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Qualitative research project to investigate the impact of online harms on children

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Executive summary

The Online Safety Bill[1], introduced to parliament on the 17th of March 2022, and provides a new regulatory framework to tackle harmful content and activity online. The Bill sets out duties on services in scope to improve the safety of their users and the strongest protections in the Bill are for children and young people.

While there is existing literature about the presence of online harms for children and young people, the evidence on the severity and outcomes of "legal but harmful" content to children, such as online abuse, pornography, violent content and disinformation, is not as well understood as it could be, nor are the long-term consequences.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) commissioned Ecorys UK, in partnership with Dr Faith Gordon (Associate Professor in Law at the Australian National University and an Associate Research Fellow, Information Law and Policy Centre, IALS, London) to lead a qualitative study to address gaps in the evidence. The focus was specifically on the impact of harmful online content for children and young people, but excluding illegal activity. This report summarises the findings from qualitative research with children and young people, parents/carers and youth workers, educators and online safety professionals. Study participants were recruited via a broad range of youth or internet safety focused organisations

A framework for harmful online content

This study focused on five types of online hazards as shown in the table below. Illegal content was out of scope for this research.

Table i. Categorisation of harmful online hazards used in the study

Type of online hazard	Hazards include
Online abuse	• Cyberbullying • Abuse • Trolling • Harassment
Inappropriate content	• Pornography • Sexual content • Nudity • Violent content
Promotion of risky and dangerous behaviours	• The promotion of unhealthy body-image; eating disorders; self-harm and suicide • The promotion of dangerous challenges and dangerous stunts
Promotion of illegal behaviours	• The promotion of illegal activity
Disinformation	• Disinformation / misinformation

[1] The draft Online Safety Bill. [online] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-online-safety-bill

DCMS required this study to conceptualise online harm within the 'hazard, risks and harms' framework, whereby:

- **Hazards** are online experiences that are a potential source of/route to harm (Stimulus)
- **Risks** are things that change the likelihood that a hazard will cause harm to an individual (Context)
- **Harms**[2] are the negative consequences on someone resulting from a hazard combined with risk factors (Impact).

Research aims and objectives

The aim of this study was to better understand the impacts of "legal but harmful" online content on children and young people, aged 8-17. However, the final achieved sample included children and young people across the 9-18 age range. This qualitative study sought to:

- Consider definitions of online hazards in **the real-world contexts** of children and young people's lives
- Identify any **new hazards** experienced by children and young people or their peer groups
- Assess the **severity and long-term impacts** of harms on behaviour and physical and mental health of children and young people
- Explore the **intersection of online harms with demographic characteristics**: e.g., by age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background
- Consider how DCMS can **better understand and measure the impacts** of online harms

Method

This qualitative study involved:

- **Workshops** with DCMS, Ofcom and a Youth Advisory Panel to agree working definitions of online hazards for this study.
- **Online qualitative interviews with 33 children and young people** (aged 9-18) to understand their views and experiences of harmful online content.
- **Focus groups and interviews with 10 parents and carers** to provide further insight into the experiences of children and young people's interactions with online harms.
- **Interviews with 21 professionals** (e.g., youth workers, educators and online safety specialists) who have supported children and young people experiencing online harms.

To ensure the study maintained a youth focus, the research team worked with a **Youth Advisory Panel** made up of young people aged 15-18 with lived experiences of online harms, to guide and support the study. They provided a valuable youth perspective on the online hazard definitions, input into the development of research tools, and supported the interpretation of the findings.

Study findings

[2] This is the impact of potentially harmful content (excluding illegal content) OR 'hazards', this is different to 'online harm' the policy area as a whole

Online hazards

For the children and young people who took part in this study, being online is part of their everyday activities. They reported engaging with a variety of positive information and activities online, which support them to develop and maintain social connections, engage in leisure activities, learning and education, as well as popular culture. However, children and young people reported that they also often encountered potentially harmful online content. Participants agreed that the potentially harmful online hazards (which were the focus of this study and excluded illegal hazards) were prevalent online. Children and young people in the study had experienced these and recognised them to be potential hazards. If they had encountered hazards but felt unaffected by them, they did not always consider them to be harmful. For example, children and young people had commonly seen health or political disinformation online but did not feel affected, and so did not categorise it as harmful content.

Individual perceptions of online hazards and resulting harms were subjective to each child and young person. What counted as harmful to one child or young person was not generalisable to all. Adults and children/young people's concerns about online content were not always aligned. Content that could seem harmless to adults, such as mildly scary material, news information, and challenging games, could cause short-term worry or distress to young people. Parents and carers however, expressed worry about online content that children and young people did not report, such as, violence and nudity in online games or dangerous stunts and challenges. Similarly, parents/carers reported that younger children had experienced online abuse, but the child had not remembered the incident as harmful. This finding suggests that some hazards may bypass adults or children/young people because they did not identify the content as harmful. Finally, the different types of online hazards were not mutually exclusive. For example, children and young people reported overlaps between the spread of disinformation and abuse targeted at a group of people online.

Intersection of online harms with demographic characteristics

Professionals believed that all children and young people were vulnerable to experiencing online hazards and harms. They emphasised that vulnerability is changeable, depending on the child's wider circumstances. Nevertheless, professionals identified groups of children and young people whom they considered may be more at-risk of experiencing and being impacted by online hazards and harms. These included children and young people:

- with limited offline social support from friends and family, seeking connections online
- with personal devices and trusted by parents/carers to have unsupervised online access
- with special educational needs and disabilities
- who experience bullying or discrimination offline
- with pre-existing mental health difficulties, and without access to formal support
- very young children and those less experienced in navigating online spaces

Additionally, certain groups of children and young people were considered more at risk of specific hazards. These included:

- Teenage girls (13-17 years old) were identified at risk of being influenced by body-image content, receiving unwanted contact, requests, and links to inappropriate content (e.g., pornography) from male peers.
- Teenage boys (13-17 years old) were identified at risk of exposure to inappropriate content, including pornography, and engaging with content showing dangerous stunts and challenges.

Severity and long-term impacts

Interviews with children and young people, parents/carers and professionals suggest that the presence of offline protections or vulnerabilities intersected with children's and young people's online experiences and were important contextual factors that changed the likelihood of hazards being encountered and causing harm. Children and young people who were vulnerable offline due to age, developmental maturity, lack of social networks, experience of discrimination, were also vulnerable online. These wider vulnerabilities made children and young people more susceptible to experiencing particular hazards, not disclosing these, and experiencing harms. For example, those experiencing abuse offline were likely to experience it online as well. Similarly, online content about body-image, self-harm, suicide, illegal activity and disinformation, could reinforce offline views and behaviours.

In contrast, offline protective factors, such as the presence of supportive social networks, skills and confidence to identify and navigate online hazards, also protected children and young people from exposure to harms from online content. Empathetic responses and effective aftercare (from family, peers, or formal services) helped children and young people feel listened to and minimised further harm. However, remaining silent and not seeking support, limited young people's access to harm reduction information and was linked to experiencing long-term harm. Children and young people faced several barriers to disclosing online hazards to adults and peers. These included:

- the absence of trusted adults or peers
- not feeling listened to or supported
- fear of judgement from others
- fear of punishment, specifically that parents/carers would restrict access to devices and the internet
- having to disclose engagement in online behaviours that young people thought others would disapprove of. For instance, communicating with strangers online or accessing age-restricted platforms and content
- a normalisation of such content among children and young people, and a perception that it has to be tolerated
- a lack of trust in offline and online reporting procedures

Parents, carers and professionals accounts suggested that certain hazards had a greater impact on children's and young people's behaviour, physical and mental health. Sustained and repetitive abuse, for instance, was typically experienced both online and offline and caused a great deal of distress to children and young people. Whereas hazards that children and young people perceived to be one-off

or minor, which they could quickly resolve (e.g., stopping unwanted contact via blocking functions) or could simply ignore, were categorised as irritating rather than viewed as harmful.

Having a clear resolution to hazards limited the negative impacts for children and young people. For example, where unwanted contact or abuse was stopped, when fake accounts were removed, or when children and young people felt they had control over social media feeds. Having no clear resolution, lengthy reporting processes or having further inappropriate content recommended to them via platform algorithms, affected the severity and length of time that harmful impacts were experienced. This also affected children's and young people's confidence to seek help in the future.

Key findings for each online hazard

ONLINE ABUSE

Hazards: Cyberbullying, abuse, trolling, harassment targeting an individual or group

Main risks: Experiencing abuse or discrimination offline

Key harms: Repetitive and sustained abuse was linked to long-term psychological distress

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

Hazards: Pornography, sexual content, nudity, violence

Main risks: Teenage boys were considered most at risk of viewing pornography; ease of accessing content and bypassing age verifications; online platforms recommending more extreme content; being shown or sent sexual content or pornography unsolicited

Key harms: Short-term discomfort or upset; normalisation of content and its behaviours over the longer-term; consequences for teenage girls being sent or shown unwanted inappropriate content from men e.g., cautiousness, wellbeing impacts, impacts on relationships and perceptions of male peers

PROMOTION OF RISKY BEHAVIOURS

Hazards: Promotion of unhealthy body-image, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide, dangerous challenges and stunts

Main risks: Teenage girls were considered more at risk of being influenced by body-image and eating disorder content, those with pre-existing mental health conditions were at risk of seeking out self-harm and suicide content, teenage boys were considered at risk of being influenced by challenges and stunts

Ease of accessing content was a risk, as well as online platforms recommending similar content and suggesting hazardous content alongside educational information

Absence of mental health support

Key harms: Psychological distress, reinforcing existing mental health vulnerabilities

PROMOTION OF ILLEGAL ACTIVITY

Hazards: Promotion of illegal activity such as stealing, drug use, carrying a weapon, to activities prohibited for under 18s, such as smoking, vaping, drinking

Main risks: Content posted by known peers engaging in these activities, the extent to which online content reflected young people's offline realities, compelling justifications to engage in these behaviours

Key harms: Normalisation of the activity, uncertainty about the boundary between illegal and legal activity, perception that black, Asian and minority ethnic young people would be disproportionately affected by acting on content, compared with white peers

DISINFORMATION

Hazards: Disinformation and misinformation

Main risks: The credibility and relationship to the content creator or sharer, alignment of the information to personal views and its intersection with age, and personal characteristics, e.g., race, sex, gender identify and LGBTQ+

Key harms: Reinforce existing views, psychological distress due to experience of discrimination and spread of disinformation about a group

Approaches to better understand and measure the impacts

Participants' accounts suggested that the relationship between online hazards, risks and harms is highly nuanced. The evidence underlined the importance of explicitly considering the protective factors (e.g., presence of offline support networks) and wider non-harmful impacts and learning for children, young people and their parents/carers (e.g., learning how to identify and navigate online hazards) as part of an understanding of hazards, risks and harms.

Each of the categories of participants discussed risk factors for harm in the context of protective factors too – those that mitigate against the risk that hazards translate into actual harm. For example, the presence or absence of offline support from trusted adults and peers or developmental maturity. Children and young people were not passive recipients of online content. Teenagers explained that they had learnt from negative past online experiences and developed strategies to safeguard themselves. They shared this knowledge with peers and siblings too.

Collectively, research participants suggested several measures that tech companies should make to better safeguard children and young people online. However, they also acknowledged that the responsibility of protecting children and young people online cannot solely lie with tech companies and suggested that there are limits to artificial intelligence detecting and removing inappropriate content. Professionals emphasised the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach to protecting children and young people online and offline. Professionals believed this involved tech companies, professionals, parents/carers, children and young people working together. Upskilling all stakeholders to know how to spot hazards, manage them and respond effectively, was considered central to safeguarding children and young people online.

Approaches to understand and measure the impacts of online harms should consider:

- The inclusion of the protective factors, alongside the risks
- The inclusion of the non-harmful impacts and learning for children and young people, alongside the harms
- Consideration of the risks and harms in the context of children and young people's wider lives, and their intersection with personal characteristics
- Future research may focus on children aged 8-12 years or children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, to explore the specific vulnerabilities and protections they experience in navigating online hazards
- Future studies would benefit from a multi-stakeholder perspective to include the experiences of: children and young people, parents/carers and professionals, to provide a holistic and nuanced understanding of how online hazards are understood, experienced and navigated
- Finally, a key message from this study is the speed at which online developments take place, and the importance of parents/carers and professionals staying up to date with these too, so they can support children and young people to navigate new online spaces and safeguard them from harm.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the support and input of many people.

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- Free2Be
- Greater London Authority
- HeadStart Kernow
- HideOut Youth Zones
- Highworth Combined School
- Islington and Camden Violence Reduction Unit Parental Support Project in partnership with The Social Switch Project
- Iver Village School
- Participation People
- McPinn
- Migrant Centre Northern Ireland
- NSPCC
- SWGfL
- The Proud Trust
- Youth Work Unit
- We are with You
- Wootton Park School

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Finally, we thank the colleagues at **Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport** and **Ofcom** who participated in the workshop to define online hazards.

Introduction

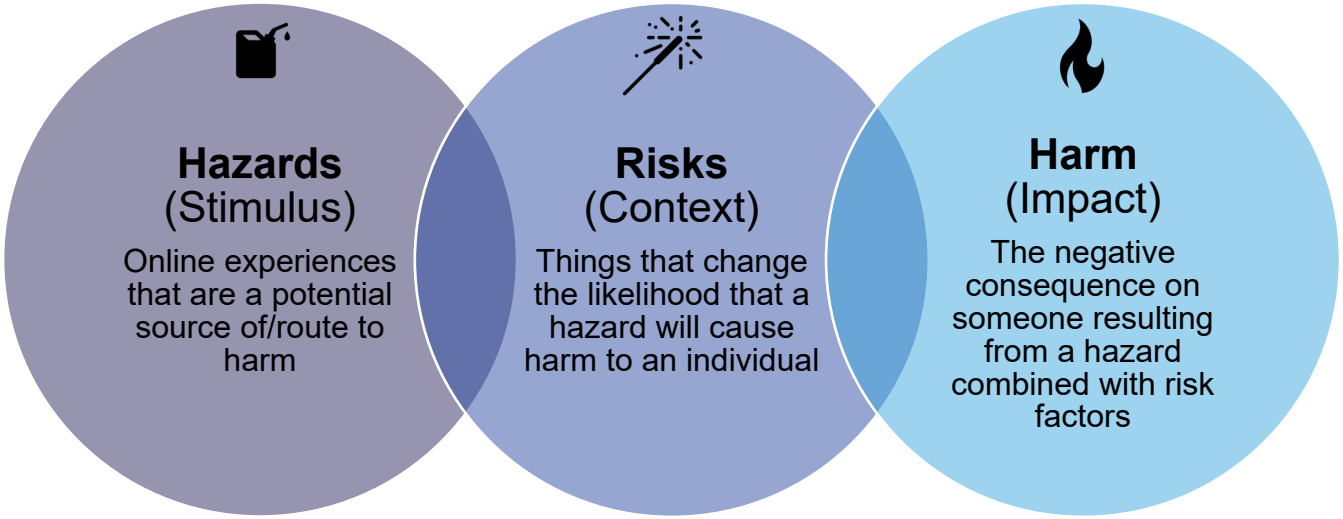
The Online Safety Bill[3] introduced to parliament on the 17th of March 2022, provides a new regulatory framework to tackle harmful content and activity online. The Bill sets out duties on services in scope to improve the safety of their users and the strongest protections in the Bill are for children and young people.

While there is existing literature about the presence of online harms for children and young people, the evidence on the severity and outcomes of potentially harmful content to children, such as online abuse, pornography, violent content and disinformation, is not as well understood as it could be, nor are the long-term consequences.

1.1 'Hazards, Risks and Harms' framework

It is in this context that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) commissioned a feasibility study to assess the effective ways to measure a number of harmful content[4]. The work was carried out by Revealing Reality and took place in the autumn of 2021, consisting of desk research and qualitative interviews. The study proposed a theoretical framework model to conceptualise online harm, using a parallel from the Health and Safety sector. This breaks down the concept of 'online harm' into Hazards, Risks and Harms, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Hazards, Risks and Harms conceptual framework for understanding online harms



It was with reference to the findings and recommendations from the feasibility study that DCMS commissioned the current qualitative study to investigate the impacts of online harms on children and young people.

[3] The draft Online Safety Bill. [online] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-online-safety-bill
[4] Revealing Reality, 2021: Online Harms feasibility study

1.2 Qualitative research to investigate the impact of online harms on children

DCMS commissioned Ecorys UK, an independent and impartial research organisation, in partnership with Dr Faith Gordon[5] to lead a qualitative study to address gaps in the evidence about the impact of harmful online content for children and young people. Illegal content was out of scope for this research. This study built on the prior feasibility study, by considering how the 'hazards, risks, harm' framework fits with children's and young people's lived experiences of online harms.

This report summarises the findings from qualitative research with children, young people, parents/carers and youth workers, educators and online safety professionals. It provides evidence about how harmful content is understood and experienced by children and young people, and the effect this has on individuals over time, to their health, wellbeing, and behaviours. The study ran from January to April 2022.

1.2.2 Online hazards: focus of this study

This study focused on five types of online hazards as shown in the table below. Illegal content was out of scope for this research.

Table 1. Categorisation of potentially harmful online hazards used in the study

Type of online hazard	Hazards include
Online abuse	• Cyberbullying • Abuse • Trolling • Harassment
Inappropriate content	• Pornography • Sexual content • Nudity • Violent content
Promotion of risky and dangerous behaviours	• The promotion of unhealthy body-image; eating disorders; self-harm and suicide • The promotion of dangerous challenges and dangerous stunts
Promotion of illegal behaviours	• The promotion of illegal activity
Disinformation	• Disinformation • Misinformation

1.2.3 Research aims and objectives

The aim of this study was to better understand the impacts of harmful online content on children and young people, aged 8-17 across the UK. However, the final achieved sample included children and young people across the 9-18 age range. Specifically, this qualitative study sought to:

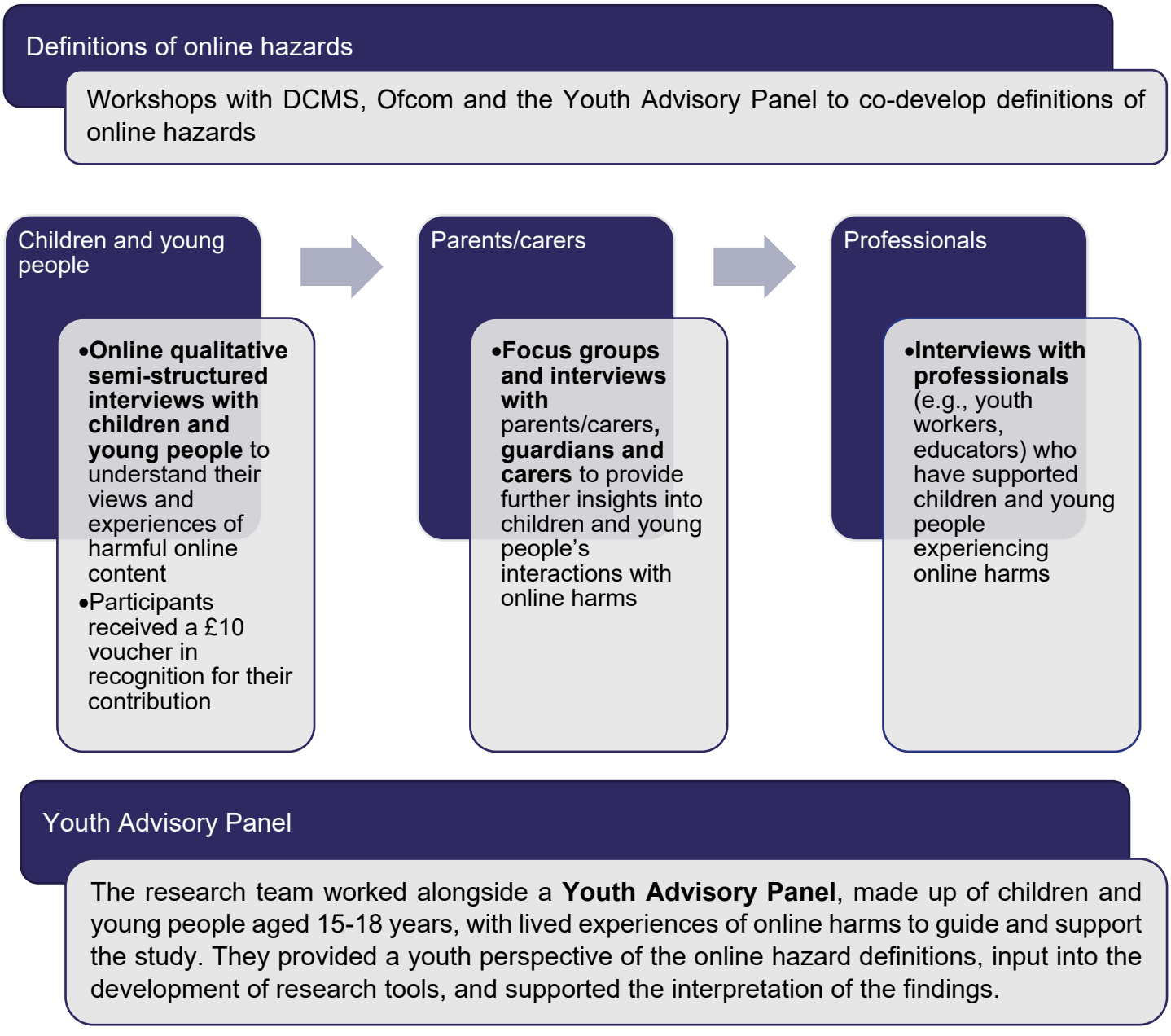
[5] Dr Faith Gordon is an Associate Professor in Law at the Australian National University and an Associate Research Fellow, Information Law and Policy Centre, IALS, London. Associate Professor Gordon is lead author of Gordon, F. (2021) *Online Harms Experienced by Children and Young People: 'Acceptable Use' and Regulation.* London: Catch22/The Social Switch Project. (113 pages). Accessible online here: https://www.thesocialswitchproject.org.uk/online-harms-research

- Consider definitions of online hazards in **the real-world context** of children's and young people's lives
- Identify any **new hazards** experienced by children and young people or their peer groups
- Assess the **severity and long-term impacts** of harms on behaviour and physical and mental health of children and young people
- Explore the **intersection of online harms with demographic characteristics**: e.g., by age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and socio-economic background
- Consider how DCMS can take **a more nuanced approach to understand and measure the impacts** of online harms.

1.2.4 Methods

This qualitative study was designed to explore the views and experiences of children and young people, parents , carers, guardians and professionals. The research team was supported by a Youth Advisory Panel, who helped to inform the research process throughout. Details of the study method are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Study method



1.2.5 Recruitment

Study participants were recruited via a broad range of youth or internet safety focused organisations. This approach was chosen to support careful recruitment of participants, given the sensitive subject matter, and to make the best use of the expertise and relationships held by intermediaries. It also allowed for appropriate presentation of information during recruitment and support following interviews. In practical terms, the research team contacted relevant organisations, who cascaded recruitment materials to children, young people, parents, carers and professionals, as appropriate.

Children and young people registered their interest to take part in the study via a short screening questionnaire (see appendix 1), which assessed eligibility and willingness to take part, as well as written parental consent for under 16s. The three eligibility criteria were:

- Aged between 8-17 years old (two young people aged 18 were also included in the sample, who focused on their online experiences from the ages of 8-17 years old)
- Living in the UK
- Experience of at least one of the types of harmful online content in scope of this research (see Table 1)

Parents, carers and professionals contacted the research team directly to request to take part.

1.2.6 Achieved sample

A total of 64 participants took part: 33 children and young people, 10 parents/carers and 21 professionals. Table 2a/b show the achieved sample of children young people by key demographic groups and professionals.

Table 2a. Achieved young person sample, by key sampling characteristics

Sample criteria	Number
Age	
9-15	9
16-17	22
18	2
Gender	
Female	25
Male	8
Ethnicity	
Asian or Asian British	4
Black or Black British, Caribbean or African	5
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	2
White	22
Disability	2

Table 2b. Achieved professional sample, by expertise

Professional expertise	Number
Education	4
Internet safety	3
Youth charities	4
Youth work	7
Other, e.g., Migration support, Substance support	3

1.2.7 Fieldwork

All fieldwork took place remotely, online or by telephone. A topic guide was used to facilitate discussions. A tailored topic guide was designed for each participant type: children and young

people, parents/carers and professionals (see Appendix 2 for full topic guides). The child and young person topic guides broadly explored:

- Participant background: who they live with, how they spend their free time
- What they usually do online, what they like and dislike about online spaces
- An overview of the types of hazards experienced
- The context of the experience, e.g., who they were with, how they responded, who they informed
- The impacts of the hazards for them in the short and longer-term
- Suggestions for safeguarding children and young people from online hazards

The parent/carer and professional topic guides broadly explored:

- Parent/carer background: who they live with, ages of children
- Professional background: job role, usual responsibilities, services offered and age ranges of children and young people they work with
- Digital skills and confidence navigating online spaces
- What children and young people usually do online, and levels of confidence that they know what children and young people access online
- An overview of the types of hazards children and young people have experienced
- The context of the experience, e.g., how they found out about the incident, what actions were taken
- The impacts of the hazards on children and young people and others in the short and longer-term
- Suggestions for safeguarding children and young people from online hazards

1.2.8 Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were recorded, with participant permission, and auto-transcribed. An analytical framework was developed, following familiarisation of the transcript data and the key themes that emerged from the data. The data was managed and analysed in NVivo using the Framework approach. Framework is a qualitative data analysis method, which uses a 'matrix' approach. Transcript data from each interview and focus group was coded and summarised under each theme (e.g., participant background, hazard, risk, harm, suggestions) within the analytical framework. The qualitative data was then systematically and thematically analysed to explore the range of participants' experiences and views, identifying similarities and differences based on key characteristics, where possible. This approach allowed for thorough analysis of the data and comparisons between cases (looking at what different participant groups said about the same types of hazards) and within cases (looking at how a person or group's opinions on one type of hazard related to their views on another). The use of NVivo software ensured that analysis was fully documented, and conclusions can be clearly linked back to the original source data.

As a final step in our analysis, the Youth Advisory Panel and children and young people who participated in the study (aged 16-17) were invited to a workshop to hear about the findings. This provided an opportunity to sense-check the findings and make sure our interpretations of the data resonated with children and young people's lived experiences. Children's and young people's feedback was incorporated into this report.

1.2.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Ecorys Research Ethics Committee in January 2021. Ensuring the highest ethical standards were met was vital i n this study given the involvement of children and young people and the sensitive topics being discussed. To safeguard all participants and study stakeholders, our key ethical measures included:

- **Careful recruitment** and ensuring **informed consent** to participate. Youth organisations acted as recruitment gatekeepers. Organisations were sent an initial email with details of the study and a request to support recruitment. Interested and willing organisations were then followed up with a telephone briefing to provide more detail about the study, set-out the eligibility criteria for participation and make clear what taking part involved. They then informed individuals about the study, as appropriate.
- **Study leaflets** for children, young people, parents/carers and professionals were designed to provide clear information about the study, its purpose, what participation involved and how to register interest in taking part. These were accompanied by a privacy notice detailing how the information collected would be processed.
- **Screening questionnaire**. Children and young people completed a short screening questionnaire to register their interest in taking part. Those aged 8-15 years were encouraged to complete the questionnaire with a trusted adult. The screener checked eligibility and willingness to take part. Children and young people were asked which online harms they had experienced, and which they were comfortable to discuss in an interview. They were also asked if they preferred a male or female interviewer. The screener triggered a request for parent/carer consent for under 16s.
- **Parent/carer consent** was required for those aged under 16. Parents/carers were asked to be present during interviews with 8 to 10-year-olds, and encouraged to be nearby (but not necessarily present) for interviews with 11 to 15-year-olds, respecting the child or young person's preference. When parents/carers were present, the researcher was clear that the interview should focus on the child's or young person's views and experiences.
- All interviews and focus groups were **participant-led**. At the start of each interview/focus group, the researcher reiterated the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the areas of discussion, the right to skip questions and stop taking part at any time, as well as how the information would be processed and reported on. Children and young people gave informed consent for involvement in the study and registered the harms they had experienced and were comfortable discussing in interviews as part of the screening questionnaire. The researcher then only asked about these experiences, reflecting the language used by the child or young person throughout. Researchers did not explore any online harms the child or young person had not experienced or did not want to discuss. Across all interviews/focus groups, there were no safeguarding disclosures or incidents of distress caused.
- Following interviews/focus groups, all children and young people and parents/carers were sent **signposting information** as standard. All children and young people received a £10 voucher in recognition of their time and contribution.
- All **researchers** held a clean DBS check and had received safeguarding awareness training. All staff are aware of their duty to contact the Ecorys safeguarding lead on any reportable incidents. Following interviews/focus groups, researchers had access to in-house and external emotional and wellbeing support, if required.

1.2.10 Study limitations and caveats

As with any study, the data limitations and caveats must be identified. This was a qualitative study, which aimed to help explain and contextualise children and young people's online behaviours and experiences, guided by the research topics set by the study, and with a focus on depth of inquiry, lived experience and 'real world' examples. The findings should be taken as illustrative, rather than generalisable to the wider population of children and young people. The report does not seek to quantify or assess the prevalence of online hazards or harms among the target group.

The report provides a snapshot of views from a finite sample of children and young people, parents and carers, and professionals, drawing out themes and findings. The final achieved sample met the requirements of allowing for an exploration of all of the key themes and topics for the study, without a need to adjust to the analytical approach and without documented gaps for any of the main topics. The research satisfied the 'saturation principle' for qualitative research, whereby interviews conducted in the later stages of the project largely reinforced and reflected the body of evidence from the study, with diminishing returns in terms of identifying completely new themes or issues.

The research included a diverse cross-section of children and young people according to age, gender and ethnic background. When interpreting the findings, however, it should be noted that the final sample was skewed towards older children and teenagers (13+). This was due to the greater difficulty of engaging and recruiting younger children and their families in the context of the sensitive subject matter and concerns around age appropriateness. The findings should be interpreted in this context, and further research with younger children and their families may be beneficial in future. There was also proportionate over-representation of girls compared with boys in the sample. Where findings have an explicit gendered dimension, this is clearly specified within the report.

1.3 Report structure

The report is separated into seven sections:

- Firstly, the definitions of potentially harmful content agreed with DCMS and Ofcom for the purposes of this study are presented. These definitions provide a framework for the focus of the study.
- The study findings are then summarised across six sub-sections:
  - The first looks at participant views across the five hazards, the overarching risk and protective factors for children and young people online, and differential harms by demographic groups.
  - The study findings are then separated by the five hazards of interest:
    - Online abuse
    - Inappropriate content
    - The promotion of risky or dangerous behaviours
    - The promotion of illegal behaviours
    - Disinformation

    Each of these sub-sections is reported in a consistent format:
    - The hazard is initially **defined**
    - Participant experiences of the **hazard are then described**
    - The **risk and protective factors** for each hazard are outlined and appraised, in terms of their potential to cause harm. Differences by demographic groups are considered where possible
    - Similarly, the **harms and wider impacts** experienced by children and young people as a result of each hazard are discussed
    - **Participant suggestions** to safeguard children and young people from online hazards and potential harm are outlined
    - Each section concludes with a **case illustration** to bring the findings to life. These have been informed directly by the data collected. The case illustrations incorporate experiences of several participants and do not focus on any one participant, to protect their anonymity. All names used are fictitious.
- Finally, the **conclusions** provide a summary of the findings and key messages from this study.

Definitions of online hazards

At the outset of the study, Ecorys facilitated two workshops to formulate the working definitions of online hazards. One workshop was held with **17 senior stakeholders (analytical and policy staff) from DCMS and Ofcom** (the intended online safety regulator). Another workshop was held with the study's **Youth Advisory Panel** to provide a youth perspective on the definitions. A further aim of this workshop was to identify any discrepancies in how children and young people and experts perceive hazards.

Workshop attendees were presented with a set of definitions taken from the Online Harms Feasibility Study[6] and DCMS' specification for this study. Attendees were asked to consider whether the definitions were sufficient or required amendments.

The table provides a working definition for each type of online hazard. It outlines each hazard and the definition based on the findings from the 'working definitions' workshops.

Hazard	Definition
ONLINE ABUSE **Cyberbullying** **Abuse** **Trolling** **Harassment**	These hazards include a wide range of activity from name calling, insulting or intimidating remarks or stereotypes, spreading malicious rumours or gossip, mobbing or posting embarrassing or humiliating images, emojis or memes without consent; as well as actions that exclude an individual from a group. They could be in the form of unwanted messages or contact from others. Messages may not necessarily be obviously unpleasant; they could be friendly or flirtatious. Importantly, the contact or content is unwanted and makes the recipient feel uncomfortable. They could be targeted at an individual or at a group of people due to their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation or disability; or personal attributes e.g., height, appearance, or just 'being different'. They could be a single one-off act or repetitive in nature. They could form part of behaviours and experiences that occur both online and offline.
INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT **Pornography**	**Content that is of such a nature that it must reasonably be assumed to have been produced solely or principally for the purpose of sexual arousal.** Notes This is a legal definition. Section 62(3) of the *Coroners and Criminal Justice Act 2009 and section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008* (offence of possession of extreme pornographic images). We are concerned here specifically with pornography that is legal for those aged 18+ but is not appropriate for under 18-year-olds to view/have access to. Note that obscene pornographic material and child sexual abuse imagery are illegal forms of content.

[6] Revealing Reality, 2021: Online Harms feasibility study

Hazard	Definition
INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT **Sexual activity** (excluding pornography)	**Content containing sexual references or remarks that may not be appropriate for children depending on their age.** Notes Hazards may include sexual memes and humour, and social media posts by adults or older children or young people which refer to sex. It may also include content that simulates sexual activity. Educational content about sexual health, consent and the legal age of consent, are not considered hazards. The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) works with a number of on demand services to give age ratings for video content available for download and streaming. BBFC age ratings are intended to help families and children make viewing decisions. For instance: • **U rating:** Contains no sexual context • **PG rating:** Sexual activity may be implied but should be discreet and infrequent. Mild sex references and innuendo only. • **12/12A rating:** Sexual activity may be briefly and discreetly portrayed. Moderate sex references are permitted, but frequent crude references are unlikely to be acceptable. • **15 rating:** Sexual activity may be portrayed, but usually without strong detail. There may be strong verbal references to sexual behaviour. Repeated very strong references, particularly those using pornographic language, are unlikely to be acceptable. Works whose primary purpose is sexual arousal are unacceptable. This hazard excludes pornography, which is defined separately, above.
INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT **Nudity** (non-sexual)	**Content that includes adult nudity that may not be appropriate for children depending on their age.** Notes BBFC ratings use the following classifications: • **U rating:** Occasional nudity, with no sexual context • **PG rating:** There may be nudity with no sexual context • **12/12A rating:** There may be nudity, but in a sexual context it must be brief and discreet. • **15 rating:** There are no constraints on nudity in a non-sexual or educational context. Sexual nudity may be permitted but strong detail is likely to be brief or presented in a comic context.
INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT **Violent content**	**Content showing violence that may not be appropriate for children depending on their age. Content may include fights and injury, the use of weapons to cause harm, the infliction of pain, domestic violence, gang violence or sexual aggression.** Notes BBFC ratings use the following classifications:

	Hazard	Definition
		• **U rating:** Violence will generally be very mild. Mild violence may be acceptable if it is justified by context (for example, comedic, animated, wholly unrealistic). • **PG rating:** Violence will usually be mild. However, there may be moderate violence, without detail, if justified by its context (for example, history, comedy, or fantasy). • **12/12A rating:** There may be moderate violence, but it should not dwell on detail. There should be no emphasis on injuries or blood, but occasional gory moments may be permitted if justified by the context. • **15 rating:** Violence may be strong but should not dwell on the infliction of pain or injury. The strongest gory images are unlikely to be acceptable. Strong sadistic violence is also unlikely to be acceptable.
	PROMOTION OF RISKY OR DANGEROUS BEHAVIOUR **Body-image content**	**Content that promotes or could give rise to unhealthy or negative body image and associated behaviours.** Notes These hazards include but are not limited to: • Content depicting digitally altered body images • Content promoting the idea of being underweight e.g., "Thinspiration" blogs or articles or online communities which describe themselves as "pro-ana", "pro-anaa" or "pro-mia" • Content that promotes binge-eating • Content that promotes extreme body building • Content that promotes an 'ideal' body type Educational content about healthy exercise and diets or body positivity are not considered hazards.
	Pro-self-harm content	**Content that provides information on how to self-harm, and online communities which encourage each other to self-harm.**
	Pro-suicide content	**Content that provides information on how to die by suicide, or content which depicts another individual dying by suicide.**
	Dangerous stunts or challenges	**Content showing viewers how to perform dangerous stunts or dangerous challenges, as well as pranks. This also includes dares trending online.**
	PROMOTION OF ILLEGAL ACTIVITY **Content promoting illegal activity**	**Content promoting illegal activity. These hazards include but are not limited to content which promotes:** • the use or sale of illegal drugs/substances (including prescription drugs) • gang involvement • the use of, or carrying of a weapon • sex work

Hazard	Definition
Content promoting underage drinking, smoking and gambling	**Content promoting illegal activity for children and young people. These hazards include but are not limited to content which promotes:** • children (under 18 years old) drinking alcohol, including excessive or binge drinking • smoking • information (e.g., discussion boards) on where minors could obtain alcohol or cigarettes • gambling
Disinformation	The ***deliberate*** creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain. This can include content (posts, blogs, articles or private messages) which deny the existence of Covid-19, climate change or other widely accepted phenomenon, or promote ideologies (e.g., anti-vax movement)
Misinformation	The ***unintentional*** creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that may deceive and mislead audiences.
Extremist content	Content which promotes far-right or far-left-wing political information. This content may include both misinformation and disinformation.

What is meant by 'promotion'?

The workshop participants were not asked to define what is meant by 'promotion'. Senior stakeholders were generally in agreement with the below definition, taken from the Online Harms Feasibility Study[7].

'Promotion' is defined as anything which makes a behaviour easier to do or that motivates people to do it more. Promoting harmful behaviours online can take a number of different forms including:

- Influencing or encouraging an individual to do something
- Offering instructions and information about how to do a particular activity
- Providing knowledge about an activity
- Fostering a sense of community and engagement around a particular topic
- Making certain behaviour or actions seem aspirational or glamourous and appealing
- Making a behaviour or action seem normal

[7] Revealing Reality, 2021: Online Harms feasibility study

Views and experiences of legal but harmful online content

Before detailing the findings of each hazard, this section outlines participant views and experiences of online harms more broadly. This section briefly outlines the benefits of online activity children and young people reported. It then focuses on how online hazards were understood, experienced, and navigated, drawing out the similarities and differences between children, young people, parents/carers and professionals' perspectives. It concludes with participants' suggestions on measures that would best safeguard children and young people online.

3.1 Benefits of online activity

For children and young people, being online was part of their everyday activities. They named multiple benefits they gained through online spaces. They enjoyed accessing social media platforms, gaming apps, streaming services, search engines and general information. They engaged with a variety of positive information and activities online which supported them to develop and maintain social connections, engage in leisure activities, learning and education, as well as engagement with popular culture.

3.2 Online hazards

As evidenced in previous research, children and young people were generally alert to, and had encountered a range of online hazards. Children and young people were concerned about online hazards related to the behaviours of other users, unpleasant or inappropriate content, and the amount of time they spent online. Children and young people recognised the range of online hazards focused on, in this study. Children and young people reported overlaps between hazards, for example, the spread of disinformation about gender identities, and abuse targeted at transgender, non-binary and gender variant people online.

Parents/carers and professionals were also familiar with potential hazards and the harms these can have on children and young people. However, children's, young people's and adults' concerns about online content were not always aligned. For example, all types of participants reported that content that could seem harmless to adults, such as mildly scary material (e.g., ghost stories), news information, and challenging games, may in fact cause short-term worry or distress to children and young people. Similarly, parents/carers expressed worry about online content that children and young people did not report, such as violence and nudity in games. Professionals stressed that perceptions of hazards are subjective to each individual and therefore difficult to define.

> "We talk about young people as a single entity, whereas actually it's millions of different people with different personalities and levels of resilience." **Internet safety professional**

Professionals and young people generally accepted that all children and young people would encounter online hazards in some form. They stressed that the presence of offline vulnerabilities and protections intersected with online experiences and were important factors that changed the likelihood that a hazard causes an individual harm.

3.3 Navigating hazards

Teenagers aged 15 to 17-years-olds said that they had learnt how to navigate online spaces as a result of exposure to online hazards. They reported independently managing hazards they deemed to be minor issues. For example, they used platform reporting and blocking functions to stop

unwanted connection requests, and 'not interested' functions or simply ignored inappropriate content or disinformation.

> I still get some videos, I'll be like 'I don't like this', but like that's something about life that you can't control like not everything is going to be for you - I think that's the most important message about [name of social media platform] or whatever. That not everything is made for you, so sometimes you just have to ignore somethings, you can't let it get to you because at the end of the day, you're not the only person in this world. **Girl, 17**

The presence of supportive offline networks was a major theme, offering protection to navigating hazards and associated harms. Participants identified barriers to children and young people disclosing online hazards to others, which in turn increased their risk of exposure to hazards and harms. These included: the absence of trusted adults or peers; not feeling listened to or supported; fear of judgement and negative consequences; and worry that parents/carers will restrict access to devices and the internet. A further barrier to telling adults about online hazards, was disclosing engagement in related online behaviours that children and young people thought others would disapprove of. For instance, communicating with strangers online or accessing age-restricted platforms and content.

> "[Young people need] an environment where if something bad happens, they can disclose it and know they're not going to get told off." **Internet safety professional**

3.4 Vulnerabilities: intersection of online harms with demographic characteristics

Professionals believed that all children and young people were vulnerable to experiencing online hazards and harms. Parents/carers too stressed their concerns about the amount of unpleasant or age-inappropriate content online. Professionals stressed that vulnerability is not static; that it is changeable, depending on the wider circumstances of the child or young person. Nevertheless, professionals identified groups of children and young people who may be more at-risk of online hazards and harms. These included:

- **Children and young people with limited offline social support** from friends and family. These children and young people were considered more vulnerable to seeking connections online with strangers, making them more exposed to potential hazards and harms. Professionals explained that this group of children and young people had limited offline support networks in place to discuss and report hazards to.
- **Children and young people with personal devices and independence from parents/carers**. Unsupervised access to online spaces, increased the risk of encountering hazards. Professionals stressed the importance of parent/carer controls and adult support and guidance to safeguard children and young people online.
- **Children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities**. Individuals who lacked the ability or developmental maturity to identify hazards, were considered more at risk. Professionals were not just worried about this group experiencing hazards from others, but also unknowingly posting inappropriate content or messages that could make other users uncomfortable.
- **Young children.** Parents/carers thought that they had greater control over both the time young children spent online and oversight of the content they accessed, to keep them safe. However, teenagers believed that, while they were skilled in navigating online hazards, they were worried about younger siblings and children. They thought that younger age

groups were inexperienced online users, and therefore less able to identify potential hazards.

Certain groups of children and young people were also considered at greater risk of specific hazards:

- **Children and young people who were bullied or discriminated against offline**, were likely to experience this online too. **Children and** young people were often targeted for being different, based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity.
- **Children and young people with pre-existing mental health difficulties**, and without access to formal support. Professionals suggested that children and young people with pre-existing mental health difficulties may be at greater risk of hazards including, online abuse, body-image content, pro-self-harm, pro-suicide content.
- **Teenage girls** were considered at greater risk of seeing and being influenced by body-image content. They were also considered more at risk of receiving unwanted contact requests and links to inappropriate content (e.g., pornography) from male peers.
- **Teenage boys** were identified at risk of exposure to inappropriate content, including pornography, as well as engaging with content showing dangerous stunts and challenges.

3.5 Digital divides

Parents/carers and professionals reported a divide between their own and children and young people's digital skills and knowledge. Children and young people were aware that parents/carers and professionals had major gaps in their awareness and familiarity with the online platforms children and young people used and associated safeguarding functions.

> "Half the time we're not aware of what they're [teenage children] looking at… and they're not necessarily going to tell us, so yeah, it's difficult." **Parent/carer**

Internet safety professionals believe this generational divide presents key risk factors to preventing hazards and harms. Children's and young people's online activity could easily bypass both professionals and parents/carers, preventing early identification of online harms and provision of support. Furthermore, adults lacked knowledge of the range of potential online hazards; and had limited confidence and ability to support children and young people to address these effectively to minimise harm. They found that adults were not always willing to admit and acknowledge their digital knowledge gaps. Although most schools and many community organisations offer online safety training, the quality can be variable. Furthermore, participants suggested that time-poor professionals and parents/carers may not engage with online safety training. Children and young people described online safety training at school as out-dated, with a focus on platforms they do not tend to use. They highlighted gaps in online safety information about the platforms they regularly used.

3.6 Identifying legal and illegal hazards

Participants – children, young people, parents/carer and professionals - were not always clear at which point online hazards crossed the line from legal to illegal. While some content was generally accepted to be illegal by participants, such as sexting, this was not the case for all hazards. For example, while unwanted contact was generally perceived to be unpleasant, some questioned at which point such contact constituted unlawful activity. Similarly, children and young people reported seeing particular illegal activity so frequently online and offline, such as their peers vaping, that they sometimes forgot whether it was legal or not for under 18s. Professionals provided examples where

children and young people or parents/carers reported online incidents to their school, which were then signposted to the police as the incidents were illegal.

3.7 Impacts and harmful consequences of online hazards

As mentioned above, each child and young person in this study experienced hazards and their impacts subjectively. The findings suggest that all hazards could have potential impacts for children and young people. The length and severity of harmful impacts was closely related to children's or young people's offline vulnerabilities and access to effective support.

While children and young people said they navigated one-off or minor hazards themselves and felt there were minimal ongoing effects relating to these, in contrast, repeated and sustained hazards which targeted an individual, such as online abuse, appeared to have long-lasting health and wellbeing impacts. The combination of offline and online abuse had detrimental effects on children's and young people's wellbeing, confidence and feelings of isolation. Children and young people described how unwanted contact and online abuse increased feelings of anxiety, which affected online and offline behaviours. These incidents could in turn affect children's and young people's school attendance and concentration on academic learning.

Even hazards which adults may not readily recognise as such, for example feeling scared by content, could affect children's and young people's feelings of safety and impact on sleep in the short-term. Body-image content could reduce an individual's self-confidence or influence eating and exercise behaviours, which has potential for long-term harm. Harms could also extend to affecting relationships with friends and family. Parents/carers noted that children and young people could become withdrawn following unpleasant incidents online. Parents/carers, children and young people had disagreements about online information, including disinformation. Additionally, children and young people experienced disagreements and fallouts with friends, these could be short-term or extend over a longer period.

Professionals highlighted the intersectionality of negative impacts for children and young people. For instance, girls belonging to conservative religious communities may experience multiple negative, long-lasting repercussions from within their social circles for posting photos that may not seem obviously inappropriate to others. For example, images of them wearing certain kinds of clothes or being in settings that were not aligned to the religious community's norms and values. Additionally, tech companies could fail to recognise the cultural sensitivities of such content which made it harmful, which caused delays to it being removed.

Having a clear end and resolution to hazards, limited the negative impacts for children and young people. Children and young people wanted clear and quick resolutions to online issues. For them, this meant unwanted contact or abuse was stopped, fake accounts removed, or being able to easily control recommended content on their social media feeds. Having no clear resolution or lengthy reporting processes affected the length of time harmful impacts were experienced and limited confidence to seek help in the future. Additionally, access to sufficient support and aftercare following incidents protected children and young people from long-term harm. This included empathic responses from family and friends to formal mental health support services.

> "If they haven't got the support network around them then it's really hard to recover from something that's happened and I guess it also depends on the level of harm…From a child's perspective, it's about the support they get to rebuild, isn't it? And the impact on their mental wellbeing will be dependent on the emotional support they're able to receive." **Internet safety professional**

Finally, children and young people reported changing their online behaviours as a result of the online hazards they had experienced. Children and young people became more alert to potential hazards, how to spot them and safeguard themselves online. Children and young people reported being more cautious about what they posted online, who they connected with and monitoring the time they spent online. They also shared their learning with peers and siblings to safeguard others.

3.8 Safeguarding children and young people online: a multi-stakeholder responsibility

Professionals, children and young people acknowledged that the responsibility of protecting children and young people online cannot solely lie with tech companies and suggested there are limits to artificial intelligence detecting and removing inappropriate content. Professionals emphasised the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach to protecting children and young people online and offline. Professionals believed this involved tech companies, professionals, parents/carers, children and young people working together. Upskilling stakeholders to know how to spot hazards, manage them and respond effectively was considered central to safeguarding children and young people online.

> "The legislation alone isn't going to necessarily help professionals to help young people. It doesn't matter what young people do online. What matters is how you respond to a disclosure of harm." **Internet safety professional**

Schools often find themselves managing difficulties that started online and continue to play out in the classroom. Schools reported the challenges they faced in policing legal but harmful content, especially when the activities happened off-school sites and involved people who did not attend the school. Education professionals thought there was an unrealistic expectation that schools should support and safeguard young people across the spectrum of risks both offline and online.

> "We cannot be society's policeman as teachers" **Education professional**

Children and young people, especially teenagers, wanted to have the freedom to explore online spaces without tight parental controls. Participants suggested ways tech companies could better protect children and young people from hazards and harms. These included steps to:

- Better police inappropriate content, and in a more nuanced way to avoid removal of educational or positive content
- Monitor authenticity of accounts and posts
- Use child-friendly language within their reporting functions
- Respond to requests to remove content quickly
- Increase trust in reporting processes through transparent reporting of the number of accounts and content that they remove
- Age guides for videos, similar to BBFC age guidelines for films
- Better regulate online advertising, to minimise children and young people being targeted with age-inappropriate content and products
- Make it easier to change social media feeds and the 'see more of what you like' algorithms.

Professionals, children and young people also recommended the need for regular high quality online safety information delivered in schools to equip individuals with the skills and confidence to spot and manage online hazards. Specially, they suggested:

- Media literacy training, which helps children and young people to be aware of potential hazards (e.g., what constitutes abuse) and practical strategies to navigate them (e.g., blocking and reporting functions, privacy settings)
- Training should focus on the platforms that children and young people tend to use
- Spaces for discussion and debate about issues online, to provide children and young people with the skills to critical evaluate online content and assess its merits and potential harm.

In the following sections, the specific findings in relation to each of the five main categories of legal but harmful online content are considered in turn.

Online abuse

4.1 Definition

These hazards include a wide range of activities from name calling, insulting or intimidating remarks or stereotypes, spreading malicious rumours or gossip, mobbing or posting embarrassing or humiliating images, emojis or memes without consent; as well as actions that exclude an individual from a group.

These hazards could be:

- in the form of unwanted contact from others. Content may not necessarily be obviously unpleasant; it could be friendly or flirtatious. Importantly, the contact and its content are unwanted and makes the recipient, feel uncomfortable
- targeted at an individual or at a group of people due to their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or disability; or personal attributes e.g., height, appearance, or just 'being different'
- a single one-off act or repetitive in nature; and could form part of behaviours and experiences that occur both online and offline.

4.2 Hazards

Children and young people identified three forms of abuse which they had experienced or witnessed online: **unwanted contact, abuse targeting an individual, or abuse targeting a group of people**. These hazards included one-off and repetitive incidents. Repetitive abuse was either directed by the same individuals or experienced multiple times by children or young people from different online users.

Unwanted contact from peers and adults, both known and unknown to the child or young person, was experienced across social media and gaming platforms. Children and young people explained that initial contact could appear harmless, for example 'liking' their posts, friendly messages, connection requests, or being added to a group. Exchanges could quickly become unpleasant or worrying, for example, being sent messages, images, and/or videos that made them feel uncomfortable or threatened. Unwanted contact could also be made by estranged family members.

Abuse targeting an individual or a group, based on protected characteristics or simply being different, was experienced first-hand or witnessed by children and young people when online. Abuse was enacted from known people as well as strangers. It took the form of unpleasant public and private messages including threats of harm or violence, negative responses to the child or young person's online posts, uploading unpleasant photos, or setting up fake accounts for the individual being targeted.

> "They get people leaving nasty messages to them or sometimes it could be they've dug up some photos of them and will make funny comments about them, which will really hurt them. They think it's funny and that's how things start." **Migrant support professional**

Children and young people and professionals also reported examples of backlash towards perceived perpetrators of abuse. From individuals being named and identified as bullies in online spaces or users confronting inappropriate language and comments made by children and young people online. Participants reflected that these incidents had impacts for all children and young people involved.

The use of 'fake accounts' was a common feature across each of these hazards. For example, receiving unwanted contact from a fake account or children and young people impersonating others online.

4.3 Risk and protective factors

The key vulnerabilities to experiencing this hazard centred on the child or young person's age, strength of their offline support networks and vulnerabilities to abuse offline. Additionally, a child or young person's ability to navigate these hazards was related to their knowledge of how to report incidents as well as prior experience of reporting incidents.

4.3.1 Age

Age was considered a major risk factor for navigating unwanted contact and online abuse. Teenagers explained that they were not aware of reporting and blocking functions when they were younger. They learnt to identify suspicious contacts and felt more confident declining requests as a result of prior negative online experiences. Similarly, these types of experiences led young people to question their peers about adding unknown users to online groups. Young people also developed strategies to assess potential hazards, for example, reviewing comments attached to videos.

> "You never know what you can trust, whether you can trust the people in the comments or the profiles, but you're more likely to trust the majority." **Girl, 15**

4.3.2 Bullying is experienced online and offline

Children and young people and professionals consistently reported that individuals experienced bullying online and offline simultaneously. It was rarely experienced in online spaces only.

> "If someone's being bullied offline, they'll also be being bullied online." **Youth worker**

Professionals and parents/carers noted that children and young people were targeted because they were perceived as different. This ranged from differences based on their body shape/weight, race, ethnicity, having a disability, migration status, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Young people experienced direct abuse that targeted them specifically, and indirect abuse, such as homophobic sentiments, which targeted a group. Parents/carers were worried about the amount of hateful content in online spaces and its potential impact on children and young people, particularly when abusive content directly or indirectly targeted them.

> "Cyberbullying has been a problem for my child in particular because they're trans, but they don't want to let other people know. They're in a small server game but a lot of the people there are not very open to the LGBTQ+ community. I'm busy trying to teach my child to stand up for themselves and feel proud, but there is homophobia and transphobia in these chat rooms." **Parent/carer**

4.3.3 Support networks

A lack of support networks offline was identified as a risk to experiencing online abuse. The presence of supportive networks helped children and young people to disclose unwanted contact and abuse to a trusted person. Disclosure was a personal choice, based on individual relationships with friends, family, teachers or youth workers. A fear of being judged, blamed, told-off or being punished (e.g., access to devices, the internet, apps or platforms being restricted) were barriers to telling anyone. Additional barriers included embarrassment about the situation, feeling responsible for the incident, and not wanting to worry others.

> "I think a lot of it was down to me, just not saying anything or just not thinking clearly 'cause I'd already been made aware, like don't speak to strangers on the internet. I don't think talking about it [telling friends] really made a difference. They were just worried…I felt like they were kind of judging me rather than supporting me. So, I just kind of kept it to myself." **Girl, 17**

Parents/carers said that children were not always forthcoming about such experiences. Parents/carers explained that they had noticed a change in the child's behaviour (e.g., being withdrawn) and had encouraged them to talk about it.

4.3.4 Intersectionality of discrimination

Professionals stressed the importance of intersectionality for a child or young person's exposure to hazards and vulnerability leading to more severe impacts. For example, young people from an ethnic minority and identifying as LGBTQ+ may experience more types of hazards online. Furthermore, they may not disclose abuse if their offline support networks do not know or accept their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Furthermore, professionals identified children and young people with SEND as more vulnerable to experiencing online abuse. Other users could be unkind about them and make targeted comments. Children and young people with learning disabilities and autism were identified as being vulnerable to seeking connections online but not always being able to distinguish between healthy and harmful connections with others. This risk was also present for children and young people offline too.

4.3.5 Knowing how to navigate hazards

Children and young people were generally aware of online blocking and reporting functions. While they were comfortable doing this with strangers, they were reluctant to take this action when being bullied because they wanted to know what was being said about them.

Individuals considered taking a break from apps and platforms to have respite from abuse. However, this would have also meant removing themselves from positive communities and connections in these online spaces. Therefore, generally children and young people continued to use them.

Even when children and young people disclosed an incident to family or friends, they did not always know the best course of action to take. For instance, peers were sometimes experiencing similar abuse, and unable to advise about how to navigate it. Similarly, the adults in their lives who lacked digital skills and were unfamiliar with the platforms children and young people were using, were also unsure about how to address incidents quickly. Parents/carers sometimes preferred to take the matter to the child's or young person's school. Children and young people did not always agree with this approach, as they did not want teacher to know or be involved in fear of this making the situation worse.

Professionals discussed the importance of assessing reports of online abuse and assessing the safeguarding risk to the children and young people involved. For example, where threats of violence are made, the need to refer these to the police. Professionals also discussed the value of facilitating restorative conversations between children and young people about abuse they have enacted towards one-another.

4.3.6 Prior experiences of reporting abuse

Children and young people were aware of online and offline reporting procedures for abuse. Those who had previously reported incidents involving peers to their school, and had experienced an unsatisfactory outcome, lacked confidence in these reporting procedures.

> "The amount of times that countless people have reported it to the [school]. But it happens so much that it's something that we become, like, desensitised to it, almost like if somebody sends you it, you just block them and move on, but like it can actually harm you." **Girl, 17**

Schools and professionals referred children and young people to therapeutic support to help them cope with impacts of abuse. However, children and young people were left unsatisfied with outcomes when schools were not able to stop the abuse. For example, children and young people reporting online abuse by pupils to the school. Young people perceived that the school made a record of the incident but did not take actions to prevent it happening again.

4.4 Harms and wider impacts

Experiencing unwanted contact and online abuse had implications for all children and young people, particularly for their health and wellbeing, and online behaviours (e.g., causing general anxiety and avoiding online spaces). The findings suggest that not disclosing hazards due to embarrassment and fear of punishment made individuals even more vulnerable to further harm. Professionals explained that remaining silent and not seeking support, limited children's and young people's access to harm reduction information to manage the situation.

4.4.1 Impacts on wellbeing and confidence

Unwanted contact was commonly experienced by children and young people. The first-time it happened generally made children and young people feel worried for their safety, online and offline. Children and young people described being worried that they had done something 'wrong'. Receiving reassurance that the incident was not their fault and would not have lasting consequences, reduced their anxieties about it.

> "I didn't know whether to believe it or not, but some people said that if you clicked on the link they would be able to see where you live. I think that's quite scary. I thought maybe I had clicked the link, and I was really panicking that they could see where I lived. That's not a good experience to go through. It wasn't nice, but I've dealt with it and now I'm fine." **Girl, 15**

Children's and young people's accounts suggest that repetitive abuse and threats directly targeted at them had detrimental wellbeing effects, both in the short and long-term. Unpleasant interactions with friends online and offline caused immediate upset. Online exchanges could spill-over into offline interactions, for example, at school. These incidents resulted in strained relations or breakdowns in relationships with their peers. Children and young people could become further distressed and isolated, when they perceived that their social networks were not emphatic to the situation.

> "My best friend had taken the side of a cyber bully. [They] were supposed to be my best friend. The worst thing was the interaction between the online and real-life world, was more real than I thought it was. Knowing my best friend was still communicating with [bully] but lying to me. I didn't have offline support. The situation never really resolved…never got better, I still feel somewhat affected by it. That's probably the thing that's affected me the most." **Girl, 18**

Participants explained that sustained abuse (usually experienced both online and offline) affected children and young people's mental health, and was a driver for general anxiety, including social anxiety, depression, and in some instances, self-harm and suicide ideation. Professionals highlighted that children's and young people's physical and mental health could be affected in multiple ways, such as sleep disturbance. While parents/carers mentioned the effects on a child's self-esteem, identify, sense of self and homelife. Professionals noted that abuse based on personal characteristics, such as race or ethnicity, made children and young people question their identity and affected their sense of belonging.

Factors associated with negative impacts on wellbeing in the longer term, included where children and young people had reported an incident but were not listed to, or where they perceived that the issue had not been satisfactorily resolved. This contributed to a sense of being left alone with the abuse. The absence of supportive, empathic responses to disclosures, alongside the absence of effective support for poor mental health, also left children and young people feeling alone with the situation. Online reporting functions, for example requests to remove fake accounts, could be prolonged and this extended children's and young people's distress about the situation, until a resolution was achieved.

4.4.2 Impacts on school and academic learning

A further consequence of online abuse included children and young people not wanting to attend school. They wanted to avoid the experience of abuse at school and avoid interactions with peers. Children and young people described not being able to focus on schoolwork and exams as a further result of abuse. Children and young people also reported changing school as a measure to stop online and offline bullying.

4.4.3 Impacts on online behaviour

Around the time of the incidents, children and young people described being anxious in anticipation of encountering further abuse, when they saw app notifications on their phones. Some children and young people chose to reduce their time on the apps and platforms where the abuse took place, to minimise the risk of experiencing further harm. Over the longer-term, children and young people who experienced these hazards felt more cautious about the personal information they shared online, thought about accepting connection requests, and clicking unexpected or suspect links.

> "Since then, I have been really nervous speaking to people online. I mean this was like five years ago now…the time after that I just wouldn't speak with people online like at all. And then…over time I have become more sociable online. A lot of my friends I have met online but they are all like around my area." **Girl, 17**

4.4.4 Developing strategies for online hazards

When children and young people successfully stopped unwanted contact quickly (e.g., blocking users or leaving a group), they still felt irritated by these incidents, but it worried them less. When blocked users created new accounts and continued contact, children and young people reported becoming worried or anxious again, until it stopped. Children and young people also reviewed privacy settings on social media accounts to increase their personal safety online. Furthermore, when children and young people did not feel personally targeted by the abuse or experienced it as a minor incident which was quickly resolved, they did not feel particularly hurt or affected by it.

> "It wasn't a major incident, so I haven't put much thought into it. But at the time I felt creeped out and scared." **Girl, 18**

4.5 Suggestions

Participant suggestions for keeping children and young people safe from online abuse focused on providing practical online safety information, empathetic responses to disclosures of abuse and improving safeguards against fake accounts.

4.5.1 Practical strategies for children and young people to navigate hazards and harms

Children and young people had received clear messages about not interacting with strangers online at home and at school. However, they felt they lacked practical strategies to navigate hazards when

they first encountered them. Children and young people suggested online safety information should include teaching children and young people practically how to maintain boundaries online, and not to feel scared but to instead feel confident to take steps to safeguard themselves. Children and young people suggested practical guidance could help younger children, for example, advice not to click on unexpected links, how to report and block across platforms, and the option to leave groups.

To reduce potential harms, children and young people valued guidance from peers about how they had successfully navigated online hazards. To raise awareness of online behaviours, children and young people suggested testimonials about what counts as abuse and its impacts on others, should also be discussed. They thought this could be helpful to make peers think about the consequences of their online behaviours. In contrast, adults were considered unreliable sources of how to navigate online spaces that children and young people use.

> "Maybe schools need to do more, but schools do stuff but it's just not very good is one of the issues, it can feel quite condescending, especially if the person who is doing the talk doesn't know how doing stuff on the internet works as well" **Girl, 17**

This was echoed by youth sector professionals. They acknowledged that important aspects of children's and young people's lives from education to socialising, take place online. They stressed that telling young people to simply 'switch off and walk away' from abuse is dismissive and too simplistic.

4.5.2 Empathetic responses to disclosures

Empathetic responses (e.g., listening to the child or young person and not judging or telling them off) helped children and young people to feel listened to and minimised further harm. Children and young people strongly suggested that their peers and the adults in their lives should avoid language and responses that blame the victim for the abuse.

4.5.3 Identifying and removing fake accounts and changing direct message functions

Suggestions for tech companies focused on increasing safeguards against the creation of fake accounts and making it easier and quicker to remove fake accounts. Furthermore, reporting functions should use child-friendly language, for example, changing language on reporting functions from 'someone is impersonating me' to 'someone is pretending to be me'. Finally, children and young people also suggested that they should have the ability to set direct message functions to a 'do not contact' status, to control who can contact them. Children and young people also wanted the ability to remove their posts and associated abusive comments from other users.

Case illustration: Sami aged 15

Sami was bullied throughout primary school, and it continued into secondary school. Sami always felt anxious about going to school and tried to avoid going as much as possible. Sami's Mum and teachers knew about the bullying, but apart from being encouraged to go to the school nurse or counselling service, nothing was done to stop the abuse.

Sami loved online gaming. They didn't use their real name in gaming spaces, to keep safe from strangers. Sami played with other gamers and was careful not to connect with anyone from school. Sometimes other gamers would say horrible things to Sami, but they did it to everyone else too. It wasn't nice, but it didn't worry them too much. Occasionally, when other gamers said they were going to "hunt them down", Sami was worried but couldn't tell anyone. They avoided that game for a few days. They couldn't tell their mum, because she didn't know they gamed with people they didn't know in real life. Sami knew she wouldn't understand and be worried. Plus, Sami didn't want her to start controlling their gaming time.

Someone from school sent Sami a link to a fake social media account, impersonating Sami. It had horrible pictures and comments about them. Sami was so upset about it and tried to report it to the social media company, but after a week, it was still there. Sami refused to go to school. Mum was worried Sami was showing signs of depression again. Sami eventually told their mum about the account. Mum took the evidence to school. Sami suspected who had set up the account, but they were never identified. Mum demanded the social media company remove the account, but it took a further two weeks for it to be taken down.

Sami found the whole thing embarrassing. Sami reluctantly went back to school.

All case illustrations have been informed directly by the data collected. The case illustrations incorporate experiences of several participants and do not focus on any one participant. All names used are fictitious to protect participant anonymity.

Inappropriate content

5.1 Definition

Pornography Content that is of such a nature that it must reasonably be assumed to have been produced solely or principally for the purpose of sexual arousal.
Sexual activity (excluding pornography) Content containing sexual references or remarks that may not be appropriate for children depending on their age.
Nudity (non-sexual) Content that includes adult nudity that may not be appropriate for children depending on their age.
Violent content Content showing violence that may not be appropriate for children depending on their age. Content may include fights and injury, the use of weapons to cause harm, the infliction of pain, domestic violence, gang violence or sexual aggression.

5.2 Hazards

The types of hazards experienced by children and young people that fell into this category included pornography, sexual activity and nudity, and violent content.

5.2.1 Pornography

Children and young people reported seeing pornography online and described the ease of accessing this type of content, regardless of their age, from actively bypassing content blockers to simply typing in a website address. A major theme was the child's or young person's choice in viewing this content. Whilst some children and young people accessed pornography out of choice, this was not always the case. Children and young people had been shown pornography unexpectedly by peers on mobile devices or had unknowingly been sent links to pornography through messages from peers. Children and young people reported seeing links to pornography shared in comments by fake 'bot' accounts, by strangers through being added to group chats or being sent direct messages. Sometimes the messages would come from fake accounts, requesting money with the promise of sending further pornographic content. The fake account profiles would also depict pornographic images, visible before clicking any links. Children and young people reported this occurring frequently and discussed the mutual experience amongst their friendship groups.

> "Literally everywhere. All over social media. You get loads of sex-bots all the time literally messaging you on every public page. It's just everywhere." **Boy, 17**

Children and young people also reported watching pornography but then being recommended further, more extreme, pornographic videos by the platform which they had not actively sought and would not have chosen to view.

5.2.2 Sexual activity and nudity

Sexual activity and nudity were not spoken about as separate issues by children, young people, and parents/carers involved in this research. Parents/carers raised concerns around nudity within video games, particularly specific games targeted at and popular amongst younger children, where parents/carers described avatars being able to play as naked characters and get into bed together.

Children and young people, most often girls, also reported receiving inappropriate content depicting sexual activity and nudity by peers or adults. The sending of images depicting adult or minor nudity to children and young people under the age of 18 years old is illegal and therefore out of scope for this study. However, due to this being a major theme in the research, this is reported on separately at the end of this section (see section 5.6).

5.2.3 Violent content

Children and young people described seeing violent content unintentionally. They were shown violent content by peers or accidentally viewed violent videos. They described watching non-violent videos which subsequently and unexpectedly cut to violent scenes or violent videos placed amongst 'harmless' content but with humorous music put to them, for example, featuring graphic content involving animals, death, murder, suicide and beheadings. Children and young people described this content as 'gore'. These videos were shared amongst friendship groups, seen on public forums without warnings, or recommended to them on their social media feeds by social media platforms.

Professionals noted that children and young people also produce violent content themselves. This included filming young people fighting and sharing this amongst peers.

Parents/carers, children and young people did not always agree on the extent to which violent content in video games was harmful. Parents/carers shared concerns about violent content in video games that children and young people played. However, children and young people described the visual and written/verbal violent content they encountered in video games to be light-hearted, humorous, or akin to violence seen offline, for example from peers at school or in movies. While children and young people did not perceive this content to be harmful, parents/carers were worried that the violent content could desensitise children and young people to violence.

5.3 Risk and protective factors

The main risks for children and young people being affected by inappropriate content included: the ability to access the content in the first place due to an absence of content blockers or age verification, or lacking the digital skills to bypass content blockers; the extent to which viewing the content was intentional; the developmental maturity and sensitivity of the child or young person. Children and young people navigated and protected themselves from harm by using the reporting and blocking functions available. However, the ability of perpetrators' to send harmful or inappropriate content to evade blocks constituted a further risk factor.

5.3.1 Likelihood of accessing inappropriate content

Parents/carers, professionals, children and young people that we spoke to said that boys were particularly susceptible to accessing pornography out of curiosity and a normalisation of this behaviour amongst male peer groups.

> "It [watching pornography] was kinda just something that I assumed everyone did." **Boy, 17**

Professionals also said that children and young people who identify as LGBTQ+ may be at increased risk of accessing age inappropriate content to explore gender and sexuality. This is particularly the

case when spaces to explore those topics may not be accessible to them in offline spaces due to the homophobic views of parents, families or peers.

5.3.2 Lack of adequate restrictions and content-blockers

Children and young people, parents/carers and professionals all told us that parental controls, age verification and content blockers designed to protect children and young people from accessing violent content, sexual content and pornography were broadly insufficient. The extent to which parents/carers used these controls varied, with some parents/carers limiting a child's access and others not being aware of controls or discovering them after the child had reported seeing content that they were uncomfortable with. When controls were in place, children and young people reported the ease of getting past restrictions and content blockers.

> "As someone who's quite techy, but I think also just anyone who's able to [use well-known search engines], and has the will, can find VPNs. I can change my DNS server right. It's more kind of a 'game on' challenge than anything else." **Boy, 16**

Furthermore, some pornography websites did not require users to pass through any age verifications in order to access the sites.

5.3.3 Covid-19 lockdowns

Professionals noted that they had seen an increase in the number of children and young people aged between 13 and 18 reporting harms related to pornography during the Covid-19 lockdowns. They believed this was due to children and young people spending more time online, at home, with less supervision due to parents/carers juggling other commitments. They also noted that restrictions to online content are more relaxed at home than at school.

5.3.4 Intentional vs. unintentional access

Children and young people reported seeing pornographic, sexual and violent content they had not opted to view. They believed this experience was common amongst their peers, as content was shared amongst peers through group chats, and regularly unintentionally encountered on social media.

> "If you use more social media, then there's a fair chance that they come into contact with things that you didn't necessarily want to see." **Girl, 17**

Children and young people also said that online platforms had recommended additional, unwanted content, after they had intentionally accessed inappropriate content. For example, a young person explained that after accessing a video on a pornography website, the site recommended further, more extreme, content to them which caused them significant distress, beyond what they would have experienced if they had just seen the video they had intended to.

5.3.5 Age and developmental maturity

Parents/carers and professionals reported that the harms caused by seeing violent content or pornography were due to children and young people not being developmentally mature enough to understand and process the material. Young people reported being more affected by content when they were younger (e.g., aged 12-13 years old), describing pornographic and violent content as more 'shocking' and 'disturbing' to their younger selves. For example, a young person reflected on being significantly distressed after seeing a video of a magic trick where a necklace appeared to be pulled through a person's neck when they were 12-years old. They felt more upset by this content than seeing a video of someone dying when they were 17-years old. This highlights the importance

of the age-appropriateness of content, and the subjective nature of what is 'age appropriate' for each child and young person's cognitive development.

5.3.6 Awareness of the harmful or age-inappropriate nature of content

Parents/carers and professionals reported that younger children or children and young people with learning disabilities, did not always understand the inappropriateness of violent or sexual content or nudity they were exposed to or engaged with online. For example, parents/carers told us of their children's gaming avatars being naked and getting into bed with other online players. Children appeared to be unaffected by the content and did not recognise the content as hazardous, but rather found it funny. However, parents/carers believed their children may have been harmed by the content due to their belief that it was age-inappropriate.

5.3.7 Individual sensitivity level

Children and young people thought that individual sensitivity levels could affect the severity of harm caused by violent content or nudity, which may be seen online but also offline, for example, on television. However, they also placed importance on not dismissing children and young people who are upset by violent content as being 'overly sensitive'. This was seen as dismissing children and young people's lived experiences, and as an excuse to justify inaction on preventing harm.

5.3.8 Navigating hazards

Children and young people told us that they self-managed inappropriate sexual content, pornography and violent content by blocking or avoiding the material, rather than telling adults or accessing support. Whilst children and young people felt confident in their ability to spot fake accounts and bots that shared such content, they were not always aware of blocking and reporting functions available to them across the platforms they used, particularly on forums. When children and young people were able to block or report fake accounts and bots, they sometimes felt overwhelmed, disheartened and disillusioned due to the large number of such accounts.

Children and young people reported closing web pages depicting pornography and sexual content or marking emails depicting such content as spam. However, junk emails depicting sexual content, pornography and violent content were able to bypass spam filters and continue to reach children and young people's main email inboxes.

Children and young people also reported leaving video games servers when content was deemed excessively violent.

5.4 Harms and wider impacts

The findings show that the type and severity of impacts resulting from engaging with or seeing violent or sexual content or pornography were often shaped by the extent to which children's and young people's engagement had been intentional. Harms and wider impacts ranged from changes in wellbeing and views about the other sex, to changes in online and offline behaviours as children and young people adopted strategies of avoidance. Children and young people typically reported limited effects from seeing violent content, however parents/carers highlighted a detrimental effect on younger children.

5.4.1 Impacts on wellbeing

Boys who had accessed pornography were concerned that the content affected their view of sex and relationships, however the level of concern about viewing pornography varied across the group of children and young people who participated in this research. For some boys, their concerns were

around the addictive nature of pornography and having increased sexual thoughts at inappropriate times. Others were more distressed about pornographic content they had seen, particularly when content recommended by the platform had been more extreme than they had anticipated. They described feeling guilty and ashamed, and concerned that the content would cause long-lasting damage.

> "He was like 'I've ruined my life, I've done so much bad stuff, I'm never going to be able to live a normal life again'. He was massively distressed. I was like holy crap what's he gonna tell me? And it was all about accessing pornography." **Parent/carer**

5.4.2 Impacts on girls' perception of boys/men

Girls told us they felt uncomfortable with the normalisation of boys watching pornography. Girls told us they were concerned about how the normalised behaviour of watching pornography amongst male peers affected their attitudes and behaviours towards girls and women.

> "I worry about the way that it impacts them now because I see the way that they treat, kind of, girls in the corridor. And it kind of worries me that seeing that kind of content, that kind of treatment of women, from such a young age, I worry that that's impacted their behaviour now." **Girl, 17**

5.4.3 Impacts on online behaviours

Whilst some children and young people felt unaffected by the violent or sexual content they had seen; others became more cautious of what they were viewing online. A strong theme was that children and young people learnt to review the comments section of content as a way of assessing whether to view it. For example, if the comments suggested that a video was 'disgusting', this would enable them to use their personal agency over what content to view or avoid. Children and young people explained that whilst this was possible on some platforms, on other platforms content 'auto-played' without the comments being visible upfront.

Boys tried to limit their exposure to online pornography through self-monitoring or through implementing additional parental controls with the support of their parents/carers. They tried to limit the impacts of pornography on their views of sex and relationships by reminding themselves that pornography is not always reflective of 'real' and healthy sexual relationships.

After seeing fake accounts and bots posting inappropriate content online, children and young people reported becoming increasingly aware of, and skilled in identifying fake accounts and bots who share violent, sexual or pornographic content. This made them feel confident in reporting such accounts before engaging with them, and reporting them as soon as they see them.

5.4.4 Normalisation of seeing violent or sexual content

Children ang young people were concerned that it was a common and normalised experience to see violent or sexual content online. They were worried this could desensitise them to violence, nudity or unhealthy sexual experiences, offline. Professionals echoed this concern, reporting that children and young people do not always recognise inappropriate sexual content displaying harmful sexual activity in pornography, and may internalise it as normal behaviour. Professionals particularly felt this could be an issue for children and young people who identify as LGBTQ+ and who may not have had the space to explore what 'healthy' sexual relationships look like in offline spaces, due to the homophobic views of parents/carers, families or peers. They were also concerned that children and young people may be desensitised to violence, sharing experiences of supporting children and young people who found violent content amusing.

> "I think a lot of youngsters take from porn sites how they feel relationships and sex should work, and that's really not helping anyone." **Teacher**

5.4.5 *Impacts on offline behaviours*

When inappropriate violent, sexual content or pornography had been shown to children and young people unexpectedly by others, they actively avoided being involved in interactions where this could happen again. In one case, a young person decided to take an alternative route to school, avoiding the school bus where they had been shown pornography on a mobile phone by a group of peers.

Parents/carers described examples of children's sleep being disrupted by nightmares after seeing a violent video. However, the children and young people we spoke to directly, reported that seeing violent content online had a limited effect on them, reporting few longer-term effects.

5.5 Suggestions

Children and young people believed that additional restrictions should be in place to prevent all children and young people, and particularly younger children, from seeing inappropriate sexual and violent content. They placed the onus for these safeguards on tech companies and parents/carers. They also suggested that schools could include discussion of pornography within sex and relationships education or Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) lessons.

5.5.1 *The role of parents/carers in moderating children and young people's online lives*

Parents/carers, professionals, children and young people suggested that parents/carers needed information to help them be better equipped with the skills and knowledge to implement additional online controls and the awareness of support available when children and young people were exposed to inappropriate content. However, parents/carers were reluctant to block content due to this being a 'broad brush' approach which could not be tailored to the types of content they wished to block. Restricting access to violent content could also restrict children, or others in the household, from accessing positive online interactions and activities. This was echoed by children and young people, who feared being restricted across a range of platforms which they enjoyed and facilitated their social interaction or leisure.

> "You don't want your kid to lose out. It's that social aspect as well… it is hard for parents, I think, to get that balance right." **Parent/carer**

5.5.2 *The role of tech companies in moderating content*

Children and young people suggested that social media companies should control content at the point of being uploaded to prevent the need to block content further down the line. They suggested that email servers should improve their spam recognition, and ad blockers should be improved to cover a broader range of pop-up adverts.

Children and young people also reported feeling disillusioned with the reporting and blocking functions available to them, particularly when reporting numerous fake accounts or bots. To combat this, they suggested that tech companies should update children and young people on the outcome of their efforts in reporting/blocking.

> "If you're taking the time to actually report it and not just scroll past, I think it's important that you should know whether any action was taken…. at least you know that what you've done is useful." **Girl, 17**

5.5.3 *The role of schools in teaching children and young people about pornography and inappropriate content*

Children and young people explained that whilst some internet safety topics such as scams, unwanted messages, and using reporting and blocking functions were discussed in detail, schools could do more to teach children and young people about pornography. They believed this topic should be taught from a younger age, when children are 11-12-years old, a view echoed by professionals who promoted an 'early intervention' approach. The need for further education on pornography was echoed by parents/carers and professionals who suggested that teachers may be reluctant to broach the subject for fear of upsetting some parents/carers or feeling uncomfortable discussing this topic. Professionals described existing early intervention services around pornography, sex and relationships, but highlighted that these services are not offered nationally, and thus further national direction is needed to support schools to deliver this education.

Case illustration: Leah aged 13

Leah and her friends were regularly shown videos of violent 'gore' and pornography by a group of boys on the school bus. Leah found these interactions intimidating and being forced to see inappropriate videos made her feel very uncomfortable. Leah's distress became apparent to her parents who noticed she had become withdrawn at home and asked her what was going on. Leah's parents told the school what was happening. The school recorded the incident but were unable to act because the incident took place outside of school, so nothing changed. Leah became increasingly anxious about taking the school bus. Together with her parents they agreed her parents would drive her to school, so she didn't have to take the school bus and cope with the boys' behaviour again.

All case illustrations have been informed directly by the data collected. The case illustrations incorporate experiences of several participants and do not focus on any one participant. All names used are fictitious to protect participant anonymity.

5.6 Sexting and receiving unsolicited content depicting adult nudity or sexual activity

A major theme within the data is that children and young people, particularly girls, reported receiving images and videos depicting child and adult nudity or sexual activity. Whilst this content is illegal (and therefore out of scope for this study), this was not always clear to interviewees.

5.6.1 Hazards

Children and young people, most often girls, reported receiving inappropriate content depicting sexual activity and nudity through direct messages sent by peers or by adults, either known to them or by strangers. This frequently took place on popular social media platforms, and the images were often sent unsolicited, indicating a form of online abuse. Children and young people reported being added into groups or being individually contacted by strangers, before being sent inappropriate content. Girls perceived this experience as normalised amongst girls and young women, from the age of 13-years-old upwards, but also happening to children as young as 10-years-old.

Children, young people and professionals reported that peer-to-peer 'sexting' – the sending and receiving of nude images by children and young people themselves – was common amongst 11 to 14-year-olds and regarded this as a substantial concern. Children and young people spoke of experiences of nude images they had shared, then being shared with wider audiences than intended. Wider sharing was considered to be malicious by children and young people. They reported peers using threats such as requesting money, in order to stop sharing the content. Whilst most interviewees were confident that that peer-to-peer sexting and sending indecent images by an adult was illegal, this was not universal knowledge. From professionals' experience of supporting

children, young people and their parents/carers, they have found that legality is seen as a 'grey area' for many.

> "If somebody contacts us about indecent images or concerns in that respect, we would definitely make onward referrals. But I think where legal but harmful comes into play, parents find that a little more challenging and we certainly get a lot of calls about how to report concerns directly." **Online Harms Support Professional**

5.6.2 Risk and protective factors

Younger children and children and young people with SEND were considered more at-risk of sending or receiving nudes without fully understanding the potential for harm or the legality of this. The unsolicited nature of receiving unwanted messages, content depicting sexual activity or nudity, or having content shared was a key risk factor for resulting harm. This was mediated by the privacy settings that children and young people employed on online accounts. Parental/carer skills and knowledge in supporting children and young people was also reported as a risk factor to navigating this hazard.

Age

Children and young people reported a lack of awareness of the legality or risks of sending nude images of themselves to peers (i.e., sexting) when they were younger (aged 11-14 years old).

Children and young people with SEND

Professionals working with children and young people with learning disabilities and additional needs highlighted that, for the children and young people they work with, those aged 16-18 years are more susceptible to share and receive such inappropriate content. They explained that children and young people with SEND, have vulnerabilities around their awareness and understanding of boundaries, and what content is appropriate to send or receive. This can result in both sending and receiving inappropriate content, putting them at risk of exploitation or criminalisation.

Unsolicited nature of content

Children and young people reported being sent or shown inappropriate sexual content and nudity unsolicited by known peers and by strangers. The unsolicited nature of the content led to negative wellbeing impacts, particularly for girls who received the content through unwanted direct contact. From their experience, receiving unsolicited sexual content and nudity from adults rather than other children and young people was particularly disturbing to them.

Navigating hazards

Children and young people told us that they self-managed inappropriate sexual and violent content sent to them by blocking the senders or avoiding the material, rather than telling adults or accessing support. They believed that engaging with messages from people they did not know in-person increased their risk of being sent unsolicited inappropriate content. Children and young people were aware of how to block and report content across the platforms they used. This prevented repeat exposure or viewing further unwanted content, mitigating the harm this could cause.

> "I just wanted to block it and move on." **Girl, 17**

Although girls reported blocking unwanted messages which depicted sexual activity and nudity, they explained that senders were able to create new accounts and continue this behaviour. When reporting and blocking unwanted messages did not stop the behaviour, girls were reluctant to tell adults due to a perceived fear of being blamed for the behaviour, and feelings of shame.

Use of privacy settings

Girls reported changing their privacy settings on their social media accounts to prevent strangers from being able to contact them or send unsolicited inappropriate content. Girls found that they were more likely to be sent unwanted inappropriate content from strangers when their social media platforms were public, or when they had accepted connections with strangers. However, girls reported that the extent to which they could control the public/private nature of their profiles and the extent to which these settings blocked unwanted messages, varied across different social media platforms. Girls believed that on some platforms, the settings were inadequate in preventing them from being contacted by people they did not know, with the intentions of sharing explicit images.

> "There's really not much protection against that [being contact by an adult as a minor, and asked for nude photos]." **Girl, 15**

Parental skills and knowledge in supporting children and young people

Children and young people also shared experiences of nude images that they had shared with male peers (e.g., with a boyfriend) being shared to wider peer groups. Whilst children and young people, particularly girls, had been reluctant to tell adults about the situation, some had reported the situation to their parents/carers. Girls reported that parents/carers had not taken always action. Children and young people believed that parents/carers did not have the knowledge of what could be done to support them and could have been embarrassed or ashamed of reporting the situation to others such as the police or school.

5.6.3 Harms and wider impacts

Harms resulting from these hazards including negative wellbeing impacts for children and young people, as both sharers and recipients of content depicting nudity, when the nature of the exchange had been unsolicited. Other impacts included a negative effect on girls' perception of boys and men.

Impacts on wellbeing

Children and young people, particularly girls, who received unsolicited content depicting nudity or other sexual activity felt disgusted, embarrassed or disturbed by the images. Girls reported feeling anxious about receiving notifications on their phone, in case they had received further unsolicited sexual images. Girls felt shame about telling their friends or adults about the unwanted images they had received.

When children and young people had shared nude images of themselves, which had then been shared more widely than intended, they felt distressed and anxious. They felt ashamed which prevented them from seeking help from adults, whilst also feeling out of control of the situation, worrying that it could get worse.

Professionals explained that the unsolicited nature, based on a lack of consent to the sharing of the content beyond the original recipient, made these interactions a form of online abuse.

Impacts on girls' perceptions of boys/men

Girls told us they felt uncomfortable with the normalisation of boys/men sending indecent images. They were concerned that their male partners would be inappropriate towards them within their personal relationships, after being sent unsolicited sexual images by adults or peers.

5.6.4 Suggestions

Children and young people suggested that further education alongside improved privacy and security settings on social media are needed to protect from the sending and receiving of content depicting sexual activity and nudity. They also placed responsibility on adults to self-moderate their behaviour and not make unwanted contact or send unsolicited content to children and young people.

The role of schools in teaching children and young people about sending and receiving content depicting sexual activity and nudity

Children and young people had received information about 'sexting' and sending and receiving 'nudes' at school, which they found useful and said that this information had clarified to them that this is illegal. However, children and young people said that schools could do more to advise them of how to send nude images safely, and support children and young people who receive unsolicited inappropriate sexual images, from peers or adults, making it clear that it is not the recipient's fault. They also suggested that schools should update their educational materials, to make them relevant to the platforms that children and young people actually use.

> "You can't tell people not to do something, you have to just tell them how to do it safely. Raise awareness of this." **Girl, 17**

The role of social media companies in protecting children and young people from unsolicited sending and receiving of content

Children and young people suggested that privacy settings should be upgraded across social media platforms to ensure that children and young people are protected from unwanted contact, particularly from unknown adults.

Children and young people believed that, despite knowing the risks of sending nude images of themselves to peers, children and young people would continue to send such photos. They suggested that they should be able to do so safely, and that social media platforms could strengthen existing protections, for example those that prevent users from taking screenshots of disappearing content.

The role of adults in self-moderating their behaviour

Children and young people reported feeling uncomfortable with what they described as the common experience of receiving unsolicited nude images from adults, mostly men but also from women. They stressed that adults should not message children and young people under the age of 18 years old and should not send nude images or sexual content without recipient consent.

Promotion of risky or dangerous behaviour

6.1 Definition

Body-image content
Content that promotes or could give rise to unhealthy or negative body image and associated behaviours.

Pro-self-harm content
Content that provides information on how to self-harm, and online communities which encourage each other to self-harm.

Pro-suicide content
Content that provides information on how to die by suicide, or content which depicts another individual dying by suicide.

Dangerous stunts or challenges
Content showing viewers how to perform dangerous stunts or dangerous challenges, pranks or dares trending online.

6.2 Hazards

Children and young people regularly saw body image content and had also encountered pro-self-harm content online. Professionals raised concerns around dangerous stunts and challenges, but these worries were not shared by the children and young people involved in this research.

6.2.1 Body-image content

A major theme was that girls reported being exposed to content which they believed promoted unhealthy eating habits, body image or exercise patterns. Content promoted both over-eating and under-eating, but more commonly under-eating. Concerns about this type of content were shared by children and young people, parents/carers and professionals. It was often seen on social media in the form of static photos, short video 'reels' and posts, and targeted adverts, which children and young people believed were often spreading dis/misinformation. Examples included social media influencers posting edited videos of 'a day in the life of…' and showing them skipping meals or consuming an extremely low daily calorie intake. Girls encountered this content both intentionally and unintentionally. The content was often stumbled across or recommended to the girls when using social media and seen repetitively. The content was also easy to seek out using well-known hashtags, which took users through to posts promoting anorexia and other disordered eating.

6.2.2 Pro-self-harm and pro-suicide content

Pro-self-harm and pro-suicide content was seen by children and young people who stumbled across content and those who were looking for support around their mental health. They reported that positive content also linked to negative content on the same topic. For example, a hashtag that led to content for support around self-harm, also led to content that promoted self-harm, including details about how to self-harm. Children and young people also joined communities and made online friends, who shared pro-self-harm content amongst themselves.

Suicide content was seen in the form of peers or strangers on forums posting content about current or past suicidal ideation. When this content was seen on forums, it was in forums dedicated to the topic of suicide which had been presented to them in lists of 'random' forums to explore, or when

actively seeking out such content. Children and young people also encountered online users telling them that they were going to kill themselves, either in help-seeking or threatening ways, usually through social media.

> "Saying goodbye on social media as their [children/young people's] last note is becoming increasingly popular" **Youth organisation professional**

6.2.3 Dangerous stunts or challenges

The older children and young people (aged 16-17 years old) that we consulted were generally unconcerned by online stunts and challenges. They felt that younger children may be more susceptible to online stunts and challenges, particularly those that were accessible to them and seemed fun. These types of stunts and challenges included timed activities, physical exercises or food-related. The children and young people believed that younger children susceptible to being influenced or incited by stunts and challenges promoted online, would also be susceptible to similar challenges incited or promoted offline. Parents/carers and professionals felt differently, citing concerns around children young people attempting skateboarding tricks, free running, or parkour, as well as extreme online challenges they had heard of which they believed encouraged children and young people to participate in harmful acts such as self-harm and suicide.

6.3 Risk and protective factors

Risk factors varied across the types of content promoting risky and dangerous behaviours. Pre-existing poor wellbeing and mental health was identified to be a risk factor for engagement with and the impact of body image, pro-self-harm and pro-suicide content. Furthermore, social media algorithms and further recommendations of inappropriate content was also a risk factor.

Specific risk factors associated with engaging with body image content hazards included being a girl, being aged 14-16, Covid-19 lockdowns, and the normalised and relatable nature of the content.

Risks for children and young people being influenced by dangerous stunts and challenges included adults inadvertently promoting trending content while trying to protect children and young people.

6.3.1 Wellbeing and mental health

Children and young people, parents/carers and professionals reported that pre-existing mental health or wellbeing difficulties, including eating and body disorders, social isolation and loneliness, and low self-esteem, increased children and young people's risk of being engaged with and more severely affected by content promoting self-harm, suicide or unhealthy or negative body image/eating content.

> "If you do self-harm or have an eating disorder, I think, you know, those communities are easy to find online, some supportive, and some more enabling" **SEND Professional**

Risk factors for children and young people with poor mental health or wellbeing could also be highly individualised. For example, young people told us that the content that 'triggered' them could be typically perceived as positive, for example, the 'couch to 5k challenge' exacerbated competitive and disordered exercise for one young person. For others, their behaviours online signalled concerning mental health or wellbeing states. Professionals saw it as a 'red flag' when children or young people they supported changed their behaviour online, for example, when behaving out of character by starting to post 'selfies' which, for one young person, signalled a period of low self-esteem.

Children and young people who did not feel affected by this type of content, told us that being self-confident and free of mental health challenges had served to protect them against the impact of online content that promoted an unhealthy or unrealistic body image or lifestyle, pro-suicide or pro-self-harm content.

6.3.2 Social media algorithms and recommended content

A major theme was that children and young people put substantial time and effort into curating their social media feeds using functions such as clicking 'not interested' and engaging in positive content, however this was broadly deemed ineffective. Girls told us how their social media feeds continued to recommend content and targeted adverts which promoted unhealthy eating habits, body image or exercise patterns, such as adverts promoting diet products. Young people explained that, in searching for support for mental health or self-harm, positive content was often linked to pro-self-harm and pro-suicide content through shared hashtags.

> "I've seen some like positive videos like helping with anxiety or depression or something, and then it's got the tag of like #mentalhealth and then it links with someone like self-harming or eating disorders. Like, they are all linked together. It's hard to avoid if you want to be seeing positive things, but then you end up seeing the negative things as well." **Girl, 17**

6.3.3 Help-seeking

Children and young people reported reaching out to adults when they perceived peers to be at risk from pro-suicide and pro-self-harm content. They shared experiences of seeking support from teachers and parents/carers when they were concerned for the safety of peers. In some cases, this resulted in lost friendships, but children and young people reported feeling confident and comfortable with their actions, despite being unsure of how the situation was then handled by adults.

> "We would discuss as a group to tell a teacher and that's why she [peer engaging with pro-self-harm content] stopped being friends with us. We told the mental health support people at school, and they didn't help much." **Girl, 17**

On the other hand, when it came to their own experiences, children and young people were unlikely to seek help from adults or peers, or to effectively self-moderate. Children and young people described a reluctance to report, block or avoid content, feeling uncomfortable about sharing what they had seen online and how this affected them with friends or parents/carers. A barrier to help-seeking was a perceived risk of not being taken seriously or uncomfortable telling adults about what they had seen online or how it had affected them. However, some children and young people reflected that they had become more likely to seek support as they had grown older (17 years old) or come out the other side of negative experiences with pro-self-harm, pro-suicide and body content.

6.3.4 Gender

Professionals and parents/carers noted gendered differences in the type and impact of content promoting risky and dangerous behaviours. They said that girls and transgender children and young people were more likely to engage with and be affected by unhealthy or negative body image content. They also believed that boys and young men were more likely to mimic potentially dangerous stunts such as skateboarding tricks, parkour, or free running that they had seen online.

6.3.5 Age

Professionals working in schools told us that issues around body image generally emerged amongst girls aged 14-16 years old, and issues around suicide and self-harm amongst children and young

people aged 14-18 years. They believed these offline concerns can be exacerbated by body image, pro-self-harm and pro-suicide content online.

The older children and young people (16-17 years old) we spoke to did not feel influenced by stunts and challenges promoted online. They believed that younger children (aged 8-14 years old) would be more likely to try stunts and challenges promoted online, as they believed they would be more attracted to stunts and challenges offline too.

6.3.6 Covid-19 lockdowns

Girls and professionals identified the Covid-19 lockdowns as increasing the risk of harm from content promoting these hazards. Children and young people told us that they spent more time online and using social media during the lockdowns, increasing their engagement with such content. Children and young people affected by body-image content, said that whilst they compared themselves to the images and lifestyles they saw online, they had limited opportunity to engage with broader representations of body image or lifestyles due to being isolated from friends and other women. For some girls, this resulted in a normalisation of unhealthy eating and exercising behaviours.

> "I thought it [excessive exercise and disordered eating] was normal behaviour and so it kind of manifested into my own behaviour because I thought all these women are doing it, and I wasn't seeing any healthy behaviours because I was so isolated [because of Covid-19 lockdown]." **Girl, 17**

However, girls also told us that, owing to an increased amount of time available to them during Covid-19 lockdowns, they had also been able to spend more time online engaging with positive content, including communities of support around eating disorders.

6.3.7 Normalisation of unrealistic or unhealthy body image or lifestyles

Girls reported seeing a singular ideal of body image and lifestyle promoted on social media. The frequency of seeing the content, the limited range of bodies and lifestyles, and the lack of monitoring of edited images normalised a narrow set of body ideals. Girls also reported seeing body positivity content removed from social media for violating content rules, for example a photo promoting body positivity showing a woman wearing trousers with her stomach on show, which the interviewee described as 'not flat'. Girls reported that this removal of body positivity content exacerbated the problem.

6.3.8 Relatability of the content

Girls who said they were not affected by the content, reported that the body images presented online were not aspirational for them. Their reasoning was that the body image content looked too different from their own bodies and others they know, due to skin colour and other noticeable demographic differences, and were therefore not relatable.

> "I'm happy those people don't look like me, because if they looked like me than I would get caught up… If you saw someone who looked exactly like you and they're saying that they look ugly, in your brain, if makes you think you look bad too." **Girl, 17**

6.3.9 Accessibility of online stunts and challenges

Whilst professionals and parents/carers were concerned about extreme online stunts and challenges, such as those encouraging suicide, children and young people were unconcerned. Reflecting on the experiences of younger children in their lives, such as siblings, older children and young people believed that online stunts and challenges were more likely to be attempted by

younger children if they were accessible or appeared 'harmless' to them, such as challenges using food ingredients, or physical challenges explained in 'how to' videos by professionals.

6.3.10 Raising awareness of trending content

Professionals reported that adults lack understanding about some online challenges. Whilst they believed that efforts to protect children and young people from dangerous stunts such as those which encouraged them to consume alcohol in dangerous ways, other measures had been less effective. They cited examples of online challenges which posed little risk to children and young people, but that schools had attempted to take preventative action against. Although schools had wanted to warn pupils of these challenges, they had inadvertently raised awareness of them. Pupils were more likely to seek out the content as a result.

> "I don't remember hearing a single case about [an online challenge encouraging suicide] actually happening. I just remember hearing so many schools ringing us saying 'oh, we've heard about this thing, but we don't know what to tell the kids'. And I just remember saying at the time 'just don't tell them anything, 'cause as soon as you tell them something, they're gonna go and look for it, and then you'll have real problems'." **Internet safety professional**

6.4 Harms and wider impacts

Body image content, pro-self-harm and suicide content had a negative impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and exacerbated pre-existing mental health and wellbeing challenges. Some children and young people attributed the development of mental health conditions including eating disorders to the content they had encountered online. Children and young people also changed the way they interacted with social media as a result of the content they had seen.

6.4.1 Impacts on physical and mental health

Children and young people, professionals and parents/carers explained that content promoting risky and dangerous behaviour hazards could reinforce pre-existing negative mental health and wellbeing.

> "It's like the negative things, it can be reinforcing what you're thinking or feeling, and it can be really stressful." **Girl, 17**

The content could trigger children and young people with eating disorders, body dysmorphia, mental health issues, negative thoughts, low self-confidence, or feeling isolated. Children and young people generally agreed, although some had actively sought out information about self-harm described finding positive content that was helpful to them, including support for mental health and advice about how to stop self-harming.

Girls said that they compared themselves to the normalised, unrealistic, or unhealthy body images and lifestyles presented online. Girls particularly described comparing their bodily development to other young people and peers that they see online. This negatively affected their mental health resulting in reduced confidence, negative feelings towards their own bodies, and reinforced existing body insecurities.

Girls explained that content promoting eating and exercising had led to competitive behaviours, trying to eat less or exercise more than what was shown in content presented online. Girls and parents/carers of children with eating or body image disorders partly attributed the development and exacerbation of their illness to the content they had seen online.

6.4.2 Concern for others engaging in pro-self-harm or pro-suicide content

Children and young people reported feeling distressed when they became aware of peers, including friends made online, engaging with pro-self-harm and pro-suicide content. They felt better after sharing their concerns and seeking support from friends, siblings, or adults.

6.4.3 Changes to online behaviours

Girls reported changes to how they interacted with social media as a result of seeing pro-self-harm, suicide and body image content. This included increased anxiety around what content they might come across and what they post. Children and young people said they felt anxious about negative content reappearing after ineffective attempts to curate their feeds. Children and young people who had encountered body image content reported feeling self-conscious about their own posts, citing concerns about comparing images of themselves against those normalised online.

6.4.4 Accidents causing physical injury arising from online stunts and challenges

Children and young people and professionals thought that attempting accessible and 'fun' online stunts and challenges, children and young people could be at risk of accidents and physical harm. For example, being physically hurt by attempting skateboarding tricks or parkour, or younger children not anticipating any potential harm from seemingly 'fun' challenges that peers were also participating in.

No interviewees reported harm arising from extreme online stunts and challenges involving the encouragement of self-harm or suicide.

6.5 Suggestions

Girls, parents/carers and professionals all suggested tighter controls around content posted online, placing responsibility for this on those creating the content, including on the children and young people themselves, and on social media companies. Girls and parents/carers suggested that body positivity could be advanced through schools teaching this from a younger age, and by social media companies changing their practices around content promotion and removal. It was also suggested that schools should be careful to avoid inadvertently promoting content depicting dangerous stunts and challenges to pupils.

6.5.1 Self-moderation

Children and young people suggested that content creators, including young people themselves, should be more accountable for what they share online, considering the impact that their content could have on other children and young people. Whilst most children and young people agreed that this should be self-moderated, others suggested additional legal restrictions could be placed on what content can be posted online.

6.5.2 Educating children and young people to recognise potentially harmful content

Children and young people saw benefit in being taught about what kind of content could be potentially harmful, such as body image and pro-self-harm content, to help them recognise this before internalising it.

They also suggested teaching children and young people about the potential risks of imitating stunts and challenges, rather than simply telling children and young people not to engage in these.

6.5.3 The role of schools in promoting body positivity, and avoid raising awareness of challenges

Parents/carers suggested that schools should teach body positivity from an early age, to give children and young people self-confidence before engaging with content which could promote unrealistic body image.

Professionals suggested that schools should give children and young people general advice about dangerous stunts and challenges promoted online but should not name specific challenges or details which could unnecessarily scare or spark curiosity in children and young people.

6.5.4 The role of co-production in designing mental health services for children and young people

Children, young people and professionals suggested that mental health support within and outside of schools should be improved, to better equip children and young people with coping mechanisms to deal with mental health issues and wider challenges. They believed this would better protect them against pro-self-harm, pro-suicide and negative body image content, and manage online content when presented. They specifically recognised a need for co-production in designing services by and for children and young people, to account for their lived experiences.

> "Young-person led support is more powerful" **Youth Worker**

6.5.5 The role of tech companies in moderating and promoting body image, pro-self-harm and pro-suicide content

Children and young people, professionals and parents/carers all placed the onus on social media companies to tighten controls around content that promotes negative body image, self-harm and suicide. All stakeholders believed that age verification alone would not solve the problem, and that some content should not be allowed on the site, which children and young people believed could be easily identified and removed.

Girls and parents/carers felt that increased body positive messaging could be useful to normalise a range of different bodies, and that social media companies could do more to promote body positivity.

> "It would be nice if there were more of those, sort of, positive messages about to counter that [negativity]." **Parent/carer**

Girls had seen non-sexual body positive content showing women's bodies but not breaking explicit content rules taken down by social media platforms and urged this practice to be changed. Professionals explained that algorithms which detect inappropriate content are ineffective at recognising context. This resulted in positive content being removed along with inappropriate images, pro-self-harm or pro-suicide content. Professionals noted that removing access to all identified content could therefore be problematic, and a more targeted approach would be needed.

Case illustration: Stephanie aged 15

Stephanie felt isolated during lockdown. Without school or activities taking place, she was spending more time online using social media. She followed accounts of influencers posting food and exercise diaries and started to 'compete' by eating less and exercising more. Over the course of the pandemic, Stephanie's grandparents became concerned about her eating and exercise patterns, noticing a deterioration in her mental and physical health. They encouraged her to go to the GP, where she was diagnosed with an eating disorder. Following this, Stephanie spent a lot of time unfollowing accounts that were triggering for her and engaging with body positivity content, but targeted adverts for meal replacement pills kept appearing. Stephanie considered removing herself from social media to avoid seeing the triggering content but doesn't want to miss out on connecting with her friends and seeing what they are up to.

All case illustrations have been informed directly by the data collected. The case illustrations incorporate experiences of several participants and do not focus on any one participant. All names used are fictitious to protect participant anonymity.

Promotion of illegal activity

7.1 Definition

Content promoting illegal activity

Content promoting illegal activity. These hazards include but are not limited to content which promotes:

- the use or sale of illegal drugs/substances (including prescription drugs)
- gang involvement
- the use of, or carrying of a weapon
- sex work

Content promoting illegal activity for children and young people. These hazards include but are not limited to content which promotes:

- children under 18 years old drinking alcohol, including excessive or binge drinking smoking
- information (e.g., discussion boards) on where minors could obtain alcohol or cigarettes
- gambling

7.2 Hazards

Children and young people reported seeing content which promoted activity that is illegal for under-18s, including underage drinking, smoking and vaping. They also saw content promoting behaviours that are illegal for everyone, including promoting stealing and promoting the sale or use of drugs.

7.2.1 Content promoting underage drinking, smoking and vaping

Children/young people and professionals reported that children and young people promoted illegal behaviours they engage with themselves, by sharing images and videos of underage drinking, smoking, and vaping online. Professionals explained that whilst sometimes the behaviours posted online were reflective of what children and young people were doing offline, in some cases posts were inauthentic and showed acts of 'bravado'. Children and young people's views on the extent to which such posts reflected real behaviours depended on whether they saw peers engage in these behaviours offline too. Some children/young people saw their peers smoking, drinking and vaping online to the same degree as offline, whereas others did not see young people drinking or smoking offline. All young people believed that posts showing peers vaping were reflective of offline behaviours. They told us that many of their peers used vapes and were not always aware of this being illegal or the potential harms of it. They saw vapes as a 'healthier alternative' to smoking. Children and young people reported that they also regularly saw young people selling cigarettes and vapes online through social media, which they were confident was illegal.

Children and young people also reported seeing adverts for alcohol, which they were not concerned or affected by.

Whilst children and young people did not share concerns or experiences of online gambling, professionals believed that some online gaming platforms promoted gambling culture amongst children and young people. Professionals explained that some popular online games encouraged children and young people to spend virtual funds on an opportunity to win in-game upgrades and unlock additional content, introducing them to a legal form of online gambling.

7.2.2 Content promoting illegal activity

Children and young people reported seeing content that promoted illegal behaviours including stealing from high street chain stores and buying and selling drugs. This content offered tips for how to steal items without being caught. The content also justified stealing, by using phrases such as 'if it's a chain, free reign' and 'borrowing', as well as sharing information about the stores' unethical practices. This content was frequently seen on social media platforms and appeared in children's and young people's 'recommended' feeds provided by the platforms. The content was often created and uploaded by children and young people themselves.

Children and young people told us that their peers used specific popular social media platforms to signpost others to drug dealers and people selling fake identification documents. For example, children and young people saw posts from their peers which provided details of how to contact people to buy cannabis, though not necessarily selling the drug themselves. A child/young person described this activity as 'legal, but suspicious', suggesting they did not classify this as illegal. Additionally, children/young people reported receiving junk emails from international companies selling weapons such as guns. Because the companies were not based in the UK, the children/young people were not clear about whether this advertising was legal or illegal.

Professionals told us that children and young people promoted buying, using and selling drugs through sharing content of themselves with drugs or having lots of money gained from being involved in selling drugs, glamorising those behaviours. Professionals also cited offline hazards that promoted buying, selling, using drugs, possession of weapons, and having lots of money, as being of greater concern than online hazards, for example rap music.

7.3 Risk and protective factors

The main risk to children and young people being influenced to replicate illegal behaviours seen online was the compelling justification of the illegal activities depicted, for example the dubious ethical practices of some businesses justifying stealing from them. However, children and young people generally believed they were not influenced by the content due to their own strong value system and protecting themselves by avoiding content.

7.3.1 Compelling justifications

Children and young people said that the justifications used in videos promoting stealing were compelling. They ade stealing from high street chain stores seem easy and harmless. The videos often described: tactics that young people felt they would be able to put into practice, negative things that chain companies had done such as using sweatshops or poor environmental practices, and the chain's financial ability to absorb losses from stealing. Young people found these justifications and motivations appealing and said that young people could be tempted to mimic the content for this reason.

> "I know the tips and tricks, there's nothing stopping me from doing it [stealing]. So, I'm imagining loads of people would have seen those videos and be like 'I'm going straight to Primark, I'm gonna loot the whole store now'." **Girl, 17**

7.3.2 Children and young people's values

Children and young people attributed the reason for not being influenced by content promoting stealing to their own moral compass and values by which they had been raised, including their understanding that there would be consequences for their actions, or negative physical health impacts.

7.3.3 Navigating the hazard

Children and young people told us that they usually skipped past, avoided, or clicked 'not interested' on content that promoted illegal activity, which they believed to be an effective strategy to manage it. Children and young people found that, if they did this enough, the algorithms stopped presenting this content to them. However, this did not always last, with content reappearing later. For example, emails advertising weapons, they tried using reporting functions to direct these messages to their spam filters but found that many continued to reach their main inbox.

Because the content came back after a while, children and young people were reluctant to use the available functions to curate their feeds, such as the 'not interested' button available on some social media platforms, or 'mark as spam email' options, as they believed this was wasted effort.

Because many of the posts promoting where to buy cannabis, underage drinking, smoking or vaping, were shared by known peers, children and young people said that they were unlikely to unfollow or block the person posting the content. Children and young people told us that it was common to stay connected to peers on social media, and they were unlikely to block or unfollow someone even if they were not in contact offline.

7.4 Harms and wider impacts

Seeing online content promoting illegal activity had implications for children's and young people's perceptions of these activities, but had a limited effect on their behaviours. The findings suggest that children and young people perceived a normalisation of seeing illegal activity amongst their peers, citing frequently seeing young people and adults engaging in illegal activity online. Children and young people reported changing views of peers after seeing them engage in illegal activity online. They also perceived that there would be differential consequences of imitating the content for different ethnic groups. When children and young people promoted engaging in underage drinking online through their social media posts, schools used these online posts as an evidence base for taking, albeit limited, action such as letting parents/carers know of pupils' behaviour.

7.4.1 Normalisation of illegal activities

Young people said that content promoting stealing, underage drinking, smoking and vaping, and using, buying and selling drugs normalised those behaviours. Young people told us that the frequency of seeing this content made them think these behaviours were common amongst their peers. They also questioned whether some behaviours, such as children and young people under 18 years old vaping, were illegal, because they were seen so frequently on social media.

Whilst children and young people reported that the content normalised seeing illegal behaviour, and glamorised alcohol consumption in particular, they did not believe that it normalised acting on the content. None of the children and young people we spoke to reported engaging in illegal activities as a result of seeing this content, however whilst young people were generally very open during the interviews, some young people may be unlikely to share this information.

7.4.2 Perception of more severe consequences for black, Asian and minority ethnic children and young people

Children and young people told us that the content promoting stealing in the videos they had seen mostly depicted white young people committing and promoting the illegal behaviour. Children and young people believed that if a black, Asian or minority ethnic child and young person were to produce or imitate such content, they would be more likely to be caught. This view was closely linked to their offline experiences of discrimination. Black, Asian and minority ethnic children and young

people therefore found the posts to be irresponsible, by promoting and normalising illegal behaviour without considering the differential impacts across different groups of children and young people.

7.4.3 Changes in perceptions of peers

Children and young people reported feeling differently about their peers offline, after seeing them promote illegal activity online. Children and young people told us they had been 'disappointed' to see some of their peers engaging in drug-related activity online, behaviours they would otherwise not have associated with that person based on interactions with them offline.

7.4.4 Content used as evidence

Professionals explained that when children and young people posted online content depicting themselves engaging in illegal activity, this content could be used as evidence. However, even when schools had such evidence of children and young people engaging in illegal activity, this did not always result in action, as the activity had happened outside school. When children and young people had content on their phones depicting peers engaging in underage drinking or smoking, schools could do no more than tell the parents/carers out of a duty of care.

7.5 Suggestions

Children and young people suggested that other children and young people should self-moderate their behaviour and use reporting and blocking functions to avoid being influenced by it. They suggested that schools could better support them by providing additional knowledge of relevant social media platforms' available functions.

7.5.1 Self-moderation

Children and young people suggested a need for peers to self-moderate their behaviour, choosing not to act on the content they had seen. They suggested blocking or unfollowing people who post content promoting illegal activity and were well-versed in the functions available to them to do this across most, but not all, platforms.

> "For most young people, I think they need to learn a little bit more self-control because you can say 'oh it's because [popular social media platform] showed me this video that I did this' or whatever, but there's always a 'not interested' button, and there's always the option to swipe away." **Girl, 17**

7.5.2 The role of schools in equipping children and young people with knowledge of platform functions

Whilst children and young people were taught how to use reporting and blocking functions on social media by schools, they said that this has focused on a limited number of social media platforms despite some of those being little used by children and young people. However, other platforms more frequently used by children and young people, had not been included in these lessons. Children and young people suggested including additional information about these platforms in online safety lessons at school.

Case illustration: Hassim aged 17

Hassim often saw videos online of young people promoting illegal activity. Hassim and his friends often shared reels of themselves vaping, and they didn't see the harm in it. Hassim was also regularly recommended videos on social media that showed young people sharing hints and tips on how to steal from a sportswear store. At first, Hassim thought the videos made stealing look easy. The videos justified stealing from the store because the brand's CEO was a multi-millionaire, so Hassim didn't think it was hurting anyone. But over time, the content started to irritate Hassim because it was always a White person in the videos. Based on Hassim's past experiences, he felt that if the person promoting stealing in the video had been from a minority ethnic group, they would be more likely to have been caught for stealing. Hassim used the 'not interested' button when he saw these videos, to change the way the algorithm recommended content to him. Eventually, the content disappeared from his feed, but after a year or so, it started to reappear. Hassim didn't see the point in curating his feed again, so instead swiped passed the content to avoid it.

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Disinformation

7.6 Definitions

Disinformation: The *deliberate* creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain.

Misinformation: The *unintentional* creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that may deceive and mislead audiences.

Extremist content: Information which promotes far-right or far-left-wing political information. This content may include both misinformation and disinformation.

7.7 Hazards

Children and young people consistently reported seeing dis- and misinformation regularly across internet platforms, both in public feeds as well as in direct messages. Children and young people encountered content related to **health, politics, conspiracy theories, racism, sexism, homophobia**, **gender identity, 'scams' and adverts**. More specifically, health content ranged from health-hacks to cure hiccups and headaches to Covid-19 related conspiracies and anti-vaccination messages. Examples of political disinformation included content promoting anti-European Union and anti-immigration ideologies. Additionally, education professionals cited seeing far-right content in school computer search histories. Children and young people encountered a range of conspiracy theories online from predictions about the end of the world to. Children and young people encountered racist, sexist, homophobic and gender identity content including information in opposition to the Black Lives Matter social movement, suggestions that the gender pay gap does not exist, anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-transgender or gender variant rhetoric. Finally, children and young people included 'scams' and adverts within the disinformation category, on an assumption that these exaggerated the benefits of the products, such as dieting products.

All participant groups (children, young people, parents/carers and professionals) used the terms disinformation and misinformation interchangeably. They did not distinguish between these two hazards.

7.8 Risk and protective factors

The three main risks for children and young people believing such content included: the credibility of the content creator or sharer, their age, and whether the information aligned to their personal views. Children and young people navigated such content and felt protected from this type of harm by fact-checking information and developing strategies to ignore or avoid it.

7.8.1 Credibility of the content creator or sharer

There was broad agreement across children, young people and professionals that content from 'voices of authority' were harder for children and young people to challenge or question. This included content endorsed by parents/carers, trusted adults or from seemingly official and reputable sources, such as social media influencers. Content shared by peers or strangers was easiest to question or dismiss. Children and young people could identify and dismiss content shared by family members when the information did not align to their personal views.

7.8.2 Age

Teenagers believed that they were able to identify false information easily. They explained that they had learnt to maintain a healthy scepticism of online content from a young age. Teenagers thought that younger children were more vulnerable to believing disinformation due to their inexperience of navigating online content. However, professionals believed that all users of the internet, regardless of age, were susceptible being influenced by dis- and misinformation online.

7.8.3 Alignment of information with personal views

All participant groups thought that children and young people were at risk of accepting disinformation online that aligned with their personal views, especially if these were reinforced by family and friends. For example, professionals stated that it was difficult to challenge strong views on issues, such as anti-vax/masks or homophobia, when these messages were perpetuated online and within homelives. There were, however, also instances when children and young people held different views about online content to their family. For example, a young person found information online to support a sexist viewpoint, which their parent/carer did not agree with.

7.8.4 Navigating hazards

Children and young people's strategies for navigating this content included: ignoring it, avoiding it by blocking or unfollowing individuals, and the use of ad blockers to restrict exposure to scams and adverts.

> "I tend to just block or ignore as much as I can…I try to narrow down the things which are inputting into my pool of content" **Boy, 16**

Children and young people reported that it was easier to block or unfollow strangers, but they were reluctant to do this with family, friends and people they knew through school, as this may cause upset or unnecessary tension.

Discussions with others (e.g., friends, family, teachers) were helpful sources of support to counter disinformation. Children and young people said they discussed disinformation they had seen online with family and friends, and fact-checked information via search engines and reputable official sources, such as mainstream news sites.

Those who felt strongly on particular issues sought to counter dis- and misinformation directly in the chat and comment functions, with the intention to stop the spread of false and potentially harmful information.

7.9 Harms and wider impacts

Although children and young people reported seeing this hazard frequently, they generally did not feel harmed by it, particularly when they felt able to identify and find their own ways to navigate it. However, professionals were concerned about the potential impact of disinformation on the formation of children and young people's views. Individuals who were affected, described short-term wellbeing impacts and disagreements with others.

7.9.1 Impacts on wellbeing

Disinformation on issues that children and young people felt strongly about could be disheartening. Those who tried to counter the spread of disinformation in comment and chat functions, described their efforts as 'unproductive'. They explained that feeling powerless and the continued spread of disinformation had a negative impact on their personal wellbeing and feelings of happiness. These were short-term impacts experienced immediately around the time of such encounters.

Disinformation about transgender, non-binary and gender variance could be detrimental to young people's gender identity and self-identity. For instance, it could reinforce negative self-perceptions and convey an impression that their gender identity is wrong or not accepted by wider society.

7.9.2 Impacts on views and values

Professionals and parents were concerned about the potential long-term harmful impact of online dis- and misinformation on the formation of children and young people's views and values. Their concerns were primarily about children and young people seeing dis- and misinformation repeatedly online without it being challenged either online or offline. Professionals and parents were worried that children and young people may accept information online at face value, and develop perspectives based on inaccurate, and sometimes harmful information, such as false information about race and gender. Children and young people too, acknowledged that even when they ignored such content, they had seen it, and often repeatedly.

7.9.3 Impacts on relationships

Disagreements about disinformation both online and offline with family, friends and others could cause upset and tension between families and social groups, in the short-term.

7.9.4 Developing strategies for identifying and navigating hazard

Young people were confident in their ability to identify disinformation and strategies to navigate it. They also felt less affected by this content compared with other types of hazards, such as online abuse, as it generally was not attacking them personally. They were also therefore less likely to report such information formally.

7.10 Suggestions

Participant suggestions to better protect children and young people from this hazard centred on tech companies removing or flagging content, schools encouraging discussion of such information, and the use of ad-blockers to reduce exposure to scams and adverts.

7.10.1 The role of tech companies to identify and remove dis- and misinformation

Children and young people wanted tech companies to remove such content quickly or suggested adding warnings to disinformation to stop its spread and help children and young people to identify it as such. Children and young people also highlighted effective mechanisms some platforms had introduced to help them identify potential dis- or mis information. For example, some platforms that use a warning message on content that has been reported as disinformation. Children and young people said that they had to 'click' to confirm they understood this warning before they were able to view the content.

7.10.2 The role of schools in supporting children and young people to dispel disinformation trending online

The information children and young people received from school about disinformation varied. Children and young people suggested that schools could provide information on how to spot disinformation, fact-check messages, and create spaces for children and young people to discuss disinformation trending online. For example, one young person had found school assemblies to dispel anti-vax messages helpful. The school had involved pupils from older year groups in assemblies for younger pupils, to encourage debate among pupils.

7.10.3 The use of ad-blockers

Children and young people suggested encouraging the use of ad-blockers to minimise exposure to scams and adverts.

Case illustration: Jack aged 12

During the summer of 2021, Jack saw racist content in a range of online sites and apps, from people at school and others. He was also aware of anti-Black Lives Matters protests in his local area and globally. He found all this upsetting and wanted to take action to stop the spread of hateful messages. Jack posted comments online that explained that racism is not ok. He initially felt good about his posts, but he became disheartened when other users, including people from his school, replied to his posts with hateful messages, promoting racist views and disputing his calls for equality. Jack felt powerless; the situation made him feel sad about the world and affected his mood. Jack spoke to his friends and parents about what he'd seen online. He felt better for knowing that the people he cared about shared his views. Jack has since decided to unfollow and block anyone promoting racist content. He rarely posts comments about his personal views anymore to avoid escalation of online discussions.

All case illustrations have been informed directly by the data collected. The case illustrations incorporate experiences of several participants and do not focus on any one participant. All names used are fictitious to protect participant anonymity.

Conclusions

This final section draws conclusions about the impact of online harms for children and young people, based on the views and experiences of the children and young people, parents/carers and professionals who took part in this study.

7.11 Children and young people's agency in navigating online hazards

Throughout this report, it is apparent that being online was an everyday activity for children and young people across the UK, who cited multiple benefits from online spaces. For children and young people, encountering potential hazards and harms went hand-in-hand with being online. Their experience of hazards and harms was highly subjective, and what counted as harmful for one child or young person was not true for all. **Children and young people's feelings of choice and control, and being able to use their own judgement was an important factor that determined whether something was perceived as harmful.** Young people wanted to feel empowered to manage their online lives and exercise their personal judgement as far as possible, rather than having content overseen by parents/carers.

Children and young people were by no means passive recipients of potentially harmful content. They had developed their own strategies to navigate potential hazards over time, and had become more sophisticated at doing so. **Children and young people reported changing their online behaviours as a result of the online hazards they had experienced.** They became more alert to potential hazards, how to spot them and safeguard themselves online. They also reported being more cautious about what they posted online, who they connected with and monitoring the time they spent online. And they shared their learning with peers and siblings to safeguard others.

Despite putting substantial effort into curating their online presence, children and young people identified ways in which internet companies and social media platforms continued to expose them to unwanted hazards. This included where algorithms suggested pro-self-harm and suicide content to children and young people seeking support for their mental health, and the promotion of unhealthy eating habits or body images to young people who had 'unliked' this content.

Children and young people wanted swift and decisive action where they reported harmful content. Children and young people lost their trust and confidence in offline and online reporting processes, where they or their peers had not experienced a satisfactory outcome from reporting in the past. This included reporting incidents involving peers to their school but where no action had been taken, or where they had controlled their online settings, but unwanted content had continued to be recommended to them. Jurisdictional boundaries could be a barrier to schools addressing harmful online encounters. This was because online disputes could involve events that took place outside of school. A reduced propensity to report hazards put young people at a greater potential future risk of experiencing hazards and harms.

The intersection of children and young people's protected characteristics and their online experiences should not be underestimated. Simply 'being different', was experienced first-hand as a risk factor to experiencing hazards, but also children and young people's perceived risk of differential treatment in how adults and tech companies understood and responded to the hazards and harms they reported. For example, online platforms not recognising the cultural sensitivities and potential harm some content can have for specific ethnic minority or religious groups.

7.12 From hazards to harms

It was rarely the effect of seeing one-off upsetting online content alone that caused a hazard to become harmful. It was the combination of online and offline relationships and experiences that

had a compounding effect for the child or young person in other aspects of their home or school lives. Generally, children and young people are the most affected by content that targets them personally. They seemed less concerned about hazards of a distal nature, such as misinformation or promotion of violent or criminal activity. There was a less immediate perceived risk of harm, where this information was not targeted at them personally. Nevertheless, this type of content may be harmful, and have longer-term impacts for some children and young people. In contrast, hazards proved complex to manage and navigate, where they directly involved peers or family, and therefore had a proximal dimension. This was because the actions taken had more immediate consequences for the child or young person and for people close to them.

The research highlighted differences in how hazards and harms were understood by adults, children and young people. Some hazards, such as dangerous stunts and challenges, and the impact of violent video games or video footage of playground fights, were a source of concern among adults. However, these were not on the radar of young people as something that might be considered harmful. In contrast, adults may underestimate the short-term harms of seemingly benign online encounters, such as feeling scared by content, which could impact children and young people's feelings of safety and their sleep patterns.

Children and young people reported that all the hazards focused on in this study were prevalent online. The relationship between hazard and harm was positioned differently according to the categories of hazards:

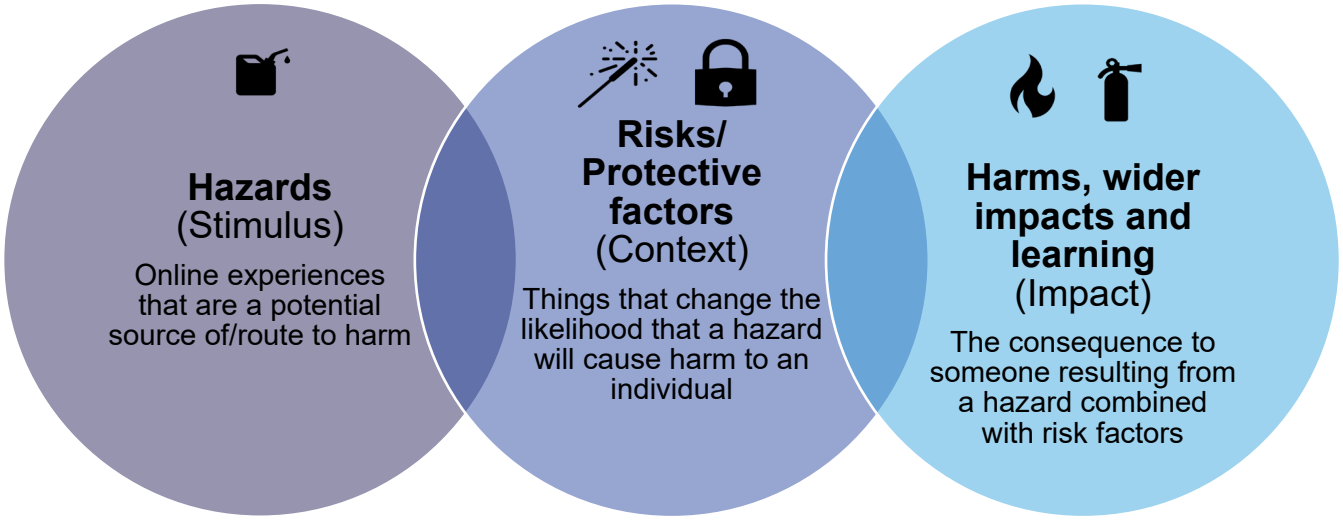
- Children and young people and parents/carers consistently reported detrimental effects of **offline and online abuse** on children and young people's wellbeing and confidence, and a heightened risk of isolation and withdrawal from offline sources of support and relationships. Online abuse emerged as being particularly challenging, in terms of the courses of action available to children and young people. Children and young people reported that it was easier to block or unfollow strangers, but they were reluctant to do this with people they knew, as this may cause upset or unnecessary tension, and where disengagement could mean being less informed about what is being said. Similarly, there were reported examples of a backlash towards perceived perpetrators of abuse, which could serve to escalate the conflict, and cause harm.
- Girls and parents/carers of children with **eating or body image disorders** partly attributed the development and exacerbation of their illness to the content they had seen online.
- Girls told us they felt uncomfortable with the normalisation of male peers watching **pornography**. They were concerned about how this affected boys' attitudes and behaviours towards women.
- None of the children and young people we spoke to reported engaging in **illegal activities** as a result of seeing content promoting illegal activities, or reported lasting harmful consequences from having viewed **dis- or misinformation.** Children and young people generally had confidence that their personal judgement and values system could mitigate against potentially harmful influences from these sources.

The findings suggest that children and young people do not disclose hazards due to embarrassment and fear of punishment, which makes individuals even more vulnerable to further harm and over long time periods. Self-regulation of online activities can provide respite from online hazards (e.g., proportionate adjustment of online activities to avoid or mitigate against another harmful encounter). However, this could also be a cause of harm where reduced online activity made children and young people more isolated and cut them off from positive aspects of their online lives.

7.13 Framework for understanding online harms

The 'Hazards, Risks and Harms' framework was designed to measure harms in a way that accounts for factors that decrease as well as increase risk, and accounts for both positive and negative outcomes of online experiences. However, in its current format, it could inadvertently appear to focus on the negative consequences of online hazards. We have therefore proposed a small revision of the conceptual framework to understand online harms, to help users to explicitly consider the protective factors and wider non-harmful impacts and learning for children and young people. Participants discussed risk factors for harm in the context of protective factors too. For example, the presence or absence of offline support from trusted adults and peers or developmental maturity. Children and young people were not passive recipients of online content and had learnt from negative past online experiences and developed safeguarding strategies.

Figure 3: Revised Hazards, Risks and Harms conceptual framework for understanding online harms



7.14 Suggestions for future support and guidance

The research highlighted a number of areas where further support or guidance might be welcome, to assist children, young people, parents/carers and professionals in navigating online hazards and mitigating against potential harms:

- **'Legality' was an area where children, young people, parents/carers and professionals may benefit from more guidance.** There was a generally low awareness of what is or is not legal and in what contexts. Perceived legality does not seem to be a primary concern for how children and young people treated a given hazard, unless this included an overtly criminal element.
- In terms of support and advice available when encountering hazards, children and young people invariably placed greater trust in their peers with lived experience, viewing adults as not having the necessary knowledge about the online spaces that children and young people access. **This suggests that peer support programmes and training are an important potential strand of harm mitigation in future.**
- There were common messages around conditions that were the most conducive for children and young people to speak openly about harmful online experiences. **This includes the need for an empathetic response, so that children and young people feel listened to, and minimised further harm**. Policy and practice guidance might emphasise this.

- The research also suggests that, while schools may not always be the most appropriate first responders to a potentially harmful online encounter, **children and young people wanted to see more action on awareness-raising and supporting healthy and informed conversations about topics that may play out online**. This includes:
  - improvements to online safety education, to address the social media platforms that children and young people engage with, rather than the ones that they do not
  - nurturing body positivity in children and young people from a younger age
  - informed discussions of pornography within sex education or PSHE lessons, which reflect the realities of children and young people's online lives and the scenarios they are most likely to encounter.
- Overall, the findings were clear that **safeguarding children online is a multi-stakeholder responsibility,** and that a multi-stakeholder solution is required in developing policy and practice guidance, which includes industry, schools, youth professionals, parents/carers, children and young people.

7.15 Recommendations for future research

Future research about the harmful impacts of online content for children and young people are outlined below.

Guiding principles for future research

- Consideration of the risks and harms in the context of children and young people's wider lives, and their intersection with personal characteristics.
- Future research should also consider the protective factors, alongside the risks, as well as the non-harmful impacts and learning for children and young people, alongside the harms.
- Future studies would benefit from a multi-stakeholder perspective to include the experiences of children and young people, parents/carers and professionals, to provide a holistic and nuanced understanding of how online hazards are understood, experienced and navigated.

Additional topics and areas for further exploration:

- Future research may focus on children aged 8-12 years or children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, to explore the specific vulnerabilities and protections they experience in navigating online hazards.
- A key message from this study is the speed at which online developments take place, suggesting a need for ongoing research to understand changes in the types of online hazards and harms experienced by children and young people.
- Similarly, the findings stress the importance of parents/carers and professionals staying up to date with online developments so they can support children and young people to navigate new online spaces and safeguard them from harm. Therefore, future studies could investigate the types of supports and resources parents/carers and professionals find helpful, and evaluations of online safety programmes to assess their effectiveness.

Appendix 1 Screening questionnaire

This screening questionnaire was completed by children and young people to register their interest in taking part in the study.

Q1. What is your name?
[Free text]

Q2. What is your age?
□ 0-7 years
□ 8
□ 9
□ 10
□ 11
□ 12
□ 13
□ 14
□ 15
□ 16
□ 17
□ 18+
[IF Q2= under 7 or over 18 Then end survey – End 1]

Q3. Where do you live?
□ England
□ Northern Ireland
□ Scotland
□ Wales
□ I live outside of the UK
[IF Q3= I live outside of the UK Then end survey – End 1]

Q4. How often do you use the internet?
Choose one answer.
□ Never
□ Just once or twice
□ At least every month
□ At least every week
□ Daily or almost daily
□ Several times each day
□ Almost all the time
(Source: Global Kids Online, Module B: Access, Question B2)

The next set of questions are about how long you use the internet for (not counting when you leave it on while you do something else, but how long you actively use it).

Q5. About how long do you spend on the internet on an ordinary weekday (school day)?
Choose one answer.
□ Little or no time
□ About half an hour
□ About 1 hour
□ About 2 hours
□ About 3 hours
□ About 4 hours
□ About 5 hours
□ About 6 hours
□ About 7 hours or more
(Source: Global Kids Online, Module B: Access, Question B11)

Q6. About how long do you spend on the internet on a day at the weekend?
Choose one answer
□ Little or no time
□ About half an hour
□ About 1 hour
□ About 2 hours
□ About 3 hours
□ About 4 hours
□ About 5 hours
□ About 6 hours
□ About 7 hours or more
(Source: Global Kids Online, Module B: Access, Question B12)

Q7. Think about how you use the internet or a phone. How true are these things for you?
a) I know lots of things about using the internet and mobile phones
b) I know more about the internet and mobile phones than my parent(s)/ carer(s)
c) I know how to check whether a website can be trusted
d) I know how to choose the best keywords for online searches
e) I know which images of me or other people it is OK to share online
f) I know when to remove people from my contact lists
g) I know how to post online a video or music that I have created myself
h) I know how to edit or make basic changes to online content that others have created
i) I know how to install apps on a mobile device (e.g. phone or tablet)
j) I know how to keep track of the costs of mobile app use

Choose one answer
□ Not true for me
□ A bit true for me
□ Mostly true for me
□ Very true for me
□ I don't understand what you mean by that
(Source: Global Kids Online, Question F1 & F2: Children's digital skills & confidence)

Q8. Do you have a good time when you go online? (e.g. you enjoy yourself or get something out of it). Choose one answer.
□ Never
□ Hardly ever
□ Sometimes
□ Often
□ Very often
(Source: Global Kids Online, Module C: Benefits of internet use, Question C1)

Q9. Do you think there are things on the internet that are good for children of your age?
Choose one answer
□ No, none (1)
□ Yes, some (2)
□ Yes, a lot (3)
(Source: Global Kids Online, Module C: Benefits of internet use, Question C2)

Q10 In the PAST YEAR, how often, if ever, has anything happened online or on a phone that bothered or upset you in some way? (e.g., made you feel uncomfortable, scared or that you shouldn't have seen it)? Choose one answer
□ Never
□ Just once or twice
□ At least every month
□ At least every week
□ Daily or almost daily
□ Prefer not to say
(Source: Global Kids Online, Module G: Harms from internet use, Question G3)

Q11. In the PAST YEAR, how often have these things happened to you?

a) I have gone without eating or sleeping because of the time I spent on the internet
b) I have experienced conflicts with family or friends because of the time I spent on the internet
c) My grades have dropped because of the time I spent on the internet
d) I have tried unsuccessfully to spend less time on the internet
e) I think the amount of time I spend on the internet causes problems for me

Answer for each option:
□ Never
□ Hardly ever
□ Sometimes
□ Often
□ Very often
(Source: Global Kids Online, Module G: Excessive internet use, Question G9)

Q12. How often does your parent/carer do any of these things?

a) Encourages me to explore and learn things on the internet
b) Suggests ways to use the internet safely

Answer for each option:
□ Never
□ Hardly ever
□ Sometimes
□ Often
□ Very often
(Source: Global Kids Online, Question N1: Mediation of internet use)

Q13. Which of the following things have you experienced or come across online?
Select all that apply.
□ **Cyberbullying**: for example, people posting nasty messages about you online
□ **Online abuse**: for example, people threating you online and making you feel sacred
□ **Unwanted contact**: for example, this is when a stranger or someone you know tries to contact you online, but you don't want to be contacted by them
□ Sites that show **sex, sexual behaviour** or **nudity**
□ **Illegal activity**: for example, a video of somebody committing a crime, gang activity, or using drugs
□ **Violence**: for example, fighting
□ **Self-harm**: for example, information about how people can physically hurt themselves
□ **Suicide**: for example, information about how people can end their life
□ **Eating disorders**: for example, information on ways to lose lots of weight or become very thin
□ **Drinking alcohol**: especially children and young people under 18 years old drinking
□ **Dangerous stunts or challenges**
□ **Misinformation**: information that you know isn't true
□ **Something else**: please tell us what happened [please specify]
□ **None of the above**, you haven't had negative experiences online
[If Q13=None Then end survey – End 1]

Q14. How much have these online experiences affected you?
□ A lot
□ A little
□ Not at all
□ Not sure

Q14b. Is there a particular experience you have had online which fits with the categories above, that you wanted to share for the research project?
□ Yes
□ No
□ Not sure
[If Q14b=Yes, then go to Q14c]

[If Q14b=No or Not sure, then go to Q15]

Q14c. Please briefly tell us what happened, and how it affected you.
[Free text – max 250 words]

Q15. Would you be willing to take part in the research study and to speak with one of our researchers about the online experiences you've had?
NOTE: Taking part would involve speaking with an expert researcher about your experiences of online harms. This would be done as a video call lasting around 30 to 45 minutes. The conversation would be confidential (private), and you could bring an adult or friend with you for support if you'd like to.
□ Yes
□ No
□ Not sure
[If Q15=No Then end survey: End 2]

Q16. Please provide contact details to arrange an interview.
For children aged 8-15, please provide parent/carer contact details.
Young people aged 16-17 can provide their own contact details.
Contact number:
Email address:

Q17. Would you prefer to do the interview with a male or female researcher?
□ Female
□ Male
□ Don't mind

Q18. What is your gender?
□ Female
□ Male
□ Non-binary
□ Transgender female
□ Transgender male
□ Prefer not to say

Q19. Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?
□ Yes
□ No
□ Not sure
(Source: Civil Service (2021) Measuring disability for the Equality Act 2010 harmonisation guidance[8])
[If Q19= Yes, ask Q20] [If Q19= No, skip to Q21]

Q20. Does your condition or illness\do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry-out day-to-day activities?
□ Yes
□ No
□ Not sure
(Source: Civil Service (2021) Measuring disability for the Equality Act 2010 harmonisation guidance)

Q20b. Please give brief information about your condition or illnesses (optional).
[Free text – max 250 words]

Q21. What is your ethnic group?
Please choose one answer

[8] The long-lasting health conditions and illness (LLHCI) standard and the activity restriction standard are combined to determine if an individual would be identified as disabled. This is either according to the Equality Act (2010) – Great Britain or the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) – Northern Ireland. Online:
https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/measuring-disability-for-the-equality-act-2010/

White
□ Welsh, English, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
□ Irish
□ Gypsy or Irish Traveller
□ Any other White background
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups
□ White and Black Caribbean
□ White and Black African
□ White and Asian
□ Any other Mixed or Multiple ethnic background
Asian or Asian British
□ Indian
□ Pakistani
□ Bangladeshi
□ Chinese
□ Any other Asian background
Black, African, Caribbean or Black British
□ African
□ Caribbean
□ Any other Black, African or Caribbean background
Other ethnic group
□ Arab
□ Any other ethnic group
□ Prefer not to answer

Appendix 2 Topic guides

Young Person (11+ years) interview topic guide

Introductions

- To start off with, can you tell me a bit about yourself?
    - How old are you?
    - Who do you live with?
    - Do you have any siblings? If so, what age are they?
- What do you like doing in your free time?

Internet use and use of other platforms

- What do you usually do online?
    - Which websites, online apps, platforms or games do you go on?
    - What do you do on them?
- Do you talk to / interact with other people online? Who?
    - Friends / family / people you don't know personally?
    - How do you know them?
    - Do you talk to them offline?
    - What is good/positive about who you talk to online?
    - And what is bad/negative about who you talk to online?
    - What is good/positive about what you talk about online?
    - And what is bad/negative about what you talk about online?
- What is good or positive about your online activities and experiences?
- What is not good or negative about your online activities and experiences?

Harmful online content

As you know, this project is about understanding difficult experiences and events that happen online. When you completed the questionnaire before the interview, you mentioned that you had [researcher to insert the relevant hazard(s) here, from the screening questionnaire] experience(s). The questions I'm going to ask you next are going to be about that/those.

Incidents (Hazards/Stimulus)

'Hazards' is the term we are using internally; please reflect the language the participant uses

- Can you briefly tell me about [hazard]?
    - What happened?
    - Did it happen just the once, or more than once?
        - When did it (first) happen?
        - How often did it happen?
    - What was happening in the time leading up to [hazard]?
- Was anyone else with you? Who?
- Did you tell anyone at the time, or after about what had happened? If so, why/why not?

Context (Risks/Mitigation)

We are trying to understand how children/young people manage and cope with harmful situations, so I'm going to ask you some questions about that next.

- Was the [hazard] related to things happening offline too, at school or home?
    - Explore in what ways offline and online experiences related
- How often did it occur – was this something that has happened to you before, or just a one-off?
- When [hazard] happened – can you tell me what you did next after it happened?
    - Did you tell anyone? Who?
        - Friends
        - Parents / guardians / carers
        - Siblings
        - School
        - Charity/helpline
    - Use the platform's reporting or blocking functions? Do you have experience of these? Do you know how to find them? Do you think other children and young people could find them?
    - Stop using the platform?

- Do nothing
- When did you do that?
- Why did you decide to do that?
  - Did you think about doing anything else?
  - What helped or made it harder for you to do that?
- What happened after you did that?
  - Did this help? And in what ways?
  - Did the issue/incident stop or did it happen again?

- Looking back, do you think anything else would have been helpful at that time?
  - Do you think there is anyone in a position of responsibility who could have helped or should be doing more to help children and young people when they experience these things?

Impact (Harms)

We are trying to understand how experiences like this affect children/young people, so the next few questions will be focusing on that.

- Now looking at the timeline, can you tell me how you felt/how it affected you:
  - Before [hazard] happened?
  - When [hazard] happened?
  - Just after?
  - After some time had passed?
  - Now?

- Did you do anything differently online or offline after [hazard] happened?
  - Did anything change about the way you use the internet or online platforms after [hazard] happened?
  - Did you do anything differently offline after [hazard] happened?
    - When did that change happen?
    - What did you do differently?
    - Why did you make that change?
    - What difference has that change made to you?
    - How has that change affected you?
- Did anything else change for you or others around you after [hazard] happened?
  - Mental health and wellbeing
  - Physical health
  - Relationships – with family or friends, or others
- [If experienced more than one 'hazard'] Were any [hazards] more difficult than the others? Why?
- Taking a step back, and looking at the [hazards] that we have discussed…
  - Do you think there are any things in common, in terms of what was happening in your life at the time?
  - Which things do you think help to protect you from coming to harm, when you come across [hazards] online?
    - Your digital skills / knowing how to manage difficult situations online
    - Your resilience, or ability to 'bounce back' when you've been upset
    - Your friendship group or peers
    - Parental support or support from another trusted adult
    - Anything else

Suggestions

- [Explore for each 'hazard' in turn] Looking back, what help would have been useful for you or other children/young people who experience [hazard]?
  - What could schools do?
  - What could parents / guardians / carers do?
  - What could children and young people do?
  - What could government do?
  - What could website/app/social media/gaming companies do?
  - What could the police or other authorities do?

Close

- Is there anything else you'd like to tell us which you haven't had a chance to say?

After the interview, share the support information and £10 voucher with the interviewee.

Child (8-10 years) interview topic guide

Introductions

- To start off with, can you tell me a bit about yourself?
    - How old are you?
    - Who do you live with?
    - Do you have any brothers or sisters? How old are they?
- What do you like doing in your free time?

Internet use and use of other platforms

- What do you usually do online?
    - Which websites, online apps, platforms or games do you go on?
    - What do you do on them?
- What do you like about being online?
- And what is bad/difficult about being online?

Harmful online content

As you know, this project is about understanding bad experiences and events that happen online. When you completed the questionnaire before the interview, you mentioned that you had [researcher to insert the relevant hazard(s) here, from screening questionnaire] experience(s). The questions I'm going to ask you next are going to be about that/those.

Incidents (Hazards/Stimulus)

Researcher note: 'Hazards' is the term we are using internally; please reflect the language the participant uses

- Can you tell me about [hazard]?
    - What happened?
    - When did it happen? How old were you?
    - Did it happen just the once, or more than once? How often? *[Plot on timeline]*
- Where were you when it happened?
- Was anyone else with you? Who?

Context (Risks/Mitigation)

We are trying to understand how children/young people cope with difficult things online, so I'm going to ask you some questions about that next.

- Were there things going on at home or in school which led to the [hazard]?
- When [hazard] happened – can you tell me what happened next?
    - Did you tell anyone? Who?
        - Parents / guardians / carers
        - Siblings / Friends
        - School
    - What did you do?
        - Use the platform's reporting or blocking functions?
        - Stop using the platform?
        - Do nothing?
    - What (and who) helped or made it harder for you to do that?
    - Did this help? And in what ways?
    - Did anyone help you with reporting or blocking functions, or did you know how to do this yourself?
    - Did you think about doing anything else?

Impact (Harms)

The next few questions are all about how difficult things online make you feel, and how they affect you.

- Can you tell me how you felt/how it made you feel at the time?
- How are you feeling about it now, do you still think about it? (probe 'in what ways?' if so)
- Have things online changed…
    - what you do online?
    - what you do when you're not online (e.g. at home or school)?

  - how you are with family or friends, or other people you know?
- [If experienced more than one 'hazard'] Were any [hazards] more difficult than the others? Why?

Suggestions

- What things might help to keep you and other children safe online? Ask in general, and then probe with examples, e.g.
  - Websites, apps, games being more child friendly
  - having more information about how to stay safe
  - having people to talk to if you get into difficulties online.

Close

- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me which you haven't had a chance to say?
- Parent/adult – check if accompanying adult would like to add anything to the discussion

After the interview, share the support information and £10 voucher with the interviewee.

Parent/carers focus group topic guide

Introductions

- Ask everyone to introduce themselves stating their:
  - Name
  - Number and ages of children and young people
  - Online sites/ platforms/ apps /games that children and young people use
  - How would they describe their own digital / online literacy and knowledge
- Check if participants know each other
- How they know what apps/platforms their children use?
- How complete they think their knowledge of their children's online activity is?

Harmful online content

The focus of the discussion will be on harmful online content. Share Showcard on screen.

Showcard

- Online abuse: Cyberbullying; abuse; trolling; harassment
- Inappropriate content: Pornography; sexual content; nudity; violence
- Promotion of risky/harmful behaviours: body-image; self-harm; suicide; dangerous stunts or dangerous challenges
- Promotion of illegal activity: gang membership; drug use; underage alcohol, smoking gambling
- Disinformation and misinformation

PRIORITY ONLINE HARMS

HAZARDS

- Briefly check if their children and young people have experienced this [hazard] [show of hands]
- How did parents/guardians/carers know when their child had experienced this
  - Who tells them / how they notice?
  - What challenges are there for caregivers in these circumstances?
  - What could be done to support caregivers in these circumstances?

CONTEXT / RISKS

- How children and young people responded to the online content?
- How parent/guardian/carer responded?
  - What actions were taken
  - Unfollowed / blocked user
  - Made a formal complaint/ report
  - Explore decision-making process
  - Outcomes of any actions

- Views on what makes children more / less at risk of experiencing this type of [hazard]?
  - Child-related: e.g.: age; learning how to navigate online platforms; wider context / child's experiences
  - Parent-related: e.g.: parent controls; parent confidence in navigating online platforms, etc.
  - Tech industry: age verification; in-build protections online, etc

IMPACT / HARMS

- In what ways this [hazard] affected children – immediately and in longer-term?
  - Changes to what they do online
  - Changes to what they do/behave at home, school, other
  - Changes to child health and wellbeing

- In what ways this [hazard] affected wider family?
  - Parents
  - Other children and young people

- Time children and young people spend online / types of activities children and young people do online
- Relationships

Suggestions

- Looking back, what would have helped children and families to better manage these online [hazard]
- What else is needed, if anything, to help children and young people to live safe and healthy online lives [Researcher: ask openly first; share Showcard if needed]

Showcard

- What could schools do?
- What could parents do?
- What could children and young people do?
- What could government do?
- What could website/app companies do?
- What could the police do?
- What could other agencies do?

CLOSE [2 mins]

- Check if there is anything else participants would like to share
- Thank everyone for their time

After the interview, share the relevant support information with the interviewees

Professionals interview topic guide

Introductions

- Ask their
  - Job title / organisation
  - Brief overview of their responsibilities
  - What age groups of children and young people that they work with, and services offered

Harmful online content

The focus of the discussion will be on harmful online content. Share Showcard on screen.

Showcard A

- Online abuse: Cyberbullying, abuse, trolling, harassment
- Inappropriate content: Pornography, nudity, sexual content
- Promotion of risky/harmful behaviours: Eating disorders; self-harm; suicide; dangerous stunts or challenges
- Promotion of illegal activity: Violence, gang membership, drug use, underage alcohol
- Disinformation and misinformation

HAZARDS

- Briefly check which ones the children and young people they work with have experienced?
  - Most common / least common
  - Who experiences these – types of children and young people (e.g. gender, age, maturity, etc)

- Check if there are any additional harmful content / online experiences which are not listed here, but children and young people they work with experience?
  - What are these
  - How common is it
  - Who experiences these – types of children and young people (e.g. gender, age, maturity, etc)

- How they typically find out when child has experienced any online [hazard]?
  - Who tells them / how they know
  - What kinds of conversations they have
    - Professional curiosity
    - More structured feedback
  - What *don't* they know (gaps / blind spots)

- How confident do they feel in supporting children to manage / navigate online [hazards]?
  - How would they describe their own digital / online literacy and knowledge
  - Professional frameworks and CPD
  - Explore reasons for feeling more/less confident with this

CONTEXT/ RISKS

- How children and young people typically respond?
  - What actions they take?
    - Unfollowed / blocked user
    - Made a formal complaint/ report
  - Explore decision-making process?
    - Who is involved
  - Outcomes of any actions
  - What helps/hinders children and young people to manage experience/ seek help?
  - Based on their experience what could change to better support children and young people?

- Views on what makes children and young people more / less at risk of experiencing this type of [hazard]
    - Child-related: e.g., age, developmental stage, gender, ethnic or religious background, digital skills and confidence, wider context / child's experiences; support network
    - Specific prior vulnerabilities: e.g., SEND, behavioural difficulties, mental health problems, family conflict, trauma, English as an additional language etc
    - Tech industry: e.g., age verification; in-build protections online, AI or algorithms presenting CYP with harmful content, etc

IMPACT / HARMS

[Researcher note: ask openly first; share Showcard B if needed]

- In what ways this [hazard] affects children and young people
    - Impact on their health and wellbeing
    - Impact on relationships
    - Impact on their safety
    - Impact on (other) risk taking or problem behaviours
    - Other personal harmful outcomes (e.g. financial)

- How they know (that harmful outcomes have occurred)?
    - Observed
    - Directly reported
    - Measured (e.g. within professional assessment)

- Timeframe over which these harms are apparent?
    - Shorter term
    - Longer term / enduring (and reasons for this)

- What factors influence the severity of harms experienced by children and young people:
    - Child-related: e.g., age, developmental stage; gender; ethnic or religious background; digital skills and confidence; wider context / child's experiences; support network
    - Specific prior vulnerabilities, e.g., SEND, behavioural difficulties, mental health problems, family conflict, trauma etc
    - Children and young person's individual resilience - how do professionals describe this?
    - Tech industry e.g., age verification; in-build protections online, AI or algorithms presenting CYP with harmful content, etc

Looking to the future

- Overall, how well equipped do they feel within their professional practice, to spot online hazards, and to understand and respond to online harms?
- What kinds of additional support or training would help them in this role?
    - Access to CPD programmes
    - Better quality materials / information
    - New assessment tools or frameworks (or modifications to existing tools and frameworks)
    - Improvements to information sharing and multi-agency working practices
    - Other things
- What else is needed, if anything, to help children and young people to live safe and healthy online lives?
    - What could schools do?
    - What could parents do?
    - What could children and young people do?
    - What could government do?
    - What could website/app companies do?
    - What could the police do?
    - What could other agencies do?

CLOSE [2 mins]

- Check if there is anything else they would like to share
- Thank them for their time