



Changing childhoods.
Changing lives.

Westminster Hall Debate on Online Safety for Children and Young People

MP Briefing | October 2024

Summary

Barnardo's welcomes the Westminster Hall Debate on Online Safety for Children and Young People. 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.

We are calling on the Government to:

- Ensure that online pornographic content is regulated in the same way as offline pornographic content.
- Place a duty on platforms to implement effective age assurance solutions to uphold the minimum age set out in their Terms of Service. This will prevent children from accessing platforms that they are too young to access.
- 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.
- 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 and access the online world 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 being online. 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.¹
- 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.²
- 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,³ which is damaging their mental health and distorting their views of healthy sex and relationships.⁴

“

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.

Young person supported by Barnardo's

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 urge the Government to listen to the voices and experiences of children and young people to understand how they would like regulation to look.

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.

¹ https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/B51140%2020886_Social%20media_Report_Final_Lo%20Res.pdf

² <https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/research-online-misogyny-image-based-abuse/>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>

⁴ https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/The%20Online%20Safety%20Bill%20-%20House%20of%20Lords%20Second%20Reading%20Briefing_0.pdf

- This includes content that sexualises children – adult actors pretending to be children through child-like clothing, language, and props – and content that shows explicit, 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.⁵
- For example, recent research from Finland found that, for offenders who had viewed child sexual abuse material, 20% had first searched for the material after becoming ‘desensitised to adult pornography’, leading them to seek out more extreme or violent material.⁶
- Legislation and regulation needs to keep up with how pornography is consumed today. The Online Safety Act already sets a precedent in expecting social media companies to keep harmful and illegal material – such as terrorist material and child sexual abuse material – off their platforms. The same should be expected of pornography companies when it comes to harmful and violent pornographic content.

Building on 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.
 - The Online Safety Act should be seen as a floor and not a ceiling in protecting children online. Emerging harms, including AI-generated child sexual abuse material, must be addressed through regulation.
 - We are particularly keen to see legislation put in place to include a duty for services to use effective age assurance solutions to uphold the minimum age set out in their Terms of Service. This will prevent younger children from accessing age-inappropriate apps and platforms.
 - We also want to see duties put in place to prevent children from accessing ‘misogynistic content’ – such as the so-called ‘manosphere’. We are concerned that this content is driving negative attitudes towards women and girls.
- We think that app stores should be in scope of the Online Safety Act. By not including them, children are able to access age-inappropriate apps, which can put them at risk of abuse or accessing harmful and inappropriate material.



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

Relationships, sex and health education

- 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

⁵ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-04/Online%20Safety%20Bill%20-%20Illegal%20and%20prohibited%20pornographic%20material%20briefing%20-%2026042023.pdf>

⁶ https://bd9606b6-40f8-4128-b03a-9282bdcff0f.usrfiles.com/ugd/bd9606_335c0ae05fc9409f91df599074ee3c2e.pdf

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.



Action you can take

- At the Westminster Hall debate on online safety for children and young people, call on the Government to continue to build on the Online Safety Act to protect children and young people online.
- Call on the Government to protect children and help to prevent violence against women and girls by regulating online pornographic content the same way that it is regulated offline.
- 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.
- 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.

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