

JANUARY 2026

# The Gender Gap: Understanding and responding to girls' and boys' online experiences

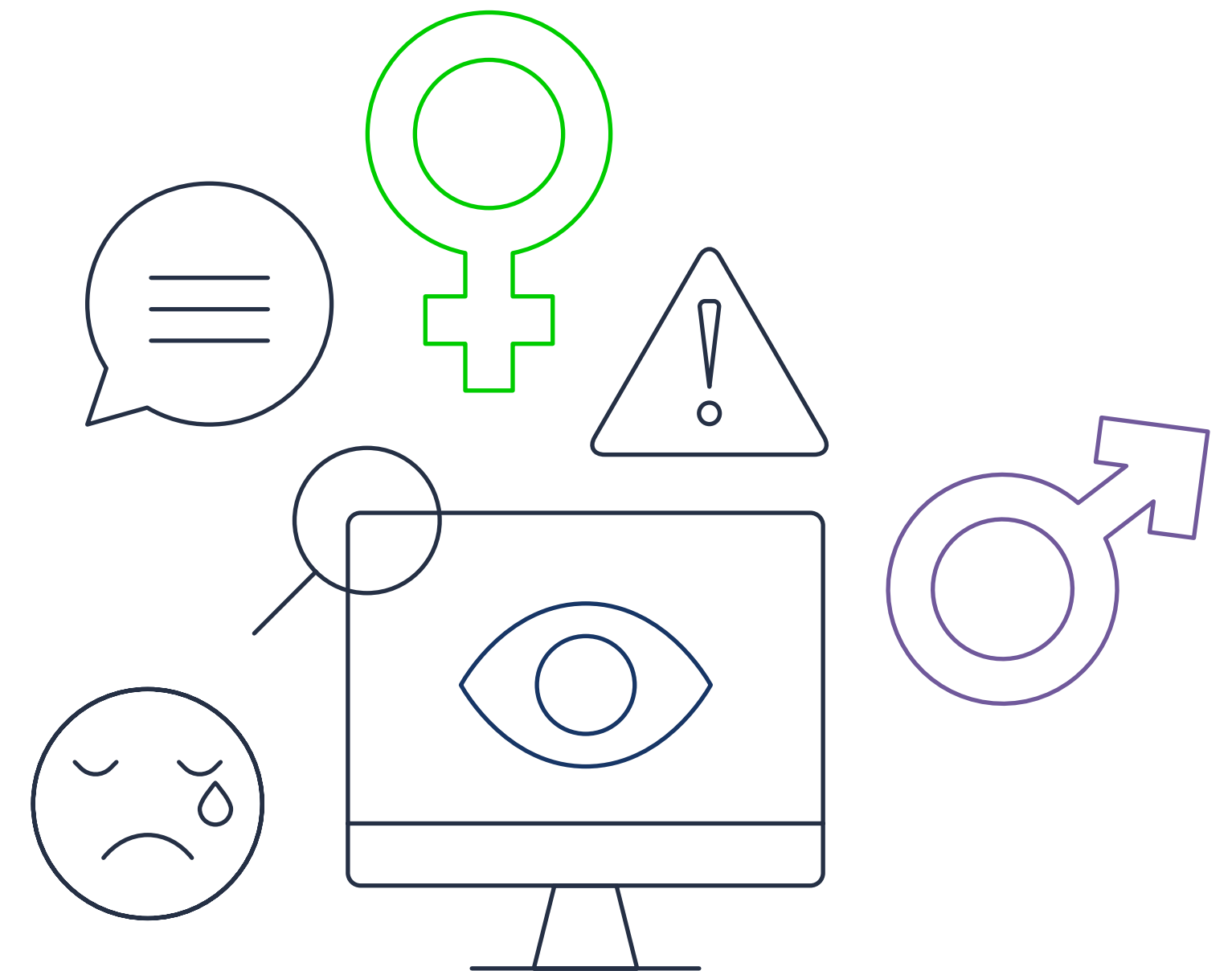
Digital Wellbeing  
Index briefing

internet  
matters.org



# Contents

Introduction	3
Girls' and boys' online lives	4
Experiences of online harm	5
The impact of harms on children's wellbeing	7
What boys and girls do to keep themselves safe online	8
Parents' perspectives on their children's online lives	9
Parents' approaches to keeping children safe online	10
Conclusion and recommendations	11



# Introduction

**This briefing explores children's online experiences through the lens of gender, building on findings from our annual Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World report, as part of our Digital Wellbeing Index.<sup>i</sup> It examines where boys' and girls' online lives converge, where they differ, and how parents' approaches to online safety vary depending on a child's gender.**

In recent years, public debate around online gendered harm has focused on the rise of online misogyny and the role this plays in fuelling abuse and harassment of women and girls, both online and offline. While this remains a critical concern,<sup>ii</sup> this briefing explores gendered online experiences through a broader lens. It examines the positives of being online, as well as a wide range of online harms faced by children and how they – and their parents – respond to them.

## Key findings from this research include:

- **Narrowing gender gaps:** The differences between boys' and girls' online activities are becoming less pronounced, with boys now spending similar amounts of time on social media as girls.
- **Exposure to harm:** Girls remain more likely to encounter online harm and experience more distress as a result, but boys' exposure is rising and, in several areas, their levels of distress when encountering harm are now comparable to those of girls.

- **Parental responses:** Perhaps influenced by heightened public discourse around misogyny, parents are increasingly taking action to support girls online, and are supporting girls and boys in different ways.

By understanding these trends and dynamics, policymakers, industry and civil society can better tailor interventions that protect and empower all children to stay safe and thrive online.

## Methodology

This briefing draws on data from Internet Matters' Digital Wellbeing Index, which is now in its fourth year. The Digital Wellbeing Index is an annual UK household survey of 1,000 children aged 9-16 and their parents, exploring children's online lives through four indices of wellbeing: physical, emotional, social and developmental.

Boys and girls are categorised based on children self-selecting from the following options: male; female; other; prefer not to say. Some of the statistics in this briefing should not be considered nationally representative because they are derived from raw data. For further information about our Digital Wellbeing Index methodology see our 2025 report: *Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World*.<sup>iii</sup>

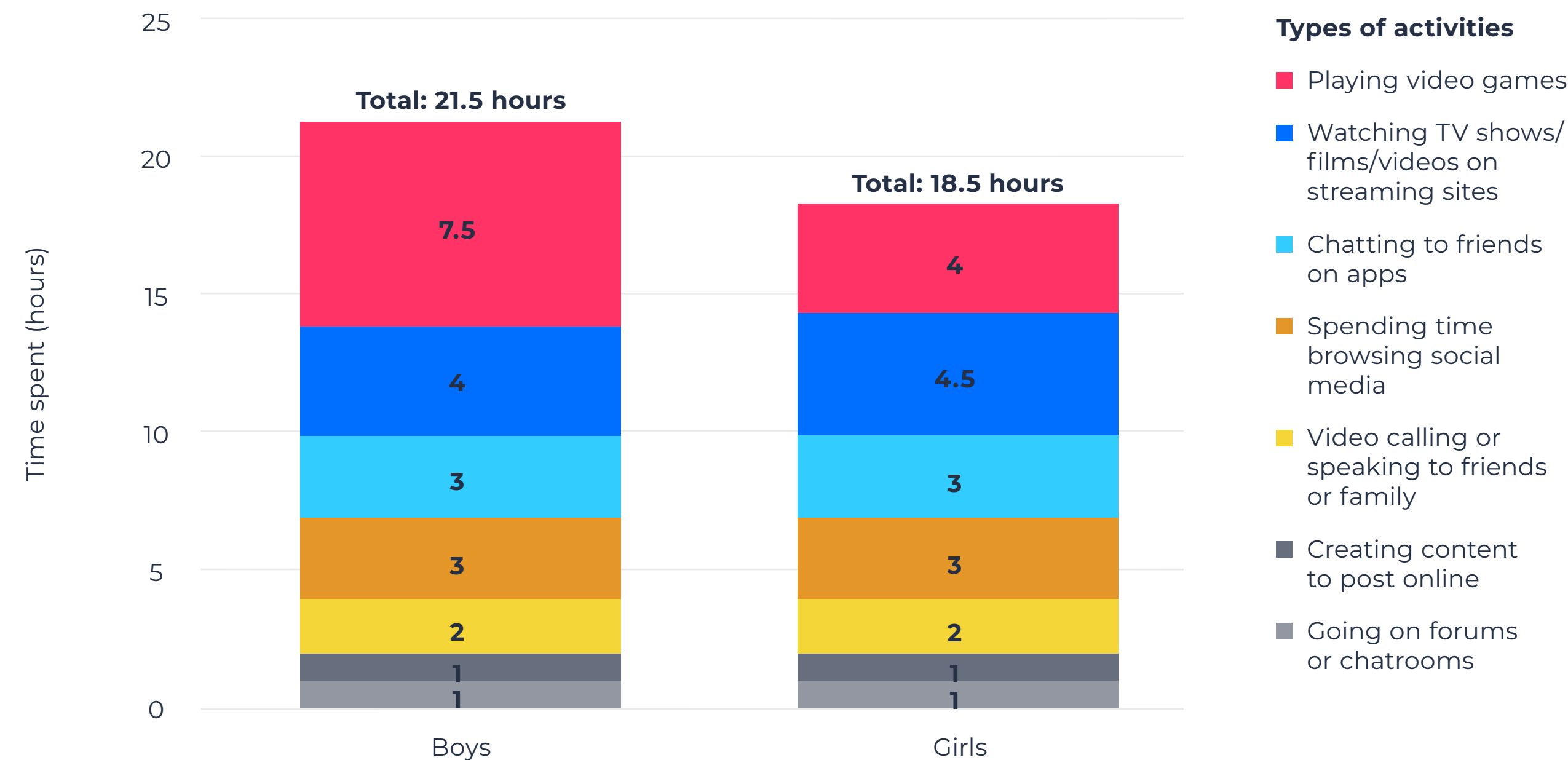
# Girls' and boys' online lives

Children spend their time online in a variety of ways, including browsing social media, chatting with friends and streaming entertainment.

## Girls and boys increasingly spend their time online in similar ways.

Over the past year, girls' use of social media has gone down to around 3 hours per week, while boys' use has risen to meet girls'. Where we see a significant difference in how boys and girls spend their time online is in gaming: boys spend almost twice as many hours as girls per week gaming.

**Figure 1:** Hours spent online per week

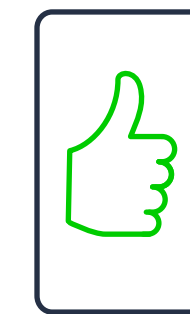


Base 1054. Q: How much time do you spend doing each of these things in a normal week?

## Boys and girls are broadly positive about the time they spend online, highlighting how it supports their wellbeing.

*"You can easily express yourself and also get inspiration [online]"*  
– Girl, 15

*"[I like] to play games. It helps me relax and chill."*  
– Boy, 13



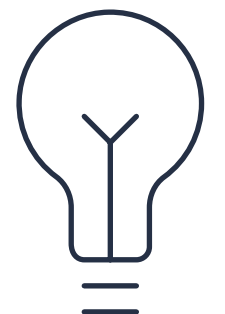
**78%**

of girls report that technology and time online helps them feel more independent.



**67%**

of boys report that spending time online makes them feel happy.



**30%**

of both boys and girls now say technology is very important for getting ideas about what they want to do in the future.

# Experiences of online harm

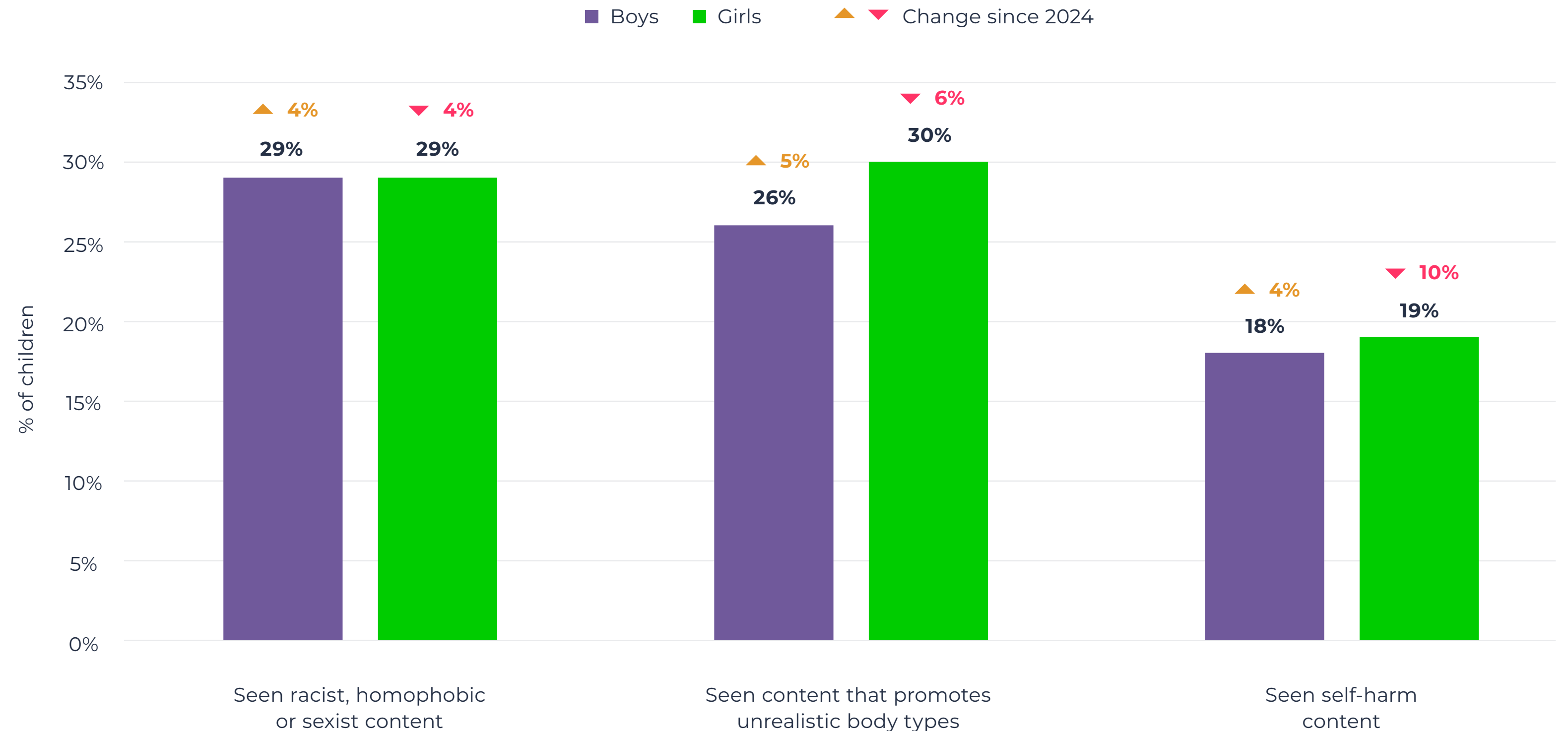
Girls and boys experience similar rates of harm online, with 69% of girls and 66% of boys reporting at least one negative online experience.

## This year, the gap between girls' and boys' experiences of several online harms has narrowed.

Boys and girls now report similar rates of encountering racist, homophobic or sexist content, content which promotes unrealistic body types and self-harm content. This is being driven by a decline in girls' exposure to these harms and a corresponding rise in boys' exposure. For example, 29% of both girls and boys have been exposed to racist, homophobic and sexist content this year: this is a 4 percentage point decrease in exposure for girls since 2024, and a 4 percentage point increase for boys in the same period.

One likely explanation for this trend is boys' increased use of social media, as existing research shows that more time spent on social media correlates with higher exposure to harmful content.<sup>iv</sup> Digital Wellbeing Index data supports this: boys who spend two or more hours browsing social media per week are more likely to see racist, sexist or homophobic content (33%), content that promotes unrealistic body types (29%) and self-harm content (20%), when compared with all boys.

**Figure 2:** Narrowing of gaps in harms experienced by boys and girls



Base: 525 (these questions were asked to 13+ only). Q: Have you had any of the following experiences online? The orange and pink arrow annotations represent the change in rate compared to last year's (2024) Digital Wellbeing Index (DWI).

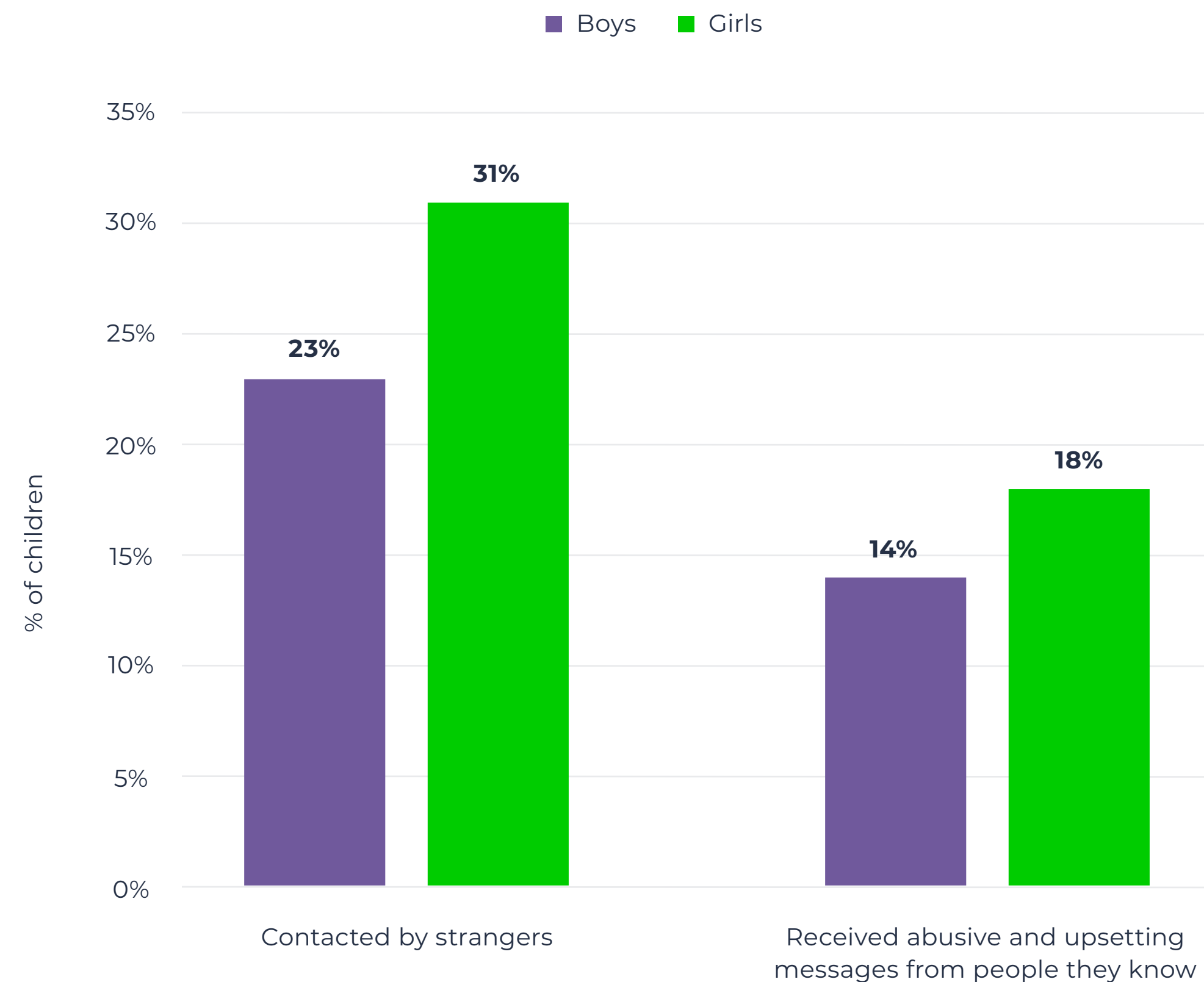
### Girls remain significantly more likely to encounter abuse and harassment.

They are more likely to be contacted by strangers (31% cf. 23% of boys) and receive abusive and upsetting messages from people they know (18% cf. 14% of boys). Previous research has also found that bullying and harassment has become a normalised part of girls' online experiences.<sup>1</sup>

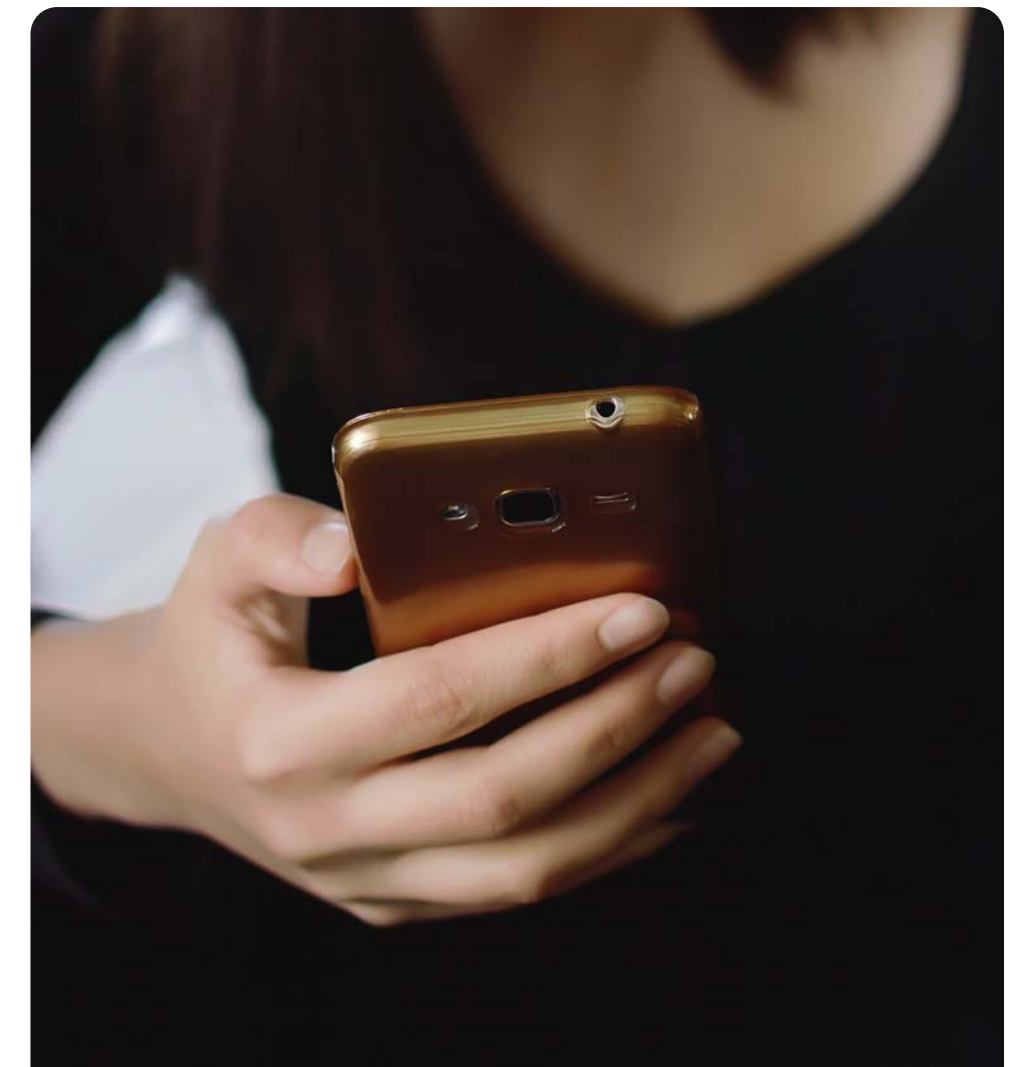
*"Misogyny on the internet is everywhere." – Boy, 15*

*"It's so common I barely even think about it too much. I get loads of strangers messaging me, following me, trying to put me in group chats with other strangers." – Girl, 16*

**Figure 3:** Girls experience more bullying and harassment online than boys



Base: 1054. Q: Have you had any of the following experiences online?



### Vulnerable girls

This year, vulnerable girls in particular reported significantly higher levels of negative online experiences, compared to vulnerable boys and children without those vulnerabilities.<sup>1</sup> They are more likely than vulnerable boys to see things they think aren't true (48% cf. 37%), to come across self-harm content (40% cf. 15%) and be bullied by someone they don't know (31%, cf. 26%).

1. We define vulnerable as those who have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), receive Special Educational Needs (SEN) Support or have a physical or mental health condition which requires professional help.

# The impact of harms on children's wellbeing

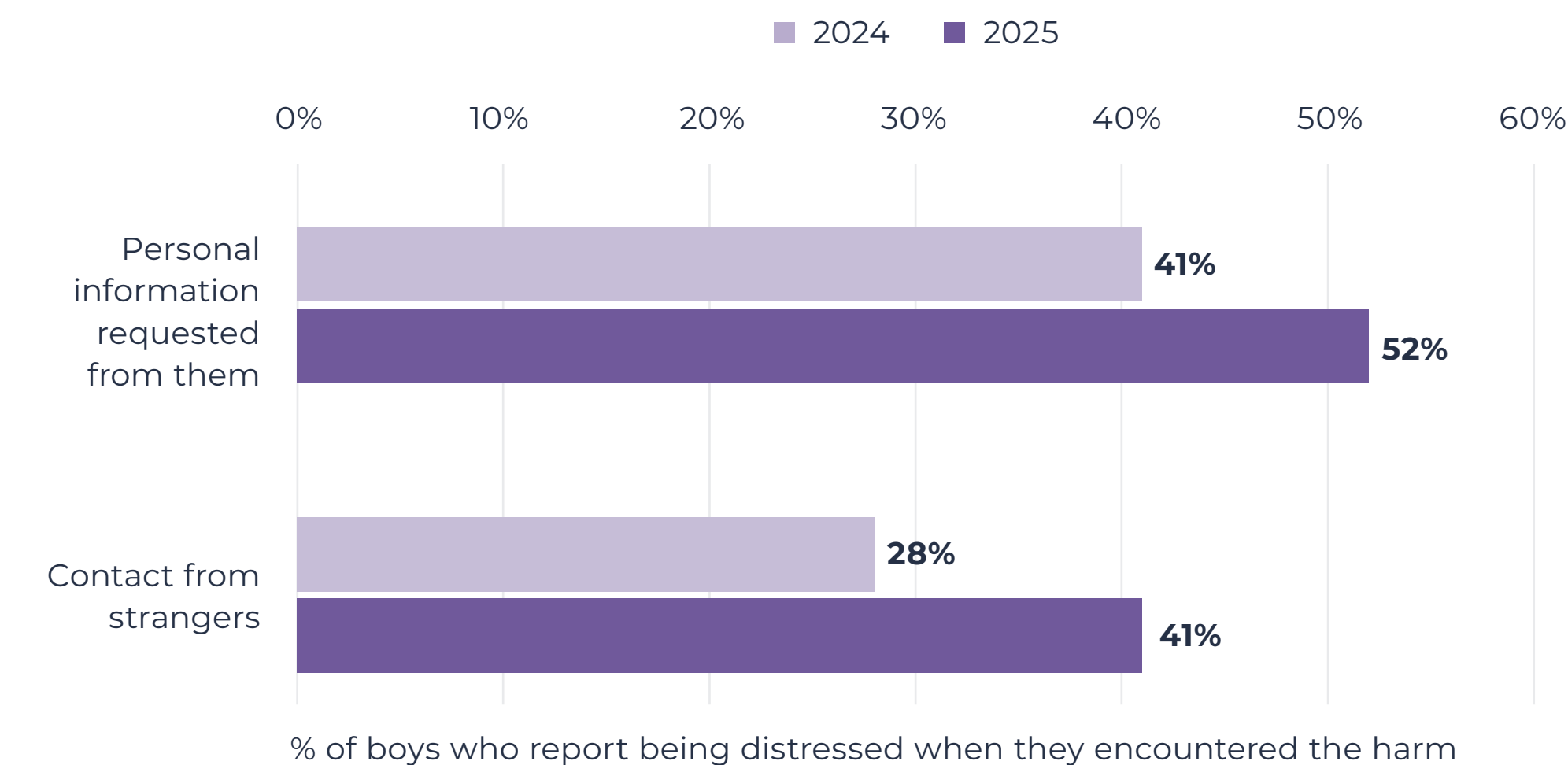
Both boys and girls report experiencing high levels of distress as a result of encountering harm online.

## Boys' levels of distress when encountering harm online are on the rise.

The biggest rises this year come from boys reporting distress:

- When they were contacted by strangers: 41% of those who experienced it said they were distressed by it, cf. 28% in 2024.
- When someone requested personal information from them: 52% of those who experienced it said they were distressed by it, cf. 41% in 2024.

Figure 4: Boys' levels of distress when encountering harm online

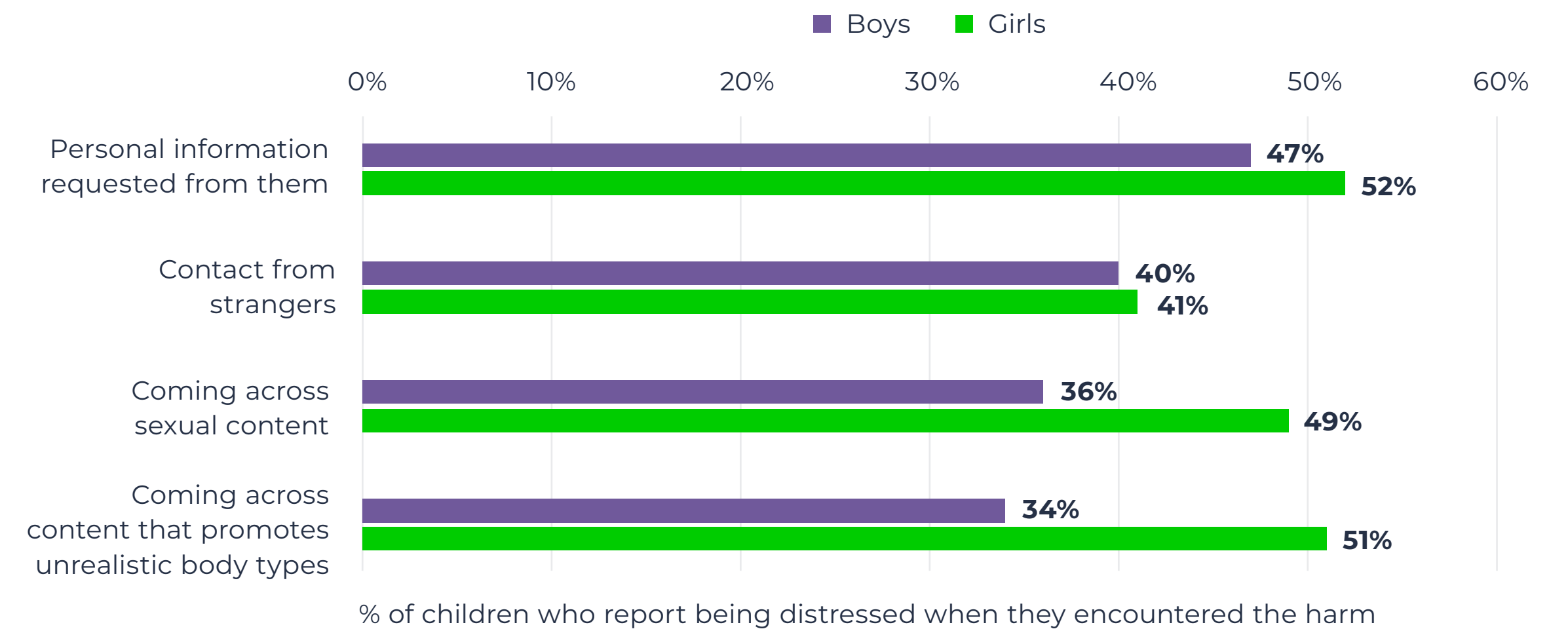


Bases: Range from 79-143 (2024); 81-120 (2025). Q: When these things have happened to you, how did they make you feel?

## Despite rising levels of distress among boys, girls continue to experience more emotional distress overall when they encounter harm online.

This is especially true of encountering certain types of online content, such as sexual content and content which promotes unrealistic body types.

Figure 5: Comparison of boys' and girls' distress levels following encountering harm



Bases range from 127-289. Q: When these things have happened to you, how did they make you feel?

1 in 3 boys and girls report that they see things online that worry or upset them.



The frequency of this happening has also increased: 14% of boys and 11% of girls now report that seeing things online that worries or upsets them happens quite a lot or all the time, compared to 10% and 6% respectively in 2024.

# What boys and girls do to keep themselves safe online

We find that boys and girls are taking different actions to support themselves online.

## Girls are more likely than boys to speak to someone when they experience harm online.

- 92% of girls and 76% of boys say they speak to someone when they experience bullying or receive abusive or upsetting messages/comments online from people they don't know.
- 77% of girls and 63% of boys have talked to a parent after receiving abusive or upsetting messages from people they know in real life.

## Boys are more likely than girls to take action on a platform to keep themselves safe.

When they encounter harm online, boys are more likely to:

- Change their privacy settings (36% cf. 31% of girls)
- Choose not to use the app (31% cf. 25% of girls)
- Deactivate their account (19% cf. 17% of girls)

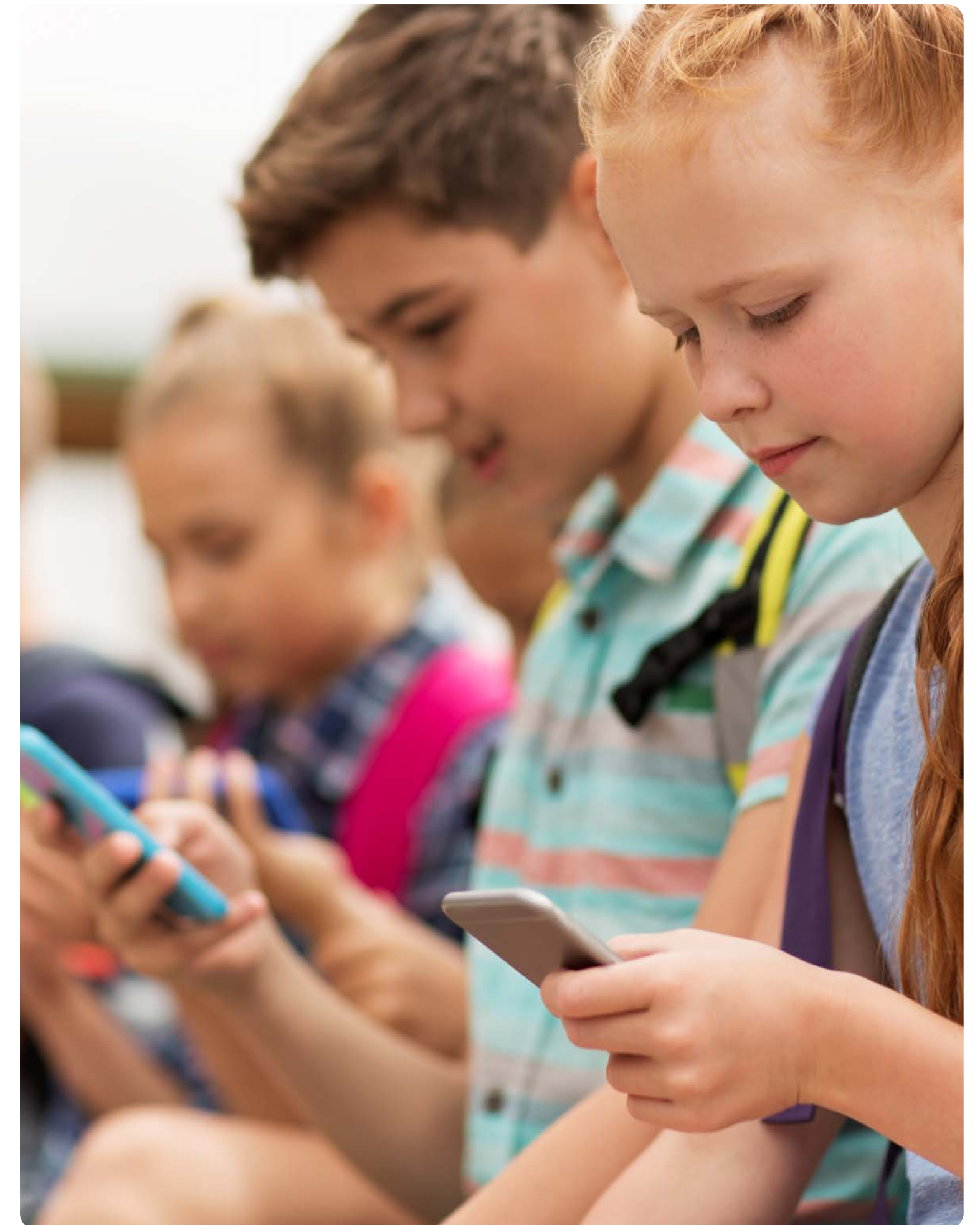


## Boys are becoming less likely to speak to people in their lives about certain harmful experiences, compared to 2024.

- Boys are now less likely to talk to friends or siblings about coming across violent content (23% cf. 33% in 2024) and sexual content (28% cf. 35% in 2024), or being contacted by strangers (15% cf. 26% in 2024).
- Boys are now less likely to speak to their parents or guardians about bullying, abusive or upsetting messages/comments online from people they don't know online (62% have spoken to a parent/guardian cf. 76% in 2024) and being contacted by strangers (58% cf. 71% in 2024).

## In contrast, girls are becoming more likely to speak to people in their lives about experiencing many harms.

- Girls are becoming more likely to speak to a parent, teacher, friend or sibling about coming across content which is violent (76% cf. 70% in 2024) or sexual (77% cf. 59% in 2024).
- Girls are becoming more likely to speak to a parent, teacher, friend or sibling about being bullied by someone they don't know online (92% cf. 86% in 2024) and having someone request personal information from them (87% cf. 79% in 2024).



# Parents' perspectives on their children's online lives

Similar to children, while many parents are positive about aspects of their children's online lives, they remain concerned about them encountering harm.

## Parents see benefits to their children being online.

- Parents of girls are more likely to feel that the online world can inspire their child to try new things (77% cf. 70% of parents of boys).
- Parents of boys are more likely to feel that technology is important for helping their child learn skills or pick up tips for improving sports and exercise (74% cf. 69% parents of girls).
- Parents of both boys and girls see the value of online time for their child to maintain meaningful relationships with people who are important to them (77% of parents of boys and 79% of parents of girls)

## Parents of girls are more concerned about their child encountering harm online.

It is not surprising that parents of girls are more likely to be concerned about potential harms

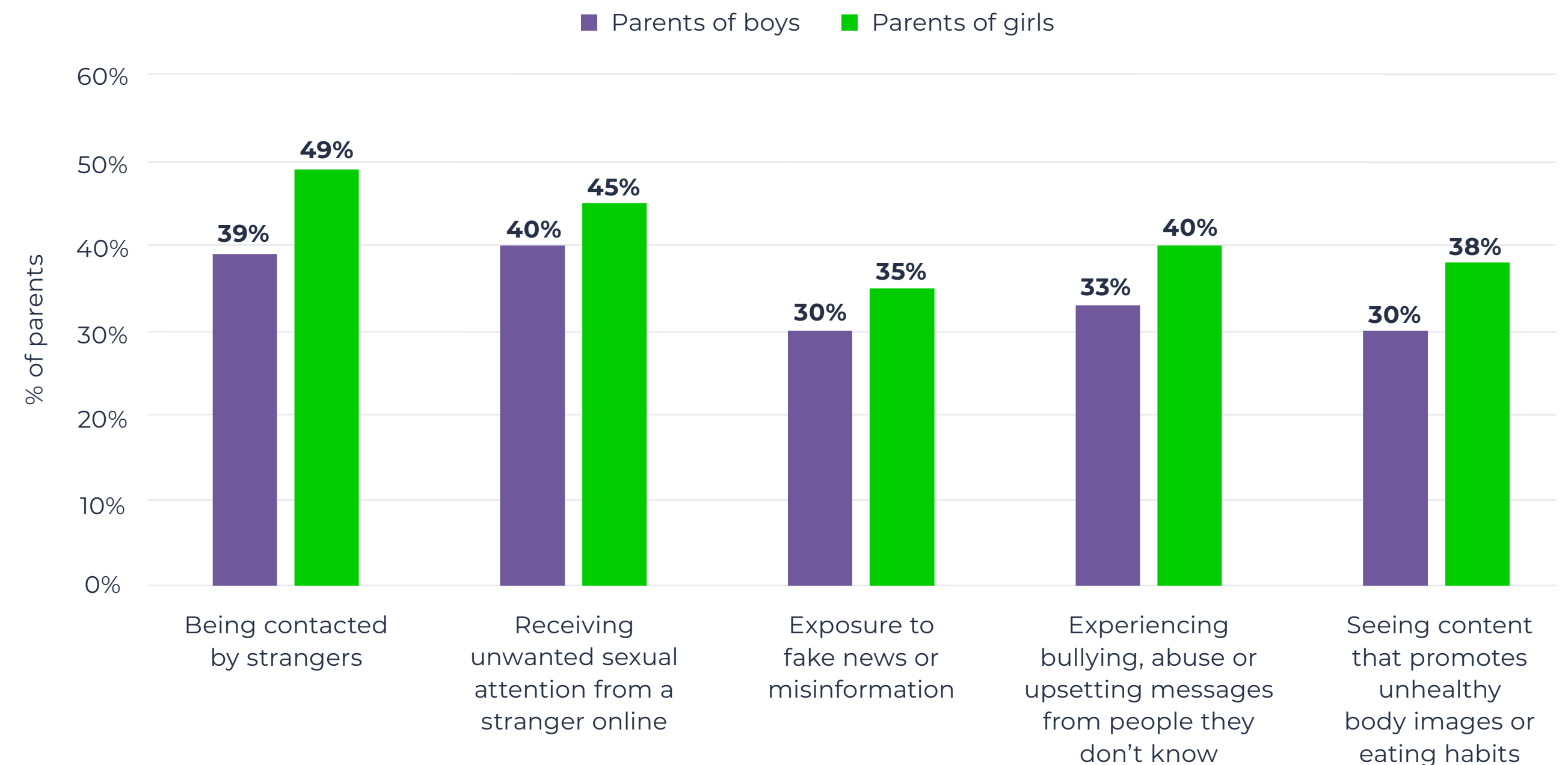
such as being contacted by strangers or being bullied online, as our data shows that girls are more likely to encounter these risks when online.<sup>vi</sup>

In support of this, almost a quarter (24%) of parents of girls feel it is easier to prevent harm offline than online, compared to less than a fifth (18%) of parents of boys. This suggests a significant gendered gap in parental perception, with the online world seen as a fundamentally more challenging environment in which to manage girls' safety.

## Parents of boys are particularly worried about loneliness.

- 28% of parents of boys believe spending time online makes their child lonely, compared with 23% of parents of girls.
- This is a growing concern: only 21% of parents of boys reported this in 2024.
- Boys themselves echo this worry: this year, 19% of boys said that being online makes them feel lonely, compared to 15% of girls and 14% of boys in 2024.

Figure 6: Parents' concerns about their children online



Base: 1054. Q: Generally speaking, how worried are you about your [Age] year old son/daughter potentially experiencing any of these things in the future? 1-7, results from bottom 2 answers

*"Unhealthy images, diets and body image promoted to young girls [has an impact on their overall wellbeing]" – Parent of girl aged 15*

*"I feel like my son has become aggressive because of things he has seen on social media and because of bullying on social media" – Parent of boy aged 15*

# Parents' approaches to keeping children safe online

In recent years, we find that parents are increasingly taking different actions to support their children online, which are driven by the gender of their child.

## Parents are taking more actions to support girls online.

- Use of parental controls among parents of girls has risen over the past three years (42% in 2023 cf. 49% in 2025) yet stayed the same for parents of boys (44% in 2023 cf. 44% in 2025).
- 22% of parents of girls, compared to 18% of boys, say that they manage their child's online experiences a lot, such as by using screen time limiters and having clear rules about how much time they can spend online.

## Parents of boys are having fewer conversations about what their sons are doing online.

This year has seen a decline in parents of boys reporting that they:

- Ask their child to show them what they are doing on their phone/device: 35%, down from 41% in 2024 and compared to 44% of parents of girls.

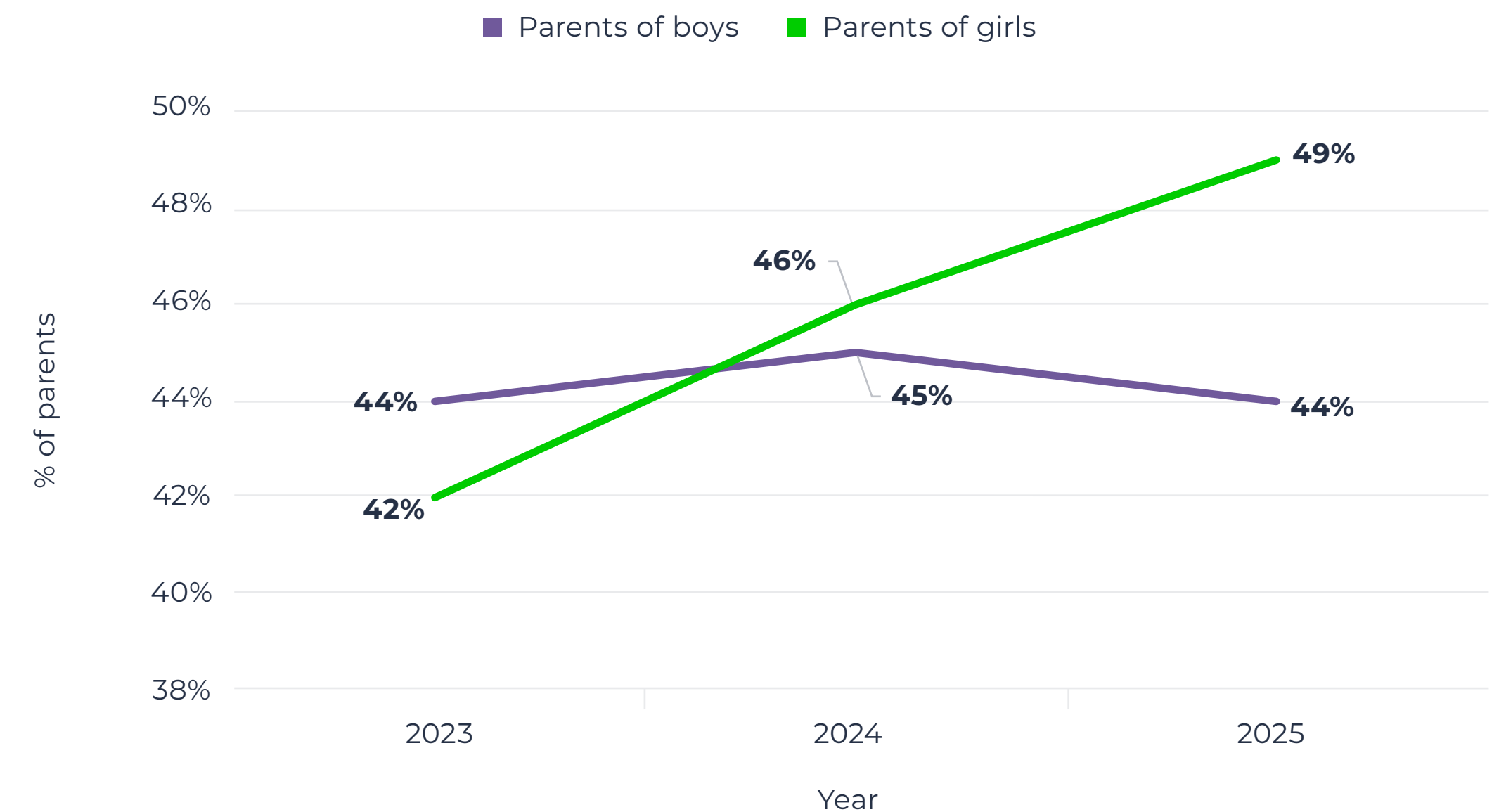
- Discuss with their child what they have been doing on their phone/online: 46%, down from 50% in 2024 and compared to 54% of parents of girls.

## Parents of boys are becoming more likely to turn to specialist organisations.

A notable increase this year is that parents of boys are turning more to specialist organisations when their child encounters harm online. 19% of parents of boys report doing so: an increase from 13% in 2024 and notably higher than the 11% of parents of girls which have done the same. Examples of specialist organisations include organisations that support children who have received unwanted sexual attention online, shared inappropriate images of themselves or others or done something dangerous because of content they have seen online. Parents reaching out to specialist organisations more could be being driven by their increasing concerns about their children encountering harm online, or by boys themselves reporting that they are becoming more distressed.



Figure 7: Usage of parental controls by gender of child



Base: 1054. Q: Do you do any of the following things to manage what your <age> year old <son/daughter> does on their devices/online? A: Use parental controls on certain devices or apps(e.g. limiting what content they can access on video streaming services)

## Conclusion and recommendations

**Boys and girls tell us that being online is a source of independence, entertainment and connection. Parents recognise this too, and understand the important role that connected technologies play in supporting children's wellbeing in a digital world.**

The research shows that while in some areas, boys' and girls' online experiences are converging – such as when it comes to time spent on social media – they remain distinct in others. For example, girls continue to experience more contact from strangers and bullying from people they know online. Their responses to harm also differ, with boys more likely to take platform-based action, while girls are more likely to have a conversation with a friend, sibling or trusted adult.

These differences also extend to parents. While parental concern remains high for all children, parents of girls report higher levels of concern and are more likely to take action to support their child's digital wellbeing. This includes being more likely to set up parental controls and talk to their daughter about what they are seeing and doing online.

Ultimately, building a digital world where all children can thrive will only be possible by considering how different factors, such as gender, shape experiences. Understanding this is key to creating policies and resources that help reduce harm and support every child online. The UK's Online Safety Act will go some way to achieving this, but to be effective it must be enforced robustly and complemented by wider action from industry, Government and civil society to address the realities of children's varied lived experiences.

### **Recommendations for Government, Ofcom and industry**

**Government should mandate robust age assurance for all children.**

Age assurance, which refers to processes and technologies used to verify users' ages, is essential to ensuring that children have age-appropriate experiences and that platforms enforce their terms of service. Government should place strong age assurance requirements on all platforms that set age restrictions, including social media sites which have a minimum age of 13.

**Government should make Ofcom's guidance to protect women and girls online a statutory code of practice.**

Ofcom has published the first draft of its "Safer life online for woman and girls" guidance, per the requirements of the Online Safety Act, to support platforms to reduce online violence against women and girls (VAWG). We are concerned that this guidance will not be sufficient to safeguard women and girls online because platforms are not legally required to follow it. A legally enforceable statutory code of practice on gendered violence would provide stronger protections for women and girls against misogyny and sexual violence online.

**Government must ensure that schools and teachers are well-supported to deliver media and digital literacy.**

We welcome the recently announced changes to the school curriculum.<sup>vii</sup> It is excellent that children will now be taught about elements of online safety from primary school onwards and that the Government has committed to improving sequencing across age groups and subjects, as this has been a significant barrier to children's media and digital literacy education in the past. It is now crucial that schools and teachers are well-supported to

deliver these changes through comprehensive teacher training, easy access to up-to-date and engaging resources, and clear, straightforward guidance for what to teach and when.

The curriculum should also take a differentiated approach to teaching boys and girls where topics have a strong gendered component and research supports this, such as in relation to teaching about sexual image sharing. Our 2024 research into methods to prevent sexual image sharing among children found that children responded better to teaching in smaller groups of single sex pupils, as well as differentiated messages based on the gender of the child.<sup>viii</sup>

For more details of our approach to improving children's media literacy education see our report *A Vision for Media Literacy: Charting the path for media literacy in schools*.<sup>ix</sup>



### Industry must make apps and platforms safe-by-design for all children

Beyond removing illegal and harmful content as required under the Online Safety Act, industry should embed safety-by-design into services from the outset. This means creating age-appropriate experiences such as through making high-risk features unavailable to younger users and ensuring functionality evolves as children grow.

A safety-by-design approach should also incorporate stronger measures to protect women and girls online. This can include setting safer defaults to prevent contact from strangers, abusability testing of features before they are rolled out and nudge techniques at the point of upload of sexual images.

## Supporting parents

Parents are children's main source of information about online safety and will always play a critical role in children's online lives.\* At [internetmatters.org](https://internetmatters.org), we provide advice for parents and carers to help support children's digital wellbeing. On our website you can find hundreds of free, online resources including:

- [Our online issues advice hub](#): This hub covers a range of key internet safety issues and provides guidance on preventing or dealing with potential harm.
- [The Online Together Project](#): a skills tool, developed by Internet Matters and supported by Samsung's Solve for Tomorrow Initiative, which encourages learning through questions and conversations for children to have with peers, teachers, parents and carers. The interactive tool includes modules addressing online hate and gender stereotypes with age-based videos, quizzes and lesson plans.
- [Step-by-step parental controls guides](#): These help parents to set up parental controls to manage children's devices, apps and platforms, to give them safer online experiences.
- [How to talk about harassment and abuse online](#): A guide with conversation starters specifically for boys and for girls on recognising and tackling abuse in online spaces.
- [A wellbeing apps guide](#): These apps help children manage their general day-to-day wellbeing. Children can learn how to practise daily reflections or use tools to keep their online interactions positive.

## References

- Internet Matters*, [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World](#), 2025.
- Internet Matters* has a number of reports that look at the rise of misogyny and the impact of this including: [So standard it's not noteworthy: Teenage girls' experiences of harm online](#), March 2024; and ["It's really easy to go down that path": Young people's experiences of online misogyny and image-based abuse](#), September 2023.
- Internet Matters*, [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World](#), 2025.
- Internet Matters*, [Connected and conflicted: Children's perspectives on restricting social media for under-16s](#), April 2025
- Internet Matters*, [So standard it's not noteworthy: Teenage girls' experiences of harm online](#), March 2024
- Internet Matters*, [So standard it's not noteworthy: Teenage girls' experiences of harm online](#), March 2024
- Department for Education*, [Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: government response](#), November 2025
- Internet Matters*, [Shifting the dial: Methods to prevent 'self-generated' child sexual abuse among 11-13-year-olds](#), May 2024
- Internet Matters*, [A Vision for Media Literacy](#), June 2024
- Internet Matters*, [Pulse](#), June 2025



Faraday Buildings,  
Ground Floor,  
1 Knightrider Street,  
London, EC4V 5BT

[info@internetmatters.org](mailto:info@internetmatters.org)

 [InternetMatters](https://www.facebook.com/InternetMatters)

 [@im\\_org](https://twitter.com/im_org)

 [@InternetMatters](https://www.youtube.com/InternetMatters)

 [Internet Matters Ltd](https://www.linkedin.com/company/Internet-Matters-Ltd)

 [@internetmattersorg](https://www.instagram.com/internetmattersorg)