



# Digital Economy Bill

*House of Commons – Committee Stage*

*Protecting children from inappropriate online sexual content*

## **Introduction**

The Children's Society welcomes the Government's aims in Part 3 of the Digital Economy Bill to protect children from access to online pornography.<sup>1</sup> However, we are concerned that the Bill does not go far enough to protect children from the risks associated with accessing online pornographic material.

As it stands, Part 3 of Bill focusses on the introduction of age verification methods for commercial providers of online pornographic content. We are worried that children will still not be protected from sexualised materials that may be accessible via non-commercial websites and social networking streams. We are therefore asking the Government to amend the existing legislation to ensure the restriction on commercial pornography sites is accompanied by a duty for schools to provide appropriate education about the damaging effects of online pornography and to teach young people about healthy offline relationships in light of new online trends and behaviours.

The Children's Society forms part of the Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety (CHIS) which brings together a number of UK charities to ensure best practice and strong policies to safeguard children when using the internet. We support the coalition's calls to strengthen measures within the Bill and enhance the powers of the proposed regulator to effectively implement age verification methods for online pornography.

## **The impact and harm caused by inappropriate online content**

Young people have told us that they feel pressured to keep up with the latest trends and cultures both online and offline, which can diminish their self-esteem and lead children to engage with adult content and websites intended for adults, such as dating sites or chat rooms.

Pornography can be extremely damaging to young people, and is now very easy to access online. Any child with a basic knowledge of the internet can access pornography and this explicit adult content can result in severe and long-term harm. Access and exposure to pornography has been linked to unrealistic attitudes to sex and young people's engagement in "risky behaviours" such as unprotected sex or sexting<sup>2</sup>. In addition, research has shown that there is a link between children viewing pornography and their engaging in harmful behaviours.<sup>3</sup>

Not only do sexualised images expose children to inappropriate sexual behaviours but also they often depict an unhealthy representation of relationships. Sexualised images and messages can expose children to dangerous situations and influence them to explore unhealthy relationships. The sexualisation of children blurs the boundaries between childhood and adulthood and can lead to exploitation.

## **Why is statutory sex education about online materials necessary**

The Children's Society are increasingly working with schools to support children affected by or engaging in peer-on-peer sexually inappropriate or harmful behaviours. This issue is particularly worrying amongst 16 and 17 year olds which our research has found are the group most at risk of being sexually exploited.<sup>4</sup> These incidents often take place via digital and social media platforms which would not be

defined as commercial pornography sites that would be addressed through the Digital Economy Bill. Dealing with this issue requires action to both limit children's access to pornography, *and* to provide better sex and relationship education in schools to counteract its influence by enabling children to protect themselves.

There is a strong case that Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) should be delivered as part of high quality statutory Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) curriculum.<sup>5</sup> In 2013 an Ofsted report on PSHE found that 40% of schools required improvement or were inadequate in this area.<sup>6</sup> Making this subject a statutory requirement is an essential step in raising the standard of PSHE teaching across schools. This is a recommendation also made by a number of House of Commons Select Committees<sup>7</sup> including the Women's and Equalities Committee as part of their recent inquiry into sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools<sup>8</sup>.

SRE is compulsory from age 11, and the government has published supplementary guidance for schools as to how to implement this in the classroom which maintained schools must adhere to.<sup>9</sup> However the most recent guidance was issued in 2000 before the advent of smart phones and other internet enabled devices. The content is focused on teaching children about puberty, reproduction, sexuality and sexual health with no references to word such as "pornography" or "online" materials. Alongside legislative change the government therefore need to issue an up-to date version of the Sex and Relationship Guidance to schools to include information on the risks surrounding pornography, the dangers of creating and transmitting sexual content online and on having healthy offline relationships.<sup>10</sup> The Digital Economy Bill provides a good opportunity to ensure that SRE makes explicit reference to the impact of online pornography and online sexual content.

## **Amendments**

### **Purpose**

These amendments ensure that there will be a requirement on all schools to provide targeted education specifically about the physical and emotional risks of looking at pornography and which is necessary for a holistic response to the damaging offline effects of online explicit material.

After clause 25 insert new clause Provision of education about keeping children safe online.

(1) The Education Act 1996 is amended as follows.

In section 403 (Sex education: manner of provision.) In subsection (1A) (a) after "children, and" insert

"(b) they learn about the risks of online sexual content, and"

(2) The Education Act 2002 is amended as follows.

In section (80) (Basic curriculum for every maintained school in England) paragraph (1) (c) at the end of the line after "sex education" insert "including about the risks of online sexual content"

(3) The Education Act 2002 is amended as follows.

In section (80) (Basic curriculum for every maintained school in England) paragraph (1) (d) at the end of the line after "sex education" insert "including about the risks of online sexual content"

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## References

- 1 <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/age-verification-main-doc.pdf>
- 2 Office of the Children's Commissioner. 2013. *Basically...porn is everywhere*.  
[https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Basically\\_porn\\_is\\_everywhere.pdf](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Basically_porn_is_everywhere.pdf)
- 3 <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/examination-impact-online-pornography-children-and-young-people>
- 4 The Children's Society Old Enough to Know Better? (2015)
- 5 <https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/sites/default/files/A%20curriculum%20for%20life%20-%20the%20case%20for%20statutory%20PSHE%20September%202016%20FINAL%20FOR%20WEBSITE%200916.pdf>
- 6 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/not-yet-good-enough-personal-social-health-and-economic-education>
- 7 <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news-parliament-2015/phse-statutory-letter-published-15-16/>
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- 10 This position is also supported the Women and Equalities Committee report (13, Sep 2016) <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/women-and-equalities-committee/news-parliament-2015/sexual-harassment-and-violence-in-schools-report-published-16-17/>