

# Safety Net: Cyberbullying's impact on young people's mental health

Inquiry report summary



**YOUNG**MINDS



# Introduction

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Social media is a huge part of everyday life for most young people, offering them 24/7 connectivity, creativity and access to endless information. There are many positives to social media, but it also presents new and unique pressures and risks.

There has been a growing concern about these risks – including in particular the scale of online bullying – and the responsiveness of social media companies in tackling these problems has come under scrutiny.

Alex Chalk MP set up an inquiry, in partnership with The Children's Society and YoungMinds, into the impact of cyberbullying on children and young people's mental health.

Throughout this inquiry, we heard how the digital landscape has fundamentally changed the way that young people interact with one another, and how some young people experience bullying. In the past, bullying may have been confined to school grounds; but with

most young people now having access to smartphones, laptops and tablets, bullying and abuse can enter young people's homes and happen at any time, day or night.

We heard harrowing accounts from children and young people who described cyberbullying as feeling 'inescapable', and in the most extreme of cases it has pushed young people to the verge of suicide.

Following the example of innovation in safety technologies in other industries such as the motor industry, it is crucial that we respond to the mental health impacts of the social media industry with a holistic approach. This approach should include three key aspects: better safety technology (like the seat belt and airbag), responsibility on manufacturers, with rules and guidelines for individuals to stay safe and keep others safe (traffic rules), and enforcement with tangible consequences for those that break them.

## The evidence

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This inquiry has sought to fill an evidence gap. It has examined the impact that online bullying can have on children and young people's mental health, and assessed what role social media companies have in preventing and tackling online bullying on their platforms.



Led by a cross-party panel of MPs and industry experts, the inquiry took evidence from:

- **Over 1,000 children and young people, aged 11–25.**
- **Global social media companies including Facebook (Instagram and WhatsApp), Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr and Snapchat.**
- **A wide-selection of experts and stakeholder organisations including psychologists, academic researchers, internet safety experts and children's charities.**

Findings from the inquiry dovetail with current policy and legislative developments, including the Government's Internet Safety Strategy and the Data Protection Bill (2017–2019).

Our inquiry has led to the development of an ambitious and achievable set of actions which recognise the need for social media companies, Government, parents and schools to work together to prevent and respond to cyberbullying and its negative consequences.


## KEY FINDINGS

### **Underage (U13) use of social media is commonplace**

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Despite most major social media companies – including Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram – specifying that users must be 13 years old to have an account, we found that 61% of young people had a first account at age 12 or under.

Social media companies cannot continue to ignore the reality that children under the age of 13 are using their sites. Therefore, we recommend that social media companies make greater efforts to identify under-13s and gain the appropriate consent, as well as providing age-appropriate settings for children using these platforms.

A close-up photograph of two young children, a boy and a girl, looking intently at a smartphone held by the boy. The boy is in the foreground, wearing a dark blue sweater with a light blue collar, and the girl is behind him, wearing a red top. A speech bubble is overlaid on the top right of the image, containing the text: "61% of young people had a first account at age 12 or under."

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## Children and young people are using social media for longer periods, and using multiple profiles

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Research shows that children and young people are using social media for longer, and that the platforms they use and how they use them changes as they get older.

Children and young people reported feeling more disinhibited on social media. Many children reported having numerous profiles online, including multiple on the same social media platforms, to preserve their anonymity or to follow their separate interests.

There has been a marked shift in the devices young people use to access the internet. They have moved from using their family computer to more personalised devices such as smartphones. This affords greater privacy, but potentially greater risk.

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Our survey indicated that nearly half

44%

of children and young people spend more than three hours per day on social media

Whilst almost

1 in 10

(9%) reported always using social media overnight between midnight and 6am

## There is a connection between intensive social media use and mental ill health

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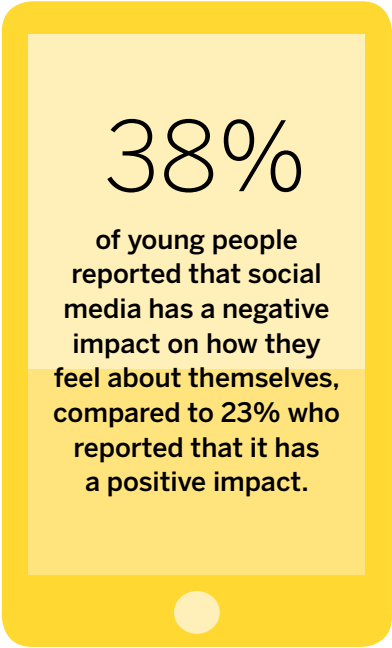
Young people report that social media can come with constant pressures to respond, update, be available and live in the public eye. The instant gratification young people feel when they receive 'likes' and new followers can act as a form of social currency.

It can also be hard not to compare your life to others when newsfeeds are constantly full of pictures of 'perfect' lives. What young people see on social media often doesn't reflect real life.

There is clear evidence that excessive use of social media is associated with low well-being and depression. However there needs to be further research to explore whether this relationship is causal or not.

The corollary is that young people report that social media (particularly when consumed in moderation) can also offer a number of social and emotional benefits. These range from connecting with friends, aiding creativity and improving self-expression, to providing a

resource for advice and a sense of belonging. Social media can also be valued by those experiencing emotional distress, allowing them to gain support, information and advice from others in a similar position.



38%

of young people reported that social media has a negative impact on how they feel about themselves, compared to 23% who reported that it has a positive impact.

This was exacerbated for girls, with

46%

of girls stating that social media had a negative impact on their self-esteem.



## Cyberbullying – a new form of bullying

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Although our inquiry found that offline bullying remains the most common form of bullying, it is clear that cyberbullying is distinct and potent – particularly due to its potential to be relentless.

Cyberbullying has the capacity to reach a much wider audience, continue around the clock, affect children in both public and private spaces – from schools to their bedrooms – and escalate quickly if people share or comment on bullying content.

The role of bystanders – those who witness but don't intervene to stop online bullying – may also normalise bullying behaviours and affect young people's understanding of bullying.



## Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of cyberbullying

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Children and young people who are currently experiencing a mental health problem are more than three times more likely to have been bullied online in the last year.

The inquiry heard about the impact that cyberbullying can have on children and young people's mental health. We heard how being bullied online, and the psychological trauma that can come with it, increases the chances that a child will go on to have poor social and health outcomes throughout their life.

We also found that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the impact of cyberbullying, given the rapid neurological development taking place in the teenage brain. This means that the negative consequences of cyberbullying can have a lasting impact through to adulthood.



## The steps being taken by social media companies in response to cyberbullying are inconsistent and inadequate

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Throughout the course of the inquiry, we heard a number of examples from social media companies about positive initiatives they have established to respond to abusive content online, such as cyberbullying, as well as promoting the mental health of their users. These included the use of algorithms to reduce the exposure of content which may be degrading or humiliating to others.


These initiatives are welcome so far as they go. But the clear overall picture which emerged from the evidence is that the collective response to cyberbullying from social media platforms is inconsistent and insufficiently robust.

To date, social media companies have largely been 'marking their own homework', operating in an ungoverned digital landscape through a system of self-regulation. The inquiry heard from expert stakeholders that the industry has

not shown the leadership, appetite or innovation to tackle cyberbullying or harassment on their platforms. The steps taken in response to growing public alarm amounted to the companies, in the words of one witness 'walking backwards slowly'.<sup>1</sup>

There is a particular concern about lack of transparency around the nature and number of cyberbullying reports, the resources allocated to tackling it, and the efficacy of the response. Currently social media companies do not consistently record and report on the nature, volume and outcomes of complaints and reports made within their systems. It is therefore almost impossible to accurately assess the scale of issues such as cyberbullying, or the effectiveness of companies' responses to such reports.

<sup>1</sup>Oral evidence from Baroness Harding of Winscombe.



## Young people concluded that social media companies' current responses to cyberbullying are inadequate

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Young people consistently raised issues with the inquiry about the slow and inadequate response they received from social media companies following a report of cyberbullying.

There is an appetite among young people for greater intervention, with 83% of young people saying that social media companies should do more to tackle cyberbullying on their platforms.

### **The key issues that young people raised were:**

- Unclear reporting processes and delayed responses.
- Unclear communication about rights and responsibilities – including community guidelines, and safety features within platform.
- Lack of support when people report online bullying.

## There is a perceived lack of consequences for those who engage in bullying behaviour

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Young people told the inquiry that they feel as though the onus is on the person who is experiencing cyberbullying to act. They spoke of a perceived lack of consequences for those who engage in bullying behaviour online, in a way there is not in the offline world.

The inquiry heard some examples of how people who engage in cyberbullying behaviour could be 'nudged back to good behaviour' by temporary restrictions, and a graduated system of penalties for those who breach social media guidelines, such as YouTube's three-strike system.

However, it is clear there needs to be more frequent and age-appropriate information for young people regarding their rights online and their responsibilities when using the platforms. We also recommend there is a toolkit of responses for moderators, and an educational approach to building empathy and responsibility online.

This would encompass a positive approach: enabling children and young people to understand the impact that bullying behaviour can have on others, what language and behaviour is not tolerated on social media platforms, and the consequences if they engage in online bullying.



## Social media companies need to do more to promote positive mental health and well-being

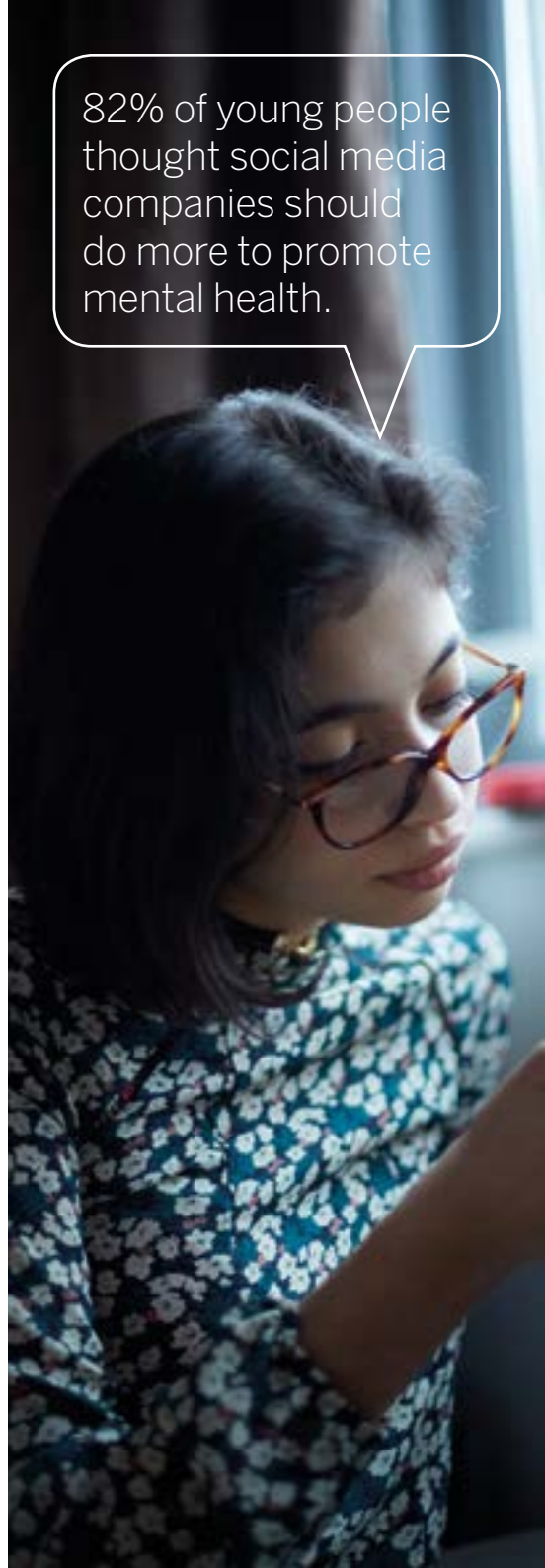
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Young people overwhelmingly told the inquiry that they wanted social media companies to do more to promote positive mental health and interactions on their platforms. Eighty two percent of young people thought social media companies should do more to promote mental health.

### **This could be implemented with a range of actions, including:**

- Identifying online behaviour that may reflect emotional distress.
- Signposting to mental health support and advice services when appropriate.
- Co-creating engaging content to provide advice and information for children on what to do if they (or their friends) are experiencing online bullying or emotional distress.

82% of young people thought social media companies should do more to promote mental health.





## Conclusion and recommendations

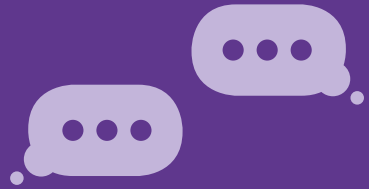
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Together with Government, schools, families and industry, we have identified a number of issues that need to be addressed to ensure that social media companies play their part in creating a digital environment that limits the prevalence of cyberbullying and its negative impacts on children and young people.

We believe that the implementation of the following achievable recommendations would go a significant way to making sure that social media companies provide appropriate and timely responses to reports of cyberbullying. These recommendations would also empower children and young people to use social media in a manner that has a positive impact on their own mental health, and their peers.

## Summary of recommendations

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1

Social media platforms must be age-appropriate, and companies should pilot approaches to identify under-13s and gain explicit parental consent.

2

Social media companies should enable children and young people to understand their rights and responsibilities, including their behaviour towards others.

3

Social media companies should provide timely, effective and consistent responses to online bullying.

4

Social media companies should prioritise the promotion of children and young people's mental health and well-being across their platforms.

5

The Government should improve accountability by requiring social media companies to publish data about their response to reports of online bullying.

6

The Government should commission additional research into the scale of online bullying, and its impact on children and young people.

7

The Government should put children's experiences at the heart of internet safety policy development.

8

The Government should teach children and young people how to be safe and responsible online, and ensure they know how to respond positively to online harms such as cyberbullying.

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**For a list of all recommendations, please see the full inquiry report.**



Right now in Britain there are children and young people who feel scared, unloved and unable to cope. The Children's Society works with these young people, step by step, for as long as it takes.

**We listen. We support. We act.**

There are no simple answers so we work with others to tackle complex problems. Only together can we make a difference to the lives of children now and in the future.

**Because no child should feel alone.**

## YOUNGMINDS

**YoungMinds is the UK's leading charity championing the wellbeing and mental health of young people.**

We exist so that young people have the strongest possible voice in improving their mental health. We strive to make sure everything, from Government policy to practice in schools and services, is driven by young people's experiences and aspirations.

We support parents to help their children through difficult times, we equip professionals to provide the best possible support to the young people that they work with, and we empower young people to change their world.

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For more information about the inquiry, please contact:

**Matthew Hussey, Public Affairs Officer, The Children's Society**

e: [matthew.hussey@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:matthew.hussey@childrenssociety.org.uk) @ChildSocPol  
t: 020 7841 4485 [childrenssociety.org.uk](http://childrenssociety.org.uk)

**Matthew Blow, Policy and Government Affairs Manager, YoungMinds**

e: [matt.blow@youngminds.org.uk](mailto:matt.blow@youngminds.org.uk) @YoungMindsUK  
t: 020 3861 2107 [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)