



Children First, Ofcom Report

May 2026

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Executive Summary

Children First has been leading ambitious participation work in relation to the online world – exploring how young people interact and experience the online world and harmful content, whilst exploring options for protection and prevention. In partnership with Ofcom, Children First are working hard to ensure that children and young people are genuinely seen, heard, and able to influence decisions that affect them. Our approach is grounded in children's human rights, the UNCRC, The Promise, and Lundy's Model of Participation, ensuring safe spaces, real impact and genuine influence.

Opportunities and challenges:

We recognise both the opportunities and challenges of establishing participatory projects, particularly within stretched services and partnerships. Our work prioritises trauma-informed, rights-respecting, and relationship-based practice, ensuring participation is ethical, inclusive, and paced according to each young person's needs. This work continues to strengthen the foundations for meaningful, sustainable, and transformative participation to influence and inform how we protect all children in Scotland.

This work has primarily focused on:

- What young people and their friends/family like about being online.
- What young people worry about when they are online.
- How young people feel and experience social media.
- What young people see and experience in relation to harmful consent.
- The support young people receive in relation to online harm.

'If a child wandered off alone in the real world, everyone would be worried. But a child can wander into an unsafe online space in their bedroom without any supervision. We need to treat online safety with the same seriousness.'

– 18 year old young person

At Children First, we want to make sure that children and young people are seen and heard on issues that matter to them. Children First is ambitious in creating meaningful opportunities for children, young people and families to inform and influence our policy and influencing work around online harm. Online harm is one of the greatest threats to children's wellbeing, and their right to have a childhood that is safe and free from mental or physical harm, including sexual harm. We know that online harm is having a profound impact on the very existence of childhood, as children are exposed to violent and inappropriate material from an incredibly young age. We believe respectful and strengths-based recording and evidencing helps us to elevate children and young people voices so that they are heard in decision making processes, including service development and design, as well as national scale influence, such as online harm. We are working hard to ensure we have a systemic way of listening and learning that will fulfil commitments made in the incorporation of the UNCRC and principles of The Promise. Children's human rights sit at the heart of our approach, and we recognise participation is fundamental to this. We are intentional in fostering safe and inclusive environments and skilled at capturing voice. We continually explore, identify and embed transformational participatory developments that are rights-based, meaning that they are meaningful, ethical, secure, inclusive and accessible.

The principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) remain deeply embedded in our participation work at Children First.

Article 12

The right to express views and be taken seriously - the right to have views given due weight

- Applies to every child capable of forming a view, without age limits.
 - Children must be supported to express their views freely.
 - Adults must consider children's views seriously.
 - Adults cannot dismiss views simply due to a child's age.
- Barriers such as discrimination, adult bias, or lack of accessible information must be removed.

Our participation work ensures that we are respecting, protecting and fulfilling children's human rights – under Article 12 of the UNCRC children and young people have the right to express their views on matters affecting their lives, and for those views to be given due weight. Our national participation work prioritises empowering children and young people to advocate for meaningful change on issues that affect them directly and impact children across Scotland (and beyond).

Participation provides a space for children and young people to feel valued, heard, taken seriously and connected. Our approach at Children First strives to reflect this by a commitment to ensuring children and young people's voices are central to shaping decisions, identifying priorities, and inspiring meaningful, sustained change. Our participation work is set within a rights-based framework and conceptualised by the Lundy Model of Child Participation. This draws on the four key elements of the Lundy Model:

Space: *Children and young people must be invited to participate in opportunities where they can share their ideas, opinions and feedback in all matters affecting them in a safe and inclusive space.*

Voice: *Accessible and inclusive information is essential before any participation projects begins. We ensure that children and young people have the support and access to the right information so they can speak out and express their views in decision making. Information is shared in a way that is appropriate to the age and stage of the children and young people. We as the adults take the responsibility to find suitable methods in which children can communicate their views, ideas, feedback, and concerns.*

Audience: *Adults must actively listen to children and young people's views respectfully and with integrity. Children's views must be given due weight, be taken seriously and acted upon by adults with the ability, authority and power to influence change.*

Influence: *Children's views must be given real consideration, and subsequent decisions are made from listening to children's views, feedback, and ideas. An explanation on how the children and young people's views and ideas have influenced change is important and why the decision was made. It is empowering for children and young people to understand and learn how their views have contributed to influencing change. And if their views have not been taken into account or are not able to be acted upon, it is important to share this with the children and young people, to ensure that we prioritise transparency.*

Setting the scene

Children First are working to create opportunities for children and young people to inform and influence the work Ofcom, *the UK's official regulator for communications*. One of Ofcom's responsibilities is to make sure online sites and apps are safe, especially for children. Ofcom was given this responsibility under the Online Safety Act (the Act). The purpose of the Act is to make sure social media platforms, websites and apps keep people safe online. Ofcom's role includes creating guidance and safety measures to help websites and apps protect children and young people from harmful content and to ensure that companies are following the duties that the Act imposes on them. Ofcom are keen to learn from children and young people, to ensure that their reporting is rooted in the voices of children and young people from across the UK. Their report will provide the UK Government advice about whether the types of harmful content in the Online Safety Act (the Act) should be changed or updated.

Our participation work isn't simply a case of "*bringing young people along to speak*" - it's about respecting their experiences, privacy, readiness, and right to participate in ways that feel right for them, whilst always working at their pace. Our approach to participation is both supportive and boundaried. We are considered and skilled at creating a safe space for children and young people to meaningfully share their voices which are heard in a safe and thoughtful way,

while modelling rights respecting and trauma-informed practice. To ensure that this work listens to the voices of children and young people in Scotland, Children First created an activity pack which provided children and young people to share their views and experiences about the digital world, online harm and use of devices.

Our approach

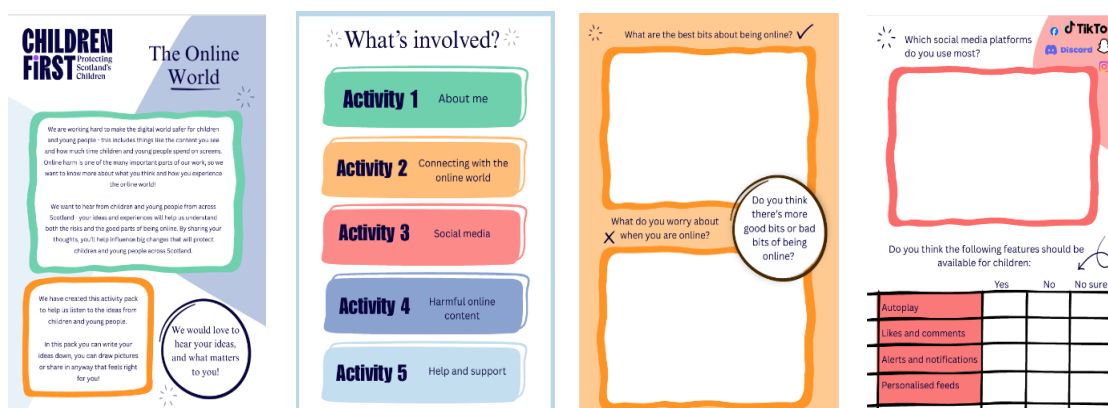
This report draws from several pieces of participation work that Children First have facilitated in relation to online harm and the digital world. The primary focus for this report has been working alongside our children and family services, where we recently circulated an activity pack, which invited children and young people to share their views in relation to:

- What they and their friends/family like about being online.
- What they worry about when they are online.
- How they feel and experience social media.
- What they see and experience in relation to harmful consent.
- The support they receive in relation to online harm.

We circulated a Project Brief paper to colleagues which provided details of the work, and support with the facilitation of the activities pack. The sessions took place in a space where the children and young people felt comfortable and safe and with their worker. If the child or young person was under 16 years old parents and carers were informed of the work and consent forms were completed. All children and young people consented to their views being shared with Ofcom.

We have heard from **24** children and young people, from the following areas: Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Ayrshire, East Renfrewshire, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Midlothian and North Strathclyde.

Example pages from the activity pack



Additional approaches

In addition to our recent activity pack, we have also embedded our learning from children and young people who have been involved in a variety of participatory projects, including:

- **On Mute May Campaign, 2026:** This is a current fundraising campaign where young people shared their views and experiences of social media.

- **Ofcom Consultation on Draft Guidance ‘A safer life online for women and girls’:** To respond to this consultation, Children First worked with a group of our Bairns Hoose Changemakers. **6 Changemakers were involved at the time.**
- **Elpis Project, 2025:** This was a European Union funded ELPIS research project, which promotes excellence in international practice in responding to online child sexual abuse, in partnership with the European Barnahus/Child Houses and the PROMISE Barnahus network. **12 children and young people participated.**
- **Digital Participation Project, 2024:** Internal project developed to create space for children, young people, parents and carers to share their views, feedback and ideas in relation to technology and the digital world to inform the Children First Digital Strategy. **19 children, young people and families participated.**

What we learnt from listening to children and young people

‘The internet itself is not evil, it is how it is used. Social media can be a space where young people have people they can talk to that share their interests and passions. But we are watching childhoods being ripped away because of the way social media is normalising harm and unhealthy expectations. To protect children and young people we must create spaces for them outside social media.’ - 18 year old young person

Connecting with the online world

Connection

Young people shared that they enjoy many parts of the ‘online world’, which can support them to connect with friends, family and a wider community, with one young person (14 years old) sharing how much she enjoys connecting with a community of people online in relation to her own personal interests. Another young person (13 years old) shared that she enjoys making new friends and talking with family who live in other countries. One young person explained,

being in a community with what you like

‘It is how we all communicate – there is no other way. I feel I am able to remember stuff more like you can save chats and see memories. I can find conversation over messages easier rather than in real life.’ - 17 year old girl

A 17-year-old shared, ‘I can find conversation over messages easier rather than in real life’, suggesting that digital spaces can reduce social pressure and support confidence. The young people reflected that it can support them to communicate and share their interests with their peers and family,

‘I enjoy looking at art and my Mum and I share funny videos with each other.’ – 17 year old girl

Young people shared with us that they like to have the ability to share their lives and feel connected with their peers on a normal day to day basis, where they can share updates about what they are up to. This can support them to feel part of a wider social culture and posting updates and engaging with others’ lives was seen as important to belonging. As one young person (15 years old) put it, ‘I like to update what I’m doing [on a] day to day basis – events and parties.’

Although we have continually heard many positive factors about the online world and how social media can be beneficial to young people, we have also heard that some don't feel it is positive space, with one young person (17 years old) reflecting, *'I don't even enjoy being online anymore.'* She went on to share that she feels that technology has progressed at such a fast rate, and thinks,

'We should have stayed in 2010 – mid 2015 devices, it was much simpler.' – 17 year old girl

This demonstrates that the conversation around the online world is nuanced, with some young people being big advocates for the positive aspects of being online, and others not enjoying, and even stepping back from social media and other aspects of the online world altogether. One young person (15 years old) shared that she no longer has social media at all.

Entertainment and Educational Benefits

For some young people the online world provided an entertainment space, where they can connect with content that makes them feel good – with a number of young people reflecting that easy-going funny content is what they enjoy most, including funny animal videos and pictures. Young people have told us that they often find safety and comfort in their phones and devices. This highlights how digital platforms can provide joy, relaxation and a sense of connection through shared culture. One young person explained,

'I like to use the internet to laugh at stupid things others upload/ post. I also enjoy seeing other' opinions and takes on shows I like. As far as I know my family and friends feel similarly.' – 13 year old young person.

The young people reflected that it's a space where people can easily access things that they enjoy, like music, and reading (digital books). For others, it can be a space to keep up to date and informed about what others are up to. With one young person (16 years old) explaining that she likes *'being in the gossip.'* Young people also reflected that being online can create a space to hangout with friends, where they can game together. One young person (11 years old), shared that he finds social media relaxing, with other young people mirroring his reflections, in saying they can be in communication with their friends more often.

For some young people the online world provides educational benefits where they can learn new skills and research subjects that interest them. The Changemakers group in Ayrshire reflected:

'[you can] watch and learn from videos, share pictures with family and friends, connection, promotes adds, space to learn.' – Ayrshire Changemakers

Another young person shared, *'I use TikTok to research things more than Google.'* There was agreement that you can learn from various platforms however, *'...you can't always trust it [the information provided].'* Other young people explained that they use the online world to help learn languages on apps like Duolingo, research topics and help with school work:

'I use online to research topics. Using social media in school makes it easier sometimes.' – 15 year old boy

Use of devices and access to the online world

Access to devices and social media

Children and young people have been clear that there is a distinction between gaining access to a device (tablet/phone/gaming device) and social media. One young person shared,

'iPad or phone at 8 primarily for communication, with limited internet access. Once 13, sit down for a larger discussion on internet dangers, lessen limitations but check in every few weeks for safety.' – 17 year old girl

With another young person mirroring this view, where they reflected,

'My child [in the future] would probably be able to access a tablet from a young age, supervised and for a limited time. They would need a phone to contact me but could have apps like TikTok from 12-13+ (depending on their maturity). And with heavy parental controls.' – 13 year old girl

It is clear that the young people feel that having access to a device from around the age of 7 would feel OK, but this would require a lot of supervision from parents and carers. Some of the young people felt that as children develop into their early teens (12-13 years old) supervision is less required. However, one young person (16 years old) reflected that *'Mums and Dads should check phones every night for under 16 [year olds].'* It is clear that there is a distinction between supervised use and unsupervised, with young people feeling that younger children require more thorough parental controls to ensure there are enough safety measures in place. It was clear that young people felt that gaining access to social media should come at a later point, to ensure that younger children do not have access to social media platforms. One young person shared,

'Getting a phone 10 years old, letting them on social media 15 years old.' – 16 year old girl

Another young person (15 years old) reflected that he had access to a device and social media from the age of 11, which provided him with an opportunity to learn how not to get bored before having a phone.

Screentime

It is clear that screentime is an area of debate amongst young people, however, there has been a clear distinction between access to devices and access to online services, with many young people supporting a gradual, supervised introduction that reflects age and maturity. Some of the

young people that we spoke to shared that up to 7 hours a day is suitable, whereas others felt less time on screens is preferable. One young person (14) shared that she has spent up to 16 hours a day on her device. The time limits we heard varied between 1 hour to no limit at all. One young person (12 years old) reflected that, *'2 hours [of screen time] but this is not realistic. It's bad for people's brains.'* Another young person (11 years old) felt that there should be more limits for under tens, then go up gradually in stages until 13-14 years old. We heard similar suggestions from other young people, with one young person (17 years old) mapping out the following time limits for screentime:

'1-3 years old: none

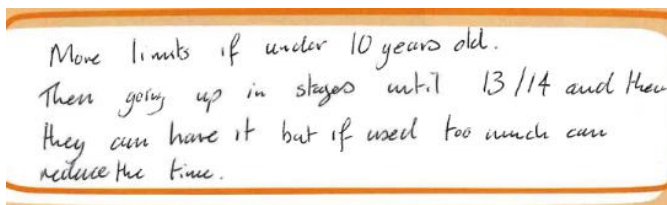
3-6 years old: 1-2 hrs

6-8 years old: 2-3 hrs including schoolwork

8-13 years old: talk with child to find a compromise'

Another young person highlighted that there could be different limits throughout the week and weekend, which could be agreed by parents and carers – this young person (15 years old) suggested 2 hours per day through the week and 4 hours (per day) at the weekend. We heard that screen time should vary from person to person, depending on what else young people have going on in their lives,

'I think it depends on what the person does as in – how much they go outside or how many clubs they do or if they have time to be on their phone.' -Young person



Children First and [Young Scot](#) ran a digital survey in April and May 2026, which asked children and young people about their time spent online. 1,059 responses were gathered, and almost two thirds (64%) of respondents said they spend too much or far too much time online. The survey also asked questions about the things children are sacrificing for this time online. The activities most displaced were screen-free relaxation (44%), sleep (41%), physical activity (34%), and time with family (33%).

Phones in school

The consensus from young people is that phones should be allowed in school, as they provide a feeling of security and safety, however many young people agreed that phones should be put away during class. With young person saying,

'100% they should not be used in class, but they can be a big comfort to even have in your bag, especially anxious children.' – 13 year old girl

'Yes I think we should [have phones in school]. I don't think we should need to be on them in class but I wouldn't want my phone taken off me because what if something was to happen or you need to send an important message. For me I needed my phone as part of my safety plan. I think it's our phone so should be our choice.' – 17 year old girl

It was however, raised that phones (and other devices) can be helpful during class for researching and using the calculator. One young person (17 years old) raised the point that *'phones are not school property'* and felt they are helpful to have with you in case of emergencies or if you need to get in touch with parents and carers. Despite the agreement from most young people, one young person (12 years old) felt that phones in school are *'too distracting'*.

Concerns and worries about the online world

'Breeding ground'

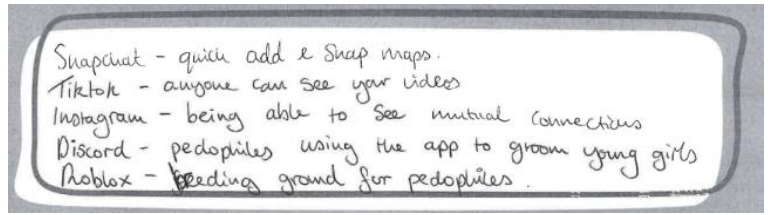
It is clear that children and young people have many worries and concerns about the online world, particularly in relation to adults having access to children, with many worrying about predators and *'creepy'* adults speaking to them, with one young person (17 years old) expressing that she worries about *'creeps (esp. pedos).'* One young person (15 years old) explained that you could be talking to *'literally anyone.'* Another young person (15 years old)

old people - being creepy

creeps
older guys
talking
to young girls
scam-fishing
using AI
on your images

— shared that they are concerned about, *'Creeps, older guys talking to young girls. Catfishing. Using Ai for your images.'* It is clear from young people that this is a real area of concern, with TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram and Roblox being the most prevalent platforms. One young person (18 years old), shared her concerns about adults having access to children, *'There are people who deliberately enter spaces meant for young children – gaming platforms, chats, livestreams – and it's easy for them to hide who they are. Roblox is a good example. They've started bringing in age checks and limiting communication, which is a step in the right direction, but it still doesn't stop everything.'* – 18 year old young person

Young people shared concerns about apps being a 'breeding ground' for paedophiles and spaces to groom young girls, with one young person (17 years old) saying that she doesn't always know who she is talking to when she is gaming online. They also shared that they receive unsolicited 'nudes', particularly on Instagram and Snapchat. With one young person (15 years old) explaining that, *'[Receiving 'nudes'] does happen, and it's disgusting. You get it more from people you don't know. Snapchat and*



OmeTV are the worst.' Young people shared that they worry about the rise of AI and the increase in 'deepfakes' – meaning that photos are being generated through AI platforms to make adults look different or younger. Through many of the conversation's young people have reflected that you don't always know who you are talking to online, which can lead to catfishing, grooming and scamming. A group of young people agreed that scammers can *'sometimes be realistic.'* Another young person shared that she uses a male name online as *'it makes me feel more comfortable.'*

Cyberbullying

Young people shared that the online world is creating spaces where people feel they can say more than they would in person,

'People can feel bolder behind a screen – which isn't always bad – but it can be. Someone can use things against you that you share or post online. Online bullying is a big thing. Someone pretending to be someone they are not.' – 17 year old girl

Young people reflected that when they post things they can worry what others might say, with one young person sharing that there can be, *'Nasty people that send threats.'* Young people reflected that being online can take a toll on you, with one young person explaining,

'Being online all the time can make you forget what's happening around you. It can take a toll on how you feel about yourself, how you see the world and even how people treat one another. The rise of toxic influencers, bullying in group chats, people sharing harmful content... it all adds up.' – 18 year old young person

One group shared that they worry about the rise of bullies and trolls. They went onto share that they also have health anxiety, which comes from *'...googling symptoms and getting extreme answer like cancer and dying.'* Others discussed the worries about pressures to lose weight and skincare which is inappropriate for children.

'When you're 12, 13 or 14, it's almost impossible to tell what's real and what isn't. You see content about how you should look, how you should live, what you should buy and who you should be. You've got influencers pushing things like weight loss, skincare meant for adults, and ads encouraging you to change yourself before you've even worked out who you are... It affects your confidence and your mental health without you even realising it... And the scariest part? You can never be fully sure who you're talking to. Adults have so much access to kids online.' – 18 year old young person

Unfiltered information

Young people reflected that information about themselves or others can be easily accessed, with one young person (17 years old) saying that she worries about how much parents share about their children online. Other young people also raised their concerns about how easy it is to gain access to people's information, including their location. They said,

‘Can’t see any emotion and people might take things the wrong way, you can quick add strangers from TikTok and snapchat which means its good opportunity for people to be abused online, can see people’s location, this could be on private or public but most young people have it on for everyone...’

One young person (17 years old) reflected that she worries about ‘Data protection, posts that are unregulated, the risks and dangers of strangers, data leaks.’ Meanwhile another young person (14 years old) shared that she worries about ‘Doxxing and SH/NSFW.’ - doxxing means the act of maliciously publicly exposing individual’s private and identifiable information, which could include their address, phone number or other private information. It was highlighted by young people that there should also be awareness about your digital footprint, hackers and what is real and what is not. One young person (12 years old) shared that she worries most about ‘Sharing bad information or misinformation.’

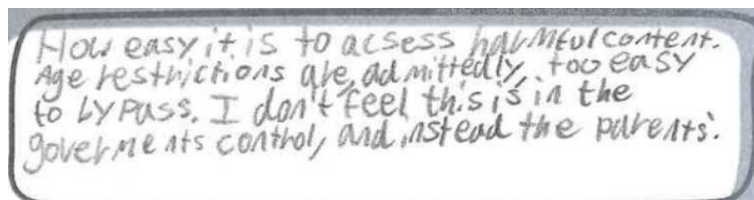
Exposure to Harmful Online Content

While children recognise the benefits of being online, they are equally clear about the serious risks and harms they experience. A consistent theme is that online spaces can feel unsafe, unpredictable and difficult to control, especially where adults exploit these environments. It is clear that children and young people are seeing harmful online content regularly, with TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram being the most prevalent platforms mentioned, with one young person (17 years old) saying ‘It is very common, due to parents leaving their children to their “own devices.”’. Another young person reflected,

‘It depends heavily on the sites/ apps that children use, but TikTok is where it appears most, even without typically viewing anything related to it [harmful content]. – 13 year old young person.

Young people explained that it is so easy to access harmful content, which appears on social media platforms, through gaming, TV shows, comments (on social media), and podcasts, with one young person saying (11 years old) ‘...it’s available everywhere.’ Another young person (13 year old young) reflected,

‘How easy it is to access harmful content. Age restrictions are admittedly too easy to bypass. I don’t feel this is the in the government control and instead the parents.’ – 13 year old girl



Online Safety Risks

Young people shared that there are multiple online safety risks for children and young people, for example sharing your location can elevate risk as it can show where you spend your time, for example your home and where you go to school. One young person (17 years old) explained that sharing your location ‘Could put themselves [children and young people] and their family in danger.’ Another young person reflected that sharing locations can increase risk for stalking and harassment. A young person shared that ‘You can track where people have been for the past 12 hours [on Snapchat], so it can give people a ghost trail – that’s what people call it... it’s such a safety hazard.’ Young people reflected that sharing one’s location occurs mostly on Snapchat, with some saying they worry that it could encourage predators. One young person shared that she has, ‘...84 boys trying to add me, but I haven’t accepted any of them. I don’t know any of them.’ Young people also shared that AI and Chatbots can be hugely risky, with ‘Grok’ – X (formally known as Twitter) being the most prevalent for producing harmful content. One young person shared her thoughts on AI,

‘BAN – deep fakes, risk for children... it also allows for fake information’ – 17 year old girl

Another young person recalled that one of her peers edited a girl's picture, which looked like a 'nude' but was 'a pic of fake boobs' which was generated through AI. One young person shared that she feels AI is creating content and images that are invasive and explicit which feels worrying.

'There's already so much AI generated stuff being dodgy like very explicit sexual content of minors and celebrities. It's very invasive.' – 19 year old girl

Young people felt AI required more regulations to create more safety, with one young person reflecting, 'I think it's a lot more dangerous than it is good - until there's proper regulations, although there probably won't be enough regulations ever.' The young people felt that although it can be helpful, the dangers outweigh the benefits. With some sharing that you can't trust people and accounts online anymore - 'You just don't know if your online friends are real or not.'

Ofcom: categories under the Act

Ofcom explain that under the Act, harmful content to children has a specific meaning. This harm can mean physical harm or psychological harm. There are three categories of content harmful to children:

- PPC – Primary Priority Content
- PC – Priority Content
- NDC – Non-Designated Content

Below we explore what young people have shared with us in relation to online harm connecting to these categories.

PPC – Primary Priority Content

Under this category of harmful content, it is clear that young people are regularly seeing and engaging with content which is significantly harmful. Self-harm content, including content about suicide, self-harm and disordered eating is shown on 'For you pages' regularly, with one young person (13 years old) saying, 'TikTok is notoriously bad for exposing young children to this content.' Young people worry that this content could influence, encourage and 'trigger' young people to harm themselves. A young person shared,

'I know Tik Tok and Snapchat can be weird and dark, with things like inappropriate images being sent and suicide pacts/trends.' – 17 year old girl

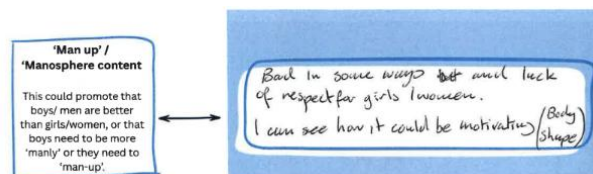
Young people suggested that this needs to be regulated and support should be offered to young people interacting with this sort of content. Young people also described that some of the content shown promotes eating disorders and encourages young people to have unhealthy relationships with food. One young person shared her concern, 'I don't think this is good for anyone because it can leave people going starving themselves.'

Heavily sexualised language and behaviour are normalised online, which appears to be accepted on forums without any challenge. This can then translate into lives offline, leading to sexualised language and behaviours becoming much more normal at a very young age. Receiving explicit images from both peers and strangers is now 'normal'. The Changemakers group shared, 'It feels like no one takes it seriously [sexual assault] and that minor things get brushed under the carpet and no one takes action, but this is what means bigger, worse things will happen later.' Other young people commented that pornographic content is regularly seen on platforms, with one young person saying 'I think it should be for adults only' and another saying, '[pornography] could traumatise [children].' One young person (17 years old) shared that, 'yes [pornography is OK] but apps should be regulated.' She went on to share that she and friends tried out some of the apps to see if they could gain access and she explained 'it was easy to get on', she later explained that 'all they do is ask your

age and you can just say you're 18.' It is clear that young people feel that more regulation is required to ensure that 'PPC – Primary Priority Content' is regulated, support is offered and is only available to age-appropriate audiences.

PC – Priority Content

Young people were clear that harmful content in relation to bullying, hate, abuse, violence, harmful substances and content encouraging dangerous stunts and challenges can be seen 'everywhere' and can hurt children physically and psychologically. They shared that some abusive content is



called out, with one young person (16 years old) explaining, 'Racism on TikTok all the time but they are called out for it.' They shared that abusive content that is harmful to women and girls is on the rise through the 'manosphere', with one young person (17 years old) explaining that the 'Red Pill Theory' is everywhere and is 'harmful, and should not be allowed.' She explained that 'Manosphere content is sometimes obvious but other times can be really subtle'. She went on to say, 'remove all content. It is becoming a pandemic of behaviour.' Other young people described it as 'bad' and 'toxic', and an 'online trend'. However, one young person reflected that it is,

'Bad in some ways and lack of respect for girls/women. I can see how it could be motivating (body shape).' – 15 year old boy

Misogyny and abuse can be promoted and romanticised as entertainment, particularly through trends like BookTok. These have a strong influence over children and young people's developing sense of self and their understanding of relationships. The Changemakers group also spoke about seeing toxic masculinity continuously escalating as people online appear to lack empathy and think it's funny to regularly insult and degrade women. They reflected on comments regularly made minimising or 'gaslighting' any females experiences. It is clear that young people are seeing abusive content all the time, with one young person (17 years old) saying she feels 'this kind of content has influenced hate-based crime.' Young people said abusive content should be 'completely illegal'. The young people reflected that other harmful content such as promoting dangerous stunts and challenges can be a 'bad influence.' A young person (17 years old) reflected that 'this [dangerous stunts] happens everywhere. As long as the posts add a warning to say not to copy them', where another young person (17 years old) suggested that this content 'should only be done by those trained.' However, one young person (13 years old), felt that this isn't as big an issue as it is made out to be.

Young people shared that there's other harmful content which 'could influence bad things', for example dangerous substances content. One young person felt that this is something to be aware of and support should be offered if a young person is interacting with this content. Young people feel that 'Nobody should be forced to do things they don't want to' but the online world can create peer pressure. With some of the young people reflecting that sending pictures of their private parts, 'nudes', is 'absolutely harmful'. One young person (17 years old) reflected that 'It's illegal and harmful to a young person's mental state.' Young people also said it was not safe to send nudes as you don't know what they'd (the recipient) do with that picture.

NDC – Non-Designated Content

Young people were reflective on how depression and body image content 'could badly affect children', where for others they felt this content can be supportive and motivating. One young person (17 years old) reflected depression content can

'can help some people recognise their feelings', and another young person, shared that this type of content can help young people feel understood and less isolated. For some young people seeing body image content can inspire and motivate them, one young person (11 years old) reflected that the likes of Joe Wicks promotes body image content which can be seen as positive. Another young person (15 years old) shared that he feels '[Body image] comments could be said to make someone sad, but alternatively as a motivation (gym).' Some of the young people reflected that this content can promote 'being thin makes you better' - the young people shared that this content should be monitored.

Further Considerations: Prevention and Protection

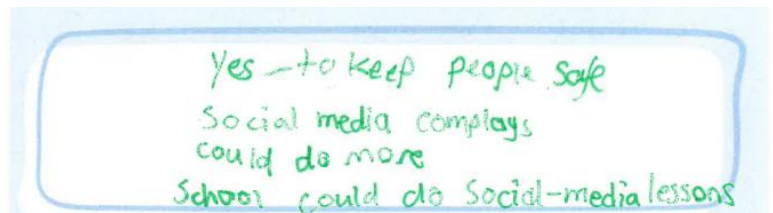
Through our conversations with children and young people we have heard such rich and informative insights into how they experience the online world and harmful content. With many young people saying that they regularly see harmful content which has become 'normalised'. One group of young people shared,

'Online harm happens all day, every day more than once. All social media platforms have bad things but it's what you choose to engage in, watch or share.'

Young people told us that social media platforms 'send you lots of random things until it learns what you like', with one young person (13 years old) sharing,

'It depends heavily on the sites/ apps that children use, but TikTok is where it [harmful content] appears most, even without typically viewing anything related to it [harmful content]. – 13 year old young person.'

It is clear from our connections with young people that more must be done to protect children and young people from harmful online content. With many recommending that parents and carers need to be encouraged and taught how to set more restrictions and put in more safety controls. One young person highlighted that parental controls can be easily got around, so it is evident that these may need further consideration to further protect children and young people. Young people reflected that parents should speak more openly with their children, to help set safe restrictions. Other recommendations were to



teach about harmful online content and social media in schools, create safety ads online and introduce more safety measures on platforms, such as age verification. The Changemakers group discussed that there needs to be more education around online dangers. They reflected that there is education around keeping safe and in person dangers but really lacked the online element. They shared that this needs to be talked about from a young age so felt that younger primary aged children should be targeted for these conversations. When the group explored how adults could support young people to understand the seriousness and help to prevent online harm happening, they all agreed that children need to be taught about the risks from primary school age, so children know not to '...talk to random people online.' The Changemakers group also felt that there needs to be more support for teachers, with a focus on trainee teachers, which would support early intervention and more protection for children and young people, 'Train trainee teachers in this [online harm]. Schools need to take problems seriously.' One young person was thoughtful about the safety of online spaces, saying,

'It's hard to think of anything [regarding parental controls] – most children's spaces are now over-run with adults, predators or not. It would be nice if there was a way to verify being a child to have an exclusive space.' – 13 year old young person

Platforms like video game sites are seen to be particularly aggressive, and all of the Changemaker group had experienced regular abuse on these platforms. These included threats of doxing, or sharing their information with malicious intent, and threats of violent and sexual assault. 'Wizz' was seen to be particularly challenging for young girls, because even though there were some security measures to verify age, there were lots of ways that this could be easily avoided like using an image of someone else or using filters to edit the picture. The young people explained that on 'Wizz', girls have to 'put up with' lots of sexually explicit messages, and people sending pick up lines or harassing girls with unwelcome conversations. The Changemakers described the app as being 'like Tinder for children'. They had often reported people which did put a block on them, but the user who is blocked can still continue to harass other users, which seems inefficient and concerning when there are clearly persistent problems with certain users. The Changemakers reflected that people often find ways to work around filters to avoid being reported, for example by replacing certain letters while it remains obvious what is being said, like 'r@pe'. We know that users who are intent on sharing or accessing harmful content will find ways around standard filters, so online providers need to widen their net to catch these comments.

Young people were clear that children and young people should not be blamed, as it is the adults that need to keep children safe. With one young person saying, 'People [adults] actually need to start caring... people should stop blaming children and actually start blaming the perpetrators.' Another young person, shared,

'Adults need to keep kids safe, but parents need support. They need clear, honest information so they can guide children online like the advice the Children First [support line](#) gives... Children shouldn't have to figure out everything alone, especially when they're not fully equipped to recognise risks... In real life, adults would never expect a young person to deal with danger by themselves. But online, we sometimes act like children should magically know what to do. They shouldn't...' – 18 year old young person

Young people were clear that adults and organisations must include children and young people in work around protecting children from online harm as 'we know most about it, we grew up with it and we kind of learned with it about the dangers of it. So, we've kind of been there experiencing all of it, the good and the bad.' As shared in our Ofcom Consultation response on the draft guidance 'A safer life online for women and girls'. Children First continue to strongly suggest that any guidance needs to include a commitment to more research and continuous engagement with children and young people to better understand the overwhelming scale of harm children face online.

Thank you to all the children, young people who have given their time and energy to share their views with us.