

Friday 6 September, 2024

## **Our Joint Letter to Minister for Early Years**

Dear Minister for Early Years,

We write to you as the Early Years for Digital Standards Action Group representing charities, educators, health professionals and academics from the early years (birth to 5 years old) sector across the UK.

Technology has revolutionised every facet of our lives, from the workplace to our homes, from education to entertainment. Even the very youngest pre-verbal children are watching streaming services and platforms, often featuring user-generated content and auto-play designs, with aggressive algorithms.

Meanwhile, adults and older children are often heavily engaged with the internet and social media devices, starving young children from necessary interactions that are essential to their development. And private moments with babies and toddlers' hashtags are trending on social media, sometimes when the child is upset.

The importance of the early years in a child's life cannot be overstated. They lay the foundation for a child's development and should be central to policies and standards that shape their future, including their experiences in the digital world.

Education and health professionals, researchers and academics are deeply concerned and point to identifiable changes in behaviour, language development, social skills and mental and physical health of early years children.

This age group is now reported in the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF)'s statistics for "self-generated" child sexual abuse images where a child is persuaded, coerced or tricked by a predator.

Safeguarding protections and standards have not kept pace with the technological changes. And while there is guidance for families and professionals on appropriate digital activity for older children and teens, there is woefully little information relevant to early years children and coverage in the media solely focuses on phones and social media with secondary school age children.

There are three calls for action from our group:

1. Guidance and support via a campaign for families and carers with children from birth to 5 years. This should focus on the best interests of the child – not the tech industry. It should include information about developmental milestones, signpost the differences between active use of technology and passive consumption of technology and highlight the role of the adult.  
Risks around online platforms, social media and children age birth-5 should be included and Safeguarding charities require key input too.  
This guidance could all be linked to the work of health visitors and educational professionals.

2. Updates to guidance from DFE, OFSTED on Digital Standards for professionals working with children from birth to 5 in educational settings and for NHS and health professionals including health visitors + Start for Life.

For education, an updated Early Years Policy is already being trialled from LGFL here <https://lgfl.net/safeguarding>.

A language framework to categorise the way children use digital resources and activities from Fiona Aubrey Smith's research breaks the term "screen time" down into a number of more precise definitions: stare & move; sense & react; think & enact. This framework would be very relevant for action points 1 and 2, along with guidance on the vital role of the adult.

3. More explicit reference to youngest children (Birth – 5 year-olds) in the national dialogue around online harms from OFCOM, Children's Commissioner and the work on the Online Harms Bill in holding platforms to account.

Early Years for Digital Standards Action Group has further research and recommendations that could inform government guidance, we also have evidence of harm, particularly as it relates to the health, safety and wellbeing of early years children in family and education settings. We would like to see a Scientific Advisory Committee responsible for digital technology and early child development to advise Ministers.

Our network is determined to see positive change for the youngest children, but it requires government and regulatory attention (across several departments and regulators) that has been sorely missing.

We recognise that the digital tech sector, government, charities, education and health should work together to improve health and the digital experience for the next generation, but without strong leadership from the government the efforts we are all making to have technology as a force for good, will fail.

Both the guidance we call for and an effective plan that articulates the responsibilities of each of these groups is urgently needed now.

We ask that you agree to meet with us to hear our concerns and discuss how they might be urgently met.

Yours sincerely,

Early Years for Digital Standards Action Group  
Led by Katy Potts, Islington Council

If you would like this document in large print or Braille, audiotape or in another language, please telephone 020 7527 2000.

Early Years for Digital Standards Action Group is supported by the following individuals, coalitions and organisations:

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Lord Ed Vaizey of Didcot, Chair, Common Sense Media UK

Our group continues to grow as organisations add their support to the call for Early Years for Digital Standards. The Action Group is led by Katy Potts, Islington Council

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