Net Aware Report 2017: "Freedom to express myself safely"

Exploring how young people navigate opportunities and risks in their online lives

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NSPCC

Net Aware ⟩⟩⟩

Where quotes from young people are used, we will state their gender, age and the app, site or game they were reviewing.

The quote that forms part of the title is from a girl, aged 15, reviewing IMVU.

Foreword

The internet has had a huge impact on many people's lives, especially young people as they grow up in the world of technology and social media. We are more reliant on the internet than ever before, leaving us to sometimes question what life was like before it was launched. How did you adults cope as children without the online world?!

But we know too well that the internet can be a risky place if not used in the right way. We need more action to really make the online world the best it can be.

I do want to say that the internet has had a positive impact on many lives as well. I am certain of this because it has had an immense impact on my life. Since everything is now at the touch of your fingertips, fantastic opportunities are more accessible than ever before. It is also a great way of staying in touch with family and friends.

I believe that we can all be responsible for our own online safety. Keeping informed about social media and the internet is vital for a safer online world for everyone. But the government and social networking platforms in particular should guarantee that appropriate settings and controls are in place (especially for children) to ensure that everyone is safe when they go online.

> *We are more reliant on the internet than ever before, leaving us to sometimes question what life was like before it was launched. How did you adults cope as children without the online world?!*

Of course, parents also have a role in keeping children safe online – though it is my belief that this role changes with age. I think open conversations about social media and the internet are beneficial for both parent and child as this builds trust and is informative for both parties.

Anna, 16
NSPCC Young Campaigner

Contents

Introduction

The Net Aware Report 2017: "Freedom to express myself safely" provides a snapshot into young people's online lives. It explores the opportunities they benefit from alongside the risks they face on a daily basis. Using data from our 2017 Net Aware research, this report seeks to amplify the voices of children and young people – exploring what they like about the online space, as well as highlighting the factors that prevent them from using it safely. Children and young people are experts in their own online experiences and this report allows us to learn from them and gain better insight into their digital reality. Based on what these young people have told us, we propose a series of recommendations for government, industry and parents to ensure the internet can be a place of fun, communication, self-expression and creativity, and not a place of unnecessary risk.

This research was conducted to feed into the NSPCC and O2's Net Aware[1] tool, a parent-facing guide on the most popular sites, apps and games used by young people. The Net Aware website (also available as an app) is updated on an annual basis and aims to provide users with real-life insight into parents' and young people's experiences on these platforms, as well as information on how to stay safe when using them.

In our 2017 research, we engaged 1,696 11–18 year olds in schools across the UK and through Childline's engagement platforms, such as Facebook.[2] Young people were asked to complete a survey that included general questions about their online behaviour and knowledge around online safety, as well as detailed reviews about specific platforms. The data collection ran from December 2016 to February 2017. We also consulted with 674 parents and carers through the research firm, YouGov. The data from parents is not used heavily in this report, as we have chosen to focus on young people's experiences. For a full methodology, please see Appendix 1.

1   www.Net-Aware.org.uk or available as an app from the App Store or Google Play.
2   1,472 young people through schools and 224 young people through Childline engagement platforms.

Key findings and recommendations

This report draws on data from our 2017 Net Aware research to provide insight into young people's online experiences. Key findings and recommendations for government, industry and parents are detailed here:

Key findings

- **Young people are motivated by enjoyment** in their exploration of the online space. They value opportunities for:
  - Fun: Respondents are enthusiastic about the potential for fun and enjoyment online; this includes sharing funny videos, posting photos and playing games.
  - Communication: The social opportunities provided by the internet serve a range of purposes for respondents including keeping in touch with friends and family, school work and employment advice, testing boundaries and building communities and social groups.
  - Self-expression, self-representation and creativity: Scope for self-expression is found in the imaginative nature of games, the potential for exploration and freedom, and the creative functionality of some platforms.
  - Online autonomy: Young people feel empowered when sites offer effective tools to keep them safe online. They praise robust privacy settings and effective reporting and blocking mechanisms.

- **However, these positive experiences are too often tainted by negative ones** – one in four (997 out of 3,975) reviews stated that the platform being reviewed was risky. This was across all sites included in the research. The primary risks identified were:
  - Interaction with strangers: This includes unwanted friend requests and sexual or offensive messages, as well as fears about lack of privacy.
  - Inappropriate content: This is particularly prevalent on sites and apps with live streaming functionality
    - Violence and hatred: One in three (1,194 out of 3,975) young people's reviews reported seeing violent and hateful content. This may be in user-generated content, footage from the news or fictional violence in games.
    - Sexual: One in five (815 out of 3,975) young people's reviews reported seeing sexual content including accidentally finding it, being sent sexual messages, or being encouraged to share sexual content themselves.
    - Bullying: Just under one in five (772 out of 3,975) young people's reviews reported seeing bullying. Some noted bullying within a social group, while others indicated that the opportunity to be anonymous on some platforms was facilitating bullying behaviour.

Recommendations

- **Platforms need to do more to protect their young users** and we would like to see an independent body set up to ensure social media platforms are transparent and accountable for the safety of children using their services. Four out of five (1,380 out of 1,696) respondents felt that social media companies are not doing enough to protect them from inappropriate content. We would recommend:

  - Bespoke accounts for under 18s, designed in a child-centred way using technical mechanisms, and moderators to respond quickly when issues arise. These accounts would have accessible terms and conditions, robust privacy settings and account verification.

  - Clear and robust community standards, including consistent definitions of acceptable behaviour, strong moderation and escalation processes, and self-tagging of content.

  - Methods to mitigate problems, including clear and visible reporting and blocking procedures.

  - Limiting exposure to online abuse and inappropriate content with sites proactively flagging content and suspicious accounts, and notifying internal moderators and young people where concerning behaviour is detected.

- **Parents and carers also have an important role to play**. The NSPCC and O2 partnership provides a variety of resources to help parents keep their family safe online. We would encourage parents to:

  - Talk frequently to their children about staying safe online.

  - Explore the online world together as a family.

  - Agree their own family rules about what is OK and what is not online.

  - Manage the privacy settings and controls on the sites, apps and games their family uses.

What young people enjoy online: "What do you like about this site?"

This section focuses on the positive elements of young people's digital experiences. We have heard directly from young people about the reasons they are using the internet, and the benefits it brings them. As will be detailed below, young people spoke enthusiastically about the opportunities to have fun, communicate, and express themselves online. Online autonomy is also important – many young people are confident internet users and value sites that provide them with effective tools to keep themselves safe online.

Children and young people's use of social media and technology is evolving at a rapid pace. They are accessing the internet at an increasingly young age and using a range of devices (particularly mobile) to do this. In 2015, Ofcom included data on the internet use of 3–4 year olds for the first time[3] and their 2016 research found that two in five (41 per cent) children aged 5–15 have a smartphone.[4] The ways in which young people use the internet are also diversifying. Research has shown that young people use multiple social media platforms for different forms of communication, something that the Net Aware research supports.[5] An example of this is using Facebook to stay in touch with family, and Twitter to communicate with friends, as this is an online space in which a young person is less likely to be connected with their parents.[6]

The amount of time young people spend online has also increased. Ofcom found that 5–15 year olds spent over an hour longer online per week in 2016 than they did in 2015 (15 hours vs 13 hours 42 minutes per week on average). This follows the trend seen since 2007 of a year-on-year increase in estimated weekly hours of internet consumption for 5–15 year olds (9 hours 42 minutes per week in 2007, 10 hours 18 minutes per week in 2011, 12 hours per week in 2013).[7] There is scant research, particularly longitudinal, on the impact of this on young people, and within the existing studies there are considerable divergences of opinion. While some view children's increasing use of internet-connected devices as a cause for concern, others disagree, suggesting that devices and apps are simply a means to a social end.[8] As will be discussed, our respondents indicate that the social opportunities provided by the internet are a significant attraction for young people.

Fun and enjoyment: "You can see some really lovely posts."
(Girl, 13, Instagram)

It seems that the majority of young people are motivated by enjoyment in their online activity – the most commonly occurring theme that emerged in our analysis was 'fun'. This correlates with ParentZone's research into young people's social media use and mental health, which found that 75 per cent of children said the internet has made them feel happy and 66 per cent said internet use made them feel relaxed.[9] As one boy in the Net Aware research said:

"It's good to see trends and to share things you like [and] find funny [things], show your friends, tag people in things they might be involved in or like, and it's easy to talk to your friends" (13, Facebook)

3   Ofcom (2015) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report.
4   Ofcom (2016) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, p.6.
5   Miller, D. (2016) Social Media in an English Village, p.98.
6   Ofcom (2016) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, pp. 31 and 41.
7   Ofcom (2016) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, pp. 41 and 47.
8   Sampasa-Kanyinga, H. and Lewis, R. (2015) Frequent Use of Social Networking Sites Is Associated with Poor Psychological Functioning Among Children and Adolescents. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, Vol. 18, No. 7: 380-385; RSPH/YHM, (2017) #StatusOfMind, p. 8; boyd, d. (2014) It's Complicated, p.18.
9   Rosen, R. (2016) ParentZone: Social Media and Mental Health report, 'The Perfect Generation': Is the internet undermining young people's mental health?, p.5.

Digital communication researcher danah boyd argues that the spaces that young people use are not as significant as what they represent: "Each cohort of teens has a different space that it decides is cool. It used to be the mall [...now] social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the cool places."[10] The young people we spoke to echo this: "I like to talk to my friends on Instagram and send them funny videos that other people post. I also like posting pictures of myself that only my friends can see" (Girl, 13, Instagram). "It's fun and it can keep you entertained forever when you've finished doing your homework" (Boy, 14, Call of Duty: Black Ops Zombies).

"You can send a picture to your friends if you're on holiday or something and you can use the Snapchat filters to make your pictures more interesting. You can also call and text your friends in a different way which is really fun."
(Girl, 13, Snapchat)

10   boyd, d. (2014) It's Complicated, p.5.

We touch on the theme of violence in detail later in the report but while some young people indicated that they found violent content distressing, this was not always the case. One boy, 13, told us he found it "very fun to destroy other people's bases in clan wars" (Clash of Clans). Another boy, 14, told us that he liked "that you can destroy people's houses and kill people (a bit of fun)" in Minecraft. Similarly, one girl, 13, said she liked "killing the zombies" in Call of Duty. It is important to contextualise the violence that young people are encountering online, and to differentiate between fictional violence and descriptions or depictions of real violent acts. Although the impact of violent games on development and behaviour continues to be an area of debate,[11] this content may be more age-appropriate than a violent video of real events appearing unsolicited on a social media feed, as we will discuss later. Of course, the age-appropriateness of violent gaming content is reliant on young people being old enough to play the game, and on the game's minimum age being suitable.

Communication: "You can talk to people without leaving your house."
(Boy, 13, Skype)

Socialising is an essential part of development and the most popular platforms reviewed allow users to do so via messaging, pictures or video chat.[12] Young people like particular apps because they can stay in touch with friends and family: "[I like] getting to speak to others face to face who aren't currently with you, I love [to] FaceTime my family in New York and Australia" (Girl, 13, FaceTime). Another young person told us they like "being able to keep in touch with friends/family that live far away and you wouldn't otherwise speak to" (Boy, 17, Facebook). Not all young people use social networks to speak to people so far afield: "I find it very handy and I can communicate to my friends in school" (Girl, 13, Facebook).

Social networking also allows young people to find others who share their interests: "I love sharing pictures of my rabbits and how other people (accounts) give me nice comments about how cute and sweet they are" (Girl, 13, Instagram). "You can talk to people who have similar interests" (Girl, 17, Omegle). Being able to easily share content was also a means of boosting confidence for some young people:

> "I like that I can put up nice photos that I like about myself and I like that I can make new friends and get closer to old friends. I like that I see lovely photos of other people and I like some of the videos because they are funny." (Girl, 13, Facebook)

Other respondents told us that they use certain apps for communication around school and work: "Well you can talk to young people about work or job interviews" (Boy, 13, Facebook). "I've had some of the most interesting conversations and some of the best career advice from people I've been paired with in Omegle" (Boy, 18). One 13-year-old girl uses FaceTime to help with homework: "You can talk to your friends and see them, so if you had homework you can see what they're doing or writing". These examples highlight some of the ways in which the internet has become integrated into many areas of young people's lives, and how it serves multiple purposes.

Some older respondents enjoyed interacting with others: "I can talk to friends and meet new people" (Girl, 14, Facebook). This is reflected in Pew's 2015 research, which found that 57 per cent of teens

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11 Tear, Morgan J., Nielsen, M. (2013) Failure to demonstrate that playing violent video games diminishes prosocial behavior.
12 Most popular in terms of the platforms in the Net Aware research that received the most reviews from young people.

have made new friends online.[13] Another Net Aware respondent noted enjoying "talking to random people about random things anonymously and having no obligation to stay in contact or even keep a conversation going if it gets boring" (Girl, 17, Omegle). While the impact of this non-committal behaviour on her acquaintances is unknown, this respondent clearly enjoys the opportunity for casual engagement with strangers on her own terms. It is essential that young people feel able to navigate online spaces, establish their own boundaries and feel empowered to make their own choices relating to their safety and wellbeing.

Later in the report, we will explore young people's communication with strangers in more detail, as this was viewed negatively in the majority of cases.

With the ability to communicate comes the opportunity to build an online community, something many young people are doing: "I love interacting with my transgender community" (Boy, 15, Facebook). Another said, "I like how you can create a whole society of online users" (Girl, 11, Roblox). "I like that I can keep up to date with people that I have an interest in, e.g. athletes, friends, family who stay abroad. I also like that you can find out information of important events in your community" (Boy, 16, Facebook). This response also illustrates how particular apps can facilitate and promote local activities, as well as relevant news. On a larger scale, platforms can be a "good way to see a variety of cultures" (Girl, 12, Instagram), allowing young people to broaden their horizons.

13   Lenhart, A., et al. (2015) Teens, Technology and Friendships. Washington: Pew Research Center.

Self-expression, self representation and creativity: "You get to express your inner self and it is very fun."
(Girl, 12, WhatsApp)

The opportunities for self-expression afforded by certain apps were also popular, and varied across platforms. Minecraft: Pocket Edition allows users to design and create a virtual world: "I like that it is free [to] roam and that it is creative and that it is helping people learn; it has been used in school before for lessons [sic]" (Boy, 12). "It's fun, because you can create a world of imagination" (Boy, 12). Another boy, 12, told us: "I like it because I want to be an architect and it is all about building houses and surviving for as long as you can." While some young people use the game to explore what they might want to do in the future, others simply "like that you can use your imagination to build and create things" (Girl, 13).

Certain apps, such as Flipagram, allow young people to experiment with design, using their imagination and creativity:

"I like that you can put all of your photos together and make a nice video with nice music and maybe make someone happy with it for their birthday or something" (Girl, 13, Flipagram)

Other respondents value the freedoms of the internet to present themselves as they wish, and to communicate with new people: "I like getting to be myself. Picking how I look, and how I present myself to people. I enjoy talking to people that don't know me" (Boy, 18, IMVU). Apps like FIFA Mobile Football also allow for personalisation: "You get to create your own team of the footballers you love and just have fun!" (Boy, 13).

Online Autonomy: "I like [...] that you can block people and change your privacy settings very easy [sic]."
(Boy, 13, Facebook)

Respondents also placed importance on having control over who can contact them: "The things I like about WhatsApp is that I can add people ONLY from my contacts and if any random people contact me I can easily block them" (Girl, 13, WhatsApp). When apps are providing effective safety mechanisms, young people notice: "I like how we can be private on Instagram and still be able to socialise with friends and family. Also, if anyone unwanted direct messages you (dm), you can easily block them and report them so they can't contact you again" (Girl, 13, Instagram). Similarly, "you can block people if you do not want contact with them" (Girl, 13, Google Hangouts). Another told us she liked having the "freedom to express (her)self safely" (Girl, 15, IMVU). Responses such as this show how young people value opportunities to protect themselves online.

In their responses, young people have clearly highlighted the substantial positive impact that the internet can have on their lives. They evidently like using these platforms and are motivated by enjoyment in their exploration of online spaces. It is essential that these platforms are developed in a child-centred way, with robust safeguarding processes and safety features in place. This will ensure that young users can feel empowered and confident to enjoy the benefits of the internet, to explore safely, and negotiate boundaries without being exposed to unnecessary risks.

What inhibits young people's enjoyment of online spaces: "What don't you like about this site?"

Young people told us that their enjoyment of online spaces was frequently tainted by negative experiences. One in four (997 out of 3,975) young people's reviews stated that the app they were reviewing was either 'very risky' or 'a bit risky'.
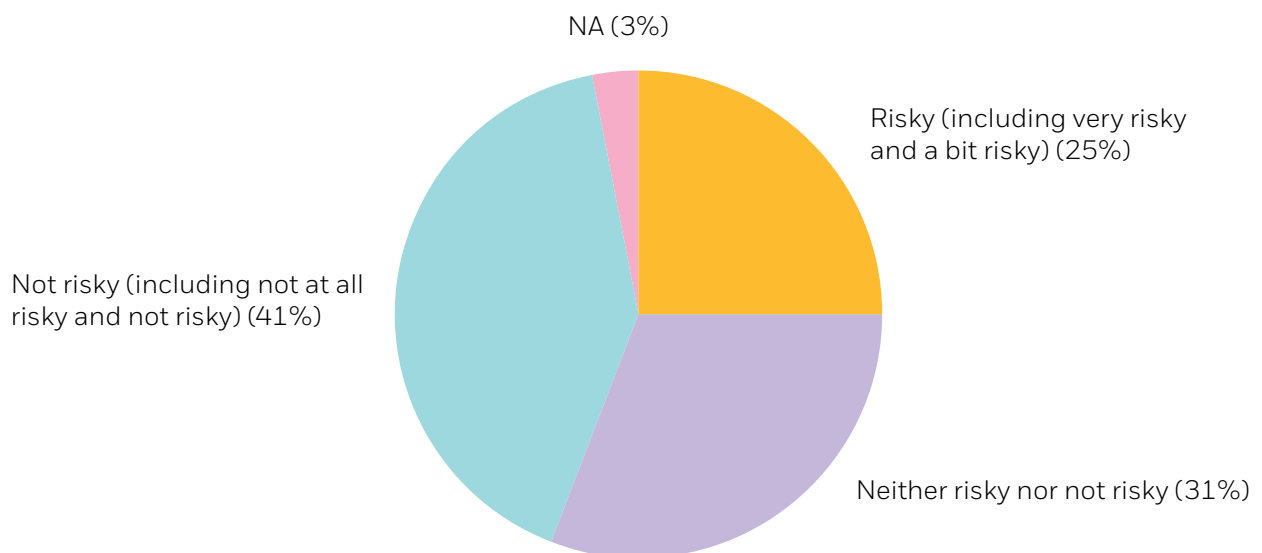
As will be detailed below, the key risks that emerged were around contact and communication from strangers, and inappropriate content including violence and hatred, sexual content and bullying. It is noteworthy that, while they receive significant media and industry attention, the issues of radicalisation, self-harm (including the promotion of eating disorders) and internet addiction did not emerge as significant trends in the Net Aware research. This does not mean that these areas are not concerning, but it appears that they were not front-of-mind for the young people we consulted in this research.

Young people's interaction with strangers: "Strangers add me a lot."
(Girl, 14, ooVoo)

As we reported earlier, young people liked the way apps and games allow them to communicate with people at a distance. However, this freedom of communication is not without risks – significant numbers of our respondents mentioned negative experiences with strangers online. This concern was present on both messaging and content-sharing apps, as well as on games with in-built messaging.

The data indicates that some young people are making contact themselves with people they do not know. Over a third of respondents (615 out of 1,696) had added someone online that they did not know in the last six months and nearly a quarter (385 out of 1,696) said they were likely or very likely

Figure 1: How risky do you think this site is for young people?

NA (3%)

Risky (including very risky and a bit risky) (25%)

Not risky (including not at all risky and not risky) (41%)

Neither risky nor not risky (31%)

Source: NSPCC Net Aware research 2017

to add someone they did not know online in the future. Some respondents indicated they felt under pressure to add strangers: "A lot of young users of Instagram tend to want lots of followers and want to be popular because of how society pressures you. So young users just accept random people and they communicate with people they don't know" (Girl, 14, Instagram).

These statistics may be concerning, but it is worth noting that there is some ambiguity. Many of the platforms included in the Net Aware research feature celebrities and high-profile individuals, such as bloggers, publicly sharing content. A young person following the account of a verified celebrity or influencer that they admire should not be considered risky in the same way as a young person adding an adult stranger. For example, one girl, 16, said of Periscope: "It's good to follow famous people (Brendon Urie!!)". Similarly, we cannot know how young people interpret the question – some respondents may consider someone they have seen at school, or a friend of a friend, to be a stranger, while others may only apply this definition to someone they have never met. Clearly there is nuance here, which we are unable to fully dissect.

Young people also told us about unwanted friend requests and communication from strangers on the apps, sites and games that they are using. One girl told us that she does not like it "when unwanted/ unknown people ask to follow you and you decline but they keep requesting" (13, Instagram). Another girl said: "Strangers add me a lot" (14, ooVoo). This gives a sense of the bombardment of communication from unknown people that some respondents are experiencing online. One boy, 13, said of FIFA Mobile Football: "The worst part of it is that you can talk to the person you're playing against, whether you know them or not". This indicates that certain apps give young people little control over who can contact them. Participating in online spaces should never place interaction with strangers as an unavoidable requirement.

Figure 2: In the last six months, have you added someone that you don't know on any sites you use?

Don't know (11%)
Yes (36%)
No (52%)
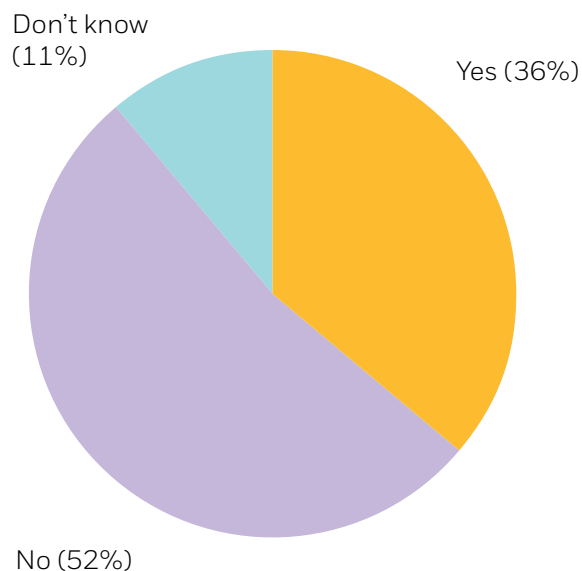
Source: NSPCC Net Aware research 2017

Figure 3: How likely are you to add someone that you don't know in the future?

Very unlikely (32%)
Very likely (8%)
Likely (15%)
Neither likely nor unlikely (17%)
Unlikely (28%)
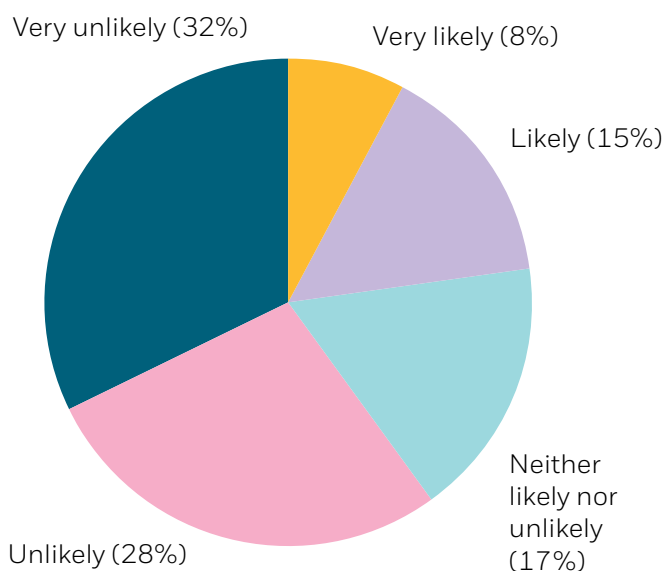
Source: NSPCC Net Aware research 2017

Some respondents told us about negative consequences resulting from being added by people they didn't know. A number of young people, particularly girls, mentioned receiving sexual messages from strangers. One girl said: "There are random people who can [add] you on WhatsApp and send you nudes and disturbing pictures and dirty language. This happened to me but I blocked them" (14, WhatsApp). Another said: "Well, people add you who you don't know! Also, people might show body parts to very young people and to people who they do not know!!!" (Girl, 11, Snapchat). Young people also noted strangers sending abusive or offensive messages. This inappropriate content was reported across all types of platform. One girl, 12, told us that Minecraft "can be very dangerous because anyone can talk to you and some people can be very rude and call people horrible names." Another told us she does not like it "when someone added you that you don't know and they start messaging you in a bad way and being rude to you [sic]" (Girl, 14, ooVoo).

Young people also expressed concern about others being able to view and access their content: "You don't know who could be watching your live streams" (Boy, 13, Live.ly) and "anyone can see your profile" (Boy, 12, MovieStarPlanet). A girl, 13, told us that the thing she dislikes about WhatsApp is that "anyone can get your number and then view your profile without your consent". Clearly respondents do not feel confident in the levels of privacy offered by some sites, highlighting the need for clear privacy settings for all users, particularly young people.

Respondents also indicated that they saw contact from strangers as a risk that may go beyond the online world. One girl told us that "random people could follow them and have their information then they could come to their houses and kidnap them" (13, Instagram). Another comment said that "it can be used by people to pretend they are someone they're not. For instance, a 60-year-old man can pretend to be a 15-year-old girl, and no one would be able to tell" (Boy, 17, Facebook). These responses tended to be hypothetical, rather than lived experience. Further research could explore how widely held this view is among young people, and

the possible range of influences at play here, such as media, peers, parents and schools. Children need to be aware of, and realistic about the true nature of the risks that exist online. However, it is also essential that they feel empowered, confident and resilient in order to manage these effectively.

Inappropriate content: "It can have rude or upsetting things on it."
(Boy, 13, Facebook)

The Net Aware survey specifically asked young people about the types of content they had seen on the platform they were reviewing. Respondents reported seeing high levels of inappropriate content. One in three (1,194 out of 3,975) young people's reviews reported seeing violence and hatred, and around one in five reviews reported sexual content and bullying.[14] This sits alongside Childnet's 2017 report that states that 70 per cent of 8–17 year olds have seen images or videos online in the past year that are not suitable for their age.[15]

Inappropriate content – violence and hatred: "People can say mean things to others and fights can start."
(Girl, 13, YouTube)

Violence and hatred were recurring themes in young people's responses about inappropriate content. This category encompasses violence, racism, homophobia, sexism and animal abuse. The type of content depended on the nature of the platform being reviewed. On content-sharing sites and social networks, user-generated content was a common source of hate. One respondent said: "I don't like how they put up disturbing videos about people fighting, animals being hurt, racism, sexism and stuff like this" (Girl, 13, Facebook). Another said: "There is quite a lot of mean, racist and homophobic content on the social network" (Girl, 13, Snapchat). A 17-year-old boy said of YouTube: "There are many YouTubers [...] talking about some inappropriate or unhealthy stuff [...for example, making] fun of several topics, such as self harm, gay people, etc."

14   Out of a total of 3,975 reviews, 815 reported sexual content and 772 reported bullying.
15   http://www.childnet.com/blog/safer-internet-day-2017-press-release

Other respondents mentioned seeing distressing news and current affairs online: "[I dislike] the news [because] sometimes there is inappropriate things on it" (Girl, 13, Snapchat). In recent research commissioned by the UK Safer Internet Centre, involving 1,512 13–18 year olds, 82 per cent reported seeing hateful online content aimed at a certain group, particularly because of religion, sexual orientation or race. Young people in this study were vocal in their dislike of this content – 94 per cent said that no one should be targeted with online hate because of their identity.[16]

In contrast to content-sharing sites, young people reporting violence and hatred on games typically referred to the content of the game. One respondent said: "It contains blood and gruesome images that could cause nightmares" (Boy, 13, Call of Duty). There was also reference to having to commit violent acts to succeed in a game: "[I dislike] when you have to kill animals for meat" (Girl, 12, Minecraft). However, as noted above, not all respondents considered the violent content of games to be negative and some young people found enjoyment in this.

Inappropriate content – sexual content and behaviour: "Some random people ask for nudes or send nudes to you."

(Girl, 14, Kik)

Significant numbers of respondents encountered sexual content on the sites, apps and games that they reviewed, often seeing it accidentally. A 2016 NSPCC and Middlesex University report asked 1,001 young people about their attitudes on online pornography and found that those who had viewed online pornography were as likely to have seen it by accident, via a pop-up, as they were to have found it deliberately, or be shown it by other people.[17] This is reflected in our Net Aware research – one girl told us that "MovieStarPlanet can be a bit risky because [...my cousin] has seen nudity and sexual content" (Girl, 12). Another said: "There is 13s and above on there being rude, semi naked or naked [sic]" (12, ooVoo). A 12-year-old girl noted that on Minecraft "people change their character so it looks like they're naked and they crouch and stand up on others so it looks like they're having sex." Some young people indicated a feeling of fatalism about encountering this material. A 13-year-old girl told us: "There is a very rude and sexual side to YouTube that is unavoidable."

Some respondents told us they have received sexual messages:

> "Lots of adults are sexual through their characters, e.g. talking about sex, and also drugs. This can be true even if they know you're very young. I had a few dodgy experiences and you never know when this could carry over into offline life" (Girl, 18, IMVU)

Another told us that the thing she dislikes about Instagram is that "some people can be very abusive and talk to younger people in a very sexual way" (Girl, 14).

Respondents also mentioned being encouraged to behave sexually. "Pedofiles [sic] might ask you to reveal your private parts on camera and attempt to meet you in real life" (Boy, 13, Skype), again indicating a fear that this risk could transfer offline. One girl mentioned older men "trying to get girls naked on camera" (18, Omegle), while another review for the same site said, "there is a lot of pressure for young people to send photos or talk dirty" (Girl, 17). A girl, 14, reviewing KIK reported

16   UK Safer Internet Centre (2016) Creating a Better Internet for All: Young people's experiences of online empowerment + online hate, p.8.
17   Martellozzo, E., et al (2017). "I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it...", pp. 3 and 8.

that "some random people ask for nudes or send nudes to you." These responses suggest that some adults are behaving illegally on certain apps without consequence, and young people are dealing with this alone. This correlates with recent research that has highlighted the prevalence of requests for sexual pictures in Canadian reports about problematic or illegal content.[18]

A trend of nudes being shared without the owner's consent also emerged. Respondents mentioned this happening primarily on Snapchat: "People ask for nudes and screenshot [it] and put it on your story" (Girl, 13) and "people put nudes of other people on their story" (Boy, 13). One girl, 15, also told us that FaceTime can be risky for young people because "they may not know who they are FaceTiming or talking to and if they show themselves nude then the person would screenshot and they won't know." Similarly, a 17-year-old girl said of Omegle, "younger people […] could be tricked into doing things. For example, if a young girl was convinced to flash, the other person could screenshot and share this". These scenarios are hypothetical but give insight into young people's concerns. The NSPCC-Middlesex University report showed a minority of young people are taking and sending nude images: 13 per cent of young people involved had taken a topless image and 3 per cent a fully naked image. Of those who took a naked or semi-naked image, over half (55 per cent) went on to share it with someone else. Twenty per cent of young people who had taken a picture said they had not wanted to take it.[19] However, sharing nude images is not always viewed negatively by young people: a 2016 literature review found that some of the major reasons for young people engaging in sexting were to flirt, as part of being in a consensual relationship and to experiment.[20]

Inappropriate content – cyberbullying: "People can bully you and post mean pictures of you. People can gang up on you." (Girl, 13, Instagram)

Cyberbullying also emerged as an issue. In 2015/2016, there were 4,541 Childline counselling sessions that mentioned online bullying.[21] In our Net Aware research, young people told us that cyberbullying was something they often witnessed and were sometimes subjected to online. One girl, 13, reported that "there is a lot of bullying on Snapchat and a lot of people embarrass each other".

In some instances, the bullying occurred within a social group: "If their videos are a little bit silly, their other friends could make fun of them" (Girl, 14, Dubsmash). Another girl, 13, told us that "people can bully you and post mean pictures of you. People can gang up on you on DM" (Instagram). Bullying behaviour also came from strangers, for example, "older people harass younger people and abuse them, and it is like a heaven for bullying" (Boy, 11, Minecraft).

On sites that allow users to post comments anonymously, this functionality was often central to the bullying behaviour reported: "Some people may think that writing on someone's ASKfm page anonymously is just a fun thing to do but when you're bullying and writing things to someone that may hurt them or make them do things to themselves it is not fun at all" (Girl, 15, ASKfm). Similarly, on YouTube, "users are sometimes abusive of their so-called 'anonymity' and use it to harass other users" (Boy, 14). In these cases, we cannot know whether the perpetrator was someone the young person knows or not.

18 Quayle, E. and Newman, E. (2016) An exploratory study of public reports to investigate patterns and themes of requests for sexual images of minors online.
19 Martellozzo, E. et al (2017). "I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it…", p.47–52.
20 Cooper, K. et al (2016) 'Adolescents and self-taken sexual images: A review of the literature'. Computers in Human Behavior, Vol 55, pp. 706–716.
21 Bentley, H. et al (2016) NSPCC: How Safe Are Our Children?

The Net Aware survey did not specifically ask young people about the emotional impact of the content they encountered, but many young people did touch on this in their responses around bullying. For example, one girl told us that, "it can leave young people feeling worthless and emotionally hurt" (17, ASKfm). Similarly, another told us that it can "make you feel down about yourself" (Girl, 13, Facebook). While a boy, 13, reviewing Instagram said that "some people can hurt you emotionally". The distress reported here correlates with other research, including the Childline bullying report 2015/16.[22]

Inappropriate content – live streaming: "People can livestream whatever they want."
(Boy, 13, Periscope)

Looking at inappropriate content across the different categories of platforms included in the survey indicates an interesting trend. The chart below shows the percentage of young people's reviews that reported seeing types of inappropriate content, with platforms grouped according to functionality. Each individual platform may be included in more than one category here, for example Facebook is included in photo/image sharing, content sharing, messaging, voice calling and live streaming as it has all of these functionalities.

Figure 4: Percentage of young people's reviews reporting inappropriate content, with platforms grouped by category
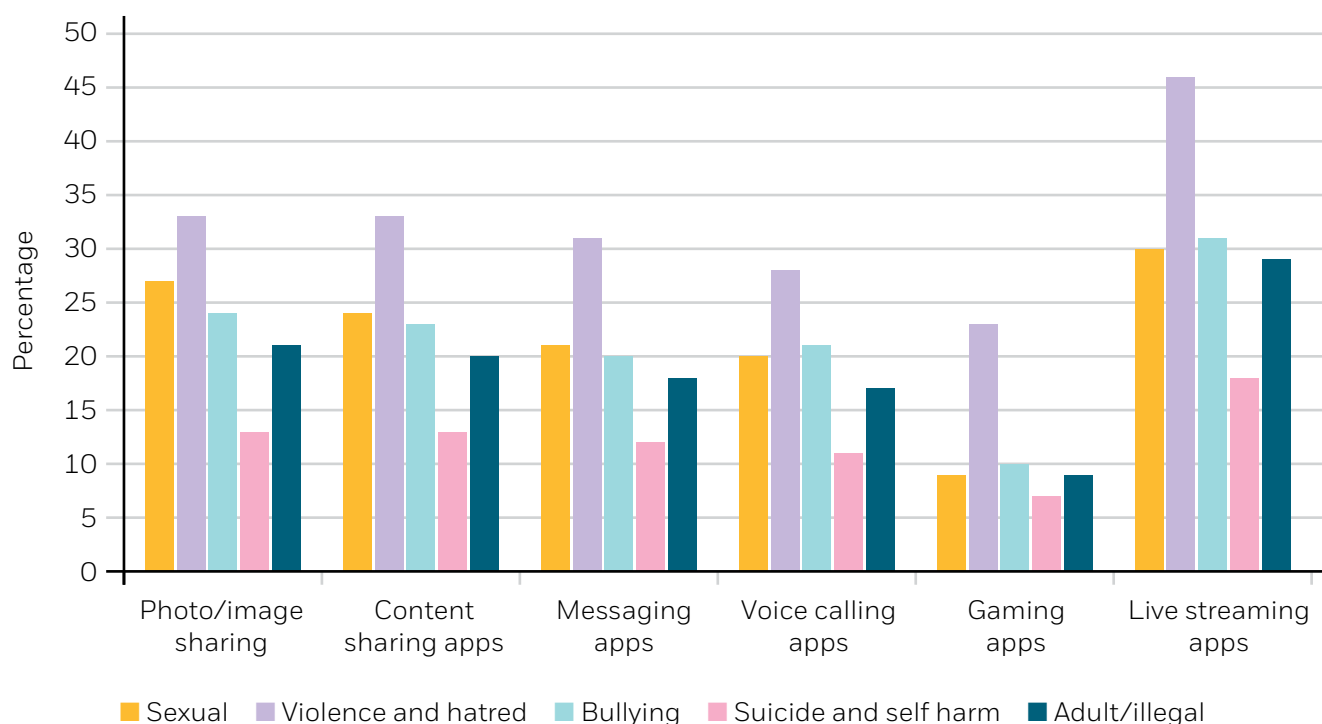
Source: NSPCC Net Aware research 2017

22   NSPCC (2016) What children are telling us about bullying, p.4.

There are notably higher levels of inappropriate content, especially violence and hatred, on the platforms with live streaming functionality compared to other platforms. However, we cannot say with certainty that this is due solely or specifically to the live streaming elements of these platforms. Nonetheless, considering the increasing popularity of live streaming, the rapid developments in this technology and the challenges around moderating or controlling this medium, this does appear to be an area that needs greater scrutiny in terms of child protection and inappropriate content. As one girl, 16, said of the live streaming app Periscope:

"You can easily tune into live streams and have [no idea] as to what content they are displaying. It is very hard to have trigger warnings as well."

The Net Aware research has highlighted the significant risks that young people are facing in their daily use of their favourite apps, sites and games. Respondents highlighted the issue of persistent and often inappropriate communication from strangers, particularly of a sexual or abusive nature. They have also emphasised the levels of inappropriate content on these platforms, including violence and hatred, sexual content and bullying. It is unacceptable that young people have to encounter upsetting and illegal contact and content as part of their online experience. Significant improvements need to be made to ensure that these risks are prevented, and that reporting and blocking tools and emotional support are in place when issues do occur.

Reporting, blocking and privacy and location settings: "I don't know how to change the settings" (Girl, 14, Snapchat)

We asked young people about their knowledge of safety functions on the sites they use. When it came to reporting, blocking, changing privacy settings and turning off location settings, respondents were most confident on the well-known platforms. The chart below shows the levels of knowledge across all platforms in the Net Aware survey compared with the five most popular: Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Minecraft and Facebook.[23]

Young people's understanding of safety functions for the most popular sites is significantly higher than across all sites reviewed. This may be due to more accessible functionality or communication and promotion from these well-known sites, or more familiarity, knowledge and understanding from young people. Unfortunately, the Net Aware data does not provide robust insight into the reasons behind this trend. Nonetheless, this indicates the need for consistent, industry-wide standards and effective communication and promotion to ensure that young people feel confident implementing basic safety functions on all apps, sites and games they are using. It also demonstrates the potential that industry leaders have to act as role models for best practice in children's online safety.

Figure 5: Percentage of young people's reviews that stated that they knew how to perform the following action on the platform they were reviewing
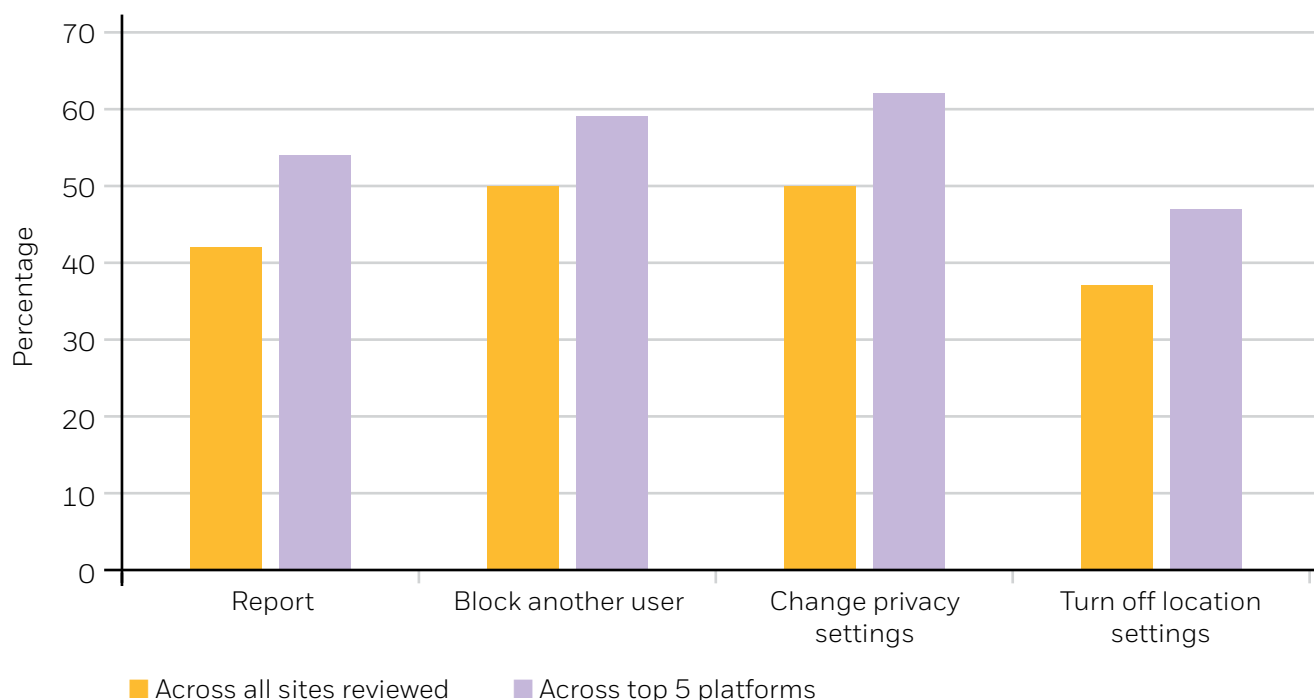

Source: NSPCC Net Aware research 2017

23 Most well-known/popular within Net Aware, meaning the platforms that received the most reviews from young people. Out of the 3,975 reviews from young people, 1,848 reviews were for these five platforms (Instagram: 450 reviews, YouTube: 448 reviews, Snapchat: 427 reviews, Minecraft: 273 reviews, Facebook: 250 reviews).

Age ratings: "Even young children can access it" (Girl, 16, Allo)

We also asked young people about the age ratings on each platform they were reviewing. As previous research has shown, many young people are using sites, apps and games before they reach the minimum age for that platform.[24] In the Net Aware research, 66 per cent (2,013 out of 3,048) of reviews of platforms with a minimum age of 13 or older stated that the young person had started using it before the age of 13. On some sites, young people may be entering a false date of birth, while on others no date of birth is required to create an account or use the platform. This shows how easy it is to access sites underage. This adds complexity to the concept of protecting younger users, as it is unclear in the current system how these users could be accurately identified. This highlights the importance of effective age verification, as will be discussed in the recommendations.

Young people were also asked what they thought the minimum age should be for the site they were reviewing. Twenty-six per cent (1,009 out of 3,947) of young people's reviews said that the site they were reviewing should have an older age limit than it did.[25] One example of this was Omegle, which 69 per cent (24 out of 35 reviews) of respondents thought should have a higher age rating. On average, young people who reviewed this site told us that it should be 16+, but Omegle actually has a minimum age of 13. Our parent respondents thought that the minimum age for this site should be 17. It is an interesting contrast that over a quarter of respondents felt that the site they reviewed should have an older minimum age, yet this same group of young people were also accessing platforms underage on a significant scale.
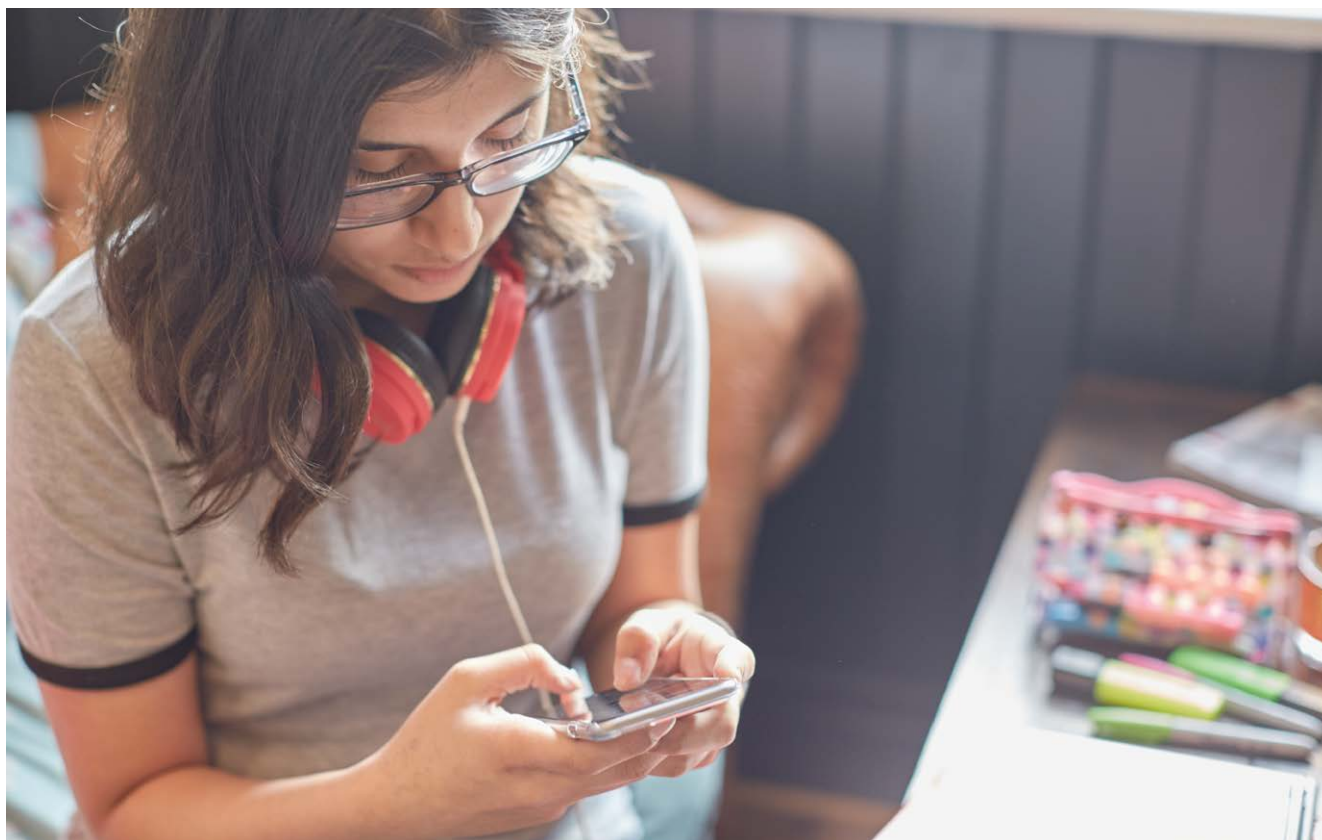
24 Ofcom (2016) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, p.74.
25 The minimum age was taken from the Terms and Conditions of the platform, except for games where the PEGI rating was used. Not all platforms could be included in this calculation as some sites did not state a minimum age at the time of analysis.

Recommendations: "It's not safe enough"
(Girl, 15, Live.ly)

Young people must be protected from inappropriate content and communication so they are free to enjoy the amazing opportunities the internet has to offer. In order for this to happen, they must receive, as a minimum starting point, the same protection online as they do offline. A young person would not be allowed to watch an 18-certificate film in a cinema, yet this report shows that they frequently encounter adult content online that has the potential to upset or cause harm. Young people's online and offline worlds are seamlessly interlinked, yet online spaces are often poorly supervised and unsafe.

The young people we spoke to in our Net Aware consultation are calling on industry to make the internet safer – four out of five (1,380 out of 1,696) respondents told us that they feel social media companies are not doing enough to protect them from content like pornography, self-harm, bullying and hatred. Parents agree too; as one of the parents we spoke to in the Net Aware consultation said, "I don't think they're doing any more than they have to, they could lead the way" (Mother of children aged 9 and 12, reviewing Instagram).[26]

Based on these insights from young people, and through our extensive policy work in this area, we propose the following recommendations for government and industry:

Independent regulation

International principles, guidance and best practice frameworks exist to encourage industry to consider the safety of children online. In relation to the problem of child sexual abuse images, these measures have had a positive impact. However, our Net Aware research highlights that many platforms have not adequately prioritised the full range of child protection and safeguarding issues on their platforms. As such, we believe that an independent body should be set up, with statutory powers, to ensure social media and interactive platforms and services are transparent and accountable for the safety of all children using their services. Industry, government, young people and the third sector must work in partnership to develop a set of online child safeguarding standards so as to provide industry with a practical set of recommendations that companies are, through statute, obliged to enforce. Our recommendations for these standards are outlined below.

Bespoke accounts for under 18s

Accounts should be designed in a child-centred way to allow children the freedom to explore the internet they deserve. An industry-wide standard can be achieved through a mixture of technical mechanisms, supported by moderators, who can respond quickly when problems arise. We would like to see bespoke, safe accounts with:

a) Accessible terms and conditions

Children signing up to social media accounts must be made aware of the implications in terms of the information that others will be able to find out about them, and how to keep themselves safe. Easy to find and child-friendly terms and conditions outline responsible use, support digital literacy, and help children feel empowered while navigating this evolving digital landscape.

b) Privacy settings should be the strongest available

There is a clear opportunity for companies to begin a dialogue with young people themselves, from the moment of registration, about the benefits of these privacy settings and how they help to keep them safe. As part of this set of protections, we want to see geo-locators turned-off as default; private and unsearchable profiles and contact details; default approval of contacts; regular prompts about privacy settings; and live-streaming and video-chat functionality restricted to users' approved contacts. No changes should be made to these privacy settings without the expressed agreement of the account holder.

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26   This response was in relation to the question: Is there anything on this platform that you think is particularly good or bad in relation to keeping children safe online?

c) Account verification

In order to develop under-18 accounts, individuals will need to verify their age on all platforms they are using. It is our recommendation that platforms assume all users to be under 18, and therefore automatically give them the safest possible accounts as default when they sign up. Platforms should only offer access to adult accounts if users are able to verify that they are over 18. Social networks that have a wide age range of users may find that there is scope to begin by offering the highest protections to their younger users, and have those protections peel away as the child gets older.

Clear and robust community standards

a) Clear and consistent definitions of acceptable behaviour

It is imperative that a common understanding and consistent thresholds for what constitutes abusive and harmful content or conduct is developed. In order to facilitate transparency, networks must develop clear community guidelines and ensure that they offer a robust feedback process to users about reports or concerns that have been flagged to them. This would also allow the development of strong evidence on the nature and scale of children and young people affected by abusive content and conduct online.

b) Robust community standards that are consistently upheld

Accounts for under 18s must be developed with clear moderation practices that prevent children from being exposed to, or accidently stumbling upon, harmful content. It is important that there are clear and consistent escalation procedures to moderate content and conduct. These escalation processes may require a referral to law enforcement. They should always signpost to crisis support services and provide sufficient feedback, offering the user a robust explanation of the decisions that the platform has taken.

c) Expectations of users to tag content when uploading

Social media companies should ensure that inappropriate, violent or adult content is either blocked or placed behind age-gates and interstitial warnings (a page, or pop-up that appears before content is downloaded or accessed). Progress could be made towards a more comprehensive regime of tagging content if social media companies offered all users the option to indicate whether their content includes inappropriate, violent or adult material.

Methods to mitigate problems

If a child experiences a problem on a social networking site, their concern must be dealt with in an appropriate manner and they should be signposted to the right types of support. Sites must ensure that:

a) They have clear and visible processes for blocking accounts and reporting content, explained in simple, child-friendly language.

b) There are regular prompts that explain how to report and the reasons for reporting.

c) Any complaint made by under 18s, or complaints involving the abuse of children, should have a distinct reporting procedure and receive a swift response.

d) Users must be informed clearly of maximum timescales for action and these should be adhered to.

e) All reports should be escalated to a trained child safeguarding moderator.

f) Child abuse or self-generated indecent images of under-18s must be removed from the platform entirely; there should be clear and transparent deactivation and removal tools for personal information and images.

g) If a child has reported something that has upset them, they should be signposted to appropriate organisations that can offer support, such as Childline.

Preventing exposure to online abuse and inappropriate content or behaviour

a) Content should be flagged by social media organisations

Pro-active moderation and identification of inappropriate content, using key word lists, for example, should be matched by filtering content or placing it behind warnings (depending on the type of material in question). It is important that this also captures adverts that contain inappropriate content or products targeted at adults.

b) Accounts that indicate illegal behaviour should be flagged

Social media organisations should proactively identify, and flag, accounts that display inappropriate and illegal behaviours. Analysis of such behaviours can be conducted in a non-intrusive manner, using metadata about the account that can be analysed in bulk rather than accessing the content of communications. This would facilitate the identification of accounts that need to be reviewed by the organisation's internal moderators.

c) Send notifications where illegal or suspicious behaviour is detected

Mechanisms need to be developed to highlight to a young person that the person that they are communicating with may have improper intentions. These tools could be expanded to flag behaviour that is indicative of grooming, bullying or harassment. These programmes are not designed to block young people's communications but instead to prompt them to reflect on the behaviour of the person that they are in contact with, and whether they are comfortable with the interaction. Signposting to support, advice and information is essential whenever a child is notified.

What parents can do

Everyone has a role to play in keeping children safe online and there are productive steps that parents can take too. It is essential that parents understand the motivations, pressures and diversity of content and communication that young people experience online. Parents need to avoid a fear-based approach to online safety, and to instead recognise the many benefits and opportunities that the internet offers to young people, as have been outlined in this report.

The NSPCC and O2 partnership provides a variety of resources to help parents keep their family safe online, and recommends they use our TEAM framework (see box opposite).

Parents can also sign up to our icebreakers email series to receive regular updates, information and activities to help keep their family safe online.[27]

O₂ ☺ NSPCC
Let's keep kids safe online

Four steps for parents: TEAM

Talk: 63 per cent (1,071 out of 1,696) of young people in the Net Aware research told us that they would speak to their parent if they came across something worrying online. We encourage all parents to have open, honest and regular conversations with their children about online safety.[28]

Explore: Parents can explore the online world with their children – find out what apps, sites and games their children are using and what they like doing online. Parents can also visit the NSPCC and O2's Net Aware tool[29] and download the app, which will provide notifications on online safety developments.

Agree: It is important to agree rules together as a family about what is OK and what is not. This can help children to understand what behaviour is appropriate when they are online. These rules should apply to parents as well as children. We have a friendly family agreement template available to help.[30]

Manage: Parents can use the settings available to manage their technology. This could include setting up parental controls on home broadband and devices, and ensuring privacy settings are turned on on the platforms that children are using. For technical advice and support, parents can call the O2 NSPCC Online Safety Helpline on 0808 800 5002.

Help your kids stay safe online. Work as a **TEAM**

Talk   Explore   Agree   Manage

27   https://nspcc.o2.co.uk/
28   www.nspcc.org.uk/shareaware
29   www.net-aware.org.uk
30   www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/online-safety/share-aware-family-agreement.pdf

Conclusion

This report has given insight into young people's online experiences, providing a platform for their voices. We have heard clearly about the opportunities that the internet offers for fun, communication, self-expression, self-representation and creativity. It has also been demonstrated that young people appreciate effective safety mechanisms, such as privacy settings, to protect themselves online – although knowledge of these safety mechanisms varies across platforms, and was notably lower on the lesser-known sites.

Young people also highlighted the concerning levels of risk that they are facing, often on a daily basis, and often alone. These risks include persistent and distressing or offensive contact with strangers. They also include witnessing violence and hatred, encountering sexual content and being encouraged to behave sexually, and seeing or being subjected to bullying behavior. Live streaming has been highlighted as a medium that needs greater scrutiny in terms of inappropriate content.

The level of risk that young people are currently facing online is unacceptable. We all have a role to play in ensuring that young people are protected from inappropriate content and communication on the platforms they are using, so that they can fully and safely enjoy the benefits of the online world. Responsibility must lie with government and social media platforms to put the necessary safeguards in place. This report has outlined practical and achievable steps that can be taken to better protect young users – providers should not rely on young people to protect themselves and should instead provide safer accounts by default. We have also detailed some simple recommendations for parents to help them protect their children online. It is essential that young people are at the heart of any developments and decision making. The internet can only become a place where young people truly have the freedom to express themselves safely if their voices are heard, valued and respected.

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Appendix 1: Methodology

In total, the Net Aware consultation involved 1,696 young people in schools across the UK and through Childline engagement platforms, such as Childline's Facebook community. Young people were asked to complete a survey. The first part of this provided a general overview of young people's online lives including:

• The apps, sites and games that they use

• Their interaction with others online

• Levels of confidence and ability in keeping themselves safe online

• Views about inappropriate content.

Young people then provided a number of detailed reviews of the individual platforms that they use. These questions covered:

• Minimum ages

• Inappropriate content

• Knowledge and use of reporting, blocking, privacy and location settings

• Perceived levels of risk

• What they like and dislike about the platforms.

Respondents were able to review as many platforms as they wanted, but could only review those that they had already used. It is important to note that varying numbers of young people reviewed each platform. Following completion of the survey, the NSPCC gave young people some top tips around online safety, as well as signposting to Childline for further support. The consultation ran from December 2016 to February 2017.

We also consulted with 674 parents and carers through the research firm, YouGov. Similar to young people, parents were asked a series of general questions followed by specific reviews of individual platforms. The data from parents is not used heavily in this report, as we have chosen to focus on young people's experiences.

Following data collection, the quantitative data was analysed to identify key themes both between apps and across the whole data set. Qualitative answers were coded using NVivo, a data analysis package, which allowed us to find the most commonly occurring words and phrases to understand trends in young people's responses. This report is grounded in the results of this qualitative analysis.

Wherever possible, we have left quotations as they were written; however, in some instances we have made minor amendments to grammar and spelling to ensure readability.

To choose the 45 most popular sites, apps and games for inclusion in the Net Aware review, we looked at:

• results from the 2016 Net Aware survey, which asked young people to tell us about their favourite sites and any new sites they had started using

• contacts we received through Childline and Net Aware to see which sites, apps and games were being referenced most frequently

• the most popular apps on Google Play and the App Store.

Through the Net Aware research, we received a total of 3,975 reviews from young people. A full list of the sites, apps and games included in the consultation, as well as numbers of reviews received for each platform is detailed on the next page. For more information on any of the sites, apps and games mentioned in this report, please visit www.Net-Aware.org.uk. Please note that not all of the platforms included in the consultation have been added to the Net Aware tool – some have been closed since the research was undertaken, and others did not meet our minimum threshold of ten reviews from both parents and young people.

Table A1: Sites, apps and games included in the consultation with number of reviews received for each platform

Platform	Number of reviews from young people	Number of reviews from parents
Allo	18	15
ASKfm	31	15
Azoomee*	0	7
BBM	34	16
Call of Duty: Black Ops Zombies	67	20
Clash of Clans	68	27
Dubsmash	30	16
Facebook	250	32
FaceTime	113	28
FIFA Mobile Football	151	16
Fling*	0	16
Flipagram	36	12
Friendlife*	9	12
Glide	27	14
Google Hangouts	17	21
Google+	49	26
IMVU	10	13
Instagram	450	25
KIK	64	21
Kiwi	22	12
Live.ly	24	12
Lovoo*	6	14
Minecraft: Pocket Edition	273	27
MovieStarPlanet	109	NA**
Musical.ly	107	14
MyLOL*	8	0
Omegle	35	16
ooVoo	85	NA**
PenPal World	11	13
Periscope	25	19
Pinterest	50	29
Pokémon GO	102	23
ROBLOX	157	19
Skype	79	30
Snapchat	427	25
SoundCloud	81	24
Steam	95	22
Tango	12	11
Tumblr	26	20
Twitch	60	18
Twitter	83	58
Viber	27	28
WhatsApp	194	28
YouNow*	5	10
YouTube	448	27

*This site was not included in the Net Aware tool
**Unfortunately, we were unable to include this site in the parents' review

Net Aware)))

Net Aware is the NSPCC and O2's guide to the most popular sites, apps and games that young people use. Sign up to the Net Aware newsletter to stay up to date.

net-aware.org.uk

You can also download the Net Aware app from the App Store or Google Play

Find out more about our work at
nspcc.org.uk