

Fines for kids' unrestricted internet use 'won't work'

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CyberSafetyIreland says education not prohibition is most effective way to protect children online



Fine Gael's Jim Daly

Proposed legislation to fine parents who allow their children to own phones with unrestricted access to the internet has been criticised by an internet safety group.

Under the planned legislation being prepared by, chairman of the Oireachtas committee on children and youth affairs, Fine Gael's Jim Daly, retailers would also face fines if they sell a mobile device with internet access to a child under the age of 14.

He said the idea for the legislation came following an appearance by the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) before the committee where it said online safety was "the single greatest threat to children in our time".

Defending the difficulty in policing such a law, Mr Daly said it was about setting a standard and creating awareness.

"It's not about unsupervised access, we do need to regulate. Essentially you are allowing a child of seven or eight years of age to have a mobile device that allows them to access unlimited pornography of every type, they can go gambling, cyber bullying. We protect our children from things like sunbeds by law, just like alcohol, tobacco."

"When the smoking ban was proposed people said it was unenforceable. Many laws are very difficult to police.

"There is a law against slapping children, I could be at home slapping my children all day, nobody is going to know about it. You don't send the police in to police it, it is about setting a standard. It's about setting an ideal, it is about creating awareness," he told RTÉ radio.

However, CEO of CyberSafetyIreland Alex Cooney said that while it was welcome Mr Daly had focused attention on the importance of cyber safety for children accessing the internet, the proposed legislation was not offering the right approach to tackling the issue.

“Prohibition does not work. We know this from talking to thousands of children and parents across Ireland over the past year. Children as young as nine are regularly accessing the internet, often on their own devices and often without appropriate supervision. We agree that adult supervision and guidance is absolutely critical but we strongly believe that the answer lies in education, not prohibition,” she said.

Ms Cooney said children and their parents should be educated on using devices in a smart and responsible way while providing them with reasonable guidelines and resources.

She also said the Government should focus its attention on putting in place a national strategy on internet safety for children as a starting point.

Director of policy and communications at the ISPCClíodhna O’Neill said the Government needed to implement a national cyber-safety strategy for children which incorporated a range of elements – including education, law reform and increased regulation.

Ms O’Neill also said that, while unsupervised access to the internet for children was not a good thing, at-risk children needed internet access and privacy in order to access some of the ISPCClíodhna services.