By Aloysious Kasoma

Parenting in digital age: Where love must meet limits

Two years after losing her husband, 45-year-old Maureen Nakaye has been living with her 15-year-old son in Kazo, Nabweru sub-county, Wakiso district.

She chose a parenting style rooted in gentleness and emotional care, hoping to protect her son from further pain.

She rarely raises her voice. She avoids harsh rebuke and treats him with tenderness, believing that love will help him heal.

Over time, however, that tenderness had begun to blur important boundaries. The boy slept late, spoke to his mother in ways that troubled her and demanded internet data with an air of entitlement.

In the living room, the boy lounged on the sofa, loud music playing, oblivious to the emotional weight of his behaviour on his mother. He greeted visitors casually, without adjusting his posture. It took a stern family friend in the military to put him straight.

PARENTING IN A WIRED WORLD

The UN Women country representative in Uganda, Paulina Chiwangu, urges parents and guardians to take greater responsibility in controlling children's phone usage, warning that unrestricted access to digital devices is increasingly exposing children and families to technology-facilitated violence.

Speaking at the climax of the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence at the Supreme Court building in November, Chiwangu said this year's campaign deliberately focused on ending technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

Chiwangu stressed that parents and other adults play a critical role in safeguarding children, especially as access to digital devices begins at younger ages.

She acknowledged that many parents face pressure to provide phones so that their children do not feel excluded from their peers. However, Chiwangu cautions that yielding to this pressure without safeguards puts children at risk.

"Peer pressure is real, but protection must come first. Access to technology should be age-appropriate and guided," she noted.

Her remarks are supported by findings from the *Ugandan Children's Online Survey 2020*, conducted by the Uganda Communications Commission.

The survey reveals early internet exposure and significant gaps in parental supervision and digital literacy. Children in Uganda begin using the Internet at an average age of 13, with most accessing it for the first time at 14 years, mainly through mobile phones used at home, often in bedrooms.

While 81% of children

Kitaka

Chiwangu

Cost of children living alone

Dr Sabrina Kitaka, a paediatrician and child health advocate, cautions that children are becoming addicted to the Internet, with some spending more than six hours online each day, exposing them to serious safety and mental health risks.

"While the Internet offers learning and social opportunities, it also presents significant dangers to children if they are not properly guided and protected," she says. Beyond immediate safety concerns, she notes that excessive internet use can negatively affect children's

demonstrated basic digital skills under the survey, only 53% of parents were familiar with internet use and just 34% were certain about what their children do online. Most concerning, fewer than half of children knew how to respond to online risks and the majority never reported online problems to their parents. "These findings underline why parents must actively control and guide children's phone usage," Chiwangu says.

"Protecting children online requires awareness, supervision, clear

mental health. Anthony Kintu, a researcher at the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC), also warns that the anonymous nature of social media platforms is increasingly exposing young people to cyber bullying and online harassment, with serious consequences on their mental and physical well-being. Kintu notes that prolonged screen time results in poor sleep quality, mental health disorders and physical health concerns linked to sedentary lifestyles, such as obesity and cardiovascular diseases.

boundaries and strong collaboration across families, schools and communities."

Dr Kitaka says as parents introduce their children to smartphones and tablets connected to the Internet, they must be prepared to provide consistent supervision and support.

Strengthening digital literacy, setting clear boundaries on screen time and maintaining open communication between parents and children are essential steps in ensuring safer internet use.