

Written evidence submitted by Girlguiding UK

1. Overview

- 1.1. As the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, with almost 300,000 young members, and over 100,000 volunteers, our submission is focused on the impact of screen time on girls and young women, and in particular, their experiences with harmful content online.
- 1.2. Girlguiding believes girls and young women should be able to use the internet freely, safely and without fear. We believe the harmful content girls and young women experience online has a detrimental impact on girls' wellbeing and opportunities. However, we recognise the many benefits of being online for girls and young women - such as feeling connected, having a sense of belonging and opening up opportunities - and these benefits should not be dismissed. We believe that any plans to manage screentime in schools should be developed in consultation with young people themselves, to ensure plans are effective and work in their best interest.

2. Relevant evidence

- 2.1. In this submission, we refer to our Girls' Attitudes Surveys from years 2019 - 2023¹. The Girls' Attitudes Survey is Girlguiding's annual research project into the lives of girls and young women, aiming to build a comprehensive picture of the emerging needs, issues and priorities of girls and young women today. The survey provides a snapshot of the views of over 2,000 girls and young women from across the UK aged 7 to 21, within and outside Girlguiding. Since 2009, we have covered a range of issues affecting girls from education, wellbeing, aspirations, social action, and safety on- and off-line.
- 2.2. In 2022, we published research showing the extent of girls' experiences of harmful content online. The results revealed that over three-quarters (79%) of young women have experienced online harm in 2021.²

3. Our response

- 3.1. 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?
- 3.2. Our 15th annual Girls' Attitudes Survey shows girls' happiness has hit an all-time-low, with only 17% of girls aged 7-21 saying they're very happy compared to 40% in 2009. This is a result of girls feeling pressures and experiencing challenges including harms online, appearance pressures, and sexual harassment.³
 - 3.2.1. Looking at the impact on being online and on social media, we see that 60% of girls aged 11-21, agreed that they worry about the negative impact of being online on their mental health. 41% of girls aged 11-21 often feel sad or depressed after spending time online and on social media. In our research, one girl, aged between 17-21, who responded stated the following; 'I don't want my children to experience the social media of today'.

¹ [Girlguiding \(2023\) – Girls' Attitudes Survey](#)

² [Girlguiding \(2022\) Online harms research](#)

³ [Girlguiding \(2023\) Girls' Attitudes Survey 2023](#)

- 3.3. The number of girls who have received sexist comments online has more than doubled since 2018 and 2013 despite most girls between the ages of 11-21 being taught about digital safety and online harms in school.
 - 3.3.1. 50% of girls aged 7-21 have seen online adverts about losing weight or changing their appearance. When asked about the impact of appearance pressures on girls, 37% of girls aged 11-21 stated that they feel concerned or self-conscious about their appearance and as a result, they stop themselves taking part in fun activities. 26% of girls aged 11-21 stated that this results in them taking part less in the classroom.
- 3.4. Social media also provides girls and young women with an effective communication tool. In 2020, 44% of girls agreed that social media makes them feel more confident to speak out about things they care about⁴. We see these trends continue in our latest Girls' Attitudes Survey that show this percentage of girls feeling empowered to speak out on issues that matter to them on social media has risen to 48%. 30% of girls and young women aged between 11-21 have made their views known about an issue they care about by posting online, whilst 28% have supported a campaign or cause via social media.
- 3.5. Prior to the pandemic, social media particularly helped young women between the ages of 17-21 maintain relationships and connections with others, including their family. From our 2021 Girls Attitudes Survey, almost a third (30%) of girls and young women aged 7 to 21 said that being online more during the pandemic encouraged closer relationships with people they weren't in touch with as often before — such as family and friends who live far away. One in five (19%) aged 11 to 21 say online forums and spaces had been an important source of support for them during the pandemic.
- 3.6. How effective is digital safety education in schools, for example the PHSE curriculum, in educating children about screen time and online harms?
 - 3.6.1. In an increasingly digital age, effective digital or online safety education in schools is incredibly important. In our Girls' Attitudes Survey 2023, it was positive to see that 91% of girls aged 7-21 years have learnt about being safe online in school. However, fewer young women aged 17-21 agree they learn or have learnt about being safe online (88% compared to 92% aged 7-16). Young women of colour this age are also less likely to agree (84% compared to 89% of white girls aged 17-21).⁵
 - 3.6.2. Despite learning about online safety, girls still don't feel safe online. 81% of girls, aged 7-21, experienced some form of threatening or upsetting behaviour online and this has risen from 65% of girls in 2018. The number of girls who are more likely to have experienced harmful content online include those who identify as LGBTQ+ (93%), neurodiverse girls (91%) and disabled girls (90%).
 - 3.6.3. When asked, girls aged between 11 – 21, say they would feel safer online if reports and concerns were taken seriously by online platforms (59%), there was more guidance about where and how to report content online (33%) and if it was easier to change and understand privacy settings on social media (31%).
 - 3.6.4. Girls are aware of the impact of spending too much time on social media, particularly when digesting harmful content. Unfortunately, due to the lack of protection online from this

⁴ [Girlguiding \(2020\) Girls' Attitudes Survey 2020](#)

⁵ [Girlguiding \(2023\) Girls' Attitudes Survey 2023](#)

content, girls are policing their own screen time. Research from our 2019 Girls' Attitudes Survey shows that four in ten girls say they'd like to spend less time online whilst one in three girls told us they regularly take breaks from using social media⁶.

- 3.6.5. The statistics show that although young people are taught about online safety at school, they still do not feel safe when they're online. While we believe it is Ofcom's duty to enact the Online Safety Act and ensure social media platforms are keeping their users safe, the statistics could indicate that the current content of online safety lessons are not reflecting young people's current experiences or needs when it comes to online safety.
- 3.6.6. It is important that comprehensive Relationships Sex and Health Education is provided alongside online or digital safety education. 79% of girls aged 13-21 have experienced online harms, between 2021 – 22, including sexist comments (35%), cyberflashing (22%), sexual harassment (20%), catfishing (20%), pressure to share nude pictures (16%) and cyberstalking (13%)⁷.
- 3.6.7. There should be guidance, support and training provided to teachers so they feel skilled and confident to address sexual harassment and abuse, whether this is in school or online. There should be better education for everyone about what behaviours are acceptable, including online conduct, and improved education around consent, health relationships and gender stereotypes. The Department for Education should support schools to take a whole-school approach to addressing sexual harassment and abuse, across school, in public places and online.
- 3.6.8. As we anticipate updated draft RSHE guidance being published for public consultation, we call on you to ensure that the focus is on guaranteeing children and young people adequate and well sequenced information and skills they need to stay safe, not on age restrictions which are bound to make teachers feel wary about answering questions that children bring to the classroom. The guidance must be very clear that laying foundations on topics like consent, healthy relationships and equalities, and teaching skills such as communication and how to deal with peer pressure should start as early as possible in order to protect children effectively, including online. We believe the updated draft RSHE guidance should reflect the needs and wants of young people to ensure they are safe both off and online.

4. Girlguiding activity

- 4.1. The Girlguiding programme gives girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, gain valuable skills, discover their full potential and have fun. Girlguiding delivers a range of activities for girls to mitigate the impact of online harms:
- The Media critic interest badge for Guides allows them to develop media literacy.
 - Free Being Me, part of our Peer Education programme, helps girls increase their body confidence and challenges unhealthy beauty ideals. It encourages girls in Brownies and Guides to challenge myths and reframe the ways they think about the way they look.
 - The Feel good skills builder allows girls to develop body confidence, self-esteem and resilience.
 - The Breaking Free peer education resource empowers young people to enjoy their hobbies, gain the skills they're interested in and help bring about a world where nobody feels trapped by gender stereotypes. Through this resource, they can develop assertiveness, cultural awareness and media literacy.

⁶ [Girlguiding \(2019\) Girls' Attitudes Survey 2019](#)

⁷ [Girlguiding \(2022\) Online harms research](#)

- 4.2 Girlguiding's partnership with Google first started in 2018, offering both Brownies (7-10 years) and Rangers (14-18 years), the opportunity to take part in digital focused activities. Over 15,000 girls took part in these. And our partnership expansion in 2022, including the new UMAs for all sections, gives even more girls the chance to learn how technology can be used to help solve all sorts of challenges.
- 4.3 Our advocate panel gives girls a platform to use their voices and seek change at the highest levels. Advocates are a group of Girlguiding members aged 14 to 25 who lead the direction of Girlguiding's advocacy and research. They act as media spokespeople for Girlguiding and speak at events. They are able to speak with decision makers including politicians about our evidence and what girls would like to see change. On Safer Internet Day in 2022, the advocates met with MPs in parliament and called for better online safety laws to protect girls and young women from harm online.
5. About us
- 5.1 Girlguiding is the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK. Thanks to the dedication and support of our amazing volunteers, we are active in every part of the UK, giving girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, have fun, build brilliant friendships, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference to their lives and their communities. We build girls' confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. We give them a space to have fun. We run Rainbows (4–7 years), Brownies (7–10 years), Guides (10–14 years) and Rangers (14–18 years).

October 2023