

Safety Net: Cyberbullying's impact on young people's mental health

Inquiry report



YOUNGMINDS

Forewords

I set up this cyberbullying inquiry following my experiences as a constituency MP – visiting schools in Cheltenham and speaking to parents and agencies like Teens in Crisis (who have been commissioned by some schools to provide regular support). I have been deeply struck by the apparent decline in child and adolescent mental health. What's more, this phenomenon doesn't seem to be a temporary spike. It's more of a lasting surge.

Much of the debate has been about cure – how society can achieve parity of esteem between mental and physical health? How do we fund more hospital beds? That's entirely appropriate of course. But equal attention needs to be given to prevention. Why is this surge in depression happening in the first place? How can we stop it taking root?

From speaking to young people, the role of social media became impossible to ignore and I wanted to investigate further. And whilst there appears to be a correlation between the rise of social media and the decline in child and adolescent mental health, I wanted to know if there was causation too.

But let me be clear what this inquiry is not about: it does not set out to address all the concerns posed by social media use. It deliberately leaves out issues of fake news, sexting, sleep deprivation and others. All are important, but they are traversed elsewhere and addressing them would make this report overly long and unfocused.

Instead, this report is about one issue only: cyberbullying. That's because evidence from young people suggests that cyberbullying is the single biggest risk factor to mental health associated with social media use.

In his New Year 2018 message Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg vowed to 'fix' Facebook. He said he intended to focus on 'important issues', which he listed as including 'protecting our community from abuse and hate'. He admitted that enforcement of house policies was failing.

As this report shows, he's absolutely right. But what this report also shows is the cost of failure to the mental health of young people is profound and concerning.

I am grateful to The Children's Society and Young Minds, who have worked hard and with great skill and professionalism on this inquiry, taking evidence from over 1,000 young people. I am grateful too to the colleagues from across the House of Commons who have made such excellent contributions.



Alex Chalk MP, Cheltenham

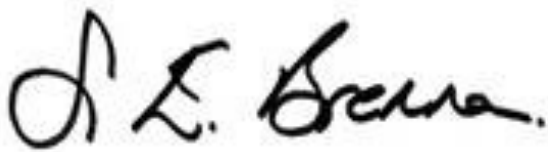


Through our work with children and young people across the country, we know that social media is a huge part of their lives. It often has a very positive impact. Social media allows young people to build friendships, keep in touch with friends and family, and express themselves in creative ways. However, it also brings with it constant pressure for young people to compare themselves with others, live their lives in public, and always be available. This can have a big impact on mental health.

We are particularly concerned about cyberbullying, which can be devastating for children and young people. Cyberbullying can happen anywhere, at any time of the day or night, which can make it feel inescapable. So it's not surprising that cyberbullying puts young people's mental health at risk.

To make a difference, we must properly understand this issue and find better ways to tackle it. In today's society, we are just beginning to understand the impact of social media. This inquiry provides much-needed fresh insight – crucially including the views of over 1,000 young people – and seeks to find solutions.

Young people have told us loud and clear that social media companies need to do more to tackle cyberbullying and promote good mental health. Parents, teachers and professionals all have an important role to play in helping young people safely navigate the online world. But it is crucial that social media companies start taking firm action to prevent and stop cyberbullying, to ensure that social media platforms are a positive environment for young people.



Sarah Brennan

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Key findings

Under-age use of social media is commonplace

- Despite most major social media companies – including Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram – specifying that users must be 13 years old to have an account, we found that 61% of young people had a first account at age 12 or under.

Children and young people are using social media for longer periods and using multiple profiles

- Our survey indicated that nearly half (44%) of children and young people spend more than three hours per day on social media, whilst almost 1 in 10 (9%) reported always using social media overnight between midnight and 6am.

There is a connection between intensive social media use and mental ill health

- Thirty eight percent of young people reported that social media has a negative impact on how they feel about themselves, compared to 23% who reported that it has a positive impact. This was exacerbated for girls, with 46% of girls stating that social media had a negative impact on their self-esteem.

Cyberbullying – a new form of bullying

- Although our inquiry found that offline bullying remains the most common form of bullying, it is clear that cyberbullying is distinct and potent, particularly due to its potential to be relentless.

Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of cyberbullying

- Children and young people who are currently experiencing a mental health problem are more than three times more likely to have been bullied online in the last year.

The steps being taken by social media companies in response to cyberbullying are inconsistent and inadequate

- Throughout the course of the inquiry, we heard a number of examples from social media companies about positive initiatives they have established to respond to abusive content online, such as cyberbullying, as well as promoting the mental health of their users.

Young people concluded that social media companies' current responses to cyberbullying are inadequate

- There is an appetite among young people for greater interventions to disrupt cyberbullying, with 83% of young people saying that social media companies should do more to tackle cyberbullying on their platforms.

There is a perceived lack of consequences for those who engage in bullying behaviour

- Young people told the inquiry that they feel as though the onus is on the person who is experiencing cyberbullying to act. They spoke of a perceived lack of consequences for those who engage in bullying behaviour online, in a way there is not in the offline world.

Social media companies need to do more to promote positive mental health and well-being

- Young people overwhelmingly told the inquiry that they wanted social media companies to do more to promote positive mental health and interactions on their platforms.
- Eighty two percent of young people thought social media companies should do more to promote mental health.

Key recommendations

We have identified a number of issues that need to be addressed to ensure that social media companies – together with Government, schools, families and industry – play their part in creating a digital environment that limits the prevalence of cyberbullying and its negative impacts on children and young people.

1. Social media platforms must be age-appropriate, and companies should pilot approaches to identify under-13s and gain explicit parental consent.
2. Social media companies should enable children and young people to understand their rights and responsibilities, including their behaviour towards others.
3. Social media companies should provide timely, effective and consistent responses to online bullying.
4. Social media companies should prioritise the promotion of children and young people's mental health and well-being across their platforms.
5. The Government should improve accountability by requiring social media companies to publish data about their response to reports of online bullying.
6. The Government should commission additional research into the scale of online bullying and its impact on children and young people.
7. The Government should put children's experiences at the heart of internet safety policy development.
8. The Government should teach children and young people to be safe and responsible online, and ensure they know how to respond positively to online harms such as cyberbullying.

A full list of the recommendations can be found in this report's conclusion.

1. Introduction

The internet has become an integral part of our lives, opening up many social and educational opportunities. It has become particularly important in the lives of children and young people who are accessing the internet more regularly, with more devices¹, and for longer periods. Young people are now using a diverse and evolving range of social media networks and platforms to connect and communicate with their peers.

Although the internet and social media have opened up novel and exciting prospects for positive interactions, these have not been without risks and harm. Launching the Government's proposed Internet Safety Strategy, former Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP noted: *'The Internet has been an amazing force for good, but it has caused undeniable suffering and can be an especially harmful place for children and vulnerable people.'*²

There are growing concerns about the prevalence and impact of online bullying or 'cyberbullying' amongst children and young people.

We know that bullying is not a new phenomenon, but the digital landscape has fundamentally changed the way that young people are experiencing it.³ It is increasingly the case that children are being bullied online through social media platforms⁴ and the complexity of these social networks means bullying can take on different forms on different platforms.

Social media companies are facing increased scrutiny from parents, professionals and Government for their response to child protection matters online, including cyberbullying.⁵ Young people told the inquiry loud and clear that the response they receive from social media companies following a report of cyberbullying is slow and inadequate. The industry has also been criticised for not showing the leadership required to innovate and address growing concerns about the scale of online bullying on their platforms.⁶

The inquiry has heard from social media companies about what they are doing to prevent and respond to cases of cyberbullying on their platforms. This report reviews their current mechanisms and policies in this area, and outlines the key steps needed to safeguard our children and young people and ensure they have safe and positive interactions on social media.

The Inquiry

In November 2016, Alex Chalk MP led a Westminster Hall debate on the effect of social media on the mental health of young people. The debate followed the publication of a study by the Office for National Statistics into children's mental health and well-being. The report found associations between the time children spend on social media and their emotional well-being.⁷

Following the debate, Alex Chalk MP initiated this inquiry to better understand what is currently known about the scale and consequences of cyberbullying and what social media companies are doing to both prevent and tackle this problem.

Terms of reference:

1. To hear children and young people's experiences of bullying on social media platforms and how these experiences have affected their well-being.
2. To better understand the extent to which cyberbullying can affect children and young people's self-esteem, emotional well-being and mental health, and other associated risks.
3. To hear from experts the extent to which existing interventions to protect children and young people from bullying on social media platforms are effective.
4. To explore how effective social media companies are at promoting healthy interactions between users on their platforms.
5. To explore the effectiveness of social media companies' existing approaches to preventing and responding to cyberbullying and how they might be strengthened.
6. To recommend, where necessary, new measures social media companies can adopt to better protect the mental health and emotional well-being of children and young people using their platforms.

Panel

The inquiry's panel was made up of a group of cross party Members of Parliament (MP) and representatives of children and young people.

- Alex Chalk MP (Chair) (Conservative, Cheltenham)
- Sarah Champion MP (Labour, Rotherham)
- Yvette Cooper MP (Labour, Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford)
- Stewart McDonald MP (Scottish National Party, Glasgow South)
- Will Wragg MP (Conservative, Hazel Grove)
- John Carr OBE, (Secretary, Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety)
- Grace Victory, (Vlogger)

Secretariat

The Children's Society staff members Kadra Abdinasir and Matthew Hussey and YoungMinds' staff member Matthew Blow provided the secretariat function to the inquiry and have authored this report.

Acknowledgements

The inquiry would like to express gratitude to The Children's Society volunteer Heather Ramage and YoungMinds volunteers Annie Bliss and Sanjana Varghese, for their support in helping to organise the inquiry. Thank you to Dr Alexandra Turner from The Children's Society for her support with data analysis, and to colleagues from both organisation for their guidance and input.

Gathering the evidence

The evidence presented in this report is based on a combination of a survey of views of children and young people; oral evidence from children, young people and experts; a review of academic literature; and insight from organisations and institutions with an interest in children and young people's experiences of bullying online, mental health and internet safety. We also took evidence from major social media companies.

1) Children and young people's survey

The survey was hosted on SurveyGizmo between March and August 2017, and was completed by 1,089 young people aged 11–25:

- 62% of respondents were under the age of 18
- Three-quarters of respondents were female (75%)
- Overall 45% of those who completed the survey said that they are currently experiencing a mental health problem. Of those children and young people currently experiencing a mental health problem, 68% of those who responded to our survey said they have experienced cyberbullying in the last year.
- This high rate of self-reported mental ill-health amongst respondents may be due to the dissemination of the survey by charities who work closely with young people with experiences of emotional and mental health problems.

2) Evidence sessions

We held three evidence sessions in September 2017 in which heard from:

- Children and young people
- Experts in the field of child mental health and internet safety:
 - David Wetherall (Senior Child Safety Online Manager, NSPCC)
 - Emily Frith (Director of Mental Health, Education Policy Institute)
 - Liam Hackett (CEO, Ditch the Label)
 - Dr Linda Papadopoulos (Psychologist and author)
 - Mark Donkersley (Managing Director, e-Safe Education)
 - Philip Powell (Research Fellow, University of Sheffield)
- Social media companies including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and YouTube.

3) Written evidence

We received written submissions from 18 stakeholder organisations and from four global social media companies.

4) Stakeholders

We received wide-ranging evidence from stakeholders in the field of children's policy, mental health, and internet safety.

5) Social media companies

Four social media companies provided written submissions outlining their policies on preventing and responding to cyberbullying. This includes Snapchat, a major platform used by children in the UK. A complete list of written submissions can be found in the appendix.

6) Literature review

We reviewed the available academic literature on children's use of social media and mental health, including analysis from the Office for National Statistics. Whilst the evidence base on cyberbullying and mental health is newly established and rapidly developing, we have reviewed research seeking to show both associational and causal links between online bullying and mental ill-health.

Key terms and definitions:

Children: Throughout the report, when referring to a child or children we are referring to a person under the age of 18.*¹

Children and young people (CYP): For brevity, when referring to children and young people we are referring to persons under the age of 25. We use the acronym CYP throughout the report.

Cyberbullying: There is currently no legal definition of cyberbullying, but it is often defined as 'wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, phones, and other electronic devices'.⁸ It is generally understood that 'cyberbullying involves hurting someone else using information and communication technologies. This may include sending harassing messages (via text or internet), posting disparaging comments on a social networking site, posting humiliating pictures, or threatening/intimidating someone electronically'.⁹

Social media: Websites, platforms and apps which allow users to interact with each other (as well as companies and corporations) and create communities to share ideas, collect information and transmit other kinds of media.¹⁰

Mental health: Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work

*¹ The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as everyone under 18 unless, 'under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). The UK has ratified this convention.

productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.¹¹(Throughout this report, we use the terms mental health problems and mental ill-health to describe different mental health conditions that children and young people can experience).

Well-being: Well-being refers to the quality of people's lives. Put simply, it is about how well we are, and how our lives are going.¹²

2. Children, young people and social media

Children and the internet

Between 2005 and 2015, the average time 12 to 15 year old adolescents in Britain spent online more than doubled from 8 to 19 hours a week,¹³ suggesting that it has become an increasingly significant part of children's lives. In addition, children's time spent on the internet overtook time spent watching a TV set for the first time last year.¹⁴

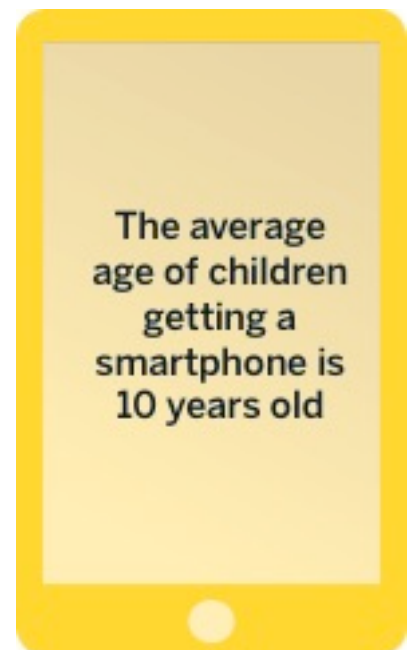
Young people use the internet in many ways, including chatting with friends on social media, learning, being creative and playing. Older children often use the internet for a range of activities such as social networking or doing their homework, whereas younger children tend to use it primarily for specific reasons such as watching video content.¹⁵

In recent years, children and young people's internet usage has also become more private. Whereas in the past children would access the internet from their shared family computer or in school IT rooms, now children own and use smartphones, tablets and laptops.¹⁶ Smartphone ownership by children in particular has risen sharply, with close to half of all 5 to 15 year olds owning a smartphone according to Ofcom.¹⁷ This has largely been driven by increases among 5 to 7s and 8 to 11s.¹⁸ A recent poll has found the average age of children getting a smartphone in the UK is 10.¹⁹

The private use of social media can make it harder for parents and professionals to supervise children while they are online. This is an important factor, and was raised to the inquiry by Emily Frith (Education Policy Institute): *'Two of the most marked changes have been the development of smartphones and the use of instant messaging – these are more private, making it harder for parents to monitor.'* – **Emily Frith, Education Policy Institute, oral evidence**

Over the last decade, there has been a range of high profile policy reviews into children's use of the internet.²⁰ Concerns about their safety online were highlighted in Professor Tanya Byron's ground-breaking 2008 review of child internet safety. Professor Byron concluded that: *'Everyone has a role to play in empowering children to stay safe while they enjoy these new technologies, just as it is everyone's responsibility to keep children safe in the non-digital world.'*²¹

Since the publication of the Byron Review, internet safety has become an integral part of child safeguarding in the UK. Furthermore, the Government's Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper is seeking to make Britain the safest place in the world for children and adults to be online, by strengthening measures to protect users and improving digital literacy for children and parents.²²



Children's use of social media

As well as increasing, children and young people's usage of social media is also evolving. The latest findings from Ofcom reveal that three-quarters (74%) of 12 to 15 year olds have a profile on a social media platform. The proportion of 5 to 7s that have a profile is currently 3%, rising to almost a quarter (23%) for 8 to 11 year olds.²³

The use of social media can allow for fast, low cost, and hidden communication between users.²⁴ This factor, in addition to the use of more personalised devices (as noted previously) can make it extremely challenging for adults to monitor their children's usage.

The benefits of social media for children

The inquiry received evidence demonstrating the multiple benefits social media usage can have for groups of children and young people. The Anti-Bullying Alliance and Youthworks Consulting both noted that young people with disabilities and communication needs (such as special educational needs) are able to find friendship and support on social media, particularly as they can connect with people who have similar experiences.²⁵

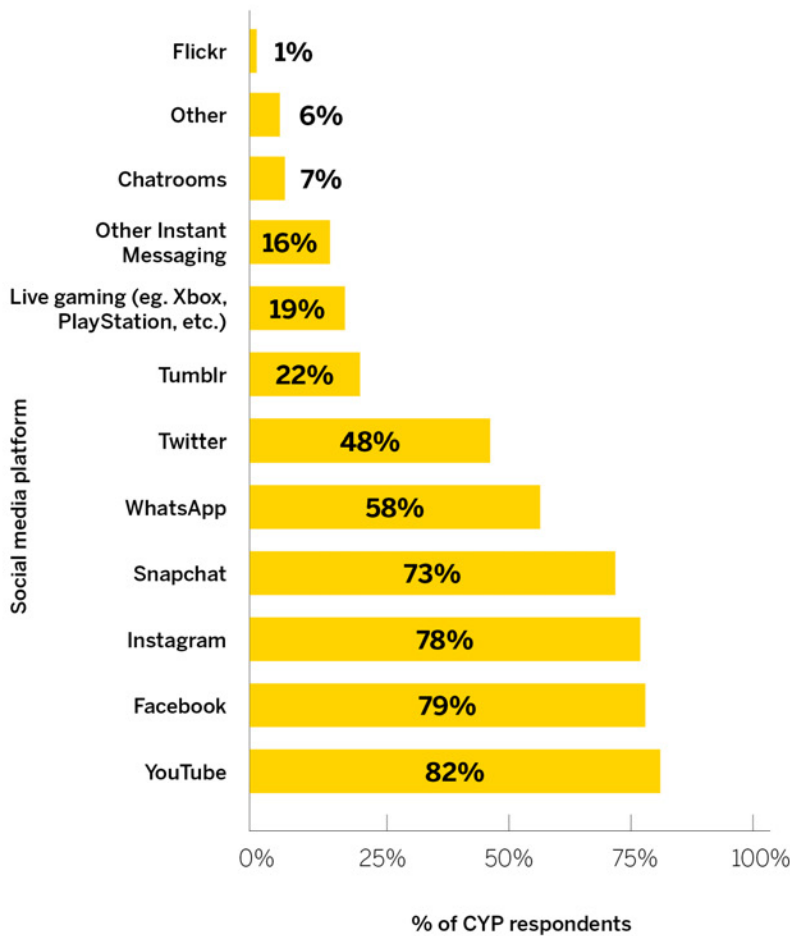
Similarly, social media can offer great support to children and young people who are going through difficulties as a result of their mental health or who are questioning aspects of their identity such as gender and sexuality.²⁶ A recent survey by Childnet found that 48% of 13 to 18 year olds say they have shown support online for a certain group in the last year, for example supporting the rights of LGBTQ+ and disabled people.²⁷

The Good Childhood Report 2017 has also shown that moderate social media usage is associated with higher levels of well-being than no usage, in relation to specific aspects including life satisfaction, friendship and school life.²⁸

There are various social media platforms used by children and young people today. Many of these centre on the development of friendships and sharing of content such as images or videos. Young people can also interact on gaming sites and consoles such as Xbox Live and PlayStation Network.

Figure 1 illustrates the most used platforms by children and young people aged between 11 and 25 who responded to the inquiry's survey.

Figure 1: The social media platforms most used by children and young people



Young people were most familiar with and used major social media sites including YouTube (82%), Facebook (79%) and Snapchat (73%). Over half (58%) of young people said they use WhatsApp.

Microblogging site Tumblr is used by 22% of children and young people, and 1 in 5 young people (19%) said they use internet enabled game consoles such as Xbox Live.

Chatrooms and forums such as Reddit and Ask.fm were used by 7% of respondents. Some of the other social media sites and Apps that young people told us they use include Whisper, Sarahah, Musical.ly, Discord and Pinterest.



82%
of young people
use Youtube



73%
of young people
use Snapchat

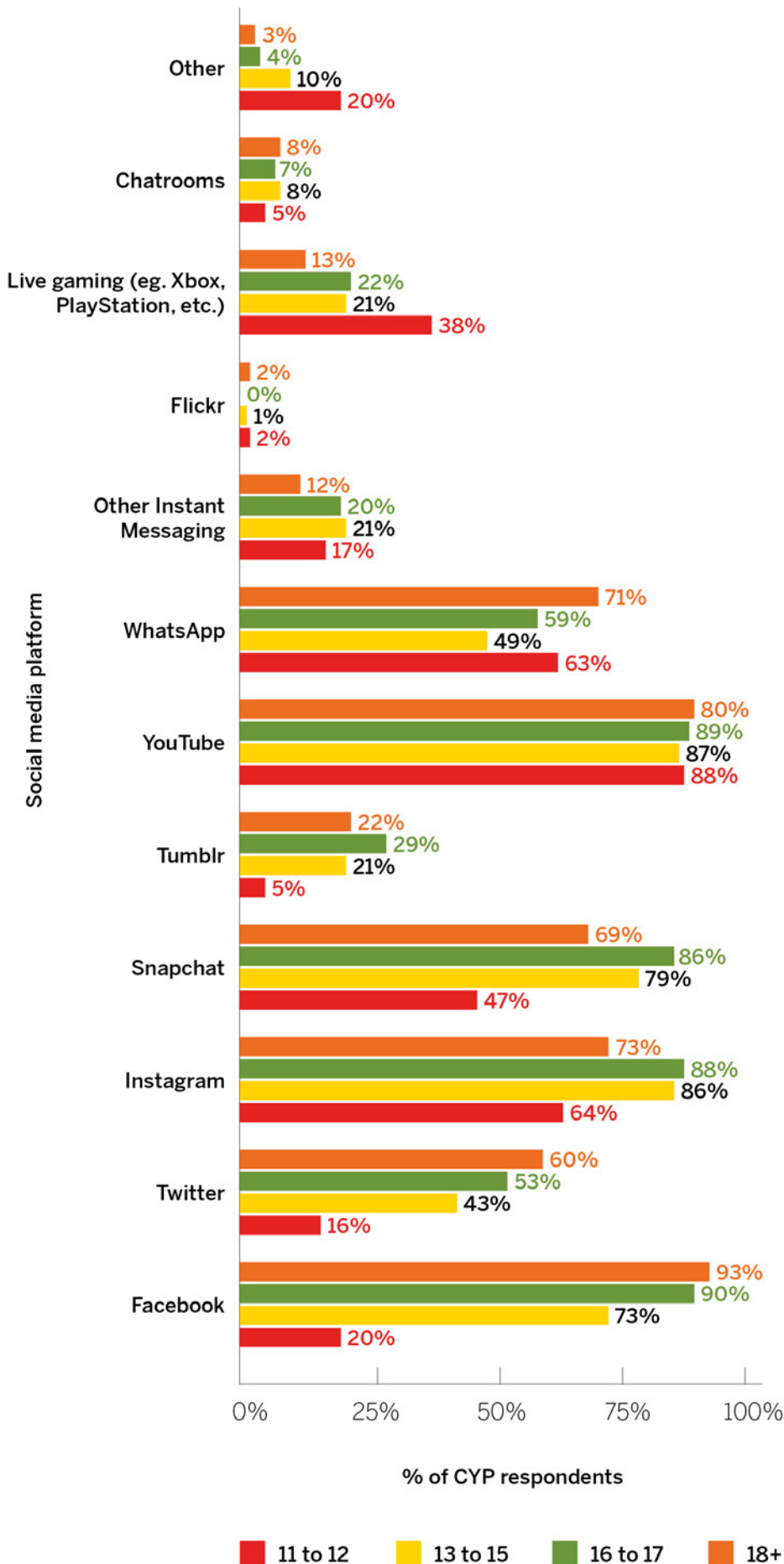


58%
of young people
use Whatsapp



79%
of young people
use Facebook

Figure 2: Social media platform usage by age group



Responses to our survey show that children and young people’s use of social media appears to change over time, with younger children tending to consume media and older teenagers generating, consuming and socialising on social media.

Our analysis finds that a significant proportion of younger adolescents are using social media; they prefer to use video and photo sharing platforms such as YouTube (86%) and Instagram (64%). Thirteen to fifteen year olds also follow a similar trend, as presented in Figure 2.

Older teenagers aged 16 and 17 are more likely to use Facebook (90%), Instagram (88%) and Snapchat (86%).

Young people’s use of social media increases with age, with those aged between 18 and 25 being the highest users of Facebook (93%), Twitter (60%) and WhatsApp (71%).

Multiple profiles on multiple platforms

At any given time, young people can have access to multiple accounts on various platforms. One young person who attended the children and young people’s evidence session told the inquiry: *‘I have multiple accounts on each social media site I use.’* – **Oral evidence from young person, aged 13 to 15**

Young people who attended the evidence session said that they had multiple profiles for anonymous browsing or to keep up with their special interests.

However, some children and young people added they created new accounts because they knew of people using their other account(s) for the purposes of sending nasty messages or stalking an individual to laugh at their photos and content.

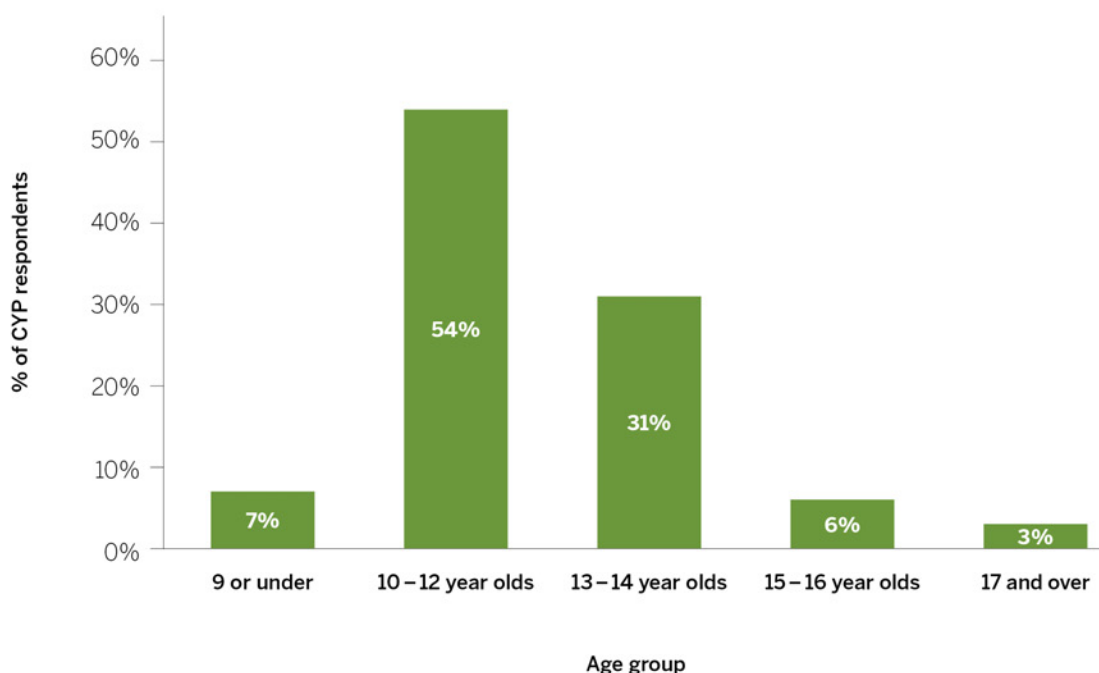
Age when children first create their social media accounts

The minimum age requirement for most social media companies is currently set at 13 years old. This is based on US legislation in the Children’s Online Privacy Protection 1998 Act (COPPA)²⁹, which mandated restrictions around the usage of online services by children under 13 without ‘verifiable parental consent’.³⁰

Given the complexity of obtaining parental consent via social media, many of the US-based companies decided to introduce a minimum age requirement of 13 and applied this globally. Other companies simply followed suit.

Whilst the inquiry did not explore age requirements in detail, the children and young people’s survey revealed that 61% of children first created their social media account before the prescribed age limit of 13.

Figure 3: Age when children first create their social media account



The inquiry's findings are in line with the recent Ofcom annual survey which found that by age 12 half of all children have a social media profile. By age nine, Ofcom reported that just over 1 in 10 children (12%) have a social media profile – this figure rises quickly: by age 10 almost 3 in 10 (28%) have a profile, and close to half (46%) of children have one by age 11.³¹

This means that many children below the age limit who are using social media may be at greater risk of online harms – including cyberbullying – because the platforms are not designed with their usage in mind.

The Children's Commissioner for England recently examined social media usage amongst 8 to 12 year olds and found that most children in this age group use social media to play and for creative purposes. However, Year 7 children were beginning to turn to social media for social validation and demonstrated over-dependence on 'likes' and 'comments'.³²

Evidence shared with the inquiry by Baroness Harding of Winscombe, former chief executive of the major internet service provider TalkTalk, highlighted that the period of transition children face between primary and secondary school coincides with the time they first create their social media profile '*because all of their peers are also doing so*'.³³

There was a consensus amongst expert witnesses that social media companies do not do enough to identify those under the age of 13 who are using their platforms.

To help address this, Baroness Harding suggests the following in her written evidence: '*Social media companies should divert resources to AI (Artificial Intelligence) to detect under 13s. Social media companies are not proactive about this because customer need is a priority in relation to functionality...this is a competitive field and without public and legislative pressure, they won't do it.*'³⁴ – **Baroness Harding of Winscombe, written evidence**

During the children and young people's evidence session, there was a sense that trying to restrict children under the age of 13 from using social media platforms through date of birth checks are not effective, as children will always find a way around such restrictions, or move on to other platforms with lower thresholds of safety features.

We heard repeatedly throughout the inquiry that, beyond age-identification approaches, it is important for social media platforms to establish age-appropriate design and communication for children – and in particular younger children – to reflect the reality of under-13s using these platforms.

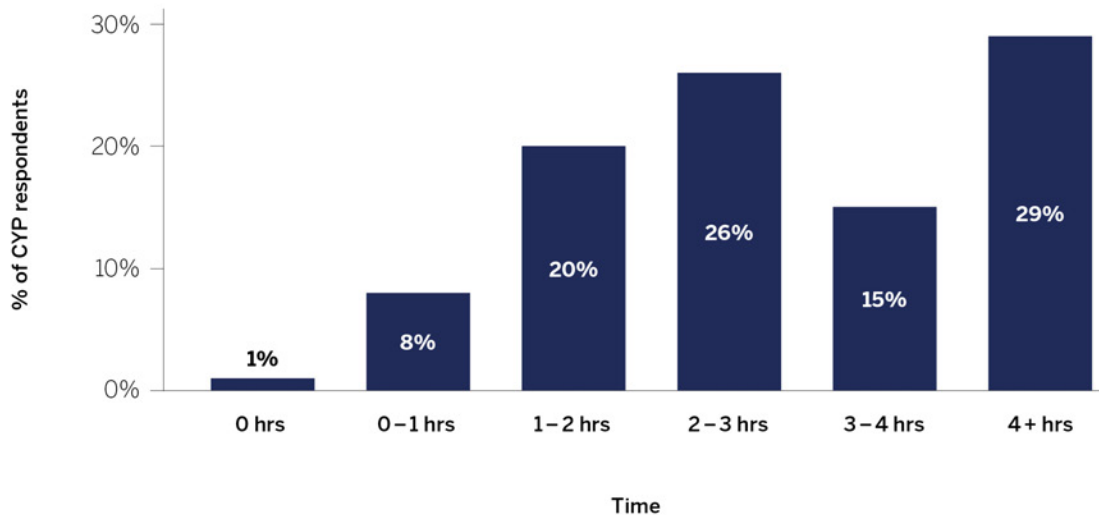
What needs to change?

Social media platforms must be age-appropriate, and companies should pilot approaches to identify under-13s and gain explicit parental consent. (Recommendation 1)

The time children and young people spend on social media

Children and young people are spending hours on social media every day. Our survey finds that nearly half (44%) stated that they spend three hours or more per day on social media.

Figure 4: The time children and young people spend on social media

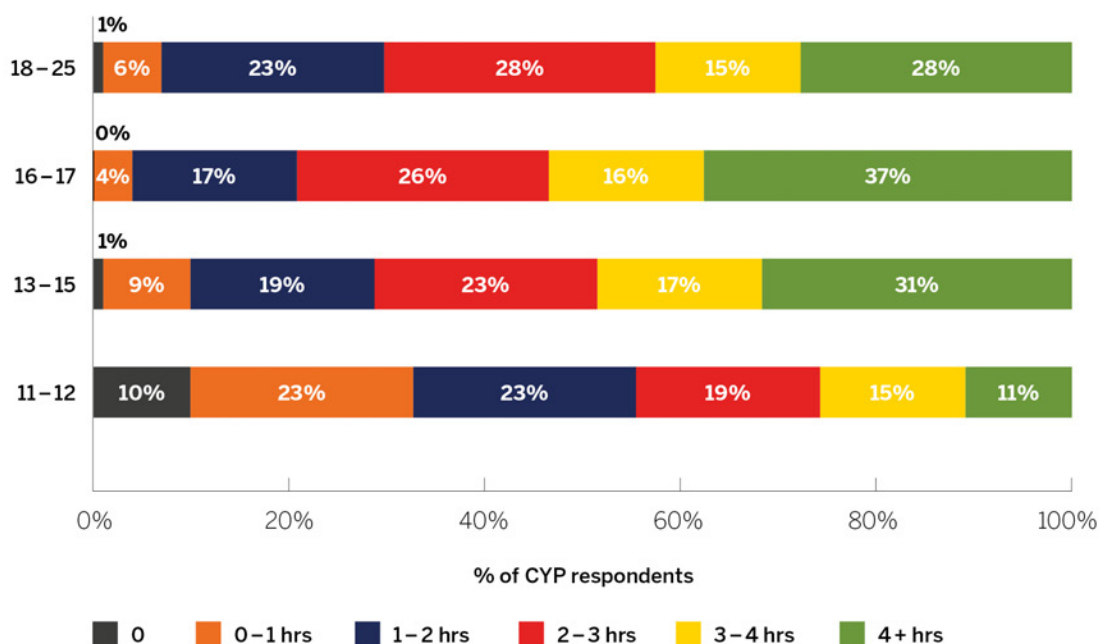


The time spent on social media by children increases with age: 37% of 16 and 17 year olds using social media for more than four hours a day, compared with 11% of 11 and 12 year olds.

Far fewer adolescents aged 13 to 18 say they spend no time on social media, compared to 10% of 11 and 12 year olds who reported this.

The time spent online by young adults aged 18 to 25 begins to decrease, with 28% saying they spend more than four hours a day.

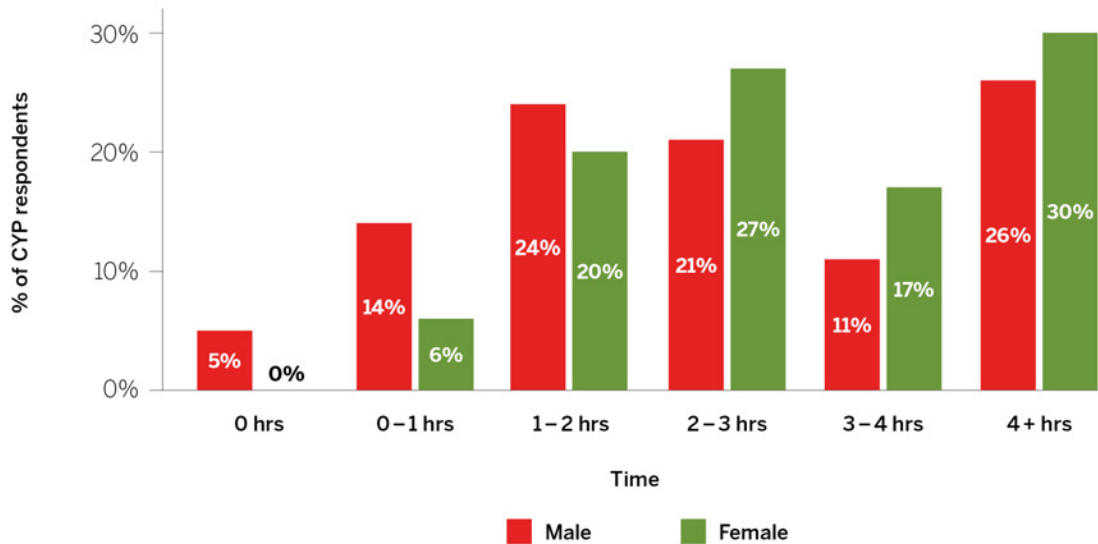
Figure 5: Time spent online by age group



The inquiry's survey also finds that girls spend longer periods of time on social media compared to boys.

As Figure 6 shows, 17% of girls report spending 3 to 4 hours a day on social media, compared to 11% of boys aged 11 to 25. More boys (14%) report spending less than an hour a day on social media than girls do (6%).

Figure 6: Time spent online by gender

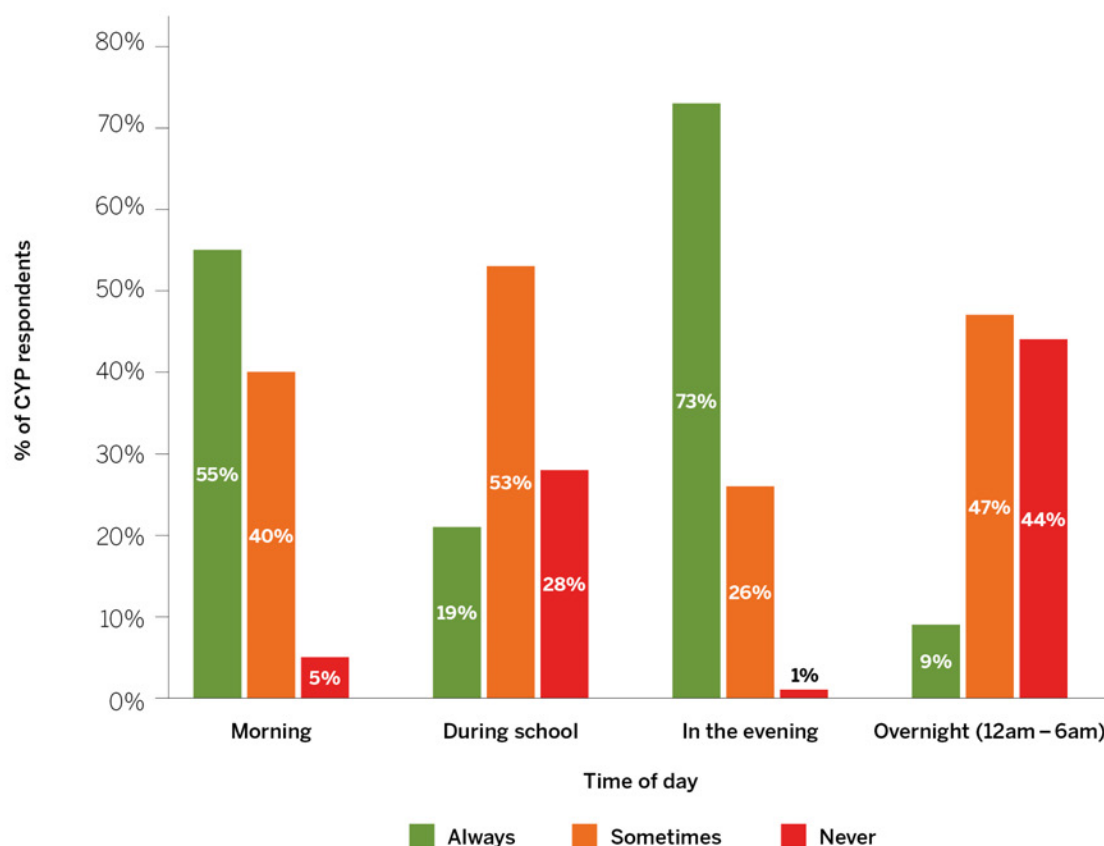


The most common time of day that young people reported using social media was in the evening (73%).

Over half (55%) of children and young people said they always use social media in the morning. A similar proportion (53%) of young people admitted to using social media 'sometimes' during school hours.

Worryingly, 47% of respondents 'sometimes' use social media through the night.

Figure 7: Time of day young people are on social media



Time spent online and children’s well-being and mental health

Studies have found a correlation between children’s extensive use of social media and lower well-being.

Young people who are the heaviest users of social media are most vulnerable to low-well-being and symptoms of anxiety and depression^{35,36} among other harms such as loss of empathy.³⁷

One young person in the evidence session suggested that those experiencing low well-being, emotional distress or mental illness may use social media more frequently than others because they are using it as a source of support, information or advice. However, there is an undeniable association between ‘extreme’ internet use by young people and low well-being.

Young people who are the heaviest users of social media are most likely to report and experience low well-being and symptoms of anxiety and depression according to research^{38,39} among other harms such as loss of empathy.⁴⁰

The Children’s Society’s Good Childhood Report 2017 has also found strong links between using social media more than four hours a day and low well-being.⁴¹ However it also found that under 1 in 10 children have this high intensity pattern of usage – but that girls are twice as likely as boys to have high intensity use.⁴²

In addition, research by the Department of Economics at the University of Sheffield finds that ‘the more time children spend chatting on social networks, the worse they feel about school

work, school attendance, appearance, family and life overall, and the better they feel about their friends'.⁴³

We received evidence to support our survey findings that girls spend more time on social media and are therefore at greater risk of its negative emotional consequences.⁴⁴ Evidence submitted by the University College London's (UCL) Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology Department noted that whilst there is a suggestive link between depression and time spent on social networks, the direction of effects (casual) is yet to be established.⁴⁵

Another more general negative impact of social media is the culture of comparison, which is characterised by young people comparing their lives – particularly in terms of their appearance – to those of others, including celebrities. This can lead to a negative impact on self-esteem, particularly for girls. Academics from UCL noted that: *'If social media use does in fact causally impact on subjective well-being, it could be hypothesized that this may be a consequence of unhealthy models of perfection that are promoted in such networks. Such models of perfection are made increasingly impossible to attain as the 'comparison pool' is worldwide due to social media, and that the information presented is often deceptive (eg Photoshop). Hence, for some individuals, their use of social media could result in incorrect perceptions regarding physical appearance, social status, educational level or intelligence and thereby affect self-esteem and behaviours, even in the absence of cyberbullying.'* – **University College London**⁴⁶

It is clear that there needs to be additional research into the causal impact that intense social media usage has on the mental health and emotional well-being of children and young people.

We therefore welcome the proposal in the Green Paper on children and young people's mental health that the Chief Medical Officer produce a report on the impact of technology on children and young people's mental health.⁴⁷

What needs to change?

The Government should commission additional research into the scale of online bullying, and its impact on children and young people. (Recommendation 6)

Parents and carers role in children and young people's social media use

Whilst this inquiry has not specifically explored the role of parents and carers, we acknowledge the important role they can play in keeping their children and young people safe on social media. Parents have a responsibility to provide information, support their children and safeguard them from online harms.

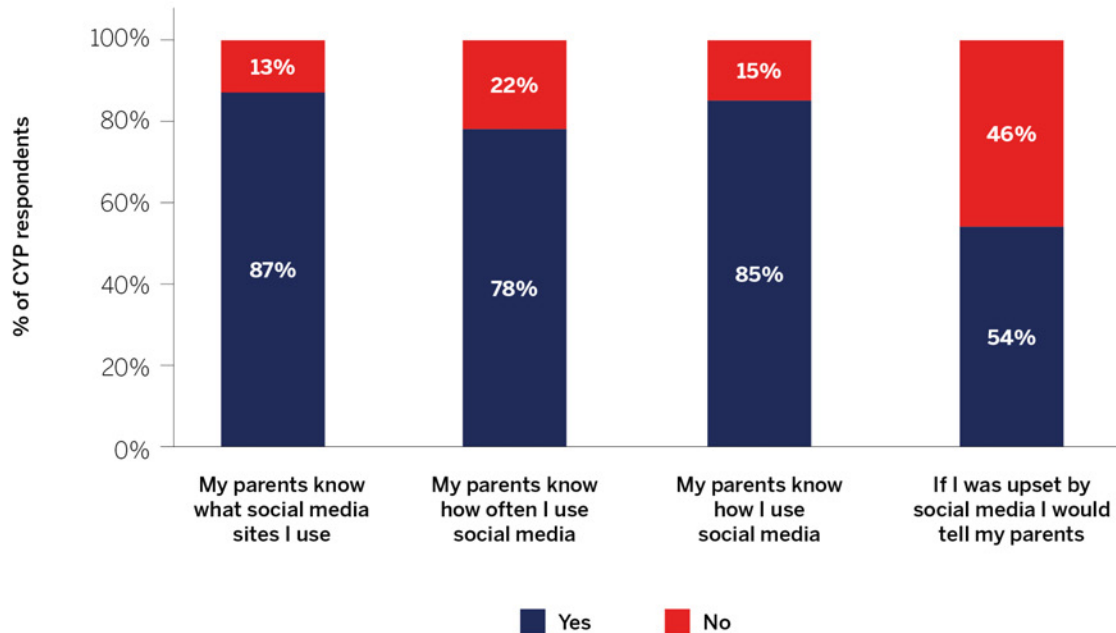
Many schools, statutory bodies⁴⁸ and not-for-profit organisations, such as Internet Matters⁴⁹ and YoungMinds⁵⁰ offer parents and carers free information, advice and resources to help them have conversations about digital safety with their children.

According to our survey, most children and young people feel confident talking to their parents about their social media usage (as shown in Figure 8).

However, 22% of young people told us their parents were not aware of how often they use social media. Children and young people also reported feeling less confident about speaking to

their parents about anything that would upset them on social media, with nearly half (46%) saying they would not approach their parents.

Figure 8: Parental knowledge of children and young people's (11 to 18 year olds) social media use



What needs to change?

The Government should teach children and young people to be safe and responsible online, and ensure they know how to respond positively to online harms such as cyberbullying. (Recommendation 8)

3. Children and young people’s perspective on their social media use

In this chapter, we explore the use of social media from the perspective of children and young people themselves. Children have engaged with the inquiry through both a dedicated evidence session with the panel and through a UK-wide survey of over 1,000 children and young people aged 11 to 25.

What young people like about using social media

Young people generally see social media as positive, with significant social and emotional benefits, including helping in making and sustaining friendships.

Using social media to support their mental health

Social media can be a source of support for children and young people with emotional or mental health needs. As Figure 9 shows, 38% of young people report that social media has a positive impact on how they feel about themselves.

During the children and young people’s evidence session, one young person stated that they were a heavy user of social media because of their poor mental health; rather than having poor mental health because of his social media usage.

‘As someone with social anxiety, I find it easier to interact online with people who aren’t close friends or family.’ – CYP survey quote, female, aged 16

‘I am more likely to talk to someone about my mental health over an instant messenger as it is less intimidating than talking face-to-face.’ – CYP survey quote, female, aged 15

Children and young people experiencing emotional distress, crisis or a period of mental ill health, may turn to social media communities for mutual support, or because online peer groups who have had similar experiences can help answer questions they might have (for example about services or managing their condition).

- Seeking advice and information

Young people who attended the evidence sessions said they were able to find information and details about support services on platforms such as Instagram.

Similarly, when facing a traumatic event, challenging life experience or an episode of poor mental health, young people state that they often turn to social media platforms to share their experiences, look for information or advice, and make sense of what is happening to them.

- Belonging and identity

A study by the NSPCC found that 11 to 16 year olds place a high value on feeling like they are part of an online or social media community.⁵¹

Young people use social media communities as an important distraction from the pressures of studying for exams or family pressures, and can gain instant access to a like-minded community of peers who share their interests or passions.⁵²

- Social media use and young people’s relationships

Social media usage has rapidly changed the way children and young people form and sustain relationships with their peers and family members.

Most young people generally feel that social media has a positive impact on their relationships, or has no impact at all. Sixty two percent of our survey respondents noted that it had a positive impact on their relationship with their friends, compared to 29% who felt it positively affected their relationship with their family.

Table 1: The impact of social media use on children and young people’s relationship and school life

Aspects of children and young people’s lives	It has a positive impact	It has a negative impact	It has no impact/not sure
Relationship with your friends	62%	11%	28%
Relationship with family	29%	18%	53%
Education or work	22%	27%	51%

Children and young people’s social media use was likely to have a more negative impact on their education or work life, with 27% reporting this to be the case compared to 22% who stated the opposite.

The pressures of growing up online: What young people don’t like about using social media

- The perceived lack of information

Many young people told the inquiry they do not read the Terms and Conditions prescribed on social media platforms and therefore do not always understand the rules, their rights or the safeguards to protect them.

When asked whether they had read the Terms and Conditions, even where they had been simplified on platforms such as Instagram, the young people advised that they ‘hadn’t and probably wouldn’t’. Young people did however acknowledge the need to better understand these terms and conditions to be able to navigate social media platforms in a safe and positive manner.

- The lack of privacy and protection

Children and young people who attended the evidence session told the inquiry that they did not always feel their profiles on social media were private or protected.

For example, one young person suggested the ability to ‘screen grab’ made it really easy for information shared in confidence to be ‘leaked’, which she described as using information to exclude or even blackmail an individual. Another young person in the group noted that: *‘It’s really easy to get around screen grab alerts which exist on apps such as Snapchat using other applications.’* – **CYP survey quote**

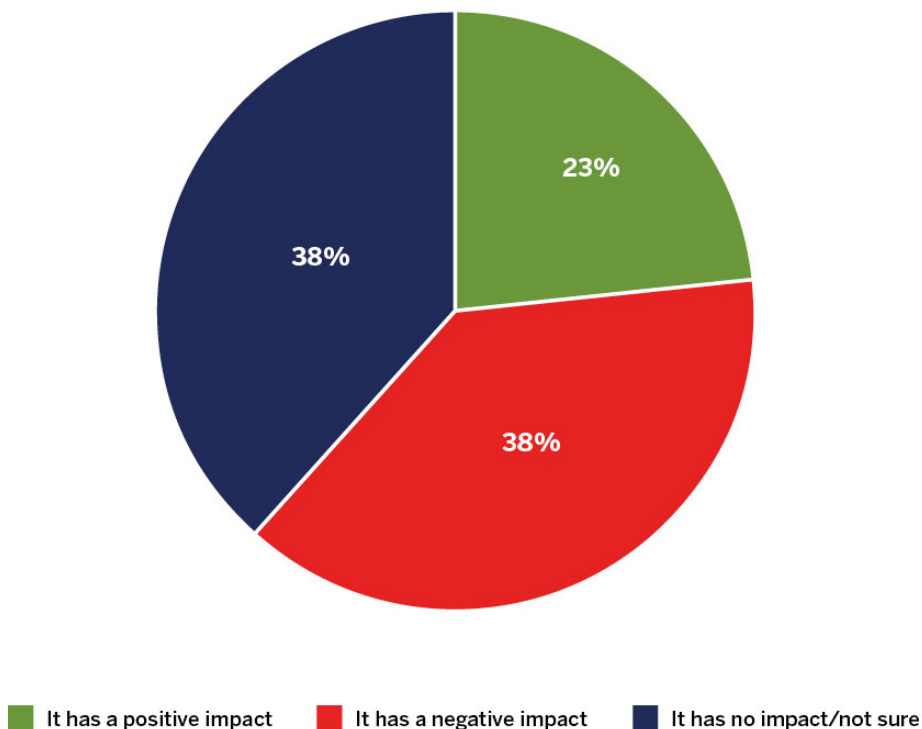
Even where screen grab alerts are in place, they said that receiving an alert is very disempowering as there is no way you can make a person delete the content – and even if they do, it will remain in their recently deleted file and could be retrieved at a later date.

- Social media and its impact on young people’s self-esteem

Whilst social media can be beneficial for young people with emotional needs 38% of those who responded to our survey felt it has a negative impact on how they feel about themselves. This was compared to almost a quarter of young people saying it that it has a positive impact.

According to one young person who gave oral evidence, social media can have a *‘permanent impact because things are written down.’* – **Young person, aged 13 to 15**

Figure 9: Impact of social media use on how children and young people feel about themselves



The negative consequences of being on social media was exacerbated for girls, with 46% of female respondents stating that social media had a negative impact about how they feel about themselves.

- The differences between online and offline behaviours

Young people who gave evidence to the inquiry described the ‘smoke and mirrors’ effect that being on social media can create about an individual’s life online. Seventeen percent of our survey’s respondents felt that people always interact differently online than they would offline.

Children and young people also noted the pressure to exaggerate their lifestyles and to be likeable online, as explained by one young person: *‘Online I’m constantly analysing whether I’m being interesting, whether they’re bored, whether I read like I am saying something with a double meaning. I can never get into a conversation like I do in real life.’* – **CYP survey quote, female, aged 19**

Table 2: Do you think that what you say or how you interact with people on social media is different to how you would speak and interact with them offline/in person?

Always	17%
Sometimes	65%
Never	18%

In some instances, young people noted that they would speak or interact differently online (65%). Young people who responded to our survey noted that their behaviour online would change depending on the circumstance. For example, in heated or argumentative interactions, young people would be crueller online than usual.

‘I have had cause to regret comments I have posted on social media in the past, as very occasionally I have written things which are controversial or nasty, which I would never say in person.’ – **CYP survey quote, female, aged 22**

‘People are sometimes really horrible over social media and say things they would never say to someone’s face.’ – **CYP survey quote, female, aged 13**

However for some young people communicating online allowed them to be more honest and open about their thoughts and feelings. This may be due to the time allowed online for young people to better formulate their thoughts than they would otherwise be offered face-to-face.

‘I am also more open via social media – it feels anonymous so it’s easier to be honest.’ – **CYP survey quote, female, aged 22**

- **‘Compare and despair’⁵³**

Children and young people who shared evidence with the inquiry were aware that online anonymity means that interactions can be exaggerated or manipulated as a result. This can enhance confidence, having both positive and negative consequences depending on the circumstance.

During the evidence session, young people raised the pressures of being judged on the number of ‘likes’ and ‘followers’ they have or received. They said that there is a range of hashtags that they use to help get their number of likes up on posts. Young people felt that not getting enough likes or not having enough followers led to feelings of inadequacy, because ‘likes’ and ‘followers’ are a form of social currency. Some of the young people suggested that this can form part of cyberbullying – the example they gave was a group of young people not liking a young person’s post where they usually would, or a mass ‘unfollowing’ of an individual.

The young people were also aware that social media glamorises life – they were aware that people only post their ‘best bits’. They also felt that hashtags such as #relationshipgoals, #bestfriendgoals, #makeupgoals have made all young people want to look and be the same. They felt that social media – and the power that it has to present a certain form of ‘perfect life’ –

left young people aspiring for things that they didn't necessarily want, or following trends that they didn't necessarily like.

The following quotes describe young people's views about social media usage shared during the CYP evidence session:

'Nobody really goes out anymore.'

'It's almost like a drug.'

'Takes you away from the real world.'

'Can be a distraction from other things going on in life.'

'Bystanders don't feel confident to stand up.'

'Not knowing where to go, I feel left alone.'

What needs to change?

The Government should put children's experiences at the heart of internet safety policy development. (Recommendation 7)

4. Cyberbullying – the scale of the problem

What do we mean by cyberbullying?

There is currently no legal definition of bullying in the UK, including bullying that takes place online. Similarly, no legal framework is in place for tackling unwanted contact online until it has reached a criminal threshold, such as online harassment.⁵⁴

There are many different definitions of cyberbullying currently used, which means the evidence base regarding the prevalence of cyberbullying is not consistent or robust. Whilst it is agreed that it involves behaviour intended to harass, embarrass, or cause distress online, it is less clear whether repeated behaviour is a key factor.

It is important to recognise that the form bullying takes is often fluid and complex. There is an understanding that bullying is usually: repeated, intended to hurt someone either physically or emotionally, and often aimed at certain groups (for example because of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation).⁵⁵

This is reflected in young people's attitudes to bullying that takes place online. A recent Ditch the Label report found that 44% of young people considered things that happened in 'real life' to only include things that did not happen online. Nearly a quarter (23%) of young people surveyed believed that cyberbullying is 'just a part of growing up'.⁵⁶

Young people who provided evidence through Barnardo's Northern Ireland⁵⁷ describe cyberbullying as:

- *Name calling or being mean online*
- *Posting embarrassing photos or videos of others without their permission*
- *Digitally manipulating pictures to create false impressions*
- *Posting pointed statuses*
- *'Sexting' requests for pictures or videos*
- *Cut and pasting pictures or status of others into group chats*
- *Deleting someone from a group chat*

The changing nature of bullying

Compared to what is seen as more face-to-face forms of bullying, 'the online environment is a place where bullying has instant and widespread effects, and a place where a bully can attack their victim 24 hours a day.'⁵⁸

Researchers from two US universities recently examined the similarities and differences between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying and found that children were more likely to differentiate between the roles of bully and victim in traditional cases of offline aggression than in online aggression. Findings also suggest that children are more likely to be both bullies and victims online (as opposed to offline) and that more research is needed to better understand the concept of cyberbullying.⁵⁹

It should also be noted that face-to-face bullying continues to be more commonplace than cyberbullying, as confirmed by a recent report in the Lancet. The report found that 1% of adolescents are only cyberbullied (without face-to-face physical bullying taking place) compared to 30% who said they experienced only offline bullying. Around 3% of young people said they experienced both offline and online bullying. This data would suggest individuals who are negatively affected by cyberbullying are also experiencing face-to-face bullying.⁶⁰

However, online bullying is a different experience – it can include a wider audience, be 24/7, affect children in public and private spaces from school to their bedrooms, and escalate in scale quickly due to people sharing or commenting on bullying content. According to Barnardo's Northern Ireland, the key elements of cyberbullying involve '*boundless space, an infinite audience, unknown bully and low parental presence*'.⁶¹ Young people who gave evidence to the inquiry also stressed the notion of a 'crowd mentality' that exists in cyberbullying cases where groups of children and young people comment, share or like content made to isolate someone.

'There are "I hate so and so..." groups that people join.' – **Oral evidence from young person, aged 17**

Evidence shared with the inquiry also suggests that the online world can amplify children's experiences of bullying offline and other adversities that they may be experiencing. ParentZone, an organisation that helps parents and carers to support their children online, told us: '*Our work with families suggests that the impact of bullying on a young person is often amplified by the internet but usually involves other offline activity and risk factors. Parents that contact us about a child that is being bullied will routinely describe a set of concerns including difficulties at school, low self-esteem, loneliness and high levels of stress. These additional factors contribute to a vulnerable child feeling less resilient and less able to deal with any experience they are having online, including cyberbullying.*' – **ParentZone⁶²**

Baroness Harding, who noted the impact of anonymity on individuals' behaviours online, also corroborated this, stating: '*The digital world tends to exaggerate human behaviour. The combination of either partial or total anonymity, and the sheer global reach of the digital world means that people often say things in a more direct way online than they would face-to-face, and people with particular interests can now reach a global community with ease...*' – **Baroness Harding, written evidence**

The prevalence of cyberbullying

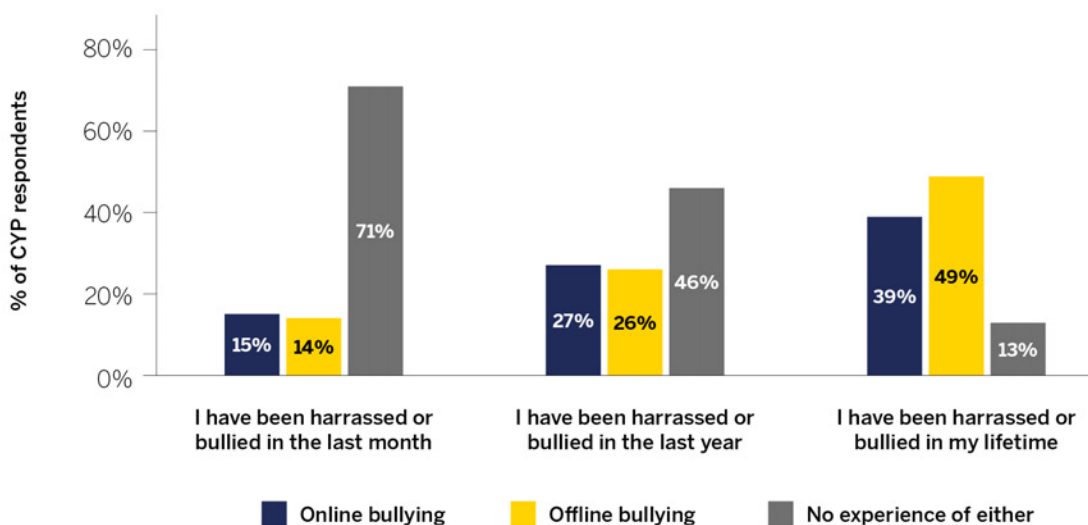
Evidence suggests cyberbullying is on the rise. Childline counselling services reported a 12% increase in the number of cases relating to cyberbullying in the financial year 2016–17 compared to the previous year.⁶³ In addition, the number of children and young people who have experienced bullying online has increased by 88% in five years, according to the NSPCC.⁶⁴

Cyberbullying is also taking place in school, with 11% of 15 year olds reporting this to be the case in a longitudinal study on bullying led by the Department for Education.⁶⁵ According to the National Children's Bureau and the Association of School and College Leaders, 81% of headteachers and deputy headteachers have also identified an increase in the number of pupils experiencing cyberbullying.⁶⁶

The increased availability of new technologies has been associated with an overall rise in the reported incidence of bullying online.⁶⁷ Qualitative research conducted by Ofcom reported an increased use of group messaging services such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook Messenger being used in less positive ways, including for bullying and harassment.⁶⁸

The inquiry’s survey found that around 15% of children and young people aged 11 to 25 reported being bullied online in the last month. A similar proportion also reported being bullied offline in this period as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Children and young people’s personal experience of cyberbullying in the last month

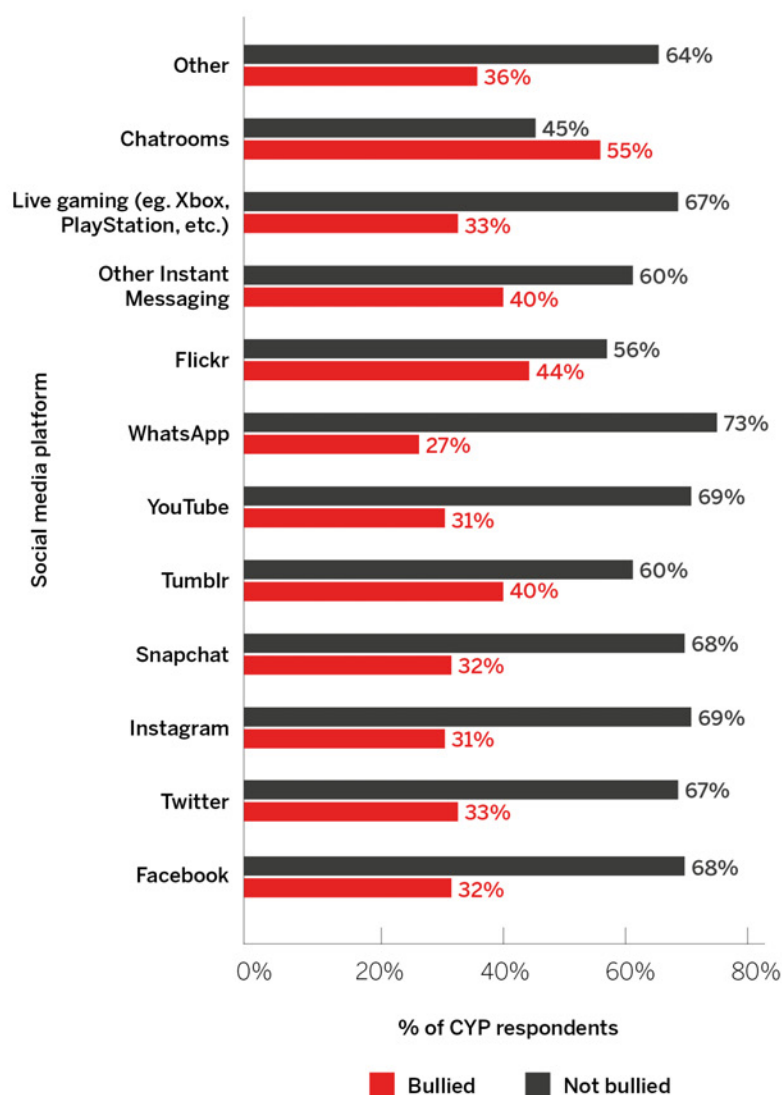


Over a third (39%) of young people told us they have experienced cyberbullying in their lifetime, in contrast to 49% who reported experience of offline bullying.

Just over a quarter of children and young people aged 11 to 25 (27%) reported personal experience of online bullying within the last year, in contrast to 26% who had experienced bullying offline.

Children and young people can often witness cyberbullying taking place on the various social media platforms they use. Our survey found that nearly just as many young people have seen somebody be harassed or bullied online (60%) as they have offline (61%).

Figure 11: A comparison of the types of platform used by young people and whether they have had an experience of online bullying within last year

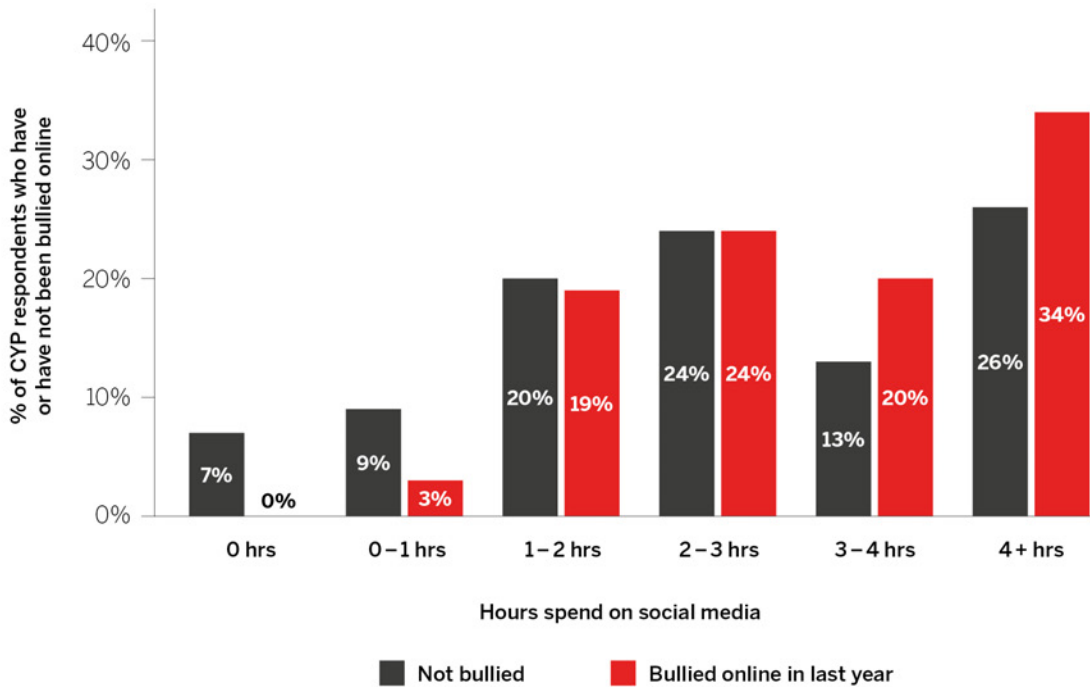


Chatrooms such as Ask.FM and Reddit and other instant messaging services such as iMessage and Facebook Messenger were the platforms used most by children and young people who have reported experiencing online bullying in the last year (55%) compared to 45% who had no experience.

Four in ten (40%) children and young people who have experienced online bullying in the last year used platforms such as Tumblr. A third of young people who have experienced online bullying also regularly use live gaming devices such Xbox Live.

In addition to the platforms cited in Figure 11, 30% of respondents who were bullied in the last year reported using other social media platforms that we did not ask about.

Figure 12: The time spent on social media by children and young people who have experienced online bullying



The more time children and young people spend online, the more they reported having experienced cyberbullying in the last year. More than half of those who have experienced online bullying spent more than three hours a day on social media, compared to 39% who had not been bullied. The less time young people spend on social media, the less they reported to have experienced online bullying in the last year.

Young people as bystanders to cyberbullying

Many of the children and young people who gave evidence to the inquiry spoke about their experience of seeing their peers or strangers being bullied online (known commonly as ‘bystander’ behaviour). This can involve being both an active participant, passively observing or defending those affected by cyberbullying.⁶⁹

There are a number of reasons why people witnessing bullying may not intervene, including self-preservation or concerns for their own safety, and diffusion of responsibility when part of a crowd.

However a number of research studies have shown that bystander behaviour can normalise bullying – both to the person experiencing bullying and the person engaged in bullying behaviour – and increase the risk of bullying persisting.⁷⁰

This chimes with the responses received from children and young people during the evidence session. When asked if they would step in where it was obvious cyberbullying was taking place, several young people said that they would or that they have done this before. However, others shared concerns that intervening could lead to them receiving abuse or negative responses from peers, and that this anxiety could stop them from acting.

Likewise, when young people said they have seen cases of online bullying, the content is likely to have also been seen by a large number of other witnesses who have also not intervened. The reach of social media can diffuse responsibility and can disinhibit interventions, through fear of becoming a target.

Interestingly, within our survey of children and young people, 18% of boys and 6% of girls did not think that encouraging online bullying constituted cyberbullying (see figure 14).

Figure 13: Children and young people's experience of witnessing bullying



The forms of cyberbullying

As noted earlier in the chapter, there is no definition of cyberbullying. This is partly because it can take place in many forms and can be received differently by different children and young people.

Figure 14 illustrates a number of behaviours that may constitute cyberbullying, and that children and young people who have responded to our survey say they have experienced. We also asked respondents whether they thought what they experienced was indeed cyberbullying.

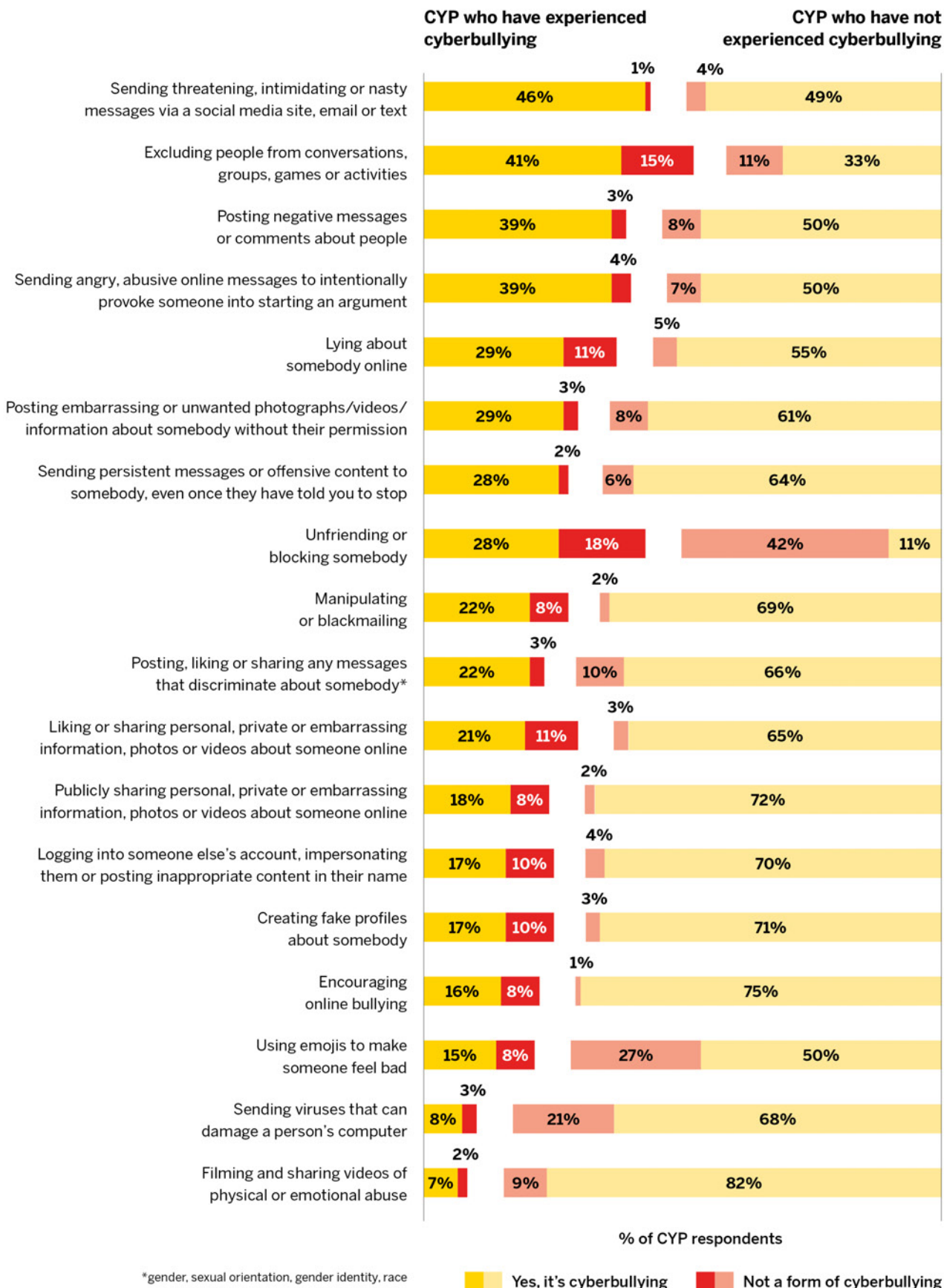
Nearly half of young people (46%) told us they had experienced threatening, intimidating or nasty messages via social media, email or text and believed this was cyberbullying.

Around 1 in 5 (18%) of young people experienced being unfriended or blocked, but did not see this as a form of cyberbullying. Worryingly, 8% of respondents did not believe that encouraging cyberbullying was not itself a form of cyberbullying and had engaged in this.

28% of young people have experienced persistent messaging after asking someone to stop and thought this was cyberbullying.

One in five children and young people (22%) report experiencing the posting, liking or sharing of messages that discriminate on the grounds of gender, race, sexual orientation and other forms of protected characteristics.

Figure 14: Children and young people’s experiences and perceptions of various forms of cyberbullying



Children and young people’s perceptions of cyberbullying

Of those who had not experienced it, more young people perceived acts such as the encouraging of online bullying as a form of cyberbullying compared to those who had experienced such behaviours (75% vs 16%).

However, young people who had experienced bullying online were more likely to perceive unfriending or blocking someone online as a form of cyberbullying than those who had no experience (18% vs 42%).

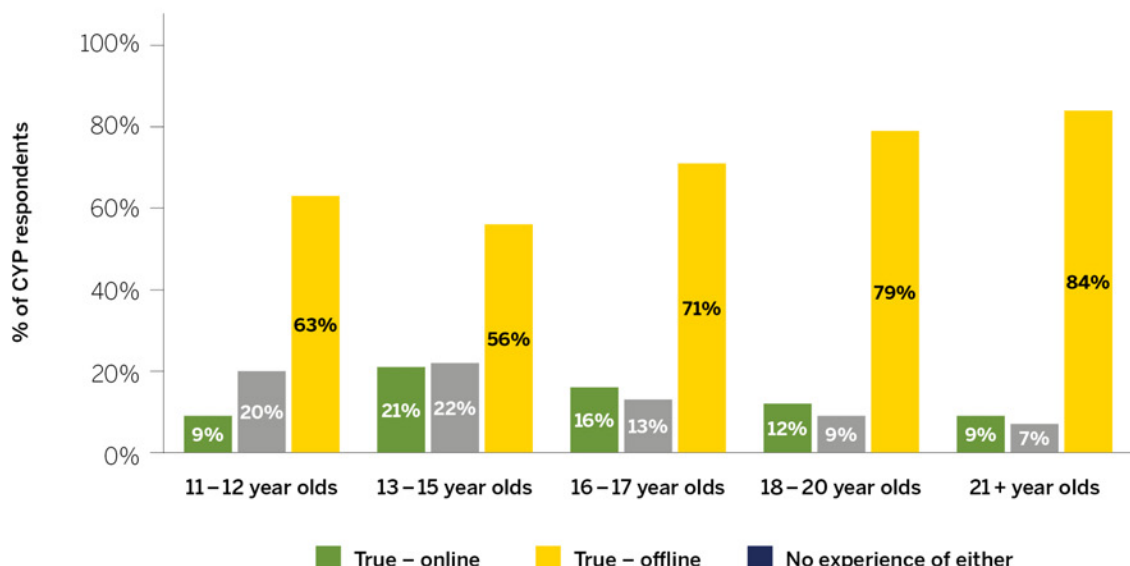
Who is most affected by cyberbullying?

Many children and young people are affected by bullying at some point in their lives⁷¹ but there are some young people who are particularly vulnerable to it and its effects.

Research into whether trends in relation to age, gender, race and sexuality found in offline bullying are mirrored in cases of cyberbullying is currently limited. However, a recent survey by the Health and Social Care Information Centre revealed that around twice as many girls (19%) than boys (10%) reported being a victim of cyberbullying in 2014.⁷² The likelihood of experiencing cyberbullying also appears to increase with age for children between the ages of 11 and 15.

Age and cyberbullying

Figure 15: Children and young people’s experience of cyberbullying in the last month by age



According to our survey, adolescence appears to be the peak age for children’s experiences of online bullying (as is the case for offline bullying). Teenagers aged 13 to 15 are the group who are more likely to report being bullied online (21%) than any other age group.

Children aged 11 and 12 report the lowest incidents of cyberbullying (9%) – but in contrast, those in this age group are more than twice as likely to experience face-to-face bullying (20%).

Young people’s experience of cyberbullying as well as offline bullying appears to subside as they get older, with the overwhelming majority (84%) of those aged 21 to 25 reporting to have not experienced either form of bullying in the last month.

Research by the Royal Foundation Cyberbullying Taskforce found that the sending of cruel comments is more common amongst younger age groups, whilst ‘banter going too far’ and the spreading of pictures or videos without permission are more common amongst older children.⁷³

The NSPCC also shared evidence from Childline revealing that 12 to 15 year olds were the age group who most called the advice line with concerns about cyberbullying (50%).⁷⁴

The majority of children and young people do not experience cyberbullying and this is true across the different age groups.

Gender and cyberbullying

Based on our survey, girls are more likely (15%) to report having experienced cyberbullying in the last month than boys (13%). A similar trend is also observed in both group’s experience of offline bullying over the same period.

A number of evidence submissions made to the inquiry noted that girls were far more likely to experience cyberbullying compared to boys.⁷⁵ In an analysis of the World Health Organisation’s 2014 study ‘Health Behaviour in School Children’, Public Health England (2017) reported that girls (24.2%) were twice as likely as boys (11.9%) to report being a victim of cyberbullying.⁷⁶

One explanation offered to the inquiry by Dr Linda Papadopoulos is that: *‘Boys are more overt on social media, whereas girls bully by exclusion, which means there is an elevated chance for girls to be perpetrators and victims.’* – **Dr Lina Papadopoulos, oral evidence**

Vulnerable groups of children and young people and their experience of cyberbullying

There are some groups of children and young people for whom the vulnerabilities they experience mean they are more likely to experience cyberbullying.

Children with special educational needs have been found to be 16 times more likely to be subject to persistent bullying, whilst children who looked after a family member who has a disability or illness were 13% more likely to experience bullying online than their peers.⁷⁷

In addition, a study by the UK Safer Internet Centre found that 38% of young people with disabilities have experienced online hate, compared to 21% of children without a disability.⁷⁸

Others studies demonstrate that LGBT young people, those from a migrant or minority background, and children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are groups more exposed to cyberbullying than others.⁷⁹

Evidence submitted by both the University College London and the University of Sheffield indicates that young people who experience face-to-face bullying are also vulnerable to facing it online.⁸⁰

Furthermore, children and young people with pre-existing or emerging emotional needs – such as depression – are also at greater risk of experiencing cyberbullying than other groups. Evidence the inquiry received suggests: *‘Most likely to be cyberbullied are people who never feel happy and confident (self-report) 49% compared to 15% of people with no difficulties. They are joined by those who feel depressed (43%) or have a mental health difficulty (42%). Being cyberbullied is likely to exacerbate these feelings.’*⁸¹ – **Youthworks Consulting, Suffolk Council and University of Suffolk**⁸²

Young people who experience cyberbullying and engage in bullying behaviour online

Young people can both experience and take part in cyberbullying simultaneously. A survey by Ditch the Label found that people who have been bullied are almost twice as likely to bully others.⁸³ During the expert evidence session Liam Hackett, Chief Executive of Ditch the Label, noted: *‘Something we must realise is that perpetrators often have issues at home and other things going on in their lives. It is much easier to bully online as it is not face-to-face.’* – **Liam Hackett, CEO of Ditch the Label**

Academics at Nottingham Trent University have recently examined the extent to which 16 to 19 year olds had engaged in or received nasty, insulting or threatening communications, or violent and unpleasant images, across a range of media. They found that 40% said they had both received and engaged in small amounts of cyberbullying during the previous year.⁸⁴

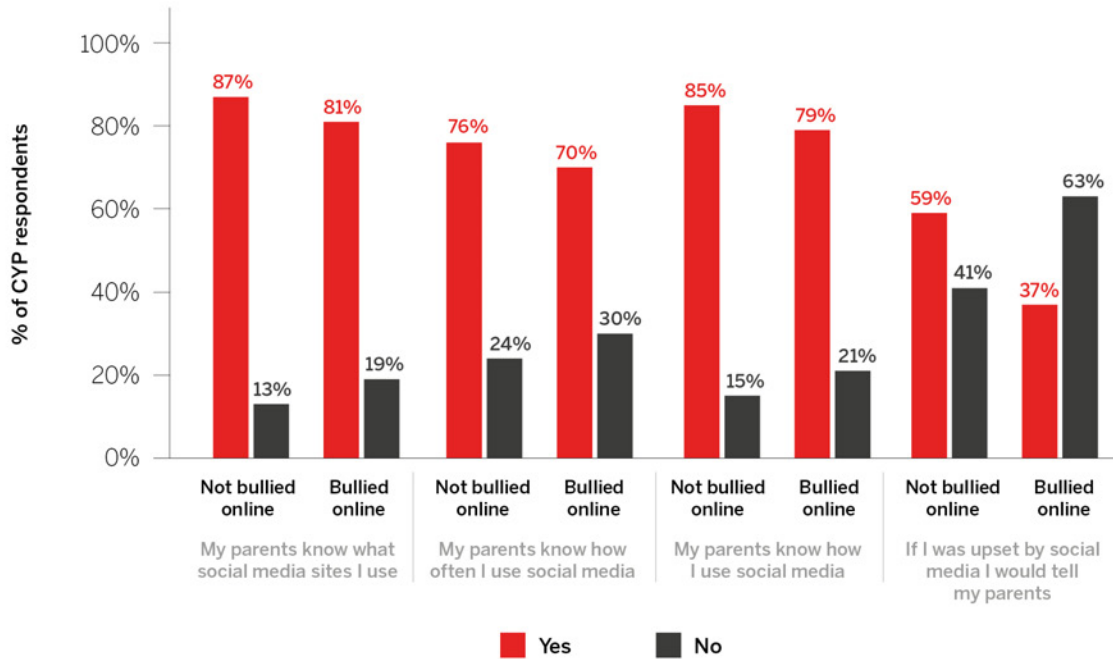
It has been hypothesised that there are three distinct bullying roles: only bully, only victim or bully-victim. Analysis of the EU Kids Online study (of 25,000 internet-using children in Europe aged 9 to 16) revealed that ‘bullies’ and ‘victims’ are both at increased risk to suicidal behaviour compared to peers not involved in bullying. Bully-victims were the most at risk group for suicidal ideation and attempts.⁸⁵

Children and young people’s experience of online bullying and what they tell their parents or carers

Of those children and young people who responded to the inquiry’s survey, the majority of respondents (87%) said their parents know about their social media usage.

Nearly twice as many (19%) of young people, who said they had experienced bullying online in the last year, said their parents were not aware of their social media activities. This is compared to 10% who had not experienced online bullying.

Figure 16: Parental knowledge of children and young people's social media use (comparison of those who have or have not experienced online bullying in the last year)



The majority of children and young people who have experienced online bullying in the last year (63%) said they would not tell their parents if something upset them on social media. This group were less likely to speak to their parent or carer about upsetting content than those who were not bullied.

Young people who gave oral evidence to the inquiry explained that those children who have parental support are more likely to know where to seek support online and be 'stronger'. They added that this was unfair for those who 'don't get on with' their parents.

5. The impact of cyberbullying on children and young people's mental health and well-being

What we already know about the impact of bullying on children's well-being and mental health

There is a well-established evidence base on the emotional and mental health costs of childhood bullying.

The Children's Society's well-being research has consistently found that children who have been bullied are much more likely to have low subjective well-being than other children. The increased frequency of bullying incidences experienced by children increases their likelihood of having low well-being. Children who have been bullied four or more times in the last three months are six times more likely to have low well-being than children who haven't been bullied.⁸⁶

Being bullied has also been associated with symptoms of mental ill-health (such as depression) that are long-lasting.⁸⁷ Emerging studies are also beginning to demonstrate the direct contributory effect on mental health problems.⁸⁸ Furthermore, a groundbreaking longitudinal study has recently shown that bullying can have damaging effects that can last into adulthood. Younger people who have been bullied in their childhood are more likely to use mental health services long into adulthood compared to those who were not bullied, according to the study.⁸⁹

Bullying is also known to have a negative impact on other areas in children and young people's lives, including their educational attainment.⁹⁰ Adolescents who are bullied are also more likely to misuse alcohol and drugs than those who are not bullied.⁹¹

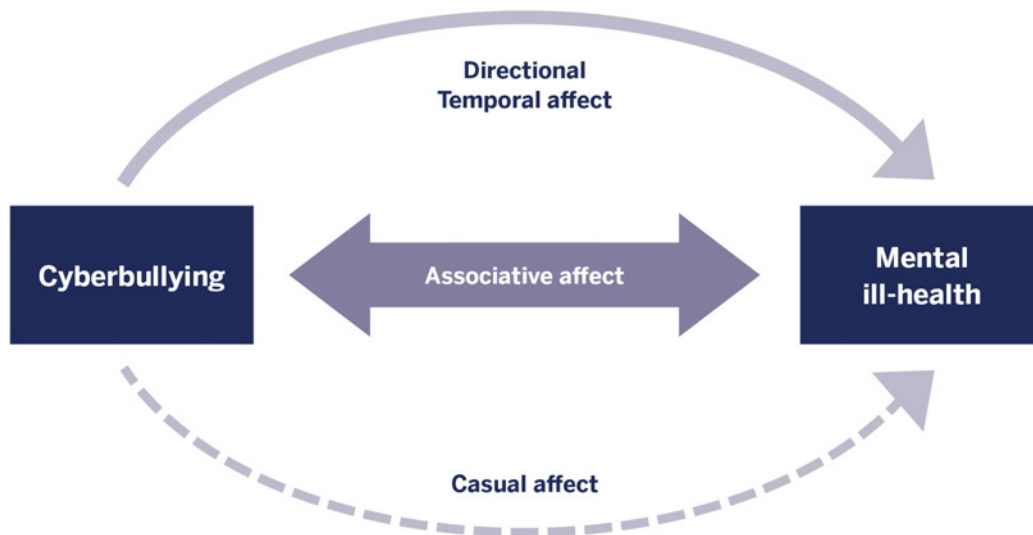
Cyberbullying and its effects on well-being and mental health

The direct impact of cyberbullying on children's mental health and well-being is yet to be extensively examined. The inquiry heard evidence to suggest that the 'disinhibition' effect and the lack of respite that children experience may mean that online bullying can have at least as much of an impact on mental health as it does offline – if not more.

Liam Hackett, Chief Executive of anti-bullying charity Ditch the Label told the inquiry: *'Thirty years ago, home was a safe place, but now there is no escape from the bullying, which creates constant stress and anxiety which is hard to navigate.'* – **Liam Hackett**

Evidence shared with the inquiry by the University of Hertfordshire, University of Sheffield and University College London points to associational, directional and emerging causal links between cyberbullying and children's mental health.

Figure 17: The links between cyberbullying and mental health – the strength of evidence to date



The University of Sheffield pointed the inquiry to a prominent pan-European study that found associational evidence between children’s experiences of cyberbullying and mental health. Analysis found 12.2% of victims of cyberbullying had viewed websites associated with suicide compared to 3.7% of people who were not involved in cyberbullying. It also found 17.7% of victims had viewed websites associated with self-harm, compared to 5.7% of people not involved in cyberbullying.⁹²

Unpublished analysis shared with the inquiry by the University of Hertfordshire of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study for England shows that young people who report having been cyberbullied in the last couple of months are less likely to say that they get enough sleep to concentrate (67% v 81%).⁹³

‘Apps such as TimeHop can remind a user of what they were doing in the past – this can bring back bad memories.’ – Oral evidence from young person, aged 18 to 21

Furthermore, a recent study by Birmingham University found that children and young people under the age of 25 who become victims of cyberbullying are more than twice as likely to enact self-harm and attempt suicide than non-victims. According to this study, perpetrators of cyberbullying are also more likely to experience suicidal thoughts and behaviours.⁹⁴

Such trends should be observed with caution according to evidence submitted by UCL: *‘Individuals that are more likely to be victims of cyber-attacks are potentially also more likely to be characterised by pre-existing mental health conditions. Some evidence from studies looking at traditional forms of bullying (ie face-to-face) indicates that such pre-existing vulnerability may explain some (albeit not fully) of the relationship between traditional bullying and mental well-being.’ – University College London⁹⁵*

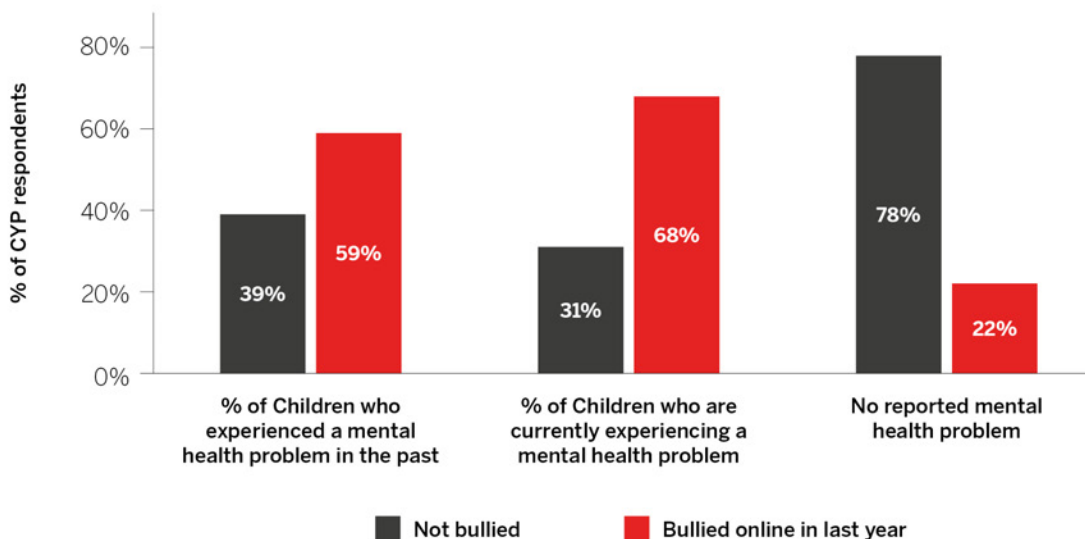
Directional evidence on the effects of cyberbullying on child mental health and well-being outcomes are less established, with few studies demonstrating the deterioration of mental health problems over time following experiences of cyberbullying.⁹⁶

Mark Donkersley of e-Safe Systems, a behaviour monitoring service, works within the education sector offering schools early warning of safeguarding risks. Mr Donkersley shared the following with the inquiry about the increased trends the company sees in cyberbullying behaviour and its association with mental ill-health: *‘Over the last two years, we analysed behaviour across a couple of hundred thousand students and there was a 160 to 170% increase in bullying incidence in that two year period, and in fact every single category of behaviour we see, every single one of them increased. The most prevalent one was mental health, which shot through the roof during this period.’* – **Mark Donkersley, e-Safe Systems**

Overall 45% of children and young people who responded to the inquiry’s survey reported currently experiencing a mental health problem, whilst 47% reported having experienced a mental health problem at some point in the past. This high rate of self-reported mental ill-health amongst respondents may be due to the dissemination of the survey by charities who work closely with young people with experiences of emotional and mental health problems.

However, as shown in Figure 18, even despite the perhaps higher rate of self-reported mental health issues there was a clear difference between children who had been bullied online and those not.

Figure 18: Children and young people’s experience of online bullying and mental ill health



Young people with self-reported experiences of mental health problems were significantly more likely to be cyberbullied than those who had no such experience.

Of those currently experiencing a mental health problem, over two thirds (68%) said they experienced cyberbullying in the last year, compared to 22% who have no experience of a mental health condition.

Forming their identity online and the pressures

Children and young people's behaviours and interactions change when they are online, because their perceptions of self are changed. Often young people find they are more likeable, funnier and more confident online. This is linked to the fact that many people are more disinhibited online.

Young people have told the inquiry that meaning, intention and emotion can be easily misconstrued over social media platforms as it is not possible to read people's faces or easily identify social cues. Dr Papadopoulos explained to the inquiry the impact bullying can have on young people's development and identity.

'Adolescents are prone to taking risk taking behaviours during this time. In the adolescent brain, the prefrontal cortex can be suppressed and this is where we learn to express our feelings of empathy...' – **Dr Linda Papadopoulos, oral evidence**

This pressure to take risks can lead to young people taking part in online bullying as well as being subjected to it, because any difference may make them vulnerable.⁹⁷ Dr Papadopoulos continues to note that identity formation is important to adolescents: *'We also know from a social perspective that identity formation is key. Why is this important? Because identity is the thing that allows us to take risks and speak up about things we're passionate about, where we form our opinions. It's the same thing that makes us different that binds us together to form groups. This is a key point, because whilst we want to be part of a group, we also want to be different. If I'm being bullied, then it gets in the way of all of that and can have lasting consequences on the adolescent brain.'* – **Dr Linda Papadopoulos, oral evidence**

However, emerging research is also finding engagement through social media platforms can provide opportunities for children and young people to increase social capital and alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety.⁹⁸

Impact of online bullying on self-esteem

Being exposed to negative messages or other forms of online bullying can also reinforce negative beliefs that children and young people hold about themselves, their lives and their futures.⁹⁹

Young people at the evidence session told how experiencing online bullying and harassment led to them being more concerned by what content was being posted online about them, and would lead to them monitoring social media more frequently and intently.

The continuous checking of messages, likes, and refreshing content streams can also play a role in heightening underlying anxieties and lowering self-esteem. For some, this can lead to addictive or obsessive beliefs and behaviours.¹⁰⁰

Engaging in online bullying or being a passive bystander to online bullying can also have a negative impact on an individual's self-esteem.¹⁰¹ In the evidence session, the young people who stated that they had not intervened when witnessing online bullying stated that it had not made them feel good about themselves.

Although there is the need for a greater evidence base, some international studies have focused on the motivations for why young people engage in online bullying. These studies have found that there can be a link between engaging in online bullying and adversities, trauma and complexities in their home and personal lives.¹⁰²

The need for further research

What has been evident throughout the course of this inquiry is the lack of evidence demonstrating the causal effects of cyberbullying on children's mental health. Experts and social media companies who gave oral evidence – as well as a number of organisations who submitted written evidence – echoed the need for further research. Longitudinal studies are also needed in this area to increase our understanding of this issue and to explore the impact of cyberbullying on child mental health over time.

6. The role of social media companies in tackling cyberbullying

The inquiry recognises the progress social media companies have made to help ensure children, young people and their families feel empowered and supported online. Social media platforms have invested significant time and money in working with partners (such as schools and community groups) to educate children about their platforms and raise awareness about online harms.¹⁰³

Whilst this is to be commended, the inquiry has heard evidence that these measures do not go far enough in preventing cyberbullying and helping those affected by incidences, including supporting their mental health. This is particularly important as there is evidence to suggest that the majority of adolescents do not seek help from adults when involved in cyberbullying.¹⁰⁴

Holding social media companies to account?

To date, social media companies have largely been ‘marking their own homework’, operating in an ungoverned digital landscape through a system of self-regulation. To hold themselves to account whilst maintaining the flexibility to evolve, self-regulation has been the preferred approach by social media companies and governments across the globe.

However, the ever-growing popularity and usage of social media has brought a range of new risks and harms for users, particularly for children. Responses from social media companies to reports of cyberbullying and harassment have been inconsistent, and in many cases inadequate.

The Government’s Internet Safety Strategy recognises the need for online service providers – including social media companies – to play a greater role in protecting children and young people from online harms, including from cyberbullying.¹⁰⁵ However, there is currently no legal or regulatory framework in the UK that places a duty on social media companies to safeguard children from cyberbullying.

David Wetherall from the NSPCC told the inquiry that: *‘Larger social media companies tend to be better – they have community standards, reporting channels and sophisticated monitoring teams. NSPCC however want the same protection offered to children online as offline. Governments should have standards and uphold these.’* – **David Wetherall, NSPCC, oral evidence**

The inquiry heard from some social media companies who accept the duty they have to ensure their users use their platforms safely and responsibly, but there is no shared understanding and approach to this.

‘We understand the duty we have to ensure our platforms are used responsibly, that users have the tools and knowledge they need to make responsible choices online, and that they are able to flag and report abuse so that it is acted upon.’ – **YouTube and Google UK, written evidence**

‘Yes, there is a responsibility for making sure they can use it in a safe way and to provide the support and tools they need. Absolutely accept that...We are a new kind of technology company that takes responsibility, that has to take responsibility for the way that people use the

platform. Not in the sense of being responsible for what is written online but being the way that people who have a responsibility make sure that their tools are there on the platform and that mechanisms are there for people to resolve their issues and to encourage and facilitate people to use the platform in a positive way and discourage negative activity.’– Facebook and Instagram, oral evidence

This duty to protect children online is relevant to both large and small social media companies, including start-ups who must give strong consideration to the needs of children from the design stage. Respondents to our call for evidence noted that the lack of attention given to the operations of start-up companies potentially drives young people to these less regulated platforms and is placing them at greater risk.

‘There is a risk that by driving young people away from the big companies such as Facebook through negative headlines, they may go to less moderated sites and those anonymous apps that cause greater problems and lack of traceability. Start-up apps are often not within our jurisdiction and redress can be very difficult.’ - Youthworks Consulting, Suffolk Council and University of Suffolk¹⁰⁶

Transparency on outcomes

During the course of this inquiry, the need for greater transparency from social media companies has been clear. It is difficult to assess the success rate of social media platforms in tackling cyberbullying and other digital harms, as companies do not consistently record and report on the nature, volume and outcomes of such complaints made within their systems.

Panel members asked representatives from major social media companies whether they held data on cyberbullying and what information they hold on how reports are dealt with.

A representative from Facebook told the inquiry: *‘I share the view that it would be great to have a much fuller analysis of the reports we receive. The challenge we face whenever we confront this issue is that how you record this stuff will slow down how we take it down. The more administrative we make it, it will slow down the process. We have a huge incentive to take stuff down as quickly as possible and the system is built that way. This is an issue we are seeking to resolve but the reason that this is not done now is predominantly to do with the speed of removal. I completely agree that being more open and transparent about what is happening is an important prerequisite to addressing problems in this area.’ Facebook and Instagram, oral evidence*

YouTube have recently committed to greater transparency by working towards producing regular transparency reports that help policy makers understand the content that is flagged, the scale and action taken. Announcing the move, YouTube’s Chief Executive, Susan Wojcicki explained: *‘We understand that people want a clearer view of how we’re tackling problematic content. Our [Community Guidelines](#) give users notice about what we do not allow on our platforms and we want to share more information about how these are enforced. That’s why in 2018 we will be creating a regular report where we will provide more aggregate data about the flags we receive and the actions we take to remove videos and comments that violate our content policies. We are looking into developing additional tools to help bring even more transparency around flagged content.’ – Susan Wojcicki, CEO of YouTube¹⁰⁷*

Throughout the inquiry, we heard repeatedly that there was poor information and transparency about social media companies moderation processes – including details about the number of moderators, how decisions are made, their training and the tools available to them.

The Government’s green paper Internet Safety Strategy proposes an annual internet safety transparency report that may include metrics around the volume and nature of the reports they receive and how they moderate such content.¹⁰⁸ Such information could be an extremely useful start in helping to paint a full picture about cyberbullying.

What needs to change?

The Government should improve accountability by requiring social media companies to publish data about their response to reports of online bullying. (Recommendation 5)

Preventing cyberbullying

There are a number of approaches social media companies have introduced to prevent negative interactions on their platforms. Whilst few measures are in place to specifically prevent cyberbullying, most platforms have clear policies aimed at preventing unwanted and harmful online exchanges. Social media companies also make use of toolkits and technological solutions to raise awareness to help address cyberbullying.

However it is too often the case that policies and mechanisms aimed at addressing children’s negative experiences on social media are reactive rather than proactive.

Children and young people the inquiry heard from felt that not enough is being done by social media companies to prevent cyberbullying in the first place.

Our survey findings:

- **The overwhelming majority of young people (83%) think social media companies should be doing more to tackle cyberbullying on their sites.**

Policies and guidelines

Social media users will usually first be made aware of how their information will be used and what is expected of them concerning their conduct when they create their account.

Evidence reviewed by the inquiry suggests that terms of service and community guidelines issued by social media companies do not go far enough in communicating rights and expectations to children in a clear and concise way. Liam Hackett told us: *‘Terms and conditions are not usable for young people. They do not read them and so are not understanding their rights. Young people must be involved in this process...Not giving children skills to navigate the internet...becomes trial and error and leaves young people unsafe.’* – **Liam Hackett, Ditch the Label**

This is a key issue that has previously been raised by the Children’s Commissioner for England, who has criticised the ‘impenetrable and largely ignored’ terms and conditions of social media companies.¹⁰⁹ The NSPCC and other respondents to our call for evidence echoed this.

As well as simplifying social media policies, there is a need for them to be regularly reviewed and evaluated for effectiveness according to Dr Nihara Krause in her written submission: *‘All measures should be monitored for effectiveness and regularly updated. Social media companies should link with schools and parents in educating CYP of appropriate use and be transparent of their policies and procedures at all times.’ - Dr Nihara Krause¹¹⁰*

Four out of the six social media companies who shared evidence with the inquiry say they make it explicit in their guidelines that they do not tolerate any form of bullying or harassment on their platform.

‘We have a strong set of community guidelines that go above and beyond the law, setting out what’s allowed and what is not, including prohibiting harassment or intimidation.’ – YouTube, written evidence

‘We have a particular focus on anti-bullying measures and take extra precautions for teens. For example, our anti-bullying policy makes clear we remove content that appears to purposefully target private individuals with the intention of degrading or shaming them.’ – Facebook, written evidence

However, children and young people who have experienced online bullying were more likely to believe that rules on social media platforms about what activities and language is tolerated were not effective (**40%**) than their peers with no experience.

The majority of those who had been bullied (**81%**) felt that having a system in place for banning those who engage in online bullying is an effective measure.

What needs to change?

Ensure that children and young people understand their rights and responsibilities when using social media. (Recommendation 4)

Promote and share best practice in establishing safety by design. (Recommendation 8)

The inquiry heard from one young person who felt that, even when there are clear policies in place, the automated responses (an automatic reply) they receive from social media companies are not effectively identifying cyberbullying: *‘The problem isn’t that these companies don’t have the policies in place, it’s that they can only rely so much on the algorithms that run the report and block system. Too often something clearly breaks rules but isn’t taken down because an automatic response doesn’t recognise it where a human being would. There need to be more actual people who deal with reported content on social media rather than relying on computer algorithms to recognise violating content.’ – CYP survey quote, female, aged 22*

Tools and technological solutions to prevent cyberbullying

To help protect their users from online harms, many social media companies are increasingly employing various tools and technological solutions (such as Artificial Intelligence or Machine Learning) to detect and tackle cyberbullying on their platforms.

In addition to these methods, many companies have specific measures in place to protect children. These include default privacy settings, deterrents and filters to prevent children engaging with strangers or seeing inappropriate or unwanted content.

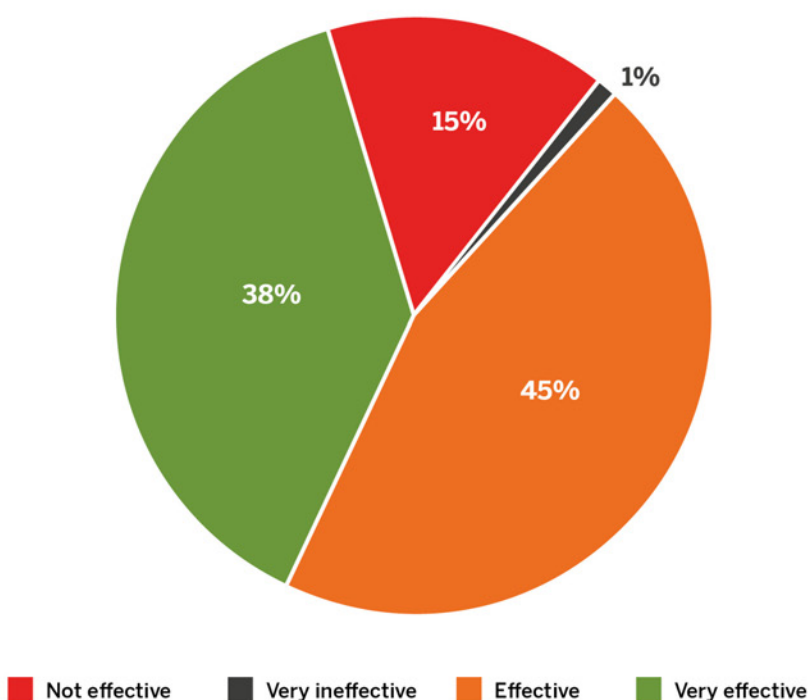
‘When it comes to teenagers, we also take extra precautions. We’ve designed many of our features to remind them who they’re sharing with and to limit their interactions with strangers or people they do not feel comfortable interacting with. For example, if a teenager changes their publishing settings to public, we will warn them that they are doing so, and that others can see the content they are posting.’ – Facebook, written evidence

‘Tumblr launched “Safe Mode” in June 2017. Safe Mode filters sensitive content in a user’s Dashboard and search results. This was part of an ongoing program of product improvements to safeguard young users. The default is “on” for all new users, including adults. Safe Mode is always on for users with a registration age of under 18 years and cannot be turned off.’ – Tumblr, written evidence

‘YouTube features an easy-to-use Help and Safety Tool that lets users contact us about content and comments which breach our guidelines.’ – YouTube, written evidence

A high proportion (**83%**) of children and young people who responded to our survey and had an experience of online bullying in the last year thought that having a private view function on social media was effective in preventing cyberbullying, as shown in Figure 19.

Figure 19: Children and young people’s views on the effectiveness of privacy settings



Some social media platforms are working to introduce advanced technological solutions to help reduce unwanted interactions on their users' accounts. For example, Instagram has recently introduced a new method to automatically filter and block negative comments from appearing in their users comment section.

'Instagram has also launched an innovative new tool to combat bullying online, which is a simple yet powerful keyword moderation tool. Using machine learning, the tool automatically blocks offensive comments. Instagram have engineers using applied machine learning to sift through tens of millions of comments to predict which might be hurtful or unwanted.' – **Instagram, written evidence**

Resources and partnership working to prevent cyberbullying

The inquiry acknowledges the important role parents, schools, the Government and other bodies have to play in supporting children and young people affected by cyberbullying. However, keeping children safe online must be everybody's business, and social media companies are in a unique position to be able to educate young people and the adults in their life.

In recent years, large social media companies have taken positive steps to launch and invest in a range of initiatives aimed at raising awareness of online bullying and safety.

YouTube runs a helpful programme to help young people to spot the signs and understand inappropriate behaviours on its platform.

'For older teenagers, our Internet Citizens workshops tackle cyberbullying and hate speech, among other issues.' – **YouTube, written evidence**

Similarly, Facebook and Instagram both have resource hubs on their platforms to support young people and provide the signposting information they need. However, given what the inquiry has heard, these measures do not go far enough in preventing cyberbullying.

'In 2013, Facebook created an online global resource, our Bullying Prevention Hub, which fills the gap between offline support and online behaviour and provides information for teens, parents, and educators on how to identify and prevent bullying. The content for the hub was developed in partnership with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and has been localised with the help of a wide range of global safety partners.' – **Facebook, written evidence**

'Instagram has developed its own Safety Centre (instagram-together.com), a place to easily access all of the safety features we've built so far, connect with support services and see what we are working on next. Our help centre also works to counter online bullying by educating users on how to control your visibility, address abuse, block people, safety tips for both users and parents, report content and share photos safely, amongst other helpful advice and guides.' – **Instagram, written evidence**

As well as developing their own resources, social media companies are increasingly partnering with organisations that help children and young people in the UK affected by cyberbullying and abuse.

'We work with the NSPCC and the Diana Award to support their anti-bullying campaigns, and provide annual promotion of Anti-Bullying Week and Safer Internet Day which reaches tens of millions of young people. Snapchat is a member of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's Royal Taskforce against Cyberbullying and has supported the Royal Foundation's "Heads Together" campaign.' – **Snapchat, written evidence**

The elevated role social media companies have to play was voiced strongly in our evidence session with children and young people. In particular, young people felt that companies should play a key role in educating young users and their parents about the risks they can face online. The following quote is illustrative of this sentiment: *'This would be particularly effective for those with less education/education about their rights, who may feel overwhelmed by the process of going to the company/police.'* **CYP survey quote, female, aged 15**

Young people also felt that social media companies should look at how they can incorporate an educational element alongside restrictions to ensure that those who breach their guidelines learn from their mistakes.

Twitter provided examples of some responses that they took in response to somebody being deemed to break community guidelines, including placing a 'fence around somebody's account' to limit their ability to post, or providing temporary sanctions.

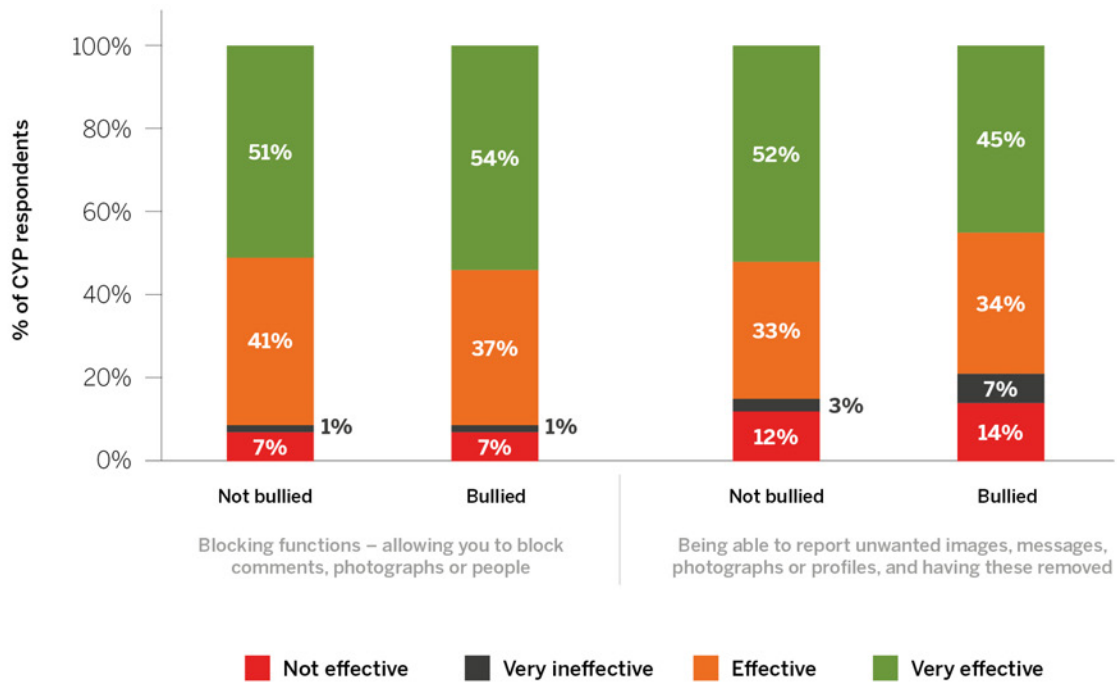
Twitter also told the inquiry that early evaluation demonstrated that some of these measures had been effective in 'nudging people back to good behaviour'.

Cybersmarties, an Ireland-based social media platform used in schools, also found that 99.2% of children stopped using negative words within three days and did not revert back to negative behaviour, thus creating a positive behavioural habit through their Cyber Well-being Education.¹¹¹

Addressing incidences of cyberbullying on social media

When a child has experienced cyberbullying there are often mechanisms in place on the platform they are using to block, report and remove.

Figure 20: Children's and young people's views on the effectiveness of account settings and security



The majority of children and young people (80%) who responded to the inquiry's survey found the ability to report unwanted contact effective, however, 1 in 5 find it ineffective or they are unsure.

However of those who were bullied online, 1 in 5 said reporting measures were not effective – but they were more optimistic about the ability to block unwanted users from their account, with nearly all young people (91%) finding this effective.

Children and young people who provided evidence to the inquiry spoke about their own experiences of cyberbullying. Many felt that reporting mechanisms were slow or did not work altogether.

'Someone made a fake account using my friend's details and pictures, so she kept reporting it, and only when she asked others to report it did it get taken down.' – **Oral evidence from young person, aged 13 to 17**

'If it's (cyberbullying) happening over livestream – how do you get them to stop?' – **Oral evidence from young person, aged 17 to 21**

This was echoed by the London Grid for Learning who state: *'Schools report to us that certain platforms are slow to respond to reporting channels where clear cases of inappropriate and hateful posts or accounts are flagged. A commitment is shown by the major players, however*

the essence of social media – its openness, easy access and encouragement to respond in real time – is at the heart of some of the problems.’ – London Grid for Learning¹¹²

What needs to change?

Social media companies should provide timely, effective and consistent responses to online bullying. (Recommendation 3)

Reporting and the perceived lack of anonymity

Young people who attended the inquiry’s evidence session felt that children and young people don’t really like reporting, as they see it as being a ‘snake’ (telling on) their friends. Many of the young people also thought that reporting was not always anonymous, and they could recount examples from friends where the person being reported easily found out who had reported them.

The lack – or perceived lack – of anonymity is preventing young people from using report functions, as they fear that reporting itself could be a cause of bullying. Platforms should actively communicate that reporting is anonymous.

Young people also told the inquiry that where they had reported cyberbullying to a platform, there was no transparency about when they would hear back, and nobody kept them up to date with progress on their report. They said that sometimes they were aware of reporting just resulting in a request for somebody to remove a piece of content, but there was no recourse if this did not happen. They thought that having a specific agency who could coordinate a response to cyberbullying would be helpful.

All of this further adds to the view – expressed throughout evidence sessions – that the onus is on the person experiencing bullying to report, and there are no real consequences online for those who engage in cyberbullying.

Baroness Harding of Winscombe told the inquiry of the challenges online services face in establishing breaches of their rules due to the sheer volume of reports they receive:

‘Social media companies and ISPs face real technological challenges. Report functions can generate a lot of false positives and negatives. This is a reasonable concern from social media companies.’ – Baroness Harding, oral evidence

In addition to offering report buttons for all content on Facebook, the platform also employs social resolution techniques to engage those who breach its community guidelines.

‘Facebook provides teenagers and other users with the ability to report content that may be inappropriate or of a harassing nature. Every piece of content on our platform has a report button – and every report is reviewed by a human being in our Community Operations team from a number of offices around the world...Even if an offensive post does not violate our Community Standards, people can do something about it. If there is something that you find embarrassing, annoying or offensive, you can use our social resolution tools to help start a conversation with the person who posted it.’ – Facebook, written evidence

'If someone is being bullied or sees content that makes them uncomfortable we encourage them to report it using Instagram's reporting tools. The content is reviewed and removed if it violates our community guidelines. Instagram removes content that contains credible threats or hate speech, content that targets private individuals to degrade or shame them, personal information meant to blackmail or harass someone, and repeated unwanted messages.' –

Instagram, written evidence

After listening to feedback from their users and from stakeholders, Snapchat introduced in-app reporting functions in 2017 to make it easier for young people to report abuse.

'After listening to NGOs and policymakers in the UK and across the world, we have expedited the rollout of in-app reporting. In-app reporting allows Snapchatters to easily report individual Snaps, Stories or accounts containing content which they find offensive or inappropriate. We have a dedicated Trust and Safety team that review abuse reports and take action against violations on a 24/7 basis within 24 hours of becoming aware of a violation.' –

Snapchat, written evidence

Temporary or permanent account suspensions

Blocking and reporting features are inadequate for many young people using social media sites, given that response times are slow and unclear, and outcomes seem automated. This leads to young people not using blocking features. When no action is taken on a report, young people stressed that there must be transparency about why that decision has been taken.

Many young people and respondents to the inquiry's call for evidence suggested that more should be done to respond to those who have been bullying others online, including banning, and time/activity restrictions. This inquiry has concluded that social media companies need to have a range of actions available to them.

However, some experts and social media companies have explained how difficult this can be in practice, with users often having several accounts or only needing to provide an email address to set up an account.

'Twitter have a toolkit of responses they can take, ranging up to banning of accounts – such actions can include temporarily freezing accounts (time-outs). Upon sanction being lifted, users will have to re-read specific rules that they have broken. Twitter have advised that based on their limited evaluation, it looked as if threatening users with a more severe sanction fixed their behaviour.' –

Twitter, written evidence

'Any content which is found to violate our guidelines is removed and may lead to the termination of a Snapchat account.' –

Snapchat, written evidence

However, a representative of Facebook noted that this can be a difficult decision for a social media company: *'We are not going to silence young people on our platform lightly. The question is are we doing what is in the young people's best interests as a whole. Is take-down the only solution? This area is important but narrow.'* –

Facebook, oral evidence

Many of the young people the inquiry heard from felt the onus is on them to deal with the cyberbullying they have experienced, and that those who engage in online bullying face no consequences for their actions. The Royal Society for Public Health support this view: *'There*

are very few “real world” consequences for those who are reported for cyberbullying – unless the victim prints off private messages and takes them to the appropriate authority. What we need to see is the translation of online actions having real world consequences. Currently, this response from social media companies is very poor. There is no link between social media companies and schools, for example.’ – **Royal Society for Public Health**¹¹³

Another issue that came up throughout the survey was that many of those who bully online suffer from poor mental health – so indefinitely blocking their account would potentially take away their support base, which could result in poor mental health outcomes for such individuals.

Children and young people survey quotes

‘Take control and really start tackling it, suspend and remove anyone who cyber bullies, a “three strikes and you’re out” kind of policy where you get suspended the first two or three times and then removed the third or fourth maybe. Also make it much easier and less scary to report someone. Have guidelines on when you need to report and not just shrug it off.’ – CYP survey, female, aged 15

‘Ban the perpetrators for life – I know this would be hard to police/control as people can create new accounts at any time. By possibly creating a barrier where you have to sign up with your national insurance number/passport number to ensure that only one account is made for that person. With this, fake profiles (catfishing) would be immediately prevented and meaning that if someone has been banned for abusive content, then they are simply not allowed to create a new profile. I know that may be slightly harsh, but it would mean people thought twice about posting things.’ – CYP survey, male, aged 20

Striking the balance between fast and effective responses:

The time it takes to both establish and respond to a report of cyberbullying has been a significant issue raised by the young people, stakeholders and social media companies the inquiry heard from.

Most social media companies have targets in place to remove content that breaches its guidelines as quickly as possible, but they do not always get it right. Evidence shared by the Royal Society for Public Health finds that 91% of young people who reported cyberbullying said that no action was taken as a result.¹¹⁴ This was also noted by other organisations including the Anti-Bullying Alliance.

ParentZone shared the following observations: *‘Children tell us that their reports are often ignored and recovery services simply do not exist. The emphasis to date has been on prevention and often peer to peer initiatives. Whilst useful, these place a great deal of responsibility on young people themselves to fix and prevent the problem, and avoid the very real challenge of dealing with the issue when it occurs.’ – ParentZone*¹¹⁵

However, Facebook UK suggested: *‘It’s a balance between the speed in which you respond and get stuff taken down and how much you record. For example, if I were to report to you and say this is nudity that can be very quickly assessed and will come down. If it’s nudity, but also hate speech, but also bullying – this will slow down the removal of the original report category it had been raised under.’ – Facebook and Instagram, oral evidence*

Whilst it is extremely important social media companies detect and act on cyberbullying reports in a timely manner, they must also understand the nature of the content that is reported to them. This will enable them to proactively monitor such cases to prevent cyberbullying on their platforms and help inform the future development of their services.

Baroness Harding suggests we draw on learning from road safety and the measures that have been introduced to protect both drivers and pedestrians.

'We need to encourage and ultimately require better safety technology itself (like the seat belt, the airbag and in future driverless cars). And we need clear consequences for individuals and technology providers (speeding fines and emissions test fines) if they break the rules. We are not, as a society, doing enough of any of these things for the digital world at the moment.' –

Baroness Harding, written evidence

7. Offering support to those affected by cyberbullying

Social media has been instrumental in helping to raise awareness about taboo topics, including mental health. Many children and young people now turn to these platforms to connect with others facing similar challenges or for anonymous advice and information.

The Inquiry received evidence suggesting that social media companies could play a crucial role in promoting well-being and signposting children affected by cyberbullying to emotional support services where appropriate.

Supporting children affected by cyberbullying

Social media companies are making progress towards making their platforms safer and a more positive environment for those affected by cyberbullying. Many now have mechanisms for supporting young people who have experienced, or reported online bullying and other forms of abuse.

For example, microblogging platform Tumblr recently introduced Public Service Announcements (PSA's) to help users who might come across harmful content.

'Tumblr displays interstitial "PSAs" to users in response to searches containing certain trigger words relating suicide, depression, eating disorders, self-harm and domestic violence. These PSAs interrupt the user experience and provide links to expert sources of advice. Where possible, these PSAs are localised for international audiences, including the UK. For example, the suicide-related PSA directs users to the Samaritans.' – **Tumblr, written evidence**

Working with Childline, Facebook and Snapchat have recently launched a pilot to signpost younger users who report bullying to Childline for additional counselling and online support should they want it. This pilot has been launched in partnership with the Royal Foundation's Taskforce on the Prevention of Cyberbullying.¹¹⁶ This inquiry looks forward to the outcome of this pilot, including what lessons have been learned.

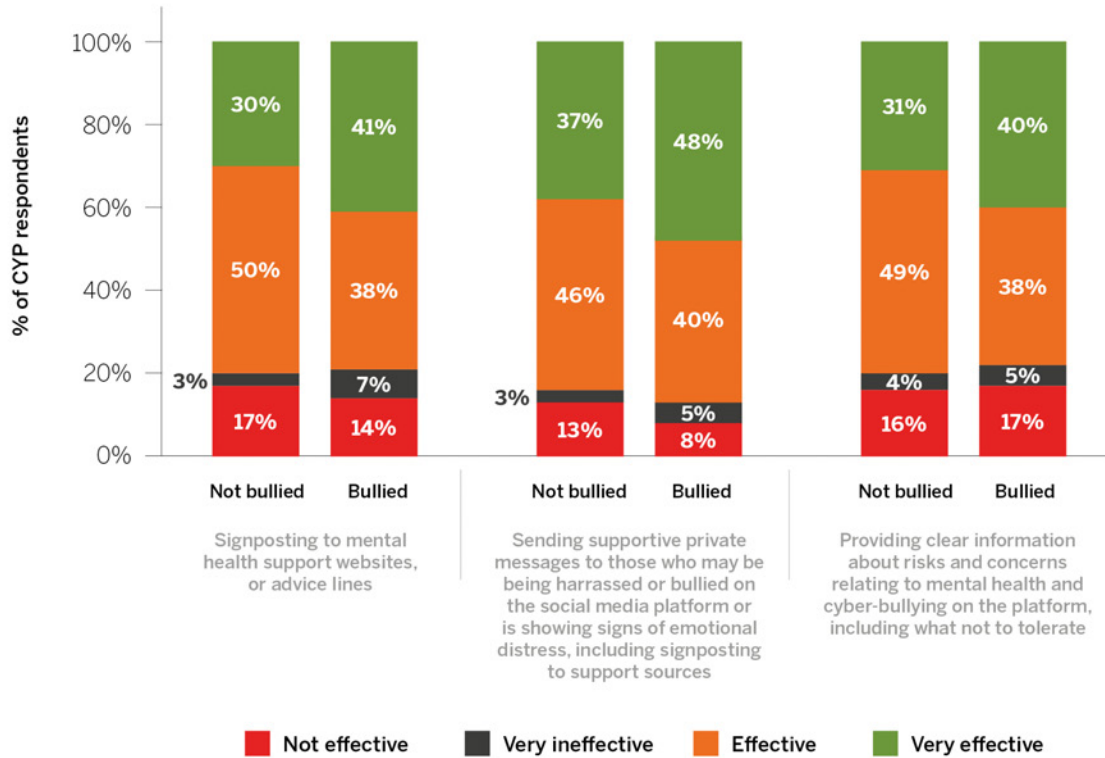
Young people and experts in the field of children's mental health have told the inquiry that social media companies could do more to signpost helplines, support websites or advertising mental health services. Companies could particularly focus on users whose posts and other data suggest they have mental health problems.

Some social media companies, including Google's YouTube, acknowledged this: *'We could do more on messaging that comes with sanctions and signpost to support and have a more intuitive reporting journey.'* – **Google UK, oral evidence**

The majority of children and young people affected by cyberbullying (78%) who responded to the inquiry's survey felt that providing clear information about the risks of cyberbullying to children's mental health on social media is effective.

A significant proportion of young people (79%) also believed that signposting to mental health support sites would be beneficial for those affected by cyberbullying.

Figure 21: Children and young people's views on the effectiveness of social media account support and signposting



Many of the young people who shared their recommendations with the inquiry via the survey felt that the sending of supportive messages to those affected by online bullying was very effective. The box contains some of the suggestions that were shared by respondents.

Children and young people survey quotes

‘Doing surveys every now and again to check on the user.’

‘Have a really clear section in the "help" bit of the website and maybe show this on the "tour" that a lot of websites give you when you join. They could also just give a little pop up window whenever they update this so all the users are aware.’

‘Not treating suicidal messages as something to report and delete (Facebook does this). Advertise help lines.’

‘I think showing people symptoms of mental health problems, instead of just advertising "mental health" because I think personally I'm more likely to take notice of symptoms I've noticed in a friend. And then talk to them and encourage them to talk to someone.’

Promoting positive mental health

Many of the young people who gave evidence to the inquiry felt that social media could be used to support those experiencing cyberbullying by offering counter messages of positivity and support. Barnardo's in Northern Ireland suggest: *'Social media platforms are well placed to signpost those experiencing mental health issues to those organisations who can help children and young people. It can also provide access to others who have experienced issues themselves and can motivate others to seek help.'*¹¹⁷

Nearly three quarters (74%) of the survey's respondents agreed that this is an effective method (as shown in Figure 22). Some social media sites have started to actively promote the mental health and well-being of their young users, but the inquiry believes that more funding, commitment and innovation needs to be invested in this.

Some social media companies are perceived by young people to be doing more than others to promote positive mental health, such as YouTube. Google have been running it's 'It Gets Better Project' on YouTube to support vulnerable groups online, such as those from the LGBT community.

'We are particularly proud of the content created to help and support young people. For example a YouTuber created the 'It Gets Better Project', with its mission to communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them. Started in 2010, the It Gets Better Project wants to remind teenagers in the LGBT community that they are not alone, and it will get better. A number of high profile supporters starred in videos to back our campaign, notably former US President Barack Obama.' – **Google UK, written evidence**

Earlier in this report, we highlighted the particular vulnerabilities some groups of children and young people face of being exposed to cyberbullying. Given that social media provides a base of support for many young people who are coming to terms with their sexuality or gender, or have a disability, social media companies could play a crucial role in promoting positive mental health on their platforms.

In addition to promoting good mental health, social media can also offer a great deal of support to children and young people with pre-existing emotional needs, as discussed in Chapter 4. For example, mental health charity Mind currently run the 'Elefriends' platform allowing for discussions on its forum about mental health.

'Social media provides a means of accessing a community of individuals 24/7 who can provide information, support and understanding. Unlike traditional services it is always open and user-led; the topics which are raised and discussed are decided by the users themselves. As a model, social media purposefully places users at the heart of their services in a way which empowers and encourages them to take ownership; something can be seen as contributing positively to well-being.' – **Mind Elefriends**¹¹⁸

Children and young people survey quotes

'A Netflix-style "you've been browsing Facebook for 2 hours, do you need to take a break?" would be a good idea.' – **Female, aged 24**

'Daily positive and inspirational thoughts posted automatically to people's inbox/ notifications. This can be individual thoughts or the same thought to everyone. Because often when you tune into Facebook or Instagram, where everyone's life looks so perfect (fake) you immediately feel bad about your life. This may remove the severity of this issue.' – **Female, aged 23**

'Be more vigilant about pro-anorexia/pro-self-harm content, especially on platforms like Instagram and Tumblr.' – **Female, aged 21**

'Posting once a week with positive ideas and thoughts and good mental health things to people so they can see that they are not alone and there are people to talk to.' – **Female, aged 15**

'Have a page that has all happy thoughts on it whenever you feel sad.' – **Female, aged 11**

'I don't think it's their jobs to promote good mental health. At the end of the day social media is only a platform, they don't produce the content, we as society do. We as a society need to take responsibility for that and shape better conversations rather than blaming faceless companies.' – **Female, aged 22**

What needs to change?

Social media companies should prioritise the promotion of children and young people's mental health and well-being across their platforms. (Recommendation 4)

8. Conclusion

Our analysis reveals the extent to which children and young people are being affected by cyberbullying, and the impact an experience of online bullying can have on their mental health and well-being.

Bullying is a complex and relational issue, which has become increasingly complex as bullying behaviour evolves online. We have found that cyberbullying takes different forms on different platforms. However, the evidence received by the inquiry was clear that social media companies need to do more than they are currently to prevent and respond effectively to online bullying, and to promote the mental health of their young users.

Cyberbullying only very rarely occurs independently of other forms of bullying, but being bullied online can be a different experience and can have different impacts. Perceived distance and anonymity can mean that online bullying can be more pervasive, intrusive and persistent.

The evidence relating to the impact that cyberbullying has on children's mental health and well-being is in its infancy – but we do know that there is emerging evidence that draws links between the two. No one adult or organisation has the whole picture of what is going on in a child's life and it will take a collaborative response to provide an effective approach to tackling cyberbullying. A collaborative response needs to bring together social media companies, industry, families, Government, schools and VCS organisations.

This report offers a series of achievable recommendations which would go a long way to ensure that:

- Children understand their rights and responsibilities when using social media platforms.
- Parents better understand how to help their children stay safe online.
- Schools equip children with knowledge of online safety and healthy relationships.
- Government sets the right framework to ensure that there are minimum standards across platforms.
- Social media companies take the lead, show that they take their responsibilities towards their users seriously and make it easy for them to report bullying.

9. Full list of recommendations

1) Social media platforms must be age-appropriate, and companies should pilot approaches to identify under-13s and gain explicit parental consent:

- a) The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) statutory code on age-appropriate website design² must require social media companies to provide information about community guidelines and privacy data for all under-18s using their platform.
- b) Industry must pilot approaches to identifying under-13s using their platforms, and gaining the appropriate consent.¹¹⁹
- c) Large social media platforms to develop basic open source safety features, which start-ups and developers can integrate into their platforms and actively promote these.

2) Social media companies should enable children and young people to understand their rights and responsibilities when using social media:

- a) All social media companies must provide age-appropriate community guidelines that clearly covers the following points:
 - i) What behaviour and language is tolerated
 - ii) How you should treat other users on the site
 - iii) Safety features – where to find them and how to use them
 - iv) The level of service that can be expected if a report is made
 - v) Consequences for breaking community guidelines
 - vi) Complaints procedure
- b) Social media platforms to communicate community guidelines to users in an engaging and interactive manner; on a recurring basis; every time the guidelines are updated; and if a user reports content for breaking the community guidelines.
- c) Social media companies should introduce an 'unskippable' reminder of the community guidelines to communicate to any user who has posted content that the platform has removed for breaking the community guidelines.
- d) Social media companies to regularly review their community guidelines and test with a representative group of young people who use their platform to ensure that they remain relevant in a shifting social media landscape.

3) Social media companies should provide timely, effective and consistent responses to online bullying:³

- a) Introduce an industry minimum standard service target for social media companies to respond to reports of cyberbullying adequately within 24 hours, and resolve the majority of reports within 24 hours.
- b) Social media providers should develop training modules for moderators on child development, child protection and mental health.
- c) Platforms should communicate effectively with users when they report content for online bullying or harassment, including the decision about whether the content will be

² This follows a Government amendment to the Data Protection Bill (2017–2019).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/children-to-be-given-extra-protection-online>

³ See reference to possible contents of an 'annual internet safety transparency report' in the Government's Green Paper

removed, a holding response if there are delays, and signposting to mental health advice or support services where appropriate.

- d) All platforms must have a toolkit of responses for moderators to use in response to those who contravene community guidelines, which are designed to 'nudge' users back to good behaviour. These responses can be graduated and could include reminders of community guidelines, temporary restrictions of use⁴, ring-fencing, and banning, such as the yellow-card, red-card system in football. Where appropriate, platforms must signpost those who break community guidelines to UK-based mental health advice or support services.

4) Social media companies should prioritise the promotion of children and young people's mental health and well-being across their platforms:

- a) Social media companies to develop and integrate algorithms that identify online behaviour that may reflect emotional distress or crisis, and signpost to appropriate UK-based support services.
- b) Social media platforms should periodically embed signposting to UK-based mental health support and advice services for under 25s.
- c) Social media companies to work collectively and with relevant UK organisations to develop and promote engaging content that provides advice and information for children on what to do if they or their friends are experiencing emotional distress or mental ill health.

5) The Government should improve accountability by requiring social media companies to publish data about their response to reports of online bullying:

- a) Establish a core requirement for social media companies to determine whether a user is under the age of 18 at the point at which they report content for online bullying.
- b) Require social media companies active in the UK to record the following data on an annual basis:
 - i) The proportion of active users who have reported a breach of the community guidelines in the last 12 months.
 - ii) The number of reports per 10,000 users for breaches of the community guidelines in the last 12 months.
 - iii) The number of children using the site within the UK and their age profiles.
 - iv) The percentage of reports resolved within 24 hours made by a) children in the UK and b) all UK users.
 - v) The percentage of reports by nature including online bullying and harassment made by a) children in the UK and b) all UK users.
 - vi) The percentage of reports by nature that are deemed to break community guidelines that were posted by a) children in the UK and b) all UK users.
- c) Require annual transparency reporting for all social media platforms active in the UK as outlined in the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper, and establish an annual internet safety transparency report to benchmark reporting data. Transparency reporting would

⁴ Including the ability to post, like or comment.

include all the measures outlined in (b) as well as details on the social media companies' approach to moderation, and any changes relating to policy and resourcing.

- d) The Government must develop a centralised process for assessing data gathered through these transparency reports to inform future policy developments.
- e) Introduce an independent and child-friendly arbitration service for users who are dissatisfied with the service or the response from a social media company. The arbitration service to be funded by a social media levy and akin to the Financial Services Ombudsman. The service to be readily signposted to by social media platforms.

6) The Government should commission additional research into the scale of online bullying, and its impact on children and young people:

- a) The Government to commission a 'What works centre for internet safety'⁵, to be funded by a social media levy and to have three main functions in relation to children:
 - i) Research into the impact of the digital world on children and young people⁶
 - ii) Research into best practice interventions for empowering and protecting children online
 - iii) Disseminating knowledge and learning to industry, Government, and the sector.
- b) Develop a standardised definition of online bullying, to be reviewed periodically following consultation with industry, children and young people, and other appropriate organisations.

7) The Government should put children's experiences at the heart of internet safety policy development:

- a) Establish a permanent working group of the reformed UKCIS (UK Council for Internet Safety) to bring together charities, organisations and industry – with an expert advisory panel of children and young people.

8) The Government should teach children and young people to be safe and responsible online, and ensure they know how to respond positively to online harms such as cyberbullying:

- a) Following the implementation of the Children and Social Work Act (2017), the Department for Education should embed core components relating to online safety and digital literacy within the Computing/ICT, PSHE, Relationships and Sex Education, and citizenship curriculum.⁷
- b) Social media companies to develop and test programmes aimed at empowering children and young people to intervene or report when witnessing online bullying.

⁵ The What Works Network aims to support better public services. The network, and the centres it includes, are designed to make the best evidence of 'what works' is available to the people who make decisions on public services. Further information can be accessed [here](#).

⁶ We would recommend specific research should include:

- a longitudinal study to assess the causal links between online bullying and mental health
- an assessment of the causal links between social media and mental health
- research into the prevalence of cyberbullying
- the impact of cyberbullying on different groups
- best practice from international examples.

⁷ These components would include: digital rights as online data subjects; how to develop healthy relationships; empathy and understanding; how to stay safe online and seek help.

c) DCMS should use the social media levy⁸ to commission a public information campaign to provide advice to parents about how they can identify when their children may be experiencing online bullying and how best to support them. The campaign to be co-produced with children and young people.

⁸ As proposed in the Internet Safety Strategy.

10. Appendix

We would like to thank everyone who gave oral and written evidence to the inquiry or assisted this inquiry in other ways.

Evidence sessions:

1. Children and young people's session

The session took place in Portcullis House, Westminster, over two hours. The 14 young people giving evidence were all involved with either YoungMinds or The Children's Society, and between the ages of 14 and 24. The panellists were Alex Chalk MP, William Wragg MP, Sarah Champion MP and John Carr OBE. The session was split into three groups according to age, and with an even spread of panellists, facilitators and other staff.

2. Expert session

The session took place in Portcullis House, Westminster, over two hours. The session was split into two panels, the first comprising of Dr Linda Papadopoulos, Emily Frith (Education Policy Institute) and Mark Donkersley (e-Safe Education); and the second comprising of Liam Hackett (Ditch the Label), Philip Powell (University of Sheffield) and David Wetherall (NSPCC). The panellists comprised of Alex Chalk MP, John Carr OBE, Yvette Cooper MP and Grace Victory.

3. Evidence sessions with social media companies

The session took place for one hour in Portcullis House, Westminster. A representative of Facebook gave evidence on behalf of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. The panellists consisted of Alex Chalk MP, William Wragg MP, John Carr OBE, Grace Victory and Stewart McDonald MP. Separate meetings were also held with representatives from Google UK, Snap Inc, Twitter and Tumblr.

4. Other meetings

The inquiry also consisted of private meetings with Laura Higgins (UK Safer Internet Centre) and Baroness Harding of Winscombe.

Written submissions

Written evidence was submitted to the inquiry by the following organisations:

1. Anti-Bullying Alliance
2. Barnado's Northern Ireland
3. Baroness Harding
4. Childnet
5. CyberSmarties
6. Girlguiding
7. London Grid for Learning (LGfL DigiSafe Team)
8. Mind Elefriends
9. NSPCC
10. Parent Zone
11. Parliament Street

12. Plan International UK
13. Royal Society for Public Health
14. Stem4
15. University College London, Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology
16. University of Hertfordshire, School of Health and Social Work
17. University of Sheffield, Department of Economics
18. Youthworks Consulting, Suffolk Council and University of Suffolk

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Right now in Britain there are children and young people who feel scared, unloved and unable to cope. The Children's Society works with these young people, step by step, for as long as it takes.

We listen. We support. We act.

There are no simple answers so we work with others to tackle complex problems. Only together can we make a difference to the lives of children now and in the future.

Because no child should feel alone.

YOUNGMINDS

YoungMinds is the UK's leading charity championing the wellbeing and mental health of young people.

We exist so that young people have the strongest possible voice in improving their mental health. We strive to make sure everything, from Government policy to practice in schools and services, is driven by young people's experiences and aspirations.

We support parents to help their children through difficult times, we equip professionals to provide the best possible support to the young people that they work with, and we empower young people to change their world.

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