Child Safety Online
Some observations from Childnet International to the COPA Commission

The Commission has collected a huge amount of evidence from many organisations within the USA. This note provides a different perspective from Childnet International, a not for profit group based in the UK but working around the world with the mission of helping make the Internet a great place for children (see Annex 1 for a description of Childnet's functions and recent activities).

Childnet was disappointed that it was unable to accept the Commission's invitation to provide oral evidence because of scheduling conflicts. At this stage of the Commission's activities it seemed best to submit a summary of the key lessons Childnet has learned from its work. If the opportunity arose to expand on this submission through oral evidence later in the year, Childnet would be very willing to do this.

1

The Internet provides tremendous opportunities for children to discover, connect and create

In the few short years that the Internet has been widely available it has made an enormous impact on children's lives. (One testimony to this is found in the amazing quality and richness of the winners of the annual Cable and Wireless Childnet International Awards contest see **www.childnet-int.org/awards**)

2

The Digital Divide is a very significant issue both within the USA and around the world

There is a near universal acceptance around the world that online access is crucial for children's learning and development of essential future work skills. But the opportunity for access, at school and at home, is very unevenly spread. There are more telephone lines in Tokyo, Japan than the whole of Africa. Strategies to overcome digital exclusion (whether of poverty, isolation, physical handicap, language, ethnic group or culture) are vital to benefit the world's children.

3

The dangers children face online are real and should be neither sensationalised nor minimised

Childnet describes the main dangers as arising from issues of:

CONTENT - accessing inappropriate content including pornography, child pornography, racist/hate and violent sites.

CONTACT - being contacted through chat rooms and e-mail by those who would seek to harm or lure them.

COMMERCIAL - the blur between much content and advertising, direct marketing to children, collection of information violating privacy.

4 The USA is likely to encounter new challenges for children online sooner than elsewhere

Experience would suggest that because of its high Internet penetration the United States has tended to experience new dangers on the Internet before other countries. The debate about pornography online and its availability to children first emerged in the US in 1993/94. The issues of advertising blurring with editorial content and marketing information being collected from children were first raised by the Center for Media Education in the US in 1996. The issues of children being potentially prey to paedophiles in chat rooms were highlighted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in 1997. All of these problems have subsequently been experienced in other countries.

5 Ensuring child safety online requires a comprehensive strategy – there is no "silver bullet" solution

Childnet has always argued that keeping children safe online required a strategy that would include the following elements:

- Promoting the use of great content for children (green spaces, kid's directories (eg Childnet's own Launchsite www.launchsite.org)
- User reporting of illegal child pornography and direct exploitation of children through tiplines/hotlines (see www.inhope.org for information about hotlines in different countries)
- Strong co-operative law enforcement to deal with child pornography and child exploitation online eg luring in chat rooms
- Effective internet education and awareness campaigns for parents, carers, teachers and children which are adapted to the particular audience (see Childnet's research on this subject at www.netaware.org)
- Use of filtering and other technology tools

6 Responsibility for ensuring and promoting child safety online should be shared by parents, child welfare groups, the internet industry and governments

No single sector within society has total responsibility on this issue and the most effective strategies will seek to harness the strengths of each sector. We note good examples of this approach in initiatives like the America Links Up Campaign, Getnetwise, the Internet Watch Foundation in the UK (www.iwf.org.uk), the Singapore government initiated Parental Advisory Group for the Internet (www.pagi.org.sg) and the new Australian community education body (www.netalert.net.au)

7 There needs to be a continuous investment in educating parents (carers and teachers) and children about internet skills and online safety

There has been a tendency to have bursts of activity on internet safety rather than a constant investment in reminding parents about how their children can be kept safe online. Childnet would like to see further initiatives eg when they first purchase a multi-media computer parents should receive a leaflet about how their children can have a great (and safe) time online; computers could have a pre-installed safety tips screen saver; ISPs should have a link to a resource like Getnetwise on their log on screen (not buried in the Terms of Service area).

8 No "parental control software" is 100% effective but the technical failings are often over stated

Technology tools to help parents and others prevent children from accessing unsuitable or dangerous areas online vary in their effectiveness. One recent study in the UK by the Consumers Association (a respected independent group) concluded that it was impossible to recommend a "best buy" from among filtering products because none were wholly effective. Thus it is very important not to give parents a false sense of security by suggesting a tool will avoid the need for parental involvement. On the other hand, such software can prevent many problems, and are a useful tool in an overall safety strategy, especially in places were parents cannot be present.

9 Parents are confused about filtering products and need very simple solutions which they are constantly reminded about

Childnet's focus group research on this issue in six European countries showed that parents were confused about how filtering worked and how products could be installed (see www.netaware.org) Parents wanted more information and very simple, easy to use solutions. Requiring the downloading and installation of the initial software or updates is a step too far for most parents. Constant reminders of how to make effective use of tools are necessary. Childnet commends the approach America Online has given to this issue through continual reminders about safety on its log on screens.

10 The aversion to mandatory filtering in schools and libraries is much stronger in the USA than anywhere else

There has been very little debate on this issue outside the USA. Initiatives have been taken in a number of countries with strong public support. In the UK, the government encourages the use of filtering in schools and has approved certain approaches (see http://managedservices.ngfl.gov.uk/); in Singapore, Internet Service providers have to offer customers the option of a "Family Access Network" with filtering at the ISP's server (see www.sba.gov.sg)) ; and Australia's new legislation requires ISPs to offer filtering products to customers.

11 The effort to build an internationally acceptable not for profit labelling and filtering architecture should be supported

The issue of safety online is so important that new approaches must be investigated and supported. The initiative of the Internet Content Rating Association (www.icra.org) is one such approach that is very attractive as it does not rely on blocking software keeping up to date with new and dangerous sites. It also has the potential to include green lists of good sites for kids, to allow third party groups to add value to the system with their own templates of what content might be acceptable and from the outset has focussed on building a globally acceptable approach. Childnet supports this not for profit effort

12 The USA has a crucial leadership role in child safety online issues but can learn from some approaches developed in other countries

Childnet applauds the continuing priority being given in the USA to finding effective online safety solutions for children. As noted in point 4 above, the USA has experienced many problems earlier than elsewhere, and has thus experimented with many of the possible solutions before other countries. Thus the findings of the COPA Commission have a global as well as a national significance.

However, there are some interesting initiatives being taken in other countries from which the USA might benefit eg the commitment to internet education and awareness in Singapore (eg see the number of government supported seminars for parents on the home page of www.pagi.org.sg); the controlled use of filtering technologies in schools and libraries in the UK; the internet industry support for tiplines/hotlines in Europe.

Nigel Williams
Director
Childnet International
nigel@childnet-int.org
www.childnet-int.org

Annex 1 - Functions and Activities of Childnet International

FUNCTION AREA	EXAMPLE OF PROJECT OR ACTIVITY
Access - promoting broad access to the internet by children and highlighting quality content	Cable & Wireless Childnet Awards - an annual contest open to children from around the world and those working with them engaged in innovative activities online. In April 2001 the ceremony will be held in Washington DC www.childnet-int.org/awards Launchsite an online directory of web sites offering safe and fun activities in which children can get involved www.launchsite.org Deafchild International - Childnet provided support to an existing deaf children's organisation to create a new initiative linking deaf children through the Internet www.deafchild.org
Awareness - helping parents and other adults supervising children be aware of the opportunities and dangers online	Research Project for European Commission - in January 2000 Childnet submitted a report following a year long research study (undertaken in partnership with Fleishman Hillard) into how to communicate safe use of the Internet to parents and children www.netaware.org Net Benefit seminars - In 1998 Childnet helped prepare the curriculum for the America Links Up campaign in the US. Later we developed our materials into a seminar for parents and produced teaching notes for trainers. These materials have now been used in a number of countries including Singapore and Austraila
Protection - strategic international initiatives to directly protect children from exploitation online	INHOPE - Childnet has worked to get hotlines or tiplines inside and outside Europe, that receive reports about child pornography online, to cooperate. We established the Internet Hotline Providers in Europe Forum in 1998 and this has now become an association - www.inhope.org International Conference on Combatting Child Pornograpy on the Internet - Childnet was invited by the US Department of Justice, the European Commission and the Austrian Government to help organise this ground breaking conference in Vienna in October 1999. www.stop-childpornog.at
Policy - engaging in strategic discussions on how access, awareness	Bertelsmann Foundation Experts Group - Nigel Williams director of Childnet served as a member of this international forum which contributed to the Bertelsmann Initiative on Self-Regulation of the Internet www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/internetcontent Internet Content Rating Association - Nigel

and protection policies that help children can be developed and implemented	Williams served as a member of the Advisory Board to ICRA commenting on the development of this new labelling and filtering architecture for internet content. Nigel was elected to chair the Board and prepared the first draft of its report www.icra.org