MAY 2025

Understanding & improving how children report online harm

Data briefing

internet matters.org

Contents

Introduction

This briefing explores children's and parents' perspectives and experiences of blocking and reporting harmful content and interactions on platforms. Blocking and reporting are tools designed to help users manage their online experiences, allowing them to limit interactions with harmful individuals and flag inappropriate content to platforms for review and potentially removal. Although these tools are widely available, research suggests that children and young people often do not use them when they encounter harm online.[i]

Methodology

To further understand this challenge, we conducted a UK nationally representative survey of 2,000 parents of children aged 3-17 and 1,000 children aged 9-17. We also conducted supplementary qualitative research including a mixed gender focus group with 5 children aged 15 and 16 and an interview with one 15-year-old boy.

Findings

The findings of this research are structured into four sections:

1. **Prevalence of reporting** examines how often children report different types of harm and how reporting rates vary across platforms.

2. **Knowledge of blocking and reporting on platforms** looks at children's understanding of how to block and report on various platforms and what they believe happens when a report is made.

3. **Barriers to reporting** explores why children may choose not to report harmful or potentially harmful content to a platform.

4. **Reporting processes and outcomes** discusses children's and parents' satisfaction with the reporting process and identifies areas for improvement.

It was important that this briefing explored the perspectives of both parents and children, as parents are often who children turn to when something goes wrong online.[ii] Given this, their insights provide valuable context for how reporting processes can be improved to better support children's online safety and wellbeing.

In addition to analysing how children, and parents on their behalf, engage with blocking and reporting, this briefing also outlines recommendations that would enhance the effectiveness of reporting systems. Low reporting rates can underestimate the true scale of online harm. Encouraging more children, and the public more broadly, to report harmful experiences can help hold platforms accountable and drive improvements in online safety.

While the UK Online Safety Act, and the accompanying Codes of Practice, place specific requirements on platforms to improve reporting experiences for children and parents, as well as other measures to reduce harm more broadly, more can still be done - as outlined in our recommendations section.

Despite reporting being a helpful tool for harm reduction, it must be noted that it is a reactive tool that places the burden on the victim to act, after harm has occurred. Efforts to improve reporting must be coupled with, and not come at the expense of, proactive measures from platforms to reduce harm, such as content moderation and age-appropriate design features. Proactive measures are essential to preventing online harm from occurring in the first place.

Key findings

Prevalence and knowledge of blocking and reporting

- **Online harm is common, but reporting remains low.**
71% of children have experienced harm online, yet only 36% of children who have experienced harm have reported it to the platform.

- **Motivations to report vary by gender.** Offensive, upsetting or abusive content are the most common reasons that children make reports to platforms. However, girls are more likely to report upsetting content and boys being more likely to report illegal content.

- **Children were more motivated to report if it impacted them, or their friends and family.** Children in the focus group spoke about how direct impact increased their likelihood of reporting.

- **Vulnerable children[1] are more likely to report.** 54% of vulnerable children have reported harm, compared to 33% of non-vulnerable children - this is positive as vulnerable children experience higher rates of harm online.

- **Children know how to report but not what happens after.** Most children know how to report or block users and the more they use platforms, the more familiar they are with reporting features. However, many children are unsure what happens once a report is submitted.
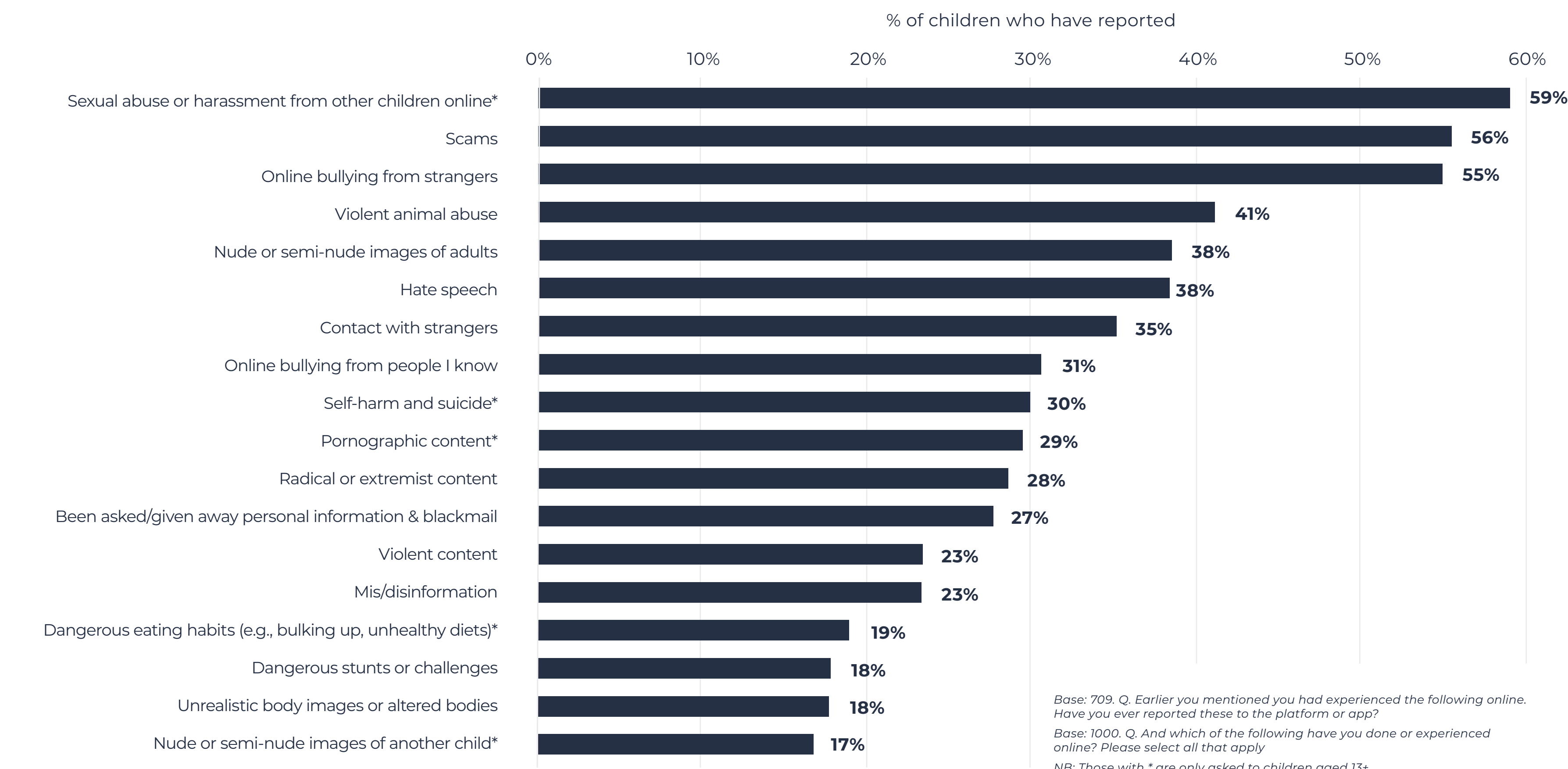
Reporting processes

- **Barriers to reporting include complexity and lack of trust.** Only 54% of children agree the reporting process is clear and in language they can understand, while 35% cite too many steps and 31% confusing categories as barriers to reporting. Concerns about anonymity and platform inaction were also reasons given for not reporting.

- **Reporting was generally straightforward for children but improvements were still identified.** While 83% of children who have reported found the process easy, 60% still encountered at least one challenge in the process, such as not being updated on the outcome.

- **Education is key to improving reporting rates.** 79% of children support more education around reporting. Schools are seen as important spaces for learning about blocking, reporting, and generally staying safe online.

- **Parents play an important role in supporting their children to block and report, especially younger children.** 83% of parents have talked with their child about reporting and younger users were more in favour of parents being able to report on their behalf.

- **When dissatisfied with the outcome of a report, parents supported options for further action.** 50% agreed they should be able to escalate the report for review by the platform and 43% supported the option to file a complaint with an independent body, such as Ofcom.

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1.   *Here we define vulnerable children as children who have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), who receive special educational needs (SEN) support, or who have a physical/mental health condition which requires professional help.*

Prevalence of reporting

% of children who have reported

Type of harm	%
Sexual abuse or harassment from other children online*	59%
Scams	56%
Online bullying from strangers	55%
Violent animal abuse	41%
Nude or semi-nude images of adults	38%
Hate speech	38%
Contact with strangers	35%
Online bullying from people I know	31%
Self-harm and suicide*	30%
Pornographic content*	29%
Radical or extremist content	28%
Been asked/given away personal information & blackmail	27%
Violent content	23%
Mis/disinformation	23%
Dangerous eating habits (e.g., bulking up, unhealthy diets)*	19%
Dangerous stunts or challenges	18%
Unrealistic body images or altered bodies	18%
Nude or semi-nude images of another child*	17%

Base: 709. Q. Earlier you mentioned you had experienced the following online. Have you ever reported these to the platform or app?

Base: 1000. Q. And which of the following have you done or experienced online? Please select all that apply

*NB: Those with * are only asked to children aged 13+*

Harmful online experiences are common for children of all ages, yet most children do not report harmful experiences to platforms when they occur.

Although 71% of children say they have experienced reportable harms such as trolling or coming across hate speech while on an app or platform, only just over a third (36%) of children have reported it. This means 64% of children have not reported harm when it has occurred.
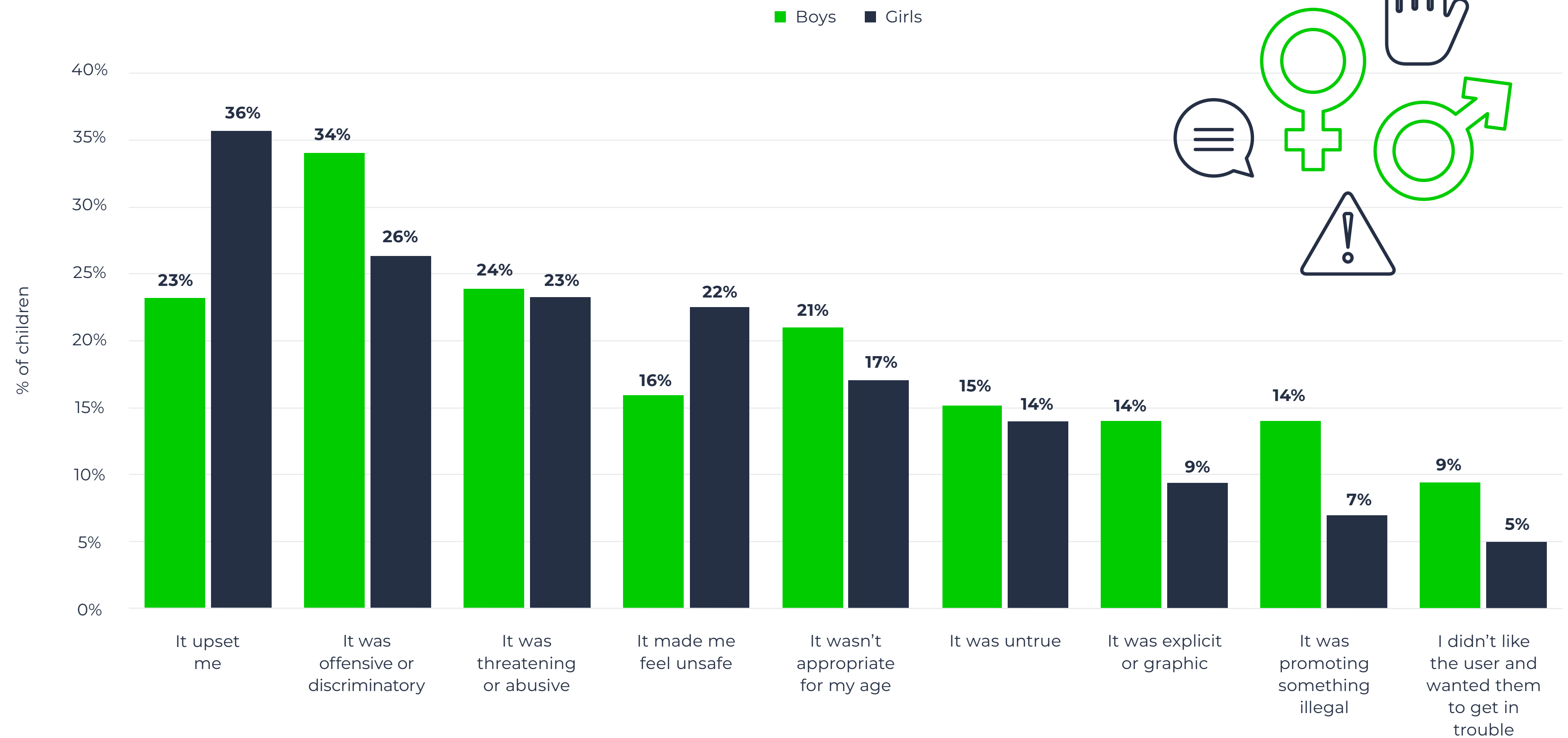
When looking at reporting rates for specific harms, we see reluctance to report even serious incidents. The most common types of harm children experience online are contact from strangers, encountering mis/disinformation, and coming across hate speech such as racism or sexism.[iii] However, reporting rates for these harms remain low. Only around a third (35%) of children who have been contacted by a stranger reported it to the platform, less than a quarter (23%) of those who came across mis/disinformation submitted a report, and just 38% of those who encountered hate speech reported it. This shows a significant gap between experience and reporting.

When exploring the data we find that girls, boys and children of all ages report at similar rates. We did find that vulnerable children are more likely to report harm when it occurs (54%) than non-vulnerable children (33%). This is encouraging as vulnerable children experience more harm online, with 75% of vulnerable children having experienced harm compared to 70% of their non-vulnerable peers.[iv]

Influences on children's reporting

When asking children generally about why they have reported something to a platform we see some differences emerge between genders. Girls were significantly more likely to say they reported something because it upset them (36% of girls cf. 23% of boys), whereas boys were more likely to report something because it was promoting something illegal (14% of boys cf. 7% of girls). This is likely due to differences in what children are encountering online with girls, especially teenage girls, more commonly encountering unwanted comments and contact from strangers according to previous research.[v]

Figure 2: Reasons for reporting by gender

- ■ Boys
- ■ Girls

Base: 267. Q. Have you reported something to a platform/app for any of the following reasons? Select all that apply.

We also found further gender differences in what children report or block when speaking to young people as part of our qualitative research. For instance, girls gave more examples of reporting people, especially strangers, who had tried to make contact or said inappropriate things, whereas boys were more likely to discuss reporting hate speech or violent content.

"If they say like the N word or something, I might like report them." **Boy, 16**

"When people [I don't know] have asked like, creepy things [I've reported them]." **Girl, 15**

"I have had [people] coming into my messages, asking who I am, I'll just block or report them." **Girl, 15**

"[I've reported] for offensive names or like offensive language." **Boy, 15**

While there were gender differences in the type of content reported or reason for reporting, we also found in the qualitative research that all children said they were more likely to report something if it directly impacted them, or their friends or family.

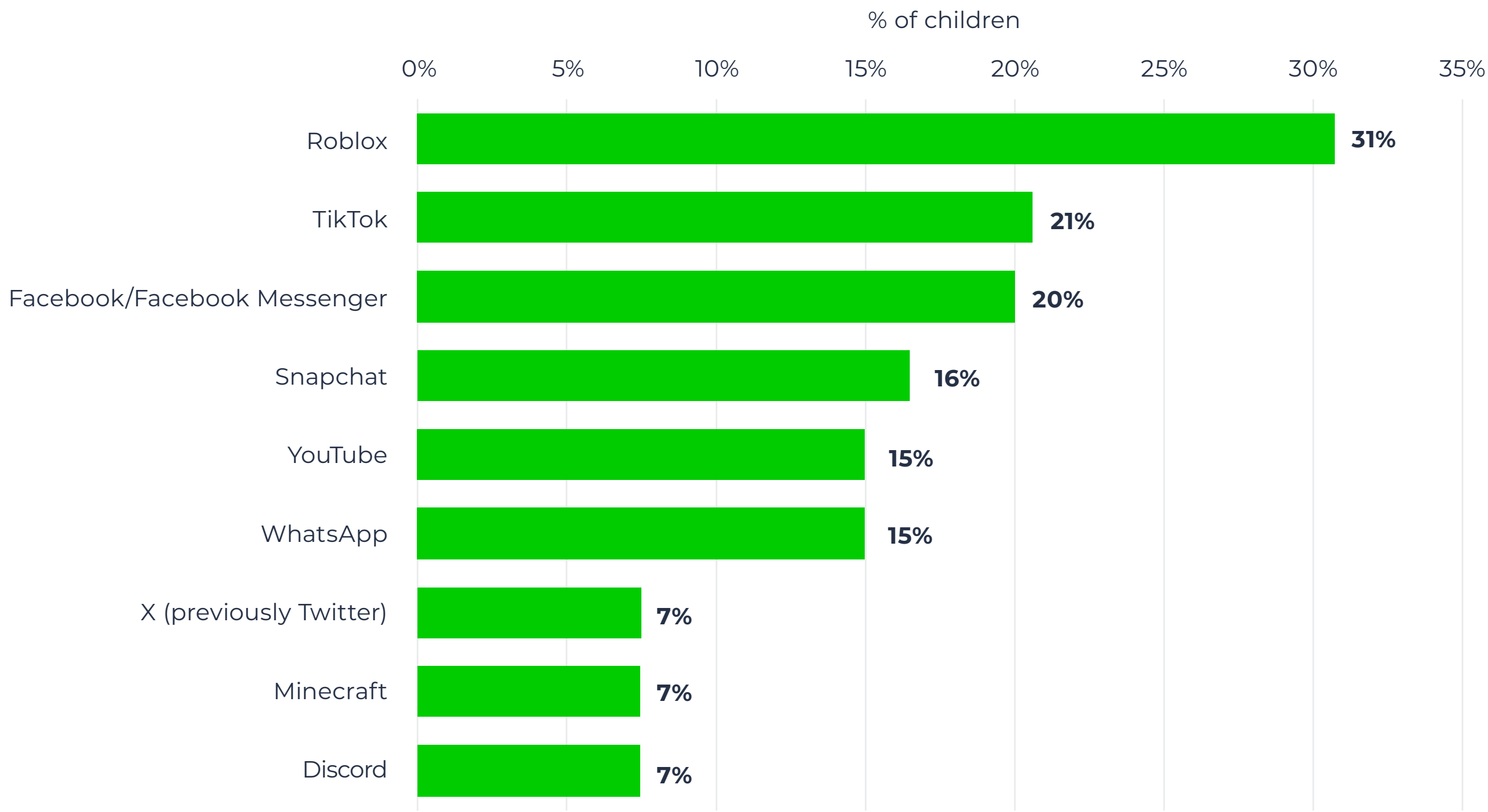*"If it affects me, I am more likely to report."* **Boy, 15**

"Probably report it if it was against my friends or family." **Girl, 16**

Reporting by platform

We also found that children were more likely to report on some platforms compared to others. For example, children are twice as likely to report on Roblox (31%) compared to WhatsApp or YouTube (15%).

These differences could be because of higher volume of harm on some platforms, more serious harms occurring, or due to platforms having more accessible reporting features than others.

Figure 3: Platforms children reported on

% of children

Platform	%
Roblox	31%
TikTok	21%
Facebook/Facebook Messenger	20%
Snapchat	16%
YouTube	15%
WhatsApp	15%
X (previously Twitter)	7%
Minecraft	7%
Discord	7%

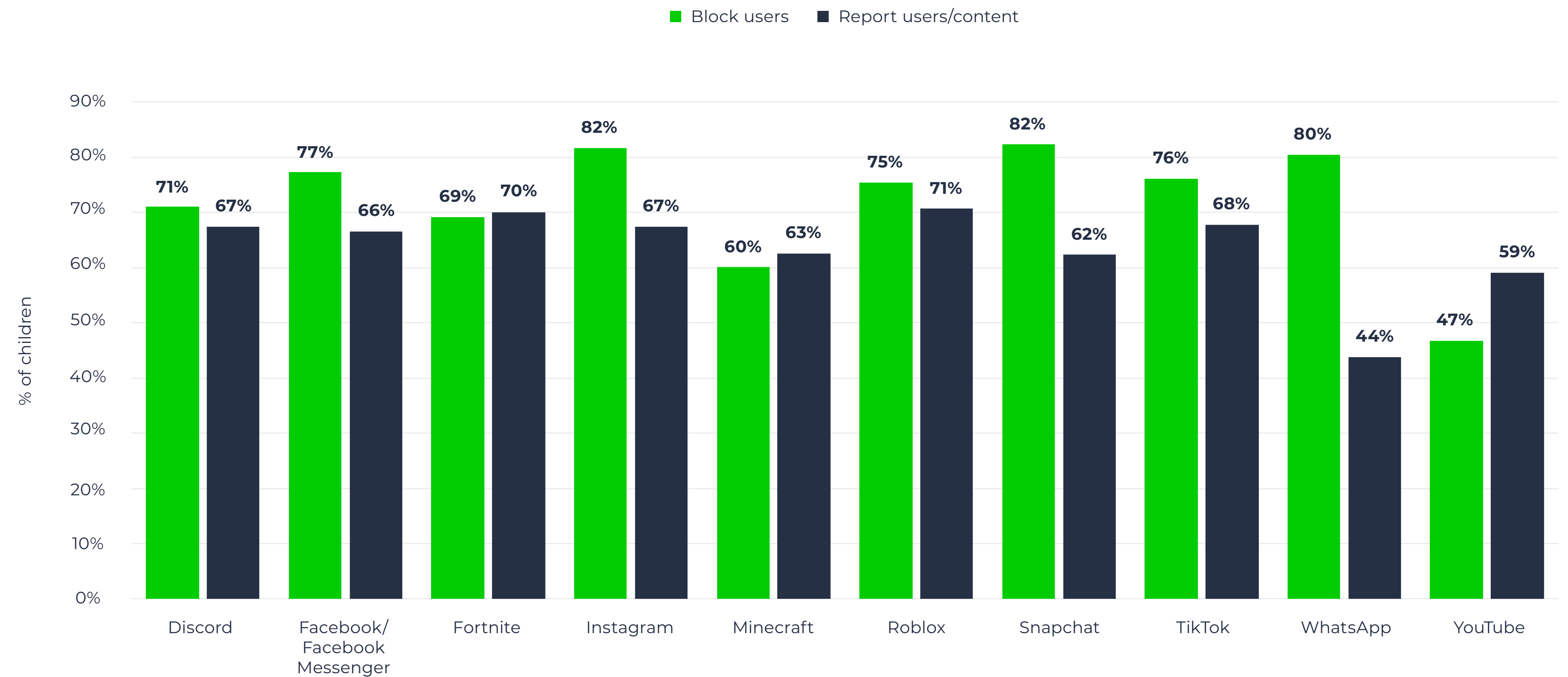*Base: 267. Q. Which of these platforms/apps did you report this experience to?*

Knowledge of blocking and reporting on platforms

Although reporting rates amongst children on platforms are low, the majority of children do know how to block and/or report users and content on platforms. This suggests that not knowing how to report content or users isn't the main driver of why children are not reporting. Children are less clear, however, on what happens after they report users or content.

When asking children about whether they know how to block and report on platforms they use, we found that across platforms, children were more likely to know how to block on the platform than report. For example, 82% of children know how to block on Instagram compared to 67% who know how to report.
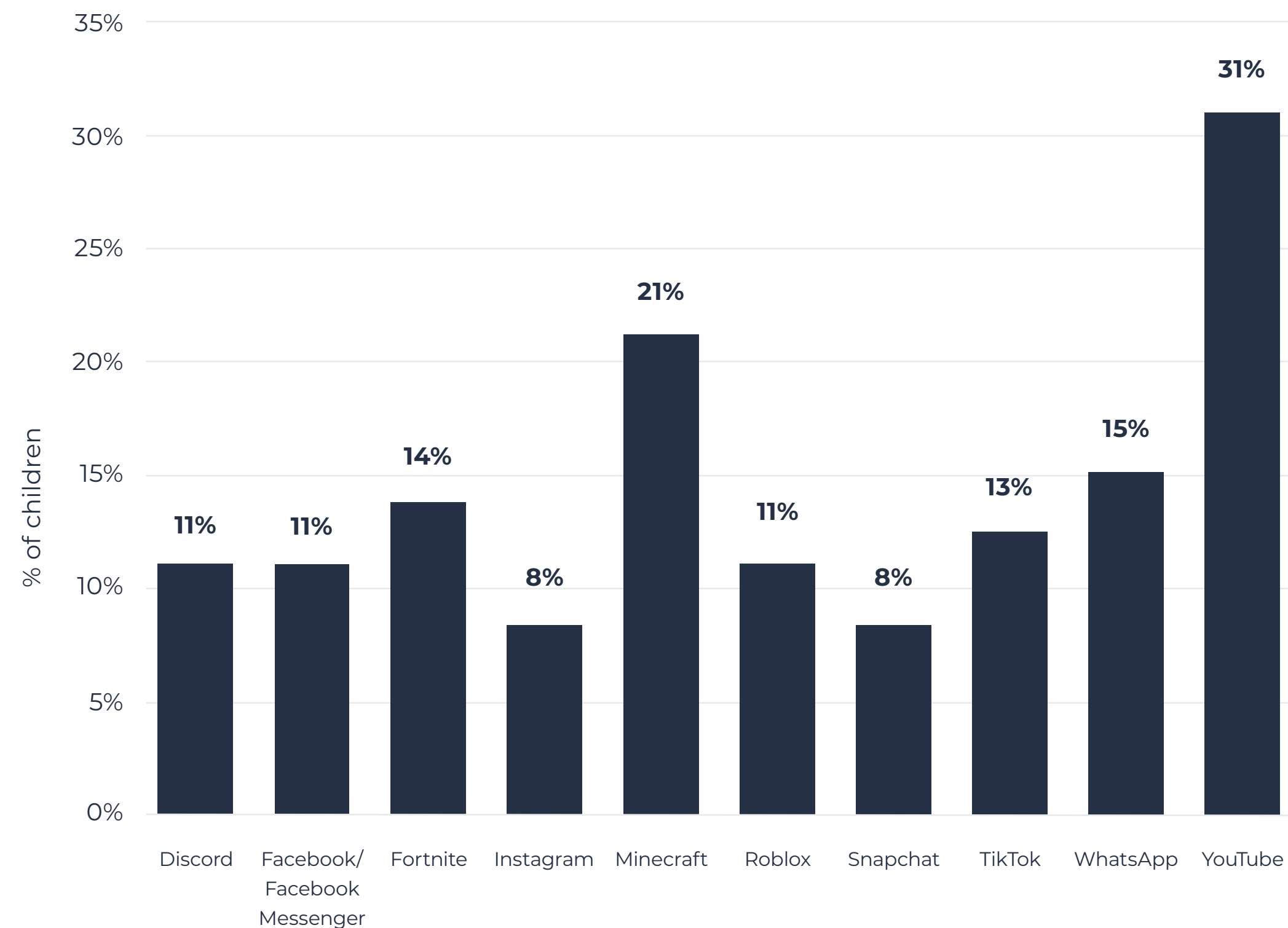
Figure 4: Children's knowledge of blocking and reporting by platform

■ Block users ■ Report users/content

	Discord	Facebook/Facebook Messenger	Fortnite	Instagram	Minecraft	Roblox	Snapchat	TikTok	WhatsApp	YouTube
Block users	71%	77%	69%	82%	60%	75%	82%	76%	80%	47%
Report users/content	67%	66%	70%	67%	63%	71%	62%	68%	44%	59%

Base 1000. Q. Which of the following apps or platforms do you use?
Base: 83-700. Q. Which, if any, of the following do you know how to do on each of these apps/platforms? Select all that apply

Figure 5: Children who don't know how to report or block by platform

Base 1000. Q. Which of the following apps or platforms do you use?
Base: 83-700. Q. Which, if any, of the following do you know how to do on each of these apps/platforms? Select all that apply

We also see that children have more knowledge of how to block and report on some platforms compared to others. YouTube (31%), Minecraft (21%) and WhatsApp (15%) are the platforms where children are least likely to know how to block and report. Again, this could be for many reasons, from less harm occurring on these platforms to the reporting and/or blocking process being more involved. We found no significant difference between vulnerable children and all other children when it came to knowledge of blocking and reporting on platforms.

In qualitative research, children explained that their familiarity with reporting and blocking functions was influenced by the amount of time they spent on platforms, with more frequent use leading to greater knowledge of these features.

> *"I'd know more like how to do it on TikTok than Instagram or something like that... because I use it more."* **Girl, 15**

We also found in the qualitative research that while children knew how to report or block, many did not know what happened after they reported something to the platform. Some mentioned within gaming platforms they could see users receive "warnings" or they might be told how long someone is banned for, following a report. However, outside of gaming platform examples children were unsure what happened after a person or content was reported. Some children speculated that it might depend on what was reported and if it was reported by more than one person; others were more doubtful that anything happened at all.

> *"On Roblox my friends would get warnings."* **Girl, 15**

> *"I don't really know what happens but I assume they prioritise the more severe reports."* **Boy, 16**

> *"I am not 100% sure... probably depends on what you have reported, what platform it is."* **Girl, 16**

> *"When I am on Rocket League or something, it tells you how long they are banned for."* **Boy, 15**

> *"I feel like some social media apps would not really do anything"* **Girl, 16**

Barriers to reporting

Children were able to identify a number of reasons why young people might not report content to platforms, despite knowing how to report.

Our research found that only 54% of children agree that the reporting process on platforms is clear and written in simple language. Furthermore, 35% think there are too many steps and a third (31%) do not understand the categories used for reporting. Other reasons children may not report include concern over whether they will remain anonymous after they have reported and lack of confidence that platforms will act on reports, with 4 in 10 children agreeing with the statement 'platforms don't respond to reports or take too long to respond'.

In our qualitative research, children shared similar explanations for why they or others might choose not to report harmful or potentially harmful content or users. When speaking about anonymity concerns, the focus was on how this concern is particularly worrying if you are reporting someone you know offline. There was also a belief amongst some in the focus groups that platforms might not actually do anything and therefore, there was no reason to report.
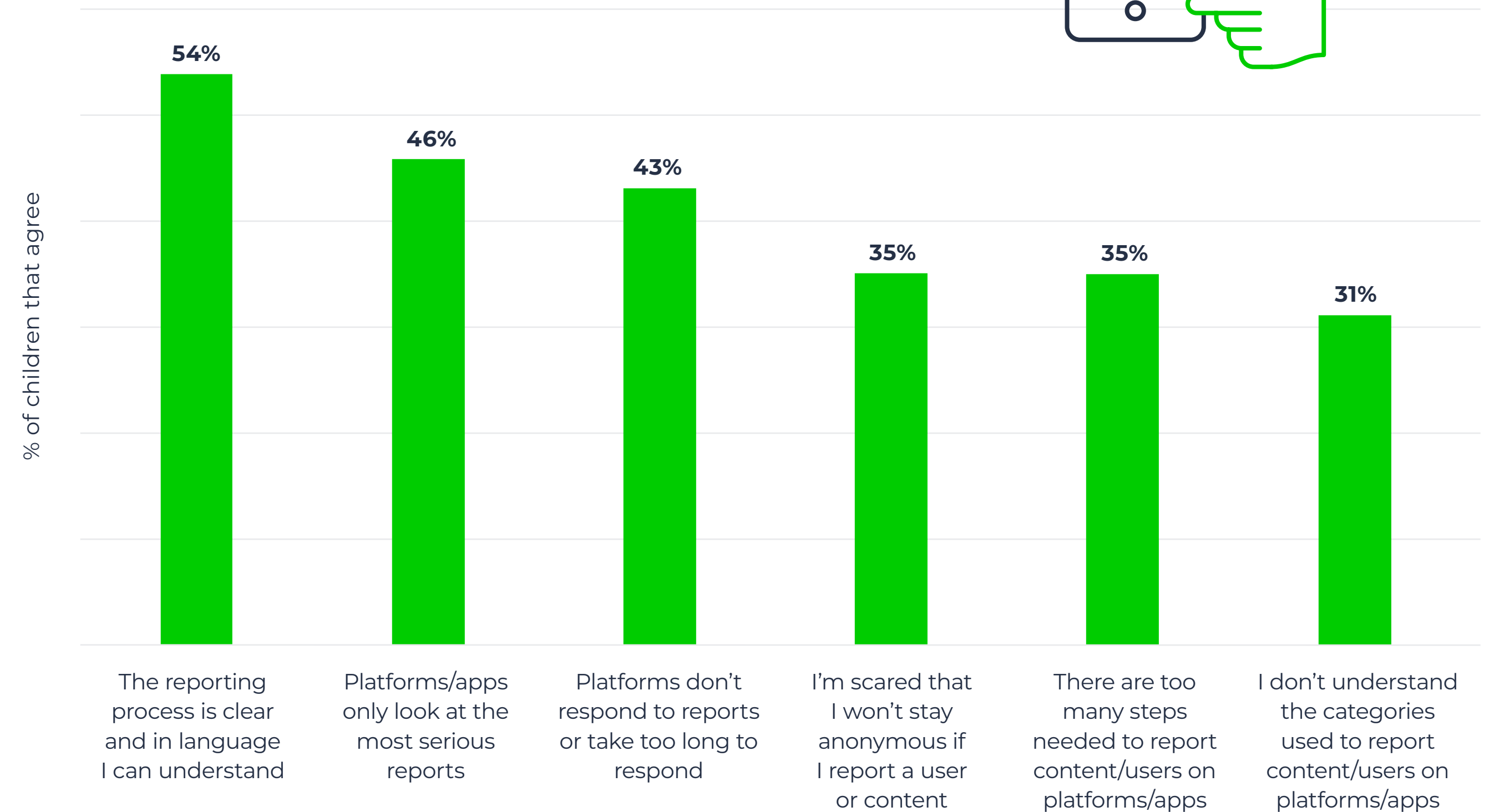
"Might be scared that whoever they are reporting finds out… Like if it's someone from your school" **Girl, 15**

"Don't think it's [reporting] going to change anything." **Boy, 15**

In addition to the above, one participant noted that some users may not report content, such as violent or inappropriate material, because they have become desensitised due to the volume of such content on certain platforms.

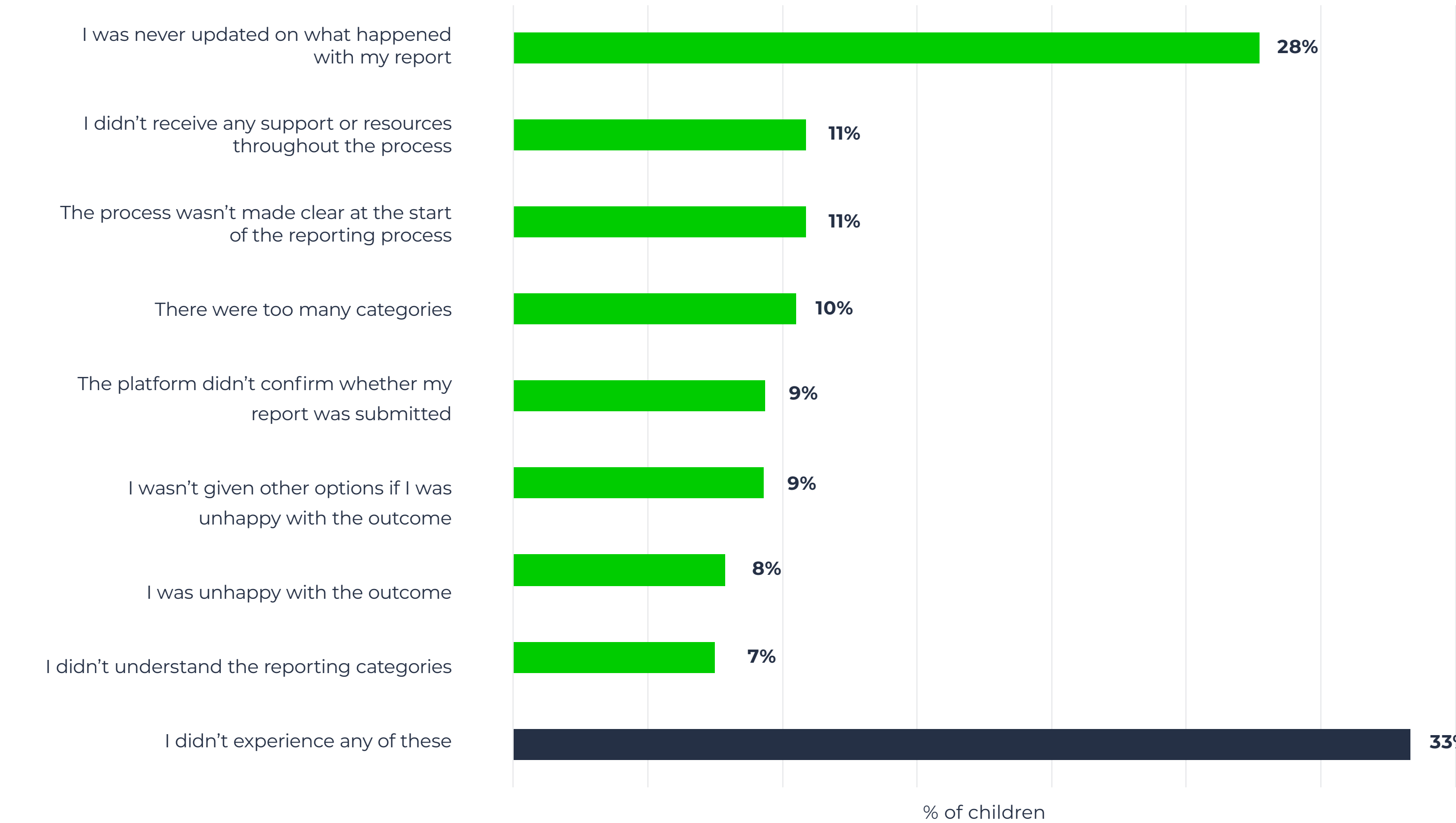*"Could be desensitised to the amount of inappropriate content"* **Girl, 15**

Figure 6: Challenges children face when reporting on platforms

Base: 1000. Q. How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Reporting process and outcomes

Figure 7: Negative experiences of reporting to platforms/apps

Category	%
I was never updated on what happened with my report	28%
I didn't receive any support or resources throughout the process	11%
The process wasn't made clear at the start of the reporting process	11%
There were too many categories	10%
The platform didn't confirm whether my report was submitted	9%
I wasn't given other options if I was unhappy with the outcome	9%
I was unhappy with the outcome	8%
I didn't understand the reporting categories	7%
I didn't experience any of these	33%

% of children

Base: 246. Q. When you reported something to the platform/app, did you experience any of the following problems? Select all that apply.

Most children who have reported, and parents who have supported their child to report, were satisfied with the reporting process on platforms and were happy with the outcome. However, children and parents do have suggestions for how the process could be improved.

Most children (83%) who have reported content or users to a platform found the reporting process easy and were happy with the outcome (66%). This was echoed in the qualitative research with children agreeing that it was easy to find the reporting button on platforms and that the reporting process was quick. It is important to note, however, that this qualitative research was with older children and there was recognition that younger children may need more support.
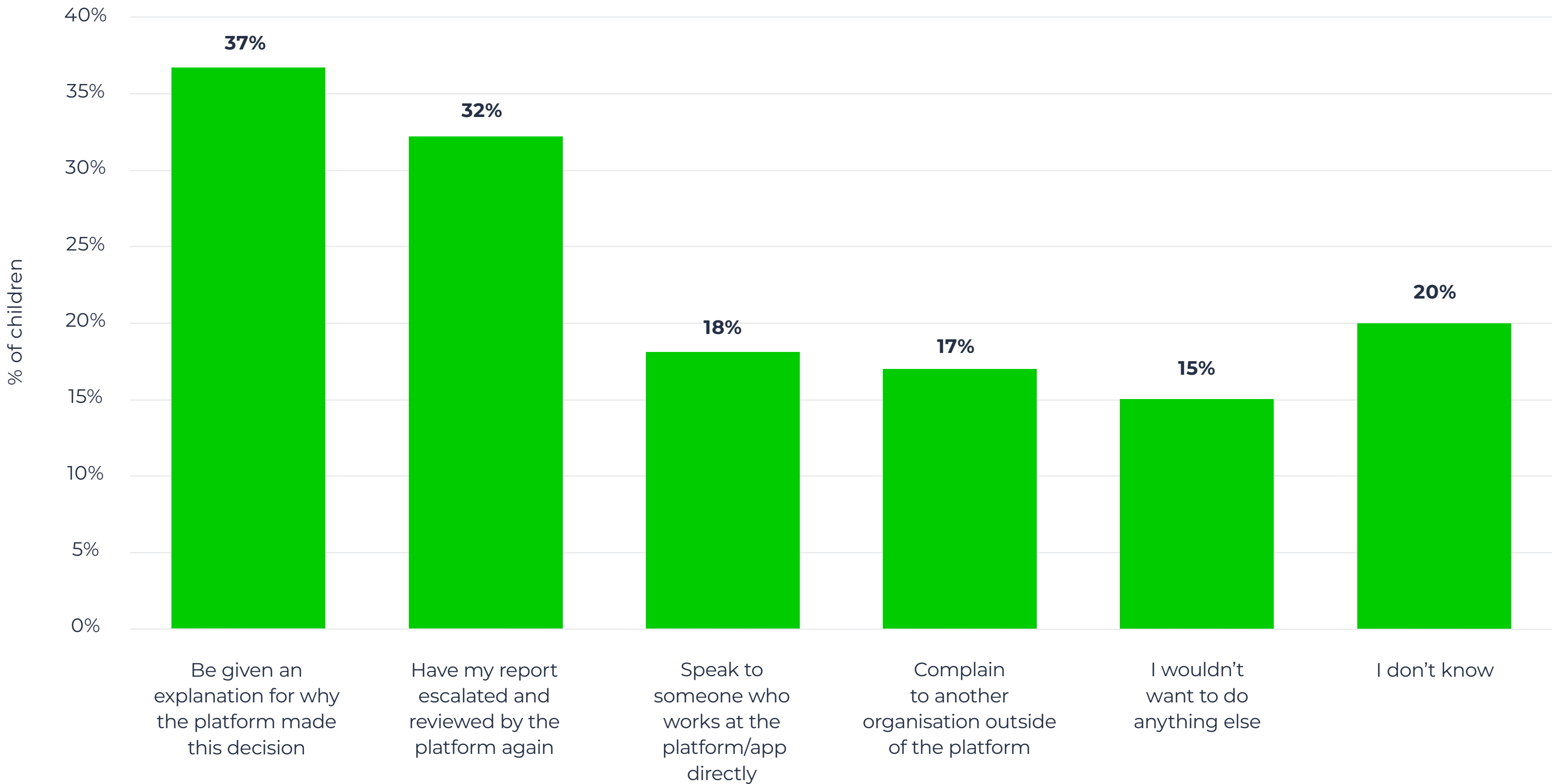
"It's easy to find the report button and easy to report content… it's not a long-winded process that you have to go through." Girl, 16

Despite most children being happy overall with their reporting experience, the majority (60%) still encountered some challenges when making a report to a platform. 28% of children said they were never kept updated on their report, 11% said the process wasn't made clear at the outset and 11% did not receive any support or resources throughout the process. This suggests that more can be done to improve the reporting process for children.

As well as asking children about barriers to reporting and challenges with the reporting process, we also asked children what they would like to happen if they were unhappy with the outcome of a report. 37% of children said they would like to be given an explanation by the platform about how they made the decision, 32% said they would like it reviewed by the platform again and 18% said they'd like to speak to someone directly.

We also found that younger children were less certain about what further action they would like from platforms, with 27% of 9-12 years olds answering 'I don't know' when asked what they would like to happen if they were unhappy with the outcome of a report, compared to 16% of 13–17-year-olds. This could indicate that younger children have a greater reliance on parents or a trusted adult to support them with experiences of harm online, or reflect that younger children having less experience reporting on platforms, given many popular services are for users aged 13+. This highlights the importance of age-appropriate design, where platforms should consider the needs and experiences of children in different age groups.

Figure 8: What children would want to happen if they were unhappy with the outcome of a report to a platform

Base: 1000. Q: Imagine you reported something to an app/platform and you weren't happy with how the app/platform responded. Which, if any, of the following would you want to do? Select all that apply.

Media literacy

Outside of addressing the aforementioned barriers and challenges, children also noted the importance of education for improving reporting rates. 79% of children were supportive of more education around how to report content/users on platforms. This was built on in the focus group, with young people discussing how school is an important place for children to learn about staying safe online, including how to report and block.

"I think school is a great place for educating children on reporting and blocking." Girl, 15

"I think school is a good place [to learn about blocking and reporting]... not everyone talks to their parents and some parents don't know what their children are like and wouldn't have known how to help." Girl, 15

"School taught me in like year 5... internet safety, and that I shouldn't add random people." Boy 15

Some children thought more could be done to raise awareness of reporting in general, with one person suggesting a campaign. Another young person recognised that the way platforms are designed can encourage users to report more, referencing how TikTok prompts about whether a video was appropriate or not to help you to think about reporting content. This highlights how important platform design can be for supporting children to report.

"Sometimes it'll like prompt you like, 'do you think this video was appropriate for TikTok?'" Girl, 15

The role of parents

Parents play an important role in children's online safety and are often who children turn to when they need advice or support to stay safe online.[vi] This includes helping children understand how to block and report content or users on platforms.

85% of parents have had conversations with their children about blocking users on platforms and apps, and 83% have had conversations about reporting users and content in the past year. Children in the qualitative research recalled having these conversations with their parents. While many learned to use reporting and blocking tools on their own, they still turned to parents for guidance, particularly when they were younger or unsure whether something should be reported.

"[I've] talked to my parents about what to report and block" Boy, 15

"I've had a conversation about blocking when I was younger... cos I used to just like add random people... so I've had a conversation with my Mum, when I was around 8 or 9." Boy, 15
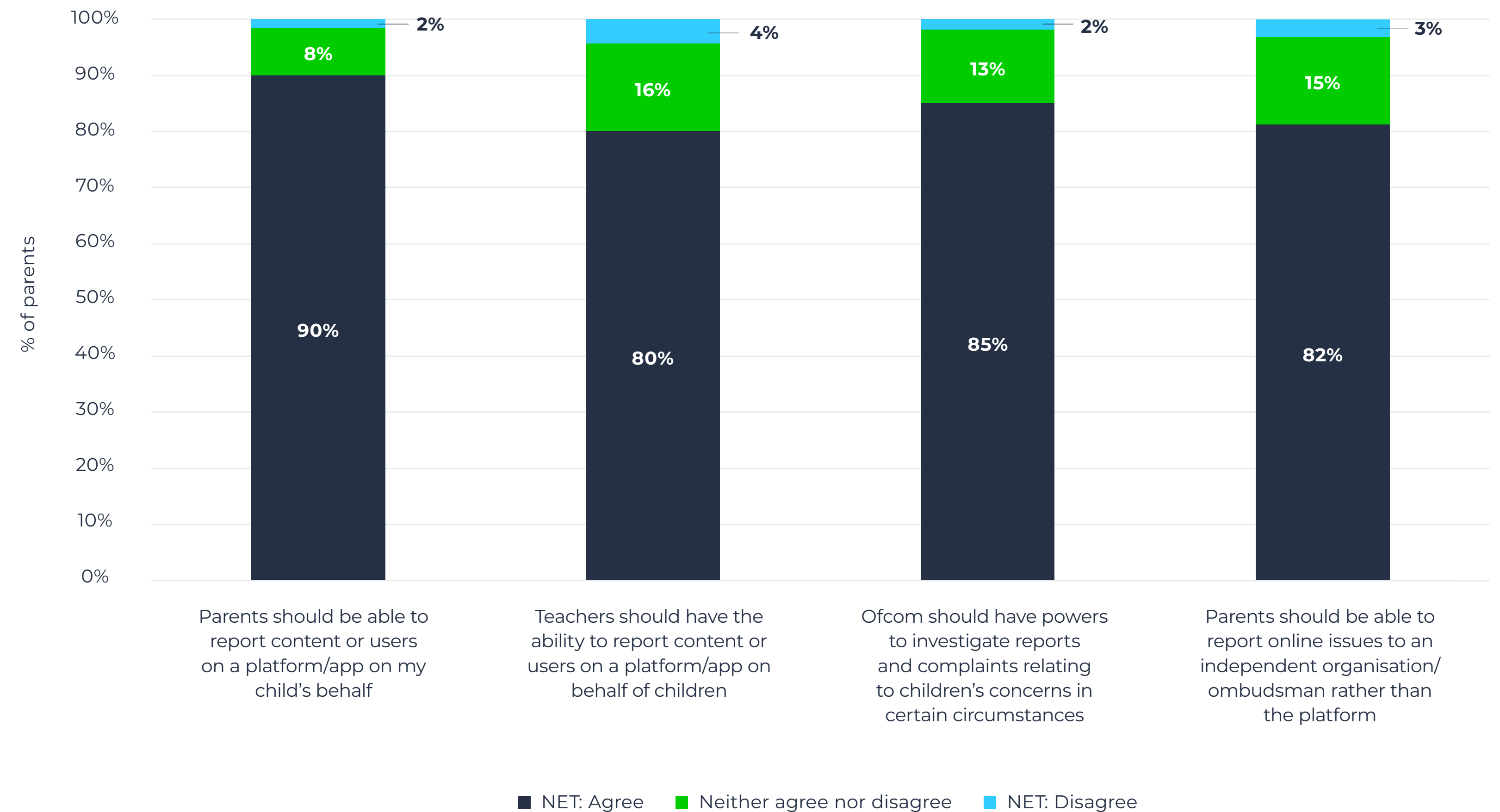
Parents of vulnerable children have these conversations even more frequently. For example, 51% of parents of vulnerable children have had a conversation in the past month about blocking users compared to 34% of parents of non-vulnerable children. Given the central role of parents in educating children about how to stay safe online, ensuring parents are provided with the knowledge to do this is as important as educating children.

While parents are more critical than children of the reporting process, 50% of parents who have helped their child to report still agree that reporting processes on platforms for children are simple and clear, and 58% of parents were happy with the outcome following a report.

Parents supported a number of actions that could be taken to make the reporting process on platforms easier and more effective for children. Some of these actions included: parents being able to report on their child's behalf (90%), Ofcom having powers to investigate individual reports and complaints relating to children's concerns in certain circumstances (85%), and having an option to report online issues to an independent organisation (such as an ombudsman) rather than the platform where the issue occurred (82%).
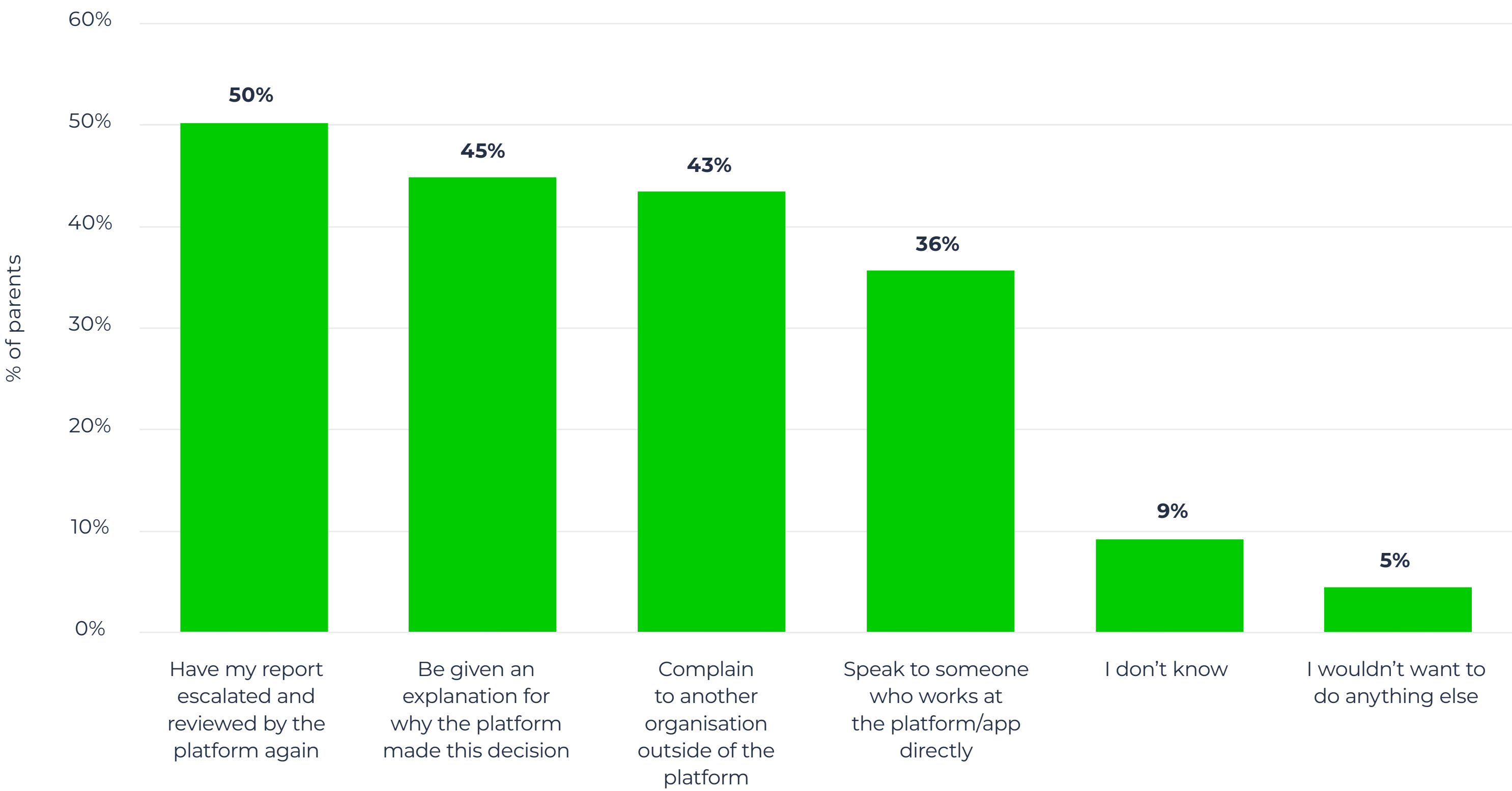
Figure 9: Parents' support of actions to make reporting processes more effective for children

NET: Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   NET: Disagree

Base: 2000. Q. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Figure 10: What parents would want to happen if they were unhappy with the outcome of a report

Children also agree that parents should have a role to play in reporting, with 74% of children thinking a trusted adult (such as a parent or teacher) should be able to report on their behalf. This was particularly true amongst younger users, with 83% of 9-12 year olds agreeing with this statement compared to 67% of 13-17 year olds. Children in the focus group also noted the importance of this for younger children as they felt they were less likely to be able to deal with harmful behaviour themselves.

"I feel like under 12 you would probably report it to someone you know, or someone you trust." **Girl, 16**

"[Allowing someone to report on your behalf would be] especially useful for younger children who might not know how to report." **Girl, 15**

"I think it would be really useful for younger people and people who are more vulnerable [to have someone be able to report on their behalf]" **Girl, 15**

When asking parents what options they would like if they are unhappy with the outcome of a report, parents were most supportive of having an option to have the report escalated and reviewed again by the platform (50%), followed by being given an explanation about why the decision was made (45%) and being able to make a complaint to another organisation (43%).

Conclusion and recommendations

This research highlights that more can be done to support children and parents to report harm when it occurs on platforms. Strengthening the reporting process, could encourage more users to take action, helping to reduce harm to other users in the short term by flagging content or users for removal by platforms. In the long term, increased reporting provides industry, government, and regulators with a clearer picture of the scale of online harms, enabling them to address systemic issues more effectively and implement stronger protections to prevent harm before it occurs.

The recently published (April 2025) Protection of Children and Illegal Harms Codes, introduced under the UK Online Safety Act (OSA), are a step towards improving users' (particularly children's) reporting experiences. The Codes set out specific measures related to reporting and complaints that designated user-to-user and search services must implement.[2] Encouragingly, many of these new requirements align with the needs and concerns raised by children and parents in this research.

The new requirements placed on relevant services include:

- Allowing reports and complaints from anyone in the UK, including those not registered as users. This means parents and teachers will be able to make complaints on children's behalf.

- Ensuring reporting and complaints processes are easy to find, clear and accessible, including for children. While there is no requirement to tailor the reporting process for children of different ages, services must make it "comprehensible to all children".

- Offering upfront information before submitting a report, including what data will be shared and reassurance that personal information won't be disclosed, to improve transparency. While anonymity isn't guaranteed, this helps people to make informed decisions when submitting a report.[3]

- Acknowledging all complaints and providing users with indicative timeframes for resolution. Users must also be able to opt out of follow-up communications.

- Limiting the number of steps in the reporting process to only what is "reasonably necessary" in order to make it more user-friendly.

- Providing children with the functionality to block or mute accounts as a form of self-protection.

Together, these measures aim to make reporting easier and more transparent, especially for younger users, and to reduce the prevalence of harm online. While the effectiveness of these new obligations will depend on how rigorously platforms implement them, and how firmly Ofcom enforces them, they represent a promising shift toward more child-centred reporting processes.

Ultimately, however, reporting is just one aspect of children's safety online. While improving reporting can be beneficial for reducing harm, the priority should always be preventing harm from occurring in the first place.

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2. Which user-to-user and search services must implement elements of the Codes depends on factors such as whether children are likely to access the service and the number of UK users the service has. For more detail, please see the _Protection of Children Codes_ published on the Ofcom website.

3. The Protection of Children Codes provides three reasons for why platforms cannot guarantee anonymity to a complainant. Explanation of these reasons can be found in Volume 4, section 16.120.

Recommendations

This briefing builds on the statutory requirements outlined above by offering further evidence-based recommendations, informed by what parents and children told us.

Industry

- **Involve children in the implementation of the Codes of Practice.** Engagement with a diverse range of children will help ensure that reporting and complaints processes are genuinely clear, accessible, and suited to the needs of most children.

- **Make guidance for children age appropriate by taking into consideration the developmental needs of different age groups.** Platforms should go beyond the minimum requirement of making complaints processes "comprehensible to all children" by actively tailoring guidance for children of different ages. A seven-year-old and a seventeen-year-old have vastly different cognitive and emotional capacities and offering the same generic information risks excluding younger or more vulnerable users. In practice, this might mean providing more visual guides, interactive or simplified formats for younger children.

- **Educate children on how to report and block including through media literacy by design on platforms.** Children should be supported in learning how to navigate reporting and blocking tools effectively. Platforms should offer this guidance through multiple channels, such as in-app prompts, gamified tutorials, or nudge techniques at relevant moments (e.g. after exposure to harmful content). Support can also extend beyond the platform, including through partnerships with schools and accessible resources for parents and carers.

- **Provide parents with clear and accessible information on how to report and block users on their child's behalf.** Platforms should provide parents and carers straightforward guidance on blocking and reporting functions, which should be accessible whether they or their child has an account.

- **Platforms should prioritise reports submitted by children or that involve child users.** Reports submitted by children should be reviewed with urgency. Children are more likely to be vulnerable to psychological harm, exploitation, or distress, and timely intervention can be critical. This should include exploring the efficacy of human review alongside automated technology.

Government and the regulator

- **Require platforms to publish reporting data.** The government should require platforms to publish regular, standardised data on reporting volumes, response times, outcomes, and user satisfaction. This would increase transparency, highlight emerging harms, and help identify which features most effectively reduce harm.

- **Provide alternative routes for redress outside of platforms.** The government should create a child and parent accessible ombudsman service to handle unresolved complaints and systemic concerns. This would give families an alternative route when dissatisfied with how a platform handled an issue. The Australian eSafety Commissioner model could serve as a useful reference.

- **Embed media literacy in the school curriculum.** Children are online from an early age, and schools provide an essential avenue for teaching children media literacy skills (including how to block and report) at scale. Improving media literacy education in schools will ensure all children leave schools with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the online world safely and responsibly. For further recommendations for improving children's media literacy education see our report, A Vision for Media Literacy.

- **Ofcom should continue to review and adapt Codes based on emerging evidence.** Ofcom should update the Codes of Practice under the OSA in line with new research and real-world experiences of users. Future iterations could address:

  - Standardised reporting categories (currently not required under the OSA but identified as a barrier for some children)

  - Prioritisation of child-originated reports

  - The efficacy of human vs automated reviews

While we wait for regulation to come into force and further action from industry, government and the regulator, there are steps parents can take now to help keep their children safe online. At internetmatters.org you will find free practical resources and guides to support children's online safety. This includes information on how to block and report content on platforms, as well as where to go for specialised support beyond the platform itself. We have a page specifically for how to report suicide content and guidance for responding to a wide range of online harms.

Additionally, our free Digital Matters platform helps teachers deliver online safety education to 9-11 year olds, with blocking and reporting covered as part of a broader range of topics.

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v.   Internet Matters. "So standard it's not noteworthy": Teenage girls' experiences of harm online. March 2025.
vi.   Internet Matters. 'Internet Matters Digital Tracker.' February 2025.

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