Written evidence submitted by Internet Matters

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About Internet Matters:

Internet Matters is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting parents and professionals to keep children safe and happy online. Half of parents have heard of us and almost 9-in-10 would recommend us. In addition to providing resources and support, we aim to share our expertise to help ensure that digital participation contributes positively to children's lives. For example, we sit on the Executive Board of the UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS), DSIT's Media Literacy Taskforce Steering Board and Ofcom's Making Sense of Media Panel.

Internet Matters conducts an extensive programme of research into the digital lives of families in the UK. This includes a specific stream of work exploring the online experiences of vulnerable children. Our response draws heavily on insights gained from our research– in particular our "Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index" and our twice-yearly, nationally-representative 'Digital tracker' survey.

Key points of our submission:

The concept of 'screentime'

- Technology can undoubtedly play a positive role in children's lives. However, it is important to acknowledge that currently, not enough is being done to tackle the negatives.
- While the **quantity** of screentime matters to some degree, so too does the **quality** of what children are engaging with. The term 'screentime' can oversimplify this concept.
- Internet Matters – in collaboration with the University of Leicester - conducts an annual "Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index" (DWI)[i,ii] to assess the impact of digital technology in children's lives, across four domains of digital wellbeing (**developmental**, **emotional**, **physical** and **social**)
- The DWI finds that the impact – both positive and negative – of spending time online varies not only by platform type, but also on the nature of children's engagement with online content.
- **Active engagement** (for example – online gaming, interacting with other users' content) results in greater digital wellbeing across all found domains, when compared to **passive engagement** with online content (for example – passive scrolling, browsing other users' content).

Vulnerability online

- Internet Matters' research consistently finds **that children who are vulnerable offline have a worse experience online**.
- Successive waves of Internet Matters research – including the Digital Wellbeing Index (2022-23), 'Changing Conversations' (2022),[iii] 'Refuge and Risk' (2021),[iv] 'Digital experiences tracker' (2021-23)[v], 'Digital wellbeing on a budget: Exploring the online lives of children receiving free school meals' (2023)[vi] – find that **vulnerable children are more prone to encountering digital risks**.
- We find that the risks that vulnerable children encounter online also escalate more rapidly compared to their non-vulnerable peers. **This is likely due to a relative lack of protective factors in vulnerable children's 'offline' lives**.
- However, **vulnerable children are also likely to derive greater benefits from being online,** in terms of connectedness, learning, etc.
- As such – blunt and reactive restriction from digital platforms (e.g. confiscating a device or deleting a social media profile) is not the correct response the online risks experienced by vulnerable children. Tailored digital support from schools and other services working with these children is urgently needed.

The role of parents

- **Parents play a key role in keeping children safe online, serving as the primary source for information and support when issues arise**.
- However, parents require more support themselves and cannot bear the responsibility alone.

The role of schools

- **Schools occupy a central position in this landscape, as they consistently interact with parents and children and can serve as a means of reaching both groups effectively**.
- Effective collaboration between schools and parents should also ensure that support extends to all children, including those lacking parental support.
- While it's worth noting that platforms, government entities, and Ofcom have respective roles to play in making services safe by design, the focus of our response does not include these aspects. Instead, our current discussion centres on **the inadequacy of online safety education in schools, which remains fragmented, lacking clear delineation of responsibilities between schools and parents, as well as among DSIT, Ofcom, and DfE**.
- Furthermore, teachers often face challenges, including insufficient training and difficulty keeping pace with the rapidly evolving landscape of online safety.

About the Digital Wellbeing Index

This response draws heavily upon our landmark **Digital Wellbeing Index**.

Internet Matters, in collaboration with the University of Leicester, conducts an annual study "Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index", designed to assess the impact of digital technology on children's lives – both positive and negative – and the factors which shape children's outcomes.

This index is rooted in a four-dimensional framework of digital wellbeing:

- **Developmental**: *the realisation of cognitive capabilities and potential*
- **Emotional**: *healthy emotional development and the ability to cope with stress and setbacks*
- **Physical**: *the achievement and maintenance of healthy growth and thriving*
- **Social**: *participation in wider communities, including schools, clubs or societies.*

Our academic partners at the University of Leicester proposed this model based on a review of the wider literature and interviews with experts from multiple sectors. Each dimension has the potential to be interlinked, in ways which both multiply and reduce the harms and benefits of being online.

After creating this framework, we then set out to measure children's digital wellbeing across the model. This was based on a detailed survey of 1,000 children aged 9-16 and their parents, providing insights into how digital technology influences various aspects of children's lives.

In the first year of the survey (2022), we established a baseline index score to serve as a reference point for tracking longitudinal outcomes in subsequent survey waves. In the second year, we used a scale indexed to scores from the previous year, with a score of 1.0 indicating no change, a score below 1.0 suggesting a decrease, and a score above 1.0 indicating an increase in children's perception of the impact of digital statements on their experiences.

This allows us to track children's digital experiences, and to break these down by demographic group. For example, we can make year-on-year comparisons in the digital wellbeing of vulnerable children, vs non-vulnerable, younger children vs older children, and among boys vs among girls.

The Year 3 fieldwork is currently underway. Full findings will be published in early 2024.

What is the current understanding of how screentime can support and impact children's development and educational outcomes, including the effect on concentration and behaviour?

Developmental wellbeing is one of the four domains of digital wellbeing identified in our annual Digital Wellbeing Index (DWI). We define 'developmental wellbeing' as **the realisation of cognitive capabilities** – including achievement of educational potential, personal growth and managing financial responsibilities that come with maturation.

Positive impacts on developmental wellbeing arise when children use technology to their advantage, helping them to discover and learn. While negative impacts occur when children are unable to control their use of technology, generating behaviour with no obvious benefit or pay-off.

Examples of positive impacts	Examples of negative impacts
Opportunities to develop thinking, collaboration, organisation and problem-solving skills	*Inability to control use of technology*
Exposure to alternative opinions and worldviews and examples of mature and rational discussion	*Exposure to disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories*
Secure understanding of how data are used	*Wasting or missing opportunities to learn*
Developing competence and confidence for roles in daily life – including financial management	*Challenges to financial wellbeing (such as exposure to subtle ways that online games take money from users)*
For some, technology can even provide an income stream, for example through the safe monetisation of digital platforms	*Cybersecurity challenges, such as managing personal data online*

Figure 1: Examples of the positive and negative impacts of technology on 'Developmental' wellbeing – based on the Internet Matters & University of Leicester Digital Wellbeing Index

<u>As across other dimensions of our index, vulnerable children experience worse developmental outcomes as a result of digital technologies, as well as more of the positives.</u>

Our Index defines vulnerable children as those who are registered as having a disability, having special education needs or who receive professional support for mental health issues. It demonstrates that vulnerable children have a significantly higher negative developmental wellbeing score (1.32) than their non-vulnerable peers as a result of digital technology. However, the index also showed that children classed as vulnerable scored slightly higher on the positive developmental factor (1.05) than non-vulnerable children (0.99) – i.e. they experience more of the positives as well as more of the negatives. This was also observed in Year 2 of the index.


Figure 2: The impact of vulnerability on children's 'Developmental' wellbeing – based on the Digital Wellbeing Index

These findings are consistent with Internet Matters (2022) "*Changing Conversations: Empowering vulnerable children in a connected world*", which found that vulnerable children are 81% more likely than non-vulnerable children to give away personal information and 58% more likely to experience bullying from people they know online.

<u>Family support plays a key role in developmental outcomes, in particular the way in which parents model screentime to their children</u>

The DWI investigated how the frequency of parents' phone usage impacts children's developmental wellbeing. In particular, this focussed on children's perceptions of their parents or guardians being on their phones when the children are trying to communicate with them. We found that children who reported their parents or guardians are on their phones all the time or quite a lot during such interactions had notably higher scores on a negative scale (1.63) compared to those whose parents never use their phones during these moments (0.64). This finding raises important questions about the digital behaviours of parents and the potential impact it may have on their children's wellbeing.
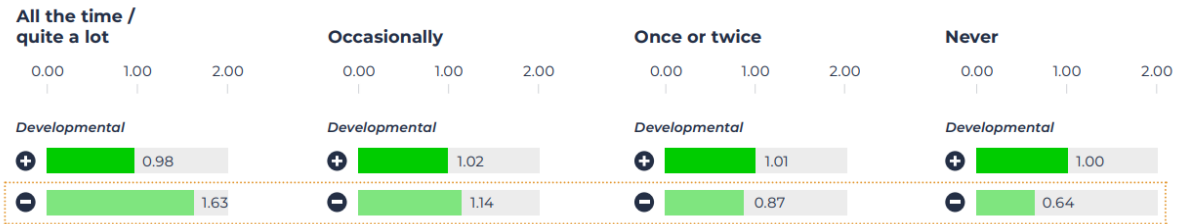
Figure 3: Children's response to the question: My parent(s)/guardian(s) go on their phones/devices when I'm trying to talk to them – based on the Digital Wellbeing Index

<u>Comparison of Wave 1 (2022) and Wave 2 (2023) DWI data shows that there has been a decline in the developmental benefits of using digital technology, and an increase in the negatives. This is particularly the case for children who spend more *passive* than *active* time online.</u>

When comparing Wave 1 and 2 of DWI, it was found that children are experiencing **fewer of the positive effects of digital technologies on their developmental wellbeing, and more of the negatives**.

One of the key findings in Wave 2, compared to Wave 1, is that children are significantly less likely to report using digital technology to be independent and do things by themselves, get ideas for what they would like to do in the future (e.g. as a job), learn about things that people might not teach them otherwise, and revise or learn things for school.

This is most likely a reflection of the fact that children returned to school and no longer using technology for remote learning at scale.

Figure 4: How the positive elements of children's 'Developmental' wellbeing have changed – based on the Digital Wellbeing Index.

What is the current understanding of how screentime can support or impact children's wellbeing and mental health, including the use of social media?

The answer to this question draws upon findings from DWI on the impacts (both positive and negative) of digital technologies on the 'emotional' and 'social' domains. Definitions and examples of emotional and social digital wellbeing are provided below in Figure 5.

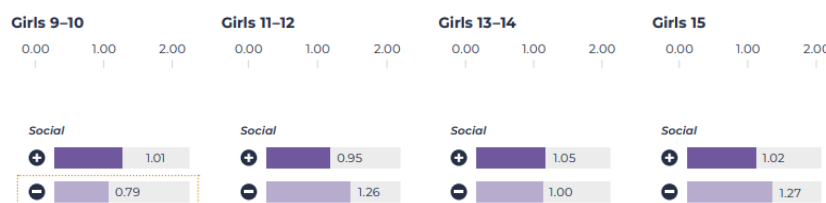| Positive impacts	Negative impacts
Emotional wellbeing *An individual's ability to effectively manage their emotions and navigate life's challenges. It does not imply the absence of difficulties or negative emotions, but rather the capacity to develop constructive strategies to thrive in difficult situations.*	
Opportunities to be authentic, for self-validation and building self-worth	Exposure to harmful content, such as extreme pornography
Exposure to positive role-models	Shaming and isolation
Opportunities to engage in joyful activities	Increased emotional distress
Social wellbeing *An individual's ability to effectively participate in and navigate various social contexts, from personal relationships with family and close friends to interactions with a broader community.*	
Opportunities for shared experiences and building of new positive relationships	Experiencing and exhibiting bullying behaviour, grooming and other forms of exploitation
Healthy and open communication	Withdrawal and alienation
Positive reinforcement from community participation	Unhealthy comparisons to others

Figure 5: Examples of positive and negative impacts of technology on 'Emotional' and 'Social' wellbeing – based on the Digital Wellbeing Index

Although there are some positive impacts, higher social media usage was linked to a rise in negative impacts on social wellbeing, especially among girls.

This trend is especially evident among girls aged 11-12 and 15, highlighting an age-related vulnerability to these negative social impacts. Notably, the index revealed that the youngest girls experienced significantly lower levels of negative impact on their social wellbeing, due to their reduced social media usage. When comparing girls and boys, girls tend to be more likely to report negative effects on their social wellbeing than boys. This is primarily driven by boys' lower likelihood to report that they get upset if they miss out on things happening on social media among their friends.
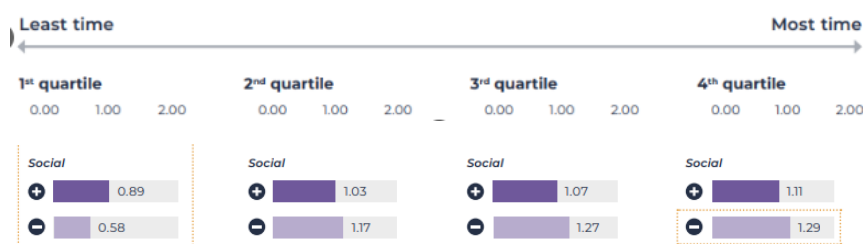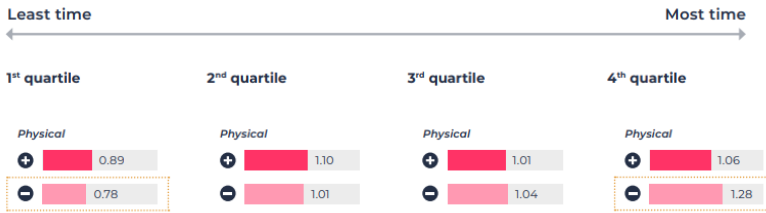

Figure 6: Reported time spent on social media by quartile – based on the Digital Wellbeing Index

Figure 7: The 'Social' wellbeing impact on girls by age – based on the Digital Wellbeing Index

As well as having an impact on their developmental wellbeing, increased time spent gaming is associated with a heightened negative impact on physical wellbeing.

In the DWI we observed that the group of children who reported the highest video game usage also exhibited significantly higher negative scores on the physical wellbeing scale. This correlation stems from the fact that those who spend the most time gaming feel that their use of digital technology leads them to spend less time being physically active. While gaming can offer advantages such as fostering social interaction and skill development, the key takeaway here emphasises the importance of assisting children in effectively balancing their gaming time with other activities.


Figure 8: Reported time spent playing video games by quartile – based on the Digital Wellbeing Index

As with the developmental domain of our digital wellbeing index, vulnerable children experience significantly more of the negative impacts of digital technology across the emotional and social domains.

Our wellbeing index demonstrates that vulnerable children have a significantly higher negative emotional (1.49) and social (1.41) wellbeing score than their non-vulnerable counterparts as a result of digital technology. Nonetheless, it's worth highlighting that vulnerable children also recorded slightly higher scores on the positive emotional wellbeing scale, indicating that they experienced a greater sense of self-esteem due to their digital activities compared to non-vulnerable children.
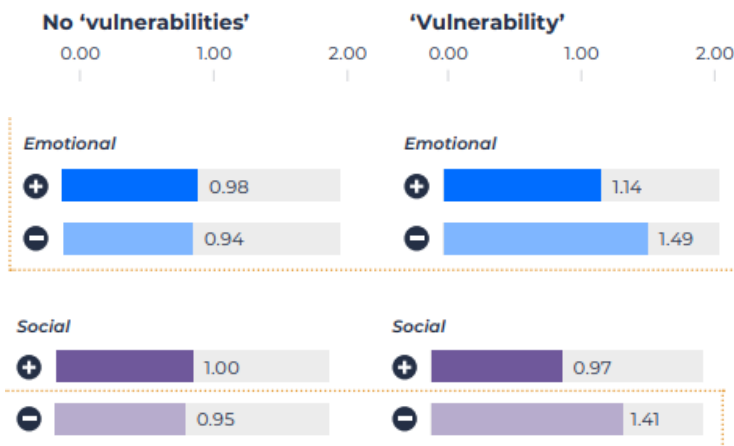

Figure 9: The 'Emotional' and 'Social' wellbeing scores of vulnerable and non-vulnerable children – based on the Digital Wellbeing Index

This finding was echoed in the second wave of our DWI, which found that vulnerable children reported feeling significantly lonelier online than children without vulnerabilities. Additionally, they expressed greater distress because of unpleasant interactions they see online.

As with parental impact on *developmental* outcomes, the relationship parents have with digital technology plays a pivotal role in shaping children's *emotional and social wellbeing.*

Our DWI found that children who reported that their parents go on their phones when they're trying to talk to them 'all the time/ quite a lot' scored significantly higher negative wellbeing results across all domains, in particular emotional (1.60) and social (1.83).

It's important to highlight that, on average, younger children were more inclined to report that their parents engage in this behaviour 'all the time/ quite a lot'. This observation could be attributed to variances in the level of attention younger children desire from their parents, rather than implying that parents of younger children use their phones more frequently than those with older children.
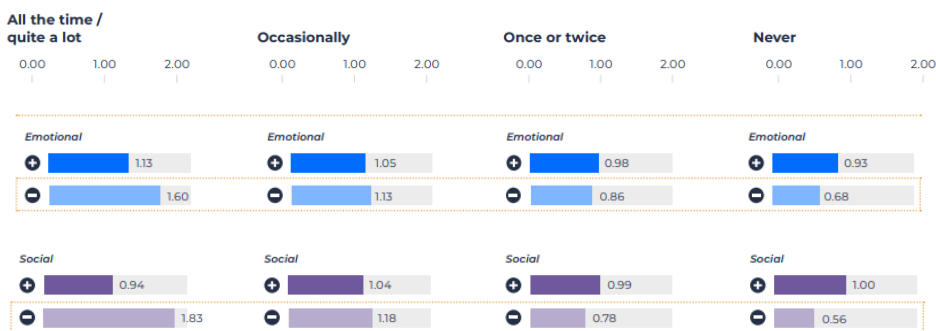
Figure 10: Child's response to question: My parent(s)/guardian(s) go on their phones/devices when I'm trying to talk to them – based on the Digital Wellbeing Index

How effective is digital safety education in schools, for example the PHSE curriculum, in educating children about screentime and online harms?

<u>Media literacy among both children and adults is poor.</u>

Strong media literacy in the 'digital age' is critical. It is fundamental to the health of democracy, to the safety of individuals and to the strength of the future workforce. Yet tracking data from Internet Matters and Ofcom continue to demonstrate that the media literacy capabilities of children in the UK are poor.

- **Over one fifth (21%) of children aged 9-16 are not confident about how to stay safe online**. 11-12-year-olds are the age group most likely to not feel confident about how to stay safe online (24%). [Internet Matters, May-June 2023, Online tracking survey. <u>Link</u>.].

- **Nearly a quarter (23%) of children aged 12-17 who claim to be 'confident' in their ability to identify what is real or fake online, cannot correctly identify a fake social media profile when presented with one**. [Ofcom, March 2023, Children's Media Use and Attitudes. <u>Link</u>.]

- **Only 41% of children aged 8-17 correctly identify the links at the top of a search engine page as sponsored ads.** [Ofcom, March 2023, Children's Media Use and Attitudes. <u>Link</u>.]

Baseline data of the adult population show that media literacy is also deficient. For example, a third of adults are unaware of the potential for inaccurate or biased information online, and over a third did not make appropriate checks before entering their personal details online. [Ofcom, March 2022, Adults' Media Use and Attitudes report. <u>Link</u>.] Not only is this indicative of poor-quality media literacy offer for previous generations (including those aged 18-35 – who were the age group most likely to not make appropriate checks before entering personal details), it is also a concerning indicator for children's present online safety. Engaged and media-literate parents, carers and professionals are a key protective force for keeping children safe and well in their online lives.

We are concerned about the priority given to media literacy across Government – for example, the Executive Board for the UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) has not met for a number of years, and the future of the UKCIS as a whole (including its valuable working groups) is uncertain. This is at odds with the increasing importance for online safety and digital skills, in the context of the rapid evolution of technologies and usage in daily life, including generative artificial intelligence (AI). Children will need strong knowledge of these technologies and the capabilities to them well and safely, if they are to succeed as adults in the future workforce.

<u>Currently, media literacy (including screentime and online harms) provision is split across multiple subjects in the national curriculum.</u>

The fact that media literacy forms a core part of several curricula reflects, at least in part, the Department for Education's (DfE) view on the importance of digital capabilities in shaping children's prospects. However, the fragmentation and duplication of key objectives also reflects the fact that media literacy education is not a central priority. We are concerned that the DfE views its role relatively narrowly, while the Department for Science, Technology and Innovation (DSIT) and Ofcom focus more heavily on provision for adults. This leaves many children with a poor media literacy offer.

Fragmented provision of media literacy education – on important issues including screentime, online safety and data protection– increases the risk that these key topics are taught inconsistently, poorly or not at all. Given competing pressures on staff time, inspection outcomes and school budgets, this is a pressing issue for many settings. As one teacher outlined in response to an Internet Matters survey:

> "*There is often a lot of things in the media like 'Teachers need to do more on this, teachers need to do more on that'. But then there's also a lot of pressure to deliver for results and ever squeezing budgets meaning that we are teaching more and more, with less and less free time. Yes, there is knowledge that online safety is important and many other issues, but also we're a grammar school, we're all expected to get the very highest grades.*" – **Secondary school teacher**, North West England

Currently, media literacy education is split across:

- **Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE)**: The RSHE statutory guidance integrates several aspects of media literacy, online safety and digital citizenship. Digital aspects are woven throughout the RSHE statutory guidance and include:

  o **Relationships education at primary school**: cyberbullying, online relationships, information and data sharing/use, online safety and appropriate boundaries in a digital context.

  o **Health education at primary school**: the risks of excessive screentime (and importance of rationing time online), the effect of online actions, the importance of age restrictions on certain online platforms, how to be a discerning consumer of information, and how to report concerns online.

  o **Relationships and sex education at secondary school**: online safety (including the risks of harmful content, including pornography, and contact), how and when to report issues online, understanding how data is generated, collected, shared and used online, and the legal implications of possessing and distributing Indecent Images of Children (IIOC).

  o **Health education at secondary school**: negotiating the positive and negative aspects of being online, the differences of the online world (including unhealthy comparisons with others, risks relating to online gambling, and how advertising and information is targeted at users), and harmful online behaviours (including bullying, abuse, harassment).

- **ICT/Computing**: safe and respectful use of technology (including protection of online identity and data, and recognition of unsafe content/contact) is a subject component aspect across Key Stages 1-4.

- **Form time**: Online safety teaching often occurs in form-time. These sessions are generally short (e.g. 15 minutes), mixed-gender, and delivered by a non-specialist teacher.

- **Other curricula**: Other subject lessons may also cover content which is relevant to online issues and critical media literacy, including English, History and Media Studies.

- **Ad-hoc sessions**: Extracurricular sessions on online safety topics may take place in a planned way, for example to mark Safer Internet Day, and may involve external speakers (for example from industry, third sector, police or theatre companies). The quality of external speakers is variable.

- **Safeguarding and behaviour responses**: Sessions may also be delivered reactively, for example in response to online behaviour or safeguarding incidents in the pupil population.

The overlapping nature of these subjects and knowledge objectives is not *inherently* negative.

Comprehensive and high-quality delivery across each of these statutory objectives and non-statutory sessions would result in a strong and broad media literacy offer for pupils. However, the unfortunate alternative is that media literacy teaching falls between the gaps. The lack of time devoted to teaching children about online safety results in many children receiving little to no education on key topics including staying safe online, critical media consumption, data literacy and screentime.

<u>Guidance for teachers relating to media literacy is also fragmented.</u>

Layered on top of a fragmented curriculum, guidance for teachers and school-leaders on media literacy is also split across multiple statutory and non-statutory documents. This includes the following pieces of guidance, ordered by date of publication or last update:

Document	Status	Date published / last updated
National curriculum in England: computing programmes of study (link)	Statutory	11 September 2013 (published)
Safeguarding devices: Information on content filtering and mobile device management to ensure devices are safe to use by young people and families (link)	Non-statutory	19 April 2020 (published)
Teacher training: online relationships and media (link)	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Teacher training: internet safety and harms (link)	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Teacher training: being safe (link)	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people (link)	Non-statutory	23 December 2020 (published)
Harmful online challenges and online hoaxes (link)	Non-statutory	12 February 2021 (published)
Support for parents and carers to keep children safe online (link)	Non-statutory	22 February 2021 (updated)
Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance (link)	Statutory	13 September 2021 (updated)
Safeguarding and remote education (link)	Non-statutory	24 November 2022 (updated)
Teaching Online Safety in Schools (link)	Non-statutory	12 January 2023 (updated)
Keeping Children Safe in Education (link)	Statutory	1 September 2023 (updated)
Teaching about Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)	Non-statutory (forthcoming)	Unpublished

Figure 11: statutory and non-statutory guidance from the Department for Education, regarding online safety and media literacy in schools.

<u>Parents are not adequately engaged. Teachers feel poorly supported.</u>

Schools can, and arguably should, be the key conduit for reaching parents (who are the first line of support for keeping children safe and well online) with media literacy messages.

However, Internet Matters' research has shown that there are fundamental issues in the join-up between schools and home in relation to online safety and more general media literacy messages. A survey conducted by Internet Matters exploring the role of schools in online safety (November 2022)

found that few parents (15%) had attended an event about online safety hosted by the school – despite this being identified by parents as by far the most effective intervention. [Internet Matters, June 2023 Online safety in schools, Link.]

The poor join-up between parents and schools can result in a lack of consistency in approach and messaging to children in staying safe online. It may also lead to confusion on the balance of responsibilities for online safety issues. For example – who is ultimately responsible for online conversations between children outside school hours?

Our research on online safety teaching in schools also found that the majority of teachers feel that online safety resources are not adequately meeting their needs, and this is seen as the greatest barrier to effective teaching about online safety. Just 36% of secondary school teachers would rate their resources as 'good' or 'excellent'. Issues cited by teachers included:

- The fact that online safety is split across different curriculum areas, in addition to safeguarding.
- The lack of time that teachers feel is available to them to stay on top of rapidly evolving online trends, issues and platforms.

[Internet Matters, June 2023 Online safety in schools, Link.]

To what extent are schools reliant on external sources, such as the use of google for education and classroom activities?

As discussed in response to Q.3, Internet Matters' research on the role of schools in online safety found that **sourcing reliable resources is seen by teachers a key barrier to effective media literacy teaching**. [Internet Matters, June 2023 Online safety in schools, Link.]

Teachers use resources from a broad range of providers (in a 'pick and mix' approach) to educate children about online safety (in RSHE and Computing lessons, form-time, responsive safeguarding and ad-hoc sessions). Providers include charities and not-for-profits like Internet Matters, commercial safeguarding companies, tech firms (including social media platforms) and local authorities. Some schools commercial providers that can charge over-the-odds, sometimes for very poor quality resources and/or training.

Our research found that online safety resources take a variety of formats. This includes videos (reported use by 73% of teachers), general guidance (67%), lesson activities (55%), training (48%), lesson plans (45%) and external speakers (24%).

The majority (59%) of secondary school teachers would use resources from social media platforms. In focus groups with secondary school teachers, content produced by social media companies was discussed as the most up-to-date and engaging form of online safety resource. However, teachers were equally concerned about the reliability of information from commercial companies which operate social networks, and how far their messages around screentime and safety could be trusted.

Some teachers suggested that they would like to see more partnerships between social media platforms and the third sector in producing education resources. Collaboration was seen as a potential route to overcome some of the negatives of either provider source, i.e.: quality, relevance, attractiveness for pupils, and trustworthiness.

Greater guidance from the Department for Education, indicating which resources teachers can trust and how they fit into the curriculum would make the process of sourcing education materials simpler.

References

i Internet Matters & University of Leicester, 2022, 'Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World'. Link.

ii Internet Matters & University of Leicester, 2023, 'Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World'. Link.

iii Internet Matters & University of East Anglia, 2022, 'Changing Conversations'. Link.

iv Internet Matters, Katz, A., & Asam, A., 2021, 'Refuge and Risk'. Link.

v Internet Matters, 2022, 'Insights from Internet Matters tracker survey'. Link.

vi Internet Matters, 2023, 'Digital wellbeing on a budget: Exploring the online lives of children receiving free school meals.' Link.