

Snoop on your child's texts: It's bizarre that parents treat youngsters' internet and mobile exchanges as private, says PM's childhood guru

- **Claire Perry said parents must view children's texts and internet exchanges**
- **Said parents need to challenge idea that children can keep them private**
- **The Tory MP for Devizes appointed David Cameron's adviser on childhood**
- **Wants internet safety taught in class and crackdown on raunchy videos**
- **Said society is 'complicit' in culture where children can contact strangers**

By James James Chapman

Parents should insist on seeing their children's texts and internet exchanges, David Cameron's new adviser on childhood urged last night.

Claire Perry said that in a world where youngsters are surrounded by online dangers, parents should challenge the 'bizarre' idea that their children have the right to keep their messages private. In her first interview since being appointed last month, the 48-year-old mother of three added that society as a whole has been 'complicit' in allowing a culture where youngsters can make inappropriate contact with strangers at all hours of the day and night.



Parents should feel more empowered to challenge their children over their phone and internet usage and read their messages

Mrs Perry said 'sexting' – where children send each other explicit images of themselves – went on in 'pretty much every school in the country'.

She said parents should feel 'empowered' to challenge their offspring about their use of mobile phones and social media sites such as Facebook, and demand to look at their messages if necessary.

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The Tory MP for Devizes added that parents had to take clearer responsibility for internet access on their children's laptops and mobile phones.

'So many people say "I have got children on their laptop at 2am – what do I do?" Well, turn the router off when you go to bed,' she said.

Mrs Perry set out a range of proposals in her new role as David Cameron's adviser on the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood. They include:

- A better, well-advertised system for parents and children to report inappropriate behaviour online.
- A crackdown on raunchy music videos and children's access to 'lads' mags'.
- A shake-up of the school curriculum so that internet safety is taught in IT classes.
- Labelling of airbrushed celebrity pictures blamed for putting unrealistic pressure on young girls.

On the issue of children's texts and internet exchanges, Mrs Perry said: 'We've given our children all these opportunities to communicate in private, but we've lost the confidence to actually get involved in that.

'We have to feel more empowered to ask. Make sure your kids allow you to be friends with them on Facebook, ask them whether what they are doing is appropriate.'



The MP wants internet safety taught in the classroom and says 'sexting' goes on in 'pretty much every school in the country'

'We have got to be much franker, much more open and upfront about it. I don't want it to sound like harking back to Victorian values, but parents should sit down with their kids and say "are you aware of what's out there?">'

Mrs Perry was appointed by Mr Cameron after leading a successful campaign for an 'opt-in' system for online porn in households with children.

She told the Daily Mail she was concerned about a broader, growing 'clash between family values and technology'.

'In a way we have all been complicit. We can't say it's all government's responsibility, or industry's or parents' – we have got to work together,' she said.

'When you and I were growing up the idea your parents would allow you to communicate daily with strangers, that you would have letters or phone calls coming into your home, would have been bizarre. Yet we have now given our kids the space to be private with their phones and internet connections. This whole issue of peer-to-peer contact is very difficult. You can't filter it using technology. Parents are not monitoring it and we don't feel we should. I said to my daughter, "perhaps I should read your texts" and she looked at me like I was insane. I thought, "well actually I am paying for it".'



Rallying call: Claire Perry said society is 'complicit' in allowing a culture where children can contact strangers day and night

Mrs Perry said the latest evidence suggested the level of 'sexting' was 'absolutely horrific'. Last week, an inquest heard how Chevonea Kendall-Bryan, a 13-year-old South London schoolgirl, fell to her death from a block of flats after begging a boy on the pavement below to delete a sex video of her on his phone.

'It is usually girls who are on the receiving end of some pretty degrading stuff,' the MP said. 'We've got young girls being asked to write their names on their boobs and send pictures. Parents would be really shocked to know

this is happening in pretty much every school in the country. Our children are growing up in a very sexualised world.'

Mrs Perry suggested there should be a simple, well-advertised system for parents and children to report harmful or inappropriate contacts.

On children's internet access via laptops and mobile phones, she said: 'Less than 40 per cent of families have downloaded filters onto their internet-enabled devices. Some of that is due to ignorance, some of it time pressure,' she said. 'If you ask parents where children learn about internet safety, the majority say at school. Yes, schools have got a role to play. But we have got to be prepared as parents to talk to our kids about these things. It's difficult and it's challenging but it's right.'

'You can set time limits, block surfing at particular hours, block access to different websites. There is an innovation and sophistication around controls. But ultimately, you can turn off children's access to the internet.'

Mrs Perry said there was a case for re-examining the school curriculum so that internet safety is included in IT lessons.

She was also 'really concerned' about 'completely lewd' music videos that are not currently age-rated. 'We aren't in the business of saying we want to stop Rihanna gyrating around,' she said.

'But it's not right that someone of any age can click online and see it. Parents should be able to say they don't want their children watching this stuff. It's not about censorship.'

But films are age-rated and it should be the same in the online world. Let's adopt a new system of classification using the British Film Classification Board. That won't mean more spending and regulation.' On 'lads' mags', Mrs Perry said she regarded them as 'appalling and demeaning', adding: 'I can't understand why anyone would ever pose for them.'

On the way up: The rise of Devizes MP Claire Perry

Claire Perry is one of the Conservative party's rising stars, having only been elected in 2010. The 48-year-old mother-of-three lives near Salisbury, Wiltshire, and grew up in North Somerset. After attending her local comprehensive school she went to Brasenose College, Oxford, where she read geography.

A career in banking followed, but after three years, in 1990, she studied for an MBA at Harvard Business School. After jobs with McKinsey and Credit Suisse, Mrs Perry gave up work in 2000 to raise her children, but carried on fundraising for local schools and hospitals.

She joined the Conservative Party in 2006, and was asked to work for Shadow Chancellor George Osborne as a special adviser the following year. In 2010 she was picked to represent the safe Conservative seat of Devizes, which she won with a 13,000 majority.

She said a report to the Prime Minister by Mother's Union boss Reg Bailey, due to be updated within the next few weeks, had recommended that such magazines should not be displayed at children's eye level, but there had been only 'patchy progress'.

She also said the culture of airbrushing celebrity photos was 'very damaging'. 'There's huge, huge pressure on young girls. I'm a mother of two daughters and I can see the pressures to look thin and beautiful,' she added. Mrs Perry said she supported those calling for airbrushed images to be labelled to make it clear they have been digitally enhanced.

She said she was prepared to be branded 'the Mary Whitehouse of the 2010s' by some critics of her new role and had already attracted a 'crowd of hateful Twitter followers'.

But she insisted: 'When I am finished I want Britain to be absolutely leading the world in online child safety.'