



Changing childhoods.  
Changing lives.

# Westminster Hall Debate on Impact of Smartphones and Social Media on Children

MP Briefing | May 2024

## Summary

Barnardo's welcomes the recent debate about the impact of smartphones and social media on children, and agree that more needs to be done to keep children safe online.

Children can be subject to devastating harm online, including exploitation and abuse, and exposure to harmful and damaging content that can harm children's mental health and perceptions of relationships and sex. However, the online space can also bring many benefits to children – including connecting with family and friends, for entertainment, developing their own identity, and as a tool for education.

We urge the Government to take a balanced approach to ensuring children's safety online. The onus of children's safety should be on the technology companies and platforms that have designed services that are not safe for children, rather than excluding children from vital technologies.

We are calling on the Government to:

- Listen to the views and experiences of children and young people, which have been missing from the debate on children's smartphones and social media use so far;
- Ensure that children are prevented from seeing harmful and inappropriate content online, through the regulation of services. This includes ensuring that the Online Safety Act is effectively implemented, and taking action to regulate the gaps, including regarding the regulation of online pornographic content.
- Work with smartphone providers and mobile network operators to understand what safety features can be implemented on devices to make them safer for children.
- Launch a public campaign on online safety, to increase awareness of harms online and parental tools.
- To ensure that all children have access to age-appropriate information about media literacy and online safety through Relationships, Sex and Health Education in schools.

## Children's online lives

- More children are online than ever before. Ofcom research has found that 71% of children aged between 5-15 years old used a smartphone to get online in 2023,<sup>1</sup> and that two in three children aged 3-17 years old used social media apps.<sup>2</sup>
- Children use smartphones for a multitude of reasons. This can include connecting with friends and family, using social media, gaming, as a tool for education and to access or understand more about the news.
- Children receive many benefits from using smartphones and social media. For example, 84% of our frontline practitioners have highlighted that children between the ages of 11-15 years old used social media to access advice and help with their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>3</sup>
- Our practitioners have told us that for some children, particularly those experiencing poverty, their smartphone may be the only device they have access to, and so are critical for connecting with others and completing schoolwork.
- However, time spent online can mean that children are exposed to a myriad of harms, including abuse, exploitation, and exposure to harmful and inappropriate content.
- This can impact a child's mental health and distort their attitudes towards their bodies and issues such as sex and relationships. We are also concerned about content that can promote misogynistic beliefs and violence against women and girls, which is having an impact on all children.<sup>4</sup>
- We are also concerned about children's access to pornographic content, including content which is violent, extreme, and would be prohibited offline. Children as young as seven are viewing pornographic content online,<sup>5</sup> which is damaging their mental health and distorting their views of healthy sex and relationships.<sup>6</sup>

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Using social media when recovering from an eating disorder helped me feel not so alone. I learned from other people's experiences and connected with people I couldn't connect with in real life.

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## Protecting children and young people from online harms

- A balanced approach needs to be taken when ensuring children's online safety, reflecting children's experiences online. Barnardo's does not support a blanket ban excluding children from owning smartphones and social media.
- Instead, the onus needs to be put on the technology platforms to make their services safe for children and remove harmful content. We would also support steps to make smartphones safer for children by adding default settings.
- We would urge the Government to listen to the voices and experiences of children and young people to understand how they would like regulation to look.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/283048/Childrens-Media-Literacy-Report-2024.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/283048/Childrens-Media-Literacy-Report-2024.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/255852/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/255852/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/B51140%2020886\\_Social%20media\\_Report\\_Final\\_Lo%20Res.pdf](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/B51140%2020886_Social%20media_Report_Final_Lo%20Res.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/research-online-misogyny-image-based-abuse/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/The%20Online%20Safety%20Bill%20-%20House%20of%20Lords%20Second%20Reading%20Briefing\\_0.pdf](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/The%20Online%20Safety%20Bill%20-%20House%20of%20Lords%20Second%20Reading%20Briefing_0.pdf)

## Safer smartphones for children

- Whilst we are not supportive of a ban on smartphones for children, and do not think it would be practicable or enforceable, we do think that steps should be taken to ensure that smartphones are made safer for children.
- This could include default settings being added to smartphones to prevent users from accessing material or apps unless they could prove they are an adult.
- However, the introduction measures ensuring safer smartphones for children must ensure safety for all children. We know that many children receive and use second hand devices, for example, which would not be equipped with new regulations to ensure safety.
- For this reason, we feel that focusing on regulating the content and features available on social media platforms, gaming sites and other platforms children access should be a priority to ensure safety for all children.

## Social media regulation, and the Online Safety Act

- Barnardo's welcome the Online Safety Act. The Act is a critical step forward in making the internet a safer place for children, and Ofcom's implementation of the Act will be key in ensuring it's success.
- We are particularly supportive of the age assurance duties included in the Act, including to protect children from seeing pornographic content and to ensure that social media sites enforce their minimum user age (usually 13 years old).



I took what I saw on social media literally. It was hard to switch on a filter to tell myself that this was not real.

**Young person supported by Barnardo's**

- We do have some concerns about Ofcom's approach to implementing the Act. This includes their focus on economic proportionality, and high evidential threshold before recommending measures to platforms. Ofcom must ensure the robust and effective implementation of the Act, protecting children from illegal content online and from other harmful and inappropriate content.
- The Online Safety Act should be seen as a floor and not a ceiling in protecting children online. Emerging harms must be addressed through regulation.
- This includes regulating generative-AI models to prevent the creation of AI-generated child sexual abuse material. In the month of October 2023, the IWF investigated 11,108 AI-generated images shared on dark web child abuse forums, and almost 3,000 were confirmed to be images depicting child sexual abuse.<sup>7</sup> More than one in five of these AI-generated images depicted rape, sexual torture and bestiality, and more than half depicted children aged 7-10 years old.<sup>8</sup>

## Regulating online pornographic content

- Barnardo's remain concerned about the lack of regulation of online pornographic content. Content that is prevalent online and found on mainstream sites would be prohibited offline, and illegal to own or supply on DVD, Blu-Ray, and for Video on Demand.
- This includes content that sexualises children – adult actors pretending to be children through child-like clothing, language, and props – and content that shows overt, non-consensual sexual violence, most often towards women and girls.
- There is growing evidence that this content can harm a users' attitude towards children and women and girls, and result in a user's behaviour escalating, including going on to seek more and more extreme content, including illegal child sexual abuse material.<sup>9</sup> For example, recent research from Finland found that, for offenders who had viewed child sexual abuse material, 20% had first

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/why-we-exist/our-research/how-ai-is-being-abused-to-create-child-sexual-abuse-imagery/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/why-we-exist/our-research/how-ai-is-being-abused-to-create-child-sexual-abuse-imagery/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-04/Online%20Safety%20Bill%20-%20Illegal%20and%20prohibited%20pornographic%20material%20briefing%20-%2026042023.pdf>

searched for the material after becoming ‘desensitised to adult pornography’, leading them to seek out more extreme or violent material.<sup>10</sup>

## Case study



A Barnardo’s Harmful Sexual Behaviour service has seen over half of their referrals so far cite the viewing of pornography as a factor in the children’s behaviour.

Children such as George\*. George is now 17 and has experienced significant trauma in childhood. He has a history of viewing pornography involving BDSM and torture and has an ongoing desire to continue to watch pornography of this nature. He has fantasies of sexually harming younger girls.

Billy\* is 14 and has been watching extreme pornography for several years. He has expressed that he ‘wants to rape a girl’ at school. He has also experienced childhood trauma.

\*Please note all names have been changed.

## Education and awareness raising

- More should be done to raise children’s, parent and carer’s awareness of online safety, including potential risks of being online and parental tools that are available to help parents and carers navigate the online world with their children.
- Relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) in schools should equip children to stay safe, feel confident online and to be able to think critically about content. RSHE should be taught in an age-appropriate way, but also reflect the reality of what children are seeing online at young ages. This should include issues related to child sexual abuse and exploitation, child criminal exploitation, harmful content including pornography, content that promotes self-harm, suicide, and eating disorders, and where to access support.
- However, RSHE lessons should not be a substitute for other protections online, and children cannot and should not be expected to safeguard themselves. Any lessons regarding online safety must make it clear that children abused online are always victims, including when they are coerced, exploited and manipulated into sharing images or activities.
- Teachers and schools should be equipped with the skills and knowledge to deliver effective RSHE lessons on the issues of online safety and media literacy.



We need to inform children from a young age about the pros and cons of social media use. The earlier the better.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://bd9606b6-40f8-4128-b03a-9282bdcfff0f.usrfiles.com/ugd/bd9606\\_335c0ae05fc9409f91df599074ee3c2e.pdf](https://bd9606b6-40f8-4128-b03a-9282bdcfff0f.usrfiles.com/ugd/bd9606_335c0ae05fc9409f91df599074ee3c2e.pdf)



## Action you can take

- At the Westminster Hall debate on the impact of smartphones and social media on children, call on the Government to ensure a balanced approach to tackling online safety concerns, recognising the benefits that being online can bring children.
- Urge the Government to ensure that the voices and experiences of children and young people are at the forefront of decisions on children's online safety.
- Call for further regulation where there are gaps – including regarding the regulation of online pornographic content, and the regulation of generative-AI models to prevent the creation of AI-generated child sexual abuse material.
- Call for more action to be taken to raise awareness among children and parents/ carers regarding online safety, and the tools that already exist. This should include through RSHE lessons.

## About Barnardo's

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear - changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year, we provided essential support to over 370,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 800 services and partnerships across the UK. For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong.

**For more information, contact Jess Edwards, Senior Policy Adviser for Childhood Harms, [jessica.edwards@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:jessica.edwards@barnardos.org.uk)**