Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety

House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology

Submission to the Enquiry into Personal Internet Security

1. The Children's Charities Coalition on Internet Safety (CHIS) brings together the UK's leading independent child welfare and child protection organizations to focus on making the internet a safer place for children and young people.

2. Below is our response to the questions on internet security which the Select Committee has posed in its Call for Evidence.

Defining the problem

3. The internet has brought immense benefits to society in general and to children and young people in particular. That said, there are clearly also serious downsides to the internet as far as children and young people are concerned.

4. The internet is increasingly recognised as being a public space but, at present, there is a widespread feeling that there are still too few protections for children and young people within it. Indeed for some children the internet has become an additional medium through which they can be bullied, harassed, threatened and made to feel unsafe.

5. Wonderful though its many other attributes are, a major unintended and unforeseen consequence of the growth of the internet as a mass consumer product has been the emergence of categories of risk which hitherto were either completely unknown or were much more limited in their scope. In relation to children and young people, many of these risks are poorly understood by parents, teachers and others with a responsibility for supporting children through the different stages of their development into adulthood. Even when the risks are understood at a general level, there is often a very limited appreciation of what practical steps could be taken to reduce or minimise them.

6. In a survey conducted for NCH earlier this year, ICM interviewed a thousand children aged 11-16 and roughly the same number of their

parents[1]. One third of children surveyed said they regularly used blogs, yet only 1% of their parents knew that they did. In fact two-thirds of parents did not know what a blog was. Similarly 79% of children said they used Instant Messaging regularly, yet only one third of parents understood what Instant Messaging was.

7. Without doubt this lack of awareness of some fairly basic aspects of children's and young people's use of the technology on the part of parents is rooted in the fact that many of them left school before the internet became what it is today. Parents have not had the same opportunity to gain a similar level of familiarity with the technology as their children. This more limited knowledge means parents may struggle to help their children understand or deal with the risks that the new technologies present.

8. There are two principal security threats to children and young people posed by the internet. Firstly it can facilitate their exposure either to egregiously age inappropriate content which they may find disturbing or distressing. Secondly it can also expose them to predatory individuals who mean to harm or exploit them.

9. The Select Committee might also want to note that some Banks issue, for example, Solo card to children as young as 11. These can be used to make online payments. As the Trading Standards Institute has noted, since a reliable visual check of a person's age is, for practical purposes, impossible on the internet, this has meant that children and young people have been able to obtain access to age restricted goods or services in circumstances which would not have obtained in the real world e.g. they have been able to gamble, buy knives, alcohol or tobacco, or adult videos. In addition, children and young people have also been the victims of frauds which would not so easily have succeeded had the targets been worldly wise adults.

10. Addressing the security threats to children and young people outlined above is not only vital in its own right, from a child protection standpoint, but it is also important because of the impact any well-publicised failures have on the general level of public trust and confidence in the internet. A medium that is so frequently associated with stories about child pornography, paedophiles and scams of various kinds is one that many will choose to avoid.

11. A startling illustration of this enduring lack of public confidence in the internet was supplied in a MORI poll carried out for "The Sun" in January 2006[2]. Entitled "Britain Today" it showed that, given a very wide range of choices, two out of the top five "worries" of adult Britons concerned children and the internet. Whatever view one might take

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[1] See http://www.nch.org.uk/information/index.php?i=77&r=469, supported by Tesco Mobile
[2] See http://www.mori.com/polls/2006/s060117.shtml

about the empirical basis for such a level of concern[3] there is no denying, firstly, that it is grounded in real events that have happened to real children and, secondly, that it persists.

Tackling the problem

12. In the UK we are fortunate to have the recently established (April, 2006) Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre (CEOP). CEOP has recently launched a hugely ambitious programme to reach, through the schools system, one million children to present them with safety messages about online risks. In this endeavour, CEOP is working very closely with and in many ways is building on the excellent work being done by the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta), a standalone organization which is a major source of advice and guidance both to the DfES and individual schools.

13. Running alongside CEOP's and Becta's work are the activities of the great majority of consumer-facing Internet Service Providers, Mobile Phone Companies and portals which similarly put a great deal of effort into publicising key safety messages aimed at children and young people. Through their web sites and other outreach efforts, many of the children's charities themselves also make their own modest contribution to this larger effort. In our view all of the players in this space have been greatly encouraged by the strong leadership shown by and through the Home Secretary's Internet Task Force on Child Protection, first established in 2001.

14. So far much of the effort referred to above is directed at increasing children's and young people's awareness of the risks and how to deal with them. There has also been work directed at building awareness and capacity among parents, teachers and others with responsibilities for children and young people, but we need to do a great deal more to reach out to these latter groups. As explained above, parents in particular need to be much better equipped if they are to be able to provide appropriate and timely support to their children.

15. While all members of CHIS are committed to the idea and importance of awareness raising and education initiatives, we also believe there will inevitably be limits to what they can achieve. We know there are some hard to reach children and families for whom, whether temporarily or for the longer term, education and awareness initiatives will either be entirely irrelevant, entirely inadequate, or of very limited value. Children with certain kinds of learning difficulties or behavioural problems, or children and young people who are unusually needy for any number of possible reasons, might derive little benefit from a web

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[3] Official figures are not always very helpful in allowing anyone to make judgements about the scale of the problem, much less to make comparisons with pre-internet days, but two reports which, inter alia, present some of the data to do with child sex abuse on the internet and child pornography have been submitted separately to the Select Committee. These are "Child Abuse, child pornography and the Internet" (2004), and "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" (2006), both published by NCH.

page full of good advice. Constant supervision is one possible answer, but that is not always going to be available or practicable.

16. This leads us neatly to a second qualification: while education and awareness are key tools, in the quintessentially technical environment which is the internet we are very clear that improved technical solutions can also play an enormous part in helping to keep children and young people safe.

17. The high tech industries are deploying ever more sophisticated solutions to combat spam, hacking, phishing, identity theft and all the other familiar problems which bedevil the internet. We can see no reason why child protection should be exempt, and indeed some companies have been devoting a great deal of time, energy and research resources to this issue, particularly in the field of filtering technologies. We welcome these moves and look forward to their deployment on a much larger scale than we have witnessed up until now. For example, we believe that a filtering product should be preinstalled on every computer sold into the domestic market, and it should be set by default to a high level of security. This is something we have campaigned for in the past, and we continue to do so. Such a product could be turned off altogether or the settings could be modified if the user so wishes. However, it seems to us entirely wrong that computers are sold into the domestic market with, essentially, haphazard arrangements being made in terms of ensuring that parents understand the risks and what to do about them. So far only one UK manufacturer of PCs has followed the view expressed here and that was *Comet,* the electrical retailers. This shows that it can be done, if there is a will.

Governance and regulation

18. When one looks across the globe there is little doubt that within the cohort of liberal democracies the UK stands out for both the scale of activity in this area, and its apparent effectiveness. For example, witness the reduction in the volume of child sex abuse images being published out of the UK, from 18% of all illegal images in 1997 to less than 0.4% today. Similarly, pioneering initiatives such as BT's *Cleanfeed* are now being taken up in several other countries.

19. It is hard to prove this beyond all reasonable doubt but it is widely accepted, and justifiably so in our view, that the UK's self-regulatory regime has played a major part in allowing the child safety agenda to move as far and as fast as it has. Again, we believe the Home Office Task Force has been absolutely pivotal in this respect.

20. At present CHIS is broadly happy with the current self-regulatory regime, although it is an area of policy which we keep under constant review. We think there are many important things that still need to be

done, urgently, many of which will increasingly depend for their success on improved international co-operation.

21. We would like more thinking to be done about how to develop the international political will and leadership to tackle the kinds of challenges that can no longer be addressed domestically e.g. around the continued growth of child sex abuse images on the internet. We doubt that shifting domestically, for example towards a more dirigiste regime, would materially aid the situation. Indeed it is likely to make it worse. One volunteer is worth ten pressed men.

Crime Prevention

22. In the field of child protection we have several on-going concerns in terms of law reform and these are being pursued within the framework of the Home Office Task Force.

23. Although it is too early to judge what difference CEOP will make to the overall situation within the UK, we all have high hopes and expectations, and are fully supportive. We believe the early signs are very promising. We will be monitoring CEOP's activities closely and look forward to engaging with and supporting their future activities.

24. We are not sure if CEOP has the right level of resources to allow it to deliver its very ambitious programme of work. There is little doubt, for example, that there has been insufficient investment generally in the police's forensic capabilities. The delay in analyzing suspects' computers after seizure is still far too long in far too many forces and in far too many cases.

25. More generally we are aware that the rate at which police officers are being trained to work in these high tech areas is still painfully slow and more resources would probably help speed this up.

26. The leading role the British police have played on the global stage in this field ought to be recognised and applauded. However, there are still too many countries which lag a long way behind and this is bound to remain a major obstacle to progress. Interpol, Europol, G8 and the Virtual Global Taskforce need to give more attention to this problem. Ways should also be found to allow civil society to be drawn into and support the work of law enforcement internationally.

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