

Written evidence submitted by Islington Council

I am the computing and online safety officer at Islington council, working there since 2000 and I deliver service to schools in Islington, Hackney, Camden and Haringey – working closely with schools and families – DSL, PHSE, Digital and EYFS teams.

For years we have been raising concern with national charities such as Childnet and NSPCC. Common Sense Media, Children's Commissioner and 5Rights and Beeban Kidron's team (I have arranged round tables of Headteachers for Beeban) inc.

- Primary age children routinely accessing 16+ 13+ 18+ apps and games, mobile devices resulting in
- cases of catastrophic online harm – inc. online bullying, exploitation and behaviour issues (misdiagnosis of ADHD/autism; when over-stimulated from excessive shortform video TikTok, Youtube)

- + OT raising physical development issues such as posture and fine motor.

- large groups of children's childhood negatively impacted - critical child development, play, interactive speaking and listening displaced by small devices and addictive platforms such as Youtube, Tik-Tok, whatsapp, snapchat

- Parents oblivious to what good screentime is eg a chrome book at home instead of a mobile device and quality screentime such as cbbc v youtube and tools to support fun learning.

We share leaflets with families on Not No Tech But Good Tech – Digital Diet – leaflet examples [here](#)

- Urgent need for national campaign for a society wide understanding on safety and appropriate online activity for children

- schools expected to pick-up cases from outside school and parents lacking understanding and not supporting guidance from schools on online age appropriate apps and online tools

Constant fire-fighting by school leaders

Additional Collated Evidence below for Age 0-5 settings

Piece with [Nursery world](#)

As the Online Safety Bill goes through Parliament this year, national media headlines are focusing on the risks associated with teenagers. But for many years, early years practitioners have been raising serious concerns about the damaging effects of screentime habits on our youngest children

With the popularity of small devices or family phones overtaking the use of TV in the living room, concerns are also being raised on these habits over time.

Increasingly, children as young as two are having easy access to inappropriate content. Excessive exposure to screens limits children's play, exercise, sleep and overall wellbeing, and there is an increasing body of evidence to suggest how this leads to negative habits for a lifetime.

So much so, that many are calling for an early years healthy screentime campaign targeted at parents, and even a government communication strategy, starting with information included in the Bounty packs given out in maternity wards.

Most importantly, there needs to be a narrative on the risks posed to the youngest children in the Online Safety Bill.

'WILD WEST FOR CHILDREN'

Online safety is recognised as being part of early years settings' safeguarding responsibilities in the Government's guidance, Safeguarding children and protecting professionals in early years settings:

online safety guidance for practitioners (2019), which states that parents must develop their own knowledge of online safety.

I have supported schools and settings across north London and in recent years have gathered cases and concerns from early years settings.

The NSPCC calls the internet the 'Wild West for children', and this term can also be applied for very young children. Dangerous content can be easily accessed on YouTube and TikTok – platforms popularised for very young children, despite age regulations of 13 years-plus.

This is highlighted in titles such as 'Huggy Wuggy' or 'Rainbow Friends', which have violent and scary content. These titles are popular with young children and the content is nudging towards dangerous.

I have also recorded cases where children are watching video content on their parents' phones, and algorithms loop to more serious adult content on YouTube and TikTok. Other cases have seen sexual and violent content intentionally tagged to early years content – such as 'Peppa Pig Gets Raped' and 'Thomas the Swear Engine'. Early years content used by teachers on YouTube is also targeted extensively, including Michael Rosen's Bear Hunt.

Streaming services, where there is not a 9pm watershed, also increasingly pose risks.

There is now an age/genre crossover with, for example, the teen success of Addams Family – featuring 'Wednesday' – while horror crossover Blood and Honey has the character Winnie the Pooh.

There have also been cases where children have stumbled across extreme content and parents have reported this to early years settings.

EARLY ADDICTION

Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok have become the daily diet for many young children. A 2022 article in The Guardian highlighted how commonplace it is for three- and four-year-olds to use TikTok, and how this short-form content has fuelled concerns about the negative impact of the dopamine rush.

Recent research from Ofcom has found that a fifth of three- to four-year-olds now have a phone of their own. Sixty-nine per cent are regularly using phone handsets to go online, including on borrowed devices, while 92 per cent are watching video streaming platforms.

Managing screentime on these devices and platforms can be challenging for parents because of online design features which aim to keep users there as long as possible.

While the Department for Education has published a recommended list of early learning apps, popularised video platforms can hook children. Meanwhile, traditional early years channels such as CBeebies Bedtime Hour are being overtaken by them.

It is now the norm to see babies and toddlers on parents' phones or often on their own device in restaurants, on buses and in prams. Nurseries say they no longer need to wean babies and toddlers off dummies, because phones and tablets have replaced them.

In 2017, Professor Sonia Livingstone at the London School of Economics and Political Science led a research project highlighting concern about lack of guidance for parents and health professionals when it comes to use of digital device use by the under-sixes.

She says, 'It's hard enough being a parent without big tech making the task even harder through irresponsible practices: research shows that young children can benefit from early access to technology if carefully managed – and that means by the companies as much if not more than by parents.'

IMPACT ON DEVELOPMENT

With the popularity of small devices or family phones overtaking the use of TV in the living room, concerns are also being raised on these habits over time, resulting in poor posture and motor skills, and a decline in families enjoying TV time together in the home.

One school reported 'addiction to an iPad' in a child transitioning from Reception class who was unable to hold a pencil or participate in age-appropriate physical activities.

And a study in the U.S.A. has questioned how technology and its overuse can impact a child in the early years, sometimes leading to a misdiagnosis of autism.

The popularity of personal devices can lead to the absence, or lack of, physical play and opportunities for communication. Time spent in early years settings, where children don't have access to personal devices, is becoming increasingly valuable for learning and development.

DISTURBED BEHAVIOUR

Early years settings are sharing advice with families, including resources from charities Childnet and Internet Matters.

Practitioners are also flagging that children with SEND are particularly vulnerable to viewing inappropriate content, as they often have a greater reliance on technology for learning and development.

Safe use of YouTube or YouTube Kids requires parental controls to be applied. There have been serious cases of three- to four-year-olds displaying disturbed behaviour towards peers in their setting. It was discovered that the children were using YouTube for sustained periods unsupervised, and had actively searched words such as 'blood', 'balloons', 'sex', and 'arsenal', leading to extreme, violent and adult content.

While children may explore age-appropriate content, it is the algorithms and apps that expose them to adult content. This continued exposure to adult content leads to normalisation, and for some children it may lead to sexual curiosity, sexual feelings and possibly a sexual response.

There have been reports in the media of peer-to-peer abuse affecting very young children.

PARENTS' SCREEN USE

Parents and carers are often prolific scrollers. Gen Z, who grew up in the social media era, have the potential to be desensitised to the impact and risks of screen overuse.

It is widely acknowledged that young children mimic the behaviour of the adults in their lives.

Communication campaigns for education have included ‘Talk to your child, not to your mobile’, along with ‘There is no app to replace your lap’, to highlight the importance of reading a book to babies and young children.

Children’s charity Childnet says: ‘How adults role model use of technology is important, and the ability to put devices down is not just a challenge for young people. In fact, in a focus group discussion with primary school children, it was clear that children have views on the extent of the screentime use of their parents and carers.’

In a video made by the Safer Internet Centre, children expressed awareness of mental health risks associated with too much screentime and also said they wished their parents did not spend so much time on their digital devices.

With a growing body of evidence to suggest the many ways in which inappropriate screentime is damaging our youngest children, it is vitally important that the content of the Online Safety Bill contains a clear strategy to address the issues. █

Katy Potts is computing and e-safety lead for children’s services at Islington Council

‘specific strategies’ needed

Does the Online Safety Bill go far enough? Baroness Beeban Kidron has voiced a strong commitment to the bill protecting the very youngest children.

She says, ‘It is well established that the first few years of a child’s life have the biggest impact on their trajectory and life chances, which makes technology use in those first few years of paramount importance,’ she says.

‘The work done by 5Rights, whether children’s rights or the Age Appropriate Design Code, references the evolving capacity of children and says categorically that specific design strategies must be made for the very youngest children.

‘We are also soon to publish an updated version of our Child Development in the Digital World report. It is essential that the forthcoming Online Safety Bill considers children from the moment they are born.’

FURTHER INFORMATION

[UK Council for Internet Safety Guidance Early years](#)

[Examples from an Early Years settings Fife and Haringey](#)

[DfE list of apps](#)

[Internet Matters advice](#)

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