HOUSE OF COMMONS

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing, HC 118

Tuesday 21 November 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 November 2023.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 1 - 65

Witnesses

I: Rafe Clayton, Principal Investigator, "New Uses of Screens in Post-Lockdown Britain", University of Leeds; Dr Bernadka Dubicka, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Hull and York Medical School, University of York; and Dr Amy Orben, Founder, Digital Mental Health Research Group, University of Cambridge.

II: Vicki Shotbolt, Founder and CEO, Parent Zone; and Carolyn Bunting MBE, CEO, Internet Matters.

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Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rafe Clayton, Dr Bernadka Dubicka and Dr Amy Orben.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session, our first on screen-time impacts on education and wellbeing. We will take oral evidence from two panels this morning. Our first panel comprises Rafe Clayton, who is online, and is principal investigator for the "New Uses of Screens in Post-Lockdown Britain" study at the University of Leeds; Dr Bernadka Dubicka, professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at Hull and York Medical School, University of York; and Dr Amy Orben, founder of the Digital Mental Health Research Group at the University of Cambridge. Thank you very much for coming to give evidence.

Can I ask each member of the panel: what is your assessment of the quantity and quality of research on screen time and its impact on children and young people?

Dr Dubicka: Thank you for inviting me here. I am also representing the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and we published a position statement on this subject in 2020.

Where do I start? The area is hugely complex. The research is always trying to catch up behind the rapidly moving technology, which is a challenge in itself. Over the years, the discussion and debate around it has become quite polarised into either good or bad, which is very unhelpful. I am sure that members of the Committee will appreciate that the subject is much more complicated than that.

There are several other points around the evidence bases. One of your questions was around screen time. Researchers are generally united in thinking that screen time is a very unhelpful concept, particularly when there is self-report by children, because we have evidence to suggest that nobody reports accurate screen time anyway, and what does it mean? What are young people doing? What are they seeing? It does not address any of that nuance.

The research has been far too narrowly focused, first on the concept of screen time, which is unhelpful, but also in the types of populations that it has looked at. If you are looking at thousands of children, or even tens of thousands, and are trying to find particular effects on particular vulnerable groups in particular ways of using screens, that is like looking for a needle in a haystack. You are not going to find those effects. Those general studies of population wellbeing using generic measures of screen time do not tell us anything at all about how the most vulnerable children and young people in our community might be experiencing some of the things that they encounter on screen.

There needs to be far more nuance in the populations that we look at, particularly the vulnerable groups, which is what I am interested in, coming from the Royal College of Psychiatrists; I am also interested in looking well

beyond screen time. What are young people doing on screens? How are they interacting with them? Who are they interacting with? Who is supervising? What vulnerabilities do young people have? Do they have parents who supervise and discuss what they might see online, or do parents just leave them to it? There are lots of questions that need asking and need looking at further.

There are lots of different lines of evidence. For example, you do not need to do a randomised controlled trial of parachutes to know that they will save lives. You look at different lines of evidence in the round, and sometimes action might be needed sooner rather than later. For example, we have certain standards and safeguards for safeguarding children and young people in their offline worlds, but those standards seem to disappear when it comes to the online world, and there does not seem to be the same level of evidence required around that.

The last point to make about the research is that we do not have access to real-time data from the tech companies, which the Royal College of Psychiatrists called for several years ago. We know that technology companies have a business model, which is to incentivise spending and generate income. Another area that is not talked about frequently enough is the monetisation of children online, and how they are used to make money for tech companies. There is a real disincentive to have systems that promote safety by design, rather that persuasive design, persuading children and young people to become addicted and look at more content.

By its nature, the most enticing content tends to be that extreme content, and that is the content that is pushed by algorithms. There is a lot more that tech companies can and should be doing, and we welcome the Online Safety Bill as a first step in that direction. However, it is a hugely complicated area. We need to be aware of any unintended consequences, and make sure that we monitor closely what is happening.

Q2 **Chair:** Since you made that call for tech companies to share data and work with the Royal College, has any tech company responded to it by being prepared to engage, and to bring you inside their models to show you what is going on?

Dr Dubicka: Amy can probably talk more about this, because she has done more research in this area. There is some access to data, but the full degree of transparency is not at all clear. It is like doing research with tobacco companies or drug companies. There needs to be full transparency and full independence for researchers.

There is also no ethical framework around data sharing and fully informed consent. Tech companies have all this data on children, and use it to their advantage, but when we are doing research studies, we have to apply for fully informed consent and ethical approval, which is a difficult and laborious process. That does not exist in the online world; it is a free-for-all. We urge the Government to bring forward their review of data sharing, which Ofcom has been commissioned to do, and in particular to look at the

ethical framework in which data is shared. Most tech companies do not understand the issues involved; a lot more needs to be done in that space.

Dr Orben: Can I quickly talk about data access? This is a difficult area because of the conflict of interest that can quickly arise. As a researcher, if I start working directly with a company, and they give me selective access, or capacity to analyse their data—that might be monetary support—you would not trust my evidence any more, or the stakeholders that I work with. This is a difficult space, where we need open and transparent ways of data sharing. The Data Services Act in the EU has created a mechanism that is being scoped out now. We in the UK are now behind, because we were calling for this data access for many years. In the Online Safety Act, there is a requirement for an Ofcom report, which Ofcom is now putting together, but there are clearer ways in which we can facilitate data access. However, the companies are not very forthcoming, naturally, because this is about their business model.

There is some movement. For example, TikTok has released an API, but it is very select. Also, a lot of this data sharing is about PR. It is about finding a couple of researchers to share data with, and then you can say that you have shared your data. However, it is all about open and consistent data sharing that we need if we are to provide you with the evidence that you need to make good policy and decisions. That is my main point—that the quality of evidence in this space is extremely weak.

Last week, there was a new meta-analysis published, a systematic review of about 100 studies, and only about eight of them did not have a medium to high level of bias. The WHO released guidelines in 2019, and a review found that 31 of the 33 studies were of low quality. They are often correlational, and often it is very difficult to show the causal links that we are looking for.

Q3 **Chair:** Looking at it from the other end of the telescope, you are a digital mental health research group. On the prevalence of mental health challenges among young people, the Committee is aware that there is a growing weight of mental health concerns. I expect that Rafe might touch on this in the post-pandemic context. I appreciate that it is not always easy to prove correlation, but given that growing weight, is there not a logical deduction to be made that there is likely to be some relation to people's experience, and this happened at the same time as a significant increase in screen time?

Dr Orben: There have been parallel processes; we have seen the lines going up for both mental health diagnoses and concerns, and for screen time. However, mental health is a complex thing. How we feel is impacted by many things in our environment. We have also had changes to the stress levels in schools; we have had a pandemic, and austerity and cuts to services. Also, young people are incredibly weighted down by things. There is very little hope now, if you look at questionnaires. When they think about the future, they do not see a lot of positives. Technology is part of their lives, and it will be playing a part. The question for us to figure out is how

much of a part it is playing, especially given other things that we know impact mental health—having food on the table, a supportive family, a good education and a conflict-free environment. That is my role.

If we look at the evidence, it is still extremely weak. It might be that we are looking in the wrong places. We know that how screens impact individuals varies a huge amount. There was a study of 60 teens in the Netherlands that measured their screen use and wellbeing about 2,000 times overall. It found huge variation. For some people, it had a positive impact; for some, it had a negative impact; and a lot of people were in between. Those people will probably vary as well; they will move in and out of categories. It is a very complex space, and when policy is being made on that weak evidence level, that needs to be a consideration. Maybe we say that technology is moving so fast that we cannot wait for an evidence consensus to arise. I would not argue against that. However, the evidence itself for something that could be driving such a massive change is still quite weak.

Q4 **Miriam Cates:** I agree that mental health is complex, and there are lots of different factors that come together to give a child a sense of wellbeing. You mentioned a number of things that are specific to this country—for example, the way that we locked down, or austerity or cuts to services. I am not saying that those things are not important, but if you look internationally across the entire Anglosphere, there has been a severe drop, particularly in girls' mental health, and an increase in suicide attempts from 2012. It is a phenomenon that is very similar across the English-speaking western world. Surely the only thing that can explain that severe drop in mental health is social media, or smartphone use, or whatever you want to call it. I am not saying that those other factors are not important, but they do not explain the very obvious trend across the western world.

Dr Orben: Looking globally is helpful to try to tease apart these trends. There has now been a piece of work that I can circulate—I do not think that it was in my evidence; it is not my own—that looked at mental health trends across the whole world. We do see drops, especially in the US, the UK and less so in some European countries. However, in South Korea we are not seeing these trends as much, and it was one of the first adopters of technology. We need to dig a bit deeper and try to understand the processes. It is not as easy as saying that everybody has been experiencing those things. I think that there are vulnerable populations that we need to think about, but across the population, things are not as clear-cut as we sometimes believe.

Q5 **Miriam Cates:** I did say the English-speaking world. There is quite a marked difference between the English-speaking world and South Korea, and other countries have a very different culture.

Dr Orben: Yes, but they did get the internet and social media at the same time, so if we think that that is the driving factor, it is difficult to explain that—

Q6 **Miriam Cates:** There is a very different context. For example, TikTok in China does not look like TikTok in the US, in terms of what children are exposed to. Even the equivalent of TikTok in China is locked to 40 minutes a day. Some US teens spend 10 or 12 hours a day on TikTok. Obviously, it will have a different impact in the US and China simply because of the physical restrictions. It is only helpful to compare countries where there is a similar digital environment.

Dr Orben: However, we were talking about 2012 just now. TikTok was not even around then. Digital environments vary, but they were a lot more similar when these trends started to emerge. Just working on trends is extremely weak, from our perspective as researchers, as evidence.

Q7 **Chair:** Can I bring in Rafe on this, and return to the original question: the quality and quantity of research into screen time? To Dr Dubicka's point, it is so interesting to look at the impact on different cohorts of children and different age groups.

Rafe Clayton: We know that there is a confusing picture when we look at screen time, due to poor definitions and a lack of anybody being able to bring together the vast amounts of screen time research undertaken since the early 1990s. Some people complain about the poor quality of research, and some complain about the absence of research in localised areas, particularly in the UK.

However, we are potentially able to look across a broad spectrum and find that there are trends that we can start to recognise and take action on. We know that screen time can cause harm. We know that it can lead to myopia, digital eyestrain, compulsive behaviours and inactivity. There are many negative impacts. What we are unable to do is recognise which aspect of screen use is related to which negative impact.

The pandemic has changed our society and culture. We are using screens more and more. The parents in the "British Families in Lockdown" study reported that they were starting to feel compelled to use, and addicted to using, their screens. The "New Uses of Screens in Post-Lockdown Britain" shows that, on average, people are using screens for around 11 hours a day. We see that there are unequal impacts on certain groups—women, ethnic minorities and higher earners are all disproportionately using screens for longer. Without understanding the cause of the behaviours, we are unable to potentially make recommendations or suggestions for mitigations, and on how people may limit their behaviours.

Limiting the behaviours is something that participants in both our studies were regularly calling for. They wanted and expected guidance, and they were surprised to hear that there was no guidance. When we were able to tell them why there was no guidance—because the Chief Medical Officer felt that there was inconclusive evidence—people seemed shocked about this. They seemed very aware that screens can cause harms, and felt that there should be guidance for them to limit their use.

It is important that we take very positive, proactive action towards providing people with what they need. The message pre-pandemic was that people can self-regulate and, through their self-regulation, should set examples to their children by acting as role models. Unfortunately, people are not able to self-regulate. They use screens to the point at which there are negative impacts, and to the point of what we could potentially describe as excessive use. Children are modelling their behaviour on the adults around them.

While I agree that there is a lack of cohesion in all the evidence around, there is also a huge amount of evidence, and historical evidence as well, that potentially will benefit from having a good team try to draw together common themes and try to lead us towards the next stage of research, which hopefully will be soon.

Q8 **Chair:** I see Dr Orben shaking her head there. Do you want to respond?

Dr Orben: We often are talking about the same thing; there is a variation. However, we also need to talk about the positives; we cannot not consider those. When I was informing the Chief Medical Officer guidelines, we talked about that, because we have growing evidence that, for example, young people from minority backgrounds, LGBTQ+ people and those from rural areas use technology to find people who they can relate to. There is often a duality. For example, we know that those young people experience heightened bullying and experience more online harms, but they also see the digital world as a lifeline—as a way to connect and find support. We therefore need to consider the whole plethora of different impacts that technology will have on us, because it all depends on what we are using it for, what use it has in our lives, and who we are. That is the real difficulty. Online life has just become life. Young people spend hours and hours on it, yes.

Chair: It is a medium, and in that respect, as you say, it can do good or cause harm, but like any other medium, we tend to try to regulate overexposure to it. There is an interesting debate about the quality of evidence, but surely the fact that there is not completely conclusive evidence of something does not mean that you should not do anything about it. That is the interesting dilemma here.

Q9 **Miriam Cates:** I have heard the argument many times that some children need an online network because they do not have a physical network. Of course there are children who are lonely and so on, but I would suggest that children do not grow up on networks; they grow up in communities, and it is quite harmful to have your community virtual and not attached to your family.

I think that there are huge safeguarding flags in what you have just said about LGBTQ+ children. If you type into the internet, "I'm a child and I think I'm LGBT", you immediately open yourself up to some horrific grooming. We have seen that gender-confused children have been drawn into transition and told how to inject cross-sex hormones without their

parents' permission. That is an incredibly dangerous part of the internet. Children who are questioning these things are then doing things in secret, away from the adults who love them and can guide them, and are potentially led down incredibly dangerous routes. We are seeing an explosion of this on the internet. That is a very negative aspect of the internet and social media, looking at what you can find immediately on typing in some search terms.

Dr Orben: We probably agree. I agree that we should have safety by design, and that we should design platforms that are safe for young people and minimise online harms, but they also use the internet in a communal fashion. Young people use phones to do all kinds of things, such as organise their friends. It is part of what it means to be an adolescent and a young person. Any policy change or regulation needs to weigh up these different risks and benefits.

Dr Dubicka: There are quite a few points that I would like to respond to within that conversation, because there are lots of relevant points. First, as I said, there are different lines of evidence. I am a clinician as well as an academic, so I see in clinics young people with mental health difficulties and other vulnerabilities, and have done for three-plus decades. It is important to look at those lines of evidence, as well as to listen to young people. There are a lot of qualitative studies, some of which I have been involved in, where older adolescent girls and young women talk about the impact of social media on their lives, and about how they see that driver of their mental health difficulties. Of course, in the NHS digital prevalence study, which was cross-sectional, it was found that children and young people with probable mental health disorders were more likely to spend more time on social media, and were more likely to be adversely affected by it.

On the CMO report, I was in the room at the time and, like Rafe, I was very concerned about the overall conclusions, because those lines of evidence were not really considered; nor was the impact on vulnerable groups. I brought up at the time that we need to have much more focus on vulnerable groups, as well as all the complexities that I discussed earlier.

The culture is important. You gave China as an example. I read recently that in China, self-harm and suicide are far more stigmatised than here, whereas here it has become normalised. From my clinical experience and some research studies that have taken place, I think that self-harm has become normalised. There are communities of young people online who teach others self-harm, as well as how to starve themselves. I have worked at an in-patient unit, and I have seen that actively happening there. We call that the contagion effect in in-patient units, and we see a similar sort of thing in communities.

Nevertheless, I completely agree with Amy's point, on the basis that these groups can also be extremely helpful. Minority groups and young people who find it difficult to talk about other issues find peer support. We have

seen that clinically, and there are research studies that show that. For example, there are studies that show that if someone is depressed and self-harming, these sorts of peer groups can be helpful and supportive and help to prevent self-harm. At the same time, when that young person is feeling suicidal, they can then trigger that behaviour and normalise it, and it becomes contagious. I have seen that in clinics. I have had a young influencer, who tries to stop young people self-harming, tell me on a good day about how many young people she has helped. Then she will come back a few weeks later, after something has happened in her life and she is feeling depressed, and she finds that same content triggering, and it encourages her to self-harm.

It is a hugely complex area. We had a debate at the Royal College of Psychiatrists a few years ago on this whole issue. One person stood up and said, "This phone is my heroin. I'm totally addicted to this. I can't sleep; I'm on it constantly." Another young person stood up and said, "I'm a looked-after child. I'm 16, and I have had to live on my own. It's my lifeline. It's how I connect with my friends and family." That illustrates the complexity behind this.

Q10 **Chair:** The people whom you are talking about in those cases are teenagers—adolescents. What is the evidence base on younger children? Is there an age at which this ought to be more limited? That is certainly of concern to parents. Has any research been done looking at different age groups and the impact?

Dr Dubicka: Amy can speak to this more in a minute, but there is a World Health Organisation statement around limits for children and young people. From the Royal College of Psychiatrists perspective, and from some of the data, the evidence around sleep displacement is fairly clear-cut. If you do this activity at night, it will displace your sleep. We know that sleep is so important, not only for educational outcomes but for your mental health. We talk in the Royal College of Psychiatrists about having a healthy balance. Anything in moderation is probably okay.

Q11 **Chair:** There is no clear definition of excessive use, is there?

Dr Dubicka: No, there is not, and that is the same as screen time. There is no clear definition of that either. The important thing is to have a healthy balance. Make sure that children get enough sleep, enough face-to-face contact with family and friends, a healthy diet, sports, exercise and fresh air.

Chair: I am going to bring in Ian, because we need to make progress, but we will come back to Rafe.

Q12 **Ian Mearns:** Are there means of controlling the negative impacts of screen usage—for example, exposure to harmful content—while preserving the benefits, such as connecting with others? You have just been talking about that, Amy.

Dr Orben: This is a difficult question. I have often argued about the low quality of evidence. We think that we need to create an internet that is safe for children. A lot of the last decade has been about solving it on a child level—telling children that everything is fake online, or that they should limit their use, or telling parents that. We know that they are overwhelmed, and it is a huge area of concern in the family and the school. Part of that digital literacy, education and support needs to continue, but a key area is that the design of these technologies is probably causing behaviours that we do not want. They are designed in certain ways, and if we were to design this from scratch, as public infrastructure, we would design it differently. It needs a triangulation of different approaches.

We cannot just work in the school setting or in the family setting to solve this. It also needs regulation. We have to think creatively about how we create an internet that is safe, and designed for young people at different age stages. Every age stage has a different developmental need. For example, for young children, that safe online world will look very different from how it does to teens; we want them to be able to explore, and to learn how to deal with something that might cause them to feel uncomfortable, and put them in some stage of conflict with friends, because that is also a normal part of their development in that age range.

Rafe Clayton: I can pick up on my point that I wanted to make earlier and lead into this. We cannot question the benefits of screen use for productivity, connectivity, learning, creativity and entertainment.

Ian Mearns: It saves you travelling from Leeds.

Rafe Clayton: Yes, indeed. Without screen use, society would look very different. Most of us are familiar with John Maynard Keynes in the 1930s suggesting that we would only be working 15 hours a week with the advance in technology. However, what has happened is that we have responded to the improvements in technology and we are finding that we are able to engage to a much higher degree. Our culture expects more than it ever did from productivity, creativity, learning, entertainment and connectivity. However, with the Government's digital strategy, with tech companies always pushing new technologies upon us, with our eagerness to be competitive internationally and the feeling that we should be putting our children more and more on screens to do that, we need to understand what excessive screen use might be to create the balance that you are seeking between the positives and the negatives.

On what excessive use might be, we need to look at anything that can lead to a negative impact on health, relationships, learning and productivity. Screen use enhances all these, but there is a point at which utility becomes disutility. One of the challenges that we face is whether we are able to decide and determine utility values or not. A lot of researchers feel that we cannot determine those utility values based on current research, and that we need to do more research to try to identify them. Some feel that there is evidence out there that can start to lead us towards some indications.

Our study suggested that something interesting happens after around six hours of screen use. There were no negative health impacts for adults—or relatively small impacts of 7%—before six hours of screen use. Then 75% of negative health impacts occur after nine hours of screen use. This is very basic data, but it suggests that there might be something around that space between six and nine hours of screen use a day. Perhaps we should potentially advise people not to go beyond nine hours of use a day, and should all try to limit use to under six hours a day to avoid negative health impacts. However, there are other approaches that we can take that might mitigate negative health impacts.

There are a number of mitigations that we can explore further and potentially introduce, so that people are able to spend six or nine hours using screens a day. In the round, we have to think that that might be good for productivity, but what about relationships and health? That might be good for learning, but is it good for socialisation of children? It is a complex picture, but the complexity is not insurmountable. It just needs people to sit down and look at everything as a whole. We have not had a very large-scale study in this area, and it is time that we did this.

Dr Dubicka: It is unlikely that one size fits all. You might have a child who has a nine-hour cut-off, but the rest of the time stays on the sofa doing nothing and has a very unhealthy lifestyle. You might have another child who is quite athletic, and spends the rest of the time competing in sports and has a very healthy lifestyle. That level of screen time has different implications for different children. It is more about encouraging a healthy, balanced lifestyle for children from an early age.

On how you balance the pros and cons, as a psychiatrist, I would say that it is always about dialogue. That is something else that we talk about in our college paper. It is so important to talk to young people about what they are doing on screens, whether you are a parent, a carer, an educator or a clinician; for them to understand the consequence of what they are doing and why some things might be harmful; and to discuss anything that they might find distressing online. I know from my clinics that most clinicians do not know enough about the online space, and it is partly fear. People simply do not ask. I suspect that is the same for many adults working with children and young people. Online and offline lives seem to be two completely separate entities, which is not the case. We need to be empowering not only children and young people, but also adults who look after children and young people, to understand this space a lot better.

Colleagues and I have produced a paper about the sorts of areas that clinicians should be interested in and curious about, because we also know from research that young people say to us, "If you don't ask, we're not going to tell you." I have some horrendous examples from clinics over the years, where young people have been seen regularly for a long time and then have been asked about their online space. For example, I have had primary school children who have accessed the dark web and were sexually

exploited. Clinicians did not ask and did not know, and parents did not know.

I had another girl who was presenting with self-harming regularly. She was in a relationship in which she was unhappy. When I asked about the influences that the boyfriend might be following, of course it was Andrew Tate. She was in a very coercive relationship, which then led to her poor mental state and self-harming behaviour as a consequence of his behaviour. That is something else that we have not talked about: misogyny in the online space. That potentially is another driver for distress in girls. That is something that we are researching in York as well.

Yes, it is complex, but that dialogue—talking to young people—we term co-production in mental health. We speak to young people about what they understand by this, and what might be helpful for them. We use them as well, but of course, as Amy says, we cannot rely on young people to police the internet. The tech companies have to be more responsible here, through legal means, probably.

Q13 **Ian Mearns:** All of this is screaming out to me that there is a lot about the whole area that we do not know enough about. It is calling out for health, educational and work-related research into the effects of this. There is a lot of concern out there, but there is a lot that we do not know. Let's have a look at it properly.

Dr Dubicka: There are things that we do know that we need to use as well—different lines of evidence. We need to listen to young people's evidence. We need to listen to the qualitative—narrative—studies out there, as well as the big data. However, the big data is completely hampered by the lack of access to real-time data that the tech companies hold.

Dr Orben: I completely agree. The US, after the US Surgeon General's report and the concern about screen time, has put in a large pot of funding, which I think will be transformational there, using their data in the US context. I also agree that we need multiple lines of evidence. For example, quantitative evidence will be behind, especially if we do not support it with data access. Hearing from young people, for us in my team, is always transformational, as is going out and speaking to them.

I wanted to revisit whether there is a good or a bad level of screen time. The problem is that screen time is not a molecule; it is not medical. It does not go into our body with a dose-response relationship, so that a certain dose has a certain outcome. Twenty minutes of screen time can have many different impacts, depending on whether you are looking at self-harm content, you are being groomed, or you are looking at the news. I do admissions interviews at Cambridge, and we have so many children now who have educated themselves on their subject, because they have not had that support in their school, and that is all on screen.

I do not know if we will ever get to the point where we can say, "This amount of use is bad," or "This amount is excessive." It might be that we get to the point where we say, "For very vulnerable children, this might be the case," or "For this age group, we might be able to give better advice," but I do not think that we will ever get to a point where we can give a concrete number.

It helps me to think about it like other things in our environment, such as diet. A bar of chocolate might be very harmful for a young person who has diabetes, and may put them in hospital, but if they have just come off the football pitch after a massive match, it might be helpful. We want to know how many chocolate bars they have to eat. Fifty in one day? Probably not good. Is that their first one? Then we think about their birthday or what their motivation is for eating that chocolate bar. Are they sad or are they hungry? We need to think a lot more like that when we think about screens.

Q14 **Ian Mearns:** You talk about 20 minutes' screen time. Within 20 minutes, because of search engines, you can look at 15 different items of content, and there can be massive variation in how positive or negative the impact will be on an individual.

Dr Orben: It is a data analysis issue. We can now get, through GDPR, people's TikTok links and what they view, but they are viewing thousands of links a day. For my team, even having the analytical capacity to understand what is going on is extremely difficult.

Rafe Clayton: I understand people's hesitancy to offer guidance, but we do not know the impacts of a certain amount of screen time on each individual. Equally, we do not understand the exact impacts of one cigarette, or 10 cigarettes, on an individual. That does not stop us from offering guidance, or offering suggestions about what is appropriate for people's healthy lifestyles.

We need to look at the evidence and start to build a solid picture, moving forwards, with an approach that incorporates different disciplines. We should try to undertake response-type research alongside behavioural research, and particularly quality longitudinal research, tracking people over time. We should work with data companies to try to draw together a picture of where harms might exist, and what the potential causes of those harms may be. I believe that we can get close to guidance that the British people are desperately calling for and need, given the inability to self-regulate.

Q15 **Ian Mearns:** In recent years, there has been a change in children and young people seeking mental health support due to negative impacts of screen time—for example, from social media use. Have you had experience with children and young people whose screen time usage is consistent with a behavioural addiction?

Dr Dubicka: Yes, I have. I will address one of the points that we were just discussing, which is guidance for parents and carers. We talked about

modelling before. As a child psychiatrist, I think it is so important that parents can demonstrate the right behaviour, but so often that is not the case. In our report, we talk about not having screens at mealtimes and so on. That is very important.

On behavioural addiction, I am not a behavioural addiction specialist, but I have certainly encountered young people over the past few years who have struggled with technology—for example, boys who have become very addicted to pornography. We talked about how much is bad. We know that lots of children are being exposed to pornography from a very early age now, to the extent that all one person was doing was watching pornography, often in front of children in the house. It was very distressing in the family. If parents tried to stop it, there would be very violent behaviour. That has all ended very well now, but there are those examples, because this material is so readily available.

A recurrent study that I am involved with is looking at unwanted sexting among older teenage girls. We know from available evidence that that is extremely distressing for many young girls. To go back to what I have seen, a lot of this can be very shameful for young people, so they are not going to talk about it unless you ask about it.

Q16 **Chair:** Are they even going to talk about it if you ask about it?

Dr Dubicka: Some might. In certain situations, I have asked and young people have started to talk about it. For example, another clinical situation is young people with bipolar disorder. In other words, they might become very depressed or very high and disinhibited. Particularly for girls, it is very risky because of how vulnerable they are online. They might start sexting to strangers, they may meet up with those strangers, have sex with those strangers. Then when they become depressed, they feel shamed by that behaviour, and of course it is dangerous behaviour. Yes, they are very reluctant to talk about it. However, if you do not ask, they will not say, but once they can start to talk about it, it is obviously quite freeing and helpful in thinking about safety and how they can make themselves safe. Another example is young people with autism. That is another neglected group that has not been looked at.

Some young people develop lots of life skills through gaming, and it can become a future career choice; I have seen that in young people. Other young people, who are vulnerable in other ways and have mental health problems, can become very addicted to it, to the extent that they never leave their room. It can become very challenging, and they do not have any semblance of a healthy lifestyle.

I have a colleague at the Royal College of Psychiatrists who has a clinic looking at these young people and the difficulties that they encounter. I have another colleague, David Zendle in York, who specifically looks at the monetisation of children. This is not addressed in the Online Safety Bill. Yes, gaming can be very positive, but it can be addictive. However, it is another way that companies have of making money from children. My

colleagues demonstrated that games targeted at four-year-olds and up can generate hundreds of thousands of pounds for companies. We do not yet know which age groups are spending that money, but as we heard recently on the news, children can easily spend a lot of money online without their parents even knowing about it.

Q17 **Chair:** We heard some quite concerning evidence in our county lines inquiry about the risks of children being targeted through gaming, and then being brought into danger of serious criminal harm. That is clearly very concerning.

Dr Dubicka: Looked-after children are another particularly vulnerable group, who might have already been exploited and groomed and abused. They are much more vulnerable to that sort of exploitation online, and I see that repeatedly in clinic. It is challenging to prevent that exploitation while allowing young people the freedom to connect with their peer group and use social media in a positive way.

Q18 **Miriam Cates:** We have been talking about mental health, but what about other behavioural impacts, such as hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder? I will not say "screen time", because I completely agree that it depends what you are doing on the screen. If you are reading an academic paper, that is probably very helpful to your concentration span, but certain social media apps, such as TikTok or YouTube shorts, are constantly serving new material that is only there to create an emotional response. Can it be demonstrated that that has an impact on children's concentration span and some of these behavioural disorders, or is that a correlation at the moment?

Dr Dubicka: Theoretically it could do. I am not an expert on this. We are in the process of revising our guidance and looking at the literature. I have not looked at the literature. Amy might be able to say a bit more on that. Technically, of course, if you have a child with ADHD, they are very impulsive, as is somebody who is manic.

Q19 **Miriam Cates:** Could it be the other way around—that the nature of these apps is contributing to a rise in these disorders?

Dr Orben: There are a lot of different ways in which this could be playing out. Evidence provision takes such a long time, and we still know very little about TikTok. That is ongoing work in my team at the moment. Similarly, we have seen bidirectional relationships; for example, those who have more ADHD-like symptoms start using more screens, but more screen time also seems to lead to more ADHD-like symptoms. However, that is not yet causal evidence. For example, ADHD runs in families, and your genetics might come into play. It is called genetic confounding: because your parents already have similar symptoms, there might be more screens in the home. There seem to be some of these longitudinal, bidirectional relationships.

Another thing is that social media has a lot of narratives around disorders and mental health conditions. As you say, that can shape how young people

experience certain behaviours. We see reference to "ADHD superpowers" online. That will also have an impact.

That is where I go back to the qualitative evidence of my colleagues, and where young people say that there are times when they feel out of control. We need to understand what those times are, and how we can change technological designs in that regard. The EU is talking about limiting endless scroll. I was in Amsterdam last week, and a colleague of mine was giving evidence on whether you should limit the endless scroll in these apps. We were discussing it, and saying that we do not have evidence, but if we believe from intuition that that might help, maybe we should roll it out for some, and test it. In the digital world, because evidence will be so slow to materialise, we might decide to do a policy change for a subset first, then evaluate it, and then roll it out later.

Rafe Clayton: We need to think about the context through which these behavioural issues are identified, often in school. We found in both studies that there is an interesting discussion to be had between learning and education. Learning takes place through screens, but it is not always aligned to the national curriculum. Children are learning through their communication, their games, their browsing, social media, and watching films. This learning is often very effective because it is self-led, self-directed and is often reward-based. It is relevant and meaningful to the young people who are engaged with it. It is engaging because it is stress-free learning. Nobody is going to be testing or measuring their learning.

With screen use increasing—half of children have their own tablets now, and 90% of 12 to 15 year-olds own their own smartphone—children can self-direct their learning, potentially away from the national curriculum. This may make the school learning appear sometimes not relevant or not as meaningful. It is teacher-led, and it is stressful because it is being measured. As a result, in a school environment, the children who are learning outside a school environment may start to exhibit symptoms or behaviours that may be—

Q20 **Miriam Cates:** I do not deny that there are some, or many, educational materials online—of course that is true—but that does sound like a rose-tinted view of how educational this content is. Even if the content itself is not by nature negative or harmful, what is the impact of scrolling through, let's say, videos of people doing football tricks? There is nothing wrong with that at all. Go out and practise the football trick—brilliant. However, if you are literally changing video every 20 seconds, and getting a dopamine hit or an emotional hit, and you are conditioned to do that every day, how can you sit through a maths lesson in school, however good, engaging, appropriate and stress-free that maths lesson is? That is the question I am getting at.

Rafe Clayton: You are absolutely right. This is the evidence that I was giving to you. When somebody is scrolling and scrolling, it is self-led and self-directed; they are engaged with it. Often, they are getting rewards for it and their perceptions—their reality—is changing in response to what they

are seeing. This can be very damaging. You may have a child who is playing a computer game in which they are being rewarded for committing acts of violence using weapons, and for theft. Then they may scroll and watch videos that repeatedly reaffirming those behaviours to them. They are learning in this environment in a way that feels relevant to them, but it is away from the national curriculum. You are absolutely right that when they go back into the maths lesson, the learning does not seem as relevant. It does not seem as self-led. It does not seem as personalised and—

Miriam Cates: It is not emotionally rewarding.

Rafe Clayton: Yes. There is a difference taking place between learning and education. The kids are learning. We might not like what they are learning, but they are learning.

Q21 **Miriam Cates:** I see what you mean, yes. That leads to physical inactivity. What children are doing on a screen impacts them, whether it is of benefit or disbenefit, with the actual screen time. That screen time is preventing them from being physically active. What evidence do you have on whether the impact of screen time is reducing physical activity? Is it variable, or has it had a noticeable impact across a cohort?

Rafe Clayton: Parents are significantly concerned about their children becoming addicted to screens, spending long periods of time watching films, and disappearing into their room. Parents report observing a physical change in their children. They were concerned that social networks exist online that prevent young people from meeting outside and undertaking physical activities together. We know what the physical impacts are of a sedentary lifestyle; that is very well established. We know that digital eye strain and close work can affect the myopia epidemic. Yes, there are very real concerns from the British public and parents about the physical impacts of screen time.

Q22 **Chair:** On that point about the physical side, is there any evidence that screen time on computers or iPads or iPhones is different from the same concerns about children sitting in front of the television 20 or 30 years ago? Do you have any thoughts on that? Secondly, on the mental health side of things, there have been some suggestions that engagement with nature is an important antidote. Is there any hard evidence that that is the case?

Dr Dubicka: The difference between TV screen viewing and screens today is that screens today shape young children's behaviour, through notifications, endless scrolling, feeds, and algorithmic persuasive design. They are shaping how our young children are developing. We still do not understand how that will influence and shape our children, but it is an area that we should be concerned about.

Nature-based intervention is an area of huge interest and concern to me as well. That is another area where the lines of evidence are still emerging. I am involved in a project that will hopefully look at the impact of forest schools and nature on young children, particularly those in vulnerable

groups. Certainly there are increasing lines of evidence about the importance and benefits for health, particularly mental health, of being out in nature.

Dr Orben: I have two points that I am desperate to raise. The first is thinking about the socioeconomic status of the children. Often we have an assumption that an hour not spent on a smartphone is an hour spent climbing a tree, helping your mum cook or playing the piano, because that is often the background that we come from as decision makers in society. However, naturally that is different for different children. There is a lot of research going on in the US about children in inner-city, high-crime neighbourhoods where an hour spent on screen might be an hour not on the streets. That might be only a minority of children, but it is something that we need to think about. Some young children do not have educational materials or after-school clubs, and the screen might be offering them different things than it does to others. That is probably also true for nature. What is the access to it? Who are those populations that have been studied? It might be quite select.

You are right that we need to consider in our evidence session the history of concerns around any new technology. In the 1940s we had the radio, and there were parenting articles and evidence sessions just like these, concerned about how it is bringing an addictive thing into the home. "It is taking our children away from our very eyes," was a quote from a parenting magazine at the time. I tell myself that my work is not going to be a laughing stock in 50 years. Things are highly individual now. We all have our own on-screen world that we inhabit, especially now with algorithmically driven content. During adolescence or a time in a young person's life where they are being shaped, I think that that matters. Maybe we do not completely understand it yet, but I do not think that it is just the radio.

Part of the concern will just be technology. There will be something new that comes around, and we will forget about the concerns that we initially had, but there are parts and specific designs of technology that we should be concerned about and should be targeting. It may not be screens in general, but how they are designed and made.

Rafe Clayton: On that point, digital screens are diverse. We have LEDs, LCDs, plasma screens, cathode ray monitors and liquid crystal displays, and there is evidence that suggests that different people respond differently to different types of light. People have different light sensitivities. This is very under-researched, but it is possible that certain people can have very negative impacts from certain types of light. We have known since the early 1970s about the impacts of blue light on sleep and mental function. We understand that lights can impact mood, but this needs a lot more research if we are to understand how the different types of light impact differently on brain function.

Chair: Thank you. Mohammad wants to pick up on that, particularly with

regard to sleep.

Q23 **Mohammad Yasin:** We move on to educational outcome. We have mixed evidence on the effect of screen time on educational outcome. For example, your university, the University of Cambridge, says that online learning is very important and has very positive impacts. However, some teacher unions and the Association of Schools and College Leaders are saying the complete opposite. In your view, is this positive or negative?

Dr Orben: There is a new meta-analysis that came out on Monday last week. It looked at educational outcomes. It found that, overall, things like screen use and television viewing were at least correlation-related to small, negative impacts, but that educational use, or use with a parent, or use of books with narration or audiobooks, led to positive outcomes. Therefore, overall, it depends on how it is used. That is increasingly what we are seeing, even from the censuses of evidence. It is not the screen; it is what is on and around the screen that matters.

Dr Dubicka: I agree with that. As I said before, it is around parental modelling in the home, and how it is used as supervision. To touch on the issue of inequalities, obviously there is digital poverty, which you are well aware of, in schools. We see that in the clinic, too, when it comes to access to online therapy. That is also very counterproductive for many children and young people, and usually goes hand in hand with lack of access to nature and a lack of beneficial impacts from that.

From our clinical experience, before the pandemic we just assumed that young people would like to be seen on screen all the time and would much prefer to be seen remotely, but it is not like that. Many young people much prefer to come and see you face to face. They find it a lot easier to speak to people in person, particularly when they are talking about something quite confidential. It is the young people who are most at risk and most vulnerable, and who are living in poverty, who might not have facilities at home for online access. They might not have their own bedroom or private space. There might be people listening in, or they might not have the right tablet. Those are important issues to consider in education.

Rafe Clayton: We have different people. Some will enjoy using screens; some will enjoy being in person. Moving forward, we need to recognise and understand that we will have that disparity in preferences, and try to support that moving forward. There is a concern among young people and parents alike about the extent to which they are using screens. People feel addicted, compelled and unable to escape from screens. For those who do not want to use screens, we would potentially need to look at what non-digital provision exists. It seems to be disappearing very quickly as we move into an almost entirely digital world.

Q24 **Mohammad Yasin:** Do you share the concerns of people who say that screen usage has a detrimental effect on the quality of children and young people’s sleep?

Rafe Clayton: Yes, and we have plenty of evidence of this. One of the issues that we have experienced is young people using screens late at night and as they go to bed, and even picking up their devices in the middle of the night, interacting with others, communicating with others. It is not just blue light disturbing their sleep, but the content they may be exposing themselves to, which is then interfering with their brain patterns as they try to go to sleep, or the arguments they have with their friends and peers, or the interesting conversations that they continue to have until 2.00 am or 3.00 am. This is something that parents are very concerned about and it is very widely reported in our studies.

Dr Dubicka: Parents often do not know. I recall a primary school child who was self-harming and not sleeping at night, and it was only after a while, when we were giving them medication to help them sleep, that I found out that they were online and being cyber-bullied until the early hours of the morning. The parents did not know. It was only once we had that conversation that the parents could become involved.

Q25 **Mohammad Yasin:** What are the consequences of this on children's educational outcomes?

Dr Dubicka: We know sleep is so important, not just for education outcomes and concentration, but for mental health outcomes. Poor sleep can drive mental health problems such as depression. If someone is depressed, they cannot concentrate on their work, and that further impacts on education. Sleep is vital for many outcomes.

Q26 **Chair:** You talked about the issues with safeguarding; surely children being unsupervised and using devices late at night is a safeguarding concern. I appreciate it is very difficult to make specific recommendations based on poor evidence, but is there not a case for age-related digital curfews of some kind? We keep children inside at night for their protection. We keep them safe in our homes. Surely saying there is a limit to what time people ought to be allowed online would not be an unreasonable recommendation to make in the interests of sleep, mental health and safeguarding.

Dr Dubicka: The primary point is that all parents and carers should encourage their children to get an adequate amount of sleep. There are guidelines for how much sleep is required for children at different developmental stages. Any activity that displaces that sleep is not good for you, and parents should also model that. Of course, the problem is that a lot of parents are taking their screens to bed and are up at night, and that is just not helpful. It is how we communicate that to parents as well.

Dr Orben: In South Korea they had a gaming shutdown law, where games shut down at midnight. I am trying to remember off the top of my head, but I think when they evaluated how much more sleep young people were getting, it was only a couple of minutes, so I do not think it will be the solution to sleep. However, you could think about the safeguarding issue and also the social pressures. The thing young people really care about is being included in their peer group. If everybody is online, there is a lot of

social pressure. It is similar to smoking: 20 years ago, you could tell a young person about all the health risks of smoking, but that social exclusion of saying, “No, I do not want that cigarette” at a party was more important to them; it is mitigating that social risk. I think the situation is very similar.

There is a group in the US thinking about whether they can bring groups together to discuss the social norms. Often they want to set restrictive norms, but they need to have that conversation as well.

Q27 **Mohammad Yasin:** Google Classroom, for example, and its programmes form a big part of the classroom in home learning. Digital devices are already embedded in a lot of schools, so how can parents control the screen time?

Dr Orben: It is difficult. We have just done a big piece of work on a new measure of digital parenting, and in the qualitative literature, especially in the interviews, parents are saying, “I am trying to limit screen time but they say they have to do their homework and they must access their materials.” I think that is why guidelines for parents might not just be the specific hours spent, but need to be a lot more encompassing around how you deal with school. It is a major issue in the home.

Q28 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** We talked about the impact of the self-regulation of parents. What are your views on parents who look at their screens and are perhaps not talking to their children, and what impact does that have on their development?

Dr Dubicka: I will let you speak about the research, but as a child psychiatrist, I think it is important for parents to show an interest in and engagement with children’s activities and whatever they are doing. If a screen takes parents away from that for a long time, that will not be helpful for the relationship with their child. There is emerging evidence around this, but it is still in its infancy. There is lots of research showing the importance of eye contact and face-to-face contact with very young infants in building a bond and a relationship with the parent. Anything that displaces that, including screens, is not a healthy thing for children. Maybe Dr Orben could speak to the evidence, which is still limited.

Dr Orben: It is very limited.

Rafe Clayton: There are positive experiences of shared screen use that occurred during the pandemic, which we can refer to. There was collective viewing of television shows, meeting with distant members of the family and having online parties. There were some very positive experiences associated with parental role-odelling and the parent and child relationship surrounding screens, but we repeatedly hear stories from adults where they wake up in the morning and pick up their mobile phone, then go down and use a tablet while having their breakfast. Then they are commuting, perhaps using their mobile phone again, spending all day on a computer, coming home and again using their mobile phone on the bus or the train,

putting on the television or playing some computer games, then using their phone or tablet again before bed.

This is very common now, and it seems that the compelling nature of screens, all the advantages of screens, seem to be encouraging certain groups of people to do this more and more. We are particularly concerned about ethnic minorities, higher earners and women, who seem to display a greater tendency to use screens for longer. These behaviours for their children are very concerning, because potentially children of those in these groups will emulate, repeat and copy.

Also, while parents are on screens, they are not looking at, supervising or observing their children. We heard a lot of guilt from parents regarding when they are looking at their screens and they have just ignored their child, or they have put their child on screens to act as almost a surrogate. These situations are seemingly increasing and are very concerning.

Dr Dubicka: I want to add two points to that. One is that we talk in our paper about the lack of concern that parents have about sharing information about their children, and images of their children throughout their lifespan. Of course, that is becoming increasingly common and is something else that needs to be thought about.

The second thing that we have not talked about—it is not in the Online Safety Bill—is that there is lots of regulation around child actors, but not child influencers. That is something that is rarely talked about, and there is very little research into it. Of course there are many parents who make a lot of money from the influencing their child does. The question is what the impact of that might be, and how that might affect displacement from education as well. There is insufficient dialogue on that. Again, there is a complete schism in regulation between the offline space and, say, child acting, and the online space, where there is absolutely nothing.

Chair: A very interesting point. Thank you. I think we have overrun our time for this panel, but it has been a very interesting discussion. Thank you very much for your evidence.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Vicki Shotbolt and Carolyn Bunting.

Q29 **Chair:** On our second panel, on the effectiveness of digital safety education, we have Vicki Shotbolt, founder and CEO of Parent Zone, and Carolyn Bunting MBE, CEO of Internet Matters. Thank you very much for joining us this morning. I think you both heard a lot of the earlier discussion.

What is your assessment of the digital media literacy of children and young people in the UK, bearing in mind what we have just heard, and recognising that this is very much an evolving space that is constantly changing and constantly facing new challenges?

Carolyn Bunting: The first thing to say is that it is complex. It is pretty fragmented and inconsistent, and it is spread across different aspects of the curriculum, whether that is computing or PSHE and citizenship. I think there is a challenge in that fragmentation and inconsistency, and also variable delivery. Some schools do it one way and schools do it another, so it is quite variable.

The other thing that we see in this space is that teachers recognise that it is a hugely important area for the young people they are supporting, but also are very torn. They have a crowded curriculum and do not have adequate training and resources of sufficient quality. The outcome of all that is that, unfortunately, children and young people do not necessarily have the skills and behaviours that they need, not only to benefit from the digital world but, importantly, to stay safe in the digital world. We still see one in five children saying that they are not confident in keeping themselves safe online, and that rises, as the previous panel said, with vulnerability. Vulnerable children are far more at risk online. Generally, there is more that could be done to improve media literacy education across the UK.

Q30 **Chair:** Thank you. Vicki, do you agree with that picture?

Vicki Shotbolt: I do. Having spent a little time listening to the previous panel and thinking about this space, it is very easy to become depressed as a parent. You could easily put your head under the duvet and try to avoid it. I think it is worth reflecting on the fact that we have come an awful long way. I can remember when we did not have online safety in the curriculum. Then it was stuck into the computing part, and now it is in RSHE, so we have started to reflect the behavioural concerns that parents are so worried about.

We have come a long way. We see in schools that there is a huge divide between primary and secondary school. Primary school has got to grips with the basics of online safety pretty well. It is impressive when you see teachers tackling the subject even with very young children. In secondary school it gets so much more complicated, because you have specialist teachers, so you lack that space for a classroom teacher who is with pupils the whole time to pick up on behavioural changes. It is a very different set-up, and the issues they are trying to deal with, whether it is Andrew Tate and misogyny, or misiniformation and disinformation or hate speech, are that much more complicated. Teachers are that much more nervous about tackling them.

It is a mixed picture, and it is alarming because we have AI joining in the subject area, and that will be a whole new frontier of complexity. There has been progress, and that is great, because if we can make this much progress, we can make more, but there are still enormous and significant gaps.

Chair: A useful introduction. I will bring Ian Mearns in.

Q31 **Ian Mearns:** The Department for Education suggests that they do not have any specific evidence on the effectiveness of digital safety education. You have already talked about it. Have you done any analysis of the effectiveness of the curriculum in educating children and young people about digital safety?

Vicki Shotbolt: I am certainly not aware of any national data that looks at the effectiveness in schools, so from that point of view I do not think we are able to say whether it is working. We run a programme with Google called "Be Internet Legends", and that is being evaluated. The hope that gives me is that a well-structured and evaluated programme can have impact, because we know from the results of that evaluation that it is possible. It is concerning that we do not have a national picture of what is working and what is not.

Carolyn Bunting: It is a relatively new area, and there is no real standardised method of assessment. Ofcom are looking in their new regime at how to effectively measure media literacy, not only across young people but in the adult population. We are trying to have some form of competency framework for young people, so that we know what we are trying to measure against when they leave school. It is quite unclear at this point what skills they need and how to measure those effectively.

Q32 **Ian Mearns:** You said it is relatively new; it is a very fast-changing scene, and Vicki Shotbolt has just mentioned the advent of AI. Is it not a concern to either of you that the DFE are not scoping this? What we are getting from the DFE is that there is not enough research. Why don't they commission some, for goodness' sake?

Carolyn Bunting: The challenge you have is that the expertise for this area is now sitting with DSIT. You have Ofcom, which is growing its expertise in this area, but neither of those organisations have the delivery routes to get to children at scale. They both have media literacy strategies, but they are both focused on quite small-scale, niche opportunities. We see that we need to educate children, who will become the adults of the future, and the way to do that is through the school system. We would love to see DFE collaborating more with DSIT to try to work out how we address media literacy in schools.

Q33 **Ian Mearns:** And indeed the Department for Health, for goodness' sake. We have already talked about mental health issues that could be related to excessive use of digital media.

What could be done to improve the way children and young people are taught about online safety in schools, and whose responsibility should it be? We have talked about it, but let's get it on the record.

Carolyn Bunting: We see schools as being the massive area that we need to give more support to. If we want to achieve anything at scale, we need to do that through schools. Schools also have the link home with parents, and at the end of the last panel, we saw the crucial and important role that

parents play in teaching children media literacy and about staying safe and well online.

There is more that could be done. The quality of resources is varied. There are some good resources; Vicki mentioned Google's "Be Internet Legends". It is a fantastic piece of work, but it is open season when it comes to where you get your resources from, who you invite into your school and the quality of information. There is more that could be done in signposting; maybe there could be some sort of accreditation. I know that sounds awful, difficult, and hard, but I think that schools need more support in knowing where to get quality information from.

Interestingly, Ofcom now have this new responsibility to signpost resources, so it will be interesting to see how they deal with that and whether school resources become part of that portfolio.

Vicki Shotbolt: I am a wee bit cautious, if I am honest, because schools are so overwhelmed, and primary schools are already tested a lot. Primary school pupils are already tested a lot, and they already have an awful lot that they need to get through. The focus on schools is critical. I say again that I applaud what primary school teachers do; they do an incredible job, and the national curriculum does a good job of laying out what they ought to cover. There is a limit to what we can expect of them.

My focus would be much more on secondary schools and how we start to elevate the status of media literacy education at a secondary school level. I am old enough to remember media studies back in the when, and it still suffers from being a little bit of a joke subject. That is problematic. We need to elevate the importance of media literacy to a subject that is credible, important and taught just as any other.

Q34 **Ian Mearns:** If we just expect schools to do something without any guidance from above, what you might get is 22,000 different models. That is the problem, really.

Vicki Shotbolt: It is a problem, but there is guidance. There is guidance in the national curriculum. The UCAS education working group—at the risk of mentioning the ghost of Christmas past, because UCAS has not met for quite some time—produced guidance on what teachers ought to be teaching, and what we ought to look for in an expert. The issue is how to maintain momentum and support teachers, so that they can continue to teach in this ever-changing space. That requires training for teachers.

Q35 **Ian Mearns:** It is not just momentum. It is also coping with the change that is taking place.

Carolyn Bunting: In our response, we cited that there are something like 13 different documents for schools, some of which are non-statutory, that all touch on this area. I think that is where DFE could simplify things a little bit more. It could consolidate it, and there could be a clearer sense of guidance for schools, at least.

Q36 **Chair:** You have both praised the "Be Internet Legends" campaign. I have been to some of their sessions, and all I have seen is good. It is impressive, I have to say, but is there not a little bit of a conflict with a major tech company being the sponsor of that campaign? With all that we have heard about the addictive nature of online engagement, are there many other subjects where we would have someone with a significant financial interest promoting content in school? How do we ensure that there is sufficiently independent content available?

Vicki Shotbolt: That is a cracking question, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to answer it. I share the concern, and that may sound strange from the organisation that partners with Google in delivering that. There are a few things that offset that. The first is that it was developed with experts independently. The second is that it was evaluated independently by Ipsos MORI.

The third and compelling reason why we decided it was a valid programme to take into schools, alongside Google, is that one of the problems that we have as a parenting organisation—and I think teachers, or all adults, suffer with this—is that young people do not believe what we say. They do not think that we know the internet as well as they do, and the credibility gap is not insignificant. There is power in going in alongside Google and saying, "This programme has been developed with the support of Google," which many young people think is the internet—they do not separate the internet from Google. It means that the message gets through.

In an ideal world, I would say that all education should be entirely independent of commercial interests, and that is my fundamental belief and starting point, but there are occasions when there is value in working alongside the companies that are doing it; I think it is true of engineering and true in this space. It does cut through to young people.

Q37 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Obviously, children are at home more than in school. Evidence suggests that parents are getting less and less secure about what their children are doing. What more can be done to provide further support for parents, and who should do it?

Carolyn Bunting: Parents are finding this stuff hard. We find through research that we do at Internet Matters that they tend to bucket into roughly thirds. One third are quite confident and feel that they know enough; one third are a bit confident; and then there is one third that do not know what they are doing, so much so that we see something like 40% say they feel out of their depth talking about online safety. About 40% say they want help with having conversations with their children.

Our research shows that parents are probably the single most important influencers in children's wellbeing online. We are in the third year of a research study that tries to assess the impact of connected technology on children's wellbeing. We see a couple of important things in that study. One is about alignment between the child and the parent at home. You ask the child in a household how things are managed; then you ask the parent how

things are managed. Where they agree, they are overwhelmingly better in their wellbeing, more positive and less negative. Where parents are available to have conversations, not on their phones, and have conversations with their young people, we see much more benefit. Where we see broader and active participation, there is much more benefit for children's wellbeing.

Parents play a hugely significant role for young people, and they are crying out for more support, easier access to information, and clearer guidance about what they should be doing and how they can help their young people.

Q38 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** The Department for Education say they do not have sufficient evidence about the impact of screen time. Do you agree with that? From the previous panel, it seems there is little evidence.

Carolyn Bunting: Academically, the jury is out, but as a parent, you instinctively think that surely all this screen time must have some sort of impact on children and young people.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Either positive or negative, yes.

Carolyn Bunting: While I agreed with the panel earlier, taking it down to a time is not a helpful construct. An hour on TikTok is not the same as an hour doing geography homework.

Chair: Either of them at 2.00 am is probably not a good idea.

Carolyn Bunting: We can give parents simpler guidance; for example, to address all the sleep issues, we can say that phones should be turned off before children go to bed, and children should not have them in the bedroom; and that there should be a balance with other online activities, and that screen use should not be detrimental to the social groups that children create at schools. It is more about giving parents some sensible principles, as opposed to saying that their child should only spend six or nine hours a day online. That feels too simplistic. The role of civil society is to ensure that children get all the benefits from technology, and to minimise the risks, and we should give parents the tools to do that.

Q39 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Vicki, what about Parent Zone? Is that something that parents can do things with?

Vicki Shotbolt: On the screen time rules, we quite often say to parents: "Do the maths." If your kids have spent four or five hours on a screen in school, and a couple on a screen at home, and you know they have to sleep for eight hours, start to add all this up and figure out how much time is left in the day. You can circumvent the screen time argument by saying, "What has the rest of the time been spent on?", and if that is wrong, there is definitely something wrong with your pie. There are ways that you can help parents.

The support question is super interesting, because it is not just about giving parents information, although I agree with Carolyn that principles are

useful. Where parents come unstuck is where they start to struggle to enforce a boundary, because they are dealing with a game that is addictive or immersive that their child does not want to stop, or they are trying to juggle their own screen time because maybe they are a single parent who is working flexibly, who is doing their emails at home in the evening.

Parental support has been stripped away to such an extent. It used to be the case that every local authority had to have a parenting strategy. It used to be commonplace for schools to have a family support worker. None of those things exist now, so we have arrived at a perfect storm where we have removed all parental support at a local level, and this new digital world has made parenting manifestly more difficult than it used to be.

I think figuring out how you provide proper support to parents at work, at home and through schools is critical, because we are not going to solve this through more information for parents.

Q40 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Who would give that support? Are you saying that the local authority or the schools should be doing that?

Vicki Shotbolt: All of the above. Parenting is a journey. It is not the same at any point in a child's life. There is pretty good support at pre-school. It is not ideal, and childcare is expensive, but it exists. At primary school, you have another opportunity, because there is lots more parental involvement at primary school level. There are not the resources for teachers to provide the support that parents need, but at least there is engagement. Then you get to secondary school and it falls off a cliff, and parents are left on their own. At that point, you must look at what else we can do. Could it be provided through local authorities, or through family support workers based in schools? We see some great examples of mental health professionals being based in schools. I see no reason why we could not replicate that model for parenting.

Q41 **Ian Mearns:** Carolyn was talking about 13 different guidance documents. The problem with what you say, Vicki, is there is already an awful lot out there, but the issue is access, availability and capacity, and also having something quite simple to look at. Parents do not want to try to go down 17 different routes to get advice and guidance. Something off the peg would be quite useful on occasions, but it should also signpost to other, more detailed, advice at a later stage.

Carolyn Bunting: As an anecdotal example, I have twins who are in different schools in the same town, but the stuff that I get home about online safety from the schools is completely different. With one school I get a monthly newsletter. They have an event twice a year. With the other school, you are lucky if it gets mentioned in the information evening at the start of the year. We should encourage DFE to give schools a bit more clarity on not only how they teach media literacy but also how they engage with parents. Don't get me wrong: events at school will inevitably attract the parents who care, because they have turned up, but parents tell us

that they are effective, and they find those the most beneficial thing that they experience in seeking support.

Trying to find ways that schools can support more vulnerable families—they work with vulnerable children day in and day out—is of particular importance to us, because we know they experience more online harm.

Q42 **Ian Mearns:** That is typically because you might get schools engaging with the parenting equivalent of the worried well, as opposed to those who do need the interventions.

Vicki Shotbolt: That is why you must develop well-targeted, well-resourced, well-evidenced support. It is not just an add-on to a teacher's job. It is not something that they can just do in between marking and teaching and all the other things that they have to do.

We run a programme called Parent Zone Local, which is funded by DSIT and is part of the media literacy strategy. In the sessions that we run with parents, 92% of them tell us that they need more of it, or that they have not had any of it, and that it is the first time anybody has sat with them and said, "This is how you do this stuff." That is an enormous gap out there.

Q43 **Chair:** I think we had mention earlier of parental supervision when children are online. How realistic is that as an aspiration? The reality is that very few parents have the time to look over a child's shoulder at everything that they are doing when they are interacting with a screen. The only way of achieving that, surely, is to ration the screen time, and do it within a very fixed period. Schools will have systems to ensure that children are not going to inappropriate sites. Are there better tools available for parents that we ought to signpost them to, to help on that front? There are debates about age verification, and settings for devices, but is there other advice that we ought to get out there on that front to help protect children?

Vicki Shotbolt: Absolutely there is, and post the Online Safety Act there will be even more, but there are already dozens of tools. We did some research looking at the top seven platforms, including TikTok, Google and Meta, and we got one of our young, capable, digitally savvy members of the team to set everything up. Meta has 30 different tools. It took seven hours to reach the point where all the tools had been set up. The short answer is, yes, absolutely, and we should signpost them. There are some good ones. Family Link springs to mind, but there are lots of good tools.

The challenge is that they are all quite complicated, and they use different language and do slightly different things. It would be great to see industry coming together to make some of those tools more consistent, so that they are much easier to set up.

Carolyn Bunting: One example is that every platform is now going to put in age verification, which is great and should be welcomed, but why isn't it in the app store? If you are buying alcohol, it is not Bacardi or whoever that age verifies. It is the person who sells you the product. There is more that could be done to make it simpler for parents. As Vicki said, the tools

are complicated. They are a good benchmark, but not the overriding indicator of children's wellbeing online. The relationship with the parents is the bigger driver in their wellbeing.

Q44 **Miriam Cates:** I will come on to schools and mobile phones in a moment, but from all the evidence we have heard this morning, I just cannot see any positives to primary school children having devices and being online unsupervised. There just do not seem to be any, and when we consider the addictiveness, the impact on concentration span, and the kind of content that so many are accessing, surely the best and most simple advice to parents would be: do not give a primary school child an internet-connected device.

I completely understand why parents—I feel the same—are at a loss on what to do, given the complexity of parental controls, which might be different on one device and different on the app. They have to know how to do the wi-fi settings, and how to assess the child's screen time. Surely the best advice, given the research available, is: do not give a primary school child a phone, and ask very serious questions about allowing any social media for secondary school children until at least 14—probably 16, looking at the evidence. Would simple advice such as that not be much more effective?

Vicki Shotbolt: It would be more effective, and it would be more straightforward for parents to understand. There are very sensible questions to be asked about the age at which a child should get a mobile phone, because by the very nature of the device, it is so personal, and it is almost impossible to supervise it, unless you are using an app to supervise. Those are important questions. If we took a cautious approach and said to parents, "Maybe the evidence is not all there, but let's just say: do not give them a device," the only problem is that the opportunity to teach good habits comes when children are younger.

Q45 **Miriam Cates:** I agree in principle, but we do not say that about things such as learning to drive, and we certainly do not say it about the use of cigarettes or alcohol. We say that parental habits are important—that is true for all those things—but we also say that there is a level of brain maturity before which a child just is not capable of handling that material. There is no safe way that a 14-year-old can learn to drive, however good their parents' habits are and however well supervised they are, because their brain just has not developed enough to judge speed and braking distance. We know that as a psychological fact. Is it not the case that there is no safe way for a nine year-old to own a smartphone? It is too addictive and they do not have the developmental ability to regulate it.

Vicki Shotbolt: I cannot say that I disagree with you, but I feel that the cat is out of the bag. Developing a child's digital resilience needs to start young, and young people need to start to self-regulate. You have that golden window before your child hits the teenage years where you can start to develop some of those good habits. They are already using devices in school for learning purposes. There is some fantastic content on those

devices. There is some good content and some great games. For me, the balance is against banning completely, but at the same time, I completely agree it is the cleanest, straightest and easiest advice.

One of the huge problems that parents talk to us about all the time is this: we talk about peer pressure among kids, but peer pressure among parents is just as much of a problem. If you had a blanket rule, it would be much easier for parents, because they would be able to say, "I know that little Johnny does not have a mobile phone, because none of your friends do."

Q46 **Miriam Cates:** Jonathan Haidt, an American psychologist who has done a lot of work on this, talks about the power of collective action. He says that if your child is the only child in the class without a smartphone, it is impossible. That child is at a social disadvantage not having a phone. If half the children in the class do not have a phone, aged nine, you can say to your child, "Well, I understand that some children do have them, but you are not going to be left out, because here are the other 30 children that you can play with after school." In Britain, which person or which Department has the most influence or credibility with parents? Are we talking health, the GP, the Secretary of State for Education, the Prime Minister, or David Beckham? I do not know. Who can come out there and say to parents, "Please do not do this"?

Vicki Shotbolt: Not David Beckham, because he posts so many pictures of his kids on Instagram.

Miriam Cates: Okay, a very bad example.

Vicki Shotbolt: Certainly not him, but I think that the Department for Education would have a very significant role. If the Department for Education said primary school children should not have mobile phones, that would be—

Q47 **Miriam Cates:** At least some parents would listen, and then you would create a movement?

Vicki Shotbolt: Exactly that. You would change the social norm, and I think the social norm has become younger and younger. Once that happens, there is only one direction of travel, and it just becomes the norm for everyone.

Carolyn Bunting: Part of that was the pandemic. I think for a lot of primary school children, to stay in contact with people, parents brought forward getting devices, because that was a way they could keep in touch. Again, your point is well made, because our wellbeing index shows that particularly young girls aged nine to 10 were struggling to moderate their WhatsApp chat, so essentially what used to be a little tiff in the playground where you went home and the next day you had completely forgotten about it now is continuing on social media. They cannot moderate their emotions, so it is coming back into the playground the next day. Primary schools are struggling to deal with that.

Peer pressure is the tricky one. I talked to a secondary school about whether we could get all the new intake of year 7 parents to agree that 10.00 pm would be the cut-off time for mobile phones, but all it takes is for one or two people to break ranks, and then it undermines it all, because then it becomes cool to be the cool kid who is on the phone late at night. It is a challenging area.

Q48 **Miriam Cates:** That leads me very well on to the question that I was supposed to ask, which is about phones in schools. Obviously we know there are screens in school, and most lessons use screens now. Many children have been given Chromebooks and all those kinds of things, but the Education Secretary has said that schools should not allow phone use during class, and preferably not in break time. Do you support that? Would you go further and make that statutory, and make it a requirement across England that you cannot have your phone out in school? If so, why?

Vicki Shotbolt: We have gone round the houses on this one. There is a solid body of evidence, as I have said, around digital resilience and the opportunity that you have to teach good habits. It is important. Coming out of secondary school, even we struggle in the workplace. We have work meetings where we all put our phones down. On balance, I think it is difficult to come up with a legitimate reason why a primary school child needs a mobile phone in school. They should be concentrating in the classroom. We know that in the playground it, an issue is not just their social interactions, but other young people's privacy, which parents talk to us about a lot. Photos are taken at school—peer-to-peer photographs, and teacher photographs—and then shared without consent. That is problematic. For all those reasons, in primary school it is a bit of a done deal for me. I do not think mobile phones need to be in primary schools.

Secondary I think is different, but there the question is more about responsible use and how to manage having devices, and where they are safely stored. They should not be on the person, but I do understand the parent who wants their child to have the phone so they can call them if the bus does not turn up and all those things. I think it is making adequate, safe storage facilities available in schools for mobile phones.

Carolyn Bunting: I agree with Vicki. In primary schools it is obvious that there are no particular educational benefits of having mobile phones available. Most primary schools tend to hand them into reception and collect them on the way out, and that seems to work. That becomes problematic at secondary school. What do you do to store 1,200 phones? Our experience is that most schools have well thought-out policies on mobile phone usage, which is the device being either not switched on or away. It cannot be seen, and if it is, it is confiscated, and if you do it so many times, there are consequences for that.

We also see that for some young people, the mobile phone is the only digital device that they will have, and increasingly, if we want children to leave the education system with the right digital skills, simply banning them, and them not having access to other digital devices in the school

environment, is problematic. Certainly we have experience of schools where young people are using their mobile phones in a controlled way. I think this goes to the point about teaching responsible usage. Every time a mobile phone is out, that is an opportunity to teach children about how to responsibly use the device.

Q49 **Miriam Cates:** That is a very fair point. I suppose you must balance that against how addictive these phones are, and teachers reporting children who are so addicted, in the same way that they are reporting children leaving lessons to vape because they are so addicted. I guess you must balance the potential positives against the addictiveness and whether it can be controlled by children of a particular age.

Carolyn Bunting: Again, instinctively, you do not want to see everyone in secondary school like that at breaktime, as you do on the tube. It is about having a responsible policy, and I think headteachers are best placed to work out what the right requirements for their school are.

Miriam Cates: Depending on whether they have, for example, enough iPads for the whole class.

Carolyn Bunting: Exactly.

Q50 **Andrew Lewer:** Some of the questions about school and parents working together, and local authority support, have already been asked, so I want to say that I think you are right about this safe storage idea—the idea that everyone hands in their phone at an allocated place. Having a child at that age now, I see that a little bit more readily than I perhaps would have done. I might have said, "Yes, let's have a rule about that. That will be great." Well, reality bites. Kids are just going to say, "I don't have a smartphone," or "I have not brought it to school with me today," when of course they have. What are you going to do? Search every child? That is just not going to happen.

I think your point about screens at breaktime is a problem as much as the classroom ban, because it creates a climate of magnifying problems that already exist in schools. When we were all at school, there were fights and scraps, and everyone hung around the said scrap until a teacher came and broke it up, but now it is recorded, so everyone thinks there is a fight all the time. Those two minutes of your life are now there permanently. The breaktime thing is important, but I do accept children need a phone to say, "I am going to be half an hour late," or "Football practice has been cancelled" or whatever.

What about the statutory issue? I want your views on the idea that to sort things out, things must be statutory—that the Department for Education and whoever the Minister is at the time will decide, "Right, I am going to tell every single school to do this." It was watered down, thankfully, but it felt like we were going to nationalise school uniform rules at some point, which is mad. What about your view of the dynamic between the benefits of statutory guidance, statutory requirements, and respecting school heads and school leaders sufficiently to allow them to determine the tone and the

behaviour of their school, because they are held accountable by governors and parents locally, rather than the state absolving them of a responsibility to act responsibly?

Vicki Shotbolt: The challenge with leaving every school to make up its own rules is that you end up with an incredibly fragmented system, and we already have an incredibly fragmented system. Those societal norms that we are talking about are difficult to establish if you have every school coming up with their own individual rules.

The power of statutory guidance is that it makes a difference in every single school. I am going to take the example of PSHE. The economic part of PSHE was not included when we did RSHE, ergo economic education in schools is pretty woeful at a time when we know that children have enormous financial agency online. They are making, spending and losing money online. Only last week, we published some research in which 75% of children involved self-identified as doing something illegal online. I love the idea that we could leave it to localism and the needs of individual schools, pupils and their parents, but I think you need a baseline, and that is where statutory guidance is so important.

Carolyn Bunting: I think there are two different issues. When it comes to the management of devices in school, I am not sure that needs to be a statutory requirement. It feels as though headteachers have considered and thought through policies already, and are managing that issue. Where statutory guidance could help is more on the bigger issue, to our minds, which is how we teach media literacy. Protected time in the curriculum for media literacy is important for schools. As to whether the lever of putting something statutory in place would be effective, it depends which topic you are talking about.

Vicki Shotbolt: That is true, but we certainly speak to a lot of headteachers who are trying to arrive at a point where they have well thought through policies in place. Many of them do, as you say, but they face quite significant backlash from parents, who will say, "But I want my child to be able to take their mobile phone into school," so it is not always easy for a headteacher to come up with that guidance and stick to it. Statutory guidance would give back-up to a decision that we have all bought into. That is when it works well.

Chair: I will bring in Caroline, who has been waiting patiently throughout the session.

Q51 **Caroline Ansell:** Finally, back to parents. Vicki Shotbolt mentioned the good content, which is engaging and stimulating. In your experience do parents have confidence in differentiating between high and low quality content online?

Vicki Shotbolt: Absolutely not. It is one of the most common questions that we get asked. I guarantee that every time we run a parenting session, one of the questions will be about how they find decent quality, whether we are talking about games, videos, or educational content. For a plethora

of reasons, there are not very many good places to point parents to—places about which you can say, "That is a good guide. Go and have a look at that, and it will tell you where to find great content." There are some. There are DFE-recommended resources, there is BBC Bitesize. I always say, "Try BBC Bitesize". There is a lack of good places for finding out where to send your child. With books, we all have our favourite books that we read as children, and our friends all had their favourite books, and there is that book of the week thing. There is a whole ecosystem that supports good content in other formats, but there is nothing for digital.

Q52 **Caroline Ansell:** Are schools directing that at all, and recommending sites or providers?

Vicki Shotbolt: Some do, but I am thinking of individual teachers who just happen to do a great job and share good content. It is always with a certain degree of nervousness, because they do not want to share something that suggests they are saying, "Do this at home," because you may go into another app that is not quite as good as the one that they have recommended. No.

Q53 **Caroline Ansell:** Building on that "no", what actions might Government or private companies bring into play to provide some confidence or standing? Is this a kitemark situation? What is out there that could be brought to bear?

Vicki Shotbolt: Some sort of kitemark would be excellent. Some sort of digital equivalent of book week would be fantastic, as would any kind of improvement in ratings system. I am thinking of something like the PEGI rating system, which could give indication of the quality of the education content in a game.

Q54 **Caroline Ansell:** Like Tripadvisor?

Vicki Shotbolt: Exactly that kind of thing. There is a lot that could be done in that space.

Q55 **Caroline Ansell:** Is anybody working this up? Is there anybody operating in this space to provide some sort of lighthouse in this digital world?

Vicki Shotbolt: The lighthouse in the dark. There is an organisation called Common Sense Media in the States that does what you would more closely relate to a rating system. It is a start, but it does not have the UK lens, or the traction, coverage or focus on good educational content that is needed.

Q56 **Caroline Ansell:** In your experience, are any countries advancing on this? Is there good practice?

Carolyn Bunting: Not that I am aware of. Ed tech is an emerging sector. More and more types of educational products are going into schools. There does not appear to be any kitemark, accreditation or process that those resources go through to get checked.

Caroline Ansell: We heard earlier about South Korea and other early

adopters. Are we not aware of any countries that have embraced a more digital—

Chair: I came across a conversation the other day about the run-up to the Hungry Little Minds campaign. That included products that were endorsed by that campaign. That is the only example I can think of. I know that the DFE is institutionally allergic to endorsing specific products. I had so many of these conversations. The argument around Oak is very interesting in that respect, because the DFE tends to fight very shy of saying, "This is a product that we support." Part of that is to do with the nature of the publishing industry, and the fact that teachers need to be able to choose their own resources, but I think in that Hungry Little Minds campaign, which is a public health-led campaign, specific products were endorsed. That is the only example I can think of. I do not know if you have looked at the value of that. That was particularly focused on the early years, obviously. I remember it very well because every time I went out of my house during lockdown, it was on the bus stop outside my house, so it was a very good reminder that I needed to do lots of talking and have lots of interaction with my two-year-old. That is the only public intervention of that nature that I can think of that picked up on specific products.

Vicki Shotbolt: I must say that has completely passed me by, so I have written that down.

Carolyn Bunting: The thing that we looked at quite a few times is the Change4Life programme. That was a kind of umbrella campaign that held underneath it different messages—five a day, sugar swaps, whatever. Having an umbrella across the top of it helped give credibility to the individual pieces that were part of that programme. That is the only one I can think of that if you were a parent and were looking at it you would think, "This is good because it is part of Change4Life, and I recognise Change4Life."

Q57 **Caroline Ansell:** Another potential issue, which is very practical, is equality of opportunity, or access to devices. We see differences across the piece. Children and young people in families from lower-income backgrounds may not be able to pivot to different devices. How can that disparity be addressed, either by schools or through government policy?

Carolyn Bunting: This is a really important area. We have taken our insight around children who receive free school meals, and recently published a report on that. Those children seem to be participating in more high-risk scenarios online. For example, 17% of children on free school meals are live-streaming, compared to 12% of their peers. Twice as many—20%—say they post and comment on social media a lot, compared to just 11% of their peer group. You have a behavioural point around free school meals.

Q58 **Caroline Ansell:** Could they not reduce access?

Carolyn Bunting: They are struggling with access because they have limited access, but they are participating in these riskier behaviours, and

therefore they are also experiencing a lot more online harm; 75% have experienced at least one harm, compared to 60% of other children. It is a difficult area. We have several projects where we have tried to help with digital inclusion. Whenever devices are being provided, that should be done in a responsible way, where we are providing educational advice.

Q59 **Caroline Ansell:** I am not sure I understand. You are describing behaviours that are riskier, even though access is more limited. Are you thinking the limitation around the availability of devices or time on devices is somehow driving inappropriate choices, and if they were provided more, that would be less as a proportion?

Carolyn Bunting: I think it is more the narrowness of the device availability. Whereas lots of people might have access to several devices, what you find in households with children with free school meals is they might only have the one device. It is not that they are totally excluded.

Caroline Ansell: So it is limited time with—

Carolyn Bunting: Yes, not as effectively, and that might be because the parents are out working three jobs and the children are not guided particularly well.

Q60 **Caroline Ansell:** If they had very good access to a device, is it your summation that they would engage in healthy and positive—

Carolyn Bunting: You can only have good access to lots of devices if you have money to spend on them.

Q61 **Caroline Ansell:** It is about choices, behaviour and exposure to risk. Why would they not be exposed to even greater risk if they had even more time to engage in some of the behaviours that you describe?

Carolyn Bunting: Generally speaking, what we see about time spent online is that it is an opportunity risk. Our digital wellbeing index shows that the more time you spend online, the more opportunities you have to have a positive experience, but you also have more opportunity to have a negative experience. We need to try to minimise the risk and maximise the opportunities. There are several ways that risk can be minimised, not just by parents. With the advent of the Online Safety Act, we need safety by design, which the previous panel touched on. There are lots of ways we need to minimise that risk.

There is no doubt that children from lower socioeconomic groups are having a worse time online, for one reason or another.

Q62 **Chair:** Have you provided the detail of that research as written evidence?

Carolyn Bunting: We can send it to you.

Chair: It would be helpful for us to look at it.

Q63 **Caroline Ansell:** Are there any very positive schemes or practice you have seen where that deficit—not so much the choice and the behaviour but

simply the access has been—

Carolyn Bunting: We found it very hard. Again, we have luckily had some funding from DSIT for a project with care leavers in Greater Manchester. We found that a difficult project in which to engage with those young people. There is a parallel project for digital inclusion in Manchester, where they are giving devices to care leavers. We are trying to ensure that they then have the skills and behaviours, but it is hard to reach that group of people in a way that engages with them. We definitely need to carry on and look at that. and explore how we can support that cohort more.

Q64 **Caroline Ansell:** Are there groups within the scope of your concern here? You mentioned care leavers. Have you identified other groups that are particularly vulnerable to this lack of access?

Carolyn Bunting: Not the lack of access per se. Generally speaking, all children who have offline vulnerabilities, whether that is self-harming, mental health issues, autism or ADHD, typically experience online harm to a greater extent than their peer group. Again, schools are a fantastic environment in which to support vulnerable young children. I have a child with autism who gets special intervention. Even if we can just educate the teaching workforce to understand that those children are at more risk of harm, they can watch out for those red flag incidents and try to intervene and support those groups of young people.

Vicki Shotbolt: I would love to pick up on that access point a little. I think it is multifaceted. One of the issues about families with fewer resources is that they very often are sharing a device. Sharing a device means that the settings are much more likely to be set up for the oldest person in the household, or you are much less likely to have the granular settings that you need. That is one issue.

The other issue is that it is very often a mobile phone. A mobile phone, just by its very nature, is harder to supervise because it is so small. At least if it is a laptop or a desktop, you stand a chance of seeing what is going on, so there is that, too. Then you see data poverty, where young people are hopping from free wi-fi to free wi-fi. That means the free wi-fi is probably not as safe as it might be, because it does not have the same controls as home routers. There are reasons why lack of digital access causes additional vulnerabilities.

We would love to see schools paying greater attention to the digital ecosystem that a child is going home to. We observe in schools that they give the same homework to all pupils, with the same expectation that all pupils will have digital access and good home wi-fi. The truth is that they do not. We should have the equivalent for digital that we have for free school meals. If you cannot afford safe home wi-fi and a suitable device, there should be some sort of subsidy. We saw that during Covid, and it can be done.

Q65 **Chair:** During Covid, we saw devices and dongles and wi-fi connectivity

supported because of the immediate public necessity for them. Let us imagine we are in a world in which we had not been through lockdown. Would you be advocating for something similar to be done?

Vicki Shotbolt: Yes.

Chair: That is interesting. Thank you. We have overrun in both our sessions, but it has been a fascinating session, and I am very grateful for the evidence you have given. This is set to be a lively and very interesting inquiry.