



THE
BIG
AMBITION



THE BIG AMBITION FOR ONLINE SAFETY
APRIL 2024

The Big Ambition for Online Safety

"Restrict social media usage and make it safer to use. More and more younger children have easy access and this ruins their childhood and future." – Girl, 16.

- In *The Big Ambition* 75% of children said that they felt safe when they went online.
- Adults responding on behalf of children were less likely to agree (52%) than children responding on their own behalf (75%).
- The majority of adults responding on behalf of children aged five or under did not agree with the statement 'They feel safe online', while 11-year-olds were the most likely to agree with 'You feel safe when you go online'.
- Children in school or college were more likely to agree they felt safe when they went online (71%) than children in home education (56%) and children not in education (53%).
- Boys were more likely to agree they felt safe when they went online (75%) than girls (67%).

The Big Ambition results show that children do not see a difference between their online world and offline world. Children want to engage with all of the opportunities that the online world offers them- the chance to socialise, learn and play in online spaces.

While many children enjoy being online, this is sadly not the case for all children. In *The Big Ambition*, children told the office that they have sometimes had bad experiences online, whether that's through cyber bullying or seeing content that they do not want to see. This generation has grown up in the digital age and expect to be kept safe online just as they expect to be kept safe in their communities.

What children and families have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has heard from over a million children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. She has explored in detail how children experience the online world and the challenges they face as a digital generation.

The Big Ask showed that the large majority of children were happy with their experiences online (74%). It demonstrated that the online world is a key part of most children's lives. Children engage with social media, gaming, and messaging platforms as a way of keeping in touch with friends and family. For some children, the online world has allowed them to develop a stronger sense of identity and community.

However, *The Big Ask* also showed that for some children, the online world does not feel safe. Children told the office about their experiences of being contacted by strangers or about seeing pornography or violent images that they did not want to see.

In 2022, the Children's Commissioner was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Secretary of State for Education to bring the voices of children to the Online Safety Act. In the same year, the Commissioner published analysis of a nationally representative survey of 2,005 children aged 8 to 17 and their parents. It found that there was widespread underage use of social media platforms and that most parents were concerned about the nature of content their children saw online, despite the majority of parents using online safety tools. 45% of children aged 8 to 17 reported that they had seen content they felt was inappropriate or made them worried or upset.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes that wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that within support for families will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child can play and learn online safely.
2. Every child has the knowledge and support to be safe online.
3. Every child is protected from online harms, and services can effectively safeguard and support them.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child can play and learn online safely.

“The Government could help keep children safe online by blocking unsafe or inappropriate websites on a majority of devices, or making it so that you have to enter your age before clicking on websites that could be unsafe to protect children.” – Girl, 12.

What is needed to get there:

- **Protections in the Online Safety Act are implemented swiftly and robustly.** Ofcom, as the regulator for online safety, must hold online platforms to account for children’s safety.

“Online safety is non-existent and parents are so ill-informed and don’t put restrictions in place (across the class spectrum) so I have friends who have seen porn, fighting and other inappropriate content and they are only 10/11 years old or younger. It feels like there is nothing in place to help.” – Girl, 12.

- **Children’s rights are protected and their voices are empowered in the online world.** Children’s rights to play, to privacy, to safety and to free expression are protected in the online world. Children are listened to about what they experience or want to change, and are given control of their safety and experiences.

“They should give more places for children to have their say on things that matter to them and also that children are warned about social media and how it can affect them.” – Girl, 11.

- **Highly effective age assurance prevents children from seeing illegal or harmful content online.** Ofcom strongly enforces the effectiveness of age assurance by platforms, and regularly reviews efforts to circumvent it by child users.

“Age restrictions on devices so children can socialise better.” – Girl, 13.

- **Online spaces are safe for children by design with child safety features built-in from the beginning.** Platforms anticipate and mitigate, as well as identifying and removing, threats to children online. Online spaces are designed according to principles that ensure the fundamental safety of child users.

"Make devices harmless or less harmful." – Boy, 9.

- **Platforms use age-appropriate engagement and recommendation algorithms and are transparent with users and regulators on their design.** Platforms do not screen harmful content or features to child users and take active steps to reduce and mitigate the addictiveness of products for children.

"Don't let people under a certain age play on computers or other technology because it can be addictive stopping people from doing other activities which they might enjoy." – Boy, 12.

- **The standards for online and offline pornography and adult content are aligned.** Online content accessed in the UK should be compliant with British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) ratings, including prohibiting extreme and harmful content that would not be classified by the BBFC.

"The government needs to do a whole lot more about online safety and porn online among children." – Girl, 13.

- **No child is able to use a platform under the age specified in their terms and conditions.** Children cannot use social media or platforms with user-to-user functionalities enabled before the age of 13, and after that age can only access ones that are safe by design.

"I only watch stuff for my age not stuff for adults because it is not appropriate." – Girl, 8.

- **Children are familiar with and have confidence in the processes to make complaints, report content or users, or seek help and advocacy online.** Reporting functions on platforms are visible, child-friendly and effective. Ofcom advocates for children and ensures that children's concerns lead to action. It also leads on sector-wide interoperability of reporting systems to address cross-platform issues, such as peer-on-peer abuse, bullying, and the sharing of distressing material involving children.

"They should make sure that people on Roblox actually read the report when someone reports a bully because you can report them and then they are just back the next day." – Girl, 10.

- **Children are not exposed to gambling harms online through paid loot boxes in video games.** Regulation of paid loot boxes in video games is aligned with other gambling harms.

"Put limit on gaming as I feel I have to do the same as my friends." – Boy, 11.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Children and parents' perceptions of their safety improves.
- Reduction in the number of children reporting they see content that they consider harmful online.
- Number of underage children accessing online platforms.
- Standards are consistent across all platforms.

Ambition 2: Every child has the knowledge and support to be safe online.

"I think children should be more exposed to online safety and health and relationship educations." – Girl, 14.

What is needed to get there:

- **Children are adequately prepared for the online world, and get high-quality education and guidance about online safety in and out of school.** Children are confident in the education and advice on navigating the online world safely that they receive, including as part of a high-quality PSHE offer. Families and professionals working with children have clear and accessible resources and guidance on supporting children.

"Promote more awareness of online safety." - Girl, 15.

- **Parents and caregivers of children have the information that they need to make decisions about children's online lives.** This means that parental controls are consistent, accessible, easy to understand, and are turned on by default. Family Hubs and schools are resourced to support families to increase their awareness of how they help their child to be safe online.

"Despite setting up all the tech as best we can to protect them, it is so easy for them to view just about anything, whether they want to or not. There seems to be no way of stopping bad content coming through." - Parent of girl, 13.

- **Schools are empowered to address difficult and emerging topics and to counter extreme views, such as misogyny and the normalisation of sexual harassment and abuse.** Teachers have the resources to anticipate, identify and understand harmful content and trends online, and to adequately respond to the harm to their pupils and to educate the wider school community.

“The amount of kids that end up having prejudiced views is disgusting just because social media companies and parents don't do enough.” – Boy, 15.

- **Platforms provide adequate and accessible links to tools, information and advice for parents, children, and teachers.** Guidance is clear and accessible and allows children, families and professionals to make informed decisions about children's safety and experiences online.

“A subset of adults lack digital skill and their children surpass them, it would be more useful for practical information (like what buttons to press - it might need to be that clear) on safety for common apps to be given out.” – Parent of girl, 6.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More schools and parents report feeling confident to support children for the online world.
- Number of parents and schools accessing online safety resources.

Ambition 3: Every child is protected from online harms, and professionals can effectively safeguard and support them.

“Strengthening child protection systems is essential to prevent and respond to abuse, exploitation, and neglect. [...] Digital literacy initiatives prepare children for the digital age, ensuring access to technology and critical digital skills.” – Boy, 15.

What is needed to get there:

- **The UK has a proactive culture to protecting children from emerging threats online.** Ofcom and the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, with the Home Office and police, proactively monitor emerging threats online and are able to respond swiftly by closing legal loopholes.
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“Letting kids feel safe on the internet and ban every scammer or any one who can talk to them without their permission.” – Child, 9.

- **Professionals working with children have the expertise and powers to address online harms that children are experiencing.** When children or parents report online harms from content or users, professionals, such as police, teachers, or social workers, can ensure that swift and appropriate action is taken by platforms. Professionals are able to triage the harm, support the child to navigate the most appropriate reporting and complaints procedure, advocate for the child with the platform, and, where necessary, escalate to Ofcom to ensure the platform is held accountable for harmful content.

“There should be [...] stricter laws against bullying on social media.” – Child, 14.

- **Children who experience online harms receive specialist support.** Professionals working with children are able to refer to specialist services, including for children who have seen illegal or harmful content online, children concerned about addiction to or dependence on video games or social media, child victims of online bullying or harassment, child victims of sexual abuse, or child victims of intimate image abuse.

“More support must be in place for children [...] who are the victims of crime. There is not enough support for such people, as I have found in my own experience help has either been withheld until that is no longer possible, or is simply inaccessible.” – Child, 17.

- **Illegal content, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM), is identified and removed.** Platforms work together to address cross-platform child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). Police have increased specialist resources to investigate and disrupt the creation and sharing of CSAM, and online exploitation and grooming.

“A focus should be put on keeping children safe. This could be done by enforcing child safety laws online better, giving harsher punishments to child sexual offenders and taking greater care in ensuring all children live in a safe environment and can get help if they need it.” – Girl, 16.

- **A robust, safeguarding-first response to intimate images.** Platforms have enhanced reporting functions for child victims of intimate image abuse and work together to combat cross-platform abuse. Children sharing non-consensual intimate images of another child, or generating or sharing AI-CSAM involving another child will meet a safeguarding-first, joined-up response from education and statutory
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safeguarding partners that does not minimise the harm to the victim. Children are not criminalised for the consensual production or sharing of intimate images.

“The government should put more safety into online security such as putting a further emphasis on the importance of not sending explicit photos online and putting a higher penalty on those who go in to share those photos with other people after having been sent them.” - Girl, 15.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Number of children who are satisfied with their ability to report online harms and the action that is taken.



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