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The Network for Principals and Deputy Principals

IPPN Submission to the Joint Committee on Children and Equality

February 2026

Table of Contents

Introduction

Our CEO Páiric Clerkin and I are pleased to represent IPPN and primary school leaders and address the members of the Committee on the subject of technology, social media and children, with a focus on the safety and wellbeing of children online.

I am a teaching principal in St. Michael's NS, at the foothills of the Ox Mountains in Cloonacool, Tubbercurry, County Sligo and took on the role of president of IPPN in September 2025 for a period of two years. As IPPN operates in the primary and special schools sector, our knowledge and our comments today are focused on children in these schools.

IPPN's role as the professional body for primary school leaders is to empower the principals and deputy principals of primary and special schools to focus on their core purpose, and what they are qualified and skilled to do: the leadership and management of teaching and learning in their schools and supporting every child in the school to thrive. It is worth noting that 54% of principals and 98% of deputy principals teach full-time on top of leadership and management responsibilities. This is often forgotten, and is relevant to today's discussion.

Evidence

Regarding technology, social media and children, the evidence is very clear – there is significant harm caused to children's mental health by social media and other online content and technologies such as gaming, particularly when used without appropriate supervision and age-appropriate filtering, which is the case for the majority of primary-age children.

Cyber Safe Kids recent report *A Life Behind the Screens* highlights some very sobering statistics about primary-age children:

- 71% used 13+ social media and instant messaging apps

- 28% experienced content or unsolicited contact that 'bothered' them, including exposure to horror, violence, sexual material, threats, scams, and dangerous ideas. 47% of them did <u>not</u> tell a parent

- 42% do <u>not</u> talk to their parents about their online activity

- 63% say their parents can't see what they're doing online.

IPPN echoes CyberSafe Kids goal of

'a digital society in which children's rights are fully recognised and upheld.

This includes restricting access to harmful or inappropriate content and ensuring that the platforms children access are age-appropriate, and meet the highest standards of safety and design, with children's evolving abilities taken into consideration.'

The Experience in Primary Schools

To be clear, social media and online content is not a direct issue within Irish primary schools. Most primary schools have policies and procedures in place to prevent or to minimise pupils' access to devices and online content during the school day. Online safety is taught as part of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum in Irish primary schools, where pupils are encouraged to use the internet responsibly, protect their personal information, and recognise online risks. Online safety is also supported through the Webwise programme, which provides age-appropriate resources to help children stay safe and respectful online. As such, technology and social media has little impact on schools insofar as its use during school time. However, school-based lessons alone are not sufficient, as many children continue to access online content outside of school hours, where exposure to inappropriate or harmful material does still occur despite preventative education. While schools are not expected to police students' online activity outside school hours, they are required to intervene where the behaviour has a negative effect within the school setting — for example, if it disrupts learning, creates a hostile environment, or affects a pupil's safety.

Online content is often designed to appeal to children and young people and is also designed to be addictive. Children are simply not equipped to self-regulate in terms of its usage and impact, which can be severe and can include anxiety, depression, school avoidance and other behaviours of concern. Increased anxiety levels among young children is something schools are dealing with all the time – we know from experience that it can be directly related to unsupervised use of online tools and access to inappropriate content.

Schools are trying to support parents and families to manage the challenges posed in this digital age. While a ban wouldn't resolve the overall issue, similar to underage drinking, it would set the standard and acknowledge harm caused and may reduce the overall prevalence. Just because people always find workarounds doesn't mean action shouldn't be taken.

IPPN is a member of the Children's Rights Alliance. It was interesting to note the perspective of the CRA on the social media ban.

> 'Undoubtedly, it's attractive to adult decision makers. It is something that can be done and one is seen to be doing something, it [would] not stop children accessing social media content on their browsers, nor going onto other platforms not subject to the ban which, as less regulated, may have even less protections than those on the banned platforms.'

IPPN certainly supports the CRA's calls for

> 'building crucial new EU wide legislation to require platforms to better regulate harmful material and to criminalise the horrific spread of child sexual abuse material online. In this digital age, we want our children to be safe. Safe in the physical world; safe online. The end, therefore, is agreed. What is being debated is the means.'

Impact on Children

Coming back to the point about the impact of access to inappropriate online content and how it plays out in schools, in essence, even when inappropriate online activity occurs outside school, its emotional, social, and behavioural effects frequently carry over into the school environment.

What we often notice is disruptive behaviour, relationships falling apart, online bullying and inappropriate behaviour coming into school ground, including heightened anxiety, emotional dysregulation, school avoidance and refusal, behavioural difficulties, social withdrawal and isolation, low mood and depression, and concerns relating to self-harm. Boards of Management, school leaders, teachers and other school staff can only do so much. It is an issue primarily of the world outside school walls. As I said, schools do their best to support parents in managing what can be a real challenge – keeping children safe physically, mentally and socially.

Mental Health Supports in Schools

In October 2022, IPPN addressed the Joint Committee on Education on Mental Health Supports in Schools and highlighted a few key points which are also relevant to today's discussion. We have submitted the document presented at the time to the Committee, so we won't go into details here, other than to say that school leaders are acutely aware of the increasing levels of emotional ill health, including anxiety, self-harm, withdrawal, school refusal, acting out, aggression, disruption in class, isolation, eating disorders and depression, among children in our primary schools. I could go on. The prevalence of this is a real concern to school leaders.

Children are also dealing with a wide range of other challenges. Some children arrive at school each day carrying significant challenges in their lives. Some may be experiencing bereavement or changes within their family due to addiction or mental health difficulties. Others may be living in temporary accommodation, residing in Direct Provision, or adjusting to life in Ireland after leaving countries affected by conflict. In addition, some children may

be caring for a family member, experiencing poverty or food insecurity, or living with domestic violence. Others may be navigating neurodevelopmental differences, learning difficulties or sensory needs. Many are coping with the impact of social media, low self-esteem, or feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the future. And yes, children are also impacted by engagement with online tools such as gaming, social media, chat rooms and the like.

What is needed

Schools do their utmost to care for and help children experiencing mental health challenges but teachers and school leaders are not experts, we are not psychologists, we are not mental health professionals, and that's the type of help so many of our pupils need. The services providing mental health support to children, while excellent when you can access them, are completely inadequate and under-staffed. Children are suffering, and their difficulties are intensifying the longer they have to wait for access to specialist support. This has to change.

IPPN's 2022 submission called for

- a seamless, integrated approach across health and education to mental health in schools
- for teams of health & education professionals to work with school clusters and individual schools, to support children directly in the schools where they learn
- sufficient capacity and timely access to supports for children – this is key
- training and support to develop a culture of wellbeing in schools.

We are delighted that, through our advocacy work alongside the NAPD and the Department of Education, mental health supports in schools are being piloted in a number of areas across the country. There have been significant challenges in resourcing even these pilots,

yet we are hopeful that increased numbers of undergraduate places will help to ensure adequate supply of skilled professionals in schools in the coming years.

The rollout of the Education Therapy Service (ETS) to special schools in the coming years and in other schools in subsequent years will also be a help. We are told that it will build on the existing therapy service in the NCSE and is part of a broader inclusive education strategy. ETS will provide three strands of support to the education system, which include:

1. Strand I: 'Embedded Therapy Support'
2. Strand II: 'Sustained In-school Therapy' (SIT)
3. Strand III: Regional Therapy (RT) – Teacher Professional Learning (TPL).

In the meantime, supporting parents to monitor their children's access to digital content is crucial, as is ensuring that platforms offering content that is harmful to children do whatever is necessary to prevent children from accessing it. In practice, stronger enforcement could include mandatory age-appropriate design standards, stricter age verification mechanisms, penalties for non-compliance, and greater oversight of algorithmic content recommendation systems that expose children to harmful material.

We hope that role of this Committee will help to ensure that the government introduces robust legislation to protect children from exposure to inappropriate online content, ensuring their safety and wellbeing, so that every child can grow, learn, and thrive in a safe digital environment.