

Speech: Keeping our children safe

It's the natural impulse in any society – to want to help and protect our kids.

In bringing up our children, we remember how important it was to grow up under the watchful eye of people who loved and cared for us.

People who wanted the best for us and their number one objective was our happiness.

I was lucky.

Growing up in Bristol, what my parents lacked in money, they made up for it with in love.

I knew that they would do anything for me and my four brothers.

They built a loving and happy home – the perfect springboard from which to go out and to grab life by the horns.

They instilled in us confidence, resilience and kindness.

And most importantly, they made us feel safe.

But some children – even those from as loving homes as mine – are not so lucky.

We know that there are people out there who want to use and abuse our children.

We know it happens all too often.

Physically, emotionally and sexually.

The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse estimates that 15% of girls and 5% of boys experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16.

Sexual abuse is taking place in family homes.

On our streets.

In our communities.

And in institutions across our country.

We've witnessed horrendous abuse perpetrated by gangs who have been persistent and determined in places like Rotherham, Rochdale, Oxford, Newcastle and Telford.

Keeping our children safe will be my mission as Home Secretary.

I've already been clear that I will ask difficult questions about the gangs who sexually abuse our children.

There will be no no-go areas of inquiry and I will not let cultural or political sensitivities get in the way of understanding the problem and doing something about it.

We know that in these recent high profile cases, where people convicted have been disproportionately from a Pakistani background.

I've instructed my officials to explore the particular contexts and characteristics of these types of gangs.

And if the evidence suggests that there are cultural factors that may be driving this type of offending, then I will take action.

But today I want to talk about the appalling growing trend of children being sexually abused online.

I want to talk about the invisible predators.

The ones who lurk online and are a great danger to our children.

It was when I visited the National Crime Agency's Child Exploitation Online Protection Command that the full horror of the scale of child sexual abuse was really brought home to me.

The National Crime Agency estimates that around 80,000 people in the UK that present some kind of sexual threat to children online.

And the NCA believe that's a conservative estimate.

One officer I met who had previously worked in counter-terrorism for over 20 years told me how in all his years of working, he's never been so shocked by the scale of the threat or the determination of the offenders as he is in his current job.

The growth of the internet has given potential offenders who previously may have had no access to children the opportunity to meet and groom and abuse victims online on gaming sites and on social media and to get access to more abuse material than ever before.

The NSPCC's own research shows that some children are being groomed online in less than 45 minutes.

In some cases, the adult pretends to be someone they're not and blackmails the child to perform some kind of sexual act online in this short time frame of 45 minutes.

In other, rarer cases, they move from targeting a victim online to abusing them in person.

We also know that more child sexual abuse images are being uploaded and

shared online than ever before.

In fact, there has been a 700% increase in the number of referrals to the National Crime Agency for this type of content since 2013. 700%.

It's also getting more graphic, with the abuse of babies and children under 10 being regularly documented.

And there's another type of online abuse that really turns my stomach.

That's live-streamed abuse.

This is a disturbing and growing trend thanks to increasing internet speeds, smartphone technology and the growing ease of which money transfers across borders.

Poor and desperate families in countries like the Philippines are being targeted by organised criminal gangs to allow their children to be abused on webcams in exchange for money.

Sickeningly, people from around the world – including from right here in the UK – are then ordering the live-streaming of this abuse, sometimes for as little as £12.

In some cases they are even selecting the age, hair colour, gender and clothing of the child they want to see abused.

Perhaps the people streaming this sort of abuse think that what they're doing isn't as bad because they aren't the ones physically abusing the child.

But let me say this.

That is wrong.

In my view, there is no difference between doing this sort of thing to a child in a bedroom in Manchester or having someone else do it for you to a child in Manila.

But live-streaming is not the only way that money is being made out of child sexual abuse.

We also know that there are some abuse websites which are generating a profit through advertisements by legitimate companies without their knowledge.

This is totally unacceptable, and I call on all companies to carefully consider where their adverts are ending up and who and what they might be funding.

I will be establishing a working group with business and the advertising industry to look into what action can be taken to stop this from happening.

Child abusers are also increasingly working together.

They are congregating online to share tips, images and videos.

And they are encouraging each other and normalising each other's behaviour.

I was recently told about one site where members need to upload 20 new images of child sexual abuse or a two minute video of an infant toddler being abused every month in order to be allowed continued access to the site.

These dangerous offenders are also sharing increasingly sophisticated ways of avoiding being caught.

They're using encryption and anonymisation tools to make their detection harder than ever.

They're jumping from platform to platform.

They're using the dark web and commercial sites.

They're swapping aliases.

And endlessly creating and then deleting online accounts to try and avoid getting caught.

These people are as sophisticated as those terrorists hiding their tracks.

But be assured, we're coming after them.

This government has done more to tackle child sexual exploitation than any other.

Since 2015, we've significantly invested in our law enforcement agencies so that they can respond better to these types of crimes.

We've nearly doubled the number of officers in the National Crime Agency dedicated to tackling online child sexual exploitation.

And every month, around 400 offenders are arrested and over 500 children are safeguarded through coordinated activity by the National Crime Agency and the police.

We've also established an Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse to thoroughly examine the extent to which institutions in England and Wales have done their job at protecting children.

It is essential that we have a robust response to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

We know that these crimes have devastating effects on their victims.

They leave children with feelings of shame, guilt and isolation.

Consequences of this type of abuse can include depression and post-traumatic stress.

In February, we saw the prolific offender Matthew Falder jailed for 32 years after Britain's biggest ever paedophile manhunt.

He had preyed on 200 victims, blackmailing them into sending him humiliating pictures of themselves which he then went on to share on abuse forums.

The courageous testimony from one of his victims shows what a lasting impact online abuse can have.

She says her relationship with her mother broke down under the strain and that she ended up moving out of the family home.

She says that her confidence has been so shaken by her ordeal that she cannot even look at herself in the mirror.

In her own words, and I quote –

“I don’t respect myself to have anyone close to me and I don’t trust anyone. Everyone is trying to trick me, everyone is trying to use me. Part of me believes that that’s all I’m good for anyway, to be abused”.

She is now receiving the help and support she needs.

It’s for children like her that we must take action.

That’s why we have we have increased the amount of funding available for charities supporting the victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

That’s why we have invested £13 million through the Trusted Relationships Fund, for projects to build children’s resilience to these types of crimes.

And that’s why we have already announced our intention to make relationships education mandatory in our primary schools, which will include teaching children about staying safe online.

And as parents and guardians, we can all play an important role in tackling online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

We don’t send our kids out to play in the park or teach them to cross the road alone without giving them advice.

But when it comes to their time spent on the internet or glued to their smartphones, it’s often a different story.

Too often we’re afraid to ask our kids the questions that really matter for their safety.

Who are they speaking to online?

What forums are they using?

What are they sharing online?

It is clear that we cannot afford to shy away from having these frank and open conversations with the children in our lives.

But parents and guardians are only one part of the picture.

There's another group we need to be having frank and open conversations with. And that's the web giants.

Because in my view, they are a long way from where they need to be.

Restrictions that are supposed to keep our children safe online are either not being enforced or do not meet expectations.

And we have overwhelming evidence that abuse continues to take place on online platforms.

This is nowhere near good enough.

And I know that more can be done.

In June I was in Silicon Valley for the second summit of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism.

The Forum was set-up after this government put pressure on the big technology companies following the attack in Westminster, to do more to get terrorist content off their platforms.

They agreed to take decisive action and I've been impressed by the progress the likes of Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and Apple have made on counter-terrorism.

Facebook for instance have taken action on 1.9 million pieces of Daesh and Al-Qaeda content in the first quarter of this year.

99% of this was found by using automated technology and internal reviewers.

Twitter was able to remove 270,000 accounts promoting terrorism between July and December last year.

Interestingly, some of this content is now being stopped before it is even uploaded in the first place.

There's still a long way to go, but a lot has been achieved in the counter-terrorism space. These companies have achieved a lot in a short space of time.

Now I want to see the same level of commitment for child sexual exploitation.

In recent years there has been some good work in this area.

For example, Microsoft has developed PhotoDNA which has helped to identify and take down child sexual abuse imagery from the internet.

And when Google and Microsoft made changes to their algorithms to make it harder to find child sexual abuse material in search results, Google reported an eight-fold reduction in search attempts.

But the reality is that the threat has evolved quicker than industry's

response and industry has not kept up.

And there are some companies that refuse to take it seriously.

So let me say this.

I am not just asking for change, I am demanding it.

And the people are demanding it too.

And if web giants do not take more measures to remove this type of content from their platforms, then I won't be afraid to take action.

We will be setting out our plans for legislation in the forthcoming Online Harms White Paper.

How far we legislate will be informed by the action and attitude that industry takes.

I am also pushing for expectations about how companies deal with online child sexual exploitation to be included in the Code of Practice that we are already asking technology companies to abide by.

Ultimately, what I want to see is a more effective partnership between technology companies, law enforcement, the charity sector and government so that we can be confident in our response to these types of crimes.

I want to lay out action in five main areas from companies:

First, I expect technology companies to block child sexual abuse material as soon as companies detect it being uploaded.

Second, I want them to stop child grooming taking place on their platforms.

Third, I expect companies to work with us to shut down live-streamed child abuse.

As a starting point, we will be making £250,000 available to support new ideas on how to detect and disrupt the live-streaming of abuse.

Fourth, I want companies to be much more forward leaning in helping law enforcement agencies to deal with these types of crimes.

Fifth and finally, I want to see a greater level of openness and transparency and a willingness to share best practice and technology between companies.

In November, I will be convening a meeting of industry experts in the US, in partnership with Microsoft to challenge companies to work together to come up with tools to detect online child grooming which will then be offered for free to other companies.

This is a great example of the type of collaboration I want to see more of.

And if you work for a technology company, then let me say this.

Getting this sort of horrific content off your platforms is the right thing for your business and the right thing for society.

And all eyes are now on you to do the right thing.

So that's what I expect from the technology companies.

But I also want to talk about the role our world-class law enforcement agencies can play in safeguarding children from abuse.

Today I'm pleased to announce that we will be investing an extra £21 million over the next 18 months to bolster the response of our law enforcement agencies to these types of crimes.

This money will be used to improve how our agencies reduce the volume of offending and pursue the most dangerous and prolific offenders.

And as Home Secretary, I will continue to make sure that the police have all the powers and tools they need to fight child sexual abuse and to bring offenders to justice.

In parallel, we will provide a further £2.6 million to collaborate with child protection organisations to improve our understanding of offender behaviour and prevent future offending.

This includes support to the Lucy Faithfull Foundation which aims to change the behaviour of offenders and potential offenders by highlighting the harm and suffering that takes place behind every image.

But we cannot solely focus our efforts on Britain.

Children are being abused across the world and it is our moral responsibility to help them.

Rocketing global internet access in Africa, Asia and the Middle East is a good thing for many reasons but it has also meant that more children than ever before are being exploited online in these parts of the world.

According to the Internet Watch Foundation – and thanks for their support – less than 1% of child sexual abuse content is now hosted on UK platforms.

But that means that 99% of it is hosted overseas.

So to get a grip on the problem, we need to focus our attentions there too.

We are already investing £20 million of overseas development aid over the next two years to tackle this threat.

Just last week, the Prime Minister announced that the UK will build a new cyber centre in Nairobi to help Kenyan police stop child abuse images being shared online.

At the recent Five Country Ministerial Meeting with my counterparts from Australia, Canada, the US and New Zealand we discussed as a priority how the

international community would work together to combat online child sexual exploitation.

We agreed that industry must take more responsibility for the content on their platforms and apps and we released a Joint Statement outlining our expectations for tackling this threat.

I am pleased to announce that the next Five Country Ministerial meeting, which I will be chairing in the UK next year – will prioritise combating child sexual exploitation.

We will also be creating a new international network of government advisers who will be stationed around the world and will help coordinate and drive action to tackle child sexual abuse in different regions.

So there's a lot of work ahead.

I want to end today by reminding you of the powerful words of Matthew Falder's victim who we heard from earlier.

Her testimony is a poignant reminder that we must do everything in our power to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation and to support victims.

And I know that both as a Home Secretary and as a parent that I have a duty to lead on this action.

My sights are set on the internet.

And to those who want to harm our children – let me say this.

Do not think you can satisfy your vile perversions from behind a computer screen or on a smartphone.

Do not think you can hurt our children or support or encourage others to do so.

Do not think you will get away with it.

Because, together, we will make sure that you won't.

Because our children deserve to have their innocence and their futures respected and protected and to grow up without fear.