

The Online Safety Act: Why it matters for children

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The Online Safety Act represents a landmark victory for children's safety online. This briefing corrects some misconceptions surrounding the Online Safety Act and outlines some of the key ways the legislation and regulation will keep children safe online.

What the Act does: The Act delivers unprecedented protection for children's safety online. Tech companies – including social media platforms and search engines – now have a duty of care to prevent children from accessing extremely harmful content or being contacted by adult strangers on their platforms.

Concrete protections for children now in force:

- **Preventing exposure to pornography:** the scale of harm is staggering.
 - By age 11, 27% of children have seen pornography, with the average age of first exposure to pornography at just 13. (Children's Commissioner for England, 2023)¹.
 - Twitter (X) is the most common platform where children see pornography (41%), followed by dedicated pornography sites (37%), Instagram (33%), Snapchat (32%) and search engines (30%). (Children's Commissioner for England, 2023)².
 - This early exposure drives harmful attitudes: 79% of 18-21-year olds have seen content involving sexual violence before turning 18 and young people aged 16-21 are more likely to assume that girls expect or enjoy physical aggression during sex. Close to half (47%) of all respondents aged 18-21 had experienced a violent sex act, with girls the most impacted. (Children's Commissioner for England, 2023)³.

The Act now requires platforms to prevent children from accessing such content.

- **Stopping predatory contact:**
 - In 2023 alone, 31% of children aged 9-16 surveyed by Internet Matters reported that strangers had tried to contact them online (Internet Matters, 2024)⁴.

¹'A lot of it is actually just abuse' Young people and pornography, Children's Commissioner for England, 2023, <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

² Growing up with pornography: advice for parents and schools, Children's Commissioner for England, 2023, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/growing-up-with-pornography-advice-for-parents-and-schools/>

³ 'A lot of it is actually just abuse' Young people and pornography, Children's Commissioner for England, 2023, <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

⁴ Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World, Internet Matters, 2024, <https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/research/childrens-wellbeing-in-a-digital-world-index-report-2024/#full-report>

- 5Rights' own research using child-aged avatars revealed that child profiles can be often sent large volumes of unsolicited messages and requests from unknown users, including adults (5Rights, 2021)⁵.
- Online grooming crimes surged by 89% between 2017 and 2024 (NSPCC, 2024)⁶.

To address these escalating harms, the Act mandates that high-risk platforms turn off location sharing by default for children, stop recommending children's accounts to unknown adults and block strangers from contacting children via direct messages.

• **Protecting children from pro-suicide, pro self-harm and pro-eating disorder content:**

- Research using child avatar accounts on TikTok found that children's accounts were shown harmful content every 39 seconds, with content referencing suicide appearing within 2.6 minutes and eating disorder content within 8 minutes of creating the account (Centre for Countering Digital Hate, 2022)⁷.
- Yet only two out of six major social media companies are actively removing potentially damaging self-harm and suicidal material (Molly Rose Foundation, 2025).⁸

The Act ensures all platforms in scope must filter out harmful content from content recommended to children.

What the Act does: The Act mandates that any age assurance methods in use must be privacy-preserving, proportionate to the risk and fully compliant with GDPR.

Concrete protections for children now in force:

Platforms hosting pornography and other high-risk content are now required to use age assurance technology to prevent children from seeing it.

This technology must meet strict standards. It must be, **accessible, proportionate to risk and privacy-preserving**. It must also be fully compliant with the UK GDPR (UK General Data Protection Regulation) and the Age Appropriate Design Code.

This includes complying with data protection duties such as⁹:

- **storage limitation** - data must be deleted once its use has been completed. In the case of age verification to access a porn website, this would mean deleting it once it has been confirmed that the user is over 18.
- **data minimisation** – companies can only collect and process the information needed to confirm someone is over 18. Age verifiers do not need to know someone's full identity.

⁵ Pathways, 5Rights Foundation, 2021, <https://5rightsfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Pathways-how-digital-design-puts-children-at-risk.pdf>

⁶ Online grooming crimes against children increase by 89% in six years, NSPCC, 2024, <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2024/online-grooming-crimes-increase/>

⁷ Deadly by Design, Centre for Countering Digital Hate, 2022, <https://counterhate.com/blog/tiktok-bombards-teens-with-self-harm-and-eating-disorder-content-within-minutes-of-joining-the-platform/>

⁸ How effectively do social networks moderate suicide and self-harm content?, Molly Rose Foundation, 2025, https://mollyrosefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/DSA_Transparency_report_MRF-1.pdf

⁹ Expectations for age assurance and data protection compliance, ICO, <https://ico.org.uk/about-the-ico/what-we-do/information-commissioners-opinions/age-assurance-for-the-children-s-code/6-expectations-for-age-assurance-and-data-protection-compliance/>

- **security and confidentiality** - companies must have security measures in place to protect users data.

Information collected about users through age assurance technology should not allow for excessive data gathering, in line with UK GDPR, which is enforced by the Information Commissioner's Office.

What the Act does: The Act ensures families get answers when children die due to online harms and push tech companies to fully support coroners with their investigations.

For too long, tech companies have stonewalled bereaved families and coroners investigating children's deaths linked to online harms.

The Act gives Ofcom the power to request information from tech companies on behalf of coroners where there is reason to believe the service may hold information relating to a child's death. This includes information such as content the child viewed or engaged with, how they encountered it and how algorithms and other functionalities may have contributed.

Tech companies must now provide parents with a helpline or clear processes for obtaining information in circumstances where a child has died. Companies have a duty to respond in a timely manner and offer a proper complaints process.

These protections were fought for, and continue to be fought for, by the Bereaved Families for Online Safety which include the parents of Molly Russell¹⁰, Frankie Thomas¹¹, Olly Stephens¹², Archie Battersbee¹³, Breck Bednar¹⁴, Isaac Kenevan¹⁵, Jools Sweeney¹⁶, Maia Walsh¹⁷, Sophie Parkinson¹⁸, Brianna Ghey¹⁹, Murray Dowey²⁰, Mia Janin²¹, Christoforos Nicolaou²², Aimee Walton²³, Josh Hendy²⁴ and Lucas Webb²⁵.

¹⁰ Molly Russell - Prevention of future deaths report – 2022, The Coroner's Service, https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Molly-Russell-Prevention-of-future-deaths-report-2022-0315_Published.pdf

¹¹ Frankie Thomas: Bereaved parents call for action on harmful content, BBC, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-surrey-59623652>

¹² Two 14-year-olds sentenced for murder of Oliver Stephens, 13, Guardian, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/sep/24/two-14-year-olds-sentenced-for-of-oliver-stephens-13>

¹³ Archie Battersbee died in prank gone wrong – coroner, BBC, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-64568698>

¹⁴ Breck Bednar murder: Lewis Daynes sentenced to life in prison, BBC, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-30786021>

¹⁵ TikTok 'put children in danger' by failing to take down 'challenge' videos, claim grieving parents, Independent, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/tiktok-instagram-youtube-online-challenges-b2493519.html>

¹⁶ Bereaved mum looks for answers after son's death, BBC, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c78680zyd3vo>

¹⁷ Inquest into girl's death will 'focus on TikTok', BBC, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c86p89d099jo>

¹⁸ Sophie Parkinson: Schoolgirl suicide 'might have been avoided', BBC, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-tayside-central-54384647>

¹⁹ Two teenagers jailed for life for the murder of Brianna Ghey, Crown Prosecution Service, 2024, <https://www.cps.gov.uk/mersey-cheshire/news/two-teenagers-jailed-life-murder-brianna-ghey>

²⁰ Stop terrorising children with sextortion, say parents, BBC, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cz6jywx37dlo>

²¹ Mia Janin: Prevention of future deaths report, Coroners and Tribunals Judiciary, 2024, https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Mia-Janin-Prevention-of-future-deaths-report-2024-0103_Published.pdf

²² Christoforos Nicolaou: Couple set up web safety charity after son's death, BBC, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-64744862>

²³ My sister was found dead. Then I discovered her search history – and the online world that had gripped her, BBC, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/may/28/my-sister-was-found-dead-then-i-discovered-her-search-history-and-the-online-world-that-had-gripped-her>

²⁴ Josh Hendy, R;pple, <https://www.ripplesuicideprevention.com/information/josh>

²⁵ Canterbury schoolboy Lucas Webb told friends of suicide plan, Kent Online, 2021, <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/canterbury/news/tragic-schoolboy-16-egged-on-by-classmates-to-take-his-o-254314/>

What's at stake: children's right to be safe online

Without the protections set out by the Online Safety Act:

- More children encounter pornography that shapes harmful attitudes about consent and violence
- More children receive unsolicited contact from unknown adults
- More children access content that encourages self-harm, eating disorders and suicide
- More families are stonewalled by tech companies when seeking answers about their child's death.

The evidence is clear. Together, with children, families and civil society, you have passed legislation that **protects children's right to be safe online, prevents the most harmful content from appearing on children's feeds, provides accountability when companies fail in their duty of care.**
