Understanding Pathways to Online Violent Content Among Children

Qualitative Research Report March 2024

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Table of Contents

Ofcom foreword 3

Executive summary 5

Research objectives and methodology 8

Research method 8

Ethics and safeguarding 10

Overview of violent content online 11

How much, and where, were children encountering violent content online? 11

What types of violent content were children commonly encountering online? 14

What types of violent content were children encountering less frequently online? 18

Pathways to violent content online 20

How was violent content encountered? 20

Why and how was violent content shared? 29

The impact of encountering violent content online 33

Safety measures and the role of platforms 37

Reflections on the approach 41

Acknowledgements 43

Ofcom foreword

This report explores the pathways through which children encounter violent content online, the impact this can have, and perceptions and use of safety measures.

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 children from content that is harmful to them.

Content that is harmful to children is separated into 3 categories in the Act – primary priority content, priority content and non-designated content. The Act sets out duties for services in relation to particular types of harmful content, of which violent content is priority content. This research was commissioned while the Online Safety Bill was progressing through parliamentary processes. While Ofcom was aware that violent content would likely be deemed as 'priority content', the definition of this type of content, that is now contained in the Act, had not been confirmed. The research therefore took a participant-led approach with participants describing what they perceived to be violent content. As a result, some of the content discussed in this report may differ from that set out in the Act and Ofcom's forthcoming guidance on content that is harmful to children.[1]

When asked what participants perceived to be violent content, some mentioned content that would likely be illegal content (for example, content related to sexual assault and terrorism). A note was made when this type of content was mentioned, however interviews and workshops were moderated so that this content was not further explored, due to it being out of scope of the research. Some categories of violent content, such as gang-related violence, contained both some content that would likely be in scope and some that would likely be illegal. In these cases, discussion of content that is likely to be illegal has been retained to reflect the complete discussion of the content category.

All findings contained in this report reflect the perceptions of children and professionals interviewed, not Ofcom or Family Kids and Youth. The report includes participant experiences and perceptions of various platform functionalities, including potential safety measures or features. Participant suggestions of what should be improved have not been assessed by the research team and should not be seen as a validation of technical feasibility, proportionality or effectiveness of the suggested solutions. Participant views have also not been verified to ensure they provide an accurate reflection of the functionalities or safety processes deployed by the platforms mentioned by participants. Some of the children in the

[1] The Act defines violent content as a) Content which encourages, promotes or provides instructions for an act of serious violence against a person b) Content which depicts real or realistic serious violence against a person; depicts the real or realistic serious injury of a person in graphic detail c) Content which depicts real or realistic serious violence against an animal; depicts the real or realistic serious injury of an animal in graphic detail; realistically depicts serious violence against a fictional creature or the serious injury of a fictional creature in graphic detail.

study are under the age of 13 (the age at which many social media services allow children access) and reported using these services and encountering violent content.

Specific online platforms are referenced throughout the report reflecting the participants' views and experiences. This should not be interpreted as an indication of the prevalence or origination of online violent content on particular platforms, but rather indicative of the platforms used by those taking part in the research, and their experiences.

As a safeguarding measure, descriptions of hashtags, certain words/terms and artists and influencers that children told us might link to harmful content online have not been set out within the report.

This research was commissioned to build Ofcom's evidence base regarding how children encounter violent content online. The findings should not be considered a reflection of any policy position that Ofcom may adopt as part of our role as the online safety regulator.

Executive Summary

Background

Family Kids and Youth (FK&Y) were commissioned by Ofcom to conduct research to explore the pathways through which children encounter violent content online. The research consisted of 2 focus groups with professionals (including teachers, specialists who work with vulnerable children, and youth social workers), 15 in-school workshops with a total of 232 children aged 8 to 17 from across the UK, and 15 in-depth interviews with children aged 12-16 identified as having had direct experience of violent content. The research was carried out between May and November 2023.

Main Findings

Overview of online violent content

Children described encountering violent content as 'unavoidable'

All children in the workshops said they had come across some form of violent content online. Although not all children we spoke to were seeing the same types of violent content, they all said that encountering violent content was an inevitable part of being online.

Children had first seen violent content in primary school, and the content described by older children was markedly more violent

Different risks emerged for children of different genders and age groups. Children in their early to mid-teens (aged 13-15), and particularly boys, were most actively sharing violent content due to their desire to 'fit in', and the perceived popularity of the content. Older children (aged 16-17) appeared to be more desensitised to the violent content they came across and were less likely to share it.

Children had seen a wide range of violent content, which was mostly via social media, video sharing and messaging services

Children said they mostly encountered violent content on social media, video sharing and messaging services, with many stating this was before the minimum age requirement to use these services. Children most frequently described: gaming violence; local school and street fighting; verbal discrimination; professional fighting; and violence in film, TV, and news reports. Children also cited other examples of violent content they had seen less frequently, but were more extreme, which included gang-related violent content. Animal cruelty content was mentioned by many children, but discussion tended to focus on one particular piece of content.

Pathways to violent content online

Many children were encountering violent content without seeking it out

A number of platform functionalities were identified in relation to how children were unintentionally coming across violent content. These included: recommender systems; messaging (including group messaging); stories, posts and livestreams; content tagging; hyperlinks; user connections; user tagging; and search engines. Children most frequently

mentioned recommender systems and functionalities that allow users to communicate with each other.

A minority of children were also actively seeking out violent content

This was most commonly mentioned by children aged 13-15, and particularly boys. Children said they searched for specific content they had heard about, for example by word-of-mouth during the school day, when content was trending/had gone viral, or when it had been mentioned by influencers or in comments online. A number of platform functionalities were identified in relation to how these children were engaging with violent content, such as: searching (on-platform and search services); recommender systems; private accounts dedicated to violent content; group messaging; stories and posts; and content tagging.

There were strong motivations for children to share violent content, which creates a cycle in which other children are then more likely to be exposed to it

Many children described sharing violent content to protect themselves from being ostracised from their peers and labelled as 'different'. Many also said they shared violent content to gain popularity due to the high levels of engagement they felt violent content would typically gain. Children described using a number of functionalities to share violent content, which included: messaging (including group, direct and time-limited messages); stories and posts; user tagging; and screenshotting and recording.

The impact of encountering violent content online

Encountering violent content had a range of psychological impacts on children

Children in early adolescence (aged 10-14) described feeling peer pressure to both watch violent content and to find it 'funny', with failure to do so leading to a fear of isolation from their peer group. They described feeling 'guilty' for watching content they found upsetting, and for not reporting it. Professionals also voiced concern that violent content is affecting children's mental health. Both professionals and children expressed a belief that children are becoming desensitised to violent content.

Exposure to violent content can lead to avoidant behaviours in children

Professionals described how they had observed consistent exposure to violent content, particularly gang-related violent content, contribute to children becoming socially and physically withdrawn. They described how children would stay at home to feel safe and miss out on education because they thought they were likely to encounter violence similar to that which they frequently saw online.

Professionals believed there are certain characteristics that may make some children more vulnerable to engaging with and being impacted by violent content online

From their experience, professionals highlighted several groups of children who they thought could be more at risk from violent content. These included: children with a lack of parental oversight or those who may be experiencing instability at home; children from disadvantaged backgrounds; children with pre-existing mental health issues or trauma; children who are neurodivergent.

Safety measures and the role of platforms

Reporting functionalities were understood yet unused by many children

There was a lack of trust in the reporting system for many children in the research. While many understood how to report, they did not believe that the reporting process would be anonymous, nor that there would be any consequences for those who post violent content. Children reported issues with the length of time the reporting process took and the lack of feedback on their report, for example regarding information about the consequences of their report on the user who posted the content.

There were behavioural and attitudinal barriers to reporting, particularly relating to 'snitch culture' and peer pressure to engage with violent content

Children explained how peer pressure to engage with and find violent content 'funny' reduced their likelihood of reporting it, as they were fearful of being 'found out'. 'Snitch culture' was another reported barrier to reporting, and older children (16+) said their desensitisation to violent content meant they often didn't consider reporting it.

Children were cautious about using safety measures they thought would restrict their online experience, but still had suggestions for improvements

Children thought they should be able to report violent content without being identified, and wanted the process to be easier and simpler. They suggested having a single reporting button that was clearly visible across all platforms. Both professionals and children were supportive of content moderation, but thought services are not currently doing enough. Professionals called for tighter rules for enforcing minimum age requirements on platforms.

Professionals and children think platforms have a responsibility to protect children from violent content

Children taking part in the research made it clear they want the internet to be a safe space for children. Many said they currently think they have to rely on themselves to stay safe online, rather than on the adults in charge. Professionals expressed concern that they always feel 'one step behind' and only become aware of violent content when it is too late, and many children have already seen it.

Research objectives and methodology

Research method

This research aimed to explore:

What violent content looks like online and its impact	The pathways to encountering violent content	Perceptions and use of safety measures
▪ Including what types of violent content children are encountering ▪ Exploring the degree of **extremity** of violent content ▪ Exploring the impact of the content (psychologically and behaviourally)	▪ What platforms it is present on ▪ How children are likely to encounter it ▪ Understanding any demographic differences, and if certain groups of children are more at risk ▪ Understanding the role of platform functionalities in engagement with and the spread of the content	▪ Understanding the use of and attitudes towards **safety measures** ▪ What participants believe are (or should be) **the roles of platforms** when it comes to protecting children from this content ▪ What participants believe services can or should do to manage and mitigate the risk of harm from this content

The research methodology was comprised of three stages:

Stage 1, focus groups with professionals: two focus groups were held with a total of 10 professionals currently working with children and young people across the UK. Focus groups took place online and were conducted in May 2023. Professionals included those working in education, such as teachers, headteachers, PSHE and SENCO teachers[2], employed in mainstream, independent and specialist schools. Other professional participants included social workers, child protection leaders, gang/exploitation workers and youth workers.

Stage 2, workshops with children: 15 workshops with 8–17-year-olds[3] were carried out in-person across a total of 9 primary and secondary schools in the UK. This included Scotland (Glasgow), Wales (Cardiff), Northern Ireland (Newry) and England (West Yorkshire, Northumberland, Essex, and London). A total of 232 children participated, coming from a variety of locations (including inner city and rural), and including a mix of gender, socio-economic background, and ethnicities. There was also representation of children in care/looked after children and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Workshops lasted 1½ to 2 hours and were held between June and November 2023.

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[2] PSHE refers to Personal, Social, Health and Economic education. SENCO (or sometimes referred to as SENDCO) teachers are teachers with additional qualifications who co-ordinate the special education needs provisions in a school.

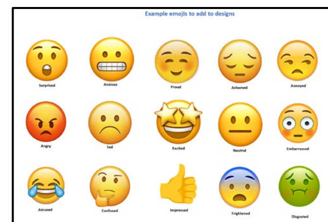
[3] Whilst the Market Research Society (MRS) defines those aged 16-17 as 'young people', this report will refer to children throughout to align with the definition as set out in the Act.

Children's responses were audio-recorded and projective techniques were used to enable children to express their experiences with violent content. Projective techniques allow respondents to project their individual, subjective or true opinions and beliefs onto other people, or onto objects. Social desirability bias can be a challenge in research, where people, and especially children, tend to give answers they think are socially acceptable or desirable instead of what they really think or feel. Projective techniques, which are also used in counselling and psychotherapy, allow researchers to gain more honest information about people's thoughts and feelings. The techniques used in this research included questionnaires (in third-person), cartoons, and worksheets and in total, there were 663 completed projective technique documents from the workshops.

Questionnaire

First name: **Age:** **Gender:** **Table:**

1. What are children and young people's favourite websites, social media, video games, or apps that they like to use?
2. What do children and young people like about being online?



Poster 1: please draw a poster showing how children and young people might first find out about violent content online?

How do children first **find out** about violent content online? Think about all the different ways you might **hear** about content like this being online.	**How** do children see it? Which device, which platform or app?	**Where** do they watch it? Think about what time of day, where they might be.	**How** does it get to them? Draw or describe the different ways children might find this content (for example, through friends or on social media)

Classification: CONFIDENTIAL

Cartoon 1

What kind of content was created? Who was involved in creating it?

Classification: CONFIDENTIAL

Cartoon 2

If a child or young person saw violent things online, do you think they might report it? Why/why not?

Is there anything you can think of that would encourage them to report it?

Classification: CONFIDENTIAL

Cartoon 3

What would you do if you were in charge of the things we see online? How would you stop children and young people seeing violent things online?

Stage 3, in-depth interviews: in the final stage of this project, 15 in-depth interviews were carried out with children from Year 8 (ages 12-13), Year 9 (ages 13-14) and Year 12 (age 16) in London secondary schools. All in-depth interviews were conducted in inner city schools because the professionals (interviewed in focus groups at Stage 1) believed that active viewing of violent content was more prevalent among inner city children; this was then confirmed throughout the workshops conducted in Stage 2 of the research. Children included at Stage 3 were identified by safeguarding teachers as being more susceptible to being affected by violent content, or as having had direct experience with online violent content. This included interviews with both children who had featured in violent content and children who had created and shared violent content online. Each interview lasted 60 minutes and was carried out face-to-face by a trained psychotherapist. Once again interviews used projective techniques, and were held in October and November 2023.

Throughout the report, participant's responses are included in their own words. This includes children's quotes from their responses to written stimuli (labelled 'Projective Technique'), and child and professional quotes taken from audio-recordings of the focus groups, workshops, and in-depths. Children's age and location and the professional's occupation are shown alongside the quotes, but names have been removed so that no participant is identifiable. A number of case studies are also included, some of which have been amalgamated from the experiences of children who took part in the workshops. Others are the direct experiences of children who took part in the individual in-depth interviews. Pseudonyms have been used for both.

Ethics and safeguarding

The research was led and overseen by FK&Y's Managing Director Dr Barbie Clarke, a trained child and adolescent psychotherapist whose Ph.D. is in child and adolescent psycho-social development, and who sits on the Market Research Society's Standards Board.

FK&Y implemented a two-staged informed consent procedure, giving the parent/carer of each child taking part in the research an information sheet explaining the purpose of the research, and asking them to sign a consent form. A child-friendly information sheet was then given to each child taking part in the research, alongside a consent form which they were asked to sign if they wanted to take part. The same procedure applied to the professionals taking part in the focus groups at Stage 1, and to the children taking part in the in-depth interviews at Stage 3. Each respondent was asked again at the beginning of the focus group, workshop or in-depth interview to confirm they were happy to proceed.

FK&Y has a stringent safeguarding and disclosure policy in place, with twice-yearly safeguarding training led by Sharon Cole, Head of Safeguarding at charity Place2Be. Sharon worked with the team throughout the research to ensure that safeguarding remained a priority. In-depth interviews with children at Stage 3 were run by trained psychotherapists.

Main findings

This report contains mention of potentially distressing themes regarding children's experiences with violent content, including sexual violence.

The report contains generalised descriptions of specific pieces of violent content, but detailed descriptions have been omitted.

Overview of violent content online

In this section of the report, we provide an overview of what violent content looks like online as described by participants. This includes the types of violent content children were encountering, where this happened and how factors such as age and gender influenced how children reacted to and engaged with violent content.

How much, and where, were children encountering violent content online?

Children described encountering violent content as 'unavoidable'

All children from the workshops said they were frequently coming across some form of violent content. The frequency and severity of this was highest among children living in inner cities, and older children in the sample. Although not all children we spoke to were seeing the same types of violent content, they all said that encountering some form of it was an inevitable part of being online.

> *"But you can't really, like, avoid it. And some people might watch it because they think it's cool"*
> **Girl, Essex, 14**

Professionals employed within mainstream schools were aware of children being exposed to violent content, but tended to be less aware of the frequency and severity with which children were encountering it. Those working with vulnerable children[4] were more aware of the extent of the issue since they worked individually with children in a supportive capacity. All professionals said it was hard to keep up with the violent content children are experiencing because the content can spread quickly, and by the time they are able to report the content, many more children have already seen it. Teachers felt the rate of technological change within platforms means that by the time they have become aware of the content, it is no longer viral and has been replaced with new violent content. There was a consensus among professionals that some parents are unaware of the violent content children encounter because they can be time poor and, in some cases, their level of digital literacy can impact their understanding of what their children can access online. Professionals also explained that they thought parents can have too much faith in child locks and password

[4] Professionals in focus groups at Stage 1 included those working in specialist schools with SEND children, including those with neuro-divergent traits and those with challenging home circumstances (e.g. parents with mental health issues, or with drug or alcohol abuse). The focus groups also included professionals working with gangs.

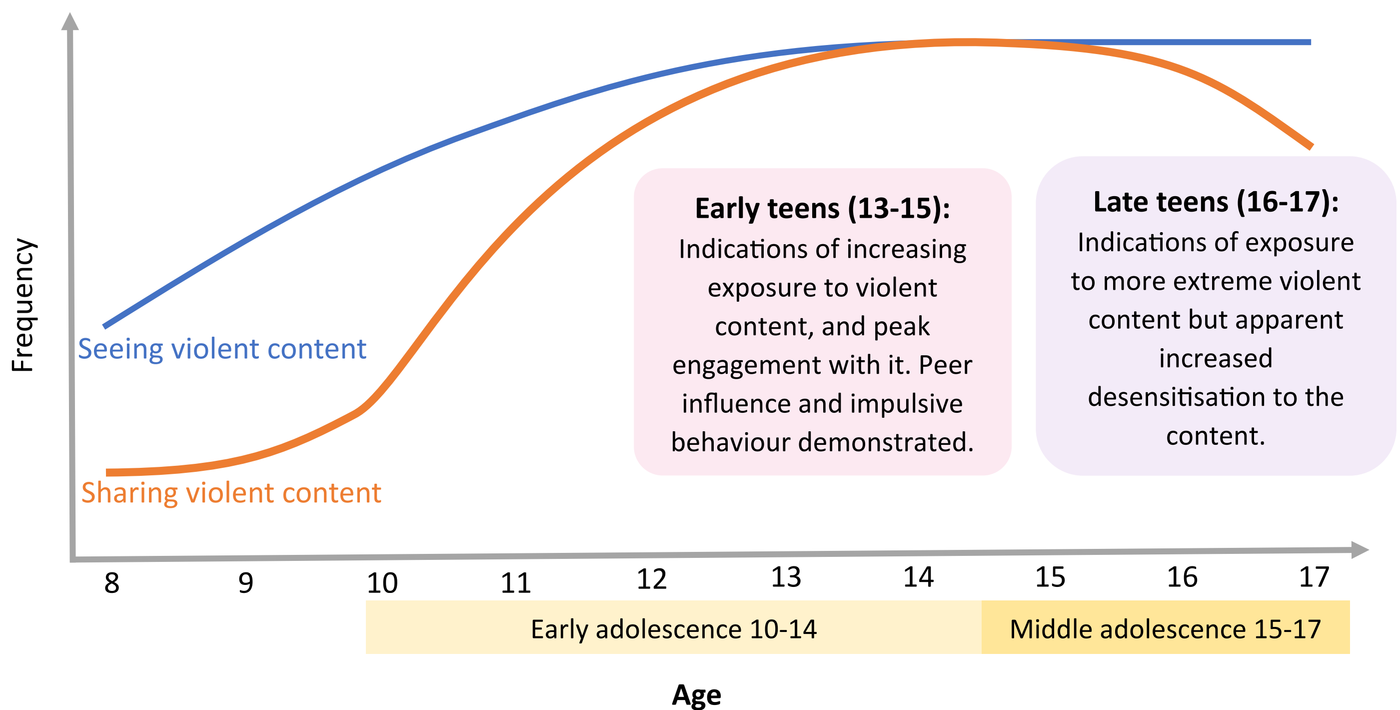
restrictions, without actively engaging with and checking the content their children are seeing.

> *"The content is everywhere and there is a limited amount of time to address these issues at school"*
> **Assistant head teacher, mainstream school**

Children had first seen violent content in primary school, and the content described by older children was markedly more violent

While all children in the workshops had seen violent content, including those as young as 8, different risks emerged for children of different age groups.

As illustrated in the diagram below, children we spoke to in their early to mid-teens (ages 13-15) were most actively engaging with violent content, including sharing content with others. They told us this was due to the perceived popularity of the content and the desire for belonging and fitting in with what others their age were doing online.



Children in their early to mid-teens actively engaging with violent content is linked to child developmental stages because throughout the teenage years, peer relations and social pressure are important factors.[5] A child's brain continues to grow, develop and mature well into their 20s and the part of the brain responsible for planning and making good decisions (the prefrontal cortex) is the last part of the brain to develop.[6] Wanting to 'fit in' is a natural

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[5] Developmental stages have been much written about, and still serve as the basis of child and adolescent psychosocial training. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and German-American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1902-1994) have been particularly influential, with Erikson's eight-stage theory of psychosocial development describing growth and change throughout life. Source: Harvard University, Erik Erikson

[6] Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development outlined 4 stages of development, from birth to adulthood. Source: Cherry, K. (Very Well Mind), 2023. Piaget's 4 Stages of Cognitive Development Explained

part of becoming an adolescent, especially in the transition from early to middle adolescence (age 13-15), and is therefore relevant to why some children were engaging with violent content.[7]

Children aged 13-15 were also most likely to describe the content as 'shocking' or 'upsetting'. A child and adolescent counselling specialist who advised on this research suggested this also relates to child development stages as children in their early teens tend to have a higher propensity for impulsive and risk-taking behaviour, so are more likely to seek out violent content but do not have the developmental maturity to process it. From age 13, peaking at age 15, children were encountering the most extreme forms of violent content online.

> *"It's [seeing violent content] a natural occurrence in life, but it depends how bad the stuff you're seeing is. Maybe seeing a person get into a fight online is a lot different to some horrific torture video you find deep down on the internet"*
> **Boy, Northumberland, 15**

> *"Year 7 – that's the time in your life when you'll see the most dodgy videos. It's part of growing up though…Yes, some of the things are really bad – you don't want to see them"*
> **Boy, Northumberland, 14**

Children aged 16-17 explained that they were less actively searching for and sharing violent content than 13–15-year-olds, who they thought did this most. Despite saying they were less actively engaged with violent content, children aged 16-17 still said they were encountering the content without actively seeking it out. These 16–17-year-olds consistently spoke about their experiences in a dispassionate, or sometimes jovial manner, explaining that they had become increasingly 'desensitised' to this type of content. This age group said they had begun to see the behaviour of sharing violent content as immature, and some had started to reduce this behaviour as a way of separating themselves from the behaviour of 'younger' children.

> *"[We are] desensitised…It happens a lot… I've seen someone break their nose, and lose a few teeth"*
> **Boy, Northumberland, 15**

Children mostly encountered online violent content on social media, video sharing and messaging services, even before the minimum age requirement

Children encountered violent content across a variety of online services, however they most commonly cited social media, video sharing and messaging services. In every school visited, many children said they set up their accounts while under the minimum user age and had set their age as older in order to access these services.

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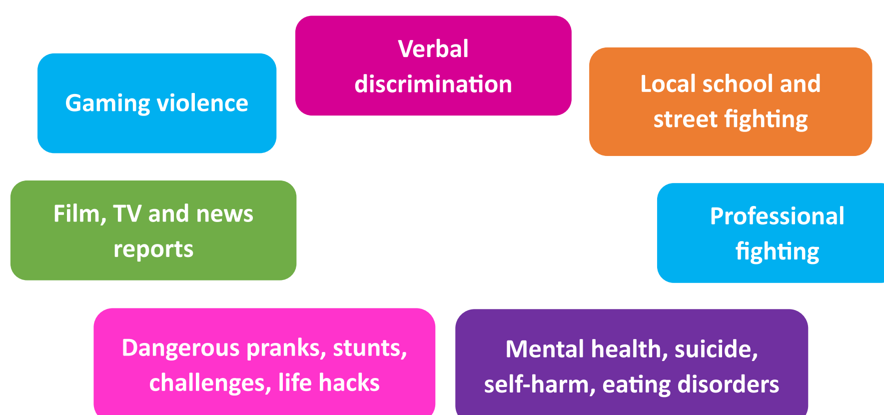
[7] The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry explains the impact of peer pressure. Source: The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2022. Bullying Resource Centre

Children also told us about other services on which they had come across violent content, often mentioning:

Children described a variety of types of violent content, which will be discussed below. A summary of the types of violent content encountered on each service is summarised at the end of this section.

What types of violent content were children commonly encountering online?

When asked about the types of violent content they had encountered, children most frequently mentioned the categories shown in the diagram below. Dangerous pranks, stunts, challenges, life hacks, mental health, suicide, self-harm and eating disorders were out of scope of this research and therefore not discussed further.



> *What kinds of violent content do children see online?* [Animal cruelty] video, Gang videos, Murder, Suicidal Videos, War, Bombs, Crimes, School Fights*
> **Girl, Newry, 13 (Projective Technique)**

Verbal discrimination:

Verbal discrimination was one of the most common types of violent content cited by children, which typically fell into the following themes: racism, homophobia, body shaming and misogyny. Children described how such content tended to be found on platforms with quick video sharing and messaging functionalities, and children in this research most often cited TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram. A male influencer, well-known for self-proclaimed misogynistic views, was mentioned in several workshops in relation to the verbal discrimination children had seen online. While some children were opposed to his views and critical of his content and behaviour, others displayed signs of being more accepting.

"He's said a lot of sexist stuff. Lots of people – mainly boys – just find it funny. Then they post it around, and then it gets shared a lot, and they start doing what he does: they use the quotations that he said, and think it's cool, then spread it around…Like girls should be in the kitchen. Stuff like that"
Girl, Essex, 14

Professionals noted that vulnerable, inner-city children and those who may lack consistent parental support tended to be more influenced by and accepting of such content and the 'lad-style banter'.[8] Teachers agreed that this behaviour was much more likely to be seen among boys from age 11.

"Basically once boys hit that Year 7, it's just endemic in secondary schools. There's this theme of boys becoming really obsessive about [him], and he's promoting violence towards women"
Child protection officer and social worker

Local school and street fighting

Another type of violent content children mentioned frequently was local school and street fighting[9] and children being 'jumped'[10] by groups. This was the only type of violent content children cited as being created by children. They described how fights would be set up, filmed, and shared, often involving the use of dedicated school fight accounts. Professionals noted that exposure to this type of violent content had resulted in some children becoming withdrawn and reluctant to leave home for fear they would become involved in a fight, either in or outside of school.

Children who had been present at such fights said they are filmed and shared by others to prove they were present and to add kudos to their image. Children and professionals both said that filming and posting fights online can make children act more violently, or 'show off', due to the increased scale of the online audience.

"If you know it's going to be filmed, you might want to like show off. Definitely"
Boy, Northumberland, 14

Who shares this type of violent content? *"Starts with people involved [in the fight]. The people involved get videoed, then shared because of interest to see it, shared constantly by a great group of people. Thousands/millions see the videos. Shocked how many people can get to videos so easily"*
Boy, Essex, 15 (Projective Technique)

Professionals reported that some children had posted images of weapons alongside local and street fighting content. They explained that, while these children were also

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[8] Collective, boorish, or misogynistic teasing or jokes by young heterosexual men.
[9] These fights tended to be amongst children aged 11 and older, both in and outside of school. It was common for children and young people involved in the fights to know each other, but they could also be among strangers. This is separate to gang and county lines content, which is discussed later in the report.
[10] Surprising or ambushing someone with the intent to do harm.

livestreaming themselves fighting on social media, they were not using the weapons in the fights – the focus of the content was to show they had possession of the weapons.

Professional fighting:

Professional fighting was cited by children as another example of online violence they had encountered; examples included Ultimate Fighting Champion (UFC), Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), boxing, wrestling and cage fighting, all of which were more commonly mentioned by boys. Scripted pro-wrestling content was seen to be 'less violent' and 'less exciting' than real-life fights, but was a source of entertainment for some. Many children explained that private, invite-only accounts have been created and become popular by sharing and reposting professional fighting content. Children told us that these accounts also shared less mainstream content such as 'Slap Fighting'[11].

> *Where do children see violent content online?* ***"****Fights on TikTok or Twitter. People like official boxing, UFC, MMA pages"*
> **Boy, Essex, 14 (Projective technique)**

> *Where do children see violent content online?* ***"****Young people can see fights online and blood online on a website called Reddit"*
> **Boy, London, 12 (Projective technique)**

Film, TV and news reports:

Children often cited violent entertainment in film and TV as their first interaction with violent content.[12] They explained that this tended to be on video-on-demand streaming services such as Netflix, Prime and Disney+ and, in some cases, video sharing platforms such as YouTube. In contrast to social media and video sharing services, most children said they had accounts for video-on-demand streaming services registered with their real age. However, they also explained that they often accessed accounts that belong to known adults (for example, parents), where they had seen age-inappropriate violent content. Children described watching age-inappropriate horror and thriller movies that included violence with family members who were older, but still near in age (for example, siblings and cousins).

> *What kinds of violent content do children see online? "People getting killed in movies. People shooting. Fights"*
> **Girl, Northumberland, 12 (Projective Technique)**

Professionals believed that violence shown in films and TV was less harmful than when children saw short clips of the same violent content on social media and video sharing platforms. They explained that this was because the context of the violence and the

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[11] 'Slap Fighting' is a one-on-one competition in which opponents strike each other in the face with an open hand until someone submits or is knocked out. This has been recognised as a sport since October 2022 by the State of Nevada Athletic Commission.

[12] Violence in film and TV entertainment on video-on-demand services are out of scope of the Act. Discussion of this content has been included to enable a better understanding of online violent content compared to broadcast and video-on-demand (VOD) violent content.

narrative of the film/TV was lost when it was turned into short clips for social media and video sharing services.

> *"You see a film and it's known for being a violent one – you have to invest in the storyline to get some sort of context. When it's online it's just 'bam' – 10 seconds. So I think there is a difference"*
> **Social Worker**

Children also described violent content relating to journalistic reports.[13] Recurring examples of this included the war in Ukraine, riots and protests, and the death of George Floyd. This type of content was more likely to be viewed when watching television, for example as a family or while parents watched the news, and was particularly mentioned by younger children (under 14). Older children, mostly aged 17, were more likely than younger children to use and download news apps and see similar content on their mobile devices throughout the day. Although children felt this content was less severe in nature compared to other violent content, children described becoming overwhelmed and upset when the content was being encountered constantly on online services and journalistic television programmes.

Gaming:

Many children, both boys and girls, cited gaming as a frequent source of violent content. This was due to children being active in the fictional violence by playing the games themselves (with gore, blood, and people being shot reported by children as common occurrences), violent comments from other users in gaming chats (from both users known and unknown to the children), and edited clips of violent games circulating online. Popular examples cited by children included Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto, and Mortal Kombat – all of which are games rated 18+. Children (including those in primary school) explained how they had become so used to seeing edited violent video game clips online that they now did not see these clips as examples of age-inappropriate content.

> *"For those who enjoy video games [they] are likely to be engaged with…where there may be violence, especially with guns and killings e.g., Fortnite or Call of Duty"*
> **Girl, Northumberland, 12 (Projective technique)**

[13] Some types of online news content about wars, riots and protests could meet the definition of violent content as set out in section 62 of the Act. However, certain types of content of 'recognised news publishers' (as defined in s.56 of the Act) are not in scope of the duties in the Act relating to content that is harmful to children. The research was designed with a participant led approach so discussion of this type of violent content has been included to reflect participants' perceptions of the violence they encounter online.

What types of violent content were children encountering less frequently online?

Less frequently, children cited other examples of violent content that included: animal cruelty (with the exception of one piece of viral content); violent crimes; domestic violence; violent cult content; violent content about slavery; murder, shootings, stabbings and assaults; content about possessed objects/people being possessed; gang and county line violence; violence towards children; violent pornography and rape; and terrorism.[14]

Animal cruelty:

Animal cruelty content was frequently mentioned by secondary school children aged 12 and over, however discussion tended to focus on one particular piece of content. This was a viral video that involved a household animal and an electrical appliance, which many children in the research had either seen or heard of. Children reported encountering this content on social media and video sharing services, mostly naming TikTok and Twitter (X). Children explained that the video appeared to have circulated freely online and had been sent via links on large group chats (on both encrypted messaging services and within video sharing services). Although only a few children had actively searched for the content, many children knew about it via group chats or word-of-mouth.

> *"This video was up for 3 days…that was really bad…it was found first on TikTok and sent round a lot of group chats"*
> **Girl, London, 12**

> *What kinds of violent content do children see online? "A couple of months ago, I saw a viral [animal abuse] video. The video got taken down about a week later, but a lot of comments were worried for the animal and were annoyed with the person doing it."*
> **Boy, Huddersfield, 12 (Projective Technique)**

Other animal cruelty content, such as footage of police officers harming animals, was less frequently mentioned and had only been seen by a minority of children. These children said seeing the content was accidental, as they had come across it on their news feed (on both social media and video sharing platforms).

Gang and county lines content:

Children cited gang and county lines content as one of the more extreme types of violent content they had seen online. This was more commonly mentioned by inner-city children, with the content featuring localised violence, weapons, and specific crimes including murders and stabbings.[15] For a minority of children, this type of content extended into

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[14] Violent pornography, rape, and terrorism came up in some of the workshops. These topics were noted but not explored further as they are likely to fall in scope of the illegal harms duties in the Act and therefore not in scope of this research. For detail on the safeguarding processes involved, please see Research objectives and methodology: Ethics and safeguarding.

[15] Some of this content is likely to be illegal, such as murders and stabbings. Discussion of this content has been retained to reflect the complete discussion of gang and county lines violent content.

engagement with international gang violent content, which mostly depicted cartel-related violence. Children said they often first encountered this content through their news feeds, which raised their curiosity and led them to actively seek out further such content.

> *<u>What kinds of violent content do children see online?</u> "Fights, Weapons, Pain, Promotion of gangs (roadmen, clothing, seeing groups)"*
> **Boy, West Yorkshire, 15 (Projective Technique)**

Professionals also expressed concern about violent music lyrics and videos that appear on social media, video sharing and messaging services. While some children mentioned rap artists in relation to violence in music videos, discussion was limited, and they did not necessarily view this content as inherently violent.

> *"The biggest concern for me – it's a certain type of vulnerable student – but if you look at the content online, if you look at drill videos right now, I have Year 7's who are accessing drill videos…it's about basically stabbing, assaulting, and shooting, and it's all gang affiliated"*
> **Assistant Headteacher**

Types of violent content encountered on different online services

The table below shows a summary of which types of violent content were encountered on the online service types children commonly mentioned in the research.

Service	Types of violent content encountered
Social media	All, but local school and street fighting and gang and county lines content most common.
Messaging	All, but local school and street fighting and gang and county lines content most common.
Gaming	Gaming violence and verbal discrimination.
Video sharing	All, but local school and street fighting and gang and county lines content most common.
TV and streaming	Film, TV and news reports, verbal discrimination and professional fighting.
Forums and chat room services	All, but gaming and verbal discrimination most common.

Pathways to violent content online

This section explores the ways in which children said they typically encountered violent content online. This includes how children encountered the content, how it was shared, and the platform functionalities described by children that were relevant to their engagement with, and the spread of, violent content. There are also case studies detailing the experiences of children who had seen violent content both actively and accidently.

How was violent content encountered?

Many children were encountering violent content without seeking it out

Children described unintentionally seeing a wide variety of types of violent content, some of which were quite extreme, and included local school and street fights, verbal discrimination, gang violence and, in a minority of cases, murder.

Children said they were accidentally coming across violent content on most social media, video sharing and messaging services, as well as discussion forums, chat rooms and pornographic services. Children within this research most regularly mentioned TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter (X) and Facebook. Children said they were seeing violent content from many different accounts and explained that, although they were sent content from friends and those they knew offline, this was the minority of all violent content they encountered – they said most originated from strangers.

A number of platform functionalities were identified as being relevant to how children were encountering violent content without actively seeking it out, which are detailed below. Recommender systems and functionalities that allow users to communicate with each other were the most frequently mentioned.

Recommender systems[16]

Children said they mostly encountered violent content accidentally due to seeing it from strangers on their newsfeeds. Most children reported that they had a limited understanding of how recommender systems work, referring to it most commonly as ‘the algorithm’.

Many children said they felt they had no control over the content recommender systems suggested. They described how unexpectedly seeing violent content in this context made them feel upset and anxious, and unsure how to react or process the information. Some children said they would not know how to prevent recommender systems from showing them further violent content, therefore seeing more violence on their feed felt inevitable.

> *“It’s like an algorithm. If you watch [violent content], you get more of it.”*
> **Boy, Essex, 15**

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[16] An algorithmic system which, usually by means of a machine learning model, determines the relative ranking of suggestions made to users on a user-to-user service. The overarching objective of recommender systems is to ensure users receive suggestions they are likely to find relevant and engaging, thereby improving allocative efficiency in the digital marketplace. This can include suggesting connections, groups, events, and content.

"With the algorithms, if you have looked at gore, you are more likely to see the [animal cruelty] video"
Girl, London, 12

Messaging, including group messaging

Most children reported that it was common for violent content to be sent in group chats created for general and everyday conversations among friends, such as gaming group chats. Children explained how they often communicated through sharing links to content they found entertaining, most of which was not violent. When violent content was therefore shared as a link in this context, children explained that they had been less likely to expect the content to be violent due to the nature of the group. More extreme (but less frequently encountered) types of violent content such as violent crimes, murder, shootings, stabbings, and assaults were shared via links in this way.

Children reported that group chats often involved both users known to children and strangers. It was a common occurrence for children from the workshops to be added to group chats by an existing member of the group, whether they were known or unknown to the child. This was typically without the child's consent, or an option for them to decline before being added. Children explained that this had led to them being exposed to violent content unexpectedly, since they were unaware of the purpose of the group chat they had been added to.

"This boy started up this WhatsApp group and I was just like added on to it"
Boy, Essex, 14

<u>*Who shares violent content?*</u> *"Group chats, people send them randomly for a laugh. The accounts are usually trolls or 'fight' accounts. Random people post and send. Friends share fights to you and group chats"*
Girl, Huddersfield, 15 (Projective Technique)

<u>*What kinds of violent content do children see online?*</u> *"Violence can be seen on group chats when people post inappropriate content"*
Boy, London, 12 (Projective Technique)

"Last week I was dealing with a kid who was being added to a Snapchat group where threats against him were being made, even though he kept leaving it"
School and Youth Engagement Lead for a Gangs & Exploitation Unit

Nearly all children said that violent content was sent in direct messages, typically from friends or people they knew offline. Children explained how violent content sent by direct message within platforms tended to include more context, such as a preview or thumbnail, which allowed them to decide if they wanted to watch it. They thought that direct messages that contained links to content on a separate platform came with more risk, as there was often little to no context about what the link led to.

Time-limited messages (i.e., those that disappear once viewed or after a certain time has elapsed) were another way many children said they had come across violent content, which

was nearly exclusively image or video based. Children reported trying to screenshot this content but were not always able to do so as the content disappeared before they were able to take a record of it. Children thought the short-lived nature of the content made it harder for it to be moderated by platforms. Professionals working with vulnerable children also cited time-limited messaging as particularly problematic, since not having proof of the content could make it difficult to intervene and support those in need.

Although children said they received most direct messages from friends, many children described how 'bot'[17] accounts were also used to send content. Some children said they had learned to identify such accounts over time, and would ignore and block them without looking at the messages. Children described feeling uncomfortable, awkward, and shocked when they first received content via what they perceived to be 'bot' accounts.

Stories, posts and livestreams

Children explained how violent content was posted and re-posted to stories, with local school and street fighting and violent gang content frequently being shared this way. They described how there was often no warning of what was included in the story, and violent content was sometimes included within or among different, innocuous content. Children explained how stories were often used as a way to repost or signpost to violent content from another source, and that this method of signposting was more common among those with a larger following. As stories disappear after a fixed amount of time, children said they would screenshot violent content they saw so that there was a record of it, sometimes reposting it themselves (see 'Why and how was violent content shared').

Some children explained how violent content was livestreamed, and that this functionality was most often used for local school and street fights. Children told us that, in most cases, livestreams of violence were found between posts as they scrolled on a newsfeed or 'For You' page. Children in their early teens described a sense of intrigue with the content when they first saw it, but said they could remain disturbed for some time after the experience. Some children said they struggled to determine if the violent content was scripted or not, but most children believed the violent content was genuine. Those aged 16 and 17 explained how they were more likely to skip this content now as they believed it was scripted violence and only existed to gain views for the person posting the content.

Content tagging

A few children said that they regularly viewed the hashtags of online content, clicking on any they were curious about, which had sometimes led them to accidently viewing violent content. Older children (age 16+) were more likely to say they now tried to avoid clicking on unknown tags, having previously discovered violent content this way; however their efforts were not always successful since tags were seen to change constantly.

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[17] Bots are accounts not registered to a human user, used to automatically generate and share messages as well as act as a follower online.

Hyperlinks

Children explained that hyperlinks – primarily used on social media and messaging services, and in direct and group messages – were one of the most common ways they had unwittingly encountered violent content, due to not knowing what the content behind the link was. Children believed that sharing violent content in this way was taken advantage of by others their age who thought it was 'funny' to surprise their friends with such content, or mislead them into thinking the link would direct them to something more innocuous.

> *"Videos can be sent as links which you can't tell what they are until you click on it. Images can be screenshot or forwarded very easily"*
> **Boy, Essex, 14 (Projective Technique)**

User connections

Many children explained how they were connected with large networks of users, which had led to some of them encountering violent content when those they were connected with online shared the content. Indeed, it was common for children to share violent content they came across online with their friends or followers (see 'Why and how was violent content shared').

Many children cited influencers and those with a large online following as sources of violent content. Children believed these individuals shared violent content because they knew it would attract the attention of children. They believed this was done to encourage and maintain a large following to enable them to generate income online. Children also described how some influencers would signpost to violent content on other platforms, typically through short or incomplete clips, so that users would watch the full content on a different platform, which children perceived to be less moderated. This typically included signposting from a video sharing platform to a discussion room or chat room service.

User tagging

A few children explained how they had seen violent content online because friends had tagged them in content they thought they should see. Older children (15+) believed the violent content they had been tagged in by others had contributed to the amount of violent content they were suggested by recommender systems.

Search engines

A minority of children said they had mistakenly come across violent content via search engines due to making a mistake while searching for something else.

Case study

The following is an amalgamated case study put together from the experiences of children who took part in the workshops, who had inadvertently encountered violent content. A pseudonym has been used.

Case study – did not actively seek violent content Emily, 12-year-old girl		
Incident	**What the impact was**	**Did she report it?**
She was added to a large group chat on a video sharing service by one of her friends. She didn't know what the group was about but joined as a friend added her. She saw a short video of extreme gang violence, which disappeared after she watched it, before she could do anything about it.	Felt traumatised; confused about why she was being sent this. Says the harmful content wasn't discussed with peers as they added her to the group and seemed to enjoy it.	No; the content disappeared too quickly to report and she couldn't get any proof she had seen it. She didn't tell her parents as she was concerned she or her friends would get in trouble for being in the group chat and seeing this content.

A minority of children were also actively seeking out violent content

While all children in the research had come across violent content, only a minority were actively searching for it. Those actively seeking it out said they were most likely to do so on social media and video sharing services and chat room and discussion forums, most commonly naming TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter (X).

Seeking out violent content typically began in Year 8 (from age 12 onwards) and was most common among boys aged 13-15. Children aged 16-17 reflected back on how looking for violent content was more prolific when they were 'younger'.

Children tended to look for specific content they had heard about, for example by word-of-mouth during the school day, from friends, when content was trending/had gone viral, or was mentioned by influencers and in comments online. Children made it clear that seeking out violent content occurred much less frequently than unintentionally coming across it.

There were several ways children who were seeking violent content came across it:

Searching (on-platform functions and search services)

Children explained that violent content was often discussed offline among friends and hearing about certain content had led some to search for it online to satisfy their curiosity, and to not feel left out. To do this, in-platform searches on video sharing and social media services were most common.

All children agreed that boys were the most likely to be actively searching for violent content; typically this was the more extreme violent content that they felt was less likely to be seen through a recommender system or without searching for it. Such content included murder, gang violence and content showing grievous bodily harm.

A minority of children seeking violent content had used search engines to find the content, however searching within platform was much more common. Children said they knew which sites were more likely to host certain content, and would go directly to that platform.

> *"In the classroom, people talk about content that's been seen online, and like joke about it; then other people hear about it, and then watch it. Or they'll hear about it: their friends will just show it"*
> **Girl, Essex, 14**

Recommender systems

Children who actively sought out violent content explained that recommender systems were still the main way they saw violent content online. The extent to which children understood that their activity and choices online can impact the content they see seemed to improve as they got older. Children around the age of 12 began to show an understanding that their personal feeds could be altered by the content they like, or that their friends had commented on. Some older children (aged 15+) also said that services could be told they were 'not interested' in certain content, which they believed would result in a reduction of how often it appeared on their newsfeed or 'For You page'. Although no children discussed actively curating their feeds to see more violent content, it was clear that the concept of adjusting your feed to see more violent content was better understood by children aged 15+.

Private accounts, dedicated to violent content

Children explained how there were private, often anonymous, accounts existing solely to share violent content – most commonly local school and street fights. Nearly all of the children from this research who had interacted with these accounts reported that they were found on either Instagram or Snapchat. Children believed these accounts were private and invite-only to appear exclusive and more exciting, and to evade moderation or be reported. Some children seeking violent content had actively followed these dedicated accounts by messaging the account holder to gain access. These children explained that violent content can be exciting to watch and having access to these private accounts meant they could view violent (often fighting) content more regularly, without having to search for it. They also explained how this was a way to remain knowledgeable about fights that had taken place locally, without having to rely on a friend to send them the content. Children interacting with these accounts explained how they could accrue a large following and become online spaces where violent content could be quickly shared to a wide audience. Children who were actively searching for and engaging with violent content said they were not concerned with where it came from, or who was operating the accounts that share this content.

Group messaging

Some children, particularly those who live in a city, discussed the presence of large, often localised group chats, where violent content was shared. They said that these chats, with names such as '[local area]' or 'Add Anyone', were found on WhatsApp and Snapchat and were where local school and street fight content was commonly shared. For example, children described one group chat containing over 1,000 users, including children from

several different schools and boroughs. Children explained that these chats could disappear within a few days, or even a few hours, after a given topic has run its course. Due to these large group chats being short-lived and having vague names, children found it hard to know which groups would be sharing violent content unless they were added.

> *"I don't think young people want to be left out…Some group chats on WhatsApp have 100 people in them. They've nearly got my whole year group in one WhatsApp"*
> **Year 9 Headteacher / PE teacher**

Stories and posts

Children reported that time-limited posts (i.e., those that disappear once viewed or after a certain time has elapsed) were used to share violent content. Children believed content was shared this way to help the poster garner a stronger presence online because only giving viewers a fixed window to interact with the content encouraged user interaction (such as leaving comments). Children explained how the entirety of the violent content was not always included in the post, but a source could be cited via an attached hyperlink, which children could follow to view the violent content in full. When a source was not cited, it tended to generate more interest in the post and prompt some children to ask for the source.

Content tagging

Children seeking violent content described using content tagging, often a hashtag (#), to find violent content. By using a content tag, children then also learnt about other tags, some of which contained violent content. A common example of this was children who had searched for a four-letter hashtag (indicating the content is not suitable to be viewed in a work environment) commonly used to find age-inappropriate content – whilst the content wasn't always violent, given the hashtag was also used on violent content, children said it was easy to discover more violent content this way.

Case study

The following is an amalgamated case study put together from the experiences of children who took part in the workshops who had actively sought out violent content. A pseudonym has been used.

Case study – actively sought out violent content David, 14-year-old boy		
How he came across online violent content	**What the impact was**	**Did he report it?**
Searches a discussion forum and social media service for specific content tags and thumbnails that 'let you know it's going to be more violent and exciting'. Influencers on other sites can 'signal boost' (the act of re-posting content from a different or specific source to your own social media followers) new or shocking violent content in their comment sections or bios.	He found it funny – the entertainment comes from the shock factor. He shared a link on his gaming group on a video sharing platform.	No. However, he suggested to other young people that if they wanted to stop seeing violent content to just ignore it otherwise the algorithm will show them more.

Only a minority of children were creating or featuring in violent content, but many were sharing it

Over the course of the workshops, it emerged that while violent content was being shared widely by the children we spoke to, very few of them were creating violent content and posting it online. Children explained that the only violent content created by children they knew were local school or street fights, which involved filming fights that were either impromptu, or planned in advance.

The following case studies illustrate the experiences of two children from the individual in-depth interviews (Stage 3): one child had featured in violent content, and one had created and posted violent content. Pseudonyms have been used for both.

Case study – child who had featured in violent content
Jack, 16-year-old boy

What happened?

Jack's friend had seen a fight take place, he wanted to be there and not miss out and show others that he is 'in the know' about fights at school. The friend was filmed watching the fight by someone else present.

Fights are often filmed by someone, and he believes this is mainly because they have seen others film fights and know the content will be viewed and shared online and boost the creator's online presence.

Jack's friend attempted to get the creator to remove the post. This didn't happen as it was generating a lot of attention and likes for them. The content was being shared outside of their control.

Jack's friend didn't know who to talk to other than a friend who also wasn't sure how to stop the post from being shared.

How did they feel?

The content of Jack's friend watching the fight online made him worry that the school or his parents might be made aware of it and that he may get into trouble or be associated with the fight.

Following the content of him viewing the fight, his friend started to have mixed feelings about being at the fight – on the one hand, he wanted to be 'in the know' but he felt guilty to have watched it and afterwards he had time to think about possible consequences.

Case study – child who has created violent content
Isobel, 16-year-old girl

What happened?

Isobel witnessed and filmed a school fight which involved her friend. Her friend did not ask her to do this, and was shocked to find out she had filmed it. Isobel explained that she doesn't believe consent exists when creating content at this age. 'It's just the way things are now.'

She explained that although this happened while she was in year 12, this kind of behaviour is much more common in Year 9 (age 13-14).

Isobel explained that she would probably do this again if the situation arose, she feels that this is just how her generation communicates.

How did they feel?

She felt proud to post but also guilty after it was online. She felt it is fun to do things that you shouldn't do. 'I should not be doing this, but I will'.

There was a disconnect/desensitisation around the lure of creating content for likes and followers, and the consequences that come with the content that she was creating. It became clear that the chance of a post going viral and reaching other countries could override a friendship.

The psychotherapist carrying out the interview noted that while she was happy to share her experience, there was a clear nervousness and a lot of internal conflict expressed during the interview. The experience of posting online was both fun and disturbing for her.

Why and how was violent content shared?

There were strong motivations for children to share violent content, linked to popularity and status online but also a fear of not fitting in

Throughout both the workshops and in-depth interviews with children, it was found that sharing violent content, most commonly local school and street fights, had become normalised for many children, and was seen as 'part of growing up'.

The culture of sharing violent content was for several reasons. Sharing violent content had become normalised for many of the children we spoke to, who described the need to share such content to protect themselves from being labelled as 'different' for not taking part.

Many children also said they shared violent content to gain popularity due to the high levels of engagement (e.g. likes and comments) the content would typically gain. Children explained that some children they knew wanted to be 'the person to go to' for a video of a recent fight, or to show off as part of a need to feel validated.

For some children, there was a desire for this to lead to notoriety and 'followers'. Many children who were looking to build a following online or wished to become an influencer themselves would share violent content to gain attention, as they said violent content seemingly gained the most attention online as it was the most 'exciting'. Some children explained how they would leave their accounts public to make sure their posts reached as many people as possible, enabling them to build a following. Children described how, if violent content featured influencers, celebrities, or those with a large following, it became much more intriguing and gained attention online at a faster pace. According to the children, this additional attention would then further encourage the sharing of the content.

For some children, the 'aim' of sharing violent content was to have it recognised by an influencer, or another young person they followed who had a large following online. This was not only for the kudos of being recognised by someone that they admired, but also to have the opportunity to increase their following online by association.

> *"The more popular videos that are posted, everybody talks about it… the severer the video, if it's from famous people or if it's really bad, people talk about it more, it gets spread about more"*
> **Boy, Northumberland, 14**

The culture of sharing violent content creates a cycle in which other children are then more likely to encounter it

As explained above, children are likely to share the violent content they see, which creates a cycle in which other children are then more likely to be exposed to it.

Children described using a number of functionalities to share violent content. These are listed below and the detail for each can be found in the previous section:

- Messaging, including group, direct and time-limited messages
- Stories and posts

- User tagging

Children described the ability to screen record or screenshot violent content they came across as 'second nature'. Most children described using these methods to capture violent content seen in the form of time-limited posts or messages due to their short-lived nature, which they could then use to repost or share the violent content on other platforms. These included services with time-limited messaging functionalities and social media, video sharing and messaging services. While screen recordings and screenshots were used to spread violent content, it was also seen as a useful tool for children who wanted to provide proof of the violent content for reporting.

> *How does violent content get shared? "Someone records a fight --> posted to a story on Instagram or Snapchat --> people share it to their friends through links, on apps, send privately"*
> **Girl, London, 16 (Projective Technique)**

Case study

The following is a case study of one child from the in-depth interviews who has shared violent content. A pseudonym has been used:

Case study – child who has shared violent content
Kieran, 14-year-old boy

What happened?	How did they feel?
He was using a video sharing platform and saw violent content on his 'For You' page. Kieran downloaded the video as he knew that it would be taken down from the platform soon, as it included severe animal cruelty involving a household pet and kitchen appliance. He shared it by uploading it to his personal account, where he knew his friends would see it and share it.	He felt a greater sense of belonging to his friendship group because the video was being talked about a lot. This meant he felt he could relate better to other children in his school year group. He felt he had more in common with them, and had something else to talk to them about. Getting likes on the content he posted was the main driver for his behaviour, as it made him feel it was justified as others had enjoyed it.

There are some differences in the pathways to violent content depending on the type of violence depicted

Children reported that it was common for them to encounter violent content that had been uploaded directly to the social media, messaging, and video sharing services they used most frequently, which they said were TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. However, children said such content was the relatively less extreme types of violence, such as school fights or verbal discrimination. There were some differences in the pathways for gaming, and the more extreme types of violence, such as murder and gang-related violence.

Gaming content pathways

Outside of children encountering violence while playing video games, many children explained that they had seen clips of violent gaming content from games rated 18+. These clips were created by gaming influencers and streamers and posted to video sharing services. Children reported coming across such content as part of their newsfeed. Children also explained how innocuous searches for age-appropriate gaming content (such as searching for an influencer, or game name and genre) had led to them encountering age-inappropriate content that had not been accurately tagged by the content creator. Children explained that influencer gaming content could be found on discussion forums and chat room services, alongside links to the original streamed and recorded influencer content. Children from this research explained that Twitch, TikTok, YouTube and Discord were the sites where they most typically encountered this.

Extreme violent content pathways

Much of the most extreme violent content that a minority of children described included murder, shootings and stabbings in full detail, and often related to gang violence.

Many of the children explained that very violent content tended to originate on the social media and discussion forums they used less frequently, which they typically said were either Reddit or Twitter (X). However, children explained that content uploaded to these sites would eventually make its way through to the social media and video sharing services they used more often. For example, they explained how content originating on Reddit and Twitter (X) had been shared onto TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat.

Children said that the most extreme types of violent content tended to be uploaded to 18+ video hosting services. A few children in the workshops were still encountering violent content that contained the logo of an adult video hosting service that was dissolved in 2021. Some of the older children (age 15+) were able to explain how this service used to be used to search for violent content. Children also explained that they knew some of the most extreme types of violent content were on the dark web. However, the children we spoke to had not accessed this part of the internet themselves.

Many children explained that links were the typical way extremely violent content made its way to the video sharing, social media, and messaging services they more commonly used. Children explained how links were posted in comments, and were often left in the comments of popular content that was unrelated to violence to increase the likelihood the link would be clicked on. In some cases, these links were posted without context, and in other cases children explained how they would have 'clickbait'[18] text that aimed to appeal to children. Some children explained that violent content can be intriguing, and they thought the accounts primarily targeted children to encourage them to click on these links. They

[18] Online content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page.

believed that such links were monetised, generating income for the person posting each time the link was clicked on.

A minority of children, and mainly boys, explained that links to violent content could be disguised, and clicked on inadvertently. They described how these links were often found on online adult services (mostly pornographic services) and were disguised, for example as a fake 'play' button on a video that, when clicked on, led the user to a pop-up window where they were exposed to extremely violent content. Some of these children explained one example of a pop-up window that led them to viewing live torture content – while they said they were unable to discern whether or not this content was staged, the memory of witnessing it had stayed with them.

While links were most common, children also explained that shortened, edited versions of extremely violent content had appeared on video sharing services, forums, and chat services. Although this was the least common pathway we heard about, it was used for the most extreme types of violence and was more common among children aged 14 and over who had been using social media platforms for longer.

The impact of encountering violent content online

This section explores how encountering violent content can impact children, including psychologically and behaviourally. Factors that may make children more vulnerable to violent content are also discussed.

Encountering violent content can evoke a range of negative emotions for children

Children in early adolescence (aged 10-14) described feeling peer pressure to both watch violent content and to find it 'funny', with failure to do so leading to a feeling of isolation from their peer group. Children also described feelings of guilt for complying with their peers and viewing content they found upsetting. Some children reported viewing violent content alone, before bed, leading to feelings of anxiety before going to sleep. There were also feelings of guilt and shame for not reporting the violent content they had encountered, with a fear of 'getting in trouble' with a parent or authority figure if they were found out to have watched this type of content.

> *"[I felt] slightly traumatised, it [seeing animal cruelty video] was really scary…nobody was talking about how bad it was…everyone was like joking about it"*
> **Girl, London, 12**

> *"There's peer pressure to pretend it's funny. You feel uncomfortable on the inside, but pretend it's funny on the outside"*
> **Girl, West Yorkshire, 11**

Professionals expressed concern that children encountering violent content is having a negative impact on their mental health. They believe children are too young to understand and process what they have seen.

> *"I think we're at rock bottom when it comes to people's mental health and yet it's still getting worse. I think violent content online plays a huge role in that"*
> **Teacher at Independent Girls' School**

Professionals and children believed children are becoming desensitised to violent content, and that it can lead to the normalisation of violent behaviours

Many older children (aged 15+) in the research appeared to have become desensitised to the violent content they were encountering. Some children this age talked about their experiences in an impersonal and objective way. A trained child and adolescent psychotherapist working on the project suggested this may be a way children cope with the discomfort and trauma of seeing violent content, as many had been exposed to it over a long period of time.

Professionals also expressed particular concern about violent content normalising violence offline, and reported that children tended to laugh and joke about serious violent incidents.

> *"They're very desensitised as well. If we're talking about something that's happened on the news that the rest of the world is really concerned about – like that school shooting*

in America – they might laugh at a joke that someone's made [about the event] on TikTok or Snapchat. They kind of think it's funny but we're like 'that's really serious'"
Learning and Support Specialist

"Much of the content is normalised – seeing stabbings, they've become desensitised; it's become a 'badge of honour' amongst some"
Teacher at Independent Girls' School

"When [children] are young adults, what sort of behaviours will they start to think is normal? The school I'm in, the area has quite high levels of deprivation…I fear for them, I fear for their future"
Primary SENCO / Teacher

Less frequently, professionals reported that some children they worked with said they had adopted violent behaviours themselves, such as carrying knives for protection, after seeing violent content such as weapons being used or flaunted online.

"Where they see a violent video online … carrying a weapon makes them feel safe because of what they see is possible to happen to them and also how other people carry weapons. If they've got anxiety, carrying a weapon and stuff makes them feel safe"
Learning and Support Specialist

"With fighting, they'll watch the fight and see people fall down after 1 punch and think 'oh I can do that I'm as strong as that person' and they're really not capable and they haven't actually been in a fight before. Same with carrying weapons as well. A lot of that stuff is normalised and they think 'It's fine if I carry this knife'"
Schools and Youth Engagement Lead for a Gangs & Exploitation Unit

Professionals had witnessed online violent content leading to avoidant behaviours in children

Professionals who work within gang exploitation units reported that they work with children who have featured in and created gang-related online content involving weapons and drugs. Teachers described how they had observed children become socially and physically withdrawn, staying at home to feel safe and missing out on education because they thought they were likely to encounter violence similar to that which they frequently encountered online. Professionals also believed this had contributed to some children choosing to protect themselves with the weapons they see online.

"It is their reality as well. A film is fantasy, but [the violence] on their phone is in the real world, just down the road"
Primary SENCO teacher

"If anything, they retreat from reality more, including non-attending school and staying at home, staying in spaces they control to deal with what they see online. They are not at risk to physical violence, but they are seeing these things online and

think that they are at risk, so stay at home. They won't get off their phone because of the benefits they get from it, but remain exposed to the negatives"
School and Youth Engagement Lead for a Gangs & Exploitation Unit

Professionals believed there are certain characteristics that may make children more vulnerable to engaging with and being impacted by violent content

Professionals highlighted several groups of children as being potentially more at risk from violent content. Reflecting on their daily work with children and young people, these included:

- Children with a lack of parental oversight or those who may be experiencing instability at home. An online world can feel 'supportive' for these children and, for some, had resulted in them becoming more immersed in violent content.

- Some children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds may be more at risk of encountering violent content because they are more likely to be alone at home, with their time online unmonitored. Professionsals working with gangs and vulnerable children explained that these children have an increased need for a sense of belonging, and that creating and sharing violent content is seen by children as a way to connect and conform with those around them. Professionals explained that children in their care had created this content without thinking about or being aware of the consequences.

- Children with pre-existing mental health issues or trauma (for example, witnessing violence) can also be disporportionately at risk. Seeing violent content online can re-traumatise children if they have seen or experienced in-person violence previously, for example at home.

  "It is traumatising, and for a lot of the kids it is re-traumatising. It could be gangs, it could be domestic violence. It brings them back to a place of pain and fear. After COVID people relied on tech a lot more and now we see triple the amount of mental health problems"
  Schools and Youth Engagement Lead for a Gangs & Exploitation Unit

- Children who are neurodivergent may be at greater risk of harm from violent content. Professionals explained that neurodivergent children they had worked with tended to be more easily influenced by violent content, and had sometimes become more obsessive about it. This had contributed to some of these children continually seeking out this content, and being more at risk of displaying copycat behaviours.

  "Children who have educational needs as well, the replicating of the behaviour, we see that in terms of our young people…a lot of our kids see these things, especially the ones with SEN. They believe they're capable of doing the same things [as they see online]... Some children with SEN will see a fight and act it out expecting to see similar results"
  Schools and Youth Engagement Lead for a Gangs & Exploitation Unit

"When you have vulnerable children or even neurodiverse children, they seem to be more at risk of this type of violent imagery and become quite obsessive over it"
Specialist in child protection

"I think every child is vulnerable, it is an epidemic of an issue. Some cannot cope with it so much, not that they should be [able to]. Neurodiverse children can become more obsessive. If there are issues with parental boundaries and instability at home, it can be supportive for children because they can become immersed in an online world where they are not supported at home"
Specialist in child protection

Safety measures and the role of platforms

Reporting functionalities were understood yet unused by children

Many children in the research were able to explain how to use reporting functionalities across social media, video sharing and gaming services, including children as young as 8. However, reporting violent content was uncommon among most children due to a number of factors.

For most children in the research, there was a lack of trust in the reporting system. Children did not believe that the reporting process would be anonymous, believing that their details would be included in a reporting / banning notification, or that there would be some way they could be identified online by the person who was being reported. Some children believed that others would be able to work out who had reported the content, for example through word-of-mouth, especially if they had told peers they disliked the content. Many children expressed a fear that knowledge of their reporting would eventually become public, leaving them exposed to potential embarrassment, ostracism from peers, or punishment. Children also lacked trust that platforms would impose meaningful consequences for those who had posted violent content.

Children who had previously reported content had experienced issues with the length of time it took to report, doubts about the impact it had, and lack of any feedback on their report. Children explained that even when content was reported, it could take too long for it to be taken down; many said they would prefer to try and forget what they had seen, particularly since the overall process was viewed as time consuming and complicated. They questioned the effectiveness of the process, with many thinking that perpetrators could easily set up a new account with a new identity and begin posting the violent content again.

There was also a shared belief among children that if they spent any time on violent content (for example, while reporting it), they would be more likely to be recommended further, similar content. They explained they would therefore often scroll past content to avoid this. Some children described their experience of reports getting lost in the system, and only receiving generic messages in reply to their report. Finally, children expressed concerns about the complexity of the process. They had found that the reporting form was complex, designed for adults, and they believed that the detail should be completed by a platform moderator – they did not think it should be up to them to fill out the report and explain what about the content was violent, or what should be done about it.

There were also behavioural and attitudinal barriers to reporting content that were independent of the reporting process

As has been discussed, most children, especially those aged 16+, were becoming increasingly desensitised to the violent content they were encountering, and did not consider making a report.

Peer pressure was also an important consideration for most children. The 'accepted' need to find violent content funny, enjoyable, and to share it with peers, appeared to reduce the likelihood of children reporting violent content.

Professionals and children frequently referred to 'snitch culture' as being a key barrier to reporting. Most children, especially those aged 13-15, described not wanting to feel they had 'betrayed' a friend by speaking out about what they had encountered. Telling parents about violent content was also not something very many children said they wanted to do, for fear of having their devices removed.

> *"There's like a snitch culture, so basically snitching or speaking to authorities or police or school is kind of seen in a negative way. So, reporting behaviour, violent behaviour or whatever, is seen as a negative thing"*
> **Learning and Support Specialist**

> *Is there anything that would encourage children to report violent content?*
> *"[Reporting] Has to be completely anonymous because some people may be scared to speak out as 'snitching' is frowned upon"*
> **Girl, London, 12 (Projective Technique)**

Children were cautious about using settings and functionalities that they thought would restrict their online experience

While not used regularly, children aged 13+ talked about several different safety measures. These included:

- Using accurate age settings
- Tagging content as 'not interested'
- Blocking/unfriending users
- Blocking content
- Resetting their 'For You page'

Changing their app settings, or blocking online violent content, was something children said they did not necessarily *want* to do, as this could restrict other aspects of their online experience, such as socialising with friends and encountering other – potentially age-inappropriate – content. Professionals expressed a view that parental settings, even if applied, were not always blocking violent content online.

A few children explained that they used content tags to avoid violent content. Children – particularly older children (15+) who had greater experience in using the platforms – explained they would avoid and/or block tags known to be associated with violent content (such as the hashtag that indicates content is not suitable to be viewed in a work environment).

Children and professionals had suggestions for how to address the issue of online violent content

It should be noted that in this research we asked children to consider improvements for tackling online violent content, whilst in practice they are mostly not using current safety measures since they perceive them to be restrictive to their online experience.

Reporting

All children we spoke to felt they should be able to report violent content without being identified, as they were concerned about the repercussions that could come with reporting, such as getting into trouble (from adults) or being ostracised by their peer group. They wanted reporting to not mean they would be prevented from having access to popular material. To make the process of reporting easier, children suggested having a single button, or creating a 'one and done' process that would not take time away from viewing additional content. Having reporting buttons clearly visible across platforms was also recommended, since children said it can be difficult to find exactly where to report content on many platforms.

> *"Make it so it's just a single wee button"*
> **Girl, Glasgow, 9**

> *"Maybe [have] more visible reporting. Sometimes you have to go out of the page to report [something]. Maybe if it was at the bottom of the feed, or the image. If you have to click away from something, you probably won't do it"*
> **Learning and Support Specialist**

Content moderation

Most children were in favour of content moderation and believed this should always be done by 'real people' (as opposed to automated) on social media, video sharing and gaming platforms. Some children explained they were pleased to see violent content being actively tackled on some services, for example children over 12 cited TikTok and Instagram as services where they had experienced violent content being removed. Professionals and children alike saw moderators as the first line of defence against violent content, but the consensus was services are not currently doing enough.

> *"The moderation is mostly bots [on TikTok], so that is why it's not that good"*
> **Boy, London, 14**

> *"Sometimes, if you're scrolling on TikTok, it'll say 'is this content acceptable or right for your age group?', so I think they're trying to stop it"*
> **Girl, Essex, 14**

Age verification

Professionals called for tighter rules for enforcing minimum age restrictions on platforms. Children were seemingly not against this, suggesting ID verification and higher age

restrictions (for some apps).[19] Some children also suggested limiting certain functionalities, such as messaging strangers.

Professionals and children think platforms have a responsibility to protect children from violent content

Most children said they feel they are self-taught when it comes to avoiding harmful content online. They believe that previous experience with violent and unwanted content is more useful than adult advice, which they considered to be outdated.

Professionals expressed concern that they were becoming aware of violent content when it is too late, and the content had already circulated among many children. They described how some schools had run child online safety sessions for parents, however these sessions were not always well attended. A monthly newsletter that informs parents and teachers about online trends was suggested by some.

Professionals called for more support from platforms, and for Ofcom to put pressure on the government to provide information, education, and early interventions about violent content online through schools, and ways to keep children safe online. They also called for more action from the government to ensure platforms were doing their part to protect children online.

> *"As awful as this sounds, I think we are always going to be one or two steps behind the technology, the violence coming through"*
> **Teacher at Independent Girls' School**

[19] In practice, many children described using online services when they were younger than the services allow.

Reflections on the approach

The use of projective techniques empowered children to share their experiences of encountering harmful content online

All children who took part in the research described many experiences of encountering violent content. The use of projective techniques were effective in helping children to provide honest, detailed, and relevant information about their online experiences in a way that they felt comfortable. A total of 663 completed projective technique documents were collected, providing a wealth of evidence and anecdotes.

Many of those working closely with children were unaware of the extent of the violent content children were encountering

While the professionals who took part in the research were aware that children were encountering violent content, they felt it was impossible to keep up with the extent of the content and believed they were made aware of it too late to protect children effectively.

Similarly, the schools we worked with were aware of children being adversely affected by harmful content and had been working proactively to keep their students safe online. However, like the professionals, they felt it was difficult to keep up with what children were experiencing online. The teachers who attended the 15 workshops (usually the head of safeguarding) said they were both surprised and shocked by the extent of the violent content that children were currently encountering, the extreme nature of it, and the age from which they were coming across it. As a result of sitting in on the workshops, teachers resolved to hold additional online safety workshops and to reach out to parents.

'Snitch' culture and other barriers are preventing children communicating the extent of their encounters with violent content to adults

The workshops highlighted the barriers that can prevent children from speaking to adults about the violent content they see, particularly the prevailing 'snitch culture' and widespread peer pressure to appear 'cool'. There was also a fear among children that speaking about violent content could lead to them being prevented from going online, or have their online access restricted by adults (such as teachers or parents).

The research highlighted children's lack of interaction with reporting, and their wish for simpler and more straightforward tools

The research found that children are not reporting harmful content for a variety of reasons. Most understood how to report but need reassurance that the reporting process will be simple, easy, fast, and taken seriously by platforms – something they currently doubt. Most importantly, there is a need to assure children of its confidentiality – that they will not be identified as having reported the violent content by any means. While responsible adults, such as teachers and parents, can help children with their understanding of reporting (such as how and what to report and the benefits of it), there is a role for platforms to improve the process.

Working with schools offered many benefits but schools and teachers are under pressure

The schools on FK&Y's school panel who participated in this research fully supported the topic of the project, and stressed the importance of conducting the research. However, the pressure they were under was clear. During fieldwork (May-November 2023) schools taking part in the research encountered problems with staff-shortages, teacher union industrial action, pupil absences, transport strikes, and closure because of RAAC[20], all of which caused delays to planned fieldwork.

Schools are also experiencing other pressures in the wake of the pandemic. For example, post-Covid, many schools across the UK are still struggling to ensure children are happy and confident enough to attend school on a regular basis.[21]

Despite the challenges faced by schools, working with them offered significant benefits. We were able to speak to a total of 247 children over the course of the research and their existing safeguarding provided an additional wraparound to FK&Y's stringent safeguarding approach.

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[20] Some schools who took part in the research were affected by the issue of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete. Source: Gov.UK, What we're doing to permanently remove RAAC from schools and colleges

[21] Latest government figures show that 1 in 5 of all pupils in England are persistently missing school, and one-third were persistently absent in the Autumn term, 2023. Source: tes magazine, 2024. Attendance: 1 in 5 pupils persistently absent

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