

Digital parenting:

How parents support children's wellbeing in a digital world



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Foreword

Dr Linda Papadopoulos
Internet Matters Ambassador



As parents, many things we guide our children in - whether that be learning to ride a bike or driving a car - we've experienced it before them. But technology is different. Once it's discovered, our children learn quickly and become more advanced than we are. It's essential that we don't shy away from technology and discussion of online safety. In fact, we should take even more time to actively engage with our children about what they are getting up to online.

This report by Internet Matters demonstrates the need for parents to be engaged in their child's online activity throughout their development - it's not a one off discussion, and it shouldn't be a big reveal when they get their first phone. Not only this, but our report highlights the value staying engaged brings to our children, by being great role models and creating a positive relationship with technology, which improves their physical, social, developmental and emotional wellbeing.

As a parent myself, I understand how difficult it can be to start these conversations and approach them in the right way. What we need to do as parents is feel empowered - we need to be given the confidence to talk openly and maintain knowledge of the online world to make sure we don't get left behind when our children reach their vital teenage years.

Yet this is difficult to achieve alone and it's equally important that industry, sector, and government reflect on these findings to support parents to play an active and positive role in their children's digital lives.



Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the digital lives of children changed fundamentally. More activity moved online and technology was facilitating learning, socialising and entertainment in ways it had never done before. As children spent longer on connected devices at home, many parents became more involved in their children's digital lives as a result. However, many also felt overwhelmed and were left struggling to get a good digital balance back in the home.

It is within this context that Internet Matters researched and published its [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index Report 2022](#). This clearly showed the relationship between technology usage and wellbeing impacts, indicating that not only how long they spend, but crucially what they do online affects children's wellbeing, both positively and negatively. This research also started to reveal how parents' own digital usage and behaviours, along with parenting style, can play a large role in how their children participate in the digital world.

This report expands on the importance of parental influence on children's digital activity and the subsequent wellbeing outcomes. Using data from Internet Matters' regular survey of 2,000 parents alongside the Index (see page 27 for Methodology), we can explore parenting approaches and the impact on children's wellbeing in a digital world in relation to:

1. Digital behaviours within families
2. Digital skills and confidence
3. Parental awareness of and engagement with what children do online
4. Management of children's digital activity through monitoring and mediation

It is not solely the responsibility of parents to ensure that children are able to manage the risks and maximise the opportunities of being online. Professionals working with children (such as teachers and social workers), policymakers and industry all have an important role to play too. Part of this role is to provide guidance and support to parents so that they can overcome some of the challenges they've encountered since the pandemic. The context provided by this research will help to make these efforts as effective as possible.

Policymakers and industry have a further responsibility to ensure that wellbeing considerations are woven into the design of online services from the outset, to help prevent issues from arising in the first place which parents and the other adults in children's lives have to address – a theme we return to in the concluding chapter. Finally, we need effective regulation focussed on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children that empowers them to use the internet safely, without restricting or inhibiting their access to digital services.



Summary

Parental influence over their children's digital behaviours is considerable for many of the families covered in the research. Where families achieve a good balance of on and offline activities and parents take more breaks from devices, it is often the case the same behaviours are mirrored by the child. In households where parents find it more difficult to achieve this balance, this appears to be associated with more adverse wellbeing outcomes for their children.

1. While acknowledging they need to be supported in this role, parents see themselves as primarily responsible for helping children to have positive experiences online, regardless of their child's age. This gets harder as children get older and become more digitally aware and potentially more knowledgeable than parents themselves. As children exert their digital independence and parental controls slip away, parents still try to maintain conversations about their child's digital life, but say they need assistance to do this effectively.
2. Six in ten parents feel they have a good balance of using digital devices in their home. In households where this is the case, parents feel more confident and knowledgeable about online safety issues and are also more confident that their child knows how to stay safe online. Parents and children are more likely to be teaching each other digital skills and parents feel that their child's use of technology and the internet has a positive impact on their overall wellbeing.
3. Conversely, in households where time is often spent alone on devices rather than doing things together and where children say that their parents go on their phone when they are trying to talk to them, our Index shows there is a strong negative impact on children's wellbeing. It is in these households that parents are less likely to feel they are mainly responsible for their children having positive experiences online.
4. A wide range of controls are used by parents to manage children's online activities, with discussion and clear rule setting used to a greater extent than the setting of physical limits or controls. Parents who lack confidence in using tools and controls are less able to support their children in issues of online safety and are more likely to feel that technology has a negative impact on their children's wellbeing.
5. The number of controls put in place by parents to manage their child's online activity is not a strong indicator of digital wellbeing outcomes; it is more important that children feel that their parents are engaged with what they do online and talk to them about their experiences.
6. Parents see many challenges in keeping up with technology and their children's online lives, and are looking for a range of support, including more information from schools, the apps and platforms their children use and from the government. These needs are less directly acknowledged within families where parents lack digital skills or have a poor digital balance in the home, where their priorities may be different – but just where it appears this support for children's digital wellbeing is most needed.



Growing up online

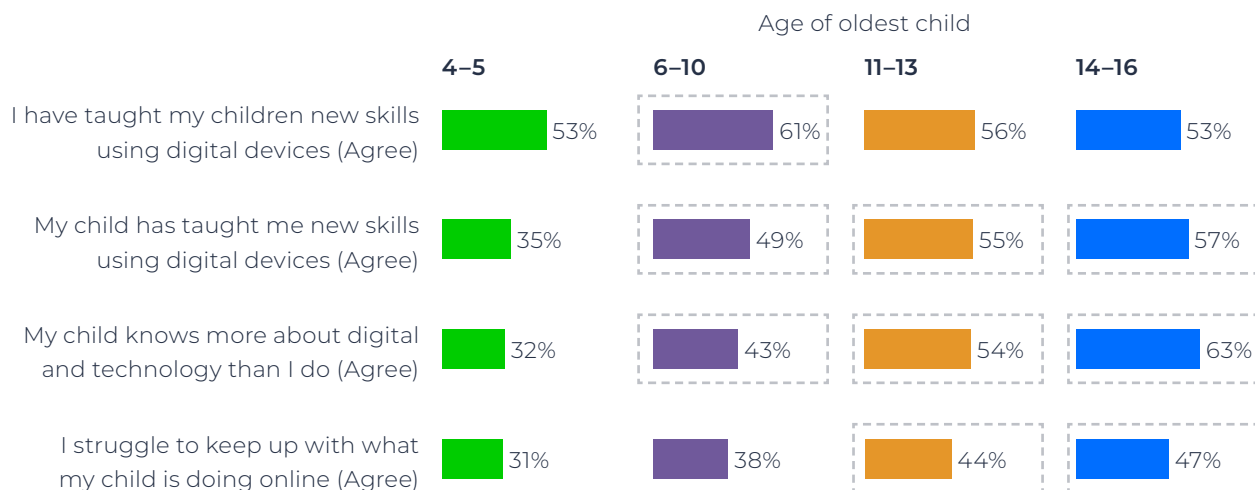
Just over half (56%) of parents of 4–16-year-olds see themselves as being primarily responsible for supporting their child to have positive experiences online and while this doesn't change as children get older, there is a clear transition in the role that parents play and the way in which they manage their children's online activity.

When children are first experiencing the digital world, they have a lot to learn and the parent takes on the role of teacher, helping them to navigate a new environment. As they become more independent and gain more experience, parents feel that the roles reverse, and their children are teaching them new skills. Parents report that children move into a position of knowing more about digital and technology than they do and by the time they are aged 14-16, almost half of parents say they

are struggling to keep up with what their child is doing online. Their children agree - with only 8% of 15-year-olds saying their parent knows everything about what they do on their devices.

Our [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index](#) demonstrated that as children get older and spend more time online, both the positive and negative impacts on their wellbeing increase. In line with this increase in age and independence, there is a decrease in the rules and controls parents put in place regarding digital use. As parents start to feel increasingly 'left behind' by their children in relation to technology, conversations about what they are doing online start to become less frequent. However, nearly four in ten parents (38%) are still trying to maintain these discussions with children aged 15, demonstrating that they clearly see the value in staying engaged, particularly when teens are most active online.

Attitudes towards child's knowledge of digital and technology



Base: Total sample parents of children aged 4-16 (n=2010); Age of oldest child - 4-5 (n=218), 6-10 (n=699), 11-13 (n=487), 14-16 (n=607)
Dashed lines indicate significantly higher among this group than at least one other

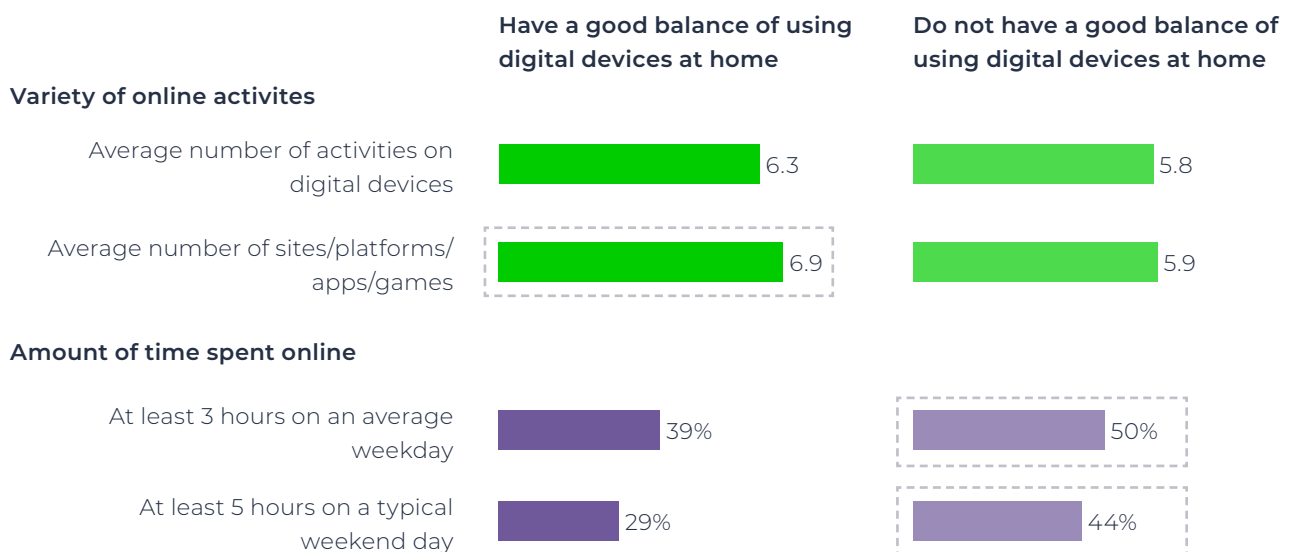


The benefits of balance

Digital and online activity is now clearly woven into family lives, but the degree and success to which this is done, and the impact it has on children, varies quite considerably. Only six in ten parents of 4–16-year-olds (61%) agree with the statement that ‘they have a good balance of using digital devices in their home’, although half (52%) feel that as a result of the Covid lockdown they now have a better relationship with technology and digital devices.

Achieving good balance seems especially true for higher income households and parents with vulnerable children and is related to a combination of the time children spend online and the types and variety of activities they are carrying out. Parents who say they have a good balance of using digital devices at home have children who use a greater range of devices, carry out a wider variety of online activities¹ and use more different sites, platforms, apps and games² than those who say they do not achieve a good balance. Crucially, their children spend less time overall using devices online. This is illustrated in the following chart and indicates that parents see children doing a variety of online activities as a benefit, provided that not too long is spent on any one thing.

Variety of online activities and amount of time children spend online



Base: Total sample parents of children aged 4-16 (n=2010); ‘We have a good balance of using digital devices in our home’ – Agree (n=1231), Disagree (n=318)
Dashed lines indicate significantly higher among this group

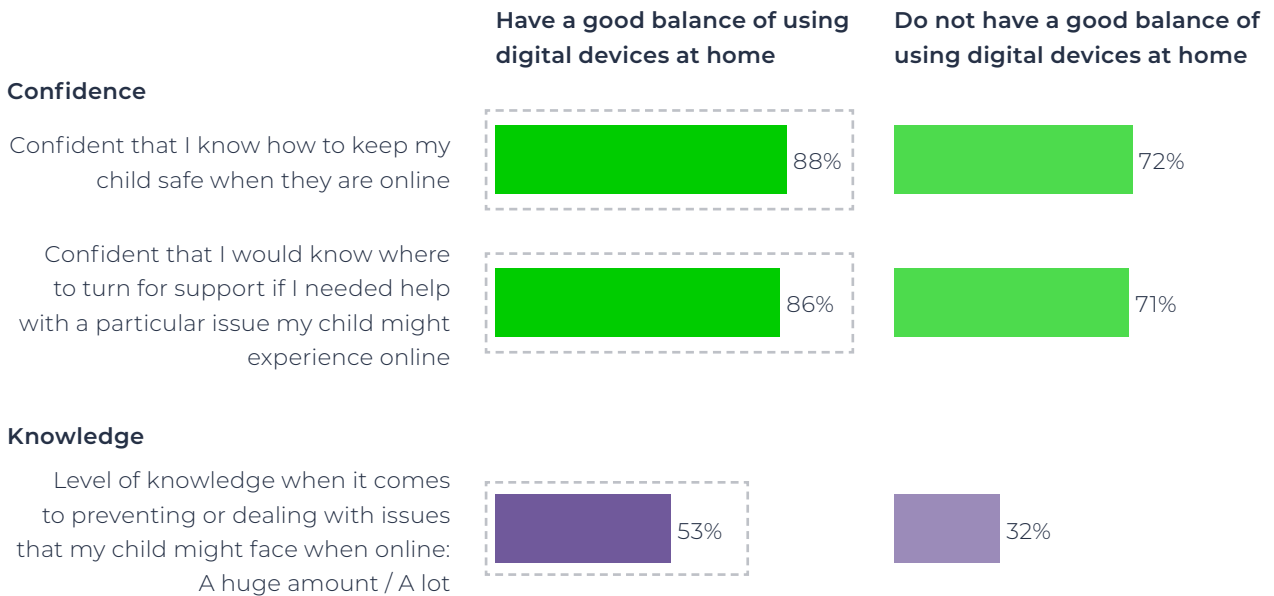
1. Number of online activities from a pre-defined list of 17 different activities. Most frequently mentioned activities that their children carry out online by all parents of 4-16 year olds are watching videos (87%), playing games on their own (61%) and watching on demand or catch-up TV (53%).
2. Number of sites, platforms, apps and games from a pre-defined list of 30. Most frequently mentioned are YouTube (61%), Netflix (58%), Disney+ (44%) and WhatsApp (43%).



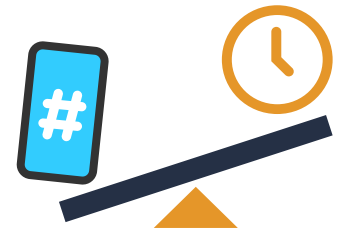
There is also a relationship between whether parents feel they are achieving a good balance of using digital devices at home and how confident and knowledgeable they are about online safety. Over half of parents who perceive a good digital balance at home feel knowledgeable about preventing or dealing with issues their children might face online compared to less than a third who don't perceive a good digital balance in their home.

It is however also worth pointing out that parents who achieve a good balance of using digital devices at home exhibit concern about a wider variety of issues in relation to their child's online experience than those who do not achieve a good balance (as illustrated in the table on page 27). The differences are more significant in relation to content and financial risks and may be due to them having a greater awareness that these are indeed issues to be faced by their children when navigating the online world.

Confidence and knowledge



Base: Total sample parents of children aged 4-16 (n=2010); 'We have a good balance of using digital devices in our home' – Agree (n=1231), Disagree (n=318)
Dashed lines indicate significantly higher among this group

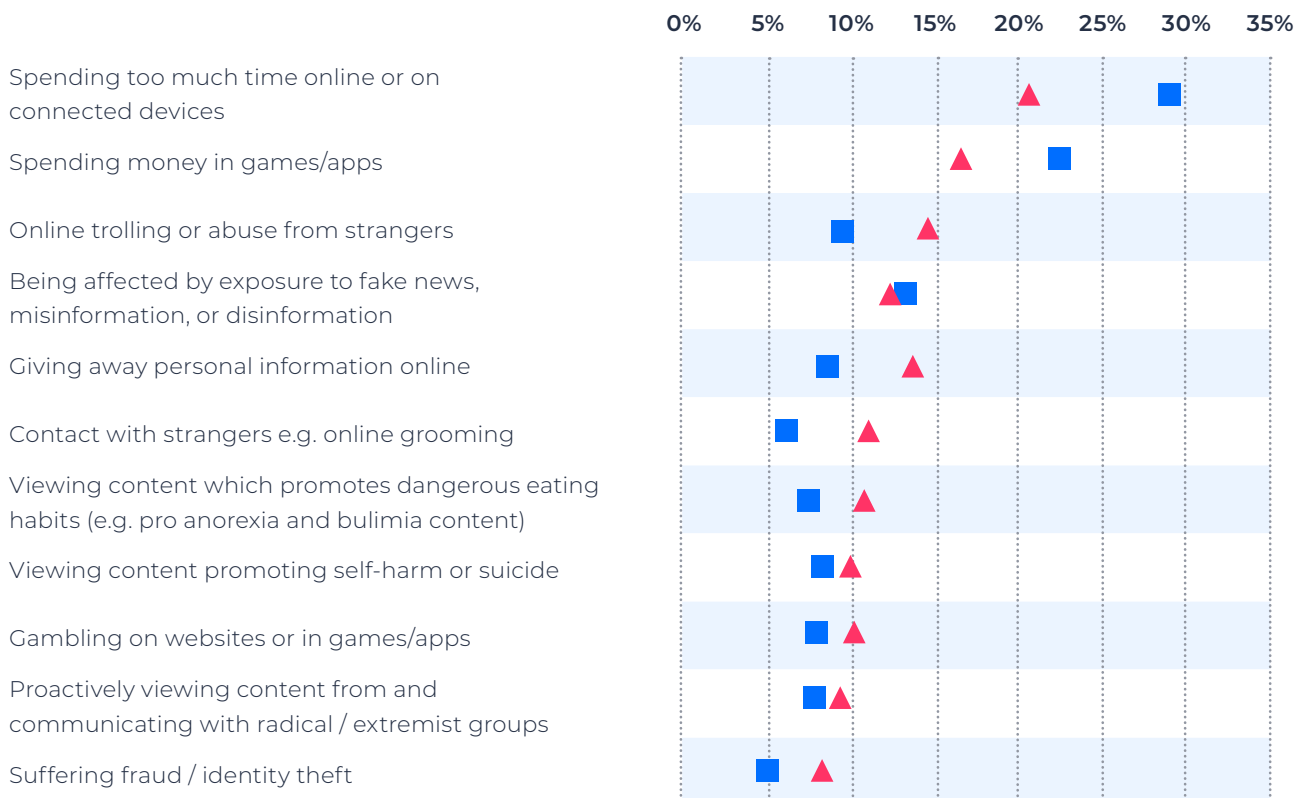


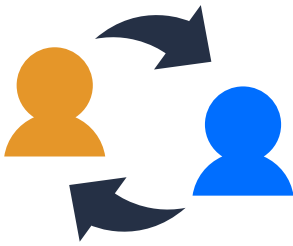
When looking at experience of these issues, the numbers are again generally higher for parents who achieve a better balance, although notably experience of children spending too much time online is higher for parents who don’t achieve a good balance. Again, higher numbers here may be down to greater levels of awareness, and as described above, these parents also feel better equipped to deal with negative consequences of their children’s online lives when they occur.

Parents reporting their children’s negative online experiences

■ Have a good balance of using digital devices at home

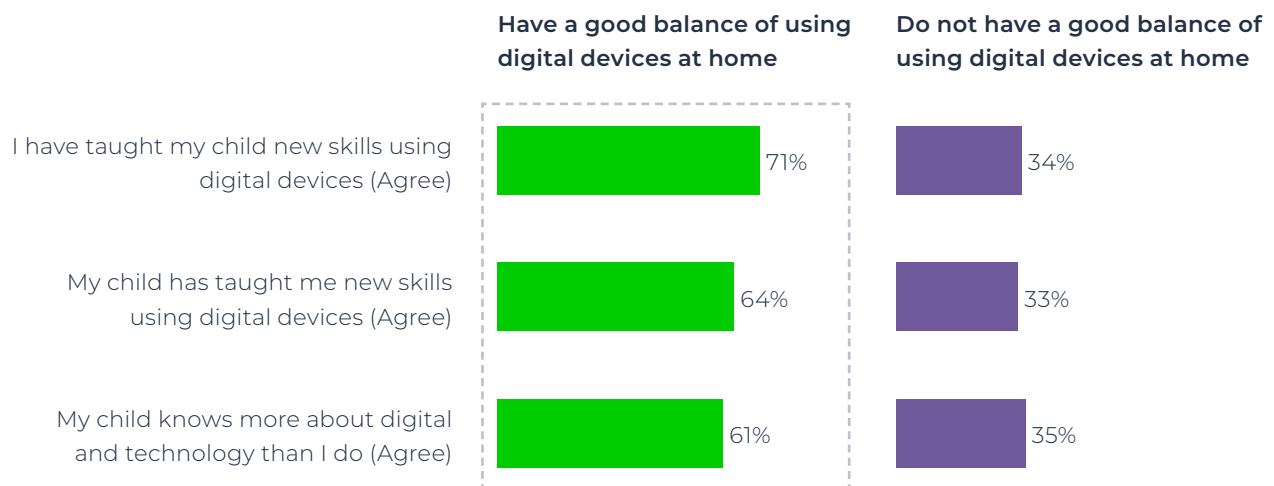
▲ Do not have a good balance of using digital devices at home





Those who feel they have a good balance of using digital devices at home are better able to teach their children new digital skills but are also more likely to be learning digital skills from their children than those who struggle to get the balance right. There are indications that this mutual teaching and learning then gives the child a good base to develop and get ahead (and potentially to deal with those issues described above), as these parents are also more likely to say their child knows more about digital and technology than they do.

Sharing of digital skills between parents and children



Base: Total sample parents of children aged 4-16 (n=2010); 'We have a good balance of using digital devices in our home' – Agree (n=1231), Disagree (n=318)
 Dashed lines indicate significantly higher among this group

All the above points to a more positive online experience and outcome for the child if the parent feels they are achieving the right balance of using digital devices at home. Where the balance is felt to be right, 81% of parents are confident that their child knows how to stay safe online (compared with 68% of those who do not have a good balance). Furthermore, 76% of parents who have a good balance of using digital devices at home say that their child's experience and use of technology and the internet has a positive impact on their overall wellbeing (compared with 55% of parents who do not achieve a good balance). Nearly a quarter of this latter group feel that it has a negative impact on their child's overall wellbeing.

Measurable impact on wellbeing

As already mentioned, our [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index](#) highlighted that children who spend more time online have more opportunities to experience both positive and negative impacts on their wellbeing. However, the way in which this time online is spent in the family environment has a considerable effect on this. Parents in this survey who describe their household as often spending

time alone on devices rather than doing things together have children who score more highly across all the negative wellbeing dimensions identified in the Index than those who say this is not like their household.

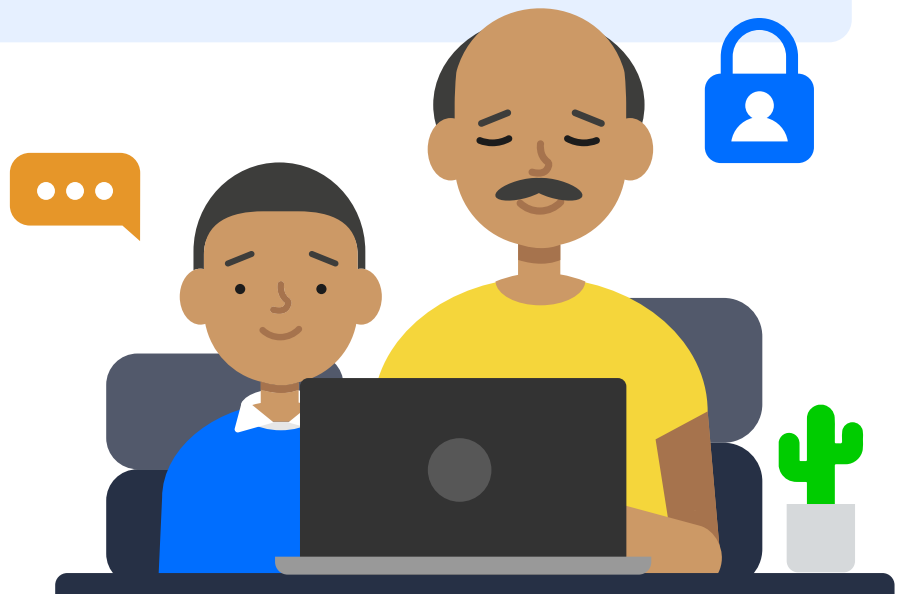
This builds on the insight in the Index Report which demonstrated that children who said their parents are often on devices when they try to talk to them also experience more negative impacts on wellbeing.

Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index Methodology

- The Index is based on a [framework](#) developed by Dr Diane Levine at the University of Leicester which identified four dimensions of children's wellbeing most impacted, both positively and negatively, by digital participation (developmental, emotional, physical and social).
- A survey was then designed with Revealing Reality and completed by 1,000 children aged 9-15, and one of their parents/guardians to measure these impacts.
- Each item was scored out of three based on the strength of an individual respondent's answer

and averaged to provide a baseline score. To help display the differences in score between groups we present the data as indices. To do this, our dimension score for the total sample becomes our baseline of 1.00 and scores from the sub-groups being analysed are presented relative to this. For example, a score of 1.50 tells us that particular group's average dimension score is 1.50 times the average (much higher), a score of 0.50 tell us it is 0.50 times the average (much lower).

- The charts included on pages 16 and 21 are based on the child's scores so the focus is on how they are reporting the impact on themselves.

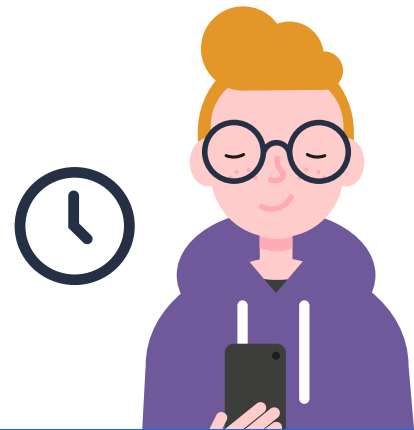


**Children’s Index scores based on statement:
We often find ourselves spending time by ourselves on our own devices
(e.g. phones, consoles, TVs) rather than doing things together**



Digital Wellbeing scores indexed against the total
Base: Total sample children aged 9-15 (n=1001); 'We often find ourselves spending time by ourselves on our own devices (e.g. phones, consoles, TVs) rather than doing things together' – Score 0 (Not like our household) to 3 (n=141), Score 4 to 6 (n=360), Score 7 to 8 (n=333), Score 9 to 10 (Completely like our household) (n=149)

Although digital activity is an inevitable part of family life, taking time away from this is also important and just over half (55%) of families with children aged 4-16 either always or regularly have time away from digital devices to do offline activities together. These parents say they are more confident in knowing where to turn for support with issues that their children may experience online (83%, compared with 72% of those who never take time out for offline activities) and are also more likely to feel that the internet has a positive impact on their child’s wellbeing (71%, compared with 51% of those who never take time out for offline activities).

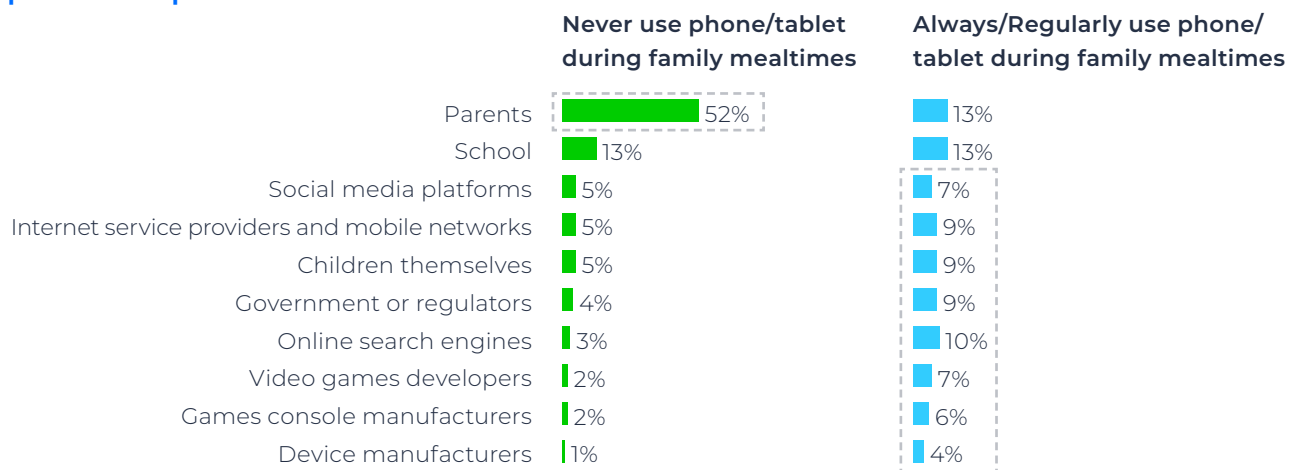


One in three parents of 4–16-year-olds admits to always or regularly using their phone or tablet during mealtimes with the family. With busy lives and multiple priorities, sitting down to a meal together every day may not always be possible in every household, but only 4% of parents said this wasn't applicable to them which indicates that most households surveyed do this at least some of the time.

However, almost half (46%) of parents whose oldest child is aged 14-16 never use their phone or tablet at family mealtimes. This may indicate parents being more conscious of their own behaviours in situations where children are more likely to also have their own digital devices or having a 'no screen time' policy.

There is evidence that parents who disengage from family mealtimes to use their digital devices step back from responsibility for supporting their children to have positive experiences online. Just 13% of this group believe they are the most important in this role, compared with 52% of parents who never use their phone or tablet at family mealtimes. Instead, parents who use digital devices at mealtimes are more likely to place responsibility for supporting their child to have a positive experience online with other entities such as search engines, internet service providers, social media platforms, the government and also with children themselves.

Parent views of who is the most responsible for supporting their children to have positive experiences online



Base: Total sample parents of children aged 4-16 (n=2010); 'use my phone or tablet during mealtimes with the family' – Never (n=774), Always/Regularly (n=647)
Dashed lines indicate significantly higher among this group

As previously noted, all of these entities have a role to play, but this does highlight that a supportive home environment is also an important factor in enabling young people to have a positive online experience. Parents who are more engaged with devices during family time and take less time away from devices overall feel less responsible for supporting their children online. This seems to be associated with more negative outcomes for children's digital wellbeing. A better understanding of the drivers of these parental behaviours and attitudes could help deliver more effective support, particularly in homes where more primary needs and priorities mean that they lack the time, resource or capability in this area.



The question of control

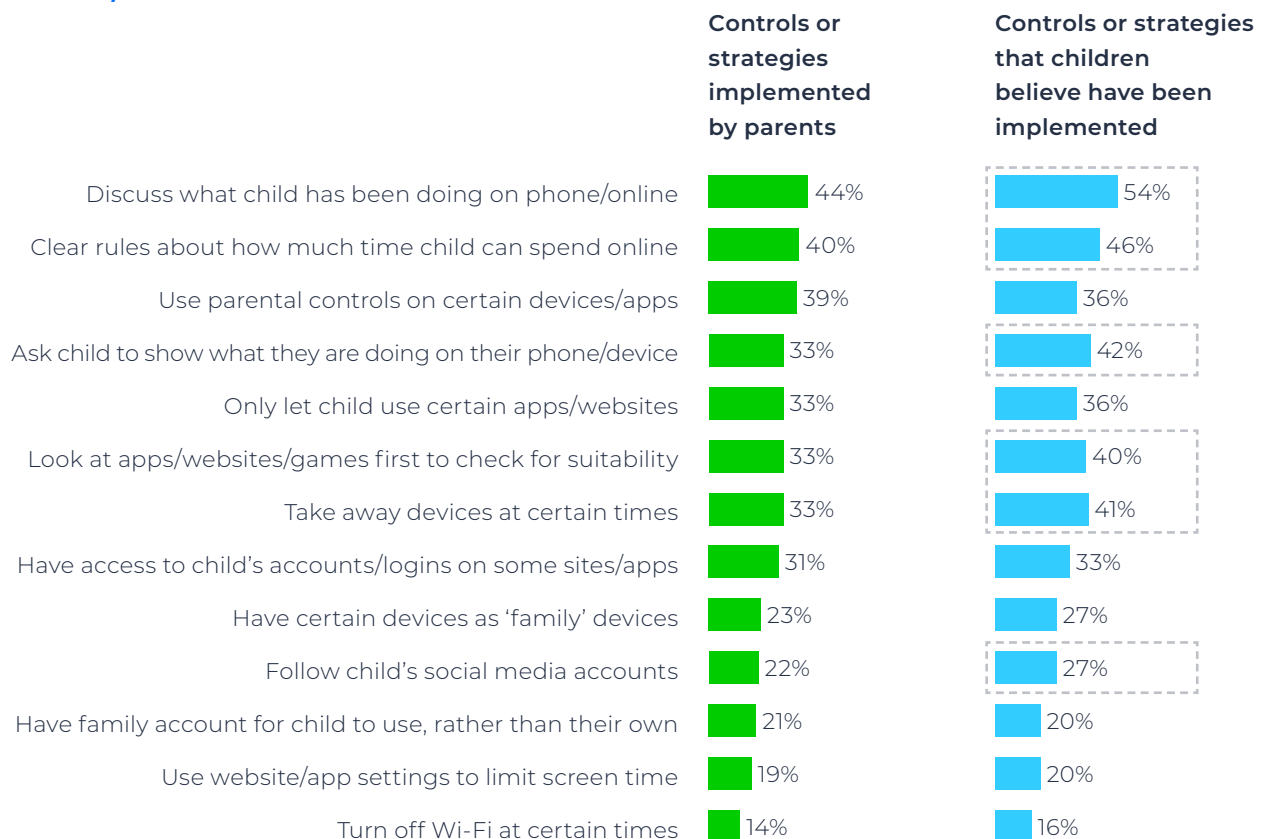
Only 13% of parents say they don’t do anything to monitor or manage their children’s digital usage. Parents implement a wide range of controls, but those which are most widely used reflect trust and discussion, rather than setting physical limits.

Four in ten parents who took part in our Wellbeing Index survey discuss with their child what they have been doing online (44%) or set clear rules about how much time they can spend online (40%), but only a third check that apps and websites are suitable

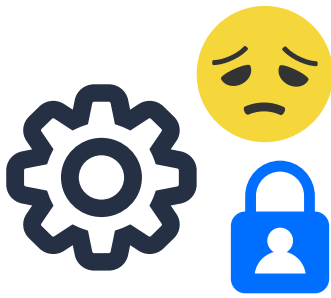
before letting children use them and fewer than two in ten use website or app settings to limit screen time (19%).

Children claim their parents are using controls to a greater degree but there is also a lack of awareness amongst children themselves of how to use the tools available to them to stay safe and manage their time online. Just over half (53%) of children say they know how to use privacy settings, less than half know how to report content or users and only 29% know how to set time limits.

Controls or strategies used by parents to manage what their child does on their devices/online



Base: Total sample parents of children aged 9-15 (n=1001); Total sample of children aged 9-15 (n=1001)
Dashed lines indicate significantly higher among this group



Parents who admit they are less confident about using online safety tools (more likely to be lower income, C2DE and younger parents) are less likely to be passing on digital skills to their children. They also have lower levels of concern about potentially harmful issues their children may be facing online. This doesn't mean their children aren't facing these issues, but that their parents are potentially less aware of what they might be. This is further

reinforced in that they are significantly less confident about how to keep their children safe online, are far less confident that their children know how to keep themselves safe and less likely to know where to turn if they encounter an issue. Ultimately these parents may generally feel more negative towards technology as 28% believe that it is having a negative impact on their children's wellbeing compared to just 11% of digitally confident parents.

Impact of parental digital confidence on perceptions of child online safety and wellbeing



Base: Total sample parents of children aged 4-16 (n=2010); Digitally confident (n=1598), Digitally unconfident (n=156)
Dashed lines indicate significantly higher among this group

Where parents take fewer actions to limit what their child is doing online, there is some correlation to the negative dimension of children's physical wellbeing. This could be linked to higher levels of inactivity from a lack of restriction on screen time. However, there is very little variation across the other dimensions of wellbeing which suggests that the number of controls parents put in place may not be a good indicator of digital wellbeing outcomes for children.

Children really benefit when they believe their parents are engaged with what they are doing online, or more specifically there are negative implications when parents are not engaged. Those who say that their parents know not much at all or only know some things about what they do online score more highly across all four negative dimensions of digital wellbeing than children who feel their parents know everything or at least most things about what they do online.



However, it is not just knowing what they are doing, it is displaying a greater level of involvement or engagement, and critically one that is apparent to the child, that also makes a difference to children's wellbeing. If children do not feel that their parents are discussing with them what they are doing online, then this also has a high impact across the four negative dimensions of digital wellbeing.

As we're already reported, conversations about digital usage reduce as children get older, and even if control measures are in place, 48% of 15-year-olds say they can get around some or all of these. This again reinforces the benefits for parents of staying involved in their children's online lives, particularly through the teenage years.

How much child thinks parent knows about what they do online



Dashed lines indicate significantly higher among this group. Digital Wellbeing scores indexed against the total Base: Total sample children aged 9-15 (n=1001); 'How much do you think your parent(s)/guardian(s) know about what you do online?' - Not much at all/Some things (n=219), Most things/Everything (n=770)

Whether parents discuss what child has been doing on phone/online (child perceived)



Dashed lines indicate significantly higher among this group. Digital Wellbeing scores indexed against the total Base: Total sample children aged 9-15 (n=1001); 'Do your parents/guardians do any of the following things? Discuss what you have been doing on your phone / online' - No (n=462), Yes (n=539)

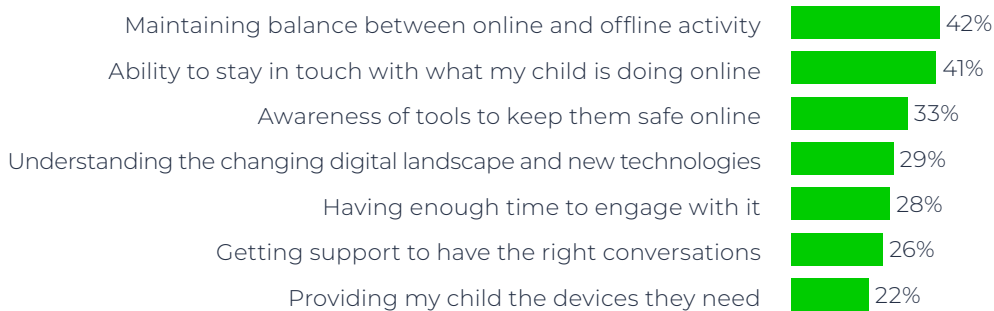
What help do parents need?

Online safety is important to parents. Ranked alongside other parental concerns 27% said it was in their top three, compared to having a good education at 37% but above eating and drinking healthily at 23%.

Mirroring what our analysis has shown, when asked directly, 42% of parents say one of their biggest

challenges is helping their children manage the balance between on and offline activities. They also see many personal challenges in terms of their own awareness and understanding of the changing digital landscape, staying in touch with what their child is doing online and the tools available to keep them safe. A quarter of parents also want support to have the right conversations with children about digital usage.

Main challenges for parents with regard to their child's digital usage



While many parents express the need for help in managing these issues and conversations with children, this is less acknowledged by those who are less digitally confident and those who feel they have a poor balance of on and offline activities in the home. As we've already seen, these are the homes where the need is greatest to ensure children are maximising the benefits of being online while minimising the risks.

To address these challenges, parents are looking for a range of support, including understanding where to access online resources and getting tailored advice for their family. Parents also rely on schools as an important source of guidance. They see schools as second to themselves in terms of teaching children about having positive experiences online and while they generally feel that teaching on online safety in

schools is good, 82% of them believe there should be more dedicated education on the subject, particularly in secondary schools.

Parents of children aged 11-13 who are likely to be getting their first smartphone also want information about safety features directly from the apps and platforms their children are starting to use. Over seven in ten parents are also looking to government for better and clearer guidance on overcoming challenges regarding children's digital usage, ahead of what could be offered from both offline and online community groups. Again, this underlines the importance parents place on keeping their children safe, healthy and well in a digital world and the consideration this needs from a wide group of professionals, technology companies, designers and policymakers themselves.

Usefulness of resources in overcoming challenges regarding child's digital usage

Green shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group than at least one other group

	TOTAL	Age of oldest child			
		4-5	6-10	11-13	14-16
More dedicated education on the subject in schools	82%	75 %	80 %	83 %	85 %
Knowing where and how to access online resources on the topics (e.g. websites)	81%	78 %	81 %	82 %	82 %
More information for parents directly from the sites, apps and platforms my children use	73%	71 %	76 %	83 %	78 %
Ability to get tailored online advice for my family	73%	70 %	73 %	72 %	76 %
A helpline or online chat service for support and advice on online safety	73%	66 %	73 %	75 %	75 %
Better guidance from government	73%	69 %	74 %	75 %	73 %
Support from offline community support groups (e.g. libraries, community centres)	70%	74 %	69 %	70 %	70 %
Support from online communities (e.g. Facebook, Nextdoor)	69%	67 %	72 %	68 %	69 %
Being sent offline resources (e.g. brochures, pamphlets)	67%	66 %	67 %	68 %	67 %

Base: Total sample parents of children aged 4-16 (n=2010); Age of oldest child - 4-5 (n=218), 6-10 (n=699), 11-13 (n=487), 14-16 (n=607)



Conclusions

While parents who believe they are managing digital activity in the home well feel more confident and aware of issues of online safety, many parents feel left behind in understanding the complexities and the important role of digital in their children's lives. In households where parents are most disconnected from children's online lives or find it difficult to get a good digital balance in the home, there seem to be clear differences in outcomes for their children's wellbeing in a digital world.

Supporting parental media literacy

This analysis shows that parental digital behaviour, skill, and awareness are strongly linked to how children experience the digital world and its effects. Improving parental understanding of this link and learning from families who are getting the balance right are important steps we can take, as well as addressing issues of digital skill. The research often pointed out that parents showing a poorer balance of using digital devices at home had fewer concerns about their children's digital experiences, which may be because there wasn't a comprehension of what the children's digital lives involved. Increased knowledge and behavioural changes could have a profound impact in improving parental confidence and ability to support children to navigate the digital world successfully.

It is welcome that DCMS and Ofcom both recently produced new media literacy strategies with the aim of increasing access to high quality media literacy education. This research speaks to the need for parents to be a focus of this work – not only because it benefits parents themselves, but because it also benefits their children, therefore amplifying the

impact of the investment. Being media literate involves more than simply being able to make use of online platforms to achieve one's goals – something which many parents feel like their children can do very well, often better than them. It also involves being emotionally resilient in the face of challenges, being conscious of the impact of one's digital interactions on others and putting information gleaned from online sources into a wider context. Parents have a vital role in supporting children to do all of these things, even as children grow into their mid-late teens. Parents need to be helped to understand this role and empowered to fulfil it.

It is important to recognise that some parents living with more challenging circumstances may struggle to support their children with their digital lives, for a variety of reasons. It is positive that vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups are being highlighted in DCMS and Ofcom's ongoing work in this space. We must collectively find solutions to better meet the needs of vulnerable families, particularly in homes with early-mid teens as their digital behaviours start to become defined. This will require greater join up between the media literacy sector and frontline services engaging with vulnerable and hard-to-reach families on a regular basis, informed by an understanding of the specific needs and concerns of these groups. As a trusted source of information and a direct line to most parents, there is a role that schools can play to bridge this gap, using the new RSHE curriculum as a springboard. There is a role for innovative new resources which provide a framework for schools to work collaboratively with young people and their parents to boost children's safety and wellbeing in a digital world. Internet Matters has recently launched its own resource, [Digital Matters](#), which aims to do precisely this.

Parents who find it hard to take time out from their own devices are also likely to be using a range of online apps and platforms. There is an opportunity for industry to use their online channels to parents to raise awareness of how children are using their platforms, and the tools and controls available to support them to have a positive experience, and as a result help children and their parents find an appropriate balance.

Wellbeing by design

In addition to improving parents' access to resources and information, policymakers and industry can do their bit by ensuring that wellbeing (along with safety) considerations are woven into the design of online platforms and services from the outset. This would help create a sense of shared responsibility and partnership between parents and online platforms for keeping children safe and well online. It would be particularly beneficial for young people living with parents who do not have the time, resources or capabilities to support them in their digital lives.

There is now a statutory basis in the UK for companies to do just this, with the implementation of the Age Appropriate Design Code (otherwise known as the Children's Code). The Code demands that online services which are likely to be accessed by children should be designed with children's wellbeing in mind. The Code came into force in September 2021 and it is already encouraging to see many platforms and services making changes to their products to better safeguard children's digital wellbeing. Internet Matters hopes that our ongoing Digital Wellbeing Programme will continue to provide useful insights into digital family life as online services shape their approaches to supporting the wellbeing of their youngest users.

The findings of this report once again point to the importance of thinking beyond the narrow lens of 'safety' when considering how parents and children can be best supported online. Focusing simply on how children can be protected from serious harm is a missed opportunity to consider how their online experiences can be made as positive as they can possibly be. The Online Safety Bill is a massive step forward in promoting children's safety online, and extremely welcome. But it would be even better if, like the Children's Code, it had a focus on children's wellbeing and empowerment at its heart. As the Bill makes its way through Parliament, Internet Matters will continue to champion the voices of parents and families in the debate and ensure that their everyday experiences and concerns are reflected as the new regulatory regime takes shape.



Methodology

Two data sources were used in the production of this report:

1. Internet Matters impact tracker. Run three times annually to N-2,000 parents of children aged 6-16 years old, nationally representative of the UK. The data used in this report is from the December 2021 wave.
2. Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index report. An annual survey to N-1,000 households – n-1,000 parents and n-1,000 children within the same household. This data is taken from survey work done in August 2021.

Additional data

Parental concern about issues in relation to child's online experience

Green shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group

	Have a good balance of using digital devices at home	Do not have a good balance of using digital devices at home
Spending too much time online or on connected devices	67 %	66 %
Contact with strangers e.g. online grooming	64 %	62 %
Viewing violent content	64 %	61 %
Giving away personal information online or data being collected about them without your and/or their consent	62 %	63 %
Online trolling or abuse from strangers	62 %	60 %
Online bullying from people they know	61 %	57 %
Viewing sexual content	61 %	63 %
Being affected by exposure to fake news, misinformation or disinformation	60 %	54 %
Peer pressure to do things online that they wouldn't normally do	60 %	54 %
Viewing content promoting self-harm or suicide	60 %	52 %
Exposure to hate speech, e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance	60 %	55 %
Suffering mental health issues as a result of what they see or do online	58 %	59 %
Having a poor body image or low self-esteem as a result of what they've seen online	58 %	54 %
Suffering damage to their current or future reputation as a result of what they do online now	57 %	51 %
Viewing content which promotes dangerous eating habits (e.g. pro anorexia and bulimia content)	56 %	48 %
Suffering fraud / identity theft	55 %	45 %
Sharing inappropriate or sexual images of themselves or others	54 %	51 %
Proactively viewing content from and communicating with radical / extremist groups	54 %	43 %
Spending money in games/apps	51 %	47 %
Gambling on websites or in games/apps	48 %	39 %

Base: Total sample parents of children aged 4-16 (n=2010); 'We have a good balance of using digital devices in our home' – Agree (n=1231), Disagree (n=318)

Case studies

As part of the development of the Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index survey, Revealing Reality carried out 10 qualitative in-home interviews with families across the UK. Here we hear from two of them.

The Abbot's are a big family where the parents have different strategies to manage and balance digital usage amongst children varying in age from 5 to 15. Their story shows the differing role of screentime rules, monitoring and conversation and how staying in control gets harder as children grow and develop.



The Abbot Family

Kaley is 34 and works full-time as an assistant general manager in a restaurant. She lives with her partner, Dan, who is 40 and works part-time as a ward controller at a hospital. They live in Birmingham with their six children: Amani (15), Ada (14), Aaron (12), Nera (10), Naomi (6) and Noah (5).

Kaley's working days rotate, but she makes sure that she can get at least one day off at the weekend, so the whole family can spend time together. Kaley described how the children are often asleep by the time she gets back from work.

Dan and Kaley try to keep a structured routine for their children, particularly the younger ones. On weekdays after they've had dinner, they're allowed to have one hour of device time from 7.30 to 8.30pm. During the holidays they are allowed to have one extra hour of device time each day, after lunch.

Dan and Kaley give the two eldest girls more freedom to spend their free time as they wish, a lot of which they spend on their devices, particularly their phones.

The children have a rich set of hobbies and interests. Aaron and Nera are particularly sporty. The younger children, particularly Nera, enjoy art.

Role of digital

The older two girls spend most of their time on their phones. Kaley described how Amani spends most of her time on FaceTime, whilst Ada spends lots of her time scrolling on TikTok, and sometimes plays on the children's PS4.

Aaron's device time is mainly spent on the children's PS4 and on his phone. His favourite things to play are Roblox on his phone and FIFA and Minecraft on the PS4.

Nera also spends most of her device time on her phone and PS4. She enjoys playing Minecraft and watching anime on apps such as Netflix and Funimation.

Naomi and Noah each have their own kids tablet where they do things such as watch YouTube and play games such as Talking Tom Gold Run.

Dan and Kaley have their own smart phones and Dan has his own PS4, but comparatively the couple don't spend lots of time on digital devices. Dan will sometime play with the children on their PS4 and they tend to have a family games session once a week at the weekend playing games such as Minecraft. However, Kaley said that digital was 'not important at all' in engaging with her children and described how she would generally prefer to spend time with them via non-digital activities.

"I'll prefer to sit down and play a board game, or going on holiday – doing things together like outside of online". (Kaley)

Parent control of children's digital usage

Dan and Kaley strictly control the time that the younger children spend on their devices. 'Device time' is seen as a luxury which can be removed if the children don't behave.

The couple have less restrictions on the content and interaction that their children have online. Kaley has discussions with her children about talking to strangers, but generally doesn't have too many concerns about their online safety. She described how the family are open with each other and that if she had any concerns, she could ask her children to give her their phone and they will. She is aware that Aaron has spoken with strangers when on his PS4, but is confident that these are young boys as she hears them talking about having to leave for school.

Benefits and challenges

Tech generally seemed to have a positive impact for the Abbot family, particularly for the younger four children.

Aaron was able to use tech to support his physical wellbeing and love of football. At the end of football

lessons, his teacher would give the class a move or trick to practice for the rest of the week. Aaron looks these moves up on YouTube to help learn and practice them.

Tech was also used in the family as a means of social connection. Amani spends a lot of her time online talking to her friends on FaceTime. Nera described how her and her friends spend a lot of their time online engaging with anime content – the next day at school they enjoy talking about the shows that they've watched and making up anime-based games.

Whilst the family recognised that digital was able to support their physical, social and creative development, Kaley made sure that the family wasn't reliant on tech for these things. She described how she'll often look for non-digital resources for the children, for example physical books and handwriting guides to improve their reading and writing.

Use of digital seemed to be more challenging, particularly in the case of 15-year-old Amani. Kaley believes that digital has had a negative impact on Amani's self-esteem and body confidence. She described how Amani seems to be trying to cut out certain foodstuffs, which she worries is a result of social media.

"Amani's gotten to that age where she is a bit more conscious about how she looks. We've got a little gym downstairs so she's started saying "Can you show me how to do this?" She's working out a little bit more. Some days she'll say "Oh I'm not going to eat today..." with social media it can be a bit of a slippery slope... and she watches a lot of anime where they're all very skinny." (Kaley)

Case studies

Technology is firmly embedded within the Jones family, but they also demonstrate the ability to consciously disconnect. The parents have learnt the importance of staying engaged and advocating a balance of on and offline activities from the experiences of an older child where they were less aware of the impacts of extensive screen time.



The Jones Family

Emma is 11 and lives with her parents in a suburb of Cardiff. Her mum Joselyn is 40 and works part-time as a retail manager and her dad, Liam works as a customer service manager at a company which makes parts for aircrafts.

Joselyn has another daughter living nearby who is 21 years old from a previous relationship.

Joselyn works shifts which means that she doesn't have a set routine each week, but she finds that this works well for her as she can adapt her schedule to when Emma is in school.

Emma is a very active child and often has after school clubs that she attends such as football or gymnastics and also regularly sees her friends. When she isn't out she will be in her room watching a series on Netflix or teaching herself new gymnastics moves from YouTube.

On the weekends they often do something together as a family. They are also very interested in the latest digital devices. Throughout their house they have multiple devices, including an Alexa in each room which they use for music, to control the lighting and also to be able to 'phone' another room in the house.

Role of digital

Emma has an iPhone, an Apple watch, an iPad, a Mac desktop computer and a TV in her room.

When she isn't doing an activity with her parents or her friends she will be using a device.

She uses her phone to stay in contact with her friends, this is primarily done through video calls or group messages on WhatsApp.

When Emma goes outside to play with her friends Joselyn makes sure that she is wearing her Apple watch. This means that she is able to send her reminders when she needs to come home without Emma needing to carry a phone with her.

"I'd always prefer to do something with my friends than be on tech, but without it I'd be bored." (Emma)

Technology plays a big role in the Jones household as updating it and getting new devices is one of Liam's hobbies.

Joselyn uses her phone for a wide variety of things, in particular she uses it as an administrative tool to organise their family calendars.

"My phone I pretty much use for everything, so I use it quite a lot, like for emails, Facebook, online banking, even organising my shifts for work." (Joselyn)

Parent control of children's digital usage

Liam and Joselyn keep a close eye on what Emma does when it comes to her digital devices. They have parental controls set on her phone which mean that she can't search for certain things, including adult content. Her dad will also regularly check her phone to see that she is only messaging people who she knows.

Joselyn explained that with her older daughter she found it hard to control her screen time when she was a teenager and therefore, they are stricter with Emma and also try to ensure that they balance online activities with offline ones such as doing activities together as a family.

"She's fine if I say its time to get off now, like she's happy to do other things." (Joselyn)

Benefits and challenges

The Jones family value digital devices for entertainment and for Joselyn they are a key way to organise the family and stay in contact. For Emma while she does like to spend time on her devices, she still prefers to do activities in person or see her friends. Digital devices are a way for her to entertain herself when she doesn't have something else to do.

"For general entertainment tech is great, it also helped us stay in contact with people during the lockdown." (Emma)

Joselyn is aware that at the moment Emma is happy to do activities that are not on digital devices, however she thinks this is likely to change as she gets older. In a few years she thinks she will have less oversight in relation to Emma's technology usage, in particular when it comes to social media.

However, evidence from other families interviewed indicates the importance of family alignment and trust around digital use, without which balance can become lost. A few of the children's quotes, highlighted here, help to demonstrate this.

The Anwari Family

Laila (13) lives with her parents and three siblings in Rochdale

"Sometimes it impacts my sleep, I'll be calling them [friends] off my phone and then I forget what time it is and end up going to sleep at like 3am."

"I used to go play on the trampoline or go out with my family to parks and stuff and now I sort of use my phone more."

The Evan Family

Savannah (13) lives between her dad's and mum's houses in South East England and has a younger sister who is 10 as well as some step siblings at her mum's house.

"No I wouldn't go to my parents if I was worried about something online, I'd go to my friends or my sister... they don't really understand what we're doing online."

"There are no rules really, he says there are but if we ask we can have our phones whenever we want really. I usually watch Netflix on my phone for a couple of hours before I go to sleep."

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