

Summary Report: Coram Submission to the “Growing Up in the Online World” Consultation

1. Introduction

This report summarises Coram’s submission to the UK Government consultation on children’s experiences in the online world. Coram advocates for a precautionary approach that places child safety and development at the centre of policy. While recognising children’s rights to participation and expression online, the submission argues that current digital environments expose children to significant risks that are not sufficiently mitigated. Evidence from teachers highlights clear negative impacts on wellbeing, behaviour, and education.

2. Benefits of Online Engagement

Coram acknowledges that online access can offer important but limited benefits. It can support connection and identity-building, particularly for children who are isolated, disabled, LGBTQ+, or experiencing bullying. It can also provide opportunities for expression and participation in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as well as allow exploration of interests and peer interaction.

However, the submission challenges the policy narrative that these benefits are well evidenced. Many claims rely on weak or self-reported data and lack robust longitudinal evidence. The idea that social media use is necessary for “upskilling for a digital future” is considered overstated, as digital competence does not depend on such use. In fact, some evidence suggests that lower screen use correlates with better digital competence, reflecting the importance of broader cognitive and social development. Coram emphasises that offline interaction remains more beneficial for development and should not be seen as equivalent to or replaceable by online activity.

3. Harms and Risks

Coram strongly emphasises the extensive and multi-layered harms associated with children’s online use, supported by research and teacher-reported evidence. These risks include addiction and compulsive use driven by platform design, as well as significant mental health impacts such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, and reduced wellbeing. The submission highlights impaired social and emotional development, including reduced empathy, alongside attention and behavioural difficulties. Sleep disruption and its health consequences are also noted, along with exposure to harmful content, bullying, exploitation, and extremism. Additionally, online use creates an opportunity cost by displacing essential developmental experiences.

The submission draws heavily on evidence from the Coram SCARF teacher survey, which includes responses from over 3,000 primary schools. Teachers report that more than one in five children frequently say online activity makes them anxious or stressed. Over three-quarters of teachers observe negative impacts on concentration and focus during lessons. Around 73% report that online behaviours affect children’s ability to regulate emotions and manage frustration, while 68% notice increased sleepiness or fatigue among pupils. Behavioural issues are also prominent, with 59% of teachers reporting increased aggressive or disrespectful language.

Online-related conflict has a direct impact on school time and teacher workload. Over a quarter of teachers spend more than one hour per week resolving conflicts originating online, while 3% report spending more than three hours per week. Overall, 83% of teachers say their workload has increased due to children’s digital use, with nearly half describing the impact as significant. This evidence demonstrates

that online harms extend directly into classrooms, affecting teaching quality, school culture, and staff wellbeing.

4. Policy Position: Risks Outweigh Benefits

Coram's overall position is that the risks of online engagement outweigh the benefits, particularly for younger children. The organisation advocates for a precautionary approach that prioritises child safety, development, and overall wellbeing.

5. Minimum Age Requirements for Social Media

Coram supports the introduction of legal minimum age restrictions for social media, with a preferred minimum age of 16. However, it stresses that age limits alone are insufficient and must be accompanied by strong education in digital citizenship, greater platform accountability, and investment in offline alternatives.

The rationale for this position is grounded in the understanding that adolescence is a critical developmental period requiring protection. Evidence links early access to smartphones and social media with poorer mental health outcomes, reduced emotional regulation, and increased exposure to harmful content. Coram anticipates that raising the minimum age would reduce harms, improve behaviour, and alleviate anxiety among teachers and parents by establishing clearer societal norms. It would also help shift expectations around device ownership and use.

6. Digital Age of Consent

Coram supports raising the digital age of consent to 16. This position is based on concerns that children lack the legal and cognitive capacity to meaningfully consent to data use, alongside significant privacy and safeguarding risks. The submission notes strong support among teachers for this change, with 81% in favour of raising the age and only 6% supporting its retention at 13.

7. Platform Design and Feature Restrictions

Coram argues that while restricting specific platform features such as autoplay or infinite scroll may provide some benefit, the underlying harms are structural and developmental rather than purely design-related. As a result, access-based restrictions are seen as more effective than feature-based approaches. The organisation recommends a minimum age of 16 for high-risk features such as live streaming, location sharing, and interaction with strangers, and a minimum age of 18 for sending explicit images.

8. AI Chatbots

Coram adopts a strong precautionary stance on AI chatbots. It states that there is currently no robust evidence of benefits for children, while the risks are significant. These risks include emotional attachment to AI, distorted understanding of healthy relationships, exposure to harmful or misleading content, and privacy concerns. Based on research into adolescent brain development, Coram recommends a minimum age of 18 for chatbot use.

9. Enforcement and Age Assurance

Coram emphasises that responsibility for enforcing age restrictions should lie with platforms rather than parents. Age verification systems should be robust, enforceable, independently tested, and designed with privacy in mind. The submission argues that child protection should take precedence over commercial considerations, drawing comparisons with age restrictions applied to alcohol, tobacco, and gambling.

10. Schools and Mobile Phones

Coram strongly supports making government guidance on restricting mobile phone use in schools statutory, rather than relying on informal policies such as “out of sight, out of hearing.” The rationale is supported by teacher survey data indicating clear links between device use and disruption, reduced concentration, behavioural issues, and the spill-over of online conflict into school.

Evidence suggests that effective restrictions lead to improved classroom focus and behaviour, reduced bullying and online-related conflict during school hours, and lower teacher workload alongside improved job satisfaction. However, Coram recognises the need for limited and controlled exceptions. These include cases involving medical needs, SEND-related assistive technology managed by schools, safeguarding situations requiring structured alternatives, and the specific needs of looked-after children.

11. Digital Literacy and Family Support

Coram supports education in digital literacy but stresses that it must complement, not replace, regulation. Priority areas for education include understanding online behaviour and relationships, managing screen time, and identifying harmful or misleading content. Support should extend beyond schools to families and vulnerable groups, and should emphasise the importance of real-world developmental opportunities.

12. Overarching Conclusions

Coram’s submission calls for a system-wide precautionary approach based on the principle that the primary risk lies not only in how children use technology, but in their exposure to and overuse of it during critical stages of development. Engagement with technology designed to be addictive is harmful in itself, and it also negatively affects children’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development by displacing real-world experiences.

The Coram SCARF teacher survey provides strong, large-scale evidence that online harms are already deeply embedded in school life, including among primary-age children. These harms affect learning, wellbeing, behaviour, and staff workload, with teachers experiencing significant operational and emotional impacts.

Key Recommendations

- Introduce **minimum social media age of 16**
- Raise **digital age of consent to 16**
- Enforce **“safety by design” standards for platforms**
- Restrict **AI chatbot access to 18**
- Implement **robust age assurance systems**
- Make effective **mobile phone restrictions in schools statutory**
- Strengthen **offline alternatives and child development support systems**

Final Observation

Coram ultimately calls for a shift in policy away from assumptions of benefit towards a focus on child development, public health, and safeguarding, highlighting the need for clear accountability for technology companies and practical support for schools and families.