Refuge and Risk

Life Online for Vulnerable Young People

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in partnership with
with Internet Matters

Contents

Foreword from Internet Matters

A refuge and a risk

This report outlines many risks and dangers for vulnerable young people online. Simply put, they are more at risk online, and this report details the types of risk they encounter, by the vulnerability they face.

However, those concerns have to be juxtaposed with the reliance these young people have on technology for positive experiences and connections. They rely on technology to a greater extent than young people who are less emotionally invested in fulfilling their needs online. For some of these schoolchildren, precisely because of the vulnerabilities they are encountering, online life holds much more significance – they depend on it, escape into it, and are deeply hurt or harmed when things go wrong. Life online, then is both refuge and risk. This intense response from them in these frank answers, makes clear how they need to be supported to grasp the opportunities that online life offers them, while staying safer than they are now.

For young people with no vulnerabilities the potential risks are lower, and they show considerable resilience. However, all young people are seeing frequent microaggression, discrimination and disturbing harmful content. Vulnerable young people experience high levels of cyberbullying, cyberaggression and manipulation or coercion. Their greater exposure to unknown people, as they seek out new friends or 'people like me,' tends to make them targets. Age, social isolation and digital competence all contribute to the extent of the online risks young people face.

Additionally, this report highlights the importance of connectivity for vulnerable young people. All children and young people get things wrong, and for today's young people that may happen on screen as opposed to in private. This doesn't mean we should take their devices away from them – as their devices are so very important in their lives. It's their access to their friends, perhaps their families too, and in a world where they already have many more challenges to deal with adding to isolation or stigmatization by routinely disconnecting them is simply not the right answer.

We have to get better at supporting young people to have a safer online experience. Four things need to happen to achieve that: firstly the tech companies can and should do more. Secondly, there must be effective regulation. Regulation has to be backed up with the third element - targeted education - for all children and young people and their parents. Finally, vulnerable young people must be routinely asked about their online lives in a way that supports them.

Internet Matters was delighted to support the work by Adrienne Katz and Aiman El Asam in creating this report.

Introduction

The digital disparity faced by vulnerable children and young people

Responses from young people in this new and large dataset, provide further evidence of the digital disparity identified in 'Vulnerable Children in a Digital World',[1] and Vulnerable Young People and Their Experience of Online Risk[2]. Young people with prior offline vulnerabilities are at greater risk of harm online than children and young people with none. Equally, the significance of their online lives is also greater. They turn to technology to be like others, to communicate, to socialise in ways they cannot achieve without it, and of course to learn and have fun. Many go online to 'escape my issues.' In this arena, young people can escape labels such as Special Needs or Learning difficulties. They can form new identities on social media and emphasise other aspects of their identity.[3]

The Cybersurvey shows how vulnerable and differently abled young people are more likely to encounter online risks and harms, be affected by them more acutely, and subsequently or concurrently, face other related risks. This divergence from the way the majority of teens live their lives online, can amplify disadvantage in an era in which being competent and safe online is vital. It also puts at risk those children and young people who are the most vulnerable in society. Our aim is to understand why this is, who needs help to be safer online and how this might be delivered. While interventions often focus on what might seem the most visible or obvious risk for a particular child, this data shows other risks might be present. Risks which may not be disclosed or assessed.

Teens with Eating Disorders

For example, teens with eating disorders were found to be not only at high risk for Content or Contact risks, as expected, but they also report seeing risky dares, content encouraging self-harm and 31% often viewed content about suicide. Half of them believed that 'the internet helped me make a good relationship', though this might have been exploitative: 23% said 'someone online tried to persuade me into some form of sexual activity I did not want'. Almost a third said their nude image was shared in revenge by a former partner after a breakup. They were among the most likely to be cyberbullied and also reported high levels of Compulsion: 46% said 'without my phone I get irritated and anxious' and over a quarter said, 'I cannot manage my life online.'

Teens with Care Experience

Teens who are care experienced report high levels of Conduct risks, but at the same time, were subjects of intense Cyberaggression themselves. Cyberbullied and insulted about how they look, one in five also received threats to harm themselves or their family. They encounter a great deal of potentially harmful content with more than one in five seeing content about suicide and 15% seeing material supporting extremist views. Nearly one in five (18%) of them report Contact risks such as people trying to persuade them into unwanted sexual activity.

Teens with Communication Challenges

Often overlooked, are teens with communication difficulties such as speech or hearing problems who report being subjected to many Cyberscams. They also describe the powerful attraction of digital life in the questions on Compulsion risks. Worryingly, they are twice as likely to be sharing nudes when compared to non-vulnerable teenagers, possibly because they believe this is the way to join in or be accepted into teenage social life.

Need to be Liked

Analysing Contact risks showed how susceptible some teens are to fake solicitation - in which a person they thought was young and interested in them, turned out not to be who they said they were. This was reported by one third of those with an eating disorder and one quarter of teens with speech difficulties, in contrast to only 8% of non-vulnerable teenagers.

Vulnerable young people experience high levels of cyberbullying, cyberaggression and manipulation or coercion. Their greater exposure to unknown people, as they seek out new friends or 'people like me,' tends to make them targets as their neediness and eagerness to be liked is evident. Age, social isolation and digital competence all contribute to the extent of the online risks they face.

For young people with no vulnerabilities, the potential risks are lower, and they show considerable resilience. They navigate the online spaces and smartphone life well. However, all young people see frequent microaggressions, discrimination and disturbing harmful content. They should not be coming across material about how to accomplish suicide - seen by a quarter of respondents.

Our Analysis

This analysis does not suggest that everyone with an offline vulnerability is vulnerable online, but that they are more likely to be so and multiple offline vulnerabilities increase that likelihood. Lough, Flynn and Riby (2015) discuss the connection between online and offline vulnerability, showing that not all individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will be exploited or vulnerable online, but there maybe risk factors to consider, risk factors that are relevant not only to them but to others with developmental disorders who are vulnerable online.[4]

The Challenge

Young people have given us a challenge: to strike a balance between enabling vulnerable teenagers to take advantage of what the digital age has to offer, while also recognising that very vulnerable young people may come to harm if they are not supported and helped to take all the opportunities afforded them by technology. To make the most of their online time they could be introduced to positive, creative activities and fun, rather than doing the same activities repeatedly. Those with special needs for example, tend to report a narrow repertoire of online activities.

A new approach to working with teenagers at risk would explore offline and online life in an integrated way, with nuanced support and prevention of possible further harms by building on strengths and developing digital competence and social skills. Training would include awareness of relationships between vulnerability and risk types.

1. *Katz, A and El Asam, A. 2019 Vulnerable Children in a Digital World. Internet Matters and Youthworks*
2. *El Asam, A, and Katz, A, 2018 Vulnerable Young People and Their Experience of Online Risks. Human-Computer Interaction, Taylor and Francis. DOI: 10.1080/07370024.2018.1437544*
3. *Holmes K. M. and O'Loughlin N. (2012) 'The experiences of people with learning disabilities on social networking sites' British Journal of Learning Disabilities 42(1): DOI:https//dpoi.org/10.1111/bld.12001*
4. *Lough, E, Flynn, E and Riby, D. M. (2015)2Mapping real world to online vulnerability in young people with developmental disorders: illustrations from autism and Williams syndrome.' Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders.2(1): 1-7, DOI: https://10.1007/s40489-014-0029-2*

About The Cybersurvey

The annual Cybersurvey by Youthworks in partnership with Internet Matters explores the rapidly changing lives of young people in the digital environment. It tracks trends, and emerging concerns while noting the advantages. Data is collected from young people aged 11-16 years in schools, colleges and alternative provision every autumn. A few are aged 17. A youth participation model that began in 2008 helps us shape the questionnaire. Schools are encouraged to discuss and explore the results with young people. Local authorities and children's services use the data to target their efforts and evaluate their services.

14,944 young people took part across the country in 2019 during the autumn term. The sample has limitations, which include the fact that it omits those not in education. In common with all earlier samples of The Cybersurvey, there are more respondents aged 11-13 than 13-16, due to the year groups school include. However, this large sample provides unique insights for services and policy makers where the focus is on early prevention and support, and for those concerned with younger teens becoming caught up in digital relationship problems. In addition, the detailed focus on vulnerable groups will be of use to planners and services.

The Cybersurvey team:

Adrienne Katz: Youthworks Consulting.
Dr. Aiman El Asam: Kingston University London.

Assisted by: Sheila Pryde, Fergus Burnett-Skelding, Lola Katz Roberts.

www.thecybersurvey.co.uk

Methodology and safeguarding

The survey questionnaire and associated procedures received a favourable ethical opinion from Kingston University. Schools are invited to take part and provided with instructions which include safeguarding arrangements and a unique code. They are asked to take a register of who is on the survey at any time. IP addresses and time of entry are collected.

If safeguarding concerns arise, Youthworks contacts the school via the code, and provides as much information as possible. However, the responses are anonymous. School level data is not shared publicly. Schools will be provided with a series of reports and resources to discuss the messages with their young people.

Young people are given information about the anonymous survey and its purpose in advance. They understand that taking part is entirely voluntary, that their answers will help others and that while we would like all questions to be answered, they can opt out if they wish. They are told how they can find out about the results and thanked. Helplines are provided at the end of the survey.

Declaration:

This dissemination report commissioned by Internet Matters, forms part of a research programme/project in which the authors (Adrienne Katz and Dr. Aiman El Asam) are working in partnership with Internet Matters. The project titled *"Vulnerability, Online Lives and Mental Health: Towards a New Practice Model"* has financial support from the e-Nurture Network and UK Research and Innovation (Research Council Grant Ref: ES/S004467/1).

Kingston University London

Youthworks

internet matters.org

enurture

About the Sample

This sample of 14,994 (after cleaning) collected in 2019, includes respondents with a range of abilities and offline vulnerabilities. Multiple vulnerabilities may be present concurrently.

Table 1 Shows number and percentage of young people self identifying with each of the vulnerable groups.

Vulnerability in the total sample			Among ages 13 and over	
I have a long-term physical illness	2%	372	3%	173
Care experienced	2%	358	2%	137
I have an eating disorder	3%	385	3%	195
Hearing loss	3%	400	3%	170
I'm a carer for a family member	4%	598	4%	242
I have a learning difficulty	4%	535	7%	421
I'm autistic	4%	646	6%	321
I have a mental health difficulty	8%	1,207	11%	717
Vision impaired	8%	1,146	8%	533
I worry about life at home	10%	1,463	9%	582
English is not my first language	11%	1,676	11%	716
I have anger issues	12%	1,790	13%	797
I have speech difficulties	10%	533	4%	250
None of these apply to me	59%	9,008	57%	3623

Note: when referring to these vulnerabilities within charts, abbreviation has been necessary. i.e. 'English' for English is not my first language and 'Carer' for I am a carer for a family member

Gender

Ages 13 and over:

- Girls **46%**
- Boys **47%**
- Prefer not to say or other/I identify as... **7%**

Some young people ticked a box for gender and also wrote in 'I identify as...' an open question

Regions

- South East, Essex and London – **3,189**
- East of England – **5,503**
- Midlands – **2,645**
- North East, Yorkshire and Humber and Scotland – **1,690**
- North West and Northern Ireland – **1,583**
- South West – **1,482**

16,092 responses were received. After cleaning 14,994 were used.

Age groups

- 11 years – **3,325**
- 12 years – **3,431**
- 13 years – **2,898**
- 14 years – **1,664**
- 15 years – **1,154**
- 16 years – **330**
- 17 years – **284**

Valid responses.

6,045 young people aged 13 and over were asked the questions on sexting, relationships and meetup while the total sample answered all other questions.

Teens, online risks and vulnerabilites

Are some teens at risk before they go online?

The aim of this research programme is to equip parents and those commissioning or working in frontline services with the messages from children experiencing vulnerabilities and their online lives. Our hope is that children are routinely asked about their digital experiences so that interventions and support can be nuanced and tailored.

Vulnerabilities are pre-existing factors that are likely to put young people at a disadvantage online or might lead them to experience online lives differently. Five types of offline pre-existing vulnerability have been explored. Two new items are included this year in response to the many young people who mentioned them in the previous Cybersurvey: 'I worry about life at home' and 'I have anger issues'.

Offline vulnerability is often modified by other contributory factors, such as social isolation, lack of digital competence, age, or gender.

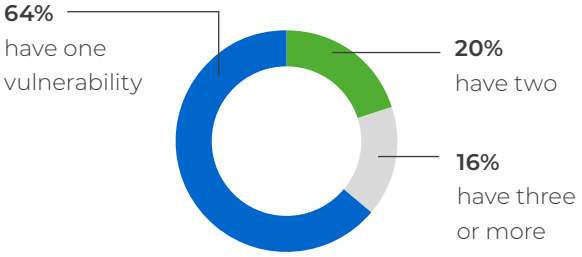
5 Types of Offline Vulnerabilities are studied:

Family & Social	Communication	SEND	Psychological	Physical
• I am in or leaving care • I am a carer for someone in my family • I worry about life at home	• Hearing loss • Speech difficulty • English is not my first language • Vision loss	• I have learning difficulties • I am autistic • I have other additional needs	• I have a mental health difficulty • I have an eating disorder • I have anger issues	• I have a long-term physical illness

New this wave are: 'I worry about life at home' and 'I have anger issues'

Prevalence of Vulnerabilities among respondents

Among **6,521** young people who have any form of vulnerability in the sample:



What are the categories of risk studied?

Content

I've 'often' seen sites, forums or social media that:

- Encourage people to bulk up their bodies
- Encourage people to harm themselves
- Talk about suicide
- Display nude pictures or videos that you did not search for
- Display very violent pictures or videos you did not want to see
- Dare you to do risky things
- Pressure people to be too thin
- Promote violence, hatred or racist views
- Support religious extremist views or terrorist acts

Contact

Answer: 'Often'

- Has the internet helped you make a good relationship with someone?
- Felt someone was trying to control or stalk you online?
- Has someone tried to persuade you into sexual activity you did not want?
- After a relationship has ended did an ex-partner share private images of you as revenge?
- Fake solicitation: I believed someone online was a young person interested in me, but they turned out not to be who they said they were
- I have come into contact with scary people

Cyberscams

Answer: 'Often'

- I've had my social media account hacked
- I've had credit card details stolen and used
- I've been tricked into buying fake goods
- I believed something that turned out to be a scam

Conduct

Answer: 'Often' or 'yes'

- I visit gambling sites
- I look at pages meant for adults
- I talk to people in chat rooms
- I visit dating sites
- Sexting: I have done this
- I have met up with someone I only know online
- I've often spent quite a bit of money in online games

Cyberaggression

Answer: 'Yes'

- I've been cyberbullied
- Received messages/comments threatening harm to me or my family
- Received messages/comments that were racist
- Received messages/comments insulting about gay (LGBT+) people
- Received messages/comments that were insulting about my religion
- Received messages or comments that were rude about my disability or a disability of a family member
- Received messages that were sexist
- Received messages that were insulting about how I look

Compulsion

Answer: 'Most of the time'

- Without my phone I get irritated and anxious
- I cannot manage my life online
- I feel my online self is better than my real self
- My online life has caused problems with my family and friends
- My online life makes me neglect my school or college work
- I feel 'addicted' to my phone

Risk categories explored

Online risks are often conveniently categorised as Conduct, Contact, Content and sometimes Commerce, known in a convenient shorthand, as the '4Cs' by those in the field of online safety. Our reports and research studies have adapted them over time, e.g changing Commerce to Cyberscams, in 2019 to better reflect changing teen online life. Here, Cybersurvey questions have been allocated to risk types and two additional risks proposed: Cyberaggression - a major component of online life today and Compulsion, the problematic use of technology, or not being able to manage life online in a balanced way. This approach reflects risks selected for this study.

Not all cyberaggression is aimed directly at the individual recipient. It describes situations where someone has been cyberbullied with intent to hurt them personally and also where they see racist, homophobic or other discriminatory comments on pages they visit, generating a sense of being surrounded by cyberaggression online. As life online changes rapidly – when new devices, apps and platforms appear – the way we look at and think about risk will change too. Risks are grouped here in response to what young people have told us in The Cybersurvey.

How offline vulnerability contributes to experience of online risk

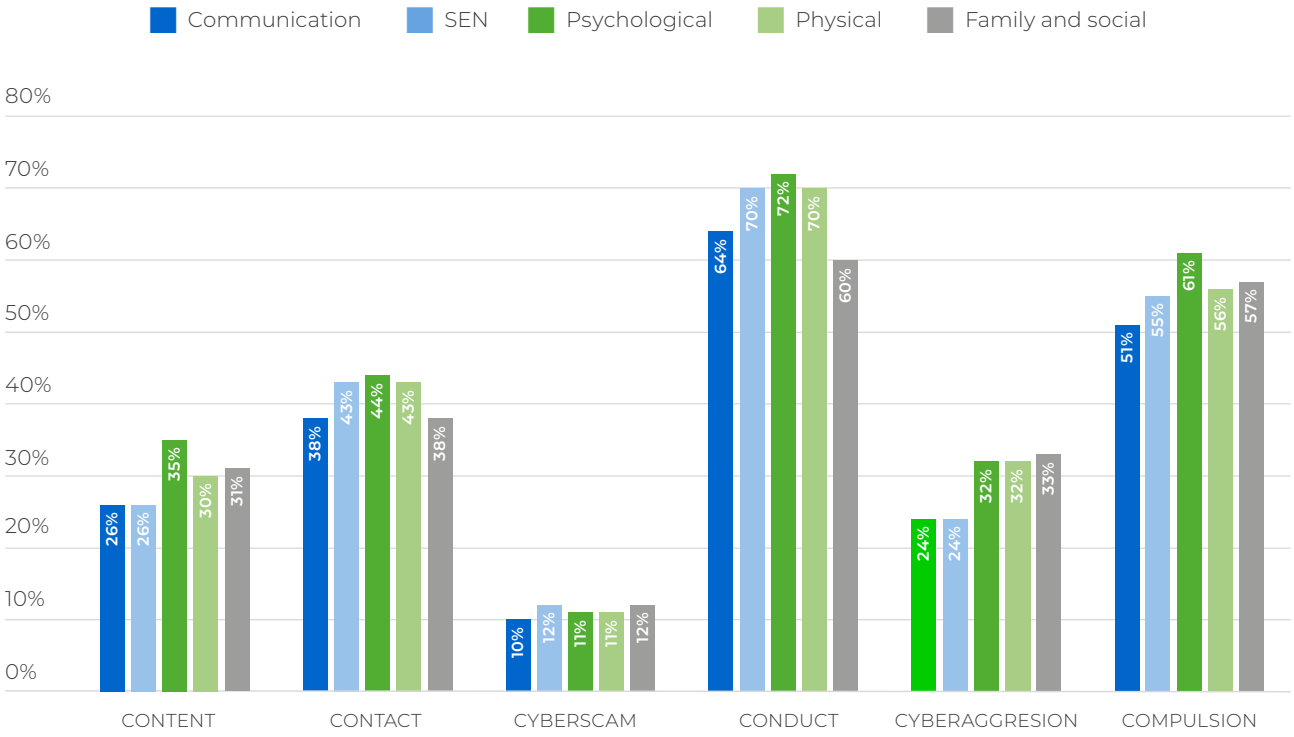
In Chart 1, Conduct risk is the category most likely to be experienced by all the vulnerable groups, particularly the psychological group, or those with special educational needs or a long-term physical illness.

The risk of becoming a Compulsive or problematic internet user is also high for those with the offline adverse circumstances studied here; in particular, teenagers with a psychological vulnerability who are also more likely to encounter Content risk, in which users see harmful content. Cyberaggression is most likely to be experienced by young people with family, a long-term physical illness or psychological vulnerabilities. Young people with the trio of psychological, SEN and physical disabilities as seen in relation to Conduct risk, also tend to report the highest incidence of Contact risk. However, all vulnerable young people encounter all these risks to a greater extent than their non-vulnerable peers.

This nuanced information allows professionals to anticipate or predict how they might plan prevention work for their young people and tailor interventions or support if incidents occur. They can also consider whether other risk types might be present but undisclosed.

CHART 1: 6 Categories of risk, by vulnerability

*% of young people in each vulnerable group who have experienced each risk category**



** For full table of risk categories please see Table of 6 risk categories page 10*

When many vulnerabilities are present, the risks increase

In every category of risk we can see that having three or more offline vulnerabilities makes a young person most likely to experience the risk. Increasing incrementally, with each additional vulnerability the chances of a young person encountering risks or harms grows greater.

Among those with vulnerabilities in this sample, 20% have two and 16% have three or more vulnerabilities concurrently, suggesting that all known offline vulnerabilities should be taken into consideration when working with young people on digital aspects of their lives.

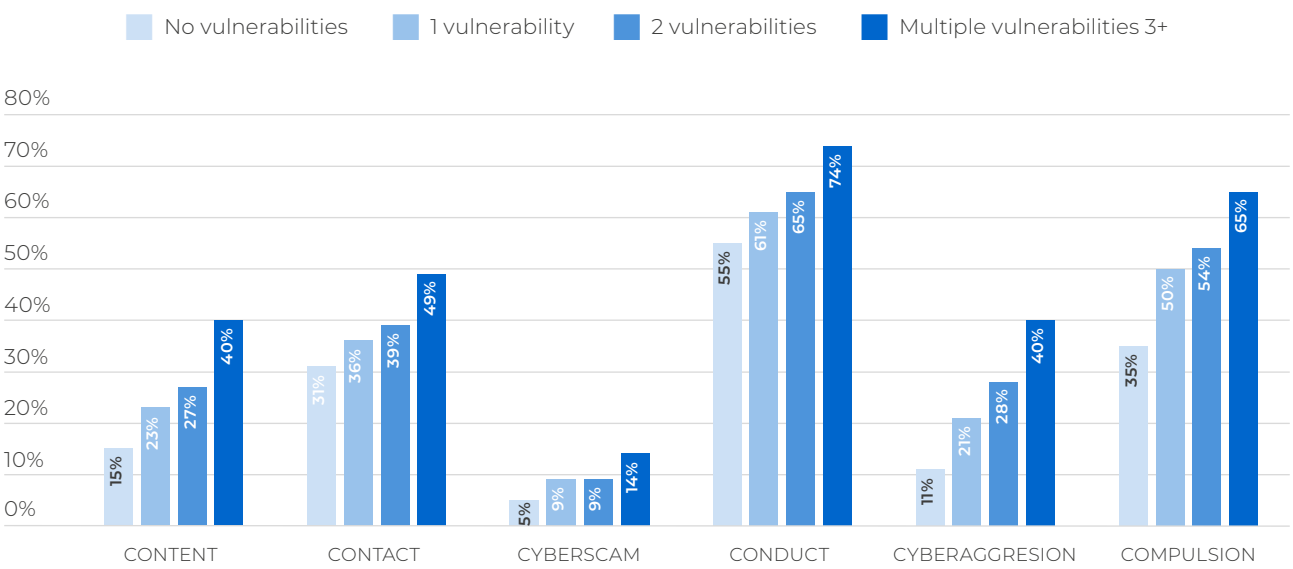
Conversely - other associated online risk types should not be overlooked if an incident appears to involve one. Katz and El Asam (2018 and 2019) showed that there are relationships between types of risk, making it more likely that if a young person encountered one, their chances of encountering related risks increased.

More than half of the respondents encounter or enact conduct risks (55%) as seen in Chart 2 . However, the extent to which young people with vulnerabilities describe wide ranging exposure to all the categories of risk is considerably higher and the fact that they are already vulnerable might make them less resilient or able to cope with the online problems they come across.

Young people with no offline pre-existing vulnerabilities told us they also encountered a wide range of online risks and harms and their experiences should not be played down or overlooked. Individuals with poor insight and social judgement have been found to be at risk. (Boujs et al 2016)[5]

CHART 2: Multiple offline vulnerabilities increase risk

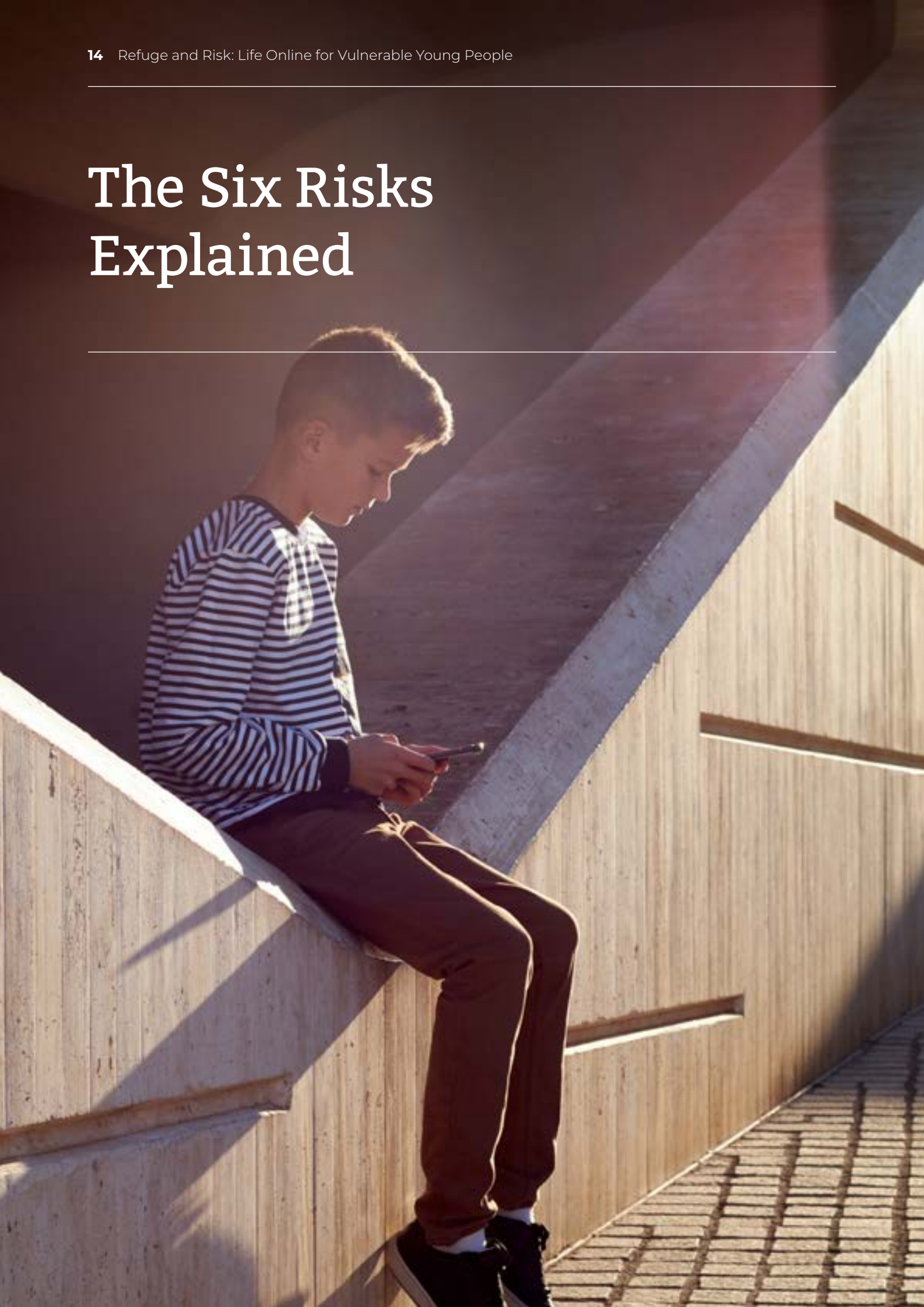
% of young people by number of vulnerabilities who experience each risk category.*



** For full table of risk categories please see Table of 6 risk categories page 10*

5. *Buijs et al (2016) Internet Safety Issues for Adolescents and Adults with Intellectual Disabili-ties. Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12250*

The Six Risks Explained



About conduct risk

Conduct risk describes scenarios where the user actions - possibly driven by immaturity or neediness due to offline vulnerability - might lead them to risky situations or steps that result in harm. This is not to suggest they are to shoulder the responsibility or to be 'blamed' for this conduct – because it is clear they are often singled out, manipulated or targeted by others. Another influence is the well documented disinhibiting effect of the internet itself which cannot be discounted.[6]

Many young people are trying to protect their emotions or feel powerless to say no. Their so called risk-taking could be seen in the context of balancing a number of everyday social challenges.[7] Behaviour can be a form of communicating distress and some online behaviour is a search to compensate for what is lacking in their lives.[8] That is why a purely rules-based approach to teaching online safety that ignores their motivation or the pressures they are under, may fail. Furthermore, some forms of supported positive risk taking can be an opportunity to develop and learn, helping young people to take control of their lives, rather than making them timid or restricted.[9]

Sexting

Not all teens are sharing nudes, with 6% of non-vulnerable children completing the survey saying they had shared a sexual image. Despite what adults believe, young people in this anonymous survey showed that sharing nudes is not 'endemic'. It is most prevalent among those aged 15 and over, 17% of whom said they had shared nude or sexual photo of themselves. But this is far from the whole picture because sharing is more prevalent among some already vulnerable teenagers. More than one in five of those with eating disorders (23%) and more than one in four of those in care (26%) are sharing nude images. Young carers (16%), those with autism (16%) and teens with speech difficulties (16%) or hearing loss (15%) plus those who worry about life at home (14%) all report more sharing of nudes than teens without vulnerabilities (6%). They experience numerous online threats and further risks because of their need to belong and connect to others which appears to be exploited. Because children in the vulnerable groups are often known to services, or receiving support, agencies may see a disproportionately high number of cases leading them to assume that all teens are sharing nudes. This might obscure the fact that sexting is so serious for vulnerable teenagers not only due to the way they are exploited, but because it is not as common among the wider teenage population.

Meetups

The picture for those who met up in real life with someone they had met online, shows that young people with any of the offline vulnerabilities are more than twice as likely to do so than non-vulnerable teenagers. Those with eating disorders (36%) and those who are care experienced (37%) are most likely to meet up with someone they met online. In contrast, only 14% of non-vulnerable teens are meeting up.

6. *Suler, J. 2004. The Online Disinhibition Effect. Cyberpsychology and Behavior, 7, 321-326*
7. *Zinn. J. O.2016. The meaning of of risk-taking – key concepts and dimensions. Journal of Risk Research*
8. *Stamoulis, K. & Farley, F. (2010). Conceptual Approaches to Adolescent Online Risk-Taking. Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 4(1), article 1.*
9. *Seale, J. K. (2004) 'The Role of Supporters in Facilitating The Use of Technologies by Adolescents and Adults With Learning Disabilities: A Place for Positive Risk-Taking.*

What do schoolchildren go online to do?

Risk online may lie not only in where users go, but how they spend most of their time when online. Young people were asked 'Thinking about your online life, what do you spend most time doing? Pick 5 things you do most, from 17 possible items. Their answers include:

Adult content and chatrooms

While only 4% of non-vulnerable teens admitted visiting 'pages meant for adults' was in their top five things to do online, young people with a physical illness (21%), care experience (23%) or an eating disorder (23%) are five or more times more likely to select this.

In a fairly young sample, those who did so were mainly boys 63% and a further 27% who prefer not to state their gender or want to identify in a specific way. 17% were girls.

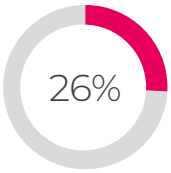
Chatrooms

Talking to people in chatrooms is not of much interest to non-vulnerable 11-16 year olds, only 6% said they spent most of their time in these spaces, but chatrooms appear far more attractive to those with offline vulnerabilities. Given that we know they are manipulated, controlled or feel 'someone is stalking me', this is a dangerous environment for them. One in five young people with eating disorders (21%), physical illness (21%) or hearing loss (20%) picked 'chatting to people in chatrooms' as one of their top 5 activities on which they spend most time when online, as did those who have speech difficulties (19%) and young carers (19%).

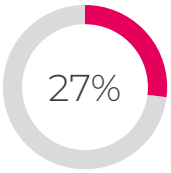
Often spending money in games

Young people love gaming and many spend money in games safely, however it is easy for users to find they are spending considerable sums of money - one boy said he had spent over £700 in this way. Those who 'often' spend 'quite a bit of money' in games appear to be those with speech difficulties, (30%) who are twice as likely to do so as non-vulnerable peers (15%). Others who say they do so are in care (27%), while 26% of teens with a physical illness or an eating disorder also often do so.

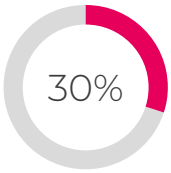
I often spend quite a bit of money in games



of those with a long-term physical illness and of those with an **eating disorder**



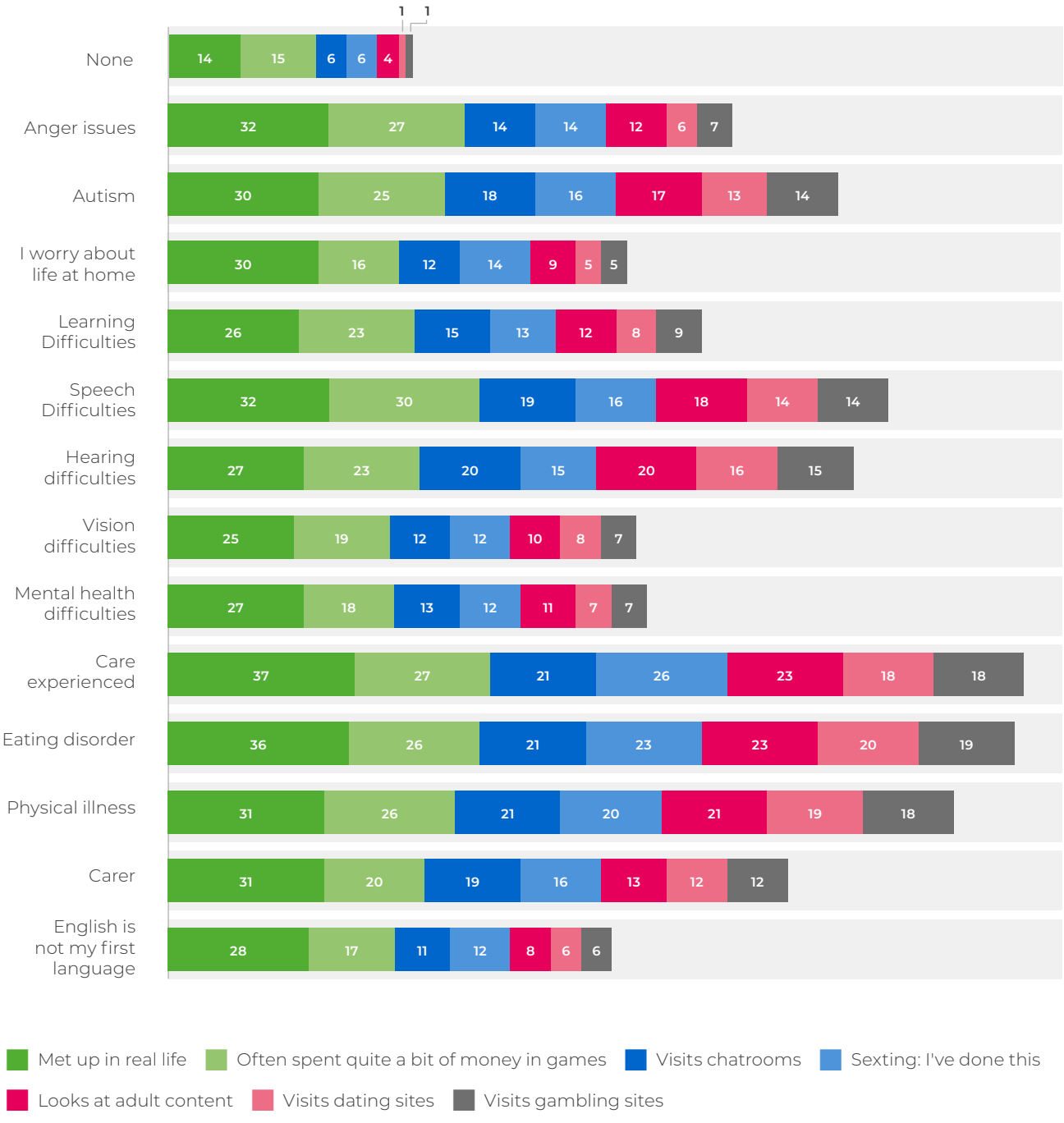
of those who have anger issues, and of those who are **care experienced**



of those with **speech difficulties**

CHART 3: Conduct by vulnerability

% of young people in each vulnerable group who experienced these risks. Answers 'often' or Yes.



About compulsion risk

While children and young people benefit enormously from online life, there are some who cannot achieve a balance. Compulsion risks describe problematic behaviour and online dependence that has impacts on life. It includes the inability to manage online life and the problems caused with friends and family or schoolwork because of it. For many young people the focus of their compulsive feelings is their phone and there were separate questions about phones.

Impacts can be physical and/or emotional:

Because of my online life:

Physical

'I forget to eat then eat a lot and then feel bad'

'I forget to wash'

'I slouch a lot which causes some back pain and my eyes have got worse.'

'I get headaches and get angry with my siblings even though they have done nothing'

'I don't get hungry or thirsty when I'm online'

Emotional

'Being on my phone makes my anxiety kick in'

'I feel I wouldn't be me if I didn't get a phone or console''

'I feel like I have more friends online than I have in real life'

'I feel disconnected from my friends and family'

'I am unsociable and do not want to leave the house, introverted and tired.'

'I hardly ever see my family and I want to stop but I can't'

'I can't manage my online life'

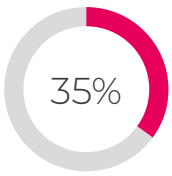
'Because of my time online I don't usually answer my parents when they call me and I hide in my room'

Phones and feelings

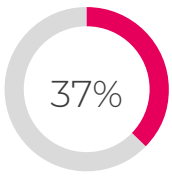
The most common feeling young people expressed about their mobile phone was that it made them feel safe 'most of the time' because they could call for help when they needed to. Another was being connected and able to chat to friends and family. But some were ambivalent – loving the features of the phone and what it offers them but resenting their dependence on it and the chore of having to check it so often. Respondents explained that if you did not check and respond speedily, you could lose friends, and this was 'tedious'. Some said they 'often' become 'irritated and anxious' without it. The role of the phone is played down by young people with no additional or unique needs: only 15% said they became anxious or irritable without their phone. In contrast to vulnerable young people who were so dependent on the phone, not only for safety but for the access it provided and the sense of being connected and like others.

Those most likely to feel this anxiety are young people with eating disorders (46%) and those with a mental health difficulty (37%) or hearing loss (36%). Over two thirds of young people with a long-standing physical illness, anger issues or care experience (35%) also feel this way.

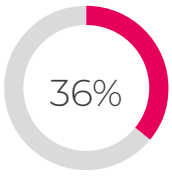
I often get irritated and anxious without my phone



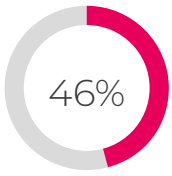
of those witha
long-term physical illness, anger issues, care experience



of those with a
mental health difficulty



with **hearing loss**



of those with an **eating disorder**

Can't tear yourself away

Care experienced young people are most likely to say: 'I cannot manage my life online' (27%) while those with an eating disorder were most likely to feel 'addicted to my phone' (37%). While we do not use the term addicted in its true sense here, it is the word young people use and was therefore included in the questionnaire.

Neglecting school or college work

Almost one in four teens with eating disorders said that their online life caused them to neglect school or college work (19%). Young people with speech or hearing difficulties agreed (17%). Those in care, and teens with autism or anger issues also felt this way (15%).

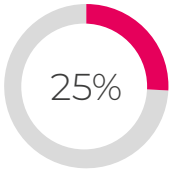
Difficulties with friends and family

Our young respondents also said they felt that their online life caused difficulties with their friends and family: This was most likely among young people with an eating disorder (22%), those with speech difficulties (16%) and among teens with hearing loss; young carers and those with physical illness (15%), in contrast to 3% among non-vulnerable teens.

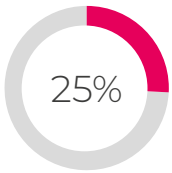
Preferred personas

These vulnerable teenagers express the duality of their online and offline selves, whereas the majority of teens, as expected, appear to see no boundary between online or offline life.

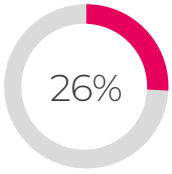
The following said 'Most of the time I feel my online self is better than my real self'



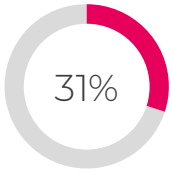
of those for whom **English is not first language**



of young people with **anger issues**



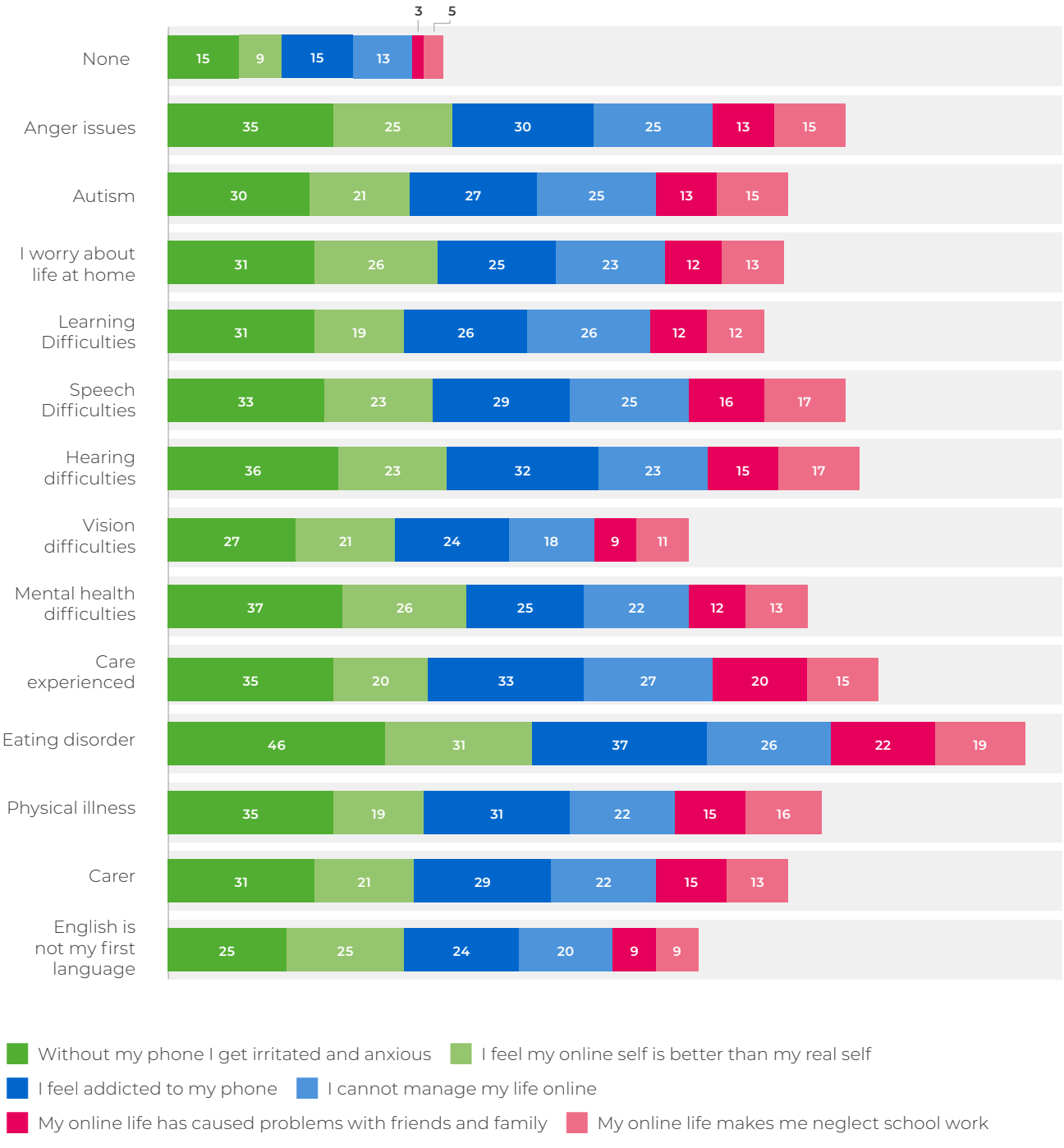
of young people with a **mental health difficulty**, and those **who worry about life at home**



of young people with an **eating disorder**

Chart 4: Compulsion by vulnerability

% in each vulnerable group that experience these risks 'most of the time'



About contact risk

Contact risks describe situations in which a young user is emotionally hurt, manipulated, threatened or harmed by another person. While the focus is on young people who experienced a contact risk 'often' as shown in Chart 5, some risks are so severe that mention is made of situations where the respondent has 'ever' experienced it.

Fake solicitation

This risk describes an encounter thought to be romantic, but which might be predatory or taking advantage of a child. This was seen most frequently among teenagers with an eating disorder, 18% said it had happened 'often'. Others who said that someone they thought was a young person interested in them, had 'often' turned out not to be who they said they were, include teens with physical illness or care experience (15%). In contrast, this happened to only 2% of non-vulnerable teenagers. By looking at those who experienced this often rather than once or twice, the focus is on those who repeatedly find themselves in such a situation. Nevertheless, for some, even once or twice could put them in danger.

Someone online tried to persuade me into sexual activity I did not want

Young people with an eating disorder were most likely to say this had happened to them. The scale of their experience is considerable, with as many as 43% having 'ever' experienced it, of whom 23% said it happened 'often'. In addition, it 'often' happened to 18% of those in care and 17% of those with hearing loss. They are not alone. While the following groups are less likely to experience it 'often', they do report this happening to them at least once or twice: 32% of those who worry about life at home and 31% of each of the following groups: those with mental health difficulties and teens in care. In contrast, only 13% of non-vulnerable youngsters said it had happened to them at least once.

My image was shared in revenge without my consent

After a relationship or friendship breaks up an ex-partner might share an intimate image in revenge or anger. Some young people were subjected to this more than once or twice. Those with eating disorders (15%) and teens in care or with hearing loss said it happened 'often' (13%). In contrast, this 'often' happened to only 2% of non-vulnerable teens.

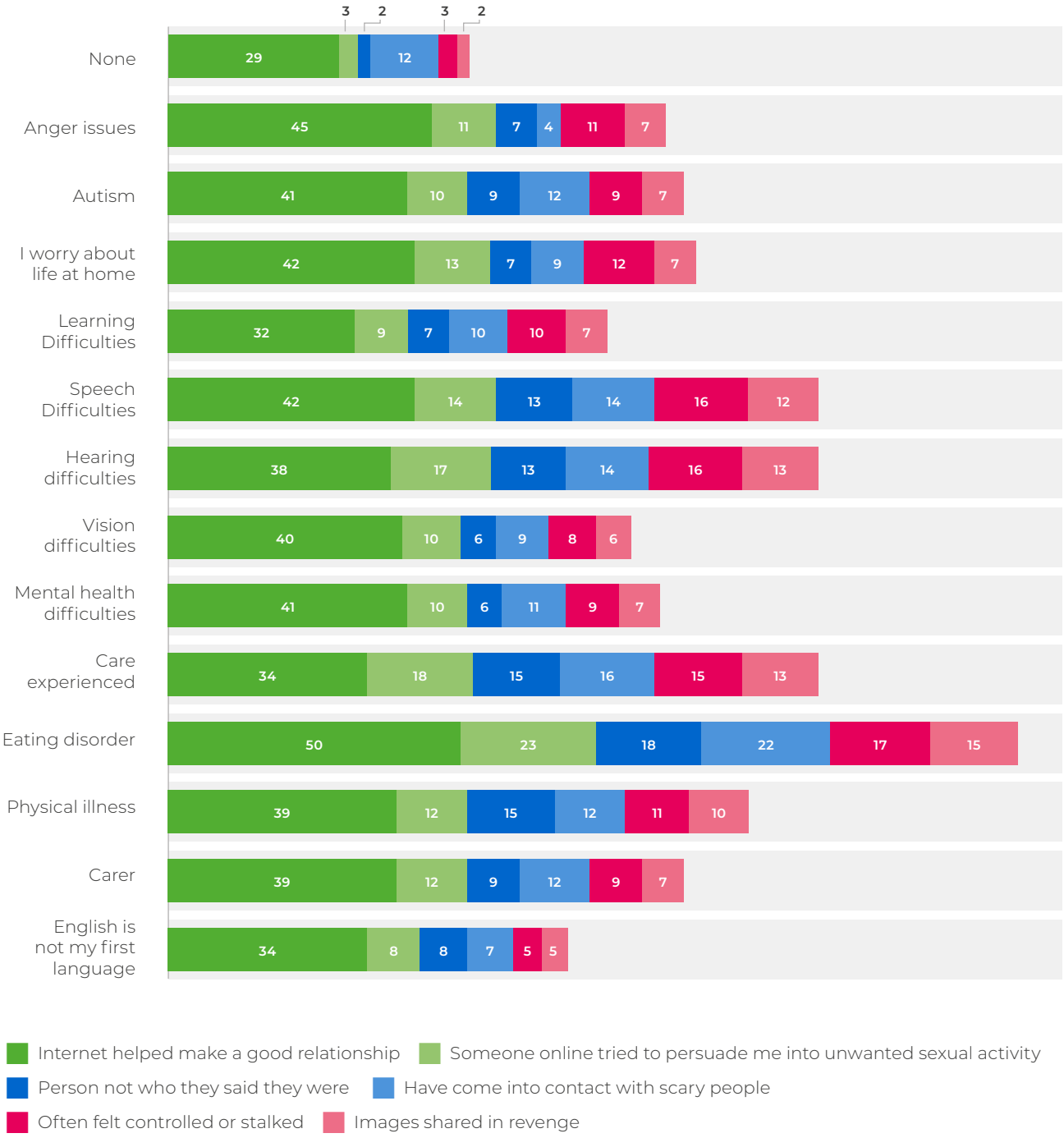
My internet life helped me make a good relationship with someone online

The online world could be both positive and negative – a refuge or a risk. There are young people who look to their online world to find new friends and people to talk to, they describe going online to 'escape my issues' or to 'find people like me'. Many succeed and develop a positive, even supportive relationship with someone or a group online, but equally some are duped, exploited or potentially groomed. Some cannot recognise that this is happening. It is this need for friendship and love that may lead a young person to want to believe that they have formed a good relationship with someone online. The figures show how many of the vulnerable young people are pressured into sexting, (Chart 3 Conduct) or believe they are in a relationship and want to do so. As we have seen they are more likely to go on to meetup in person and more likely to say that 'someone they met online tried to persuade me into some sexual activity I did not want.'[10]

10. Katz, A. and El Asam, A. 2020 Look At Me: Teens, Sexting and Risks. Internet Matters and Youthworks

Chart 5: **Contact by vulnerability**

% in each vulnerable group that experience these risks 'often'



About content risk

One of the most important messages from the Cybersurvey this year is about harmful content. Young people are viewing content encouraging behaviour or ideas which are potentially dangerous and many 'come across' it often. While professionals are likely to be alert to harmful content such as pro-anorexia, self-harm or suicide content when assessing young people with mental health difficulties or eating disorders; it seems pro-anorexia material is widely viewed by other vulnerable groups and by non-vulnerable teenagers too. Hate speech, violence and racist material is widely seen as well as risky dares and content supporting extremist ideas.

Pro-anorexia material

As expected, teens with eating disorders (31%) or mental health difficulties (19%) are 'often' seeing pro-anorexia content. Young people with a long-term physical illness (18%), those in care or with hearing loss (16%) also tell us how they 'often' view this content, as do those with autism (14%).

However there are less obvious groups who have 'ever' seen this content: they include those who worry about life at home (39% ever and 15% 'often') and those with speech difficulties (31% ever and 15% 'often') or anger issues (31% ever, 12% 'often') These young people may be overlooked when anorexia content is considered. This may also be a concern among young carers, because as many 30% have ever seen pro-anorexia content (13% of them 'often'). To put it into perspective - young carers - while not reporting quite such high percentages as the other groups, are nevertheless 50% more likely to say they 'often' see pro-anorexia material than teens with no vulnerabilities (19%).

Self-harm material

Likewise content encouraging self-harm is 'often' seen by those with eating disorders (23%) but also by those with a physical long-term illness and those in care (16%). Teens with speech difficulties and those with hearing loss report seeing it 'often' (13% and 12%). The latter emerge in this report as a group requiring targeted support.

While more of the vulnerable teens report having seen content about self-harm than non-vulnerable young people, it might be more commonly picked up among those with a mental health difficulty or an eating disorder and is indeed prevalent among them (30% and 40% respectively). But less obviously, as many as 31% of young people with autism, 29% of those with care experience, and 24% of those with anger issues also reported seeing self-harm content. Compare these figures with non-vulnerable teens, only 9% of whom have ever seen content like this.

Talk about suicide

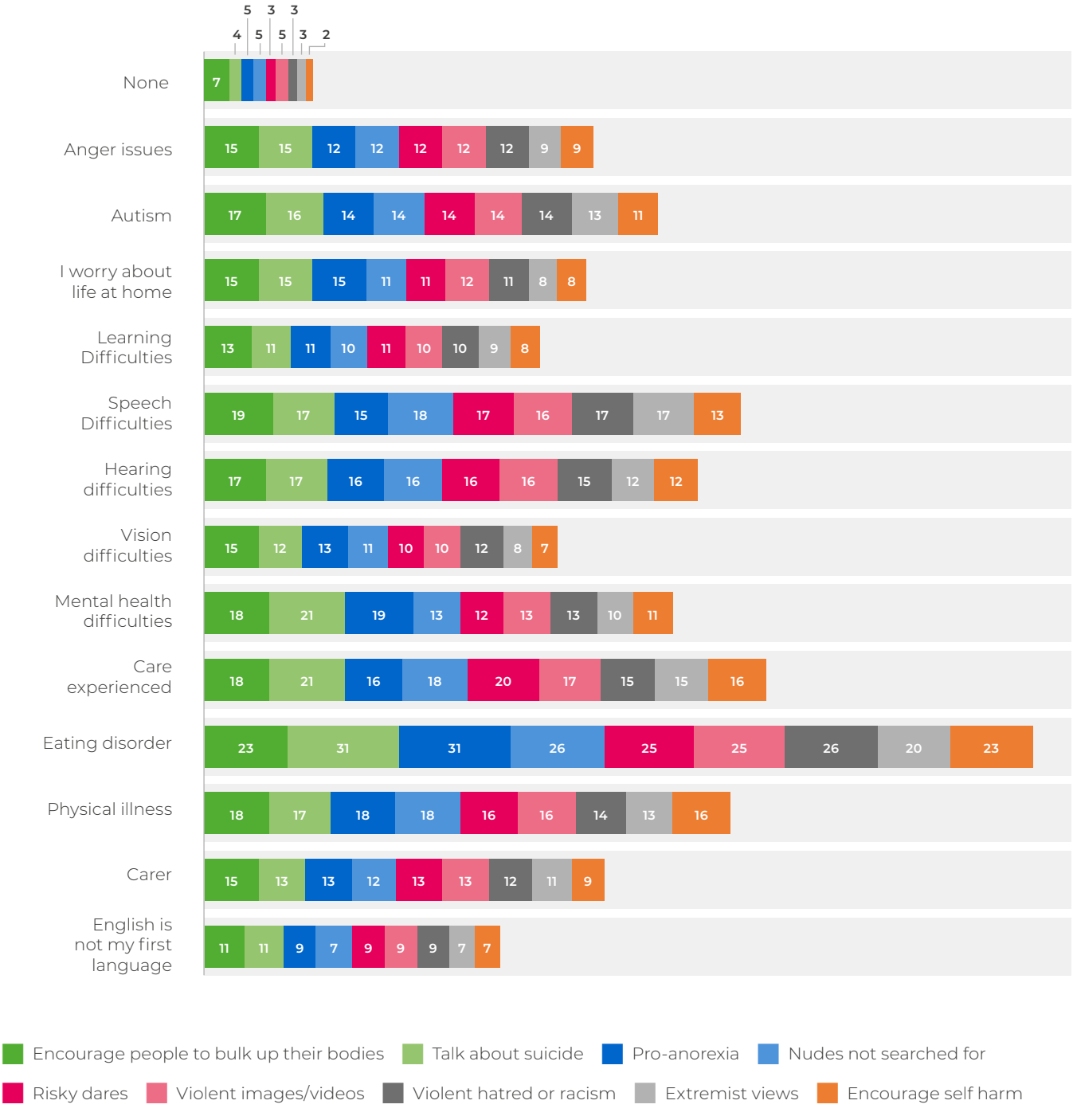
A quarter of all teenagers had 'ever' seen content about suicide and this is one of the main findings of the 2019 Cybersurvey. While it is those with mental health difficulties and eating disorders who are in focus when services are looking to intervene and rightly so, other vulnerable teens, such as those with speech difficulties (37%) or worries about life at home (45%) have seen this type of content at least 'once or twice'. Those who are most likely to see it 'often' are shown in Chart 6 and include: teens with an eating disorder (31%) and those with a mental health difficulty, teens in care (21%) and those with hearing loss, speech difficulties or physical illness (17%).

Hate speech and extremist material

Young people with an eating disorder (26%), speech difficulties (17%), hearing loss (15%) and physical illness or autism (14%) say they 'often' see content with violence, hatred, or racist views. As many as one in five young people with an eating disorder (20%) have 'often' seen content supporting extremist views and terrorist acts. People with a speech difficulty (17%) or hearing loss (15%) and those with autism or a physical long-term illness (14%) also report seeing this type of material 'often'.

Chart 6. Content by vulnerability

% in each vulnerable group that experience these risks



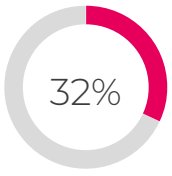
About cyberaggression

In addition to directly aimed cyberbullying, it can seem that some online spaces are filled with daily micro-aggressions where vulnerable young people are sometimes barraged by insults or degrading speech parading as banter. These can slide into threats of violence and harm for the young person and their family. Vulnerable young people may struggle to interpret this, or feel unable to navigate their way through it and, wanting to be accepted, they might believe that this is the price to be paid to belong to a group of 'friends'.

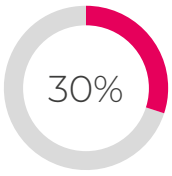
Vulnerable teens can soon find that their appearance and everything about them is rated publicly. Even if not directed at the user personally, this pervasive environment of insults and comments and judgement or 'rating', must be negotiated to achieve social acceptance.

The majority of young people do this well, some do not even come into contact with such aggression at all. However, this report is concerned with those who are more vulnerable generally offline. For them, the promise of the internet and mobile connectedness, is that new possibilities, new friends, and a more equal life can be found online. Accessibility tools are available, further enabling young people with difficulties to be themselves, undefined by disability or any difficulty. However, as shown here, cyberaggression is rife and harmful content promoting violence, hatred or extremist views is available as seen in Chart 7. Those who are desperate to fit in or to belong to a group may tolerate being victimised or asked to do things, as the price for belonging.

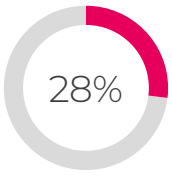
I have 'often' experienced racist comments or insults



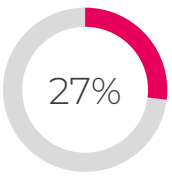
of those with an **eating disorder**



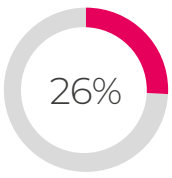
of those **in care**



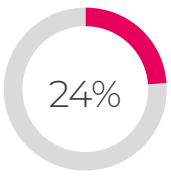
of those with **speech difficulties**



of those with **hearing loss**



of those with a **long-term physical illness**



of those for whom **English is not 1st language** and **young carers**

Rising intolerance

Racism and homophobia have both increased since 2015.[11]

Religion

In Chart 7, people with an eating disorder and those in care are especially likely to receive insults about religion 'often' (17% and 16%). Twelve percent of those for whom English is not their first language and teens with autism also report that they often receive messages or insults of this type.

Sexist insults

More than a third of teens with an eating disorder (35%) are on the receiving end of sexist insults, their sensitivities once more coming to the fore as they are the group most likely to report this. Over a quarter (27%) of care experienced young people and those with a physical long-term illness are also targeted with sexist insults.

Homophobic insults

As many as 41% of teens with an eating disorder report such insults and they are commonly seen or heard by vulnerable children. The high levels reported by those with difficulties such as speech or hearing, (Chart 7) suggest that homophobic language is being used a proxy for disability insults when young people believe they are less likely to get into trouble using it than if they deployed homophobic insults. When questioned, young people suggest that teachers are less willing to intervene if they hear homophobic language than if it were disablist language. The following teens are more than three times as likely to have experienced homophobic insults than their non-vulnerable peers (11%): those with eating disorders (41%), mental health (34%) and hearing difficulties (35%). All homophobic language is unacceptable. This high level of homophobic insults should be investigated.

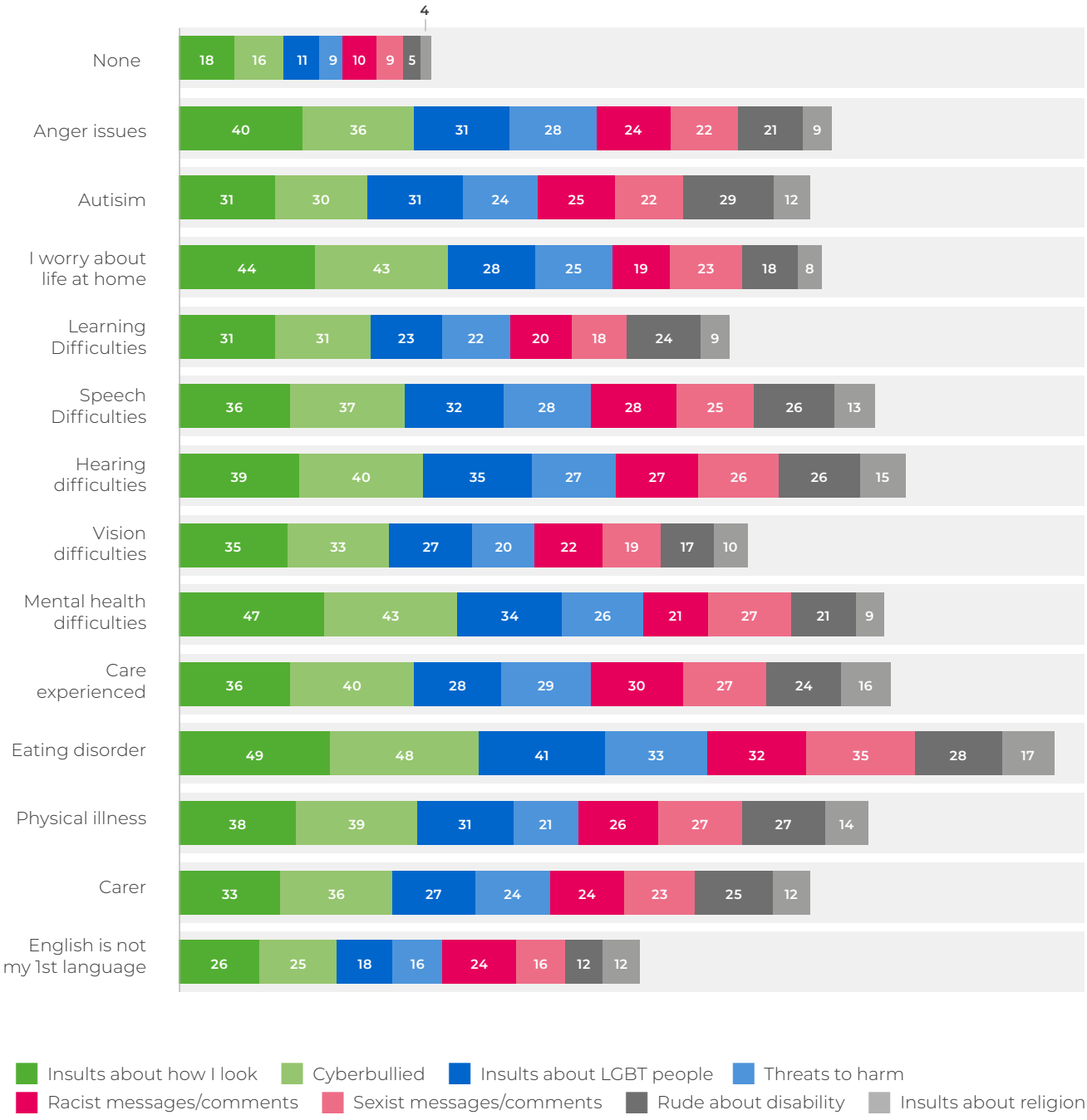
How I look

In terms of insults and disparaging remarks – for all teens it is about appearance. 'How I look' has remained for many years the most commonly cited reason for unpleasant insults or cruel behaviour from others whether in surveys on bullying or within The Cybersurvey. Almost half of all those with an eating disorder experience it (49%). Also hurt by this are those with a mental health difficulty and those who worry about life at home (47% and 44%). It is also listed by 40% of those with anger issues and 39% of those with hearing loss. This compares with 18% of non-vulnerable young people who received these insults.

11. *Katz, A and El Asam, A. (2020) In Their Own Words: The Digital Life of Schoolchildren. Internet Matters & Youthworks*

Chart 7: **Cyberaggression by vulnerability**

% of young people in vulnerable groups who experienced each of these risks



About cyberscams

The majority of our respondents do not fall for cyberscams, are not using family credit cards and spend moderately in games. Those few teens who do have problems with money, getting ripped off or scammed, are often very vulnerable children. Below we can see how care experienced children, those with an eating disorder, speech difficulties and young carers, all report heightened problems of this type.

Falling for a scam

A third of care experienced teens have fallen for a scam and 16% of these say it happened often. 15% of teens with eating disorders also report having this experience often, as do 12% of those with a speech difficulty or autism. Like those with speech difficulties, teens with autism had difficulty discerning what was genuine. While the rate they report is lower than those who are care experienced, it is worth emphasising that is four times higher than the rate reported by teens with no vulnerabilities.

Tricked into buying fake goods

Twelve percent of care experienced young people say they have 'often' been tricked into buying fake goods as do teens with speech difficulties. One in ten (10%) of those with eating disorders have also 'often' been tricked into buying something which turned out to be fake (it might be weight loss products). Almost one in 12 (8%) of young carers have 'often' bought something which turned out to be fake.

Credit card crises

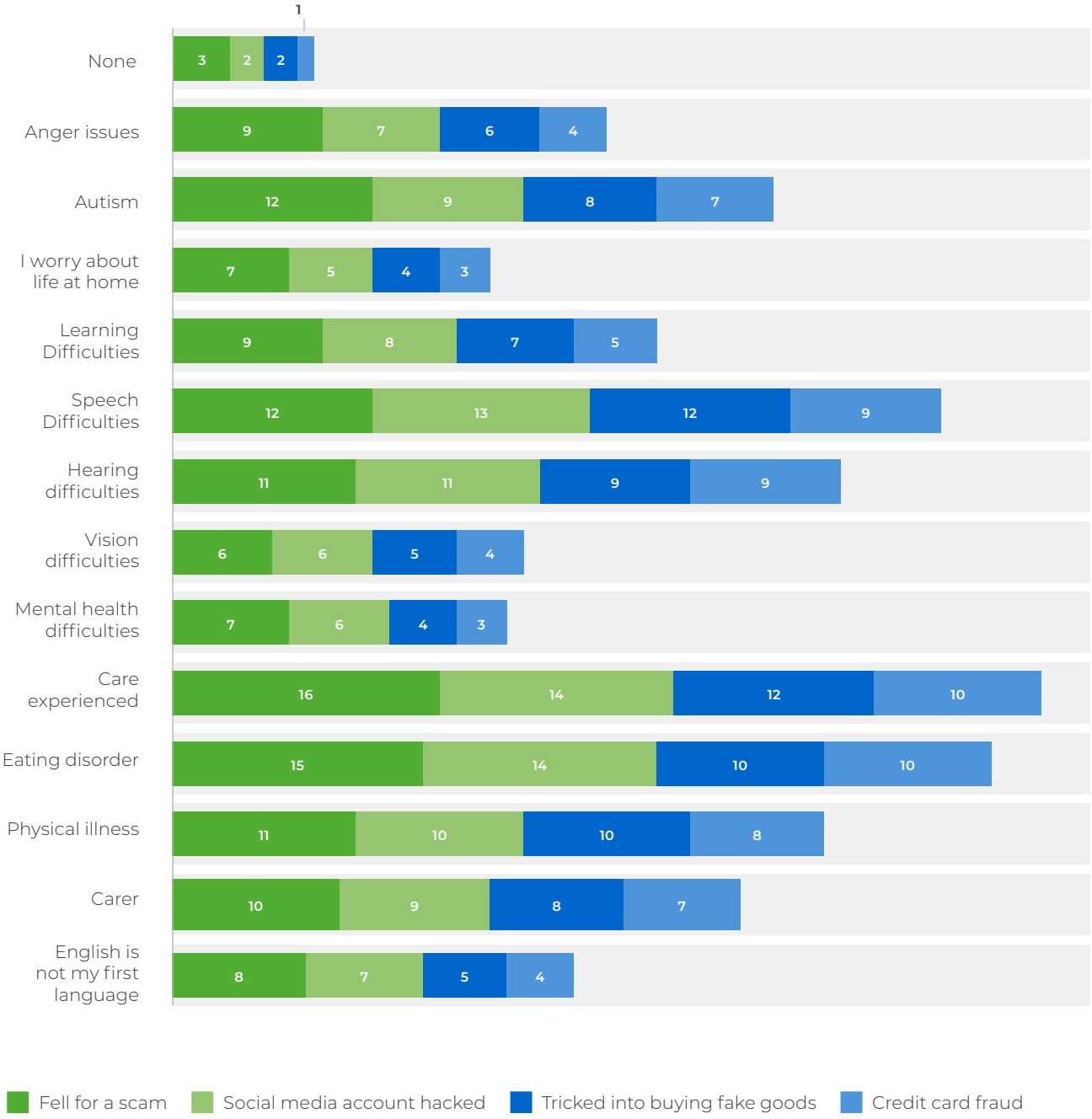
Young carers need support in handling money. They are often dealing with family responsibilities which may include online shopping, yet they experience amongst the highest levels of card fraud – 14% report this happening to them and of these, 7% say it occurred often, compared to 4% of non-vulnerable teens. One in 10, (10%) of teens with eating disorders say they experienced credit card fraud, as do care experienced young people. This is also experienced by 9% of teens with hearing loss or speech difficulties and 7% of young carers.

Social media hacked

About one in seven (14%) of care experienced teenagers have had their social media account hacked as had 14% of those with an eating disorder and 13% of young people with speech difficulties.

Chart 8: Cyberscams by vulnerability

% of young people in each vulnerable group who experience these risks 'often' i.e. more than once or twice

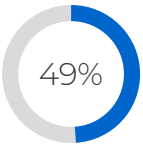


Positive experiences

Connecting to others, feeling supported or finding people 'like me' are on the face of it, very positive experiences. Young people can feel connected and supported or feel they have found people with whom they fit in. As they form their identity, their peers will have a greater influence. Teens do help one another, and some are steered towards support groups by those caring for them. This connectedness or belonging can be of greater significance for vulnerable teens than for those who have no vulnerabilities. The latter may find their friendships and support elsewhere.

One caveat: It is not necessarily uniformly positive however, as discussed in earlier chapters. Some vulnerable children struggle to identify when a relationship is not genuine, but manipulative or controlling. For the teens below, their online life has brought opportunities such as these:

'My online life has helped me to find and talk to people like me'



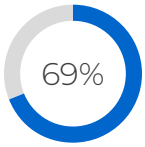
of teens with no vulnerabilities

Nearly half (49%) of teenagers with no vulnerabilities felt that the internet had helped them to do this. However there are those for whom the importance of this ability to connect or talk to people with similar issues, is far greater. More than half of everyone in all the vulnerable groups studied said this was the case for them, in particular:

- **62%** of teens with speech difficulties
- **61%** of teens with hearing loss
- **60%** of young people with a mental health difficulty
- **59%** of those who say I am autistic
- **58%** of young carers
- **57%** of those who worry about life at home

Being connected and 'part of life' is an absolute priority for them.

'My online life has made me feel supported and connected to people



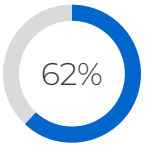
of teens with no vulnerabilities

The importance of technology and the internet in the lives of vulnerable young people cannot be underestimated as they build support groups make friends, play and learn from other young people.

- **69%** of teens with speech difficulties
- **69%** of teens with anger issues
- **69%** of young carers
- **68%** of teens with mental health difficulties
- **67%** of teens with hearing loss

This 'gift' of the digital world seems to be appreciated by all teens.

‘The internet ‘opens up lots of possibilities for me’

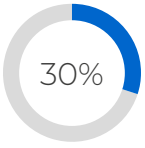


of teens with no vulnerabilities

In contrast to non-vulnerable young people, those with offline vulnerabilities tended to feel that the internet opens up lots of possibilities more than their non-vulnerable peers. 62% of all non-vulnerable teens said this was the case for them.But this world of possibilities was appreciated even more by:

- **86%** of teens who are autistic
- **82%** of teens with learning difficulties
- **69%** of teens with anger issues
- **67%** of teens who worry about life at home
- **67%** of young carers
- **67%** of those with a mental health difficulty

‘My online life gives me personal freedom’

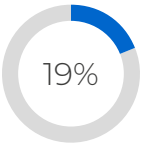


of teens with no vulnerabilities

The extent to which the internet represents personal freedom for vulnerable teens cannot be underestimated.

- **50%** of teens who are autistic
- **46%** of teens with anger issues
- **44%** of teens with an eating disorder
- **42%** of teens who are young carers
- **42%** of teens with a mental health difficulty

‘Most of the time my online life helps me escape my issues’



of teens with no vulnerabilities

To be able to escape even for a time from worry or stress is a vital part of the lives of so many young people, who use the internet to self soothe, to meet others, to be entertained and to connect.

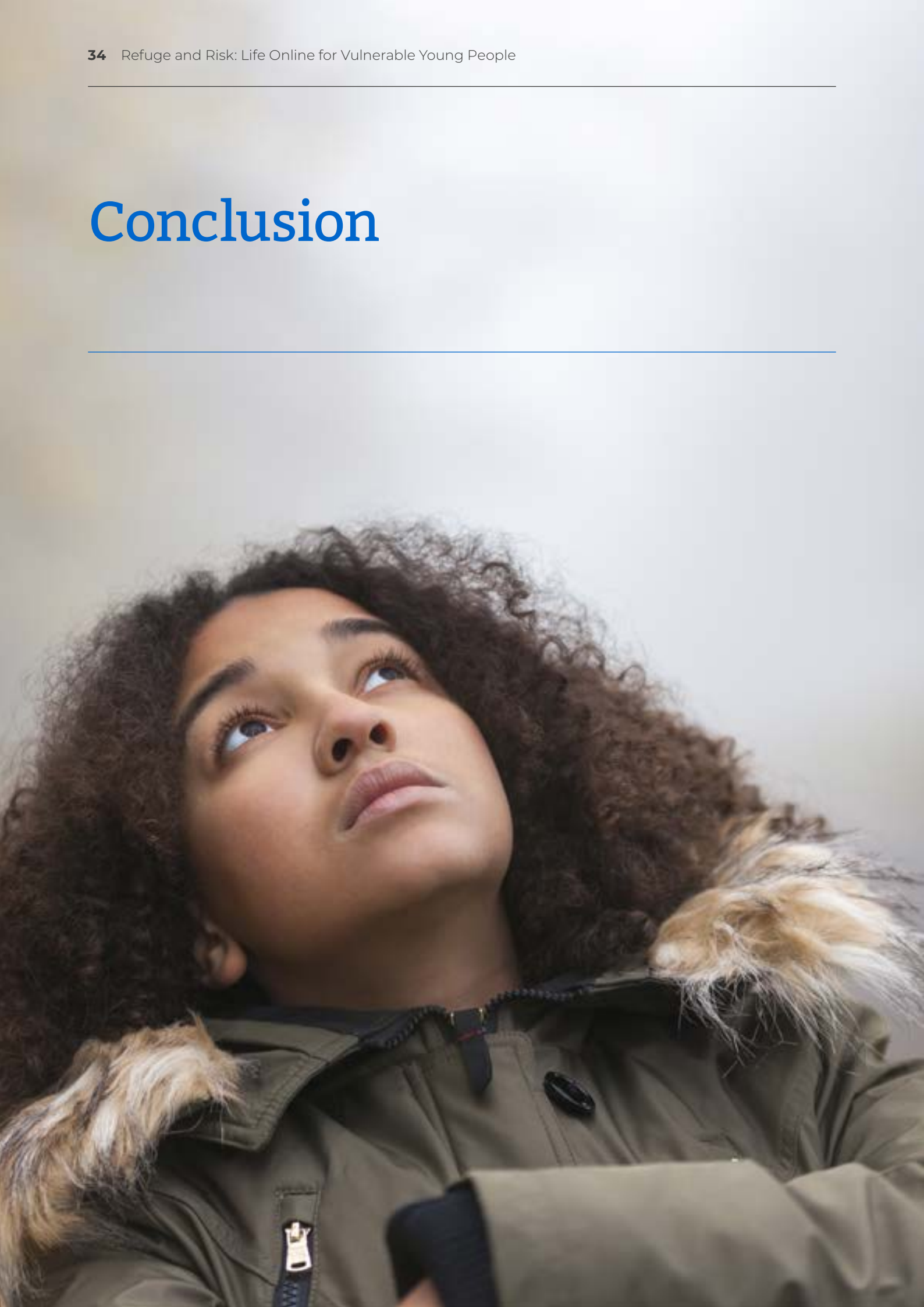
- **38%** of teens who worry about life at home
- **38%** of those with a mental health difficulty
- **39%** who have an eating disorder
- **35%** of young people with a speech difficulty

They show how their offline life is motivating their online actions and choices.

Those who are socially isolated are at greater risk online because this is often evident to other users in their interactions and search for affirmation. It may be constructive to offer other ways to feel good about themselves.

These positive aspects of the online lives of vulnerable children are life enhancing. They are enriched and comforted by the digital experience. But these positive aspects are threatened by the risks and harms they face. Some get too scared to go online. Others experience negative impacts and harms as we have seen. But there is no denying how much they need all that technology offers. For them, even more than for other children, it is vital that they can go online safely. The solution is not to remove a device or turn off the router, but to provide more relevant non-judgemental support and to help them build their digital competence while supporting emotional development.

Conclusion



Young people's behaviour online is influenced less by rules about online safety than about how they feel. It is influenced by emotional needs, pre-existing vulnerabilities and the support around them.

Implications for professionals

1. These messages from young people can help those working in services for children to be alert to harmful content - even when this is not immediately obvious. Pro-anorexia, self-harm material, or content about suicide is very widely seen by all young people and vulnerable groups in particular.

2. Known offline vulnerability should be included in the assessment of any case with a primarily digital component. The impact of multiple or cumulative vulnerabilities present concurrently, or perhaps in the child's past, may contribute to the extent to which they at risk they might be online.

3. In safeguarding practice: while one risk may be the cause of the referral, there may be other online issues, possibly even more serious, that have not been disclosed. Relationships found between risk types, show that it is likely that others have been experienced or might yet be encountered.[12]

4. Evidence is now being published on the impact on young people of lockdown life during a pandemic - when the role of the digital world in our lives has immensely increased. Research by Young Minds among 2,111 young people (aged 13-25) with a history of mental health needs describes worsening mental health for 83% of respondents. Many reported heightened anxiety, sleep problems, panic attacks and increased urges to self-harm (among those with a history of doing so). A quarter of these young people no longer had access to mental health support as a result of the pandemic.[13] Worsening mental health among children and young people has also been noted by Barnardos.[14] The Children's Society had reported a decline in children's well-being predating COVID-19. Children's mean happiness with their lives was at its lowest since 2009/10.[15] Given the rise of mental and emotional health issues, professionals should consider the digital lives of those they are supporting and assessments should include this.

12. *Aiman El Asam & Adrienne Katz (2018) Vulnerable Young People and Their Experience of Online Risks, Human–Computer Interaction, 33:4, 281-304, DOI: 10.1080/07370024.2018.1437544*
13. *Young Minds (2020) Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs. Available: https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3708/coronavirus-report_march2020.pdf*
14. *Barnardo's (2020) Generation lockdown: a third of children and young people experience increased mental health difficulties. See https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/generationlockdown-third-children-and-young-people-experience-increased-mental-health*
15. *The Children's Society, The Good Childhood Report (and annual household survey).*

5. Isolated children in this unique situation will be dependent on accessing the internet in any way they can for comfort, entertainment, gaming, social life, education and shopping or helping their family with online tasks. Now is the time to re-imagine services and online safety advice and to help young people gain a wider range of digital skills. Many vulnerable children and teens spend their time in a narrow repetitive loop of limited activity. Only one in five of all young people said one of the five top things they did online was learning and only one in four chose browsing and exploring as one of their top five things to do online.

6. Before the pandemic 25% reported in the Cybersurvey that they had viewed content talking about suicide. Harmful content, whether encouraging anorexia or bulking up the body, self-harm or extremist views, is the risk type that must be urgently reduced.

7. Instead of a one size fits all approach – a nuanced approach with adjustments tailored to what is known about the individual child is likely to have a better outcome.

Implications for Parents and Carers

1. Your child's emotional state may influence what they do online. Be alert to feelings of friendlessness, isolation or breakdowns in relationships. It is at these moments that young people go online in search of comfort, support, new friends or excitement.

2. Dialogue is better than advice. The Cybersurvey has shown that talking to young people about their online lives in general rather than laying down rules, is helpful.

3. Life experience and knowledge of how relationships work, give parents an advantage even if their digital skills are not high. They can help their child through friendship and relationship issues.

4. Young people enjoy 'learning about staying safe online together' with adults rather than being told. Their desire for autonomy is strong and they also like to find out for themselves. This could be encouraged if they were asked to find out from reliable sources and explain it to their parents.

5. Any dramatic change in body shape is obviously a cause for concern. Conversations with young people about this should include a digital dimension to understand if and how they are being influenced by what they see online.

6. Foster parents and care workers caring for teens in residential settings should be fully trained to be aware of digital risks and how to talk about them in a sensitive teen friendly approach. Because their young people are likely to be especially vulnerable, the likelihood of online harm is high.

Implications for tech companies

1. Adopt the UK's Age Appropriate Design Code and uphold high standards for all children and young people under 18.

2. Rapidly take down content encouraging suicide, anorexia or self harm.

3. Ensure harmful content is not repeatedly served up even if it has been viewed.

4. Increase real-time advice on what to do if distressed by something a user has seen.

5. Continue to expand the creation of hubs to help vulnerable users such as Connecting Safely Online and Inclusive Digital Safety

6. Incorporate children's rights: if children's voices and experiences are generally under-considered in digital policy and rights debates, the rights of those who are vulnerable or have difficulties are even more likely to be ignored.

Appendix 1.

Young people with no vulnerabilities for comparison

CONDUCT	No Vulnerabilities
Visits gambling sites	1%
Looks at adult content	4%
Visits chat rooms	6%
Visits dating sites	1%
Sexting: I've done this	6%
Met up in real life	14%
Often spent quite a bit of money in games	15%

COMPULSION	No Vulnerability
Without my phone I get irritated and anxious	15%
I cannot manage my life online	13%
I feel my online self is better than my real self	8%
My online life has caused problems with friends and family	3%
My online life makes me neglect school work	5%
I feel addicted to my phone	15%

CONTACT	No Vulnerabilities
Internet helped me make a good relationship	29%
I felt someone was trying to control or stalk me	3%
Persuading me into unwanted sexual activity	3%
I've had my image shared in revenge after a breakup	2%
Person not who they said they were	2%
Have come into contact with scary people	12%

CYBERSCAMS	No Vulnerabilities
Social media account hacked	2%
Credit card fraud	1%
Tricked into buying fake goods	2%
Fell for a scam	3%

CONTENT (Often)	No Vulnerabilities
I've seen content that encourages people to bulk up their bodies	7%
I've come across content that encourages self-harm	2%
I've come across content that talks about suicide	4%
I've come across nudes I did not search for	5%
I've come across violent images or videos I did not want to see	5%
I've come across risky dares	3%
I've come across content encouraging people to be too thin	5%
I've come across violence, hatred or racism	3%
I've come across extremists views and support for terrorist acts	3%

CYBERAGGRESSION	No Vulnerabilities
Cyberbullied	16%
I've received threats to harm me or my family	9%
I've received racist messages/ comments	10%
I've received insults about LGBT+ people	11%
I've received insults about my religion	4%
I've received messages or comments that were rude about disability	5%
I've received sexist messages/ comments	9%
I've received insults about how I look	18%

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