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Girlguiding response to the Science and Technology Committee inquiry on the impact of social media and screen use on young people's health

Introduction

1.1 Girlguiding's submission focuses on evidence from our annual Girls' Attitudes Survey - the largest survey of girls and young women in the UK - which gathers the views and opinions of over 1,600 girls and young women throughout the country aged 7 to 21, from inside and outside guiding. For more information and data on the latest and previous reports please see www.girlguiding.org.uk/girlsattitudes. We also refer to evidence for the ChildWise monitor report.

1.2 We have also included quotes from members of our youth panels.

We believe we are in a good position to respond to this consultation because of our extensive research with girls and young women, including around their experiences - positive and negative - online. Although we know that this issue affects everyone, as the UK's leading organisation for girls and young women, our submission focuses particularly on this group. In addition, online harassment and abuse can affect girls and women disproportionately, so we believe it's vital to represent their experiences, views and voices on this issue.

1.3 Our submission includes girls' views on the impact of a number of aspects of using social media and being online, such as:

- Being exposed to unwanted violent or graphic imagery (including pornography)
- Cyberbullying, harassment and abuse and online pressures
- The role of parents in keeping children safe
- Positive experiences online and the role of influencers, such as YouTubers

1.4 We also highlight the importance of considering online issues in the wider context of the gendered pressures girls and young women face, as online issues of sexism and abuse can mirror and sometimes exaggerate what they are experiencing in everyday life. We discuss these issues further in our [response](#) to the Children and Young People's Mental Health Green Paper.

Evidence of the effects of social media on young people's physical and mental wellbeing and the physical/mental harms from social media usage

2.1 Inappropriate content

Our Girls' Attitudes Survey highlights the inappropriate content girls have been exposed to and what impact this has. In 2017:

- 54% of girls aged 11-21 said they have come across unwanted violent or graphic images online that made them feel upset or disturbed



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- 26% of girls aged 13 to 21 said they have come across pornography accidentally
- 50% aged 7 to 10 are worried about seeing rude pictures online
- 44% aged 11 to 21 have seen statements about women or girls that they thought were sexist on the news or social media in the past week and 47% had seen stereotypical images of men and women that made them feel less confident to do what they want
- 65% see or hear gender stereotypes on social media often

Our 2016 Survey showed the hugely negative impact that online harassment and abuse can have on girls; with 49% aged 11 to 21 saying fear of abuse online makes them feel less free to share their views online. This can be seen in the more than half of girls aged 11 to 21 (55%) who feel safer sharing their views anonymously. Around a quarter (24%) said they have at least one anonymous social media account.

In terms of the sexism and harassment and abuse girls had experienced online:

- 50% aged 11 to 21 said they think sexism is worse online than offline
- 23% aged 11 to 21 have had threatening things said about them on social media
- 21% aged 11 to 21 have had sexist comments made to them
- 20% aged 13 to 21 have had unwanted pornographic imagery/film sent to them
- 15% aged 13 to 21 have been trolled for expressing their views
- 7% aged 16 to 21 have been threatened with sexual violence.

80% of girls aged 11 to 21 agree that more should be done to tackle sexism and abuse online.

70% of girls aged 11 to 16, and 80% aged 17 to 21 think women are too often shown as sex objects in the media and online - for 61% of these girls, this makes them feel disempowered.

Many girls feel that the rise of online pornography contributes towards unfair and abusive behaviour towards girls and women. Our 2015 Survey revealed that:

- 70% of girls aged 13 to 21 thought the rise in online pornography contributes to women being treated less fairly.

Of girls aged 17 to 21:

- 80% thought it encourages society to view women as sex objects
- 78% felt it encourages gender stereotyping of girls/women and boys/men
- 71% thought it normalises aggressive or violent behaviour towards women
- 71% thought it gives confusing messages about sexual consent
- 66% thought it puts pressure on girls to have sex before they are ready
- 65% thought it increases hateful language used about/to women
- 53% thought it coerced girls into sex acts because boys are copying what they see in pornography.



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'The media influences society hugely, so if the media presents women as being sex objects, there only to satisfy men and be judged on their appearance, ordinary people start to believe that as well. Sarah, 18, Birmingham

'We don't want to be objectified. It has a negative impact not only on women but also on men and young boys, and changing this could lead to a decrease in gender-based violence and rape.' Haley, 20, Carrickfergus, former Girlguiding Advocate

2.2 Online abuse

Our 2015 Survey also showed that cyberbullying is a significant issue among older girls and young women. Among girls and young women aged 11 to 21, 42% say they have experienced bullying on social media and 24% via websites and chat forums. Although cyberbullying was less common among younger girls, 13% aged 7 to 10 had been bullied on social media and 8% on a website.

Girls aged 11 to 21 told us that cyberbullying had a significant impact on their lives and wellbeing:

- 85% said it made them feel isolated and lonely, with 44% saying it made them feel like this a lot.
- 69% said bullying made them from speaking out about their views
- 69% said it made them less interested in school/college work
- 66% said it stopped them going out with friends.

Cyberbullying had more serious consequences for many girls. 44% aged 13 to 21 said it led them to self-harm to some extent, including those saying it did so 'a little', 'somewhat' and 'a lot'. This rose to 49% in young women aged 17 to 21, with 22% choosing 'a lot'.

Despite the lower number of younger girls who had experienced cyberbullying, our 2017 Survey shows that this is still a significant worry to them. When we asked girls what they worry about online, bullying and intimidation came up for all age groups - with particularly high numbers of younger girls aged 7 to 10 worrying about this:

- 64% of girls aged 7 to 10 worried about threats from strangers and 50% about bullying.

In addition, 43% of girls aged 11 to 16 and 26% aged 17 to 21 worried about threats from strangers and 34% about bullying.

Our evidence shows that girls face specific, gendered pressures online, such as sexist bullying harassment and abuse. In addition, our 2016 Survey showed that cyberbullying can affect girls identifying as LGBT particularly. 41% of girls aged 11 to 21 who identified as LGBT had experienced cyberbullying compared to 25% of girls overall.

In 2015, 45% aged 11 to 16 said they had experienced bullying on social media and 49% who had experienced bullying said it led to them taking more risks than they usually would. One in four 17 to 21-year-olds say the pressure of bullying made them use drugs or



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alcohol (27%), or pressured them into having sex (24%), and 44% aged 13 and over say that cyberbullying has led them to self-harm to some extent.

Girls can also experience coercive and controlling behaviour online. Our 2015 Survey revealed that a significant minority of girls have experienced this from a partner, with 18% of girls aged 13 to 21 saying their partner had checked up on them on their phone or social media.

2.3 Barriers to reporting abuse

In our 2016 report 'Girls' Wellbeing Explored', we found that girls often shrug off or normalise unacceptable incidents. Fear of embarrassment, shame and being blamed can stop girls opening up about the pressures they face, preventing them from getting the support they need. The research showed that when girls do seek help, it is often from their friends rather than professionals. This is reflected in the online world. Evidence from our 2013 Survey showed that girls aged 11 and up tend to react in an informal way to rude or abusive messages online. 59% of girls delete the messages and block the sender, 39% ignore the messages, 30% tell a friend or a sibling and 22% tell their parents. Girls aged 16 to 21 are more likely to report comments to a moderator (29%) than those aged 11 to 21 (22%).

Our research revealed girls want to know more about where to get help and support, and more should be done to build resilience and challenge the gendered pressures they face.

"I don't think girls feel comfortable reporting abuse, as they may not even recognise it as being abuse in the first place. I think every comment or message with a potentially harmful word in should be flagged, alerting the girl that it has the potential to be abusive. Then, if the girl recognises that the comment is abusive, they can easily report it." (Laura, Advocate, 16)

"I think it's incredibly rare for girls to report abuse and harassment, likely because they fear judgement or being told that 'it happens'. This leads girls to feel as though their harassment is not worth anyone's time, but this needs to end. Spreading awareness of harassment and educating people to know that it should be reported would be a big step forward for reporting abuse to be more supported." (Imogen, Advocate, 15)

"I don't think girls feel comfortable reporting harassment, particularly when it comes from male peers and acquaintances. This is because, in my experience, many girls feel they need to "laugh it off" and fear being labelled a "snake" by others for reporting unacceptable comments. I think although most websites are clear on their safety functions, it doesn't necessarily get used by girls because of these fears." (Izzy, Advocate, 15)



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Our Girls' Attitudes Survey highlights some of the pressures girls face online which impact their lives. In 2017, 52% of girls aged 11 to 21 have seen airbrushed images in the media that made them feel pressured to look different and 45% said they sometimes felt ashamed that they are not like the girls and women in the media. Additionally, 35% aged 17 to 21 are worried how universities and future employers judge their social media profiles.

In our 2017 Survey, girls also told us what they want to see to feel safe online:

"If you could block bullies and people you don't know." (Girl aged 7 to 10)

"Ask your parents before you go online so they can check what you're doing."

"If you were notified when people took screenshots of your social media profiles."
(Girl aged 11 to 16)

"More serious punishments for online bullying." (Girl aged 11 to 16)

"Make sure age appropriate material or adverts are shown on social media and YouTube." (Girl aged 11 to 16)

"More clarity as to where personal information is going." (Young woman aged 17 to 21)

"More restrictions from abusive, violent and inappropriate content." (Young woman aged 17 to 21)

"Social platforms taking more time to delete and remove bad people and their accounts."

In addition to our research, the Monitor Report 2016 by ChildWise offers useful insights into the extent to which girls and young women use the internet. The report looks at children's media consumption using a sample from across the UK of over 2000 children aged 5 to 16. The main points we would like to highlight include:

- 95% of girls aged 5 to 16 has access to the internet, with 72% of those girls able to go online in their own rooms
- On average, girls spend 2.8 hours a day online, with 7 to 10 year olds spending 1.7 hours online, rising to 4.1 hours by the age of 11 to 16
- 40% of children aged 5 to 16 go online to look up information, with girls more likely to use the internet this way
- 45% of children aged 5 to 16 go online to message friends and family, and 42% go online to use social networks. These activities are favoured by girls and increases with age, with 75% of teenage girls messaging their friends and 81% using social media
- Girls are also drawn towards visual social networks, with 54% of girls normally using Instagram and Snapchat

2.4 Further research needed

We believe more research is needed into the specific impact online harms can have on children and young people. For example, eating disorders are often talked about in terms



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of having been 'caused' by online abuse and harassment, but - as far as we understand - there is limited evidence available to confirm this.

Wellbeing benefits from social media usage

3.1. We believe it's important that the positive and empowering ways that young people use the internet - such as for communication, creativity and activism - are not overlooked. Our 2016 Survey showed that girls can see social media as a space where they can share their views and seek support. 46% of girls aged 13 to 21 said that social media empowers them to speak out about things they care about and 14% aged 11 to 21 told us they had accessed an online support group.

"The internet gives young people a voice... gives us access to political discourse, and has made us one of the most connected and worldly generations of all time - and the value of this cannot be overlooked." (Katie, Advocate, 18)

It's vital that efforts to tackle online harassment and abuse involve young people and acknowledge the realities of their lives - including positive experiences online.

Awareness of risks and how this could be increased

4.1 Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE)

Awareness amongst young people should be raised through quality Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE). Please see the next section and our [response to the government's RSE and PSHE consultation](#) for more information.

4.2 Parents' role and responsibilities

Parents should also be supported to understand the issues their children experience online. Our 2017 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed that only 47% of girls aged 11 to 21 think their parents understand the pressures they face online.

Parents should also be shown how to avoid inadvertently putting children at risk - for example, by sharing photos or locations publicly. It should also include the importance of asking children's permission before sharing images of them. In our 2017 Survey, 22% of girls aged 7 to 10 said their parents post pictures of them on social media without asking permission - 21% in this age group said this made them feel embarrassed.

Children's rights and potential discomfort around how their parents may use their image or information online should also be considered in relation to the 'right to be forgotten' (Consultation, p18). This indicates that children under 13 would need their parents to make a request for information about them to be removed and deleted. While it makes



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sense for parents to take on responsibilities for young children, it's vital that these children's voices are also represented in the process.

Members of our youth panels thought parents needed to know more about what their children were accessing online and raised issues of privacy and security in relation to sharing images of their children:

"I think parents should know what social media their child uses to make sure they are comfortable with the sites. However, teenagers should be given the freedom to use social media, as it comes with many benefits such as keeping in contact or sharing memories. Raising awareness about risks is important for both parents and children to understand how to stay safe online." (Imogen, Advocate, 15)

"It's important that parents are aware of dangers and know ways to prevent their children from risk online, through parental security and blocking certain types of pages." (Girl, aged 14 to 21)

"Parents should be taught how to set child locks and restrictions, as lack of knowledge can lead to children seeing inappropriate content. Parents sharing photos of children can certainly be frustrating, from the child's point of view. [This] can be embarrassing, and at the more severe end, put the child in danger of being featured in ads or even porn sites." (Juliet, Advocate, 17)

4.3 Online influencers

It would be worth considering how online influencers, such as YouTubers could help spread messages about online safety, due to their immense popularity amongst young people. Our 2017 Survey showed that 55% of girls aged 11 to 21 go to YouTube to find out something they're not sure about and over a third (34%) would be more likely to get advice from a YouTuber than their parents. This would have to be done carefully to ensure that those spreading messages were appropriate ambassadors (and not known for spreading inappropriate content).

Although girls have varying views of YouTubers (with older girls in particular more likely to be cynical about the commercial aspects), many see them as a source of advice and support. Our 2017 Survey showed that:

- 62% of 11 to 16 year olds think YouTubers are good role models
- 34% of 11 to 21 year olds would seek advice from a YouTuber rather than their parents

My favourite YouTuber/s...

'...really good advice on anxiety and it helps me a lot' (Girls' Attitudes Survey participant, 11 to 16)

'...does videos on how to cope with issues and bullying' (Girls' Attitudes Survey participant, 7 to 10)



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Measures, controls and regulations and responsibility and accountability

5.1 PSHE and RSE

As discussed, Girlguiding believes that young people must be given comprehensive education to enable them to develop the skills to deal with online pressures. Quality Personal, Social, Health, Economic education (PSHE) and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) can help young people develop resilience and teach them about the benefits and risks of using the internet and how to stay safe online. In our 2016 Survey, we asked girls aged 7 to 10 what they would like to see included in PSHE lessons, and 48% chose 'online safety'. However, although it's vital that young people are taught resilience and online safety skills, this must be done alongside tackling the unacceptable pressures they face - such as cyberbullying and all forms of abuse and harassment online.

It's also crucial that the new relationships and sex education curriculum provides information for young people to stay safe online including the risks around sexting - in 2017 our Survey found that 16% of girls aged 18 to 21 have felt pressured to send nude pictures.

5.2 Measures to regulate social media

Girlguiding supports measures to enable girls and young women to use the internet freely, safely and without fear. We believe that social media platforms must take greater responsibility to protect users of their platforms and welcome the Government's focus on this issue in its Internet Safety Strategy. Our 2016 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed 80% of girls aged 11 to 21 thought more should be done to tackle sexism and abuse online.

"Although companies always say that they take concerns seriously, too often it's just for show and comments aren't taken down." (Girl aged 14 to 21)

"I think social media sites are reluctant to take responsibility for content. They're constantly quoted in the media as emphasising that they're platforms not publishers, and this doesn't give me confidence that they'd respond to concerns. To be honest, I'm not even sure how I'd contact them." (Girl aged 14 to 21).

"I feel as if social media companies act on things eventually, but not quickly enough - so the damage has already been done by that point." (Girl aged 14 to 21)

"I have reported concerns before. I asked for a post to be taken off Facebook but was told it wasn't inappropriate. I disagreed. I have no confidence that enough is being done to stop harmful posts or content." (Girl aged 14 to 21)

We support the government's proposal to introduce a social media levy and see it as a positive first step, but believe that voluntary participation may make the levy (and



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broader code of practice) less effective. We would like more information on how and when the proposal will be put in place and whether the only incentive for taking part will be reputational. We would also like to know how the proposal will be reviewed and, if the voluntary levy doesn't meet the outlined aspirations, what further considerations will be made. We agree with the point raised in the House of Lords debate (13.11.17) on internet safety, that government should take further action if it is shown that voluntary participation of companies is not producing the necessary results in reducing harm.

We believe the levy should be used to promote existing programmes run by organisations, such as Girlguiding's Free Being Me and Think Resilient, which support reliance and confidence building for young women and critical thinking around navigating the online world and staying safe.

We think there should be minimum safety standards which digital and platforms must meet. Social media companies should aspire to more than these, but the minimum expected should be laid out in a way that's clear to sites and users.

5.3 Support for children's digital skills from the tech industry

We believe that the technology industry can and should play a vital role in supporting children to develop their digital skills - both to help children stay safe online and to engage them in learning essential skills for their futures. In our 2017 Girls' Attitudes Survey, 76% of girls aged 7 to 21 were confident in their digital skills. However, only 37% of girls aged 7 to 21 said they would consider doing a job in technology and 49% did not know what jobs they could do in technology.

It's crucial the tech industry has the right skills and talent to effectively address issues of safety and tackle abuse and harassment. More must be done by the tech sector in collaboration with schools to close the gender gap when it comes to women in the tech industry and improve girls understanding on how tech offers a cross-cutting theme when it comes to thinking about future careers from health and care to creative industries. This starts with girls feeling supported and encouraged to develop and continue their interest in ICT at school. In 2016 our Survey found 52% of girls aged 11 to 21 thought STEM subjects have the image of being more for boys; 41% said there are too few role models in STEM related careers and 35% said there are too few women role models teaching these subjects.

5.4 Age-verification for online pornography

We believe more needs to be done to stop children from accessing adult content online and the harm this can cause. We support age-verification for online pornography and were delighted when this was brought in with the Digital Economy Act - our 2016 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed that 75% of girls aged 13-21 supported this. However, more needs to be done to control graphic, disturbing and violent images on other sites across the internet - our 2017 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed that 54% aged 11 to 21 have come



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across such images, causing girls to feel upset or disturbed. We believe age-verification could be extended to all sites with terms and conditions indicating that the site provides adult content which would be subject to the watershed. In the case of social media sites, where users as opposed to providers post adult content, providers should be responsible for removing inappropriate content. Additionally we believe it would be beneficial for young people and parents to have clear guidance about age restrictions applying to social media (i.e. 13 and above) and why this is important for both safety and wellbeing.

5.5 Peer-to-peer support

As we said in our response to the government's internet safety strategy consultation, we believe there would be many benefits to introducing peer-to-peer development opportunities to help keep children safe online. However, there is a need to consider how to achieve a balance between giving young people the space to talk openly about issues and not exposing them to further abuse from others within a group. To ensure this is the case, peer educators must receive proper support and training.

This issue affects all young people (and people of all ages). However, we believe that girls and young women would benefit especially as they experience particular gendered pressures. In addition, girls from different groups - such as those from BAME backgrounds, those with disabilities or those identifying as LGBTQ+ - could particularly benefit, as they can experience double or multiple forms of discrimination. For example, our 2016 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed that 41% of girls who identified as LGBTQ+ had experienced cyberbullying, compared to 25% of girls overall.

We know that the peer-to-peer method can work really well, as our own peer education programme has proven successful in giving girls a space to talk about issues that are important to them with peers they trust. *Free Being Me* sessions help girls recognise beauty myths, grow in confidence and be happy in their own skin. *Think Resilient* is designed to help girls build mental wellbeing and grow resilience.

While peer support is one way to tackle this issue, it should not be considered a catch-all solution and - as discussed - should be implemented alongside other forms of support and education, including quality Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) as well as support and guidance for parents and guardians.

It's also important not to assume that young people will want to access everything online simply because they are 'young people'. Many may prefer a face to face approach or find this easier to access and so information should be available through a variety of means so it meets the needs of all young people.

"[Having a peer education scheme] could help children recognise internet danger and help them prevent future issues." (Girl aged 14 to 21)



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“As a young person myself, I know that children are more likely to listen to their peers rather than adults. I think that this is because in lots of cases, adults are less in touch with the online world. However, if children are spoken to by an active user of social media, they are more likely to take on board what’s being said and co-operate.” (Girl aged 14 to 21)

“I think peer interaction is one of the best ways to engage young people and make them feel they are being addressed as equals. But I only feel it would be effective if every child knew about it, had access to it and was encouraged by their peers themselves to use it.” (Girl aged 14 to 21)

“It would depend on the circumstances and how this was to be done. Children, especially ones who feel confident on the internet may not want to take part (even though they may be vulnerable). Children new to the internet may be more inclined and so for them it would be useful. Even if it doesn’t prove valuable to a number of children, if it helps others then it’s worth it.” (Girl aged 14 to 21)

5.6 What Girlguiding is doing

At Girlguiding, our [‘Safe Space’](#) safeguarding training for staff includes online issues and keeping children and young people safe online. We also provide [guidance](#) to our leaders on making the most of using social media whilst being aware of the risks.

In our 2017 Girls’ Attitudes Survey, we asked girls what they would like to feel safe online:

Girls aged 7 to 10:

“If you could block bullies and people you don’t know”

“I’d feel safer online if there were kids-only channels that didn’t have things popping up that aren’t suitable”

Girls aged 11 to 16:

“Make sure age appropriate material or adverts are shown on social media and YouTube.”

“If you were notified when people took screenshots of your social media profiles.”

Young women aged 17 to 21:

“More clarity as to where my personal information is going.”

“More restrictions on abusive, violent and inappropriate content.”

“Social platforms taking more time to delete and remove bad people and their accounts.”

5.7 Gendered pressures

In addition to the issues discussed here, online harassment and abuse should be considered alongside the other pressures girls and young women face online, such as gender



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stereotyping and sexism in advertising and appearance pressures. Please see our [response](#) to the Youth Select Committee's inquiry into these issues for more information.

"I think one of the main issues for girls and young women is distinguishing between reality and the internet. On social media, it's easy to believe that everyone is living a "perfect life" all of the time, and that their internet life directly reflects their real life. I know this is not the case, but many girls have anxiety stemming from this. This needs to be tackled through better education delivered to girls through schools and workshops - for example, through Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)." (Izzy, Advocate, 15)

"There are a number of issues that girls face online. One is body image. When girls go online and, say, go internet-shopping for clothes or make-up, they will immediately be confronted with models who seem to have "perfect" bodies. Almost all will be white, and very thin. This can lead to girls who don't have bodies like this feeling less comfortable with their bodies. Advertisers should take responsibility for the messages they're sending out online, and choose a diverse group of models with a range of body shapes to promote products." (Juliet, Advocate, 17)

Monitoring

6.1 We welcome the proposals for an annual internet safety transparency report (p18, consultation). We believe complaints should be categorised by all protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that companies are aware of the scale of abuse against people from these groups and able to tackle it. Abuse against both women and girls should be measured to reflect the particular pressures they face.

7.1 Recommendations

1. We support the use of a social media code and levy. However, we would like to know the timescales and method of evaluating these, considering that sign up is voluntary. We agree with the point raised by peers in the House of Lords debate on 7th November 2017 that government should take further action if it is shown that voluntary participation of companies is not producing the necessary results in reducing harm.
2. We believe it's necessary to educate young people on how to stay safe online through quality RSE and PSHE. Where appropriate, this could be supplemented by peer to peer support schemes and other online information.
3. Online safety education should also be available to parents/guardians through both on and offline methods. The aim would be to help them keep their children safe online and to educate them on the risks of sharing photos and information about their children.



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4. The voices of girls and young women - and all young people - must be included in discussions and decisions on this issue, through direct participation (with support from civil society organisations as required) and taking advice from experts in children and young people. This includes finding a way for the voices of children under 18 to be heard in relation to the 'right to forget'.
5. Terms and conditions should be clear and easy to understand so that young people know how to report harassment and abuse. A good example of this is the accessible terms and conditions from the [Children's Commissioner's guide for children](#). However, the government should also tackle the barriers that stop girls and young women from reporting issues such as the normalisation of sexism and abusive behaviour or the fear of being bullied for speaking out. These should be tackled as part of quality RSE and PSHE lessons.
6. Social media sites should have to follow minimum standards. These should include the issues highlighted by girls in this response - e.g. delays and lack of consistency in addressing reported issues.
7. We support the age-verification principle laid out in the Digital Economy Act for online pornography being extended to all sites providing adult content. Social media sites should be responsible for removing adult content from their platforms.
8. We would also recommend considering issues of online harassment and abuse alongside other online pressures, such as the pressure to live the perfect life online, body image anxiety and sexual harassment in schools.

For more information, please contact Alex Webber, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, on alex.webber@girlguiding.org.uk