

Believe in
children



Barnardo's
Scotland

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Briefing for Scottish Government Debate: Keeping Children Safe Online

Key points:

- The internet poses **opportunities** as well as **risks** to children and young people.
- There is a need for **professionals** to be able to effectively **recognise and respond** to issues around the online behaviour of children and young people.
- **High quality, age appropriate sex and relationship education** is crucial to equipping children and young people with the skills they need to stay safe online.

Barnardo's is the UK's largest children's charity, in Scotland we work with over 26,500 children, young people and their families every year. Over the last 20 years the internet has revolutionised many aspects of young people's lives: learning, entertainment, friendships and creativity for Scotland's children all look radically different in comparison to how they looked even a generation ago. It is therefore imperative that children and young people are able to utilise the opportunities offered by the internet whilst also staying safe online.

Risk and opportunity

Practitioners working with children and young people can often display a divergence of opinions about the impact of technologies upon children and generally the debate is whether individuals see the internet as a place of risk or opportunity, **in reality it is both.**

The debate around children online can often be characterised by 'stranger danger', the idea that the dangers of the internet lie in adult perpetrators and child victims. The reality however is that children themselves can be perpetrators and victims, as can often be seen in cases of sexting and harmful sexual behaviour displayed online.

But children and young people have a right to freedom and privacy online, as well as the right to protection and this is a complex relationship. **Being able to balance these risks and opportunities** is of crucial importance for children and young people and there is a key role for professionals in supporting them to do so.

Guidance for professionals

The recently published National Action Plan on Internet Safety for Children and Young People ¹ contained a commitment from the Scottish Government to develop guidance for professionals and parents to provide support on internet safety; we very much welcome this commitment.

Our report '*Over the Internet, Under the Radar: Prevention of Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in Scotland*' ² highlighted that professionals working with children and young people can often lack confidence when it comes to the internet. Professionals must be able to talk to young people about what they do online, and this can only be done if they themselves are equipped with the required digital skills, knowledge and confidence.

We would like to particularly highlight the need for trauma informed responses to offences committed online and the need for professionals to have an understanding of the different ways children and young people may respond to online behaviour as opposed to offline behaviour. For example children may not want to disclose that they have had indecent images shared of them by someone else online because that may mean other people, including adults, will see the images, or they may still be in personal contact with the perpetrator. We need to ensure that professionals **know how to respond appropriately to disclosures from young people**, for e.g. professionals can't ask children and young people to send them the images; this is something we have been made aware of happening in some schools.

Sex and relationship education

We increasingly live in a society where many complex aspects of adolescent development concerning relationships and healthy sexuality now take place online, children and young people are increasingly turning online for information about sex and relationships and our education system needs to be able to respond to this.

Barnardo's has consistently argued for **high quality age-appropriate sex and relationship education** for children and young people as a crucial element of PSE and as a vital part of preventing sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, our report in 2015 '*Digital Dangers: The impact of technology on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people*'. ³ recommended:

"All educational establishments to provide high quality healthy relationships and sex education"

Ensuring that children and young people are equipped with the knowledge and skills to stay safe online should be a key element of any curriculum.

Nicki Wray – Policy and Parliamentary Officer, Barnardo's Scotland
Nicola.wray@barnardos.org.uk (0131 446 7033)

¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0051/00516921.pdf>

² http://www.barnardos.org.uk/over_the_internet_under_the_radar_report.pdf

³ http://www.barnardos.org.uk/onlineshop/pdf/digital_dangers_report.pdf