CHAPTER 5

Bridging the Divide

Abstract The verification of the Online Resilience Tool, which aimed to provide professionals with a resource to help inform safeguarding responses to disclosed concerns or harms by young people as a result of digitally facilitated behaviours, was conducted through focus group activity with young people and parents of the very young, to determine the placement of behaviours (harmful, potential harmful, not harmful). This research demonstrated that even after development phase underpinned with youth voice, further verification with young people challenged the placement of many behaviours, particularly around more contentious issues such as the dark web.

Keywords Online safety · Digital resilience · Online safety resources · Online harms · Dark web

This chapter will explore the development of the digital resilience tool as a means to provide professionals with a resource to guide rational decision making around online safeguarding.

It will describe how we decided upon the structure of the tool, how the initial behaviours were identified and placed, and how these behaviours evolved through the consultations we held with young people and professionals.

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It will then look in detail at how young people's views differed from those of the professionals, and how we took these differences into consideration when deciding how to re-classify behaviours.

This chapter will conclude by reflecting on how these different views on risk affect the conversations between young people and professionals about the online world.

Early Development of the Online Resilience Tool

As outlined in Chapter 3, the attitudes, values and beliefs of professionals have historically been more of an influence on their safeguarding decision making around young people's online behaviour than the reality of the risk experienced by young people. It therefore became apparent that a simple and clear safeguarding tool was needed to show whether behaviours constituted a safeguarding concern, or whether they reflected normal exploration of the online world.

To best support professionals in their practice, we decided to split the behaviours into Harmful (meaning an intervention is needed), Potentially Harmful (meaning a conversation must be had to identify if the behaviour is harmful or not) and Not Harmful (meaning no intervention is needed, but positive reinforcement and education should continue). We also split the behaviours into 5 age groups: 0–5 years, 6–8 years, 9–12 years, 13–15 years and 16–18 years.

The older age groups were chosen to reflect the changes in the way young people are viewed by the legal system: A child under 13 can never give consent to a sexual act, between 13 and 16 consent is considered in decision making around safeguarding, and at 16 young people have reached the age of consent and can leave school but are not classed as adults until they turn 18 (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). The younger age groups broadly reflect key stages.

The research phase of the work, described in Chapter 4, highlighted the need for the tool and how best professionals (and later parents/carers) could be upskilled to support young people. They also provided the detail of what young people do online which populated the first draft of the tool, along with the input from the team of professionals developing the tool.

This draft had 129 behaviours listed across the 5 age groups which would evolve into 155 behaviours through focus groups with young people and input from safeguarding professionals.

Focus Groups

The focus groups were arranged through parent toddler groups, schools, colleges and youth clubs in Cornwall. Young people were shown the draft of the tool and asked whether they thought the behaviours were in the correct category (Harmful, Potentially Harmful or Not Harmful), and whether there were any other online activities that should be added. We saw the young people in the same age groups as the tool used (outlined above). For the youngest age group (0–5 years), we spoke to parents.

We ran 11 focus groups with the age breakdown as follows:

Parents of 0–5 age group—10 parents
6–8 age group—6 children
9–12 age group—4 children
13–15 age group—16 young people
16–18 age group—46 young people

We had a disproportionate number for each group due to the different amounts of time schools, colleges and youth groups were able to give us. We opted to speak to parents of the youngest age group because they act as gatekeepers to their child's online activity.

All focus groups had another adult present, whether a teacher or youth worker from the youth group.

For children in the 6–8 and 9–12 age groups, we amended some of the language used to ensure they would understand the behaviour and would not be upset by it. For example, we changed "games with fantasy violence" to "games with cartoons who fight each other" and "accessing pornography" to "accessing grown-up content on purpose".

We ran focus groups as informal group discussions, and participants were also given paper to record any other thoughts they did not wish to share with the whole group. We opted for discussions rather than surveys because, although we may have been able to get a higher number of responses with a survey, it was important to understand the young people's motivation for their feedback, which was only possible through this qualitative approach (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). We wanted to ensure we weren't simply asking young people to parrot the online safety messages they had received through their education, and using a questionnaire may have forced the young people to relay these messages,

providing them with answers they would be unlikely to express otherwise (Nicholas, 2000). The focus groups allowed us to delve into young people's actual experience and identify when lack of personal experience led them to fall back on these online safety messages.

The focus groups also enabled us to gently question these safety messages to see whether the children and young people thought they were useful and used by children their age. This helped us to identify ambivalence in the young people through their non-verbal communication (Nicholas, 2000).

One of the problems we experienced with running these focus groups was that often one or two young people would lead the whole group (Smithson, 2000). This led to whole groups of young people stating the same belief because one or two dominant young people suggested it.

We did expect this to happen and took a few measures to overcome it. The first was to arrange focus groups with groups of young people who would not necessarily be confident to get their voice heard in a larger, heterogenous group. We asked a Special School and an LGBT support group if we could meet with their young people, as well as asking schools to arrange focus groups with specific cohorts of young people.

Unfortunately, the special school did not respond to our requests. And, as ethnic diversity in Cornish schools is quite low, the schools which were able to support the focus groups were not able to provide a separate group of young people of a similar age from BAME backgrounds. We did meet with 2 groups of LGBT young people which allowed us to ensure this groups' voice was present in the tool.

Another measure we took was to split large groups into 2 smaller groups; this better enabled us to record the depth of the conversation while minimising the impact of one dominant young person.

However, even with these measures, there were a number of groups who had one or two very vocal young people whose opinions influenced the whole group.

Another issue was that the focus groups had to be run as a cross between an education session, a youth group and a research group. The reasons for this were as follows:

- Education session—young people did not always have experience of the behaviour we were talking about, or had no experience of adults talking to them about it. Therefore, in order to ensure we were talking about the same issue, we had to first explain what it was.

- Youth group—as youth workers it was natural for us to take a youth work approach to these groups, including having a "group agreement" and actively engaging the young people, rather than simply asking questions and awaiting responses.
- Research group—bring our alternative persona as researchers, we did have specific questions we wanted to ask the young people, so when conversation veered too far from the topic, we would ask specific questions to bring it back.

This approach made the setting quite informal, and therefore, sometimes teachers or youth workers would ask leading rather than open questions and would guide the discussion in an effort to be helpful. Equally, young people would sometimes ask us our opinions on issues, and our answers would inevitably guide the discussion.

The beauty of this informal approach was that it allowed us to have interesting and varied discussions with the young people based on their interest and knowledge of the issues. For example, with a group of 13- to 15-year-old boys, we had a long discussion about what they enjoyed about online gaming, which illuminated a great deal of activities linked to gaming which we had not anticipated. Equally, a group of 16- to 18-year-old young women spoke at length about their views and concerns about young men their age watching porn, covering their frustrations over what these young men expected women's bodies to look like, to fears that it would have a long-term negative impact on the young men's ability to have healthy, happy sex lives in the future.

Emerging Issues from Focus Groups

There were some areas which generated a lot of interesting discussion, and these are explored below. When we reflect upon these findings, we see some similarities with the initial discussions with young people which convinced us of the need for the tool and allowed us to shape the early draft. It also allowed us to be confident that we had reached a point of saturation when exploring some of the key issues around online safeguarding, young people's use of digital technology and its impact upon their wellbeing. However, it also further improved our appreciation of the complexities of young people's use of digital technology and the importance of an individual response to young people's disclosures of online harm—different activities clearly impact on young people depending on

their existing knowledge, resilience, support structures and personality. We cannot simply say that behaviour x requires response y. It became clear that the most significant part of the tool would be the "potentially harmful" category, where we were essentially guiding the professional to discover more from the disclosure to consider appropriate response.

The Dark Web

In many discussions with the 13–15 and 16–18 age groups, young people said accessing the dark web should be in Harmful. They had a very limited understanding of the deep web and mostly had no understanding of the difference between the deep web and the dark web. Many felt, quite strongly, that anyone accessing it could only be doing so for nefarious purposes.

> ...I would change one of the amber ones to red – accessing dark web.
> Young person, 16–18 age group

> Dark web should be in red as it's dangerous. (emphasis in original)
> Young person, 16–18 age group

These responses helped us identify that we needed to be clearer about the distinction between the deep web and the dark, specifically splitting them to show that accessing the "dark web" refers to accessing illegal content and accessing the deep web is just using a browser such as TOR to mask their identity; we also included these definitions in the glossary of the tool as we realised that professionals would likely also need this clarification (Headstart Kernow, 2020).

In the majority of our discussions with young people, even after being given this distinction, they did not feel that there was any legitimate reason to access the deep web.

That is, until we spoke to an LGBT group. In this group, the understanding of the dark web was far more nuanced. It was the first group we spoke to where the young people admitted to having accessed the deep web. Their reasons for using it were usually around exploring their sexuality or gender identity without any risk of being "outed" before they were ready.

Talking to this group of young people revealed a vulnerability while also highlighting an important function of this online behaviour. The

vulnerability was that a young person who is exploring their sexuality or gender identity on the deep web would be at high risk of being groomed, harassed or receiving unsolicited sexual advances. Being young, likely not yet "out", and inexperienced in relationships generally would mean they would be less able to identify risks, and may be less likely to seek help if something went wrong for fear of outing themselves. If they lived in a household where homophobia, biphobia or transphobia were present, they would be even less likely to seek help, especially as this may be why they were using the deep web in the first place.

This high level of risk for this clearly very vulnerable group of young people would surely make any professional want to start safeguarding procedures. However, the function of the behaviour should also be recognised. The young person may need to explore their identity in order to be able to talk about it. Many parents may not know or understand the terms pansexual or asexual. They may be opposed to transgender issues, or be confused by the idea of non-binary people. Therefore, they might not discuss these issues with their children, or if they do, might (deliberately or inadvertently) state homophobic or transphobic views. While these identities may be becoming more mainstream as whole, a non-binary 15-year-old will need to learn what non-binary means before they are able to come out as such.

After many deep discussions with young people and with the other professionals involved in the development of the tool, we decided that this behaviour should be categorised as Potentially Harmful. If a young person says they've accessed the deep web to explore their sexuality, and they are now ready to come out as pansexual, we shouldn't be starting safeguarding procedures because they've accessed the deep web, but instead talking to them about how we can best support them. That discussion should rightly cover whether they had any bad experiences while on the deep web, which may well require a safeguarding referral, but it should also cover what support or social groups for LGBTQIA+ young people they can access, where they can find reliable information about these issues and who they can go to for help with any more research they might want to do.

This is a perfect example of the importance of finding out more when a Potentially Harmful behaviour is identified.

Sending/Receiving Nudes

Another hotly debated behaviour was that of nudes. Firstly, it caused a great deal of disagreement among the young people, and later a similar amount among the professionals. Some of the issues are identified and explored below.

1. It's illegal, so don't do it.

Most young people have heard this message. They know it's illegal. Actually, I was surprised about the level of knowledge they had about the law. They knew that it was illegal for them to take nudes of themselves, for them to send them to other people and for other people to look at and/or keep those messages.

The youngest age group that we talked about nudes to was 9–12; this was because for younger age groups we had not included sending nudes/sexting in the first draft of the tool. For 9- to 12-year-olds, sending nudes/sexting is categorised as a Harmful behaviour, and certainly, at this age, we would expect to see a safeguarding response if young people were found to be engaging in this behaviour. The children in the focus groups agreed that this was the correct place, but interestingly they also felt that adults could best support them by helping them remove any naked pictures of them. Sadly, in talking to professionals about online safeguarding, even though they know the distribution of these images is illegal, many do not know the mechanism for removal.

2. Sharenting

For the 9–12 age group, one issue that caused much discussion was the fact that their parents had naked baby photos of them on their Facebook page. These pictures had existed for years on this page, but the young people had reached an age when their peers might seek out these images in order to embarrass and humiliate one another. All the children we spoke to, from 6 years old upwards, didn't like their parents having so many pictures of them online, but the fact that these photos could then be shared around a friendship group or class as a method of bullying was of particular concern. While these images wouldn't be considered illegal to the letter of the law, as they were not intended to be indecent (Crown Prosecution Service, 2018) the children and young people in these focus

groups did make that distinction—naked photos of themselves that were shared around their consent were humiliating regardless of the nature of the photos.

3. “Accidental” Nudes

In the 13- to 15-year-old age group, one interesting discussion with a group of boys was around images being sent to them without their consent. This was not about the unsolicited “dick pic” but rather that if pictures are doing the rounds, they felt it would be very unfair if they were punished for receiving it if they had never asked for it in the first place. Discussions on this subject also touched on the idea that young people would delete these images straight away but some messaging services (such as WhatsApp) would save them without the young people necessarily knowing, again meaning they may be in possession of an illegal image without their knowledge. This also raised concerns about how to report these images. If a young person was sent an illegal image without their consent, should they delete it completely, or keep it in order to report it? The message of “it’s illegal, don’t do it” has so muddied the water that young people do not know how to help keep other young people safe.

Interestingly, in the 16–18 age group, the discussion of “accidentally” receiving nudes was viewed with much hilarity, especially by one group of young women, who felt that anyone claiming to have “accidentally” received a nude was probably lying to get themselves out of trouble with whoever had found it.

There was a great deal of cynicism from the young women in this particular group; their attitude towards young men their age was that boys their age were less mature than them and were always just out for whatever they could get, whether it was nudes or a physical sexual relationship. The young women saw themselves as the gatekeepers of this, with some expressing the idea that if you send a nude you should expect it to get shared around all the boys. Young men seemed less aware of this, and none of them said they would share an image with others if it was sent to them, whether this was a case of only sharing views that would be well received by the group (Smithson, 2000) was not clear from the discussions.

4. Intimidation

In one of the focus groups with 16- to 18-year-olds, there was a concern that some of their peers may be using sexual images to intimidate other people, whether a selfie or something sourced online. The young women seemed particularly concerned about being sent these images. They were able to talk eloquently about the issues they had dealing with these situations as they felt the young men sending them were likely to react badly if they asked them to stop, and that it might result in even more intimidating images being sent. Many young women expressed the view that the only way of dealing with this behaviour was to ignore it. This was therefore not something they would be likely to report and they did not feel parents/carers or professionals in their lives would be able to help them even if they did report it.

It was interesting that this was noted as the converse situation (where young women send nudes to males) was not something they were able to use to the same effect. Males in their lives could intimidate them by sending images, and by receiving them, suggesting a highly gendered experience of sharing these images.

Young men we spoke to did not see the sending of images as intimidating, but were not able to articulate why they might send an image.

Social Media

Many of the young people we spoke to had had bad experiences as a result of social media. These were not experiences of grooming or "catfishing" (receiving messages from someone pretending to be someone else). In fact, in the focus groups, there was not even in-depth discussion of bullying through social media. The main concern that young people had around social media was the anxiety it caused them.

One element of this was "fear of missing out" (FOMO) (described as "the mundane" in Chapter 4), where young people felt they had to perform on social media so as to prove they were having a really good time—and even though they knew that what they posted wasn't an accurate representation of what they experienced, they still felt envious when seeing how much fun other people were having.

Another element was around body image. Young men in the 13–15 age group said that they knew friends (generally girls) who always used

apps like "face tune" to enhance their appearance, which they thought was a bad thing as it would make people feel bad about themselves.

This group of young men also thought that although compulsive social media use was definitely a bad thing, it was pretty normal.

All the young people we spoke to between 13 and 18 years old said that although they thought looking at your phone at night was probably not good, they didn't think it was a big problem, as long as you just checked messages and then went back to sleep. Some people identified that sitting up all night scrolling would be bad, but on the whole, young people didn't feel that looking at a device at or after bedtime was a problem.

Gaming

There were a variety of thoughts around gaming. Parents of the youngest age group felt that children in the 0–5 age group should not be exposed to any age-restricted games, with many parents stating that they did not even use devices around their children (although it was not clear whether this included Smart TVs and streaming services). Children in the 5–7 and 8–12 focus groups actually tended to agree with parents, saying that games with violence should be in the Harmful category. One young person expressed this by saying about games and violent TV shows and films:

> When you get stressed it stops you being a child.
>
> Child, 8–12 age group

For those over 13, the issue of age-restricted gaming was more relaxed. There was a general sense that if someone is playing age-restricted games and their parents have agreed to it, it's probably fine, with the caveat from one group that parents should make sure they know what the game is about so they can make an informed decision.

One group of young men in the 13–15 age group said that although Fortnite is a 12 (PEGI rating), there were loads of younger kids playing it. This was described as quite unpleasant for these young men as they didn't want to get screamed at by a load of kids.

With regard to the risk of grooming and catfishing in these games, they said that if you are aware of it happening, it ruins the game. This was not to say they would rather not know, but with games where they were working collaboratively with other people, leaving a group may mean

having to start from scratch with minimal strength and abilities—which would be a huge disappointment after months of building those things up. They said they would probably just stop playing in that case, rather than starting again.

The same group of young men said that their parents were much stricter about them staying up at night playing on game consoles than about playing on their phones. In some cases, this meant they could keep playing even after they had been told to turn off the console as some games are also accessible on a phone. However, in the main, the sense was that this was unfair, with siblings being allowed to scroll through social media long after the young men had been told to stop playing.

Recognising the Behaviours

We also asked young people whether they thought parents/carers or teachers would recognise any of the Harmful behaviours, and whether they would recognise them in their friends. The majority of those who responded said that it might be obvious that something was wrong, but really the only way to know would be if the person told you.

One respondent also said in relation to whether a parent/carer or teacher would know what to do if you told them one of the Harmful behaviours was happening to you that their lack of knowledge might result in them thinking the young person disclosing was joking.

Overwhelmingly, the sense from young people was that adults would not recognise when something was wrong, and that even if they did (or were told) they would still not know what to do about it.

Making the Changes to the Tool

Once all the focus groups had been run, we collated all the feedback and went through each point to assess whether to make the proposed change or not. We considered the number of young people who had made the suggestion and whether there were other safeguarding concerns around the changes. We rejected 37 suggestions and accepted 50, some of which were amended.

Some of the suggestions were rejected because they were too specific, such as creating memes, parties on snap chat and accessing Omegle. These were covered by more general behaviours such as “making content and publishing online’, and ‘online interaction with strangers”. Others were

rejected because they do not reflect the best way to protect young people, for example "move phone after bedtime to green" and "move taking a selfie to red". The latter was from a young woman who said that for her, taking a selfie was a sign of poor mental health. She had struggled with eating disorders and body dysmorphia, so if someone saw her taking a selfie, it would be a sign that she was on a downward spiral and would need some support. This showed incredible insight from the young person into her own digital life, and should be applauded. For the majority of young people, this would not be the case but it does serve to highlight the fact that young people are often able to articulate the risk they face in greater depth with better understanding than professionals may give them credit for.

Of the suggestions we did accept, we added 26 behaviours, amended the wording of 22 behaviours and moved 6 behaviours. For example, "sending/receiving nudes" was placed in Harmful for 9- to 12-year-olds and Potentially Harmful for 13- to 15-year-olds. Young people suggested adding "pressuring someone to send nudes" and "selling nudes". The published version of the tool now has 8 distinct behaviours relating to the sending and receiving of nudes which are included in age groups from 6 to 18 years.

The purpose of consulting with young people wasn't simply to tick a box, or to assume that they knew more about staying safe online than we did. In fact, a point that we always come back to when talking to professionals about Online Resilience is that as professionals we know a lot more about managing risk than young people. During adolescence, young people are predisposed to want to take risks and explore their identity (Harris, 2013). The internet simply provides them with a new environment in which to do this. As discussed in Chapter 2, the "digital natives" narrative is frequently brought to bear but rejected—young people don't have an innate understanding of the risks they may be facing online.

Conclusion

Through the focus groups and discussion with professionals working with young people, we found a disparity between perceived problems and threats online. Some of these were driven by young people wanting to engage in certain behaviours which we could not, in good conscience, say were healthy—for example looking at their social media at night.

Others were a result of professionals having a poor grasp of what young people actually do online, which prevents them being able to have meaningful discussions with young people about their online lives.

Our aim was to close this gap by outlining the specific behaviour professionals should be looking for, rather than looking at the app/game/platform.

By consulting with young people, we were able to ensure the behaviours listed in the tool reflected the wide-variety of activities young people engaged in online, and by sharing this with colleagues across the sector, we were able to phrase this in a way professionals would accept and understand.

While not all suggested changes were applied to the final version of the tool, we considered every suggestion on its individual merits and added or amended 50 behaviours.

In the next chapter, we will discuss how the tool was received by professionals in the field generally, as well as the issues created by professionals' own expectations and values.

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