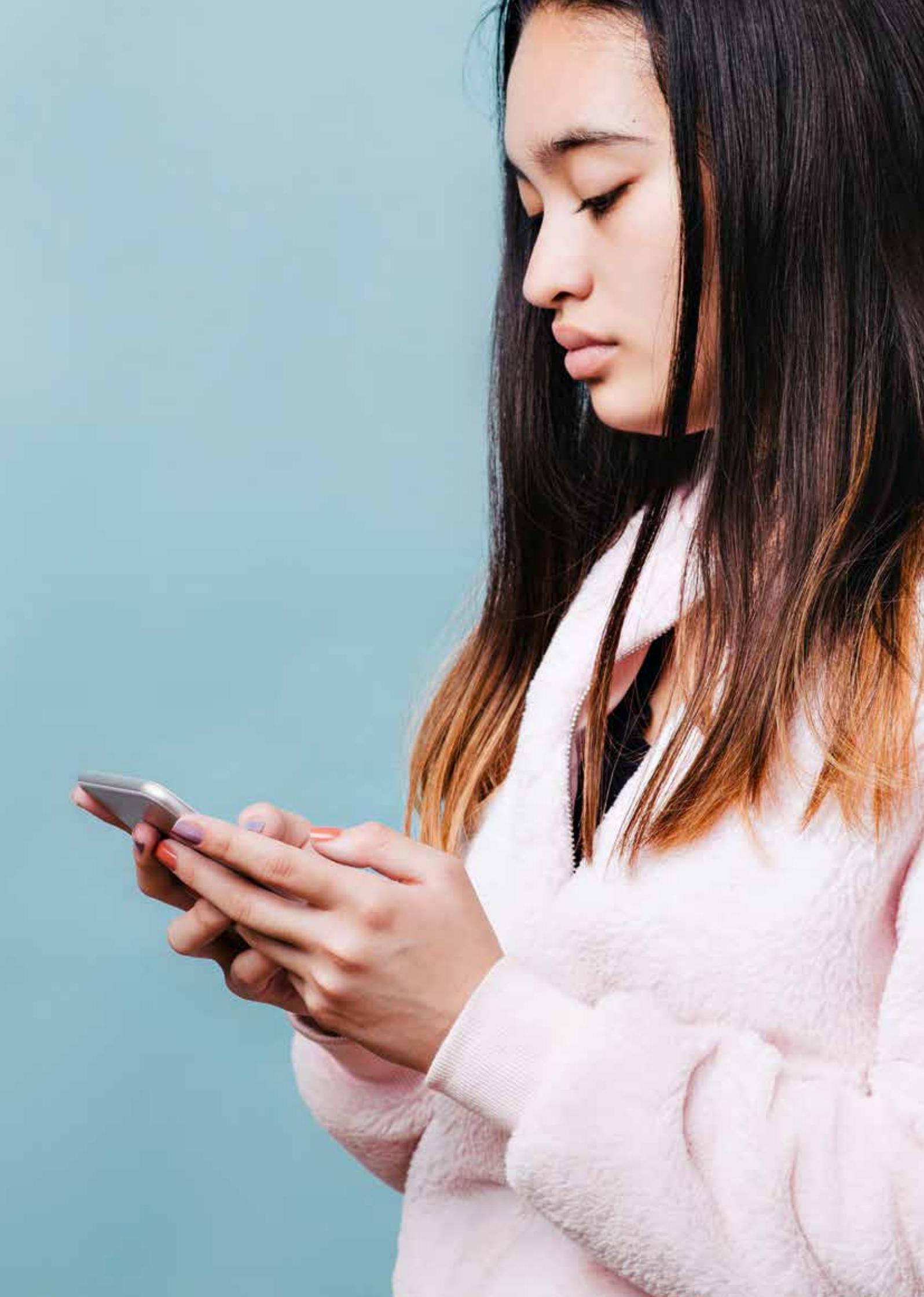# Vulnerable Children in a Digital World

Adrienne Katz &
Dr Aiman El Asam,
in partnership with
with Internet Matters

Contents

Note

The Cybersurvey is an annual survey of young people's views and online experiences run by Youthworks since 2008. Over the last 10 years, 38,000 young people have participated. A research partnership has been established between Youthworks and Dr Aiman El Asam of the Department of Psychology at the University of Kingston to study samples of this data further.

Evidence for this position paper is drawn from Cybersurvey data and reports by Adrienne Katz and research papers by this partnership Dr Aiman El Asam and Adrienne Katz:

- Street, C., Katz, A. 2016, Evaluating the Response to Online Safety Among Local Authority Services. By Youthworks Consulting

- Dr Aiman El Asam and Adrienne Katz 2018, 'Vulnerable Young People: Their Experience of Online Risks'. Human-Computer Interaction.

- Dr Aiman El Asam and Adrienne Katz (In preparation). 'Vulnerable offline is vulnerable online' a study of looked after children and young carers.

All reports from The Cybersurvey can be accessed at **www.thecybersurvey.co.uk.**

We wish to thank Suffolk County Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council and Nottinghamshire County Council for enabling young people to respond to the Cybersurveys used here.

Foreword

internet matters.org

Carolyn Bunting
CEO Internet Matters

Internet Matters wants every child to safely benefit from connected technology. That's why we were delighted to partner with Youthworks Consulting to turn their academic research into this report. It is not acceptable that vulnerable children who need our help most are not only missing out on opportunities to flourish online but are often experiencing the very worst that the online world can be.

This report takes the conversation on – to challenge and inspire all of us; parents, teachers, frontline service workers and corporate parents to ask better, more nuanced questions, of ourselves and the children and young people in our care. We must have up to date resources for our front-line service workers so that they can better understand the online challenges young people are facing. How much better would it be if they could also help these vulnerable young people use the internet well?

Resolving these challenges is a task bigger than one Internet Matters can take on independently. This is an immensely important piece of work, given the gravity of the situation some of these young people find themselves in and the sheer number of children involved. We welcome the opportunity to work together with a number of expert organisations striving to help vulnerable children flourish online.

Children's COMMISSIONER

Anne Longfield
Children's Commissioner for England

"The experiences of vulnerable children have too often been neglected in conversations about children's interaction with the digital world. This report is a great start to securing accurate and nationally representative data on the online risks for these children. We look forward to working with Youthworks Consulting and Internet Matters to expand the reach of the insights in this report."

Believe in children Barnardo's

Javed Khan
Chief Executive, Barnardo's

"Vulnerable children are more likely to be at risk from online dangers than their peers, and it's vital that professionals working with young people understand the risks and how to help keep children safe. This Internet Matters report is a very welcome resource, explaining why we need to incorporate online risks into assessments and support. This is about responding to children's lived experiences in the digital age. We would urge everyone working with vulnerable children to engage fully with the report's findings and recommendations."

NCA National Crime Agency

Roy McComb
Deputy Director, Vulnerabilities Command, National Crime Agency

"Understanding children's lived experience is essential to the National Crime Agency's efforts to protect them from online sexual abuse and exploitation. This report presents valuable new evidence of the impact a child's vulnerabilities can have on the risks they might encounter online. We would encourage anyone working with children and young people to consider its implications for their essential role in safeguarding them."

Unequal online

There can be no doubt of the significant change connected technology has had on the day to day lives of children and young people, and the pace at which the technology they are using develops is relentless.

What is clear from our research is that the support networks around vulnerable children have not yet caught up with the reliance many of them have on their devices and the connectivity it brings them. Although it is readily accepted that some children and young people are more vulnerable than others we must now systematically and thoroughly consider the digital dimension in their lives to ensure we can better protect them from online risk.

The Good Childhood Report shows that 18% of children live with seven or more serious problems, such as fear of crime, domestic violence and emotional neglect. One in five children do not have stability because of residential transience. More than a quarter live with a parent who has a mental health difficulty while almost 10% act as young carers for someone in their family.[1]

Children and young people may have physical, emotional or mental health problems of their own, including disabilities and special needs or speech and language difficulties.[2] Increasing numbers of our young people have mental health difficulties,[3] while others exhibit emotional distress. When adverse childhood experiences are acknowledged, it is evident that certain children require additional support.

Despite these documented adversities, some vulnerable children remain hidden and neglected. The Children's Commissioner for England has raised awareness of many hidden groups and described the risks faced by vulnerable young people as 'the biggest social justice challenge of our time'.[4]

It is not surprising therefore that vulnerability should extend to digital life. Online, despite the advantages of technology, some children's vulnerabilities are exacerbated, and others are ill prepared for safe internet use. This briefing paper will highlight how some young people are vulnerable online in specific ways and suggest some solutions.

Lost in digital space

Vulnerable children's digital lives seldom receive the same nuanced and sensitive attention that 'real life' adversity tends to attract. In terms of policy, safeguarding and specialised provision, they remain hidden. At best they receive the same generic online safety advice as all other children, while specialist intervention is required.

The debate about time spent online and the impact on young people's mental health is ongoing, with a narrow focus on 'screen time' or social media. However, a review of the literature on children's time spent online by Kardefelt-Winter for UNICEF points out that 'It is not feasible to investigate the effects of digital technology in isolation from children's lives in a broader sense.'[5] The activities or distress displaced by 'screen time' in the lives of vulnerable children are not necessarily positive or more desirable.

Perhaps, as argued by Phippen (2018), the concept of online safety and safeguarding requires expansion and nuance.[6] It needs to be acknowledged that some online encounters and experiences are harmful to certain children, while others are beneficial. The current debate might distract from and obscure some areas for concern. These include:

- Vulnerable children miss out on online safety education or find it does not seem relevant, given their concerns. They point out it is often given 'too late'.[7]

- Lack of training and assessment tools for use in cases with a digital component, among agencies who work with vulnerable children[8]

- Exposure to harmful content such as pro-anorexia, self-harm or suicide sites could be a greater risk than social media and is increasing[9]

- Existing offline vulnerabilities significantly predict certain types of risk[10]

- Experience of one high risk category predicts the likelihood of encountering others. Interventions therefore require a wider and more nuanced response beyond the problem the young person initially reports[11]

- There is a hierarchy of risk in which some vulnerable groups are significantly more at risk than others in specific ways.[12]

- Teens' trust in adults to solve online problems for them is low[13]

A range of agencies interact with vulnerable children, yet a response analysis by Street and Katz (2016) for a local authority found that these agencies often lack the specialist training required to deal with complex cases with an online component, do not collate data and do not have appropriate assessment tools to use with children and young people. A majority of local authority services were using assessment tools designed to identify child sexual exploitation, with only minor exploration of other aspects of the young person's online life.

Agencies were collecting little or no data on the types of online issues seen among the young people with whom they worked, making it difficult to identify trends or evaluate their service. This also meant that without data they could not flag up whether a young person had presented before with other high-risk online scenarios. Given the findings of El Asam and Katz (2018), this approach risks missing opportunities for intervention, because experiencing one category of online risk was found to predict certain other risks.[14]

Safe online use or digital literacy is a basic life skill[15] yet a sizeable minority of teenagers simply do not have this skill. The result is a widening gap between the majority of young people who are becoming increasingly digitally adept and a vulnerable minority whose online life puts them at risk of harm.[16] Their behaviour in the digital world is influenced by vulnerabilities already present offline and compounded by risks and harms they encounter online. For them, a 'one size fits all'

online safety education is simply inadequate, if they received this at all.

Another group are losing out. The Cybersurvey has found that internet avoidance is reported by some children, mainly young girls, who fear the digital space because they have heard scare stories about what could happen to them. *'Someone could find me and take me away.'* They become less skilled or confident, as their peers become better at solving problems and more adept at spotting scams and assessing risks.

Miss it, miss out

Some of the most vulnerable young people are missing out on online safety education. Vulnerable pupils might be absent from school for medical reasons or go through many placement changes if they are in care. This means having to settle into a new school several times during their school years.[17]

If bullying and online safety are addressed only occasionally rather than embedded into the life of the school, it becomes more likely that vulnerable children will miss out (A report for Internet Matters found that 27% of secondary schools evaluated only deliver online safety education once a year).[18] Where online safety education is delivered very rarely, students can lose trust in adults as a source of help if or when they have online problems. Just half of secondary school pupils in a survey (of 15 secondary schools) said there was an adult at school they could talk to if they felt upset about something that has happened to them online.[19] Adults need to demonstrate engagement with online issues and maintain an ongoing dialogue with young people that is age appropriate and responsive if they are to be trusted to help. One-off sessions are not sufficient.

Young carers are often absent from school due to their care-giving role, and their parents may not be in a position to provide online safety advice, so they can miss out on learning to identify and respond to online risks. El Asam and Katz found that young carers were significantly more likely to encounter

high risk scenarios online than their non-vulnerable peers. This is especially acute for those young carers who also experience several short bouts of foster care if their parent is occasionally too ill or unable to care for them.[20]

More than a quarter of children with a chronic or longstanding illness spend five or more hours a day online and were significantly more likely to say they had not received any online safety education. They told the Cybersurvey that they were most likely to learn about online safety from a friend. In schools where mobile phones are banned, there may be little opportunity for young people to explore worries about life online or develop the digital skills necessary because there is no positive engagement with mobiles. Research has shown that having little or no exposure to the digital world might be a disadvantage in today's connected environment.[21]

Of young people who need help with English, only 35% told the Cybersurvey that their online safety education was very good. It has been pointed out by Carrick-Davis in work with young people in Pupil Referral Units that poor language or reading skills disadvantages some students when it comes to reading or understanding terms and conditions on social media, or other websites and applications.[22]

*Looked after children are **7 times more likely** than other children to have their personal details hacked or stolen.*

Motivation beats rules – challenges for online safety education

The right content?

The content of online safety education is increasingly being questioned by researchers. Jones et al (2014) point out that methods used when giving advice in other areas of life, such as drugs and sex education were changed after it was shown that 'scare stories followed by rules' did not have the desired impact. Yet their analysis of online safety programmes showed that this approach has been retained in a large number of programmes widely taught to young people.[23]

It is likely that motivation and emotional need, poor understanding of relationships, and peer pressure, have more influence than rules. As one girl of 14 put it in the Cybersurvey, *'When I am upset, the rules go out of my head'*. Another explained her reasons for sharing explicit images of herself as *'I was in a relationship and I felt I had to.'* The motivations, prior traumas and emotional needs of troubled or vulnerable young people can make it more likely that they come to harm online.[24] Unless this is understood, it is not clear how their needs will be met.

Right for all?

Another question is whether the advice is effective for groups of young people with difficulties or those who experience adversities. The Cybersurvey revealed that 'Looked After Children' were the group least satisfied with the quality of the online safety education they had received, with 31% saying it was not good enough. They were three times more likely than their peers to try and get around blocks or filters, and almost seven times more likely to have had their personal details hacked or stolen. Of this group 45% were using chatrooms and they tended to overshare, posting about what they were

doing and uploading photos more than all other vulnerable groups except those with mental health difficulties.[25]

Further analysis in our research paper on this data showed that despite advice received from parents, carers and schools, looked after children and young carers were significantly more at risk of an array of online harms than their peers with no difficulties.[26] This suggests that the advice, if it is given, may be heard but not acted upon. The challenge is to convert knowledge into action when there are powerful emotional needs driving young people's actions, whilst being aware that young people who do not feel good about themselves, lack confidence or are unhappy or introverted, tend to go online to compensate. Banning 'screens' is not the answer.

Evidence based?

A largescale study by Pryzbylski and Weinstein (2017) quantifying the relations between digital screen use and the mental wellbeing of adolescents showed that a moderate amount of screen time was not intrinsically harmful and may be advantageous in a connected world. The relationship between digital screen time and mental wellbeing is non-linear. The researchers consider the wider social and developmental contexts surrounding digital screen use and when the activities took place – weekdays or weekends. The teens could engage in digital activities between 22 mins and 2 hours 13 mins a day longer on the weekends before evidence of negative effects were found. Furthermore, not all digital activities were considered equal.

Challenges for caregivers

To rebel or not to rebel?

Research into teenagers' responses to parents' efforts to restrict online use or give online safety advice suggests that some styles can backfire; producing resistance and might prompt teenagers to hide their use. Considering teenagers' propensity for risk-taking and the possibility that they may resist, rebel or conceal their use if restricted, research by Weinstein and Przybylski proposes that parents should use a style that is supportive of autonomy with teenagers. They showed that 'motivation framing' in this way was more likely to engage otherwise rebellious teenagers and reduce resistance or concealment when caregivers sought to restrict use of digital devices.[27]

Relevant for our needs?

Given that among the vulnerable groups studied in our paper there were young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties, and others with mental health, learning or communication difficulties, it should not be surprising that skilled, nuanced delivery of online safety messages would be required for these populations. Yet there is little evidence that they are receiving this at present. Jones et al (2014) point out that we know little about which messages are most effective. What is needed is a thorough long-term evaluation of several online safety education programmes.[28]

The challenge is to convert knowledge into action when there are powerful emotional needs driving young people's actions

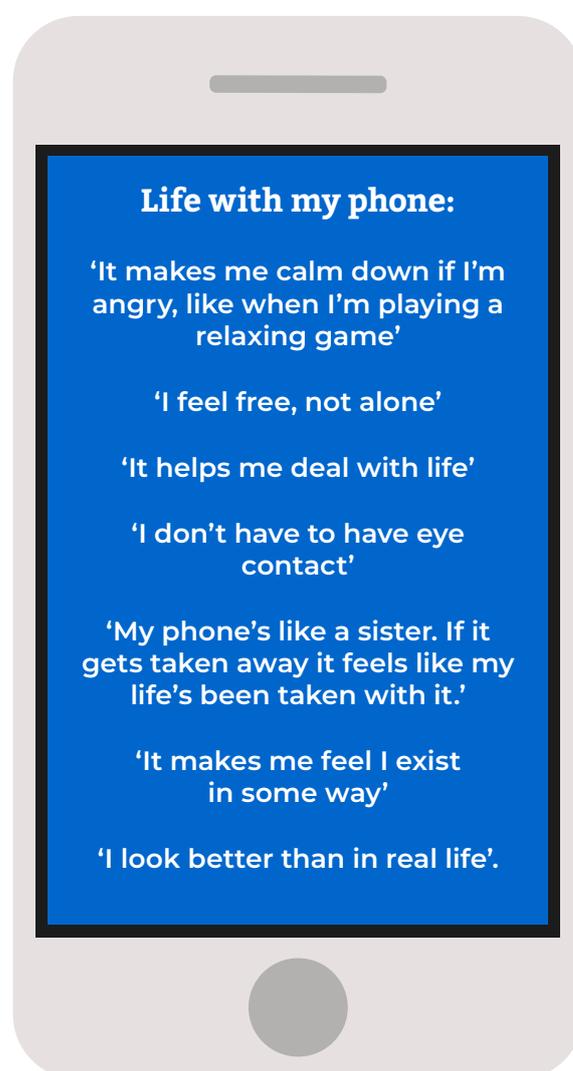## 'A window into a whole world' – for some

The digital environment is a great equaliser for many vulnerable children. Technology assists and enables a disabled child to play games and joke with friends online without barriers. This is also the case for those with speech and hearing difficulties. Young people can find others going through the same experience and support one another. They can seek advice and help, or escape their worries through enjoying music, films or videos. They say they relax, avoid boredom, manage moods and have intense social interactions. It *'takes my mind off things when I play games'*. They also learn. The Internet is, as one boy wrote: *'A window into a whole world'.*

Asked how their smartphones made them feel, a quarter of all children and young people aged 10 -16, told the Cybersurvey they felt 'addicted' to their phones. Smartphones are an essential device to those with speech or hearing loss, one third of whom say they are 'addicted' to theirs, as are 31% of children who need help with English. For vulnerable children the phone represents safety: *'I feel I can ring my mum'*, it offers status and belonging, *'It makes me fit in'*, *'It makes me a person'.*[29]

They do not describe 'addiction' in the medical sense but illustrate how vital their phones are to them.

Because of the opportunities offered by technology, it is all the more important that every child is enabled to make use of it safely. Thornham and Cruz (2016)

point out that less privileged young people tend to use the internet solely via their mobile. As a result, their access is somewhat restricted. Vulnerable children can be further disadvantaged if a 'digital divide' develops, conferring advantages on young people according to how safe they are online and what they can access.

Life with my phone:

'It makes me calm down if I'm angry, like when I'm playing a relaxing game'

'I feel free, not alone'

'It helps me deal with life'

'I don't have to have eye contact'

'My phone's like a sister. If it gets taken away it feels like my life's been taken with it.'

'It makes me feel I exist in some way'

'I look better than in real life'.

About the study

What research evidence prompted this work?

- Adversities are not present in isolation. Vulnerable children tend to live with several difficulties

- Vulnerable children experience multiple victimisations

- Isolation, weak offline social networks and poor social skills are unlikely to help develop quality friendships online

- Vulnerable children lack relevant advice on staying safe online

- Online safety education often delivers a generic set of rules and warnings without addressing motivation or emotional needs, despite evidence that socially isolated or introverted teens engage in risky online behaviours

The annual Cybersurvey by Youthworks repeatedly showed that some young people were more vulnerable online than others. More in-depth analysis was needed.

With these observations in mind, our research study was designed to explore the digital lives of vulnerable children and their susceptibility to online risks. Five groups of vulnerable young people were identified from a sample of 2,988 young people aged 10-16. The following groups of respondents were formed:

Vulnerable groups studied

Family Vulnerability	Communication Difficulties	Physical Disabilities	Special Educational Needs	Mental Health Difficulties
'I am a young carer' 'I live in care'	'I need help with English' 'I have speech and language difficulties' 'I have hearing difficulties'	'I have a physical disability' 'I have vision difficulties' 'I have a long-standing illness'	'I have learning difficulties' 'I have other forms of Special Educational Needs'	'I have a mental health difficulty'

Online risks studied

High Risk Online Scenarios (HROS) were grouped into four risk categories, using commonly used terms: Content, Contact, Conduct and Cyberscams. These we call the 4Cs.

Contact	Content	Conduct	Cyberscams
High risk online relationships involving sexting and reasons for doing so:	**Visiting or being exposed to websites:**	**High risk conduct**	**Abuse of personal data:**
Pressured to do so, blackmail,	that urge me to be very thin,	Use of chat rooms,	I have had:
I was tricked into it,	that talk about self-harming or trying to kill themselves,	I look at pages meant for adults,	my social media account hacked,
I was in a relationship and I wanted to share the picture,	promoting hatred or racist views,	visiting online gambling sites,	personal details stolen or hacked,
I was in a relationship and pressured to share a picture,	giving dangerous advice,	downloading movies or music without paying.	credit card details stolen and used,
due to threats I shared it.	selling illegal goods		I've been: tricked into paying money for something I did not want to buy,
I just tried it for fun.	that show nude pictures or videos I did not search for,		I've been tricked into buying fake goods.'
	with very violent pictures or videos I did not want to see,		
	items from an open question.		

The study asked:

- Does being vulnerable offline predict online vulnerability?
- Does each offline vulnerability predict particular types of risk?
- Does experience of risk predict further risks?

Analysis

- Multiple linear regression analysis showed that being in any of the five vulnerable groups significantly predicted a higher overall score for a basket of all High Risk Online Experiences (HROEs).
- Statistical analysis also showed that individually each of the categories of risk (4Cs) can be explained by different vulnerabilities.

- Furthermore, experiencing one of the high-risk categories predicted the experience of specific other risk categories.
- Vulnerability plus experience of high-risk scenarios combine to make it likely the young person will experience several other forms of high-risk scenario:

Table 1:

Risks	Contact	Content	Conduct	Cyberscams	Overall risk – all 4Cs' together
Vulnerabilities					
SEN	+				+
Communication			+	+	+
Family/Social				+	+
Mental Health					+
Physical Disability			+		+

Offline vulnerabilities predict different risks, but all are significant for a basket of all 4 categories of high online risk experiences.
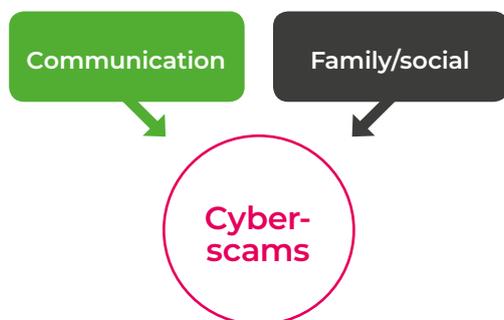
*Diagrams 1-4: How Vulnerabilities predict individual risks*
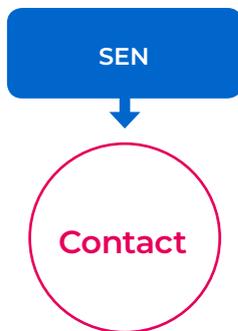
1. Contact Risks are predicted by the vulnerable group with special educational needs (SEN).
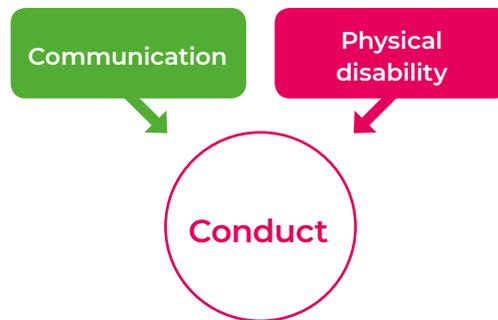
2. Conduct Risks are predicted by vulnerable groups having a physical disability or a communication difficulty.


3. Cyberscams are predicted by vulnerable groups with communication difficulties and family or social vulnerability.
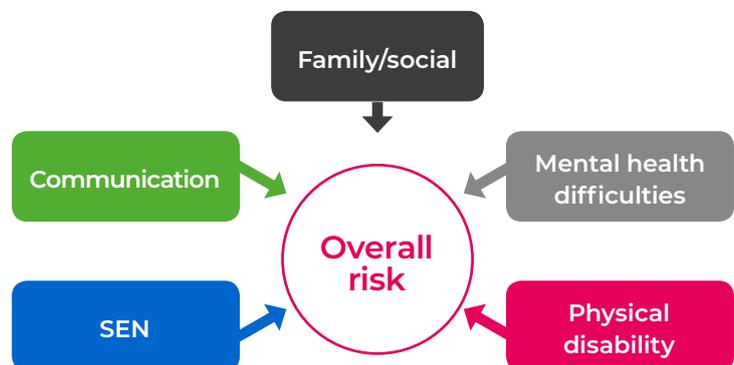

4. All vulnerable groups predicted the likelihood of experiencing a basket of all risks. (Overall risk).

The following diagrams illustrate the interplay between types of risk. For example, experiencing one makes it more likely that the young person will experience certain others. Other variables play a role such as age, gender, experience of cyberaggression (including cyberbullying) and the extent to which young people network (and overshare) and the extent of their internet use.

Diagrams 5-8 illustrate additional demographic factors that predict each of the 4 categories of risk.
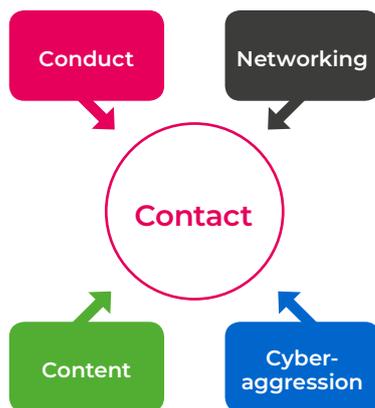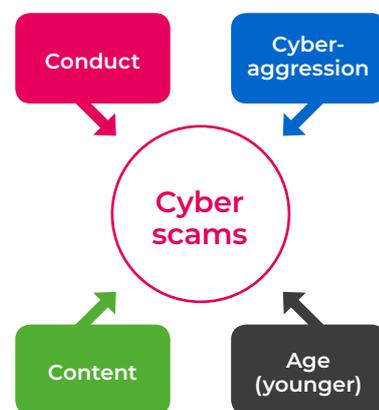

5. Contact risk was predicted by experiencing Content or Conduct risks, and high levels of networking or experience of cyberaggression.
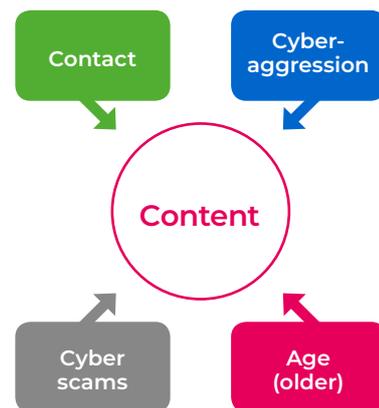
6. Content risk is more likely when Cyberscams, Cyberaggression or Contact risks are experienced. While age (being older) also contributed to this risk.
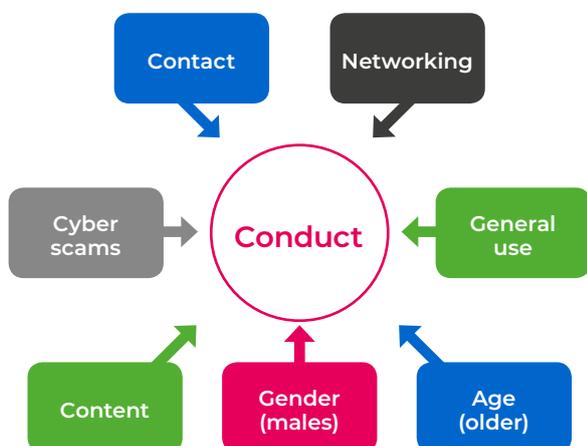
7. Conduct risk was predicted by all other risk categories, high general use of the internet, older teenagers and being male.

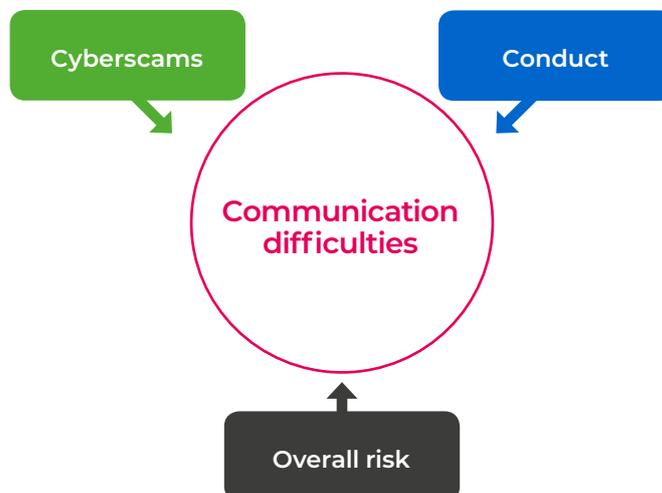**8. Cyberscams** are predicted by experiencing Content or Conduct risks, being a victim of Cyberaggression and being younger.

Diagrams 9-13: How each of the 5 vulnerable groups predicts online risks

9. A family/social vulnerability predicts Cyberscams and a higher likelihood of a basket of overall risks.

10. Communication difficulties predict Conduct Risks and Cyberscams as well as a basket of overall risks.

Overall risk

Mental health difficulties

11. **Mental Health Difficulties** predict a basket of overall risks.

Conduct

Physical disabiltity

Overall risk

12. **Physical Disability** predicts experience of a Conduct Risk and the basket of overall risks.

Contact

SEN

Overall risk

13. **Special Educational Needs (SEN)** predict Contact risks and a basket of overall risks.

Results: Vulnerability predicts risk

Images from ISTOCK, posed by models

What does young people's offline vulnerability tell us about the risks they are more likely to face online? By looking at each vulnerable group in turn, this discussion will explore what is known about these young people that might explain their online experiences of the risk categories studied. The results of our research study will be given, followed by messages from the young people in the Cybersurvey using the dataset from which the study is developed.

Family and social vulnerability: Young carers and children in care

Research shows that young carers are more frequently withdrawn, or anxious. They tend to have low self-esteem, with behaviour difficulties or self-destructive behaviour.[36] They spend long hours at home due to caring responsibilities and can feel they are missing out on the social lives their peers lead. Carers go online for entertainment, to socialise and often to shop for the family. With high levels of special educational or disability needs themselves, they are also more likely to be living with a mother who has no educational qualifications or who may not have English as a first language.[37] Given these challenges, they need help accessing relevant online safety education, followed by support to put this knowledge into action.

Children in care may be living away from home following a court decision, because of the inability of their family to care for them, or because of neglect, abuse, substance misuse or mental ill health of a parent.

After the trauma of being taken away from home a child may go through many moves necessitating school changes, along with adjusting to new carers,

as documented in the Children's Commissioner's Stability Index.[38] Their attainment levels may suffer as a consequence.[39] All these contributing factors, and their own levels of behavioural and emotional problems[40] and mental health difficulties[41] may influence how they act online and the searches they make. These factors may also suggest they have missed out on learning how to be safe.

Neglect is a common reason for being taken into the care system. This prior neglect can result in developmental, behavioural and emotional problems[42] suggesting that they might seek new relationships, possibly online that provide the interaction and response they are seeking.

When compared to their peers, abused teens were found more likely to have racy social media profiles or experience sexual advances from people they did not know. Both these behaviours are separately linked to meeting strangers offline.[43] Pre-care experiences such as maltreatment and neglect are thought to persist[44] and children taken into care due to abuse are more at risk of sexual victimisation and exploitation.[45]

What did this vulnerability group predict?

- Family vulnerability (being in care or being a young carer) predicted high overall online risk scores (a 'basket' of all high-risk scenarios).

- In addition, they are particularly susceptible to Cyberscams.

- The study reveals a significant relationship between experiencing Cyberscams and being a victim of cyber aggression, suggesting that if a young person reports a Cyberscam risk, they should be questioned about experiences of bullying and online aggression. Equally, if they report online aggression, support should include addressing Cyberscams with them.

- A young person who is experiencing Cyberscams may have been exposed to harmful Content. Analysis showed that exposure to Content and Conduct risks makes it more likely that the young person will also experience Cyberscams.

Insights from the Cybersurvey:

- Negative experiences online:
    - 14% said they had had credit card details hacked.
    - 58% of Young Carers and 48% of those in care said they had been cyberbullied compared to 25% of young people with no vulnerabilities.

- Online safety education:
    - Young carers miss out on advice from home; only 55% of Young Carers received advice from parents or carers on how to stay safe online compared to 62% of other young people.
    - While two thirds of young people in care do report getting advice from parents or carers on staying safe online, 31% said it was 'not good enough or useless.'

- Time online:
    - More than half of the young carers surveyed spent five or more hours online per day.
    - In a workshop to discuss the survey results, young carers reported that the adult they cared for was 'always on a screen'.

Children and young people with special educational needs

Young people tend to see no boundaries between on or offline life[46] and often become victims online, of someone who knows them offline and is aware of their vulnerability. In this way the perpetrator has the knowledge to manipulate their target especially if they have SEN.[47] They may be persuaded to send explicit photos because they are tricked into believing this is a loving relationship. Young people with special educational needs have been found to be more at risk from abuse.[48]

The teen years are a developmental period in which risk taking is to be expected. Enjoyment of adventure, challenge and risk[49] may be heightened in some people. However, in this group there are -

by definition - young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties. It is essential to consider whether their risk-taking behaviour is likely to be expressed online as well as offline.

The interplay of their multiple adversities offline can lead to very different online experiences. For some, going online will provide a positive space to escape from or compensate for their offline reality; a way to find sensation and fun.[50] Others who are socially isolated and introverted may lack social skills and therefore be less active or lively online in the way that they interact with friends. They tend to disclose and share less in contrast to their more extrovert peers. This can increase their social exclusion.[51]

What did this vulnerability group predict?

- A significantly higher overall score for a basket of all online risks could be predicted for those with SEN.

- Young people in this group are significantly more likely to experience Contact online risks, including sexting under pressure, coercion, blackmail or threats to send more images. They appear to be preyed upon and singled out. They may not recognise when an apparent friend is manipulating them.

- Experiencing Contact risks is also associated with a greater risk of seeing harmful Content, experiencing Conduct risks, higher networking use and experiencing Cyber Aggression.

- Being a victim of Cyber Aggression also predicts a high likelihood of experiencing the basket of all High-Risk Online Experiences.

Insights from the Cybersurvey:

Compared to young people with no difficulties, those with a range of special educational needs were:

- One third more likely to say they were not taught how to stay safe online; one third more likely to say it was 'useless' and significantly more likely to say they never follow it if they were taught. They were also twice as likely to say it was given too early,

- Those with learning difficulties were one third more likely to spend more than 5 hours per day online than peers, and one third more likely to have their social media account hacked,

- Of these children and young people 27% view sites promoting self- harm compared to 17% of non-vulnerable peers, and 25% often view pro anorexia sites in contrast to 17% of peers.

Communication difficulties

Although they network less than their peers, young people with communication difficulties are more likely to visit gambling sites and spend more time in chatrooms. Chatrooms facilitate immediate and direct communication between users and when targeted at teenagers, are known for explicit sexual talk, inuendo, obscene language[52] and aggressive sexual solicitations.[53]

Young people with hearing loss are more likely than peers to suffer from depression in their teenage years.[54] This should be considered when supporting their online lives, given that in this present study, poor wellbeing predicted greater online risk. Some said they feel isolated from teenage social life and seek it online.

Certain difficulties or impairments can put young people at heightened risk of sexual exploitation. Carers and schools should be trained to recognise these.[55]

Young people with language or reading difficulties may struggle to understand terms and conditions on websites and apps or when shopping online. Carrick-Davis found when working with young people in a PRU (2011) that this can increase their risk of falling prey to commercial scams.

What did this vulnerability group predict?

- Young people with communication difficulties are significantly vulnerable to the basket of all high-risk online scenarios.

- They are significantly susceptible to Cyberscams and Conduct risks.

- Having a communication difficulty was significantly associated with experience of Cyber aggression.

Insights from the Cybersurvey:

Young people with hearing loss were more likely than peers with no difficulties to be involved in sexting and five times more likely to say that the 'internet often left me with thoughts and feelings that were upsetting'.[56] They were twice as likely to be cyberbullied than their non-vulnerable peers.

Mental health difficulties

In 2016, Mental Health Today described the rise in self-harm among adolescents in England and Wales.[57] The rise in hospital admissions gave impetus to a national debate about the online pro-suicide and pro-self-harm information easily available to children. Concerns about the mental health of adolescents are high on the agenda as current NHS Digital figures for active referrals of young people show a steady increase in the last two years (June 2018). In the Cybersurvey, more young people report having viewed a pro-anorexia site than have been cyberbullied.[58]

Online forums set up to be supportive can connect socially isolated people and provide immense help and comfort. But Daine et al 2013 conducted a systematic review and found that people who went online in search of information about self-harm and suicide were also shown violent imagery and frequently acted out what they had seen online. In this way, internet use was linked to more violent methods of self-harm. The authors suggest that viewing this content might normalise self-harm.[59]

The Cybersurvey sample used in our study showed that certain vulnerable young people are repeatedly returning to such sites, particularly those with self-reported mental health difficulties, 44% of whom said they 'often' visited such sites (offered a choice of possible answers that included 'once or twice' or 'never').

Mental health charity, Young Minds, in a review of research, describes the relationship between the online world and clinical mental health problems as complex with no simple causality.[60]

Our study shows that existing vulnerabilities predict certain online risks, but it does not show whether online experiences cause vulnerabilities such as mental health difficulties. It is likely that someone with pre-existing mental health difficulties could be impacted in different ways by their online experiences and find their mental and emotional health problems compounded by exposure to certain content or encounters. We have shown that children and young people with mental health difficulties are significantly more likely to experience all the high-risk online scenarios.

What did this vulnerability group predict?

- Young people with self-reported mental health vulnerability were at significantly high risk for the entire basket of high-risk online scenarios rather than a single category of risk.

- Being a victim of cyber aggression significantly predicts the likelihood of experiencing all the high-risk online scenarios. This should be considered because of the following messages from the Cybersurvey.

Insights from the Cybersurvey:

40% of young people with self-reported mental health difficulties report having been cyberbullied in contrast to 23% of those with none. Young people who feel 'I am not good enough' most of the time were more than twice as likely to have been cyberbullied (49%). A link between being cyberbullied and visiting pro-suicide websites has been found by Gorzig (2016) who found that both those who were cyberbullied and the perpetrators, were likely to be viewing this content. [61]

Those with mental health difficulties were less likely to be gaming but far more active than peers in posting photos and sharing what they were doing. They were also more likely than other groups to visit sites displaying adult content.

Physical Disabilities

Like the other vulnerable groups studied, young people with physical disabilities were at risk for the basket of all High-Risk Online Scenarios. In addition, they were at risk from Conduct risks. The potential for self-expression and the opportunity to develop new friendships is liberating for children with disabilities[62] but if they are at significantly higher overall risk, they could lose this positive attribute and be driven away from internet use if they become fearful. Some report being online for very long periods of the day, which may suggest a lack of social interaction with others.

Cyberspace offers anonymity and a freedom to meet strangers, identity can be hidden or curated and disinhibition is a factor of online life. The Anti-Bullying Alliance showed that children with special needs or disabilities were often afraid of using the internet because of a fear of being cyberbullied.

What did this vulnerability group predict?

- Like all the vulnerable groups, those with a physical disability are significantly more likely to experience a basket of all High-Risk Online Scenarios than non-vulnerable peers.

- They are at particular risk for Conduct risks.

Insights from the Cybersurvey:

Over half the children and young people with physical disabilities reported spending over 5 hours per day online. Their parents were least likely to limit their screen time and only 54% said their parents had taught them how to stay safe online. They were dissatisfied with online safety advice or education they had received from parents or schools. 32% said it was not good enough or useless in contrast to 8% of peers with no difficulties. They also tend to visit sites with adult content more than their peers and over one third had experienced their social media account being hacked

Vulnerabilities intersect

While it is valuable to study each vulnerability, in life, adversities and vulnerable conditions do not appear in isolation but intersect not only with each other but with age and gender. The combination of age, gender, vulnerability and the digital environment is complex and requires a nuanced response. What is harmful to a vulnerable younger child may not be harmful to a teenager who has not experienced childhood adversity. Messages need to be age appropriate but also communicated in a manner that is tailored to the listener. Ability, communication skills and educational key stages vary enormously. As teenagers increasingly become bored with the idea of learning more about online safety, it becomes more challenging to engage them and deliver a meaningful message. For some vulnerable children, one reason that they give for not being attentive during an online safety session is that they are worrying about real major problems in their life and simply do not have the capacity to view as urgent the potential risks being described in the session. They can shut it out, or feel they know it already or it 'won't happen to me'.

Gender and age play a role in digital life, for example boys are three times more likely than girls to visit online gambling sites and almost twice as likely as girls to be tricked into buying fake goods.[63]

- Boys are more likely to be involved in Conduct risks.

- Girls are more active networkers.

- Girls are impacted by considerable misogyny online and the cruelty of anonymous disinhibited users.

- Young people who prefer not to state their gender are particularly at risk online.

Some possible reasons for these results

Contributory factors include:

- Being disadvantaged.

- Being cyberbullied or a victim of online aggression.

- Social isolation.

- Poor emotional health.

- The intersection of several vulnerabilities and adverse early childhood experiences.

- A parent- child divide: young people are digitally skilled but less emotionally mature, parents feel inadequate when faced with digital problem solving.

- Online safety education does not meet the needs of vulnerable young people.

- Prior trauma or neglect.

- Few, if any, models of a healthy relationship.

- Special educational needs which make it difficult to recognise manipulation.

- Communication difficulties, either physical or due to first language.

- The deep emotional needs of children and young people to connect and be accepted by people they love and care about.

- Risk-taking - common in adolescence.

The role of emotional health

The Cybersurvey is tracking changes in answers on emotional health. In 2016, pro-anorexia sites were viewed 'often' i.e. more than once or twice, by 40% of young people who *'feel I am not good enough most of the time'* in contrast to 11% of the total sample.[64] Whether they felt this way before visiting these sites or were made to feel that way by visiting

them is not known. Visiting such sites again and again would be likely to exacerbate feelings such as *'I feel I am not good enough'*.

There is evidence that this issue is increasing. The percentage of all respondents who visited pro-anorexia sites once or twice rose from 21% in 2014 to 29% in 2017, a year when young people were more likely to view anorexia sites than experience cyberbullying.[65] Given that we know vulnerable groups are particularly likely to visit these sites, all services working with or caring for them should be alert to this.

Universal online safety education is not enough

Online safety education tends to be transmitted through parents and schools. A few young people report that they turn to the web or learn from siblings and other relatives.[66] What they currently lack is a fully integrated way of learning about relationships and staying safe that is delivered all the way through childhood and adolescence in a continuum. This approach is recommended by the PSHE Association. The debate centres around the Education Act 2002 and the Academies Act 2010, which states that schools must provide a *'balanced and broadly-based curriculum'* which promotes *'the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life'*.

The new RSE basic curriculum (to be compulsory in schools in England)[67] provides welcome opportunities to begin to close this gap, however the workforce requires training in online safety to fully enable this. Moreover, special attention must be given to children with vulnerabilities - and this report begins to suggest how to do that. RSE could deliver nuanced education and support to vulnerable children.

Parents are struggling

Parental engagement with their children's online safety education peaks between the ages of 11-12 (often linked to giving them a mobile phone). However, the time of greatest risk is between 15-16 which is precisely the age at which parents are reducing their advice- giving.[68] Too few parents check ratings of games or films their children view[69]. Overturning an age-old understanding that children can turn to their parents or other trusted adults for help, we see a growing gap in trust when it comes to online problems. Young people are less likely to turn to any adult for help when something goes wrong online than if they had a problem in real life. Of the young people surveyed for the Make a Noise programme, 92% said that they would turn to a teacher for something that happened face to face, whereas only 34% would turn to a teacher for something that happened online.[70] London Grid for Learning found that only 56% of young people they surveyed talk to their parents about online safety at least once a year.

Young people report that parents give less online safety advice to those who prefer not to state their gender (50% compared to 66% of girls and 58% of boys[71]). Yet the survey showed these teenagers faced many high-risk situations online.

The vulnerable groups report receiving less parental support to stay safe online. This can produce a combination of a lack of advice and support from parents on how to stay safe and missed school-based advice through absenteeism or multiple moves for those such as children in care who commonly face several placements and disruption.

Too many secondary schools give online safety advice only once a year[72] and generally provide a one size fits all generic set of descriptions of risks followed by a set of rules. This results in little or inadequate support for troubled or vulnerable young people who may turn to the digital world to compensate for their unsatisfying or distressing offline lives; or for those whose needs mean they need additional help to benefit safely from all that

the technology can offer. There are children and young people whose parents are simply not able to provide this.

Vulnerable children or young people may struggle to understand the advice or indeed recognize when a relationship is becoming manipulative or controlling. Their emotional need to connect, or for affirmation may override any safety rules they have learned. Some parents or carers will not be digitally knowledgeable. Other major family problems may crowd out the need to address online safety and language challenges may compromise their understanding of the advice in English.

Interventions and Safeguarding: Seeing the whole child

When a vulnerable young person reports a significant risk or actual harm in their online life, the steps taken should include a wider consideration of their known offline vulnerabilities and an exploration of their online experiences that goes beyond the issue that is the subject of the intervention.

Finkelhor et al (2007) of the Crimes Against Children Research Centre show that some children and young people suffer a wide range of separate kinds of victimization at the hands of a variety of offenders over a short period of time. This could include physical and emotional abuse by caregivers, assaults and harassment by peers, sexual victimisations by acquaintances and strangers and exposure to neighbourhood crime and violence. They found that 10% of children in a national sample reported four or more different kinds of victimisation in a single year.

They also found that once children become what they term 'poly-victims' their risk for additional victimisation tends to remain very elevated. If the wider picture of many victimisations is not apparent, it could seem that the high traumatic symptom measures seen, relate only to the one issue that has been reported.

Effective interventions and therapeutic responses will need to consider all the pieces of the jig-saw. Researchers, professionals and frontline practitioners need tools and training to identify potential poly-victims and to intervene in ways that can prevent the 'most serious victimisation careers and the most adversely affected children.'[73]

- Staff training will be needed for the new RSE curriculum. The introduction of this new curriculum offers opportunities for staff to gain training in effective online safety teaching integrated with Relationships and Sex Education.

- More nuanced support for parents or carers in other languages and levels of accessibility.

- Training for frontline staff to look beyond the issue reported by the young person and consider the whole child. Good data and record keeping could assist in this, along with regular staff briefings on current trends seen.

Safeguarding: Keeping Children Safe in Education now includes some vulnerable groups:

Any child may benefit from early help, but all school and college staff should be particularly alert to the potential need for early intervention for a child who:

- is disabled and has specific additional needs.

- has special educational needs (whether or not they have a statutory education, health and care plan).

- is a young carer.

- is showing signs of being drawn in to anti-social or criminal behaviour, including gang involvement and association with organised crime groups.

- is frequently missing/goes missing from care or from home.

- is misusing drugs or alcohol themselves.

- is at risk of modern slavery, trafficking or exploitation[74].

- is in a family circumstance presenting challenges for the child, such as substance abuse, adult mental health problems or domestic abuse.

- has returned to their family from care.

- is showing early signs of abuse and/or neglect.

- is at risk of being radicalised or exploited.

- is a privately fostered child.

Indicators of abuse and neglect are explicitly referred to in advice on safeguarding.[75] It is explained that abuse can occur wholly online or used to facilitate offline abuse.
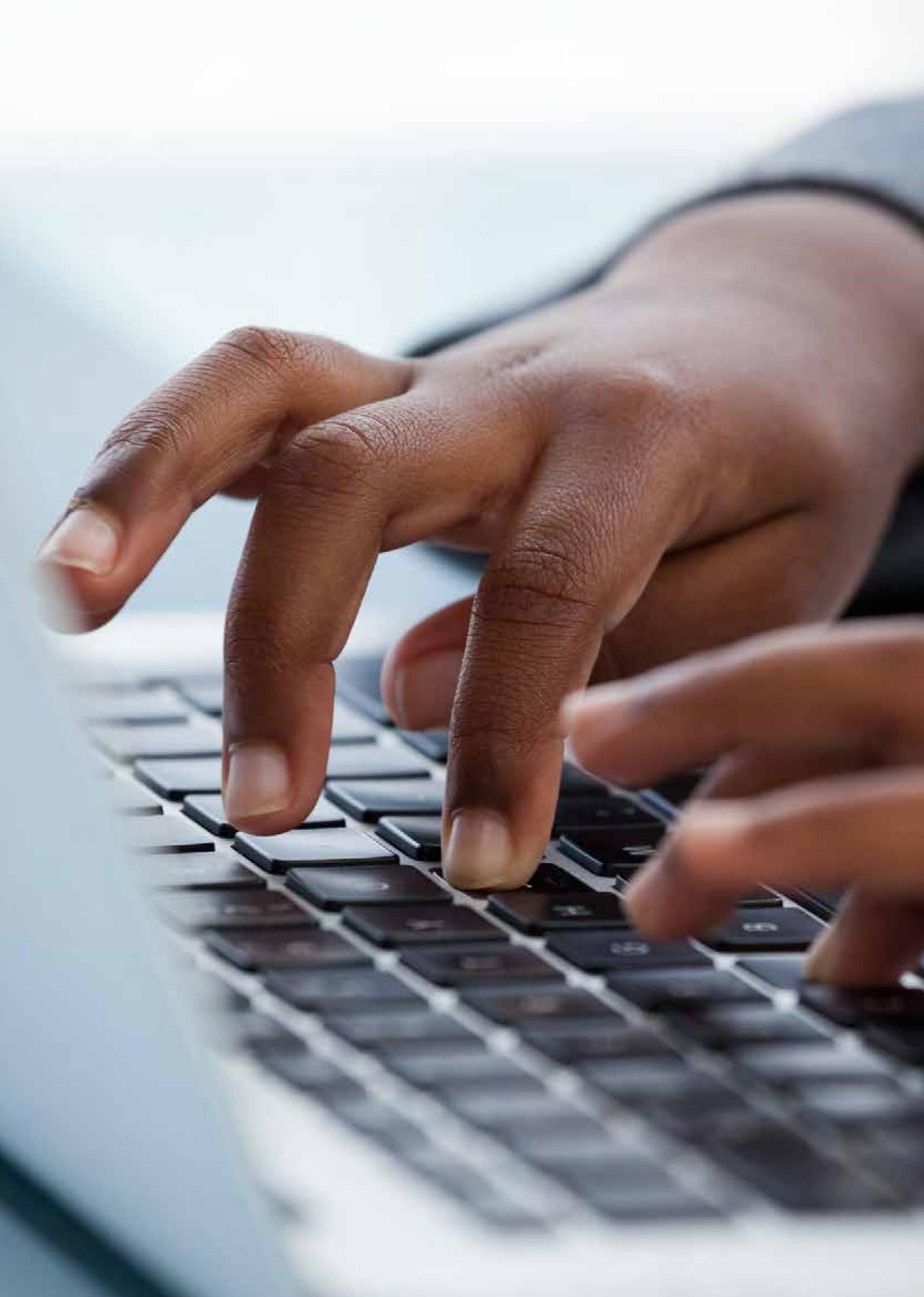
What should be done?
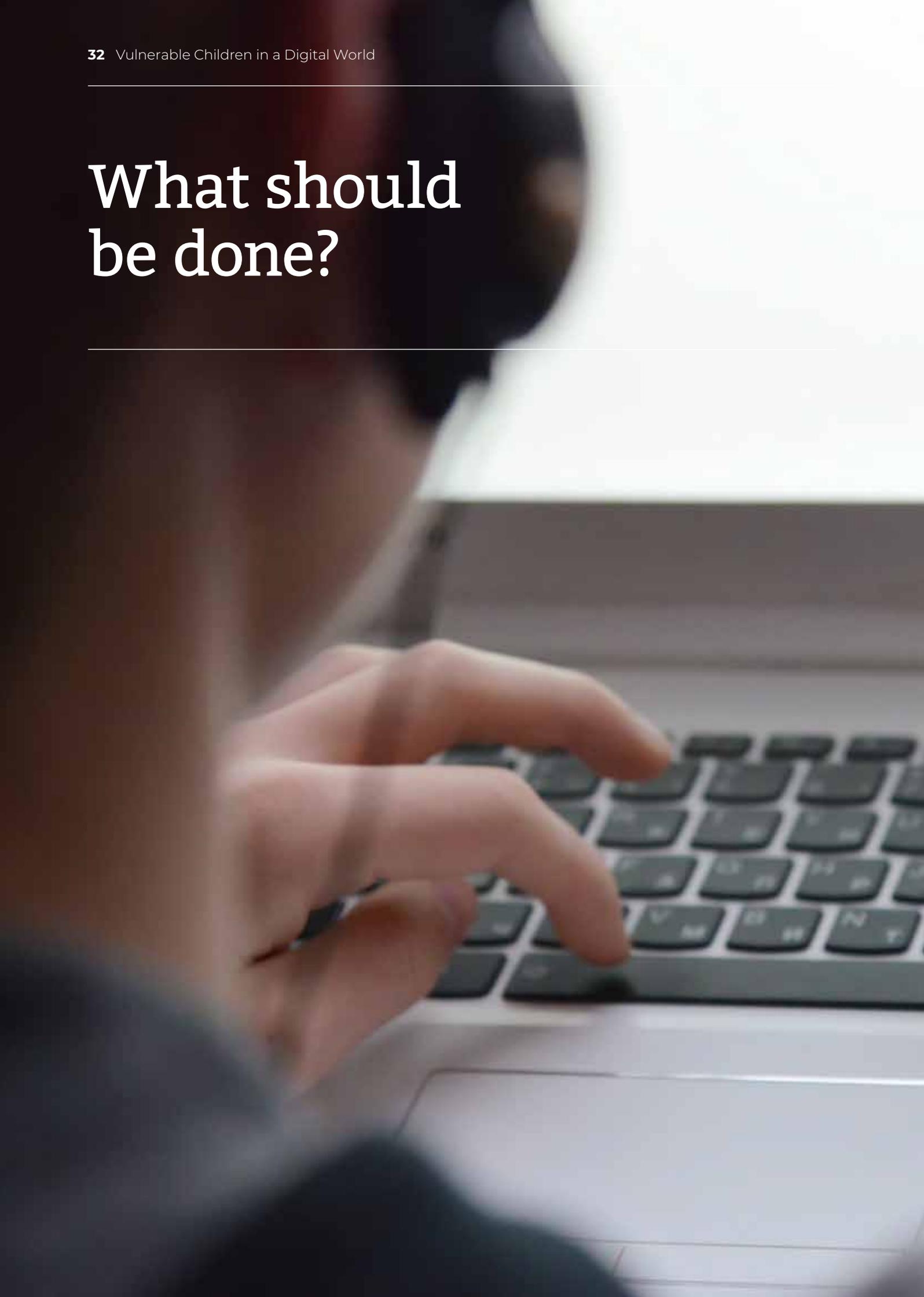
Acknowledge the extent of the population of vulnerable children

Over 2 million children in England are living in families with complex needs – children are living in families with domestic abuse, parental substance abuse and mental health problems. The Children's Commissioner's office estimate that there are 100,000 children living in households where an adult faces all three of these issues to a severe extent, with 420,000 living with a parent facing all three issues to a moderate extent.

These figures do not include children who have their own personal difficulties with health, disability, special needs or emotional and mental health.[76]

We need to create and implement responsive online safety education and support programmes that are based on evidence and evaluation. These should also be targeted at parents and carers (including corporate parents).

Insights for parents and carers

1. Avoid reacting to media panic headlines

Parents should be encouraged to be sceptical about media panics and simplistic ideas such as limiting 'screen time' or banning social media. These messages overlook the very real harm accessible to vulnerable young people with emotional difficulties because they turn parents into clock watchers or gate keepers, rather than asking them to be aware of what their children do online and which websites or platforms they visit. And, most of all, how they are feeling about their life.

2. Screens: time online or context, creativity and content?

Screen time should be looked at alongside the young person's weekday activities and after school structured activities, sports and friendships. It is possible that young people who are not involved in weekday activities after school are spending more time online and are missing out on social development and other aspects of wellbeing. Researchers conducting a large-scale study found a slight impact if young people spent excessive amounts of time online, but this effect was small. The researchers note that this was smaller than the impact of a missed breakfast.[77]

What the online activities are, the content that is seen and the encounters experienced, are considerably more important than the sole measurement of time. A bookish child might be absorbed reading on a tablet.[78]

3. Don't ban social media

Banning social media is a pointless parental response because teens rapidly move to new apps and find other ways to communicate if banned from popular social media platforms known to parents. Some of these smaller messaging or image sharing apps may provide anonymity, fewer privacy settings and less moderation than the 'giants' - making interactions even less safe. Chats via text may never take place on social media, or via Wi-Fi, but through the phone line. Public Wi-fi may be used if the home lacks or restricts access to broadband.

4. Know what questions to ask

Harmful content could be a greater risk than social media. Parents should consider their child's emotional state. Young people who say 'Most of the time I don't feel good enough' are four times more likely to be visiting pro-anorexia sites 'often' than their peers.[79]

Knowing what questions to ask would help detect or avert serious risk situations. If the user is needy, engaging in high risk encounters or visiting websites with harmful content such as pro-self-harm; suicide or anorexia sites, we have to understand why that person is repeatedly visiting such content. Until parents and carers, practitioners and professionals do that, we will fail to address their needs or tackle root causes. Research shows that one reason young people go online, is because of loneliness.[80] Professional help may be needed if a young person is repeatedly viewing high risk content.

5. Support the child's desire for automony

Instead of delivering a rigid set of rules as commands or bans, work together with your child to help them become more skilled and self-sufficient. Encourage the child to help advise younger siblings or parents using their expertise. In that way parents can know how much or how little their child knows and understands.

6. Don't replace carer interaction with digital devices

Large numbers of young people with disabilities report being online for very lengthy periods and while the internet is an enabler and an equaliser, it should not become a replacement for carer interaction.

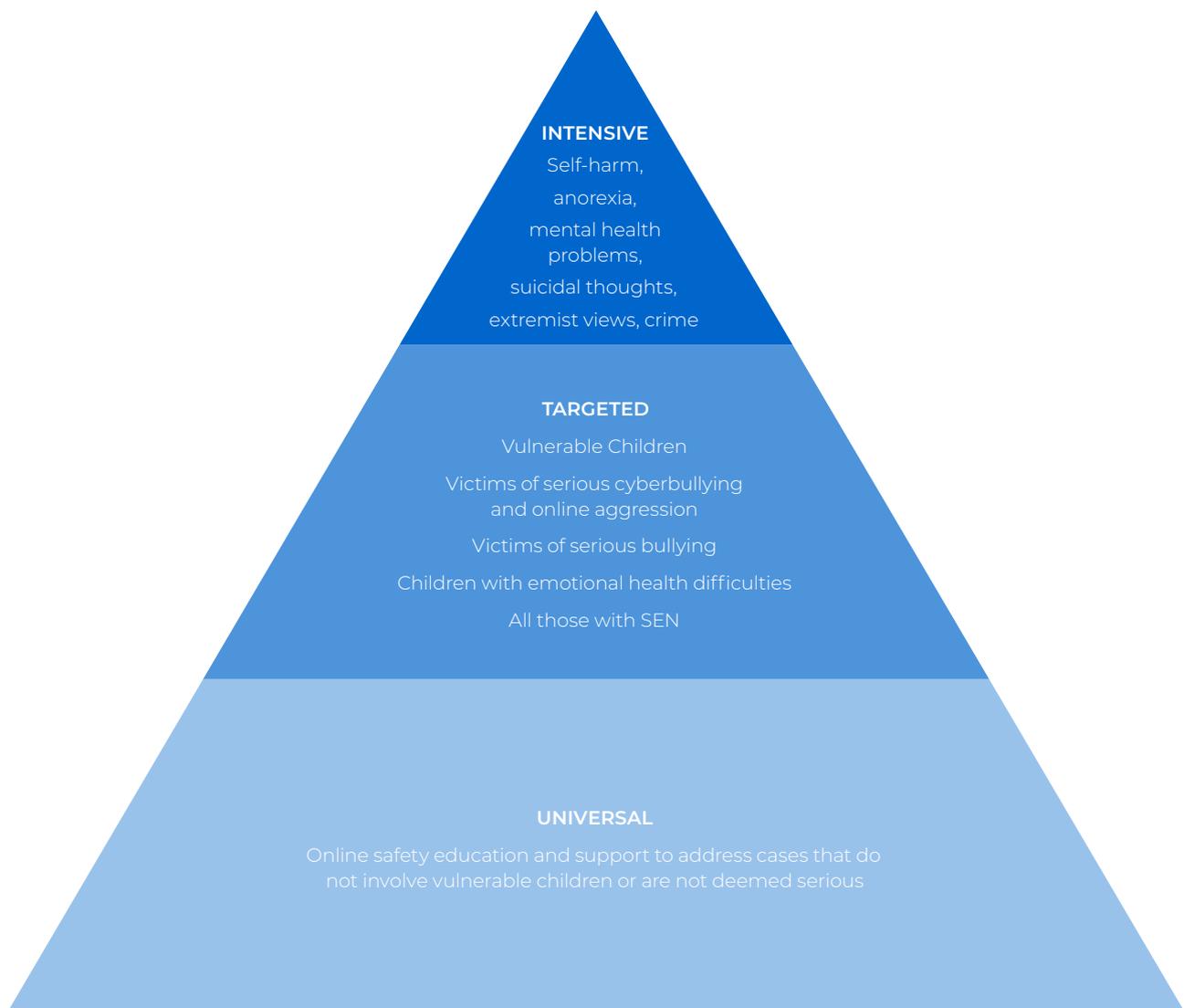## 7. Could excessive sharing signal a cry for help

Anne Collier of Net Family News sees in children's social media use, 'the exposure of their deepest needs; for deep connection and to be heard and accepted by people they love or care about'. She goes on to say 'I think it's quite possible that the less the real need is met, the more sharing and connecting of the shallow sort tends to happen.[81]

Insights for Educators

1. One size doesn't fit all

A 'one size fits all' online safety education message will not suit vulnerable children and young people. More nuance and sensitivity are needed, along with specialised knowledge delivered in this proposed 3 tier model:

INTENSIVE
Self-harm,
anorexia,
mental health
problems,
suicidal thoughts,
extremist views, crime

TARGETED
Vulnerable Children
Victims of serious cyberbullying
and online aggression
Victims of serious bullying
Children with emotional health difficulties
All those with SEN

UNIVERSAL
Online safety education and support to address cases that do
not involve vulnerable children or are not deemed serious

A three tier model of delivery of Online Safety Education and Support for Children and Young People

2. Understand how motivation outweighs rules

Teens tell us in surveys and workshops that they felt 'The rules don't apply to me'. Dorling (2014) found that many teens who already know about possible negative outcomes still engage in sexting. If a young person with special needs or powerful emotional needs believes that after some chat, they know this person and it is a love relationship, it can seem to them that the rules do not apply. Therefore he argues that new approaches to education are required because current campaigns studied primarily rely on scare scenarios, the risks of bullying and criminal prosecution.

Wolak et al (2008) recommend changes in the message, moving from a focus on personal information to concerns relevant to teenagers such as interaction, romance and sex.[82] Scare stories followed by rules have been found ineffective (Jones et al).[83]

A recent report by London Grid for Learning (LgfL) involving 40,000 young people showed that this approach is still prevalent. Secondary pupils were seven times more likely than primary pupils to say that online safety at their schools just scares them.[84]

As trust in adults to solve online problems is low[85], it is recommended that discussions about online safety offer a safe respectful space in which conversations can take place in a non- judgemental manner. Two in five pupils have never told anyone about the worst thing that has happened to them online according to LGfL.

Young people like to see themselves as capable in the digital arena, (and able to help one another) the Cybersurvey found. Building that sense of autonomy along with problem- solving skills together in a non-judgemental dialogue with adults is also recommended by Przybylski and Weinstein (2018).

3. Consider the risk of unintended consequences of online safety education

Emmens and Phippen (2010) write that educating vulnerable children in online safety is more complex than a one size fits all delivery. There is a risk that limiting or censoring the discussion of self-harm may overlook the way it might be being used as an emotional coping strategy, preventing more extreme risks by young people in the group. Guidelines might be developed to accompany the delivery of online safety education so that educators are aware of how to address this issue.

4. Evaluate the effectiveness of online safety programmes

Online safety education should be delivered within a robust systematic evaluative framework. Emmens and Phippen (2010) found that many are developed from a practitioner perspective where evaluation might not be the main aim, or those developing and delivering these programmes might lack the methodological training to appreciate the implications of evaluation.[86]

Insights for Services

A number of agencies and services have contact with vulnerable young people ranging from CAMHS and social services to counselling services. An evaluation of their available data, specialist training and assessment tools, revealed a lack of focus on the online lives of their clients.

1. Assessment tools need to be more relevant

Assessment tools tend to be focused on and searching for child sexual exploitation. With all eyes on the goal of identifying CSE, it is possible to overlook other high-risk scenarios which in themselves many render a young person more at risk of being exploited.

2. Training is needed to handle privacy sensitively but safely

Carers report that social workers tell them that it is a breach of a young person's privacy to look at the mobile phone of a young person they care for. But they do not receive enough training on constructive ways to engage in a dialogue about staying safe and healthy relationships. If carers are nervous about addressing digital issues, they tend to avoid the subject. Young people stated that they were sometimes told by their carer not to use digital devices.

3. Counselling services for young people should track trends in the types of cases or issues reported, so that appropriate training can be provided to staff

- Collate and share good data on cases with an online component.

- Develop specialist training re: online lives of vulnerable children.

- Develop dedicated and appropriate assessment tools.

- Set up robust evaluation methods.

- Provide support for the parents of clients or patients.

- Provide support for foster parents.

- Provide support for Care home managers.

Insights for Safeguarding

Firmin is proposing a new concept of Contextual Safeguarding which includes looking at the young person's friendships, where they spend their time and their activities beyond the home because, she argues, peer influences are strongest in the teen years. This concept of Contextual Safeguarding could be extended to include the digital lives of young people. Safeguarding and therapeutic interventions could expand to encompass a young person's digital life and the people who influence them, both positively and negatively.[87]

Those carrying out an intervention should consider all known vulnerabilities of the child or young person. They should be trained in the right questions to ask and have suitable assessment tools. If one category of high-risk online scenarios is present, they should:

- explore whether there are other high-risk scenarios presenting a risk

  and

- work to prevent harm occurring from categories of risk which are likely to co-occur

Staff training should become more specialised and nuanced. Basic online safety is not sufficient for services working with vulnerable children or within services such as CAMHS.

Contextual Safeguarding could be a useful basis for broadening how the child or young person is viewed.

Insights for Industry

It's not acceptable that harmful and disturbing content exists online and can be easily found and shared. We recognise that some parts of the internet eco-system are taking steps to reduce it – and that should be welcomed. But the evidence from young people is that not enough is being done and the internet industry in its widest sense has to do more. There is simply too much content promoting suicide, anorexia and self-harm easily available online, in messaging, searchable content and pop-ups.

There seems to be a disconnect between what the online industry commits to in terms of filtering, blocking and taking down, and what vulnerable young people say they experience. This may, in part, be explained because it is the most vulnerable who need the protections that technical tools provide most, yet are least likely to have the support network in place to ensure the available tools are used effectively. It is clear however that the current approach to protecting children from harmful content online is simply not working.

The internet eco-system must develop ways to make it much harder for young people to find and share this content. Locating support should be much easier and more readily suggested when searches are made, or message content indicates a need for it. More should also be done to identify the people that need help most and point them towards that help.

The forthcoming Internet Safety White Paper may well call for better regulation and a 'duty of care' for all users, irrespective of this, internet companies have a moral imperative to invest in protecting the most vulnerable when they are online.

In conclusion

These research findings should not lead to all young people in the vulnerable groups studied being automatically considered at risk online. The research should be used to ensure young people who are vulnerable offline are given relevant, proactive and nuanced education and support to help them stay safe online. If they do encounter problems, the level of intervention and support should be well informed and responsive to the other possible risks that might be present For this to happen we need:

1. Updated risk assessment tools for frontline workers

2. Contextual safeguarding updated to include online life

3. Better data collection and analysis within services

4. More personalised internet safety education for vulnerable young people

5. Educated and well resourced parents and carers

6. Closer working between the experts and the industry to make the online experience of vulnerable young people safer

7. Prioritisation from all areas of the internet industry to make content promoting disturbing and harmful content much harder to find

Below are comments from a workshop with young people in care:, which highlight how complex and necessary this work is:

'Just because I am in care that does not mean I am vulnerable.'

'Just because I am sad (due to bereavement) it does not mean I don't know how to use my phone.'

'My carer doesn't use the internet and doesn't think I should'.'

'I spend nine hours a day online in the holidays.'

Let's make this better for our vulnerable young people.

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