

Internet Matters

Response to the Science and Technology Committee inquiry into
The Impact of Social Media and Screen Time on young people's health
March 2018

Introduction

We believe that the advancements of modern technology are overwhelmingly positive for children and young people, however we also recognise they present a new set of challenges for them as well as their parents, carers, teachers and health professionals.

The prevalence of connected devices at an ever younger age creates an environment where children are exposed to a world predominantly designed for adults, with all the challenges, unpleasantness, and risks that creates. Collectively, we have a responsibility to educate our children - helping them develop a range of skills that can help them navigate the digital world both safely and healthily and allow them to benefit from the vast array of opportunities that technology affords.

Parents tell us that for children to be safe online, four elements have to be in play. These are:

- **Education of children and young people**

We support the proposal to include online safety in to the RE and RSE subject areas and believe that further support and training needs to be given to teachers to effectively help and manage online risks and harms. We welcome the Children's Commissioner's role to update the school curriculum so that it is comprehensive in its approach to teach children to be critical thinkers so they can interpret content encountered online, help them navigate the commercial realities on the Internet, as well as teaching them the ability to bounce back and learn from upsetting experiences online.

Internet Matters has a dedicated resource portal on our website that connects education professionals with resources from third parties that include policy, training and classroom resources, plus we offer dedicated advice and resources for parents.

- **Education of parents**

Research consistently informs us that parents play the most influential role in both ensuring digital technology is framed and managed effectively in the home and also developing children's digital resilience to enable them to use critical thinking, judgement and the ability to bounce back from challenges they experience online.

- **Technology solutions**

Products and services used by children should have their safety at the heart of their design, plus they should give parents the ability to use settings and controls to allow children more freedom as they grow.

- **Recovery services**

Adequate investment should be made into recovery services for children that come to harm, particularly where online services play an important role, in particular addressing the potential increases to mental health problems associated with the increasingly connected world children live in.

Whilst we recognise that some of these elements are out of scope for this consultation we would urge the Committee to use its significant influence so that this inquiry influences the policy outcomes – which is the only way to achieve the noble objective to making the UK the safest place in the world to be online.

Internet Matters

Since our launch in 2014 we have been striving to help parents keep their children safe online, raising awareness and empowering parents through the provision of practical, simple and relevant advice. During this time we have made significant progress, with over 6m million visitors to our website and the launch of a number of innovative programmes. We remain committed to working together with industry, sector experts and policy makers, to support families across the UK. We know that the single most influential factor in keeping children safe online is parental engagement. Internet Matters equips parents to have those conversations, about a world they increasingly don't understand and their children know more about than they do.

Our latest research tells us parents have 3 primary concerns about their children's online lives:

- Parents are struggling to keep up with the 'new normal' of the online world and therefore educate their children on how to keep safe.
- Parents are increasingly concerned their children will access sexual or violent content by accident or deliberately.
- Parents continue to be concerned about online bullying with many worried they don't know how to spot the signs or what action to take if a situation occurs.

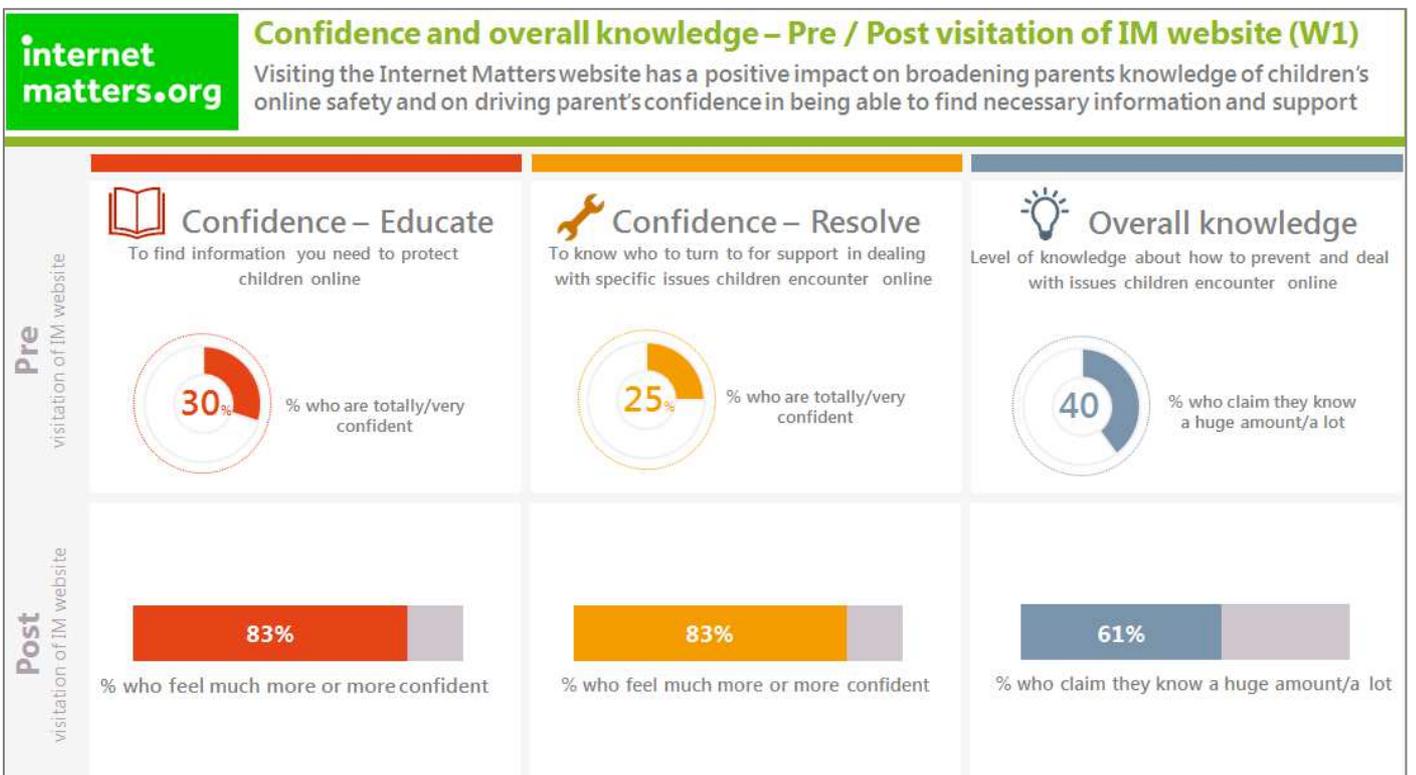
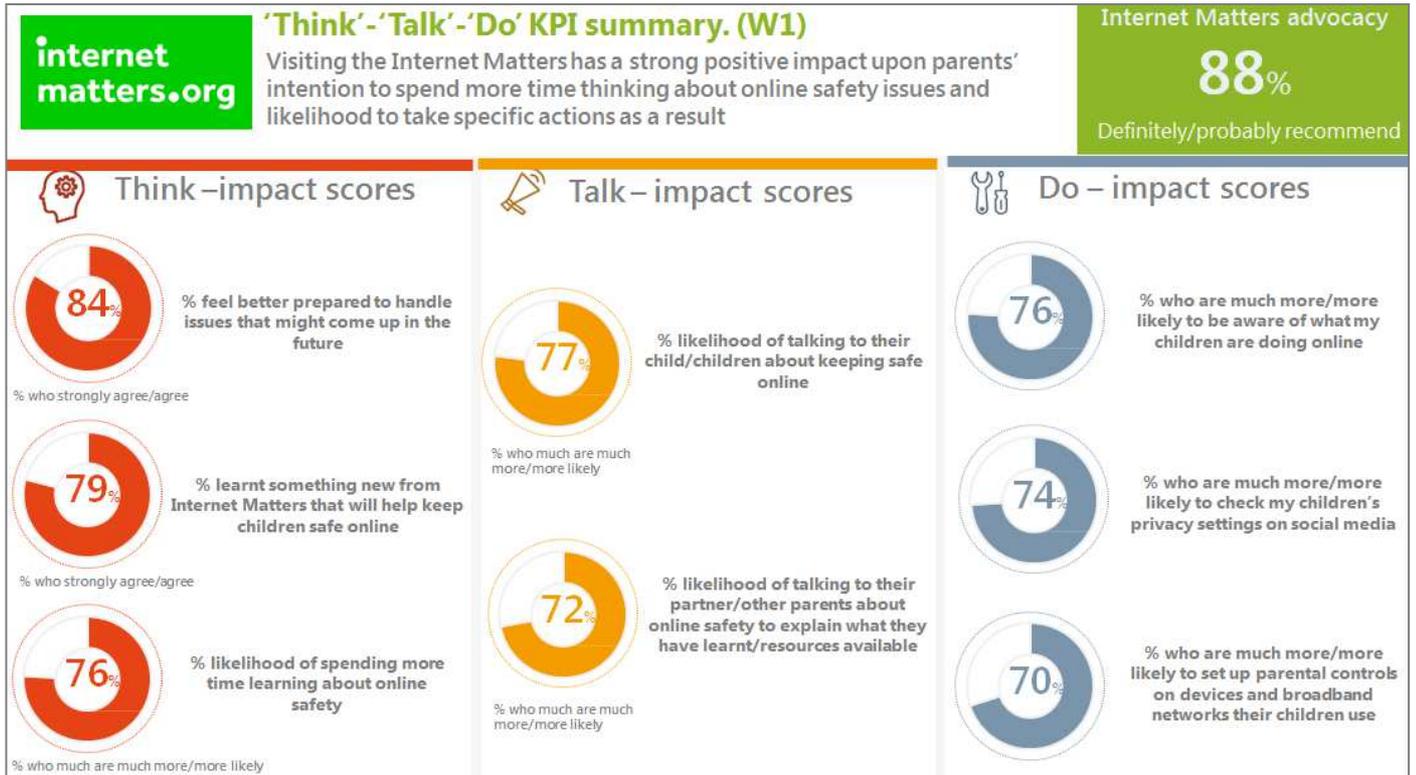
Our business model is predicated on industry collaboration. We were founded by BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin Media in 2014 in response to David Cameron's challenge to address the harm done by online pornography, with the BBC and Google becoming members in 2016. Now, there are many more issues to be considered, and we continue to expand our network by attracting support from companies such as EE, Twitter, Facebook and Huawei. These companies recognise they have a role to play in helping educate parents, ensuring their children benefit from the internet in as safe a way as possible.

We are a recipient of a grant from the Department of Education to pilot an online reporting tool for children, parents and staff in 300 schools nationally. This innovative platform allows children to anonymously raise any concerns or issues they have and get a response back from an anonymous member of staff. Whilst focussed on bullying and cyberbullying, the tool allows for any social or emotional concerns to be raised and then effectively managed and recorded by the school. The platform also provides pupils, parents and staff with a wealth of appropriate resources and self-help suggestions.

Our work on cyberbullying also extends to being members of HRH the Duke of Cambridge's Taskforce for the Prevention of Cyberbullying and we are also members of the Executive Board of UKCCIS, the UK Council for Child Internet safety.

Since our formation just four years ago, we are already the second most recognised brand for online safety for parents, behind only the NSPCC, who are established and recognisable for a wider child protection remit. We will attract over 3.25m visits this year of which over 70% are identified as new.

Our latest research demonstrates the impact we are having:



What evidence there is on the effects of social media and screen-use on young people's physical and mental well-being — for better and for worse — and any gaps in the evidence;

The pace of technological change, specifically the advent of social media and the speed at which that has achieved mass penetration means that the evidence base over time is almost inevitably lacking. However, there is an emerging literature base which shows increasing digital media usage at a young age. Ofcom's Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report (Nov 2017) details the digital footprint of the nation's children by age.

Their data indicates that 23% of 8-11 year olds have their own social media accounts, which rises to 74% of 12-15 year olds. Equally interesting are the findings for 3-4 year olds:

- 96% watch TV for 15 hours a week
- 40% play games on a screen for 6 hours a week
- 53% go online for 8 hours a week
- 48% watch YouTube
- 0% have a social media account

Evidence of the impact this increased usage is having is still unclear; however, there are some indicators which are pertinent to the Committee's inquiry:

- Research by the University of Essex, published this month, found increased mental health risks to girls who spend more than an hour a day on social media.¹ The research tracked youth participants' data from the UK household longitudinal study, Understanding Society, following almost 10,000 young people from diverse backgrounds across the whole country between 2009 and 2015. At age ten, girls who interacted on social media for an hour or more on a school day had worse levels of well-being compared to girls who had lower levels of social media interaction. Additionally, these girls with higher social media interaction at aged ten were more likely to experience more social and emotional difficulties as they got older. While the researchers were unable to say that the higher level of social media use among young girls directly caused the mental health issues, they concluded there was a strong association.
- The Children's Commissioner's 2017 report, *A Life in Likes*, demonstrates the mixed impact that children themselves say the internet usage has, with positive impacts included the ability to pursue interests, stay in touch with friends, stay entertained, but the negative impact of making them "worry about things they had little control over.

Clearly usage and screen time is not the same as impact on well-being - but the scale of usage and screen time from a very young age underlines the importance of this inquiry.

It is worth noting that the screen time as a proxy for impact is as lazy as it is prevalent. As the Ofcom data shows, screen time covers a range of activities from a young age. For children or young people fascinated by space, or dinosaurs, or seeking support for mental health issues, or advice on how to care for a sick parent, screen time in of itself should not be a significant concern. We would urge the committee to be more nuanced and sophisticated in its analysis and resist the temptation to demonise screen time. The introduction to The Children's Commissioner's Report 'Life in Likes' published in Jan 2018 makes this point powerfully:²

"reveals two sides to social media: one side which helps younger children to discover new things about the world around them, which boosts their moods and allows them to be creative, but another side among those approaching their teens which makes them worry about things they are not able to control. The 'cliff edge' often appears as children move into secondary school, with their use of social media changing from becoming about games and creativity to more about social interactions and image."

¹ Gender differences in the associations between age trends of social media interaction and well-being among 10-15 year olds in the UK:

<https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-018-5220-4>

² <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2018/01/04/children-unprepared-for-social-media-cliff-edge-as-they-start-secondary-school-childrens-commissioner-for-england-warns-in-new-report/>

Professor Sonia Livingstone, endorses this point and raises the more apposite question in her recent 'In the Digital Home' research³

“rather than worrying about the catch-all notion of ‘screen time’ it might be better to focus on whether, when and why particular digital activities help or harm individual children.”

The areas that should be the focus of any further research needed, and why;

There is an abundance of reports covering the breadth of issues in this area - ranging from body confidence issues, to mood and socialisation, and plenty more besides - we're not short of reports. Some reports quiz a small number of children and parents, and some will research thousands. Therefore, we could benefit from both a meta-analysis of the literature to draw out the larger conclusions, and ensure any comparisons are equitable, and consider the methodological parameters, and a quality longitudinal study that considers well-being by age of child and by effectiveness of parental intervention. Such a study will allow us to explore whether parental understanding of social media changes over time and will enable us to consider which actors - parents, government, companies - should act, and how.

The well-being benefits from social media usage, including, for example, any apps that provide mental-health benefits to users;

Our own expert adviser, Dr. Linda Papadopoulus⁴ has demonstrated that:

- Online games and activities can enhance teamwork and creativity.
- The internet's wealth of information can add to the child's store of knowledge, provided that the child has learned to discriminate between good and bad information sources.
- Children in households with computers perform better academically than peers who do not have ready access to computers.
- Interacting with computers improves both visual intelligence and hand-eye coordination.
- Technology takes away physical barriers to social connections – which can be especially important for children who fail to find their tribe at school and / or have special interests or special needs.
- Outcomes for children are better if they benefit from connected technology.

The physical/mental harms from social media use and screen-use, including: safety online risks, the extent of any addictive behaviour, and aspects of social media/apps which magnify such addictive behaviour;

- Our own research tells us that parents are most concerned by the typical worries associated with the online world such as:
 - Content - what are children looking at and whether they are accessing inappropriate content.
 - Contact - who are they speaking to - strangers and people presenting with false identities.
 - Conduct - how they present themselves and engage with others, and the prevalence of online bullying.
- Additionally, parents are becoming concerned about the lifestyle pressures created by the perceived requirement to be physically perfect, and enjoying a lifestyle devoid of dullness. This theme was echoed in the Children Commissioner's recent report 'Life in Likes'⁵, where attention was drawn to the pressures caused by validation being solely provided through other people liking your content. This creates a notion of being 'always on show', and as such there is a pressure for our lives to become show reels.
- Such a presentation of ourselves is at best partial. A 2013 Michigan University study found that over 75% of people surveyed, shared only 'good things' on-line- only 36% shared negative things.

³ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/preparing-for-a-digital-future/P4DF-Survey-Report-1-In-the-digital-home.pdf>

⁴ <http://drlinda.co.uk/about/>

⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/life-in-likes/>

- This is particularly relevant for young adults who have had years of very clear guidance about how well they are doing - but when test results and degree classifications are no longer the thing you look to for how well you are performing, it's hard to know if you're getting an A or failing. That's the appeal of social networking; it provides an easy way to 'grade' yourself in comparison to others. And so the social surveillance begins, with people spending more time looking at other peoples' pages and editing their own as they try to live up to what they believe they need to adhere to.
- The desire to live up to a fake standard can be aggravated by the behavioural science that some social media companies deploy to keep people on line for as long as possible. That's the metric of success for many of these companies - and currently there is little to no regulation around this area - especially on apps or devices designed and targeted at children and young people. Examples include the trend for 'streaks' on Snapchat. An app that was originally about enjoyment and sharing experiences has now developed so that children are sending each other random images of walls to keep up to date with their streaks. It has simply become about keeping children on the platform.
- What psychologists and brain scientists tell us about interruptions is that they have a fairly profound effect on the way we think. It becomes much harder to sustain attention, to think about one thing for a long period of time, and to think deeply when new stimuli are pouring at you all day long. The price we pay for being constantly inundated with information is a loss of our ability to be contemplative and to engage in the kind of deep thinking that requires you to concentrate on one thing.
- We also know that:
 - Sleep cycles are affected by blue light from screens tricking our brain into thinking it is still daylight, making it difficult to sleep.
 - Screen-based entertainment increases central nervous system arousal, which can amplify anxiety.
 - We're creatures of habit so it doesn't take long to get used to glancing at your smartphone 150 times a day.
 - Millennials are more forgetful than OAP's; they've outsourced their memory to Google, GPS, calendar alerts etc. Columbia University found that when people know that they'll be able to find information online easily, they're less likely to form a memory of it.

There is much here for the committee to consider - balancing positives of connectivity with the challenges of living up to an impossible standard and facing constant interruptions. In our judgement, part of the solution through this has to be a bold, consistent and simple campaign to parents to get them to engage with their children's online lives and provide that counter-balance of validation and mediation. We hope that the Internet Safety Strategy will lead the way here - backing a clear call for industry and the charitable sector to favour of a consistent clear actionable message to parents, backed up with usable resources.

Any measures being used, or needed, to mitigate any potential harmful effects of excessive screen-use - what solutions are being used?;

There are a raft of products & apps that allow parents to 'control' internet usage, including, but not limited to: Homework Time from TalkTalk App's Guided Access, Oyoty, Dafetonet, Online Them, Circle, Haandle. Recently Google introduced [Family Link](#) which helps parents while their children are online. The app allows parents to connect their phone to their child's phone or tablet, and to set and tailor the digital ground rules that work for their family.

We also welcome the PEGI age-ratings in the Playstore and Apple and would urge the committee to explore how this can be made consistent with the ratings used in other technologies.

However, the wider policy question that this raises is what is the appropriate balance between controlling and restricting access and educating parents to raise digitally resilient children, who understand the benefits and challenges of constant connectivity. Clearly the most appropriate point on that spectrum may vary from family to family – but it is clear that technological solutions alone cannot provide the entire answer. The Children’s Commissioners Digital 5 a Day⁶ offers one framework which provides a way into this challenging area.

Beyond technology solutions, we believe that education and support for both parents and young people can help to mitigate potential harm. Developing children’s understanding of online behaviour will help them contextualise the online world, and build the resilience they need to recognise potentially harmful behaviour, and take steps to avoid or mitigate it.

The extent of awareness of any risks, and how awareness could be increased for particular groups - children, schools, social media companies, Government, etc;

1. The key to a healthy online life for children is parental engagement, which has to start with awareness and education. The Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper calls for ‘greater public awareness’ of online safety and we believe that a programme to drive parental engagement is key to achieving this policy objective:
 - 96% of parents accept their responsibility to keep children safe and well, but 70% of parents consistently tell us they want more help.
 - As a nation we need to deliver a step-change in the awareness, education and involvement of parents. Examples could be:
 - i. Some kind of national education campaign for parents - which could include public service broadcasting.
 - ii. Cross departmental working - whether with Department of Health on mental health issues or Department of Education for schools (of our visitors 12% are teachers) - we’re supportive of a multifaceted approach.
 - iii. Research into how to reach the parents/carers of the most vulnerable children, so that we can make the greatest impact to children who may be at the greatest risk of harm.

Our website - www.internetmatters.org is full of simple, practical advice to parents, offered by issue, age of child, app or device. Fundamentally we help parents have the conversations that will help keep their children safe online.

We need a multi sector, pan-industry alliance, supported by Government to create the cut through needed to engage and support parents in these new challenges. We would urge the Committee to lend its support to this with some urgency.

What monitoring is needed, and by whom;

We would urge the Committee to consider the work done by the Royal Foundation’s Task Force on Cyberbullying which created some safety guidelines for social media and gaming platforms. We have included an extract here for ease of reference and would encourage the Committee to explore this further.

1. Social media and gaming platforms will adhere to the Taskforce’s Design for Safety Guidelines. The guidelines contain provisions to promote:
 - a. Increased education and awareness about cyberbullying.
 - b. A clear and transparent reporting process.
 - c. Provision of emotional support for when things go wrong online.
 - d. Clear explanations of the consequences of misconduct online.
2. Social media and gaming platforms will design any new products or functionality with the consideration of children and young people’s needs in mind.

⁶ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2017/08/06/digital-5-a-day/>

Critical in this is for social media companies to report and be transparent to young people - so the feedback loops must be short and effective, for them to be meaningful and enjoy the trust of users and parents.

The new provisions of the Data Protection Bill - which will set standards required of websites and app makers on privacy for children under the age of 16 - also offers an opportunity to introduce new monitoring of technological solutions. We urge the Government and the Information Commissioner’s Office to ensure this process assesses the impact of any new features or processes which are aimed at protecting children, and shares best practice where appropriate.

What measures, controls or regulation are needed;

Regulation and control in this area is really tricky territory - because many of these decisions are completely dependent on family circumstances, the age and maturity of the children, whether the aim is to build digital resilience or address a specific risk factor to counter a harm.

Given all of those variables and myriad more we’ve not listed, the optimal approach has to be to educate and equip parents, and teachers to have those missing conversations to ensure children do enjoy the wealth of benefits being online brings, with resilience and critical thinking.

This will not happen by accident, it will need a concerted, multi-stakeholder effort. Internet Matters has four years of experience in reaching parents - and we would be delighted to share our insights with the Committee if that would be helpful.

Consideration must also be given to the impact of any interventions aimed at the most vulnerable children. We recognise that propensity to risk and harm is variable, based on many factors, including home life, age, health etc. Like many organisations we are rapidly expanding our evidence base here, and would urge the Committee to resist the temptation to act without due consideration for these groups.

Where responsibility and accountability should lie for such measures;

In November 2017 we asked over 2000 parents of 6-16 year olds who they thought was responsible for keeping their children safe online. Over 80% said that parents have a high level of responsibility; however, 61% thought that this level of responsibility extends to social media companies. In addition, almost 50% believe that app creators and ISPs are also responsible. This demonstrates that responsibility is shared across different stakeholders and therefore any policy approach and regulatory oversight must support a multi-faceted approach. The State has a role in commissioning and using the very best evidence to inform policy, to convene the appropriate actors in this area and above all to support an education campaign to equip and empower parents to keep their children safe online.

