All of our concern: commercialisation, sexualisation and hypermasculinity
Executive Summary

All of our concern

Family Lives has published this report to take forward the useful debate that has been most recently built upon by the 2011 Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood undertaken by Reg Bailey. This report seeks to address issues that the Bailey review gave less time to and makes recommendations to take the agenda forward in a way which empowers young people and their parents.

This report will discuss the progress made since the Bailey review and identify areas which still require policymakers and parents’ attention.

- Family Lives believes that much of the commercialisation and sexualisation debate has been framed around girls and neglects to consider how boys have been affected by these pressures and how to engage them in preventative strategies. This report will address this gap.

- This report will also examine a serious, yet neglected topic: peer–on–peer sexual exploitation and violence. The report examines the consequences of extreme gender identification, specifically hypermasculinity, which is associated with sexual violence against girls. Tackling this problem is essential to ensuring that all individuals are free from sexual and gender-based violence and have an equal opportunity to participate in education and the broader society.

Our Expertise

Family Lives brings together our experience of working with families and with young people in schools to call for action by Government, schools and families.

In September 2011, Family Lives merged with the charity Teen Boundaries. Teen Boundaries began as the only charity solely devoted to stopping sexual bullying and encouraging positive gender relationships. The project aims to support schools and community groups in delivering high quality Personal Social Health and Education (PSHE) and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE).

The view from families: a survey of parents and children

In May 2011, Family Lives and alcohol awareness charity Drinkaware undertook a survey of 1002 parents of 8–17 year olds and 633 10–17 year old children and young people to find out more about their attitudes to and experience of a range of issues, including their exposure to pornography, technology and the media. These results help to inform the analysis.

The sexualisation of mainstream culture and the danger of gender stereotypes

In common with the recent Bailey Review, many of the parents we surveyed are concerned about the effects of sexualised imagery and marketing, but we also found concern over the pressures of ‘ideal’ body images and gender stereotypes. Through our work with young people we know that negotiating sexualised and gender pressures in the teenage years can be very difficult.

While research on the effects of sexualised media and marketing is mixed, it is clear that gender stereotyping has clear effects on development; potentially limiting girls’ and boys’ future aspirations and achievements, leading to associated social and educational costs.

Recommendation 1: Parents should be supported in reducing pressures for their children to conform to strict gender stereotypes. Retail codes of practice should contain guidance on good practice with regards to gender alongside sexualisation.

Recommendation 2: Schools should take a leading role in teaching children and young people to see through gender stereotypes and sexualised media from an early stage. Both primary and secondary schools should be receive funding to invest in high quality Personal, Social And Health Education (PSHE) lessons that explore gender stereotypes and help children to decode the messages that the media and marketing practices are sending about gender roles, empowering them to challenge what they see.
The importance of sex and relationship education: limiting the influence of pornography

Many parents, educators and policy makers continue to be concerned about children viewing pornography. This recently led to the Coalition government putting out a consultation to introduce further regulations for internet providers. Family Lives welcomes these proposals as the evidence shows that accidental exposure to pornography can be distressing for young children. However, there is a need to go further; research shows that increasing numbers of young people seek out explicit pornographic content and share this between them, subverting most parental and industry controls. A large reason for this is adolescents’ curiosity and desire for frank information on sex. However, without educating young people about the unreality of pornographic sex through high quality Sex and Relationship Education (SRE), there is a danger that young people will develop unhealthy and unrealistic expectations about sexual relationships.

Recommendation 3: The evidence shows that without access to information about sex and relationships, young people will rely on or be conditioned by inaccurate information or portrayals, including those from pornography. All schools, including primary schools should provide age appropriate Sex and Relationship Education (SRE).

Recommendation 4: Parents have a key role to play in reinforcing ideas about healthy relationships and sex. National awareness campaigns should be developed to up-skill parents to talk openly and confidently about sex and relationships to both boys and girls.

The digital world: new mediums for old risks

Digital and communication technologies are opening up children to new practices and pressures at a rate which leaves both parents and children struggling to fully recognise the potential risks and implications for the future. It is imperative that the ways in which children make use of new technology is known to parents and educators so that the potential risks, which include sexual exploitation, harassment and bullying, can be combated at the earliest available opportunity.

Recommendation 5: Many parents feel ill equipped to keep their children safe online and many others underestimate the risk to their child or the age at which their child may be engaging in risky or sexualised behaviour online. Support and awareness raising campaigns targeted at parents may help to encourage them to talk to their children about staying safe in the digital world at an earlier stage, reducing their child’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

Recommendation 6: All schools should be provided with guidance based on up-to-date research on pupils’ evolving practices with regards to new digital and communication technologies. All schools should develop and update school policies which tackle new forms of bullying including sexual bullying and peer-on-peer sexual exploitation.

Hypermasculinity, gender violence and consent: a neglected issue

While many policy makers have been right to explore the nature of the growing sexualised and commercial pressures that young people face today, by framing the discussion around ‘sexualisation and commercialisation’ there is a potential that this debate can obscure or ignore another significant danger to the social, emotional and physical safety of young women and men: sexual harassment, bullying and assault by peers.

Recommendation 7: Urgent research is required to quantify the full extent of sexual violence between young people. Both quantitative and qualitative research is needed to explore the causal drivers underlying this behaviour. The government should prioritise funding to ensure that there is enough data on this problem to understand the scale of the problem and generate evidence-based measures to tackle it.

Recommendation 8: Schools should play a leading role in teaching children and young people about consent and unacceptable sexual behaviour, and should work with parents to ensure that these messages are delivered and reinforced in the home environment. Educational prevention initiatives must focus on teaching boys about consent and boundaries as well as girls.
All of our responsibility: the need for a whole school approach

Family Lives considers the most effective strategy to address the continuing pressures that young people face today is to adopt a holistic, whole school approach. However, recent policy with regards to tackling sexual bullying is fragmented and as such there is a danger that schools will not be able to fully address the commercialised, sexualised, gendered pressures that young people face today. In addition, there is a risk that sexual coercion and exploitation will not be systematically tackled.

Recommendation 9: In order to meet the Home Office’s “Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls’ Strategy” there is a clear need for a consistent, universal approach in schools to ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to realise their fullest social and intellectual potential and live lives that are free from coercion, exploitation and abuse. It is critical that the Department for Education are brought into these plans, as tackling child exploitation, violence against women and girls and empowering young people to resist sexualised and commercial pressures depends upon engaging schools and families. Family Lives recommends that the Department for Education should work towards producing guidance that supports a whole school approach to tackle sexist, sexual and gender-based bullying.
Introduction: all of our concern

Family Lives has published this report to take forward the useful debate that has been most recently built upon by the 2011 Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood undertaken by Reg Bailey. This report seeks to address issues that the Bailey review gave less time to and makes recommendations to take the agenda forward in a way which empowers young people and their parents.

Much of the debate over commercialisation and sexualisation has been exclusively framed around girls. Family Lives believes that boys have been neglected, both in terms of how the commercial and sexualised world affects boys and secondly by being largely absent in discussions of how to overcome the negative aspects of these pressures. This report seeks to address this gap by considering the effects on girls and boys. It will also demonstrate that it is imperative to engage both boys and girls in preventative strategies.

This report will also move the current debate forward in an important way. This report examines the consequences of extreme gender identification, specifically hypermasculinity, which is associated with violence against girls. Tackling this problem is essential to ensuring that all individuals are free from sexual and gender-based violence and have an equal opportunity to participate in education and the broader society.

Family Lives believes that the challenges that young people face today are a concern for us all. To effectively address these issues requires an approach which engages schools, parents and young people and moreover does this at the earliest available opportunity. Early intervention needs to be integral to the solution: educating parents and young people early will reduce the likelihood that these individuals will suffer negative social, emotional and educational costs.

Together we can help to ensure that children and young people have the tools to deal with coercive pressures, can be empowered to make positive and healthy choices and can reach their fullest potential in every aspect of their lives.

Our expertise: the Teenboundaries project

Building on evidence from our service users and a literature review of relevant academic research, Family Lives brings together our experience of working with families and with young people in schools to call for action by Government, schools and families.

In September 2011, Family Lives merged with the charity Teen Boundaries. Teen Boundaries began as the only charity solely devoted to stopping sexual bullying and encouraging positive gender relationships. The project aims to support schools and community groups in delivering high quality Personal, Social and Health Education and Sex and Relationship Education. The work seeks to:

- Raise awareness of the dangers of unhealthy and exploitative relationships
- Advise teens of the dangers of being involved in inappropriate or coercive relationships and sexual activity
- Increase understanding of a persons’ rights to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse
- Decode the effect of Cyber world; Sexting/Internet (porn-fantasy and reality) and how it adds to the issues of sexualised bullying; the use of Form Spring, Facebook, Blackberry Messenger etc. in Cyber Bullying.
- Increase confidence to report exploitation and abuse
- Develop understanding of how unwanted pressure to have sex can lead to more dangerous and exploitative situations

The view from parents: our national helpline and website

Between April 2010 and March 2011, Family Lives’ free helpline received 40,081 long calls of which 1,226 calls concerned children’s sexual behaviour. This amounted to 3% of all long calls to Family Lives’ helpline.

Family Lives found that out of 1,226 calls:
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June 2012

- 38% of calls revolved around general sexual behaviour issues
- 32% of calls revolved around underage sex. Overall, most issues relate to 13-15 year olds

Data from families in this report comes from the large number of families who use our forums and message boards to seek help on issues around the inappropriate or worrying sexualisation of their children.

The view from families: a survey of parents and children

In May 2011, Family Lives and alcohol awareness charity Drinkaware undertook a survey of 1002 parents of 8-17 year olds and 633 10-17 year old children and young people to find out more about their attitudes to and experience of a range of issues, including their exposure to pornography, technology and the media. These results help to inform the analysis.
The sexualisation of mainstream culture and the danger of gender stereotypes

The sexualisation and commercialisation debate
It is widely accepted in the policy and academic community that there has been a sexualisation of mainstream culture over the last decade and that this has been exploited by commercial interests. The graphic content in music videos, ‘porno chic’ in advertising; sexualised representations of women and men in the media; the marketing of clothing and accessories that sell or represent sexualised identities all demonstrate that mainstream media makes sex much more visible and that such imagery now wallpapers children’s lives. In common with the recent Bailey Review, many of the parents we surveyed are concerned about the effects of sexualised imagery and marketing, but we also found concern over the pressures of ‘ideal’ body images and gender stereotypes. Through our work with young people we know that negotiating sexualised and gender pressures in the teenage years can be very difficult. This section explores the key issues for children and young people. While research on the effects of sexualised media and marketing is mixed, it is clear that gender stereotyping has greater effects; potentially limiting girls’ and boys’ future aspirations and achievements, leading to associated social and educational costs.

Looking again at the wallpaper of children’s lives
The marketing of commercial goods for children
In the today’s world, children and young people are surrounded by commercial products that are made and marketed especially for them. A key concern of the Bailey Review was the increase in sexualised goods marketed for children, which are viewed as causing premature sexual maturity. Many parents are concerned about the existence of these products – particularly for girls. 73% of our parents surveyed felt that these type products place children under inappropriate pressure to grow up too quickly. However in reality, various studies show that the number of sexualised goods aimed at children is very low and their availability is limited. This is particularly since a number of public campaigns, including pressure from Family Lives has led to retailers signing up to tighter guidelines from the British Retail Consortium. In addition, researchers consider sexualised goods to have a limited effect on the premature sexual development of children and young people. Research suggests that children often make their own meanings of such products that resist sexualised connotations. For many children, such products are viewed as simply being ‘cool’ or a marker of adulthood.

While the effect of sexualised goods on children’s development is not securely established, research is much clearer on the effect of gender stereotyped products. Evidence from developmental psychology unequivocally demonstrates that exposure to gender segregated clothing, toys and stories leads to children shifting into gender-stereotyped play and subsequently begin to police their own and each other’s behaviour. Rather than exhibiting a fixed course or essential development, current neuroscientific evidence suggests that gender identity at this stage of life is fluid and develops from a complex interaction with the environment. Studies show that gender stereotyping can be lessened by interaction with other types of play.

Media and advertising imagery
A second area of concern for parents and policy makers is the saturation of sexualised media imagery. This is a particular concern for American policy experts who argue that the sexualisation of contemporary culture is thought to cause significant harm including promiscuity, mental health problems and self-destructive behaviour. Many of these accounts are informed by “media reception theory” which states that viewing sexualised media
directly causes premature sexualisation, which has associated negative costs. Overwhelmingly, the focus of this research is the negative effect on girls' sexual development to the exclusion of the effects on boys. UK research evidence, particularly in-depth qualitative and public health research suggests a more complex picture of the effects of media on sexual development and it demonstrates that the potential effects of sexualised imagery are different depending on the age of the children.

Young Children

A major study of UK Children (2010) found that younger children do not necessarily always understand adult sexual references in mainstream sexualised media; often perceiving such imagery as rude rather than to do with sex which sits outside young children’s framework of knowledge and understanding. Similarly, Kehily's (2002) in-depth interview study found that girls at primary school were adept at practices of self-regulation, eschewing the sexually explicit content of some girl’s magazines. It is clear that for most children, sexual awareness occurs gradually and is mediated by self and peer regulation. In addition, different styles of parenting at this stage can either model of reinforce particular responses to sexual material and allow for different ways of coming to terms with it.

A growing body of health research further complicates a picture of media imagery influencing children’s early sexual development. It suggests that cases of early sexual awareness in children may be due to biological rather than media influences. Recent research from the Royal College of Obstetricians states that the early onset of puberty — which may be occurring earlier in a growing number of children due to average increases in Body Mass Index — can lead to earlier sexual awareness and increase the risk of psychological and social impacts of the child and family. For parents, it can be a complex task to negotiate these changes and provide guidance without embarrassment or encouraging inappropriate development of sexual consciousness.

As with marketed goods, research shows that media imagery aimed at young children is highly gender stereotyped and it is this imagery that has the largest effect on children’s development. A 2008 content analysis of 601 adverts found that overwhelmingly adverts appealed to action-adventure, sports and play for boys whereas appeals to girls emphasised nurturing, physical attractiveness, friendship and romance. In addition, a US study of ‘U’ rated children’s film and television found that over a third of animated films showed females with unrealistic body shapes (such as a thin waist) against 12% of males in animated action films (such as unrealistically muscularised physiques).

Research shows that children at this stage are highly tuned to idealised gendered imagery and this has potentially significant costs. Studies show that viewing such images can lead to early body dissatisfaction in both genders, although the relationship is stronger for girls. Parents can play an active role in combating these pressures; research shows that viewing shows with children and discussing the messages may help reduce some of the negative effects. However, it is clear from our work with parents that they feel ill-equipped to deal with this on their own and it is imperative for broadcasters and the wider industry to behave responsibly and ensure that are showing a range of real bodies and less provocative images.

Older Children and Teenagers

Older children and teenagers are more aware of sexual references and hence the saturation of sexualised imagery has the potential for greater influence on young people’s behaviour. It is clear from research however, that such images have indirect rather than direct effects on young people’s development. In focus groups, young people are generally sceptical that sexual images would induce them to have sex and research casts doubt upon a one-to-one or direct relationship between media consumption and sexual practice.

The major effect of sexualised media is that it operates to amplify gender stereotypes, normalise unrealistic body images and reinforce gender inequality. Analysis of recent mainstream print, television, film and computer games show that there is a growing tendency to depict men and women in a one-dimensional way, playing out hyper-sexualised and largely unequal roles.

For young men, sexualised masculine physical ideals such as a six packs, chest size and height are fused with character ideals such as having will power, control, being
competitive and dominant. Young women on the other hand are often portrayed in an erotic manner, scantily clad and obsessed with their appearances. Having a ‘sexy body’ is presented as a key (if not sole) source of identity and in recent years has come to compete with the previously dominant thin ideal. These idealised bodies come with gender roles that are highly unequal, sexist and often degrading. A 2009 analysis of platinum selling rap music found four major themes:

- 1) Degradation of women; praise of men;
- 2) Sexual objectification of women, sexual empowerment of men;
- 3) Women as distrustful, men as invulnerable;
- 4) Normality of violence by men, normality of women as victims.

Less extreme, but similarly unequal gender roles are found in film and television aimed at teenagers.

Teenagers commenting in teenboundaries workshops illustrate their awareness of this trend:

“(the media) can influence (men) to make bad choices, and to see women as objects. It’s just a bad thing...like you have to be dominant...if you’re not dominant you’re not popular. Women, they’re more concerned with their own image, rather than men’s because they have to impress the male first.” (boy...age 14)

“When you see girls on TV like in music videos, and basically everywhere, they’re all sexualised. Basically everywhere, you don’t see a girl on TV that isn’t sexualised. Guys aren’t encouraged to see a girl’s personality. In the media it’s all about how they look, and getting to that girl for stuff.” (girl...age 13)

“The media makes people act and treat women unpleasant, because they’ve seen them in the media being like, in page three, being topless so we see them as sex objects, so we don’t see them as actual women, we see them as objects” (boy...age 13)

Whilst young people are clearly aware that these are media portrayals, research shows that idealised sexualised imagery negatively affects both young women’s and men’s self-image and body satisfaction.

Small-scale qualitative studies in UK schools have shown that young people face oppressive pressure to be judged on sexualised body ideals, to know sexual slang and to appear sexually confident. For many, this pressure is keenly felt before young people have any practical knowledge of relationships or sex, inducing young people to ‘act out’ a sexual sophistication that they are unlikely to actually possess which some could find upsetting, stressful and open up potential for exploitation.

The harmful effects of gender stereotypes on young people’s education and aspirations

As the as the previous discussion has shown, gender stereotyping occurs at an extremely early stage of life and is continually reinforced as children grow up. As such, a large body of research states that although young people enact gender roles, they are not freely able to perform these as they wish; rather they are powerfully constrained and tightly corseted around acceptable forms of femininity and masculinity. The implication is that young people more likely to believe and reinforce sexualised media gender differences and accept unequal roles. This can have a significant effect on not just young people’s social and emotional wellbeing but adversely affect young people’s aspirations and educational outcomes.

The school is a key site of social interaction and research shows that peer groups have an enormous impact on pupils’ attitudes to schooling and behaviour at school. Various studies have shown that school peer groups hold largely stereotypical versions of femininity and masculinity and this has associated costs for each gender.

Young Women

Various studies and surveys have shown that a large number of girls hold “sexualised ambitions” which are heavily gender stereotyped and negatively affect the value that girls place on education and future aspirations. A 2005 BBC online survey found that 63% of girls considered ‘glamour model’ and 25% thought ‘lap dancer’ to be their ideal profession in a list of choices that included teacher and doctor.
Colin Stanley, a Teen Boundaries practitioner, sees such views in the schools he works in:

“A lot of the girls think glamour modelling is a good career choice because the media plays a massive part in glamorising it, so a lot of women who are impressionable tend to think yeah, I can do this, and this is what society says is ok and this is what they’re showing day in day out”.

It is also shown that gender stereotypes can inflate girls’ perceptions of their ability in arts subjects and reduce these for subjects like maths. Simply ticking a gender box can actually reduce girl’s performance on tests.

Young Men
The effect of gender stereotyping on young men’s education and ambitions has been neglected in policy discussions despite broader fears about boys’ educational underachievement.

Recent research has found that ‘gender intensification’ occurs towards the end of primary school and during adolescence where boys can feel that they have to relate to other boys. Boys who have previously played and related to girls can find themselves under pressure to belong to male groups and participate in traditionally male activities such as football irrespective of their interest in it.

Qualitative studies have uncovered dominant exaggerated models of (heterosexual) masculinity in both state and private schools that are anti-academic, limit educational roundedness and put breaks on boys fulfilling their academic potential. As Nayak and Kehil (2008) found, young men would admonish one another through homophobic insults for crossing their legs, walking in a ‘mincing’ fashion, being slightly built or displaying an earnest academic prowess. Boys who do not fit into the ideal male body and/or subscribe to what are viewed as ‘feminine’ behaviours can be subject to intense bullying, which reduces engagement with education. In a study at a private school, the researchers found that many boys felt extremely stressed at balancing the dominant masculinity at school with a more expansive masculinity outside/at home where they were able to participate in less stereo-typical extracurricular activities such as music and dance.

Current theories for boys educational underperformance stress that gendered subject choices and a neglect of arts based subjects can limit overall academic achievement by focusing on narrow aspects of intellect.

Tackling sexual and gender stereotypes

It is clear from the evidence that mainstream sexualised imagery can put undue pressures on children as they reach puberty. Moreover, that gender stereotypes which embed at a very early stage can limit both girls’ and boys’ future social wellbeing and educational potential. Whilst parents can play a role in mitigating these pressures by talking to their children about sexualised and gender portrayals in the media, it is clear that peer groups, particularly those at school, create powerful social incentives to conform to stereotypes. This is why Teenboundaries workshops are so important as they explore with young people their perceptions of gender stereotypes and ask them to think critically about how the media portrays men and women.

Recommendation 1: Parents should be supported in reducing pressures for their children to conform to strict gender stereotypes. Retail codes of practice should contain guidance on good practice with regards to gender alongside sexualisation.

Recommendation 2: Schools should take a leading role in teaching children and young people to see through gender stereotypes and sexualised media from an early stage. Both primary and secondary schools should receive funding to invest in high quality Personal, Social And Health Education lessons such as teenboundaries that explore gender stereotypes and help children to decode the messages that media and marketing practices are sending about gender roles, empowering them to challenge what they see.
The importance of sex and relationship education: limiting the influence of pornography

Many parents, educators and policy makers are concerned about children viewing pornography. Much of the recent policy focus has been on protecting young children from exposure to pornography, leading to the recent consultation by the Coalition government to introduce automatic filters for adult content for new internet customers, unless adults specifically opt-in to receive content. Family Lives welcomes these proposals; the evidence shows that accidental exposure to pornography can be distressing for young children.

However, there is a need to go further: research shows that increasing numbers of young people seek out explicit pornographic content and share this between them, subverting most parental and industry controls. A large reason for this is adolescents’ curiosity or amusement and desire for frank information on sex. However, without educating young people about the unreality of pornographic sex through high quality Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) there is a danger that young people will develop unhealthy and unrealistic expectations about sexual relationships.

Protecting Young Children

There is a clear need to protect young children from exposure to graphic pornography. Extreme pornography, particularly which is violent (especially towards women) can be extremely distressing for young children who accidently stumble upon it online. There is evidence that young children do encounter such material; however it is rare. The 2010 EU Kids Online study found that 14% of 9-16 year olds had seen sexual images, with 2% reporting extreme content. Almost half were either fairly (28%) or very (16%) upset at what they saw. Many parents, who are not as internet-savvy as their children, find parental blocks and filters difficult to implement. As such, Family Lives welcomes the recently announced measures to help parents protect young children from accidental exposure to online pornography. We recommend that internet controls should be in place as standard, with adults opting out if they choose. However, much more needs to be done to ensure these controls are translated into smart phones, given their increasing use by children.

“...I'm at a loss as to what to do”
Family Lives website user

Pornography: a poor educator of sex and relationships

Pornography by nature is sexually explicit and more sexist, degrading and hostile towards women than other sexual media; pornography can include scenes of violence, sadomasochism, bondage, bestiality or rape. There is evidence that pornography is becoming more explicit and extreme, driven by a market which searches for ever new or ‘nastier’ content. Pornography is freely available in large quantities online.

While many policy makers and parents are concerned that young people will be accidently exposed to
pornography, there is evidence that some children deliberately seek it out. A study carried out by the LSE in 2004 found that 10% of young people admitted to having visited a porn website on purpose. In total, 68% of 12-19 year olds claimed to have seen porn on the internet. Young people will do this for a variety of reasons: curiosity, interest in sexual and reproductive health, interest in information which may make them appear more sexually knowledgeable or a desire for sexual stimulation. The major concern that many sexual health educators hold is that pornography depicts unrealistic, deconstructed and decontextualized representations of sex acts, neglecting other aspects of sex such as intimacy or romance. In this way, pornography can potentially distort expectations of sexual relationships, leading to pressures to engage in extreme practices or coerced sexual activity.

There is evidence in statistical studies of pornographic consumption that those who are frequent consumers of pornography are much more likely to hold the perception that woman are sex objects. There is also evidence of associations between watching pornography and engaging in more extreme sexual practices. In addition, studies indicate that pornography can influence young people to accept unequal and sexist power hierarchies in relationships; where young women are under pressure to satisfy male desire or - more dangerously - where men are key to unlocking female desire – even if at first they do not realise it. In this way, pornography serves as a very inadequate and sometimes dangerous manual or educator for sex and relationships.

**Many parents feel unable to talk about sexual relationships and pornography**

Many parents we surveyed are aware of the harmful effects of pornography and think that parents have a clear role to play in moderating its effects, yet a large proportion felt extremely uncomfortable about talking about this topic.

In our 2011 survey of over 1000 parents of 8-17 year olds, 7% of respondents reported having experienced an issue with online pornography with their child, with 14% reporting that they had heard about this issue occurring with their child’s friends or at their child’s school.

Most parents thought that they were the best person to talk to their children about pornography, although men were less likely to think so (64%) than women (76%).

Despite this, only 34% of parents had spoken to their child or planned to. In addition, where parents were prepared to speak to their children, many were leaving it until at late stage, with the average age that the conversation took place, or was expected to take place was 12.8 years of age.

Only 40% of parents reported that there is a lot of support and advice available to help them talk to their child about online pornography, but 19% found little or no support or advice on the issue.

We asked parents how confident they felt about talking to their children about a range of topics. The graph below clearly shows that compared to other topics, discussing issues of sexuality and pornography presents difficulties for parents.

**Combating the influence of pornography: high quality sex and relationship education**

Protecting children and young people from the harms of pornography by simply seeking to limit avenues of exposure will not be effective if children and young people do not have adequate access to knowledge about
sex and relationships. Many Sex and Relationship Educators state that there is an urgent need to instruct young people with age-appropriate and compelling materials on sex and sexuality that counter the fantasy, unrealistic and sexist versions found in pornography and more broadly in mainstream fiction/film. Maintaining children’s sexual ignorance fosters the potential for sexual exploitation, poor social and emotional health and risks young people seeking out inaccurate information which may distort their perceptions of healthy sex and relationships. Indeed, many studies show that access to high quality Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) reduces instances of risky sexual behaviour and in countries where high quality Sex and Relationship Education is widespread; the age of first sexual intercourse is higher\textsuperscript{48}.

It is imperative that SRE strategies include boys as active participants in maintaining healthy attitudes to sex and relationships. All too often, protectionist agendas focus on girls and empowering girls to resist pressures to engage in sex before they are ready; leaving boys’ role in this area largely unproblematic. As Ringrose and Renold found in a study of girls’ and boys’ attitudes to Sex and Relationship Education (SRE), the idea of healthy relationships and sexuality education (and indeed domestic abuse and violence) were bracketed by boys as ‘girls’ issues’\textsuperscript{49}. On the other hand, a recent evaluation of an SRE project found that young people really wanted to discuss the differences between porn and real sex\textsuperscript{50}. It is clear that providing accurate, frank information is the key to engaging young people and particularly boys in SRE.

**Recommendation 3:** The evidence shows that without access to information about sex and relationships, young people will rely on or be conditioned by inaccurate information or portrayals, including those from pornography. All schools, including primary schools should provide age appropriate Sex and Relationship Education (SRE).

**Recommendation 4:** Parents have a key role to play in reinforcing ideas about healthy relationships and sex. National awareness campaigns should be developed to up-skill parents to talk openly and confidently about sex and relationships to both boys and girls.
The digital world: new mediums for old risks

Studies on children and young people’s practices of online and digital technology are limited. However, some interesting work has recently been conducted in this area and the findings suggest that digital and communication technologies are opening up children to new practices and pressures at a rate which leaves both parents and children struggling to fully recognise the potential risks and implications for the future. It is imperative that the ways in which children make use of new technology is known to parents and educators so that the potential risks, which include sexual exploitation, harassment and bullying, can be combated at the earliest available opportunity.

Family Lives polling of parents in 2011 showed that 48% of 8-17 year olds and 30% of 8-12 year had access to a computer in their bedroom. In a parallel survey that we ran with children, even higher numbers reported having access to a personal computer in their bedroom, with 38% of 10 year olds rising to 71% of 17 year olds. Girls were more likely to report having access to a computer in the bedroom, with 65% compared to 57% of boys.

With the growth in access to personal computers in the home, this statistic is not surprising. However, given the advice that children and young people should not have access to personal computers in private rooms, but computers should instead be kept in communal areas where parents can monitor their use, this rise is worrying.

Sexting

The advent of smart phones increases young people’s access to the internet. 80% of parents reported that their child had personal access to a mobile phone, although we did not ask them to specify whether or not this phone was internet enabled. Reporting by children was slightly higher, with 88% reporting that they have access to a mobile phone. This figure was significantly higher for girls (94%) than boys (83%). 60% of 10 year olds reported having their own mobile phone, rising to 97% of 17 year olds.

The number of children with their own mobile phone is of concern because parents report that sexting is the area of risky behaviour where they feel least confident.

Sexting is defined as the ‘exchange of sexual messages or images’ or the creating, sharing and forwarding sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images through mobile phones and the internet. Statistics range between 15 and 40% of young people being involved in sexting. In our polling only 3% of parents reported having had direct experience of issues around sexting with their child; 10% had heard about sexting going on at their child’s school or with their child’s friends, and 43% had heard about the issue in the media.

In some recent research, children as young as 12 or 13 are thought to be engaging in sexting. Children at this age may not fully realise that such behaviour is on the spectrum of sexual practice. The danger is that participating in sexting can initially be thought of as silly or fun for young people, only to suddenly find that they are actually participating in the sexual world, with its associated pressures and risks. Some evidence suggests that children subsequently find it more difficult to maintain relationship boundaries that they feel comfortable with, in some cases leading to significant pressure to engage in sexual intercourse earlier than they otherwise would. In addition, children may not be fully aware of the risks associated with spreading sexual images of themselves; that these private images can easily be shared with their peers and further onwards to adults, including paedophiles. While current policy debates focuses on the latter risk- of the potential for sexual exploitation adults - a recent pilot study for the NSPCC found that peer-on-peer sexual exploitation is a significant problem and that this practice operates to reinforce existing sexualised stereotypes and unequal gender relationships. It was clear that girls faced intense pressures to comply with boys requests for pictures and found this stressful and upsetting.
Despite these clear risks to young people’s wellbeing, nearly half (46%) of parents had no plan to talk to their child about sexting, only planning to deal with it if the need arose. 28% had not made plans to talk to their child, but felt that they should and 9% had made plans but not yet spoken to their child about the issue. Just 17% of parents had actually spoken to their child about sexting, and Dads felt far less confident than Mums, with 57% of Dads reporting that they would be the best person to talk to their child about sexting, compared to 75% of Mums. Only 14% of parents felt that there was a lot of information, support and advice on talking to their child about sexting, with 57% reporting that there was little of no support and information for parents on the topic.

One Family Lives service user describes her confusion about her son’s sexting:

“Does anyone else have problems with their 14 year old son getting Fan Pics from girls? These are pictures taken with phone or webcam. They do not display their head only their bra and pants, if you’re lucky. I have seen one without bra and some with very low cut and revealing pants.

When I ask who has sent he makes up names of people I have never heard of and who funny enough don’t go to his school, but knows them from a friend of a friend with MSM!

The chat has now progressed to, well basically cyber-sex. Have grounded him removed MSM from PC and removed PC access. However he thinks I am over reacting. Neither of us talking to each other, which is not a help.” Family Lives website user

Social Networking

Social networking site Facebook has a minimum age of 13, yet 15% of parents reported that their 8-10 year old was signed up to Facebook, and 54% of parents of 11-12 year olds reported that their child had a Facebook page. Reporting amongst children was slightly higher, with 38% of 10 year olds admitting having a Facebook page; 48% of 11 year olds and 69% of 12 year olds. This disparity indicates that many parents are unaware that their child is signed up to an age-inappropriate social networking site and flags another area of potential concern where parents are failing to successfully monitor their child’s use of digital media.

Parents on Family Lives’ web forums differ in how equipped they feel in dealing with the risks and opportunities that digital technologies present. One user describes her experience of feeling unable to support her daughter:

“The whole social networking thing is so difficult to manage. My own experience of being a teenager does not come into it as we just did not have it in the 80’s. How much time on it is acceptable? ...I am trying to give (my daughter) more responsibility and let her experience the consequences of her actions. However, with MSN/facebook am not sure about what boundaries to set. Is this much time social networking normal or is she obsessed with it or addicted to it? She does also have a social life but mainly at weekends as we live in a village.”

One Family Lives’ service user describes her experience of trusting her daughter and finding out too late that the trust had been misplaced:

“I just found out on Wednesday that my 11 year old daughter has been chatting to an older boy (says he is 14) on MSN and from what I can tell she has showed him parts of her body on a web cam and possibly sent him photos of herself. I was extremely shocked to find this out as she has shown no interest in boys/sex/kissing etc. but reading through the message history that I have found she has been discussing sex with him. She has also accessed porn sites. As soon as I discovered this I have talked to her - she says she does not know why she has done this, that she isn’t really interested in boys/sex etc. I have explained to her all the dangers of what she has done, and also now installed a software package which restricts the length of time she can use the Internet and blocks her accessing inappropriate sites and also tells me what sites she has tried to access I can now also approve her MSN friends and view conversation logs. I feel better knowing that I can vet her every movement on the Internet, but I am still very very puzzled as to why she has done this is the first place. She honestly has never shown any interest in boys or sex, in fact compared to some of her friends she
seems quite "backwards" in this area. I never would have dreamt in a thousand years that she would do something like this. I am blaming myself for not noticing what she has been up to, but I really did think she was as good as gold as far as the Internet is concerned - she chats daily to her dad and her grandparents and her school friends and I had no reason to think she was doing anything else.” Family Lives website user

As can be seen from the previous case study, new digital and communication technologies open up children and young people to new opportunities to communicate with their friends, but also present new risks to negotiate whilst they are developing. Perhaps the greatest risk that these new technologies present for children and young people is the potential for sexual coercion, exploitation and bullying. Transmitting pictures via phone or the over the internet can feel less risky and does not always appear as coerced as it would in person. However, these images can quickly fall into the wrong hands, providing material that can be used to bully individuals. As with any form of bullying, sexual or sexist bullying can lead to significantly poorer outcomes for the victim, including loss of confidence, isolation, school absence and potentially lower future qualifications.

Recommendation 5: Many parents feel ill equipped to keep their children safe online and many others underestimate the risk to their child or the age at which their child may be engaging in risky or sexualised behaviour online. Support and awareness raising campaigns targeted at parents can help to encourage them to talk to their children about staying safe in the digital world at an earlier stage, reducing their child’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

Recommendation 6: All schools should be provided with guidance based on up-to-date research on pupils’ evolving practices with regards to new digital and communication technologies. All schools should develop and update school policies which tackle new forms of bullying including: digital, sexual and cyber bullying and peer-on-peer sexual exploitation.
Hypermasculinity, gender violence and consent: a neglected issue

While many policy makers have been right to explore the nature of the growing sexualised and commercial pressures that young people face today, by framing the discussion around ‘sexualisation and commercialisation’ there is a potential that this debate can obscure or ignore another significant danger to the social, emotional and physical safety of young women and men: sexual harassment, bullying and assault by peers. It is important to state that discussions of sexual violence such as rape should be considered carefully within debates over ‘sexualisation’ in order to make clear that these perpetrators of such violence are not driven by sex but power and control. There is evidence to suggest that broader trends towards increased sexual awareness or activity are not related to the development of this specific problem.

There is a great lack of accurate and up-to-date information on the prevalence of youth sexual violence, especially upon younger age groups; hence it is easy to simply dismiss the issue as extremely rare. However, from our work with the teenboundaries project we know that this is a growing problem and as more cases of early sexual violence appear and throw light on the problem of peer-on-peer abuse, it is important to highlight this seldom discussed problem and work towards measures to tackle it.

The problem of hypermasculinity and violence against women and girls

Giving evidence to the House of Commons Committee for Home Affairs in June 2012, the Deputy Children’s Commissioner stated that she had uncovered a case of a gang rape of a very young girl by 14 and 15 year old boys who had been summoned by Blackberry Messenger. Whilst this example is shocking and cannot be taken as evidence of broader trends across the UK – indeed it is very difficult to get an accurate prevalence rate for sexual assault, as under-reporting of rape and sexual assault is so high – there is a growing recognition that sexual violence is a real and present danger for many young people. Moreover, that the risks of suffering sexual exploitation and violence can come from peers as well as from much older teenagers and adults.

In recent years, researchers have sought to identify and explain instances of sexual violence. A key analytical concept here is hypermasculinity. Although this concept focuses on males and masculinity, the literature does not dismiss boys as potential victims of rape or assault. However the research generally focuses on male-on-female rape and sexual assault as this is by far the most prevalent form of sexual violence.

Hypermasculinity is an extreme gender identity which results from a gender role socialisation in which cultural expectations of maleness produce both a turning away from relational ways of being and also an adversarial relationship with females who are viewed as deficient, ‘other’ and dangerous. Hypermasculinity is identified by testing levels of ‘negative attitudes towards women’, believing ‘violence to be manly’, ‘holding calloused sex attitudes towards women, including beliefs in rape myths’ (such as scantily clad women deserving what they get). Measuring high on this scale is found to be a reliable predictor of sexual assault and rape.

In addition to its association with rape, hypermasculinity is also correlated with alcohol use, drug use, delinquency, and aggression. This is perhaps unsurprising as features of hypermasculinity include risk taking behaviour, fighting and holding extreme views on the position of women in society. Studies of hypermasculinity have linked the development of this personality type to various factors such as having witnessed or experienced violence as a child or early delinquent behaviour.

In a systematic review of research on masculinity and sexual assault, the stark finding that cultures which strongly differentiate between men and women, devaluing women and promoting aggressive and dominant ideals of
masculinity are more likely to have a high rate of sexual assault. The analysis looks to schools to promote cultural change to reduce rates of sexual assault, arguing for young people to be taught to be critical of media messaging that promotes violence and sexism.

**Tackling sexual violence**

While most research is clear that ultimately efforts to fully address sexual violence against women and girls will involve a whole-sale and long term change of culture and moreover early intervention measures to address early delinquency, anti-social and aggressive behaviour, preventative education programmes can play an important role in countering some of the sexist and calloused beliefs that help maintain a culture where sexual violence is tacitly accepted.

A series of evaluations of violence prevention education delivered in schools have shown that such interventions can have positive effects on males’ attitudes towards violence against women. For example, male (and female) secondary school students who have attended rape education sessions show less adherence to rape myths, express less rape-supportive attitudes, and/or report greater victim empathy than those in control groups.

**Teaching young men about consent**

In their evaluation of the NIA project, a prevention programme designed to tackle violence against women and girls, Coy, Thiara and Kelly provide a useful analysis of previous research into attitudes to consent which shows an alarming blurring of the boundaries for young people, particularly if they are in a relationship. A survey of young men found that they agreed that it might be acceptable to pressure a young woman into sex if he thinks she wants it, if she has been drinking alcohol or if she is his girlfriend. Nearly half of the respondents felt that it was ok to take advantage of an intoxicated woman, and a third felt that if a girl has a reputation for being “easy” then it is acceptable to pressure her into sex.

Colin Stanley, Teen Boundaries practitioner, frequently comes across attitudes such as these, amongst both boys and girls, in the sessions he runs with young people:

“A point that was raised by the boys and the girls was that people may perceive looking at a magazine, right: This is how women should look or how they must look. If the women dress with a minimal amount of clothing on then that will attract negative stereotypes about how they will act. They felt that you should expect people to come along and feel that they have the right to touch you, even though they haven’t, because of the way you’re dressed.”

The End Violence Against Women coalition conducted a poll which found that 29% of 16-18-year-old girls had been subjected to unwanted sexual touching at school. As discussed earlier in relation to educating young people about healthy sexual relationships, it is simply not acceptable to allow this problem to be constructed as a ‘girl’s problem’ and educating boys about consent, boundaries and what constitutes rape and sexual assault is absolutely critical.

Classroom teachers may not be the best people to deliver these messages, but rather a specialist outside agency should be commissioned by schools to work both with staff and pupils to develop a whole school approach to tackling inappropriate sexual behaviour, empowering young people to understand and enforce their own sexual boundaries.

In order for schools to take a lead on these issues there are a number of barriers which must be overcome. The evaluation of the NIA project found that for some schools and local authorities there was a fear that bringing in an external organisation to deliver workshops on the issues would signal that the school had a problem and would have a negative impact on its reputation. It is also clear that a co-ordinated nationwide approach may be difficult in a school system within which decision making and target setting is increasingly being devolved down to individual school level, with less centralised direction.

**Recommendation 7:** Urgent research is required to quantify the full extent of sexual violence between young people. Both quantitative and qualitative research is needed to explore the causal drivers underlying this behaviour. The government should prioritise funding to ensure that there is enough data on this problem to understand the scale of the
problem and generate evidence-based measures to tackle it.

Recommendation 8: Schools should play a leading role in teaching children and young people about consent and unacceptable sexual behaviour, and should work with parents to ensure that these messages are delivered and reinforced in the home environment. Educational prevention initiatives must focus on teaching boys about consent and boundaries as well as girls.
All of our responsibility: the need for a whole school approach

Tackling the multiple pressures that young people face today as discussed in each preceding section are a concern for us all and also all of our responsibility. There is no simple panacea to tackling these problems and whilst recent policy attention has focused on seeking to limit the risk exposure to sexually explicit images and goods, there is a need to move beyond the regulating the wallpaper of children’s and lives and to examine where sexual and gender identities are formed and reproduced: in the home, in school and between peers. Throughout this report, attention has been placed upon joining together the efforts of schools, parents and children to work together and reinforce measures to combat the commercial, sexualised and gendered pressures. The clearest strategy of bringing together all these efforts is to adopt a whole school, holistic approach.

A whole school approach

A whole school approach is predicated on the assumption that bullying and other coercive pressures are a systemic problem, and by implication, an intervention must be directed at the entire school context rather than just at individuals. In many ways it seeks to change the overall culture of the school and in so doing support and reinforce complimentary strategies by teachers, parents and peers to counter these pressures and quickly sanction those who do not comply.

Whole school approaches to bullying have been shown to be effective. A randomised control trial of a whole school approach to sexual bullying, sexual harassment and gender violence in Texas, “Bullyproof”, found significant effects on levels of bullying knowledge and significant increases in peers likelihood to intervene in bullying situations.

Dimensions of a whole school/holistic approach:

- Curriculum Guidance – Sex and Relationship Education and Personal, Social and Health Education should be not simply taught as stand-alone subjects within workshops but also be integrated into core subjects. A school should have a clear plan for ensuring all pupils obtain sufficient Personal, Social and Health Education and Sex and Relationship Education.

- Behaviour Management - all teachers should be trained to understand and deal with instances of sexist, sexual, homophobic or transphobic bullying.

- Child Protection – schools should conduct audits to ensure that cases of child exploitation (including peer-on-peer sexual exploitation) are being identified and appropriate safeguarding measures are put in place

- Pupil Support – pupils should have clear pathways to access support if they are suffering from all forms of abuse and bullying.

- Parental Engagement. Schools should actively share policy with parents and work with them proactively.

- Management and Review. After an instance of sexist, sexual bullying or abuse occurring – a school should adopt a post incident review tool which:
  - Analyses the incident in question
  - Analyses the assumptions driving the behaviour and the other learners including bystanders
  - Understands the dynamic s - the time, location, known views and previous behaviours.
  - The Staff Roles and Actions
  - The Impact on policy and practice – including reviewing behaviour and relationships policy; curriculum design and staff training and systems.

Where are we now?

Previous UK guidance on bullying including ‘sexual bullying’ was contained in the 2007 DCSF document “Safe to Learn: Embedding anti-bullying work in
schools”. A comprehensive document, it outlined the definition of sexist and sexual bullying and advocated a whole school approach to deal with all forms of bullying and sexual harassment. The document contained sample anti-bullying information and satisfaction surveys for parents, alongside a comprehensive list of independent organisations that could provide further and specialist help. In addition, www.teachernet.gov.uk provided useful teaching materials that could be used in the classroom.

The Coalition government has taken a different approach which has sought to simplify guidance to teachers and schools on bullying. On the 17th May, 2012, the DfE released new guidance to replace "Safe to Learn". The new guidance, "Preventing and Tackling Bullying", is a much shorter document which does not reference sexual or sexist bullying and does not mention sexual harassment. "Preventing and Tackling Bullying" implicitly prioritises physical forms of bullying. It states “stopping violence and ensuring immediate physical safety is obviously a school's first priority but emotional bullying can be more damaging than physical; teachers and schools have to make their own judgements about each specific case”. It lacks guidance such as a toolkit of resources and with the decommissioning of teachernet, it is likely that schools will not have adequate guidance or resources to prevent this type of bullying.

A separate Home Office agenda led to the creation of the Equality Act 2010 and a new public sector Equality Duty that came into force on 5th April 2011. The duty requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act. Whilst not specifically addressing sexual bullying, schools are required to publish specific and measurable equality objectives and information by 6th April 2012 to demonstrate that they are complying with the equality duty. This information must be published every four years.

Currently there is a danger that by removing references to sexist and sexual bullying in the schools guidance, schools will not be able to implement a holistic whole school approach designed to tackle all forms of bullying, moreover, that schools will not have relevant and up-to-date toolkits to deal with this issue.

As such, the Coalition Government’s recent recommitment to end violence against women and girls is welcome. They state in the May 2012 update to the strategy that:

“Everyone has a role to play in prevention. This is not just about government activity, but is also about schools, the media, employers, health workers, friends, family members and neighbours spotting the signs and taking a stand. We will continue to support and promote actions that help people recognise domestic violence and sexual violence and know where to go for support”.

Family Lives recommends that the most effective way of achieving this aim is to develop a whole school approach.

Recommendation 9: In order to meet the Home Office’s “Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls’ Strategy” there is a clear need for a consistent, universal approach in schools to ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to realise their fullest social and intellectual potential and live lives that are free from coercion, exploitation and abuse. It is critical that the Department for Education are brought into these plans, as tackling child exploitation, violence against women and girls and empowering young people to resist sexualised and commercial pressures depends upon engaging schools and families. Family Lives recommends that the Department for Education should work towards producing guidance that supports a whole school approach to tackle sexist, sexual and gender-based bullying.
Conclusion & Recommendations

All of our concern
Family Lives has published this report to take forward the useful debate that has been most recently built upon by the 2011 Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood undertaken by Reg Bailey. This report has sought to address issues that the Bailey review gave less time to and makes recommendations to take the agenda forward in a way which empowers young people and their parents.

Family Lives believes that the challenges that young people face today are a concern for us all and all of our responsibility. We have recommended that an effective approach to deal with these issues should engage schools, parents and young people and moreover does this at the earliest available opportunity. Early intervention needs to be integral to the solution: educating parents and young people early will reduce the likelihood that these individuals will suffer negative social, emotional and educational costs.

Together we can help to ensure that children and young people have the tools to deal with coercive pressures, can be empowered to make positive and healthy choices and can reach their fullest potential in every aspect of their lives.

The sexualisation of mainstream culture and the danger of gender stereotypes
While research on the effects of sexualised media and marketing is mixed, it is clear that gender stereotyping has greater effects; potentially limiting girls’ and boys’ future aspirations and achievements, leading to associated social and educational costs.

Recommendation 1: Parents should be supported in reducing pressures for their children to conform to strict gender stereotypes. Retail codes of practice should contain guidance on good practice with regards to gender alongside sexualisation.

Recommendation 2: Schools should take a leading role in teaching children and young people to see through gender stereotypes and sexualised media from an early stage. Both primary and secondary schools should be receive funding to invest in high quality Personal, Social and Health Education lessons that explore gender stereotypes and help children to decode the messages that the media and marketing practices are sending about gender roles, empowering them to challenge what they see.

The importance of sex and relationship education: limiting the influence of pornography
Many parents, educators and policy makers continue to be concerned about children viewing pornography. While new industry regulations are a first step towards limiting the harms of pornography, increasing numbers of young people seek out explicit pornographic content and share this between them, subverting most parental and industry controls. A large reason for this is adolescents’ curiosity and desire for frank information on sex. However, without educating young people about the unreality of pornographic sex through high quality Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) there is a danger that young people will develop unhealthy and unrealistic expectations about sexual relationships.

Recommendation 3: The evidence shows that without access to information about sex and relationships, young people will rely on or be conditioned by inaccurate information or portrayals including, those from pornography. All schools, including primary schools should provide age appropriate Sex and Relationship Education (SRE).

Recommendation 4: Parents have a key role to play in reinforcing ideas about healthy relationships and sex. National awareness campaigns should be developed to up-skill parents to talk openly and confidently about sex and relationships to both boys and girls.

The digital world: new mediums for old risks
Digital and communication technologies are opening up children to new practices and pressures at a rate which leaves both parents and children struggling to fully recognise the potential risks and implications for the future. It is imperative that the ways in which children make use of new technology is known to parents and educators so that the potential risks, which include sexual exploitation, harassment and bullying, can be combated at the earliest available opportunity.

**Recommendation 5:** Many parents feel ill equipped to keep their children safe online and many others underestimate the risk to their child or the age at which their child may be engaging in risky or sexualised behaviour online. Support and awareness raising campaigns targeted at parents may help to encourage them to talk to their children about staying safe in the digital world at an earlier stage, reducing their child’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

**Recommendation 6:** All schools should be provided with guidance based on up-to-date research on pupils’ evolving practices with regards to new digital and communication technologies. All schools should develop and update school policies which tackle new forms of bullying including sexual bullying and peer-to-peer sexual exploitation.

**Hypermasculinity, gender violence and consent: a neglected issue**

While many policy makers have been right to explore the nature of the growing sexualised and commercial pressures that young people face today, by framing the discussion around ‘sexualisation and commercialisation’ there is a potential that this debate can obscure or ignore another significant danger to the social, emotional and physical safety of young women and men: sexual harassment, bullying and assault by peers.

**Recommendation 7:** Urgent research is required to quantify the full extent of sexual violence between young people. Both quantitative and qualitative research is needed to explore the causal drivers underlying this behaviour. The government should prioritise funding to ensure that there is enough data on this problem to understand the scale of the problem and generate evidence-based measures to tackle it.

**Recommendation 8:** Schools should play a leading role in teaching children and young people about consent and unacceptable sexual behaviour, and should work with parents to ensure that these messages are delivered and reinforced in the home environment. Educational prevention initiatives must focus on teaching boys about consent and boundaries as well as girls.

**All of our responsibility: the need for a whole school approach**

Family Lives considers the most effective strategy to address the continuing pressures that young people face today is to adopt a holistic, whole school approach. However, recent policy with regards to tackling sexual bullying is fragmented and as such there is a danger that schools will not be able to fully address the commercialised, sexualised, gendered pressures that young people face today and there is a risk that sexual coercion and exploitation will not be systematically tackled.

**Recommendation 9:** In order to meet the Home Office’s “Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls’ Strategy” there is a clear need for a consistent, universal approach in schools to ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to realise their fullest social and intellectual potential and live lives that are free form coercion, exploitation and abuse. It is critical that the Department for Education are brought into these plans, as tackling child exploitation, violence against women and girls and empowering young people to resist sexualised and commercial pressures depends upon engaging schools and families. Family Lives recommends that the Department for Education should work towards producing guidance that supports a whole school approach to tackle sexist, sexual and gender-based bullying.
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