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School of Law
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Coronavirus Research by the European Children's Rights Unit

Protecting Children Online during COVID-19



Coronavirus (COVID-19) #LivUniCOVID
Research and response

Briefing Paper #1

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The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed even more of our daily lives online. In some areas of the world, daily internet usage has risen by [50 per cent](#).

For children and young people, online gaming, social media and video chatting has replaced face-to-face communication and become a substitute for the playground. These virtual platforms offer many positives during this period of isolation, but they also put children and young people at greater risk of [numerous online harms](#).

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recently released [a statement and a series of recommendations](#) urging states to consider, among other things, the social and recreational impact of the pandemic on the rights of the child. While restrictions on the enjoyment of human rights is understood to be a necessity in this time of crisis, states must ensure that their responses to the pandemic continue to uphold the principle of best interests ([Art 3 UNCRC](#)) and ensure the safety of children and young people is not impeded.

No specific reference to the increased risk of online harm, or how to mitigate these risks, was set out by the Committee in their statement. However, it is now more crucial than ever that those responsible for facilitating online communication take [greater responsibility](#) for ensuring the safety of children and young people.

What are the increased risks to children online and what can be done to combat them?

1. Sexual Exploitation

It is a child's human right to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse ([Art 34 UNCRC](#)). However, according to the [National Crime Agency](#) (NCA), there are at least 300,000 people in the UK

who pose a threat to children. The NCA anticipate that many of these criminals will exploit the current crisis to carry out sexual abuse online. As children's time online increases so too does the risk of coming into contact with an online predator. Similarly, with more adults isolated inside, there may also be a rise in the demand for child sexual abuse material.

With these increased risks, it is imperative that tech companies and social media providers are particularly vigilant. Plans to [establish a statutory duty of care](#) to make companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users are long overdue and the current rise in internet usage demands that this is implemented at the earliest opportunity. It is also vital that children and young people, as well as their parents and carers, are provided with the knowledge and tools to keep safe online. The [Government](#) and many organisations including [UNICEF](#) (and its partners), [UK Safer Internet Centre](#), the [NSPCC](#) and the [NCA](#) have created resources and guidance to help.

2. Sexting and Youth Produced Sexual Imagery (YPSI)

With children and young people's interactions and associations heavily restricted, nearly all of their communication with friends and romantic partners is taking place electronically. All sexual activity and experimentation that would previously have occurred in person no longer can. This is likely to result in a rise in online sexual behaviours such as the [sharing of sexual imagery](#), which is a [criminal offence](#) for anyone under the age of 18. Not only is it illegal, it can also cause [serious psychological harm](#).

Previously, much of the responsibility for handling incidents of YPSI was placed on [schools and colleges](#). During the current pandemic, the

responsibility falls on parents, carers and young people themselves. The [NSPCC](#) has provided clear guidance on what to do if a child has sent sexual images, and there is equally good [advice and support for young people](#) themselves. However, '[wider initiatives to empower users to stay safe online](#)' is required.

3. Cyberbullying

Increased access to the internet has proven to [increase rates of online bullying](#). Therefore, as more and more children immerse themselves in the online realm and formal education is absent from their lives, increased vigilance and education around online communication is required. In 2019, it was reported that [more than a third](#) of young people (across 30 different countries) had been bullied online. This often takes place on social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Unlike traditional bullying, there is no limit to the time or location that cyberbullying can occur; it can be constant and perpetual. However, while studies suggest that [bullying significantly increases the risk of suicide](#), only 1 in 10 victims will inform a trusted adult of their abuse.

To ensure children and young people are protected from harm, and to reduce the [legal and psychological consequences](#) associated with cyberbullying, it is paramount that [tech companies take on a greater role](#) in monitoring online content. It is also vital that parents and carers know what to do if they suspect their child is bullying others or being bullied and that young people are educated on the effects of bullying and are informed about what to do if they, or someone they know, is bullying or being bullied. The Government has issued [some advice for parents and carers](#) and Childline, among others, have produced [some guidance for children and young people](#).

4. Harmful and Age-Inappropriate Content.

Increased online activity may expose children to age-inappropriate and potentially harmful content. For example, content that is violent, pornographic, [extremist or xenophobic](#), or content that incites [suicide and self-harm](#). Children may also be exposed to a larger quantity of targeted online [marketing that promotes unhealthy foods](#) and [misleading information about COVID-19](#). In 2018, [Ofcom reported](#) that parents were particularly concerned about their children feeling pressurised to spend money online and the possibility of their child being radicalised online. These concerns were also emphasised in the [Government's White Paper](#) reaffirming the need for greater levels of online content regulation.

To ensure exposure to this content is minimised, it is also paramount that parents and carers adjust privacy and safety settings. Guidance on how to do this has been produced by [UK Safer Internet Centre](#). Unfortunately, these risks cannot be entirely eliminated and so it is also important that young people are correctly educated and know what to do, and who to talk to, if they do engage with this type of content.

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a rise in online interactions and communications. Many children and young people will engage unproblematically with the internet, but with greater exposure comes increased risks. To ensure the highest level of safety for children and young people, a combined effort by government, digital technology companies, social network providers, internet providers, parents / carers and schools is required. For more information on protecting children online during COVID-19, see the [UNICEF Technical Note](#) and the

[Government guidance](#). For information on the Government's planned Online Harms Bill, see the [Government White Paper](#).

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Her research explores the legal regulation of teenage sexting and other forms of youth produced sexual imagery.

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