CEASE. CENTRE TO END ALL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

contact@cease.org.uk
CEASE, 483 Green Lanes, London N13 4BS

Raising the Age of Access for Social Media:

A Necessary "Circuit Breaker"

Key Messages:

- CEASE[1] recommends **raising the age of access to 16** for social media platforms **with risky functionalities and addictive design** as a necessary circuit breaker- but it is not a silver bullet and cannot act as a substitute for safety by design.
- The onus must be on Big Tech to protect children; privilege of access must be accompanied by protection. We must raise the stakes for non-compliance for minimum age restrictions to be effective not just in principle but in practice.
- Language around a 'ban' implies criminalisation of children and fails to recognise that this approach is not about stopping children from accessing social media – it's about preventing Big Tech from accessing children and profiting at their expense.
- CEASE's concerns about the harms of social media focus on both what platforms expose children to (for example, predatory individuals, pornography, and content promoting sexual harm and objectification) as well as how they do it (addictive design, algorithms etc).

Harms of Social Media

CEASE spotlights some specifically sexual harms but welcomes the opportunity to expand or discuss on the points raised. With no existing legal minimum age of access, Big tech, driven by profit, has to date had unfettered access to children on social media platforms. Despite measures introduced by the Online Safety Act (OSA), social media is still awash with sexually harmful content (alongside other harmful content) and platforms can act as a conduit for sexual exploitation and grooming.

Here CEASE spotlights four examples of social media's sexual harms towards children:

1. **Platforms are "predators' playgrounds"**

They expose millions of children to unwanted contact with strangers and predators intent on grooming and exploitation, including through sextortion.

Both Facebook and Instagram (now Meta) have been found to be major hubs for sex and labour trafficking. A newly unsealed court filing shows "from at least 2015 onward, Meta was knowingly exposing teen users to millions of interactions with suspected child predators in order to protect its bottom line- including sex traffickers reported as such as many as 16 times." [2] We also have evidence of TikTok acting similarly.

One internal Instagram study also found that 13% of 13-15 year olds reported receiving an unwanted sexual advance, 19% reported seeing unwanted sexually explicit content, and 21% reported seeing posts that made them feel worse about themselves every seven days.[3] In pursuit of profit at all costs, social media platforms are serving children to predators on a plate.

[1] CEASE (The Centre to End all Sexual Exploitation) is a UK based charity working to expose and dismantle the cultural and commercial drivers behind all forms of sexual exploitation in the UK.
[2] N. Witkin, "Meta's Child-Sex Trafficking Problem"
[3] Why Every Country Should Set 16 (or Higher) as the Minimum Age for Social Media Accounts

contact@cease.org.uk
CEASE, 483 Green Lanes, London N13 4BS

2. They are a "pipeline" to OnlyFans – harmfully shaping children's sexual norms

Social media platforms also contain vast amounts of sexualised content which is normalising harmful objectification and "promoting and glorifying porn-prostitution".[4] This content is designed to drive social media viewers to pornographic content on sites such as OnlyFans.

OnlyFans is an adult platform designed for creators to monetise their content. It operates on a subscription model, allowing users to access exclusive content for a monthly fee, with the platform taking 20% cut of earnings. Pornographic material makes up the majority of OnlyFans content.

Content creators are financially incentivised to create 'engaging content' on social media that drives people to buy their sexual services on OnlyFans – in fact OnlyFans demands that they have a social media presence. This content is of course designed to grab attention and arouse.[5] Manipulative algorithmic targeting drives this harmful content to children's social media feeds. In their social media advertising, OnlyFans content creators paint a picture that 'sex work' is a fun, glamorous empowering lifestyle for young girls and explicit content generation on OnlyFans is an easy way to generate income.[6]

This harmful "parasitic" pipeline grooms young girls to think of sex as something they perform and sell – whilst also grooming boys to buy sex. Raising the age of access for social media with addictive design and manipulative algorithms would help puncture this pipeline.

3. They promote harmful strangulation content

Recent research from the Institute for Addressing Strangulation (IFAS) finds that now 71% of people aged 16-34 with sexual experience have been strangled and/or strangled someone during sex. This includes 43% of 16-17 year olds with sexual experience. This is a massive health crisis given that there is no safe way to strangle someone, and alongside the obvious health risks, study after study shows neurological impacts.

Social media is one of the key routes by which sexual strangulation has been normalised, glamourised, sanitised and promoted. Research studies find that sexual strangulation posts on social media often present it as normal, pleasurable and sexy, and as something that masculine men do to young women who love it. Posts also promote the myths that there are safe ways to strangle someone and that its harms are simply funny and light-hearted.

Platforms are promoting strangulation content to children and young people and in doing so they have powerfully helped to normalise this highly harmful practice, resulting in untold pain and physical and psychological damage, in particular to girls and women.

4. They are leading children to pornography.

The OSA mandates that social media companies have a legal duty to protect children from pornography. However, children are still seeing pornography on social media platforms and, more frequently, they are acting as a gateway to dedicated porn sites.

---

[4] Melinda Tankard Reist (2025) TikTok to OnlyFans Pipeline. CEASE webinar.
[5] Themes of this content include: the sexualisation of childhood/ childhood innocence being sexy, "sex work" being what normal people do, pain and injury as a badge of honour and the inversion of ethics.
[6] For examples see TikTok accounts of the "BopHouse", Ari Krysta, Sophie Rain and Bonnie Blue.

contact@cease.org.uk
CEASE, 483 Green Lanes, London N13 4BS

An investigation by Global Witness[7] found that despite OSA measures, TikTok's search algorithm is still serving up sexually explicit search terms to 13-year-olds, directing them to pornographic content. The report highlights, "not only was TikTok showing pornographic content to a minor – their algorithms were actively pushing minors towards pornographic content."[8] Thus, whilst a child scrolling may not necessarily be shown pornography, they are being breadcrumbed on social media and invited to click onto links that do show this material.

Furthermore, platform X's policy explicitly states it permits pornography on the platform, with an alarming "opt-in" approach for adult users. There is currently no evidence which suggests X has effective age assurance in place to prevent children from viewing this material online.

More generally, it is unclear from Ofcom or social media companies what, if anything, the companies have done to prevent children following a pathway to pornography via their platforms. Data pre-dating OSA measures coming into force shows the average age a child first sees pornography online is 13; 8 out of 10 of the main sources children access pornography are social media or networking sites.[9] (X/Twitter (41%) followed by Instagram (33%) & Snapchat, TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, Facebook.[10])

A rich literature attests to pornography's harms to children. Fundamentally, pornography shapes children's sexual scripts towards corporate profit. In the process it increases their risk of abuse, whilst reducing their chance of relational, sexual and bodily satisfaction, and of healthy relationships. Whilst Age Verification of free porn sites has made progress, routes to pornography via social media must be stopped to prevent this harmful breadcrumbing.[11]

Risky Functionalities and algorithmic drivers of harm

Interrelated to all the above, there are currently multiple child-inappropriate features on social media, including; livestreaming, ability to send nude images or videos, disappearing content, location sharing and connecting or talking to strangers. These functionalities "promote risky interactions with anonymous strangers at an age when teens have less ability to self-regulate or know what is safe."[12]

Furthermore, social media platforms are not passive – Big Tech's design choices intentionally and proactively shape behaviour and sexual scripts through manipulative algorithms and addictive design used to drive engagement and maximise profit. In this attention economy, children are being targeted by algorithms promoting harmful behaviours and inappropriate content; capitalising on and exacerbating their vulnerabilities.[13]

Sexualised harmful content is being intentionally and algorithmically drip fed to children.[14] Children are not "stumbling into harm by accident- they are being systemically exposed to it – on platforms engineered to capture their attention, monetise their vulnerability and retain their engagement at all

[7] Global Witness 'TikTok directs 13 year old users to porn."
[8] Global Witness 'TikTok directs 13 year old users to porn."
[9] Children's Commissioner "Sex is kind of broken now": children and pornography (August 2025)
[10] 5Rights (2021) Pathways: How digital design puts children at risk, Children's Commissioner (2023)
[11] Dr Elly Hanson, 2020, What is the impact of pornography on young people? Research briefing for educators.
[12] J. Haidt, R.Iyer, 'Why Every Country Should Set 16 (or higher) as the Minimum Age for Social Media Accounts (Jan 2026).
[13] Dr Elly Hanson, "Taking Liberties: Confronting Big Tech's False Freedoms." (April 2025)
[14] A survey of over 1000 11-14 year old boys conducted to inform a Vodafone and Global Action Plan campaign found that within only 10 minutes of going online, a third of boys reported seeing violence, a quarter saw negative content about girls and women, a quarter saw sexual content, and a fifth saw content that made them feel bad about themselves. These percentages increase the longer children are online.

contact@cease.org.uk
CEASE, 483 Green Lanes, London N13 4BS

costs."[15] Big Tech's business model is built on profit, engagement and ultimately exploitation of children's vulnerabilities.

CEASE's Recommendations

Against this backdrop of harms, CEASE recommends the UK Government adopt a "third way" by blending the best aspects of both the Australian approach (which raises the age of access for all social media to 16) and the Indonesian approach (which raises the age of access to 16 for social media considered "high risk") and adding a robust enforcement bolt-on to make it more watertight and effective.

This means:

- **Raising the age of access to 16 for all platforms which have risky functionalities and harmful design features.**
- **Adding an enforcement "bolt on" which means platforms which fail to protect children in this way lose access to adults as well; i.e. they are blocked from operating in the UK.**
- **Meanwhile, parents and children must face no penalties.**

OSA penalties are not currently acting as a strong enough deterrence. With children's safety at stake, intervention must raise the stakes for non-compliant services- the Overton window on acceptable regulatory measures must move to bring about substantive change.

In practice this does mean a blanket ban like Australia, as social media platforms in their current form all have risky functionalities and addictive design features. However, this "third way" compliments points made by advocates of safety by design and provides incentive and scope for child-friendly versions of social media in the future with safety by design embedded.

Parliament should set "minimum statutory design safety conditions" which act as the threshold for determining whether platforms can access children under 16. These conditions must be enforced by the Regulator and tech companies should not be given the easily exploited freedom to self-categorise their risk. CEASE recommends the UK Government base these statutory conditions on the principles set out in Lord Nash's Joint Statement of Principles for Furthering the Protection of Children Online.[16] These conditions must also be capable of developing dynamically to keep up with evolving technology which poses new and emerging risks.

Losing access to not only children, but adults too, would hurt Big tech's business model and send a clear message that unless platforms are safe by design, then they cannot have access to children.

CEASE considers this the necessary circuit breaker and child protection measure to stem the intolerable harms incurred by platforms that for far too long have been dangerous by design.

For more information please contact: Lauren Agnew (Head of Policy & Public Affairs) at lauren.agnew@cease.org.uk

[15] Canadian Center for Child Protection, "Why a social media delay is in a child's best interests."
[16] Lord Nash's Joint Statement of Principles for Furthering the Protection of Children Online signed by over 40 civil society organisations and 32 individuals.