

Minister Issues Apology to UK Children Exposed to Harmful Online Content

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Technology Secretary Peter Kyle has formally apologised to a generation of UK children exposed to harmful content online, acknowledging the government's failure to act swiftly in regulating digital platforms. His remarks come as the UK implements key provisions of the Online Safety Act 2023, aiming to protect minors from toxic material in the digital space.

In a candid admission, Kyle stated that children over the age of 13 had been effectively “sold downstream” by years of policy inaction, which left them vulnerable to disturbing and inappropriate online content. Speaking in an interview with the parenting forum Mumsnet, the minister described the situation as a failure that has had lasting consequences for young people. He called the new online safety legislation the most significant change to children’s digital experiences since the internet began.

Kyle rejected calls to ban smartphones for teenagers outright, noting their practical benefits, such as enabling communication, accessing transport passes, and providing reassurance for parents. However, he expressed support for stronger content filters, age restrictions, and screen time limits. He also emphasised the need for a national conversation on digital wellbeing, similar to public discussions on nutrition, sleep, and physical activity.

The Online Safety Act 2023 compels online platforms to take proactive steps in removing illegal and harmful content and ensuring effective age verification. Under the law, companies can face fines of up to £18 million or 10 per cent of global turnover, with senior executives held personally accountable in cases of non-compliance. The regulator, Ofcom, has introduced new codes requiring platforms accessed by children to prevent exposure to content relating to self-harm, violence, sexual abuse, and suicide.

Campaigners such as Beeban Kidron and Mumsnet chief executive Justine Roberts have welcomed the reforms but stressed they must mark the beginning, not the end, of action. They highlighted gaps in current regulation, especially regarding addictive algorithms and misinformation, calling for faster updates as technology continues to evolve.

Research shows most children encounter violent or distressing content online, yet few report it. Kyle acknowledged the legislation must be responsive and updated more frequently, rather than relying on delayed, sweeping changes.

The minister's apology signals a renewed commitment to protecting children online through realistic regulation and platform accountability. While the new rules represent progress, much remains to be done to ensure children's safety keeps pace with the challenges of the digital age.