

# LISTENING TO THE UNHEARD VOICES OF ONLINE SAFETY



With the Online Safety Bill set to be scrutinized in parliament in early 2022, conversations about how we protect kids online are going to ripple through the UK. Yet those who are the heart of the Bill – children – are not always heard in this debate.

To give kids a chance to voice their opinion on online safety, TalkTalk and online safety and wellbeing experts Internet Matters hosted a series of focus groups in Salford in March 2022. During these focus groups, two diverse sets of teenagers aged 14-18 shared their thoughts about the proposed legislation. TalkTalk also surveyed 2,000 parents to create a complete picture of the online safety concerns felt by UK families.



## THE ONLINE SAFETY BILL

The Online Safety Bill targets illegal and harmful online content. It puts new demands on internet and social media companies to do more to tackle illegal and legal but harmful content – and makes firms that operate search engines work harder to stop this content from being found.

The Bill also aims to:

- Make legal changes to strengthen people's rights to express themselves freely online
- Reduce online scams like catfishing and credit card fraud
- Apply laws to companies that are not based in the UK, if they have a UK based audience



*"The Online Safety Bill is one of the most important pieces of legalisation in recent years and it's crucial that young people's views are considered. Internet traffic on TalkTalk's network has increased by 40 per cent over the past two years, so it's vital that everyone feels safe and protected online."*

**Tristia Harrison**

CEO of TalkTalk and parent of two teenagers



Over half of parents we polled thought that the internet was becoming a **less safe space for children**.

*"This is the generation who will shape the future digital world, so it's important to hear their views, as much as it is the experts and the politicians, on what this piece of legislation means for them in the here and now."*

**Carolyn Bunting**

MBE, CEO of Internet Matters



Of parents TalkTalk polled, said they **don't think tech companies** such as those responsible for social media advertising, **do enough to keep young people safe**.

## TEENS URGE GOVERNMENT TO LISTEN TO THEIR VIEWS

### YOUNG PEOPLE SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON THE PROPOSED LEGISLATION



#### BODY IMAGE IS KEY

Young people stressed the impact of poor body image on mental health, and its repercussions such as self-harm and eating disorders. Many teens said that posting negative content connected to these topics should be a criminal offence.



#### POTENTIAL INVASIONS OF PRIVACY

Despite backing the Bill, lots of teenagers raised fears that increased regulation could lead to invasions of privacy when online.



#### PAID ADVERTISING SHOULD BE REGULATED

The majority of teens agreed that paid advertising, particularly scam adverts pushing fake products or information, should be included in the Bill.



#### ACCOUNTABILITY WHEN REPORTING ISSUES

Issues around scam adverts are exacerbated by poor experiences of reporting issues to platforms. Many teens back plans to make large tech companies more accountable for the content on their sites.



#### GREATER INVOLVEMENT OF KIDS' VIEWS

The participants were eager to share their views on the Bill, making clear that online safety is a discussion that needs their voices.

*"I've seen people get abused on social media for looking a certain way and then not being able to do anything about it."*



Female focus group participant



*"The privacy bit of the Bill could be worked on. While there are clearly issues that need to be sorted out, it should not come at the expense of people's privacy online."*

Male focus group participant

## THE ONLINE WORLD: POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES

Young people felt that the online world was more of a **positive** than negative force in their lives. They identified particularly positive aspects as:



- Finding out more about what's going on in the world
- Having fun and fighting boredom
- Connecting with people – both friends they knew offline and people they didn't

Most of the key **negative** impacts can be seen as the "other side of the coin" to these positives, i.e:



- The potential for misinformation and fake news
- Feeling a lack of control over the amount of time they spend online
- The risks of connecting with people they didn't know offline

**A KEY AREA OF CONCERN WHICH EMERGED IN BOTH GROUPS WAS THE IMPACT OF CONTENT PROMOTING UNREALISTIC BEAUTY STANDARDS, AND THE IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S BODY IMAGE. THESE CONCERNS WERE RAISED BY BOTH BOYS AND GIRLS.**

## PARENTS BACK STRICTER PUNISHMENT FOR TROLLS

TalkTalk also polled UK parents, to gauge their views on the Online Safety Bill and young people's online behaviour. It revealed that there were high levels of anxiety felt in relation to their children's' online activity.

**78%**  Regularly speak to their children about the dangers of being online.

**70%**  Think the internet is becoming a less safe space for kids.

 Top concerns were cited as online grooming, bullying, scams, and pornography.

It's not surprising that there is widespread support amongst parents for several proposed elements of the Bill.

Stephen, 53, from London worries that his son Raffy, 17, doesn't know enough about how to keep himself safe online:

*"Raffy is very relaxed about his online security, and it's a concern for me. He plays a lot of online games with people he doesn't know and I'm conscious that they could ask for his financial or personal details. Any extra protection the Online Safety Bill can provide would be reassuring."*

**84%**    Of parents we polled said **smaller businesses** should be subject to the same rules as larger ones.

**90%** 

Agree with several of the key proposals within the Bill, such as content around **self-harm, cyber-flashing, cyber-bullying** and **threats to rape or kill**.

**DESPITE THIS,**

**67%** 

Said that the internet is a force for **good** in their children's lives, for instance for **homework, friendships** and **education**.

## INTERNET MATTERS: TOP TIPS FOR STAYING SAFE ONLINE

**1**

**Empower young people to be critical thinkers online.**

Encourage them to question what they see online to make more informed decisions about what's real and what's fake.

**2**

**Give them guidance on how to balance screen time.**

Make use of digital tools to ensure they have a healthy mix of screen activities that benefit their development on and offline.

**3**

**Discuss how to make and manage connections online.**

Have regular conversations about how they interact with others online and encourage them to think before they share.

**4**

**Talk about the best ways to manage their personal information and online identity.**

Regularly review the information that is available about them online and make use of privacy settings on the platforms they use.

**5**

**If something goes wrong online, find a solution together.**

Discuss coping strategies they can use to deal with online issues and make sure they know when and where to go for support.

**Note:**

On 2 March 2022 Internet Matters conducted two semi-structured focus groups with young people aged 14-18. Research among 2,000 parents in February 2022 undertaken by Mortar Research.