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# ONLINE HARMS EXPERIENCED BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE: 'ACCEPTABLE USE' AND REGULATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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## INTRODUCTION



The online world presents opportunities as we have never seen before – for connection, education, and employment. We have never expected children and young people (CYP) to do so much – receive their education, build their skills, and develop their employment prospects – all with minimal supervision, through an unregulated medium, and one which is evolving by the minute.

Growth online has been a blessing in many ways – for connection, for learning and for innovation, but with that, we have seen stark and harmful gaps: a digital divide in skills, leaving the most vulnerable further behind, less diverse supervision over children than ever before, and the rapid escalation of harms online – from cyberbullying to threats, from grooming to criminal and sexual exploitation, and from the sale of illegal substances and witnessing violent content online, to the mental health impact that comes with all of this.

In light of the increasing amount of time CYP were spending online during the COVID-19 lockdowns, Catch22 launched an Online Harms Consultation in 2020. The survey received responses from young people, frontline professionals, tech platforms and commissioners on the challenges of online behaviour. The findings showed that more than 70% of young people have seen content online that they have found concerning, including violent and explicit content. Only 40% of young people report online harm to the platforms they are using.

Supported by the Mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit, Catch22 and Redthread, The Social Switch Project wanted to gain a better insight into children's and young people's perceptions of online spaces and what they should be - 'acceptable use'. We wanted to understand the impact of online harms, and CYP's opinions, as well as professionals' views on what could be developed to ensure CYP can safely thrive online.

Considering the ongoing discussions about regulatory and legislative reforms, the incoming Online Safety Bill and the implementation of the UK Information Commissioner's 'Age Appropriate Design Code', this report advocates for CYP's voices, experiences, and opinions to be at the centre of all discussions on policy reforms in this area.



The aim of this study is to provide a platform for the voices and experiences of the most marginalised CYP to be heard on issues that matter to them most when using online platforms, social media, and gaming platforms. It also offers an opportunity for a range of professionals to present their perspectives in navigating the impacts of online harms or working in the industry and regulatory spaces.

“Youth participation was at the heart of the approach for this research. If we want to create an evidence-base in order to affect change, we need to gather the voices and experiences of the people who are most **impacted**, then **elevate** their **voices** to achieve **real change**.”

Dr Faith Gordon





“**Vivid images and videos.** When you can't get rid of something like a video of a suicide, it **plays on your mind** a lot ... **you relive it**”

#### Unwanted contact

- CYP speak about the behaviour of others on online spaces and in particular the unwanted contact they received from adults, and on occasions from other CYP, commercial companies or bots.
- CYP refer to coming across other users who were clearly significantly older or younger than the age they are perceiving themselves to be online.
- Unwanted contact is in the form of cyberbullying, threats, sharing of explicit content and harassment. CYP placed blame on the lack of restrictions on platforms.

“**Why do they allow it to happen?** Why do they allow these people to pop up on your screen when **you don't know who they are?**”

'Harm' is damage or injury that is physical, psychological, or emotional. When CYP were asked about what 'harm' means to them in online spaces, they identified the following:

#### Unwanted content

- CYP are too often exposed to unwanted content online, including graphic imagery and videos.
- CYP differently perceive some platforms as more negative and "toxic" than others.
- Perceptions of difference exist in relation to harm, and CYP feel that younger children are most 'at risk' of harm online.



#### Unwanted surveillance and use of data

- While CYP say that some peers want to be 'noticed' online and many seek validation through the numbers of followers or 'likes' they receive, CYP are generally future-thinking in their discussions. They want the option to respond by deleting their previous content and refer to wanting a 'right to be forgotten'.
- CYP are concerned about what happens with the content that they post online, often referring to their job prospects and whether previous content would impact upon those.
- CYP want their privacy to be respected and do not want their data being used without their full knowledge, understanding and consent. They question how their data is being used by companies, agencies, law enforcement and others. Some described phone seizures by police during investigations as a cause for concern, including the timescales in returning devices and the extent of information extracted.

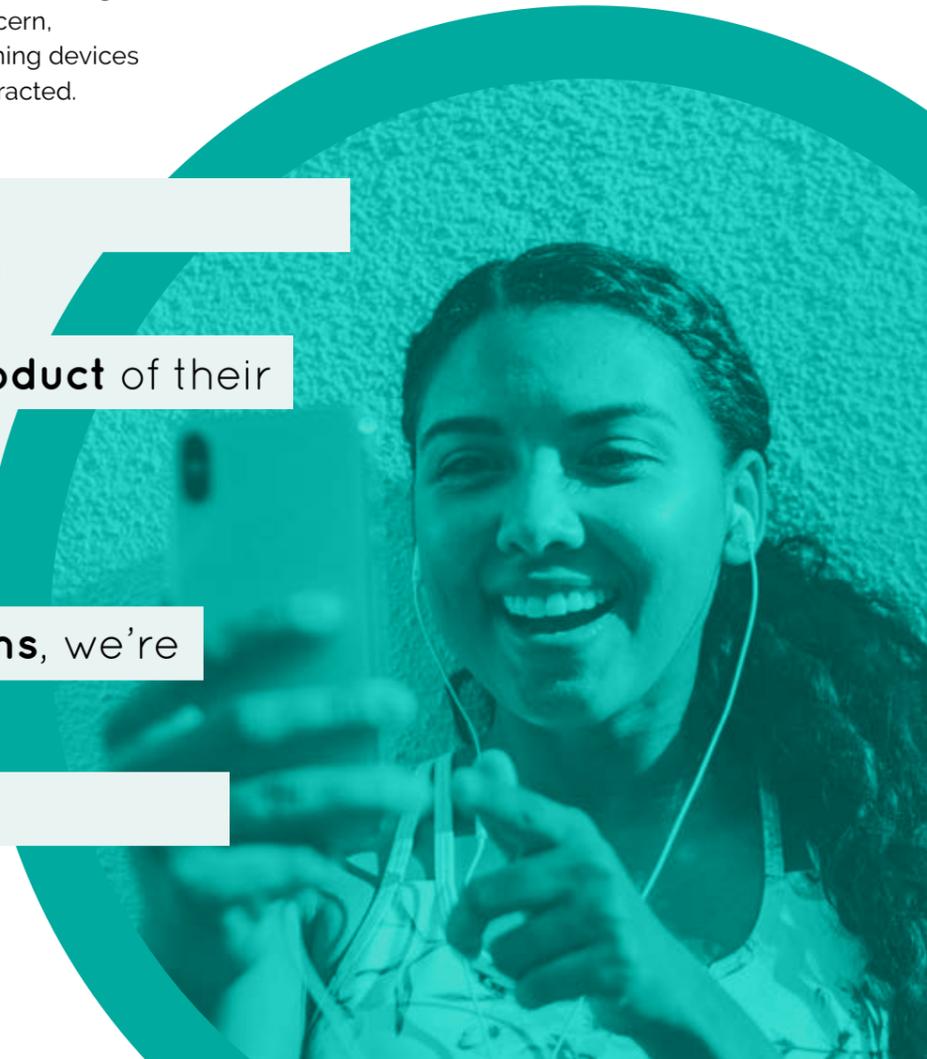
“I know as soon whatever company is getting the data will **use me as a product** of their advertisements really.”

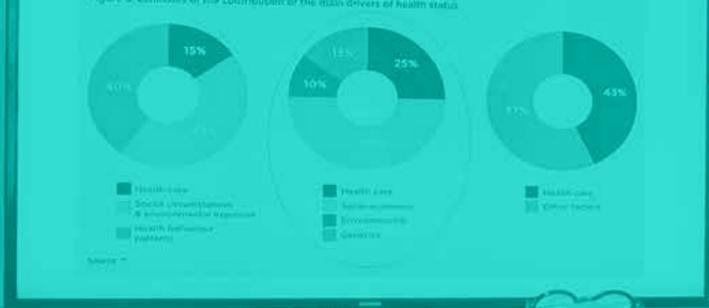
“**We don't** even **know what it means**, we're just agreeing to stuff because we want to go



#### Unreasonable delay in action and lack of redress

- CYP have felt responsible for reporting content as they do not want other CYP to view the content and be equally as distressed. However, they felt that often redress was not always possible, as the "damage" is often already done when the incident or incidents occur.
- CYP stated that sometimes they did not hear back after making a complaint or they often received responses a long time afterwards and this had caused them to relive the event or incident.
- Several CYP did not know how to seek redress. Others felt that it was pointless to complain if the company responded with an automated response or if nothing happened about the complaint.





**97%** of Catch22's child sexual exploitation referrals have an online or social media element.

2020-2021 referrals

"When I have tried to report stuff, **they haven't done anything**, even though the account will be blatantly going **against the rules**. So posting like graphic stuff on hate, or revenge porn and things like that."

"I tried to **make a complaint**, and I sent a message a month ago and it only responded to me just yesterday. So it's like, **how am I supposed to know that my response has been acted on** when it's taking companies so long to respond back to me?"

## WHAT DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE EXPECT 'A GOOD WEB' TO LOOK LIKE?

CYP want to have access to all the benefits of online spaces, acknowledging children's right to play and right to learn. But CYP want users to be respectful, for their behaviours to be 'acceptable', and for younger users to feel safe.

### Acceptable use of online spaces

For many CYP 'acceptable use' was interpreted as what was "OK" to do online. They felt that platforms should have boundaries in relation to what is acceptable and what is not. CYP want to be better informed about their rights online and they feel that is closely related to 'acceptable use'.

"I have a younger sister and sometimes, I'll see her watching things - **it's unacceptable**, and it's weird because I used to watch the same things, but that has like, **it's changed me as a person.**"



### Guidelines and boundaries

CYP recommend that terms and conditions and other agreements should be designed to acknowledge diversity in literacy levels and language skills. They need to be made shorter in length, more accessible, and easy for all age groups to understand.

In relation to age verification, CYP suggest a more rigorous process for all age groups, including adults. Suggestions include asking people for their passports as a form of ID, using secure apps and advocating for digital passports.

### Opportunities

Online spaces can give CYP unique opportunities for learning, play, and to express themselves. Young people recognise how much opportunity for future income there is through the digital world, and they want support to access this. Online spaces should be designed and exist in a way that promotes positive benefits, not just responding in times of harm.

"You can find **new hobbies**, you can find **new people** to talk with, **new friends**, and people who can **help you improve being who you are.**"

## Options

As online users, CYP enjoy having options. They did not want to see 'kids' or 'teens' versions of apps, but rather wanted equality in relation to access to online spaces and safe platforms which promoted greater agency and control over the type of content they see.

They feel that the 'right to be forgotten' was important for young users and their future prospects.

## Digital Inclusion and Innovation

Young people want to be included in discussions and decisions about innovations in their online spaces. They also want to see differences in the digital literacy of children, young people and adults addressed via tailored educational programmes and training.

Young people have highlighted the need for everyone to have access to a device and the internet.

## What, where, who, when, and why?

There is a need to identify, recognise and thoroughly understand harm online in order to address it. Children and young people are highly aware that adults tend to have minimal knowledge of the behaviour taking place online.

Protection should not reduce participation in online spaces – there needs to be an **appropriate balance struck**. Over the page, we have outlined this in more detail.

## Education

CYP feel that the education and training they receive on online safety is "outdated". CYP want to be better informed about their rights online and they feel that this was closely related to "acceptable use" and consent.

Redevelopment of the PSHE module in the UK was identified as vital. CYP feel that they should be asked to inform education programmes and that more police should facilitate education initiatives.

Tailored training for professionals is viewed as essential and urgent. The importance of training and education for law enforcement is highlighted by police professionals, particularly in relation to the complexities surrounding legal but harmful content. Programmes such as The Social Switch Project, informed by the voices and experiences of young people, was referred to as a vital resource.

## Bringing about Change

CYP want to see improved monitoring, swift action, and accountability – rather than responsibility placed purely on the user. They want to see personalised responses to complaints, and feel automated responses do little to make them feel heard.

CYP want to see reforms to the education provided to professionals around online behaviour. Law enforcement professionals and young people recognise that police are often "one step behind" developments in technology, as well as the new and emerging forms of harm on online spaces. The need for police to have strong relationships with tech companies is essential to adapt to change quickly and effectively.



# 44%

In 2020-2021, 44% of referrals to Catch22's CSE services registered an **online harm** as the **primary reason** for referral.



**WHAT** is happening online?

- Online spaces provide CYP with opportunities to communicate, to learn, to find new hobbies, and have a sense of belonging. Some young people feel it was easier to talk to people online than in person and this helps with participation, building confidence and combatting loneliness.
- In contrast, CYP describe cyberbullying, threats, harassment, unwanted contact from older adults, and receiving explicit content online. CYP outline examples of seeing videos of suicide, nudity, aggressive violence, and abusive language.

**WHERE** is the harm happening?

- CYP indicate that video-sharing platforms, image-sharing platforms, online gaming platforms and social networking sites are amongst the most "toxic" spaces online. Very young children who are device sharing can be exposed to harmful content and "pushed content", often without the knowledge of adults.

**WHO** is affected and who provides support?

- CYP note levels of distress and long-term consequences, including on their mental health and well-being.
- Professionals discussed the need for often extended support and counselling, and interactions with other agencies, including the police. They note that the police's involvement and outcomes often did not bring a sense of closure or resolution for victims and survivors.

**WHEN** do CYP respond and when do they choose not to?

- CYP referred to taking regular breaks or opting out of platforms entirely, and others blocked accounts, following harm. Children referenced how older siblings, parents/ guardians, or "trusted" adults can be helpful in navigating online spaces and reporting harm.
- Many choose not to complain and describe it as "pointless" if the company responds with an automated response or if nothing happens about the complaint. A few CYP feel often that resolution is not possible, as the "damage" is already done.
- As a safeguard, particularly after negative experiences, some CYP describe not using their real or full names on accounts and profiles, to protect themselves.

**WHY** might the COVID-19 lockdowns be having an impact?

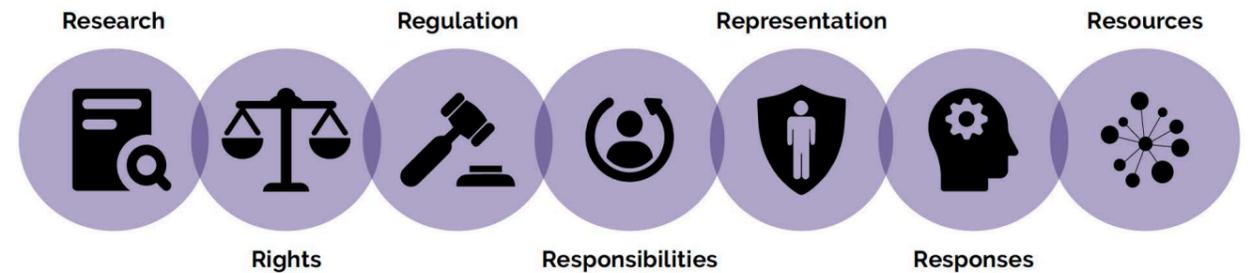
- CYP describe spending notably increased amounts of time online during the COVID-19 lockdowns and highlight the prevalence and the complexities surrounding "fake accounts".
- Key concerns for safeguarding professionals are the high levels of online harm reported to them following lockdowns and the return to school; the evolving and changing nature of online harms; and the challenges in resourcing delivery of effective responses.
- Law enforcement professionals feel that the COVID-19 lockdowns have shone a light directly onto the ineffectiveness in the moderation of content online, with artificial intelligence deemed to be less effective than human moderators.



**RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS - THE 7 'R' FRAMEWORK**

Incorporating the insights from CYP, and the discussions with professionals, industry, policy makers and the international literature and policy review, the 7 'R's have been devised to outline the recommended action points.

**THE '7 Rs'**



**Research**

Tech professionals stated that research is essential for defining what "harm" is. In this current research CYP identified and conceptualised online harms as: unwanted contact, unwanted content, unwanted use of data, and lack of resolution to clear harms.

With more transparency and engagement, the distrust and feelings of professionals always being "one step behind" could be addressed. Collaborations with independent academics can create new knowledge, generate more data on the capabilities of tech and therefore better enable society to gain insight.

**Action:** All reforms need to be based on evidence. For those that affect CYP, children and young people should be effectively consulted. Evidence about CYP should come from CYP.

**Action:** Given how rapidly platforms and technologies are evolving, resources need to be dedicated to independent research that is fully participatory and includes transparent input from tech companies.





### Rights

What CYP often referred to as being important for them is clearly linked to their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – including their right to find and share information, to their right not to be exploited. Children's rights discourse appears to be absent from much of the discussions and debates on online harms in the United Kingdom.

**Action:** The United Nations General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment makes clear recommendations. The United Kingdom needs to engage more with the international children's rights instruments and embed the international children's rights frameworks into proposed reforms.

### Regulation

Regulation and the creation of a regulatory framework has been the central focus throughout the discussions and debates in the United Kingdom. The proposed legislative framework of the draft Online Safety Bill, includes details of an independent regulator.

Regulation however is not a 'fix-all' solution. It will not address each aspect of online harm and is just one of many necessary measures.

**Action:** Legal but harmful content should be recognised in future legislation and the need for a clear duty of care.

**Action:** For regulation to be successful, emphasis needs to be placed on areas such as education and development, addressing social inequalities, and the need for transparency by companies.



### Responsibilities

CYP felt that balancing freedom of expression, access to information and protection from exploitation was a major challenge for companies, the Government and wider society. CYP placed a lot of emphasis on the responsibilities of companies and felt that they should be held accountable for inaction.

A statutory duty of care placed on social media service providers in regards to their users, as proposed by the Carnegie UK Trust, has the potential to help with protecting CYP online. The 'Children's Code' developed by the UK Information Commissioner, is the first of its kind in the world. It has the potential to make a significant difference to the way in which UK children's data is collected, shared, and used by UK and non-UK companies.

**Action:** Companies should be responsible for the creation and maintenance of safe spaces online and they should be held accountable for inaction in addressing concerns.

**Action:** An independent and transparent oversight body is required for overseeing regulation, which can ensure that companies and individuals are held accountable. CYP need to be made aware of its existence and role, and all information and complaints processes need to be accessible for CYP.



### Representation

During this research, most CYP stated that this was one of the first times that they had been asked about their experiences online and what interventions they could suggest. CYP want more opportunities to express their opinions and for their suggestions to inform change.

They also want opportunities to engage with those who design, maintain, and regulate online spaces.

**Action:** Policymakers, legislators, practitioners, and industry need to create greater opportunities for CYP's opinions, from a diverse range of backgrounds, to be heard. The need to ensure that CYP's experiences inform change in areas such as online safety, accessibility and in the education design and delivery space. Australia's 'Safety by Design' approach is an example worth considering.

**Action:** CYP want to be part of the design and delivery of education programmes. They want to be part of panels that tech companies, platforms, and gaming designers consult with when designing, developing and updating new products.





## Responses



CYP have said that responses from companies following a complaint often go unaddressed or there are delays. The delayed responses, often automated, were referred to as retraumatising and made CYP relive the original harmful experience.

A small number of CYP mentioned experiences of having their mobile phones taken away for months at a time by the police for evidence gathering purposes, in response to serious incidences. For less serious incidences, professionals' approach to issues was too often about 'getting offline', which denies children and young people their right to participate.

**Action:** CYP and their advocates want to see quick, appropriate, effective, and proportionate responses to online harms. They want personalised - not automated - responses and want to feel that companies are acting on complaints.

**Action:** CYP want law enforcement to outline from the outset how long they will require their phones and devices for, and they want swifter processing and better updates from law enforcement.

**Action:** Frontline professionals must be trained and prepared for responding to instances of online harms and divert CYP towards embracing the opportunities digital worlds can present.

## Resources



This research has demonstrated that educators and safeguarding professionals feel that the lack of resources to respond to the rise in incidents of online harms, leave them feeling overwhelmed and concerned for the safety, health, and well-being of CYP.

**Action:** More resources are needed for those working in education and safeguarding and also adequate funding needs to be available for the provision of victim support to address harms originating online.

**Action:** CYP want reforms to PHSE education to include online behaviour, and professionals want to see more education on how to identify harmful behaviour, 'self-regulate' and report such incidents too.



## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This research was conducted by Dr Faith Gordon, ANU College of Law and the Information Law and Policy Centre, IALS London. The study, funded by the Mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit, was commissioned as part of The Social Switch Project, a programme co-delivered by charities Catch22 and Redthread.

The report is based on extensive focus groups and interviews with 42 CYP aged 10-22 years, who engage with service provision provided by Catch22. 15 interviews were also conducted with key stakeholders and professionals, including senior police, educators, safeguarding experts, youth workers, victim service providers, tech and gaming companies, regulators, and representatives from the wider tech industry. A Youth Advisory Group, some drawn from the Violence Reduction Unit's Young Person's Action Group, helped draft the questions asked in the interviews and helped explore suitable approaches for the online workshops with children and young people.

This research report includes analysis of quantitative data from service providers pre-pandemic and during the UK lockdowns, as well as reference to relevant international literature and materials. The data provides context on the wide-reaching implications of the lockdowns and COVID-19 on online harms and the need for services and training for professionals, parents and guardians during this time.



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