



Audience Perspectives on Harmful and Offensive Media Content

Focus groups with children and young people



ombudsman
do leanaí
for children



Coimisiún
na Meán



IFCO
OIFIG AICMITHE SCANNÁN NA HÉIREANN
IRISH FILM CLASSIFICATION OFFICE

Before you read this report, let us tell you what we mean when we talk about media content and children's rights...

What is media content?

Media content is anything you see or hear on TV, in the cinema, on the radio, in DVDs, or on streaming platforms like Netflix.

What are children's rights?

Children's rights are all the things you need to live and grow up happy, healthy and safe. For example, food, clean water, education and people who love and care for you.

What's this all about?

Coimisiún na Meán and the *Irish Film Classification Office* are two important organisations who make big decisions about how to keep children safe when they watch or listen to media content. Before they make rules that protect you and your family, they wanted to talk to children so they could understand what it's like to be a young person today. So they asked us, the Ombudsman for Children's Office, for help. We are an organisation that works to make sure children's rights are respected and protected in Ireland.

We were excited to work on this project, because every child has the right to enjoy lots of different kinds of media content—whether it's on TV, in the cinema, on the radio, or through streaming services like Netflix—in a way that is safe, inclusive, and appropriate for their age. Adults have to make sure that everything young people watch and listen to is safe for them to see and hear. They make rules so that you can still watch lots of stuff, but in a safe way.

When adults are making rules that will change your life, they should ask your opinion - and take it seriously. It's your right to have a say on issues that affect you.

Parents have been asked what they think about media content rules in Ireland, but they don't always remember what it's like to be a child. We wanted to find out what children and young people think, so we asked.

We talked to children about what they are watching and listening to in 2025 that might be harmful or violent. We asked what makes some stuff okay for children to watch and other stuff not okay. We even asked young people what they believe the rules should be! This report will tell you everything children had to say.

We'd like to say a huge thank you to the children and young people who took part in this project. Your voices will help to make media content safer for children and young people to enjoy.

Who did we speak to and how?

We spoke to 61 children from all across Ireland. Everyone was aged between 8 and 17 years old. We spoke to 6-10 children at a time in small groups, so that everyone got a chance to speak. We talked to 8 groups in total. The meetings happened in places children know well, like their school or youth club.

At the Ombudsman for Children's Office, we work with children and young people all the time. We made sure the groups were fun and inclusive spaces where everyone could take part. If children changed their minds and didn't want to take part anymore, that was okay too. We told children that we were going to write an important report after speaking to them, so that adults who make decisions would know what they think. Sometimes during the focus groups to help us talk, short video clips were played. All the clips played were suitable for each age group.



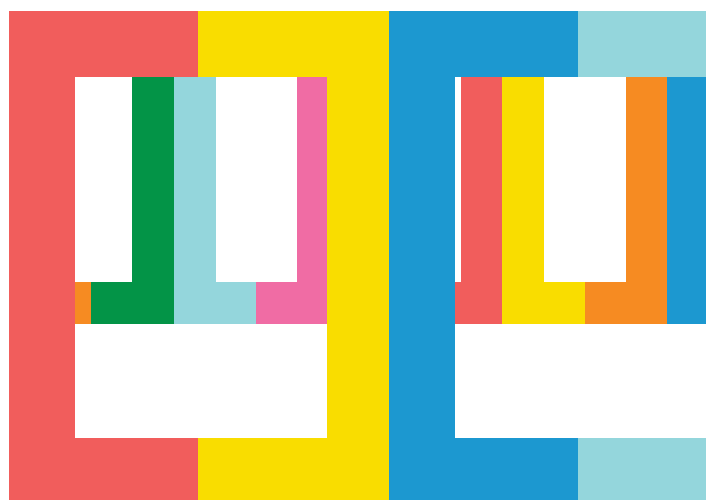
How are children and young people enjoying media content?

Young people liked to watch stuff **on their own** and **with other people**.

Watching stuff together was good because:	Children also liked watching things on their own, because:
• It's a nice way to spend time together – it's less lonely	• They can concentrate better
• You might like watching the same thing, for example a movie or a sports match	• Nobody interrupts them – it's peaceful
• Parents might want to show their children something important	• They can watch whatever they want, for example, things that aren't suitable for their younger siblings
• It's nice at certain times or occasions, like in the evening or at Christmas	• They might be a private person

Young people use lots of different devices when watching or listening to media content, like:

- Mobile phones (especially on their own)
- Tablets
- TV (with family and for sports)
- Radio (when they're drawing or in the car)



They liked to use different streaming services and apps:

Younger Children	Older Children
YouTube Kids	YouTube
Netflix Kids	Netflix
	TikTok
	Disney Plus
	Amazon Prime

Not many young people watched TV channels, like RTÉ or Virgin Media. They liked streaming services and apps better because:

- No ads!
- More content to choose from
- Can **watch what you want, when you want**
- Cool features like **subtitles** and **different languages**



What do young people think of violent media content?

Violent media content

What's violence?

Violence happens when somebody controls or hurts another person. They can do this with their body or other things they say or do. We talked about violence that young people are seeing and hearing on TV, radio, in the cinema, in DVDs or on streaming services like Netflix.

Younger children didn't see or hear as many violent things in media as older children. When they did, it was often in fantasy movies or shows, like Star Wars and Harry Potter.

Older children said they were seeing too much violent content, especially because of the internet. They worried that it could make young people feel sad or scared, and that children would do dangerous things in real life because they're seeing so much violence.



Young people told us when it was okay for them to see violence, and when it was not okay.

They thought it was easier to see or hear violent stuff when...	They said it was harder to see or hear violent stuff when...
• It teaches you about something important	• The violence lasts for a long time
• There's a good reason for it to be in the TV show, movie or on the radio	• It's a true story
• It shows you the consequences for people who are violent	• You see what happens in a lot of detail
• You hear about what happened, but you don't have to watch it in detail	• There's blood or bad injuries (younger children found this hard)
• It's funny or silly	• The characters use weapons
• There's rules about the violence, like in a boxing game	• There's bad language as well as violence
	• Something similar happened to you
	• The violence is sexual



Violent content

“If I was an adult, and I had a kid, like, I would let them watch animated stuff only if it was like, not violent. I wouldn’t let them watch realistic stuff until they’re, like, older, because they might, like, think it’s real and then they might get scared and have nightmares and stuff.”

“There’s more and more violence on screens and it’s easier and easier to access it... most 12 to 15-year-olds are now seeing much more gruesome things, and it’s actually quite a problem. Like I was quite desensitised growing up as well. I think a lot of people my age are quite desensitised due to both the internet and also just movies getting less restricted, more that kind of stuff.”

“You can’t imagine a film about war without people shooting guns and stuff like that... [It’s] kind of impossible to make [a] film like that without violence.”

“There’s also the sense of, like, on a societal level, I think if you suppressed stories of domestic partner violence, that’s bad.... Like, people should be aware that it happens.”

“I think, like, sometimes it’s not good to see, like, really, really violent things, but it’s good to see, like, sometimes, because, like, around the world if you see, like, bad stuff happening, like, you understand what’s going on, so, like, you’re not in, like, this closed space that you don’t know what’s happening around the world.”

Violent content

“Let’s say in a children’s TV show there’s someone bullying another child but then that bully gets consequences, in a way it can sort of teach children that you shouldn’t do that because there will be consequences if you do. So, in a way, if the bully never did anything then the child could hit someone and think there’s no consequences to it.”

“I feel like it’d be more violent if it had like weapons, I guess, than, like, using your physical body.”

“Yeah, it’s upsetting to hear it but it’s good that they talked about it so that they can tell other people who might be in a similar situation.”

“It’s not like gore or, like, blood, like actual, like, people hurting, it’s just, like, the silly punches and stuff.”

“For the first clip we watched, there was kind of a difference in the violence... There was violence in the first clip, but it was more in a way funny violence, but in this clip, it was, I suppose, very dark. Much darker than the first clip”.

Violent content

“There is a lot of violence in Ninjago [but it’s] with the Lego people, so it’s not that bad.”

“It’s not real, so like it doesn’t bother you as much as it would have. Like, if it was a real life movie around genocide and you see dead bodies, that would bother me, but I know it’s a movie, it’s entertainment...”

“It’s not really showing the violence really, it’s just showing the blood. There’s a lot of offscreen stuff.”

“The real life one that you, like, see, the clips of would be the worst to watch.”

“There’s a difference between the Krakow evictions in ‘Schindler’s List’, and, like, the Crazy 88 in Kill Bill Volume One but, like, they’re both, like, gut wrenching but one of them is kind of more on a fun side, the other is kind of, like, a very kind of important thing to say.”

Dangerous or harmful behaviours

What are dangerous or harmful behaviours?

Harmful behaviour happens when someone does something that hurts themselves or others, even if they didn't mean to. This could be things like bullying, using drugs, hurting yourself, or just acting in a way that makes others feel bad. We spoke to young people about the dangerous or harmful behaviours they see or hear on tv, radio, at the cinema, in DVDs or on streaming services like Netflix.

The children we spoke to were very aware of bad things that might happen if young people see harmful content. For example, it might affect their mental health, or younger children might try to repeat some of the things they see in real life.

Just like violence, older children said they were observing a lot of harmful or dangerous behaviours, mostly through social media. They told us when it was okay for them to see or hear harmful behaviour, and when it was not okay.

They thought it was easier to see or hear harmful behaviour when...	They thought it was harder to see or hear harmful behaviour when...
You are more mature	It's in social media videos rather than films or TV shows because it's more realistic
The harmful behaviour is being punished	The problem continues and doesn't get fixed
It teaches you about something important and stops you from doing the same thing	It's made to seem cool or attractive so children might copy it
It's animated, funny, or fake	It's severe, goes on for a long time or unexpected bad language is used
It makes sense as part of the whole movie or TV show	
Things get better by the end and you know why the harmful thing happened	

Dangerous or harmful behaviours

“When I’m watching a film and I see abusive stuff to other people, it won’t harm me as much as it would if I was watching YouTube. Because the thing I know about a film is that there’s actors. They’re acting. They’re doing their job.”

“If, like, for instance, a young child watches a video that does something harmful to a person that’s making the video, they might try to replicate it and they might get hurt.”

“Harmful stuff might also be worse for younger children to watch than older children.”

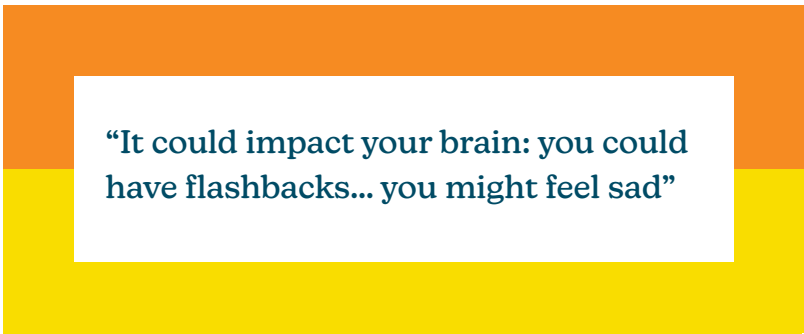
“It kind of depends how old you are, because the older you get, the more you, kind of, understand that you shouldn’t be doing that.”

“Animation is not nearly as impactful, compared to a news story, a documentary. Animation or films that aren’t real... it’s not so bad.”

Dangerous or harmful behaviours



“I do think context is important... like, it shouldn’t just happen, there should be something behind it at least ... [whereby] it adds something to the story rather than just, like... it’s there for the sake of it, like.”



“It could impact your brain: you could have flashbacks... you might feel sad”



“Say they’re just in a bad mood that day even, or they just lost a friend, or something happened in their family, that can then bring them to be more influenced by things.”

How can children enjoy media content in a safe way?

Finally, we asked young people about ways to make sure that what they watch is safe.

Age-classifications

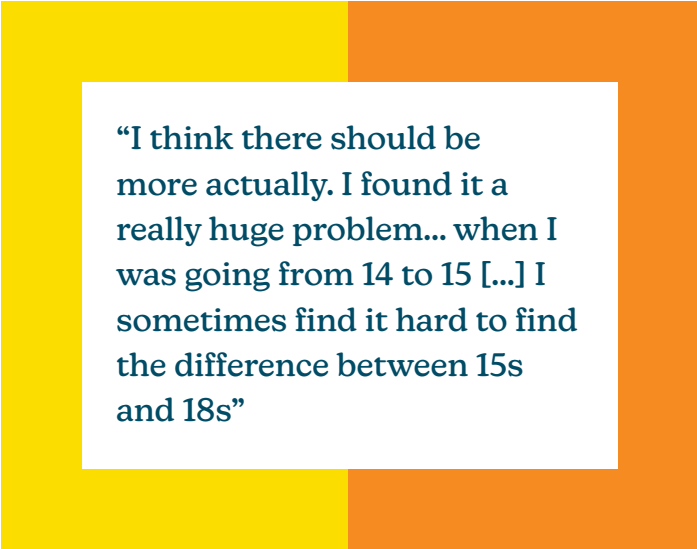
Age classifications - like PG, 12A, 16, or 18 – help parents and young people know if something is safe for children to watch by recommending a minimum age for a film or TV show.

Young people told us they found these useful when deciding what to watch, but they did mention some problems:

Good things about age classifications	Problems with age classifications
• Helps children avoid things that might upset them	• Sometimes age classifications seem lower than they should be
• Helps children to know when things are too childish for them	• Too big of a gap between some of the ratings
	• It's easy for children to ignore ratings sometimes and watch inappropriate content anyway
	• Some platforms don't even include them



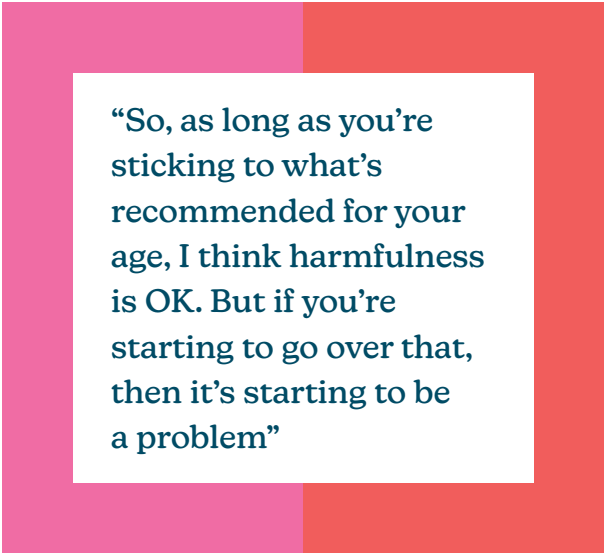
Age-classifications



“I think there should be more actually. I found it a really huge problem... when I was going from 14 to 15 [...] I sometimes find it hard to find the difference between 15s and 18s”



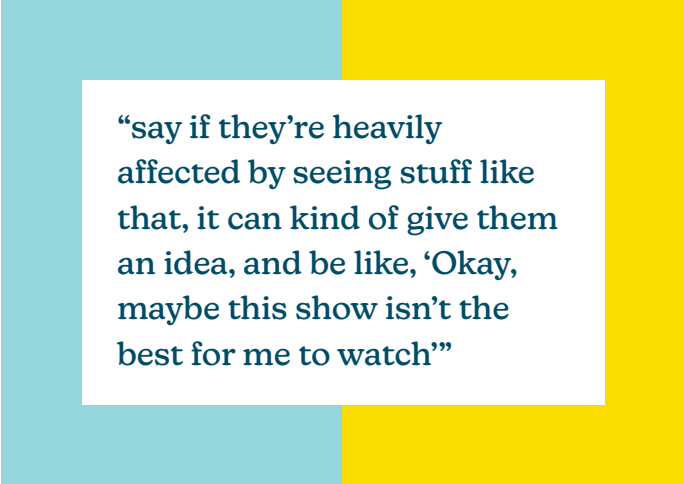
“I feel like it’s important to have rules because different ages can handle different things”



“So, as long as you’re sticking to what’s recommended for your age, I think harmfulness is OK. But if you’re starting to go over that, then it’s starting to be a problem”

Content Warnings

Young people also found that content warnings about things like violence, drug use, or mental health issues were helpful. They made them aware of content that could be upsetting before they started watching something. However, the young people said that content warnings should be **more detailed and easier to see**:



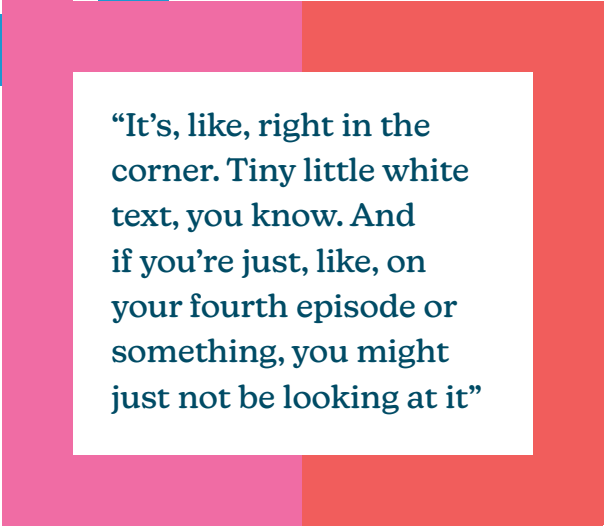
“say if they’re heavily affected by seeing stuff like that, it can kind of give them an idea, and be like, ‘Okay, maybe this show isn’t the best for me to watch’”



“the warning is good because, like, if you don’t want to hear about it, like, you can skip forward a bit or you can, like, turn, mute the TV”



“Not small warnings, like clear, big, like bold warnings”



“It’s, like, right in the corner. Tiny little white text, you know. And if you’re just, like, on your fourth episode or something, you might just not be looking at it”

The Role of Parents

When it comes to deciding what children watch, we found out that parents have much more control over what younger children watch than older children. Here’s what young people told us:

For younger children	For older children
• Parents and children often share accounts so parents can see what their child has watched	• Parents trust older children more to decide what’s okay for them to watch
• Parents use parental locks or passcodes on streaming accounts	• Older children watch more things on their phone or in their bedroom so it’s harder for parents to keep an eye on them
• Parents sometimes watch films themselves first to see if it’s okay for their child	• It’s harder to use parental controls as older children are better at getting around them



The Role of Parents

“All of these restrictions and guidelines, it’s very good for like younger children, because they don’t know what they’re doing, but for teenagers... The more you don’t want us to do something, the more we want to do it, and... We’re going to, like, figure out how to work around it and that defeats the purpose of it.”

“If I was a parent, and I had a kid, I would check what they’re watching... And, like, I would go by their age.”

“They kind of make it clear to me what I’m allowed to watch and what I’m not and I just stick to that... They kind of trust me that I don’t watch anything bad.”

“It was when I stopped having to watch everything in a public room of the house that... like, they have no real way to police me.”

“They used to when I was younger but now, no. As you get older you, like, kind of gain kind of, like, respect and trust as well, off your parents.”

The Role of Young People Themselves

Some young people we spoke to thought that it was also up to themselves to make sure that they didn't watch things that would upset them. They told us about different ways that they do this:

- finding out more information about shows before deciding to watch them or not
- switching off when they see something they don't like
- finding other things to do to take their mind off an upsetting scene



"I have something called Safety Search, where if I search something up, then... even if it's, like, very violent photos that come up, or even nudity, it'll, like, be blocked out, it won't come up at all"

"I'd sort of trust myself as well, like, remove myself from the situation that I don't want to be in."

"If I was a parent, and I had a kid, I would check what they're watching... And, like, I would go by their age."

Media companies

Media companies, like Netflix, also have ways to make sure children are watching things that are safe for them. Here are some examples of things the young people thought worked well:

- showing helpline numbers for support organisations at the start or end of a TV show
- having a way to report offensive or upsetting content
- allowing young people to choose what content is and isn't recommended on their video feed



What will happen with this research?

This research will be really helpful for *Coimisiún na Meán* and the *Irish Film Classification Office* when they're making rules. They will use this report, as well as other research with grown ups, to help them make decisions so that every young person in Ireland can enjoy their right to media content, but also stay safe and well.

Once again we want to say a big thank you to all the young people who helped us with this report by sharing their views and experiences. We plan to share this report with them so they can see how their views will help to shape these decisions about what they watch and listen to.





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