

Written evidence submitted by the NSPCC

The online world is an integral part of children's lives. Children learn, play, and socialise online. Many children do not distinguish between their 'online' and 'offline' worlds, with both parts informing who they are and their life experiences.

Children have a right to safely access the online world without detriment to their wellbeing. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have highlighted that meaningful access to the online world can support children to realise a wide range of rights, and that these opportunities play an important role in children's development.¹ They raise that children should be supported and encouraged to benefit from the social, creative, and learning opportunities presented by the digital environment.

At the outset, we want to urge this Committee to ensure that any recommendations they make recognise the importance of the online world to children and uphold their rights to access it. Whilst we know that screen time is an issue raised by parents and professionals, the NSPCC are focused on making sure children's time spent online is safe. We recommend the Committee considers this distinction in their approach.

In this response, we will set out the importance of ensuring children are empowered and supported to manage their own experiences online in a safe way that supports their wellbeing. In line with NSPCC expertise, this response will focus on children's wellbeing, and not on the use of the internet and technology in educational settings. We have answered the three questions below because they most closely relate to our concern about the potential infringement on a children's right to be online through a focus on screen time.

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?

The evidence of the impact of screen time on children's development and wellbeing is complex. Whilst there is evidence showing that there are risks associated with very high levels of screen time, this is not clear cut and can often be exaggerated.²

There are a number of challenges when considering the correlation between a child's screen time and their wellbeing. A young person can be on their device for only a minute and receive an unwanted explicit image – something we know is a concerning regular occurrence for many girls.³ Meanwhile some children could be online for an hour looking for help, support, or research.

There are a number of important reasons why children and young people may rely on access to the online world on a more regular basis and therefore have a higher screen time. For example, the significant benefits of being online for LGBTQ+ children include the opportunity to create communities and find support from others who may be going through similar experiences.⁴ This is especially important if they feel unable to talk to others and get this support from their friends and family. Children and young people with learning disabilities also benefit from using the internet to support their learning and interactions with their peers.⁵

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child (2021), [General comment No. 25 \(2021\) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment](#). United Nations.

² The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2019), [The health impacts of screen time - a guide for clinicians and parents](#).

³ Ringrose, J., Regehr, K., and Milne, B. (2021), [Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse](#).

⁴ Stonewall (2022), [Staying safe online: Practical strategies to best support all children and young people online, including those who identify as LGBTQ+](#).

⁵ Cerebra (2015), [Learning Disabilities, Autism and Internet Safety: A Guide for Parents](#).

Children and young people often go online to support their learning in school. Ofcom's annual media use survey highlights that the majority of children aged 12-15, as well as parents of this age group, think that being able to go online helps with school/homework.⁶ Our research with children and young people shows that they learn from or turn to the internet to access information missing from other areas of their lives or learning.⁷ Some topics they discuss learning about online include LGBTQ+ identities, relationships, body image and mental health. For many children, limiting time online would risk limiting their ability to access a source of information which helps them to learn about themselves and the wider world.

Instead of focusing on screen time, it is the design of platforms which needs to come under scrutiny. Algorithms on social media are often designed to be addictive.⁸ These algorithms also promote harmful and inappropriate content to children, which can become more extreme the more time a child spends online.⁹ However, rather than placing the burden on children to cut themselves off from their online life due to these risky design features, tech companies must instead be held accountable for designing services with children's safety built in. The recent passage of the Online Safety Bill will play a vital role in holding companies accountable for doing this.

As well as requiring greater action from tech companies, children and young people should be supported to critically engage with online spaces and the information they access online through Relationships, Sex and Health Education. By ensuring platforms are safe by design for children and supporting them to evaluate what they see online, children and families can be empowered to access the online world in a way which is appropriate for them and meets their needs, which will be different for each child.

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

It is vital that lessons on digital safety are rooted in the reality of children and young people's experiences. A focus on restricting screen time is likely to be alienating to many young people, for whom the online world is an integral part of their lives. Online safety messaging which is disconnected to children's experiences can lead to children ignoring these lessons altogether, and in turn missing out on other important conversations.¹⁰

It is welcome that in the current statutory Relationships and Sex Education guidance, the section on health and wellbeing recognises the positive benefits of being online for children.¹¹ Screen time is noted alongside a number of other topics to consider when discussing online safety. We support this balance and recommend that it is maintained.

The guidance could be further enhanced through building on the sections which discuss supporting children's wellbeing online and managing online harms. The guidance for secondary schools should include further detail on teaching about how children can evaluate what they see online and assess the ways seeing harmful content could impact them. Encouraging discussion about what young people see online, and what the risks might be, can help children to make more informed decisions. Conversations about screen time should also be approached in this manner – teachers should not

⁶ Ofcom (2023). [Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes](#).

⁷ Renold, E. et al (2023). ["We have to educate ourselves": how young people are learning about relationships, sex and sexuality](#). NSPCC.

⁸ Qiu, T. (2021). [A Psychiatrist's Perspective on Social Media Algorithms and Mental Health](#). Stanford University.

⁹ Burgess, T. (2023). [Andrew Tate: Controversial influencer pushed on to 'teen's' YouTube Shorts and Instagram video feeds](#). Sky News.

¹⁰ Katz, A. and El Asam, A. (2019). [Look at Me: Teens, sexting and risks](#). Internet Matters.

¹¹ Department for Education (2021). [Relationships and sex education \(RSE\) and health education](#).

just explain why there are restrictions on certain sites or games, but also encourage young people to discuss why some content may be helpful or risky for their wellbeing.

We know that whilst young people use the online world to teach themselves more about some topics, they continue to view school as the place to learn because it is accessible for everyone. NSPCC-commissioned research has found that many young people are critically engaging with social media, search engines, websites, and wider media to learn about relationships, sex, and sexuality.¹² They recognise that while online spaces have merit, not everything they view is accurate or appropriate and therefore want a safe and supportive environment to discuss certain topics. We recommend that this is reflected in the RSE guidance for schools by giving greater focus to supporting young people to critically evaluate what they are viewing online.

“Well, like obviously, scrolling through TikTok, it’s – or Instagram, or YouTube, or Google, you’re just exposed to information and education. Some of it’s good, some of it’s not so good. Qualifications aren’t really a thing; you can say whatever you want. And there’s – there’s sort of a blurred line between how much of what I’m being told is correct?” (Henry, age 16)¹³

How can schools and parents be better supported to manage children’s screen usage, for example, through age-related guidance? Could the Department for Education be doing more in this area?

Recommendations about managing children’s access to the online world must be mindful of a child’s right to go online. Solutions will be most effective, and meet children’s needs best, if they ultimately support and empower children to spend their time online in a way which promotes positive mental wellbeing.

Children are increasingly being exposed to harmful material and interactions online at a younger age.¹⁴ Age-appropriate limits on certain social media platforms and games have an important role to play in keeping children safe. However, these limits cannot remove the risk that young children are exposed to harm online. Furthermore, too great a focus on telling younger children that they should not be on particular apps risks discouraging them from seeking help when something goes wrong. Combined with a potential blanket ban on phones within school¹⁵, this risks pushing children and young people to be secretive about their experiences online, making it more difficult for schools and parents to identify risks to their safety¹⁶.

Schools and parents must be supported to broach topics such as online safety and wellbeing with all children. Schools must also be supported to hold conversations with young people about what they want to learn about online safety and their wellbeing through RSE. By doing so, teachers will be much better equipped to understand what children’s lives online and offline involve, and support them with strategies to keep safe, assess information and manage their screen time. Guidance can support teachers to deliver this through providing example strategies of how to consult children and young people on these topics. It should also support teachers to explain to parents how they are teaching about online safety, and help parents to engage with their child about the topic in an empowering and non-judgemental way.

¹² Renold, E. et al (2023). [“We have to educate ourselves”: how young people are learning about relationships, sex and sexuality](#). NSPCC.

¹³ Renold, E. et al (2023). [“We have to educate ourselves”: how young people are learning about relationships, sex and sexuality](#). NSPCC.

¹⁴ Data available from Childline outlines the harm experienced online by children under 11. Examples of this data can be provided confidentially upon request.

¹⁵ Mason, C. and Jeffreys, B. (2023). [Gillian Keegan pledges crackdown on mobiles in schools](#). BBC News.

¹⁶ National Association of Head Teachers – Busby, E. (2023). [Blanket ban of mobile phones in schools across England ‘unenforceable’](#). The Independent.

We recommend that the Department for Education prioritises ensuring teachers have the training and resource required to deliver a high-quality online safety and RSE curriculum which supports children and young people to manage their wellbeing online. Any guidance to schools or parents must not be limited to screen time, and should instead support them to have ongoing conversations with their children about managing their wellbeing online, informed by children's priorities, with information about how to adapt these conversations as the child grows older and seeks increased independence online.

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