

## Written Evidence Submitted by Parentkind (OSB0207)

20<sup>th</sup> October 2021

### Parentkind response

1. As a national charity, Parentkind gives those with a parenting role a voice in education. We invest substantial resources in representing parent views on their child's learning to local, regional and national governments and agencies because evidence tells that parental participation in education benefits all children in all schools and society as a whole. Parentkind is the largest network of PTA fundraisers in the UK. We bring specialist fundraising support and advice to parent volunteers so that every school can benefit from a successful PTA. Our 13,000 PTA members usually raise over £120+ million per year, placing us alongside some of the largest charities in the UK.
2. We believe that further consideration should be given within the bill to acknowledge the particular vulnerability of children to online abuse. The Online Safety Bill Explanatory Notes<sup>1</sup> speaks of "A commitment to delivering a higher level of protection for children". It is also essential to go further and acknowledge the dynamic within families, where parents play a crucial role in keeping children safe, both online and offline. Empowering parents with the knowledge and tools to keep their child's internet usage both a positive and safe experience, and to spot concerns where they may arise, should be at the heart of the bill. This is especially crucial since children have spent more time online since the pandemic<sup>2</sup>, and are therefore more likely than ever before to be exposed to online harms and risks.
3. Research backs up that children's online safety and the negative mental health consequences when they suffer abuse has become more acute since the pandemic. Our Annual Parent Surveys<sup>3</sup>, which has a large sample of 1,500 parents in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, have consistently found that parents are concerned about their child's mental health over a period of the last four years. The pandemic, and the accompanying disruption to children's schooling and routine, has simply exacerbated mental health problems and given the issue greater prominence. In our Annual Parent Survey 2020<sup>4</sup>, 61% of parents said they were concerned by the longer impact of schools being closed to most pupils during lockdowns on their child's mental health.
4. Our Annual Parent Survey 2021<sup>5</sup> found that, when asking parents about their perceptions of their child's mental health, almost half (48%) reported that they were concerned by the pressure they experienced to constantly engage with social media,

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/985031/Explanatory\\_Notes\\_Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/985031/Explanatory_Notes_Accessible.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/covid/online-safety-during-coronavirus>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/Research--Policy/Research/Annual-Parent-Surveys>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/Research--Policy/Research/Annual-Parent-Surveys/Annual-Parent-Survey-2020>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/Research--Policy/Research>

where 20% reported that their child had experienced the issue (up from 15% in 2020, perhaps as a result of lockdowns, partial school closures and children spending proportionally more of their time online. Understandably, it is a bigger concern for parents of children in secondary rather than primary school). As many (48%) were concerned about cyber-bullying/online abuse, which was up slightly from 45% the year before, and 17% reported that their child had experienced cyber-bullying. Concerns about depression (43%) and self-harm (32%) were high, with 18% and 12% respectively reporting that their child had experienced them, whilst almost a third (32%) of parents had concerns about sexual harassment, with 9% registering direct experience when it came to their child. Where data for the previous year was available, all of the figures showed an increase in 2021 from 2020, perhaps as a side effect of the pandemic and the disruption to education and their normal routine that all pupils experienced. Worryingly, all of the figures were proportionally higher for the demographic of parents of children with SEND and FSM.

5. Parentkind represented parents' views on the panel of reference group members for Ofsted's 2021 review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges<sup>6</sup>. The report made the following recommendation for government: "in partnership with others, launch a communications campaign about sexual harassment and online sexual abuse, which should include advice for parents and carers." The review also found that, apart from their peers, children were most likely to talk to their parents about sexual harassment and violence. The problem of a current conspiracy of silence was described by one school leader: "So often, nobody is talking to young people about these things – including or especially their parents. These conversations are awkward so there has almost been a tacit agreement not to have them. This means that we risk not knowing what young people do, or think, and how what they do is affecting them."
6. The Online Safety Bill must consider among its wider implications how adults, especially parents, can be better educated and informed about online sexual harassment between young people, or directed towards young people by adults. One solution identified by Ofsted was in competent implementation of the new RSHE curriculum, and it recognises the essential need to properly engage parents, who must now be consulted on RSHE curriculum or changes to the school's policy<sup>7</sup>. Ofsted's review says, "When planning the RSHE curriculum, it is essential that schools work closely with parents and carers to talk them through areas covered, address any gaps in their understanding and equip them with the confidence to be able to have open discussions with their children. Research indicates that there is a particular gap in parents' understanding of issues around online sexual abuse. Many parents are interested in learning more about the issue through schools and online resources. They also want more support in understanding how to talk about these issues with their children." Our research suggests that this is true. In order to

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>

respond to the government's consultations on RE/RSHE when guidance was overhauled in 2018, we ran surveys of parents. We found that more than six in ten believed it was more difficult for their child's generation to navigate relationships and sexual issues than it was for their own. More than two thirds disagreed or did not know if pupils were getting the information they needed to thrive and stay safe in the modern world. They were overall supportive of schools teaching the subject, and almost all parents believed that informing children about sexual health and relationships is primarily the responsibility of schools and parents in partnership, or parents, rather than schools. Tellingly, only 45% believed their child was equipped with enough knowledge to stay safe online. Parents are aware of dangers that can lie online, and RE/RSHE must now include staying safe online in the curriculum. At the same time, many parents aren't entirely aware of how to best keep their child safe online. When considering online safety in the whole, special consideration should be given to providing parents with the knowledge and resources to keep children safe because the status quo is inadequate. As Ofsted's review damningly says, "The children and young people we spoke to were seldom positive about their RSHE and PSHE lessons. They felt that the quality of the input varied according to who was teaching them and that the lessons were not relevant to their daily experiences and the reality of their lives." Ofsted goes on to state: "We recognise that RSHE is just one part of a whole school approach to tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. Other factors, and the role of parents, are also vital." Parentkind agrees wholeheartedly that the parental role in maintaining online safety is critical.

7. Further to RSHE and Ofsted's Review of sexual abuse in schools, we have some research that you may wish to consider when refining the bill. A snap poll of parents in August 2021 found that many were in favour of removing mobile phones from schools and classrooms<sup>8</sup>. In order to respond to the DfE's consultation on behaviour management strategies in August 2021, we put out a two-question poll on Facebook and Twitter to gain a snapshot of parental opinion. In total, we received 54 responses from parents and carers. We asked whether or not they support their child's school banning the use of mobile phones. By far the most popular choice was "yes, throughout the school day" selected by just over three quarters (76%) of respondents. The next most popular was "yes, just in lessons", selected by one fifth (20%) of parents. This indicates that almost all respondents (96%) favoured some curtailment of the use of mobile phones during the school day, therefore backing their prohibition from use in classrooms. Against the ban was the remaining 4%, with no respondent selecting "don't know". We also asked if parents had any concerns over their child's school banning the use of mobile phones during the school day. Three main mitigating factors all involved providing parental reassurance that their child will be able to contact them, or vice-versa, if necessary, which may fall under the bracket of 'peace of mind'. Very few parents nominated the options that concerned the use of mobile phones as tools for learning. Although we would have

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/News/Parents-give-their-views-on-mobile-phones-in-schools-and-classrooms>

to conduct further research to be sure, it may be that parents are concerned by the prominence of mobile phones because of their tendency to act as a distraction, as well as the ready online access that children have throughout the day, with the attendant online safety issues away from parental supervision. At the time of the consultation we suggested that if the government moves to legislate against the use of mobile phones in schools, that school leaders are required to communicate expectations clearly with parents, so that they are aware of how the rules will be implemented and what they entail.

8. Parentkind believes that the Online Safety Bill would be better to encompass all aspects of children's online access such as those mentioned above, beyond the suggested 'duty of care' within user-to-user services to all providers of internet services. For example, children can readily access online streaming services such as Netflix at home. We have recently commented extensively in the media about the success of the Netflix series 'Squid Game'<sup>9</sup>, which has led to some copycat re-enactments of the games in school playgrounds, leading to concerns by both schools and parents. Before television series could be streamed on-demand, a 9pm watershed existed that made it easier for parents to judge which series may or may not be suitable for their child to access, and when parental supervision might have been advisable. Although given a 15 certificate, news reports suggest that 'Squid Game' has been accessed by younger children who have in turn been exposed to graphic violence, distressing scenes and the use of knives in playground games. Although parental controls are available on subscription services such as Netflix, they aren't always activated, and children can learn ways to get around them. More consideration should be given to this aspect of keeping children safe online, and increasing parental awareness of existing help and resources such as those on setting parental controls published by the charity Internet Matters.

Greg Ellwood-Hughes, Policy and Media Officer

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10073111/Schools-warn-parents-not-let-children-watch-Squid-Game.html>