



Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education & Skills

15th May 2018

CyberSafeIreland Mission Statement

*To empower children, parents and teachers to navigate
the online world in a stronger, smarter and safer way.*



My name is Alex Cooney and I am the CEO of CyberSafeIreland and I would like to thank the Chair, Deputy O'Loughlin, and the Committee members for the invitation to speak today. I would like to begin this statement by saying that CyberSafeIreland welcomes the RSE review and particularly the announcement by Minister Bruton in April that it will focus on how issues like consent, sexual orientation, healthy relationships, safe use of the internet and the impact of social media on self-esteem can be addressed within the curriculum.

Just to give some background to the Committee on our work: CyberSafeIreland is the Irish children's charity for online safety. Our focus is on equipping children aged between 8 and 13 with the skills to manage their online experiences in a safe, positive and successful manner. We do this primarily through the delivery of educational programmes in primary schools, but also through raising awareness amongst parents and teachers as well as the wider public. We have spoken to almost 12,000 children aged between 8 and 13 since 2016.

I am therefore speaking today from the perspective of online safety for children. **We believe that an updated curriculum must endeavour to equip young people with the skills that they will need to safely navigate through their lives, both online and offline.** According to Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, education should prepare children "for responsible life in a free society" and in the modern world this must reflect what children are exposed to in the online world as well as how this exposure influences their development.

Children are accessing the online world at an ever younger age without appropriate guidance, monitoring and support, making them vulnerable to a range of online risks, which I will outline further below. Based on our own survey of 4,000 children aged between 8 and 13 that we've spoken to since September last year, 67% of them own a smartphone and **72% are using social media and messaging services such as Snapchat, Instagram and WhatsApp.**

This data serves as a reminder that the majority of children in Ireland are embracing technology and that they are doing so from a young age. Whilst the online world undoubtedly offers opportunities to children to access information, this increased exposure brings with it increased risk including loss of privacy and personal data, exposure to inappropriate material, cyberbullying, online grooming, extortion, and negative impacts on their health and well-being.

I would like to consider for a moment, exposure to inappropriate content: 32% of the children we surveyed (and 52% of the boys overall) are playing adult-rated games. These games, such as Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty are designated for 18 years and older as a result of, for instance, sexual and/or violent content of a more extreme nature. In our earlier submission, we highlighted findings from a 2017 NSPCC survey that examined children's exposure to porn. It found that **53% of 11- to 16-year-olds have seen explicit material online**, nearly all of whom (94%) had seen it by the age of



14.¹ Most of the boys who had viewed pornography online thought it was realistic. Whilst we don't yet know how such exposure is going to impact children over the longer-term, I think we can agree that the sheer scale of these figures suggests that we need to fundamentally address these issues with children in an appropriate way and ensure that they are not learning about important topics such as consent or respect in relationships from online pornography.

Our focus is primarily on children aged 8-13. As such, we do not come across regular incidents of children sharing explicit images or videos, i.e. "sexting", although it is often a topic that concerns the parents to whom we speak. However, we are aware that it is a much greater issue among older teens in Ireland. Children should be educated on the risks related to inappropriate sharing of explicit images or videos, and specifically on consent issues relating to online sharing of another's images or videos.

The role of schools

Whilst there is no doubt that parents play a crucial role in both protecting and empowering children in relation to online safety, schools also have a fundamental role to play. In our experience, parents also need a lot of support as many are struggling to manage their children's online use and to set parameters around it. Parents and schools need balanced and sensible guidance on how to minimise risk whilst encouraging positive uses of digital media.

It is critical that every child gets the opportunity to get consistent information and to have well-informed and balanced discussions on important issues like consent, sexuality and what healthy relationships look like and the school curriculum offers that opportunity. This is particularly important given that parents often have very different approaches to discussing these issues at home. In reality, some parents will avoid having "awkward" or "difficult" conversations.

Children are learning how to use technology in schools in a much more consistent way since the roll-out of the Digital Strategy for Schools in 2015 and this is welcome since technology will play such a significant part of their future lives. But this education will need to extend beyond the teaching of practical skills of computer literacy to include a much broader focus on **digital literacy**, where children get the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills in an online environment so that they can make smart choices.

This education should start when children are young, in an age and stage appropriate manner. If children are getting their first device and exploring the online world in primary school and we know from experience that most of them are, then these discussions need to start both at home and in

¹ Martellozzo, E., Monaghan, A., Adler, J.R., Davidson, J., Leyva, R. and Horvath, M.A.H. (2017). "...I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it..." A quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people. NSPCC, The Children's Commissioner and Middlesex University



school at least at the same time, if not before. **It would be good to start talking about things like self-regulation and achieving a healthy balance from an early stage too** as so many of the online platforms they are using highly addictive by design. According to Dr. Jenny Radesky, a US-based developmental behavioural paediatrician from the American Academy of Paediatrics, we can begin to teach children to self-regulate from as young as 6 or 7.

In 2017, a survey by Barnardos in the UK found that 70% of 11 – 15 year old children in England wanted the government to ensure that all children have school lessons on sex and relationships.² 96% of the children surveyed felt that it was important for them to understand the dangers of being online so that they can stay safe. I don't believe we have carried out a similar survey in Ireland but I suspect the figures would be broadly similar and it would be well worth ascertaining young Irish people's views as part of this review.

We provided a set of recommendations in our earlier submission and whilst I won't repeat them here, I would like to emphasise the importance of ensuring that digital literacy is a compulsory part of the curriculum at both primary and secondary level, along with age- and stage-appropriate discussions around issues related to what children are exposed to in an online environment including consent, respect, gender equality, sexuality and healthy relationships. Such additions to the curriculum will help to mitigate against risks that children face in the online world and to embrace the opportunities that exist for them.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak and I look forward to your questions.

² https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/Children_want_safer_lives/latest-news.htm?ref=121054