Believe in children

Barnardo's

Briefing for DCMS Sub-Committee on Online Harms and Disinformation

Thursday 30 April 2020, 9:30am-11:30am

Summary - Online Harms

- Even before the lockdown, the risks to children online were extremely serious and growing, ranging from online bullying and self-help forums to sexual grooming and abuse.
- Since lockdown, **37%** of Barnardo's frontline staff said children and families are concerned about spending more time online.
- With children 'hidden' from protective factors like school and services, and with more children and perpetrators spending time online, combined with a shortage of online moderators[1], children are at increased risk of harm online.
- Our **abuse and exploitation services have reported an increase in children experiencing harm online**, including exposure to distressing stories about Covid-19, using online forums to discuss eating disorders and self-harm, cyberbullying and sharing self-generated sexual images.
- **Children should not be expected to look after themselves online.** In the absence of legislation, tech companies must ensure children are protected online.

Child sexual abuse and exploitation

- Before Covid-19, **two-thirds** of the children we supported through our sexual exploitation services were groomed online before meeting their abuser.
- Since the lockdown:
  - **45%** of Barnardo's frontline staff report a decrease in referrals, including from schools, local authorities and police.
  - **Europol** has raised concerns about an increase in online activity by those seeking child abuse materials during lockdown.[2]
  - And the National Crime Agency latest assessment shows that **300,000 people in the UK present a sexual threat to children** through 'contact' abuse or online.[3]
- **Not every child is safe at home,** some children live with their abuser or their family may be involved in their exploitation.
- Lockdown has meant **it is harder for children to access support** meaning that children and young people may not be able to discuss their concerns with professionals (e.g. teachers, support workers).
- Combined with children and perpetrators spending more time at home and online, we are concerned children are being targeted online and are **more likely to go unrecognised and unsupported.**

Impact on children's and young people's mental health

- Due to the pandemic, children are being exposed to overwhelming amounts of information about Covid-19, including distressing and upsetting stories.
- We are concerned that Covid-19 (mis) information is adversely affecting children's mental health, especially those with existing mental health conditions.
- Since lockdown, **75%** of Barnardo's frontline staff have reported children and families being more concerned about their mental health, especially anxiety, stress, and depression.

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[1] BBC, April 2020. Coronavirus: Internet child abuse images not being deleted.
[2] Guardian, April 2020. Lockdown hampering removal of child sexual abuse material online.
[3] National Crime Agency, April 2020. Law enforcement in coronavirus online safety push.

- - **One fifth** of children highlighted increases in self-harm behaviours; and
  - **15%** of Barnardo's frontline staff noticed increases in suicide ideation in the children they are supporting.[4]
- It is not always easy for adults to differentiate between information online that is true, misleading or false. **However, children, in particular, may struggle to critically analyse what they see online and to understand whether or not content is accurate.**

The role of tech companies in protecting children
- With legislation to regulate the internet paused, and as the lockdown is increasing the risk of online sexual abuse **tech companies should take extra steps to keep children safe.** This includes:
  - Ensuring the industry monitors the potential surge in online harm and intervenes quickly and robustly - allocating resources to disrupting perpetrators.
  - Sharing intelligence with each other about risks.
  - Facilitating partnership working between tech firms, Government and children's charities, such as Barnardo's, to ensure that online spaces are safe-by-design.

Questions:
Detection and removal of disinformation and harmful content
- Have Twitter, Google & Facebook identified a surge in harmful content online?
- What measures are Twitter, Google and Facebook taking to monitor the potential surge in a full range of online harms and how are they allocating resources and new technology to robustly disrupt harmful activity by identifying and tackling sources of harm?
- What procedures are in place for reporting illegal content (that is discovered on platforms) to the police?
- Are the community standards and policies of the tech companies sufficiently robust to address online harms that vulnerable children and young people encounter? If so, do they have the resources to enforce their own community standards and policies?

Safety by design
- In what way are Twitter, Google and Facebook embracing a 'safety-by design' approach and what systems are in place to ensure that children and young people are not confronted with harmful content?

Collaboration
- How are Twitter, Google and Facebook collaborating with others in the tech sector, during this time, to share intelligence about risks and how risk can be reduced?
- How are Twitter, Google and Facebook working with the Government, law enforcement and children's charities to better protect children online?

About Barnardo's
Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2018/19, we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. For more information please contact Claire Stewart, Senior Public Affairs Officer, on claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk or 07584 347 308.

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[4] Barnardo's, April 2020. Quarterly Practitioner Survey