

## Written evidence submitted by Barnardo's

### About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2021/22, we reached 357,276 children, young people, parents and carers through our nearly 800 services and partnerships across the UK. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Barnardo's has a long history of supporting all children through different forms of childhood harms, including child sexual abuse and exploitation, and domestic abuse. Barnardo's has supported children and young people affected by sexual abuse for over 25 years and now delivers specialist services in 45 locations across the UK. Our practitioners support children and young people's recovery by rebuilding their confidence and self-esteem, and by helping their families, schools and social networks make sense of what has happened. It is often longterm and complex work. We also work in partnership with other statutory and voluntary organisations to promote joined-up responses for children and their families, and strong support networks.

Barnardo's also host the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse which reaches thousands of professions through its training and research and the National FGM Centre which works with professionals and in communities to educate and prevent FGM.

### What is the current understanding of how screen time can support and impact children's development and educational outcomes, including the effect on concentration and behaviour?

Spending time online can be beneficial for children, including being a way to connect with their friends and family, and making use of learning and educational platforms. However, the content that children can see online can harm and impact their behaviour. Barnardo's is concerned that children are accessing pornographic content online, which is impacting their mental health and distorting their views of healthy sex and relationships. Pornographic content is present across the internet, and is not limited to dedicated commercial pornography sites. Since the decision not to enact Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act in October 2019, Barnardo's have calculated that it is likely that children have accessed pornographic content more than 54 million times at a minimum.

Research by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) has found that children are coming across pornography online from as young as 7.<sup>1</sup> Recent research by the Children's Commissioner for England found that 79% of children had encountered violent pornography before the age of 18, with the average age that children first see pornography as being 13 years old.<sup>2</sup> Children often come across pornographic content for the first time accidentally, unwittingly searching terms like 'sex' or 'porn' without knowing what they mean.<sup>3</sup>

Some social media sites, including Twitter and Reddit, allow for pornographic content on their platforms, despite the minimum sign-up age being just 13 years old. The Children Commissioner's research found that Twitter is the platform where the highest percentage of children had seen pornography, at 41%.<sup>4</sup> Even social media sites which ban pornographic content from their platforms

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian (2020), [Porn survey reveals extent of UK teenagers' viewing habits](#)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

including Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and Facebook, do contain pornographic content which is accessed by children – the same research by the Children’s Commissioner found that 33% of children who had seen pornographic content had seen it on Instagram, and 32% on Snapchat.<sup>5</sup> Further, 30% had seen pornographic content on search engines.<sup>6</sup>

Children have also reported seeing sexualised cartoons appearing in pop-up ads on gaming and streaming sites – depicting popular children’s characters, used to actively groom children towards pornography.<sup>7</sup> According to research by the BBFC, almost half of the top 100 pornography sites visited carry content which features characters from children’s cartoons or characters that children would recognise – including characters from Frozen, Scooby Doo and The Incredibles.<sup>8</sup>

We are pleased that, following the work of Barnardo’s and other charities, the Online Safety Bill does now include a duty for highly effective age verification to protect children from pornographic content on both dedicated pornography sites and social media sites that allow pornography. This duty must be implemented as swiftly and robustly as possible, to ensure that children are protected from this content. We do also know that many children will have already accessed pornographic content, which has harmed their mental health, and impacted how they view healthy relationships, sex, and consent.

Online pornographic content is often violent, abusive and degrading. Content that would be prohibited by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) offline, and so illegal to own or supply on DVD or Blu-Ray, is unregulated and prevalent online. This includes content which sexualises children – ‘barely legal’ pornography where young-looking, petite adult actors are made to look like children through props, toys, and child-like clothing – incest pornography, and pornography which depicts overt sexual violence against women, including breath restriction (strangulation), gagging, and forced penetration. This content is prevalent online – a recent report by France’s high council for equality between women and men found that 90% of pornographic content online features verbal, physical and sexual violence towards women.<sup>9</sup>

The availability of this content has a twofold impact on children. Firstly, it normalises sexual violence towards women and girls. According to research by the NSPCC and the Children Commissioner for England, 44% of boys aged 11-to-16 who regularly viewed pornographic content reported that it gave them ideas about the type of sex that they wanted to try. Further, the Government’s Equalities Office, found that there was ‘substantial evidence of an association’ between the use of pornography and harmful attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls.<sup>10</sup>

Research by the Children’s Commissioner for England found that, in 50% of cases of child sexual abuse that had been conducted by another child, the associated interview transcripts included words referring to at least one specific act of sexual violence that is commonly seen in pornography.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> BBFC, 2022, ‘Non-Photographic Images of Child Sexual Abuse: BBFC Content Investigation

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/27/online-pornography-breaks-french-law-equality-watchdog-france?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/27/online-pornography-breaks-french-law-equality-watchdog-france?CMP=share_btn_tw)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/28604/view/INQ006736.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> The Children’s Commissioner for England, 2023. Evidence on pornography’s influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/05/Evidence-on-pornographys-influence-on-harmful-sexual-behaviour-among-children.pdf>

Further, a study published in 2019 involving 568 adolescents revealed that exposure to sexually explicit material online – including pornography - was related to individuals’ resistance towards the #metoo movement, and increased acceptance of rape myths.<sup>12</sup> A study of young people across Europe found that boys who regularly watched online pornography were significantly more likely to hold negative gender attitudes; and regularly watching pornography and sending/ receiving sexual images or messages were both associated with increased probability of being sexually coercive.<sup>13</sup>

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation – a UK-wide organisation dedicated to preventing child sexual abuse – reported that there has been a 30% increase in under-18s contacting them, and a 26% rise in adults contacting them because they were concerned about the behaviour of a young person, including viewing illegal child sexual abuse material.<sup>14</sup> They said that “porn is a contributing factor – teenagers become desensitised to what they are seeing”.<sup>15</sup>

Barnardo’s practitioners have said that children are participating in acts that they have seen in pornographic videos, despite feeling uncomfortable and scared. In a survey of Barnardo’s practitioners in 2021, more than a quarter (26%) had supported vulnerable children who had accessed pornography, and almost a third (32%) said that it led to the children that they supported developing unrealistic expectations of sex and relationships.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Barnardo’s Case Study**

A 13-year-old boy who had never been in trouble before exposed himself to a much older woman and made sexually suggestive comments to her. He was subsequently arrested, convicted of a sexual offence and excluded from school.

He disclosed that he had been viewing content which portrayed men exposing themselves in public to women.

Secondly, viewing this extreme pornographic content can normalise how girls view sexual violence, with girls often seeing it as a ‘normal’ and ‘expected’ part of a relationship. In research by the Children’s Commissioner for England, 76% of girls agreed with the statement that “viewing online pornography affects young people’s expectations around sex and relationships” – compared to 67% of boys.<sup>17</sup>

Barnardo’s welcomes the recently announced Government Review into pornography, which will investigate the disparity between the regulation of content online and offline. Resolving this

<sup>12</sup> Maes et. al., 2019. # (Me)too much? The role of sexualising online media in adolescents’ resistance towards the metoo-movement and acceptance of rape myths.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.10.005>

<sup>13</sup> Stanley et. al., Pornography, sexual coercion and abuse and sexting in young people’s intimate relationships: a European study. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0886260516633204>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/sep/26/pornography-driving-teens-child-abuse-material-charities-police>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/sep/26/pornography-driving-teens-child-abuse-material-charities-police>

<sup>16</sup> Barnardo’s, 2022. The Online Safety Bill: Impact of Pornography on Children.

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-02/The%20Online%20Safety%20Bill%20-%20Impact%20of%20Pornography%20on%20Children.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> The Children’s Commissioner for England, 2023. ‘A lot of it is actually just abuse’: young people and pornography <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

disparity and ensuring that online pornography is regulated in the same way as offline pornographic content will ensure that this harmful content is prohibited.

#### Case study – Elizabeth\*

There are also children who view pornography to try to understand their own sexual abuse. Unfortunately, what these children find is content that normalises the most abhorrent and illegal behaviours.

This includes 15-year-old Elizabeth\* who was sexually abused by a much older relative for a number of years. The content she found on pornography sites depicted older relatives having sex with young girls and the girls enjoying it. It wasn't until she disclosed her abuse that she realised that it was not normal.

\*Please note all names have been changed.

#### What is the current understanding of how screen time can support or impact children's wellbeing and mental health, including the use of social media?

Spending time online can be positive for children and young people. For example, in a survey of Barnardo's practitioners, 84% highlighted that children between the ages of 11-15 were able to use social media to access advice and help for mental health and wellbeing.<sup>18</sup> Further, practitioners felt that social media played an important role in building and maintaining family relationships, particularly for those aged 11 to 19 years old.<sup>19</sup>

However, spending time online can expose children and young people to experiences that can be damaging to their mental health and wellbeing. 1 in 6 children in the UK has a probable diagnosable mental health disorder, rising to 1 in 4 young people aged 17-19.<sup>20</sup> The number of children and young people struggling with their mental health and wellbeing has been increasing for several years, and has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and currently the cost-of-living crisis.

All children are at risk of accessing harmful content on different platforms that can impact their mental health or wellbeing, however certain factors can mean that a child is more at risk of seeing this content. The Internet Matters 2023 report found that children who are more active online (posting rather than passively scrolling) experienced more of both the positive and negative effects of digital tech than those who were less active.<sup>21</sup> They were more likely to see violent content, be contacted by someone they didn't know, see false information or receive abusive messages. The same report found that children in families experiencing financial difficulties, those with disabilities, mental health issues or special educational needs experience more negative effects on their wellbeing than those without these challenges.<sup>22</sup> They experienced an increase in incidence of harmful experiences online, with more of an impact on them than other groups.

<sup>18</sup>

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

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

<sup>20</sup> NHS Digital, 2022

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Internet-Matters-Childrens-Wellbeing-in-a-Digital-World-Index-report-2023-2.pdf>

Research by Barnardo's found that other groups of children are more susceptible to online harms. These include: children in care, care leavers and young carers; those experiencing poverty; and children with additional needs.<sup>23</sup> Barnardo's practitioners found that these groups of children were more susceptible either because of their increased use in comparison to other children, or because of their decreased ability to approach and interact with social media in a self-protective manner. For example, care leavers and young carers can be more susceptible to the negative impacts of social media as they are more likely to experience isolation from friends and family, or struggle to develop and maintain these relationships offline due to the possible transient or unsettled nature of their life.<sup>24</sup>

Images posted online can have a negative impact on children and young people's perception of themselves. Girls and young women in particular are affected by the pressure to conform with the images of bodies they see on social media, however body dissatisfaction and eating disorders are rapidly rising in boys and men too.<sup>25</sup> Children and young people are less likely to critically analyse images or consider that they may be altered. They are also more likely to negatively compare themselves with unrealistic images seen online, resulting in unhappiness with their own appearance. This is significantly associated with poor mental health amongst children and young people.

Mental Health Foundation research has found that 40% of children and young people have seen images online that made them worry about their body image.<sup>26</sup> In a Barnardo's survey of children and young people in 2022, 87% of respondents thought that the internet and social media creates at least some pressure for children and young people to look at certain way, with 35% saying it creates a lot of pressure.<sup>27</sup> 68% of respondents reported having been made to feel badly about how they look because of things they'd seen online.<sup>28</sup>

The use of filters and editing images can affect children and young people's body image – an inquiry by the Women and Equalities Committee found that one of the most persistent causes for body dissatisfaction was widespread use of image editing and digitally altered images, and increased social media use.<sup>29</sup>

Image editing and the use of filters can have a two-fold effect on children and young people's wellbeing; as many people share filtered and edited images on social media, unrealistic body standards become more normalised, leading to children and young people comparing themselves to these images.

As children and young people themselves turn to filters and image editing, it can encourage negative feelings towards their body as their 'real life' self cannot match their online photos. According to research released by Meta, using Instagram made body image issues worse for 1 in 3 teenage girls who already faced body image issues from the UK and US.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Internet-Matters-Childrens-Wellbeing-in-a-Digital-World-Index-report-2023-2.pdf>

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

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

<sup>25</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5357/documents/53751/default/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/news/millions-teenagers-worry-about-body-image-and-identify-social-media-key-cause-new-survey-mental>

<sup>27</sup> <https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/Barnardos-Your-Voice-Matters-2022-20.3.23.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> <https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/Barnardos-Your-Voice-Matters-2022-20.3.23.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5357/documents/53751/default/>

The relationship between social media, self-harm and suicide is complex, as it can offer a source of support for children and young people at risk of self-harm, or who have self-harmed in the past. However, social media can also expose children and young people to online harms that increase the risk of self-harm including cyberbullying and abuse.

Self-harm amongst children and young people is increasing. The Health Behaviour in School Aged Children Survey (HBSC) has recorded an increase from 22% to 25% among 15-year-olds (2014 to 2019).<sup>31</sup> Further, the University of Manchester reported a 68% increase in self-harm for 13–16-year-old girls between 2011 and 2014.<sup>32</sup>

Social media can facilitate and amplify messages that may lead to self-harm and suicidal thoughts and intentions. 26% of children and young people presenting at hospital with self-harm or suicide attempt injuries had accessed related content online.<sup>33</sup> The number of children aged 9 to 12 who were admitted to hospital for intentionally hurting themselves had risen from 221 in 2013–14 to 508 in 2019–20.<sup>34</sup>

Children can also be susceptible to abuse and exploitation when online, including child criminal exploitation (CCE). CCE is when a child under the age of 18 is encouraged, expected or required to take part in any activity that constitutes a criminal offence under British law.<sup>35</sup> CCE can take many forms, including ‘county lines’ (where children are coerced to carry drugs and weapons from one area to another to service complex drug supply chains), stealing or shoplifting to order, including perfumes, alcohol or cars, cannabis cultivation, and forced begging.

Children can be groomed and coerced and threatened into CCE online. Online platforms can be used to contact, groom and keep children trapped in a cycle of exploitation. This includes perpetrators advertising their associated lifestyles to their social media networks, for example posting pictures of luxury items and cash in trap-houses, a technique used to recruit and control victims. Barnardo’s services support children whose exploitation started with initial contact via online platforms such as sharing posts aimed to lure children into trap-houses with money, trainers and weapons.

Research in 2019 showed that one in four (24%) of young people reported that they see illicit drugs advertised for sale on social media.<sup>36</sup> Further, in 2020, research by the Youth Endowment Fund found that 20% of young people had seen online content promoting gang membership in the previous 12 months, and 24% reported seeing content featuring carrying, using or promoting weapons.<sup>37</sup> Further, recent research by Revealing Reality’s recent report, Anti-Social Media, found that children across the UK are routinely viewing videos of illegal activity on social media, including

<sup>30</sup> <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/09/research-teen-well-being-and-instagram/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://hbscengland.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/HBSC-England-National-Report-2020.pdf#page=16>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/news/steep-rise-in-self-harm-among-teenage-girls/#:~:text=University%20of%20Manchester%20researchers%20have,much%20higher%20rates%20than%20boys.>

<sup>33</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/8206/documents/84092/default/#page=13>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/16/self-harm-among-young-children-in-uk-doubles-in-six-years>

<sup>35</sup> This is Barnardo’s and The Children Society’s preferred definition for Child Criminal Exploitation. We hope that this will be included by the Government in the Victims and Prisoners Bill. Child Criminal Exploitation is defined in the Working Together Guidance as where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

<sup>36</sup> <https://volteface.me/dm-details-selling-drugs-age-social-media/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/YEF-Children-violence-and-vulnerability-2022.pdf>



fights, stabbings, and the sale of weapons and drugs online – with some children reporting that they see this type of content several times a day, every day.<sup>38</sup>

Perpetrators also use social media sites for ‘remote mothering’ – the ability to monitor where someone is, what they are doing, and who they are with at all times, via location tags, GPS tracking, pictures and video calling. The APPG for CCE and Knife Crime, which Barnardo’s are co-secretariats of, heard that perpetrators use features such as SnapMaps on Snapchat to track children.<sup>39</sup>

Perpetrators also use technology for online collateral – the use of incriminating images, videos, screenshots and voice notes to ensure compliance, for example as a threat of ‘revenge porn’. This is especially used to control girls, and ‘subordinates’ – often younger children.

How effective is digital safety education in schools, for example the PHSE curriculum, in educating children about screen time and online harms?

Children and young people need to have access to appropriate, inclusive relationships, health and sex education (RHSE), which includes a focus on online safety. This should include the risk of grooming and abuse and exploitation online, where to seek support, and how to process inappropriate material. In polling of almost 1,000 children aged between 11-15 years old conducted by Barnardo’s in December 2016, 96% of children said that it’s important for them to understand the risk and dangers of being online so that they can stay safe.<sup>40</sup>

Through education, it should be made clear that children abused online are always victims, including where they are coerced or manipulated into sharing intimate images, or other activity, including criminal activity. Education will never prevent harm to children, and by receiving RSHE, the onus of protection should not be placed on children.

Further, given the increase of mental health issues within children and young people, it is important schools take a whole school approach to mental health and early interventions for children and young people. Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) support teachers to deliver a whole school approach to mental health and identify at risk children and young people as well as providing early interventions to children and young people with mild to moderate mental health needs. Barnardo’s is calling for the expansion of MHSTs to all schools and colleges.

It is important that a whole school approach to mental health is supported by the RHSE curriculum. Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is a curriculum supported by schoolwide activities, that is provided in one hour’s worth of lessons each week. PATHS is an evidence-based early intervention programme that can improve school attainment, support resilience and help seeking. As a health promotion programme, it has a positive life course impact on children and young people.<sup>41</sup> Studies have measures the impact of PATHS including social and emotional skills, attitudes/ relations, emotional wellbeing, prosocial behaviours, conduct problems and academic performance.<sup>42</sup> The programme builds the foundation of healthy development, helps to create and embed a whole school approach to mental health and empowers children and young people to

<sup>38</sup> <https://revealingreality.co.uk/anti-social-media-what-some-vulnerable-children-are-seeing-on-snapchat/>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.preventknifecrime.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Child-Criminal-Exploitation-Knife-Crime-APPG-The-Online-Safety-Bill-and-CCE-Briefing.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> [https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/involve\\_us\\_respect\\_us\\_web.pdf](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/involve_us_respect_us_web.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.pathseducation.co.uk/pdfs/public/early-intervention-next-steps2.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Shi J, Cheung ACK, Ni A. The effectiveness of Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies program: A metaanalysis. *Front Psychol.* 2022 Dec 9;13:1030572. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1030572. PMID: 36571043; PMCID: PMC9780599.

understand their feelings and those of their peers and provides them with the tools to understand when they might need help or support to manage them.

Further, it is important that RHSE is inclusive, and should be consistently inclusive of LGBTQ+ people, which is beneficial for all students and particularly valued by LGBTQ+ students. New research by Barnardo's shows that the most important factor LGBTQ+ young people said that could improve their school or college experiences was to have more inclusive sex and relationships education.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> <https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Life%20as%20a%20Young%20LGBT%2B%20Person.pdf>