CYBERSAFE KIDS

Keeping Kids Safer Online

Online. Safety. Matters.

Trends and Usage Report Academic Year 2022-2023

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.

Contents

CyberSafeKids Academic Year in Review 2022 – 2023

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Foreword

A momentous year for children's online safety

The past year has been a momentous one for children's online safety. The enactment of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022 and the appointment of Ireland's first Online Safety Commissioner are hugely welcome and long-sought developments. Likewise, the coming into effect of the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) and the measures to be taken by platforms, especially the Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs), are aimed at making online providers more accountable. For one, the DSA requires all platforms to implement measures that ensure the privacy, safety and security of minors accessing the service. Targeted ads at children are prohibited, while mitigation measures, such as applying age verification to ensure children are better protected from age-inappropriate content, are required. One expects these significant developments will change how children experience the online world.

Such measures will, of course, take time to have an effect. CyberSafeKids' Trends and Usage Report 2022-2023 will be exceptionally valuable in this context. As it stands, there are some noteworthy trends in this year's report that will be vital to track as new online safety measures are introduced.

From this year's report:

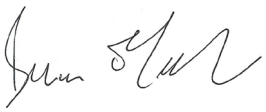
- Cyberbullying continues to be a persistent issue that children report as a concern as they navigate the online world, as it is also for parents and educators. This year's report shows that a quarter of primary school-aged children experience this, rising to 40% of 12-16-year-olds.
- Over a quarter (26%) of younger children 8-12 report experiencing something upsetting online, with just under a third saying that they kept it to themselves.
- Many children appear unaware of how to manage privacy settings, report having contact with strangers and play games aimed at older age groups with people they don't know.

A striking finding in this year's report is the range of responses to children's descriptions of what being online means to them. Only a few children report feeling empowered by what they experience, while the majority say they have no strong feelings about being online. One in five girls say it leaves them feeling 'jealous of others' while a smaller proportion says it makes them feel inadequate or like they are missing out.

These are complex issues that rules or regulations on their own will not solve. As has long been recognised, children's online safety is a shared responsibility that requires all stakeholders, including children, to play their part. Education, as ever, is central to empowering children with the awareness, skills and critical understanding needed to keep safe online. CyberSafeKids plays a crucial role in this by helping to support schools to deliver quality online safety training to children from an early age. Given the fast-changing nature of the digital environment, this is a service that parents need and appreciate.

A recent Eurobarometer study found that most European parents felt unsure about what their children are doing online. This was the case for 85% of parents in Ireland. At the same time, most parents feel they are under increasing pressure to ensure their children stay safe online. 56% of parents in Ireland said they strongly agreed with this statement, while 78% say that tools like parental controls are not sufficient to keep children safe online.

CyberSafeKids' innovative, child-focused online safety awareness programmes help children to be smarter and safer in the online world. Such skills are indispensable not just for their safety and well-being but also for preparing them to become effective digital citizens in a rich and rewarding environment that respects democracy and promotes the rights of all.



Brian O'Neill, Emeritus Professor, Technological University Dublin, Researcher on young people's use of digital technologies, online safety and policy for the digital environment. Board Advisor to CyberSafeKids.

Footnotes

[1]Flash Eurobarometer 532 Protection of children against online sexual abuse, July 2023. Available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2656

Introduction

I'm delighted to introduce CyberSafeKids eighth annual 'Trends and Usage Report' for the 2022-2023 academic year. The rich data collected from over 5,000 children aged 8-16 in schools across Ireland provides valuable insights into how they are spending their time online, the access they have and their experiences therein, positive and negative. The results speak for themselves, and highlight the importance of providing children and parents with robust digital literacy and online safety education.

As a parent myself, I am keenly aware that parental supervision is crucial in managing children's online activity, yet the report reveals a significant number of children have unrestricted access to the online world: 31% of 8-12 year olds and 73% of 12-16 year olds reported they can go online 'whenever I want'. I find it concerning that a third of younger children aged 8-12 yrs game online with people they don't know offline and 61% of those children said they had been contacted by a stranger in an online game. This highlights the need to focus on restricting our kids' contact with strangers when gaming online just as much as we do on social media platforms.

The report also highlights the need for open communication between children and their parents about online activity. Worryingly, it reveals over a quarter of younger children (26%) spoke to their parents less than once a month about what they are doing online with 21% seeing something online they wouldn't want their parents to know about. As parents we need to monitor our kids' devices and check in with them regularly to discuss what they are consuming online - we also need to remember that parental controls are not foolproof and cannot replace hands-on involvement.

2022/23 was the busiest year yet for CyberSafeKids in schools with its online safety education programme reaching over 16,000 children, 2,400 parents and caregivers, and 1,200 educators. Our annual **CyberBreak**, which encourages children, families and people throughout Ireland to take a 24hr digital detox was the most successful to-date with over 11,000 people participating last October. As part of Safer Internet Day 2023, CyberSafeKids launched the **Same Rules Apply** campaign, which highlighted the need to approach parenting our children online in the same way that we approach parenting them offline.

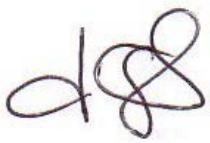
I would like to thank my fellow board members for dedicating their time and expertise to CyberSafeKids' work and to especially thank our outgoing Chairperson, Avril Ronan for all her hard work and commitment since 2015. We also said goodbye to longstanding board member Derval Blehein, as well as Mary Mitchell O'Connor, who joined us in 2020, and I'd like to acknowledge their many contributions. We welcomed Clare Daly and Bryan Hickson to the board, who are already making an invaluable contribution to our ongoing work in safeguarding children online.

CyberSafeKids could not carry out its vital mission without the continued generous support of our key funders over the last year: Accenture Ireland, Community Foundation of Ireland, Rethink Ireland and Trend Micro. A special note of thanks goes to Life's2Good Foundation who have just concluded four years of generous support, and to our donors – Sara Emmanuel and CommSec – for their ongoing support.

To enable CyberSafeKids to continue its critical role in teaching children, parents and all educators about how we can be safer online, I call on all potential investors and supporters to talk to our CEO, Alex, myself or indeed any of the board of directors about how you can make a real impact on children's digital safety and wellbeing in Ireland.

Key among the recommendations outlined in the report is the need for Government to make online safety and digital literacy a core curricular subject at both primary and secondary levels. Additionally, let us not forget that the onus to make the online world safer for our children also lies with the online service providers who need to provide adequate age assurance mechanisms and a safer age-appropriate experience for younger children with the timely removal of harmful and inappropriate content.

Finally, I would like to thank Alex Cooney, CEO, for her unfaltering energy, determination and great leadership of a passionate team at CyberSafeKids who have once again produced invaluable year on year research on children's digital use in Ireland. This research emphasises the need for comprehensive digital literacy and online safety education for children and young people and is critical in the assessment of online safety educational impact to date - identifying the gaps where the need to educate and support children of all ages regarding online safety still remains.



John Fitzsimons,
Chairperson

Our Year In Numbers

Since 2016 we have spoken to over 55,000 children and almost 12,000 parents. This academic year (2022-23) we have delivered impact and support through our education programmes to:

16,000+

Children and young people aged 8-16yrs

2,400+

Parents and Caregivers

1200+

Educators

100+

Over 100 schools engaged with our **CyberSafe Tool for Schools**

6 module

We developed a **6 module** eLearning course for rollout in academic year 2023-24

CYBERSAFE KIDS

CyberSafe **Tool for Schools**

CyberSafe **eLearning**

Points of Interest

8-12 year olds

93%
of 8-12 year olds own a personal **smart device** (47% own a smartphone)
(74% of 12 year olds own a smartphone)

84%
had their **own social media** and/or instant messaging account

Top 4 most popular apps:

- **76%** YouTube
- **39%** WhatsApp
- **37%** Tik Tok
- **37%** Snapchat

33%
of **children gamed with strangers online**. 61% were contacted by a stranger in an online game

28%
of boys **played over-18s games**

26%
have **seen or experienced something online in the last year that "bothered" them**. 31% kept it to themselves

25%
have experienced bullying behaviour online. 28% did not tell anyone about it

31%
have unrestricted access to the online world

12-16 year olds

100%
of 12-16 year olds **own a personal smart device**

40%
have **experienced bullying online**. 43% of girls have been bullied compared to 30% of boys and 74% identifying as non-binary

46% of boys,
28% of girls and
64% identifying as non-binary
...kept it to themselves.

26%
have seen or **experienced something online that "bothered" them**.
40% did not tell anyone about it

40%
reported that they **post videos of themselves online**, 83% of which used TikTok to do so.

Teachers

74%
of teachers told us that **online safety was a significant issue in their school**

62%
of teachers dealt with **online safety incidents,** including cyberbullying more than once over the past year. 21% of teachers dealt with more than 5 online safety incidents

45%
of teachers feel they **don't have sufficient knowledge/skills** to effectively deliver online safety educational messages

CyberSafeKids Academic Year in Review 2022 – 2023

Overview

Delivering online safety education to over 16,000 children

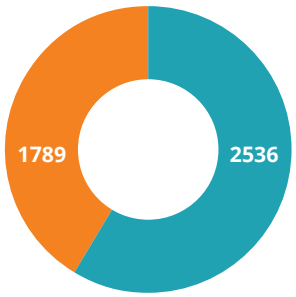
This report provides an overview of the data collected in the 2022-2023 academic year, between September 2022 and June 2023. The data was collected from children via anonymous online surveys before we visited a school or delivered a live webinar.

This academic year we have delivered online safety education to over 16,000 children in schools across Ireland and this report is based on responses from over 5,000 children in schools who opted-in to complete the survey. This year we surveyed 8-12 year olds in 66 primary schools across Ireland; we will refer to this cohort throughout the report as 'younger children'. Additionally – and for the first time – we surveyed children of 12-16 years, in 13 secondary schools, to whom we will refer collectively in this report as 'older children'.

This additional data from older children enables us to report on trends and usage across a wider age range this year and consider the change in usage as children transition from primary to post-primary education. Where it is of statistical relevance we have reported on changes in usage from last year for younger children. A breakdown of the data sample is presented below.

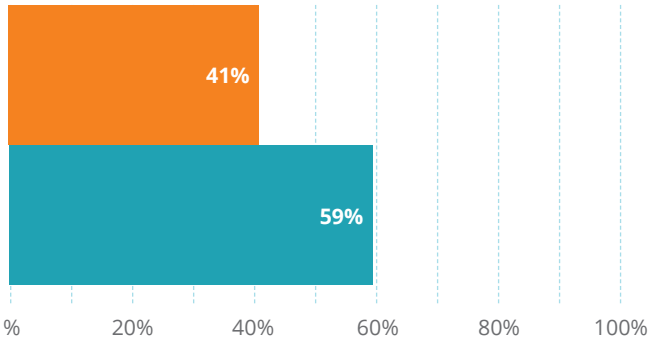
66
Primary schools surveyed across Ireland

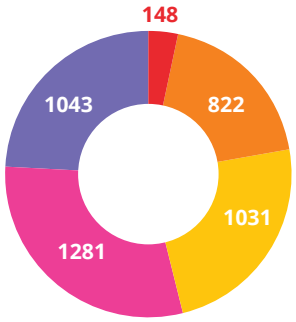
Primary school children, aged 8-12 years



Number of children
4325

- Female
- Male





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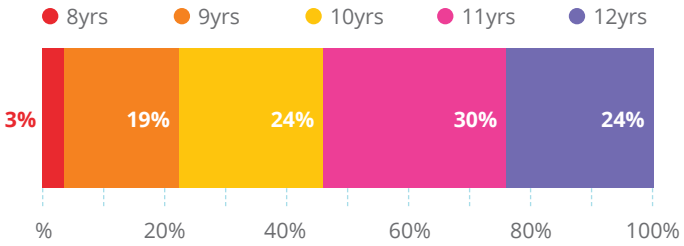
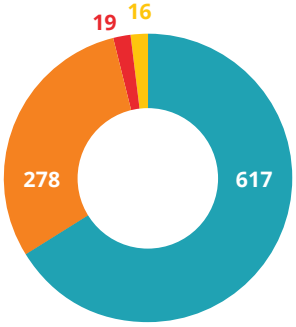
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12

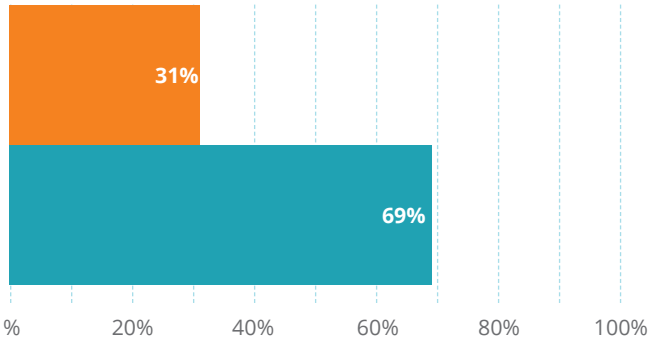


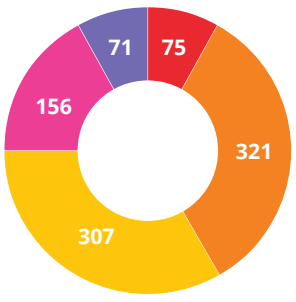
Secondary school children, aged 12 -16 years



Number of children
930

- Female
- Male
- Non binary
- Prefer not to say





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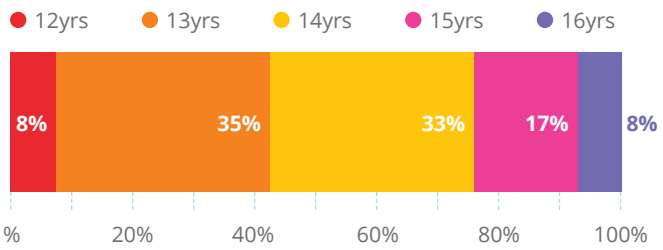
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16



Online Access and Supervision

Equipping children to safely navigate online environments

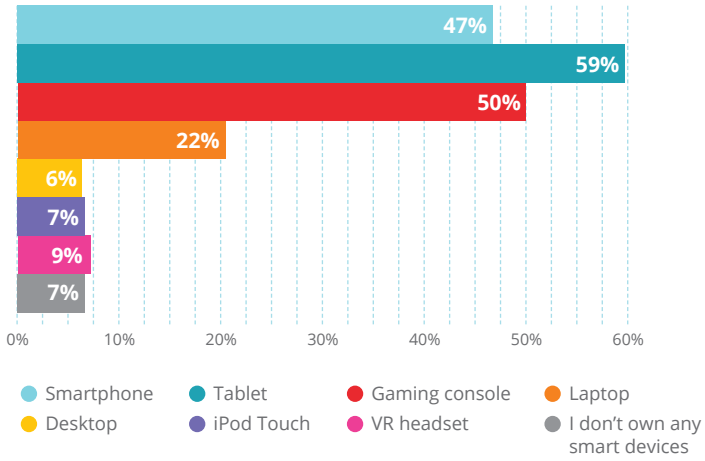
According to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), introduced in 2018, Ireland's digital age of consent is 16, but data from 8-16 years olds shows that they have access to the online world and differing levels of parental supervision from a much younger age. It is therefore vital that children in Ireland receive a balanced and well-informed digital literacy and online safety education about the online world. They must learn how to protect themselves online so that they are better equipped to navigate these environments in a safe and responsible way.

"It is therefore vital that children in Ireland receive a balanced and well-informed digital literacy and online safety education about the online world and how to protect themselves online."

Smart device ownership

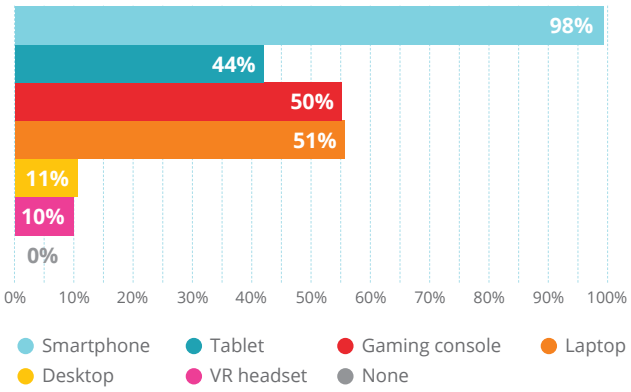
Smart device ownership remained high this year with 93% of 8-12 year olds surveyed saying they own a personal smart device (Table 1)[1]. All (100%) of 12-16 year olds in secondary school owned a smart device (Table 2)

Table 1: Smart device ownership for younger children (8-12 years)



Footnotes
[1] The question posed states not to include "devices that your parents own and just let you use sometimes".

Table 2: Smart device ownership for older children (12-16 years)



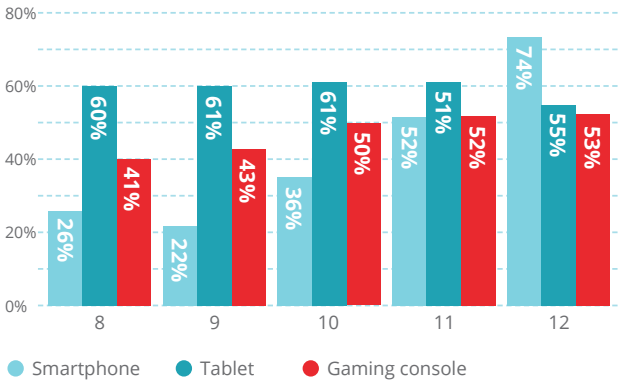
We can deduce from the data that the first smart device owned is most often a tablet or a gaming console (Table 3), with more than half of parents delaying the purchase of a smartphone for their child until the age of 11. Ownership of gaming consoles rose slightly with age from 9-12 and remained constant around 50% in secondary school, while tablet ownership began to drop from the age of 12. Laptop ownership increased at secondary school to 51%, possibly due to students engaging more online for schoolwork.

Importantly, smartphone ownership rose rapidly year on year (Table 3) from 9-12 years.

74%

Almost 3 out of 4 children owned a smartphone at age 12 (74%), before they made the transition into secondary school, when ownership rose to 97% for both 12 and 13 years olds.

Table 3: Ownership of the most popular smart devices, by age (8-12 years)



The popularity of the smart devices that we tracked differed significantly by gender (Tables 4 and 5). Gaming consoles were much more popular with boys (78%) across all ages surveyed, while tablets were the most popular device with 8-12 year old girls (65%). This was likely due to their interests and gaming preferences at this age (young girls gamed more on mobile).

This year we asked about Virtual Reality (VR) headsets for the first time and saw a strong interest in immersive experiences with 9-10% ownership levels. Boys were more likely to own both VR headsets and desktop machines, possibly because of their gaming and in some cases, coding interests.

Table 4: Ownership of smart devices by gender among younger children (8-12 years)

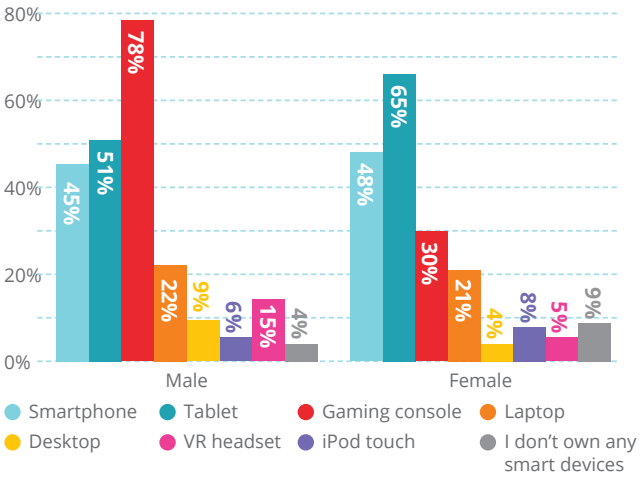
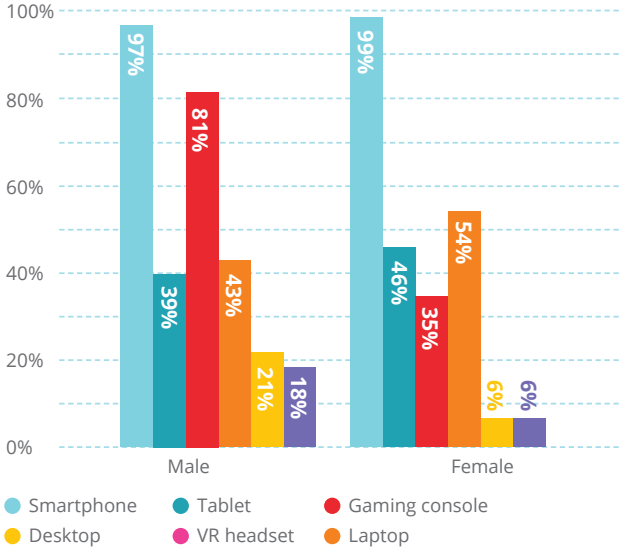


Table 5: Ownership of smart devices by gender for older children in secondary school (12-16 years)



Supervision

The high levels of smart device ownership make it easier for children to engage online. It is vital therefore, when purchasing smart devices for children that the parents/caregivers are ready to assume responsibility for helping their children manage the devices and their online activity.

Unfortunately this is not always the case, as our research this year showed. 3 in 10 children (31%) aged 8-12 years reported having unrestricted access to the online world (Table 6), significantly increasing to 73% for 12-16 year olds (Table 7). Additionally 15% of 8-12 year olds reported having 'no rules' in place about when and where they go online (Table 8), which increased to 23% for 12-16 year olds (Table 9).

"It is vital therefore, when purchasing smart devices for children that the parents/caregivers are ready to assume responsibility for helping their children manage the devices and their online activity."

Table 6: Time restrictions for younger children (8-12 years)

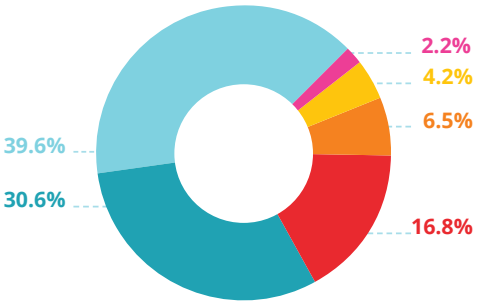
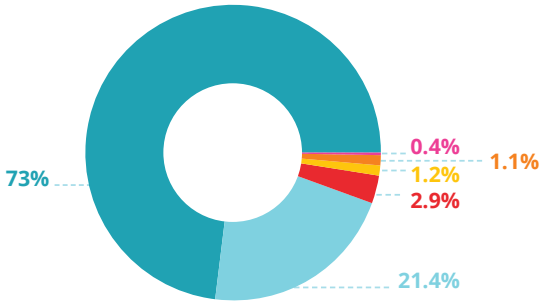


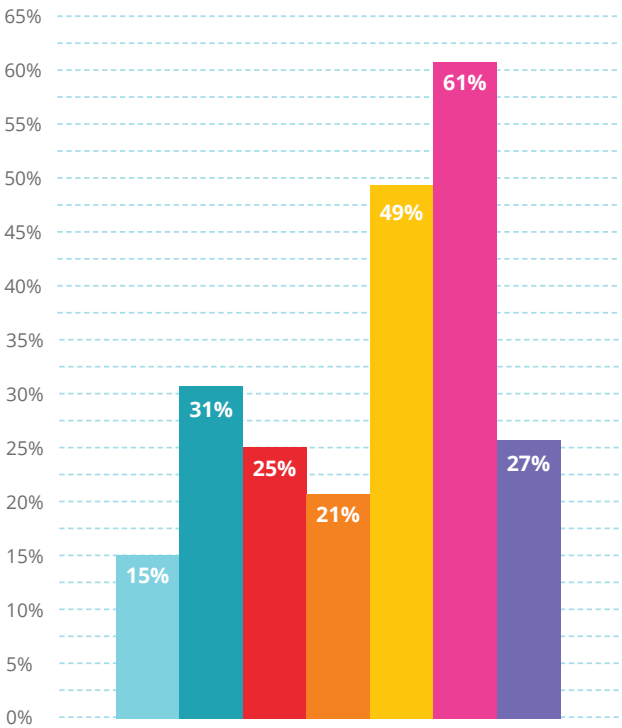
Table 7: Time restrictions for older children (12-16 years)



- Every day for an agreed amount of time
- I can go online whenever I want to
- At weekends for an agreed amount of time
- Not very often
- At weekends for as long as I want
- Never

With the younger age group the main focus of parents was on restricting contact with strangers, more so on social media platforms than when gaming (Table 8). This remained a concern for parents of older children (Table 9), but the most common rule for this age group was to prohibit online purchasing without permission.

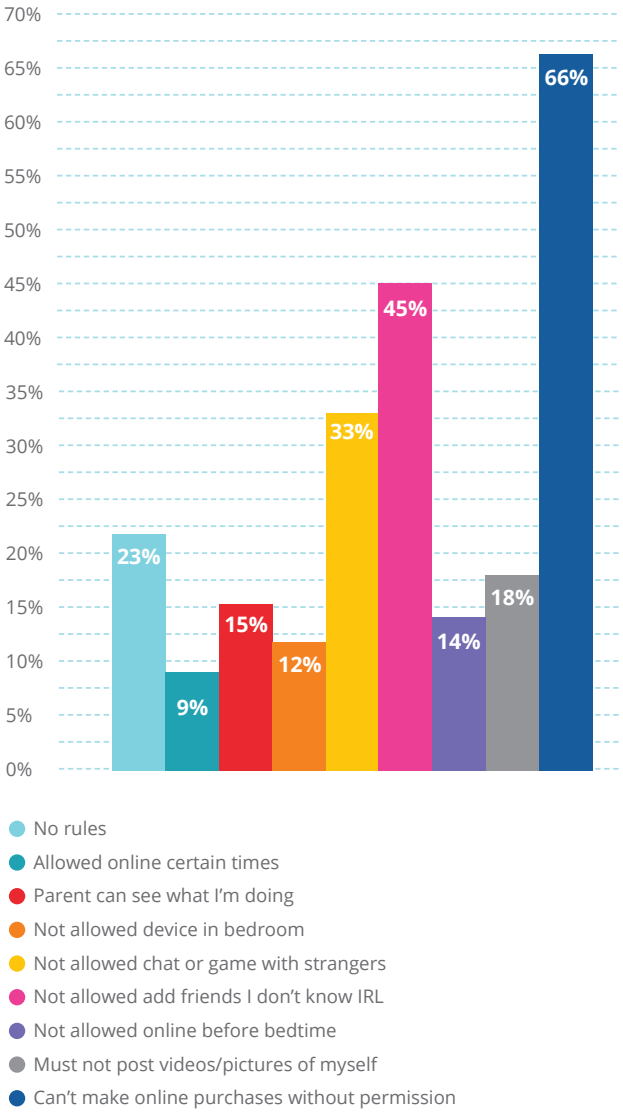
Table 8: Rules for going online for younger children (8-12 years)



- No rules
- Allowed online certain times
- Parent can see what I'm doing
- Not allowed device in bedroom
- Not allowed chat or game with strangers
- Not allowed add friends I don't know IRL
- Not allowed online before bedtime

"The main focus of parents was on restricting contact with strangers, more so on social media platforms than when gaming."

Table 9: Rules for going online for older children (12-16 years)



We found that girls were more likely to talk about their online activity than boys, most commonly with their parents and teachers (Table 10). Teachers need to be well supported in this role; almost three-quarters (74%) of teachers told us that **online safety was a significant issue in their school**. Almost two thirds (62%) of teachers dealt with online safety incidents, including cyberbullying more than once in their school over the past year. 21% reporting more than 5 times, and 19% of teachers reporting 2-5 times. Almost half (45%) of teachers feel they **don't have sufficient knowledge or skills** to effectively deliver educational messages relating to online safety. 98.5% of teachers surveyed told us that they felt it was beneficial to get external experts on online safety into the school to talk to the students.

Case Study 1

Online Safety Incidents at Primary School*

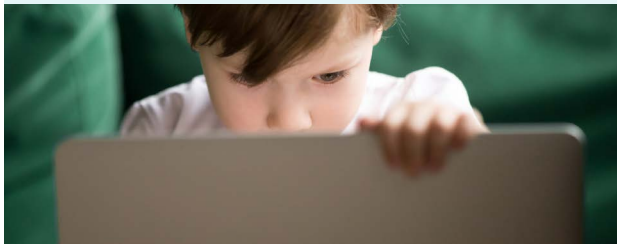
Concern about the kind of content children are being exposed to online

A primary school principal reported that a group set up by fifteen boys in 6th class on one of the popular apps was sharing porn and images and video of a toddler being abused by an adult. It came to the attention of two of the parents who then informed the principal. The group was shut down.

Intervention/action:

In this case, the Gardai should be informed as there is a child victim involved and the possession and sharing of such imagery is illegal. The school should talk to the whole class about online etiquette and the importance of telling a trusted adult if they've seen content online that upsets and/or confuses them. The school could invite the Gardai to give a talk in general terms about the illegality of having or sharing intimate images of a child on a device. Parents should also be informed and asked to keep an eye on what their kids are doing online, as well as having conversations about what is/isn't okay etc. The school could send a follow-up email with talking points for both children and parents.

**anonymised to protect the identity of the individuals and families concerned.*



Disappointingly, more than 1 in 4 younger children (26%) spoke to their parents less than once a month about what they are doing online (Table 11) and 1 in 5 (21%) saw something they wouldn't want their parents to know about (Table 12).

"Normalising the discussion about online activity in the home environment is important if children are to open up about their experiences – both negative and positive."

74%

almost three-quarters (74%) of teachers told us that online safety was a significant issue in their school.

Table 10: Who younger children talked to about online activity in the last year (8-12 years)

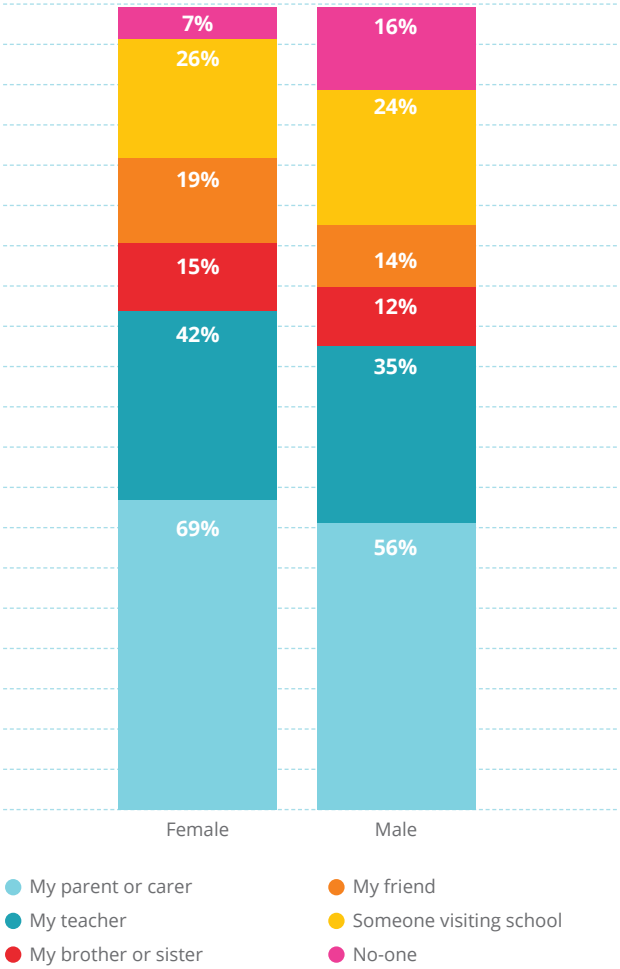


Table 11: How often younger children (8-12 years) talked to their parents about online activity

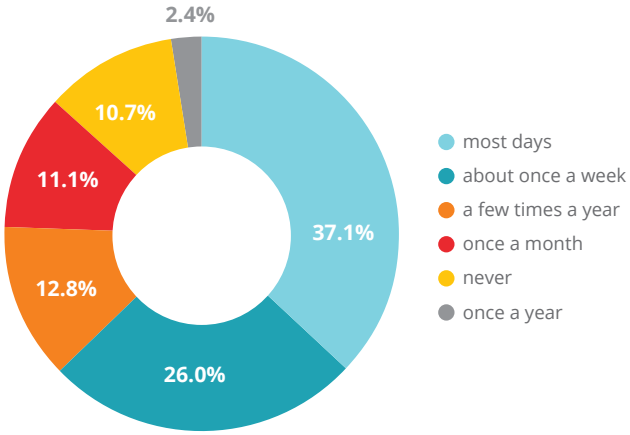
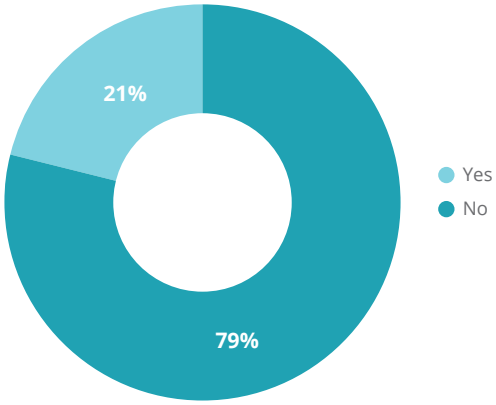


Table 12: Saw something they wouldn't want their parents to know about (8-12 years)



Online Activities

Building skills that are necessary for the world we live and work in

There are so many great opportunities available to children when they engage online to build skills that are necessary for the world we live and work in today. Our research shows, however, that children aged 8-12 were very active on platforms not designed for younger users and they are not legally allowed to sign up to, given data privacy and protection rights for children.

Younger children reported spending most of their online time gaming (36%), watching videos (26%), using social media (15%), and chatting to friends (13%), in that order. Boys were more likely to game than girls, who were more likely to spend their time on social media (Table 13). Social media engagement and chatting to friends online increased with age, as time spent gaming and watching videos declined overall (Table 14). For older boys of 12-16 years, gaming (36%) remained the most popular way to spend time (Table 15), followed closely by social media (32%), while older girls' focus shifted even more firmly to social media platforms (55%).

"Children aged 8-12 were very active on platforms not designed for younger users and they are not legally allowed to sign up to, given data privacy and protection rights for children."

Table 13: By gender, younger children (8-12 years), spent most of their time online...

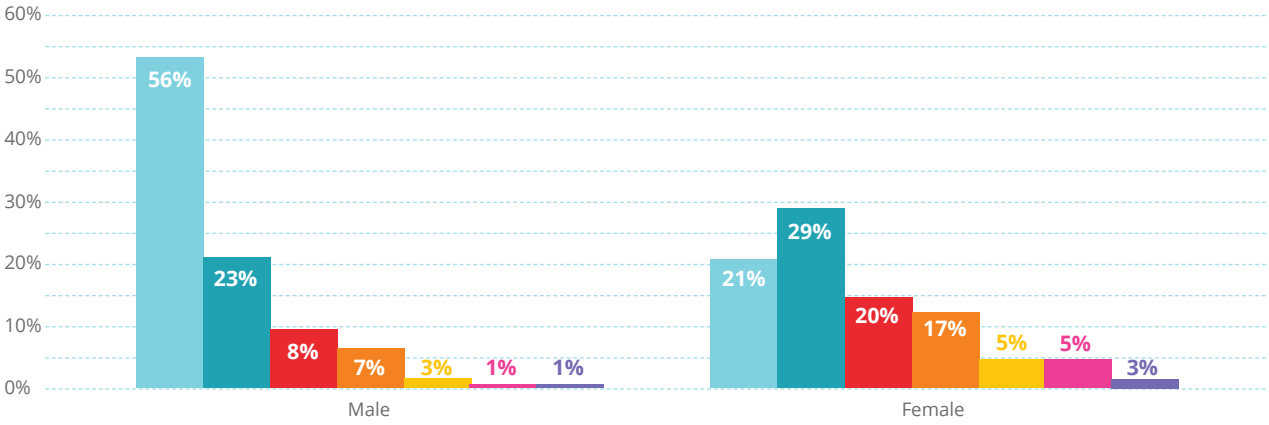


Table 14: By age, younger children (8-12 years), spent most of their time online...

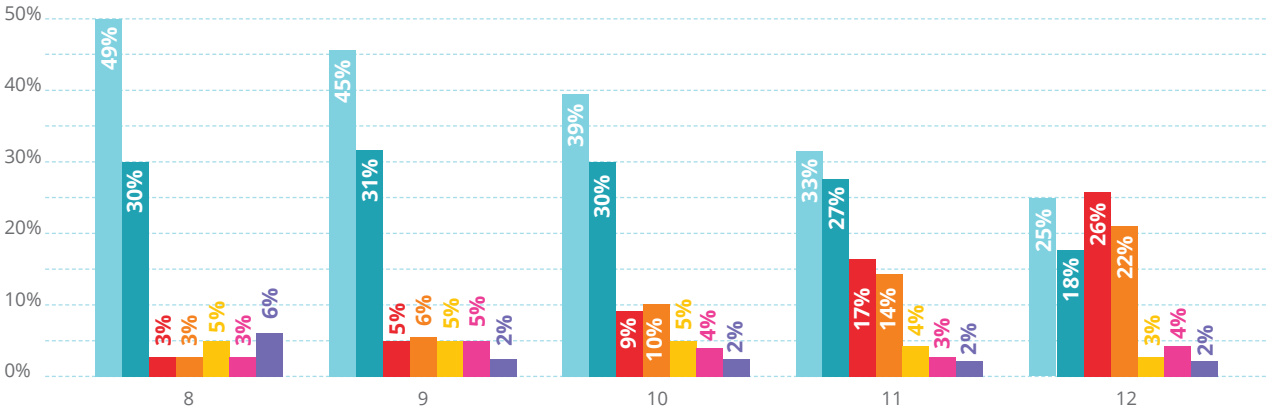
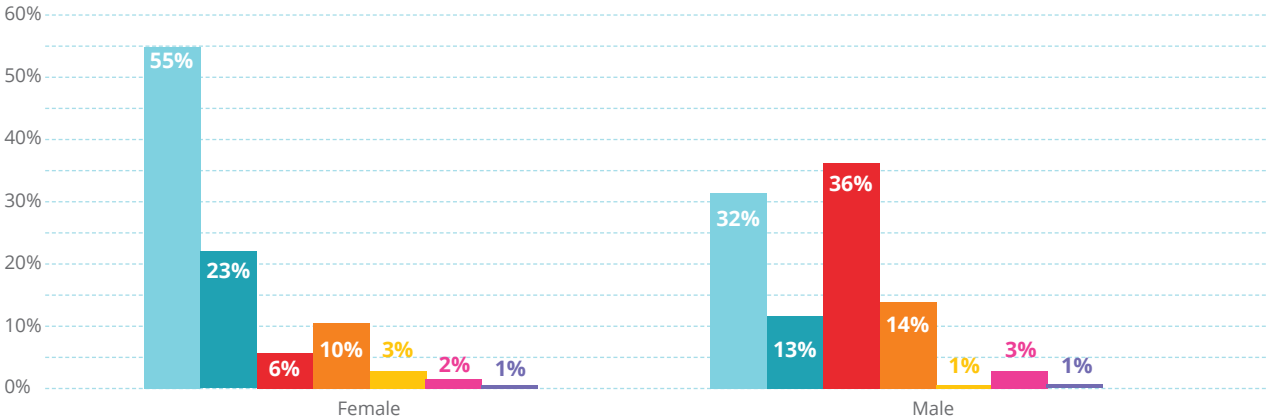


Table 15: By gender, older children (12-16 years) spent most of their time online ...



- Using Social Media (e.g Snapchat, TikTok)
- Chatting with friends (e.g. WhatsApp, iMessage)
- Gaming
- Watching videos (e.g. YouTube)
- Chatting to family (e.g. WhatsApp, Zoom)
- Looking up information (e.g homework projects, research)
- Creating things (e.g. drawing apps, iMovie, Photoshop)

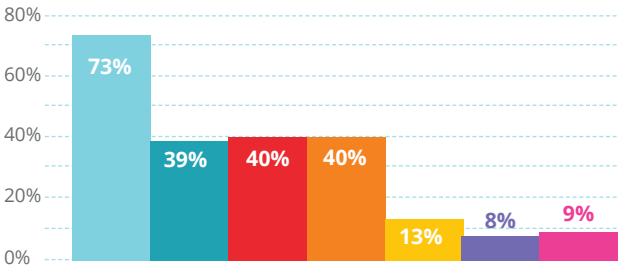
Social media and messaging

Overall, 84% of 8-12 year olds reported being on social media and messaging apps with their own accounts. The 4 most popular apps across all ages and genders remain unchanged from recent years. For YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok and Snapchat, we saw usage of 76%, 39%, 37% and 37% respectively amongst 8-12 year olds.

The top 6 platforms differed by gender; boys favoured Discord (22%) and Twitch (17%), apps popularised by the gaming community, while girls used image-focused apps more, such as Instagram (13%) and BeReal (9%) (Table 16). BeReal, the photo sharing app designed to be 'more authentic', is a new addition to the top apps this year and it remains to be seen if it will retain the interest of this age group next year.

"Boys favoured Discord (22%) and Twitch (17%), apps popularised by the gaming community, while girls used image-focused apps more, such as Instagram (13%) and BeReal (9%)."

Top 7 apps for Girls



Top 7 apps for Boys

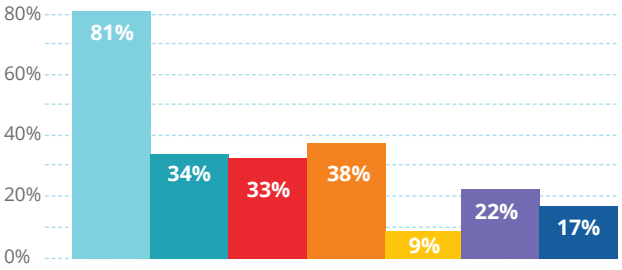


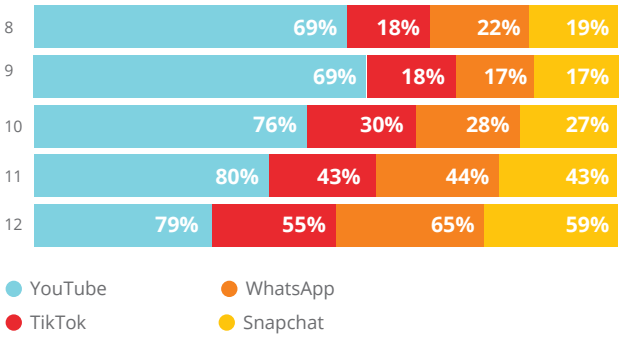
Table 16: By gender, top 7 apps used (8-12 years)

YouTube	Instagram
TikTok	Discord
Snapchat	Twitch
WhatsApp	BeReal

While YouTube and WhatsApp usage remained high, we saw decreases on some platforms among 8-12 year olds. The largest decrease was seen on TikTok, a fall of 10% from 2021-2022 levels. This is particularly noticeable for 9 year olds, an alarming 37% of whom reported having TikTok accounts last year, versus 18% this year. This decline in TikTok usage among 8-12 year old users may be the result of efforts by TikTok to close more underage accounts. It may also be related to parents' concern about security and privacy issues highlighted by media coverage this year, causing some parents to delay younger users from signing up. TikTok usage is now on a par with Snapchat overall at 37%, while last year its popularity among young children surpassed all apps other than YouTube.

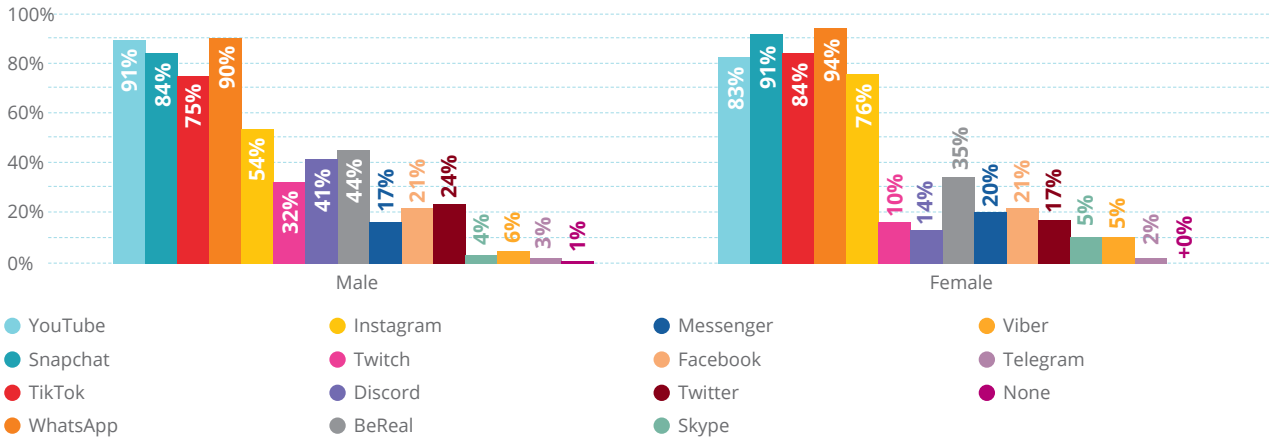
Usage of social media platforms rose with age (Table 17), in spite of these platforms prohibiting use for under-13s or in the case of WhatsApp, under-16s. 79% of 12 year olds in primary school were on YouTube, 65% on WhatsApp, 55% on TikTok and 59% on Snapchat. This rose to 88% on WhatsApp, 80% on TikTok, and 89% on Snapchat for 12 year olds who have already started secondary school. These findings make it clear that age assurance measures on these platforms were inadequate and determined children had little trouble bypassing them. Some platforms may provide a slightly altered experience for young teenagers (13-16 year olds) but we have no way of knowing if 8-12 year olds will bypass these safeguards also, when giving a false date of birth at sign up.

Table 17: % of younger children (8-12 years) with their own social media and messaging accounts for top 4 apps, by age



TikTok, Snapchat and WhatsApp usage increased greatly following the transition to secondary school (Table 18), reaching similar or higher levels to YouTube for this age group. Older children aged 12-16 tended to sign up for other apps in greater numbers than the younger children surveyed, with Facebook, Messenger, and Twitter among the next most popular apps. BeReal was very popular with older boys, as well as girls.

Table 18: % of 12-16 year olds with their own social media and messaging accounts, by gender



VSCO, the photo editing and sharing app, was popular with the older age group. This was particularly true for girls (12% had accounts) and among 14-15 year olds (also 12%). This app was rarely mentioned by younger children.

Amongst 8-12 year old boys, we noted a couple of instances of OnlyFans usage, the 18+ subscription service, which is often (but not solely) associated with creators of adult content.

In addition to messaging over WhatsApp and on social media, many children also used Apple and Google messaging apps on mobile. More child-friendly apps, JusTalk Kids and Stars Messenger, were popular for 8-10 year olds in a small number of the primary schools that we surveyed. These options can work well when usage is agreed within a school community, allowing younger children to connect more safely with one another.

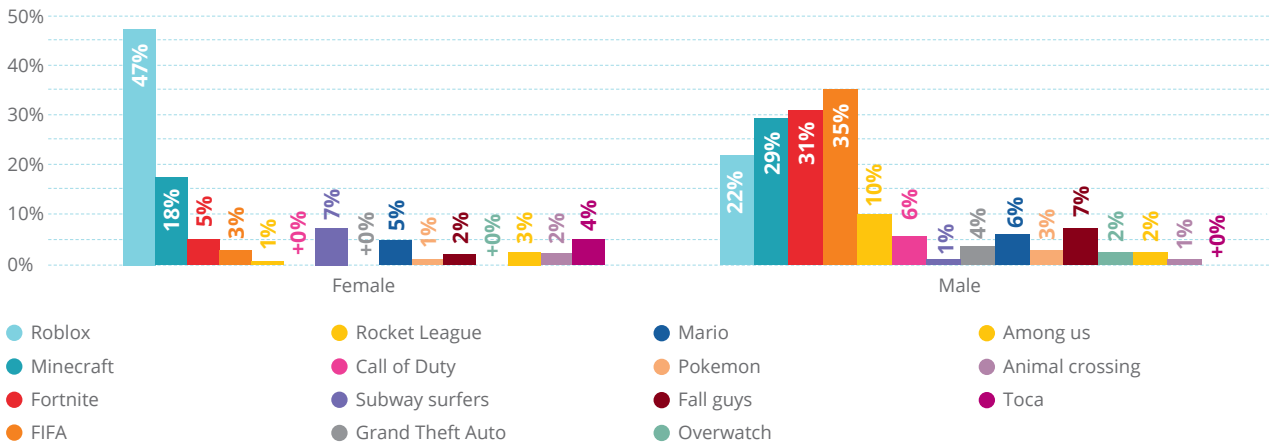
Gaming

Based on our conversations in the classroom it comes as no surprise to us that gaming is a hugely popular activity for young children.

"Just 14% of girls and 2% of boys aged 8-12 reported that they don't game in some form or other."

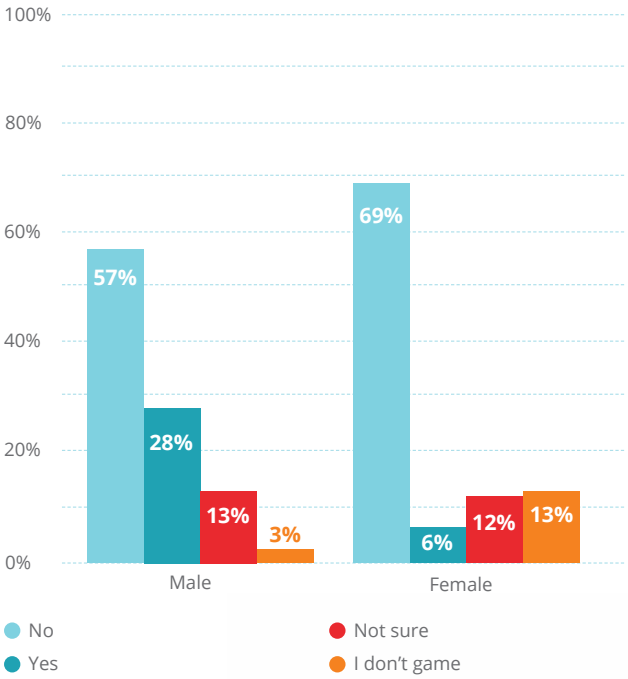
Younger boys and girls in general had different gaming interests (Table 19). Minecraft proved popular with both, although more so with boys. Girls favoured Roblox (47%) and casual mobile games, like Subway Surfers, but this interest lessened with age. As expected, boys preferred more competitive environments, such as shooter- and sports-themed games, with FIFA and Fortnite the most popular game choices (35% and 31% respectively). 28% of boys also reported playing over-18s games vs just 6%

Table 19: Most popular games with younger children, by gender (8-12 years)



of girls (Table 20), with Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto being the most commonly mentioned over-18s titles. This year we can also say that gaming continued to be a great source of entertainment for older children of 12-16 (15%), and older boys (36%) in particular, although we did not track specific gaming titles for this age group.

Table 20: Younger children (8-12 years) who played over-18s rated games in the last year, by gender



Online Exposure

Our research highlights that children do not put sufficient emphasis on protecting their their privacy

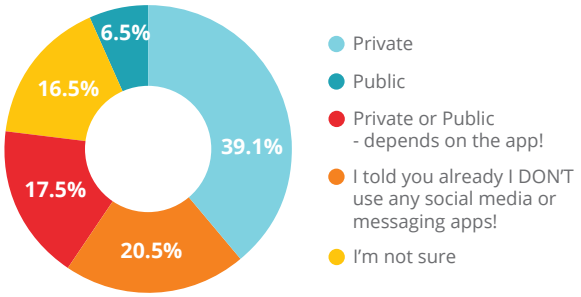
Our research this year highlights again that children do not put sufficient emphasis on protecting their privacy and restricting contact with strangers. They often chose to have public accounts, had friends and followers they did not know, posted videos online, and gamed with strangers.

"The need for education in this area is clear if they are to reduce their digital footprint and protect themselves from harassment and inappropriate contact."

Privacy settings

Many of the 8-12 year olds we surveyed maintained public accounts on some social media platforms or were unsure of their account settings (Table 21) and the number of private accounts holders (39%) decreased by 3% this year.

Table 21: Privacy settings on social media accounts of younger children (8-12 years)



As children get older they are more likely to set their accounts to private and to know their settings (Table 22, Table 23). Just 22% of 8 year olds but 59% of 16 year olds stated that they had private accounts.

"It is very concerning that the youngest account holders are the most likely to expose themselves to harm."

They were also least likely to understand privacy settings, with 32% of 8 year olds and 23% of 9 year olds unsure of their privacy settings. The provision of privacy by default for all account holders would help in this regard. While some platforms have provided this for young teens, we cannot say whether younger children, when inputting a fake date of birth to sign up, will indicate one over 16 anyway and therefore bypass this important safeguard.

Table 22: Privacy settings by age on social media accounts of younger children (8-12 years)

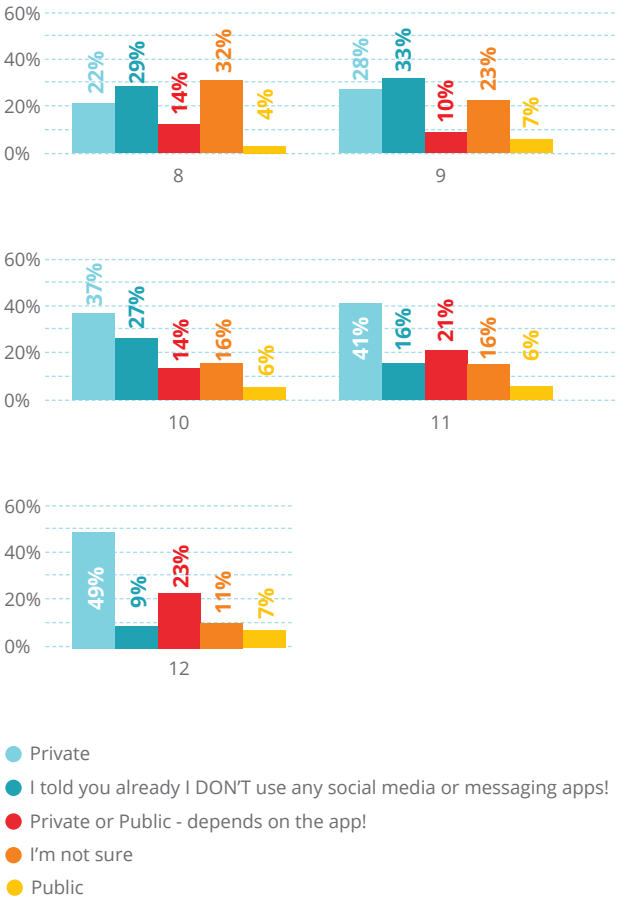
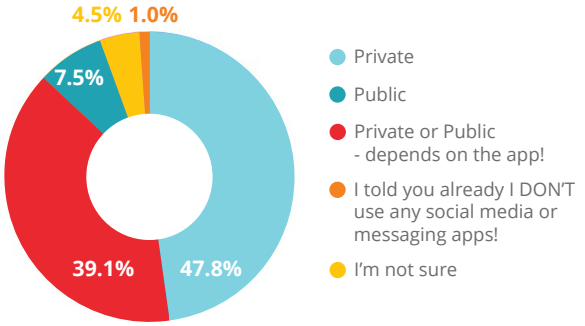


Table 23: Privacy settings for older children in secondary school (12-16 years)



We found that girls were more likely to have private accounts than boys. 45% of girls and 31% of boys, aged 8-12, held private accounts and this rose to 53% of girls and 40% of boys aged 12-16.

Contact with strangers

Our research shows that children frequently gamed with strangers and many had friends and followers they did not know on social media, whether they opted for private or public accounts, this could expose them to harmful contact online and they were also more likely have consequences for their digital footprint.

Younger boys seem less concerned in general about contact with strangers than girls. Boys were more likely to have public accounts and they were also more likely to have friends and followers they did not know in real life on social media (Table 24), and to have played games with people they do not know (Table 25).

Table 24: Do you have friends and followers you do not know in real life? (8-12 years)

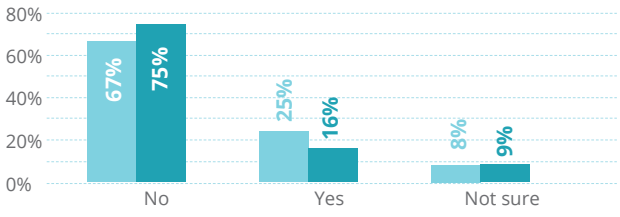
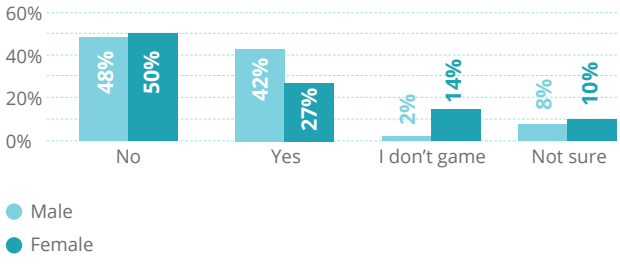
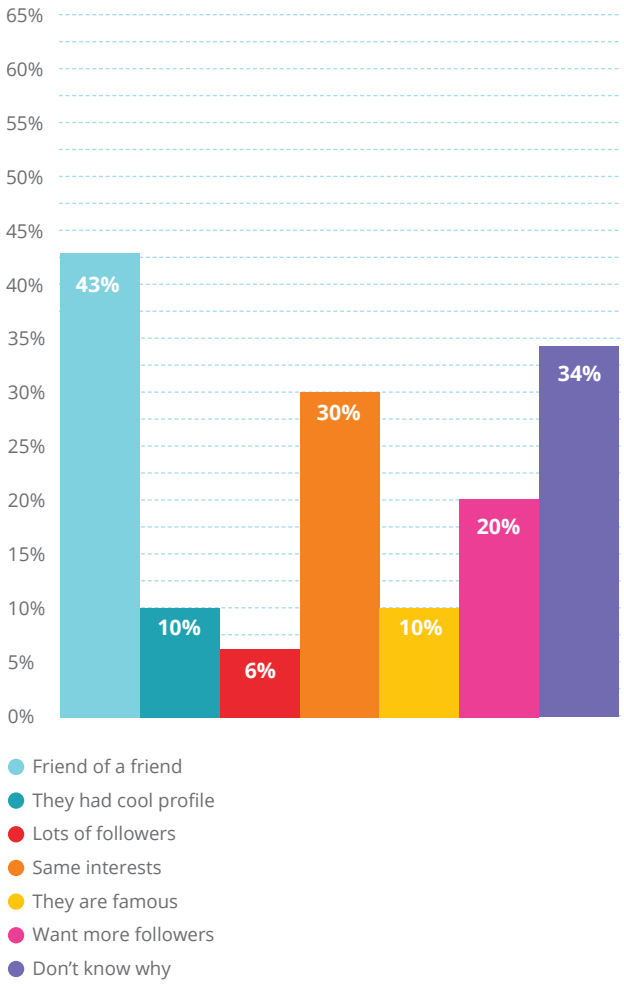


Table 25: Do you game with people you do not know in real life? (8-12 years)



Younger children accepted people they did not know as friends and followers on social media for a variety of reasons (Table 26). The most likely reason was that they believed them to be a "friend of a friend" and as a result possibly felt confident that the person was not a predator or someone out to scam or harass them. The second most common reason given was "I don't know", with other popular reasons being common interests and a desire to build a larger following. We know from conversations in the classroom, as well as these research findings that young children often fail to understand the implications of permitting private online interactions with people they do not know well or trust, as well as giving them access to all information they share online.

Table 26: Why did you accept friends and followers you do not know? (8-12 years)



Case Study 2

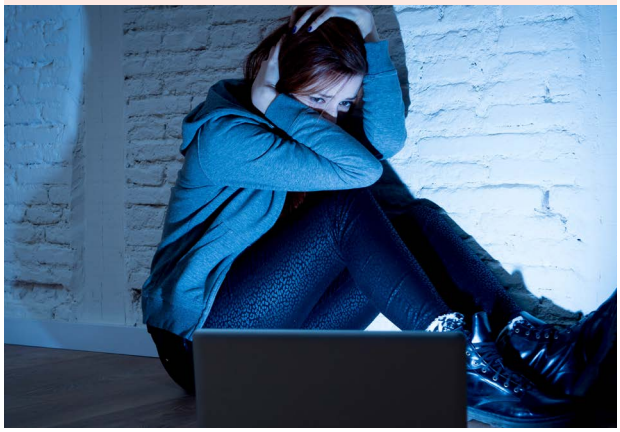
Sexual exploitation online* (often referred to as "Sextortion")

There have been incidents where boys/girls think they are being contacted by someone of their age in their year or class. However, people pretending to be someone they're not may share inappropriate imagery requesting the contacted child to send images/videos (graphic) of themselves in return. Once sent they'll receive a threatening message saying that unless they pay a sum of money, those images/videos will be shared with a group that they'll set up with their contacts (e.g. peers from school and even family members).

Intervention/action:

Should this happen to any family, it's important to reassure your child that they are not alone. These perpetrators more than likely have a large number of victims at any one time. Report the account through the online services' reporting channels and then block the account immediately and report it to the Gardai, who should take details of the account and investigate it. Ask to speak to a detective from the Divisional Protective Services Unit (DPSU) as they will have specialist knowledge of online exploitation and every area should now have this expertise available. We advise parents to talk to the school confidentially so that they can keep an eye on the child as well. Also, keep in mind that any sexualised chat that occurs early in a connection is often a red flag so keep an eye on younger children's accounts and ensure that you're having conversations with older kids about the risks and red flags.

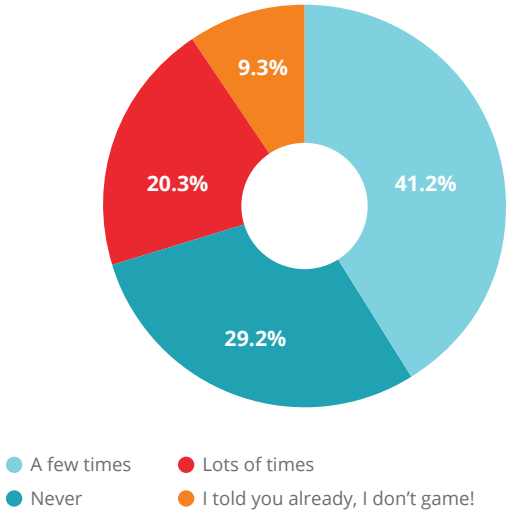
**anonymised to protect the identity of the individuals and families concerned.*



"Contact with strangers through games is also an area of concern because predators and cybercriminals operate on gaming platforms, as well as other online platforms."

Many children (61%) aged 8-12 years old reported being contacted through online games by people they had never met in real life either 'lots of times' (20%) or 'a few times' (41%) (Table 27). It is important that children are educated about how to protect themselves in multiplayer environments, in which they are spending significant time. They should be encouraged to game with people they know or against the computer, limit voice and chat interaction and never to click on links or download anything without permission from a trusted adult.

Table 27: How often have you been contacted through a game by someone you have not met in real life? (8-12 years)



Posting videos online

Staying with privacy concerns, we noted that the numbers posting videos online on social media platforms grew with age from 8-12 years (Table 28) and increased further for older children. It is worth noting that girls posted videos of themselves online more than boys and this became even more pronounced for 12-16 year olds (Tables 28 and 29), with 1 in 2 girls reporting that they had posted. Posting videos can have consequences for digital reputation and may be a factor in girls (more than boys) setting accounts to private and not having friends/followers they didn't know.

"Girls posted videos of themselves online more than boys..."

Table 28: By age, do you post videos of yourself online?

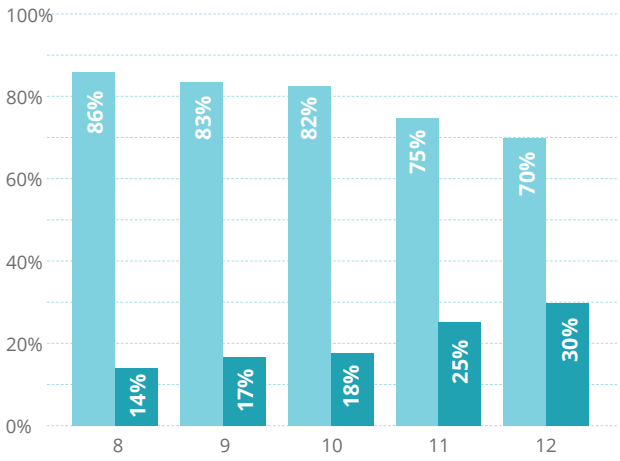


Table 29: Do you post videos of yourself online? by gender (8-12 years)

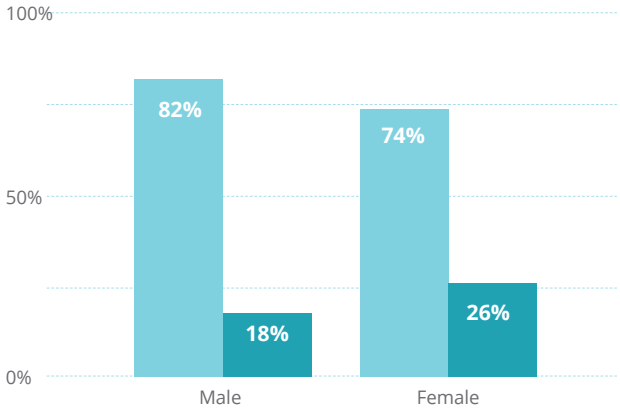
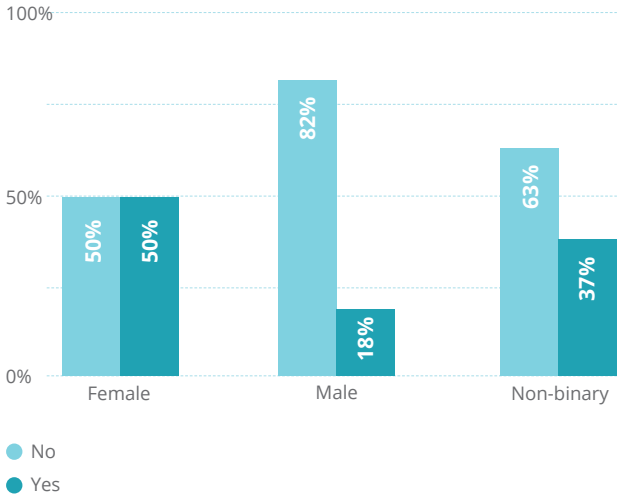


Table 30 Do you post videos of yourself online? by gender (12-16 years)



"The most popular platform for posting videos was TikTok across all ages (Tables 31 and 32)."

Boys of 8-12 posted more to YouTube than girls, but posting to YouTube decreased for 12-16 years olds when fewer boys posted videos. Boys aged 8-12 said they posted "somewhere else" in higher numbers than girls. Given that many boys indicated they had accounts on Twitch it seems likely that some may have posted content to this platform, but we did not track this specifically.

Table 31: Where do you post videos? by gender (8-12 years)

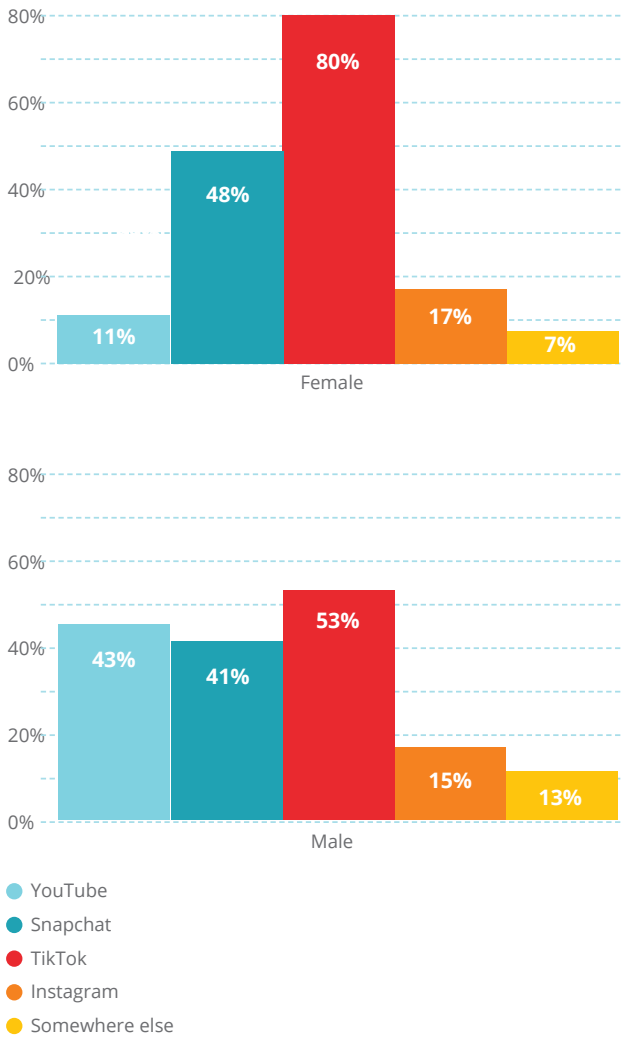
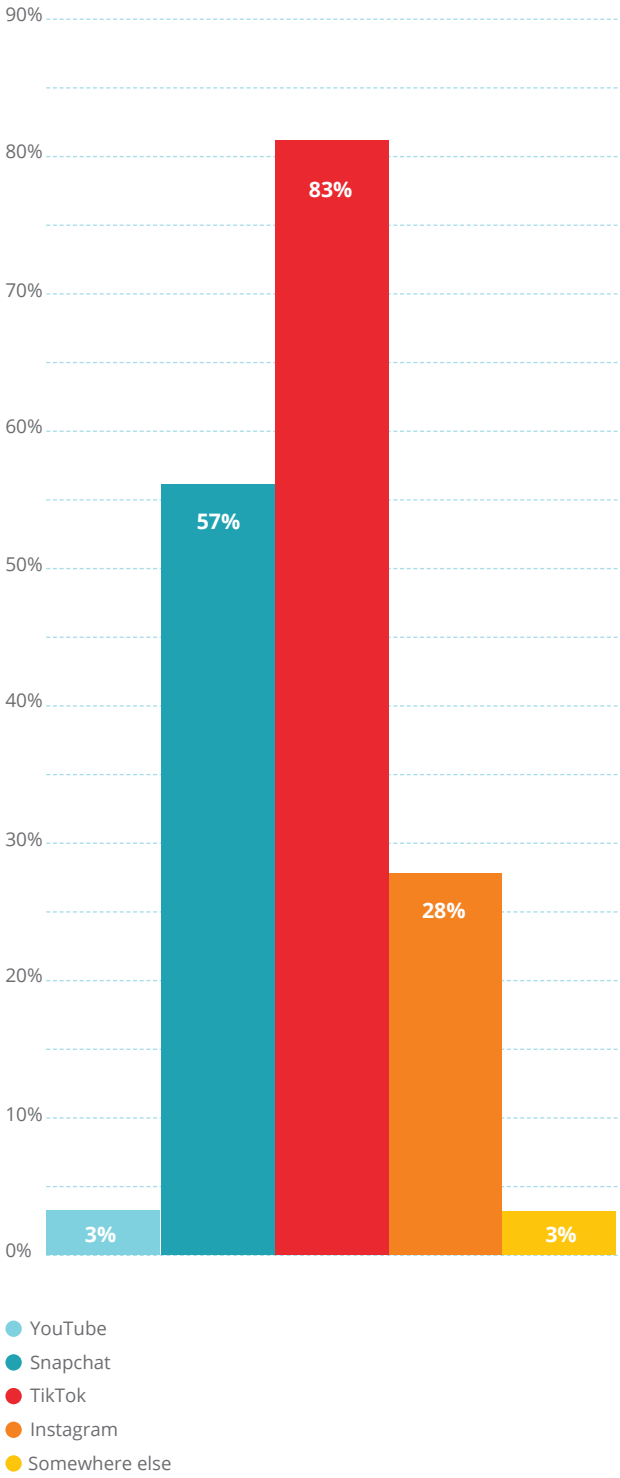


Table 32: Where do you post videos? (12-16 years)



Online Experiences

It is important to educate and support children of all ages

It is worth stating that children's online experiences are affected by their access and supervision, their choice of online activities and their online exposure, as discussed earlier in the report. We found that 80% of older children, aged 12-16, believed the online world to be a mix of negative and positive experiences. It is important to educate and support children of all ages as they learn to navigate this space in a positive way so that they can benefit from existing and emerging technology.

80%

of older children, aged 12-16, believed the online world to be a mix of negative and positive experiences.

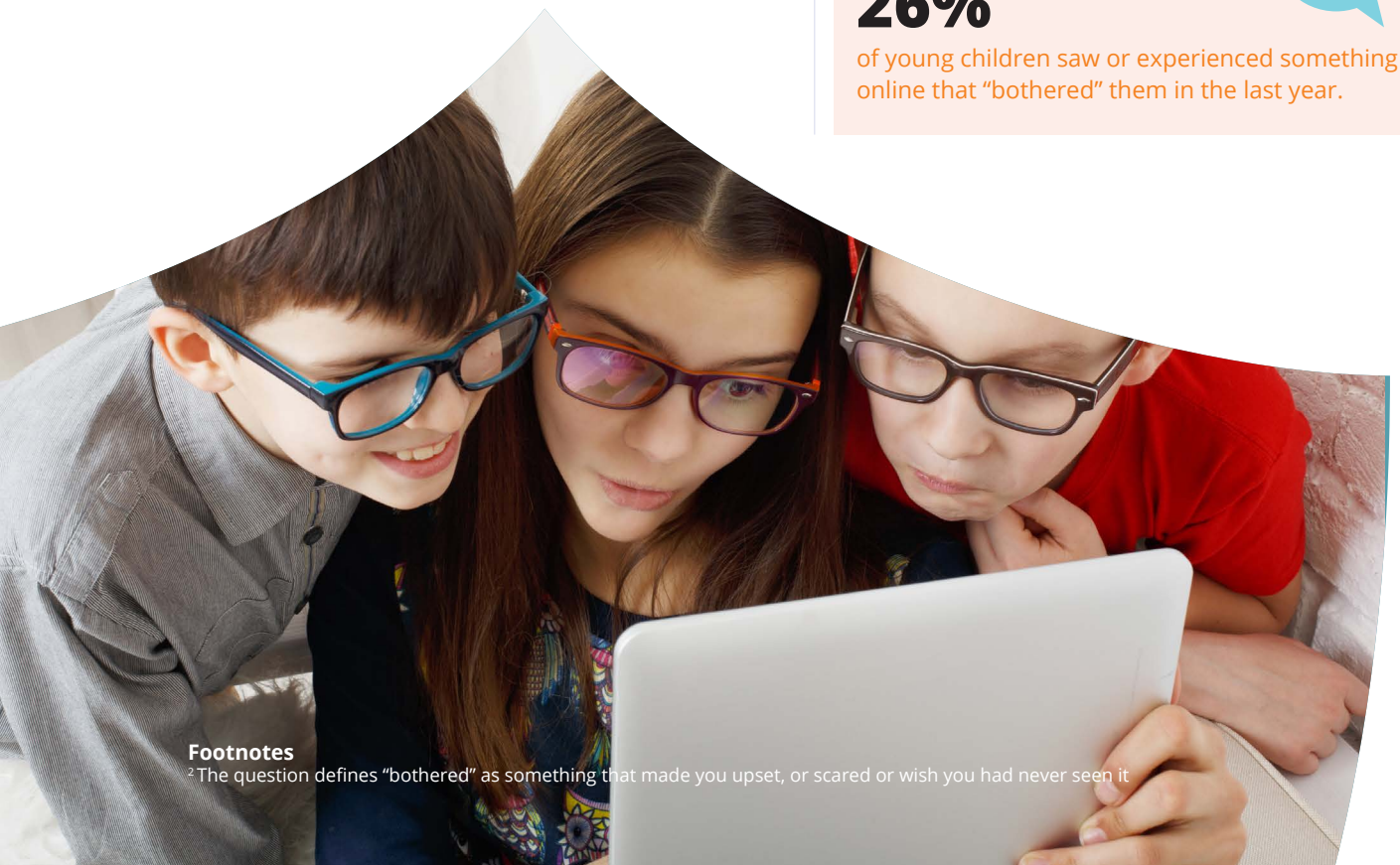
Harmful content

We know that there is a lot of content readily available on online platforms that could be harmful to a young audience, including information on eating disorders, suicide, self harm, pornography, misogynistic content, discrimination and hate speech in general. 26% of young children saw or experienced something online that "bothered" them in the last year[2].

This decreased with age (Table 33), with 8 and 9 years olds most likely to be "bothered". This highlights that young children should not be viewing content on these platforms that were not designed with them in mind and when they are less able to process what they are viewing. Where children are given access at a young age, parents should apply whatever parental controls and filters are available, such as paired accounts and restricted modes, as well as monitoring devices and checking in with them regularly to discuss what they are consuming.

26%

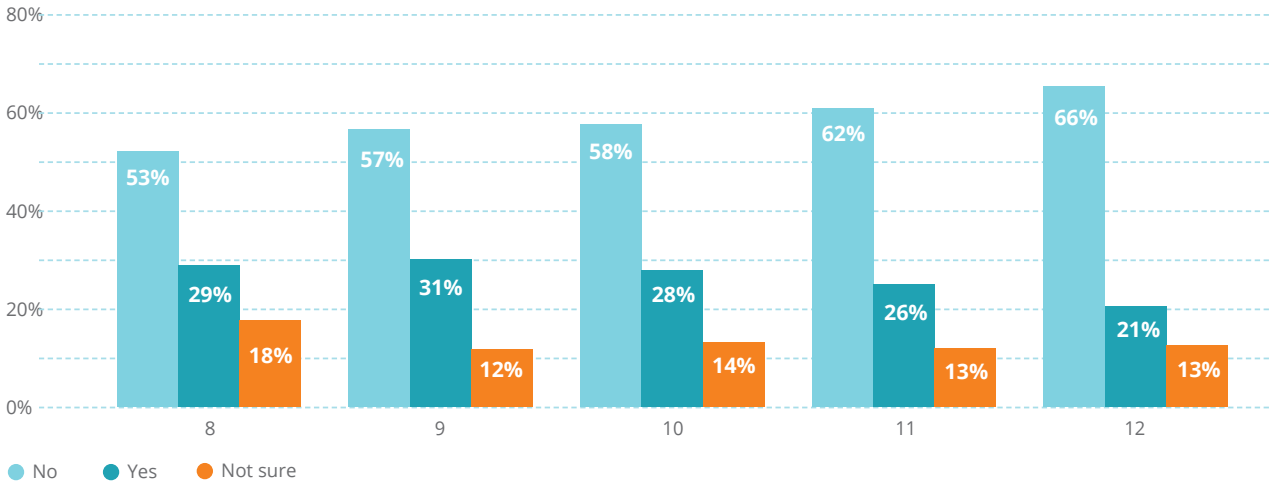
of young children saw or experienced something online that "bothered" them in the last year.



Footnotes

[2] The question defines "bothered" as something that made you upset, or scared or wish you had never seen it

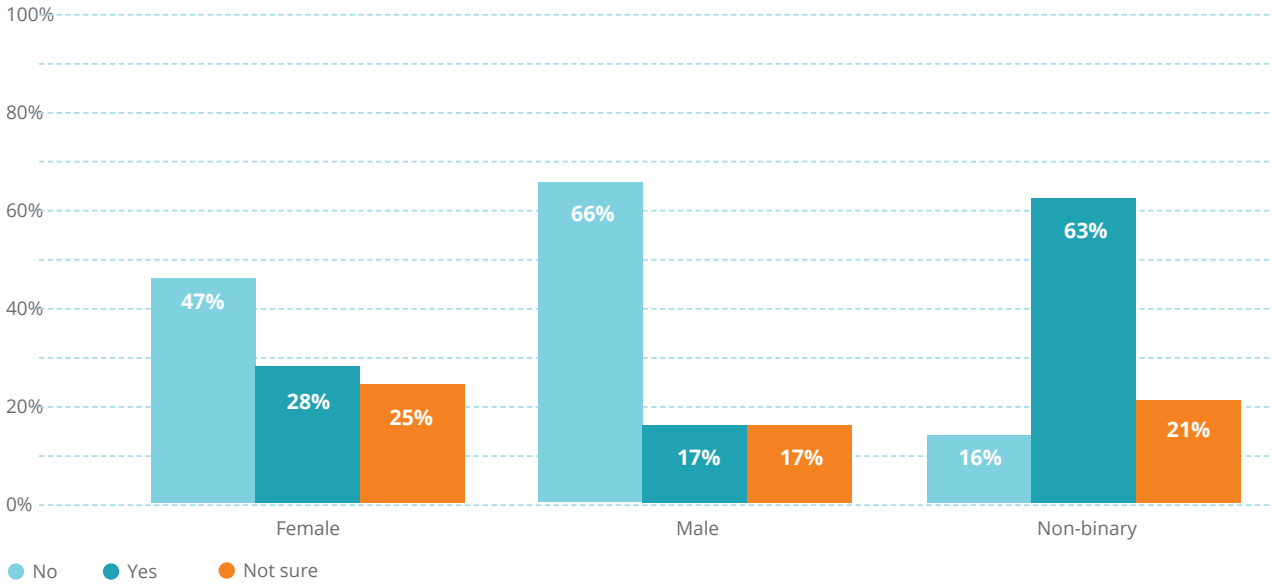
Table 33 Have seen or experienced something online that bothered you in the last year? by age (8-12 years)



Gaming environments can also be a source of harmful content. This is especially true for younger boys (28%) who were more likely to say that they played over-18s games in the last year (Table 20) and who stated that they played in multiplayer environments with people they did not know (42%) more than younger girls (27%). (Table 25). Boys were also much more likely to have held accounts on the live streaming platform Twitch (17%) (Table 16), where streamed content and live chat may not be appropriate for their age on some channels, as well as YouTube for gaming content.

Numbers remained high in secondary school and it is worth noting the gender breakdown for 12-16 years olds (Table 34), as boys reported being "bothered" less often than other genders we tracked by online content/ experiences in the last year. This may be connected with how and where they chose to spend their time online.

Table 34: Have seen or experienced something online that bothered you? by gender (12-16 years)



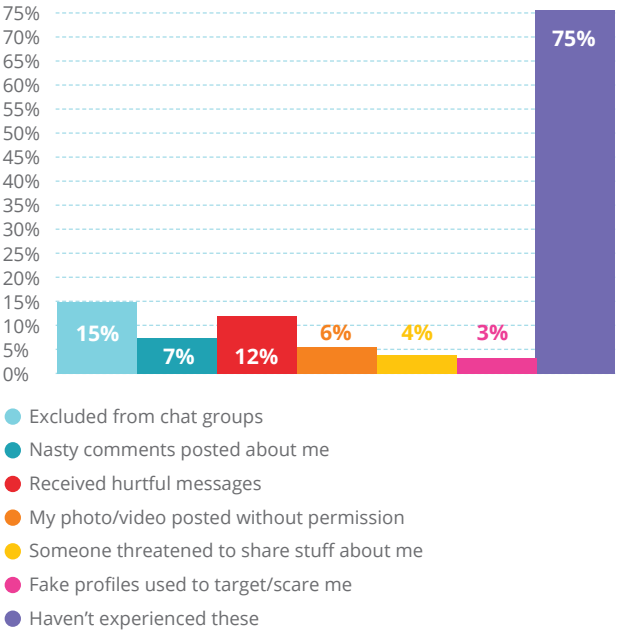
Cyberbullying

When children go online we need to prepare them for harmful contact from predators and scammers, but we also need to educate them about cyberbullying, which can often involve people they know offline. Reducing their exposure, knowing how to block and report bad behaviour, and communicating appropriately themselves online are all important – as is knowing when to reach out for help from a trusted adult.

25% of children aged 8-12 told us they had experienced one or more common cyberbullying behaviours (Table 35)[3].

Being excluded from chat/messaging groups is the most common form cited and in our experience children do not always identify this as cyberbullying so better education about this and other cyberbullying behaviours is needed. This is our first year to track an older age group and the incidence increased significantly for 12-16 year olds, 40% of whom reported experiencing cyberbullying (Table 36). Bullying peaked in primary schools at ages 11 and 12, with 28% citing one or more experiences. As noted above, overall the numbers were much higher for the older children but peaked at the age of 15 with 45% of children in this age group citing at least one experience of cyberbullying. This increased incidence likely correlates with increased access and fewer restrictions in place as children age.

Table 35: Personal experience of this behaviour for younger children (8-12 years)



Girls of 12-16 are much more likely to have experienced cyberbullying than boys (43% vs 30%, Table 37). This gender difference is not really noticeable for younger children. This could be linked to where and how older girls chose to spend their online time, i.e. on social media and chatting.

Table 36: Personal experience of this behaviour (12-16 years)

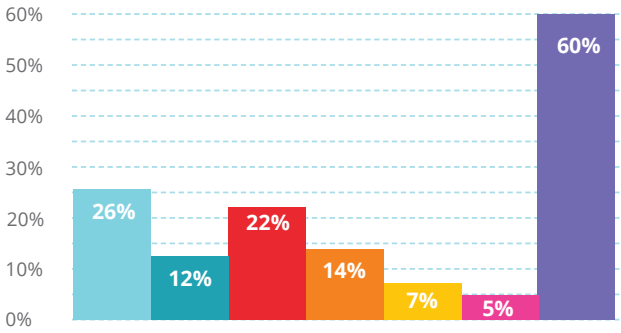
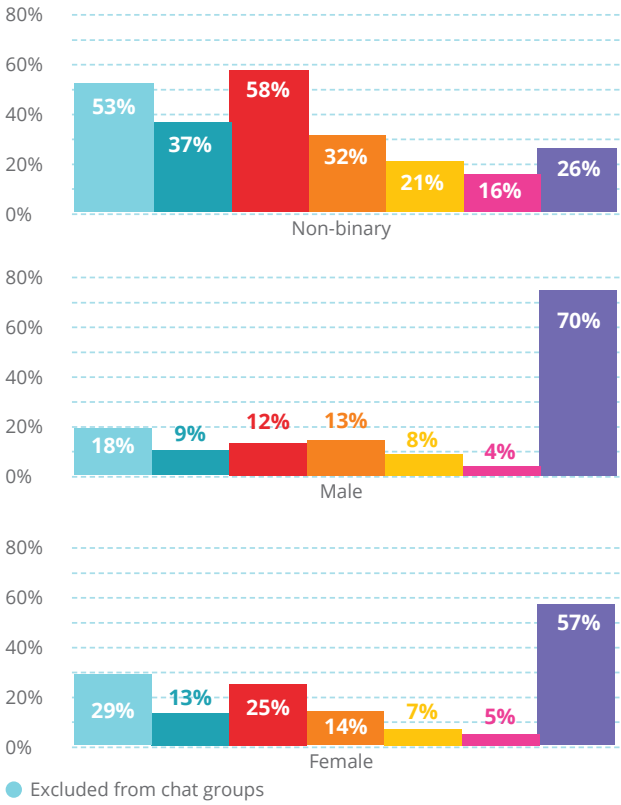


Table 37: Personal experience of this behaviour, by gender (12-16 year olds)



Footnotes

[3] We did not use the word "cyberbullying" in our survey. Instead we opted to ask about specific and common cyberbullying behaviours by posing the question as "Tick any of these experiences that you have had online" because not all children identify these behaviours as cyberbullying.

A small number of older children identified as non-binary (total sample size 20) in the school surveys. It is worth highlighting that this group of children had more negative experiences online than other user communities. Almost 3 out of 4 said they had been cyberbullied (Table 37) and 63% had seen or experienced something that bothered them online (Table 34).

Case Study 3
Cyberbullying*

A family contacted us regarding an imposter account that had been set up in their child's name on a popular video-sharing platform, featuring photos and inappropriate posts. The person behind the fake account was calling the child harmful names such as 'paedo'. This was deeply distressing for the family who reported it to the platform immediately. However, despite reporting it multiple times via different channels, they received no response at all for three weeks. They then reached out to their local TD, who also received no response, and finally, contacted the school. The school in turn advised the family to contact us.

Intervention/action:

Once informed of this, we reported it through an NGO escalation channel. Within four minutes of doing so, we received an email confirming that this account violated their community guidelines and had been removed. This illustrates how difficult it is for families to resolve such an incident by themselves. It has been indicated that an individual complaints mechanism (ICM) will be set up as soon as possible as part of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022. Once in place, this should make a vital difference to children and their guardians, after they have tried and failed to get content removed from a platform in a timely manner (and our recommendation on this will be that a family can contact the ICM if a complaint is not responded to within 48 hours by the platform).

In addition to reporting such incidents to the school, which should have cyberbullying policies and procedures in place, serious incidents of cyberbullying should be reported to the Gardai as harassment of the child, especially if it is prolonged and contains personal information about the child.

**anonymised to protect the identity of the individuals and families concerned*

Children's response to negative online experiences

"Just over half of younger children aged 8-12, who saw or experienced something that bothered them, told a parent/trusted adult but worryingly, almost 1 in 3 chose to keep it to themselves (Table 38)."

Older children aged 12-16 were both more likely to have kept it to themselves (39%) or to have told a friend than a parent (Table 39). By the age of 15 we noted that half chose to keep it to themselves and only 16% told a parent. This seems to indicate that a parent's role in guiding their child online diminishes with age, especially in secondary school, in spite of the fact that the digital age of consent is 16.

Table 38: What did you do about it if bothered by something you saw/experienced? (8-12 years)

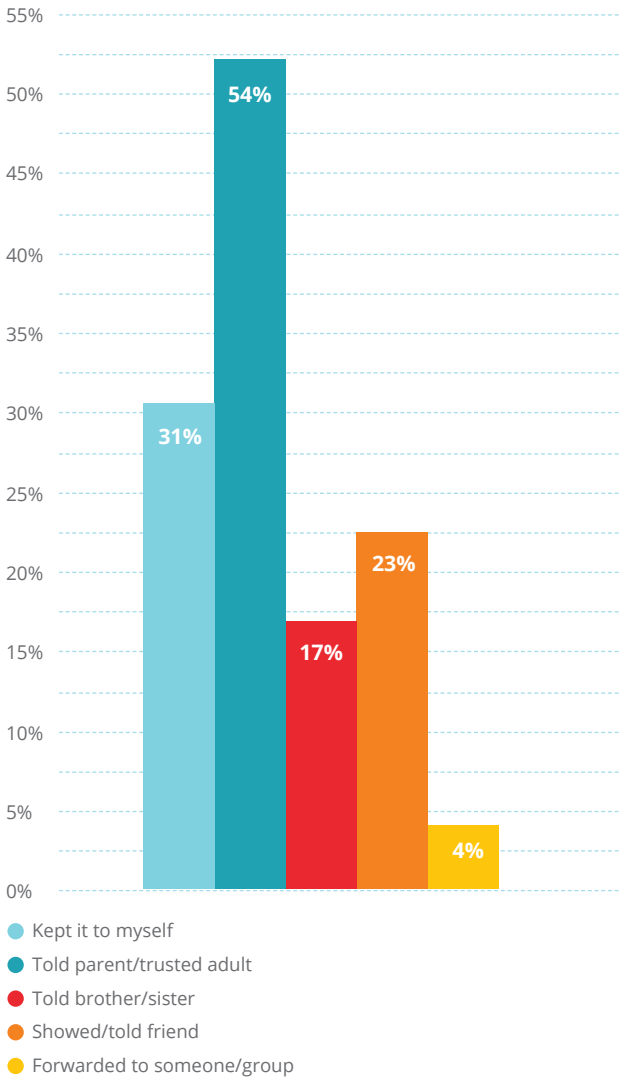
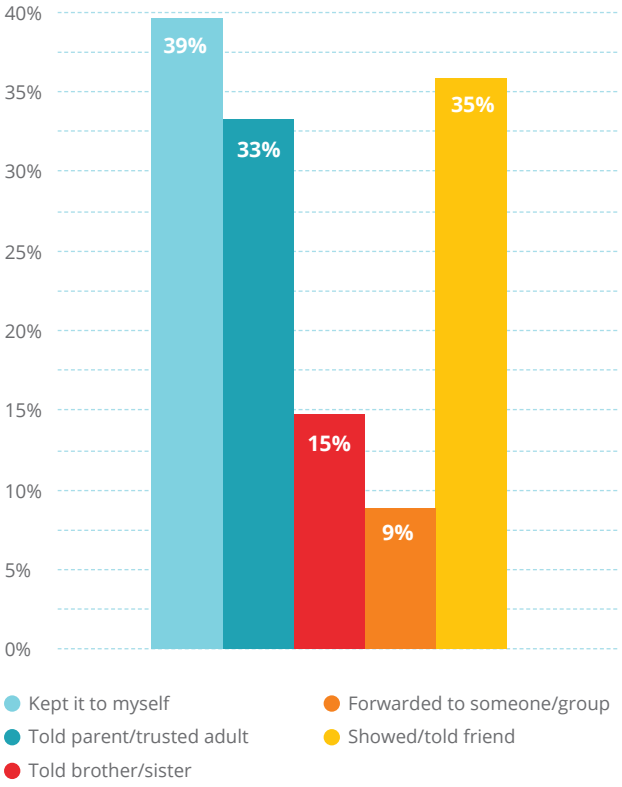


Table 39: What did you do about it if bothered by something you saw/experienced? (12-16 years)

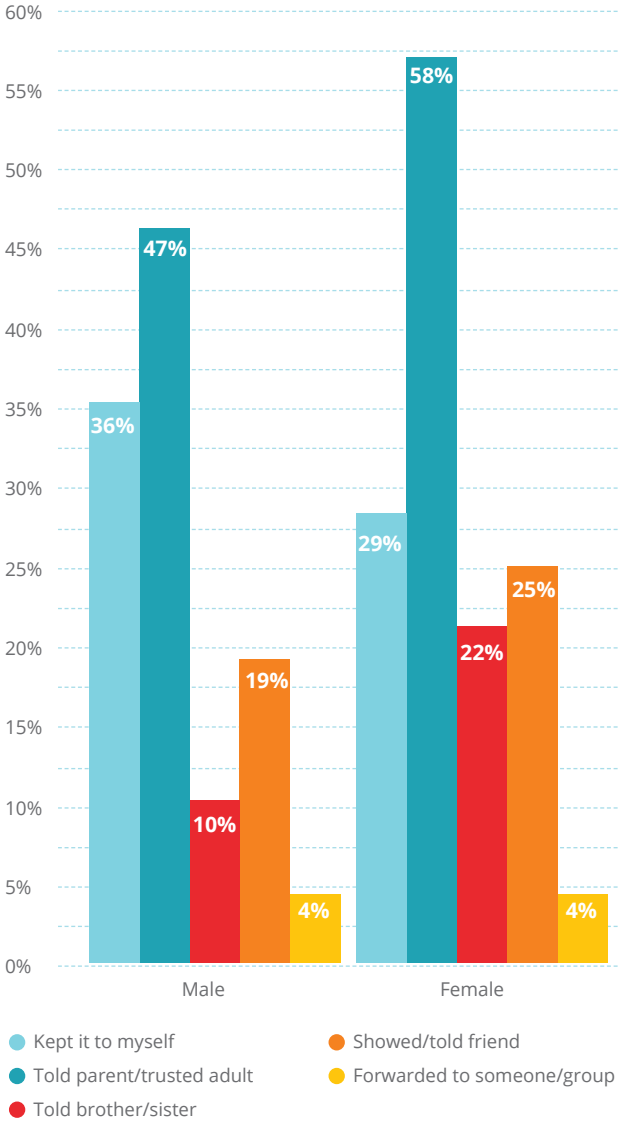


Forwarding on content that scared or upset them or that they wished they had never seen was more common among older children, with almost 1 in 10 saying they "forwarded to someone or a group". From conversations with children we know that harmful content can sometimes be distributed in large messaging groups and once seen by group members, it can't be unseen. This tendency to forwarding peaked at age 13 following an upsurge in usage across many platforms, and can further compound the problem of easy, (and sometimes accidental), access to harmful content online.

Younger girls were more likely to have shared with a parent and less likely to have kept it to themselves than boys (Table 40), indicating that young girls are more likely to open up about their online lives than boys.

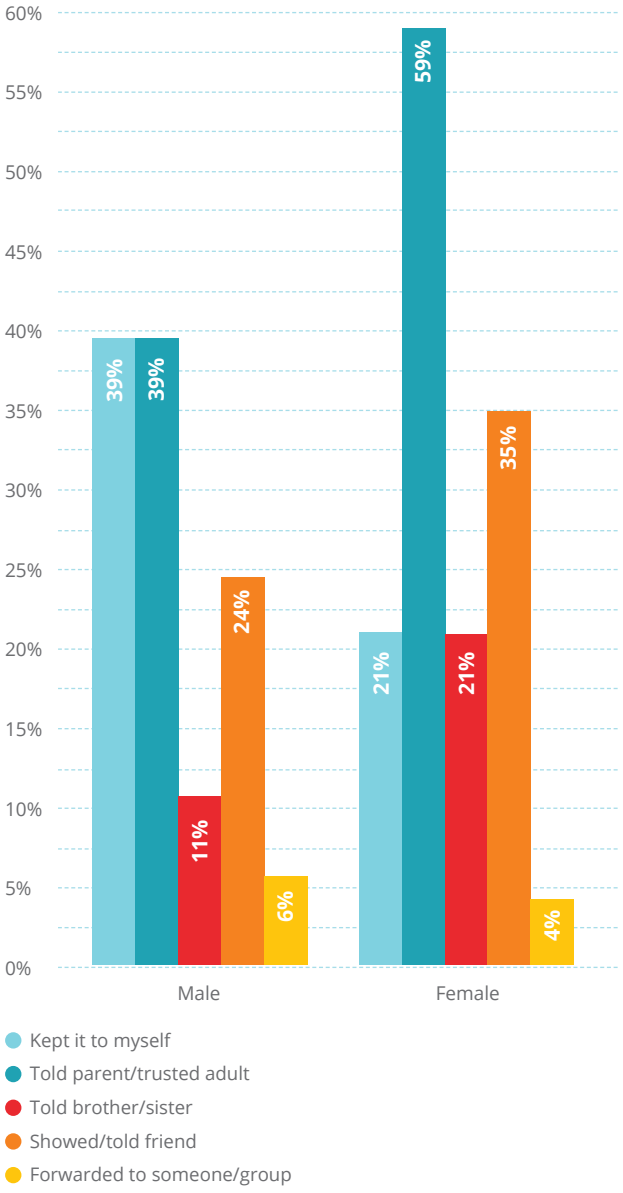
"Harmful content can sometimes be distributed in large messaging groups and once seen by group members, it can't be unseen."

Table 40: What did you do about it if bothered by something you saw/experienced? by gender (8-12 years)



Very similar responses were noted for children who experienced cyberbullying, with 52% of younger children stating that they told a parent and 28% keeping it to themselves. Once again girls were more likely to speak to their parents and less likely to have kept it to themselves than boys. The difference in response by gender is even more pronounced for cyberbullying (Table 41).

Table 41: What did you do if you experienced cyberbullying behaviours? (8-12 years)

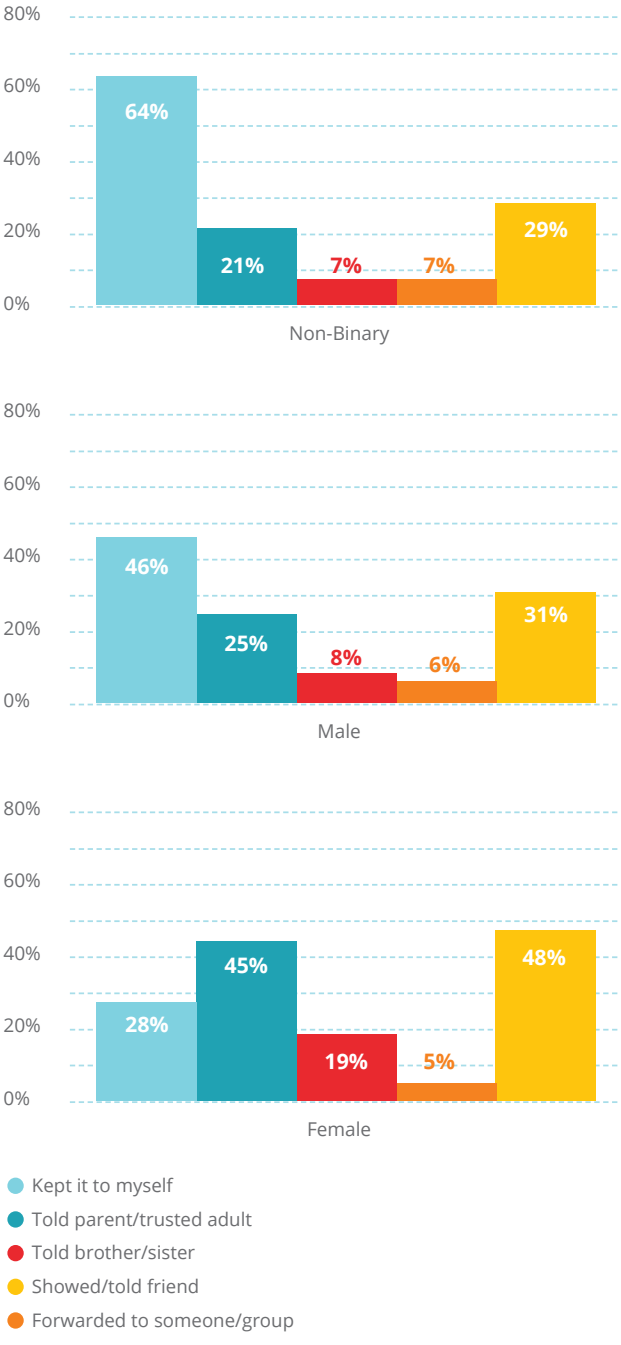


Older boys (46%) were much less likely to speak up than girls (28%) about their cyberbullying experiences (Table 42). For the small number of non-binary students we surveyed this year it is worth noting that in addition to experiencing high levels of cyberbullying, they are highly likely to have kept it to themselves (64% response), which is very concerning.

46%

of older boys were much less likely to speak up than girls (28%) about their cyberbullying experiences

Table 42: What did you do if you experienced cyber bullying behaviours? (12-16 years)



Children's views on their activity online

It was really interesting to see how children view the time they spend online. We asked children aged 12-16 what feelings they experienced when they go online and found that girls were more likely than boys to indicate negative feelings, including "jealous of others", "afraid", "anxious", "inadequate", "like I'm missing out" (Table 43).

"Girls were more likely than boys to indicate negative feelings."

When prompted on how they might feel about their online time, we found that many felt they spent too much time online, something that increased with age. Overall 51% of 8-12 years olds felt that they spent too much time online, rising to 67% for 12-16 year olds and 80% by the age of 16 (Tables 44 and 45).

As respondents got older they were less likely to feel that they wanted to spend more time online and they increasingly said that they "find it hard to switch off games/apps". They also indicated that they "waste time online" – this feeling increased from 16% at the age of 9 to 66% by the age of 16.

Table 43: Being online makes me feel... by gender (12-16 years)

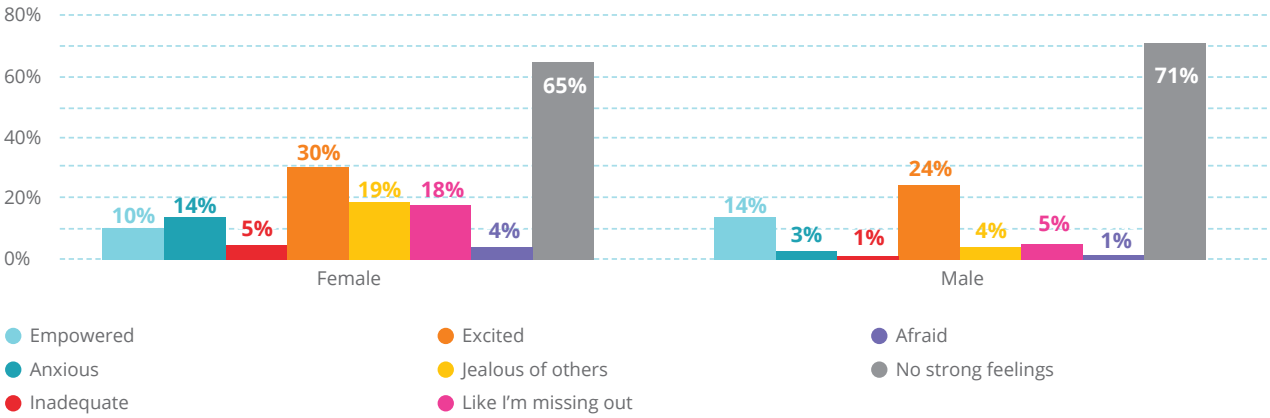


Table 44: Views on online activity by age (8-12 years)

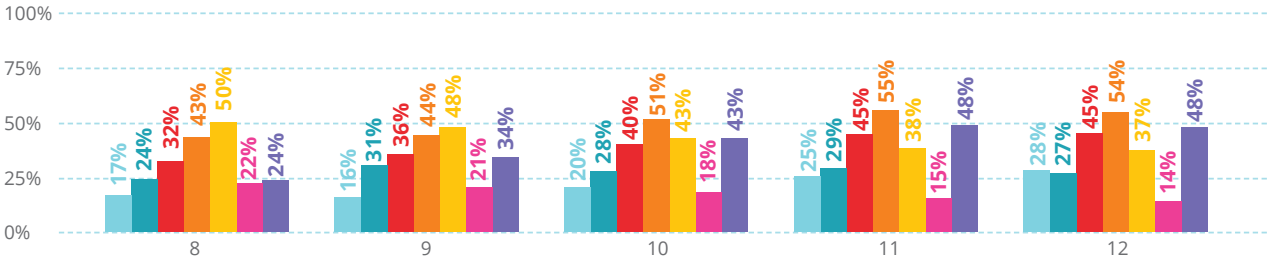
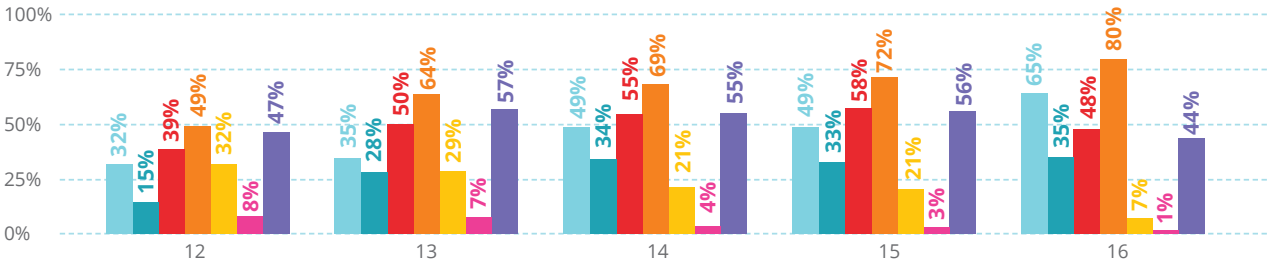
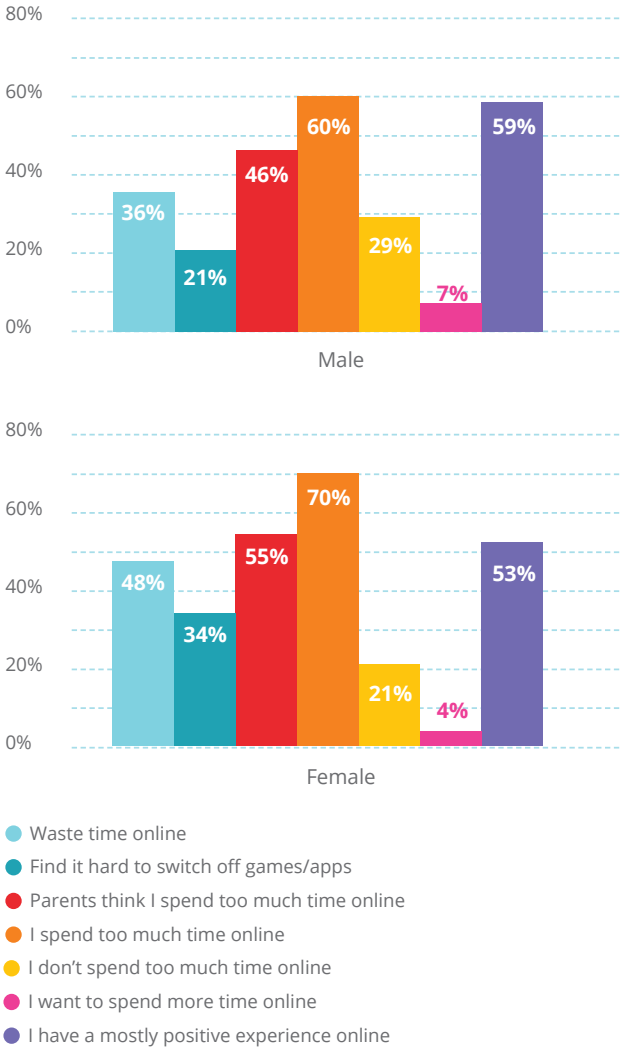


Table 45: Views on online activity by age (12-16 years)



There were only small differences in responses given by younger boys and girls, but significant differences were found for 12-16 year olds (Table 46). We found that girls are more likely than boys to have said they "spent too much time online", "wasted time online", and "found it hard to switch off".

Table 46: Views of boys and girls on their online activity (12-16 years)



From our research we can say that girls had a slightly more negative view of their online activity and a greater incidence of negative feelings when online than boys. This became more pronounced as the respondents got older. Older girls' preference for spending their online time on social media platforms, with algorithmic feeds and a focus on appearance, could be an important factor. By comparison, older boys continued to game in high numbers and were likely to view their gaming as a worthwhile form of entertainment, rather than a waste of their time.

"Girls had a slightly more negative view of their online activity and a greater incidence of negative feelings when online than boys."

Recommendations

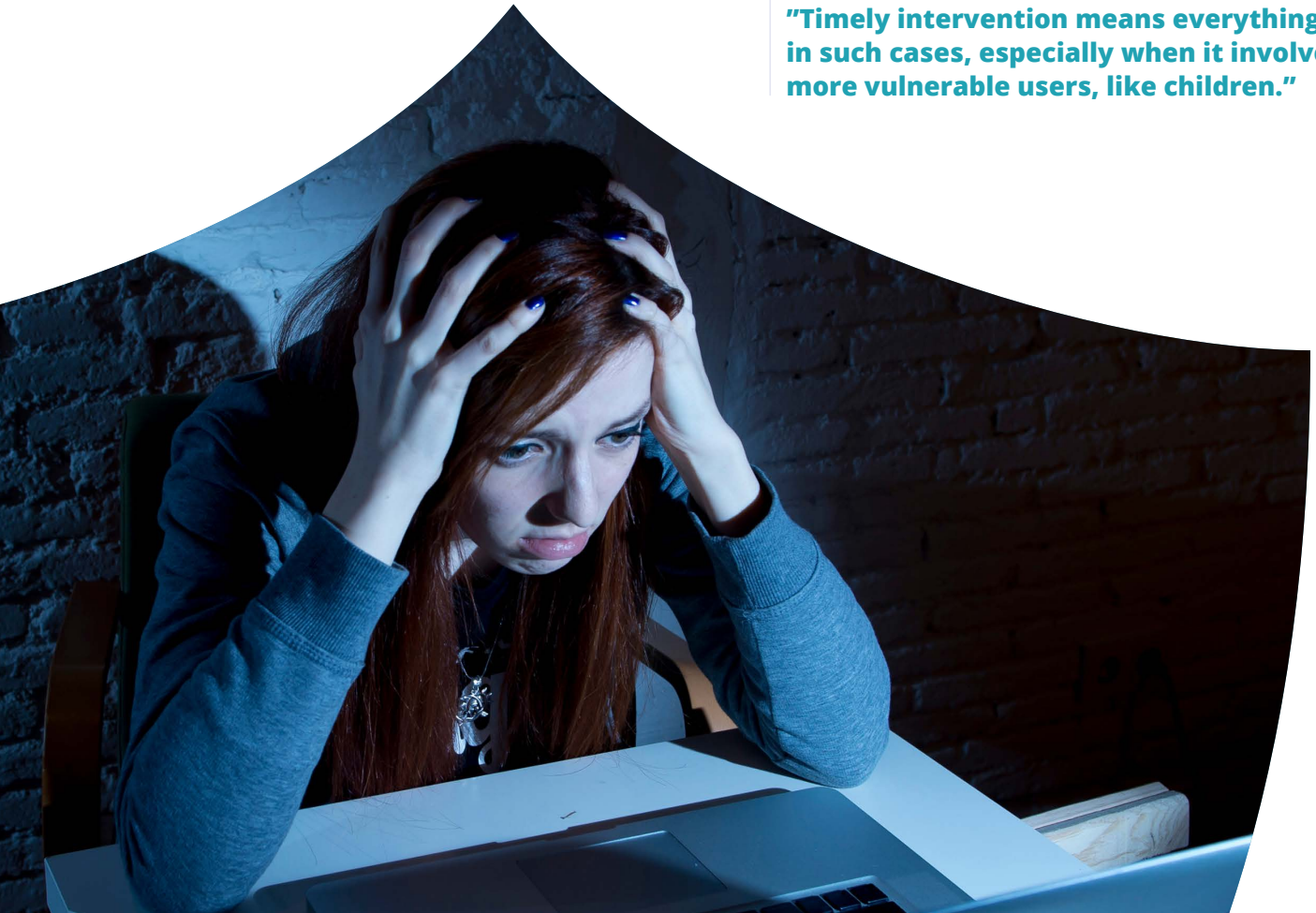
Unsupervised access to the internet creates vulnerability for children online

We have been reporting on children's online trends and usage data since we launched our education programme in 2016. Year after year, we have clearly highlighted how engaged children are in the online world and the extent to which they are living their lives online. Whilst progress is being made, we are still falling far short of adequately preparing children for being online: we must support them to navigate the online world safely and respectfully and also ensure that these online spaces are made safer for them. We know from our own data – as well as other research – that unsupervised access to the internet creates vulnerability for children online.

"We are still falling short of adequately preparing children for being online."

The establishment of Coimisiún na Meán in 2023, the appointment of Ireland's first Online Safety Commissioner in March 2023, and the upcoming enforcement of the EU's Digital Services Act do indicate that there is significant progress being made to provide better protection for users via increased levels of accountability and reporting. The roll-out of online safety codes will provide an overall standard in terms of good practice in the handling of complaints, as well as the removal of harmful content on online platforms. The introduction of an Individual Complaints Mechanism will also provide greater power to individual users to get harmful content removed in a timely fashion. Timely intervention means everything in such cases, especially when it involves more vulnerable users, like children. More needs to be done, however to ensure that online services are designed with the safety of their users in mind, especially as generative AI features are being rapidly rolled out on popular apps, often without adequate testing or guardrails in place.

"Timely intervention means everything in such cases, especially when it involves more vulnerable users, like children."



"Parents will continue to play a crucial role in guiding and supporting their children on their online journeys."

Whilst it is encouraging to see progress being made with regulation, we need to see stronger measures put in place to better equip children for being online safely and responsibly. These measures should include a greater focus on online safety and digital literacy education for children in schools. Parents will continue to play a crucial role in guiding and supporting their children on their online journeys and we must also do much more to support them.

Our Recommendations

We recommend that:

1. **Every child between the ages of 6 and 16 is provided with ongoing online safety/digital literacy education in school**, appropriate to their age. This can no longer be a peripheral topic in schools, but must become a core curricular subject in order to reflect the extent to which children are online. This will require updating curricula and relevant teacher training.

2. **Parents are adequately informed and supported to be active and engaged digital parents.** This will require well-targeted and well-resourced information, awareness campaigns and support resources.

3. **The Online Safety Commissioner, and Coimisiún na Meán more broadly, is given sufficient powers and resources to adequately hold the online services to account.** This must include providing an Individual Complaints Mechanism at the earliest opportunity.

   This ICM must be available as an option to users, particularly children and their guardians after they have tried and failed to get content removed from a platform in a timely manner (i.e. if a complaint is not responded to within 48 hours by the platform). The ICM's response must also be time bound as a timely removal is often extremely important in these cases.

4. **The online service providers should be required to ensure their services provide a safe and age-appropriate experience for younger users.** This will necessitate ensuring adequate age assurance mechanisms are in place, limiting exposure to, minimising, and removing harmful content and contact.

Teacher Testimonials

“I felt the content was really well presented, age appropriate, and very engaging!”

6th Class Teacher | St John’ s NS, Clondalkin

“Our class built upon their knowledge so much in this session. The content and delivery was engaging and thorough. Go raibh maith agaibh!”

4th Class Teacher | Realt na Mara National School, Skerries

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CyberSafeKids CLG

93 Upper George's Street, Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin

@CyberSafeKidsIE

/CyberSafeKidsIE

CyberSafeKidsIE

T (01) 254 9986

E info@cybersafekids.ie

cybersafekids.ie

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