Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report

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Contents

Section

Foreword

The importance of children's media literacy continues to grow as online services and functionalities evolve. It is important that we track and seek to understand children's use and attitudes towards the media they use, so that we can work with partners to help support children's media literacy needs.

Ofcom has had statutory duties to research and promote media literacy since it was established in 2003. These duties were further clarified by the Online Safety Act 2023.

'Media literacy' can be defined in many ways. Our definition of media literacy is deliberately broad, so that it remains relevant in the context of ongoing rapid technological change: *'the ability to use, understand and create media and communications across multiple formats and services'.*

In 2024 Ofcom published its first 3-year media literacy strategy, setting out the three central pillars in its programme: Research, Evidence and Evaluation; Engaging Platforms; and People and Partnerships.

Our long-running tracking projects are a foundational aspect of this work, sitting within the research pillar. We have been surveying the UK population - both adults and children - since 2005, asking a range of questions about media habits, attitudes, and understanding.

Over this period, we have needed to update our methodology and questionnaires, and this year's report marks a new methodology. We have returned to a single survey in order to be able to conduct more analysis across different questions, exploring what drives different aspects of media literacy. This means that this year our trends over time are indicative rather than absolute, and we have indicated this where applicable in our report.

Our sample size this year (5008 interviews with parents of children aged 6 months to 17-years-old and 3,426 with children themselves aged 8 to 17) enables us to analyse our dataset by a range of sub-groups. In this report we show differences by various groups including a sample of looked-after children, and we plan to publish further analysis over the year providing more detailed analysis both by demographic group as well as by theme.

Understanding what children and young people do online, and how they and their parents and carers feel about what they do has never been more important. These findings will inform our work with the broad range of service providers that enable the creation, hosting and distribution of content and media through broadcast, on-demand and online services. We will be saying more about this in June in our publication finalising our Statement of Recommendations for Media Literacy. This research will also inform the programmes we commission from community organisations to enhance the media literacy skills of the people they serve.

Overview

Key findings

This report presents the findings from Ofcom's Children and Parents Media Literacy Tracker, supplemented by insights from our qualitative study, *Children's Media Lives*. Together, these sources document the extent and range of children's media literacy in the UK, capturing how children use, understand and navigate media and digital technologies, both online and across other parts of their everyday environment. It also examines parents' views - both positive and negative - about their children's online activities, the ways in which they supervise their children's media use, and the steps they take to keep their children safe online. The research forms part of Ofcom's wider programme of media literacy activity.

Children's free time is often organised around screens and devices

Digital devices play a central role in shaping how children spend their free time, reflecting the widespread availability and use of devices. Just under eight in ten (78%) children aged 8-17 have their own mobile phone, six in ten (59%) use a tablet to go online, and 55% use a games console. Ownership of a mobile phone rises sharply from 56% of 10-year-olds to more than eight in ten (83%) of 11-year-olds. Nearly all (98%) 16-17s own a mobile phone.

When asked about their three favourite things to do in their free time, activities on a device or a screen are most commonly mentioned: gaming (43%) and watching TV or films (36%) are the top two activities selected by 8-17s. Activities that don't include a device or screen also feature among children's favourite choices: just over a quarter (27%) say playing or hanging out with friends in person is one of their three favourite activities, while smaller proportions mention being with pets (14%), being creative offline (13%) or spending time outdoors (8%).

The findings of our qualitative *Children's Media Lives* research indicate that among that sample of children, activities that don't include a device or screen make up a relatively small share of their overall free time, particularly among the older children.

Screens are used by children aged 6 months to 2 years for entertainment and learning

For the first time this year we extended our sample of parents so that we could ask those with children aged 6 months to 2 years about their child's media and communications habits. Overall, 65% of parents of children aged 6 months to 2 years say that their child goes online. When asked more broadly whether their child ever looks at a screen, the vast majority (85%) of parents say that they do. These parents were asked about their child's screen-based activities. Watching TV programmes or films is the most common activity (82%), followed by listening to music or stories (51%) and looking at photos or videos (51%).

There are some differences by gender, particularly for listening to music or stories, which is more common among girls than boys (59% vs 43%). Children in ABC1 households are also more likely than those in C2DE households to use screens for reading-related activity (14% vs 4%).

These activities align with the reasons many parents give for their child using screens. Around two thirds (67%) of parents say this is to provide entertainment, while more than six in ten (63%) say it is to support their learning, and just over half (52%) say it is because their child enjoys it. Half (49%) of parents say that screens are used to occupy their child while they carry out other tasks.

Children's use of media and communications continues to evolve

The internet is central to most children's lives, with parents saying that 88% of children aged 3-7, and almost all (99%) children aged 8-17 go online. Over half (55%) of children aged 3-17 play games online. Listening to audio is also an integral part of children's media diet, with parents saying that three quarters (76%) of all children listen to any type of audio. Listening to online music services is most likely (56%), followed by radio (31%).

And according to Barb figures[1], 91% of children aged 4-15 watched some type of audio-visual content on a weekly basis in 2025[2]. Over six in ten (63%) 4-15s watched some broadcast TV on a weekly basis in 2025, down from 66% in 2024. Time spent viewing of YouTube and other video-sharing platforms (VSPs) increased by 3% between 2024 and 2025, and VSPs account for the largest share of children's in-home video viewing, again according to Barb. Children are most likely to say they watch funny videos, cartoons, music videos and educational content on VSPs, according to our Children and Parents Tracking survey. And our qualitative *Children's Media Lives* research notes a continued trend for fast-paced and 'random' video content.

Most children do not post on social media, instead preferring to like, comment, watch and read

Many children tend to consume content rather than create it. Two-thirds (65%) of 8-17s who use social media say they mainly read, watch, follow or 'like' content on social media platforms, compared to around a third (34%) who are 'active' i.e. say they share, comment on or post content.

Among 16-17s, 37% are 'active' social media users. Children in ABC1 households are more likely to be 'active' users than those in C2DE households (38% vs 29%).

AI is becoming more integrated into children's online experiences, but trust in it varies

AI tools are now widely embedded in children's online experiences, particularly among teenagers. Over half (56%) of children aged 8-17 say they have used AI, rising to two thirds (66%) of 16-17s. Children use AI for learning, creativity and everyday tasks, and one in ten AI users aged 8-17 (11%) say they have used AI as someone to talk to or 'as a friend'.

At the same time, levels of trust in AI-generated content vary. Four in ten (40%) teenage AI users say they would trust an AI-generated news article either as much as, or more than, one written by a human, compared to 43% who said they would trust it less. Notably, nearly half (46%) of 8-17s who have read AI summaries on search results believe these summaries are always accurate.

Children' s confidence online does not always align with their ability to judge information or to spot advertising

Many children say they feel confident navigating online information. Around six in ten (62%) 8-17s say they are confident in judging whether information online is true or false. However, when tested in practical scenarios, gaps emerge between confidence and ability. While around six in ten children can correctly identify some misleading content, a sizeable minority struggle to distinguish fake social media profiles, AI-generated images or advertising content.

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[1] Further detail on Barb is included in the methodology section later in the report.

[2] This includes live broadcast, recorded broadcast, BVoD (broadcaster video on demand), SVoD (subscription video on demand), AVoD (advertising-based video on demand) and VSP (video-sharing platform) content.

For example, three in ten (31%) 8-17s said they were confident, but were unable to correctly identify the fake social media profile that was shown to them. And only four in ten (42%) 8-17s who use search engines knew that the top four results (in a search for trainers) were there because they were paid-for adverts and not for any other reason such as being the most popular result.

This gap between confidence and ability is particularly important in an online environment that is increasingly complex, personalised and influenced by AI-generated content. This research illustrates how confidence can be misplaced at times. The findings of our *Children's Media Lives* research indicates that although some children are aware of cues indicating that content may not be genuine, others rely heavily on surface signals, or trust in platforms and brands, rather than critical evaluation of the information provided.

Parents and children indicate that digital activity can further children's creativity, education, and wellbeing

Children say they go online for a range of reasons. Eight in ten (80%) children aged 3-17 use digital devices to take part in at least one of the creative activities we asked about, with differing preferences by age. Two thirds (65%) of 3-7s make drawings, pictures or use colouring apps, according to their parents, while older children are more likely to nominate educational or online tutorial use.

Two-thirds (64%) of children aged 8-17 say they use online services in relation to their mental and physical wellbeing. Girls, and children in ABC1 families, are more likely to say they do this. Overall, over a third say they use online services to relax or unwind (36%), to improve their mood or to feel happy (31%) or to feel energised or motivated (16%). Younger children are more likely to say they use apps or sites to improve their mood or make them feel happy, with almost four in ten (38%) 10-12s saying this compared to 27% of 13-17s.

Parents also report benefits in their children being online; nearly all (91%) parents whose child goes online say that being online helps their child in at least one way. For the parents of the youngest children, the most commonly-cited benefit is developing skills in reading and numbers (46%). These foundational skills are also important for parents of 3-7s (56%) alongside creative skills (57%). For parents of older children, education benefits are more prominent. Many children from our *Children's Media Lives* research report that being online and using devices is often a necessary aspect of their learning. Perhaps reflective of this, seven in ten (69%) parents of 8-17s say being online helps their child with their schoolwork.

Alongside these benefits, children encounter risks in terms of content and behaviour

There are various indicators of children's attitudes and experience that speak to the downsides or negative aspects of being online. For example, a third (33%) of 8-17s who use social media or messaging, voice or video-calling apps say they feel pressure to be popular *all or most of the time*, while around seven in ten (70%) say they feel this pressure at least sometimes.

To provide a wider context for children's negative online experiences, we asked children aged 8-17 about whether they had seen 'nasty or hurtful' behaviour in the past 12 months, either online or offline. Almost a quarter (23%) of those who answered said this had happened to them personally. Among this group, nearly half (47%) say this happened through social media, while a similar proportion (43%) say this happened via face-to-face interactions.

Nearly four in ten children think they spend too much time on screens

We also asked children about their own perception of their 'screen time'. Almost four in ten (37%) 8-17s say they think they spend too much time on screens. This increases from just under three in ten (28%) among 8-9s to over four in ten (44%) 16-17s.

Concern about screen time is higher among some groups of children. Nearly half (47%) of children with impacting conditions say they spend too much time on screens, increasing to over half (56%) among those with a mental health condition. This rises further among looked-after children, with nearly six in ten (57%) saying they feel their screen time is too high.

With regard to time online, two-thirds (65%) of online 13-17s say they have taken active steps to manage their own time online over the past 12 months, including disabling notifications (29%), setting aside offline time (28%) not taking devices to bed (21%) and taking a break from social media (21%). Three in ten (31%) 13-17s have taken none of the actions we asked about.

Turning to parents, over half (55%) of parents of 8-17s say they think their child's screen time is too high, rising from 49% of parents of 8-9s to 57% of parents of 13-17s. Around one third (32%) of parents overall agree that they find it hard to control their child's screen time.

Around a third of parents can correctly identify the minimum age for accessing most social media platforms

Awareness of the existence of minimum age requirements is high: more than eight in ten (83%) parents of children aged 6 months to 17 know that most social media platforms have a minimum age[3]. However, fewer parents can identify the specific age correctly. Around a third (32%) correctly say the minimum age for most social media platforms is 13, with parents of older children more likely to give the correct answer than those with younger children. Half of all parents (51%) give either the wrong answer or don't know. Children aged 8-17 are more likely than parents to give 13 as the correct answer (40%).

When asked whether they would allow their child to have a social media profile before reaching the minimum age, just over six in ten (62%) parents of children aged 6 months to 17 years say they would not, while a quarter (25%) said they would, and 12% weren't sure. Parents of children close to the minimum age are the most likely to agree, with 30% of parents of 10-12s and 29% of parents of 13-15s saying they would allow this, compared with 23% of parents of 8-9s.

Parents have concerns about various aspects of their child's online activity, but many still feel that the benefits outweigh the risks

Understandably, many parents continue to have concerns about the risks associated with their child being online. For every item included on our prompt list, more than half of parents say they are concerned. Around seven in ten (69%) parents say they are concerned about their child seeing age-inappropriate content, particularly adult or sexual material, while around two-thirds say knowing what is real or fake online (66%) or their child being bullied online (64%) are concerns. Parents also have concerns around their children's online gaming. The most cited concern (of the four they were prompted with) among parents of 3-17s whose child plays games, is the possibility of their child talking to strangers while gaming, either within the game or via the chat function (64%).

[3] The Online Safety Act does not require social media sites or apps to set a minimum age to access their service, but many services have decided to set their minimum age requirement at 13 as part of their terms of service.

At an overall level, more parents agree than disagree that the benefits of being online outweigh the risks. We ask about three types of online activity: gathering information online, playing games, and using social media. Two thirds (66%) of parents of online 3-17s agree that the benefits outweigh the risks of gathering information, with 13% disagreeing. Over half (56%) say that the benefits of playing games outweigh the risks, with 16% disagreeing. The picture is more ambivalent for using social media; 46% agreeing and 34% disagreeing. And for parents of online 8-12s, the responses are reversed, with one third (33%) agreeing that the benefits outweigh the risks but 48% disagreeing.

Conversations, rules and school education play important roles in supporting children's online safety and helping develop media literacy skills

Most parents say they set rules around device use: nine in ten (91%) parents of 3-17s who game say they have rules about their child's gaming, and 89% of parents of 8-17s say they have rules about mobile phone use, most commonly relating to time spent online. Conversations about staying safe online are also common: around two-thirds (66%) of parents say they talk to their child about online safety at least every few months, including over four in ten (43%) who do so at least every few weeks. Discussions and rule setting are most common among parents of 10-12s and less frequent among parents of older teenagers.

One third (34%) of parents said they had looked for information about how to supervise their child online in the last month and 28% said they had been given information without seeking it. The main source of information was their child's school (49%) followed by advice from other parents/peers (44%) and parenting forums or online communities (43%).

Schools play an important role in supporting online safety and developing media literacy skills. Over eight in ten (85%) children aged 8-17 say they have had lessons at school about being online, and 23% say they have had regular lessons. Among those who say they have had lessons at school, the most common topics include being kind and respectful of others (57%), recognising harmful behaviour online (55%) and what to do if someone you don't know contacts you (54%).

Less commonly recalled topics include spotting misinformation (36%), how to change privacy settings on apps (31%), spotting AI-generated content (23%), how to identify adverts/advertising online and on social media (21%), and supporting issues children care about (18%). Children in ABC1 households are more likely to recall having lessons about being online than children in C2DE households (91% vs 79%).

Methodology

Children and Parents Media Literacy Tracking survey

This report draws most of its data from our Children and Parents Media Literacy Tracking survey, and discusses the media use, attitudes and understanding of children aged 6 months to 17 years. Where the data relates to children aged 7 and under, this is provided by parents or guardians rather than the children themselves, while we speak directly to children aged 8+ via a mix of online and face-to-face interviews. A detailed description of the survey methodology can be found in the survey's accompanying Technical Report, along with associated documents, including data tables and the questionnaire which are published on Ofcom's Statistical Release Calendar.

In 2025, we conducted a full review of the survey which resulted in methodological and questionnaire changes. Between 2022 and 2025, the Children and Parents Media Literacy Tracking survey was made up of three separate surveys. We have now streamlined this into a single, overarching survey. To ensure that we cover all the key topics related to children's media use, attitudes and understanding as before, we have adopted a modular approach, whereby all parents and children complete core modules, and additional modules are rotated among subsets of the sample.

By bringing the survey together through this modular approach, we can make more effective use of our large sample and produce richer demographic analysis, including for smaller sub-groups such as looked after children and those with a limiting or impacting condition that were previously more difficult to examine.

In addition to this, the sample has also been expanded to include children aged 6 months to 2 years of age for the first time.

While previously the survey included online interviews only, face-to-face interviews were introduced this year alongside the online panel.

To adapt to the modular design and to ensure that the survey remains up to date and closely reflects how children experience and navigate digital services today, we have also made changes to the questionnaire. Some questions have had their wording adapted to capture greater nuance, others now cover an expanded sample, and some have been redesigned entirely.

As a result of these methodological and questionnaire changes, we have taken particular care when making comparisons with previous years. Accordingly, some year-on-year differences are likely to reflect the changes in methodology and question design, rather than changes in behaviour alone, although shifts in children's media use may also be present. As a result, the analysis in this year's report primarily focuses on demographic differences within this year's dataset, although we make comparisons across years where it is appropriate and meaningful to do so. Any trends over time are indicative rather than absolute, and we have indicated this where applicable in our report.

Other data sources included in this report

To support us in providing an over-arching narrative on the key themes of children's media experience, this report also draws on our Children's Media Lives research. The *Children's Media Lives* study is a qualitative longitudinal, ethnographic project which has been running since 2014 and complements our quantitative survey data. As far as possible, the research has followed the same children, aged 8-17, interviewing them on camera each year about their media habits and attitudes.

Data relating to children's use of websites and apps from **Ofcom's Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST)** has been used in the report. This survey has been designed to monitor UK children's (8-17) online experiences, including their awareness and use of online safety tools, and their recalled exposure to harmful content online. COST is conducted on an online panel, where children are recruited via their parents. At the time of publication, two waves of the study have been analysed – we include data from wave 2 in this report. Wave 2 was conducted from November to December 2025 and includes 3,387 interviews with children aged 8-17 via an online panel.

We also include data from **Ofcom's News Consumption Survey**. This is a long-running survey exploring news consumption across the UK, including the sources and platforms used for news, the perceived importance of different outlets for news and the attitudes towards different news sources. Between 2018 and 2025 this ran as a biannual survey, taking place across two fieldwork waves. From 2026 onward continuous interviewing is employed across the fieldwork period running from November 2025 to March 2026. The survey includes interviews with children aged 12-15.

In addition, data from **Barb** is included in the report. Barb Audiences Ltd (Barb) is the industry's standard for understanding what people watch. Barb uses a hybrid approach, integrating people-based panel data with census-level online viewing data to provide the official broadcast TV measurement for the industry. The Barb panel consists of a nationally representative group of approximately 7,000 homes (c.16,000 individuals). The data that Barb collects includes viewing of broadcast TV through TV sets and via any devices attached to TV sets, such as computers, streaming devices, or set-top boxes. Barb also captures device-based 'big data' whenever anyone in the UK watches a broadcaster's video-on demand (BVoD) service on a connected device, as well as some viewing data for online streaming services (VSPs and SVoD/AVoD) on TV sets, and for devices not connected to the TV being watched at home via WiFi. Barb does not capture out-of-home viewing.

The analysis of Barb data in this report is based on 'as-viewed' data, where viewing is not tied back to a linear transmission and includes non-linear programming on BVoD services (including content libraries and BVoD exclusives), and measured SVoD/AVoD and VSP services. This allows viewing to be de-duplicated and time spent to be calculated by device.

A note on terminology used throughout the report

Throughout the report, the term 'children' is used to refer to the 90% of children aged 6 months to 17 years who go online. However, when we refer to 'all children' we are including the relatively low proportion of predominantly very young children who do not go online (this is primarily drawn from the 6 months to 5 year old age group). Please note that 93% of children aged 6-7 do go online and once children reach the 10-12 years age group, nearly all (99%) do so.

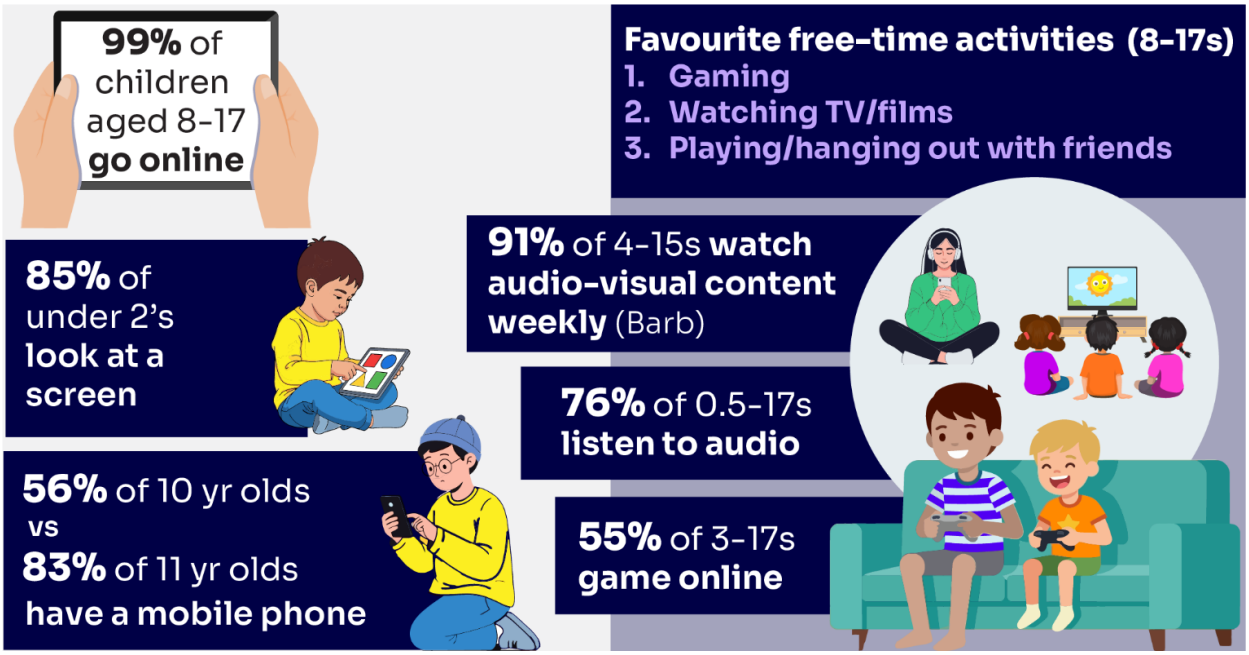
The same principle applies when we refer to parents: 'parents of children aged 6 months to 17 years' means parents of children who go online, whereas 'parents of *all* children aged 3-17', includes those whose children do not go online.

We also frequently use the term 'teenagers', which refers to children aged 13-17 (not 13-19).

Children's media use and consumption

Introduction

This section examines media use among children aged 6 months to 17 years, providing an overview of the devices they use, as well as their behaviours and habits across key platforms including audio, television, news, video-sharing platforms, gaming and different apps and/or sites. The section starts with a snapshot of what children say their preferred activities are, to provide initial wider context.



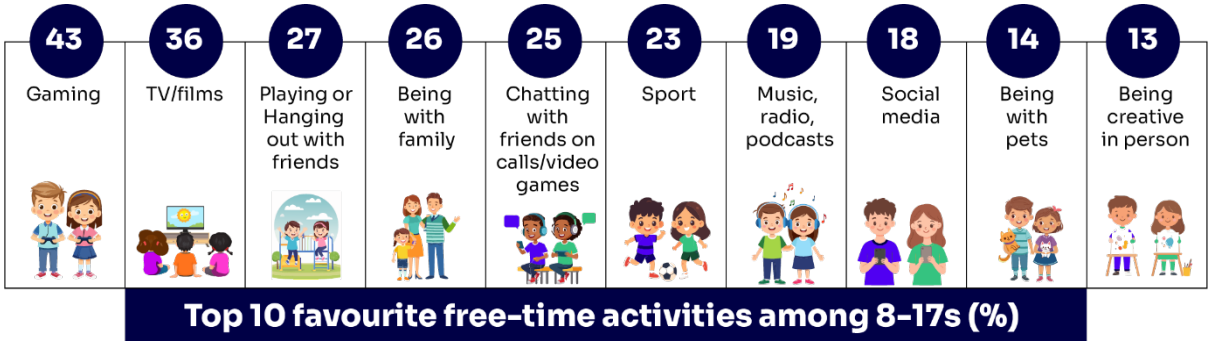
Children's favourite free time activities

Gaming and watching TV or films are the top two free time activities nominated by 8-17s

To better understand the role of media and communications activities within the wider context of children's lives, we asked children aged 8-17 about their favourite things to do in their free time. This was a new question for this year; children were shown a list covering online, media-based and offline activities[4] and were asked to select their three favourite things to do in their free time. While this does not show everything children like doing, or what they do in practice, it nonetheless provides a useful snapshot of the relative popularity of the different types of free time activities children enjoy.

[4] The prompt list includes: gaming, watching TV or films, playing or hanging out with friends in person, being with family, chatting with friends on calls or video games, sports, playing or listening to music, radio or podcasts, browsing social media, being with pets/animals, being creative in person e.g. making art, inventing games or stories, building models or sculptures, reading comics or books, nature/being outside, dance, cooking, sleeping/napping, being creative online such as making digital art or online content, something else.

While the top ten free time activities selected by children include a mix of online and offline activities, the top two activities involve devices. Gaming is the most popular activity, with over four in ten (43%) 8-17s selecting it as one of their top three favourite activities to do in their free time, followed by watching TV programmes or films (36%). These were followed by social activities including playing or hanging out with friends in person (27%), being with family (26%) and chatting with friends on calls or video games (25%).



Boys are much more likely than girls to select gaming as one of their top three free time activities (60% vs 24%), as well as sports (34% vs 12%). Girls are more likely than boys to select activities such as being with family (30% vs 23%), playing or listening to music, radio or podcasts (24% vs 15%) and browsing social media (20% vs 16%).

Younger children are more likely than older children to select gaming, being with family, being creative in person, reading comics or books and dance. Older children are more likely to select chatting with friends on calls or video games, playing or listening to music, radio or podcasts, and browsing social media.

In the *Children's Media Lives* sample, many children reported spending a lot of their free time online

Although the Children and Parents Tracking survey did not explicitly ask about frequency or time spent on the various free time activities, the above findings are consistent with insights from Ofcom's *Children's Media Lives* study. We have seen that the top two favourite free time activities among 8-17s involve devices, and the qualitative research found that many of the children in the sample were spending much of their time online and with digital media more broadly. Although many of the children in the sample did take part in offline hobbies or extracurricular activities, these were often described as occupying a smaller portion of their time.

The time the children spent on offline activities continued to decline across the sample. This is compared to early waves of the study, where we found the children's free time was defined by after-school clubs, physical hobbies and playing outside, with media use playing a less prominent role in their lives.

> "On a Monday, I go to Air Explorers now… [On other days] I don't really have, like, anything set."
>
> Zak (15)

> "Reading? Not really, no. Unless it's at, like, school and stuff, obviously. But at home, I don't think – like, my reading is fine, but, like, at home,

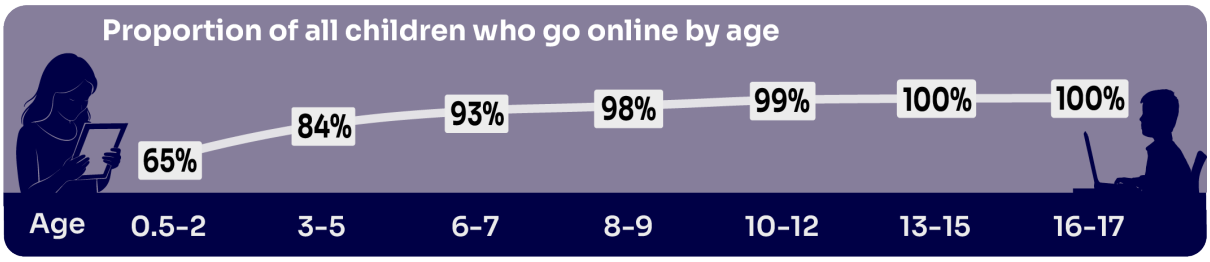
it's just, reading, like, books and stuff, it just doesn't entertain me as much as, like, movies and stuff."

Amira (15)

Children's use of devices

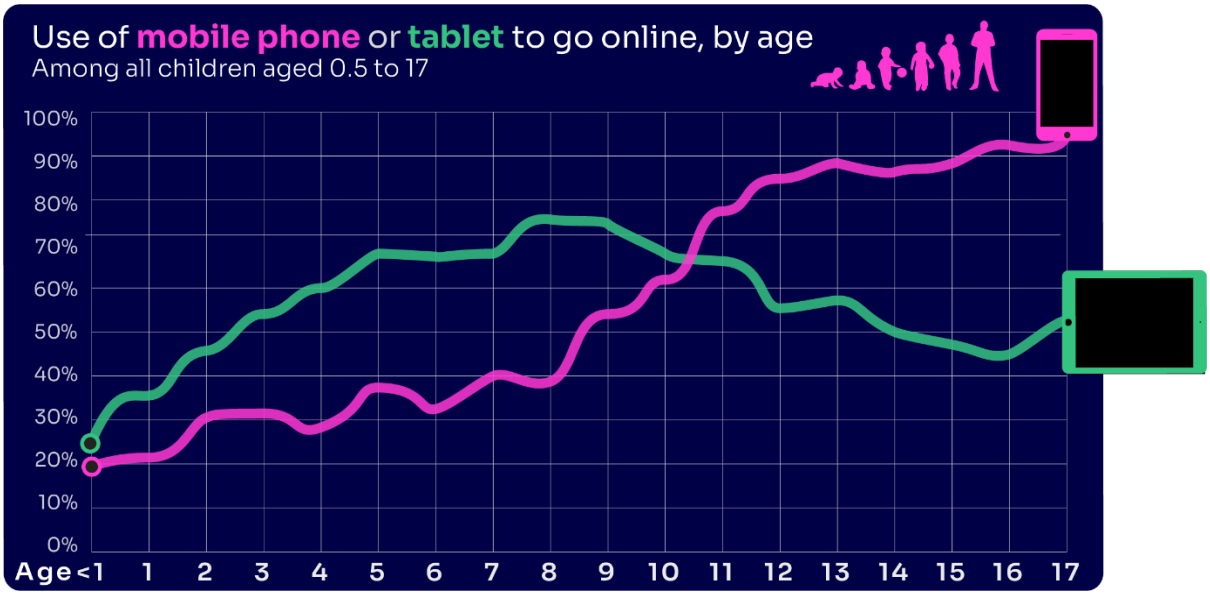
Older children are most likely to use smartphones to go online, while younger children are most likely to use tablets

In 2025/6, parents report that almost all (99%) their children aged 8-17 go online. This is slightly lower among children aged 3-7 (88%). According to parents, two-thirds (65%) of children aged 6 months to 2 years go online.



The devices children use to go online change as they get older. As with our findings last year[5], the move to secondary school marks a shift towards smartphone use; parents of older children are much more likely than parents of younger children to say that their child uses a mobile phone to go online. Nine in ten (90%) parents of 13-17s say that their child uses a mobile phone to go online, while six in ten (59%) use a laptop and half (50%) use a tablet.

For all younger age groups, the tablet is the most common device for online use. For example, parents report that 77% of 8-9s use a tablet to go online. The only exception is the youngest age group: for those aged 6 months to 2 years, parents say that the smart TV is the most common device (40%), followed by tablets (36%).



[5] Trends are indicative due to changes in methodology.

Beyond age, there are other demographic differences in children's use of devices to go online. Children in C2DE households are more likely than those in ABC1 households to say they use mobile phones to go online (61% vs 54%) and to use games consoles (44% vs 40%). Children in ABC1 households are more likely to say they use most other devices for internet activity, including tablets, laptops, desktop computers, smart speakers and smart watches.

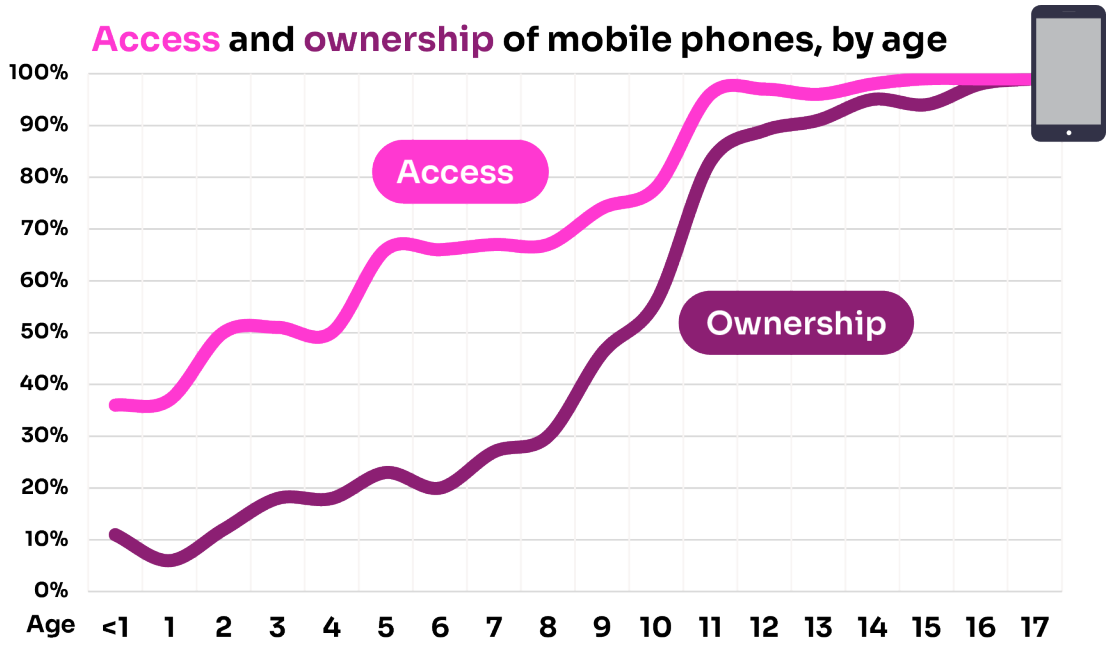
Boys are more likely than girls to say they use games consoles for internet activity (51% vs 32%) and VR headsets (13% vs 7%), while girls are more likely to use tablets, laptops, smart speakers and smart watches.

Children with a limiting or impacting condition are more likely than children with no conditions to say they use most of the devices we asked about to go online (this includes mobile phones, laptops, games consoles, smart speakers, smart watches and VR headsets).

Most children have their own smartphone, with ownership rising sharply at the point they move to secondary school

Parents tell us that just under eight in ten (78%) children aged 8-17 have their own mobile phone, while nine in ten (91%) have overall access to a mobile[6].

As with the type of devices children use to go online, the key age for mobile phone ownership seems to be around the transition from primary to secondary school, when ownership rises sharply from 56% of 10-year-olds to 83% of 11-year-olds. Nearly all (94%) secondary school age children own a mobile phone. Regardless of age, parents report that the vast majority (96%) of children who own a mobile phone have a smartphone rather than a more basic type of phone.



There are some socio-economic differences relating to access to mobile phones among younger children. Primary school children in ABC1 households are more likely to have overall access to a

[6] 'Overall access' includes both personal ownership of a mobile phone and/or access to another mobile phone in the household (e.g. using a shared device or having the ability to use someone else in the household's device).

mobile than those in C2DE households (74% vs 63%), even though both groups have similar rates of mobile phone ownership[7].

In addition to socio-economic group, children with minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely than white children to have overall access to a mobile phone (80% vs 75%), although they are less likely to have their own device (48% vs 56%). Children with a limiting or impacting condition are more likely than those with no conditions to both own a phone (66% vs 51%) and to have overall access to one (85% vs 74%).

Looked after children are more likely to have access to mobile phones than children who are not looked after

For the first time this year, we set specific recruitment targets to include children, and parents or guardians of children[8], who are currently or have previous experience of being looked after, to examine this group as a discrete cohort[9]. For simplicity, we will be referring to this group as 'looked after' throughout the report. A total of 103 interviews were conducted among this group.

The profile for this year's looked after children sample is as follows:

- Boys (43%), girls (57%)
- Aged 0.5-2 (19%), 3-7 (39%), 8-12 (14%), and 13-17 (28%)
- ABC1 (84%), C2DE (16%)

Although the sample size of this group is limited, it provides an initial basis for exploring potential differences in the experiences of looked after children compared with other children.

For example, when looking at access to mobile phones, looked after children are more likely than children who are not looked after to have access to a mobile phone that is not their own (39% vs 22%).

Further differences are highlighted throughout the report, although some observed differences may reflect the demographic profile of the sample (such as the higher proportion of girls and children in ABC1 households).

[7] 36% of ABC1 primary school children and 35% of C2DE primary school children have their own mobile phone.
[8] While we refer to 'parents and guardians' of looked after children in this report, some of the children included in the sample may be under the care of a local authority.
[9] To find out whether a child is looked after, we asked parents/guardian several questions. Firstly we ask permission to ask about whether any child in their household may or may not be in a care arrangement and if they agree we ask whether they are a foster carer, are an extended friend or family member providing kinship care or if they are responsible for a child that has previously been in a care arrangement (e.g. special guardianship order, child arrangements order). If the parent/guardian says a child has previously been in a care arrangement, we ask two additional questions to find out what best describes that arrangement and how long ago the child left the care arrangement. Recruitment for this group was supported through partnerships with specialist organisations and targeted newsletters to raise awareness of the research opportunity.

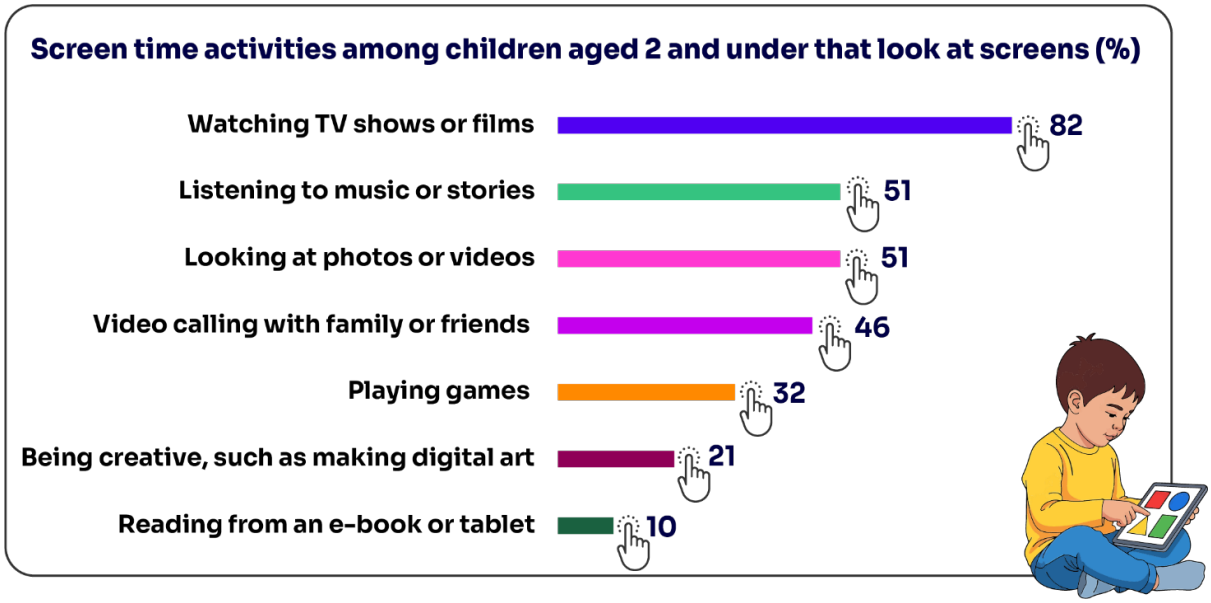
Two-thirds of parents with children aged 6 months to 2 years say their child goes online, and that most look at screens

For the first time this year, parents of children aged 6 months to 2 years were included in the survey sample and asked about their children's media use.

Overall, 65% of parents of children aged 6 months to 2 years say that their child goes online. The most common devices for this are smart TVs (40%) and tablets (36%). Around a quarter (24%) of parents of children aged 2 and under say that their child has used a mobile phone to go online, although this rises to 42% of parents when they are asked about their child's access to a mobile phone more widely (i.e. including offline activities).

When asked more broadly whether their child ever looks at a screen, the vast majority (85%) of parents say that they do. This was higher among parents of children in ABC1 households (90%) than those in C2DE households (75%).

Parents of children aged 6 months to 2 years who look at screens were asked about their child's screen-based activities. Watching TV programmes or films is the most common activity (82%), followed by listening to music or stories (51%) and looking at photos or videos (51%). There are some differences by gender, particularly for listening to music or stories, which is more common among girls than boys (59% vs 43%). Children in ABC1 households are also more likely than those in C2DE households to use screens for reading-related activities (14% vs 4%) and for playing games (37% vs 22%).



These activities align with the reasons many parents give for their child using screens. Around two thirds (67%) of parents of children aged 2 and under who look at screens say this is to provide entertainment, while more than six in ten (63%) say it is to support their learning, and just over half (52%) of parents say it is because their child enjoys it. About half (49%) of parents say that screens are used to occupy their child while they carry out other tasks.

Across these reasons, there were no notable differences by gender, except in relation to learning. Parents of girls aged 2 and under were more likely than parents of boys of the same age to say that screens are used to support learning (70% vs 56%). There were no differences by socio-economic group.

Audio listening

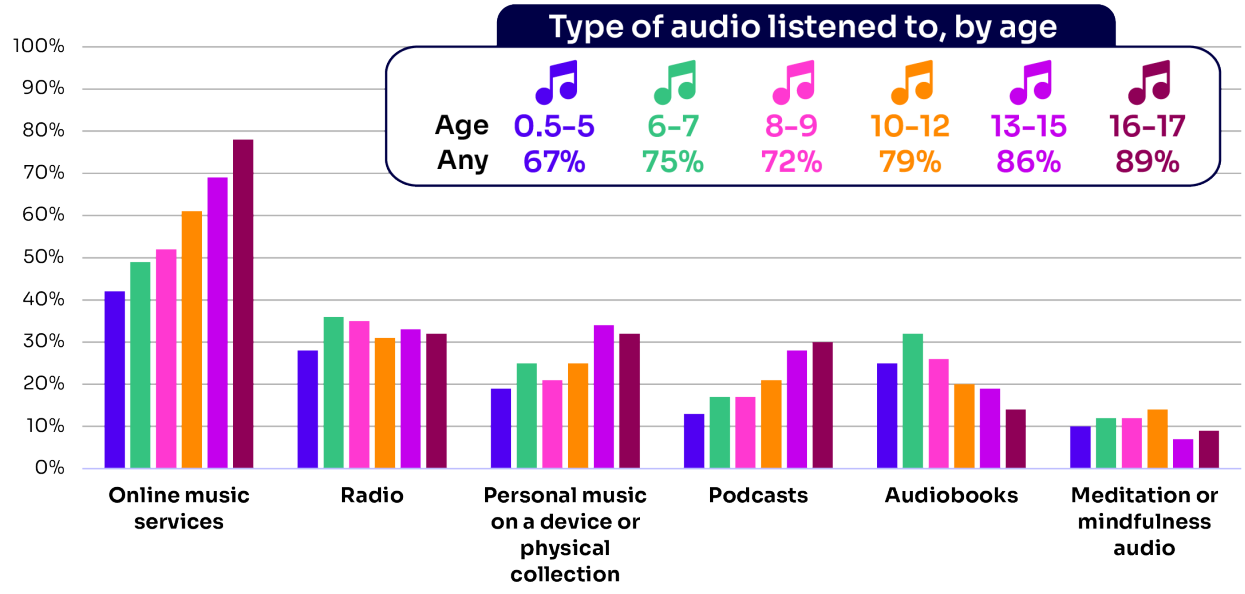
Three-quarters of children aged 6 months to 17 years listen to audio content

Audio is an important part of children's media lives, with parents reporting that three quarters (76%) of all children listen to any type of audio, rising to nine in ten (89%) 16-17s. The most likely way children listen to audio is through online music services (e.g. Spotify), with over half (56%) of all children listening to this type of audio, rising to almost eight in ten (78%) 16-17s. While use of online music services is considerably lower among younger age groups, a significant minority do listen this way, including just over four in ten (42%) children aged 5 and under.

Radio is the next most listened to audio type, and there are relatively consistent levels of use across all age groups, with three in ten (31%) children listening to any radio stations[10]. Use of other audio types vary more by age. For example, podcast listening is most common among older children, with 28% of 13-17s reporting to listen to this audio type[11]. Children aged 3-7 are more likely to listen to audiobooks (32%) than any of the other age groups[12].

Children in C2DE households are the least likely to listen to any form of audio: three in ten (30%) parents in C2DE households say that their child does not listen to any of the listed audio types, compared with 16% of parents in ABC1 households.

To see how these findings compare with adults, please see Ofcom's annual Audio Report.



	Online music services	Radio	Personal music on a device or physical collection	Podcasts	Audiobooks	Meditation or mindfulness audio
8-17s	56%	31%	25%	20%	23%	11%

[10] 28% of all parents say their child listens to a radio station which mainly plays music, compared to 9% for radio which is mainly speech-based.
[11] Overall podcast listening is 20%.
[12] Overall listening to audiobooks is 23%: 0.5-2s (19%), 3-7 (32%), 8-12 (22%), 13-17s (17%).

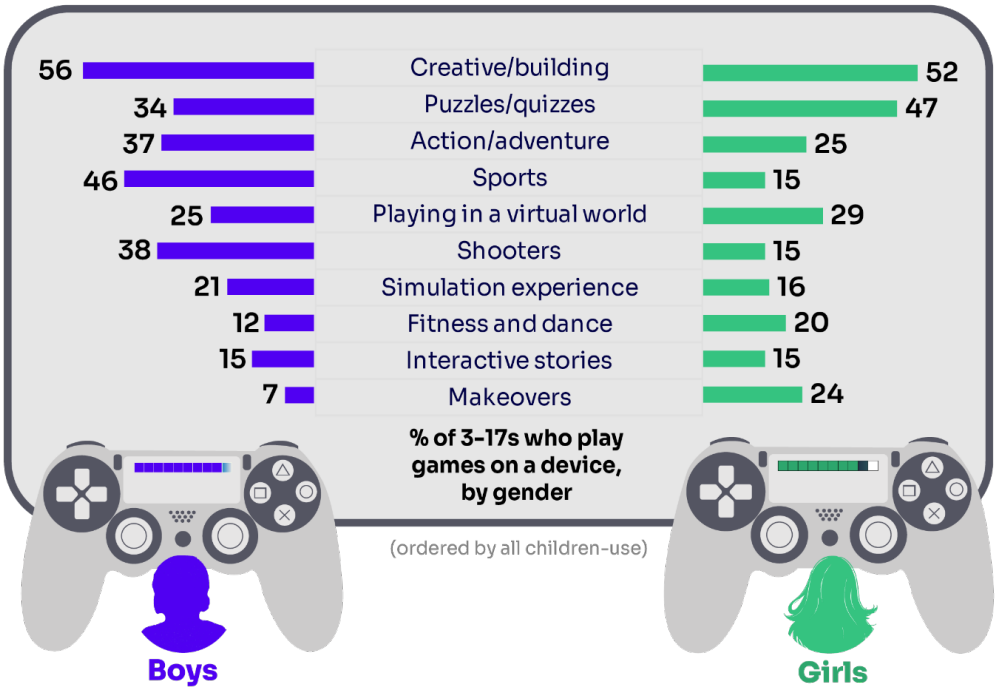
Gaming

There are clear differences in the gaming habits of boys compared to girls

As reported in previous years, gaming is a key part of children's lives. Almost nine in ten (88%) children aged 3-17 play games on some kind of device, which is broadly in line with last year[13]. Gaming peaks at around 10-12 years-old (96%) and boys are more likely than girls to game (91% vs 86%). In addition, children with a limiting or impacting condition are more likely to game than those with no conditions (95% vs 88%). Nearly all the looked after children in our sample say they game (99%).

The most common devices for children to play games on are games consoles (50%), mobile phones (50%) and tablets (47%). Games consoles are more likely to be used by boys than girls (62% vs 38%), but the use of other devices is more evenly split.

The most popular games for these children are creative and building games (54%) and puzzles/quizzes (40%). There are notable differences in the sorts of games boys and girls typically play. Girls are more likely than boys to play puzzles/quizzes, fitness/dance and makeover games, while boys are more likely to play most other types of games.

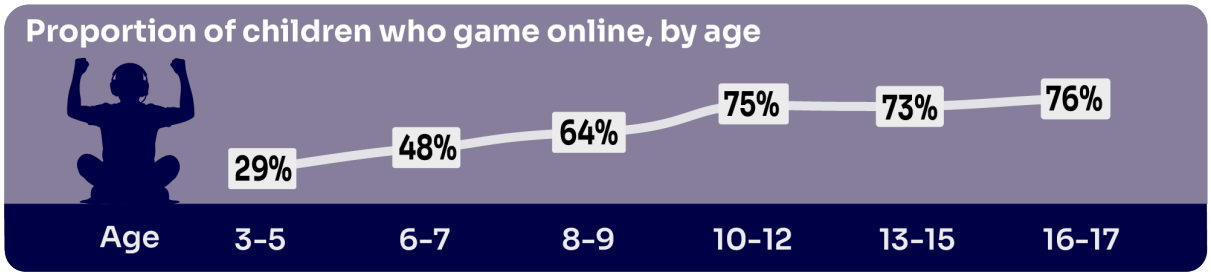


Over half of children who game online say they play with people that they have not met in person, at least sometimes

Over half (55%) of children aged 3-17 play games online, rising to around three-quarters (72%) of children aged 8-17[14]. However, online gaming is also relatively popular among younger children, with 37% of parents of 3-7s saying their child does this. Boys are more likely to game online than girls (59% vs 51%). As is the case with any type of gaming, children with a limiting or impacting

[13] Last year, 89% of 3-17s played games. Trend is indicative due to methodology changes.
[14] This is relatively consistent with last year when we reported that 61% of all children aged 3-17 game online. Trend is indicative due to changes in methodology.

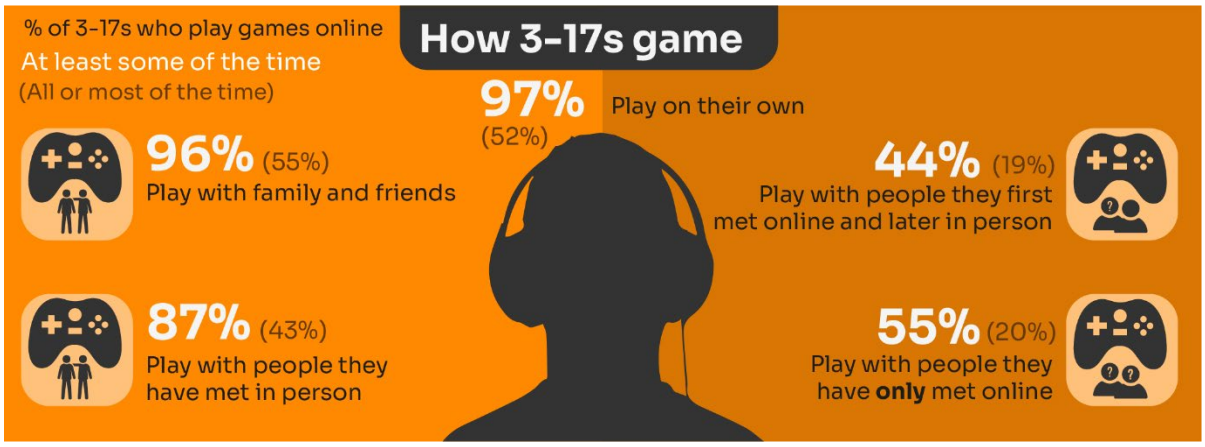
condition are more likely to game online, compared to children with no conditions (70% vs 54%). Looked after children are also more likely to game online than our total sample (75% vs 55%). There are minimal differences between children in ABC1 and C2DE households[15].



Apart from playing by themselves, playing with friends or family members is the most common way in which children play games online. Almost all children who game online do this at least sometimes (96%), and over half (55%) do so all or most of the time. Playing with people that children have met in person is also quite common. Nearly nine in ten (87%) children who game online do this at least sometimes, with around four in ten (43%) doing so all or most of the time.

However, many children also play with people they have only met online. Over half (55%) of those who game online say they do this at least sometimes, while one in five (20%) do so all or most of the time[16]. While there is little difference by age, this behaviour is more common among children in ABC1 households than among those in C2DE households (24% of ABC1s do so all or most of the time vs 15% of C2DEs). Children with a limiting or impacting condition are more likely to do this than children with no conditions (31% vs 16%). In addition, those with a minority ethnic background are more likely than white children to game with people they have not met in person (26% vs 18%).

Playing with people they have first met online, and later in person, is less common: 44% of children who game say they do this at least sometimes, and 19% do so all or most of the time.



For many children in the *Children's Media Lives* sample, gaming was an important source of both entertainment and social interaction

Many of the children in *Children's Media Lives* described gaming as a way to spend time with friends or family members, as well as an opportunity to meet new people. Some of the children emphasised the social aspects of play, including talking and messaging others, as well as the gameplay itself.

[15] Those who game online: ABC1 (30%) and C2DE (29%).
[16] We discuss the rules that parents set around their child's gaming activities later in the report in 'Rules, supervision and education'.

So, I'll play like Roblox or something with my brother. So that's just like an online game basically, where you can like talk to people and stuff, message them. And there's like tons of different games on that game… I play, yeah, every single day, sometimes with my friends… But it's mostly with my brothers."

Amira (15)

And I do play Fortnite with my friend sometimes… that's more about like playing because I want to play with my friends rather than like playing for the game."

Ben (18)

Television and VSP viewing

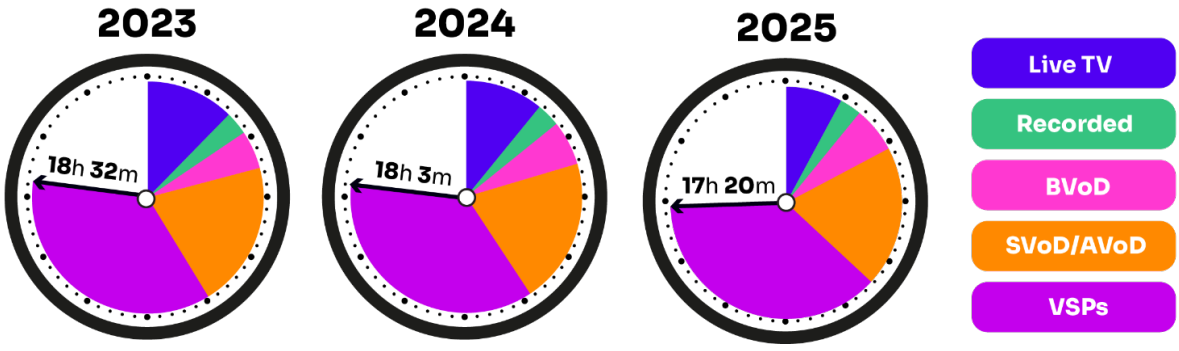
Viewing of live broadcast TV has been overtaken by video-on demand content among 4-15s

According to industry measurement from Barb, children aged 4-15 watched 2 hours 32 minutes of live broadcast TV on average per week in 2025 (this includes linear TV channels watched live, at the time programmes were broadcast and viewing of TV programmes that had previously been recorded via devices such as a digital video recorder). This was around 48 minutes less than in 2024, representing a 24% year-on-year decline, and continues the long-term downward trend in broadcast viewing among children, although steeper than in recent years.

Time spent watching broadcaster video-on-demand services (BVoDs) such as BBC iPlayer, ITVX and Sky On-Demand remained broadly stable in 2025 compared to 2024. Viewing to subscription video-on-demand services (SVoDs) and advertising video-on-demand services (AVoDs) such as Netflix, Disney+, Amazon Prime Video and Paramount+, declined again in 2025, with children aged 4-15 spending an average of 4 hours 34 minutes per week watching SVoD/AVoD services, down around 12 minutes (4%) on 2024.

Despite this decline, children spent considerably more time watching SVoD/AVoD services than broadcast TV for the first time, with children viewing nearly 33 minutes more SVoD/AVoD than broadcast TV inside the home.

Average weekly minutes to identified in-home video viewing, all devices: Children aged 4-15



Along with the decline in the amount of time children spend watching broadcast TV, the proportion of children who watch at least 3 minutes of broadcaster TV[17] in an average week (weekly reach) also fell in 2025. Around 63% of children aged 4-15 watched some broadcaster TV on a weekly basis, down from 66% in 2024. Nine in ten (91%) of 4-15s watched any audio-visual content in 2025.

The most-viewed programme in 2025 for children aged 4-11 was *KPop Demon Hunters* on Netflix with an audience of 11.03 million. This was followed by *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* (4.62 million) also on Netflix, and *Moana 2* (3.24 million) on Disney+. For children aged 12-15, *KPop Demon Hunters* was also the most-viewed content (1.48 million viewers), followed by the first episode of the second season of *Wednesday* (0.63 million) and *Adolescence*'s opening episode (0.52 million).

Looking at the most-watched programmes excluding films, Netflix dominated the top ten list for 4-11s with six titles, compared to three BBC programmes and one title from Disney. Among 12-15s, viewing was split between Netflix and PSBs (public service broadcasters) with Netflix having five of the top programmes, followed by the BBC with three and ITV with two.

Children's in-home viewing on VSPs increased in 2025

Barb industry data indicates that, in contrast to broadcast viewing, children's in-home viewing on video-sharing platforms (VSPs) across TV and all other devices connected to the home broadband increased slightly in 2025. Children aged 4-15 spent an average of 8 hours 45 minutes per week watching video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, Twitch and DailyMotion, up by around 16 minutes (3%) compared with 2024. As a result, video-sharing platforms continued to account for the largest share of children's in-home video viewing.

The amount of time spent viewing YouTube increased once again, with children aged 4-15 averaging 7 hours 7 minutes a week, up 8%. Those aged 4-9 averaged 6 hours 47 minutes a week, a 25-minute (7%) year-on-year increase, and 10-15s averaged 7 hours 27 minutes a week, up by 37 minutes (9%).

There are clear age and gender differences in the type of content children say they watch on VSPs

Our Children and Parents Tracker shows that there are some clear age-related differences in the types of content children watch on VSPs. For 3-5s who watch videos on any app or site[18], the most popular type of content categories are cartoons/animations (80%), funny videos (43%) and videos that help them learn new things or help with homework (38%). In contrast, children aged 8-17 who watch videos on any app or site are most likely to report watching funny videos (62%), music videos (46%), and gameplay content (43%).

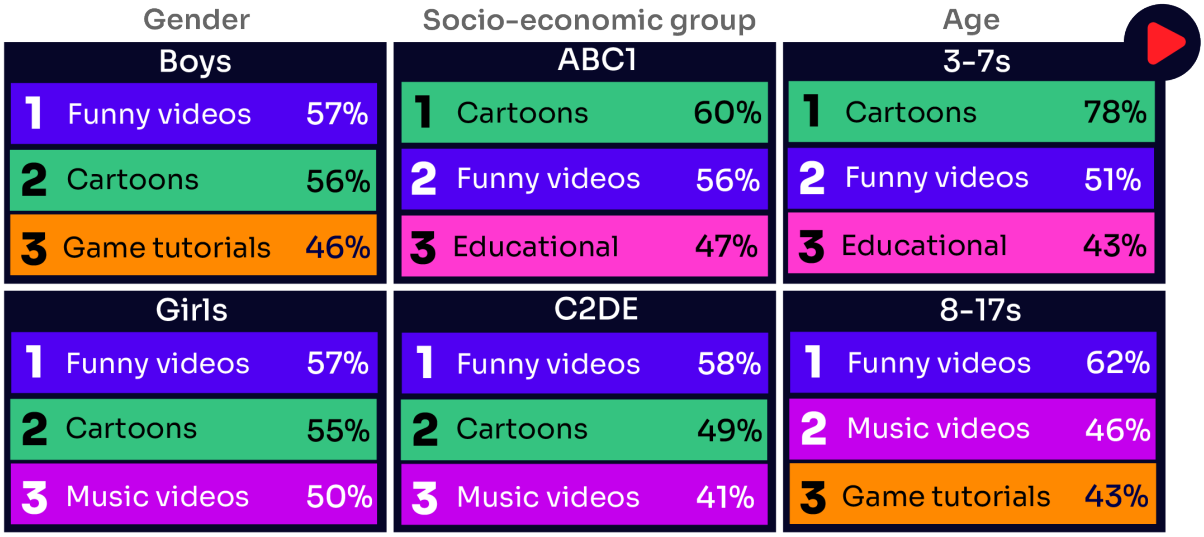
Boys are more likely than girls to watch sports content and gaming videos, while the reverse is true for music videos, 'how-to' or instructional videos, ASMR content and self-improvement content.

Educational content is viewed by all ages, with around four in ten (42%) children aged 3-17 who watch videos on any app or site watching videos to help them to learn new things or for schoolwork and homework. However, there is a clear difference between children in different socio-economic groups. Nearly half (47%) of children in ABC1 households watch this type of content, compared to just over a third (35%) of those in C2DE households.

[17] 'Broadcaster TV' is all broadcast content including live TV, recorded and BVoD.

[18] We first ask parents and children what apps or sites their child/they use and then we ask what activities they do on the apps/sites they said they use. The list of activities includes 'to watch videos on'.

Types of video content watched on VSPs



% of 3-17s who watch videos online

Many of the children in our qualitative sample find it difficult to identify a strong narrative in content they are watching

In a continuation of a trend observed previously, we found that most of the children in the sample for *Children's Media Lives* were spending less time overall watching long-form content than short-form content. Typically, the content the children watch is fast-paced and highly personalised. Many children struggled to describe the specific content they have watched, often referring to it as "random" or broadly "funny" or "relatable". This suggests a more passive mode of engagement, with less emphasis on following sustained narratives or recalling specific storylines.

> "Just like random stuff. Like, I don't know, like, how to describe them. Just random stuff. Like, a lot of them are fidget [videos]…There's a lot of random stuff like this."
>
> Billy (10)

> "I don't really know what I'm getting. I'm getting, like, we have football, but then there's also – I don't know. They're like ads and people's reposts."
>
> Angus (13)

Although some long-form content, such as films or television series, still formed part of some of the children's media lives, it generally played a smaller role than short-form content, and was often consumed alongside other media or with divided attention.

News consumption

TikTok is the most-used source of news among 12-15s who access news

Ofcom's News Consumption Survey[19] explores the use of and attitudes of children aged 12-15 towards news. A third (34%) of 12-15s say they are interested in watching, reading or listening to news. Three in ten (30%) say they are neither interested nor uninterested, with a further third (33%) that say they are not interested

Among 12-15s who do access news, social media is the most common platform used for news consumption. TikTok is the most-used news source, with around four in ten (42%) teenagers saying they use the app or site to access news. This is followed by YouTube (38%) and Facebook (29%). However, when we look at the combined use of BBC services (including TV, radio and online services) for news, it comes into the top three, at 35%.

As in previous years, insights from our *Children's Media Lives* study back up many of the findings from the News Consumption survey. We continue to find that most of the children in the qualitative study are not active news seekers and those who do recall seeing news tend to come across information while scrolling through social media feeds or through by hearing events being discussed by friends and at school.

> "I tend to scroll past like a lot of, uh, like political, that type of stuff… When there's something really big happening, like I've seen stuff in the past couple weeks about like Epstein files and all that. Which I haven't paid much attention to. But when it's stuff like that, like, I'll see it. And then when there's nothing big happening, I reckon I wouldn't see anything for like the day. Or maybe I would and I'll just scroll past it, I don't know."
>
> Ben (18)

> "The only thing I heard, literally for 5 minutes was about that ICE protest thing, and that was basically it... I don't really keep up with, like, law, politics, and stuff."
>
> Amira (15)

Some of the children in the *Children's Media Lives* sample described seeing 'meme' content about events or figures in the news on social media. The children themselves typically did not talk about these memes as 'news' content but did report that the content poked fun at the same people and events covered in traditional reporting.

> "[It's] quite satirical and taking the piss out of politics…[it's] sort of making light, and very light-hearted."
>
> Taylor (17)

[19] Ofcom News Consumption Survey data tables can be found on Ofcom's Statistical Release Calendar: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/our-research/statistical-release-calendar-2026.

Website and app use

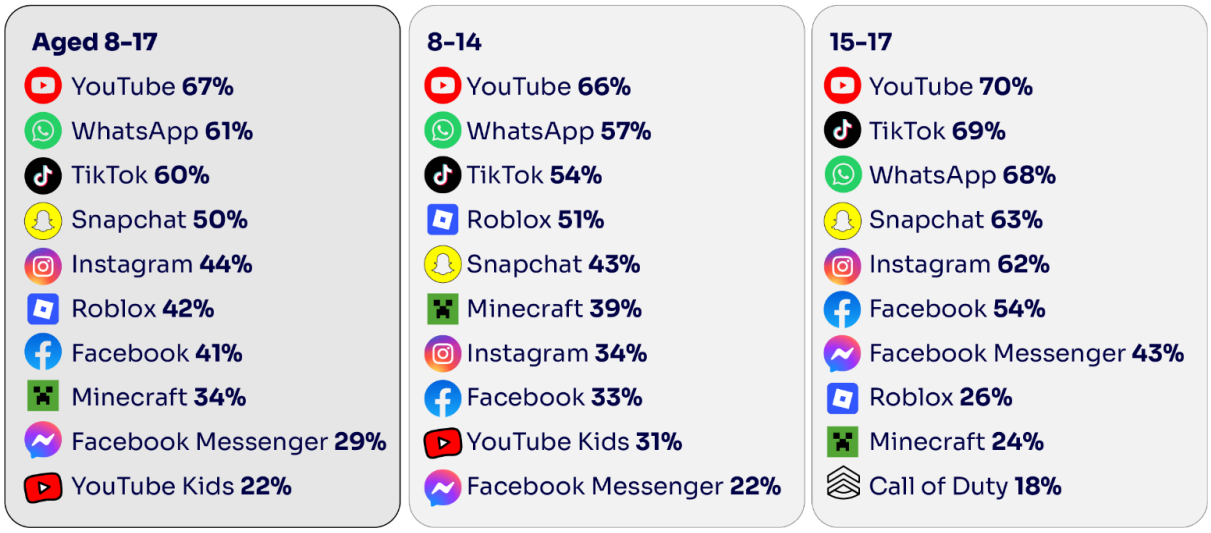
Children's reported use of sites or apps can vary depending on how survey questions are worded.[20] To avoid presenting multiple statistics that can differ, this section draws on data from our Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST) [21]. This enables us to provide a consistent picture of children's use of these sites/apps across Ofcom publications[22].

YouTube is the most selected service among 8-17s

The COST survey asks children aged 8-17 which sites/apps they have used in the past 4 weeks. YouTube (not including YouTube Kids) was the most selected site/app among all age groups (including 66% of 8-14s and 70% of 15-17s). WhatsApp (58% of 8-14s and 68% of 15-17s) and TikTok (55% of 8-14s and 69% of 15-17s), came next.

While for 15-17s, other social media sites/apps followed this (including Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and Facebook Messenger), the next most popular site/app for 8-14s was Roblox (51% vs 26% for 15-17s).

Top 10 sites / apps used by 8-17s in the past 4 weeks



Children typically take a 'passive' approach to social media

Two-thirds (65%) of 8-17s who use at least one social media site or app are 'passive' users[23]. Among these children, nearly four in ten (38%) mainly use social media to 'like' things and follow accounts, while 27% only read or watch content.

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[20] For example, if a specific timeframe is referenced or not. The Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST) asks 'Which of these have you used in the last 4 weeks?' and shows a prompted list of 15 services. The Children and Parents' Media Literacy Tracking survey which asks 'Which, if any, of these apps or sites does [child]/do you use?' and shows a prompted list of 33 services.

[21] The Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST) is an online survey, commissioned by Ofcom, of a UK-representative sample of children aged 8-17, recruited via parents. The data referenced here was collected as part of Wave 2 (November to December 2025) which had a total sample size of 3,412 children. For further information on COST and the data tables, please see here.

[22] The Children and Parents' Media Literacy Tracking survey data tables provide details of children's app use although for the reasons stated we are reporting on site/app use using the COST dataset this year.

[23] We use the terms 'passive' and 'active' here in a neutral descriptive sense, rather than making a judgment about one being preferable to the other. 'Passive' use – liking and following – can have significant ramifications – and 'active' use may not be appropriate on various sites or forums.

A third (34%) of social media users aged 8-17 are 'active' and say that they typically share, comment or post things when online. Among 16-17s, 37% are 'active' social media users. Children in ABC1 households are more likely than those in C2DE households to be 'active' users (38% vs 29%).

'Active' activities on websites/apps more broadly become more common as children get older: more than a third (36%) of all 13-17s say they upload videos, compared to around two in ten 8-12s (22%) and 15% of 3-7s[24].

Our *Children's Media Lives* study found that most of the children in the sample who used social media spent most of their time using it to passively consume content, typically scrolling and watching short-form content. Most of the children were not actively creating content themselves and instead preferred to consume content created by others. When they did share content, they were more likely to repost or use temporary formats rather than create original content.

> "It just satisfies me to not have loads of photos on my account. Plus, the more you get, the older the old ones seem to get. And it just. It's convenient because the old ones are like, ew, why did I look like that? Because it's like, two years ago, so I just delete them."
>
> Taylor (17)

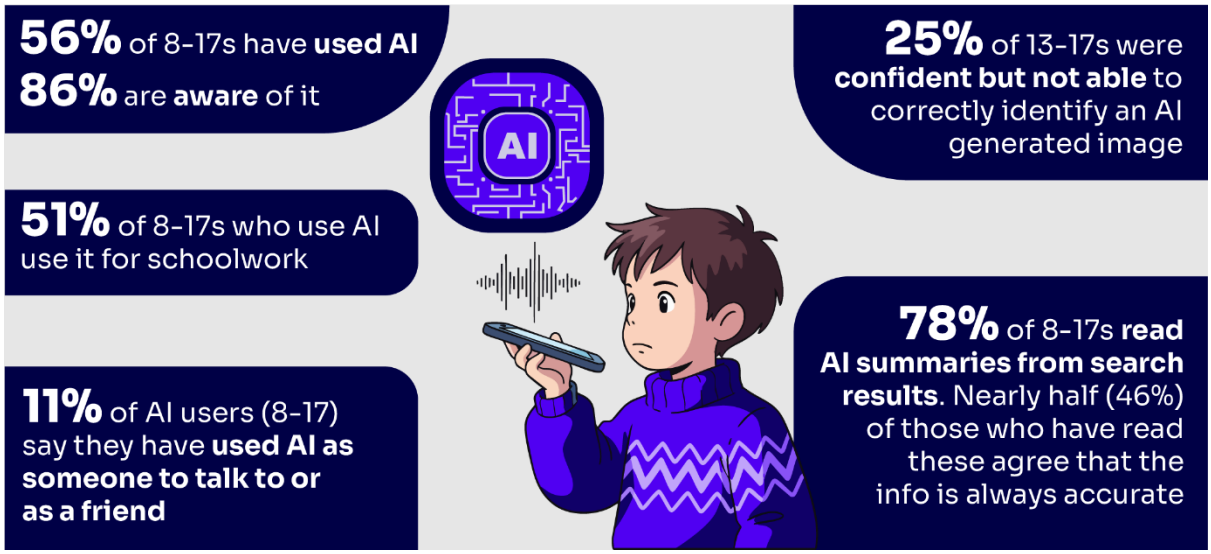
> "But I don't really post much. I mainly post on my story… Yeah, well the stories don't stay. Yeah, which is like I prefer that. So if I post something I normally private it within like a few days and if I post something on my story it obviously disappears. So it's handier to post on my story."
>
> Niamh (16)

[24] We also ask about children's experiences of livestreaming, which is a topic that is covered in our livestreaming publications: Children who create and view livestreams

The role of AI in children's lives

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming a routine part of children's online experiences, with more than half of 8-17s telling us they use it. Unlike earlier digital innovations that arrived as distinct tools or apps, AI capabilities are now woven into existing digital experiences, often operating seamlessly in the background. This section explores children's use and awareness of AI, their trust in AI-generated content, and their confidence and ability to recognise AI-generated content.



Awareness and use of AI

Awareness of AI is widespread among children, although its use varies by age and socio-economic group

Nearly nine in ten (86%) children aged 8-17 say that they have heard of artificial intelligence (or AI) such as ChatGPT, CoPilot or Gemini. The oldest teenagers are the most likely to be aware of AI, rising from seven in ten (69%) 8-9s to just over nine in ten (92%) 13-17s.

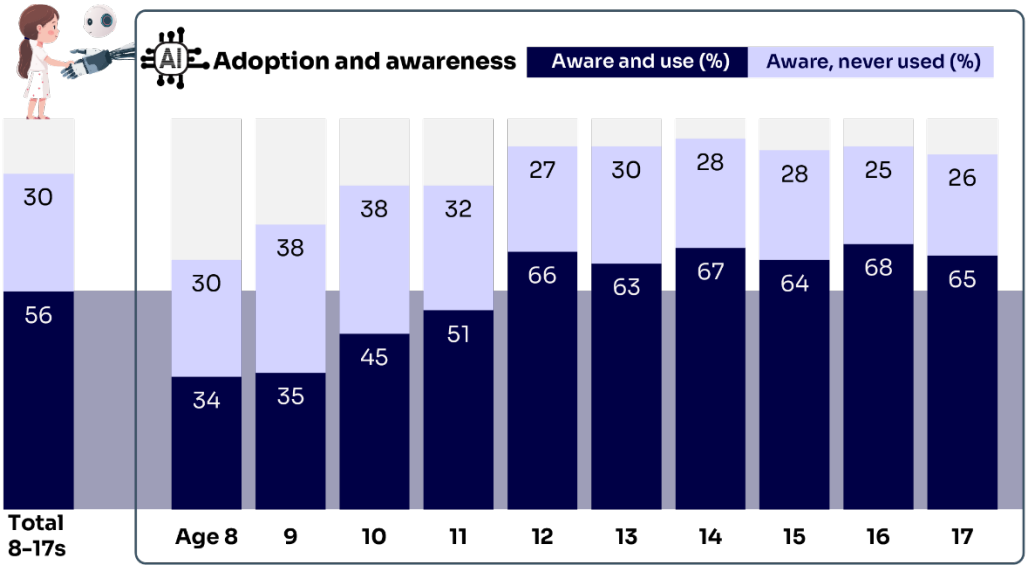
Over half (56%) of children aged 8-17 say they have used AI[25]. Last year, we reported that 50% of 8-17s had used AI and the year before that, the figure was 46%[26]. The findings of our *Children's Media Lives* study show that this year there has been an increase in AI use by the children in that sample.

As with awareness, use is strongly age-related: just over a third (35%) of 8-9s say they have used AI, compared with two-thirds (66%) of 16-17s. There are also clear socio-economic differences, with

[25] To explore awareness and use of AI, we asked 8-17s firstly whether they had heard of Artificial Intelligence of AI such as ChatGPT, CoPilot or Gemini and included this explanatory note: *These are tools that can answer your question or respond to instructions in a 'human' way, such as having a conversation with you. This can be in the form of text, images, videos or voice.* We then asked 8-17s who said they were aware of AI whether they had used AI such as ChatGPT, CoPilot or Gemini. Data relating to proportion of children who are aware of AI and use it included in this report has been rebased to all 8-17s.

[26] Trends are indicative due to changes in methodology.

children in ABC1 households more likely to report having used AI than those in C2DE households (67% vs 46%).



AI is part of many children's online activities

Evidence from this year's *Children's Media Lives* shows that AI is playing an increasingly important role in many of the activities children take part in. All the children in the sample said they had seen AI-generated content, and many reported using AI for activities such as schoolwork and homework, finding information such as how to deal with health problems, and even for advice on relationships.

> "When I want a more complex, more in depth answer of a niche thing, I'll go to AI. Because they do the searching for you in the sense that they… I think how they work is they take everything from the internet, they scan everything in seconds and they compile it into one answer. And that will take you hours and hours to do if you're not using AI."
>
> Arjun (14)

> Like when I was doing my [coursework]… I put the whole thing through and I put the assessment criteria through and basically told it to grade it before I submitted it to give me constructive criticism and feedback to improve it. So, I was using it to improve it, not to write it for me."
>
> Taylor (17)

Turning back to the Children and Parents Tracking survey, we asked 8-17s who have used AI what they have used it for. Half (51%) say they use AI for schoolwork or homework, while over four in ten (43%) say they use it for learning more generally. Use of AI for schoolwork or homework, in particular, appears to have increased over recent years, rising from 34% in 2023 to 45% in 2024, and to 51% this year[27]. Just under three in ten (28%) say they use AI to find information such as news, weather or general knowledge. AI is also supporting some aspects of creativity, with two in ten (20%) children saying they use it to help them make images or songs. Over four in ten (43%) children

[27] Trends are indicative due to changes in methodology. Not all reasons for using AI included in this year's survey were asked in previous waves.

who use AI say they use it simply for fun[28]. Among parents of 3-7s who go online to do creative activities, just over half (52%) say their child has used AI when doing those activities. This includes 16% of parents who say that their child often uses AI when being creative. Examples from the *Children's Media Lives* sample highlighted some of the ways in which children are using AI to create content.

> We were like [to ChatGPT], write a story and then we get it to add our names to it. We've done it one time with Love Island. We done it, like, make a Love Island episode and we put all our names in it and then some boys from other classes in it."
>
> Suzy (14)

> "Me and my friends did it once. It was like we generated like a picture of us next to like, what are say, like a celebrity crush or something. I did mine. I think I generated a picture of me next to Drake. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my whole entire life. I loved it."
>
> Amira (15)

We also found that some children were using AI for immediate and confidential answers to health worries and anxieties.

> "My Snap AI, it's just more like personal questions or like questions regarding me or like just something else or... Like, so say if I'm like sick or something and like, say like my neck is like, I can't really speak out of it. Or like, say like the side of my stomach is like really hurting or something... just in case, like, because I don't want to die or anything. So I would just ask my AI if it's like anything serious."
>
> Amira (15)

A minority of children report having an 'AI friend'

One in ten AI users aged 8-17 say they have used AI as someone to talk to or 'as a friend'. Our *Children's Media Lives* study showed that children's use of AI in this way appears to be primarily linked to seeking personal advice. Some of the children showed awareness of the limitations of using AI in this way, although it is unclear whether this has affected how they use AI in their everyday lives:

> "AI doesn't have any emotions of its own, it doesn't have any empathy. I feel like it wouldn't be very good at [advice] but in year seven when I was dating someone, I don't remember what the scenario was, but either it was me asking them out or it was me breaking up with them or something similar to that. And I think I asked ChatGPT for some help."
>
> Willow (13)

[28] Reasons for using AI are largely aligned with last year when we reported that using AI for fun, to learn and for school were the most common reasons. Trend is indicative due to changes in methodology.

Recognising AI-generated content

Just over half of teenagers say they feel confident in identifying AI-generated content

As part of a series of questions exploring children's critical understanding of different aspects of being online, we asked 13-17s who said that they were aware of AI, how confident, if at all, they felt in recognising whether something they see online is AI-generated. Just over half (52%) say they felt confident (although only 13% describe themselves as very confident). A further three in ten (29%) say they feel neither confident nor not confident, and 15% say they do not feel confident.

Among this group of teenagers who were aware of AI, younger teens were the most likely to say they are confident in recognising AI-generated content (56% of 13-15s vs 47% of 16-17s) as are as those in ABC1 households (61% vs 45% of those in C2DE households).

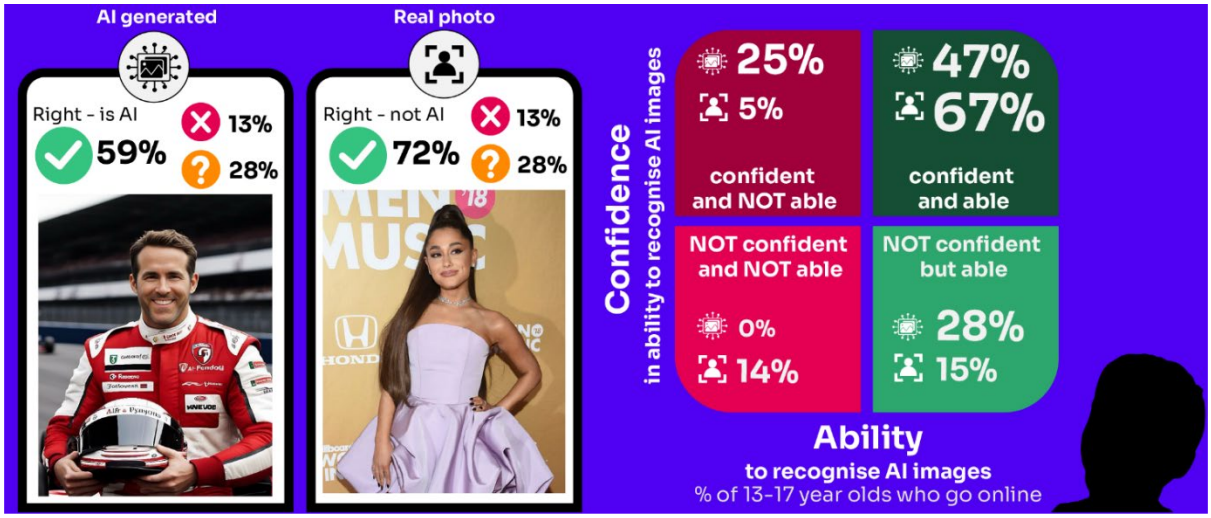
This level of confidence is the lowest among the three areas of critical understanding explored in the survey: recognising advertising online (64% of 13-17s say they are confident) and knowing whether information they come across online is true or not (65% of 13-17s say they are confident), compared to the 52% of 13-17s being confident recognising AI-generated content. This is explored in more detail in the 'Critical Understanding' section.

There is a gap between children's confidence and their ability to recognise whether images are real or AI-generated

This year for the first time, we showed children aged 8-17 two images of well-known celebrities: one real image and one generated using AI. For the AI-generated image, around six in ten (59%) correctly identified it as AI-generated (32% were very confident and 27% were somewhat confident it that was AI-generated). However, more than a quarter (28%) said they were unsure and 13% incorrectly thought the image was real. Recognition was higher for the genuine image: just over seven in ten (72%) were confident it was real, while 21% were unsure and 6% incorrectly stated that it had been generated by AI.

Older children were more likely than younger children to be confident recognising the AI-generated image (61% of 16-17s vs 51% of 8-9s), although there was no difference by age for the real image. Children in C2DE households were less likely than those in ABC1 households to correctly recognise the AI-generated image as AI (54% vs 63%).

As noted above, just over half (52%) of 13-17s say they are confident in their ability to tell whether content they see online has been produced by AI or not. When tested in practice, however, a quarter (25%) were confident but were unable to correctly identify the AI-generated image shown to them. This points to a gap between children's self-reported confidence and their ability to determine whether online content is genuine or not.



Some children in the *Children's Media Lives* sample felt there were clear indicators of AI-generated content

While quantitative findings suggest lower confidence among children in identifying AI-generated content, participants in the qualitative research said they had encountered AI-generated material frequently and were familiar with some of its signs, especially in relation to video or image-based AI content. Children mentioned visual errors, implausible scenarios, and labels indicating that the content had been generated by AI.

> "There's been a few times on TikTok… videos that have come up saying AI generated underneath."
>
> Bryony (18)

> "I look out for little glitches, animals disappearing, or, like, something disappearing."
>
> Keeley (10)

However, some children also spoke about being unsure whether things they saw online were real or AI-generated.

> "I am quite bad at telling whether it's AI or not. I'd like to think that I don't really get much on my For You page, which is why I can't tell in the first place. But sometimes it can be quite like, you actually, like sometimes I will go to the comments of a, especially it's more so on Instagram, I'll get sort of AI. I'll go to the comments and I'll be like, 'Oh, that's AI? I thought that was real.'"
>
> Taylor (17)

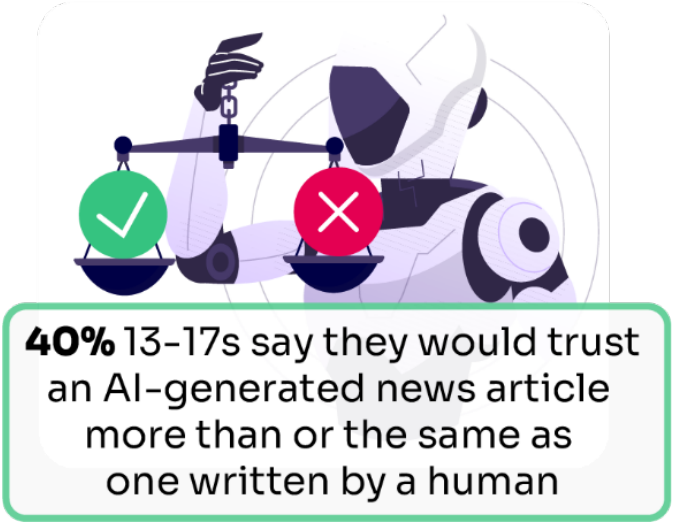
> "Prime example – bunnies jumping on trampolines. That is completely AI-generated. Yeah, I've definitely fallen for that before. And I have friends who would send me a very AI-generated video and be like, oh my gosh, look at this new thing that happened in Switzerland. Isn't it so cool?"
>
> Willow (13)

Trust in AI

Four in ten teenagers who are aware of AI would trust an AI-generated article at least as much as one written by a human

We wanted to establish the extent to which 13-17s who are aware of AI would trust AI-generated content. To do this, we asked those who were aware of AI to imagine they had read a news story online which stated that it had been generated or written by AI and tell us whether they would trust that article more, less, or to the same extent as one written by a person.

Around three in ten (31%) say they would trust an AI-generated article to the same extent as one written by a person, while a further 9% say they would trust it more. In contrast, just over four in ten (43%) say they would trust an AI-generated article less than one written by a human. Taken together, four in ten (40%) teenagers who are aware of AI say they would trust an AI-generated article either more than, or to the same extent as, a human-written article[29].



Nearly half of 8-17s who read AI summaries in search results think they are always accurate

This year, we introduced a new question to explore children's use of the AI-generated summaries that appear in search results. Nearly eight in ten (78%) 8-17s say they at least sometimes read AI summaries when searching for something online.

We then asked children if the information in AI summaries is always accurate. Nearly half (46%) of those who have read AI summaries agree that the information is always accurate. This is compared to two in ten who say they (21%) disagree, while a quarter (26%) neither agree nor disagree. While there is little variation according to age or gender, agreement that AI summaries are always accurate is higher among children in ABC1 households than those in C2DE households (54% vs 38%). Children with no limiting or impacting conditions were more likely than those with a condition to agree (48% vs 38%) and those with a minority ethnic background were more likely than white children to agree (60% vs 42%).

[29] Last year we reported that 36% of AI users aged 13-17 said they would trust an AI-generated news story less than one written by a human, 35% said they would trust it to the same extent as the human version and 17% would trust an AI-generated news article more than one written by a human. Trends are indicative due to changes in methodology.

In the *Children's Media Lives* sample, most children regarded AI as a trusted source of information

Researchers asked children in the qualitative sample how they worked out whether the information they got from AI was trustworthy and if that mattered to them. Most children said that as the results felt relevant to their questions, they tended to accept the responses AI provided without checking the sources. Some also cited the reputation and commercial interests of the companies behind these AI tools as reasons to trust them.

> "I just trust it [ChatGPT]…which seems bad, but I think it's bound to be accurate."
>
> Arjun (14)

> "I trust it [Google's AI overview] yeah, because they're a multibillion-dollar company which they're not going to jeopardise that over an AI machine."
>
> Angus (13)

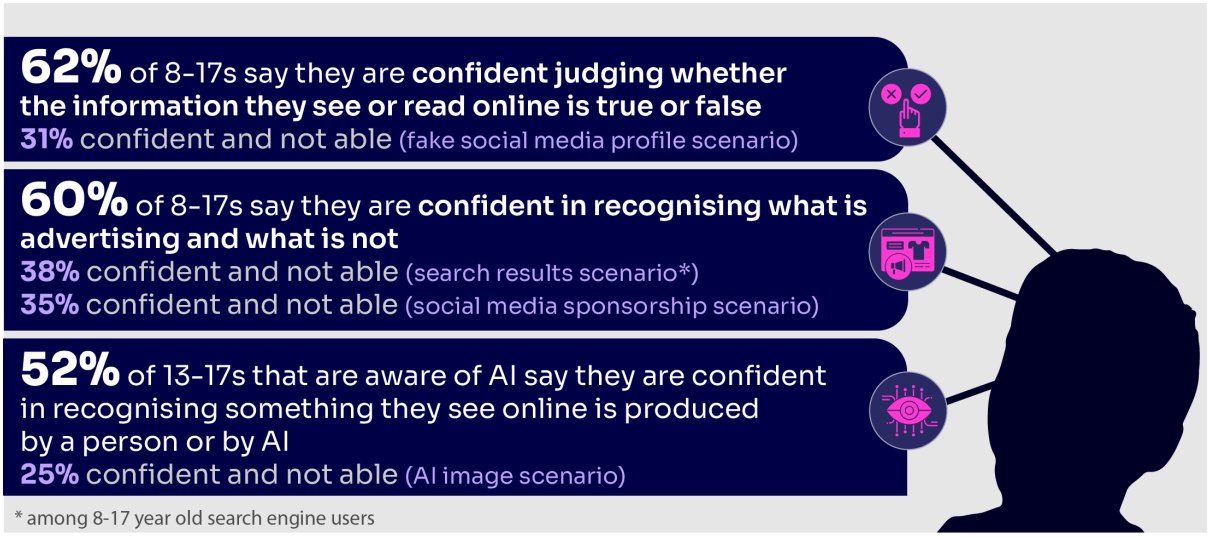
It is worth noting that this was generally the children's approach to interpreting traditional search results as well. Indeed, with the exception of a couple of participants, most rarely made a conscious choice between AI-specific tools (such as generative summaries) and other sources.

Children's critical understanding of online information

Introduction

Critical understanding is a core element of media literacy for children. It supports how they navigate the online activities that are part of their everyday lives, such as watching videos, playing games, using social media, searching for information, and interacting with new tools like AI. Having stronger critical understanding can help children make sense of what they see online, recognise commercial or misleading content, and decide how much to trust the information, images or advice they encounter.

Confidence plays an important role in this, although this role is a nuanced one. When confidence is higher than ability, children may be more likely to accept content at face value or take online risks. Where ability is stronger than confidence, children may doubt their judgement or feel uncertain about their online choices. In this section, we explore the relationship between confidence and ability by asking children how confident they feel in carrying out specific online tasks and then assessing their understanding through short scenarios.

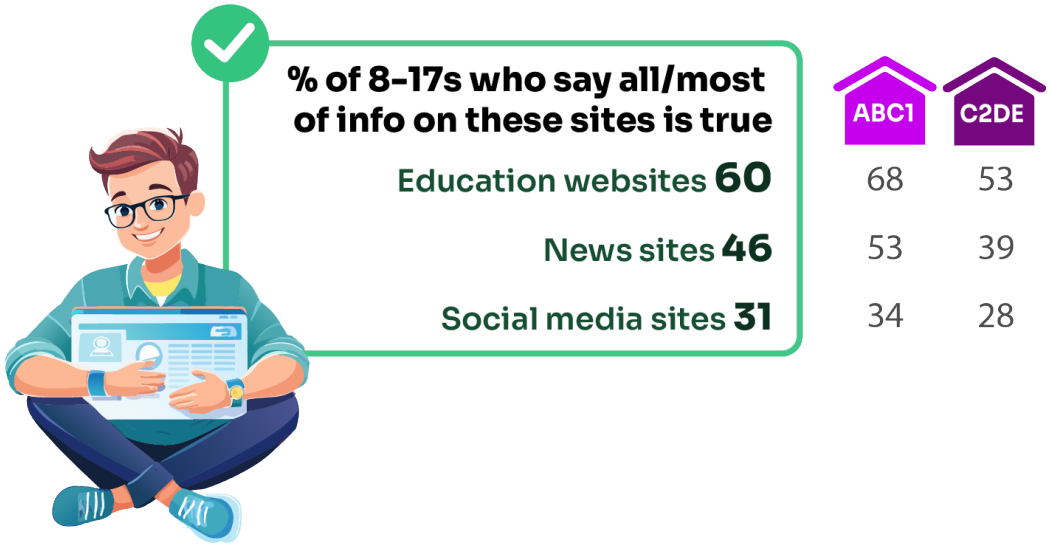


Trustworthy content

Children in ABC1 households are more likely than those in C2DE households to trust all the online platforms we asked about

We asked children aged 8-17 the extent to which they trust the information they find on different types of sites/apps. Education websites, such as BBC Bitesize, are seen as the most trustworthy, with six in ten (60%) children saying that all or most of the information they see on these sites or apps is 'true'. In comparison, less than half (46%) say the same about apps or sites focused on news and current affairs, such as the BBC News, CBBC Newsround and newspaper apps/sites. For social media, trust is lower, with around three in ten (31%) saying that all or most of the information on these platforms is true. This pattern of trust is broadly the same as last year[30].

Levels of trust are broadly consistent across age and gender, although children in ABC1 households are more likely to trust the information they find on all platforms than those in C2DE households.



Among users of each news source, traditional news sources are seen as the most trustworthy, while social media is seen as the least

In this year's News Consumption Survey[31], questions on trust covered both types of platforms and individual news providers. Over half of children aged 12-15 who have used these platforms for news in the last month say the news they see in print newspapers (54%) or on newspaper apps or websites (51%) is always trustworthy. This compares to around a third of users who rate radio and television news as always trustworthy, including TV apps or sites (36%), live radio (33%) and TV or streaming services (30%). Just under three in ten (28%) users of search engines, AI apps or AI overviews for news say that news seen via these methods is always trustworthy. Social media is seen as the least trustworthy platform for news, with 16% of users saying it is always trustworthy.

Looking at specific news brands, traditional news broadcasters rank highest, with nine in ten users of these news brands saying they trust news on Sky (90%), Channel 5 (88%), Channel 4 (86%), ITV (82%) and the BBC (80%). Social media providers are less trusted: although around two-thirds of users say

[30] Trends are indicative due to changes in methodology.
[31] Ofcom News Consumption data tables can be found on Ofcom's Statistical Release Calendar: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/our-research/statistical-release-calendar-2026.

they trust news on YouTube (68%) and Instagram (64%), trust falls to 54% for Snapchat users and to 45% for TikTok users.

Confidence in critically judging information online

We asked children a series of questions to understand their confidence in critically judging the information they see online. We first asked them a general question about how confident they feel judging whether the information they see of read online is true or false. We then asked them more specific questions regarding their confidence in identifying advertising and recognising AI-generated content online.

Children feel least confident identifying AI-generated content

Around six in ten (62%) 8-17s say they are confident in judging whether the information they see or read online is true or false, while a quarter (25%) say that they are neither confident nor not confident, and just under one in ten (9%) say they are not confident. Confidence is lowest among the youngest children with less than half (43%) of 8-9s saying they are confident. This rises and remains relatively stable among the older age groups at around two-thirds (65–67%).

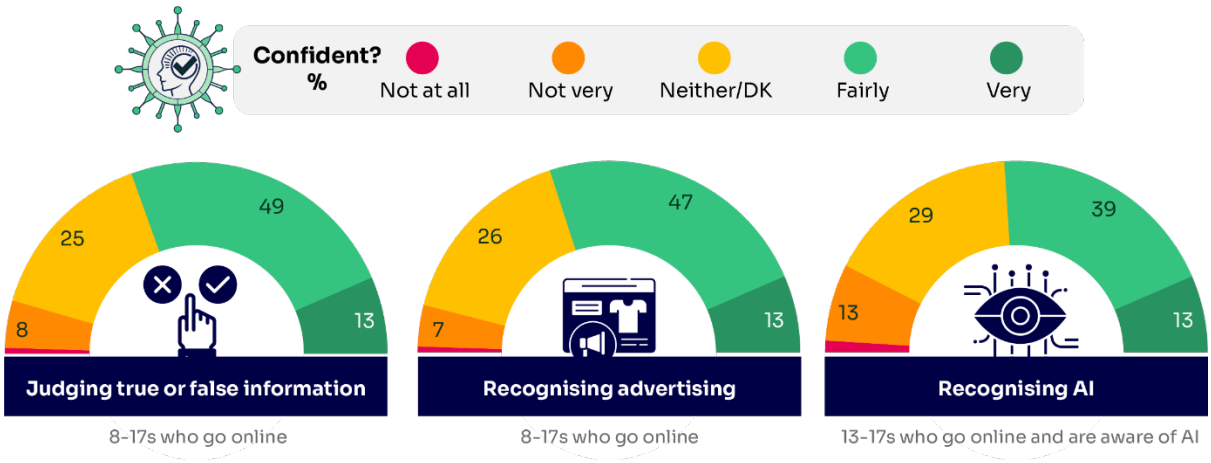
As noted in last year's report, confidence among the older teenagers in particular, appears lower than in earlier years. While we cannot conclusively say there has been a further decrease due to changes in methodology, confidence among 16-17s stood at 73% last year and 82% three years ago, compared with 65% this year.

A similar proportion of children say they are confident in recognising what is online advertising and what is not. Six in ten (60%) 8-17s say they are confident in doing this, which again indicates of a decrease in confidence compared to last year when 93% of 13-17s said they were confident recognising advertising (vs 64% among 13-17s this year) [32]. As with judging true or false information online, 8-9s are the least confident (45%), while there is little difference in the confidence levels between the older age groups (62% of 10-12s and 64% of both 13-15s and 16-17s).

In contrast, as mentioned in the previous section, fewer children report being confident in recognising whether something they see online, such as a news story or image, has been produced by a person or by artificial intelligence. Just over half of 13-17s (52%) who are aware of AI say they are confident in doing this. Within this age group, children aged 13-15 are the most confident (56% compared to 47% of 16-17s).

Children in ABC1 households are more likely than those in C2DE households to say they are confident in judging whether the information they see online is true or false (67% vs 56%), recognising advertising online (68% vs 52%) and identifying AI-generated content (61% vs 45%).

[32] Trends are indicative due to changes in methodology.



It is important to note that lower confidence in judging online information does not necessarily indicate weaker media literacy. While in some cases it may reflect gaps in knowledge or education, it may also signal increased awareness of the growing complexity of online information environments, including the prevalence of AI-generated content. In this context, children's uncertainty may be a realistic response to their realisation that it's becoming harder to know what is true or not online.

Ability to critically judge information online

While confidence in judging online information is important to understand, we also wanted to assess children's ability to do so in practice. To do this, we presented children aged 8-17 with various scenarios designed to test their ability to critically evaluate online content. These scenarios included a fake social media profile, a genuine and an AI-generated image (which has been discussed in the previous section), real social media advertising posts and a set of sponsored search engine results.

Three in ten 8-17s are confident in their ability to tell if something is true or false online, but could not identify a fake social media profile

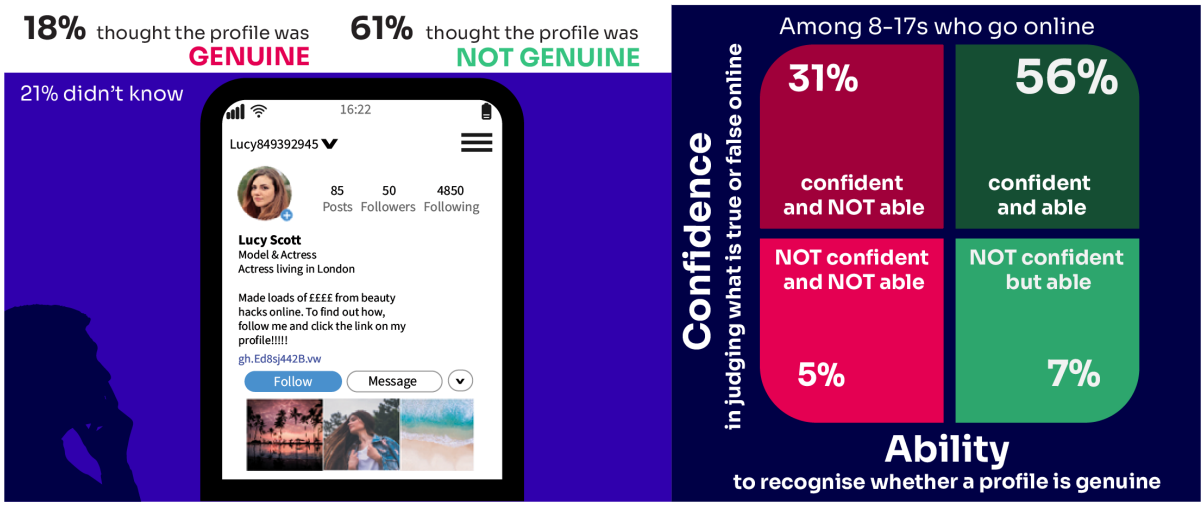
The first scenario featured a fake Instagram profile created by researchers. Around six in ten (61%) 8-17s correctly recognised that the profile was not genuine. However, just under two in ten (18%) incorrectly said it was a real profile, while a further 21% said they were not sure.

Older children were more likely than younger children to recognise the profile as fake. Half (50%) of 8-9s identified the profile as fake, compared with 54% of 10-12s, around seven in ten (69%) 13-15s and a similar proportion (68%) of 16-17s. There was no difference by gender or socio-economic group.

We then asked children to identify which elements of the profile had influenced their judgement (by clicking or tapping directly on the profile on their screens). Among those who correctly identified the profile as fake, the profile description was the most cited indicator (81%). The profile description included claims such as 'Made loads of ££££ from beauty' and prompted users to follow the account and click a link in the profile. Almost a third (35%) Identified the number of posts and followers as indicators that the profile was not genuine.

When we asked those who believed incorrectly that the profile was real why they thought this, the answers were more varied, with no single feature standing out. This variation suggests a degree of uncertainty about which signals indicate whether a profile is genuine or fake.

Overall, these findings point to a gap between some children's confidence in judging online content and their ability to do so in practice[33]. Combining these findings with the earlier question around confidence in judging whether information online is true or false, three in ten (31%) 8-17s said they were confident but were unable to correctly identify the fake social media profile shown to them.



To better understand what shapes the different aspects of children's media literacy, we conducted further analysis using a statistical technique called logistic regression. This method allows us to explore how demographic factors and online behaviours relate to the likelihood of specific outcomes such as ability to recognise true or false information online. We carried out regression analysis to explore how children's exposure to media literacy education[34] influenced their performance across the various scenario-based questions.

While a relationship between children's media literacy education exposure and their ability was less straightforward to identify for the other scenarios, we found that the ability to recognise a genuine versus a fake social media profile was strongly associated with higher levels of media literacy education exposure.

Four in ten 8-17s identified that the only reason the top results appeared was because they were adverts

To assess their understanding of online advertising, we showed 8-17s who use search engines a screenshot of a Google search result for trainers (see image below). We then asked them to select from several options why the top four results appeared first in the list. The children were allowed to choose all the options they felt applied.

Around six in ten (57%) correctly identified that the results appeared at the top of the page because they were adverts and had paid to be there. However, as this was the only correct response, and

[33] Confidence does not just follow from good media literacy skills but intersects with it in a way which can either strengthen or undermine critical understanding. Someone whose confidence is not matched by ability in practice may be more likely to make mistakes, which could lead to harm. Conversely, someone who has good critical understanding skills but is not confident in them may not trust their own good judgment, which could lead them to feel unsure or unsafe online.

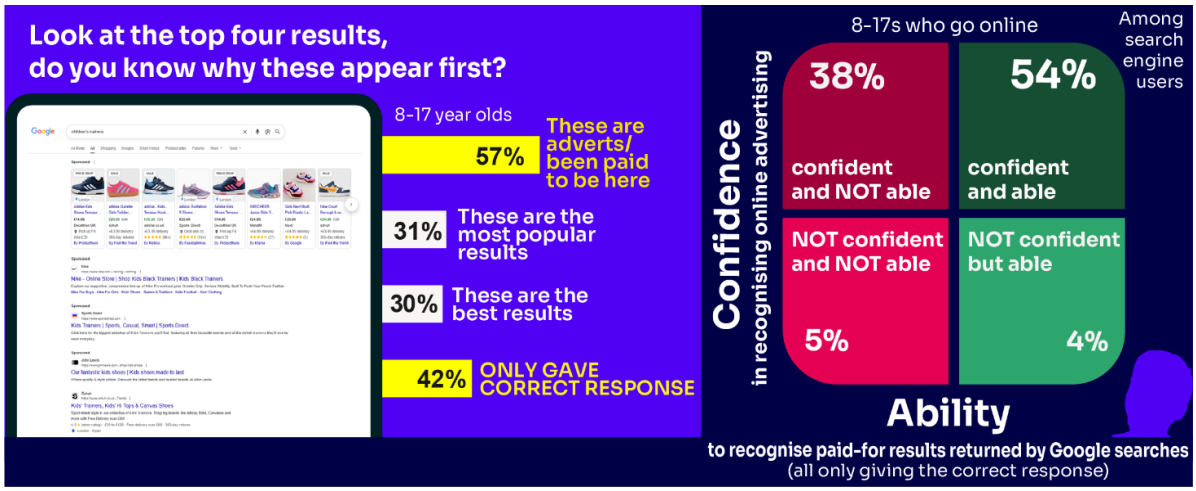
[34] Children were classified as having exposure to media literacy education is they met all of the following criteria: (i) they reported having had a conversation about using the internet safely, sensibly and positively (ii) they reported having had multiple or regular school lessons about being online and its risks and benefits and (iii) they reported that five or more topics were included in their lessons about being online.

because children were able to select multiple answers for this question, when we look at those that only said these results were adverts, the figure drops to 42% of 8-17s.

Other responses to this question included three in ten children (31%) who said the results were placed first because they were the 'most popular' results. A similar proportion (30%) said it was because they were the 'best' results.

Older children were more likely to correctly recognise that the results appeared at the top of the search page due to paid advertising (65% of 16-17s vs 49% of 8-9s), and children in ABC1 households were more likely to recognise this than those in C2DE households (62% vs 52%).

We noted above that 60% of 8-17s say they are confident in recognising advertising online. However, when we consider this alongside those that understood why a search showed certain results at the top of the page, we found that a substantial proportion of children (38%) were confident but not able in practice to identify advertising.



A similar proportion of children recognise influencer marketing on social media

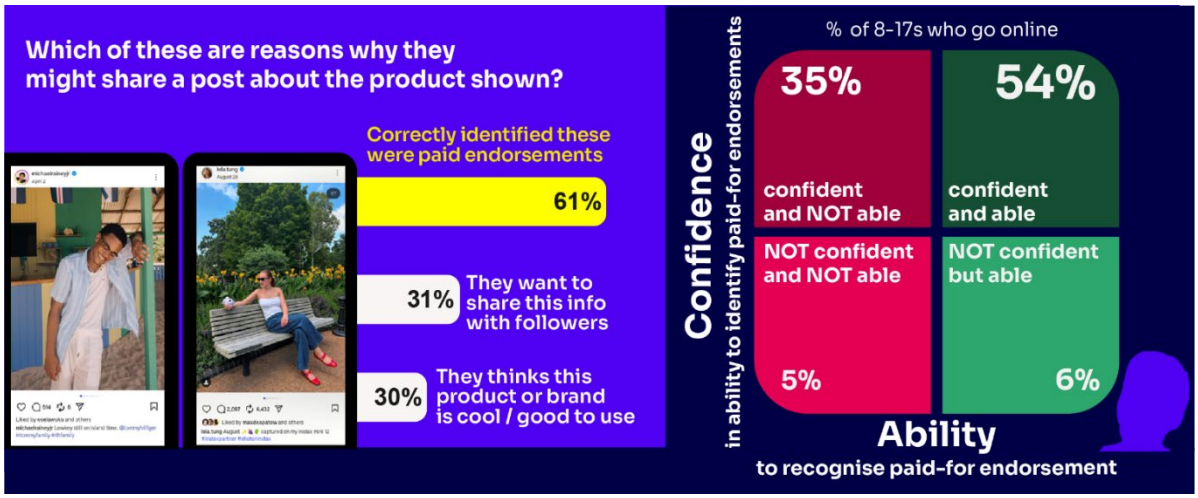
In addition to search engines, we explored how well children aged 8-17 recognise advertising through influencers social media posts. To do this, we showed children one of two Instagram posts: one featuring American actor Michael Rainey Jr. promoting clothing, and the other featuring American actress and singer Lola Tung promoting a camera. Half of the sample were randomly selected to see one of the posts and the other half saw the other post. Both were genuine posts. Children were then asked why they thought the celebrity might have shared the post.

Combining the results for both posts, six in ten (61%) correctly identified that these were paid endorsements. However, three in ten (31%) believed that the celebrities shared these posts because they wanted to share the information with their followers and a similar proportion (30%) believed they shared them because they considered the product to be cool or good to use. Given that celebrities and influencers may have multiple reasons for promoting a product (for example, they may genuinely like it as well as being paid to endorse it), any mention of the post being paid-for is considered a 'correct' response, even if the respondent selected other reasons as well.

As was the case with all other scenarios (the fake social media profile, the AI-generated image and the reasons why certain websites are listed at the top of a search engine result page), younger children and those in C2DE households were the least likely to correctly state that the celebrity's post was paid-for. Half (50%) of 8-9s recognised this, compared to 65% of 16-17s. This may be because 8-9s are less likely to use social media and therefore have less experience of seeing these

types of posts. Just over six in ten (63%) in ABC1 households were correct compared to 59% in C2DE households.

We reported above that nearly four in ten (38%) 8-17s were confident in their ability to recognise advertising online but were unable to do so in practice when showed a search engine result; a similar proportion were confident but not able to recognise advertising in the social media posts (35%).



Not all children in the *Children's Media Lives* sample were able to recognise more embedded forms of online marketing

Many children spoke about frequently encountering adverts while online, often describing them as intrusive or "annoying" because they disrupted scrolling or viewing content.

However, a few children in the sample did not recognise content featuring products or brand promotion as marketing. For example, Niamh (16) reported that she did not think she came across many "adverts" on her TikTok feed:

> "No, they weren't adverts, they'd just be literally people wearing them [clothes]... I suppose actual adverts from brands, I'd say [I see] about 1 or 2 a day."
>
> Niamh (16)

However, during a three-minute screen recording of Niamh's TikTok use, researchers saw seven adverts in addition to two videos of influencers showing products they had recently bought[35].

Many teenagers are unclear about how social media companies generate revenue through selling user data

This year, we introduced a new question to better understand how well 13-17s understand the different ways in which media platforms generate revenue. Overall, many 13-17s seem to recognise the main funding models used across services, but understanding varies by platform type. Nearly seven in ten (68%) correctly associate the BBC with the TV licence fee (although this is slightly lower among younger teenagers), while a similar proportion associate streaming platforms with

[35] It is worth noting that the children could have recognised the content in the moment but found it difficult to recall the content they saw in the interviews. Also, some children may not consider promotion of products 'advertising or marketing'.

subscriptions (68%). Half (50%) of teenagers associate advertising as the main source of income for commercial broadcasters and 46% do so for social media companies.

Less than a quarter (22%) identify that social media companies make money from selling user data to advertisers. Uncertainty is highest for this platform type, with 12% saying they do not know how social media companies make money. This was higher among girls than boys (15% vs 9%) and among C2DEs compared to ABC1s (15% vs 8%).

Children's experience of the online world: benefits and potential risks

Introduction

In this section we discuss the benefits and potential risks of children being online. We set out the ways that children are using online spaces to explore their interests, develop skills, get help with their education, be social, and aid their physical and mental wellbeing. Of course, the online world also contains various risks, and we outline children's experiences and attitudes as well as the concerns and opinions of their parents.

The benefits of being online

Digital devices and being online can provide ways for children to be creative

The online world can provide a range of ways for children to be creative. Eight in ten (80%) children aged 3-17 use digital devices to take part in at least one of the creative activities we asked about. However, the types of creative activities children undertake varies significantly by age.

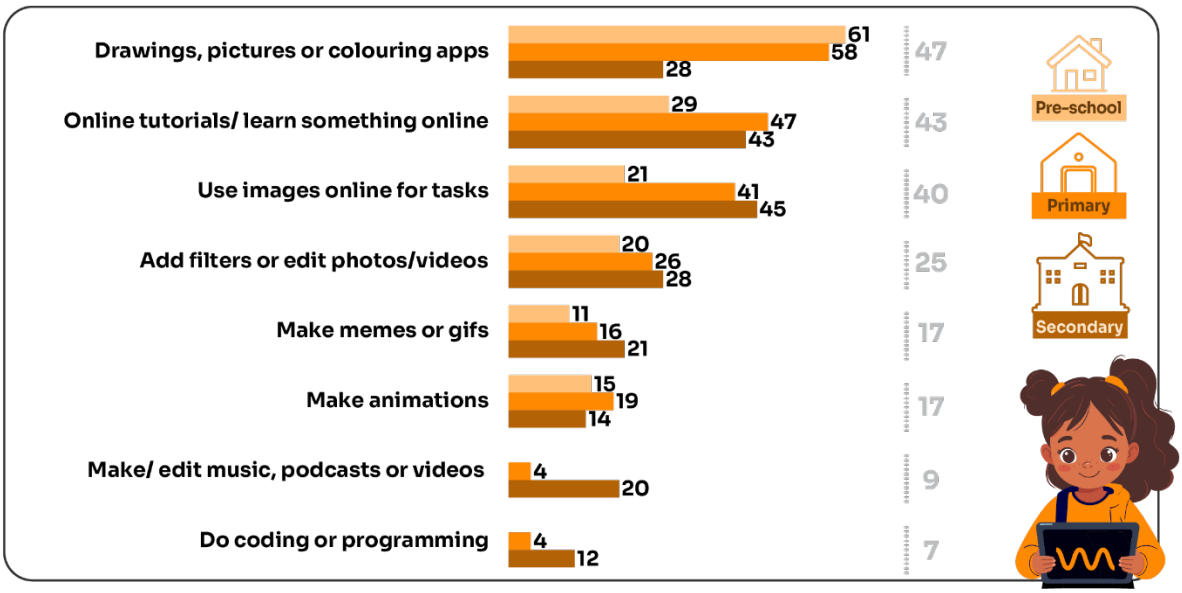
Younger children are more likely to engage in creative play-based activities. As reported by parents, two thirds (65%) of 3-7s use digital devices to make drawings or pictures, or use colouring apps[36], while two in ten (20%) 3-7s say they make animations (e.g. using stop-motion) [37].

Older children are more likely to participate in more technical creative activities. Nearly two in ten (17%) children aged 8-17 say they make or edit music, podcasts or videos, and slightly fewer (12%) say they code or program, such as making websites, apps or games. Just under one in ten (7%) say they write blog or other longer posts.

Activities like adding filters or making changes to photos or videos, as well as finding and using images online for tasks such as for homework or making memes or gifs are all fairly consistently reported across age groups.

In addition, children in ABC1 households are more likely than those in C2DE households to say they do most of the creative activities we asked about.

Creative activities undertaken on devices by children aged 3-17 (%).



Turning to the youngest children, parents of children aged 6 months to 2 years who use screens were asked what their child uses them for. Around two in ten (21%) say that their child uses screens for creative activities such as making digital art.

Many 8-17s say they are using online spaces to aid their mental and physical wellbeing

We asked 8-17s whether they use websites, apps or other online services to help them with aspects of their mental and physical wellbeing. Overall, just under two-thirds (64%) say they do. Girls are more likely than boys to say they use online services for wellbeing purposes (68% vs 60%).

In terms of differences by age, children aged 8-9 are the least likely age group to say they use online spaces for wellbeing purposes. Children in ABC1 households are more likely to do so than those in C2DE households (73% vs 56%), rising to 78% among children in AB and falling to 54% among those in DE households. In addition, children with a limiting or impacting condition are more likely than those with none to say they use the internet for wellbeing (72% vs 62%).

[36] This is compared to 40% of 8-12s and 23% of 13-17s.
[37] This is compared to 16% of 8-12s and 11% of 13-17s.

% of online 8-17s who use websites or apps for any wellbeing reason

Total	Girls	Boys	Aged 8-9	Aged 10-12	Aged 13-15	Aged 16-17	ABC1	C2DE
64	68	60	52	69	63	69	73	56

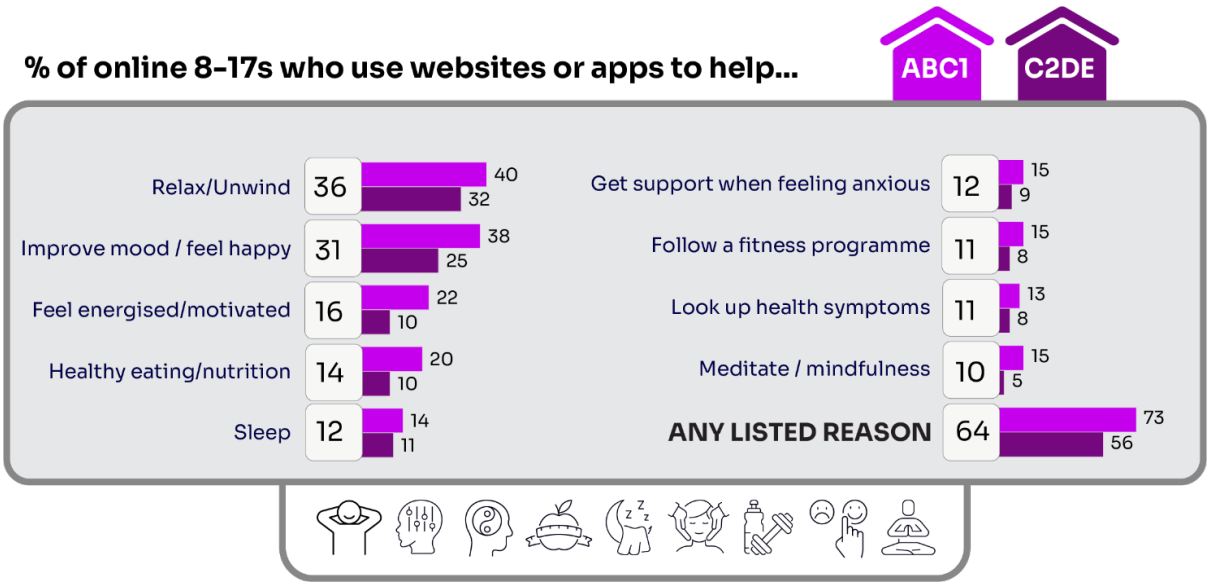
When asked how online services help with their wellbeing, children most commonly say they use them to relax or unwind (36%), improve their mood or to feel happy (31%) and to feel energised or motivated (16%)[38]. There are minimal gender differences when looking at these specific ways in which online services can be used to support wellbeing, but girls are more likely than boys to say they use online services to get support when they are feeling unhappy, anxious or worried (14% vs 9%).

Younger children are more likely to say they use apps or sites to improve their mood or make them feel happy, with almost four in ten (38%) 10-12s saying this compared to 27% for 13-17s. Older children are more likely to say they use online services to in relation to their physical wellbeing such as seeking advice on healthy eating and nutrition (18% for 13-17s vs 11% for 8-12s), or following a fitness programme or using a health tracker (14% for 13-17s vs 8% for 8-12s). Older children aged 13-17 are also more likely than 8-12s to say they look up health symptoms (15% vs 7%).

Children with a limiting or impacting condition are more likely than those with no conditions to say they use online services to improve their mood/feel happy (39% vs 29%), get support when feeling unhappy/anxious or worried (23% vs 9%) and to look up health symptoms (16% vs 10%).

Children in ABC1 households are more likely than those in C2DE households to say they engage in almost all the wellbeing-related online activities we asked about.

% of online 8-17s who use websites or apps to help...



[38] Last year, 'to relax' and 'to improve my mood' were also the top two responses. Trends are indicative due to changes in methodology.

Looking at the specific ways in which children use online services to support their wellbeing, many make use of audio and video platforms. As noted above in the audio section, among all parents of children aged 6 months to 17, one in ten (11%) say their child listens to meditation or mindfulness audio, with 8-12s most likely to do this (13%). Those with a limiting or impacting condition are more likely to do this than those with no conditions (15% vs 10%).

Among children who watch videos online, 15% say they watch ASMR videos and 14% watch self-improvement (SI) content. 8-12s are the most likely to watch ASMR (20%) and 13-17s are the most likely to watch SI content (17%).

Ofcom's research Understanding children's use and perceptions of ASMR and self-improvement content reported that for children who watched or listened to ASMR, the primary benefit was relaxation, while users of SI content saw the primary benefit as improved self-motivation and/or to help them feel better about themselves. The most widely used types of ASMR content were chill music and relaxing sounds. The research also found that children said ASMR helped them to relax and manage their moods and feelings, including feelings of anxiety or over-stimulation. Some children also talked about ASMR offering a sense of escape from their busy lives.

What is Self-Improvement (SI) content?

Self-improvement covers a range of content related to physical health and fitness, mental health and mindfulness, motivation and relationships. It can range from instructional and functional videos to motivational content, and take many forms. Some of this content may have a commercial angle, linking users to products or services, promoted by the content creator.

What is ASMR content?

ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) is content that usually involves sensory themes like watching hands playing with slime with very crisp audio of the resulting sounds. Other examples might be natural sounds, food-based sounds, whispering, crinkly, or tapping. It is intended to produce a tingling sensation in the scalp and neck, which some people find relaxing.

Parents indicate that digital activity can further children's creativity and education

For parents, developing new skills and learning are the most widely cited benefits of their child being online. Around half of parents of online children say that their child goes online to develop creative skills (52%) or to learn a new skill or skills (50%). These benefits are reported at similar levels across age groups, highlighting the perceived importance of online spaces in supporting children to build skills at all ages.

While there is little difference according to age, parents in ABC1 households are more likely than those from C2DE households to see the internet as a place to help build skills.

Children's own responses reinforce this idea about how digital spaces can foster skill building. The most common activity 8-17s selected (when asked about the creative activities they use digital devices for) is following online tutorials or learning how to do something online (42%). Among 8-17s who watch videos online, four in ten (40%) say they watch videos that help them to learn new things or with their schoolwork. A similar proportion (38%) say they watch how-to videos or tutorials related to their hobbies and interests.

Many children from *Children's Media Lives* report that being online and using devices is often a necessary aspect of their learning

Participants in this year's *Children's Media Lives* study reflected on how schoolwork is now closely intertwined with being online. For many children, digital devices and platforms were embedded in their learning environments, with schoolwork and homework often required to be completed online and managed through school-set platforms. A small number of children also described using their personal devices in school during lessons for educational and learning purposes.

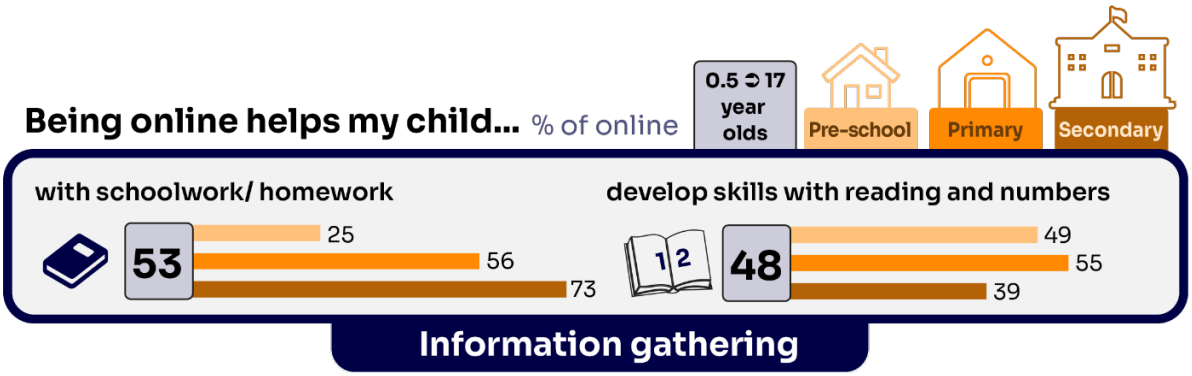
> "We use the laptop for every single subject... for homework in school, to communicate with teachers, to keep track of your debt. It's everything. Literally everything in my school... the laptops are such a key part of learning. Like, if you don't have your laptop, you can't really do anything. It means also I'm spending more time on screens and kind of relying on them... If I forgot my laptop I'd be cooked"
>
> Willow (13)

> "I bring my laptop into school most days to do work because it's just easier. A lot of my non-classwork, like assignments, are set online and it's easier to do them that way… And I use my phone pretty much every day as well, checking like for stuff. And sometimes I complete work on my phone if it's easier that way."
>
> Ben (18)

Reflecting these findings from *Children's Media Lives*, over half (53%) of parents say that going online helps with their children's schoolwork or homework, while just under half (48%) say it helps develop their skills in reading and numbers.

Parents of younger children, typically younger primary school aged children, are particularly likely to say that being online helps their child with reading and numbers (57% for 3-5s and 56% for 6-7s). Helping with schoolwork or homework is more commonly reported by parents of children aged 8+

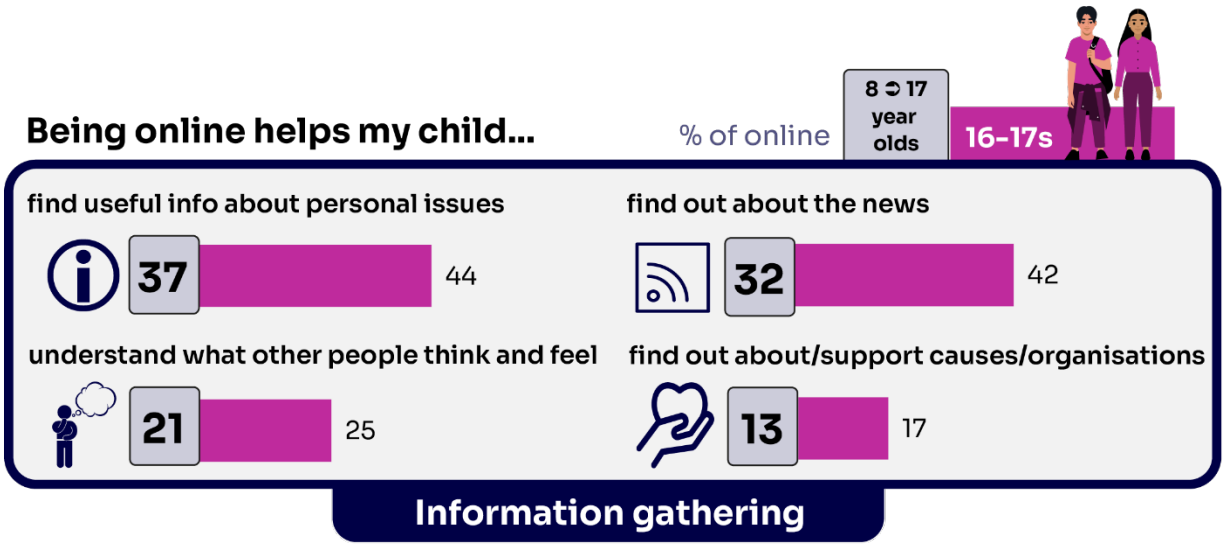
(69%), rising to over seven in ten (72%) among parents with children aged 10-12 and 13-15 (73%). Unlike skill building, there are no significant differences according to socio-economic background.



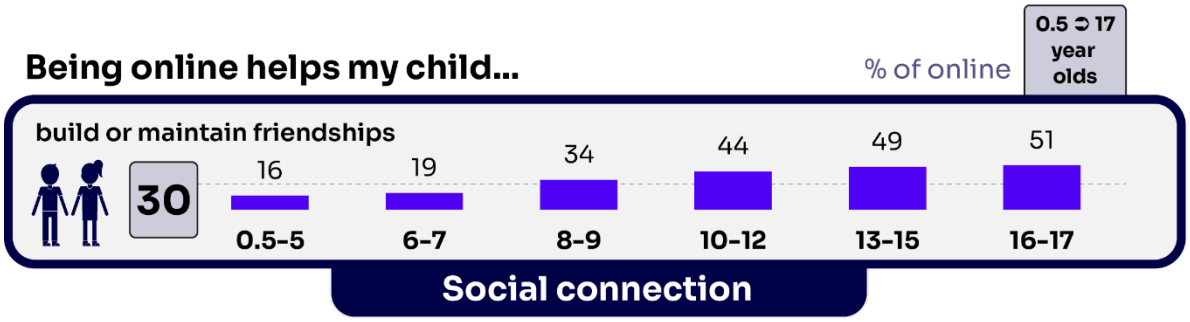
Parents tell us that online spaces can support children's understanding of the world and their relationships with others

Around a third (32%) of parents of 8-17s say their child uses the internet to find out about the news, while 37% say it helps their children find useful information about any problems or issues they may have. Two in ten parents (21%) say being online helps their child to understand what other people think and feel about things, and over one in ten (13%) say it helps them to find out about, or support causes or organisations.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these potential benefits of being online are more commonly reported for older children, particularly those children aged 16-17. Among parents of 16-17s, over four in ten (44%) say that their child goes online to find useful information about any problems or issues they may have, while a similar proportion (42%) say they go online to find out about the news.



In addition to learning about the world, online spaces can support children's social lives. Three in ten (30%) parents of 0.5-17s say being online helps their child to build or maintain friendships. There are no differences between boys and girls for this measure, although it does become more common the older a child gets, rising to around half for parents of 13-15s (49%) and 16-17s (51%).



We found that some participants in *Children's Media Lives* this year are using communication apps to build closer relationships with their peers. A couple of children spoke about leaving calls on in the background for hours on end, sometimes even overnight, to garner a general sense of closeness. When researchers asked why they did this, the children explained:

> "Just to stay connected. I don't know, I can't really explain it."
>
> Sam (15)

> "I think it's just something about feeling close to your friend or something. I don't know."
>
> Bryony (13)

The downsides and potential risks of being online

Seven in ten children who use social media and messaging apps say there is pressure to be popular

A third (33%) of 8-17s who use social media or messaging, voice or video-calling apps say they feel pressure to be popular *all or most of the time*, while seven in ten (70%) say they feel this pressure at least sometimes.

These feelings vary by demographic group. Girls who use these apps are more likely than boys to say they feel pressure to be popular most of the time (38% vs 29%), with girls aged 13-15 the most likely to report this (40%). Children in ABC1 households are also more likely than those in C2DE households to say they feel pressure most of the time (38% vs 29%).

Children who use sites or apps for social media use or messaging and calls and have an impacting condition are more likely than those without to say they feel pressure to be popular on these platforms all of the time (38% vs 32%) and at least sometimes (77% vs 69%). Children from ethnic minority backgrounds are also more likely than white children to say they feel pressure most or all of the time (38% vs 32%). Nearly all looked after children say they feel pressure to be popular at least some of the time (97%).

Several children in the Children Media's Lives sample expressed concern about their high screen time

In our *Children's Media Lives* study, this year several children reflected that they spent too much time online, particularly on social media, and reported that that this might not be good for them and that there were better things they could do with their time. However, some of the sample also described the difficulty they had in drawing themselves away from their devices – with some calling themselves "addicted" to certain social media platforms.

> "I mean, you can see by the hours, but my sleep schedule was terrible for this week. I was staying up really late … I definitely spend too much time online, and I could be using time more productively… I mean, having a really high screen time is a bit embarrassing just because, you know, you just shouldn't and you're just wasting time… I have a thing on TikTok when I've been 30 minutes uninterrupted, it'll give me a notification. Uh, I, I don't know why, because I usually just scroll it away and then carry on. Same thing on Instagram."
>
> Ben (18)

In new Ofcom research[39] among children who told us they were spending more time online than they planned to or realised, children and their parents shared examples of platform design features that were influencing children's time spent across gaming, social media and video sharing platforms. Based on the feedback from children and parents, the research analysis identified four key categories of persuasive design features which make it more difficult for the children to manage their time on online platforms: social influence (e.g. real-time visibility of friends), impulse activating (e.g. live in-game events), dissociative (e.g. auto-play) and reward-based features (e.g. daily challenges).

Nearly four in ten 8-17s say their screen time is too high

In the Children and Parents Tracker, we asked children, and their parents, if they thought their screen time is 'too high'. We explore parents' perspectives in Chapter 5, but for the children themselves, nearly four in ten (37%) 8-17s agree with the statement that, in general, their screen time is too high. This is slightly less than those who disagree with the statement (38%), but more than those who gave a neutral answer (22%).

Consistent with the findings of the qualitative study, agreement is highest among older children, rising to 44% among 16-17s where agreement is higher than those who disagree (33%). There is limited difference by gender or socio-economic group.

Concern about screen time is higher among some groups of children. Nearly half (47%) of children with impacting conditions say they spend too much time on screens, increasing to over half (56%) among those with a mental health condition. This rises further among looked after children, with nearly six in ten (57%) saying they feel their screen time is too high.

Two-thirds of 13-17s have taken active steps to manage their own time online

We asked 13-17s if they have taken any steps in the past 12 months to help manage their time online and 65% reported doing at least one of the steps we asked about. This includes things such as disabling notifications on devices or using 'do not disturb' settings (29%), setting time aside for themselves when they are not online (28%), taking a deliberate break from social media apps (21%) and not taking devices to bed (21%).

13-17s in ABC1 household are more likely than those in C2DE households to have taken at least one step to help manage their time online (72% vs 59%).

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[39] Ofcom research: Exploring the relationship between persuasive design on online platforms, and the time that children spend on them.

Children say they experience 'nasty or hurtful' behaviour in a range of places

To understand children's negative online experiences in the context of wider offline negative experiences, we asked children aged 8-17 about whether they had seen 'nasty or hurtful' behaviour in the past 12 months, either online or offline[40]. Over a third (36%) who chose to answer these questions[41] say this had happened to someone they know, while just under a quarter (23%) say it had happened to them personally.

There are no statistically significant differences by age or gender. However, children in AB households are more likely than those in DE households to say that they have seen such behaviour, both directed at others (42% vs 24%) and at themselves (30% vs 16%)[42]. Children with a limiting or impacting condition were more likely than those with none to say that they have seen nasty or hurtful behaviour directed at others (48% vs 32%) and towards themselves (38% vs 19%), while those with a minority ethnic background were more likely than white children to report having seen this kind of behaviour directed at themselves (32% vs 21%).

Among those who report that someone had been nasty or hurtful towards themselves personally in the past 12 months[43], just under half (47%) say this happened through social media. A similar proportion (43%) say it happened via face-to-face interactions. This was followed by text or messaging apps (41%) and online games (38%). In total, 88% of the 8-17s that reported someone had been nasty or hurtful towards them in the past 12 months, said it had happened in any online/digital location[44]. This equates to 20% of all 8-17s who agreed to answer the question.

There are demographic differences: among those who report that someone had been nasty or hurtful towards themselves personally in the past 12 months, boys were more likely than girls to say they experienced it through online games (48% vs 29%)[45] and ABC1s are more likely than those in C2DE households to say they experienced it via social media (56% vs 36%).

There was no difference according to ethnicity, but children with a limiting or impacting condition who have experienced nasty or hurtful behaviour in the past 12 months were more likely than those with none to say it has taken place via phone calls (28% vs 14%) and video calls (33% vs 19%).

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[40] We gave children a list of examples to think about, which included*: 'People can be nasty or hurtful. It could be behind someone's back, to their face, through calls or texts. It could be by being nasty through social media, games or other websites. It could be by calling people names, leaving them out, or through sharing photos or videos that upset them. It could be threatening to hurt or actually hurting them. It could be done on purpose or as a joke that goes too far'.*

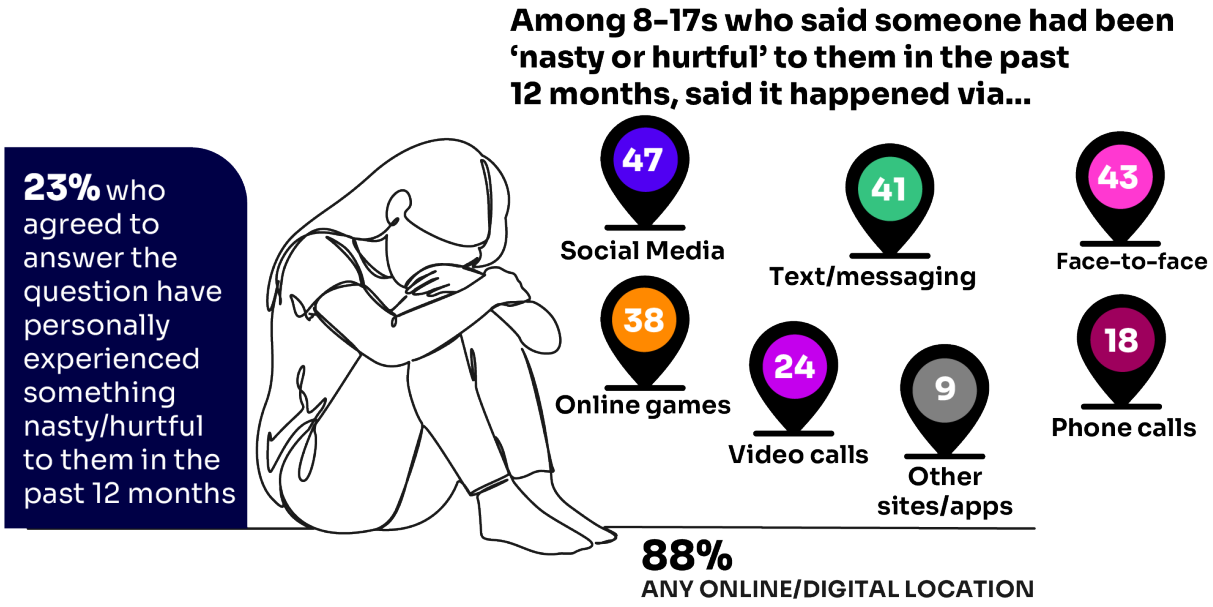
[41] A total of 1112 out of 1695 8-17s who were asked the question chose to answer it.

[42] It is important to note that this question is based on children's self-reported experiences. Differences between groups may, in part, reflect variation in the likelihood of recognising or describing behaviour as nasty or hurtful, rather than differences in direct exposure alone.

[43] Children who said they had something 'nasty or hurtful' had happened to them in the past 12 months were asked a follow-on question: 'When somebody was nasty or hurtful to you did it happen in any of these ways?' and children were given a list of possible options to choose from: Face to face, by text messaging apps (like WhatsApp), on social media sites or apps (like TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat), through other websites or apps, through phone calls, through video calls (like FaceTime or Zoon or WhatsApp video calling, in online games, through some other way).

[44] Any online/digital location includes: by text or messaging, on social media sites or apps, through other websites or apps, through phone calls, through video calls and in online games.

[45] As noted earlier, boys are more likely to play games online than girls (79% of boys aged 8-17 play games online vs 66% of girls the same age).



Eight in ten children who saw something 'worrying or nasty' online told someone about it

We also asked children aged 8-17 if they had come across anything online that they had found 'worrying or nasty', which they didn't like, in the past month. Close to two in ten (17%) children said they had. This was more common among children with limiting or impacting conditions than among those with no conditions (28% vs 15%), and those in ABC1 households than those in C2DE households (22% vs 12%). There were no differences by age or gender.

Among children who said they had encountered something 'worrying or nasty' in the past month, around eight in ten (81%) said they had told someone about it.

When asking all children who go online, including those who had and had not seen worrying content in the past month, most (83%) say they would tell a family member if they were to encounter such content.

Parents remain most concerned about children's exposure to age-inappropriate content

We asked parents of children aged 6 months to 17 years about the aspects of their child's online use that they are concerned about[46]. For every item included in the prompt list, over half of parents say they are concerned. As in previous years[47], parents' primary concern continues to be potential exposure to age-inappropriate content, in particular, the possibility that their child might see 'adult' or sexual content online. Seven in ten parents (69%) say they are concerned about this, including 44% who say they are 'very' concerned.

Concern around this type of content is highest among parents of younger children, peaking among those parents of 6-7s (77% concerned with 56% very concerned) and declining as children get older. Among parents of 16-17s, six in ten (61%) say they are concerned, with a quarter (24%) very concerned. Parents of children in ABC1 households are more likely than those in C2DE households to say they are very concerned about their child seeing adult or sexual content online (51% vs 34%). In

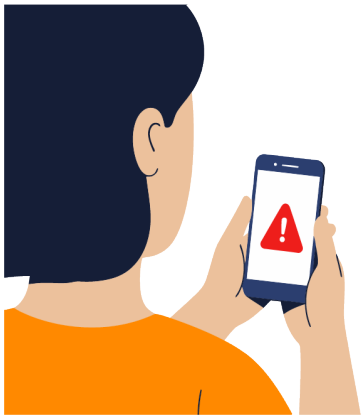
[46] We asked this question to all parents whose child goes online because we wanted to understand the concerns parents had around their child being online, even among parents of the very youngest children.
[47] Trends are indicative due to changes in methodology.

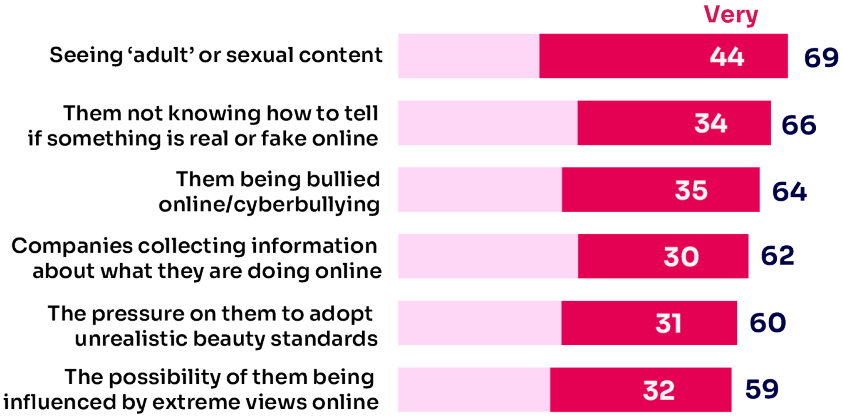
addition, parents of children with a minority ethnic background are more likely to be concerned about 'adult' or sexual content than parents of white children (77% vs 67%), including 55% who are very concerned (vs 40% among parents of white children).

Children not knowing how to tell if something is real or fake online (66%) and the possibility of their child being bullied online/cyberbullying (64%) are the next most concerning aspects of being online among parents.

Parental concerns

% of parents concerned about aspects of their child being online





Many parents are concerned about their child being bullied online

Just under two-thirds (64%) of parents of online children are concerned about their children being bullied online, including 35% who are very concerned. Parents of younger children are typically more concerned than parents of older children, with levels of concern peaking among parents of children aged 3-7 (41% say they are very concerned about bullying online). This compares to nearly a quarter (23%) of parents of 13-17s.

Parents in ABC1 households are also more likely to be very concerned about online bullying than those in C2DE household (41% vs 27%), as are parents of children with an ethnic minority background (70% vs 62% among parents of white children).

Bullying via gaming is also a concern

Parents also have concerns around their children's online gaming. When presented with four potential concerns related to their child's gaming, the most cited concern among parents of 3-17s whose child plays games is the possibility of their child talking to strangers while gaming, either within the game or via the chat function (64%). This is followed by concerns about their child being bullied by other players (60%), exposure to inappropriate content in the game such as violence, bad language or disturbing material (59%), and pressure to make in-game purchases (51%).

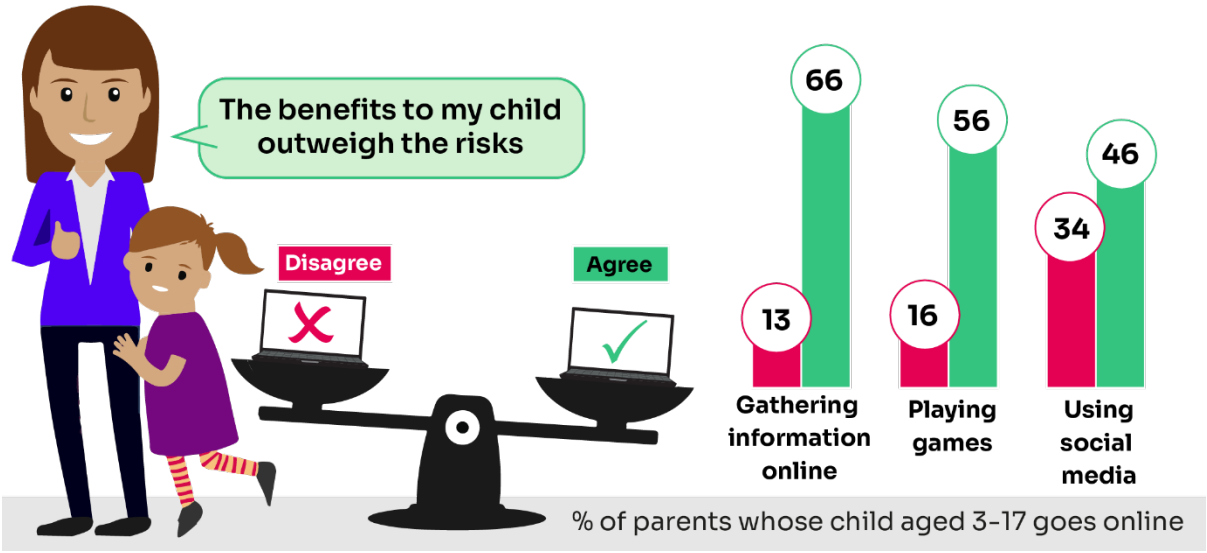
Parents/guardians of looked after children are most worried about the content of the games their child is playing (85% vs 58% among parents of non-looked after children).

A third of parents disagree that the benefits to their child of using social media outweigh the risks

We asked parents whether the benefits to their child of various aspects of being online outweigh the risks. Overall, parents were least likely to agree that the benefits to their child of using social media outweighed the risks (46%, compared to 56% for playing games and 66% for gathering information). Parents were also more likely to disagree with the statement that the benefits of using social media

outweigh the risks, with a third (34%) saying they disagree. For parents of online 8-12s, the responses are reversed, with one third (33%) agreeing that the benefits outweigh the risks, and 48% disagreeing.

The proportion of parents who agree that the benefits to their child of using social media outweigh the risks increases among those with older children (33% of parents of 8-12s agree vs 48% of parents of 13-17s).



While online experiences are mixed, respondents from *Children's Media Lives* largely reported feeling safe online

We have seen above that both parents and children report many benefits of being online. They tell us that being online can aid mental and physical wellbeing, inspire creativity as well as help with homework, schoolwork and developing skills. Both parents and children also acknowledge the downsides or negative aspects of being online. A third (33%) of 8-17s who use social media or messaging, voice or video-calling apps say they feel pressure to be popular *all or most of the time,* while almost four in ten (37%) say they think they spend too much time on screens. Parents continue to have concerns about the risks associated with their child being online, in particular, exposure to age-inappropriate content.

Reflecting on internet use more widely, the children in our *Children's Media Lives* study had a generally positive view of their online experiences. Nearly all the children in the *Children's Media Lives* sample described seeing the internet, primarily, as a place for entertainment and learning. While some of the children mentioned being aware of the potential risks associated with being online, others also felt that these risks were sometimes exaggerated and said that they had not personally experienced anything negative or hurtful online.

> "I know they're just trying to keep me safe and away from those eyeball eating murderers… they [parents] definitely have a different perception than what actually goes on… it's probably never going to happen, it's such a low chance but just because she [mum] listened to these audiobooks… that's one of the reasons I can't have any social media."
>
> Willow (13)

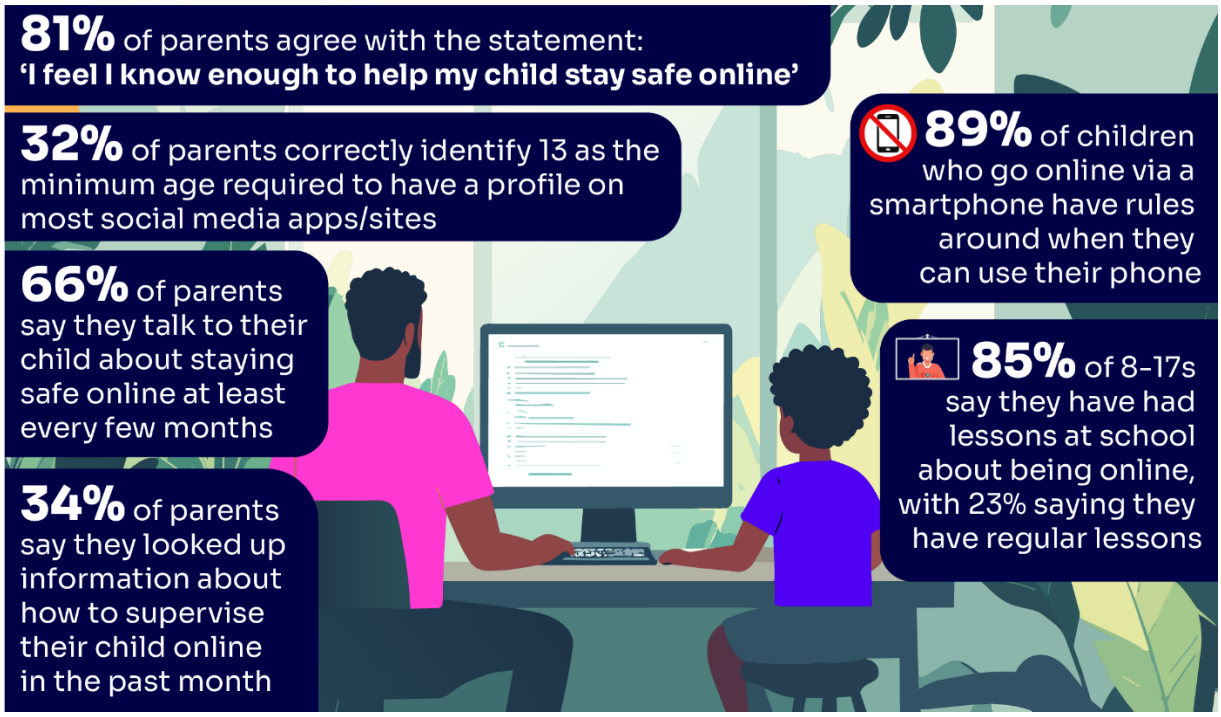
> “I’m fine with gore and stuff, but that doesn’t come up anyway…I just don’t really care… There was one time two months ago, something on Instagram and TikTok, stuff like that got raided with people getting ran over. That was when they got hacked and stuff. Even then I was fine with it.”
>
> Arjun (14)

Findings from the Children and Parents Tracker align with these children’s opinions. When we asked 8-17s who use social media how these types of sites/apps make them feel, 71% say using them makes them feel happy all or most of the time, while nearly all (96%) say it makes them happy at least some of the time. Eight in ten (81%) say they feel safe using these types of sites/apps all or most of the time (96% at least sometimes).

Rules, supervision and education

Introduction

The benefits and risks associated with children being online are well established. In this section, we focus on parents' perspectives in relation to keeping their children safe online, such as the rules they may use to manage their child's device usage and screen time, and their use of specific supervision methods. We also explore parents' views towards social media age restrictions, Finally, we examine the extent and content of children's media literacy education.



Rules on device usage and screen time

Most children have rules around when they can use their phones

Around nine in ten (89%) 8-17s who go online with a smartphone say there are times when they are not allowed to use their device, with restrictions particularly common among younger children, a finding similar to last year[48]. Nearly all (97%) 8-9s who go online with a smartphone say they must follow some rules, compared to three quarters (76%) of 16-17s.

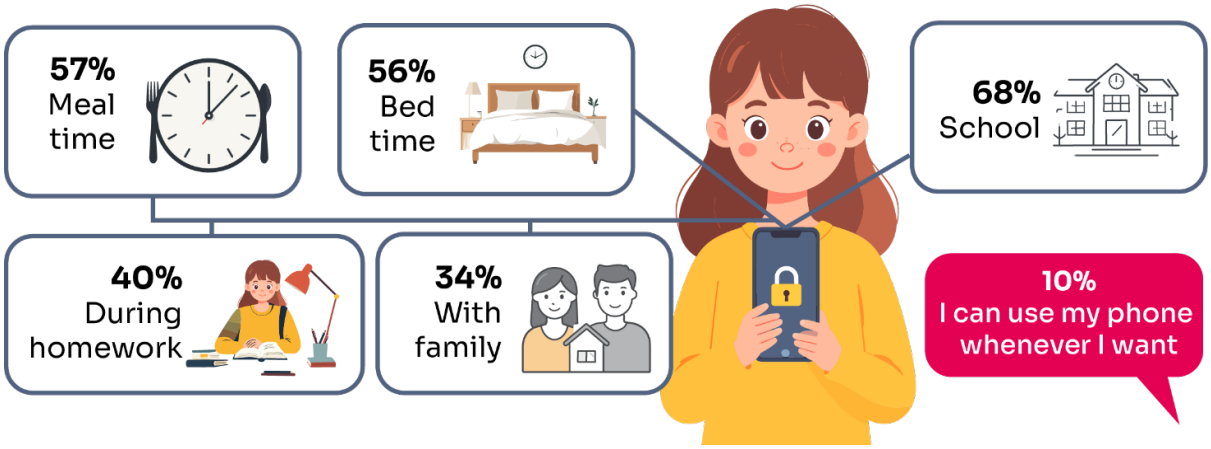
The most widespread restrictions relate to school, with just under seven in ten (68%) children aged 8-17 saying they are not allowed to use their phone during lessons. Eight in ten (81%) say they have

[48] Last year we reported that 94% of children aged 8-17 who go online using their phones say they have at least one restriction on when they can use their phones, irrespective of where they are. This was more likely among 8-12s in this group than 13-17s (98% compared to 91%). Trend is indicative due to changes in methodology.

rules around when they can use their mobile in their home, most commonly at mealtimes (57%) and bedtime (56%).

However, one in ten (10%) children aged 8-17 say they can use their phone whenever they want, rising to a quarter (24%) of 16-17s. Those in C2DE households are more likely to say this, than those in ABC1 households (13% vs 7%), particularly DE households (17%). There is little difference by gender; the only exception is that boys are more likely than girls to say they are not allowed to use their phone when doing homework (43% vs 38%).

Times when 8-17s who go online via a smartphone are not allowed to use their phone



Most parents set rules about their children's gaming habits

Nine in ten (91%) parents of 3-17s who game say they have rules about their child gaming; this is in line with last year (87%)[49].

The most popular of these rules are about how much time the child can spend playing games (56%), when they can play (51%) and rules about only playing games with appropriate content (50%). Rules about playing games with an age-appropriate rating (49%), and rules related to purchasing or downloading games, including in-app purchases (48%), are also quite common.

One in ten (9%) parents say they don't have any rules about their child's gaming, and this rises to two in ten (20%) parents of children aged 13-17.

Over four in ten (43%) parents say they have rules about who their child can play games with. This is despite, as mentioned in the previous chapter, over six in ten (64%) parents of 3-17s saying that they are concerned about the possibility of their child talking to strangers while gaming, whether within the game or via the chat function, and another 60% saying that they were worried about their child being bullied by other players. As mentioned earlier, two in ten (20%) children aged 3-17 who game online play with people they have only met online (i.e. never met in person) all or most of the time.

[49] Trend is indicative due to changes in methodology.

Managing screen time was the most common way parents described overseeing their children's online lives

In *Children's Media Lives,* parents most commonly reported managing their children's online lives by trying to limit or reduce screen time.

> "The only thing we do, we try to do is like to reduce his, you know, screen time… So we try to, you know, let him replace [Roblox] with other things… Like when, you know, like take our phone and like my own phone, he knows the password. So the other one we put a password so he doesn't have access to it."
>
> Caleb's (9) mum

> "We're trying to sort of cut it [technology use] down a wee bit. So during the week, we tend to not have the tablets out through the week when they're at school, still trying to reinforce that… I think it [her tablet] was affecting her ability to be able to concentrate on anything other than what was in front of her."
>
> Keeley's (10) mum

A third of parents say they find it hard to control their child's screen time

In the Children and Parents Tracking survey, we ask parents a series of questions about their child's screen time. This includes a question about how hard they find it to control how much time their child spends on their devices. Overall, around a third (32%) of parents agree that they find it hard to control their child's screen time. This increases as children get older, rising to four in ten (41%) parents of 13-15s and half (49%) of parents of 16-17s. These proportions are broadly in line with last year[50].

A similar trend is seen when we ask parents whether they think their child has a good balance between screen time and other activities. Just over two-thirds (68%) of parents agree that their child does, which is again similar to last year[51]. However, agreement is lower among parents of teenagers: just under six in ten (58%) parents of 13-17s agree their child has a good balance. This compares to just under eight in ten (78%) parents of children under-8s and nearly two-thirds (64%) of parents of 8-12s.

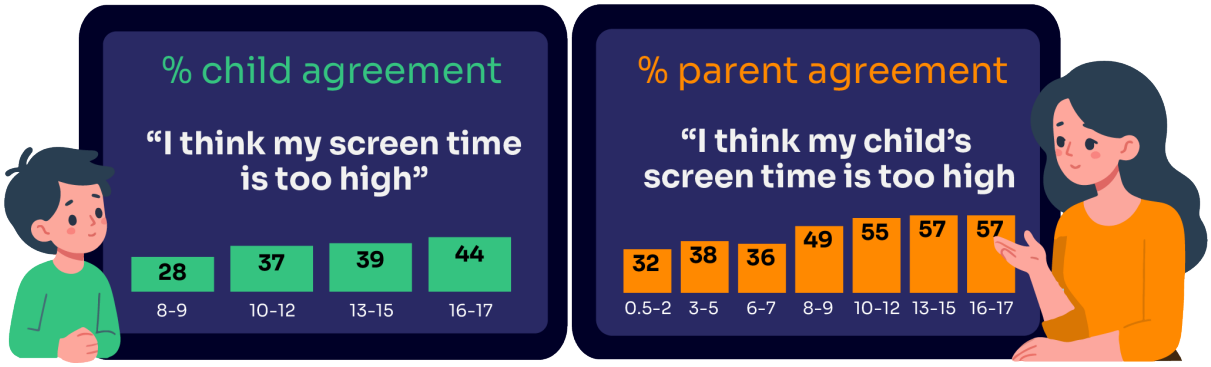
Children are less likely than their parents to think their screen time is too high

Parents are also asked whether they agree with the statement, 'In general, I think my child's screen time is too high'. Parents of older children are the most likely to agree, with almost six in ten (57%)

[50] Last year, 39% of parents of 3-17s said they find it hard to control their child's screen time, rising to 50% of parents of 16-17s. Trend is indicative due to changes in methodology.
[51] In 2024, 64% of parents agreed, although trends are indicative due to changes in methodology.

parents of 13-17s saying they feel their child's screen time is too high, compared to over half (53%) of parents of 8–12s and just over a third (35%) of parents of children aged 6 months to 2 years.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, we also asked children about their own perception of their screen time. In general, children are less likely than their parents to say that their screen time is too high. For example, under four in ten (37%) 8-17s say they think they spend too much time on screens, compared with over half (55%) of parents of children the same age. As with parents, children are more likely to agree with this statement as they get older, increasing from just under three in ten (28%) among 8-9s to 44% of 16-17s. However, it remains lower than the parent's views at every age group, with the biggest difference between children aged 13-15 and parents of 13-15s (39% vs 57%).



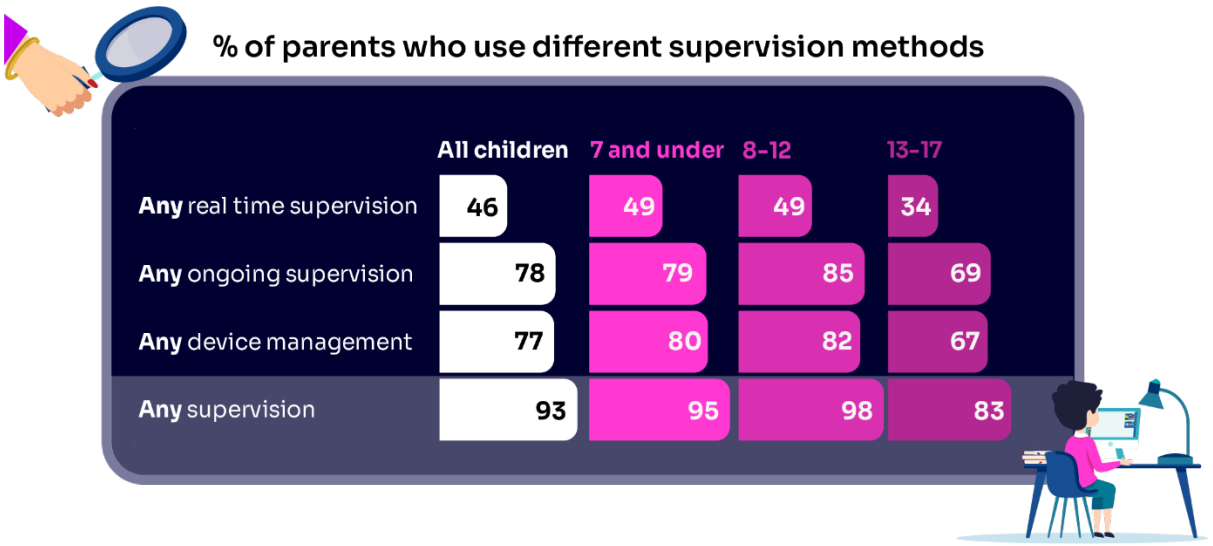
Parental supervision

Nearly all parents say they usually carry out some form of supervision of their children's online activity

We asked parents what things they usually do to supervise or monitor their child's online activity and almost all (93%) selected at least one of the options provided to them. This was the same as last year, although the trend is indicative due to changes in methodology. Almost eight in ten (78%) parents say they use methods of ongoing supervision such as checking their child's history or asking them to show what they've been doing online (we discuss in more detail later in this section the proportion of parents who have conversations with their children about how to stay safe online). A similar proportion of parents (77%) describe using device management tools such as implementing parental controls and screen-time limits on certain apps.

In comparison, real-time supervision (e.g. sitting with the child, being nearby and checking their device) is less commonly reported by parents (46%). This form of supervision is more common among parents with young children than those with older children (49% among 8-12s compared to 34% among 13-17s).

Across all its forms, supervision is much higher among parents of 8-12s (98%) than 13-17s (83%). Parents of 13-17s are less likely to do most forms of supervision, although they are more likely than all parents to discuss with their child what they have been doing (37% vs 28%) and to follow their social media account (26% vs 16% for all parents). Parents in ABC1 households are more likely to do some kind of online supervision than those in C2DE households (96% vs 89%).



A significant minority of children say they know how to do things such as use VPNs and get around parental controls and age checks

Just over a third (35%) of all parents say they use parental controls to help supervise and manage their children's online activity. Of these, seven in ten (69%) say these controls are used to prevent their child from downloading or using VPNs[52].

When asked directly, two in ten 13-17s (19%) said they know how to use a VPN or similar technology (such as a proxy server) to access particular sites, apps or content. We explored VPN use among children in more detail in other work (see Children's Online Experiences Report), in which 11-17s were asked about a variety of online activities including accessing geo-blocked content (e.g. content not available in the UK like films, series or gaming), or content with age restrictions. In total, 25% of children told us they had used a VPN in the last 6 months: 14% said they had used it for reasons including those listed above, or to 'hide their identity, keep personal information private' and a further one in ten (11%) said they had used a VPN but did not tell us why[53].

In addition, around a third (32%) of 13-17s say they know how to use a privacy or incognito mode when browsing online (15% of those who were aware say they had done it in the past 12 months), while a similar proportion (35%) say they know how to delete the 'history' records of the websites they have visited (19% say they had done it). A further 16% reported knowing how to get around parental controls and age checks, although only 6% of these teenagers (5% of all children aged 13-17) said that they had done so in the past 12 months.

[52] A VPN (Virtual Private Network) is a service that service that encrypts a user's internet connection and routes it through a secure server, hiding the user's real location. It often is used to keep online activity more private or access content that may be restricted by location or network controls.

[53] In the Children and Parents Tracker, we asked about recent VPN use among 13-17s who said that they knew how to use a VPN, with 7% of those who go online saying that they had in the 12 months. This figure is considerably lower than the 25% reported above, reflecting differences in question design, reference periods, and challenges associated with asking children to accurately report their own VPN use.

Case Study: The limits of parental controls and children's workarounds

In our *Children's Media Lives* study this year, several parents discussed the difficulty they faced in having oversight of their children's online activities. Some parents spoke about feeling outpaced by their children's savviness and their ability to circumvent parental restrictions.

For example, Willow's parents have set up multiple parental controls to manage what she watches, and what platform she accesses. The family follows strict time limits, with phones disabled overnight and only accessible during specific windows, like the commute to school or set times on weekends. Her mum has also put a 'blanket ban' on certain platforms.

"You can just get into this really mindless, meaningless content consumption. And that's what we're trying to protect her from. So it's anything that in any way approximates TikTok, anything that even slightly TikTok-esque, I am going to make sure she can't have access to it."

Willow's mum

Despite these restrictions, Willow has found ways around her parental controls to get to the content she wants.

Parental attitudes towards social media age restrictions

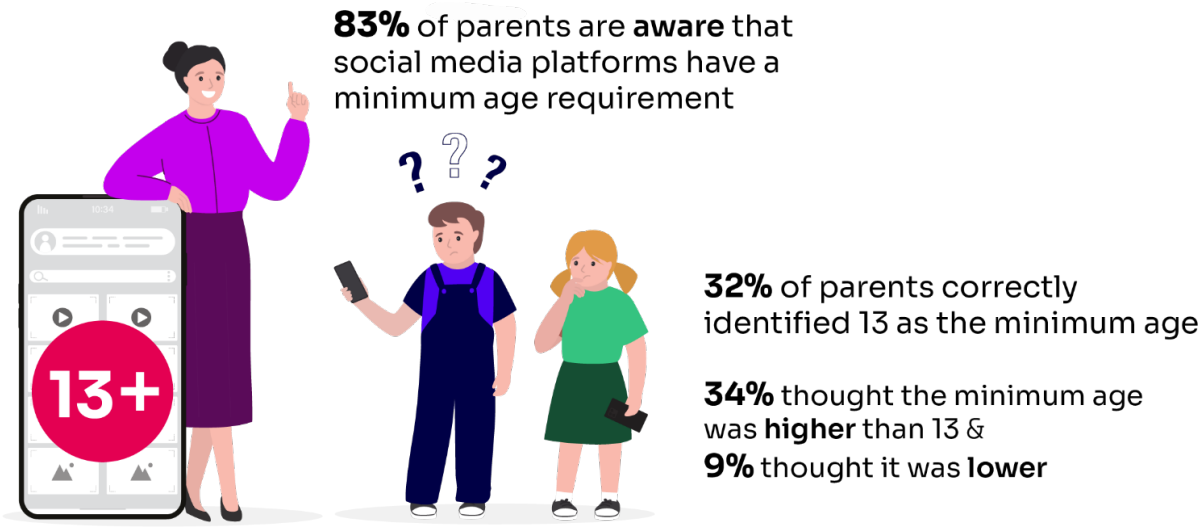
A third of parents were able to correctly identify the minimum age required to access most social media

Among parents, awareness of the minimum age requirements for social media platforms is widespread. More than eight in ten (83%) parents of children aged 6 months to 17 years say they are aware that most social media platforms have a minimum age requirement[54]. This level of awareness is consistent across parents regardless of the age of their child but is slightly higher among parents in ABC1 households than those in C2DE households (86% vs 80%).

However, correct knowledge of the specific minimum age requirement is much less common; just a third of parents (32%) correctly identify 13 as the minimum age for most social media platforms. Instead, a similar proportion believe the minimum age is higher (34%), while 9% of parents give an age below 13. Overall, half of all parents (51%) either gave the wrong answer or did not know.

While awareness of the existence of a minimum age requirement did not vary according to the age of the child, parents with older children were more likely to give the correct answer when asked what that age was (32% of parents with children aged 3-7, 40% of 8-12s and 43% of 13-17s).

[54] The Online Safety Act does not require social media sites or apps to set a minimum age to access their service, but many services have decided to set their minimum age requirement at 13 as part of their terms of service.

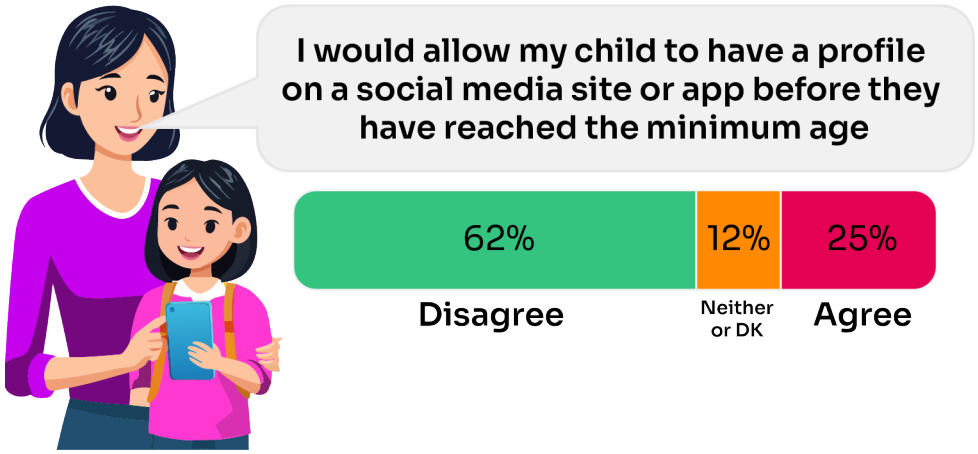


Parents are more likely to say they would allow their child to have a social media profile when their child is close to the minimum age

When asked whether they would allow their child to have a social media profile before reaching the minimum age, just over six in ten (62%) parents of children aged 6 months to 17 years say they would not allow their child to have such a profile, and a quarter (25%) said they would[55].

Willingness to allow their child early access to social media varies by the age of the child. Parents of children close to the minimum age are the most likely to agree, with 30% of parents of 10-12s and 29% of parents of 13-15s saying they would allow this, compared with 23% of parents of 8-9s. Parents in ABC1 households are more likely to agree with this statement than those in C2DE households (28% vs 21%), and parents of children with a limiting or impacting condition are more likely to agree than parents of children with no condition (30% vs 24%).

Just under half (47%) of the parents/guardians of looked after children say that they would let their child have a social media profile before the minimum age of 13, compared to 25% for parents of non-looked after children.

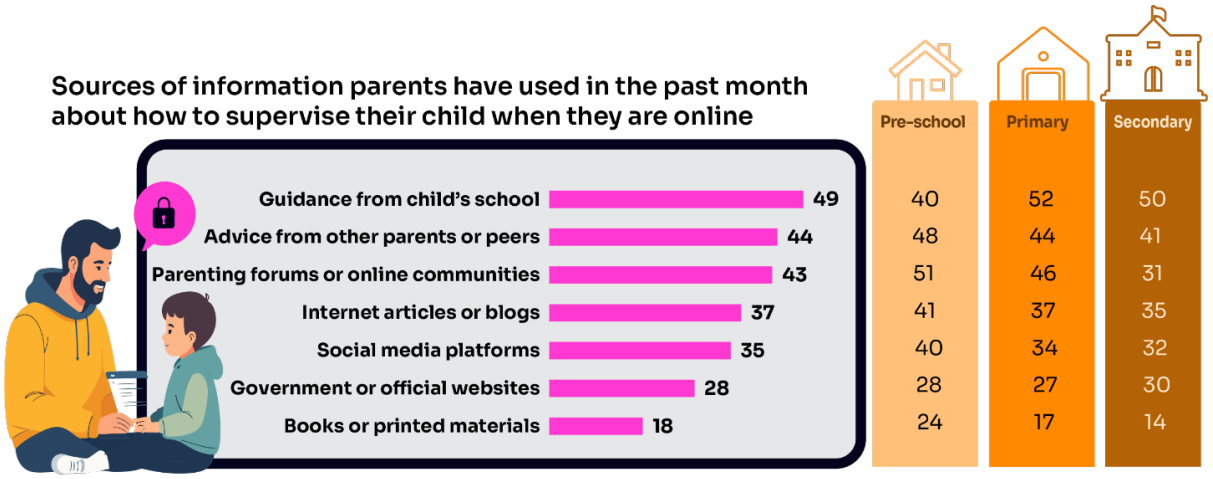


[55] Parents may be less likely compared to last year to allow their child to have a social media profile before they reached the minimum age, although given our methodology changes, the decrease is only indicative this year. This year, among parents of 3-17s, 27% of parents said they would allow their child a social media profile before they reached the minimum age, compared to 37% of parents last year.

Online safety and media literacy education

The most common places for parents to get information about online safety are through schools, from other parents and via forums

Around a third of parents (34%) say they have actively looked up information about how to supervise their child online in the past month (33% among parents of pre-school children, 38% among parents of primary-school-aged children and 28% among parents of secondary-school-age children). This behaviour is more common among parents in ABC1 households than in C2DE households (41% vs 24%) and declines as children get older, from around a third of parents of 8-9s (33%) and 10-12s (36%), to less than a quarter (22%) of parents of 16-17s. A further three in ten (28%) parents say they had not looked up information themselves but had received information anyway. Among those parents who had looked up or received information, the most common sources were guidance from schools (49%), advice from other parents or peers (44%), and parenting forums (43%).



% of parents of 0.5-17s who have seen or searched for information

Some groups of parents are more likely to say they have looked up or searched for information about online safety in the past month. For example, parents of children with impacting conditions are more likely than those no conditions to say that that they have looked up or searched for information in the past month (42% to 33%). This is also the case for parents of children in minority ethnic groups (45% compared to 30% of parents of white children), and parents/guardians of looked after children (55% compared to 33% of parents of non-looked after children).

Eight in ten parents feel that they know enough to help their child stay safe online

Around eight in ten (81%) parents across all age groups of children say they feel they know enough to help their child stay safe online, including 44% overall who feel strongly that this is the case[56]. One in ten (10%) parents overall say they disagree, while a similar proportion (9%) say they neither agree nor disagree (these proportions are consistent across parents of children in the three different school stages).

[56] NET confidence among pre-school (80%), primary (82%) and secondary (80%) children's parents.

That said, there are some differences when comparing particular age-groups. Four in five (79%) parents of 10-12s say they know enough compared to 83% of parents of 13-15s, and 75% of 16-17s.

In addition, parents in ABC1 households are more likely to say they feel they know enough to help their child stay safe online compared to those in C2DE households (84% vs 76%), as are parents of children with no limiting or impacting condition compared to parents of children with a condition (83% vs 77%). There are no notable differences between the parents/guardians of looked after children and those whose children are non-looked after.

Two thirds of parents say they talk to their child about staying safe online every few months

Alongside rules and controls, many parents support supervision through conversations with their child. Two-thirds (66%) of parents say they talk to their child about staying safe online at least every few months, including 43% who do so at least every few weeks. However, 13% of parents say they talk about online safety less often than every few months but more than once a year, 5% say they have talked about it only once, and a further 13% say they have never discussed it with their child.

Parents of 10-12s (80%) are the most likely to have a conversation with their child at least every few months while parents of 16-17s (62%), alongside parents of children aged 6 months to 5 years (53%), are the least likely to have monthly discussions. There are also differences by socio-economic groups: ABC1 households are more likely to have discussions about staying safe online at least every few months than C2DE groups (71% vs 60%).

Nearly nine in ten children say they have had lessons at school about being online

Over eight in ten (85%) children aged 8-17 report having had lessons at school about being online and the possible risks and benefits, which is similar to last year[57]. Just under a quarter (23%) say they have had regular lessons on such topics. Children aged 10-12 are the most likely to say that they have had these kinds of lessons at least once (89%) while 16-17s are the least likely (80%). Children in ABC1 households are more likely to report having had lessons than those from C2DE households (91% vs 79%), as are children with a minority ethnic background compared to white children (88% vs 84%).

Among those who say they have had lessons at school, the most common topics include being kind and respectful of others (57%), recognising harmful behaviour online (55%) and what to do if someone you don't know contacts you (54%). Over a third of children who say they have had lessons could recall lessons about spotting misinformation (36%) and how to change privacy settings on apps (31%). The least commonly covered topics are spotting AI-generated content (23%), identifying adverts online (21%), and supporting issues children care about (18%). Overall, coverage of most of these topics increases with age and is more common among children in ABC1 households.

Among those who say they have had lessons, over nine in ten (93%) say they were useful. Younger children and those in ABC1 households are most likely to describe these lessons as *very* useful, while older teens are more likely to say they are *fairly* useful rather than very *useful*.

[57] Last year, 92% of 8-17s could recall having at least one lesson at school about being online and the possible risks. Trend is indicative due to changes in methodology.

Top 10 topics covered in school lessons about being online and the possible risks and benefits
% of 8-17s who recall having had lessons

Some children report being taught how to use AI tools appropriately at school

Some children in the *Children's Media Lives* study describe having been taught about how AI tools should be used to help them with their schoolwork and homework.

> "[The assembly] was about using AI for good and not for bad, because if you get every single homework and you just do it all with AI and copy in the answers that it's given you, then you're never going to learn it. But then he was also showing us ways that you can use it to help you and how he did it for his son, and he made this study timetable and he showed you how to use the prompts."
>
> Niamh (16)

> "Yeah, AI is a great tool… Sometimes they [teachers] tell us to use it. For like English and stuff, to get definitions. Like we can pull, sometimes they [teachers] attach stuff and we can just attach that to ChatGPT and say, go find definitions for all these words that we can write down in our books instead of having to search up each one individually."
>
> Arjun (14)