



**Rt Hon Ed Balls MP**  
Secretary of State

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14<sup>th</sup>

December 2009

Dear

Professor Buckingham

**Assessment of the impact of the commercial world on children's wellbeing**

Thank you for very much for undertaking your independent assessment of the impact of the commercial world on children's wellbeing, which we are publishing in full this morning. Your report is a very helpful and thorough distillation and critique of the evidence in this area, and I am grateful both to you and to all the other members of your panel for dedicating your time and knowledge to compiling it. I am also grateful for the efforts you have made to involve voices that represent the wide spectrum of views that exist on this subject.

As you note at the beginning of your assessment, there is an ongoing public debate about childhood that can, at times, become unhelpfully polarised between those who on one hand see children as helpless victims of the commercial world, and others who like to portray all children as savvy, streetwise consumers. In fact, neither image is wholly representative and your work shows us very clearly that the evidence paints a much more complex picture, from which it would be a mistake to draw hard and fast conclusions that apply to every child, in every situation.



department for  
**children, schools and families**

Your report demonstrates very clearly that the commercial world and the media offer children wonderful opportunities for learning, enjoyment and personal growth. You also insist, as do we, that we must always ensure that appropriate safeguards are consistently in place to prevent children from being exploited or exposed to inappropriate material.

In this regard Government is already doing a lot to ensure that children can make the most of new opportunities and be protected from negative influences – the most recent example being the launch on 8 December of the first UK internet safety strategy, to help ensure children and young people stay safe online.

This strategy is, we believe, the first of its kind anywhere in the world led and owned by an unprecedented coalition of Government, Industry, Charities, Law Enforcement and many others united in working together. And we have launched the first stage of the “Click Clever Click Safe” public awareness campaign with our online version of the Green Cross Code: “Zip it, Block it, Flag it”. We want to see the digital code become as familiar as ‘Stop, Look, Listen.’

For the first time, key players from industry, charities and Government will be independently reviewed against standards to keep children safe online. Online safety is already a compulsory part of the National Curriculum for secondary schools and is also being taught in many primary schools. And from September 2011 online safety will be a compulsory part of the curriculum from age 5 too.

It is for similar reasons that I am announcing steps to deliver new, improved regime of pre-performance regulation to apply to children’s participation in performance activities of all kinds. You will find a copy of the Written Ministerial Statement that I have laid before Parliament today enclosed with this letter.

As a country, we want to continue celebrating the brilliant performances of children in stage shows like Billy Elliott or programmes like Britain’s Got Talent, and it is right that our talented children should continue aspiring to appear on those stages.

We also benefit as a country from the careful and sensitive insight into children’s lives given by films like Fish Tank or documentary programmes like My First Year.

But where many parents, educators and Ministers become concerned is when programme makers seem determined to keep pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable, to provide shock value for viewers and push up ratings, rather than to do anything positive or meaningful for our children, our culture or our country.

Questions have arisen about the extent to which the current regulatory approach for child performance, which dates back to the 1960s, is still fit for purpose today. Earlier this year I asked officials to examine the regulations with the aim of updating them. The results were discussed informally over the summer with interested parties.



These discussions made it clear that simply updating the existing regulations would probably not create the kind of approach that we believe we now need: that is, one that protects children effectively and proportionately from the risk of harm, enables them to make the most of the many exciting performance opportunities now available, and reflects and respects the right to freedom of expression and editorial independence.

I and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport have therefore decided jointly to commission a piece of work to explore these issues in greater detail, with a view to deciding what a modern, effective and proportionate set of arrangements for the regulation of child performance should look like. We have appointed Sarah Thane, CBE, to lead it. As you may know, Sarah is a former chair of the Royal Television Society, a former adviser to Ofcom on regulation and content, and a member of the governing board of Teachers TV, and therefore brings considerable, relevant experience and expertise to the task.

Sarah will engage and work with all those with an interest in this area, including organisations representing children and parents; children's charities; broadcasters, programme and film makers; representatives of local arts and drama organisations; theatre organisations and local authorities, among others. Sarah will report her conclusions to us by the end of February 2010.

I think this cross-Departmental approach, that involves close collaboration with all the key interests in finding a way forward that works for children and their parents, and for commercial interests, is an example of what your report says should be happening more generally. I agree, and from that point of view I hope this review of child performance regulation, and of course our work on our UK internet safety strategy, can act as models from which wider lessons can be learned and applied to other difficult issues.

And, in addition, we will continue to encourage high quality UK-sourced, original PSB content for children on televisions because, as your report suggests and, as I strongly agree, this is important for children's development.

One of the most important points arising from your work is, in my view, the need to ensure that children and parents are equipped with the knowledge and guidance they require to allow them take advantage of the opportunities that both old and new media have to offer.

That is why I have today announced my intention to establish a panel to assess the place of media literacy within the school curriculum, to help schools to enhance the media literacy of their pupils, so our children and young people stay safe and make the most of these exciting opportunities. We are also announcing our intention to commission materials to help parents guide their children and help them deal with commercial messages transmitted via old and new media.

In addition to this new activity we will continue our work in a number of other areas

that you discuss on in your assessment. The Chief Medical Officer is this week publishing his guidelines on the health effects and risks of children drinking alcohol. We will work with the Department of Health and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport on the development of a set of voluntary principles to underpin all forms of marketing and promotion of food and drink to children.

We also want there to be strong links and productive partnerships between schools and businesses, as illustrated in '*Building Stronger Partnerships*', published in December 2008. The best practice principles relating to the commercial aspects of these partnerships have been in place for nine years, as you know. We have reviewed these with businesses and school partners and we now plan to update them to provide stronger guidance about the characteristics of good partnerships and how these are best formed, so both schools and businesses can benefit. The new charity, the Education and Employers Taskforce, will be doing more to coordinate and promote constructive joint working between schools and employers. It has already published some initial online guidance.

Thank you again for your work in this area, which is one of great importance to children and families, and to our broader society.

Yours,

Ed Balls

**ED BALLS MP**