

Technology Secretary Addresses Delay in Online Safety Measures for UK Children

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As new regulations to safeguard young people online take effect, Technology Secretary Peter Kyle has acknowledged significant delays in protecting children from harmful digital content, admitting that successive governments have failed to act decisively. In a candid interview with Mumsnet, Kyle expressed regret, stating, “Politicians have sold a whole generation of children downstream by taking too long to implement laws to keep them safe online.”

The newly introduced Online Safety Act places greater responsibility on tech companies to shield children from toxic material, such as explicit content and harmful forums. Kyle described the legislation as “the most significant advancement for young people’s online experience since the invention of the internet.” However, he conceded that the seven-year delay in enacting these measures exposed countless children to “torrid toxic material.” He added, “I want to apologise to every child over 13 who lacked these protections and to parents who struggled to shield their kids from this content.”

The legislation mandates platforms to remove illegal content, such as material promoting suicide, and enforce age verification to restrict access to age-inappropriate material for those under 18. Social media platform X has announced plans to restrict access to adult content, including pornography, for under-18s, though enforcement mechanisms are still under development.

Despite these steps, critics argue the government must act more swiftly. Beeban Kidron, a crossbench peer and vocal advocate for internet safety, urged Kyle to amend the Online Safety Act to address disinformation and the addictive nature of social media. Justine Roberts, Mumsnet’s founder, welcomed the new rules but emphasized that they are merely a starting point. “Teenagers spend 35 hours a week on smartphones, with real consequences for their mental health,” she said in an interview. “Big tech’s addictive algorithms still expose children to harm, and further action is urgently needed.”

Kyle acknowledged the need for rapid responses, telling Mumsnet, “We cannot allow another seven-year delay when technology demands urgent safety measures.” He called for a “national conversation about what a healthy childhood looks like online,” comparing it to established offline parenting practices like setting curfews or managing diet. His department is exploring additional measures, such as time limits, to curb social media addiction among young people.

On the question of banning smartphones for teenagers, Kyle was pragmatic. “Many parents rely on phones for practical reasons, travel passes, communication, or digital payments,” he noted. “Kids themselves say they want safer online spaces, not to lose their devices.” He also addressed proposals to raise the digital age of consent to 16, suggesting the focus should instead be on ensuring access only to age-appropriate content. “No child under 18 should encounter pornography, and no child under 13 should see violent or misogynistic content in their feeds,” he said.

The Online Safety Act marks a step forward, but its delayed implementation has drawn scrutiny. With pressure mounting to tackle the broader impact of social media on young minds, Kyle's department faces a challenging road ahead to restore public confidence in digital safety measures.