Internet Matters' response to the Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) review

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About Internet Matters

Internet Matters is a not-for-profit organisation which exists to support parents and professionals, including teachers, to keep their children safe and well online.

We empower adults to have conversations about digital safety and wellbeing with children with our practical advice on online safety issues. This includes 'My Family's Digital Toolkit' – a collection of personalised resources designed to help families navigate the digital world safely.

We conduct extensive research into families' digital lives, including our Digital Wellbeing Index and our twice-yearly Children and Parent Digital Trackers,

each of which provide year-on-year insights into the complexities, impacts and benefits of children's experiences of the online world.

We are proud to work alongside industry partners, policymakers and sector experts to support families' digital lives and to make the online space as safe and supportive as it can be for all children, including the most vulnerable.

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Introduction

The digital world is not optional for children. Over the last decade, and particularly since the pandemic, there has been a significant increase in device ownership among young people, to the point that almost all teenagers aged between 12 and 17 own a smartphone (98%) and use social media (97%).[1]

Digital technologies provide young people with access to education, social channels and spaces in which to play, create and engage in the wider world. The online world is also a space where, for better or worse, many young people develop and explore relationships, including intimate relationships, for the first time. This brings many risks and complexities at different stages of childhood and adolescence.

Collectively we all – parents, teachers, policymakers and platforms – have a responsibility to make sure that children's use of technology is safe and appropriate. This includes ensuring that young people are educated and fully equipped with the skills they need to navigate their digital lives safely, and to manage their own and others' behaviour online.

The Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum is central to this effort. We are pleased to provide our rich insights into children's digital lives to the first stage of the Government's review of the statutory guidance. This document contains a summary of our submission to the first stage of the review, and we look forward to working closely with the Department for Education as the review develops.

Background

Since September 2020, some or all components of RHSE have been compulsory for all schools. Relationships and Health Education is mandatory for all primary and secondary pupils. At secondary school, Sex Education must also be taught – although parents have the right to request that their child is withdrawn from some or all sex education lessons.

The Government announced in March 2023 that it will review the RSHE guidance, in line with its three-year review cycle. The entirety of the RSHE statutory guidance will be in scope for review. However, the Education Secretary has expressed intention to ensure that (a) RSHE is taught in an age-appropriate and factual way and that, (b) the curriculum adequately covers priority issues including mental health, suicide prevention and violence against women and girls.[2]

This briefing contains a summary of Internet Matters' submissions to the first stage of the RSHE review in June 2023, across 7 themes:

1. Intimate image-sharing, including image-based sexual harassment and abuse
2. Online misogyny
3. Online scams
4. Online self-harm and suicide content
5. The relationship between schools and parents
6. Vulnerable children
7. Wellbeing in the online world

These topics were selected for their relevance to children's digital lives, evidenced by Internet Matters' extensive research into children's wellbeing in the online world. Under each topic we have outlined why we believe the guidance should be strengthened to better support children, and the evidence underpinning each assertion. We have also drafted wording to improve statutory guidance on each topic.

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1. Ofcom, 2023, 'Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2023 – interactive data'. *Link*. Accessed 18/07/2023. 53% of 8 to 11-year-olds, 96% of 12 to 15-year-olds and 98% of 16 to 17-year-olds owned their own smartphone in 2022.
2. Department for Education, 31 May 2023, 'Next steps taken to ensure age-appropriate relationships, sex and health education'. *Link*. Accessed 18/07/2023.

Summary of recommendations

Topic	Key points
Intimate image-sharing, image-based sexual harassment and abuse	• **Introduce a consolidated section on intimate image-sharing**, including image-based harassment and abuse. There is strong evidence to suggest that image-sharing is prevalent among teenagers, and that girls and vulnerable children are more likely to be pressured to share nudes and to be victim to abuse of their intimate images (Internet Matters 2020, Revealing Reality 2022, Ringrose & Regehr 2023). • **Reduce reliance on risk-based messaging** – for example, teaching about criminal offences relating to possession of indecent images of children – and incorporate a greater focus on consent, healthy relationships and safe alternatives to image-sharing. There is evidence that the current risk-based approach to teaching about image-sharing is failing to resonate with teens and to reduce harmful behaviour, including image-based sexual harassment and abuse (Internet Matters 2020).
Online misogyny	• **Introduce a teaching component on 'misogyny'** including how problematic online content promoted by some influencers may promote harmful, dangerous and even illegal behaviour (Internet Matters, forthcoming September 2023). • **Take an inclusive approach to teaching about online misogyny** to reduce the risk of alienating boys and young men. This can be achieved through discussion of the risks and harms to boys of misogynistic communities (in regard to self-esteem and wellbeing) and by promoting positive examples of masculinity.
Online content promoting self-harm and suicide	• **Introduce suicide prevention, including teaching about the impact of online content which promotes self-harm and suicide.** There is strong evidence to suggest that exposure to online content which promotes self-harm and suicide is implicated in self-injury and suicide deaths among young people (Rodway et al 2022) • **Take a safeguarding-first approach to teaching about self-harm and suicide content.** The guidance should promote help-seeking behaviour and refrain from graphic or instructive depictions of pro-self-harm or suicide content. Teachers should take care not to suggest where this content can be found online, and should recognise the significant impact on children who are already facing mental health challenges. • **Acknowledge the nuanced ways in which young people engage with online self-harm and suicide content.** Online platforms can provide young people opportunities to seek help, access peer support and professional outreach. The guidance should provide teachers with an understanding of the important role that digital spaces can play in reducing social isolation among young people facing mental health challenges. (Susi et al., 2023)

Topic	Key points
Relationship between school and home in relation to online safety	• **Establish a united front between schools and parents to tackling online issues.** Digital issues permeate the boundary between school and home. However, despite the importance of coherent responses between teachers and parents, there is evidence that in many cases the relationship between school and home in relation to online safety is simply not working. (Internet Matters 2023, Internet Matters 2019). • **Scaffold provision of online safety resources for parents.** Internet Matters research shows that children most frequently turn to their parents when they are in need of support for online issues. Our research suggests that the most effective way of engaging parents in online safety is through opportunities to discuss issues directly with the school and/or external speakers – and this is not happening enough.
Vulnerable children online	• **Promote awareness of the specific challenges faced by vulnerable children**, Research consistently shows that children who are vulnerable offline (e.g. children in care, young carers, children with SEND or with mental/physical health difficulties) are likely to be more vulnerable to harms online too. It is important for the RSHE guidance to acknowledge this and equip teachers with an understanding of the ways in which vulnerable children may experience greater risks and harms online. (Internet Matters 2021, Internet Matters 2019). • **Support vulnerable children's digital resilience**, Internet Matters' research has found that some professionals respond unhelpfully to online safety challenges faced by vulnerable children, for example by attempting to restrict their access to devices and platforms altogether. Guidance should reinforce the importance of supporting children in their online lives and of actively building their digital resilience. (Internet Matters 2022).

Topic	Key points
Digital wellbeing	• **Adapt screentime teaching to emphasise the importance of quality time spent online**, research indicates that there is no set limit at which screentime becomes harmful. What children are doing online is just as – if not more – important than the sheer amount of time they spend online. The guidance on screentime should be re-framed to emphasise the importance of the quality of time spent online. (Internet Matters 2023, Internet Matters 2023, Internet Matters 2022). • **Incorporate teaching about screentime tools**, despite the wide availability of screentime management tools, research suggests that many children do not use them on platforms and devices. RSHE guidance should balance children's anxieties about screentime with teaching about the tools which are available to help pupils manage their time online. (Internet Matters 2022).
Online scams	• **Introduce teaching about online scams**, issues relating to online gambling and targeted advertising are already addressed through the online safety component of health education, but there is a gap in educating children about online scams. This is despite evidence of the prevalence of online scams and children and parents' concerns about this issue. (Lloyds Banking Group 2022, Internet Matters 2023).

1. Intimate image-sharing, including image-based harassment and abuse

Background

This section responds to growing concerns among parents, children and teachers about the impact of intimate image-sharing – a behaviour known colloquially among young people as sharing 'nudes' or 'semi-nudes'. The near ubiquity of smartphone ownership (98% of 12 to 17-year-olds)[3] and social media use (97% of 12 to 17-year-olds)[4] mean that teenagers have unprecedented means of sharing media with one another, including images and videos of an intimate and sexual nature.

This behaviour is associated with a number of risks. Once an image is shared, even if consensually, the sender can quickly lose control of its spread. Harmful attitudes among some male peer groups,[5] such as acceptance of sexual aggression towards women, may precipitate the collecting and non-consensual sharing of girls' nude images. Sexual double standards also intensify the consequences for girls of their images being distributed,[6] in the form of bullying, shaming and sexual harassment.[7] So too do 'offline' vulnerabilities, including care experience, additional learning needs, physical disabilities and illness[8] and socioeconomic disadvantage.[9]

For the purposes of this section, we define 'image-based abuse' as the 'non-consensual creation and/or sharing of private sexual images', per McGlynn and Rackley (2017),[10] and image-based harassment as unwanted and/or persistent solicitation for nude images and the sending of unsolicited sexual images ('cyberflashing').[11]

Despite the prevalence of intimate image-sharing among teenagers, and the risks and harms associated with this behaviour, the existing statutory RSE guidance does not provide a consolidated focus on image-sharing, image-based harassment and abuse. We believe that education is a key mechanism through which to prevent the perpetration sexual harassment and abuse, and to protect all pupils from the risks associated with intimate image-sharing.

The current guidance touches on themes relating to image-sharing at various points, including, p.28 '[pupils should know about] *online risks, including … the difficulty of removing potentially compromising material placed online', and '[pupils should know that] sharing and viewing indecent images of children (including those created by children) is a criminal offence which carries severe penalties including jail'.*[12] Internet Matters is concerned about the lack of cohesive focus on image-sharing and IBA/H, and how this may risk leaving gaps in teaching.

Furthermore, the guidance, as currently drafted, is heavily weighted towards teaching pupils about the risks of image-sharing (criminal prosecution and the difficulties of removing intimate imagery from the internet), implicitly inculpating the victim whose image has been used in an abusive way.[13] Research suggests that abstinence, risk or fear-based messaging is not the most effective way to challenge or prevent image-sharing, as the majority of young people are aware of the risks associated with intimate image-sharing, but engage it in anyway. [14]

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3. *Ofcom, 2023.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ofsted, 2021, 'Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges'. Link. Accessed 21.07.2023.*
6. *Revealing Reality, 2022, Not just flirting: The unequal experiences and consequences of nude image-sharing by young people. Link.*
7. *Ringrose & Regehr, 2023, 'Recognizing and addressing how gender shapes young people's experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse in educational settings', Journal of Social Studies. Link.*
8. *Internet Matters & YouthWorks, 2020, Look at me: teens, sexting and risks. Link. p.35.*
9. *Revealing Reality, 2022. pp.71-76.*
10. *McGlynn & Rackley, 2017, 'Image-Based Sexual Abuse', Oxford Journal of Legal Studies. Link.*
11. *Ringrose & Regehr, 2023.*
12. *Department for Education, 2019, Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education: Statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers. Link.*
13. *Ringrose & Regehr, 2023.*
14. *Internet Matters & YouthWorks, 2020.*

Internet Matters suggests that a more productive approach to prevent image-sharing and image-based sexual harassment and abuse among peer groups lies in teaching about consent, respect and safe alternatives to image-sharing. This approach should better enable pupils to resist pressure and to make more thoughtful choices about healthy alternatives when exploring relationships online. Teaching about image-based harassment and abuse should be closely aligned with wider curriculum points about sexual harassment and abuse, with clear emphasis on how these behaviours are always unacceptable and, without exception, the responsibility of the perpetrator(s), so as to not implicitly endorse 'victim-blaming' narratives.

Supporting research

- Internet Matters, Children and parents' tracker survey, forthcoming September 2023.

- Internet Matters & YouthWorks (2020), Look at me: teens, sexting and risks.

Internet Matters and YouthWorks Cybersurvey (2020) find that almost 1 in 5 (17%) teens aged 15 and over are sharing explicit images with others online. This is likely to be an underestimate, given the likelihood for respondent bias on embarrassing or stigmatised research topics.

The study also finds that young people with offline vulnerabilities are more likely to engage in intimate image-sharing, and to be victim to harmful consequences such as blackmail and bullying. For example, young people with care experience and with eating disorders were 4 times more likely than their peers to share nudes, while those with a chronic physical illness were 3 times as likely, and those with mental health conditions, speech and language difficulties and young carers were more than twice as likely as their peers to share nudes.

The most common reason for sharing intimate images was 'I was in a relationship and I wanted to', while more than a third of boys (35%) believed nudes are expected in relationships. This suggests that prevention messaging centred on 'just say no' advice will not bring about a change in behaviour. Instead, more productive approaches to explore this dynamic may lie in work on respectful relationships, communication and thoughtful alternatives to nude-sharing.

Suggested wording for revised statutory guidance

After Paragraph 81, insert:

"While not all pupils are actively sharing intimate images, many will have been sent sexual images of others and asked to share images of themselves. Teachers should refer to 'Sharing nudes and semi-nudes guidance' when teaching about intimate image-sharing, and should ensure that lessons are conducted in a non-judgemental manner. Lessons on image-sharing should be grounded in a focus on healthy relationships, communication and consent, and should encourage consideration of healthy and safe alternatives. Pupils should understand the risks associated with intimate-image sharing, including how images may be shared non-consensually and the legal implications of possession of indecent imagery of children, however this must not be taught in a way which would discourage disclosure, for example, through fear of criminalisation. Schools should be mindful of how issues associated with image-sharing may affect some pupils differently, including pupils who identify as LGBTQ+ and those from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds and should make reasonable efforts to ensure that lessons on image-sharing are relevant to the experience of these groups.

"Pupils should understand the terms image-based abuse (the non-consensual creation and/or distribution of intimate images), and image-based harassment (the unsolicited sending of sexual images, and pressuring or coercing another person to share sexual images). Pupils should be aware that this behaviour is always unacceptable and always the responsibility of the perpetrator. Pupils should know how to safely report the non-consensual creation or distribution of an intimate image to trusted adults, including when they have been sent an intimate image of another young person (for example, on a group chat). Teaching about image-based harassment and abuse should align closely with schools' sexual violence prevention strategies."

2. Online misogyny

Background

The rise of misogynistic influencers and communities online – known collectively and colloquially as the 'manosphere' – has been documented extensively,[15] as has the harmful rhetoric that these groups promote to their largely young and male following.[16] This includes victim-blaming narratives and content permissive of sexual violence.[17] Some extreme misogynist communities also direct vulnerable boys and young men to pro-self-harm and suicide content.[18]

While issues relating to misogyny are touched upon tangentially across various points of the existing RSE guidance, Internet Matters believes that there is scope to consolidate and provide explicit guidance to schools on how to deliver effective preventative education on misogyny. Teaching should effectively challenge misogynist influences that young people may encounter online, and actively consider ways to reduce the risk of further alienating boys from this teaching, for example teachers can resist 'blaming' narratives and focus on positive male role models.

The statutory RSE guidance should aim to protect children of all genders and identities from the harms of misogynistic rhetoric online, recognising the risks that these ideologies pose to girls (in increased risk of experiencing discrimination, sexual abuse and intimate partner violence), boys (in respect to their self-esteem, mental health and wellbeing) and those who identify as LGBTQ+ (in increased exposure to discriminatory behaviours and attitudes). Internet Matters views the incorporation of teaching about misogyny, including online misogynist communities and influencers, within the statutory RSE curriculum as a key mechanism with which the Government can realise the aims set out within the Tackling VAWG Strategy.[19]

Supporting research

- Internet Matters, *Children and parents' tracker survey*, forthcoming September 2023.

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15.   BBC News, 14 February 2023, "Andrew Tate's appeal to Birmingham schoolboys 'looking for direction'". *Link*.
16.   YouGov, 23 May 2023, "How many Britons agree with Andrew Tate's views on women?". *Link*.
17.   The Guardian, 6 August 2022, "Inside the violent, misogynistic world of TikTok's new star, Andrew Tate". *Link*.
18.   New America, 2021, Misogynist Incels and Male Supremacism: Overview and Recommendations for Addressing the Threat of Male Supremacist Violence, 'Red Pill to Black Pill'. *Link*.
19.   Home Office, 2021, Tackling violence against women and girls strategy. *Link*.

Suggested wording for revised statutory guidance

After Paragraph 81, insert:

"Teachers should be aware that some pupils are exposed to sexist and misogynistic rhetoric and behaviours online, via content promoted by certain influencers, forums and communities. This includes exposure to content which is permissive of sexual violence, harassment and abuse, intimate partner violence, discrimination (against women, LGBTQ+ people and other minority identities) and victim-blaming narratives. Some extreme communities may also direct vulnerable followers towards harmful content which promotes disordered eating, pro-self-harm and pro-suicide content. Pupils should be taught the definitions of sexism and misogyny, and how problematic online content may promote harmful, dangerous and even illegal behaviour. Pupils should have an unequivocal understanding of why these attitudes and behaviours are unacceptable. Pupils should be encouraged to consider how these messages are underpinned by exploiting valid concerns and insecurities among boys and young men, but how the ideals that misogynistic influencers promote may in fact be harmful and restrictive to both men and women. Pupils should consider what 'healthy masculinity' may look like, and all pupils should know how to safely act as a positive bystander in order to challenge harmful behaviour that they may witness others perpetrate. It is important that these lessons are conducted in an inclusive and non-judgemental way, with care and sensitivity so as not to alienate pupils. Teachers should be aware of risk factors that may make some pupils more vulnerable to persuasive misogyny narratives, these factors include mental health needs and experience of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) including neglect and domestic violence."

3. Self-harm and suicide content

Background

Online behaviour relating to self-harm and suicide is sadly a common antecedent to suicide deaths in young people. One study (Rodway et al 2022) found that suicide-related online experience – including searching for method, visiting sites that have encouraged suicidal behaviour and communicating ideation or intent – was reported in a quarter (24%) of suicide deaths in young people aged 10-19.[20] This is likely to be an underestimate, given the difficulty in obtaining information relating to a young person's online behaviour preceding suicide.

Recent tragic and high-profile cases of suicide among young people, including Molly Russell,[21] demonstrate the devastating role that recommendation algorithms can play in intensifying suicidal ideation. The sheer volume of pro-self-harm and suicide content on content sharing platforms may draw a distressed young person further into a downward spiral, where the constant stream of material can reinforce or 'normalise' harmful thoughts.

While legislative developments such as the Online Safety Bill are important steps to reduce the volume of self-harm and suicide content in circulation on regulated platforms,[22] harmful material will not be eliminated in entirety. It is crucial that young people are given the knowledge and tools to report harmful content relating to self-harm and suicide, as well as to understand the role that persuasive design plays in amplifying certain types of content. Above all, it is vital that young people know to seek support for harmful thoughts arising from online experiences.

However, it is important to note that the effects of online behaviour relating to self-harm and suicide are complex and not, necessarily, exclusively negative.[23] Online platforms can provide young people opportunities for help-seeking, peer-support and professional outreach. It is important for the RSHE guidance to acknowledge the nuanced ways in which young people interact and communicate about their mental health. For example, the guidance should provide teachers with an understanding of the important role that digital spaces can play in reducing social isolation among young people facing mental health challenges. Above all, the aim of the RSHE guidance must be to equip pupils with the skills and awareness to interact with communities and content relating to self-harm and suicide safely and in a way which is supportive for their own mental health and the wellbeing of other young people online.[24]

Concerningly, there is currently no requirement within the statutory guidance for schools to discuss online content relating to self-harm or suicide. This is despite the prevalence of self-harm and suicide material online,[25] and the serious harm that this content can precipitate.

Schools should take care to communicate curriculum material with parents. It is crucial that content relating to self-harm and suicide is taught sensitively, so as to promote help-seeking behaviour and to minimise the likelihood that lessons are in any way inspirational or instructive. It is likely that a specialist teacher or an expert external provider will be best placed to deliver these lessons safely and with the level of nuance reflective of young people's experiences.

20. Rodway et al., 2022, 'Online harms? Suicide-related online experience: a UK-wide case series study of young people who die by suicide', *Journal of Psychological Medicine*. *Link*.
21. North London Coroner's Service, 'Molly Russell – Prevention of future deaths report'. *Link*.
22. UK Parliament, 2023, HL Bill 164 (Online Safety Bill). *Link*. At the time of publication (August 2023), the Online Safety Bill is pending Lords 3rd Reading. The Bill, as drafted in August 2023, imposes new duties on platforms to remove illegal content and activity, including assisting suicide. The Bill also introduces a new offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm (Clause 185). In addition, 'Primary priority content that is harmful to children' is content that platforms must prevent children of all ages from encountering and includes content which encourages, promotes or provides instructions for suicide or self-injury.
23. Susi et al., 2023, 'Research Review: Viewing self-harm images on the internet and social media platforms: systematic review of the impact and associated psychological mechanisms', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. *Link*.
24. For example, see Orygen, 2018, #chatsafe: A young person's guide for communicating safely online about suicide. *Link*.
25. Samaritans, 2022, How social media users experience self-harm and suicide content. *Link*.

Supporting research

- Internet Matters, 2023, Children and parents' tracker survey. Link.

Internet Matters conducts a twice-yearly tracker survey with a representative sample of 1,000 UK children aged 9-16 and 2,000 parents. In the November 2022 wave, Internet Matters found that 6% of all children aged 9-16 had encountered content promoting self-harm online. The proportion of children who had encountered content promoting self-harm increases progressively with age, to 12% of 15-year-olds and 17% of 16-year-olds. Concerningly, 14% of children aged 9-16 with a physical or mental health condition requiring professional support had encountered content promoting self-harm online. Almost two-thirds (63%) of parents stated that they are concerned about their child viewing content promoting self-harm or suicide online.

While exposure to content promoting self-harm and suicide may not be a universal experience, we find that there are serious consequences for those that do encounter it. Among children aged 9-16 who had encountered content promoting self-harm online, 46% said that it gave them high levels of distress. This is corroborated by wider research on children's experiences of harmful content. Ofcom (2022) finds that experiences of online self-harm content can exacerbate the symptoms of children with existing mental health challenges.[26]

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26. *Ofcom, Revealing Reality, 2022, Research into risk factors that may lead children to harm. Link.*

Suggested wording for revised statutory guidance

After Paragraph 81, insert:

"102. In delivering curriculum content about serious mental health challenges, teachers should be aware of the prevalence and impact of content which promotes self-harm and suicide on online platforms. Pupils should understand the risks of viewing content which promotes self-harm and suicide and should consider how design features, such as recommendation algorithms, on some social media platforms can amplify this type of content to some users. All pupils should be equipped with knowledge of how to safely report material which promotes self-harm or suicide to the platform and should understand the importance of doing so to protect themselves and others. Pupils should know how to access support from a trusted adult if they have been affected by self-harm or suicide content which they have encountered online.

"Schools should also consider the benefits and protective effects that online platforms can confer to children facing mental health challenges, including opportunities for peer-support and social connection, help-seeking, outreach by mental health professionals and promotion of recovery. Pupils should be informed about how to engage with online content relating to mental health safely, including sharing their own experiences, and should consider strategies to support their own mental health and the wellbeing of others online.

"Teachers should take care to deliver teaching on online content relating to self-harm and suicide in a sensitive and age-appropriate way, with recognition of the significant impacts on children who are already facing mental health challenges. Teachers should be careful not to provide graphic descriptions of online content relating to self-harm or suicide, nor to discuss methods, nor where this content may be found online."

Under secondary school curriculum objectives, 'internet safety and harms', p.36, insert:

"Pupils should understand the risks of viewing online material that promotes self-harm and suicide. All pupils should know how to safely report content promoting self-harm or suicide, and the importance of doing so to protect others. Pupils should know how to access support from a trusted adult if they have been affected by online content which promotes self-harm or suicide.""Schools should also consider the benefits and protective effects that online platforms can confer to children facing mental health challenges, including opportunities for peer-support and social connection, help-seeking, outreach by mental health professionals and promotion of recovery. Pupils should be informed about how to engage with online content relating to mental health safely, including sharing their own experiences, and should consider strategies to support their own mental health and the wellbeing of others online.

4. The relationship between schools and parents

Background

Join up between school and home is important across all topics within RSHE. But it is perhaps especially important in relation to online safety because digital technology permeates the boundary between school and home. For example, interactions that occur online outside of school hours can spark conflict at school, resulting in significant disruption to children's learning. If one child gains access to inappropriate content – for example adult content, or underage access to an app – then it can quickly spread across entire year groups. This can result in serious safeguarding incidents. The answer to this challenge must lie in parents and schools presenting a united front about what is acceptable and good behaviour online, and what is not – and responding to challenges consistently and coherently.

And yet, as set out in our new data briefing, there is evidence that in many cases the relationship between school and home in relation to online safety is simply not working. In a survey of schoolteachers and leaders by Internet Matters, nearly one quarter (23%) said that difficulty engaging parents was the biggest barrier they faced in addressing online safety issues. Similarly, in our recent regular survey of parents, nearly one in five (18%) said that they had little knowledge of the school's approach to online safety education. One

quarter said that they had had no engagement with the school whatsoever in relation to online safety – whether in the form of talking to the teacher about any issues or problems, reading the school's online safety policy, or even simply receiving information from the school about how parents can help keep children safe or about what children are being taught. Just 15% of parents say they have attended an event or session about online safety hosted by the school, despite this being considered the most impactful form of outreach by those who had experienced it.

It is positive that the current RSHE guidance includes a dedicated section on working with parents/carers (and the wider community), recognising that "Parents are the first teachers of their children". This resonates with research from Internet Matters that finds that when children are in need of support with online issues, they most frequently turn to their parents. But given the challenges outlined above, it is clear that this section needs strengthening – at least in relation to online safety. In particular, the guidance currently says that schools should work closely with parents when planning and delivering RSHE, and should provide them with certain information, but is not prescriptive enough about how this should be achieved. Our evidence suggests that although receiving information about the curriculum content and how to keep children safe is helpful for parents, it is more effective when scaffolded with opportunities to discuss the issues directly with the school and/or external speakers.

Close engagement between school and home is particularly critical in relation to the issue of sexual content online, including pornography.[27] Research has shown that children are exposed to online pornography, including violent, degrading and 'extreme' content,[28] at progressively younger ages, and that this can have a deeply damaging impact on children.[29] Consequently, Internet Matters is concerned about provisions relating to the withdrawal of a child from sex education, of which teaching about sexual content online forms a part. The guidance notes (p.17) that, in the case that a parent withdraws their child from some or all of sex education, 'it would be good practice for the head teacher to discuss the request with parents and, as appropriate, with the child'. Internet Matters recommends that this point be strengthened, to require the head teacher or Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) to discuss the request to withdraw with the parents and, as appropriate, with the child.

Supporting research

- Internet Matters, 2023, *Data briefing: online safety in schools*. Link.

This paper is based on four studies conducted by Internet Matters between Spring 2023 and Winter 2022. A survey of schoolteachers and leaders by Internet Matters finds that nearly one quarter (23%) said that difficulty engaging parents was the biggest barrier they faced in addressing online safety issues. Nearly one in five (18%) said that they had little knowledge of the school's approach to online safety education. One quarter said that they had had no engagement with the school whatsoever in relation to online safety. Just 15% of parents say they have attended an event or session about online safety hosted by the school, despite this being considered the most impactful form of outreach by those who had experienced it.

- Internet Matters, 2019, *We need to talk about pornography: children, parents and age verification*. Link.

This report outlines findings from a nationally representative survey of 2,000 parents conducted in November 2018, which finds 52% of parents think a child may believe online pornography represents typical sex. A further 47% are concerned about poor portrayal of women in pornography including violence and abuse, and 48% say online pornography is improper sex education leaving a child with an unrealistic view of 'normal' sex.

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27. Children's Commissioner for England, 2023, 'A lot of it is actually just abuse' – Young people and pornography. Link.
28. Vera-Gray, McGlynn, Kureshi, Butterby, 2021, 'Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography', The British Journal of Criminology. Link.
29. Internet Matters, 2019, We need to talk about pornography: children, parents and age verification. Link.

Suggested wording for revised statutory guidance

Section 43, page 17, remove:

"Many schools build a good relationship with parents on these subjects over time – for example by inviting parents into school to discuss what will be taught, address any concerns and help support parents in managing conversations with their children on these issues.",

And insert:

"Schools should build a constructive relationship with parents on these subjects over time – schools should invite parents into school to discuss what will be taught, address any concerns and help support parents in managing conversations with their children on these issues. Information shared with parents on the RSE curriculum should include advice on how parents can protect their child from harm, for example how to effectively protect children from online pornography through use of parental controls on devices."

Section 46, page 17, remove:

"Before granting any such request it would be good practice for the head teacher to discuss the request with parents and, as appropriate, with the child to ensure that their wishes are understood and to clarify the nature and purpose of the curriculum. Schools will want to document this process to ensure a record is kept."

And insert:

"Before granting any such request the head teacher or designated safeguarding lead (DSL) must discuss the request with parents and, as appropriate, with the child to ensure that their wishes are understood and to clarify the nature and purpose of the curriculum. Schools must document this process to ensure a record is kept. Schools should remain in active communication with parents who have chosen to withdraw their child from RSE, including by sharing curriculum materials and information on their relevance to their child's safety, health and development."

5. Vulnerable children

Background

Research from Internet Matters and others consistently shows that children who are in some ways more vulnerable offline are more likely to experience harm online too. This includes children with family-related vulnerabilities (e.g. children in care, young carers), children with SEND and/or mental health problems, and those who do not speak fluent English. The drivers behind this are varied – for example, children who feel isolated may be more likely to seek out connection online from people they do not know. Young carers who are handling online transactions on behalf of their parents can be at greater risk of being scammed, while children with mental health problems may be less resilient in face of harmful content online.

Research has found that many education professionals struggle to support children in their online lives and can respond unhelpfully, for example by simply encouraging, if not forcing children to withdraw from online spaces which should be appropriate for them. Teachers need to be aware of the fact that vulnerable children are more at risk online, and vulnerable children require tailored support in this space.

The guidance on physical health and mental wellbeing currently states, "Teachers should understand that pupils who have experienced problems at home may depend more on schools for support." (p36). While true, it is not explicitly recognised that these children may require more support in their online lives. Furthermore, as set out above, it is not only children with family-related vulnerabilities who are more at risk, but also those with other vulnerabilities, e.g. SEND.

Supporting research

- Internet Matters & YouthWorks, 2019, *Vulnerable Children in a Digital World.* Link.

Research based on a sample of 2,988 children aged 10-16, each with at least one offline vulnerability (e.g. SEND, looked after, young carers, mental health difficulties), compared to a much larger sample of non-vulnerable children. Multiple linear regression analysis showed that being in any of the vulnerable groups significantly predicted a higher overall score for a basket of all High Risk Online Experiences (HROEs).

- Internet Matters & YouthWorks, 2021, *Refuge and Risk.* Link.

Research based on a sample of 14,994 children aged 11-16, including 6,521 with at least one offline vulnerability (e.g. SEND, looked after, young carers, mental health difficulties). Findings include that 15% of children with no vulnerabilities report experiencing content-related risks online, rising to 23% of those with 1 vulnerability, 27% with two vulnerabilities and 40% with three vulnerabilities. Similarly, 35% of children with no vulnerabilities reported experiencing compulsion online compared to 50% with 1 vulnerability, 54% with two and 65% of children with three vulnerabilities.

- Internet Matters, 2022, Changing Conversations. Link.

Research based on qualitative work with education professionals, children with SEND and/or mental health problems and, separately, their parents/carers. Finds that professionals struggle to support vulnerable children in their online lives and too heavily rely on methods which involve encouraging or forcing children to withdraw from online spaces. Recommends that guidance directs teachers to focus specifically on the digital resilience of vulnerable children.

Suggested wording for revised statutory guidance

Section 102, page 36, remove:

"Teachers should understand that pupils who have experienced problems at home may depend more on schools for support."

And insert:

"Teachers should be aware that there are some pupils, for example, looked after children and those with special educational needs, who may be more susceptible to online harm or have less support from family or friends in staying safe online. Teachers should consider how to tailor their offer to make sure these pupils receive the information and support they need."

This wording is largely reproduced from the Department for Education's non-statutory 'Teaching online safety in schools'.[30] The need for differentiated support for vulnerable pupils needs to be included in the statutory RSHE guidance rather than in non-statutory guidance.

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30. *Department for Education, updated January 2023, Teaching online safety in schools: guidance. Link.*

6. Wellbeing in the digital world

Background

Screen time is an area of concern for parents: through Internet Matters' twice-yearly digital tracker survey, screentime consistently emerges as the most concerning online issue identified by parents (out of a list of around 20 issues).[31] It is also a concern for children themselves: our research shows that children want to feel a sense of agency or control over their online lives, but that they frequently lack this due to the pressure they feel to spend ever increasing time online.

The RSHE guidance includes reference to the issue of screentime, stating that primary pupils should be taught about "the benefits of rationing time spent online and the risks of excessive use of electronic devices" and that secondary pupils should be taught about "The impact of time spent online". While it is positive that the guidance addresses screentime, it needs re-framing to avoid playing into parent (and child) anxieties around the issue of screentime. Research indicates that there is no set limit at which screen time becomes harmful, because what children are doing online is just as – if not more – important than the sheer amount of time they spend online. Furthermore, teaching children about the risks of being online is a missed opportunity (and can create more anxiety) without teaching them also about the tools available to help manage their screen time – especially once they reach secondary school. Internet Matters research indicates that many children do not use screen time management tools despite these being available on many online platforms and devices.

Supporting research

- Internet Matters, 2023, Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Year Two Index Report. Link.

Wellbeing research lensed in an academic framework developed by the University of Leicester. Based on responses to a detailed survey of 1,000 children aged 9-15 and their parents, conducted during summer 2022, with qualitative interviews with six families. Both children and parents reported that children were spending significantly more time compared with the previous year staying up late on their devices, and that this was negatively affecting their sleep patterns. The data also indicated that there were no significant changes in the overall amount of time children in the sample were spending online from year to year. It is possible that the times that children are able to be online have shifted since the return to schooling in person, meaning that children are spending similar amounts of time online but now at later hours than they used to.

- Internet Matters, 2022, Digital Parenting: How parents support children's wellbeing in a digital world. Link.

Research finds only six in ten parents of 4–16-year-olds (61%) agree that 'they have a good balance of using digital devices in their home'. Finds there is a relationship between whether parents feel they are achieving a good balance of using digital devices at home and how confident and knowledgeable they are about online safety. Over half of parents who perceive a good digital balance at home feel knowledgeable about preventing or dealing with issues their children face online compared to less than a third who don't perceive a good digital balance in their home.

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31. *Internet Matters, 2023, 'November 2022 tracker insights'. Link.*

- Internet Matters, 2023, Children and parents' tracker survey. Link.

Based on nationally representative survey of 2,000 parents of children aged 4-16 and 1,000 children aged 9-16. Found that in a typical week, children were spending more than one complete day online – an average of 3h 48m on weekdays and 4h 54m on weekend days.

42% of parents said that they were somewhat concerned about their children spending too much time online, and a further 30% said they were very concerned. This made screen time the issue of biggest concern for parents in relation to their children's online safety and wellbeing – consistent with previous waves of this survey.

- Internet Matters, 2022, Intentional Use: How agency supports young people's wellbeing in a digital world. Link.

Based on a two-year European research programme coordinated by Internet Matters with support from TikTok, comprising online focus groups and community panels with parents and young people aged 13-16.

The research finds that having a sense of agency and control over their online lives is important to young people but an area they find extremely challenging. Young people do not make use of the screen time management tools available at the time, nor did they seek parental support in this area.

In terms of the types of on-platform tools would help young people in this space – young people favoured greater information about how long they were spending online, greater use of active alerts including pop up messages, and flexible solutions that they could adapt themselves to suit changing circumstances (e.g. more alerts in school term time than in the summer holidays).

TikTok responded to this research by introducing new screen time management tools on their platform, e.g. a new notification alerting young people aged 13-17 when they spend more than 100 minutes per day on the app, inviting them to switch off.

Suggested wording for revised statutory guidance

Section 102, p.36, after:

"The impact of time spent online, the positive aspects of online support and negotiating social media, including online forums and gaming, should also be included",

add:

"Teachers should acknowledge that what children do online is just as important for their health and wellbeing as the amount of time they spend online, and that tools are available on many platforms to help them manage their screen time"..

7. Online scams

Background

Internet Matters recognise that broadly speaking, financial education does not form part of RSHE, and is addressed in other parts of the school curriculum, including maths and citizenship education. However, there are certain topics which do not fit into the maths and citizenship curricula and better fit in the online safety component of health education. Examples of these include online gambling and advertising. It is welcome that these are already included in the RSHE guidance, which states that secondary school pupils should be taught about "the risks related to online gambling including the accumulation of debt, how advertising and information is targeted at them and how to be a discerning consumer of information online."[32]

However, it is currently a gap that children (or at least, those of secondary school age) are not required to be taught about common online scams and how to avoid them, as part of the online safety component of health education. The absence of online scams as a teaching topic within RSHE is problematic because of:

- **The scale of the problem:** according to a recent study by Ofcom, nearly 9 in 10 UK adult internet users (87%) have encountered online scams, with a quarter losing money as a result. Among those who had lost money, one in five (21%) had lost over £1,000. Younger people aged 18-34 are significantly more likely than average to have encountered online scams.

- **The fact that parents and children are very concerned about this issue:** in a nationally representative survey for Lloyds Bank, a third of parents said they feared it was only a matter of time until their children became victims of fraud while gaming online, and 31% felt powerless to help them. In a forthcoming report by Internet Matters, we find that scams are the biggest concern of parents and children in relation to cryptocurrencies and NFTs.

- **That it is not adequately taught about through other routes:** teachers consider online scams part of online safety, rather than financial education – along with online gambling and online advertising, which already form part of the RSHE curriculum. Indeed, there can be significant overlap between these issues – for example, online scam ads are high on the wider governmental agenda, having recently being added into the Online Safety Bill.

The introduction of the guidance mentions that schools should take into account the fact that "criminals can operate online scams, for example using fake websites or emails to extort money or valuable personal information" and consider this when planning their teaching of RSHE and the wider curriculum, but this risks online scams falling through the gaps and not being taught anywhere, as it is not clear where it is best addressed.

In the recent Fraud Strategy, the government has committed to introducing new anti-fraud lessons for young people. Adapting the RSHE curriculum to include online scams and fraud would be a sensible way of delivering upon this commitment without introducing new guidance, thereby minimising teacher burden.

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32. *Department for Education, 2019.* Link.

Supporting research

- Lloyds Banking Group, 2022, 'Lloyds Bank reveals "powerless" parents of online gaming children fear fraud "only a matter of time"'. Link.

Representative survey of UK parents of children aged 6-15 found that one-third of parents fear it is only a matter of time until their children become victims of fraud while gaming online. 31% felt powerless to protect their children and 36% feared their own finances were at risk. 55% of parents had given their children access to their credit or debit accounts.

- Internet Matters, 2023, *Decrypting Crypo: exploring children's engagement with cryptoassets*. Link.

In May 2022 Internet Matters conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,000 parents of children aged 4-16, and 1,007 children aged 9-16 in the UK to explore children's engagement with currencies and non-fungible tokens (NFTs). The primary concern among both parents and children who were familiar with cryptoassets was the risk of falling victim to scams and fraud – 49% of parents and 46% of children cited this as concern they associate with cryptoassets.

Suggested wording for revised statutory guidance

In paragraph 9, page 9, make the following change (highlighted):

"Young people should be aware that certain websites may share personal data about their users, and information collected on their internet use, for commercial purposes (i.e. to enable targeted advertising). In addition, criminals can operate online scams, for example using fake websites or emails to extort money or valuable personal information. This information can be used to the detriment of the person or wider society. Schools should address these risks as part of health education, while making links to the wider curriculum, e.g. maths, citizenship education"

In paragraph 103, page 36, add the following (highlighted) to the "Internet safety and harms" table entry:

"The similarities and differences between the online world and the physical world, including: the impact of unhealthy or obsessive comparison with others online (including through setting unrealistic expectations for body image), how people may curate a specific image of their life online, over-reliance on online relationships including social media, the risks related to online gambling including the accumulation of debt, how advertising and information is targeted at them, how to be a discerning consumer of information online, and how to identify and avoid online scams."

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