MOLLY ROSE FOUNDATION

Children's exposure to suicide, self-harm, depression and eating disorder content on social media

Research briefing – October 2025

It is now almost 8 years since Molly Russell died after being algorithmically bombarded with harmful suicide, self-harm and depression content. New research finds that, just weeks before the Online Safety Act's Protection of Children Codes came into force in July 2025, children continued to be put at risk at a deeply worrying scale.

- In the last week, over a third (37%) of 13–17 year olds had seen high risk suicide, self-harm, depression or eating disorder content on major social media platforms. This is content likely to be classified as harmful under the Online Safety Act, either as Primary Priority Content or non-designated content.[1]
- Girls, children with SEND and those with low wellbeing were even more likely to be exposed. One in two girls (49%) had seen high risk content, along with 68% of those with low wellbeing.
- Children using TikTok and X were twice as likely to have encountered high risk content as users of other platforms.
- Many children were at risk of cumulative harm – either repeatedly encountering high risk content, or seeing high risk content alongside high volumes of compounding material. This suggests that the risks faced by Molly remained considerable as late as this summer.

These findings must be an urgent call to action, with Ofcom's unambitious approach to implementing the Online Safety Act incommensurate to the scale at which children are being exposed to potentially harmful content. Without decisive action to strengthen the legislative framework, further young lives will be lost.

About the research

In spring 2025, MRF commissioned Revealing Reality, working with the PHSE Association, to conduct a large-scale survey to understand children's exposure to potentially harmful content on

1 Under the OSA, Primary Priority Content (PPC) refers to harmful content that all children must be prevented from accessing. Non-designated content (NDC) refers to content that children must be protected from depending on their age. Under Ofcom's codes, NDC should be excluded or given a low degree of prominence on recommender feeds.

social media[2] across four themes: suicide, self-harm, depression and eating disorders. 1,897 children aged 13–17 across the UK took part, covering a range of backgrounds and characteristics.

The survey aimed to provide a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of children's experiences than existing Ofcom trackers, asking children not only whether they had seen content types likely to be classified as harmful under the OSA ('high risk' content), but also about broader content types that could contribute to cumulative harm.[3]

Fieldwork took place immediately before the Online Safety Act's Protection of Children Codes came into force in July 2025. The results therefore provide a crucial baseline against which the effectiveness of regulation can be judged. The full research report can be found **here**.

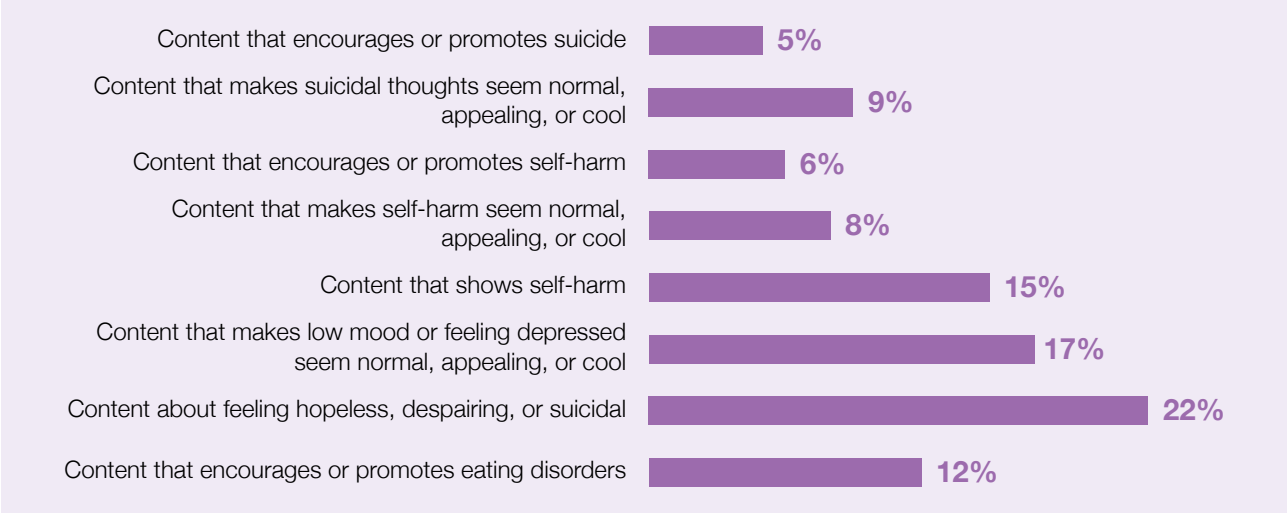
What the research found

Over a third of 13–17 year-olds had seen high risk suicide, self-harm, depression or eating disorder content in the last week, with some encountering this repeatedly

Our analysis found that **over a third (37%) of children had seen at least one type of high risk content in the last week – content that they should be prevented or protected from encountering under the Online Safety Act**. This equates to roughly 1.5 million 13–17 year olds across the UK, and suggests that a considerable proportion of children were being shown harmful material on a regular and normalised basis.

Looking across the four themes explored in the research, over a quarter (28%) had been exposed to high-risk depression content, with one in six (17%) seeing high-risk self-harm content. Slightly fewer young people had encountered high risk eating disorder content (12%) and suicide content (10%). Figure 1 breaks this down by specific content type.

Figure 1: Proportion of 13–17 year olds that reported they had seen high risk content types while using TikTok, Instagram, X, YouTube, Pinterest or Snapchat in the last week



2 Children were asked about their exposure to potentially harmful content across six major platforms: TikTok, Instagram, X, YouTube, Pinterest and Snapchat.

3 For a full breakdown of the content types children were asked about within each theme, and the risk level these were assigned during analysis, see the full report.

27%
of those who had seen **'content that encourages or promotes suicide'** had seen this **10 times or more** on at least one platform.

Some children were being repeatedly bombarded by harmful content, increasing their risk of experiencing the cumulative harm which contributed to Molly's death. **Of those who had seen each type of high risk content, between 13% and 27% had seen this 10 times or more on at least one platform**. This included 27% of those who had seen 'content that encourages or promotes suicide' and 20% of those who had seen 'content that encourages or promotes self-harm.'

One in two girls had encountered high risk suicide, self-harm, depression or eating disorder content in the last week

Groups of children known to be more vulnerable to online harm were at even higher risk. **Around half (49%) of the girls in the sample reported seeing at least one type of high risk content in the last week, compared with a quarter (25%) of boys.** This included one in five (21%) who had seen 'content that shows self-harm', one in five (20%) who had seen 'content that encourages or promotes eating disorders', and around a third (32%) who had seeing 'content about feeling hopeless, despairing or suicidal'.

These findings are incredibly concerning. Not only is suicide-related internet use recorded more frequently in deaths by suicide for girls,[4] girls are also more likely to experience self-harm.[5]

Children with low wellbeing were three times more likely to have encountered high-risk content than those with high wellbeing, with those with SEND also more at risk

Children with low wellbeing were also substantially more likely to be exposed to harmful content. This clearly points to the role that recommender algorithms play in targeting content based on behavioural indicators, as well as the increased level of risk facing those already struggling with their mental health.

Over two thirds (68%) of 13–17 year olds categorised as having low wellbeing had been exposed to high risk suicide, self-harm, depression or eating disorder content, compared to just one in five (20%) with high wellbeing.[6] This included around a quarter (23%) of those with low wellbeing who had seen 'content that encourages or promotes suicide', compared to only 3% of those with high wellbeing.

68%
of 13–17 year olds with low wellbeing had seen high risk content, compared to one in five of those with high wellbeing.

Children with SEND were also at higher risk than their peers. Two in five (43%) of those with SEND reported that they had seen high risk content, compared to 35% of those without.

4 Rodway, C et al (2022) Online harms? Suicide related online experience: a UK wide case series study of young people who die by suicide. Psychological Medicine, 53 (10), 1–12
5 Diggins, E et al (2024) Exploring gender differences in risk factors for self-harm in adolescents using data from the Millenium Cohort Study. Journal of Affective Disorders, 345, 131–140
6 Children's wellbeing was measured using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS). For further detail please the detailed methodology in the full report.

Many children were seeing high risk content alongside high volumes of compounding material – increasing the risk of cumulative harm

We know from the circumstances of Molly's death that harmful content poses an increased risk when viewed repeatedly[7] – a pathway recognised in the Online Safety Act as 'cumulative harm'. Our findings show that, as of June 2025, many children continued to encounter potentially harmful content in alarmingly high volumes.

Our methodology enabled to us to determine that not only were many children encountering high risk content repeatedly, **many were seeing high risk content in combination with related material likely to increase their risk of experiencing cumulative harm.**

For example, of those who had seen content encouraging suicide or self-harm in the last week, over a third (34%) had also seen 'content about feeling sad, down or lonely' at least ten times. Similarly, two in five (42%) of those who seen content encouraging eating disorders had seen 'content that makes being slim look cool or desirable' at least ten times.

34%

of those who saw **content encouraging suicide or self-harm** also saw **'content about feeling sad, down or lonely' 10 times or more** on at least one platform

These findings – to our knowledge the first of their kind – are deeply disturbing, and demand a regulatory regime that not only has the teeth to tackle the high risk design choices that we know are bombarding children with high volumes of potentially harmful content, but that also takes a more nuanced approach to understanding and monitoring online risks.

Children were most likely to encounter high risk material on TikTok and X

Children were considerably more likely to be exposed to high risk content on two major platforms, TikTok and X. Comparing those who spent a similar amount of time on each platform, **children using TikTok and X were more than twice as likely to have encountered the high risk content compared to users of other platforms**. Of those spending 30–120 minutes on each platform, 31% of TikTok users and 29% of X users reported seeing at least one type of high risk content, compared to 13% of Instagram users, 13% of Pinterest users and 11% of YouTube users.

Potentially harmful content was most likely to be seen on recommender feeds

When asked where they had encountered potentially harmful content,[8] **over half of children reported encountering this on recommender feeds, such as Instagram's Explore and Reels pages, or TikTok's For You page**. This finding underscores the central role that these functionalities play in exposing children to harmful or age inappropriate content, and aligns closely with MRF research highlighting how aggressive algorithms push high volumes of harmful content in the interest of increased user engagement.[9] These results re-iterate the case for urgent strengthening of measures designed to address algorithmic harm.

7 The Inquest into Molly's death heard that she saw 2000 items of harmful of content on Instagram alone in the months before her death.
8 Children were asked where they had seen potentially harmful content at the theme level (i.e. suicide, self-harm, eating disorders or depression content), rather than in relation to specific content types.
9 Molly Rose Foundation (2025) Pervasive by design

Our analysis also identified a number of other high risk product surfaces. This included 11–14% of those who had seen potentially harmful content seeing this on 'Story' features, and 9–13% seeing this on 'Someone's profile'. In light of this, it is concerning that Ofcom's codes include almost no measures targeted at these and other risky functionalities, despite a requirement to make services safe-by-design in the very first section of the Act.

Most children felt they had little agency over the content they saw on social media

Our findings suggest that most 13–17 year olds did not feel able control their exposure to harmful content via platforms' existing safety features. **Of those who had ever seen something that made them 'upset or uncomfortable', less than a third felt there was 'always' something they could do to avoid this** (27%–30%, depending on the platform). Disturbingly, around a fifth felt there was 'nothing' they could do to avoid harmful content, including 30% of those who had seen harmful content on X**.**

Measures that can meaningfully address this challenge and give children agency over their online experiences are a crucial part of the online safety regime. However, MRF research suggests that Ofcom's early efforts in this area are unlikely to be effective, with evidence that Platforms already appear to be 'gaming' new requirements introduced by Ofcom's codes.[10]

Implications for the Online Safety Act

Molly Rose Foundation have repeatedly been highly critical of Ofcom's deeply unambitious approach to implementing the Online Safety Act. These findings both justify and increase our concern, with Ofcom's current set of measures poorly placed to respond to the scale at which children were being exposed to harmful content and the potential effects of cumulative harm as recently as this summer.

Our research shows that, immediately before the Act came into force, children were being put at risk at considerably higher levels than estimated by existing trackers.[11] This includes many being repeatedly bombarded by overwhelming volumes and toxic combinations of potentially harmful content, with vulnerable groups worst affected.

These findings must inject renewed urgency and ambition into Ofcom's implementation of the Act, with current risk-averse measures unlikely to adequately drive change or reverse the incentives associated with deeply embedded business models. For example, it is highly unlikely that Ofcom's current measures to protect children from the effects of algorithmic harm – where tech firms are asked to invest only £80,000 in one off costs and then £3,000 – £20,000 on an annual basis – will adequately protect the many teenagers we now know are being bombarded with high volumes of harmful content. Similarly, the fact that Ofcom's latest consultation on Additional Safety Measures does not recommend the use of proactive technology to detect non-designated content profoundly lets down the 28% of children who saw high risk depression content in the last week.

10 ibid.

11 Ofcom's Online Experiences Tracker aims to cover a broader range of harmful content than this survey, and as such includes limited statements related to each theme. By including a greater range of statements, this survey was able to more accurately understand children's exposure to potentially harmful content.

This research must also increase pressure on the Government and Prime Minister to address structural weaknesses in the Act. The challenge identified here necessitates a regime with robust incentives to drive down children's exposure to potentially harmful content. **A new harm reduction duty on Ofcom – with clear targets for what the regime should achieve – would recentre the regime around safety outcomes,** and add much needed urgency and ambition to Ofcom's approach.

This research aimed to establish an in-depth baseline against which the effectiveness of the OSA can be judged. That this was necessary points to **a clear need for far more effective monitoring of online harm**, including research that goes beyond existing trackers towards a more nuanced and user-centred understanding of risk – that takes into account how, when and to whom different types of potentially harmful content are being shown, rather than just whether content violates a certain threshold. As it stands, civil society plays a central role in providing this evidence with little support or funding. This balance must urgently be addressed, with the **industry levy extended to support civil society and independent research.**

In light of these findings, **children also urgently need to be empowered to engage with online environments in a safe, healthy and critical manner.** Government must urgently prioritise the teaching of **critical algorithmic literacy,** helping young people to critically engage with the toxic business models and recommender algorithms that are shaping their online experiences and exposing them to harm. The ongoing Curriculum and Assessment Review presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to embed these skills across all key stages and the entire curriculum.

This research will make difficult reading for parents everywhere, even more so for the parents of girls and other vulnerable children. The tragic reality is that every day we lose one young person to suicide where technology has played a role.[12] Without clear and decisive action we will continue to lose more young lives.

While the Online Safety Act continues to be the most effective vehicle to protect children from preventable harm, further legislative strengthening is urgently required to reset the balance in favour of children.

For a briefing and discussion about how we can work together to tackle preventable harm, please contact **hello@mollyrosefoundation.org**

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12 Rodway, C et al (2022) Online harms? Suicide related online experience: a UK-wide case series study of young people who died by suicide. Psychological Medicine, 53(10), 1–12