

YOUNG Mi MINDS

PRESS RELEASE

Social media companies ‘failing young people’ on cyberbullying

Social media companies’ failure to tackle cyberbullying is putting the mental health of children and young people at risk, warns an inquiry from MPs and leading children’s charities today.

Worryingly for parents, almost two thirds of (63%) of young people surveyed by the enquiry who had been cyberbullied said that they would not tell their parents if they experienced something upsetting online. [1]

The inquiry led by Alex Chalk MP, The Children’s Society and YoungMinds, publishes a new report *Safety Net* today, which has found that children and young people can be subject to cyberbullying around the clock, as social media giants fail to make their platforms safe for teenagers.

One 15 year old girl said: “You kind of expect to experience it: nasty comments on the selfie, Facebook posts and Twitter posts, people screen grabbing your Snapchat story to laugh about it... I feel like it’s something people don’t take seriously. But leaving just one nasty comment could really hurt someone.

“Social media companies should take complaints more seriously. If someone reports something, they shouldn’t take days to review it, they should literally just remove it straight away. The reaction from adults is just delete your account to stop the bullying, but that’s taking something away from that young person’s life for something that’s not their fault.”

The inquiry took oral and written evidence from young people - including an online survey of 1,089 young people aged 11-25 - social media companies, mental health experts and children’s charities in order to explore the impact of cyberbullying on children and young people’s mental health. Its panel included cross-party MPs and vlogger Grace Victory, who has spoken out about abuse she has received online.

Cyberbullying takes many forms, the inquiry heard, from mass unfollowings of people, to persistent messaging or sharing embarrassing photos or information online. Almost half (47%) of young people surveyed had experienced threatening, intimidating or nasty messages via social media, email or text.

The report highlights the addictive nature of social media: one in ten (9%) young people surveyed admitted logging on after midnight every night and one young person said it was “almost like a drug”. Young people giving evidence to the inquiry described feeling judged and inadequate if they didn’t have enough likes or followers.

The inquiry heard that young people who are the heaviest users of social media are most likely to have low wellbeing and symptoms of anxiety and depression. Those who had been bullied online told MPs that they would frequently check their feeds to see what else had been shared or said about them online. Links between self-harm, suicide and cyberbullying have already been established by academics.

Alex Chalk MP, who led the enquiry, said: “*Cyberbullying can devastate young lives, but to date the response from social media companies has been tokenistic and inadequate. It has failed to grip the true scale of the problem. For too long they have been marking their own homework and it’s time they become far more transparent, robust and accountable.*”

The Children’s Society Chief Executive Matthew Reed said: “*The inquiry has heard from young people describing cyberbullying as ‘inescapable’, and in the most extreme cases it has pushed some to the verge of suicide. But we’ve also heard about the positives that social media brings for young people. Social media is part and parcel of teenage life and we all need to support young people to stay safe online, including better education in schools and information for parents.*”

Despite social media being an integral part of young people’s lives, with most children starting secondary school with a smartphone, there are currently no rules requiring social media companies to protect children and young people from cyberbullying. This is something that the inquiry says urgently needs to change.

Sarah Brennan, Chief Executive of YoungMinds, said “*With so much of young people’s everyday lives involving the online world, it’s crucial that it is a place that young people can feel safe and enjoy being part of. We need to see platforms creating age-appropriate content for younger users, as well as parents and teachers speaking to young people early about how to respond positively to the online world, and what to do if they come across upsetting content. But most of all, this inquiry has shown loud and clear that it’s time social media companies sit up and take action to tackle cyberbullying and promote good mental health on their platforms.*”

Young people who gave evidence to the inquiry said they felt let down by social media companies, and were worried what would happen if they reported bullying or abuse. Many said they wanted sites to take tougher and swifter action on online bullies, including banning them from platforms.

The inquiry is now calling on social media companies and the government and to act. Key recommendations from the report are for social media companies to be clearer with young users about how they should behave online, faster in responding to reports of bullying – within 24 hours – and to take tougher action on those who break platform guidelines. It

wants the government to embed online safety lessons into school curriculums and to require social media companies to report data on cyberbullying.

The report comes ahead of the government's response to its consultation on the internet safety strategy, which is expected soon.

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Notes to editors

The survey was hosted on SurveyGizmo between March and August 2017, and was completed by 1,089 young people aged 11–25. The survey was promoted by YoungMinds and The Children's Society via their websites and social media so may not be representative of all 11-25 year olds:

- 62% of respondents were under the age of 18
- Three-quarters of respondents were female (75%)
- Overall 45% of those who completed the survey said that they are currently experiencing a mental health problem. Of those children and young people currently experiencing a mental health problem, 68% of those who responded to our survey said they have experienced cyberbullying in the last year.
- This high rate of self-reported mental ill-health amongst respondents may be due to the dissemination of the survey by charities who work closely with young people with experiences of emotional and mental health problems.

[1] This figure refers to 150 out of 255 young people.

The Children's Society

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs local services, helping children and young people when they are at their most vulnerable, and have nowhere left to turn. We also campaign for changes to laws affecting children and young people, to stop the mistakes of the past being repeated in the future. Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children and young people they are on their side.

www.childrenssociety.org.uk

YoungMinds

YoungMinds is the UK's leading children's mental health charity committed to improving the mental health and emotional well-being of children and empowering their parents and carers. For further information please visit www.youngminds.org.uk

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