Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, Online Harms, and Stakeholder Responses

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Chapter 1 – Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Online Harms

In the real world, I'm a coward. When I'm online I'm a hero

The above quote is paraphrased from a conversation with a young man with autism spectrum disorder, discussed in more detail in chapter 8. In this conversation he was expressing frustration about his teachers' worries about what he does online, and how he felt they were overly cautious and protectionist about his use of technology. In his view, digital technology afforded him positive outcomes that did not manifest naturally in the "real" world around him. He was extremely positive about his online gaming and the communities around that.

The digital world is now deeply woven into the fabric of young people's lives. For those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), technology can be an invaluable tool—offering communication, independence, social connection, and access to education in ways that were previously unimaginable. However, alongside these opportunities lie significant risks. The online experiences of young people with SEND are shaped not only by their own digital engagement but also by the responses of those around them—parents, educators, social workers, and policymakers—who play a vital role in safeguarding and supporting them.

A dearth of literature (Griffin, 2014, Katz and Amin 2018) highlights how children with SEND have been largely ignored in relation to online risk and opportunities (safeguarding), with the focus predominantly on children within mainstream schools without a learning need or disability. There are some unique challenges for children with SEND that can potentially place them at a greater risk than mainstream children and which can have a significant and long-lasting effect on mental health, self-esteem and development.

The interaction and engagement of stakeholders is a central theme in examining how to effectively safeguard children with SEND online and support a system which places the child at the centre. Underpinned by an ecosystems theory approach (Bronfenbrenner 1979), which considers child development as a system of interrelated relationships affected by multiple levels of surrounding environment. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's seminal work positions the research within the field of education and facilitates an analysis of stakeholder engagement which proposes that a multi-stakeholder approach is central and key to supporting children with SEND.

This book delves into the complex intersection of SEND, digital technology, and online safety, drawing primarily on research conducted during a PhD and follow up study in the UK between 2018 and 2024. By examining the perspectives of young people themselves, alongside the voices of key stakeholders, this book seeks to illuminate both the risks they face and the strategies that can foster safer, more inclusive digital experiences. While rooted in the UK context, the findings are far from geographically bound. The challenges and responses discussed here reflect broader global concerns about how young people with SEND navigate digital spaces and how society can better protect and empower them. The experiences of stakeholders in the UK are readily applicable to other geographies and, arguably, given the UK is seen as a leading exponent of this issue (Phippen 2025).

Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

SEND is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of conditions affecting children's learning, development, and well-being. A child is considered to have SEND if they require additional support beyond what is typically provided in a mainstream educational setting. These needs can be categorized into four main areas:

Communication and Interaction: This includes conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and speech and language difficulties, which can impact a child's ability to understand and express themselves effectively.

Cognition and Learning: Children with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, or global developmental delay may struggle with acquiring and processing information at the same pace as their peers.

Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH): This includes anxiety disorders, ADHD, or behavioural difficulties that can affect a child's ability to regulate emotions, interact with others, and engage in learning.

Sensory and Physical Needs: Some children have visual or hearing impairments, mobility difficulties, or other physical disabilities that require adaptations to their learning environment.

We do not intend to cover all issues affecting all aspects of SEND. A point we will return to many times during this book is that SEND is not a single condition but rather a spectrum of needs that vary in severity and impact. While some children may require minimal support to succeed academically and socially, others may need highly specialized interventions. Recognizing and addressing these diverse needs is essential for ensuring that children with SEND are able to thrive in both offline and online spaces. This is particularly important when a typical stakeholder response in online safety (as we discuss in chapters 5, 6 and 7) is a requirement for "SEND" resources. It would be extremely difficult to develop a "SEND online safety resource", given the need for any resource to be tailored to a young person's particular needs. Which is possibly why we have always resisted doing this!

Types of Online Harm and Risks for Children with SEND

Another aspect of online safety that remains a perennial gulf between young people and the adult stakeholders around them is the need to categorise online harms (Phippen and Street 2022, Phippen 2025), which is at odds with young people's wishes to have support networks and holistic

approaches to helping them understand risk and navigate the online world. It was not unusual, as we will be exploring in chapters 4 through to 8) for adult stakeholders to ask how we stop a certain type of online behaviour (as we were asked: “How do I stop my son going on the dark web”) or what the “bad apps” are.

This book critically examines the intersection of online safety and children with SEND, exploring how existing safeguarding measures may fail to adequately address their specific needs. It highlights the crucial role of families, educators, policymakers, and technology companies in ensuring that the digital world is accessible, safe, and empowering for all children, regardless of their abilities. Through a combination of theoretical insights, policy analysis, and empirical research, this study aims to bridge the gap in current scholarship and advocate for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to online safety for children with SEND.

The Need for Research on Online Safety and SEND

The broader discourse on online harms and safety measures has primarily focused on children as a homogenous group, with limited consideration for those with SEND. Existing frameworks tend to prioritize general online risks—such as exposure to inappropriate content, privacy concerns, and digital addiction—without fully acknowledging how these risks manifest differently for children with SEND. For example, children with autism may struggle with interpreting social cues online, making them more susceptible to manipulation and cyberbullying. Similarly, those with communication difficulties may face barriers in seeking help or reporting online abuse. Additionally, research suggests that children with SEND are disproportionately affected by cyberbullying and online exploitation, yet safeguarding strategies rarely include tailored interventions for this group.

The lack of SEND-specific online safety research raises significant concerns about the effectiveness of existing policies and educational initiatives. While some efforts have been made to include SEND perspectives in broader online safety discussions, these have often been fragmented, inconsistent, or insufficient. This book seeks to fill this gap by providing a structured, evidence-based analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by children with SEND in digital spaces. It also proposes practical recommendations for improving online safeguarding strategies to ensure they are inclusive and responsive to the needs of all children.

This empirical research presented in this book aimed to address this gap and initially set out to explore online safeguarding with a focus on children with SEND. However, as the study progressed, it became evident that there was a significant gap in research specifically addressing children with SEND, or any child with a learning need, disability, or mental health disorder. The lack of literature on their online behaviour and safeguarding has created real challenges for stakeholders supporting children with SEND online (SEN, 2019; Ballantyne, Duncalf, and Daly, 2010; Livingstone, 2013). Most existing research has primarily focused on children without SEND attending mainstream schools, and without considering the diverse needs that influence online interactions and risks (Katz, 2016). These needs range from emotional and social difficulties to behavioural and mental health disorders, all of which play a role in how children engage with digital environments.

It is crucial to recognize that children with SEND are not a homogeneous group, yet they are often treated as such in policy and guidance. This issue, including the ongoing debate over the definition

and classification of SEND, will be explored further in Chapter One. Understanding the balance between online risks and opportunities is central to safeguarding children with SEND while ensuring their rights to privacy, freedom of expression, and digital inclusion are upheld. When effectively supported, technology can be a powerful tool for learning, socialization, and development. However, current research indicates that children with SEND face a higher level of risk online, which can have long-term impacts on their mental health, self-esteem, and identity (Rose et al., 2009; Griffin, 2014). There is strong evidence that existing advice and guidance must be improved to better protect and support children with SEND in the digital space.

While highly exploratory in nature, this research was guided by the following key questions:

1. What are the current perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the risks and opportunities for children with SEND online?
2. What roles do different stakeholders play in supporting and safeguarding children with SEND in digital spaces?
3. How can stakeholder perspectives inform a more effective approach to balancing risk and opportunity for children with SEND online?

By addressing these questions, this research aimed to contribute to the development of more inclusive and effective online safeguarding strategies for children with SEND and present an alternate view to prohibition and one stop solutions.

While digital engagement among youth is well studied, children with SEND are often excluded or homogenized in research and policy discussions. Their social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive challenges significantly influence their online experiences. This study aims to fill this gap by amplifying the voices of children with SEND and the stakeholders who support them.
Guided by an exploratory framework, a qualitative, semi-structured interview method was adopted, allowing for rich, participant-led discussions. This approach aligns with interpretivist and phenomenological traditions, emphasizing participants' lived experiences over rigid frameworks. Quantitative methods were deemed inappropriate due to their inability to capture the nuanced realities of vulnerable populations like children with SEND.

The research emphasized ethical engagement, especially with children, and sought to create a participatory environment where their agency and voices could be heard. However, inherent challenges - including institutional gatekeeping and power dynamics - often limited the depth of child responses.

A total of 18 participants took part: 14 adults and 4 children (ages 12–14). Adults included headteachers, SENCOs, parents, police, inspectors, and mental health professionals - selected to represent various layers of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (e.g., microsystem to exosystem). Children were recruited from a SEND school that served students with complex emotional and behavioral needs. The school was instrumental in facilitating access to stakeholders and navigating ethical concerns.

Recruitment was iterative. While gaining school access was challenging, adult stakeholders were easier to engage, often through professional networks or referrals. Within the school, the

headteacher selected children based on perceived readiness and communication ability, limiting researcher control but prioritizing student well-being.

Interviews with children were brief (10–15 minutes) and often shaped by adult presence, including the headteacher. Despite attempts at rapport-building and observational visits, some children were guarded, though others shared meaningful insights - including one who conducted their interview from inside a cupboard, a known coping strategy. Multiple school visits allowed the researcher to observe daily interactions and build a contextual understanding. Ethical principles guided every stage - ensuring informed consent, protecting anonymity, and respecting children's autonomy. These safeguards aligned with UNCRC principles and qualitative research ethics.

Thematic analysis, grounded in participant narratives, was employed using grounded theory and coding methods. This enabled emergent themes to shape the ongoing research direction. Data saturation was pursued to ensure reliability and depth. Child data, though limited in quantity, provided valuable contextual insights into how their digital lives intersect with broader support systems.

Approaching the Research Questions

The remainder of the book is broken down into policy and literature analysis, the core empirical work that aimed to answer the research questions, and a phase of validation exploring the findings of the research in a different context. The chapter breakdown is as follows:

Chapter 2 – The Policy Context for SEND and Online Safety examines the evolution of policies related to SEND education and online safety in the UK, highlighting key legislative developments. It starts with the Warnock Report (1978), which was a groundbreaking policy in the UK that laid the foundation for inclusive education. The report emphasized the importance of integrating SEND children into mainstream schools and advocating for tailored support systems. Over the years, additional legislation, such as the Children and Families Act (2014), reinforced the need for individualised support through Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs). These policies aimed to create a more inclusive educational environment, ensuring that SEND children received the necessary resources and support.

Parallel to the evolution of SEND policies, online safety policies have also developed, albeit in a fragmented and inconsistent manner. Early efforts, such as the Byron Review (2008), proposed a multi-stakeholder approach that emphasized digital literacy and parental guidance. However, more recent policies, including the Online Safety Act (2023), have leaned heavily on technological and regulatory solutions, focusing on platform accountability rather than empowering users. The chapter critiques this shift, arguing that while regulation is necessary, it should not come at the expense of education, awareness, and inclusive digital strategies.

A key issue highlighted in this chapter is the disconnect between SEND policy and online safety measures. While educational policies recognize the need for individualised support, online safety policies often treat children as a homogenous group. This oversight means that many existing safeguarding strategies do not adequately address the distinct vulnerabilities of SEND children. The

chapter calls for a more integrated policy approach that considers both education and online safety together, ensuring that children with SEND are adequately protected in digital spaces.

In **Chapter 3 – A Critical Review of SEND and Online Safety** we explore what existing research there is on the online experiences of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), focusing on both the risks they face and the opportunities available to them in digital environments. It highlights that while online platforms provide meaningful spaces for social interaction, learning, and self-expression, children with SEND are often more vulnerable to online harms such as cyberbullying, online grooming, and digital manipulation. However, the current research landscape primarily focuses on the general child population, leaving a significant gap in understanding how SEND children experience digital spaces differently. The chapter critiques this lack of specificity, arguing that effective online safety measures must be tailored to account for the diverse needs of SEND children rather than relying on a universal approach.

A key theoretical framework introduced in this chapter is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which provides a lens for understanding how various environmental influences shape the online experiences of SEND children. This model, extremely well established in child development, considers multiple interconnected systems that impact a child's development, including the microsystem (immediate family, teachers, and peers), the mesosystem (interactions between these groups), the exosystem (broader institutions and policies), the macrosystem (cultural attitudes and societal norms), and the chronosystem (the influence of time and technological change). Applying this framework to online safety allows for a more holistic exploration of the risks and protective factors affecting SEND children in digital spaces. For example, while family support within the microsystem can act as a protective buffer against online risks, systemic failures in the exosystem—such as inadequate digital literacy education or inaccessible platform policies—can leave children with SEND potentially more exposed to harm.

This chapter also critiques the prevailing risk-averse discourse in online safety discussions. While much of the conversation around child internet use focuses on limiting exposure to online dangers, the ecological model highlights the need for a more nuanced approach—one that balances protection with empowerment. The chapter argues that rather than restricting access, efforts should be made to strengthen protective mechanisms across all ecological levels. This could mean enhancing family and school support (microsystem), improving collaboration between institutions and technology companies (mesosystem), advocating for more inclusive policies (exosystem), and shifting public narratives to recognize the benefits of digital inclusion (macrosystem). By embedding online safety within an ecological framework, this chapter emphasizes that safeguarding SEND children requires a multi-stakeholder approach that goes beyond technological restrictions and fosters resilience, awareness, and agency.

Chapter 4 – Stakeholder Views on SEND and Online Safety embarks on the analysis of the data collection that took place in this project. The chapter presents findings from interviews with key stakeholders, including educators, parents, and safeguarding professionals, regarding the online safety of SEND children. Many stakeholders expressed concerns that existing online safety education is not tailored to SEND children, making it less effective. They emphasized the need for more

specialized resources and training for teachers and caregivers to help them better support SEND children in navigating digital spaces.

Educators highlighted the lack of guidance on how to address online risks specific to SEND students, such as social manipulation or digital addiction. Parents, on the other hand, voiced frustrations over the limited parental controls that cater to SEND children's needs, particularly for those with impulse control difficulties. Many caregivers also expressed a desire for more collaboration with schools and online platforms to create a safer digital environment.

The chapter also discusses the role of policymakers and technology companies, questioning whether their initiatives adequately consider SEND children's unique vulnerabilities. While policies like the Online Safety Act focus on platform accountability, there is little consideration of how these regulations translate into real-world safeguarding for SEND users. The chapter concludes by stressing the need for a multi-agency approach where parents, educators, policymakers, and technology companies work together to create inclusive digital safety measures

Chapter 5 – Unpacking Stakeholder Goals and Motivations takes a deeper look at the motivations and perspectives of different stakeholders—parents, educators, policymakers, and technology companies—regarding online safety for children with SEND. It applies Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to analyse how these various actors interact to shape digital safeguarding strategies. Parents and educators often prioritize protection, seeking ways to limit online risks through restrictions and supervision. Policymakers focus on regulatory frameworks, but often without directly engaging with the specific needs of children with SEND. Technology companies, on the other hand, operate within business models that sometimes prioritize profit over user safety.

A major theme in this chapter is the lack of alignment between these different stakeholders. While schools may aim to educate students on online risks, parents may take a more restrictive approach, limiting internet access altogether. Meanwhile, technology companies develop broad safety features that may not always be accessible or suitable for children with SEND. The lack of coordination between these groups often results in fragmented and ineffective online safety measures. For example, while platform regulations focus on removing harmful content, they rarely address how children with SEND might uniquely interact with or be impacted by digital environments.

The chapter argues for a shift towards a collaborative, child-centred approach to online safety. Instead of treating safeguarding as the responsibility of one group (e.g., parents or platforms), the chapter suggests a more integrated model where all stakeholders share responsibility. By considering the specific needs of children with SEND, online safety policies and educational strategies can become more inclusive and effective. The chapter concludes by emphasizing that understanding the motivations of different stakeholders is key to developing a holistic and practical approach to safeguarding children with SEND online.

In Chapter 6 – A SEND Online Safety Framework we build upon the insights from earlier chapters and develop a comprehensive framework for ensuring online safety for children with SEND. The framework is developed using empirical research and stakeholder feedback, ensuring that it is both practical and evidence based. It moves away from a purely risk-avoidance model and instead

promotes a balanced approach that includes protection, education, and empowerment. The framework emphasizes that digital inclusion is just as important as digital safety—children with SEND should not be excluded from online opportunities due to excessive restrictions.

A key feature of the framework is its multi-stakeholder focus. It outlines specific roles for parents, educators, policymakers, and technology companies, ensuring that each plays an active part in safeguarding children with SEND online. For example, educators are encouraged to incorporate digital literacy lessons tailored to different SEND needs, while parents are provided with strategies for supporting their children's online interactions without overly restricting their autonomy. Policymakers are urged to develop regulations that specifically address the needs of children with SEND, and technology companies are encouraged to improve accessibility features and create safer digital environments.

Another central aspect of the framework is the idea of resilience-building. Instead of relying solely on content filtering and parental controls, the framework suggests teaching children with SEND how to recognize risks, make informed choices, and seek help when needed. It also highlights the importance of peer support networks, encouraging children with SEND to connect with trusted friends and online communities. The chapter concludes by advocating for a shift in online safety discourse—from one of prohibition and fear to one of support, guidance, and empowerment for children with SEND in digital spaces.

In **Chapter 7 – Verifying the Findings and Implementing the Framework** we evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed online safety framework by applying it to a real-world case study: the Headstart Kernow project. This initiative focused on online safety education and support for children with SEND, using a trauma-informed and multi-stakeholder approach. The chapter describes how the project incorporated feedback from children with SEND, parents, and educators to tailor its interventions, ensuring that safeguarding strategies were not only protective but also inclusive. In this way, it both verified the findings of the main study, with similar results, and also provides a vehicle to build upon the developed framework.

One of the key findings from the project was the importance of flexibility in online safety education. Traditional approaches, which often rely on lectures or text-heavy materials, may not be suitable for all children with SEND. Instead, interactive and visual-based resources were found to be more effective. Additionally, the project highlighted the need for ongoing support rather than one-time interventions. Many children with SEND require continuous guidance to navigate digital spaces safely, which suggests that online safety education should be embedded into their long-term learning journey.

The chapter concludes with recommendations for scaling up the framework and integrating it into broader online safety policies. It suggests that schools, local authorities, and technology companies work together to ensure that children with SEND are adequately supported in online environments. The findings reinforce the book's central argument: that online safety strategies must be inclusive, evidence-based, and developed with direct input from the children they are meant to protect. By implementing this framework, stakeholders can create a safer and more accessible digital world for children with SEND.

And in drawing the book to a close, **Chapter 8 – Conclusions and the Future**, brings together the key findings of the book, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach to online safety for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It begins by critiquing current safeguarding policies, which often take a restrictive or prohibitionist stance that limits digital opportunities rather than fostering safe and meaningful engagement. Drawing once again Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the chapter highlights how online safety cannot be the sole responsibility of any one stakeholder but must be a shared effort among families, educators, policymakers, digital platforms, and the children themselves. The discussion critiques recent legislative efforts for prioritizing content removal and platform accountability over education and resilience-building, arguing instead for a rights-based approach that balances protection with accessibility.

The chapter also explores the importance of individualised approaches to online safety, acknowledging that children with SEND are not a homogenous group and require tailored interventions that reflect their diverse needs, risks, and coping strategies. It presents a proposed safeguarding framework that calls for greater cross-sector collaboration, urging educators to embed digital literacy within SEND-specific curricula, parents to adopt open and supportive communication strategies, and policymakers to move beyond reactive measures based on moral panics. The role of the technology industry is also examined, with recommendations for co-designing inclusive safety tools and implementing AI-driven accessibility features. Finally, the chapter outlines future directions for research, policy, and practice, advocating for national and international forums to facilitate knowledge-sharing and best practices. By reframing online safety as an empowering rather than limiting process, this chapter argues for a shift towards a more balanced, inclusive, and rights-based approach to safeguarding children with SEND in digital spaces.

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