



Social Media and Youth Violence

UK Youth Select Committee Inquiry

About Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)

Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights) is an alliance that works to improve the awareness, understanding and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other international human rights treaties across Scotland. We have over 600 members ranging from large international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through to small volunteer-led after school clubs and interested professionals. The views expressed in this submission are based on wide consultation with children, young people and our members but may not necessarily reflect the specific views of everyone. Views expressed separately should also be taken into account.

Introduction

Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the UK Youth Select Committee Inquiry into social media and youth violence. Our response shares evidence from children and young people, gathered for our recent [State of Children's Rights Report](#), alongside guidance from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee).

Children and young people emphasise the many benefits of being online, whilst also noting potential harms and the actions that governments should take to address these. While the participants in our report did not focus specifically on knife crime, homicide, gun crime or gang violence (see [Inquiry terms of reference](#)), they shared evidence about access to harmful content more generally, the role of algorithms in determining what they see online, age restrictions, the role of social media companies, and the role of parents and carers.

The digital environment engages a wide range of rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This includes their right to access information (Article 13), to express their views (Article 12), freedom of association (Article 15), right to be protected from all forms of violence (Article 19) and the right to recovery from trauma (Article 39). The UN Committee's General Comment 25 provides specific guidance on upholding children's rights in the digital environment.¹ The UN Committee has also made recommendations directly to the UK and devolved governments in relation to upholding children's rights in online spaces.² In addition, General Comments 13³ (freedom from violence) and 24⁴ (child justice system) are particularly relevant in the context of children's use of digital spaces and the prevention of violence.

¹ [CRC/C/GC/25](#).

² [CRC/C/GBR/CO/6-7](#).

³ [CRC/C/GC/13](#).

⁴ [CRC/C/GC/24](#).

Exposure to violence on social media

1. How do young people experience violent content on social media, and to what extent does this exposure link to incidents of serious violence? To what extent do algorithm-driven platforms promote violent or harmful content, and how does it affect young people?

Children and young people tell us that their online experience is shaped by algorithms. These algorithms can sometimes lead them towards violent or otherwise damaging content:

Protection from violence - people may be exposed to harmful videos. (Member of Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYP))

[S]ometimes if posts fall into wrong algorithm, [it] can be a really negative place and hard to get out of. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland)

Others highlight the ease of joining and setting up groups, some of which promote harmful content:

You can easily join or set up groups online, but they may be harmful. (MSYP)

Children and young people are also wary of AI-generated material, which can include violent, inappropriate or otherwise harmful material:

AI makes it hard to tell if information/videos online is fake or correct. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland)

It [AI] can come up with inappropriate stuff - 18-plus. (Member of Children's Parliament)

Social media companies' behaviour

2. How do social media companies ensure that young people have age-appropriate and safe experiences on their platforms? To what extent do social media companies effectively and consistently enforce age restriction policies and content reporting mechanisms?

Children and young people tell us that social media companies need to do more to protect their safety. They call for stricter guidelines, more proactive moderation, better reporting systems and clearer terms of service.

Companies should do more to protect us. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland)

More safety regulations (reporting systems) e.g. Xbox. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley)

Strong guidance and delete parts when are appropriate or AI made stuff, don't wait until viewers report it. (MSYP)

Some children and young people believe that age limits should be raised for certain platforms:

Age limits need to be higher - e.g. 16+ for Snap, TikTok, Instagram. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland)

Guidelines need to be stricter. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland)

Meanwhile, others feel that age limits are already set at the right level, or are of limited use – as they are easy to bypass:

Good thing that social media have age-appropriate rules. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley)

Age restrictions don't help, people just lie. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland)

Some children and young people feel that both the individual and the company each have their roles to play:

People should be calling bad behaviour out online like they would in person. No one should be a bystander even online and companies and governments need to take more steps to protect our rights online. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland)

I think it's personal responsibility for what you post online but companies should do more too. (anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland)

Overall, there are clear calls for platforms to do more to create safe, child-friendly spaces, where they can interact safely without being exposed to risks such as violent content. Some suggest creating platforms specifically designed for children that could have additional safeguards in place to ensure they do not see content which is harmful:

Insta, Twitter, and TikTok should make apps especially for kids. (MSYP)

Platform for just kids. (MSYP)

The UN Committee says businesses (including social media companies) should respect children's rights, prevent violations and provide a remedy when these do occur. General Comment 25 makes clear that governments are responsible for ensuring that businesses meet these requirements.⁵ Governments should implement a range of measures, including requiring businesses to implement regulatory frameworks, and a requirement that they undertake child rights impact assessments and make the results of these public.⁶

⁵ [CRC/C/GC25: Para: 35.](#)

⁶ [CRC/C/GC25: Paras: 38-39.](#)

UK Government policy and the regulation of online safety

In its 2023 recommendations, the UN Committee called on the UK Government to:

“[A]dopt the Online Safety Bill and ensure that all laws and policies on the digital environment protect the rights, privacy and safety of children in the digital environment and protect them from harmful content and online risks”. (UN Committee)

The UN Committee also called on the UK and devolved governments to:

“[E]nhance the digital literacy and skills of children, parents, caregivers and teachers, including by incorporating digital literacy into school curricula.” (UN Committee)

These recommendations build upon broader guidance in General Comment 25 that requires governments to “put in place, monitor and enforce laws and regulations aimed at preventing violations of the right to protection from violence, as well as those aimed at investigating, adjudicating on and redressing violations as they occur in relation to the digital environment”.⁷ These measures should be implemented in accordance with children’s evolving capacities.⁸ General Comment 25 also highlights that online spaces may be used to recruit children to participate in violence, highlighting that such children are also victims and that the child justice system should apply.⁹

Education and prevention

6. What role do parents, schools, social media companies, and young people themselves play in preventing the youth being exposed to violent content on social media? What barriers do they face to addressing this issue? How can parents and young people’s education on preventing online harms be improved?

Role of social media companies

See answer above.

Role of parents and carers

Children and young people often view parents and carers as the first line of defence in helping them stay safe online. Open conversations can help them feel more confident and secure. This highlights the importance of digital literacy for adults, so they can keep up with new and emerging issues and know how best to respond:

My mum has helped me stay safe online and I can talk to her about anything. Other young people have shown me things which upset me from their online life and I didn't know what to do. I wish there were safe spaces for young people online. (Chaz, age 16, Edinburgh)

⁷ [CRC/C/GC/25: Para: 37.](#)

⁸ [CRC/C/GC/25: Para: 82.](#)

⁹ [CRC/C/GC/25: Para: 83.](#)

My mum checks my devices and I know to let her know if something is bad. (Bb16, age 16, Falkirk)

One eight-year-old boy told us that he only uses the internet on shared family devices and in the living room and that this helps him feel safe:

I feel safe online, I don't use a computer or smart phone but I used to watch YouTube on a laptop. Now, I watch it on the TV with my family. (Rowpow, age 8, Midlothian)

However, some children and young people feel that too much parental control can be restrictive, and express a desire for more freedom:

My parents are super protective of me online because my mum is a teacher. She checks what I am doing all the time which is annoying. I am not allowed social media. I just got an email address this year. My uncle built me a computer to play Minecraft on this year. I spend time online every day after 4pm and before dinner. I wish my parents gave me more freedom online. (Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross)

Role of schools

Schools play a crucial role in supporting children to learn about online safety from a young age. Many young people say this is introduced at primary school level:

We know a lot about internet safety it's been a hot topic at school from about Primary 6 - maybe before (Alfie, age 14, North Lanarkshire)

Children recognise that these lessons have helped them to make informed decisions and recognise potential dangers. However, again they also recognise that schools will need to keep up with the fast rate of change and new risks emerging. This is particularly true given that many parents and carers with low levels of digital literacy look to schools and teachers for support. Children's calls echo UN Committee guidance that teachers, parents and other adults should receive training and advice on the use of digital devices and protecting children from online harms.¹⁰

Conclusion

Children and young people's stories highlight both the opportunities and challenges of the digital world, emphasising the need to fully embed a children's human rights approach across all online spaces. Based on what they tell us, some key messages for decision-makers at UK and devolved level include:

- Ensure children's human rights are at the heart of all policies and practices related to online platforms and technologies;
- Train parents, carers and educators on children's human rights in the digital world and how to support children online;
- Provide age-appropriate information about online rights and safety across all age groups;

¹⁰ [CRC/C/GC/25: Para: 15.](#)

- Involve children and young people in the design and moderation of online platforms;
- Provide meaningful feedback when views are sought about online experiences and safety measures;
- Establish clear, age-appropriate reporting and complaint procedures across all online platforms;
- Regularly monitor and report on how children’s human rights are upheld across online spaces.

While the focus on this inquiry is on young people, it is worth noting that the above recommendations are relevant across all age groups. As such, particular attention should also be given in ensuring younger children are engaged and that their particular needs are addressed.

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