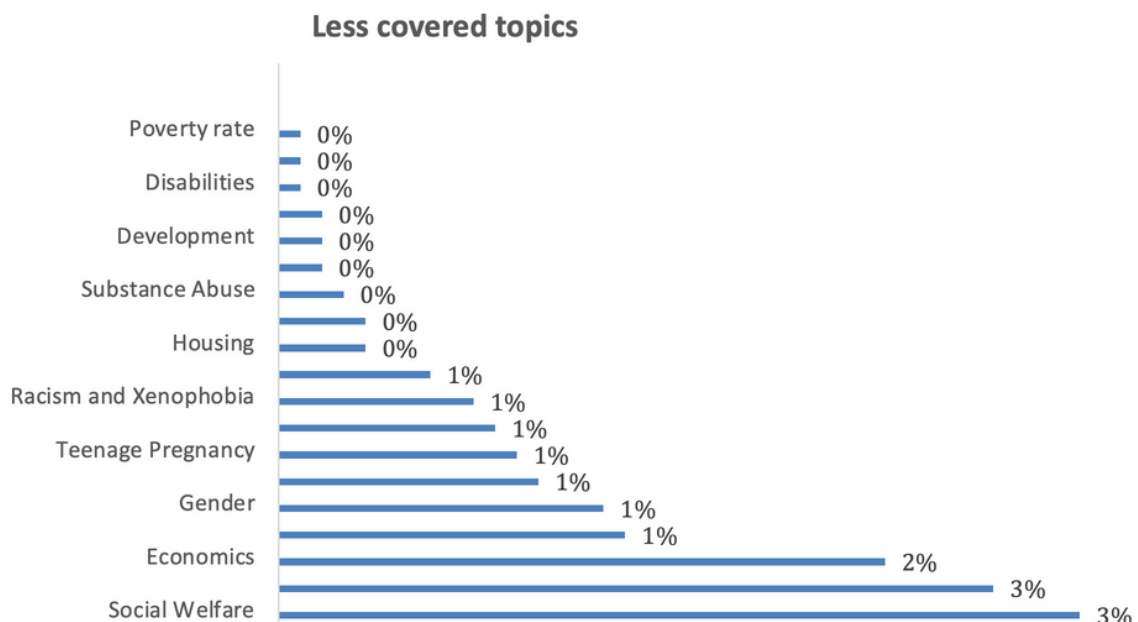


Figure 5: Least reported topics in the media

[8] <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report%2000-80-05/Report%2000-80-052020.pdf>

[9] https://www.saps.gov.za/services/downloads/july_to_september_2021_22_quarter2_presentation.pdf

3.5 Children's voices

The participation of children in issues that affect them is extremely important. Besides improving their decision-making skills, this also ensures that their right to be heard is promoted. Their participation in the media should of course be guided by Journalism Ethical Guidelines,[10] which promote the best interests of children.[11]

Through the media, children can express their opinions, ideas, and interests, which will foster participation and help them realise their rights. In addition, this ensures that decisions and actions to address issues facing children are taken with children's lived experiences in mind. Unfortunately, children are not participating enough in media coverage. All previous research studies conducted by MMA on children in the media found that children rarely participate in news coverage. For example, recent monitoring results show that only seven percent of stories on children in 2020 had children's voices. This data remains the same for 2021 as can be seen in the figure below.

Children accessed vs. not accessed

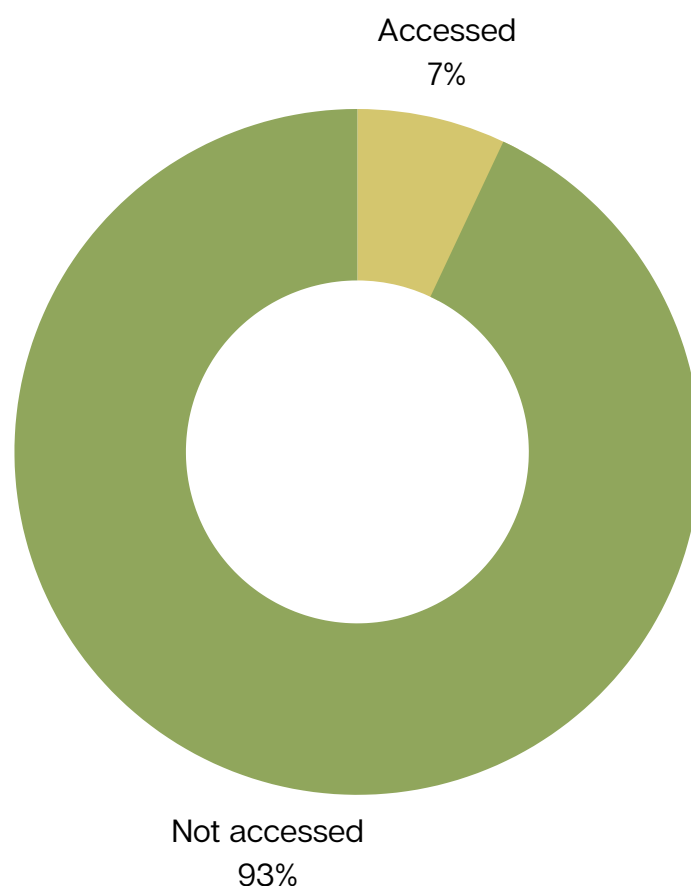


Figure 6: Children accessed versus those not accessed

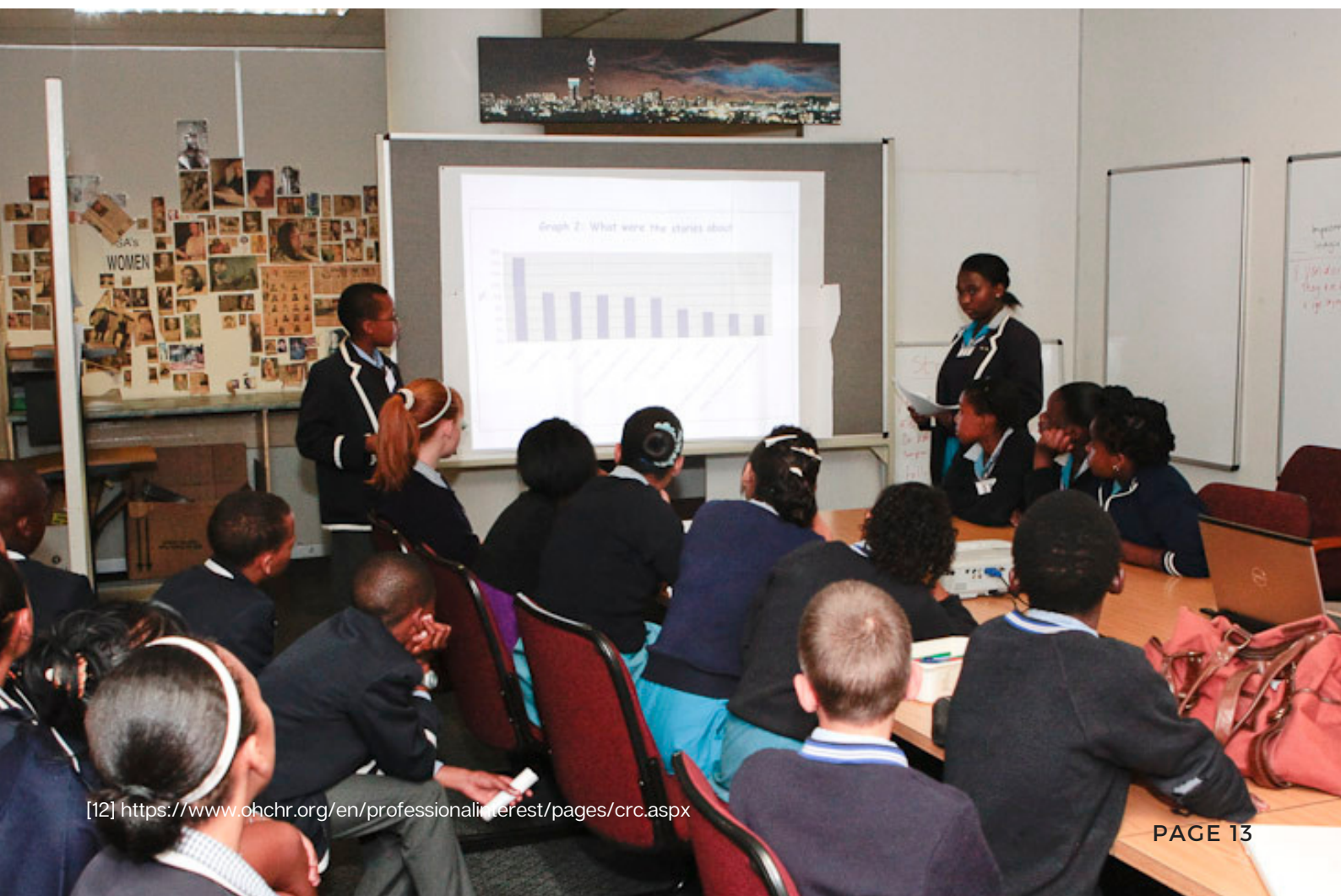
[10] <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/ethical-guidelines>

[11] https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/mma_editorial_guideline.pdf

Over the years, the South African media has failed to significantly improve children's participation in the news. This is despite several recommendations made by MMA to the media on how gaps in coverage of children can be bridged.

South Africa is a signatory to conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which seek to, among many other things, encourage children's participation in matters that affect them.[12] This means that the South African government, while working with its stakeholders like the media, has committed themselves to ensuring that children in South Africa enjoy these rights. Further, Journalism Ethical Guidelines urge the media to access children as sources in coverage.

Taking no action to promote children's involvement in issues that affect them has a huge negative impact on society because the voices of the children are not heard in national agendas and consequently, their needs and expectations are not addressed or are addressed without a child rights angle. Therefore, the media is urged to include children's voices to stories about the children the same way they do in stories about adults. This is not only fair but will also ensure that children are not further marginalised in the media.



[12] <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

3.6 Children's voices versus adults' voices

It has already been established that children are not speaking adequately in media coverage of them. Therefore, it is important to see who speaks on their behalf.

The figure below shows data obtained after comparing the number of articles that had children as sources to the number of articles that had adults. As can be seen, the percentage of adults speaking in articles about children is almost at 100 and this remains the same when compared to 2020. This demonstrates that adults' voices are the dominating voices in media coverage of children's issues. In fact, as is indicated in the data below, it can be deduced that children are not heard in coverage and that adults are speaking on their behalf. The implication of having adults speak on behalf of children is that decisions will ultimately and potentially be made without a child rights angle and more likely without the children's best interest being paramount. This is not only disempowering to the children but also suggests that children have no ability to speak on their own behalf and, have no agency.

Children's voices vs. adults' voices

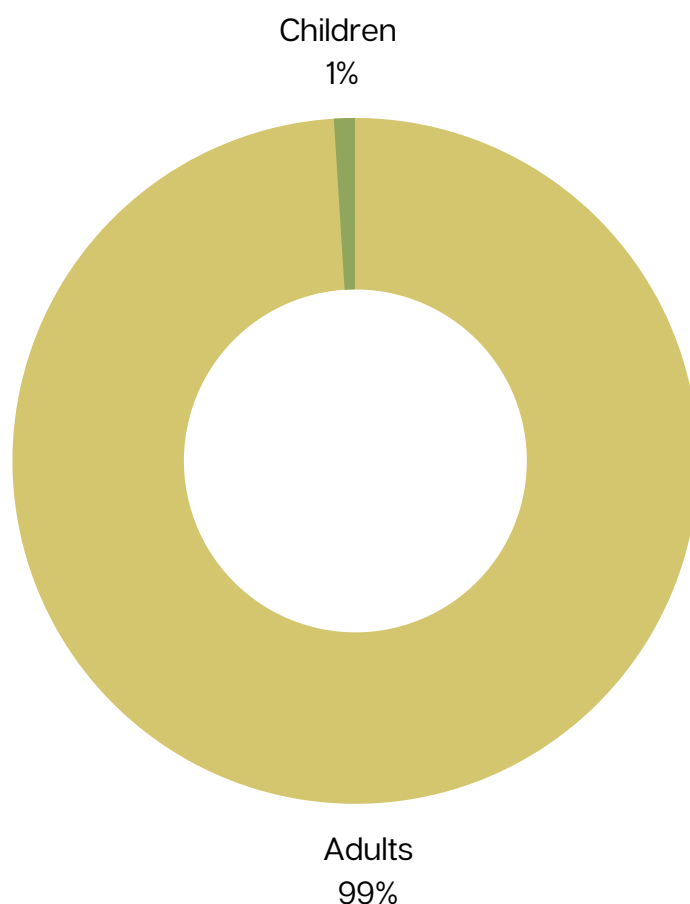


Figure 7: Children's voices versus adults' voices

3.7 What are the adults saying?

The section above shows clearly that adults are the dominating sources in news coverage about children. So what are they exactly saying?

All direct and indirect quotations by adults were collected and put into a word cloud. The bigger the word, the more it was repeated in the quotations.



Figure 8: Words cloud of the most used words by adults

The most used words are related to the top topics covered. For example, 'school' is always on the list of most used words because of the extensive coverage of education in South African media, as has been shown in Figure 4. The term, 'children' is among the most used terms of 2021. This could be attributed to the fact that the top role on the list of top five roles as will be shown in Figure 10 below is children.

Interesting to note is the dominance of the word, 'said'. What this shows is that in the collected quotations by adults, the word said was repeated more than other words. This potentially indicates that adults were relaying, on behalf of children, children's views to the media. This is supported by the findings presented in the sections showing data for children's voices and adults' voices.

3.8 Boys versus girls in coverage

According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), gender disparities are considered to be a persistent form of inequality in every nation. The UNDP further states that gender equality has not yet been achieved in any nation, rich or poor.[1] This indicates a very serious issue that needs to be addressed. The media, just like other duty-bearers, has a role to play in achieving gender equality and this can be done in media coverage which has been found to have an influence on society.

Girls vs. boys coverage



Figure 9: Girls versus boys coverage

The graph above shows that girls at 56% are reported on more by the media compared to boys who featured in coverage at 44%. This is a trend that has been picked up in most of MMA's research studies on coverage of children. In 2020, for instance, boys received a 45% representation share while girls got 55%.

The representation of boys and girls in media is significantly different from the representation of adults. In all of MMA's research studies involving adults, women have always been significantly underrepresented at around 20% and less. For instance, women were represented in media coverage of the 2021 local government elections at a mere 19%.[14] Therefore, when compared to the representation of adult genders in media coverage, the media is commendably doing a great job at an almost equitable gender representation of children.

[14] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/LGE21-Elections-Report-.pdf>

3.9 How are children portrayed?

It is necessary to examine the roles that children play in the media in order to determine whether certain stereotypes persist about them. The regular and disproportionate portrayal of children in the news, especially in negative roles, can have an influence on society's perception of children and their abilities.

Top 5 children's roles (which is 92% of all coded roles)

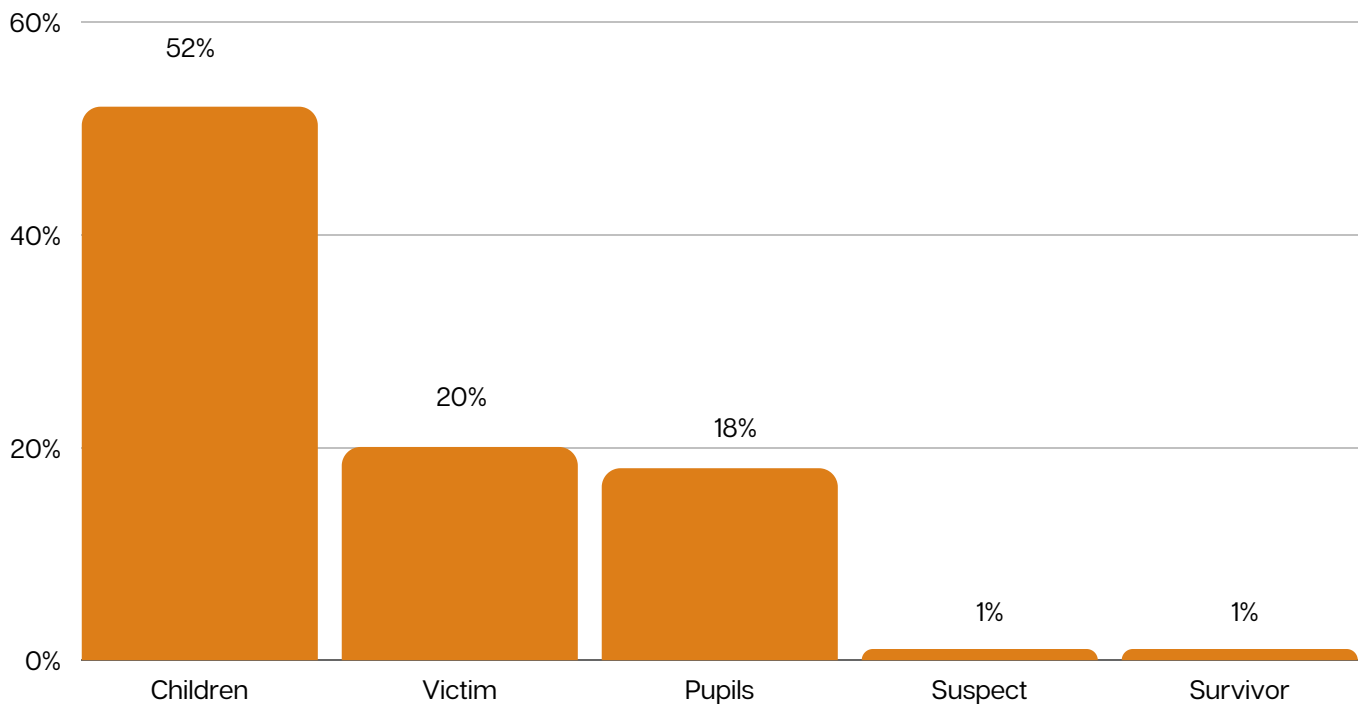


Figure 10: Top 5 children's roles

Over the years, MMA has found that the roles children occupy in the media are often linked to the topics reported. For instance, if crime or child abuse was among the most reported topics, then among the top roles would be victim. In 2021, education was the most reported topic as shown in Figure 4 and as can be seen in the graph above, pupils as a role was among the top three roles.

The roles, children, victims, pupils/learners are roles that have remained largely the same over the years often occupying over 80% of all coded roles. Children as a role recorded an increase from 40% in 2020 to 52% in 2021. This means that there was more mention and portrayal of children just as children. Portraying children just as children is not empowering, denies children's diversity and suggests they are all the same with little agency.

3.10 Children's rights

When checking for media's promotion and/or protection of children's rights in the media, MMA pays particular attention to the rights to privacy and dignity, freedom of expression, participation and best interests. The graph below shows how the media respected or violated these particular rights.

Children's rights respected vs. violated

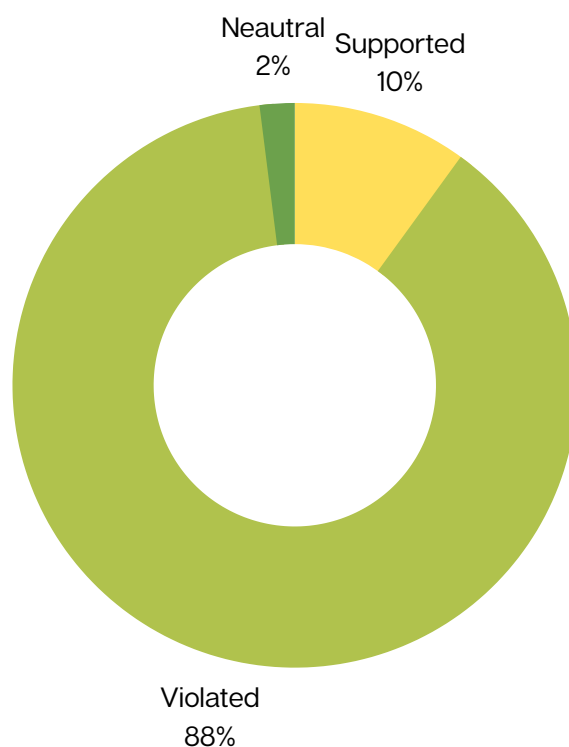


Figure 11: Children's rights respected versus violated

The graph above shows that the media does not fully promote or protect children's rights in stories about children. Two percent of the stories violated children's rights and this is an increase from the one percent recorded in 2020. The media was deemed to have violated children's rights when they failed to protect children's identities, for an example where necessary.

Meanwhile, the media should be commended for the increased effort in respecting the rights of children when reporting on or about them. The results above show that 10% of stories respected the rights of children compared to the six percent obtained in 2020. The media were deemed to have respected children's rights when they withheld identities of children where necessary or when they interviewed children when in the children's best interest thereby promoting the rights to expression and participation.

3.11 Quality of information in the stories

MMA understands quality news on children to be that which provides detailed information and goes beyond the “who”, “where”, “when”, “what”, “why” and “how”. In other words, a good quality story should go beyond providing a basic context to being in-depth, relaying the consequences of the event or issue, as well as offering solutions and self-help to the audience. Additionally, a good quality story must make reference to relevant policy or legislation and must be clearly written with the best interests of the child in mind. Monitors used these qualitative elements to examine whether news stories were of good quality or not. Each story was examined against all the elements. Some stories met all the qualitative criteria, others met one or more while others met none. The results are provided below.

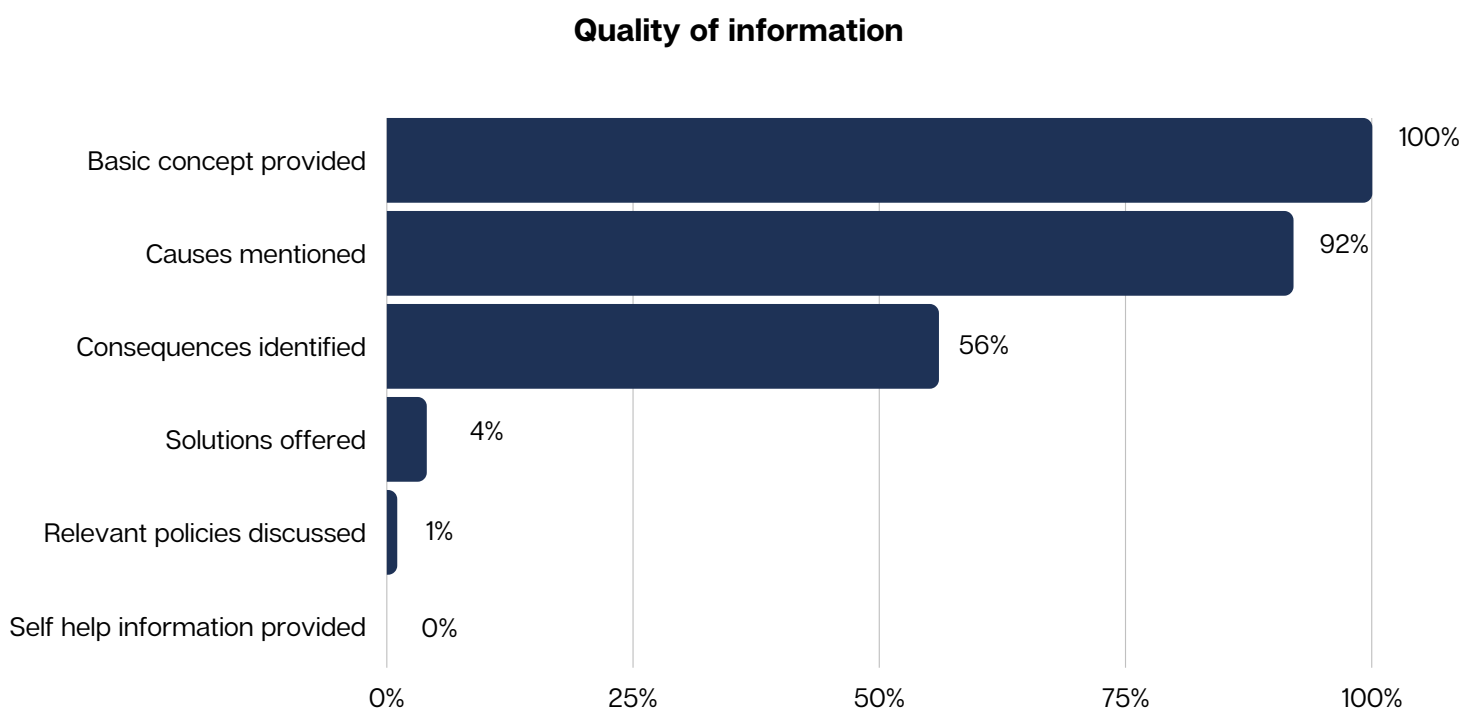


Figure 12: Quality of information

Since almost all stories in the media should meet the “who”, “where”, “when”, “what”, “why” and “how” standards, it is not unusual that all the stories on children had a basic context. This was the same in 2020.

A quality news report should also show the implications of the course of events and how the events might impact children or society at large. It is therefore encouraging that 56% of the stories on children explained the possible consequences of the events or issues reported on in 2021. The data has increased from 44% in 2020.

The lack of stories that discussed relevant legislation or policy and offered self-help is concerning. This is taking into consideration the fact that crime that involved children and child abuse are among the top reported stories in the media as has been shown in sections above. It is disheartening that the media will report about issues facing children such as child abuse and bullying but fail to provide self-help information in those stories. Therefore, the media needs to discuss existing legislation and policy on issues facing children or question the adequacy of or, the rate of implementation, for instance. The media should also offer self-help especially in stories about abuse. This will help citizens to know when, where and how to seek help when faced with a particular challenge.



CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has shown that there are still gaps existing in media coverage of children and issues facing them. For instance, children are not given adequate space in media coverage and their voices are not sufficiently sourced. Further, their rights are still violated, and the media struggle to provide sufficient details in stories to help the readers fully understand the context of what is being reported on.

On the other hand, the media should be commended for its improvement when it comes to respecting the rights of children, which increased from six percent in 2020 to 10% in 2021. The following are MMA's recommendations to media houses and media practitioners to help with the improvement of their coverage on children

- The presence of children in the media is vital, especially since they represent a substantial population proportion in South Africa (currently 39%). MMA urges the media to report more on children and their issues.
- Media coverage should reflect the diverse issues that affect children, not only in terms of topics covered but also in terms of geographical coverage. Additionally, children can add new perspectives to common stories on topics ranging from economy to politics to sports.
- Where possible, the media needs to look beyond just mentioning children to accessing them as much as possible. It is important that the media are constantly reminded of the importance of including children's voices and are trained on how to reach them ethically, especially when accessing children can be cumbersome and daunting.
- When reporting about children's rights, the media should aim to have zero tolerance for infringement. By providing continuous training as well as effective systems of media accountability, media who violate ethical standards in their reporting can be held accountable.
- The media should strive to portray children in roles that empower rather than disempower them, since they are capable of much more than they are given credit for. It would be better to portray children as survivors, rather than as victims, since the latter has a positive connotation.

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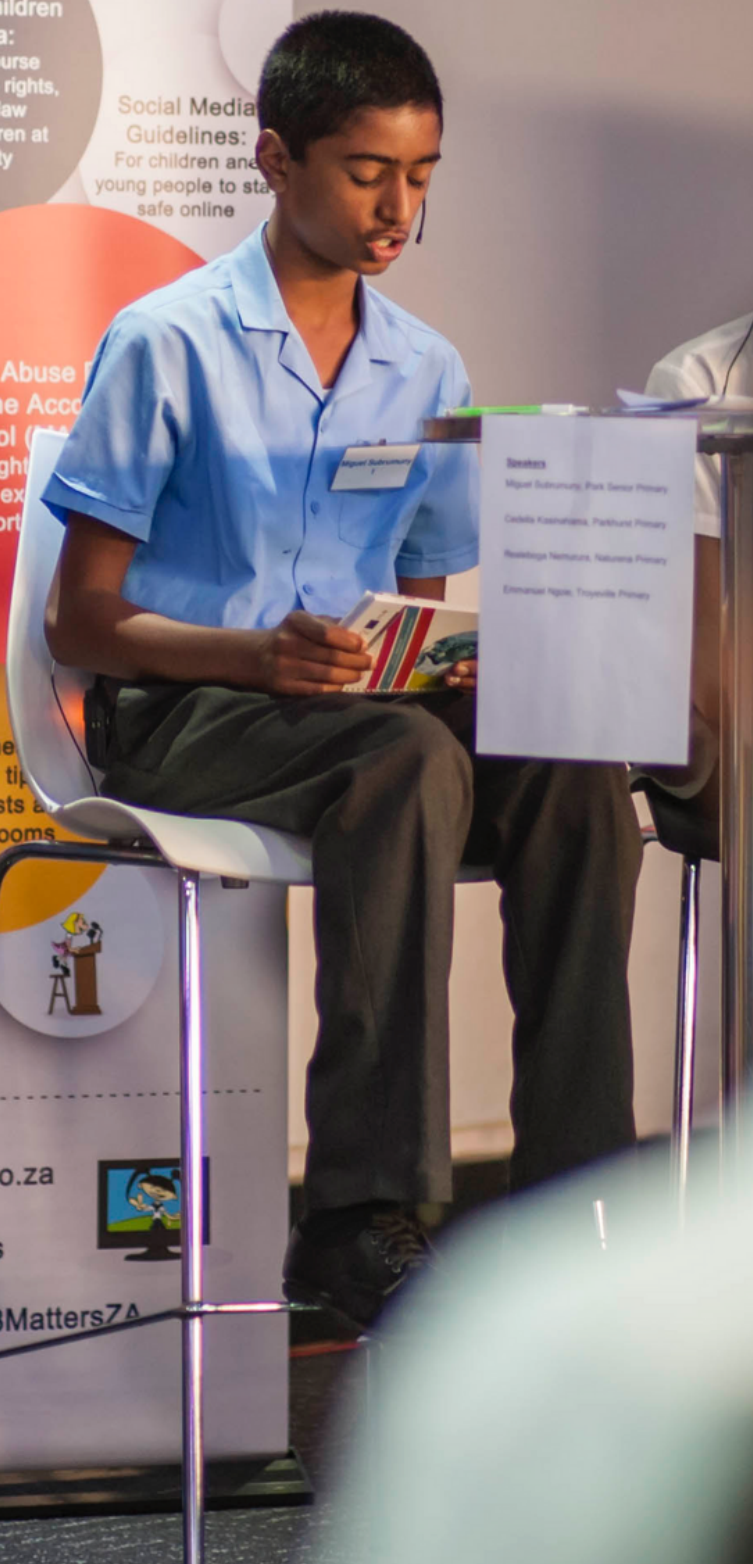
Take Abuse Online Accidents Tool (TAAT)

Online Safety: Practical tips for parents and teachers

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