

Left To Their Own Devices



The virtually unprotected lives of kids in Ireland



Trends and Usage Report Academic Year 2023-2024

Our Mission

To make online safer for children and children safer online. We do this through education, giving voice to children's online experience and by being a fierce advocate for children's online safety.

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“Children deserve better. They have a legitimate right to participate actively and fully in the digital world around them”

Foreword by Brian O’Neill

As the annual CyberSafeKids Trends & Usage Report shows, children grow up in thoroughly digitalised worlds. The diversity and breadth of digital products and services that young people use and experience is striking. It is clear that the digital environment is a mainstay of young people’s everyday lives. Whether at home, at school, or at play, being connected digitally is unavoidable and an integral part of the world we live in. For many parents and for many young people, this may feel like a double-edged sword: while ever-present digital technologies undoubtedly offer many positive opportunities and benefits, there are also some startling challenges.

As we can see in this report, children experience disturbing and sometimes shocking content on supposedly child-friendly platforms; they receive unwanted contact from strangers whose motives are often suspect; they experience deep anguish about the cyberbullying torment they routinely experience online; and most worryingly, they often don’t know what to do or are afraid to speak up or seek support when bad things happen to them online.

Children deserve better. They have a legitimate right to participate actively and fully in the digital world around them and to expect that digital service providers offer safe and age-appropriate experiences. But clearly, as these indispensable CyberSafeKids findings show, this is not always (or even often) the case.

Major policy initiatives – such as the enhanced protections of the European Union’s Digital Services Act (DSA) or the expected safety standards set out in Ireland’s draft Online Safety Code – are working



to bring about a better digital world, and one that young people deserve. But key to this is hearing from children themselves and understanding the reality of their experiences. Research that tracks where children encounter problems, how they are impacted, and what they believe could best be done about them is vital for developing sustainable and effective solutions. Restricting or eliminating children’s access to digital technologies is neither an adequate nor workable response, and as the report argues, it may leave children ill-prepared and lacking in the very digital skills they need to prosper in the digital world. A better approach is to focus on an all-around safer online environment – the current focus of major policies nationally and around the world – and to equip children appropriately with the skills, literacies and resilience needed for a certain digital future. The vital contribution that CyberSafeKids makes to this challenge is to be commended and merits support from every area of society.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian O'Neill'.

Brian O’Neill,
Emeritus Professor,
Technological University Dublin.

Brian O’Neill is a researcher on young people’s use of digital technologies, online safety and policy for the digital environment, and a board advisor to CyberSafeKids.

Key Numbers

In this report, we will provide a comprehensive overview of children's relationship with the online world and highlight a considerable number of vulnerabilities. A summary of key numbers is included below.

8–12 Year Olds
in primary school

12–14 Year Olds
in secondary school

Have their own smart device

94%

- Tablet 59%
- Games console 57%
- Smartphone 49%
- Laptop 21%

99%

- Smartphone 97%
- Games console 59%
- Tablet 49%
- Laptop 42%

Have their own social media & instant messaging accounts

82%

100%

Spent most of their time online

42%
Gaming

- Watching videos 25%
- Social media 12%
- Chatting with friends 11%

41%
Social Media

- Gaming 22%
- Chatting with friends 22%
- Watching videos 11%

Most popular online environments to have own account*

75%
YouTube

- WhatsApp 41%
- Roblox 40%
- Snapchat 36%
- TikTok 33%
- Fortnite 30%

86%
WhatsApp

- Snapchat 84%
- YouTube 83%
- TikTok 74%
- Instagram 51%
- Pinterest 38%

Have experienced cyberbullying

25%

- 28% of girls
- 22% of boys

38%

- 46% of girls
- 30% of boys

8–12 Year Olds
in primary school

12–14 Year Olds
in secondary school

Have been bothered or upset by something seen or experienced online

25%

- 37% on YouTube
- 23% on Roblox

21%

- 41% on Snapchat
- 30% on TikTok

Kept negative experiences to themselves

29% when bullied

36% when bothered by something online

38% when bullied

38% when bothered by something online

Have unrestricted online access

35%

61%

Rules at home

19% have no rules

17% restricted use of devices in bedrooms

20% have no rules

66% needed permission to make online purchases

Talked to a parent about how to stay safe online in the last year*

58% talked to a parent

37% talked to a teacher

*Note gaming environments are not included for secondary school children

*Study carried out amongst 8–12 year olds only

Introduction

“Somebody was saying creepy things to me on Roblox” *Girl, aged 9*

If a child tells you that they have a lot of negative experiences online then they are not alone. Our latest research shows that only 43% of 8-12 year olds had ‘mostly’ positive experiences online in the last year. Exposure to harmful content and contact were commonplace in the online environments where young children spent so much of their time.

Since 2016 we have highlighted the extent to which children in Ireland are engaging with technology and their resulting experiences. This year we have seen a reduction in parental involvement and a continuing gap in the digital skills of children that leave them far too vulnerable to online harm. This is a real cause for concern.

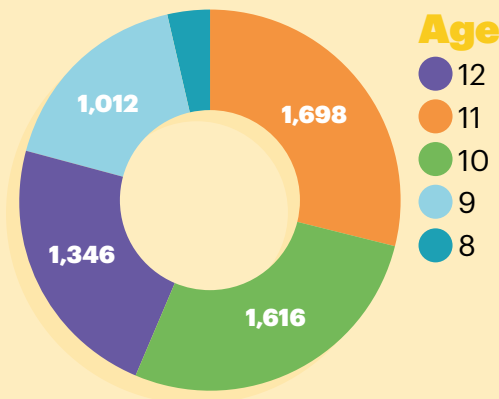
Research Data

During the 2023-2024 academic year we surveyed a total of 7,176 children, aged 8-14 years, in 101 schools across Ireland. Our research data was collected via anonymous online surveys before visiting each school.

Overall, we delivered our education programme to 19,136 children across Ireland in the 2023-24 academic year.

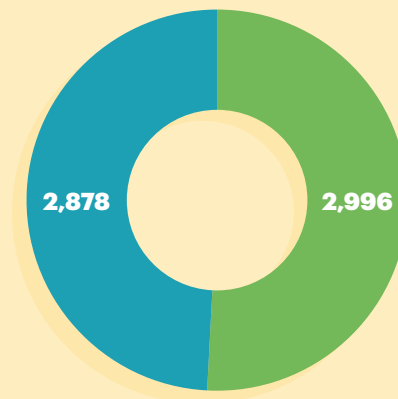
Primary

- 5,874 children
- aged 8–12
- across 84 schools



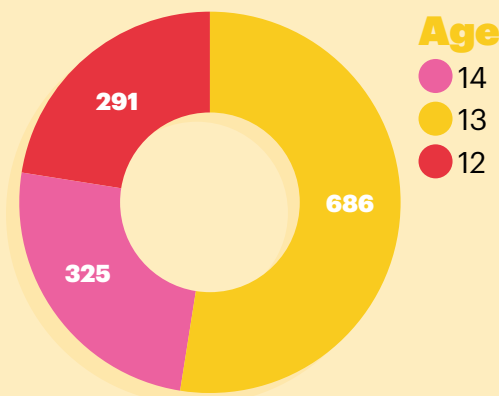
Gender

- Male
- Female



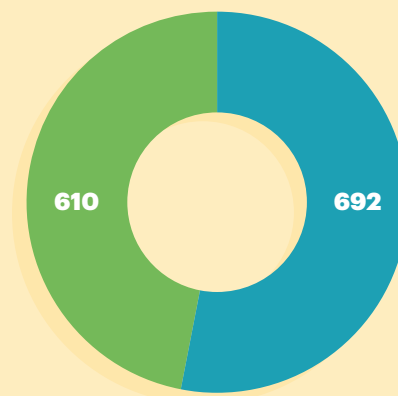
Secondary

- 1,302 children
- aged 12–14
- across 17 schools



Gender

- Male
- Female



Online Access Too Young

94% of 8-12 year olds owned a smart device (Table 1). Attention of late has focused on banning smartphone ownership for this age group, but smartphones are not the only device (or even the most popular devices) that young children use to access the online world. Tablets and gaming consoles are often the first device children own, and can expose them to the same online harms.

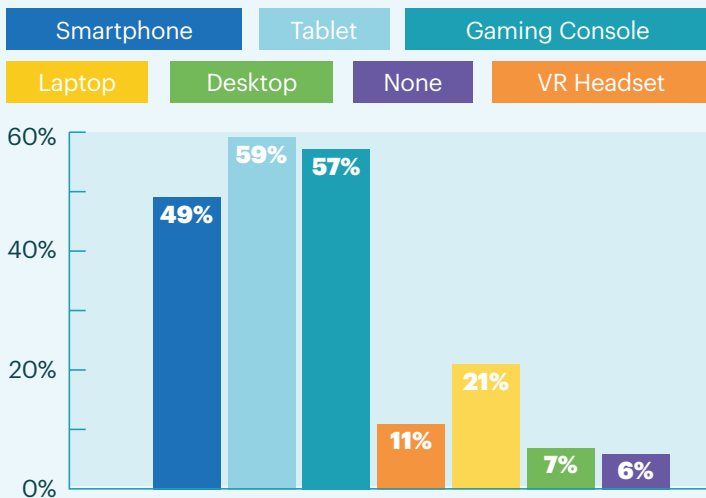


Table 1: Smart device ownership (8-12 year olds)

We have yet to see any impact from childhood smartphone-free initiatives within the school communities that we surveyed. It is actually more common than ever before for an 11 year old to own a smartphone in Ireland. This year 59% owned a smartphone vs 52% of 11 year olds in 2022-2023, and this rises to 74% by the age of 12.

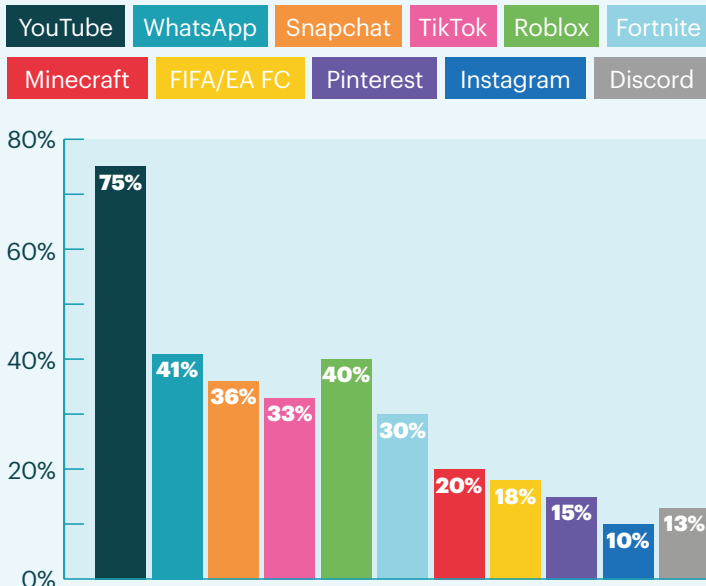


Table 2: Most popular online environments (with 8-12 year olds)

While online, children engaged with a range of popular social environments, including video sharing platform services, games, and instant messaging apps: (Table 2). YouTube continued to be the most popular platform with both boys and girls (8-12 year olds) and watching videos was chosen by 1 in 4 children as the online activity they spent most time on.

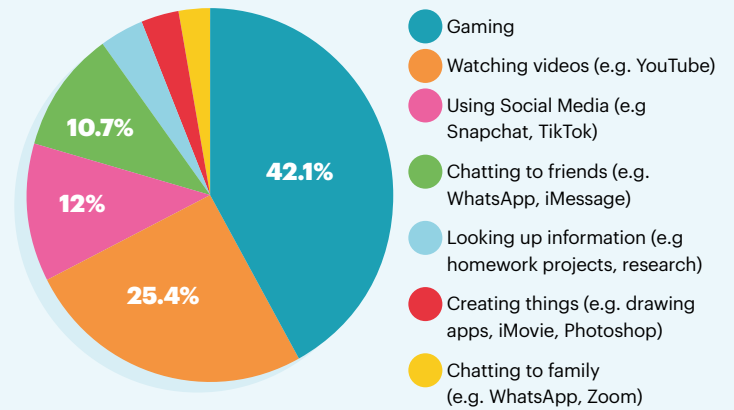


Table 3: I spend most of my time online... (8-12 year olds)

This year children of every age that we surveyed in primary school told us that they spent more time gaming than on other online activities: (Table 3). After YouTube, the most popular environment with girls was Roblox (54% had accounts) and the most popular environment with boys was Fortnite (48% engaging on the platform). These social gaming environments, like video sharing platform services, raise concerns around contact with strangers, cyberbullying, targeting, and harmful content.

As in previous years, 1 in 4 8-12 year olds reported being bothered or upset by something experienced or seen online. Exposure to horror content was the most common negative experience reported on YouTube. A startling 23% of incidents which bothered or upset the children surveyed took place on the Roblox platform. These negative experiences involved anything from threats, scams and harassment, to horror games. Given that gaming environments are where children spend the most time, there is an urgent need to find ways to regulate such environments and also educate children on how to navigate safely through them.

Online Gaming: A Gap in Regulation

We need to ensure children are equipped with the skills and knowledge to avoid and/or report harms as they arise and importantly, we need to ensure that these gaming environments do far more to prevent harms.

Regulating online gaming environments has not received the same attention as other social online environments in which children spend time. These environments were not considered under Ireland’s Online Safety Media Regulation Act. There are some regulatory requirements that the companies involved must meet under the EU’s Digital Services Act (DSA). However, because the number of monthly active users falls below the 45 million threshold required to meet the DSA’s definition of VLOPs (Very Large Online Platforms), regulatory requirements are not as onerous for these platforms. It will also not fall to Coimisiún na Meán to enforce the DSA for these environments because the EU headquarters of most gaming companies are not in Ireland.

“I had a bad experience with people I thought were my friends. They hacked my Snapchat, took my photos, sent bad messages to themselves using my account. They ruined most of my reputation” *Girl, aged 12*

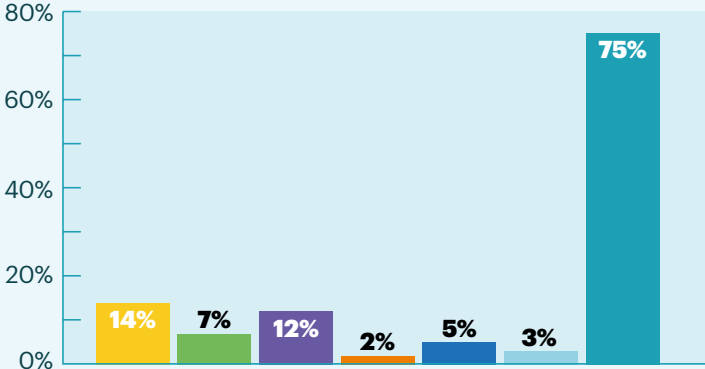
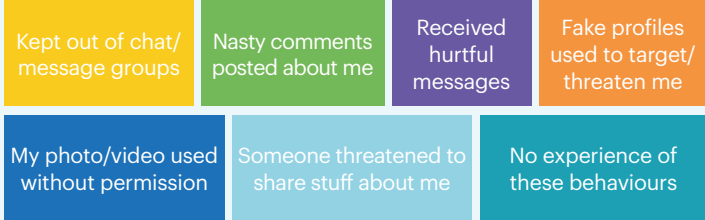


Table 4: Cyberbullying experiences you have had online (8-12 year olds)

“My closest friend posted a harmful video of me, stating how rude I was and photos of me.” *Girl, aged 12*

Children also raised concerns about content viewed on video sharing platform services that bothered or upset them. Advertisements presented on these platforms were also problematic at times for young children, confusing or scaring them.

Cyberbullying continued to affect 1 in 4 8-12 year olds this year, with some children targeted in multiple ways (Table 4).

How online time was spent had a great impact on the likelihood of being cyberbullied (Table 5). Children who spent most of their time on social media platforms were much more likely to have experienced cyberbullying (42%) than those who spent most of their time in gaming environments (24%) or consuming videos (19%).

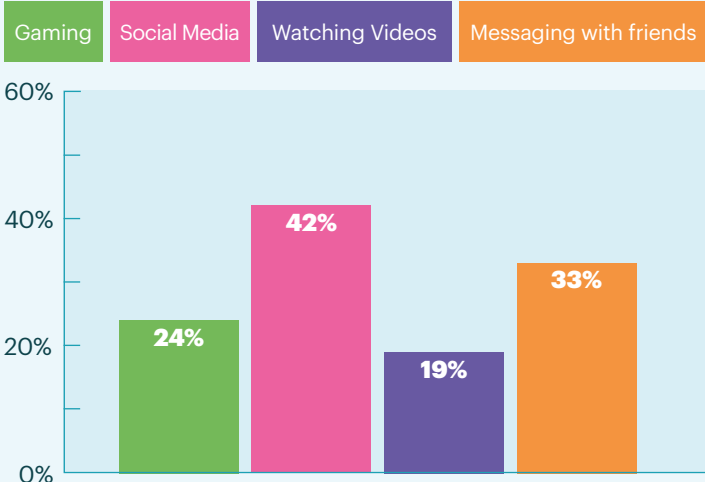


Table 5: I spent most of my time online...and experiences of cyberbullying (8-12 year olds)

Online Access Without Education

The school curriculum currently does little to prepare children for the challenges they face online. This is apparent when we consider some of the poor choices that children made this year when they engaged with games and apps, which exposed them to greater risk of harm than was necessary.

Only 1 in 3 maintained private accounts, a significant reduction from last year's figure of 39% (Table 6). An additional 19% did not know their privacy settings so were very likely unfamiliar with settings that could have provided some protection.

22% accepted friends and followers they do not know on social media (Table 7) and 38% gamed with people they did not know, allowing for interactions with strangers (Table 8).

20% overshared by posting videos of themselves online (58% on TikTok, 37% on Snapchat, 31% on YouTube), that could be accessed or misused by others.

63% participated in group chats (33% on Snapchat and 41% on WhatsApp), where inappropriate communication, cyberbullying amongst peers and the sharing of links to harmful content can occur.

30% of boys and 9% of girls played over-18s games, exposing them to violent, sexually explicit or other harmful content (Table 9). A further 15% said they didn't know the age ratings of the games they had played, indicating that they pay little regard to these.

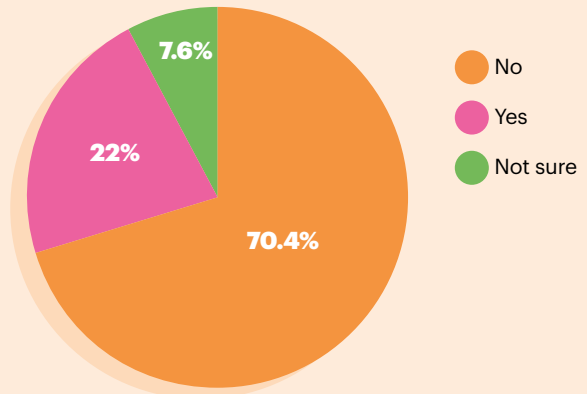


Table 7: Do you have friends and followers you do not know offline? (8-12 year olds)

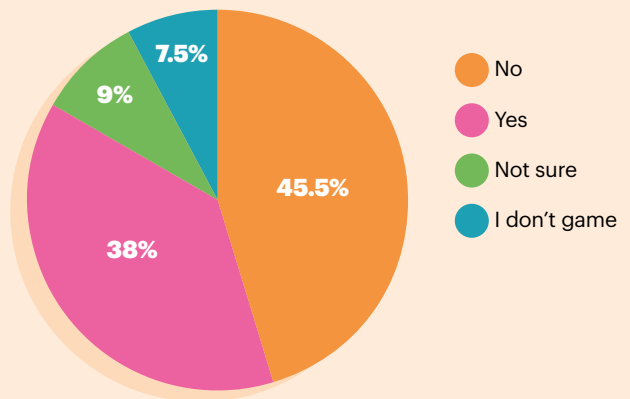


Table 8: Do you game with people you do not know in real life? (8-12 year olds)

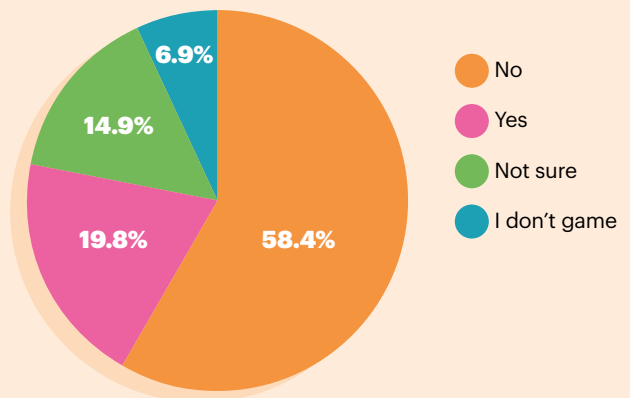


Table 9: Have you played a computer/video game with an age rating of 18+ in the last year? (8-12 year olds)

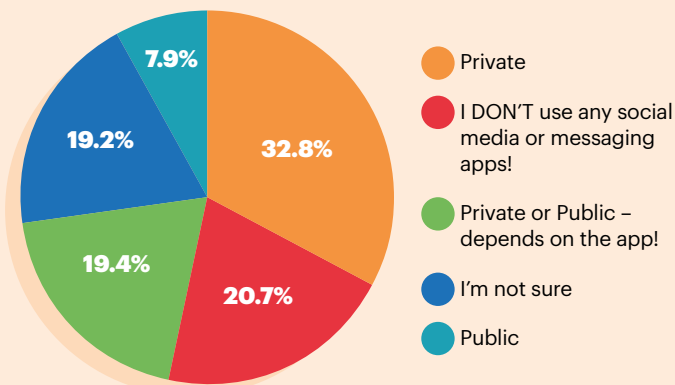


Table 6: The settings on my social media accounts are... (8-12 year olds)

Negative experiences occurred less often for children who made smart choices regarding their privacy, interactions and activities on social media.

Children who said they only held private accounts on social media were less likely to have experienced cyberbullying – 30% vs. 40% of those with public accounts (Table 10).

Children who had friends and followers that they did not know were much more likely to say they had been bullied – 47% vs 19% (Table 11).

Children who posted videos of themselves online were much more likely to say they had experienced bullying – 46% vs 20% (Table 12).

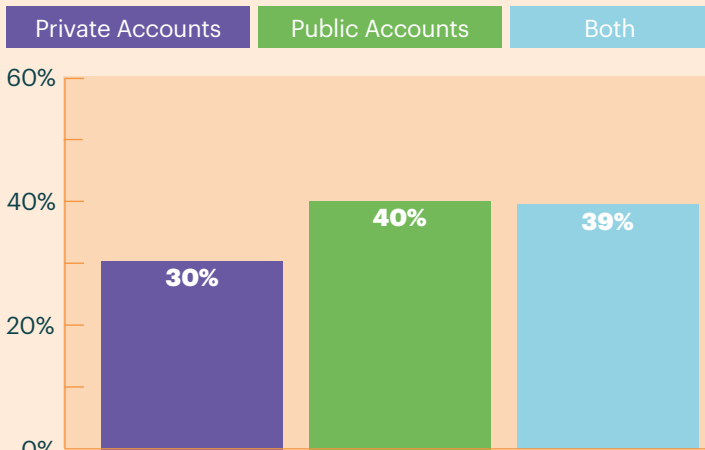


Table 10: Privacy settings and whether cyberbullying has been experienced (8-12 year olds)

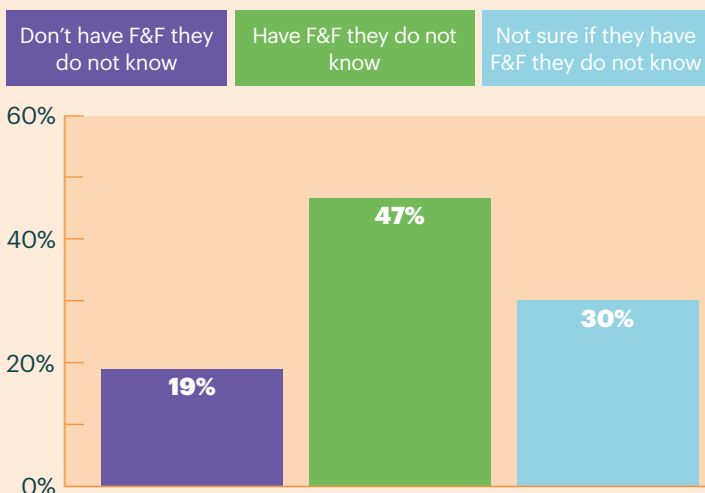


Table 11: Do you have friends and followers you do not know? / Experiences of cyberbullying (8-12 year olds)

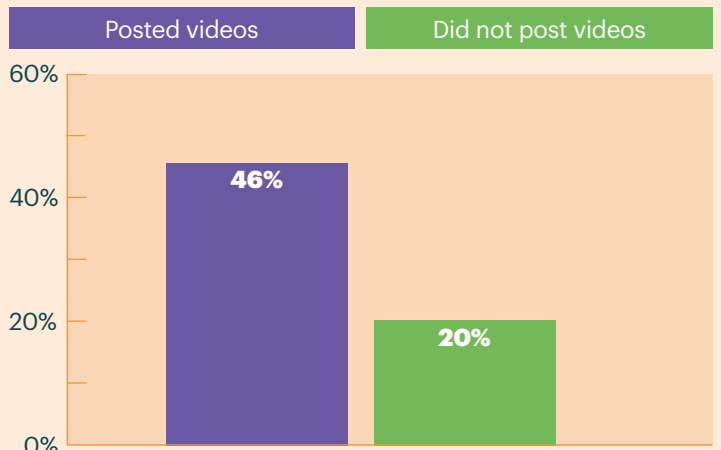


Table 12: Posting videos and whether cyberbullying has been experienced (8-12 year olds)

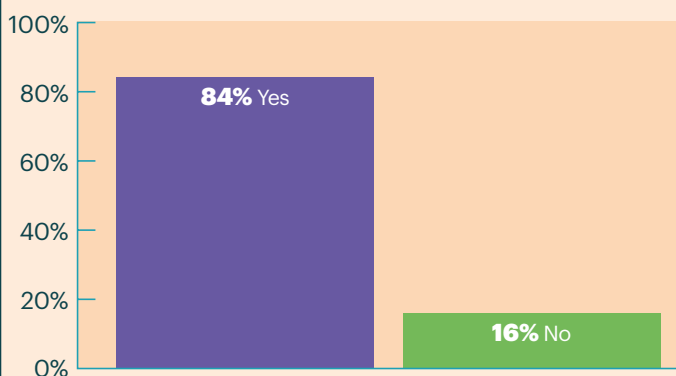
If children were better educated on how to reduce their exposure then they could reduce the likelihood of being cyberbullied. Poor online choices made by children also put pressure on schools, with cybersafety considered a significant issue now in the vast majority of schools. With better education in this area the number of cybersafety incidents should fall and take up less valuable class time.



Impact on Schools: Online Safety Incidents in Schools on the Rise

84% of teachers told us that online safety was a significant issue at their school. This is an increase from 74% last year and 63% the year before. Dealing with these incidents can eat into valuable teaching time and because many of these incidents relate to interactions happening outside of the school day, it can't be addressed solely by restricting the use of smartphones in the school environment. Nearly half (48%) of teachers indicated that they had to deal with multiple cyber safety incidents during the school year, compared to 30% the year before so the frequency of incidents is also on the rise.

Would you consider online safety to be a significant issue in your school/organisation? (Sample: 77 teachers)



Benefits of Education

Media education has become central in policy agendas to provide children with necessary skills to be aware and responsible users of digital technologies (see the European Commission's Strategy for a Better Internet for Kids (BIK)). This emphasizes the importance of education programmes in schools to support children navigating the online environment in a safe and positive way. Moreover, recent research conducted by University College Dublin and CyberSafeKids showed that children can benefit from media education programmes delivered in school to foster their digital skills. Also, the research highlighted the need to support the coordination between families and schools regarding educating children to use digital technology, as alignment between parents and teachers will enhance educational outcomes for children.*

** Messena, M., Everri, M., & O'Brien, V. (submitted 2024), Fostering children's digital skills: The development and effectiveness testing of an e-learning educational programme in primary schools.*

Online Access Without Supervision

Alongside increases in access and failures to adequately educate children, parental involvement has decreased this year leaving many children to navigate online challenges that they faced alone. More children went online whenever they wanted to than we have seen in any previous year. 35% of children had unrestricted access, a 4% increase from last year alone (Table 13).

“I was about to fall asleep and I didn’t see what video was on next on YouTube and a scary video turned on and I woke up” *Girl, aged 9*

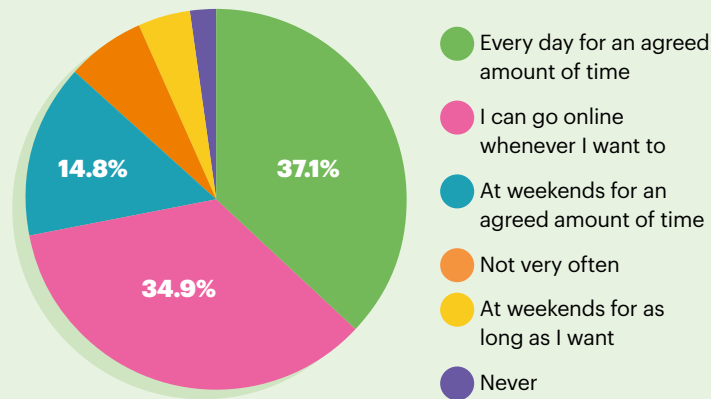


Table 13: When can you go online? (8-12 year olds)

This year children were also more likely to indicate that they had no rules at all around online engagement (19% vs 14% last year). The vast majority were unsupervised by their parents (77%) and could use devices in the privacy of their bedrooms (83%) (Table 14). Interacting with strangers through games and apps was also permitted in many households.

The number of parents setting rules at home continues to decrease, year on year, with a 4% drop in the last year and a 6% drop since the 2020-2021 academic year. This is very concerning because parental involvement can have a significant impact on children’s online experiences. Children granted unlimited time online were more likely to have experienced cyberbullying than those who had restrictions (33% vs 21%), as were those who had no rules at home around their online engagements (34% vs 23%), (Tables 15, 16). They were also much more likely to have been bothered by something online or to have seen something that upset or scared them (Tables 17, 18). Parents need to step up and set rules for virtual engagements, just as they do for activities in the physical world, and it is not necessary for parents to be technical experts in order to do so.

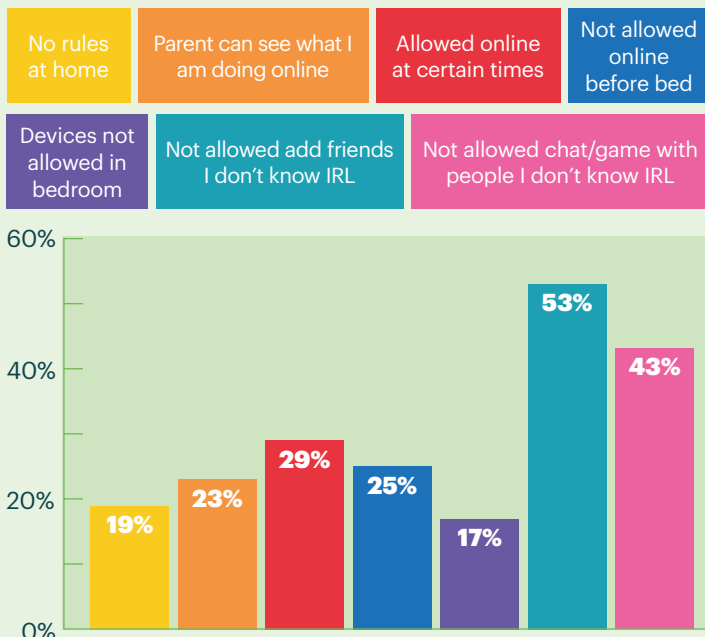


Table 14: What are your rules for going online at home? (8-12 year olds)

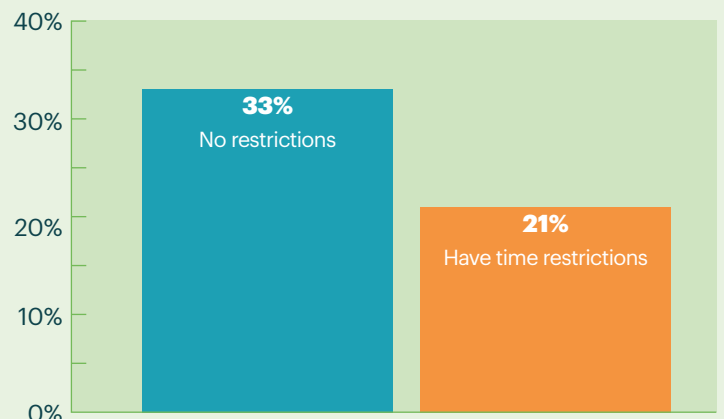


Table 15: Time restrictions and likelihood of having experienced cyberbullying (8-12 year olds)

“I was playing Roblox...and people were being mean and it made me quite upset, but I told my mom and I’m now okay”
Boy, aged 10



With unwanted contact/content so commonplace, it is vital that children have someone to talk to when they encounter problems online, which will lead to much better outcomes. But fewer children talked to their parents about their online activity this year than last – a decrease from 64% in 2022-2023 to just 58% this year (Table 19).

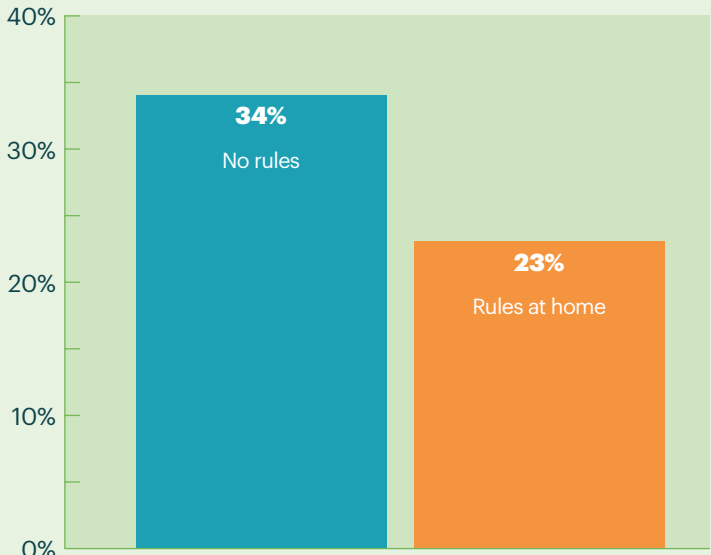


Table 16: Rules at home and likelihood of having experienced cyberbullying (8-12 year olds)

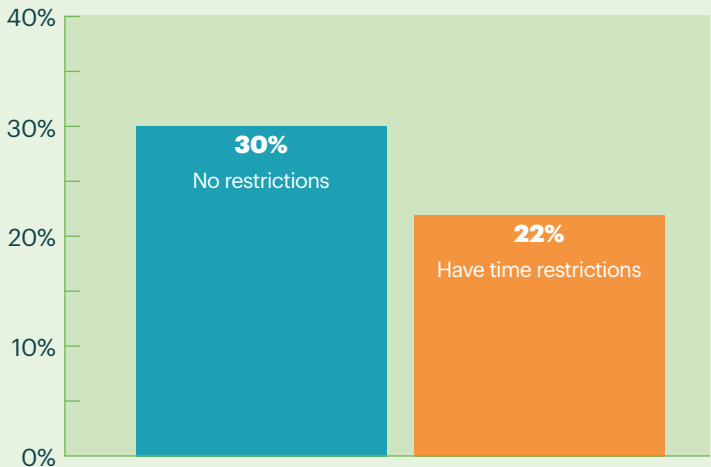


Table 17: Time restrictions and likelihood of being upset/confused/scared by something online (8-12 year olds)

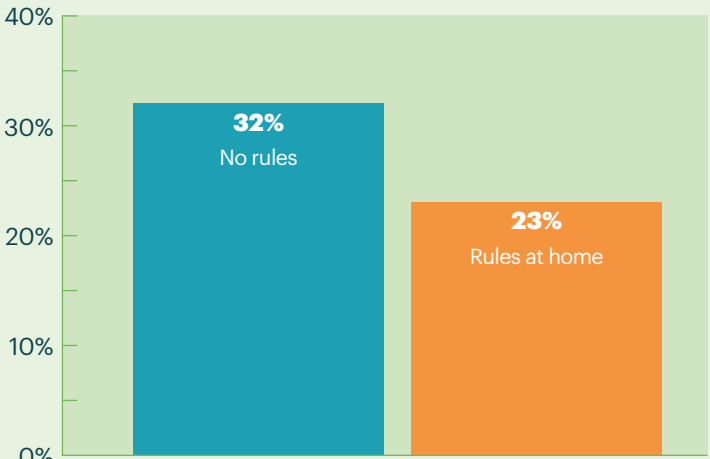


Table 18: Parental supervision and likelihood of being upset/confused/scared by something online (8-12 year olds)

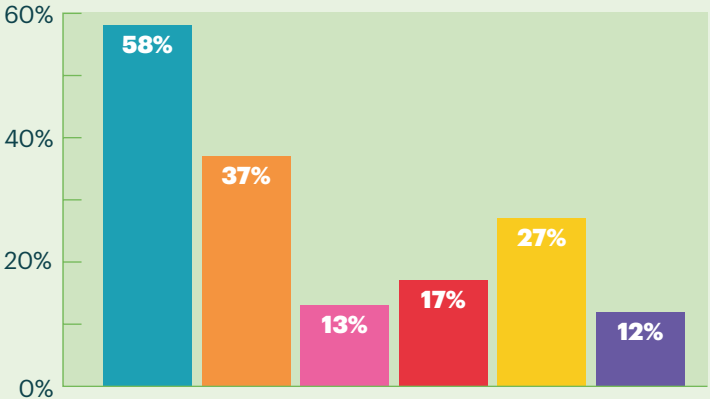
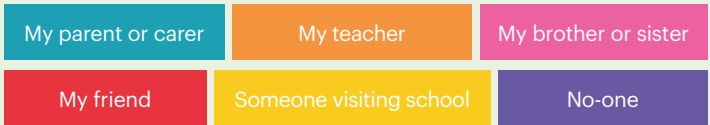


Table 19: Who did you talk to about your online activity in the last year? (8-12 year olds)

There was a marked trend towards greater secrecy and less parental involvement this year when children had a negative experience. Previously we have reported that over half of children (54%) told a parent/trusted adult when bothered or upset by something seen or experienced online. This fell to just 45% this year and 36% of children failed to speak to anyone about this negative experience, an increase of 5% on last year (Table 20).

“So on WhatsApp a person gave my phone number to a guy and he started texting me and then I blocked him and I was scared to tell my mum” *Girl, aged 11*

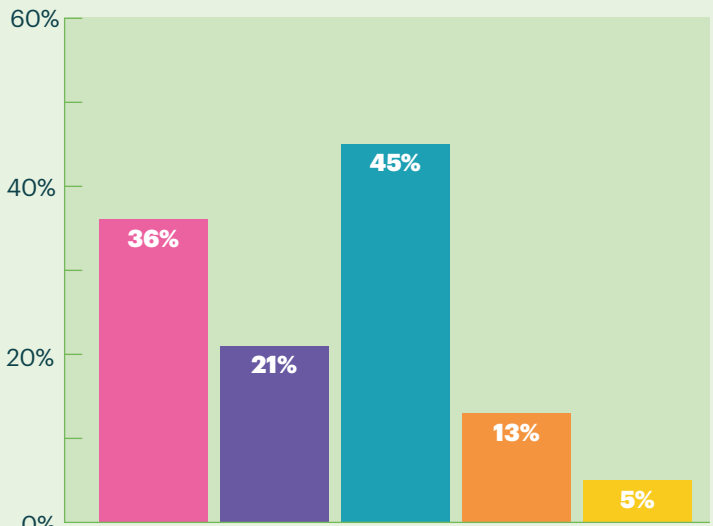
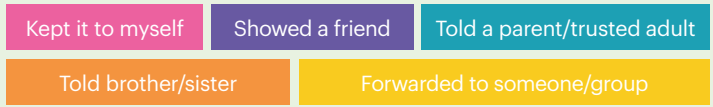


Table 20: If you have seen/experienced something online that bothered you, what did you do about it? (8-12 year olds)

A concerning trend can also be seen when we asked children, who were the victims of cyberbullying, about parental involvement. Less than half involved a parent this year (47%), compared to 52% last year and 60% in both 2021-2022 and 2020-2021 (Table 21).

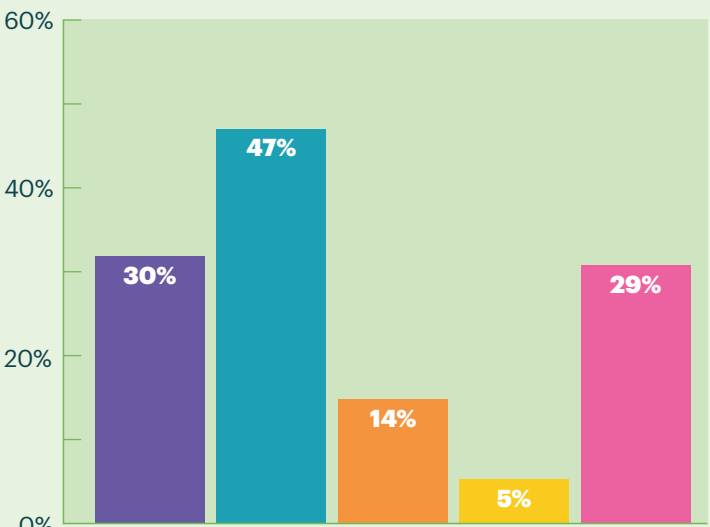
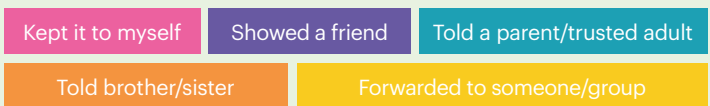


Table 21: If you experienced cyberbullying what did you do about it? (8-12 year olds)

Older, Not Wiser

The situation worsens considerably when children transition into secondary school. Access increases, parental involvement decreases further, and children are clearly ill-prepared.

97% of 12-14 year olds in secondary schools had a smartphone, making it the most popular choice of smart device by far (Table 22) and a huge increase on levels of primary school ownership.

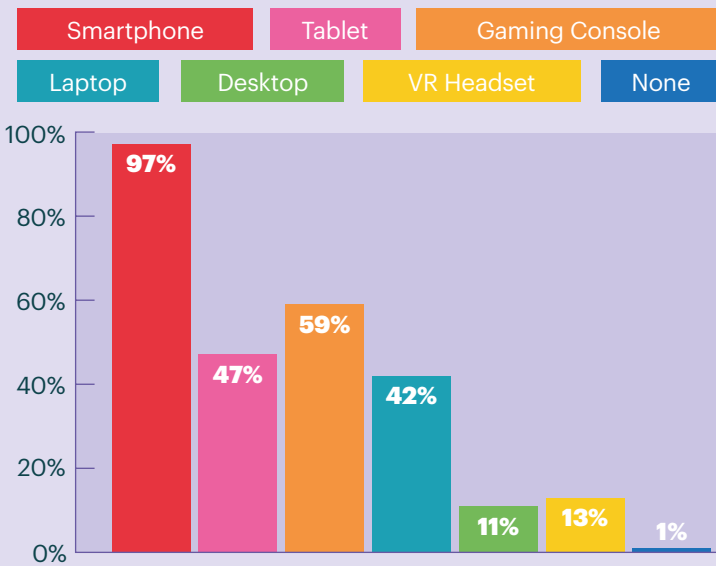


Table 22: Smart device ownership for 12-14 year olds in secondary schools

Children’s focus also shifted significantly to social media and messaging with friends (Table 23). 41% of these children spent most of their time using a range of social media apps (Table 24) vs. 12% of younger children. 22% primarily chatted with friends on WhatsApp and other instant messaging apps compared to 11% of younger children.

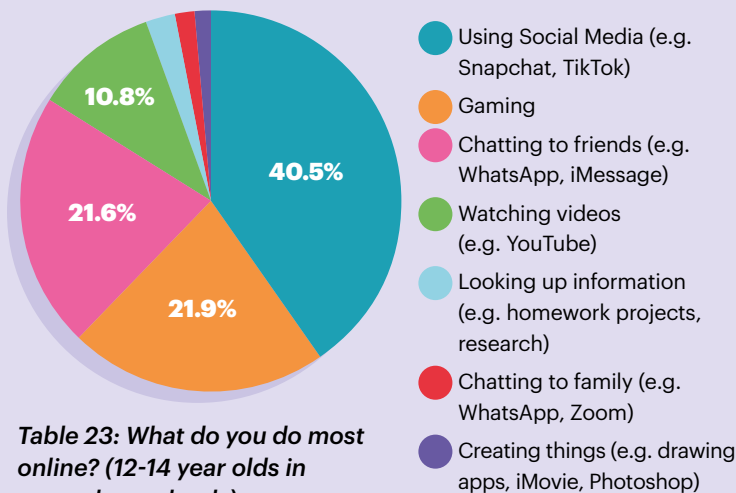


Table 23: What do you do most online? (12-14 year olds in secondary schools)

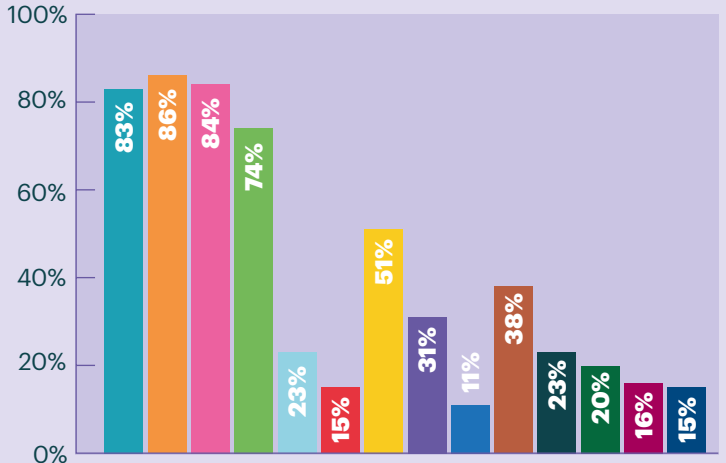
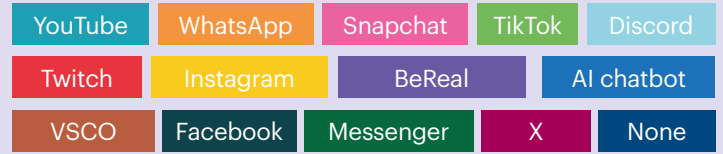
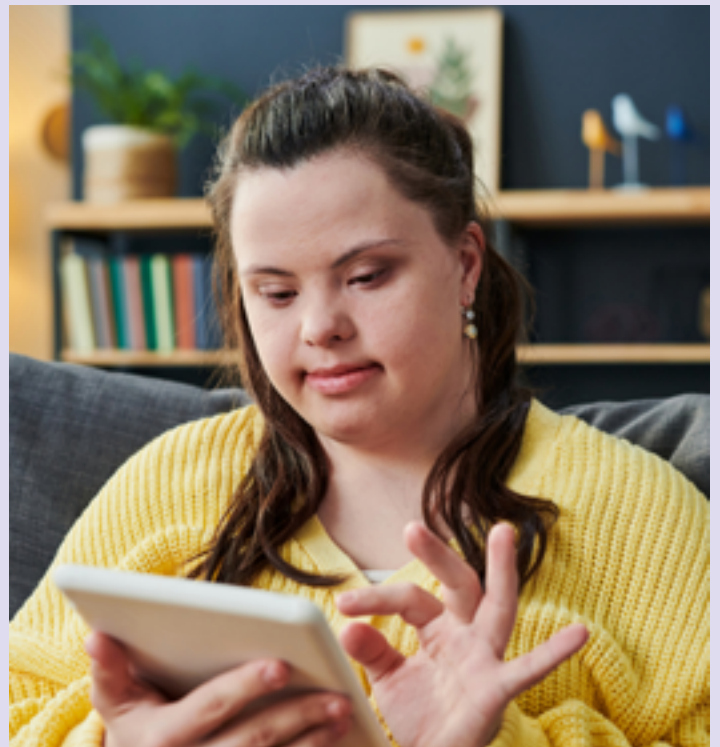


Table 24: Popular online social environments with 12-14 year olds in secondary schools



“Snapchat showed pornography videos to me multiple times and TikTok has showed me lots of stuff related to suicide and self harm.” Girl, aged 12

Where children raised concerns about the content they consumed and negative experiences they had in social online environments, they predominantly identified two apps – Snapchat and TikTok (Table 25). Children were not prepared for the content served to them by the recommender algorithms and/or the interactions they had. These apps failed to provide a safe and enjoyable environment for young people.

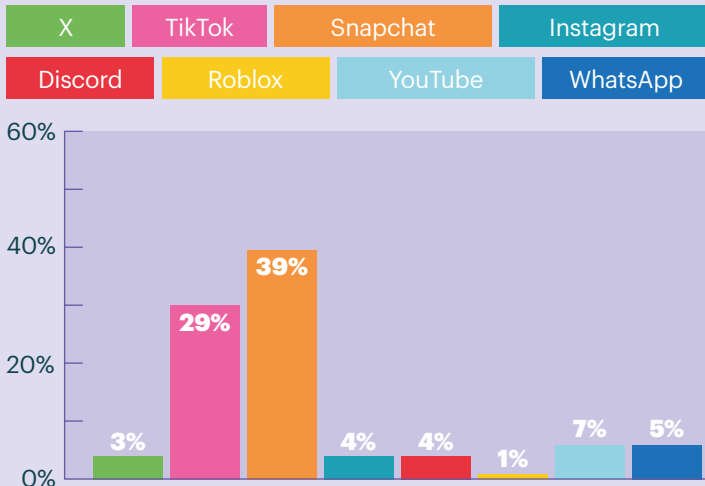


Table 25: What social online environment were you using when you were bothered/upset? (12-14 year olds)

Older children of 12-14 reported that, alongside this greater access, they received much less parental supervision than younger children. A whopping 61% reported being able to go online whenever they wanted to (Table 26) and there was a reduction in the application of each of the rules we considered, when compared to younger children of 8-12 years (Table 27).

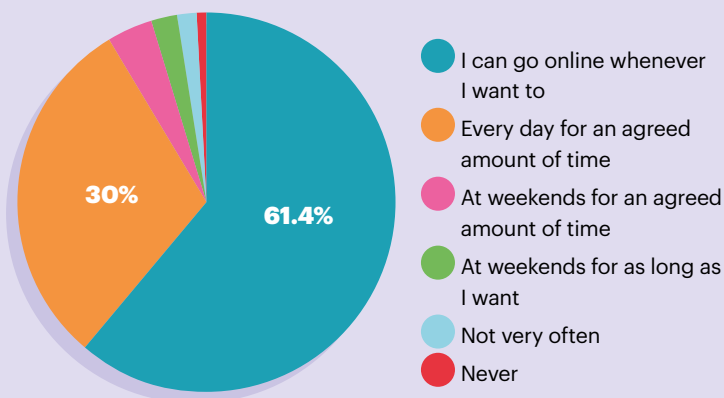


Table 26: When can you go online? (12-14 year olds)

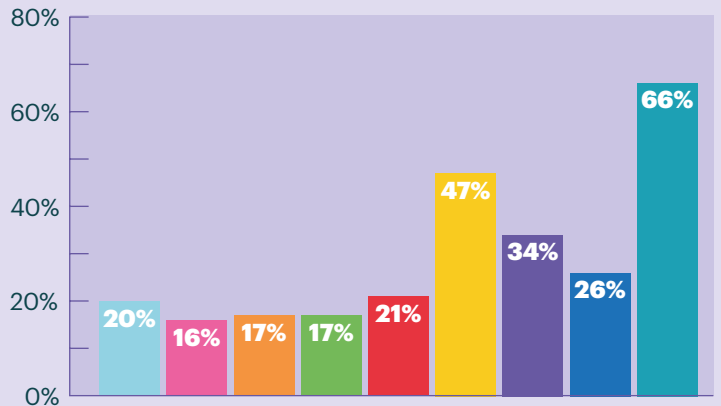


Table 27: What are your rules for going online? (12-14 year olds)

“I was live on TikTok and my friend invited someone to go live with us and he started being racist and said he will come to my house” Girl, aged 12

Reduced parental guidance coupled with a lack of education meant that older children were more likely than younger ones to make poor choices regarding their settings and content shared. Almost half (46%) held some public accounts, compared to 28% of 8-12 year olds. 39% of 12-14 year olds posted videos of themselves online, which is almost double the number we saw among primary school children.

One consequence of this is higher levels of cyberbullying amongst older children of 12-14 years old. 38% experienced cyberbullying (Table 28), a substantial jump from the rate of 25% for younger children. On average, we witnessed a doubling in the incidence rate of each behaviour that we tracked compared to primary school levels, so more children were being targeted in multiple ways. We also saw an increase amongst this age group when compared to last year’s figures across almost all behaviours that we tracked.

“A girl told my friend that I was her gay little girlfriend basically saying me and my friend were dating but we weren’t and she said it in a mean way” *Girl, aged 13*

Older victims of cyberbullying were much less likely to involve a parent than those children still attending primary school, as were those who were bothered/upset by something they saw online. 38% spoke to no-one at all about these negative experiences (Tables 29, 30). Just 36% of cyberbullying victims involved a parent and only 37% told a parent when they were upset by something they saw online. This shows a significant decline in parental involvement when compared to 8-12 year olds (Tables 20, 21), at a critical time when children clearly need support.

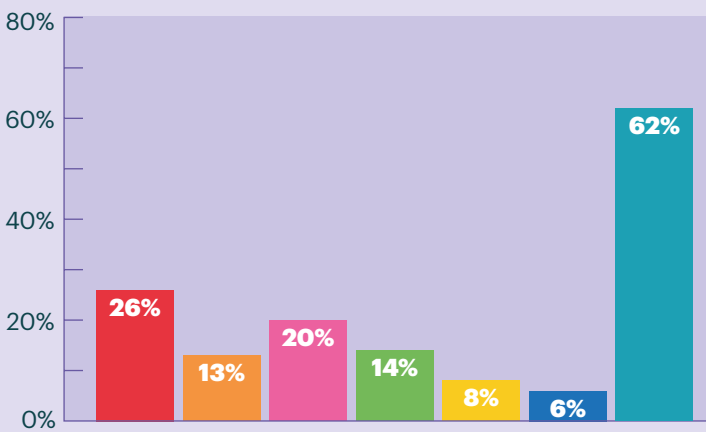
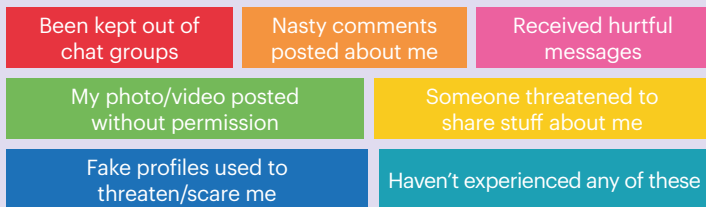


Table 28: Experiences of cyberbullying amongst 12-14 year olds in secondary schools

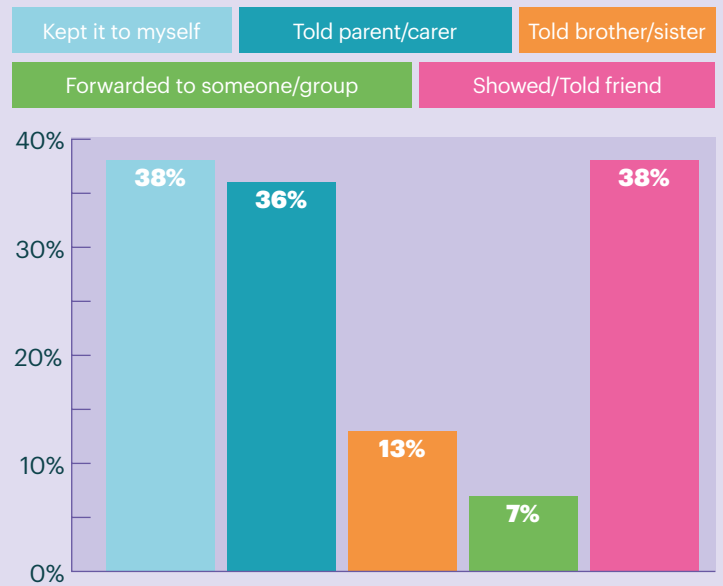


Table 29: Who did you talk to if you were cyberbullied? (12-14 year olds)

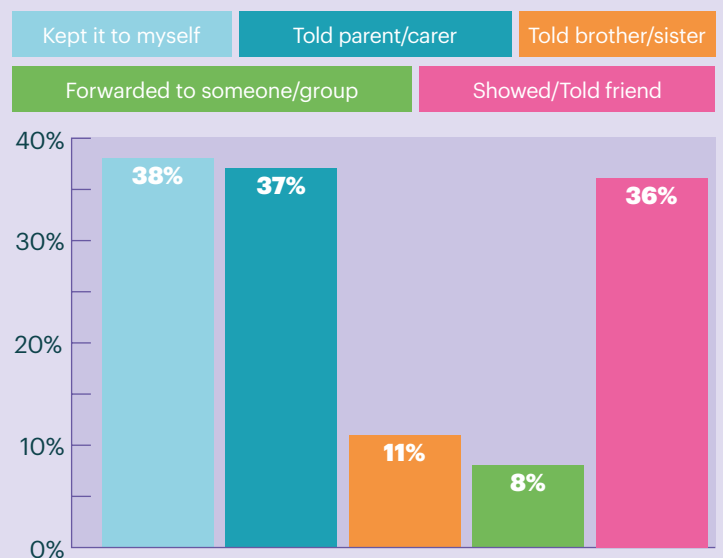


Table 30: Who did you talk to if you saw/experienced something that bothered/upset you? (12-14 year olds)

Recommendations



We need to recognise that a child does not have a 'lightbulb' moment on their 13th birthday or when they graduate primary school that equips them for increased online engagement. The concept of banning smartphones for primary school children as a solution to the problems children face online is quite misleading. We need to prepare children for when they do start to engage online, whatever age that may be, and whatever smart device they may be using.

We know there is no 'silver bullet' solution. It's going to take a range of measures and the involvement of stakeholders across society – parents, educators, policy-makers and the tech industry – all working towards the same goal of children being able to participate in and, crucially, thrive in a digital world. We have seen progress in recent years, particularly with new legislation, the appointment of the Online Safety Commissioner and establishment of Coimisiún na Meán, but progress is still far too slow, and much slower than the warp speed at which the online world moves.

Quite simply, as a society we are failing children every day. We have to do better. Kids want to have fun online and should be allowed to do so, embracing the many benefits that technology has to offer. They can only do this if they are not left to face online challenges alone. If we do not step up to advocate and address the gaps in regulation and education we will continue to see the same negative outcomes for children time and again whenever online access is granted to children and young people in Ireland.

Our recommendations below will help towards achieving a vastly better digital world for children.

1. Make age verification a mandatory requirement for access to online services, and legislate for a minimum age at which online platforms can provide services to children. Define features of online environments in law that are harmful to children and ensure that children are protected from these features by effective age gates, put in place by the online service providers.

2. Make online safety and digital literacy the 4th pillar of the education system, both at primary and secondary levels. These cannot continue to be peripheral subjects, and sufficient time must be allocated to train teachers and the pupils they will educate.

3. Deliver national public awareness campaigns and resources aimed at parents in Ireland to create social norms around online safety, including encouraging smartphone-free environments in schools. Parents must be able to make informed decisions so they can provide the vital guidance that must accompany online access.

Education Programme Impact



This academic year we have delivered impact and support through our education programmes to:

19,136 Children

3,321 Parents

939 Educators

We would like to thank the supporters who make our work possible:



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