

#### Episode 4: Safety of girls in the digital world

[MUSIC PLAYING] KSENIA BAKINA: Welcome to The Cyber Armor, a podcast which champions voices and safety of women and girls in the digital world. This podcast is brought to you by the Centre for Protecting Women Online and the Open University. I am Dr. Ksenia Bakina, your host for the podcast. I'm also a research fellow and a stream lead for law and policy at the Centre for Protecting Women Online. In today's episode, we are going to be talking to one of our partner organizations, Parent zone.

We'll explore some questions surrounding media literacy of young people and the impact this may have on addressing online violence against women and girls. We'll also discuss whether tech abstinence should be adopted by families, and address online financial harms experienced by children.

To discuss these issues, I have a wonderful guest here with me today, Vicki Shotbolt, who is founder and CEO of Parent Zone, which is an organization which helps families navigate technology safely and addresses emerging parenting challenges in the digital age.

Vicki is also a trustee of the Media and Information Literacy Association, chair of international youth-led organization VoiceBox, and chair of the consortium of organizations researching and responding to child financial harms. Finally, Vicki is also a host of TechShop, a podcast exploring the impact of digital technology on family life. Vicki, welcome to this podcast. It's wonderful to have you here today.

VICKI SHOTBOLT: Thank you for having me, and thank you for that absolutely lovely introduction. That's very kind.

KSENIA BAKINA: So to begin with, I would really like you to tell me more about Parent Zone, its mission, and the kind of work that you do.

VICKI SHOTBOLT: Parent Zone is an organization that has a mission which is improving outcomes for children. That's what we're all about. That is our North Star, how do you improve outcomes for children, particularly in the context of children growing up in a digital world. And we know that the two biggest influences on a child's outcomes are parenting and poverty, and we deal with the parenting side of that equation.

So we're interested in looking at the experience of a child being parented. We're interested in figuring out how you support parents, well, who are parents who are grappling with parenting in a digital age, And We're interested in looking at all of those policy areas that impact parenting, whether that's parental leave or the Online Safety Act.

We're interested in those policy areas that impact on parenting. And because the environment that parents are parenting in, we know is really influential. So that's our remit, and what that looks like in practice is that we run projects directly to young people. We see those as a way of really supporting parenting in a practical way, and we also deliver interventions directly to parents.

KSENIA BAKINA: Wow, that's really a broad mandate because to deal with issues such as from parental leave to online safety, there's a lot of things that you must be very busy at your organization, I can imagine. But I want to focus today more on the online and the digital world aspect of your work. So I wanted to ask about, are there any specific online harms that you have noticed that are experienced by children and young girls in particular, or are there specific online harms that parents are concerned about?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: That's such a great question, and I should say that we do filter all of the work that we do through that digital lens. We try and we try and give ourselves a bit of a break by always thinking about what are the digital impacts of that. So that narrows our remit a little bit. So we're busy. But my team does get the weekends off.

So the online harms that parents are worried about. And that we see young people experiencing are extraordinarily broad, and I think that's one of the interesting things but also one of the complexities. The end that we worry about most in a way, is that environmental and the environment that young people are experiencing and digesting, I suppose, which I think comes directly to that point of harms against women and girls, so the objectification of girls, the sexualization of girls, the commercial pressures on girls.

I mean, we hear parents talking about really young children, really young girls feeling that they need to have a makeup routine because it's something that they've watched on a short

form video platform. And so that digital environment that young people are growing up in, that brings many, many wonderful benefits and opportunities but also includes societal changes that have really shifted the way we think about girls and their exposure to the world.

And then, of course, that leads into the more direct, measurable, tangible, familiar harms like cyberbullying as it used to be called, or commercial risks like being introduced to gambling behaviors, or so many, so many risks that I think a lot of exposure to pornography at an inappropriate age, so many risks that I think parents are now really quite familiar with, the group of risks that we see them least familiar with are those commercial risks and those child financial harm risks. But I think parents really are conscious of the fact that there's a lot of potential harm that the internet can bring into their family homes.

KSENIA BAKINA: Yeah, and again, that's a lot of different harms and a lot of different types of harms. So the more specific harms such as cyberbullying or trolling do more societal issues, such as you've mentioned, objectification, sexualization of young girls and potentially misogynistic attitudes of young boys. So what does Parent Zone actually do to try and make a difference on these very different levels, which seems so huge right now?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: It really does seem so huge. And I think what gives us comfort is that we know that parenting has adapted over generations to respond to changing societies, and parents can do so much to protect their children, to raise kids who are resilient and able to flourish in the society that they're growing up in, and that gives us comfort that we can, if we make the right interventions, help guide children through this environment that is changing so fast, particularly if we now think about AI.

And the way we tackle that is to think about the big principle things, so thinking about resilience, how do you foster a child's resilience, but also how do you teach them effective and really critically important media literacy skills, and those kind of foundational concepts that we then try and bring to life through all sorts of different interventions.

Because I think without those foundational principles, good enough parenting, supporting resilience, developing media literacy, it can start to feel a little bit like whack-a-mole. So we start from those principles, and then we figure out how we embed them.

KSENIA BAKINA: Talking about media literacy, I know you do a lot of work on this issue. So what do your interventions at Parent Zone look like? What do you do to tackle media literacy in young people?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: Media literacy is such a fascinating subject. We absolutely love it, and our central program that we deliver on media literacy is called Everyday Digital. And the reason it's called Everyday Digital is because digital is part of everyday life. And what we try to do is think about those moments when a parent is experiencing using digital, any digital tool, and work on developing healthier habits.

So we look at things like the content that they consume, the consequences of life online, understanding your digital environments. We help them understand these principles of media literacy, recognizing emotional language, recognizing when you're being manipulated, and then we try and encourage really simple behavior changes, little simple habits that families can adopt.

So for example, I'll give you one that's a really simple one. But I think it's such a powerful one. We talk to parents about data, for example, and the habit we often talk to parents about. It's a really simple change. When you go into a shop and they say to you, would you like your receipt by email, or would you rather have a paper version?

We say to parents, why do you think they're asking for that? What is it? Why would they rather give you one? And they, oh, it's because they want your email address, and we go, yes, and you have a choice. So just form a habit to go, no, I don't. Fine, give me the paper. Give me the paper one.

So we don't start with the big complex things. We don't start with the really complicated or you've been manipulated, what's the author trying to make you feel. We start with those really simple. How can you embed in your daily life habits that will start to develop your not just your media literacy understanding but also some really practical steps that you can take to act on it?

That's our core program. We also deliver programs in partnership with YouTube and Google, which is they're designed particularly for children, and they're very different because they're much more skills, behaviors, and pedagogically different, but our core ones are Everyday Digital because we know that everyone is using digital every day all the time.

KSENIA BAKINA: I think that's such a good example about data and shopping, because my background is in privacy law and data protection. So it's something I'm very familiar with and

passionate about, but even I get a little bit stumped when I go to a shop, and the first thing they say to me, oh, so what's your email address for the receipt? And the way they position it from the outset is not as if you don't have that choice, and it does take a real conscious awareness that, no, I can say no, even if the question isn't posed a question, but as an expectation that you share your email address to get the receipt. And I think that's something that most people won't even think about because it's not the option that they give.

They don't say, would you like a receipt by email or would you like to print it? It's more really pushing that email address being given to the consultant. And so other, this is-- are there any more habits that parents should incorporate to increase their media literacy and potentially to increase media literacy of their children, to protect them from these online harms? What do these habits look like?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: It has to be the habit that's right for you. So we give ideas, but then what we try and encourage parents to do is to think about their own context, their own family, what it is that happens at home, that maybe they want to introduce a habit that will just change it up a little bit, or make them more conscious of what it is that they're consuming.

So recommendations is one that we always suggest. So you're somebody who scrolls through your Instagram all the time. If you're me, you seem to get trillions of dogs and tons of gardening stuff because that's what I click on. So my feed is absolutely full of it.

And so we say one habit that a family can get into is exchanging recommendations with each other and taking a look for some of that content, because that way, not only might you get to know a little bit about what your kids are interested in and what they're watching, you may also switch up your own feet a little bit, and find that you're not in that same content bubble that you've kind of created because you've followed your own thread.

So that's the kind of have an exchange of ideas of what I'm looking at evening. Or, when you're boiling the kettle in the morning, and you're standing there waiting for it to make your cup of tea, go through your privacy settings and just do a check or delete a few apps from your phone that you're no longer using or just little simple things that will start to make you more conscious of the fact that you're living in such a media-heavy world that's everywhere and all the time and in your pocket, and you have this feeling that you can't get away from it. And actually, that's a tip that somebody gave me. And actually, I've followed it ever since is if you don't be distracted from your phone, just leave it in another room and ideally leave it on another floor in your house if you have another floor in your house, because the effort of going to get it might just put that little bit of grit in the process that will stop you going and picking it up.

KSENIA BAKINA: I think that's definitely a very good tip that I will myself, a take on board to get that little bit of distance from me and the phone. I think that's a very good tip. And another thing I noticed from Parent Zone is that you also encourage media literacy even for early years. So I think that your project looks at even children from 0 to 5.

And this I initially found a little bit surprising because I didn't think that parents should be thinking of media literacy already at such a young age, especially because I have a one-year-old, one year and nine months. So I thought, oh my goodness, I need to start thinking about media literacy already. I thought I still had a couple of years to go. So do you think it's-- so do you think that children of early years before they reach five? Are they too young to be media-literate, educated?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: Absolutely not, and I think what's interesting about the debate that's happening about digital and families at the moment, and I know we're going to come onto this conversation about abstinence. We've got this idea that digital is somehow bad for children, and that there's a world in which their kids away from tech, and the truth is nonsense.

I mean, you're not using video in this podcast, I know, so listeners won't be able to see what I can see. But I can see a TV behind you, and I bet it's a smart TV. And there are homes now that have got smart fridges and smart washing machines, and they've got Alexa devices, and we live in a digital world. So this idea that somehow parents are going to digitize their homes when a baby comes into it is just silly, quite honestly.

So that being the case, how do you start, just as you do with all the other foundational skills that you're teaching a toddler, how do you start to build positive media literacy skills? And obviously, you don't do that by sitting down and talking to them about manipulative language and emotional language.

But there's a fantastic person expert in the States called Faith Rogow, and she talks about how parents can even do simple things, when they're reading a story to their very small child,

talking about instead of telling them what comes next, asking them what they think is going to come next, asking them what's making them think that that's what's going to happen next, because that's starting to teach them about picking up those clues about what the media they're consuming is making them feel and think about. And these are skills and behaviors that are easy to introduce to early-years parenting if we take the time.

And I think, unfortunately, loads of people look at parents with smaller kids and the narrative is all about that. Oh, they're using the iPad as a babysitter. Oh, they're using the phone to distract them, and they don't talk. Mums aren't talking to their kids anymore, and all of that negative stuff, actually, when you talk to parents, they've been really thoughtful about it. They're setting boundaries. They're trying to find those apps that do nursery rhymes, but are also really good apps and safe apps. So parents have been really thoughtful about this stuff, and it's important that we help them do it well in those absolutely critical early years.

KSENIA BAKINA: Yes, absolutely. I really agree with you because at first, I even from my own perspective, I thought I was not going to let my child have any screen time at all. When I first gave birth, I thought, this is going to be TV-free, YouTube-free home.

But I very quickly gave in and I actually realized that there are a lot of benefits to watching some YouTube shows, particularly YouTube shows, for instance, in another language, because I'm raising my child as bilingual. So that's another help to get him used to the other language. And there are some really nice shows.

For instance, he's learned to say no or to shake his head very early on from watching Ms. Rachel because she shows them how to shake their head and things like that. And also, as you said, my parents have Google. So the first thing my child does when we visit grandparents runs to Google and say, Google bus, Google bus.

[LAUGHING]

So at first, I thought, oh, maybe it's a bit young, but actually I see that it's inevitable that he is being brought up in this digital age, and I will definitely take a look at that recommendation work by the author who you suggested because I think I definitely could do with more tips about how to raise a more media-literate child.

And so talking about media literacy, I also wanted to ask you, what do you think media literacy can do in preventing the violence and online harms that are currently being faced by young girls? How much of an impact can it actually make?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: Again, such an interesting question. I'm afraid I may actually be about to fudge it a little bit because I think it's absolutely vital that we raise people's media literacy skills. I take the Finnish approach. I think Finland have got it right when they say that, actually, it's a question of national security apart from anything else. It's a requirement to maintain democracy and security.

And so I agree with that, and I cannot underline enough how important I think it is that families have great media literacy skills. But is that enough to inoculate girls from the violence and unpleasant misogynistic narratives?

And no, I don't think it is, actually. I think these are skills and behaviors and knowledge that people should have as a personal asset, but I don't think it in any way excuses or even to some extent can ultimately mitigate the levels of misogyny and violence that we're seeing, the behaviors that have crept into society.

And furthermore, I don't think it's reasonable or appropriate to expect women to protect themselves. I think that's where we've ended up for time immemorial, that women have had to take all the responsibility for protecting themselves and don't wear that skirt, don't walk down that dark alley, don't go to that platform, don't learn how to use the Block and Report button because muting those unpleasant comments will protect you. But what does that do to change the digital environment?

It just you still know it's there. You still know that that's what somebody is thinking about you and saying about you. So I think it's really important, and I think it does help women to develop those techniques to protect themselves when they need to, and I think it gives them the knowledge that they need to perhaps process some of the content that they're seeing.

And I think, for boys, it's even more critical because hopefully it helps them recognize that some of what they're consuming is, either utter nonsense or deeply offensive, or that they're counter to their own values and the man that they want to grow up to be. So I think it can do an awful lot of that work, and I think it's vital that it does. I'm always just a little bit nervous about the idea that if we develop these media literacy skills, that will do the job, because I don't think it will. I think there's something more fundamental that needs to happen.

KSENIA BAKINA: I couldn't agree with you more, and I'm really glad that you identified that correlation between the fact that there's so much responsibility on parents to raise their children, to be media-literate, and to prevent in this way, them accessing websites that might contain a lot of harms. It's very similar to that victim blaming attitude of women about wearing short skirts, that it's somehow their responsibility to protect themselves from abuse or from rape, which is not the case because you may be media literate parent.

You may raise your children to be media-literate, but you cannot counter the impact that social media platforms have, that gaming industry have on children, and that that's not your responsibility to regulate those platforms, to regulate those industries, to make sure that pornographic content is not splashed everywhere online with easy access for young people. So there's definitely still a lot of responsibility on corporations, on the industries, and on the government itself. So I wanted to ask you, apart from increased media literacy, what do you think need to be supported and put in place more or maybe governmental or societal level that we change in our attitudes and move away from the objectifying sexualization of young girls and these misogynistic attitudes that boys tend to be very kind of open to online?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: It's an interesting one to reflect on, isn't it? And I was in danger of giving a trivial response, which is reaching a situation where our policymakers were. There was a gender balance in Westminster. Might be a start because I do think we often point the finger at social media companies or big tech, and there's definitely some pointing to be done. There definitely, definitely is.

But I'm interested to know what happened in society that allowed those companies to flourish in the form that they've taken. Because if you remember all the way back, I mean, it's such a famous story, Mark Zuckerberg, when he first developed Facebook, it was to score girls looks. It was-- which woman in Harvard gets the highest score based on her looks. There was a deeply seated misogynistic value there.

It wasn't killed at birth. It was allowed to flourish and turn into this Global platform, which does a lot of good. I'm not one of the social media haters. I'm absolutely not. But I just find it fascinating that our society has rewarded what should have actually been nipped in the bud as that's inappropriate. Don't do that. Create this kind of positive contribution to society instead.

And I can remember talking about the rise of pornography 20 years ago, digital pornography. I was talking about along with other people like Elly Hanson. We were ridiculed, abused, called narrow-minded. You name it. We were told that it was silly. So why was it that the pornography industry was allowed to develop this business model that promotes violent, misogynistic, dreadful porn that actually would be illegal if it wasn't online?

I think there's something gone really radically wrong at a societal level, but definitely at a governmental level. And I think that's actually where more of the finger pointing ought to be placed. Why did we-- what is wrong with our structures that they couldn't identify that the direction of travel was not right? And instead, we rewarded business models that are ultimately harmful to society. And I think that's really, we're now in the business with the Online Safety Act of trying to put the genie back in the bottle, and I think it's going to be exceptionally difficult.

KSENIA BAKINA: Absolutely, I couldn't agree with you more. And I think considering where Facebook has started, is it really a surprise that now Meta is abolishing its fact finders and the new outputs that Mark Zuckerberg has put out surrounding fact finding and the equality and diversity aspects of Meta? Is it really a surprise that given a little bit of leniency from the Trump administration that we're now going backwards to more misogynistic Meta? But that's where it started all those years ago.

VICKI SHOTBOLT: Exactly, if you reward bad behavior-- we know that this is basic parenting. This is parenting 101. If you reward bad behavior, you're going to get more bad behavior. You ignore the bad behavior and you reward the good behavior. That's basic parenting. So we've done the exact opposite.

And I think you can't ignore the Trump effect. Donald Trump has come in. He's a misogynistic offensive man. Is it any wonder that society is going to lurch more in that direction? I fear. I fear we're not in the best of times. Let's put it that way.

KSENIA BAKINA: So we've talked a lot about media literacy. This has an impact on parents and young children, but I know that you've also done a lot of work on financial harms that are experienced by children, and that's something that's I think, really important and not talked about as much. So could you maybe elaborate on what kind of online financial harms young people experience in today's world.

VICKI SHOTBOLT: Absolutely, and I agree with you completely. It is an area that is not talked about enough. And it's perplexing really, because we know money can often be the root of all evil, and it's kind of not surprising that money features in lots of different forms of harm online from sextortion to the more familiar friend of mine, things like scams.

So when we're thinking about child financial harms, we are thinking about that broad spread from direct financial harms where you are losing money, you're being scammed, you are-- identity theft, all of those things, overcharged direct money-related harms through to where money is playing a key role in another harm, and that might be sextortion, where money is being used to tempt people to share intimate images, and then they're blackmailed as a result of sharing those intimate images.

We're also thinking about things like the commercial environment that children are growing up in. So those spaces where they are being sold to, even though it may not explicitly feel that way. We're thinking about things like loot boxes in games where children are being introduced to gambling-like behaviors. Even though the industry would say it's not gambling, it's all fun, but it is gambling-like behaviors.

We're thinking about a really broad spread, and we know from talking to parents that levels of awareness of that spread of financial harms is incredibly low. Parents own financial confidence is sometimes quite low. But if you then introduce things like cryptocurrencies and virtual in-game currencies, it becomes just completely perplexing and mind-boggling, even if you're working in that space.

And I'll finish with one number because it stays with me from all of the work that we've done, children. And by children, we were looking specifically at 13 to 18-year-olds, but children spend 50 pounds million a week online. That figure is really quite bracing, I think, and we called our report where we did some research with children and young people to understand more about their buying, spending, and losing money behaviors.

And we call the report hidden in plain sight because I think one of the category errors that we've made about this group of harms is that we've based all of our assumptions on this idea that children are not independently financially active online because the model that we're used to is a child being given money by their parent and then going off and doing some shopping.

That's the model that's in our head. But that's not the model that is true anymore. The model now is that children are independently buying, selling, making, and losing money online. And that has introduced a whole new category of harms.

KSENIA BAKINA: Mm-hmm, and so what do you think parents can do realistically to prevent their children from online harms, particularly especially if you say there's so much about gaming currencies and that they might not even understand? How do they even begin to tackle this issue?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: And it's really difficult because the issue is so new, or our understanding of the issue and our starting to quantify, measure and talk about this issue is so new that there really isn't that much support for parents, and I think that's one of the gaps that we are campaigning really hard to try and fill, because parents need support on this, because there isn't a quick and easy answer to your question.

So there are some things that you can do, make sure that you've got parental controls on if you've got your credit cards saved to a gaming device, make sure that there are spending limits. Ideally, don't have your credit card associated to a gaming device. That's not always possible. It's sometimes not possible to use some gaming consoles without having a card saved to it. So definitely, make sure that you're using those technical tools that can limit spending.

But I think ultimately, the most holistic thing you can do is make sure that conversations about money and financial harms are part of the conversations that you're having in your home, because children told us that they'd feel really embarrassed if they fell foul of a scam, they wouldn't tell anybody, because growing financial autonomy is kind part of your identity as a growing adult, isn't it?

You want to have autonomy. You don't want that autonomy to be taken away. And so children felt really anxious that they'd be embarrassed or that they wouldn't be allowed to do things if they told anybody. So you have to deal with that embarrassment, and the only way to deal with it is to be open about money, what they're spending, if they have lost money and make it OK because, let's be fair, funnily enough, I fell foul of a scam.

I should have known better, but I answer it in one of those text messages only a couple of weeks ago. It can happen to anybody, and we need to make sure that kids have that

message so that they will disclose to their parent, because ultimately, that's the key thing. We have to help children to tell us if they've fallen foul of a financial harm.

KSENIA BAKINA: Absolutely, I think it's the scammers. The online scammers are so good at making you believe them. I also fell for a scam a few years ago because I was sent a link to what looked like, a HMRC website willing to give me a tax rebate. So I quickly-- I was so excited. I quickly put in my card details without even thinking, and only afterwards, I realized that actually something is off, and I've done something wrong, and I had to call HMRC to see if this was correct.

So if adults can be fooled, it's so much easier for children to be fooled like that, and it's very important to really make it open that yes, sometimes we all make mistakes, sometimes we fall for lies. Fraudsters do have a fantastic ability of recreating websites and making it look so legitimate.

And as you were talking, I was also thinking about extortion and just how much anxiety it creates because when this extortion scandal first came out a few years ago, I was really surprised that it was predominantly young boys who were targeted, and young boys were so embarrassed that they committed suicide. There were numerous suicide and suicides as a result of this extortion blackmail because, again, we are not often-- you don't feel confident in talking about these issues.

They might be embarrassed that they've sent their nude images to someone else or just that they've been scammed in such a way that it's definitely I think having those conversations having this open parenting approach is fundamental. But also, I agree with you that I think there's definitely a need for more awareness raising and more support for parents to even be able to understand these different currencies and how they work to be able to help their children. So bearing that in mind, is there anything you think could be done at governmental level to support the parents in this way?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: One of the things that we're really keen for policymakers to do is to just recognize that parents need to be given the tools to support children. So I'll give you one example of some legislation that's going through at the moment, and it's called the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act. And it's all about-- one of the things it's trying to achieve is to make it as easy to cancel a subscription as it is to take out a subscription.

But the act completely forgets that children might be taking out these subscriptions. So it doesn't give parents any additional tools to cancel subscriptions on behalf of children. So for example, it said that it wanted to address the way that reminders were sent to consumers if they'd taken out a subscription in a timely way so that you could cancel that subscription, which is great, perfect for adults, really important, good idea. But if the person who took out the subscription is a child, regulation needs to remember that it's going to be a parent who needs to be able to cancel that subscription.

And at the moment, regulation simply isn't remembering that children are active consumers online. So none of it is thinking about what additional protections are going to be needed in order to help parents protect their children's rights online. So that's the biggest change that we'd like to see. I mean, and it's not a big ask, I think, it's like for me, it's back to this gender balance thing. I think if there were more women in parliament, they'd be more conscious of this.

Just remember that children are parented, and parents need to be able to support their children. So every piece of regulation that goes through parliament, we think, should pass the family friendly test. Is there a child that's going to be impacted by this? And if there is, have parents got what they need in order to protect their children's rights. And at the moment that simply doesn't happen. So yeah, it's a big wish list from us, but we think it's really, really important, because if you don't embed that to regulatory basis. Parents are inevitably left picking up the pieces without very many tools in their toolbox.

KSENIA BAKINA: Absolutely, it may be a big wish list, but it's one we should be wishing for. We shouldn't be wishing for anything less than tools that are needed to ensure that parents can do their job effectively and that children are safeguarded from these harms.

So we've talked about the financial harms today, and we've talked about the way also there are other online harms, including cyberbullying and objectification, sexualization of girls. We often hear that these tech abstinence arguments, which we briefly touched upon earlier that well, if you don't give a computer, if you don't give an iPad to a child, you're not going to have that problem.

If for instance, your child doesn't have an iPhone with which they can take this naked image to send to the scammers, the problem isn't there. If you take them off Facebook and don't

give them access to Facebook, they're not going to experience the cyberbullying. Is there any truth to this argument? Do you think this would be a good solution to just have the children in this bubble that doesn't include smartphones or smartwatches or anything like that?

VICKI SHOTBOLT: Short answer is no. It's an absolutely rubbish idea, and it's a bit silly to be honest. It's a bit-- I don't know. I struggle a bit with the screen-free childhood campaign. I understand and actually empathize a lot with that desire to just make this a bit simpler to take it away, and I think that's what parents are saying. They're saying, can we just take this away? Can we take a pause until we've got on top of it, and then, maybe we can tackle it. But in the real world, that's not going to happen. And in the real world, children are growing up in a digital environment, and therefore our job, as parents, is to raise them with the skills, knowledge, and behaviors they need in order to flourish in that digital environment. So does that mean that we need proper boundaries? Of course.

One of the rules that we say to parents, don't ever let your child take their phone to the bathroom. There is no good reason for a phone to be in a bathroom. And we know that's often where children take intimate images. Set boundaries. Every single parent will have boundaries about where their child is allowed to go in the offline world and when they're allowed to do it.

I live in London. When my child was growing up, my little boy was growing up, there were parts of London that I said, you're not going there at all, and you're definitely not going there on your own. I'll take you. I'll pick you up at the end at the time that I say I'm going to pick you up.

The same is true online. There are apps and services that children shouldn't be using and parents should be saying no to, and that includes following age ratings that are clearly saying this tool is not suitable for your child. Parents should be setting those boundaries. And it's difficult. It's really difficult.

Tech does not make it easy for us because it's sticky, and it's everywhere. Not all parents have the same boundaries and it's really difficult. But that is the job of parenting. You have to have boundaries around tech use, and you have to create spaces, and children say this to us themselves.

They want spaces away from tech. They need their parents to help them carve out time that is tech-free. So really super-duper important that parents set boundaries with this stuff, but an abstinence approach, A as unachievable for all the reasons we talked about earlier smart fridge, Alexa, the smart telly, all of those things, B, as with anything else in life, you have to understand the rules, internalize them, learn them in an age-appropriate way, grow with them. You can't take children to 16 and then push them off a cliff. You can't push them off a digital cliff at 16 and say you had no exposure up until 16, but don't worry, you'll be fine in your get. That is not sensible parenting. So this idea of screen-free, it's silly. But that is not to say that there aren't very, very important questions to ask.

So for example, edtech, Sweden have famously rolled back the edtech revolution in that country to say we want less edtech in the classroom, and I think there are very valid reasons, questions to ask about-- what's the quality of the screen time the child is having? How much of it is appropriate at their age? Is it properly balanced with other physical skills and outdoor play, free outdoor play? Are all of those things also in place?

But we have to look at we have to look at it in the round, not just hope for some kind of tech-free wooden toy utopia that is not really either realistic or achievable or ultimately desirable if you want to raise children that are going to flourish in this century.

KSENIA BAKINA: I couldn't agree with you more because, as you were talking, I was thinking of my own childhood where I was a little girl, we had a TV that barely worked and it was so blurry and you had to bash it around a couple of times to even watch a cartoon. So it was easy for me to grow up and pretty much screen-free more or less.

But in today's world, it's impossible, especially if children see their parents on their phones, with their watches, with their smart TVs, smart fridges, I think, absolutely, it's not something that we can achieve. So I just want to wrap up by asking you, do you have any top tips for parents raising children in today's digital world? If you could maybe summarize a couple of top tips that would be really helpful.

VICKI SHOTBOLT: I will do my best, and there are two buckets-- boundaries and conversations. Those are the two buckets. So the first bucket, get your boundaries. And that means, decide how many hours a day. Decide which tools you're going to use. Set up the tech before you hand it over. Make sure that you are setting the rules for your family that are going to work, and that will vary depending on your child. It will vary depending on your

household, for a household that doesn't have a room that they can keep tech-free if you're living in a one-room apartment, and you've got two kids don't have that very many choices. But try and decide purposefully, what are my boundaries going to be around tech in our family life? That's the number one. The second bucket is that bucket of conversations. Have open conversations. Have them earlier than you think you need. You need to. So if you're not talking to your child about pornography by the time they're 8, the internet probably is. So you might not feel comfortable doing it. You might be nervous doing it. You might feel awkward doing it. If you can have the most open, complete conversations about all this, be guided by your child. If they ask you a question, answer it honestly and openly. Be honest and open about the challenges that you have with digital environments. The more conversations you can have and the more open they are and regular and normalized, the more chance there is that if and when your child has a problem, and they will because everybody does, they're going to come to you, and that's ultimately what you want because things can be fixed if you know about them. And so that's the parents job. Make it easy for your child to come and talk to you because you've started all those conversations with them.

KSENIA BAKINA: Thank you very much for this advice, Vicki. And thank you for being on today's podcast. It's been an insightful and useful and eye-opening conversation which I really enjoyed. In today's podcast, we discussed online harms affecting children and young girls. We've talked about the role that media literacy has to play in tackling these harms, as well as the rise of financial harms experienced by children online.

Finally, we've discussed whether tech abstinence is the solution to this and what could be done instead. I hope you've enjoyed listening to this podcast and follow the Centre for Protecting Women Online on our LinkedIn page, and you can also stay tuned for the next episode.

[MUSIC PLAYING]