

# Digital Childhoods: A Survey of Children and Parents

## Introduction and background

Young people turning 18 this year were born in 2004, the year that Facebook was founded. This generation has never known a world without social media, smartphones, and 24-hour communication. This has brought benefits; never before has a generation been so connected and well-informed. However, the major social networking platforms, where children spend so much time, were not designed with their safety and wellbeing in mind.

This report has been produced by the Children's Commissioner and her team in response to concerns about whether enough is being done to protect children online. It aims to better understand digital childhoods, and what can be achieved through the Online Safety Bill to protect children online. It is based on a survey commissioned by the Children's Commissioner's Office to which 2,005 children aged 8-17 and their parents responded. The survey is nationally representative of children in England, by age, gender, and region.

## Key findings

### Parents' concerns

- Two thirds (67%) of all parents are concerned about the content that their children are viewing online. This is particularly true among parents of younger children – 74 per cent of those with a child aged 8-9 and 73 per cent of those with a child aged 10-11 said they were concerned about the nature of content on social media, compared to 52 per cent of parents with children aged 16-17.
- Parents are most concerned about the content their child may see on TikTok (66% of parents) and least concerned about messaging apps such as WhatsApp (46%) and Apple iMessage (42%).
- Three quarters (75%) of parents use tools to monitor and restrict what their children see and do online. In all age groups, children of parents who use tools were more likely to have come across content or messages which they felt was inappropriate or made them worried or upset. This could be due to parents using tools in response to their children seeing inappropriate content or pre-emptively using tools because they're concerned their child is at risk of seeing inappropriate content.
- most frequently reported, occurring with the highest prevalence on TikTok and YouTube respectively.
- Between 6 and 8 per cent of children reported exposure to pornography across the platforms, in the month before taking the survey. Research by the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) suggests that almost two thirds of children have seen pornography online at some point, and that this was likely to be accessed on dedicated adult pornography sites. The prevalence of pornography on platforms with minimum age requirements of 13 and 16 is cause for concern.
- Worryingly, pupils with eligibility for free school meals (FSM) were considerably more likely to report having seen all categories of harmful content. For example, 42 per cent of FSM pupils had been exposed to anonymous trolling on Twitter, compared to 22 per cent of non-FSM children. This finding backs up earlier research published recently by Internet Matters. The Children's Commissioner will conduct more qualitative research with children to gain a greater understanding of this issue.

### Children's experiences of platforms

- Most children use some form of social media. The most popular apps are YouTube (used by 87% of boys and 81 % of girls), and WhatsApp (used by 74% of boys and 75% of girls), followed by TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. Boys are more likely to access WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. About 30 per cent of children aged 8-17 use all 7 apps surveyed.
- Forty-five per cent of children aged 8-17 have seen some form of harmful content online. Boys are more likely to have seen harmful content than girls (48% vs 42%). Anonymous trolling was the harm which children were most likely to report having experienced, this was most prevalent on Twitter and Facebook. Sexualised and violent or gory content were the next

### Reporting harmful content to platforms

- Underage use of social media and messaging platforms is widespread. The platform with the largest share of underage users, according to the survey, is WhatsApp (min. age 16) followed by TikTok (min. age 13) and Instagram (min. age 13). This is even though children generally have an accurate understanding of the minimum age across different social media and messaging platforms. The only exception is WhatsApp, where children in the survey guessed that the minimum age for this platform was 13 when it is in fact 16.
- According to the survey, 79 per cent of WhatsApp users aged 8-17 are underage. The figures are high for several other platforms, such as YouTube (50%), TikTok (44%), Snapchat (41%), and Twitter (39%).



- Seventy per cent of all children surveyed and 90 per cent of all parents surveyed think that there should be a minimum age on social media platforms. As children get older, they become more likely to favour age restrictions. Children eligible for FSM are also more likely to want age restrictions than other children (73% compared to 68% of those not eligible for FSM.)

### Children's Commissioner's recommendations

- Children grow up seamlessly online and offline. Relationships, education, and other milestones of childhood and adolescence play out in the digital world, as much as they do at home, in the playground, and in the classroom. The rights and protections which exist in the offline world must therefore extend online. Tech firms must be held to the highest standards on children's safety and wellbeing.
- As the Online Safety Bill is shaped and formalised in Parliament, the Children's Commissioner sets out 3 key principles for the legislation, distilled from her conversations with children and industry. These are: children's voice, recognition of childhood, and a collaborative approach to online safety.
- Many of the children and teenagers to whom the Children's Commissioner speaks are dispirited and despondent. They feel they have no power against the might of global tech firms. The survey found that when children do report harmful content, little happens. There is little recourse when platforms don't respond, and children's faith is gradually eroded. Furthermore, the older a child gets, the less likely they are to report harmful content. The Children's Commissioner would like to see a strong, independent voice for children enshrined in the Bill.
- Recognition of childhood is an important principle. Every platform to which the Commissioner spoke has terms and conditions setting out a minimum age for signing up to their services. But the survey shows that children regularly access social media when underage, even though they know the minimum age requirements. The Commissioner therefore calls on Ofcom to draw up a Code of Practice on proportionate age assurance as a priority. Standards should be privacy-preserving, inclusive, and effective. She urges tech firms to develop and roll out technology which meets these principles ahead of regulation.
- Finally, the Commissioner calls for a collaborative approach. Her roundtables with tech firms demonstrate how little information and best practice is shared across the industry. Cross-industry collaboration, mandated by the Online Safety Bill, would require companies to work together on key risks which span across multiple platforms. Children have reported to the Commissioner how often sexual harassment and abuse is perpetrated across several platforms, with intimate images shared across private chats, social media, and even gaming channels.
- The Bill should therefore require platforms to work together on child safety, sharing insights and best practice. This should include a requirement on platforms to share information on cross-platform child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSEA), such as 'breadcrumbing,' and child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

**The full document can be downloaded from:**

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/cc-digital-childhoods-a-survey-of-children-and-parents.pdf>