Consulting children on proposed safety measures against online grooming

A report based on research and engagement with children aged 13-17

Report by Praesidio
safeguarding

Ofcom

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We are above all grateful to the students in these schools who engaged deeply with the questions we posed and who considered, clarified, ruminated and shared their views with immense thoughtfulness and openness. We have sought to do justice to their views and insights in this report.

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Contents

Praesidio
safeguarding

Foreword from Ofcom

This report shares children's views about Ofcom's proposals for measures to protect children from the risks of online grooming. This project marks an important step in Ofcom's approach to listening to children's views on our policy proposals for the Online Safety Act, and we are continuing to proactively engage with and embed children's voices in our work to protect them online.

Ofcom is the independent regulator for communications services in the UK and has statutory duties in relation to media literacy and online safety. The Online Safety Act 2023 ('the Act') includes the requirement for services in scope to have systems and processes in place designed to protect people from illegal harms. This includes requirements for providers of user-to-user (U2U) services to mitigate against the risk of child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSEA) on their services.

In November 2023, we published the Illegal Harms Consultation, which recommended several measures that providers of U2U services can take to address the risk of online grooming for the purpose of CSEA on their services.

Each year, we hear from thousands of parents and children about their experiences online, as part of our research programme. The Illegal Harms Consultation received a lot of interest and feedback from industry and other stakeholders. However, given our measures to address online grooming would have a direct impact on child users, we decided it was important to proactively seek their views – also recognising they are an important group of stakeholders unlikely to engage in the wider consultation process.

According to the measures proposed in the consultation, children should be provided with a suite of default account settings, to make it harder for perpetrators to discover, locate and interact with children online. We also proposed that children should receive supportive information at critical points in their online experience – including at the point they may choose to change the default account settings. [1]

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[1] Ofcom's consultation document can be found <u>here</u>. The draft codes of practice relating to online grooming can be found in Annex 7, on page 31, where they are called 'Default settings and user support for child users.'

For this project we commissioned Praesidio Safeguarding to run deliberative workshops with 77 children aged 13–17. Together with Praesidio, we created materials that presented the proposed measures and relevant context in an age-appropriate and accessible way, and asked children to share their views on these. Using a range of creative and participatory exercises, children were asked to discuss and reflect on these proposals and think about how they might positively or negatively affect the lives of children online.

Overall, the children generally supported the measures. They felt it was right to do more to protect children online, based on concerns about feeling unsafe; in most workshops, at least one child had personally experienced receiving unwanted sexual communications online. **Additionally, many also felt it was important for children to maintain some control over their account settings,** and welcomed the proposals to give children supportive information alongside the option to change the defaults, according to their preferences.

The children who took part were extremely open, thoughtful and insightful in their responses. The report shows that children recognised there was a trade-off to consider: between continuing to enjoy existing access to the platforms they use, and benefiting from interventions that reduce the risk of grooming – but which might also change what they enjoy about these services. Children also told us that they appreciated the opportunity to participate in this project and valued the chance to have their voices heard.

This project has allowed us to consider children's views alongside those of many other stakeholders while making our decisions on these proposals. The children provided useful and important evidence that supports our final set of measures addressing grooming (known as 'safety defaults for child users and support for child users'). The final measures are being published in the Illegal Harms Statement, in December 2024, at the same time as this report. [2]

Their input has also helped us think about related issues to consider going forward as we continue our work on how to address wider CSEA risks online. This includes difficult challenges such as how providers can determine whether a user is a child on relevant services.

Note: whilst the report includes some references to Ofcom's draft and final codes of practice addressing online grooming, the findings from the engagement and research with children should not be considered a reflection of any policy position that Ofcom may adopt as part of our role as the online safety regulator.

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2 The decisions made by Ofcom after the consultation about the online grooming codes of practice can be found here in Volume 2, Chapter 8 of Ofcom's Illegal Harms written statement (the chapter is titled U2U settings, functionalities and user support). The final grooming measures can be found here in Section 4 of the Illegal content Codes of Practice for User-to-User services, and are numbered measures F1 and F2.

Executive summary

About this report

In March–April 2024, Praesidio Safeguarding carried out workshops in schools with 77 children aged 13–17, to consult them on Ofcom's proposed safety measures to address online grooming for the purpose of child sexual abuse, and to understand the different factors that influence these views. The proposed measures consisted of default settings for child accounts on user-to-user online services, as well as providing child users with supportive information at relevant moments.[3]

This report describes the children's views towards these measures. It is intended to provide direct feedback from children for Ofcom to review alongside more formal consultation responses, to inform Ofcom's decision about how to proceed with these measures, as well as future policy decisions in this area. This report also provides insight into children's online lives and experiences, including how they currently perceive and navigate the risks and opportunities of being online.

We have also written a summary report for children who participated in this project, and which can be seen here. If you would like to find out more about Ofcom's work on online safety, please go to this webpage.

Key points

Overall, the children were positive about measures proposed by Ofcom. They broadly felt that these would make online experiences safer, and thought that this was valuable, in particular for younger children (often those under 13) opening accounts on social media and other online services for the first time.

Overall, proposals for services to **provide supportive information** to children, and to **disable location sharing settings by default**, were the most popular and widely supported. Proposals with **new default settings for user connections and direct messaging** were seen as more likely to negatively impact children's ability to socialise online. However, they were also considered more likely to have a direct positive impact on protecting children online, in particular by making children who kept these settings enabled less visible to other users (see next section for further feedback on individual proposals).

The measures as a whole were supported because they were seen to address a significant problem – that children on social media receive sexual communications from online users they don't know. In nearly all workshops, there were children who shared experiences of receiving unsolicited sexual messages from others. The measures were seen as a way of helping to prevent this from happening, and some participants felt that the measures were overdue.

3 For a more detailed description of the measures see page 59

In addition, the measures were seen to offer meaningful choice. Children felt it was right for there to be safer default settings, to avoid children accidentally sharing information such as location with others – but they also felt it was important that these settings could be altered. The children expressed that ideally, they would want to be able to tailor their experiences in as granular way as possible. In part this was to retain some of the freedoms of use they have already, whilst also making personal decisions about safety and use that reflect their preferences. While there were children who felt they would disable at least some default settings in order to maintain their existing independence online, others talked about how enabling these settings would help them feel 'freer' online and make them more comfortable posting content if only their friends could see this. We found throughout that children were appreciative of proposed changes that would give them more information, advice, and control.

Children did voice some concerns about potential limits on the effectiveness of Ofcom's proposals. They felt that it was challenging to prevent communication from potential perpetrators of grooming offences to children, on online services that don't require users to be connected in order for direct messaging to take place (e.g. as 'friends' or 'followers'). Participants were concerned children might still be curious to read messages from other users, even if as Ofcom were proposing, these online services asked children whether they wanted to read a direct message from someone else, before its contents are shown. More generally, participants described a risk that some children might disable all the default settings rather than make active choices about individual settings. Participants therefore highlighted the importance of educating children on making informed choices about settings on their online accounts.

There were some differences in opinion between participants. Support for the proposals was a little weaker among boys, who shared fewer experiences than other participants about receiving unsolicited messages. Support was also weaker among children aged 13–15, who were more concerned than others that the changes would threaten some of their online freedoms. Children aged 16–17 were more likely to feel that the changes would not greatly affect their current internet use, and talked less about using social media to expand their social network than when they were younger. Some 16–17-year-olds reflected that the safety measures were too late to meaningfully shape their own experiences but felt that they would be useful for younger friends, siblings, and future generations.

Summary of feedback on each proposal

Ofcom's draft measures were communicated to children in the workshops as four separate proposals that would apply to user-to-user services. The key pieces of feedback on each proposal were as follows – listed below from most to least popular proposal.

Supportive information
Providing supportive information to child users at key points in the user journey (e.g. disabling settings) to help them make informed choices about potential risks.

This was extremely popular as participants said that account settings on user-to-user services could be confusing and unclear, and that greater clarity and education around the use of settings would be helpful. The children appreciated the approach of service providers giving information and educating users about the impact of their choices, in order to promote more informed and conscious use – which they saw as greatly preferable to dictating to users how they can use their services. Children felt that the main challenge for this proposal would be to get children to engage with the messages and content effectively. Children felt it would be important for supportive information to be simple and engaging and were thoughtful about the need to reduce the risks of users becoming disengaged by repeated exposure.

Location sharing settings
Default settings that mean child users' location information is not visible to other users.

This proposal was also generally popular and felt to be sensible and protective, by making children's geographical location less accessible to strangers. Children shared some clear preferences for how they wanted this proposal to be implemented, in terms of how the functionality of location settings worked. They wanted the user to have the option to enable different location sharing settings for some contacts while keeping them disabled for others. Children were often already familiar with tailoring location settings and were comfortable with the approach of sharing their location data with some of their friends and family, but not more widely.

User connection settings
Default settings that make child users less 'visible' in user connection and networking features (e.g. 'suggested friends').

This proposal was also popular with most of the participants. Children tended to agree that these changes would have a positive impact on protecting users from being overly visible to unknown adults joining their online communities. However, hearing about these proposals prompted some concerns about having social opportunities limited. Whilst children generally agreed with their protective intent, there were concerns about a potential negative impact on their social connections and network building.

Direct message settings
Default settings that mean that child users cannot receive direct messages from those who are not a formal connection. On a service with no user connection functionality, child users are asked to actively confirm if they would like to receive a direct message from a user before it is visible to them.

This proposal was supported overall as it was seen as positive in protecting child users from unwanted communication with unknown adults. However, as with the proposals relating to user connection settings, it was noticeable that many of the children raised concerns about this limiting their opportunity to socialise and connect with others. Many children expressed that they wanted to have more control over how to monitor and filter direct messages from accounts they are not connected with, rather than not receive them at all. Finally, as noted above, children felt that it was more challenging to prevent communication from potential perpetrators of grooming offences to children on online services that don't require users to be connected in order for direct messaging to take place (e.g. as 'friends' or 'followers'), given the potential for children to be curious about the content of messages sent to them.

1. Introduction

Background to this project

In November 2023 Ofcom published their 'Protecting people from illegal harms online' consultation. The consultation proposes a range of measures for regulated user-to-user and search services. The consultation included measures that were proposed to address online risks of CSEA (Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse). Some of these measures were designed to address the risk of online grooming.[4] Evidence shows that grooming can not only cause harm to children in the online world, but can also result in contact sexual abuse and cause lifelong negative psychological impacts.[5]

In addition to conducting a formal consultation on these proposals as part of a wider consultation on illegal harms, Ofcom also commissioned Praesidio Safeguarding to consult children between the ages of 13-17 to gather their views on the measures outlined in the consultation in relation to grooming. The purpose of this engagement was to understand what children thought about the proposed safety measures and what impact they thought they would have – something particularly important given the impact these measures could have on shaping children's experiences online.

This report describes the children's views towards these measures. It is intended to provide direct feedback from children that Ofcom has reviewed alongside more formal consultation responses, to inform Ofcom's decision about how to proceed with these measures, as well as future policy decisions in this area. In seeking children's detailed views of the measures, this report also provides useful insight into children's online lives and experiences, including how they currently perceive and navigate the risks and opportunities of being online.

For details of how the proposals were presented to children, please see Chapter 3, where these are shown alongside the feedback received from children. The Appendix also includes a comparison between the child-friendly version of the proposals and Ofcom' draft codes of practice.

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[4] To view the draft codes of practice that Ofcom consulted on, see section A7 of Ofcom's illegal harms consultation on page 31. The decisions made by Ofcom after the consultation about the online grooming codes of practice can be found here in Volume 2, Chapter 8 of Ofcom's Illegal Harms written statement (the chapter is titled U2U settings, functionalities and user support). The final grooming measures can be found here in Section 4 of the Illegal content Codes of Practice for User-to-User services, and are numbered measures F1 and F2. It is worth noting that whilst these measures were designed mainly with the intention of addressing online grooming for the purposes of sexual exploitation, they may address the risk of other illegal harms as well.

[5] For more detail about the causes and impacts of online grooming, please see chapter 2B of Ofcom's Illegal Harms Register of Risk.

Approach to consulting children

Praesidio worked closely with Ofcom to create a toolkit which provided the basis for our discussions with children. This included an agenda and structure for the workshops, information for facilitators to share when explaining the changes being proposed, and a series of prompts and participatory exercises that enabled data gathering. The engagement was designed to be deliberative so that children could provide their views in light of different pieces of information, and by discussing these with their peers.

Outline of the sessions

Each workshop involved the following key components.

- Accessible introductions to Ofcom's proposals, as well as further background and contextual materials

- Group discussion, with questions including:
    - How *effective* children thought the proposals would be;
    - What *impact* they thought the proposals would have on themselves personally as well as other children; and
    - How *supportive* they felt towards the proposals.

- A series of written tasks and rating exercises for children to provide their individual responses and thoughts, before taking part in a group discussion. This helped to prepare children for the discussion, as well as to enable them to capture some feedback privately as individuals.

- Ofcom's reasoning behind each of the proposed changes. This was revealed only after the children had a chance to initially consider and discuss the impact of the measure; to avoid Ofcom's perspectives leading their insights or opinions.

- In addition to the more qualitative data gathered through discussion, we captured a small amount of quantitative data from the ratings exercise, that captured their opinion on a Likert scale. This asked children to reflect on how they felt about the measure being introduced and whether they agreed with it. They were asked to respond to the measure in this way before and after it had been discussed and analysed in the group discussions, and sometimes their rating changed after fuller discussion.

More details on the stimulus material used and the structure of the sessions can be found in Appendix 1.

Sample and recruitment

We consulted with 77 children over the course of 13 separate workshops. All children and their parents were provided with an accessible information sheet, including a form for providing informed consent to participate in a workshop, and some initial information about the Online Safety Act 2023 and Ofcom's role as the online safety regulator.

The workshops were held in person in four different English and Welsh schools in March and April 2024, and included a fairly equal mix of boys and girls. There were 41 children aged 13–15, and 36 aged 16–17. The age distribution of children across the different workshops can be found in the Appendix.

Recognising the research which shows that children from socially excluded, and minority backgrounds face greater risks of exclusion and harm online,[6] we sought to ensure that we had a diverse mix of children from different backgrounds in our sample:

- Over 1 in 4 participants (22) were from a minority ethnic background
- Around 1 in 6 participants (13) had SEND
- Around 1 in 10 participants (9) identified as LGBTQ+
- Around 1 in 10 participants (7) had experience of the care system

Safeguarding of child participants

Ofcom and Praesidio developed a robust safeguarding protocol used when conducting the workshops, which included but was not limited to the following elements:

- The materials and agreed questions were designed to avoid asking children about any individual personal experiences of online harm that they may not be comfortable disclosing to Praesidio or their peers.

- A series of suggested ground rules on how to make the workshop environment respectful and safe were presented to children at the start of each session, which they were invited to build on and add to.

- A safeguarding policy and procedures were agreed between Ofcom and Praesidio. This included a protocol on actions that would be taken if during the project a child disclosed harm or if there was any identified risk of harm to a child, or if there were any concerns about a child's wellbeing. This included pausing the workshop and liaising with relevant safeguarding leads.

- Whilst this was not deemed essential for the project, the workshops were conducted in a school setting which could facilitate close contact with teachers and professionals already responsible for safeguarding of child participants.

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6 Adrienne Katz and Dr. Aiman El Asam, in partnership with Internet Matters, 2019. Vulnerable Children in a Digital World.

2. Overarching views of the measures

This section identifies the key findings and cross cutting themes that arose from our engagement with children.

2.1 Participants generally felt the measures would help protect children online

Children saw online grooming as a serious issue and felt that the measures genuinely addressed the problem. In this context, the measures were seen as a welcome and positive development by most children.

A clear majority of children we spoke to expressed support for the measures. This support reflected their agreement that the proposed changes would provide children with better protections from online grooming. While there were differences in opinion around which changes would be most effective and potential negative impacts on their freedom online, participants agreed with the overall premise that the measures could have a significant, protective impact on children. Many expressed that the measures would make themselves and other children feel safer, more secure and less exposed:

> *I feel like overall, [the measures] will really help children and keep them safe online, because when we looked at all of them from different points, you can see how it would help with grooming and protect children online. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

> *I think on a day to day, it will be normal and not much will change, but it will make me feel safer and protected from grooming. (Boy, aged 13, School 3)*

Support was driven by the acknowledgement that the issue of online grooming was important. In nearly all workshops, there were children who described unwanted contact and sexual messages as a familiar and routine part of their digital lives. They often alluded to the widespread experience of unwanted communication from strangers online:

> *I think one of the biggest things is how social media is unsafe for children. The amount of times that, not just me, but a ton of my friends have been randomly messaged by strangers when you didn't want to be messaged, is unreal… (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

Some children were strongly in favour of the measures and described them as overdue. They believed that the measures would particularly help to protect younger teenagers and children who are going online for the first time.

Given their personal experiences of unwanted online communication, some children were emphatic that the measures were important and were overdue, because of children's level of exposure to adults on social media and how unsafe they considered social media to be. Some described the measures as being very helpful for online safety in general.

> *Very effective. It will just protect them all, I can't really explain it. I just think it's helpful… I think it would make us safer, like I've not been groomed before, but I reckon this would help someone who was. If these measures were put in place further back in time, it would've prevented anything further from being done [children being groomed]. (Boy, aged 14, School 3)*

Children explained that they feel social media platforms tend to be more dangerous than children initially anticipate when they first start using them. They thought the measures would be helpful in preventing grooming at this most vulnerable point:

> *I think it's really positive. There's a certain unawareness of social media and some aspects of the app makes it easy for [children] to be contacted, so having these as default settings adds peace of mind so they don't need to be worried about others reaching out. (Girl, aged 15, School 3)*

Similarly, it was recognised that if the proposed changes became normal then younger users starting out on social media would be more likely to accept them as they would have less attachment to how the settings were before.

> *I reckon if you just downloaded [a new app] – you'd keep the feature on. But if you had it for 4 or 5 years, you'd change it back because that's what you were used to. (Boy, aged 14, School 3).*

One young girl explained her support for the measures in terms of the safety and protection of her younger sisters, alluding to the fact that this would help them to avoid the negative and stressful interactions on social media that she had experienced:

> *With my siblings... I don't want my siblings to go through what I did on social media. I feel happy about these measures because I know that my sisters and siblings would feel safe (Girl, aged 14, School 2)*

Children identified wider benefits to the measures beyond the specific risk of online grooming.

In the workshops children often appreciated the measures as they provided a more general feeling of greater safety and security online. There were comments about how the measures that made child accounts less publicly visible could help protect children who felt too easily accessible to 'strangers' online. There were also comments about the potential for the measures to protect against people with 'bad' intentions. For example, measures aimed at direct messaging supported children wanting to avoid contact with any individuals who they felt were potentially dangerous (whether an adult or child).

> *Some kids, they don't necessarily know it's happening. They just see someone who they think shares the same interests and then they share too much information and get drawn into doing things they don't want to do and struggle. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)*

As discussed below, children also identified downsides to the measures around the potential to feel more restricted online. However, some children felt the measures could help them feel 'freer' online. The idea of being less exposed on social media for some participants led them to believe they would feel more comfortable posting things online or doing online activities with their friends. They felt that the risk of strangers contacting them was limiting them from doing more things they liked to do, and that they needed to be careful about what they did online to not receive attention.

> *[I will] Have freedom with friends instead of being afraid. (Girl, aged 14, School 2).*

> *Some people may find it distracting when random people text, so this will make some people feel good, safe, and comfortable. (Girl, aged 13, School 2).*

A minority of children had more negative responses to the measures. However, the ability to change default settings largely addressed their concerns.

A few children reacted negatively to the measures and saw them as overly restrictive. The most articulate comments about this came from children who described themselves as mature enough to make decisions for themselves about what to do online.

> *It is quite dictatorial really in terms of people being able to talk to who they want. Everything's going to revolve around technology soon, so it's stupid to restrict access to that for people. If you're 17, you're responsible enough and should be trusted to know what you're doing online. (Boy, aged 17, school 3).*

> *It's almost dystopian. It's like almost all your rights online are being taken away because you're young. (Boy, aged 16, School 4)*

However, the knowledge that these proposals allowed children to disable default settings if they wanted to, reassured most children who had these concerns (see section 2.3).

2.2 Some proposals were more popular than others, and there were some differences in views between workshops

There was clear support for the proposals relating to supportive information and location features.

The children we spoke to were strongly supportive of being given more information at key decision points in a child's user journey, such as deciding whether to alter their default settings, or accept a connection request for the first time. They tended to agree that decisions to connect or be visible on the major platforms could be made too easily and prompting users to think through their decisions would significantly improve safety. They had a great deal to say about how to make this communication as effective as possible and minimise user fatigue with alerts providing supportive information (see more detail in next chapter).

> *If this is presented in a simple way, like it's easy to understand and it gets the message across – like if it's not long and wordy – then kids will probably read it….It would be more effective if it had an infographic or something easier to read rather than a big wall of text... a graphic or a video so it's not a big, long paragraph of text. (Boys, aged 17, School 1)*

There was also solid support for sharing location information to be set to 'off' by default. The only caveat was that children wanted to be able to differentiate this setting for different contacts in their network so that they could be visible to family or close friends whilst not visible to others. Some pointed out that location data sharing is often unwittingly enabled during the set-up of accounts without users realising or thinking through the risks:

> *Yeah, what often happens is when you make an account, they ask for your location so you say "yeah sure" …but then [later], you have to go through settings just to turn it off and it can be complicated, (Boy, aged 16, school 3*

The proposals relating to network building and direct messaging were also broadly supported, though there were concerns about whether these could negatively impact their social lives and interests.

The proposals relating to network building and messaging carried a lot of support in our conversations, as children identified the benefits of being protected from adult strangers infiltrating their social networks. These proposals were generally seen by the children as having the potential to have the greatest impact on protecting children online.

> *[This will be] quite effective because no more strangers can be added, there are no more creeps sending things, and it will decrease grooming. (Girl, aged 14, School 2)*

However, a significant minority remained uncertain about these proposals, and a small number were opposed to them. This reflected concerns about the potential detrimental impact on the freedom to build social networks and connect with others. Some children mentioned the desire to socialise fluidly (e.g. via gaming) or via interlinked online and offline social networks. They also mentioned the ability to meet new people outside of their existing social and community networks – for example those with shared minority identities or interests – as well as practical ways in which they use platforms to earn money (for example when trying to sell items online; see next chapter for more details).

> *Older children 16+ with jobs or older friends couldn't receive an initial message...*
> *The measure would stop dodgy people from texting you but there would be a lot of*
> *limitations with older friends, work, family. (Boy, aged 16, School 1).*

Some children reflected that proposed changes would prevent friendships from originating and developing online, given that children would be less able to meet peers online.

> *My best friend... I met her more online. We've been friends for like 3 years now, so*
> *if I don't [accept messages] I won't be able to make friends online. (Girl, aged 17,*
> *School 2)*

Many of the children understood the positive impact that the proposals could have in reducing unwanted contact but had alternative suggestions such as continuing to enable messaging from unconnected users but to offer child users a preview of content or greater information about the sender (see next chapter for more details).

Older participants (aged 16-17) tended to be slightly more supportive of the measures than younger participants (aged 13-15). This seemed to reflect the younger children having a greater desire to expand their social networks.

In general, we found that our older cohorts of children (16–17) tended to be more positive and supportive of the measures being introduced than the younger groups (13–15). The younger groups were more likely to talk about disabling one or more of the default settings, and express anxieties about the impact on how they socialise and build social networks.

> *[The user connection proposal is] not effective because I would turn it off. (Girl,*
> *aged 14, School 3).*

> *[The user connection proposal] would impact the younger scale of children*
> *because it's one of their main ways of contacting. (Boy, aged 14, School 3).*

Participants aged 16–17 tended to feel that because they had already established their social networks, they no longer need network building features in the same way:

For older children it probably won't matter too much because we already have all those connections. (Boy, aged 17, School 1).

We've been on for a few years so we've already made the connections, so it wouldn't have as big of an impact compared to people who are just getting on the apps now. (Girl, aged 16, School 3).

Older children aged 16-17 expressed concerns that it was users under 16 that would potentially benefit the most from the measure, but that the intense social pressures affecting them might encourage them to turn off defaults. Older children aged 16-17 reflected on how they had built their networks and relationships when they were younger; by using networking features such as mutual or suggested friends functions, including features such as 'quick add'. They spoke about how when they were younger they often felt social pressure very keenly and this translated into pressure to build up their friendship groups:

I think when I was younger, I definitely used it [quick-add] a lot more, and now I don't use it at all. You just wanted to get as many people on there as you could. (Girl, aged 16, School 2).

Younger [children] will likely turn it off. When you get older, you think "ah I got my friends already, I'll turn it off". (Girl, aged 17, School 4).

There were exceptions to this trend. In particular, some 16-17-year olds talked about wanting their account settings to be the same as those of adults as they gained more independence, and wanted to be perceived as and treated as more mature.

I think 13 to about 15, they wouldn't mind too much. But I think it is, when you get to that 16 mark, when you're starting to leave school and coming into college, that's when you think you're a lot older than you are, that's when I think it would get frustrating, and I think people will start adjusting their settings to go back to that adult account, instead of a child's account. (Girl, aged 16, School 1).

It was noticeable that some of the boys expressed the strongest opposition to the changes, which seemed linked to less frequent experiences of unwanted sexual communications online.

Some of the boys were less able to identify the benefits of the changes and this translated to being less supportive and more sceptical. This seemed driven by different experiences online to the girls. While for the girls the issue of unwanted sexual contact from strangers was particularly salient and important to address, this was less common for the boys. Though most workshops with boys included individuals who had experienced unwanted contact, they talked less about themselves or their peers receiving unsolicited sexual messages online.

I don't think people would be happy about being protected by other people. They might not want to be, because they want to connect with other people. (Boy, aged 13, School 1).

Children will feel controlled… It will limit who they can connect with. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)

However, it is important to note that the differences in favourability did not always follow this pattern across the workshops. For example, some 16–17–year–old children questioned the impact of the measures on their independence while some 13–15–year–old children (including boys) expressed their strong support. In addition, there may have been other factors influencing these differences beyond age and gender identity.

2.3 Children felt it was important to have empowerment and choice online.

Some support for the measures was driven by appreciation of users having the option to disable some or all of the default settings if they choose to.

During the workshops, we did not attempt to ask children to say definitively which default settings they would keep or disable – as doing so would have been both a hypothetical exercise, and quite complex given the many different services children used. When discussing this, however, children were supportive of the fact that the settings could be disabled by users if they wanted:

I think that as long as someone has the ability to remove these settings, even though being able to remove them will make it more ineffective, but I think there's no harm in adding these things if you can remove them yourself. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)

Some children indicated that they would like to retain some default settings and disable others based on their personal use and preferences. This was part of a wider pattern of wanting to tailor settings based on specific preferences for different services they used. For example, there were children who described not wanting to share their geographical location with social media contacts by default, but feeling it was important to share it with some contacts for safety reasons.

There's a level of connection of being able to know where your friends are but not to the extreme of knowing where everyone on your social media is. (Girl, aged 16, School 3)

A small number of children expressed that they would disable the settings in order to avoid feeling restricted online. But it was more common for participants to feel either supportive towards the measures, or torn between the need for greater protection and a desire to continue having existing access to online content.

Obviously, everything's good and it supports children to stop them from being groomed, but it's so restrictive. (Boy, aged 16, School 4)

While this helps people 12 or below – possibly 13-years-old – this is all common sense to me. I would get frustrated by these restrictions if [I'm] unable to disable them as I am not gullible enough to listen to a groomer. I think it is important and I want them added but I want the option to disable them for myself. (Boy, aged 15, School 3)

Children often indicated that they wanted granular choice over different features in the settings.

Linked to the above, children often described strong preferences about how different settings should operate at a granular level on different platforms (and as discussed in the next chapter, had a range of suggestions for how the measures could be implemented). Children often indicated wanting to tailor settings and enable and disable different features to suit their use and preferences:

I think all of these are quite good to implement, but I think it would be good to have the feature to individually remove some of the options because you might agree with some and disagree with others, rather than having all of them on or all of them off. I personally would like to have something like quick-add or the ability to get messages from people, but I would only want to get messages if I could see their name. (Girl, aged 16, School 2)

In line with this some children were very critical of the ways that different connection features are often bundled together which they perceived was to incentivise take up. They felt increasing choice, control and awareness would improve children's safety:

The reason I look at people's location is because it's linked to when users are last active because they're not two separate functions. If you differentiated those settings, it could save a lot of people turning it on. (Girl, aged 17, School 3)

2.4 Children had questions and suggestions about how to implement the measures

Children were quick to identify the potential implementation challenges created by weak age assurance on many platforms they use.

Children commonly pointed out that effective age assurance would be needed to prevent children misrepresenting their ages and missing out on the protections provided by the default settings. They spoke about how common it was for children to claim to be older, so that they could access content or apps before their actual age would allow:

I think it's common for kids to lie about their age on social media …kids will lie to gain access to those things. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)

They felt that there was a risk some would deliberately misrepresent their age to skip these settings. Many of the children were in favour of making age verification stronger to improve child safety online:

I think some kids would not put their actual age though if they knew those measures existed. (Girl, aged 16, School 2).

If you could give ID, like a passport or government ID. Having strong age verification. (Boy, aged 15, School 1)

Some children suggested that different measures were needed for children of different ages.

There was some discussion about how the measures did not differentiate between child users depending on their ages. Some felt the measures would benefit from having slightly reduced restrictions by default for the oldest children (usually described as 16–17-year-olds), to acknowledge their different needs and greater levels of maturity. It was noted that greater differentiation could help to encourage older children (16–17-year-olds) to keep the default settings in place, as it would not limit them to the same protection needs of younger children:

I think my problem with this, it's just got such a large age bracket that you need slightly different amendments for different age groups. I feel like me when I first got social media, this would've been beneficial, and my parents would've liked this. It would have been safer all around. But then as you get older it becomes part of your life and how you connect with people. It's different for different ages. (Girl, aged 17, School 3).

Some children proposed removing the protections provided by the measures at 16. Others suggested that protective measures should be removed in a gradual way. For this, the youngest users would be targeted with all the measures, and the individual elements of the measures would be reduced or removed as they got older.

I feel like, once you get to 16, I think it's a bit more acceptable to go out of your way to make friends with people that you don't necessarily know in real life, and I feel that at that point you'll have been through enough school and education to have learned what is not safe and I think that it's better like that because you can apply more restrictions to those who need them more, and then allow the freedom for the older kids. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)

As you get older, the settings should get lighter and lighter so it's not instantly opening you up to everything when you turn 18. (Boy, aged 15, School 1)

Some felt it was important to promote parental involvement in their children's account settings.

For some of the children, a way to enhance the protections in the measures was to enable or encourage greater parental control or involvement in the management of their child's accounts, particularly for 'younger' users (the meaning of which varied depending on the age of the participant). There were suggestions for how this might work and how much control parents should be given:

> *It should be a parent's decision to turn it on or off. Like maybe the parents have control. I mean, of course children wouldn't like that, they want to be able to have their own account, I just think it's the best way to go about it. Have parents control the situation. (Boy, Aged 17, School 3)*

> *If he turns off a default setting it could flag up on his parents' account or give his parents a notice. (Girl, aged 17, School 4)*

Participants felt it was important for there to be communication and education about the settings, to encourage children to retain these.

As identified above, the proposals relating to supportive information were extremely popular with all the groups. Children also appreciated that the other proposals involved default settings that can be enabled or disabled by the user. This combination of education and choice that was seen as a helpful and effective approach.

The children we spoke to were thoughtful about the risk that children may disable all the default settings, and how to encourage themselves and others to keep the settings enabled. They raised the need for wider education and explanation about the rationale behind the measures being implemented to reduce the number of children disabling the settings:

> *I feel like younger children would hate it – they would remove them – but older children would be a bit more mature and willing to go with it. I think if it were explained to me about why they're doing it all – then it would make sense to me, and I would be willing to go with it too. (Boy, aged 13, School 3)*

This, again, supports what we heard from children throughout the workshops – namely the importance of educating and communicating with children about risks, and seeking their support for and buy-in for protective measures.

3. Children's views of the measures in detail

3.1 User connection settings

What were the proposed user connection settings?

As outlined in the methodology, adapted language was used to introduce participants to the different elements of the measures. The first proposal for user connection settings was described as follows:

> This proposed change would be automatically applied to child user accounts (i.e. any account that has not been confirmed to belong to an adult) on platforms that have network connection functionalities (e.g. a 'friends' list). Users can turn off these settings at any point. The settings are:
>
> - Children are not presented with suggestions of other users to add to their network
> - Children do not appear as suggested users for other people to add to their network
> - Children cannot be seen in other users' connection lists
> - Children's connection lists cannot be seen by other users

Overall perspectives on user connection settings

We found that overall, most of the children we spoke to were supportive of this proposal. We found that the older age groups (16-17-year olds) were strongly in favour of the proposed changes, while the younger groups (13-15 year olds) were in favour of the change overall but tended to be somewhat less positive.

Children were generally positive because they felt that the proposal offered children more control over who can contact them, thereby reducing the ability for perpetrators to contact children easily. Despite this, some of the children were also thoughtful about the trade-offs and potential downsides to the proposal. Some raised concerns about how not being able to see their friends' connection lists would limit their opportunities to make friends and socialise.

However, despite some differences of opinion about the proposal within the group, and some mixed feelings from individual children, it was noticeable that majority support for the proposal held up well following discussion when all aspects of it had been fully considered.

In depth discussion of user connection settings

Strengths and benefits of the proposal

Children in all age groups agreed that the proposed changes to user connection settings would be effective in helping to protect them from online perpetrators of grooming. Children frequently used terms to indicate that they thought the proposal would improve safety and security and would make them feel safer when communicating with other users online:

> *It would be a safer and more secure environment online. (Boy, aged 16, School 1)*

One of the most popular aspects of the proposal was the way it was seen to enhance privacy and make children safer by making their profiles less accessible to other users:

> *It will make children safer. They won't be as public as they are now. (Boy, aged 17, School 4)*

Children referred to the reduced risk of contact from much older strangers, which they felt would inherently make communication between users safer. They pointed out they would have more trust in who they were communicating with, as they would need to be friends or at the very least people they knew or had purposefully added to their network:

> *Kids will feel safe because they know who their friends are. (Girl, aged 15, School 1)*

> *[There would be] safer communication. (Boy, aged 13, School 1)*

Children also suggested that the change would make them more thoughtful about who they choose to include in their social networks:

> *They will think more carefully about who they add and who they don't add. (Girl, aged 15, School 1)*

Children explained that this measure could make them consider the intentions behind other users seeking to add them; related to the more purposeful steps a user would have to take to add a child user. Children described needing to establish a stronger relationship with someone before adding them on social media:

> *[You would need to] personally connect with people to allow them to add you. (Girl, aged 15, School 1).*

> *It's a good idea, makes you ask if you actually know this person. (Girl, aged 17, School 2).*

Children recognised and commented positively on how the measure would limit the ease with which perpetrators identify and target children. They recognised that by making children's friends lists inaccessible, perpetrators would be more limited in finding victims and connecting with them through children's social networks:

> *I think this would be very effective as people may use mutual contacts in order to access people, so being unable to contact through them is great. (Girl, age 16, School 2)*

They also spoke about how perpetrators would have less leverage to blackmail or extort a child because they would be less likely to know and have access to a child's online network of friends:

> *This would help from strangers finding you and blackmailing you, and knowing people close to you. (Girl, aged 14, School 2)*

The proposed changes to user connection settings were seen to be particularly impactful by the girls when they reflected on their experiences of being contacted by strangers. Notably, many girls suggested this measure would make them more comfortable going online because they would be less exposed to strangers:

> *[The] benefit would be less online grooming, feel more comfortable online, and less likely to be in contact with strangers. (Girl, aged 15, School 1)*

> *[I would] be less exposed, have a stress-free experience. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

Girls described the benefits of being protected from unwanted contact:

> *You wouldn't have weird conversations with people over your age and people that you don't normally know. (Girl, aged 13, School 1)*

> *[This will be] quite effective because no more strangers can be added, there are no more creeps sending things, and it will decrease grooming. (Girl, aged 14, School 2)*

With these interactions in mind, many girls felt that the removal of features which encouraged users to add each other quickly was a positive benefit. Girls described how such features generated a range of random or chance interactions:

> *I think it would be a positive change. When you quick add, sometimes it's because you have mutual friends, other times it's creeps. (Girl, aged 14, School 2)*

They also referred to the benefits of being protected from inappropriate content:

> *I think we would be better off without quick add. I don't use it because I used to use it and you would just get inappropriate pictures of like grown adults, but I just take myself off it. You can do that in settings, but I think young people would be better off without it. (Girl, aged 16, School 1)*

Children agreed that although the measure would not prevent all grooming, it would make it harder for perpetrators to find and target children as their details would be much less accessible:

> *It doesn't fully stop the problem. There's no fool proof way – but it does make it a lot harder. You have to get access to a kid's phone or use someone else's account or get it off a friend. These are much different than just adding random people. (Boy, aged 16, School 3)*

Overall, children felt this measure would be highly likely to limit the number of interactions and connection requests they receive from online perpetrators.

> *I think it will definitely make a difference in online grooming and make it so that older people cannot have easy access to talk to youngsters. (Girl, aged 14, School 3).*

> *[I think it could be] quite effective because it could prevent random people from instantaneously joining a group, becoming a mutual friend, and then a suggested friend, allowing them to become friends with others of younger users. (Boy, aged 14, School 2).*

Drawbacks and limitations

Concerns about socialising and connecting

Despite the strong positives around protection, and with many children feeling this proposal would be a positive change to their current online experience, the children we spoke to did often also raise the downsides in limiting some of their ability to socialise and connect freely. Some children described the proposal as "restrictive" and felt the changes could create barriers to making friends online.

One girl explained how social networking features had been instrumental in helping her reconnect with a broader set of friends in a different social network:

> *I reconnected with a bunch of primary friends. A couple were under 'quick add' and then you can also see their friends and add them from their friends lists. (Girl, aged 16, School 3).*

Some of the children discussed how they use these features to expand their social networks – particularly by using mutual friends to introduce them to friends of friends or using suggested friends to meet more people in their local area. As these features become limited, they envisaged that this would also limit their ability to connect with people around them:

> *It'll impact me as I won't be able to make initial connections with other people to then communicate with friends of friends. (Girl, aged 17, School 2).*

> *Children may not be able to add those people who are around their area but not that close. (Girl, aged 14, School 1).*

This impact on both current and new friendships was raised a number of times, with some 16–17 year olds in particular expressing how being online is forming an increasingly larger role in their relationships with their peers. They explained that it is becoming more common to connect online first before meeting in person:

> *Most people make their connections online first before meeting them in person, and it's getting more common as we move on. (Boy, aged 17, School 1).*

> *You know of people online and friendships are constructed online – not necessarily strangers but you get mutual friends that you see online. And it's not necessarily a negative thing. (Girl, aged 17, School 3).*

Some children discussed how the measure would make socialising in new online environments more difficult, by limiting their ability to see the friendship networks of existing and potential new connections. They pointed out that this measure may disadvantage children who are less confident in offline situations, in particular with new people, who may rely on the ease of online connection and friendship to initiate relationships. Some related that the measure could make it more difficult for them to find friends when they go to new environments such as college:

> *[There will be] increased safety, however, teenagers leaving school and going to college are going to want to make new connections and they may struggle doing that. (Girl, aged 16, School 1).*

A small number of children commented on how this measure could negatively impact children who depend on social media and the online world as an anonymous space to express and explore their sexuality or gender, and therefore that it could be more detrimental to children identifying as LGBTQ+. One girl discussed her friend's experiences of seeking LGBTQ+ specific help. The girl noted her friend had actively sought out someone she did not know, and was not previously connected to online, to help her understand her identity:

> *I have a friend that connected with someone she didn't know and talked to them about advice. From that, she kind of gained the confidence to be out more through speaking to them about their experience. (Girl, aged 17, School 3).*

Some boys raised worries around the impact of the measure on online gaming and the enjoyment they derived from playing multi-player video games with mutual friends – which for them was a route to broader socialising (and further gaming). They felt it would be a shame if they could not then see these mutual friends easily or find them to connect with on social media, and worried about whether this measure would detract from the fluidity of the social aspects of gaming:

> *Some [children] may complain because you may be friends with a random player online and you are good teammates with them in a game. (Boy, aged 14, School 3).*

Concerns about decreasing the role of mutual friends in cautious network building

When considering the potential downsides of the measure some of the children argued that limiting the visibility of mutual friends could make the ways they establish their networks less safe and appropriate. Some felt that removing their ability to see shared or mutual friends when considering or assessing a friend request would remove an important tool for how they make the judgement of whether or not to accept. Most notably, girls described how they currently use the number of mutual friends as a way to assess whether to accept a new connection request or not:

> *I'd say like for a safety point, it's different but if I can see their friends list, I can see it's a person and their friends because when you search someone on Instagram there are many people with the same name. But if I see they have like 20 mutual friends then I know that's definitely the person I want to add. (Girl, aged 16, School 3).*

This proposal was seen as negatively affecting this potential safeguard, as children would no longer be able to validate the identity of the person they were adding by checking the number of mutual connections:

> *If there was someone I knew and I looked up their name, loads of users come up and the ones with the most mutual friends come up first and I click the one with the most mutual friends...If I can't see their mutual friends, I won't know if they're the person I'm looking for. (Girl, age 13, School 3).*

Children spoke about the ramifications of this, with some suggesting it could be counterproductive to the intention of the proposal and make them less safe. Some felt the lack of visibility of mutual friends could mean that they would add other users less discriminately to preserve relationships online or to avoid missing out on social opportunities:

> *Could be good but it also could be bad, because if you don't have that then you don't know if you know them or not. I would just accept anyone then. (Girl, aged 14, School 3).*

> *This would impact badly because if I only saw a random name and didn't add them – that could be the most popular kid in school, and I just rejected them. I might be just adding them more often to get opportunities. (Boy, aged 13, School 2).*

When asked whether 'mutual' connections could really indicate that someone was safe to add – with this misconception being a grooming risk in itself – the participants were thoughtful about this tension. One suggestion to address this was to ensure that the mutual friends feature could give stronger assurances about age and identity. One suggestion was for friends lists to show how long people have been friends, as this would help children identify someone who might be adding users in quick succession with the purpose of exploiting them versus their friends in more established social networks:

I think if it's a 12-year-old making their first account – then they won't have any contacts to make their friend group. You could probably keep mutual friends but highlight how long their friends have known each other on the app – like if someone has known a friend for 3 years versus 3 hours. (Boy, aged 17, School 2).

Suggestions for potential changes to the proposal and its implementation

The children in our groups had a number of suggestions for how they felt the proposal should be modified or improved both in ways that would improve security but which in some cases would also mitigate against lost social connections.

Greater shielding of child accounts from adults

One theme that arose was around ensuring other ways in which children's accounts could be shielded from and made inaccessible to adults. Participants discussed the different ways a child's account can be visible to adult users via a person's feed, comments, mentions, or being tagged in posts. Some of the children felt that this visibility (where children's profiles could still be located by adults without being searched for) could limit the effectiveness of the measure. They wanted to know how this would apply and whether adults would be blocked from adding them from public posts:

I just have a question; how does it apply if you get mentioned? If you're mentioned in a story, everyone can see your account. (Girl, aged 17, School 2).

The groomers are still able to find these children through tagged posts, tagged in stories? (Boy, aged 16, School 1).

It might cause problems though if you can see what people are commenting. Your profile would still show up and you'd appear in that list. (Boy, aged 13, School 3).

Children felt that user connection settings should also hide children's accounts from adults in instances where children's social media accounts are 'tagged' in a post. Similarly, some felt that the proposed changes to user connection settings should also protect children when they leave public comments on social media – for example by anonymising their profile but allowing their comment to be seen:

Having an anonymous button so that you are also anonymous when you are commenting or liking so people can't see you through that too. (Boy, aged 14, School 3).

Suggestions on how to make the proposal less restrictive

Some children felt it should be possible to maintain some of the connection list functionality they liked but to provide it in what they saw as a safer and more limited form. Children provided a range of suggestions with this in mind – for example, allowing children to continue using 'quick add', but only with contacts already saved in their device:

Allowing quick add but only for contacts on your phone. (Boy, aged 13, School 2).

I think with something like quick add, I think you should only be suggested based on if they have your number... friends of friends wouldn't be suggested if you don't have their number, but I think that's probably for the best. (Girl, aged 17, School 2).

Some children suggested a modification could be to have a 'walled garden' or a closed environment for under-18 users. In this scenario they would be able to continue to see and add mutual friends at random, but the only users shown to them would be those who are under 18:

Allowing them to still see children in their age group – stopping them from wanting to just turn it off to find people around them. (Boy, aged 16, School 1).

Let children be suggested to other children just not over the age of 18. (Girl, aged 14, School 3).

I feel like children should be able to see other children in the suggested friends list, whilst adults can't [see children.] (Girl, aged 17, School 2).

Children often felt the proposal would be strengthened if in practice users were offered very granular settings and choices that they could tailor to their needs. For some it would offer the privacy protections they liked but also allow them to be able to continue using their own ways of network building such as assuring peoples' identities by using mutual friends. Examples shared included not wanting to be shown in connection lists, or in features like 'quick add', whilst still being able to look for child accounts.

I wouldn't want to be in someone's quick add but I'd like to still see mutual friends. (Girl, aged 16, School 3).

It would be more effective if we could switch it off when we are searching for particular people and turn it back on when we are done, to not be bothered. (Girl, aged 14, School 2).

Agree and disagree ratings

Children were asked to say how much they agreed or disagreed with the proposal at two separate points – once after first being shown the proposal, and again after more detailed discussion.

Overall, the majority of participants agreed with this proposal being introduced on the platforms they use, both before and after it had been fully discussed and explored. Where changes occurred between rating incidents, these tended to shift more in agreement with the proposal, for example, moving from 'unsure' to 'agree'. This appeared to be the result of the shared reflections on the value of the proposal and the salience of the issue of grooming for many of the participants, once this topic was discussed in more detail.

How much do you agree or disagree with this measure being introduced on the platforms you use?

Rating	Immediate responses		Responses after discussion	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	12	16%	13	17%
Agree	37	48%	43	56%
Unsure	18	23%	12	16%
Disagree	8	10%	6	8%
Strongly disagree	2	3%	3	4%

3.2 Direct messaging settings

What were the proposed direct messaging settings?

The second proposal discussed was described as follows:

> The below settings would be automatically applied to child accounts – i.e. any account that has not been confirmed to belong to an adult – on platforms where children can send and receive direct messages. Users can turn off these settings at any point.
>
> - Children should not receive direct messages from accounts they are not connected with.
> - If the service isn't one where users can 'connect' with each other (e.g. as 'friends'), the platform should provide children with a way of actively confirming whether or not they want to receive a direct message, before they actually see the contents of the message.[7]

Overall perspectives on message settings

Children were generally positive about this proposal, and tended to feel that it would improve protection from online grooming, but had more mixed feelings about the proposal compared to others.

Children felt that limiting children's ability to receive messages from other users would have a big direct impact on their protection online. At the same time a number of children were concerned about the ways in which this would limit their connectivity altogether, and for this reason a vocal minority were strongly opposed to the proposal.

In addition, there were concerns about the effectiveness of the proposal for services with no user connection functionality. When thinking about being asked by an online service if they would like to receive a message from a user they have no connection with, many children felt that this would be less effective than stopping direct messaging from non-connected users altogether. They felt many children would simply be too tempted to accept a message offered to them for this to be effective.

Many of the children expressed that while they wanted to know if someone was trying to message them and be offered the choice to accept, they also wanted to be protected from the risks of such a message, and be given greater information about the specific content and the sender so that they could make an informed choice.

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7 As noted in the Appendix, not all details of the draft codes were captured in the child-friendly materials for the purposes of simplicity. In the case of this proposal, we did not share with children that on services where direct messaging is a necessary and time critical element of another functionality, the draft codes state that child users should be presented with a means of actively confirming before any interaction associated with that functionality begins. This may have had an impact on children's feedback in relation to gaming services, where direct messaging can be a time critical element of other functionalities when playing a game.

In depth discussion of message settings

Strengths and benefits of the proposal

When the message setting proposals were presented to children in the workshops, the initial reactions were generally positive, and they immediately understood the protective impact of preventing or limiting direct messaging from unknown contacts. The children noted that the benefits of the measure would be stronger for platforms with a networking function, where contact would not be possible at all, and tended to focus on this element in their positive comments (though as noted below some specific drawbacks were identified for these online services). The majority of participants agreed that this change would be effective in helping to keep children safe against grooming attempts.

Many children commented that the proposal would make them feel safer, as it would help to prevent approaches from those that they variously described as 'groomers', 'predators', 'creeps', and 'strangers' from being able to contact them. This was widely seen as positive across the different groups:

> *I think it's effective as you have less of an audience of men trying to message you. (Girl, aged 16, School 1)*

> *I think this would definitely be effective when it comes to helping children be safe as it prevents children from coming into contact with potential groomers. (Boy, aged 17, School 4)*

> *I think this is very effective because direct messages are normally where groomers start. (Girl, aged 14, School 3)*

In a similar vein to the discussion about the impact of user connection settings, many of the children talked about how changes to message settings could also improve wellbeing online by removing unpleasant and unwanted approaches from strangers. At various points they talked about this measure making them feel safer, more in control and more comfortable:

> *This can make the children feel more comfortable online because they don't have to be worried about receiving harmful messages and unkind messages. (Girl, aged 14, School 1)*

> *There would be a safer happier environment – there would not be the chance of total strangers contacting you. (Girls, aged 14, School 3)*

> *I will feel more secure online and have a sense of privacy as well as safety. (Boy, aged 14, School 3).*

> *I would like this as I personally don't want random people to message me. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

Participants welcomed being protected from certain types of sexually explicit content and communication that had become familiar to them online:

> *This is effective because it can block any kind of inappropriate messages. (Girl, aged 15, School 1)*

> *This will stop us from getting inappropriate messages and photos. (Girl, aged 16, School 1)*

We found that it was mainly girls that described experiences of receiving harmful sexual contact, while boys acknowledged the widespread nature of this contact for many of the girls they knew:

> *Yes, most of the time, young girls get added by random dudes who start trying to talk to them and then something bad happens, it goes wrong. (Boy, aged 13, School 2)*

> *It would make girls safer…weird people don't really come for us (Boy, aged 14, School 2)*

At the same time, boys also felt there would be benefits to this protective measure in preventing them seeing harmful content. Some of the boys elaborated on types of harmful content and contact that this measure would protect them from, including scams, and spam:

> *Would feel safer that random people can't spam message. (Boy aged 15, School 3)*

> *It would just help. It would shield us if something were harmful you wouldn't just see it. (Boy, aged 14, School 3).*

> *It reduces kids being lured in by fake accounts. Obviously, it's a good idea, it protects you from anyone trying to be bad to you. But it also limits you and prevents you from getting involved with any bad groups. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)*

Children also identified the benefits of the measure in combination with the proposed changes to user connection settings. Specifically, that if friendship connections were more carefully curated, this would mean that messaging would be from a more limited number of known connections, further reducing the likelihood of children interacting with unknown adults:

> *It would be effective if paired with [the changes to user connection settings]. It would reduce the number of DMs received from groomers. [You would be] safer from being messaged by people you don't know. (Boy, aged 16, School 3)*

Many of the children also talked about how they saw the element of the proposal that prevented messaging altogether as important and beneficial for the protection of 'younger' children – by which they often meant children with less experience and exposure to social media and online environments:

> *This setting will protect younger people from inappropriate images/videos [its important] for way younger kids. (Boy, aged 16, School 1)*

> *I think it is effective and valuable to keep younger people safe (Boy, aged 15, School 1)*

It was noticeable that in this discussion some of the younger members of our groups (those aged 13–15) saw themselves as 'older' in relation to participation on social media, as they had been active on social media for a significant period. Children often considered themselves to be experienced enough to make informed decisions about opening messages from strangers while continuing to advocate for the measure for the 'younger' users. This was reflected in the following conversation between two 14-year-olds:

> *It could be someone trying to pretend to be someone and then you think they're being nice, but they have [different intentions]… (Girl, aged 14, School 1)*

> *Yes, and younger children don't really know [what could happen] and would start messaging them. Just younger kids, not older. It's safer for younger children but for older children it could be restricting. (Girl, aged 14, School 1)*

Children of all ages tended to agree that individuals newer to social media tended to be less aware of the risks and felt the measure would be beneficial for this most vulnerable group.

> *Some kids, they don't necessarily know it's happening. They just see someone who they think shares the same interests and then they share too much information and get drawn into doing things they don't want to do and struggle. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)*

> *For new users, I believe it will be safer. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

Drawbacks and limitations

Impact on socialising and connecting

Although most of the participants agreed that the element of the proposal that prevented direct messaging would be effective in helping to keep them safe from grooming attempts, many of them also thought it would have negative impacts on their online experiences by limiting their social connections. To some degree the children recognised that this was an inevitable trade off:

> *It will protect you from strangers …. It will impact your social life though. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)*

Some children viewed the proposed message settings as restrictive, impacting their social freedom and ability to expand their networks. Similarly to the conversations about user connection settings, some of the older girls (aged 16–17) discussed their own experiences with making friends online and expressed the view that they would not have been able to do so had the proposal been in place at the time:

> *It would change it because my best friend and my boyfriend, I met them online. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

Some felt the default setting, if left alone, could frustrate children's desire for independence as they grow older:

> It could be quite effective, but you might just get annoyed with it and it might limit it. Once you get to 14 or 15 you want to be seen as independent and do little things that give you independence. (Boy, aged 17, School 4)

16-17 year olds also referenced their proximity to adults, and a few mentioned that the measure could potentially have a negative impact on forming new connections with adult friends and colleagues:

> Older children 16+ with jobs or older friends couldn't receive an initial message... The measure would stop dodgy people from texting you but there would be a lot of limitations with older friends, work, family. (Boy, aged 16, School 1).

Concerns about employment and earning money

Some of the girls expressed that the message setting proposals would negatively impact their ability to earn money. They referred to being able to sell items online, via apps and platforms such as Vinted, which relied on them being able to contact other users they are not formally connected to:

> If you're trying to sell items online, it [the proposed changes to message settings] makes it difficult. (Girl, aged 14, School 3).

Another girl explained that not receiving or seeing a message from someone could mean she would miss out on potential babysitting clients:

> A downside is not being able to see a brief context of a message – could be useful contact for babysitting. (Girl, aged 15, School 3).

Unease regarding potential negative impacts on working and employment was shared among several children we spoke to. One boy mentioned having mandatory work experience and felt the proposed changes to message settings could make it more difficult for him to be in contact with prospective sponsors:

> It [the proposed changes to message settings] would be a huge inconvenience. I have to apply for work experience and if they can't reply to me then it's useless doing it. (Boy, aged 15, School 3).

Concerns about online gaming

Boys in the workshops raised concerns about the impact of this proposal on their ability to socialise in online gaming environments, where communicating rapidly with many other players is a significant part of their experience.

It was noted that on services with user connection functionality, the proposed default settings would mean that any child hoping to communicate with another player on a server would now have to add them to their network in order to directly message them.

Ever so slightly worse for communication…. in a server you're most likely never going to have anybody added if you're playing by yourself. But you still may want to talk to somebody in the server…. (Boy, aged 16, School 4)

Concerns about lower effectiveness on platforms with no user connection functionality

Despite some of the criticism about the restrictive nature of preventing messaging on services with user connection functionality, many of the children also tended to be critical of the proposal for services without user connection functionality, as they felt this would be less protective, and as it stands would not be effective. Many of the children explained that they might be too curious not to open a message if they were made aware it existed:

The first part of the [proposal] would be stronger than the second part. Good, because they'd have to know the person, before they could access them. But ….if they were prompted, then you want to see a message, they may be intrigued and want to open it… Anyone can still send you a message request and you'd think "Oh what are they saying"? (Girl, aged 16, School 3)

I think the first one's [element of the proposal] better because you're going to want to reply if you know someone messaged you. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)

Many of the children felt that knowing there was a message, but not being able to see the content, would make them curious:

People are really curious either way, and they might accept it just to see. A lot of people would just say yes because they're really curious. (Boy, aged 14, School 2)

Well, I reckon I'd want to see what the message is – but after I saw it, I would regret it. (Boy, aged 13, School 3)

In a similar vein one participant explained why he felt it would be a more effective on services without user connections for protection to simply prevent direct messaging altogether:

It might make your curiosity a bit worse; because you don't know what they're saying and you don't know who it's from. If you're trying to stop people from messaging kids, then you should block it altogether. This just seems like it's dangling a message in front of them and allowing them to read if they want. (Boy, aged 17, School 3)

Suggestions for potential changes to the proposal and its implementation

Suggestions for platforms with user connections

Some of the children in the groups raised concerns about the part of the proposal that removes the ability to receive a message at all (from users you are not connected with) and felt this was too restrictive. Many children disliked the idea that messaging in this context would be entirely disabled, and this came across in a number of their alternative suggestions for this part of the proposal. Children tended to suggest that they should be given a range of information and choices to enable them to decide whether or not to receive a message.

> *Being able to choose whether to accept on any social media platform – including ones that [you have] friends [on]. (Girl, aged 15, School 3).*

> *I think the options should be: Filtered – only receive messages from friends or Semi-filtered – receive a warning saying 'a user messaged you' followed by accept or deny followed by part of the message which could be set automatically for under-18s. (Boy, aged 15, School 3).*

Some children suggested the alternative approach of filtering the content within all messages to ensure it is safe and appropriate – and blocking any content that is harmful:

> *[...] If it were intentionally harmful, it should be automatically blocked and not sent as a request. If it were a post – it would be automatically taken down. So, I think messages should be censored in some way or assessed like regular posts. (Boy, aged 15, School 1).*

Several boys felt AI could be incorporated into determining whether a message is harmful:

> *I think if an AI read the message first and noticed it [the message] could be harmful they could hide it but if it were fine, it would show the message. (Boy, aged 14, School 3).*

> *AI is pretty good though. You could develop some sort of AI that knows what grooming looks like. (Boy, aged 17, School 3).*

Children were generally in favour of being given a choice and information about their messages before reading them or deciding whether to receive them:

> *There should be different options. Say if someone sent explicit images, or say maybe language, you could block that out. You could make it so it splits into images, videos, URL links... and decide if you don't want certain types of things sent, like they could use explicit language, but I don't want any links sent to me. (Boy, aged 13, School 3).*

> *If it said their age/gender or some indication of who they are it may stop you clicking, for example, if it said 50+, male or around that. (Girl, aged 13, School 3).*

Suggestions for platforms with no user connections

Many of the children felt that for platforms with no user connections the proposal would benefit from further safeguards. Here some of the feedback dovetailed with the suggested modifications for platforms with connection lists – they suggested that notifications could contain information that could help them to decide whether or not to accept the message. This could include information as to the who the sender was, their age, or what the message contained as described in a subject line or heading:

> *Maybe be able to see a profile or usernames in case you know them offline. (Girl, aged 16, School 2)*

> *Age identification would be helpful to see where the message is coming from and who they're coming from. Give context to message. (Girl, aged 13, School 3)*

Some participants felt that being provided context before viewing the full message could help mitigate risks, by informing the child of the potential nature of the content without exposing them to it directly:

> *Being able to see some context and seeing what the message is about. (Girl, aged 15, School 3)*

> *Would it give us a summary, so we know what it's about? Could there be a reason available – like harassment or imagery – so you know what the content is without looking at it? (Boy, aged 14, School 3)*

Children also conveyed that it would be useful to be able to preview message contents (or indeed read the message) without the sender being made aware. They felt that this would enable them to safely review messages while maintaining privacy and control over the interaction:

> *Being able to see the content of the message request without the other person knowing that you've seen it. (Boy, aged 17, School 3)*

Participants wanted to clarify whether under the current proposals the sender would know whether or not they had opened the message. 16-17 year old girls explained their current practices on some online services when someone they did not know was trying to send them a message, and how they felt safer knowing that the sender did not know if they had read the message.[8]

> *Half-swipe it... it's when you can peak at it [the message], but the sender won't know you've looked at it. (Girl, aged 15, School 1)*

They pointed out that the possibility the sender could know whether their message was read, put pressure on children in an unhelpful way:

Would the person sending the message receive notification that someone has viewed their message? I feel this has a lot to do with children making the decisions and not the people pursuing them... It's a lot of pressure on the children... (Girl, aged 17, School 3)

Considering the pressure put on children, some children felt the proposal could instead notify the sender that the recipient will need to accept the message and that it will not necessarily be read by them:

A notification should be sent to the person sending the message to say the person they are trying to message needs to accept it. (Girl, aged 16, School 3).

Suggestions to make the proposal less restrictive for 'older' children

Some participants felt that some aspects of the measure might be too restrictive for 'older' children (defined as 15+ or 16+ by different participants). One suggestion was to differentiate the measure for differently aged children:

I think there should be a range of limits. Like with the one about accepting message requests, you'd have to be older to understand if it's a good message or not. So, I think that would be like 15 plus, [at that age] you have a good understanding, but not having non-connections be able to contact you at all should be for the younger ones. (Girl, aged 14, School 1)

Suggestions to incorporate parental controls for 'younger' children

Some children felt that whilst this proposal would benefit 'younger' children (the meaning of which varied depending on the age of the child using this term), they might turn off the defaults due to the social pressures of being online. Some therefore suggested that message settings could benefit from being integrated into parental controls.

I think with online safety it's really important for parents to be involved. (Boy, aged 14, School 2).

Many of the children who proposed incorporating parental controls into message settings imagined parents acting as mediators who could help decide whether a message is appropriate for their child to receive.

Well like what if you were a parent or something, if you have a parent account – could they see that? Could the parent interject and decide the child shouldn't see that. (Boy, aged 16, School 1).

Parental controls were felt to be a safeguard against turning off the setting. One young boy who spoke with us felt he might personally be inclined to turn off the message settings to view a message from someone but might then regret viewing the message. The boy reasoned his parent could prevent him from turning off the measure and seeing potentially harmful content.

I reckon it could be good but maybe a parent should control it. Like say, I might want it off, but for safety, my parents could be thinking "I don't want him receiving these messages" and put it on and not allow me to turn it off. [...] Well, I reckon I'd want to see what the message is – but after I saw it, I would regret it. (Boy, aged 13, School 3).

Agree and disagree ratings

Overall, a narrow majority of participants agreed with this proposal being introduced on the platforms they use, both before and after the measure had been fully discussed and explored. However, once the proposal was discussed and participants were asked to rate their level of agreement following the discussion, the majority in favour became very marginal and there was a negative shift in opinion, with the number of 'unsure' and 'disagree' statements increasing.

This reflected the detailed consideration given in the session of how the proposal might impact their ability to socialise and make connections. Some of their uncertainties were also reflected in the significant number of suggested improvements and modifications to the proposal that they put forward. Their feedback therefore balanced dissatisfaction with both elements of the proposal as they currently stand with an appreciation of the protective intent and impact.

How much do you agree or disagree with this measure being introduced on the platforms you use?

Rating	Immediate responses		Responses after discussion	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	16	21%	10	13%
Agree	33	43%	29	38%
Unsure	22	28%	25	33%
Disagree	4	5%	11	14%
Strongly disagree	2	3%	2	3%

3.3 Location sharing settings

What were the proposed location sharing settings?

The third proposal discussed was described as follows:

> Some platforms automatically display information about where a user is located, in shared content, profiles or through live location functionalities. The proposed change is that children's accounts should not automatically show a child user's location. This means that the initial settings on child accounts will stop children's location from being automatically displayed, unless the child turns off this setting.

Overall perspectives on message settings

The majority of children of all ages felt that this proposal would be effective in helping to make children safer.

One of the reasons children tended to support this proposal appeared to be because the changes reflect existing practice on platforms they use. For example, participants referenced Snapchat as a platform with similar settings.[9] This meant that children had an almost immediate sense of how this proposal would work and what it might mean, and this comfort and familiarity seems to have generated positive sentiment.

At the same time, the children did stipulate some clear preferences for how they would want the measure to be implemented in practice – in particular they wanted the user to be able to enable different location sharing settings for different contacts.

In depth discussion of location sharing settings

Strengths and benefits of the proposal

Almost all of those we spoke to felt that this proposal would be effective in making children's geographical location less visible to potential groomers. Many of the children we engaged with made comments to the effect that this measure would make children safer and more fully protected:

> *It will prevent children's location from being leaked or shared without their knowledge (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

They expressed that it would prevent children from being targeted or tracked according to their area, which would make it harder for them to be manipulated or blackmailed:

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[9] References to the use of Snapchat were led by participants in the workshops. Except where specified in the report (e.g. the warm-up exercise described in the appendix). Praesidio did not suggest specific services to children in the discussions. We have made direct reference to Snapchat in this part of the report as it was talked about frequently in the context of this proposal by child participants. It is worth noting however that much of the discussion could be applied to other services that have location sharing functionalities.

It would be effective since groomers would not see if you're near them or where you are, or threaten them with it. (Girl, aged 13, School 3)

Many of the children reflected that they were already thoughtful and selective about the current use of location sharing, and this was especially the case with 16–17 year olds. They described using strategies such as 'Snap Maps' but keeping their settings on 'Ghost mode',[10] so they themselves are unseen, or sometimes simply sharing location for limited periods of time to facilitate a particular meet up with other children:

Snap maps – I do have a ghost mode to say I'm at a certain place. I'll turn on my place for 30 minutes or an hour if I'm somewhere and want a friend to come out. Then I'll turn it back off. (Boy, aged 14, School 3)

However, it was understood that not 'all children' necessarily use location sharing settings in this way. One of the ways that children felt that it would make them safer was through encouraging children to actively think and pay attention to their location settings (and increase the likelihood they remained off). They felt that currently many were not aware of their location data settings:

This will greatly help protect children who don't necessarily know how the location feature works (Girl, aged 17, School 2)

Very effective – especially for people oblivious to location services being a feature in the first place (Boy, aged 17, School 3)

Many of the children also alluded to the fact that currently they felt that many children were not aware that their location was being shared, as they had often enabled location sharing without thinking about it during the set up of their accounts:

This would work. I think that some younger children may just press yes to get something set up so having something like this is good. (Boy, aged 15, School 3)

The children valued that this would force children to think about their location status rather than unthinkingly sharing it with all.

No downsides. If your location is off and you don't realise – it doesn't really matter. If it were on and you didn't realise – that would be more detrimental. (Boy, aged 17, School 3)

As with the proposals discussed above, children were also supportive of the measure in the context that they were able to change the default settings.

It will make a positive impact ...because what's the problem with no one seeing your location? There are no downsides unless you can't have it on for certain people without having it on for everyone. (Girl, aged 14, School 3)

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10 Ghost mode is a privacy setting on Snapchat which allows users to hide their location on Snap Maps from other users.

Drawbacks and limitations

Concerns about not sharing location with family and friends as a safety feature

Children commonly expressed that they wanted to be able to share their location data with family and friends, but have it turned off for strangers. They felt it was important that they could turn off the blanket default settings and share location with families and friends but keep it restricted for people they did not know.

Some of the children raised issues with the fact that this setting (if it remained off for all) could cause frustration and difficulties for parents who liked to use location data to track their children and know their whereabouts. Many of the children aged 13-15 explained that their parents expected them to share their live location with them and that 'almost everyone' shares location with family members:

> *I share it with my parents on Life360. You can make it so you can see certain pins – and it will tell you where someone has gone to, so you could know if someone arrived at home or at school. (Boy, aged 13, School 3)*

The children felt it was important for parents to still be able to track their children's live location in order to keep them safe:

> *I don't think this will impact much on the children, but for the adults – they will be impacted and worry because they won't be able to really see where their child is or who their child might meet... I can see why they're implementing it because it's better for strangers not to know – but for parents, it's good to know here your children are so they can make sure they get to places safely. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)*

> *I feel like it's good because when you first mentioned it, I put I strongly agree because why would you turn your location on if it's already off, but if it's off for family as well, and friends, then it's a bit like dangerous. (Girl, aged 14, School 3)*

Some of the children expressed real anxiety about safety issues if their parents were unable to track them:

> *No one would know where you are if something bad happens or you get lost – very unsafe...Your parents wouldn't be able to track your location then and if something bad happened they wouldn't be able to...it'd be hard to find where you are. (Girl, aged 15, School 3)*

For many of the children these issues could be resolved by being purposeful and having location enabled for apps such as Life360 (for their families and friends) but having it remain off for services such as Snapchat:

> *I keep my services on for Life360 but turn it off on Snapchat. (Boy, aged 16, School 1)*

However, while for some this could be resolved by using different apps and services for each, others wanted flexibility within apps and services for different settings to apply to different contacts. For some of the children there was a genuine concern that the measure could make them less safe if their parents could not track them (although a very small number mentioned liking this). Some also wanted their friends to know where they are. So, for some of the children this proposal was seen as less beneficial if the default had to remain either on or off for all of their contacts, including their families or friends. Children suggested it would be helpful if the setting could be applied in a granular way with children able to choose to have location on for specific people without having to have it on for all.

Comments about limited impact of the proposal

A small number of children felt that the impact of the proposal would be limited on its own, as it would not change existing practice for most apps, which they related already have location off by default:

> *I feel like most platforms don't show people's locations; it's the odd few that do. On most platforms, location sharing is an option as it currently is... (Girl, aged 16, School 4)*

There were also some participants that felt that the proposal would only have limited impact because perpetrators did not need location information to groom and manipulate children online:

> *I don't know... because if they can't see where you are. They can still talk to you it doesn't really stop the whole thing. There are other ways for them to get to you and message you. (Boy, aged 17, School 4)*

> *I mean it will [make children safer], but it's not a massive difference like [the proposed changes to user connection settings]. This is just a side thing... (Boy, aged 17, School 3)*

> *I don't I feel like a physical location is something perpetrators would really use. It wouldn't be their first choice. (Girl, aged 16, School 4)*

Suggestions for potential changes to the proposal and its implementation

Clarity of settings and reminders

Some of the children had ideas and suggestions around how to make this measure more effective. These mostly related to increasing the clarity on the settings and allowing and encouraging children to make conscious choices around their location settings. Some of the 16–17 year old girls made suggestions for making location choices more obvious and visible to users:

> *Users should very clearly know when [location] is on or off. The map should change colour to show if location is on/off (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

> *A prompt would be good so you can turn it off if you want to. You may be reminded it's on. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

For many, the risks around location sharing were the greatest during the set-up, and their recommendations included prompts at the set-up stage to encourage users to properly focus on the issue of sharing location data:

> *Even when making an account, don't make the button pop-up to ask about location until they look on the maps. (Girl, aged 14, School 3)*

Some children suggested that location should not simply be one pop up question, but that you should have to actively choose whether to share location for individual connections:

> *When you first get the app, have a suggestion to select a few people to be able to see your location. (Boy, aged 14, School 3)*

The children had a detailed discussion around reducing the risks to children from location sharing, suggesting that, it would be helpful for apps to separate out different features rather than bundling them together in ways that incentivised the user to accept them all (e.g. in relation to having location data sharing turned on). For example, a group of 16-17-year old girls discussed the fact that on Snapchat location data was linked to 'last active' data and a number of them felt that de-linking these would be helpful.

> *The reason I look at people's location is because it's linked to when users are last active because they're not two separate functions. If you differentiated those settings, it could save a lot of people turning it on. (Girl, aged 17, School 3)*

> *[Since activity is related to location on Snapchat] there is social pressure around replying to messages because people can see when you're active, changing that would take off pressure. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

This discussion reflected a common theme in the workshops of children expressing that they wanted as much granular choice over different settings as possible.

Agree and disagree ratings

Overall, a clear majority of participants either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the measure both before and after the measure had been fully discussed and explored. A very small increase in disagree votes between rating incidents appears to have reflected concerns that implementation might not allow users to tailor settings for different contacts.

Praesidio safeguarding

How much do you agree or disagree with this measure being introduced on the platforms you use?

Rating	Immediate responses		Responses after discussion	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	31	40%	29	38%
Agree	29	38%	26	34%
Unsure	8	10%	10	13%
Disagree	6	8%	12	16%
Strongly disagree	3	4%	0	0%

3.4 Supportive information

What was the proposal for supportive information?

The forth proposal was described as follows:

> The proposal intends to provide child accounts with helpful information about safety at different points in their user journey when there is a higher risk of being contacted by perpetrators of online grooming. Children would receive messages at the following points:
>
> - When a child turns off any of the proposed default settings
> - When children start to respond to a received connection request
> - When they are receiving a direct message request from someone they aren't 'connected' with (either because the platform isn't one with 'connections' or 'friends', or because the child isn't connected to the user trying to send them a direct message)[11]
> - When children are reporting a user or taking action to reduce interaction with a user.
>
> The kinds of messages that might be used here would be different depending on the platform and the point in the user journey. Information could focus on how changing settings may impact their experience and interactions on the platform, for example:
>
> - When responding to a connection request, asking the child to think about whether or not they know the person requesting to connect or trying to contact them, and the risk of not knowing who they are or what they are trying to send them.
> - When receiving a direct message, explaining to the child a chance to confirm whether they would like to receive a message from someone for the first time. This may also include information about how to block or report the user if they feel uncomfortable.
> - Giving supportive information after blocking or reporting or any other restrictive actions against another user – so the child has more information on what to do if they were uncomfortable at any point during the conversation or any further actions, they can do to limit interaction.

Overall perspectives on message settings

The children we consulted with were overwhelmingly favourable towards the proposal for supportive information. They felt that providing information and education at the right points in a user journey would make children more aware of the risks they face online, and thereby improve their safety. They particularly appreciated the approach of giving child users information to make a choice, rather than imposing fixed restrictions. The children had ideas and suggestions to enhance the impact of the delivery of the information as well as to avoid fatigue from frequent notifications, which might lead to disengagement with supportive information.

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[11] It is worth noting that under Ofcom's draft measure, children would also receive such information when receiving a message from a user they are connected with on a service with user connections. This is described later in the text but it is possible children may have interpreted the measure as not applying to messages from users they are connected with.

In depth discussion of supportive information

Strengths and benefits of the proposal

There was a strong consensus in our groups that messaging children with more information at the points described in the proposal would be a positive change. Many of the children identified the benefits of having more thinking time to consider their actions at these decision-making moments:

> *It would give more thinking time... They would be able to control their social media more and manage the risks and it would give the user more control. (Girl, aged 14, School 3)*

> *I think it would make children more responsible when using social media. (Boy, aged 15, School 1)*

For most of the children, having more thinking time, and being encouraged to be more conscious and aware of their choices, would contribute to greater caution and safety:

> *It tells you why it's doing this – it makes you think about it more rather than just giving you the option. (Boy, aged 13, School 3)*

> *It will make us safer because it makes us more aware of our actions. (Boy, aged 14, School 3)*

> *This will help people to avoid seeing anything unpleasant or inappropriate. (Girl, aged 14, School 2)*

Supportive information when responding to connection requests and DMs

The children talked about the benefits of encouraging users to consider the connection requests they receive more carefully. They felt that messaging at this point would help users to pause and consider their choices:

> *I think it would make people think twice about accepting. Just a pop-up saying are you sure you want to accept? And then yes or no options will give you a second chance to think. (Girl, aged 14, School 3)*

> *Some children may follow it and think before they decide.... They may deeply consider something before doing it. (Girl, aged 13, School 1.)*

Some of the 16-17-year olds reflected on the ease and frictionless way in which users are encouraged to grow their network and the fact that platform design often encourages you to connect with others almost without thinking. For this reason, they were supportive of adding in more prompts that would increase conscious and purposeful decision making:

I think it's effective. I guess, obviously some people will click off, there's no harm in having it on there, but also if you're scrolling on social media, you may accidentally add someone, I find on TikTok it's easy to add people by accident. I'm literally just swiping and it's one small button, and if you accidentally hit it then you've just added a random person. So, I think if it came up with like, 'do you want to add them?' it'd be more beneficial to protect kids against those they don't know. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)

It gives them more knowledge of the subjects and what they're trying to do on social media. On social media, you do things without really thinking about it and about the consequences of what you're doing. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)

In line with their discussions in relation to the message setting and user connection proposals, the children we engaged with appreciated being given information and advice and being allowed to make a choice. Many of the children expressed that they wanted specific information about direct messages sent to them (as discussed above in relation to the message settings proposals). However, they also strongly agreed with the principle that they should be encouraged to think about the risks and make a decision that is well informed:

I think it's not restricting anything; you still get to do what you want, it's just making sure you know what you're doing. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)

Supportive information after taking action against a user

The children we consulted were strongly in favour of receiving additional information at the point where they had taken action against another user. It was noted that this was a moment when a child may have had a harmful experience, and therefore an appropriate time to signpost them to support.

If they were reporting it and were genuinely very affected by it, they would be looking for help they may read more. They may take more notice if they need to, so the option of having it there is good. (Girl, aged 16, School 3)

Supportive information when a child turns off a proposed default setting.

Children also expressed support for additional information explaining the consequences should users choose to turn off a proposed default setting. They felt that this would help children to reflect and consider their decision:

This would help children realise the consequences of what changing certain settings would make. (Boy, aged 14, School 3)

Yes [its good] I think it reminds children why these measures have been put in place….If you have the education provided, you can make educated decisions about each of the measures. (Girl, aged 17, School 3).

It gives kids a chance to make sure they want to do what they are doing and really check if it's what they want to do, and the impacts of turning it off. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)

Drawbacks and limitations

Concerns about children reading or noticing the information

In their discussion of the effectiveness of supportive information, many of the children expressed the concern that providing this information might not be effective if users do not read or engage with it. Some of them reflected that they themselves would often disregard pop ups or notifications or not have the patience to read them properly. One girl explained how she would disengage completely from notifications and information:

I'll read it like a sentence and as soon as I see like they're trying to tell me, 'don't add so-and-so...' I'm just going to put down my phone. If it's a timed thing, again, I'm going to put my phone down. On Google, they do this thing with terms and conditions, where you have to scroll down, and it doesn't let you press accept until you scroll. I scroll down but I don't read it. I'm scrolling down and I'm pressing 'accept.' (Girl, aged 16, School 2)

Some of the 16-17 year old participants, whilst being broadly positive about providing additional information to increase awareness, expressed uncertainty about how effective these messages would be. Some were simply not sure to what degree users would genuinely pay attention to the warnings:

I'm not sure how effective it would be as some would just not read it but there is no harm in having it on there as it might change someone's mind. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)

It will be fairly effective to a short extent – because it might stop users and make them think... But they also might just click through. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)

Some participants reflected that pop ups and notifications can create friction for the user that is frustrating and can lead to disengagement:

It might get annoying if there are too many, people may turn it off. (Girl, aged 14, School 2)

Sometimes it might irritate people. Cause if you keep messaging people and checking if they want to do something – it might just get on them. Like they're already sure of what they want to do and don't need any messages. (Boy, aged 13, School 2)

However, most children felt that while disengagement could be a problem, overall the information would still have benefit:

I don't think kids will be bothered much because they're going to see the benefits – some might be bothered and think "Ah, I don't need this, I'm old enough" but I think most will read it and agree. (Boy, aged 17, School 2)

Most children remained supportive as they felt it could be a critical moment in which users become more aware of the risks:

I don't think this would stop someone from turning it off – but I do think it could make them more cautious about what they're doing...I think it will make them all a bit more self-aware. (Boy, aged 16, School 4)

Suggestions for potential changes to the proposal and its implementation

Getting the messaging right

The children were thoughtful about how to implement this proposal in a way that would maximise its effectiveness. They had advice for how the information should be provided and tailored in order to make an impact:

I feel like if this person, like you got a message from this person, then be aware 'this and this' could happen. That's getting the information to them, and I feel like they'd just read it. I don't think there's a big point in linking anything or putting in loads of information – it just needs to be direct and to the point. Just make them aware that this and this could happen. You could just encourage them to look it up if they're intrigued. (Girl, aged 16, School 4)

It could give them a warning sign about 'this could happen' and maybe give you a chance to read about it or look more into it. Or if you don't care, you just click off it. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)

Children suggested avoiding advice or information that was too wordy or overlength:

Normally these things are very long and stuff, so you just don't read it. But kids might read it if someone tells them – the interruption might be all they need. It might make them go "huh, is this something I actually want to do?" (Boy, aged 17, School 2)

With terms and conditions, you have to scroll but not have to read it. Something that makes you read it. (Girl, age 14, School 2)

The children were thoughtful about how to format the information suggesting that short, visual, and interactive pop-ups would be most effective. They explained that messaging should be clear, focused, and accessible:

If this is presented in a simple way, like it's easy to understand and it gets the message across – like if it's not long and wordy – then kids will probably read it….It would be more effective if it had an infographic or something easier to read rather than a big wall of text… a graphic or a video so it's not a big, long paragraph of text. It would need to be easier and more accessible. (Boys, aged 17, School 1)

Could we have like a little graphic or a video – and a little summary text. And a link to learn more. Just some sort of graphic and link, as well as a summary of what could go wrong. Buttons like "click here to learn more" and you could choose to go deeper. (Boy, aged 14, School 3)

I feel like if [the messaging] was bright and in your face, and if you wanted to add someone you could get a pop-up saying, 'Are you sure you know them? Do you know them?' … if you want to unblock someone, it should be 'are you sure you want to unblock them?' and if you get a DM from a stranger and you click on it, there should be a pop-up that says 'do you know this person?' Just, if you see it a lot, you'll think about why you're doing it more. (Girl 17, School 2)

Children also emphasised that finding the right tone was important. The information provided needed to be clear and to the point without either exaggerating the risks, or being too reassuring:

They need to be careful about how they write it. Because if it were just gentle reminders, they could be easily dismissed. Likewise on the other extreme fearmongering could be damaging, so there needs to be a balance between making it too gentle and too scary. (Girl, aged 17, School 3)

Children conveyed that they wanted the messaging to be educational without using scare tactics. They explained that they thought directives or instructions would be unhelpful but that children would appreciate information and advice that was delivered in a supportive tone:

I think more of an explanation – instead of being told what not to do – if they explained the risks or told me what could happen. Instead of them just going "do not do this" – they could explain it to me and make me understand. I mean, … like we want to do what we want online, so I'd feel quite annoyed. [if told not to do something] But if instead, for this, you're being told "here's what could happen" then I'd feel more supported. (Boy, aged 14, School 3)

Playing a video not saying they shouldn't do it but saying what can happen and what to do if they come across something bad. (Girl, aged 16, School 2)

Avoiding overexposure and disengagement

The children in our groups were thoughtful about the risk of overexposure to the messaging via fatigue with notifications and nudges. One suggestion included making sure that messaging and information did not pop up so many times that children were desensitised to it, and it lost its impact.

> *You could make it more effective by not getting the same prompt over and over. (Girl, aged 14, School 2)*

> *If it's limited to only coming up a certain amount of times each week, it might be able to get kids to think about it more. (Girl, aged 17, School 4)*

The children suggested delivering the message a limited number of times, so that it remained impactful. Some felt there should be some limits on the number of prompts a person could receive.

> *I guess? I feel like it'd get too repetitive. [You'd] be getting that message over and over again. If every single time [you] got a friend request and got "oh you're seeing people – you're going to get groomed" then it might remove that feeling of control or make you feel unnecessarily managed. (Boy, aged 16, School 4)*

Some recommended mixing up the content of the messages to keep them fresh so that they were visual in a different way or used different words each time they were served to users. One suggestion was that notifications should be saved for when a message was received by an over 18s:

> *Maybe if someone is trying to DM.. and they're over the age of 18 – you should get a notification for that. But if it's for someone under 18, you wouldn't really need it. (Boy, aged 17, School 4)*

Children commonly suggested that when a message is served to a user there should be a timer to prevent clicking it away before a certain amount of time has elapsed. It was felt that this would enforce engagement and increase the likelihood uses would read it. Some agreed this should not be too long (around 5 seconds) as any longer would cause them to detach from the platform altogether and do something else:

> *Just add a timer so you have to read it. (Boy, aged 13, School 2)*

> *You could probably just scan it to be honest. Maybe you could make it so if you immediately click off after you saw it – the next time you see it there's a delay, and the third time you can't just click off, you have to confirm somehow. (Boy, aged 14, School 3)*

> *If there's a timer, so then if you can't click off of it then for a certain amount of time then you're forced to read it because you'll want to get back to your app. (Girl, aged 17, School 2)*

Signposting children to support.

Children felt it would helpful if the support available could be empathetic and include options for personal contact. They saw this as important at times when children may have taken action against another user because of an experience with harmful content. Having human contact at this time was seen as very beneficial.

I think it would help children because it if says "You ok?" it feels as if you got someone to talk to. (Boy, aged 14, School 1)

They should link to someone or a good resource at that point. Like say I was messaging someone who was being really inappropriate and saying "ah, I'm gonna do this to you" or "I'm gonna hurt you", I'd want a link to someone to talk to. (Boy, aged 13, School 3)

Agree and disagree ratings

Overall, the participants were in agreement with this proposal being introduced on the platforms they use. The majority of participants 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the change, both before and after the proposal had been fully discussed and explored. The majority of fluctuation between voting incidents occurred between the two most positive categories.

How much do you agree or disagree with this measure being introduced on the platforms you use?

Rating	Immediate responses		Responses after discussion	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	33	43%	23	30%
Agree	36	47%	44	57%
Unsure	8	10%	8	10%
Disagree	0	0%	2	3%
Strongly disagree	0	0%	0	0%

4. Conclusions and discussion

Our engagement found that children were mainly supportive of the proposed measures against the risk of online grooming. Their support reflected concerns about their current online experiences, in particular their level of exposure to strangers online which they found uncomfortable and sometimes disturbing. They commonly reflected on the experiences of unwanted online contact in the workshops that we ran – and they agreed that the issue was important and needed addressing. The measures were therefore seen as legitimate and welcome in addressing this problem.

As discussed above, the extent to which different children supported the different individual proposals did vary, often according to how they personally prioritised the trade-offs and what they expressed was important to them online. As captured above in the analysis, the proposals relating to supportive information and location sharing both commanded clear majority support across the cohort with particularly strong agreement around the value of supportive information.

The proposals relating to user connection settings and direct messaging were still supported for their protective impact but generated more concern and push back among some of the children. Some of the children expressed that the proposals would create frustrations and constrain how they use online spaces to socialise and connect with others. While many children were willing to accept more restricted communication in return for greater safety and security – others articulated that they wanted instead to be offered alternative solutions to unwanted or harmful stranger contact. For example, some suggested that they wanted to be served information about the strangers or people they did not know trying to connect with them (or about the content of their messages) in order to make an informed choice.

One of the reasons the measures carried overall support with our groups appeared to be the fact that they offer children continued choice and control, as most of the proposals relate to default settings which can be disabled. Children therefore perceived them as less fundamentally dictating restrictions, than seeking to prompt and shape user choices with relevant information and education. Children often acknowledged a risk that some children will simply turn off such settings, rendering them less effective.

It is not possible to use this engagement to fully predict or track how the measures will impact children's use and safety over the longer term. Children who we consulted were hearing about the proposals for the first time, and the environment in which the discussion took place might have led children to take the topic of grooming more seriously than they might have done in other contexts. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that only a very small number of children suggested they would turn settings off; some children also suggested that they might turn one or two of them off and keep others. Importantly, children also expressed that the stage of account set up was an important opportunity to provide effective information about settings and their purpose – and felt this was a good opportunity to persuade children to keep safety defaults enabled.

A consistent feature of our discussions was how many additional ideas and requests that children had for service design – both within the scope of the implementation of the measures and beyond it. It was interesting to hear children reflect thoughtfully on their current experiences of online 'choice architecture' and the ways the settings tend to incentivise users to connect and share without highlighting the impact of different choices or giving users a chance to pause. As we explore above, in considering the measures children noted how it would be useful for platforms to offer more granular choices and to disentangle different features from each other, to make the impact of different settings and choices clear and offer as much choice as possible over individual features or accounts.

They appreciated the increased education and information that would be offered through these measures and generally wanted the opportunity to personalise their accounts through making their own specific and informed choices about their usage.

The children we spoke to were thoughtful about the efficacy of the measures and overall felt they would make a positive difference. It was common for children to point out that the efficacy of the measures would depend on a meaningful age assurance process which, they often pointed out, was not currently in place on most platforms they use. Related to this, they did sometimes express preferences for children of different ages to be treated differently – reflecting the significant developmental differences between children of different ages – suggesting the potential that these measures could be served in a more graduated way for different age groups, if tied to effective age assurance. They also emphasised the relevance of parental involvement in account settings for younger children joining social media for the first time.

Finally, an important theme in our engagement was the enthusiasm with which children engaged with and interrogated these proposals. We found that many of the children felt empowered to be giving their opinion for a consultation which will meaningfully impact platform design and child user experience. They appreciated the opportunity to influence this and described a number of ways in which they felt it was important to do so. Children understood that they experienced the online world differently to adults, which made it important to them to give their views and be represented:

> *Yes [it's important for young people to be a part of this process] – it allows them to share their concerns that older people may not realise or underestimate. (Girl, 16, School 3).*

Praesidio safeguarding

Appendix

Appendix A: further detail on workshop methodology and sample

Outline of the sessions

The workshops were structured as follows:

- At the beginning of each workshop, children took part in a warm-up activity where they were shown posters with the names of around 20 online services, and were asked to place sticky dots on the ones they used, and add the names of any other services they used.

- Participants were introduced to the Online Safety Act 2023, background context and definitions for online grooming, and a summary of the measures to address online grooming.

- Ofcom's draft codes of practice themselves were re-organised and presented as four separate proposals. Each of these were then discussed and evaluated in turn, allowing opportunities for participants to fully explore and develop understanding of each proposal through a range of activities (referred to within the toolkit). Across the workshops, proposals were presented in different orders to ensure feedback was obtained in a balanced way overall; in some cases this meant some proposals were discussed in more depth than others.

- In order to capture children's individual feedback and response as well as the broader sentiment of the group, we combined individual written feedback with group discussions (including small groups of 2 or 3 or whole groups of up to 10). As each proposal was introduced and explained, the children completed a series of written tasks and rating exercises to provide their individual responses and thoughts, before moving into the group discussions.

- Discussion was facilitated to explore the different elements of the safety measures and to establish how effective the children thought these were, what impact they thought these would have, and how supportive they felt towards them.

- We also explored with children how they thought online experiences may change if these proposals are introduced

This approach allowed us to fully interrogate the measures with the children in our groups. Rather than simply asking if they agreed or disagreed, we set out to fully explore their opinions and the thinking behind them. We also sought to explore the proposals with them from a range of different perspectives so they could think about their own situation but also about other children – and we included a discussion of case studies of different online child users in order to stimulate discussion. We also asked them to think about how they thought the measures might work in practice, how they thought children of different ages might respond to the measures and we invited them to think about strengths as well as any drawbacks or limitations.

Considerations for the design of the workshops

One of the risks of group discussions is that group dynamics can be unpredictable, with 'louder' voices sometimes dominating the discussion without necessarily reflecting the views of all participants. We sought to mitigate this risk both by how we set up and framed the sessions but also by ensuring that participants completed individual written exercises, and worked in small groups, before considering the issues as a whole group. This enabled us to gather data in a way that allowed different individual perspectives to come though as well as also benefitting from rich and thoughtful discussion where the children were able to share and evolve their thoughts collectively in a supportive group environment.

In addition to the qualitative data, we were also able to capture a small amount of quantitative data where children expressed their level of agreement with the proposals on a Likert scale. Our toolkit was designed so that we would be able to measure children's levels of agreement with each proposal at two stages: when it was first introduced to participants, before any further exploration or discussion, and, secondly after each proposal had been fully explored and discussed in their groups. This captured children's initial reactions to the proposals, but also tracked whether their levels of agreement changed after they had time to develop their understanding of the proposal through the discussion and activities. The participants 'agree' ratings for each proposal are shared in each section and offer a useful snapshot of children's view towards different elements of Ofcom's proposals – though it is worth noting the small sample size, and therefore the limitations in interpreting this as robust quantitative data.

Our approach recorded how children felt about the proposal separately from how much they agreed or disagreed with it. The intention behind asking children their feelings was to ask them to select an emoji that would set up the subsequent conversation about how and why they felt the way they did. To capture this, participants were asked to select an 'emoji' which best depicted their feelings about the measure (see Figure 1) which was linked to the terms listed on the right.[12]

12 They were also given the option to draw their own icon if required. It is worth noting that no participant used this option, instead selecting from the list provided.

Question	Emoji	Linked terms
Which emoji best describes how you feel about this measure? Please feel free to select one of these or draw your own in the box here:	😄	Really like
	🙂	Like
	😐	Unsure
	🙁	Dislike
	😠	Really dislike

Figure 1

To measure the extent to which participants agreed with the proposal, participants were asked to select a statement which indicated their level of agreement (see Figure 2).

How much do you agree or disagree with this measure being introduced on the platforms you use?	Strongly agree
	Agree
	Not sure
	Disagree
	Strongly disagree

Figure 2

Sample table

Full details of the make-up of the sample of children who took part in the project, in terms of age and gender identity, is detailed below (Figure 3). Four workshops were run in each school, and each one took place with children of the same age and gender identity – with the exception of School 4, where there was one workshop held with 2 girls and 2 boys, all aged 16–17. One non-binary participant joined a group otherwise consisting of girls. A total of 77 children took part.

School setting	Age 13-15		Age 16-17		Total
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
School 1 – Wales	7	5	5	7	24
School 2 – England	3	8	6	2	20
School 3 – England	10	7	4	8	29
School 4 – Wales	0	0	2	2	4

Figure 3

Appendix B: child-friendly materials

Comparison of child friendly proposals with Ofcom's draft codes of practice

Praesidio and Ofcom worked together to adapt Ofcom's draft codes of practice addressing the risk of online grooming into a more child-friendly format. Below we have compared Ofcom's draft measures with the child-friendly versions created for this project.[13]

The text below includes a description of Ofcom's reasoning behind the proposed change. These descriptions were shown later in the discussion about each proposal, to avoid being too leading, and to allow participants to digest different pieces of information on their own.

The text below was shown in a different format during the workshop, in a series of visually engaging slides and handouts. While sticking to the specific text agreed with Ofcom, Praesidio facilitators also used some flexibility when presenting the materials. As and when they needed to, they asked participants how clear the text was, answered questions, and provided clarifications, to ensure participants understood the proposals as clearly as possible.

Proposal 1: User connection settings

Text from Ofcom's draft codes of practice

If the service has network expansion prompts or connection lists, the provider should implement default settings ensuring that:
- child users are not included in network expansion prompts presented to other users;
- child users are not presented with network expansion prompts;
- child users are not included in the connection lists of other users;
- connection lists of child users are not displayed to other users

Child-friendly description for workshop

What is the proposed change to better protect children from online grooming?

The below settings would be automatically applied to child user accounts (i.e. any account that has not been confirmed to belong to an adult) on platforms that have network connection functionalities (e.g. a 'friends' list). Users can turn off these settings at any point.
- Children are not presented with suggestions of other users to add to their network
- Children do not appear as suggested users for other people to add to their network
- Children cannot be seen in other users' connection lists
- Children's connection lists cannot be seen by other users

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13 Text from Ofcom's draft codes is taken from section A7 of Ofcom's illegal harms consultation, on page 31. As noted earlier in the report, not all aspects of the measures were described in the child friendly materials for the purposes of simplicity and due to the limited time available to discuss them. Whenever we feel this may have had an impact on children's feedback about the measures we have noted this in the report.

Proposal 2: Direct message settings

Text from Ofcom's draft codes of practice

If the service has direct messaging, the provider should implement default settings ensuring that:

- If the service has user connections, child users cannot receive direct messages from a non-connected user
- If the service does not have user connections, child users are provided with a means of actively confirming whether to receive a direct message from a user before it is visible to them, unless direct messaging is a necessary and time critical element of another functionality, in which case child users should be presented with a means of actively confirming before any interaction associated with that functionality begins.

Child-friendly description for workshop

What is the proposed change to better protect children from online grooming?

The below settings would be automatically applied to child accounts (i.e. any account that has not been confirmed to belong to an adult) on platforms where children can send and receive direct messages. Users can turn off these settings at any point.

- Children should not receive direct messages from accounts they are not connected with.
- If the service isn't one where users can 'connect' with each other (e.g. as 'friends'), the platform should provide children with a way of actively confirming whether or not they want to receive a direct message, before they actually see the contents of the message.

Additional text shown in workshop

What are Ofcom proposing this measure? (shown towards end of discussion)

The intention of this measure is to reduce the number of unsolicited messages that children receive. Ofcom know, from research, that perpetrators are contacting children through direct messages in the hope that they respond. With this setting Ofcom hopes that it reduces the amount of unsolicited messages children receive from people that they don' t know.

Proposal 3: Location sharing settings

Text from Ofcom's draft codes of practice

If the service has automated location information displays, the provider should implement default settings ensuring that automated location information displays are switched off for child users.

Child-friendly description for workshop

What is the proposed change to better protect children from online grooming?

Some platforms automatically display information about where a user is located, in shared content, profiles or through live location functionalities.

The proposed change is that children's accounts should not automatically show a child user's location. This means that the initial settings on child accounts will stop children's location from being automatically displayed, unless the child turns off this setting.

What are Ofcom proposing this measure? (shown towards end of discussion)

From research, we know that perpetrators are often using location information to identify where child users live. It can be as part of a blackmail or manipulation tactics used by perpetrators.

Proposal 4: Supportive information

Text from Ofcom's draft codes of practice

Before a child user disables a default setting set out in Recommendation 7A, the provider should provide information to child users regarding the potential risk involved. The information should assist child users in understanding the implications of disabling that default setting, including the protections it affords.

The provider should provide the following information when a child user seeks to respond to a request sent by another user via a user connection, before the connection is finalised:

- the types of interactions that would be enabled through establishing a connection; and
- the options available to take action against a user, such as blocking, muting, reporting or equivalent action.

The provider should provide the following information when a child user exchanges a direct message with a user for the first time:

- a reminder that this is the first direct communication with that user; and
- the options available to take action against a user, such as blocking, muting, reporting or equivalent action,

Unless direct messaging is a necessary and time critical element of another functionality, in which case the child user may be provided this information before any interaction associated with that functionality begins.

The provider should provide the following information when a child user seeks to block, mute, report, or take equivalent action against a user:

- the effect of the action, including the types of interactions that it would restrict and whether the user would be notified; and
- the further options available to limit interaction with the user or increase their safety.

The provider should ensure that the information provided in line with paragraphs A7.6 to A7.9 is:

- prominently displayed to child users; and
- clear, comprehensible and easy for a child user to understand.

Child-friendly description for workshop

What is the proposed change to better protect children from online grooming?

The proposal intends to provide child accounts with helpful information about safety at different points in their user journey when there is a higher risk of being contacted by perpetrators of online grooming. Children would receive messages at the following points:

- When a child turns off any of the proposed default settings
- When children start to respond to a received connection request
- When they are receiving a direct message request from someone they aren't 'connected' with (either because the platform isn't one with 'connections' or 'friends', or because the child isn't connected to the user trying to send them a direct message)
- When children are reporting a user or taking action to reduce interaction with a user

The kinds of messages that might be used here would be different depending on the platform and the point in the user journey. Information could focus on how changing settings may impact their experience and interactions on the platform, for example:

- When responding to a connection request, asking the child to think about whether or not they know the person requesting to connect or trying to contact them, and the risk of not knowing who they are or what they are trying to send them
- When receiving a direct message, explaining to the child a chance to confirm whether they would like to receive a message from someone for the first time. This may also include information about how to block or report the user if they feel uncomfortable.
- Giving supportive information after blocking or reporting or any other restrictive actions against another user – so the child has more information on what to do if they were uncomfortable at any point during the conversation or any further actions they can do to limit interaction.

What are Ofcom proposing this measure? (shown towards end of discussion)

It is important that children are aware of their choices on platforms and make informed decisions when making those choices. Ofcom think children should receive support at points in their user journey where groomers may try to make contact or where children may be in a more vulnerable position. Ofcom have designed these measures with the intention that they lead to children feeling safer online and provide information on the risks around certain user choices. For example disabling default settings and interacting with other users online.

This measure is slightly different from the previous ones. This relates to points in the user journey where information could be presented to child users to develop their understanding of risks. This may be similar to other ways in which platforms try to educate users, or use prompts or 'nudges' to point users towards support, or alert them to potential risks.

Summary of additional information shared with children

Other materials were also shared with children during the workshops:

- **Introduction to the Online Safety Act**, to provide children with the context for the workshop including examples of other measures being proposed in the consultation, as well as what Ofcom's responsibilities are for online safety (e.g. monitoring compliance of regulated services and taking enforcement action)

- **Definition and explanation of online grooming.** Text was agreed that defined what grooming is, shared examples of the kinds of child sexual exploitation it can involve, and how perpetrators communicate with victims. As with all materials shared with children, we ensured the information was shared sensitively, accurately and in a trauma-informed way.

- **A shorter summary of the measures as a whole** to help introduce this to children and prompt overarching discussion about the proposals.

- **Further explanations about how the measures might work.** Text was agreed that could be shared with children if to aid discussion it would be useful to talk about which services the measures would apply to, and what work Ofcom is doing in relation to age assurance.

- **Case studies.** Facilitators agreed with Ofcom that where there was time, to aid the discussion, they could show participants personas of different online child users. This was to help participants think about some of the potential impacts of the measures on children from different walks of life, with different relationships to going online.