



Barnardos

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Parent and Carer Involvement in the Online World of Children

Consultation Report
November 2025

Supported by:

Google.org



Barnardos Online Safety Programme

Supporting children, families and professionals to
navigate life online safely.



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Foreword

The Barnardos Online Safety Programme has been empowering children, parents, and educators across Ireland with the knowledge and tools to navigate the digital world safely since 2014. With the support of Google.org, we have delivered workshops to over 100,000 children across more than 1,000 schools nationwide.

We recognise that digital providers, policy makers and communities all have a role in supporting children's online activities to ensure they are safe, age appropriate and free from harm. We aim to ensure children have the skills, knowledge and emotional support to engage in online activities and ensure young people have a voice in shaping their digital safety.

Each year, we ask children about their online experiences. Their feedback helps shape our work. This year, we also spoke to parents and carers in order to explore an important but often overlooked perspective: how the role of parents in children's digital lives is perceived.

This report explores a number of areas such as how supported children feel by their caregivers in online activities, their comfort in discussing both positive and negative experiences with them, and the moments when they will seek help from them. In terms of parents, we hear about their concerns, their challenges and where they feel they need support.

Our findings highlight that teens are less comfortable discussing the more difficult emotional aspects of their online lives, pointing to a need for more nuanced parental engagement. Children expressed a desire for more guidance in areas such as identifying what is real or fake online, staying happy and healthy online and online shopping, but they would like more autonomy with managing screen time, social media and gaming.

While many parents feel actively involved, they also report challenges in keeping pace with the complexity of technology and the ever-evolving digital landscape.

We are excited to share the insights from children, young people, and parents which provide lots of food for thought. The findings emphasize the importance of open communication and shared online activities between parents and children to foster trust, understanding and promote digital safety.



Executive Summary

This report explores how children and parents view parental involvement in children's online lives, based on surveys with 450 children and 320 parents/carers.

The findings reveal a disconnect between parents' perceptions of their involvement and children's actual experiences, especially in the areas of communication, confidence, and control.

Involvement Gap

- **56%** of parents said they talk to their child about their online experiences "very often." However, only **15%** of parents said they engage in online activities with their children "very often".
- Meanwhile, **52%** of children say their parents join their online activities "*never*" or "*not too often*", highlighting a gap between conversation and participation.

Parental Confidence

- Only **29%** of parents feel *very confident* in their understanding of online safety.
- While **43%** of children say they either don't know or don't think their parents understand their online experiences.

Emotional Sharing

- **78%** of children feel very or somewhat comfortable discussing positive online experiences with their parents, but this drops to **53%** for negative experiences.
- Comfort levels appear highest among 11 and 12 year olds.

Consistent Engagement Builds Emotional Safety

- Children who said their parents were involved in their activities online either "not too often" or "never" were more likely to feel uncomfortable or unsure about discussing online related emotions.
- This shows that regular, empathetic involvement can help to build trust & openness, especially around difficult topics.

Where Children Want More/Less from Parents

- Children want more parental involvement in identifying real vs. fake content (**52%**) and supporting their wellbeing online (**49%**).
- They want less involvement in screen time (**41%**) and social media/gaming (**27%**).



- Notably, **23%** of children (nearly 1 in 4) say they want less screen time, highlighting children want guidance and engagement not just control, while also presenting an opportunity for parents to encourage and support more offline activities.

Overall, the findings show that children feel safer and more supported when parents are actively involved in their online lives and parents are doing their best.

For parental involvement to be effective, parents need to feel confident in their role and understand how their engagement should adapt as their children grow. More supports for parents in the form of assessable, easy to understand settings and guidance from trusted sources are needed.

Moving beyond rules towards genuine guidance through open conversations, shared experiences, and respect for growing independence can help build trust, strengthen emotional connection, and support children's digital wellbeing.





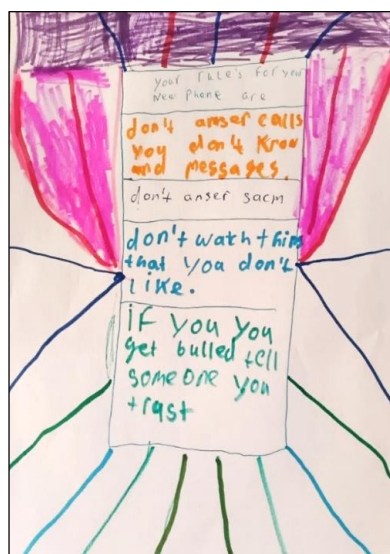
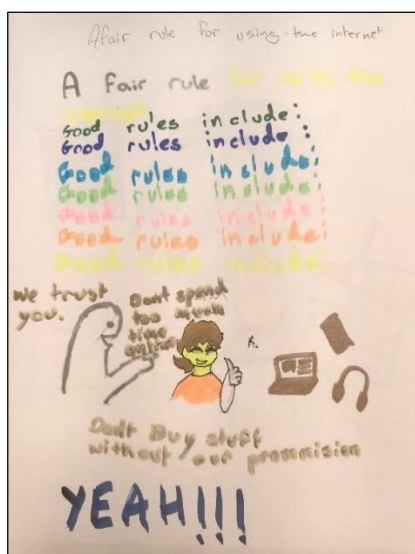
Background and Methodology

We used a combined approach to gathering information for this consultation report, using both qualitative focus groups and a quantitative survey.

We surveyed children and parents and hosted 7 student focus groups over the months of May and June 2025. The consultation focused on key questions about how parents and children experience online involvement, particularly around communication, engagement, and support. It was prompted by concerns we hear from parents and ongoing discussions with children in our school workshops.

Focus Groups: We spoke directly with 64 children; girls and boys aged between 10 and 14, from 5th class (primary) to 2nd year (secondary). Children were asked their views and given the opportunity to create images depicting their experiences. The focus groups were held in 5 different schools in Dublin, Cork and Kilkenny. The schools included mixed and single-sex settings, spanning primary, secondary and DEIS schools, located in urban and rural areas. Information was shared through the schools and consent for participation was obtained from parents and the children themselves.

Surveys: We also held 2 surveys amongst the schools we had connected with over the year and their wider school communities. We held a survey for children (450 respondents), and a separate one for parents (320 respondents). Children & parents were recruited to the survey either through their schools or as supporters of Barnardos and their consent was obtained.



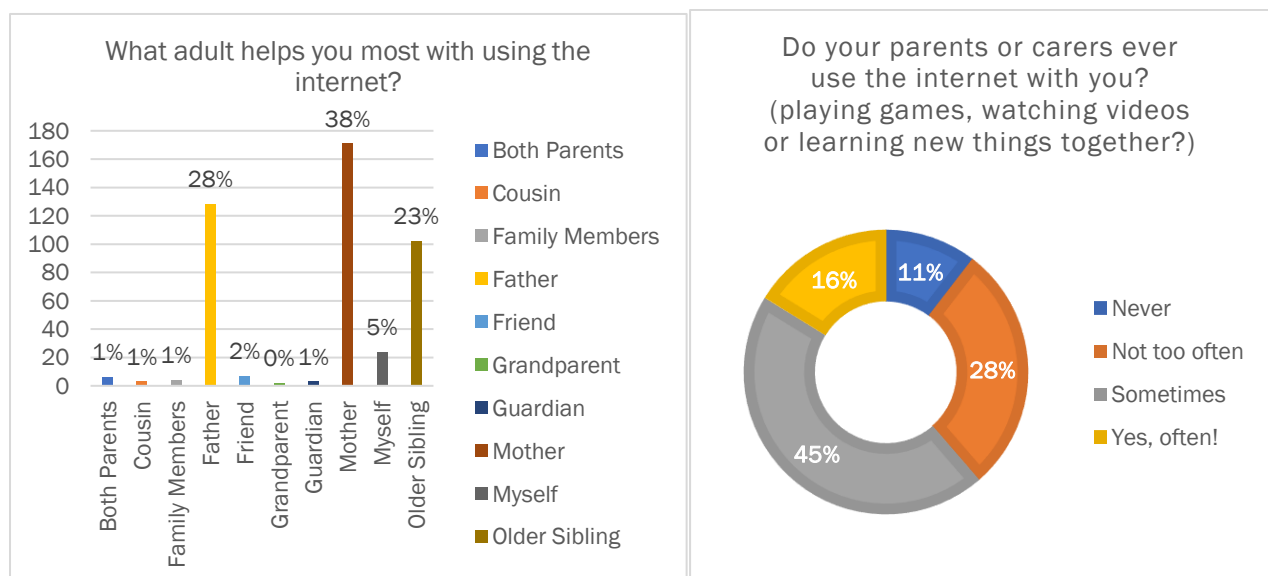


Section 1: Parental Boundaries, Involvement and Challenges

Setting online rules is not easy for parents. This section looks at how parents try to set boundaries around their children's online activities, the challenges they face, and the kind of help they need to guide their children safely.

Who Supports Children Online?

The children and young people that we spoke to identified several key adults who support them with their time online but the most common one mentioned was mother, with 38% followed by father at 28%, and older siblings at 23%.



However, 52% of young people say their parents join in in their online activities either “never” or “not too often”.

Shared activities such as playing games, watching videos, or engaging in online learning were relatively uncommon. This shows a gap in parental involvement in children's digital experiences.



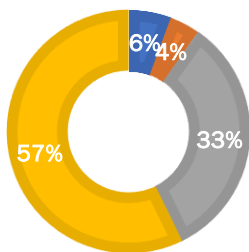
Rules, Guidelines & Monitoring

Most families have rules and safety tools in place. Many parents told us about the proactive measures they take in ensuring their children's safety online:

- 57% of parents report having clear rules.
- 78% use parental control software.
- 74% of children say their parents know which apps and websites they use.
- 54% of parents monitor regularly; 35% monitor occasionally.

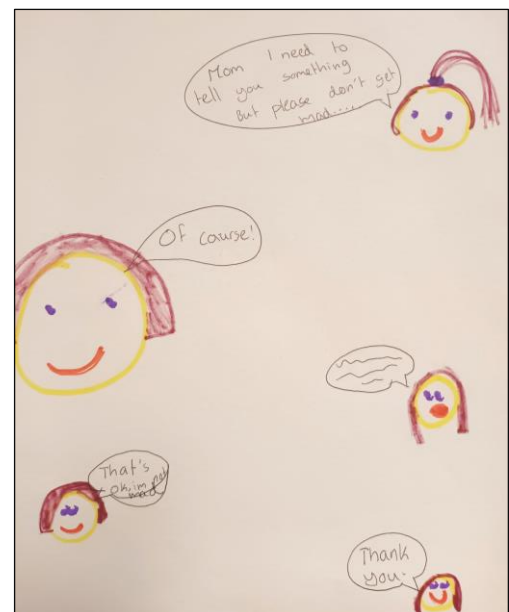
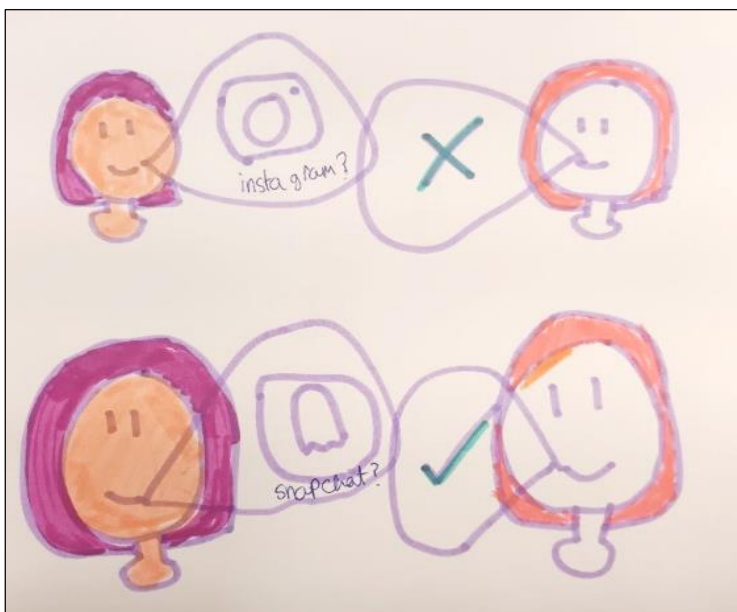
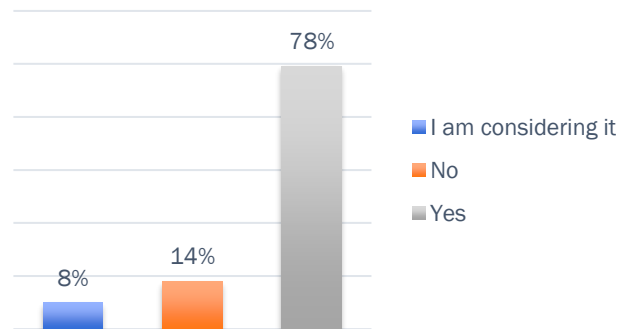
This indicates many parents take steps to support their children online, but they do not always join in or take part in what their children are doing online.

Have you established any rules or guidelines for your child's internet use? (time limits, website restrictions)



- No, we don't have any specific rules
- We are working on establishing rules
- We have some guidelines, but they are flexible
- Yes we have clear rules

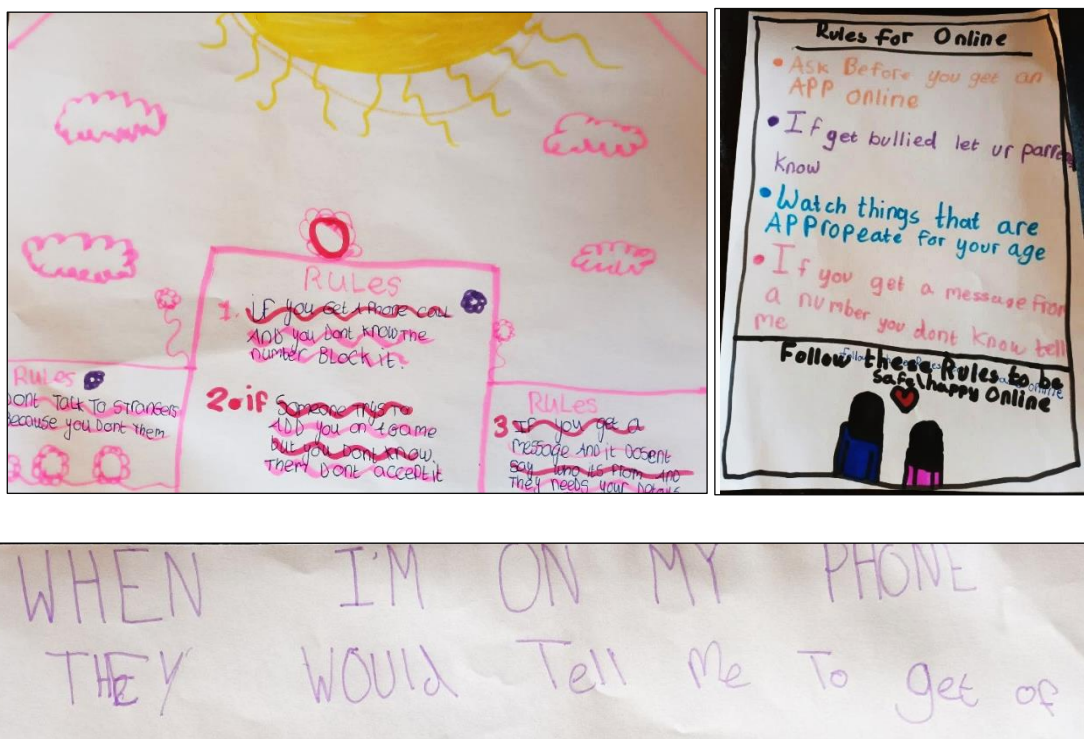
Have you ever used parental control software or features to manage your child's online activity?





Disagreements

When asked about handling disagreements about online safety, parents told us that screen time and device use cause the most arguments. Parents say the biggest disagreements with their children are about how long they spend on screens and when they should put devices away. Other common arguments happen when children want to use new apps or games that their friends are using, but parents are not sure they are safe. This can lead to tension over rules and restrictions.



Many parents say they remove phones or tablets to discipline their child. But children often feel this is an invasion of their privacy and trust. It can make them less likely to talk about problems or ask for help

"When to put the phone down or how long they have been on it."

"We remove the device for days at a time"

"They feel like it is an invasion of their privacy and trust"

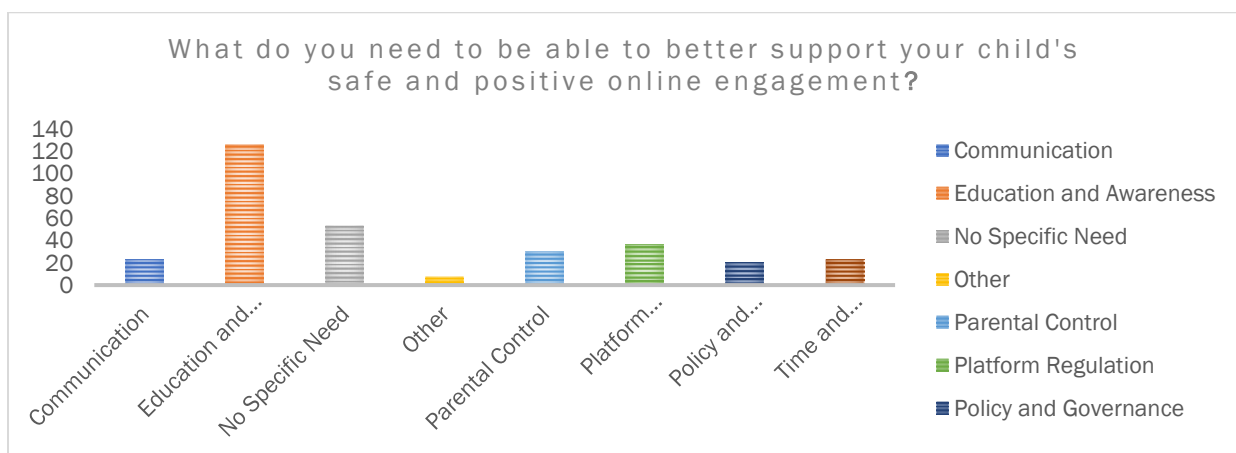
"He knows that he will lose online time/access if he doesn't stick with our agreements"



Parents' Needs for Better Support

When asked what parents needed to be able to better support their child's safe and positive online engagement, the most frequent request from parents is for more education and awareness (126 mentions).

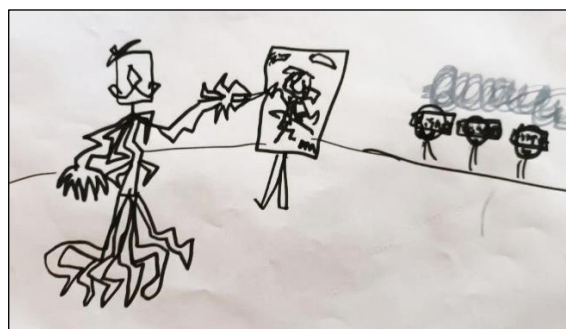
In their responses, parents asked for continuous updates on new apps, trends, and scams to help them keep up with the fast-changing digital world. They also requested practical help in the form of jargon-free guides, online safety workshops, and information on how to use parental controls, as current device settings are often "too complicated."



"More education myself... and up to date information."

"Clear and easily accessible guidelines on how to practically implement safety controls."

"More articles that are written for children. Tell the story for them. Real life cases."





Parents biggest online safety concerns

Parents worry most about harmful content and online threats. Many mentioned being concerned about their child seeing inappropriate or violent content, especially pornography. They also mentioned worrying about cyberbullying, strangers and online predators.

"Adults posing as children."

"Bullying is a big concern as it just takes one person to post something... and it can ruin someone's life."

"The access to pornography that is violent, misogynistic and totally unrealistic."



Challenges in Guiding Children Online

Parents mentioned a range of challenges they face in guiding their children online, showing they need clear, practical guidance to help them support their children better



Confidence: Many parents feel unsure of themselves. A big reason for this is not feeling confident about online safety. Less than a third of parents surveyed (29%) said they felt very confident in their knowledge, and many reported finding it hard to keep up the digital world.

Knowledge: Parents also mentioned feeling held back by not knowing enough about technology and online risks, which makes it harder to guide their children confidently.

Peer pressure: Many parents say it's tough to enforce online rules because other families have different boundaries. When children expect the same freedom their friends have, peer pressure becomes a challenge for parents.

Technology: Parents mentioned struggling with managing screen time and keeping up with technology, new apps and updates. Especially with very fast evolving technology such as AI, bringing about challenges with algorithms and content.

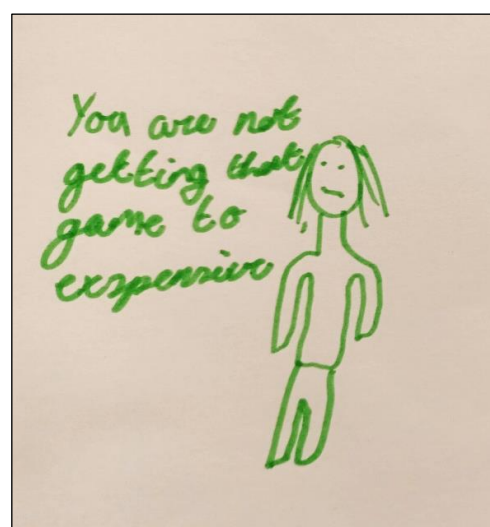
"The lack of time and knowledge I have on the subject."

"They have found ways to turn off the content restrictions I set... that I can't identify."

"Lack of knowledge about various apps for the phone"

"(My) child will know his way around better than me on the device"

"I have no idea what is going on out there for them. I am blind"



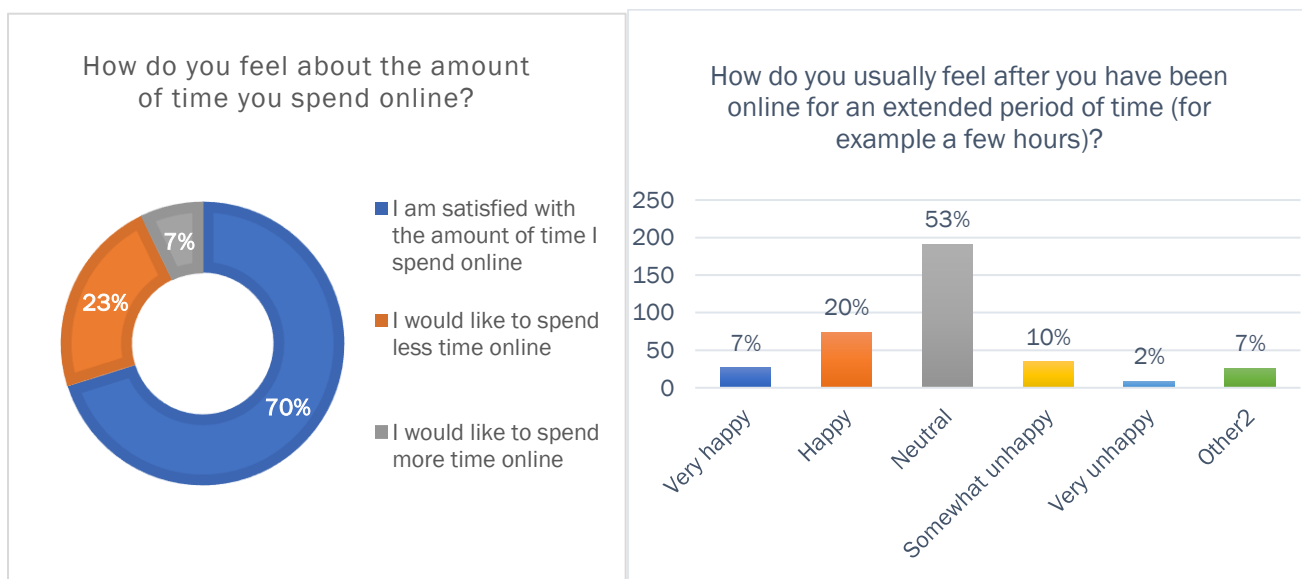


Section 2: Children's Preferences for Involvement and Autonomy

This section looks at what children want from their parents online. It includes the type of help they're asking for, how much freedom they want, and how they feel emotionally about screen time.

Screen Time and Emotions

Most young people reported feeling generally satisfied with their screen time, with 57% indicating they were content. However, 23% (nearly 1 in 4) expressed a desire to reduce their screen time.



Children feel lots of different emotions after spending time online. When asked how they feel after being online for a long time, 53% said they felt neutral; not good or bad, 20% said they felt happy, and just 6% felt very happy.

On the other hand, more than one in ten children (12%) told us they felt unhappy or very unhappy after prolonged screen time. Others (7%) said they felt bored, annoyed, tired, hungry, or even disappointed in themselves. This shows that too much time online can have both positive and negative impacts on how children feel.



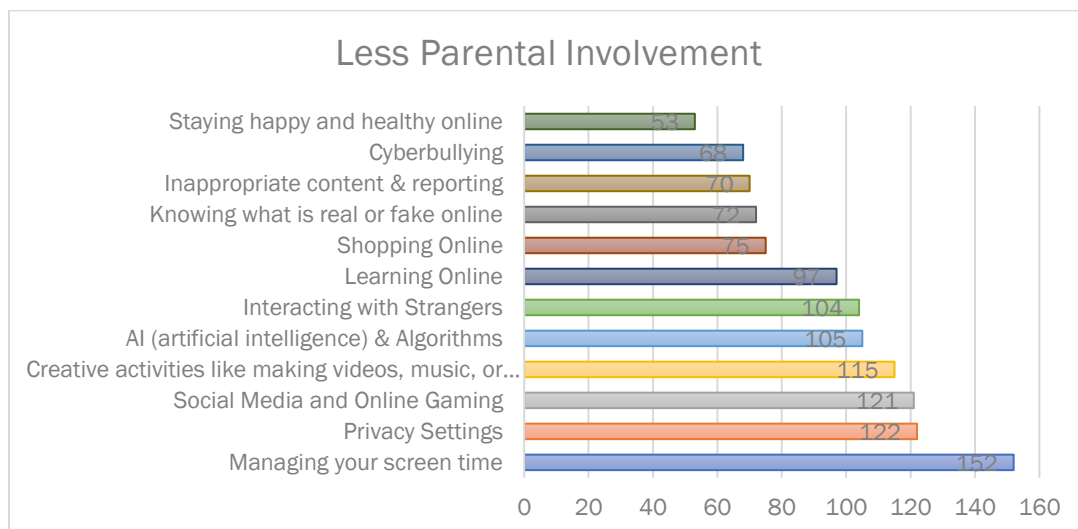
Children's Views on Parental Involvement Online

Children expressed clear preferences about how much involvement they want from parents in different areas of their online lives.

Areas Where Children Want Less Parental Involvement:

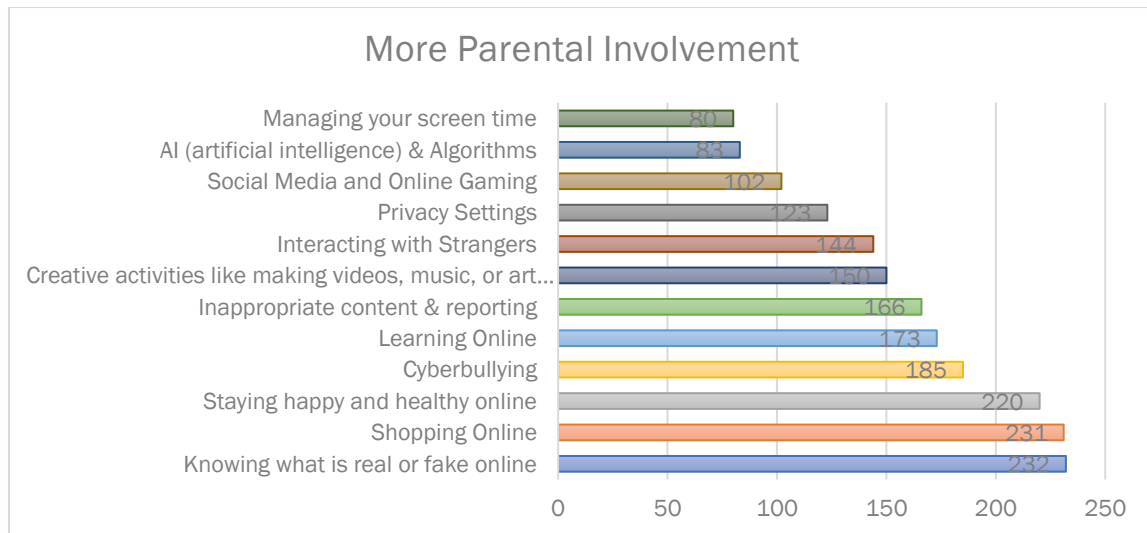
- Screen time: 41%
- Privacy settings: 27%
- Social media and gaming: 27%

These findings suggest that children may feel confident managing these areas themselves or believe their parents are already involved enough.



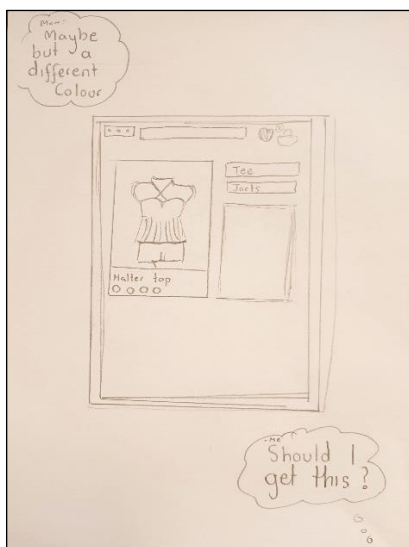
Areas Where Children Want More Parental Involvement:

- Knowing what is real or fake online (media literacy): 52%
- Shopping online (financial literacy): 52%
- Staying happy and healthy online (digital wellbeing): 49%



While children welcome autonomy in certain areas, particularly in social and entertainment, they also seek support in how they spend their time online. They are asking for support with more complex online challenges, such as spotting misinformation, managing wellbeing, and making safe financial decisions.

This suggests that parental guidance needs to go beyond screen time and settings, focusing more on helping children navigate the deeper, more difficult aspects of their online lives.

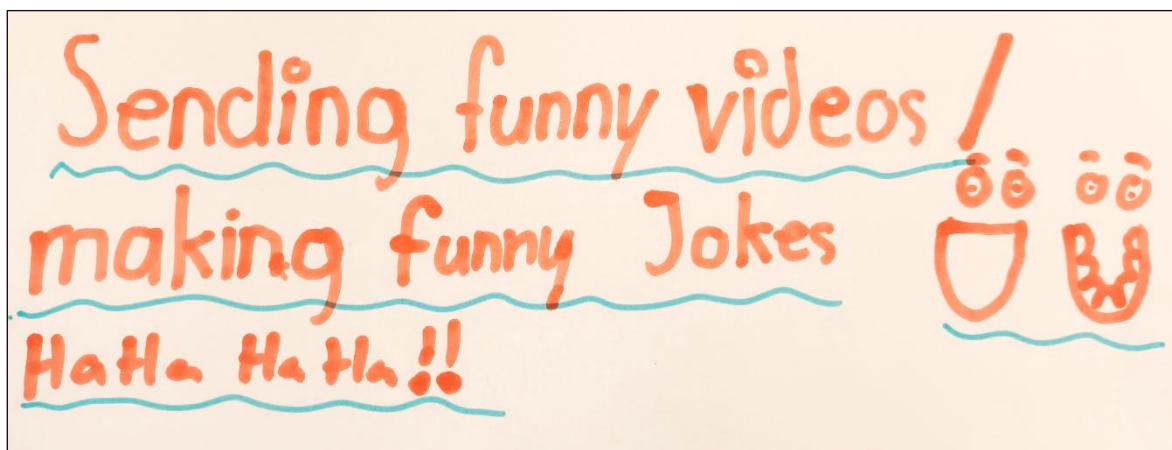




How Could Parents Improve Online Experiences

When we asked children and young people how parents could improve their online experiences, several themes emerged. Many children expressed a desire for more trust and autonomy, suggesting they value independence and want parents to respect their ability to navigate online spaces.

Others asked for help with safety & technical issues, highlighting the need for guidance in managing risks and troubleshooting problems. A smaller group mentioned the importance of shared gaming experiences, indicating that co-playing games could be a meaningful way for parents to connect with their children online.



"Give me my phone back and trust me with it and my socials"

"Trusting that we make good decisions on our online activities"

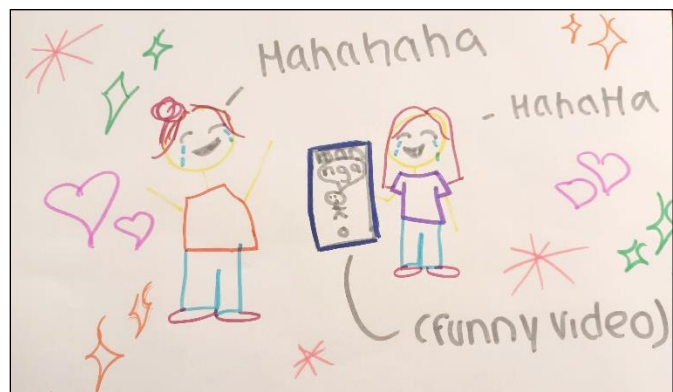
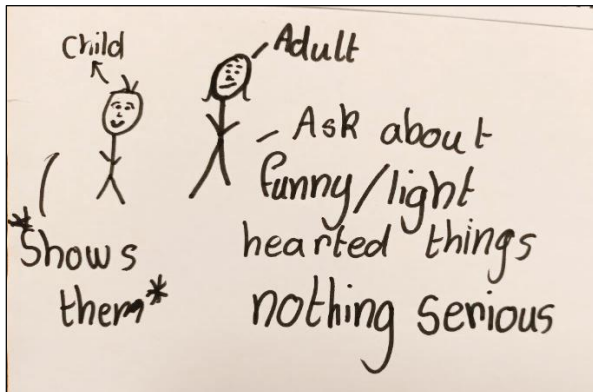
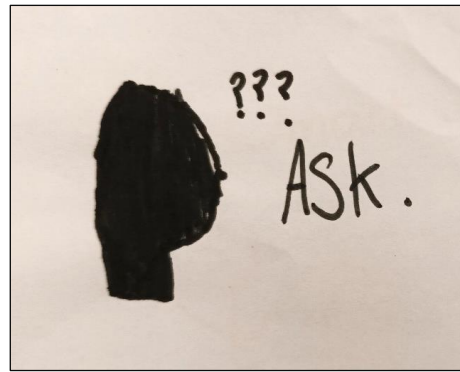
"Not checking my social media without phone, I have nothing to hide but the fact they don't ask breaks trust"

"It would be better if they didn't just suddenly take away an app from me that I was using"

"Play video games with me and make memories"

"Put trust in me"

"Spend time with me"



What's one thing you wish your parents understood better about being online?

Children told us a variety of things that they wish their parents understood. Many responses centred around practical knowledge, such as not being able to pause online games, but some responses gave insight into children's mindset online.

"I go online because I'm just bored and have nothing else to do"

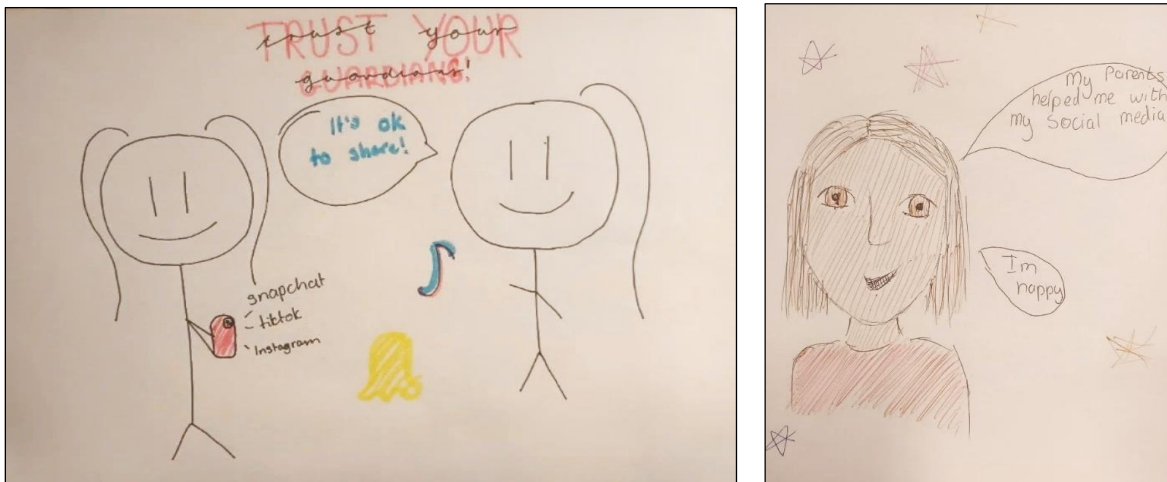
"I wish they understood that not all apps are dangerous"

"They always look at their phone but don't let me"



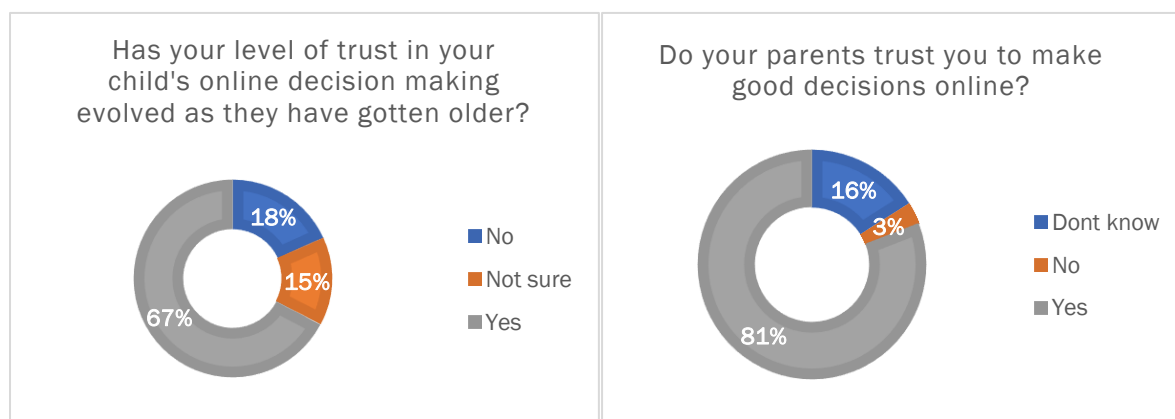
Section 3: Parent-Child Communication and Emotional Sharing

This section explores the patterns in trust, parent-child communication, emotional sharing, and help-seeking behaviour as reported by both parents and children regarding online experiences.



Trust and Growing Autonomy

Parents told us that they are actively granting their children independence and trust in the online space. 67% of parents reported that their level of trust in their child's online activities has increased as the child has gotten older. This trust is widely recognized by children, with 81% of children believing their parents trust them to make good decisions online





As trust and autonomy evolve, it is important for parents to ensure that conversations and shared activities continue to be a priority.

Trust should act as a foundation for continued guidance online, rather than a reason to be less actively involved in children's online lives.

Parental Involvement and Communication Patterns

The data reveals a difference between what a parent and child reports regarding the nature of parental involvement in online life.



56% of parents reported that they talk to their child about their online experiences “very often.”

However, parents are less likely to participate actively in online activities. Only 15% of parents reported engaging in online activities (such as gaming or watching videos) with their children “very often.”

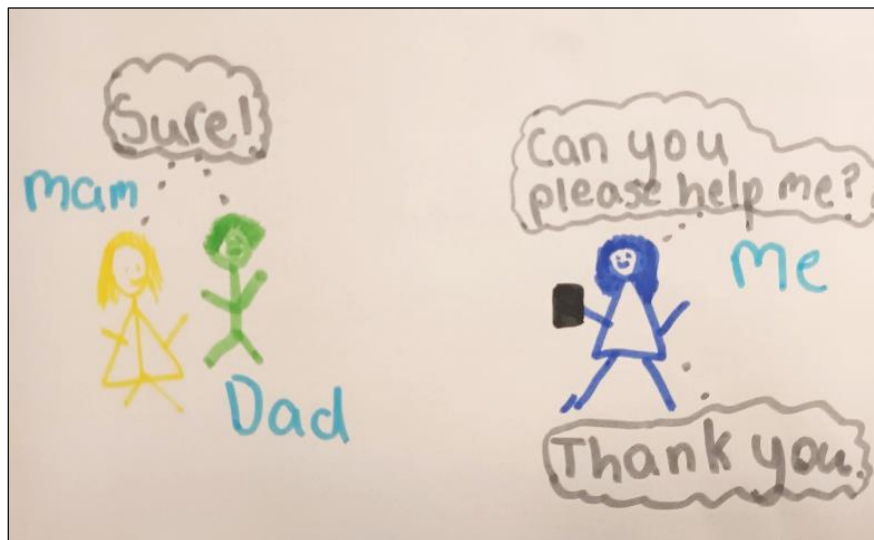
This is mirrored by the children's responses, where 52% of children reported that their parents join in their online activities “never” or “not too often.”

This finding highlights a gap between frequent conversation and joint digital participation.



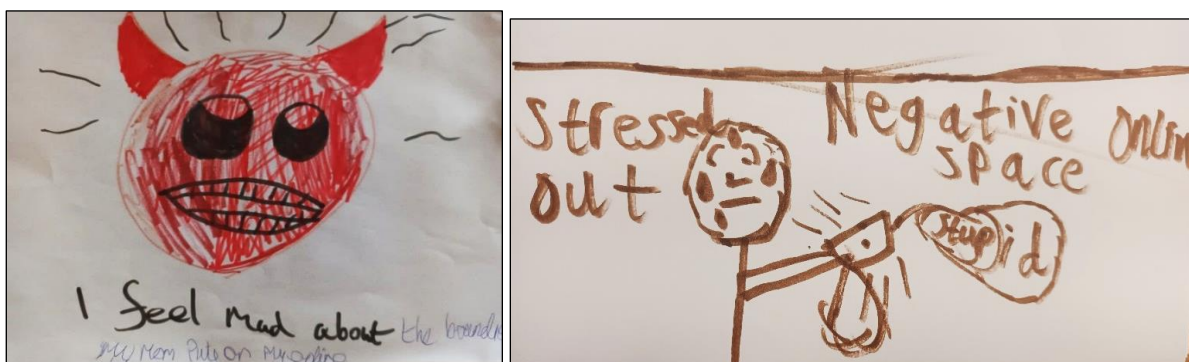
Emotional Sharing and Help-Seeking

Active parental involvement could be linked to how comfortable children feel when discussing their online feelings.



The children we surveyed reported being significantly more comfortable discussing positive online experiences than negative ones. 78% feel comfortable discussing positive online experiences such as happiness, excitement and experiences that make them feel good about themselves.

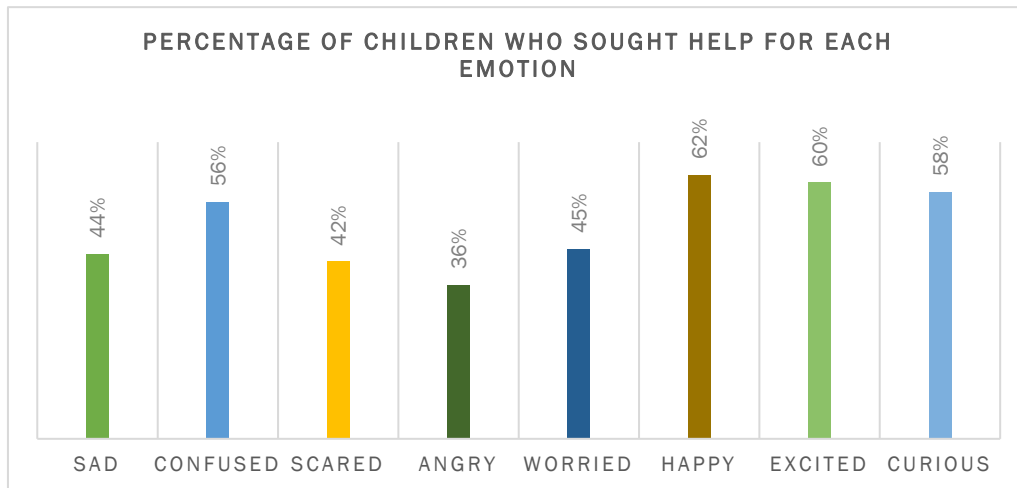
Comfort drops to 53% when discussing negative online experiences such as experiences that make them feel worried, scared or bad about themselves.



This 25 percentage point difference shows us that sharing difficult emotions related to the online environment is less comfortable for children than sharing positive feelings.

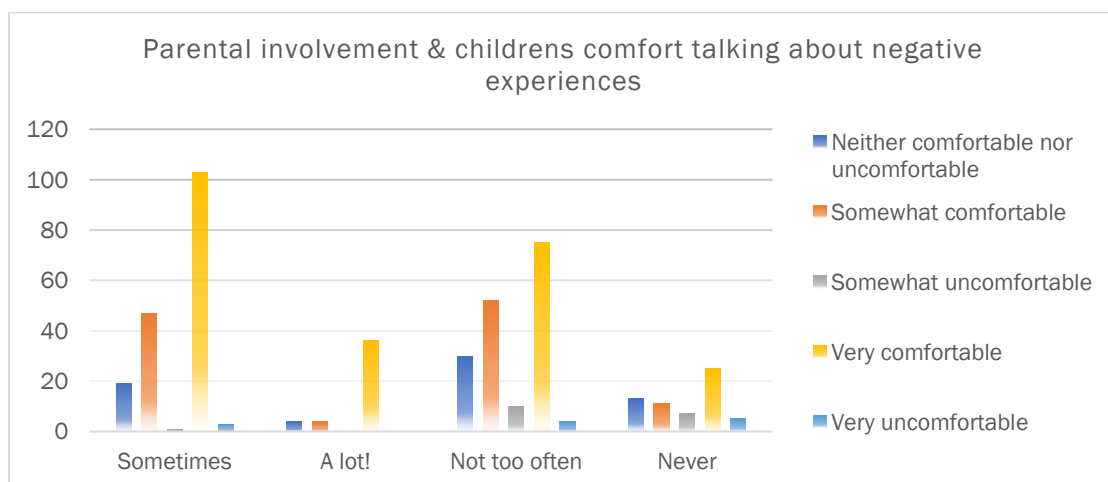


Help-seeking behaviour mirrors this pattern, with children more likely to seek help for positive emotions (62% for happy) than for negative emotions (44% for sad).



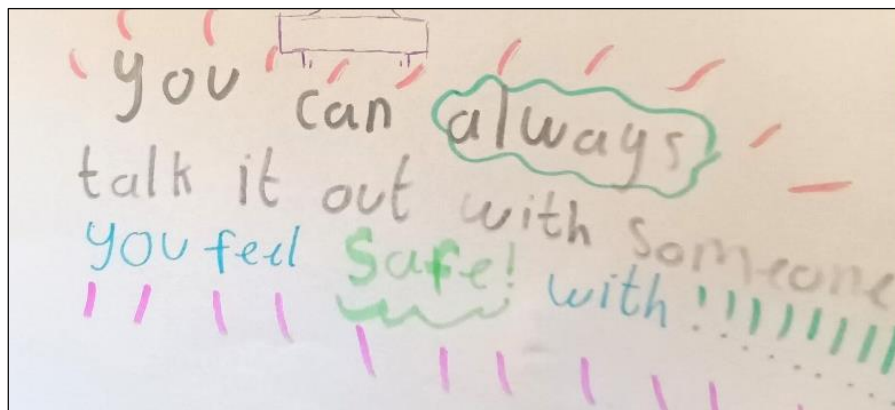
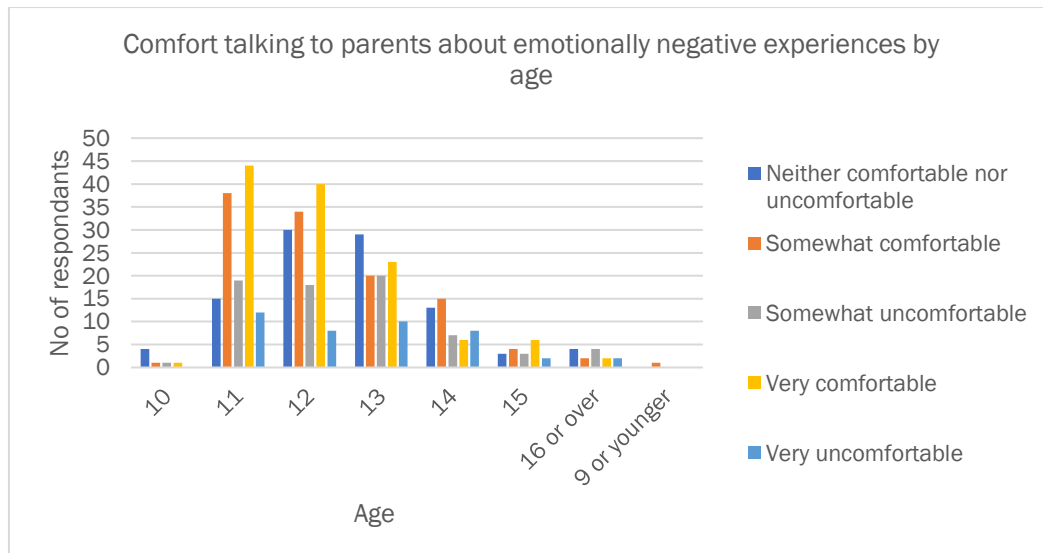
The Impact of Consistent Engagement

The findings indicate that children who stated their parents were involved in their activities online either “not too often” or “never” were more likely to report feeling uncomfortable or unsure about discussing online related emotions. This suggests that consistent parental involvement may relate to a child’s willingness to be open about difficult topics.





The data also shows that comfort levels for discussing online experiences are highest among 11 and 12 year olds. This suggests that pre-adolescence may be a key time for establishing strong communication channels, and that older teenagers may be more reserved in expressing difficult emotions related to online life.





Conclusion and Recommendations

Effective online child safety requires a collaborative approach centred on trust, engagement, and open communication between children and caregivers. While monitoring children's online activities and setting rules are important, our findings suggest that measures prioritising shared experiences and partnership are more effective for fostering long term digital resilience.

The following recommendations encourage a shift from reactive monitoring to proactive digital mentorship.

1. For Parents and Carers: Foster Digital Partnership

Spend Time Together, Online and Offline

Don't just talk about online safety, get involved in whatever interests your child online. Play games, watch videos, explore the apps and activities they like together while also making time for offline activities. This helps build trust, understanding and creates moments for safety conversations. It will also help you to better understand the risks and benefits associated with your child's online activities.

Build Trust Through Independence

If rules are broken, explain that restricted device access is a natural consequence, (something that logically follows), rather than a penalty. Focus on gradually increasing a child's digital access as they demonstrate responsibility. Being overly strict without discussion can stop children from asking for help when they encounter problems online.

Learn from Your Child

Ask your child to be the expert and show you how new apps and platforms work. This shows them you are interested in what interests them, not just worried. It also respects their digital knowledge and opens opportunities for supportive conversations.

2. For Schools and Education Groups: Help Families Learn

Teach Digital Media Skills

Encourage practical lessons for both students and parents on spotting real versus fake information, understanding AI, and thinking critically about what they see online.



Offer Easy Tech Help for Parents

Provide clear guidance on privacy settings and safety tools, current online trends and activities, avoiding confusing technical language.

3. For Policymakers: Build Systems That Support Families

Centrally Updated Resources

Develop and support central, regularly updated resources on online safety that offer practical tools, promote ongoing education, and share best practices on new technologies for parents and all stakeholders to stay informed and connected in an easy and accessible way.

Support Ongoing Education

Invest in continuous programmes that train parents and teachers on new apps, trends, scams, and current online risks.

Ensure Safety Tools Are Easy to Use

Encourage tech companies to design simple, clear safety settings that parents can understand and use confidently.

Support Digital Mentoring

Create programmes where young people can mentor parents/carers on online culture and platforms fostering trust and intergenerational understanding.

These recommendations are grounded in the research findings, reflecting children's experiences, parents' concerns, and the importance of trust, shared engagement, and guidance over control in supporting digital wellbeing.





Support Available

To support parents in guiding and protecting their children online, the following resources provide practical advice, guidance, and tools:

Barnardos Online Safety Programme

Offers workshops to help parents understand online risks, develop practical safety strategies, and learn how to talk to children about digital wellbeing. barnardos.ie/osp

Google Family Link

A tool that allows parents to monitor screen time, manage apps, set device limits, and guide children's digital experience safely across devices. families.google/familylink

Webwise Parents Hub

Provides videos and tips on internet safety, cyberbullying, screen time, guides on apps and platforms, conversation starters and topic generators, helping parents feel confident and informed. webwise.ie/parents/

Media Literacy Ireland

Works to empower people with skills required to critically evaluate media and navigate the digital world responsibly. medialiteracyireland.ie/

CyberSafeKids

Offers e-learning courses and guides for parents and children on online safety, helping families understand technology and develop digital resilience. cybersafekids.ie/elearning/

National Parents Council – Primary (NPC)

Offers training, resources, and advice to support parents in understanding online safety, building digital skills, and engaging with children on technology use. npc.ie/training-and-resources/training-we-offer/internet-safety

ISPCC Digital Ready Hub

Provides practical advice on online safety, guidance for conversations with children, and strategies to manage screen time and online behaviour. ispcc.ie/helping-to-keep-children-and-young-people-safe-online/

Citizens Information – Online Safety

Provides clear, authoritative advice on online safety, digital rights, and responsibilities, giving parents a reliable reference for protecting children online. citizensinformation.ie/en/consumer/buying-digital-content-and-services/online-safety/



Family Online Agreement

This is an example of an agreement within families to help them talk openly about online life, set shared expectations, and support each other in creating a safe and positive digital experience.

Communication & Trust

- ☐ We will talk regularly about what we do online – apps, games, videos, and friends.
- ☐ We will listen without judgment and ask questions with curiosity, not criticism.
- ☐ If something goes wrong online, we will talk about it before taking action.

Shared Online Experiences

- ☐ We will spend time online together, playing games or exploring apps that interest us.
- ☐ We will learn from each other and share what we enjoy online.

Screen Time & Boundaries

- ☐ We will agree on screen time limits together and review them as needed.
- ☐ We will take breaks when we feel tired, stressed, or overwhelmed
- ☐ We will also pursue offline activities and hobbies together
- ☐ We will respect each other's need for downtime and privacy.

Safety & Support

- ☐ We will help each other think about what's real and fake online and spot unsafe content.
- ☐ We will use privacy settings and safety tools together.
- ☐ We will ask for help when something feels confusing, upsetting, or unsafe.

Let's Talk About...

- ☐ What's one app or game you love right now?
- ☐ What's something online that made you feel happy or proud?
- ☐ What's something online that made you feel unsure or uncomfortable?

Signatures

We agree to support each other and keep talking about our online lives.

Parent/Carer: _____

Child/Young Person: _____

About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960's, Barnardos works with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support.

Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction.

Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential – regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability' – Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.



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