

## House of Lords: Growing Up with the Internet

### Aims

This inquiry by the House of Lords' Select Committee on Communications during 2016-17 considered what skills children might need and the impact of the internet on children's development, wellbeing and mental health. It also examined the rights children enjoy online, and what impediments there are to these. It comprised a substantial process of evidence-gathering and deliberation, resulting in a set of recommendations for stakeholders.

### Key Findings

- Ofcom said that since 2015 there have been increases in the numbers of 5-15s who say that a tablet (39% vs. 33%) or mobile phone (28% vs. 19%) is the device they use most often to go online.
- BT found that children have mixed views about technology and receive conflicting/confusing messages about its use. Schools encourage them to use technology to gain strong computational thinking skills, but on the other hand they are told to spend less time on their devices at home. The slicker technology gets the less curious children become as it is not designed to be 'tinkered with'. The language used and emphasis on coding makes it appear 'nerdy' rather than dynamic.
- YouthLink Scotland believes that digital literacy education is essential to make children critical consumers who understand why/how content is created. Ofcom found that less than half of 12-15s who go online in 2015 were aware of paid endorsements by vloggers (47%) or personalised advertising (45%). Parent Zone and the Oxford Internet Institute, found that digital skills/literacy were positively correlated to building online resilience.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics updated their screen time guidelines in 2016 indicating that children under 2 should avoid solo media use. The LSE Media Policy Project argued that emphasis on screen time is misleading and parents should instead focus on the context of use, the content of use, and connections made/lost.
- Young people can feel unable to switch off from their online lives causing stress; Dr Krause found that often there is a fear of being left out of events, or shared images available for a short time, and children do not want to be the one person to miss it.
- 'Harmful use' of the internet can manifest in problems such as 'online gaming addiction' which is an issue Dr Bowden-Jones believes needs more research. Conversely, the Children's Media Foundation found that using digital platforms appropriately can result in dynamic spatial skills, improved language skills, self-discovery, and greater understanding of the world around them.
- The 'always on' culture has an impact of children who may be victims of bullying; whereas bullying used to stop when children went home for the day, it now can continue on Facebook, WhatsApp and other platforms.
- Encountering pornography online is of particular concern as this can mean that the internet is where children first 'learn' about sex, and may then attempt to imitate what they have viewed online which may be extreme or violent. A 2015 Girlguiding survey found that 71% of young women aged 17-21 think that pornography gives out confusing messages about sexual consent.
- Sharing photos on Instagram, Snapchat, or Facebook are believed to contribute to unrealistic expectations of body images. A Children's Society report from 2016 found that 34% of 10-15 year-old girls are unhappy with their appearance, largely attributed to pressure on social media. Dr Bush found that this issue affects men as well, many of whom are experiencing body dysmorphia or obsession with exercise.
- The direction of causality between wellbeing and social media use is not conclusive; while social media use is measured as an input and wellbeing as an output, it may be the reverse where children with lower levels of wellbeing choose to spend more time on social media.

- Implementing children's rights online can be problematic because they often conflict. While children have fundamental rights to access to information, freedom of expression or privacy, factors like filtering, blocking, age verification, monitoring, and imposing a duty of care have consequences for these rights. Wendy Grossman is concerned that when presented with such conflicts, schools, campaigners, or policy makers often privilege restrictive child protection policies at the expense of other rights.
- Many children lack the ability to understand how their data are being used; the Children's Commissioner's Digital Taskforce and Schillings published a report rewriting the terms and conditions of Instagram in language that would be better understood by children. When tested, one child expressed that had they known Instagram could read their Direct Messages, they would have been using the feature much less.

### Policy Context

- The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) will give children more rights, including the right to erasure (the so-called 'right to be forgotten') and it is necessary that regardless of membership in the EU, the UK Government commits to the rights provided to children by the GDPR as a minimum standard in UK law.
- Industry must implement minimum standards of child-friendly design, filtering, privacy, data collection, and report and response mechanisms for complaints. The standards should encompass consideration of children's rights and should be built early into the process of design so that the needs of children are considered preventatively rather than reactively.
- The four major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) provide child-friendly filters, and it is necessary for all ISPs to do the same. There should be minimum standards for online filters, including a system to manage the over-blocking of websites, and filters should be required to be 'on' by default, with geolocation switched off until activated. Privacy/geolocation settings must not be changed during manual or automatic system upgrades.
- Digital literacy must sit alongside reading, writing and mathematics as the fourth pillar of a child's education. No child should leave school without a well-rounded understanding of the digital world. Schools should teach online responsibilities, social norms and risks as part of mandatory, Ofsted-inspected PSHE education.
- Any future policy should be based on principles which firmly place children's rights, wellbeing and needs as the preeminent considerations at all points of the internet value chain where the end user is a child.

### Methodology

Evidence was gathered by a public call for evidence (written and oral), consulting a broad group of stakeholders and the views of young people.

### Background

There is well documented public concern about risks to children from the internet such as easy access to inappropriate content, loss of privacy, commercial exploitation and cyberbullying. Government responsibility for this is fragmented between and within departments resulting in a lack of coordinated policy and joined-up action.

**Source** House of Lords (2017). *Select Committee on Communications: Growing Up with the Internet*. 2nd Report of Session 2016-17 - published 21 March 2017 - HL Paper 130. The call for evidence, sources, and full report can be accessed here: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldcomuni/130/13002.htm>

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