

The impact of technology on children's digital wellbeing (October 2022)

Findings in the 2022 Index Report

In our [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index Report 2022](#), we assessed the impact of digital technology on the wellbeing of children and young people. Our research revealed interesting aspects of digital participation in the modern UK home.

We learned that as children get older and spend more time with digital technology, they experience more of the positives as well as the negatives. The report also demonstrated the potential wellbeing outcomes of excessive social media usage and gaming. Additionally, and fundamentally, it reinforced the point that vulnerable children experience greater impact from participation in the digital space.

Ahead of the launch of the 2023 Index, we conducted additional research with parents (of children aged 4-16) and children (aged 9-16) on subjects that impact children's digital lives, including a focus on wellbeing. Here we examine how this further builds the picture of children's wellbeing in a digital world.

Key findings in our additional research

1. **Advocacy amongst parents of the positive impact of digital technology on children's wellbeing is linked to their confidence in online safety.** Over the past two years, we have seen more positivity towards children's usage of the internet, particularly from fathers. Positivity grows amongst dads and mums when they have a greater comprehension about how to keep their children safe online.
2. **Parents perceive being online to have greater negative impact on their children's emotions than their children themselves do.** Children feel more positive about being online compared to their parents, who expectantly have greater concerns about possible dangers. This was particularly true for parents of boys, who show greater concerns but also recognise the benefits more so compared to parents of girls.
3. **Vulnerable children enjoy as many positives from being online, but have more upsetting experiences online.** Those classed with a 'vulnerability' were more likely to experience more of the negative aspects of being online compared to those without vulnerabilities. When speaking with parents of

vulnerable children, those most affected were under 10s, and late teens (14-16).

1. Positivity towards wellbeing impacts is linked to parental confidence in online safety

When asked about the overall impact of digital technology on their children's wellbeing, parents were mostly supportive. When speaking directly to parents, we can see that positivity has grown over time.

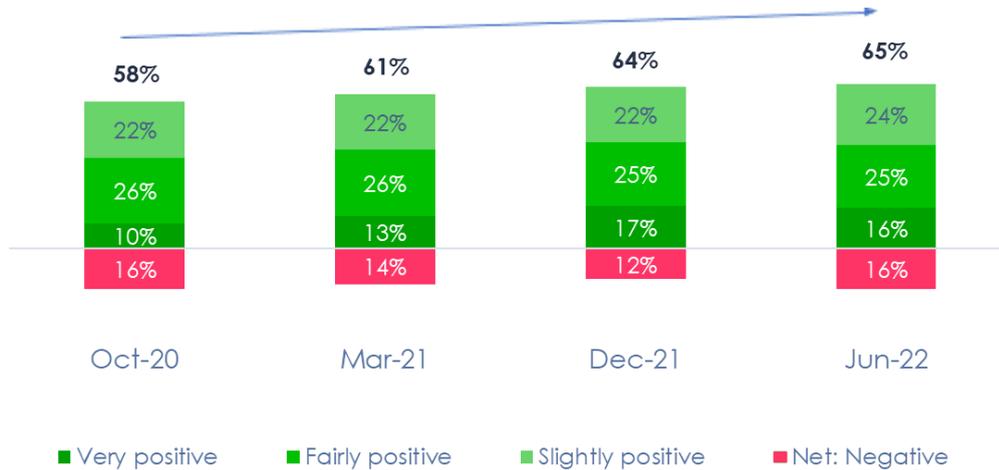


Table 1. Taking all things into consideration, do you think [child's name]'s experience and use of technology and the internet has positive or negative impact on their overall wellbeing? c. N-2,000 parents per wave.

Parents of younger children (4-8 years old) were less positive about digital technology (59% net positivity) than parents of older children (62%, 15-16 years old). This supports the idea that the benefits of being online increase as children get older as referenced in our Digital Wellbeing Index 2022 report.

Fathers (67%) were significantly more positive than **mothers** (54%) about the impact of digital technology usage amongst their children. This may link to dads feeling more confident in knowing how to keep their children safe online. For instance, 80% of fathers felt confident about how to do this vs. 74% of mothers. When we look at those 'confident' mums and dads, both were significantly more positive towards internet usage overall. The gap between them was also smaller – 84% of dads feel positive about the internet's impact on their children's wellbeing vs. 81% of mums.

We can conclude that with an increased understanding and confidence of how to keep their children safe online, parents acknowledge and appreciate the benefits of digital technology for their children more so than parents lacking that confidence. Increasing the capabilities of parents to keep their children safe online may support parents in understanding (and potentially children in accessing) the more wellbeing-enhancing aspects of the digital world.

2. Parents perceive that being online has greater negative emotional impacts for children than children themselves

We asked parents to reflect on what being online does to children's wellbeing and asked children the same about their own wellbeing. There was an interesting split in the interpretation about being online. As expected, parents were more likely to show concern about their children's usage of the internet compared to children themselves. The starkest difference was around 'feeling sad' – a complex emotion that around a third of parents (31%) link to their children because of being online, whereas less than one in five children (18%) share this view.

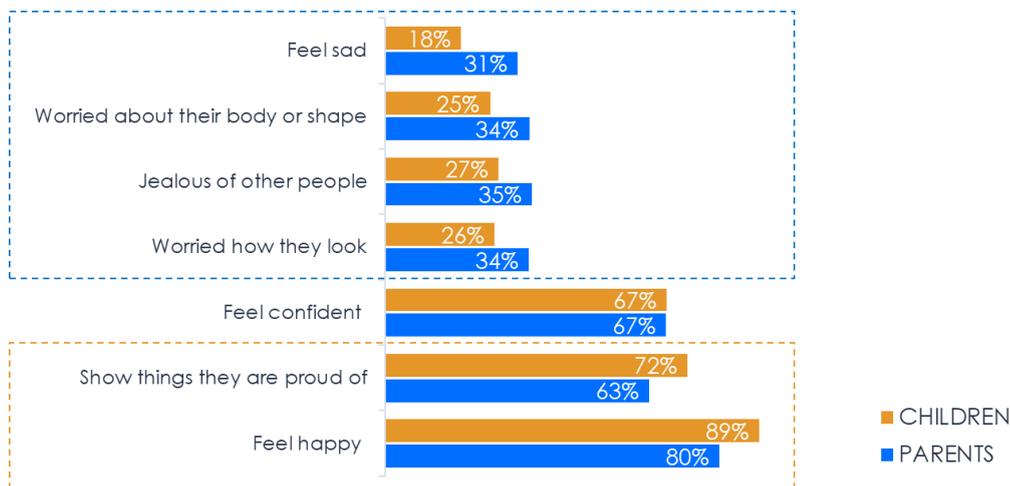


Table 2 Thinking about how being online and access to digital technologies impacts your child/children's/your own wellbeing, when your child/children goes online, does it do any of these things? Taken from June-22 wave; Parents N-2,001 ('Yes, definitely', 'Yes, mostly' excluding 'a mix' responses to make comparable with Children responses), Children N-1,000 ('Yes, definitely', 'Yes, mostly')

The positive impact of the internet comes through more than negative impacts, for parents and even more so for children. 'Feeling happy' was the most selected option for both parents (80%) and children (89%), with 'showing things they are proud of' also widely agreed with (63% parents, 72% children).

As discussed in the previous point on parental confidence, those parents with greater confidence in staying safe online also have greater positive response to the internet as well, 84% of parents with confidence on staying safe online acknowledge the internet makes their children 'feel happy' compared to 72% of parents who lack confidence. However, this is also true of the more negative traits, for example, 38% of

confident parents say the internet makes their children 'feel sad', compared to just 18% of unconfident parents.

Additionally, parents of boys were more likely to identify the positive impact of the internet – feeling happy, proud, confident – when compared to parents of girls. Particularly late teen boys (15-16) who were significantly more positive that the internet made their sons more confident (48%, vs. 42% overall).

	Total - all parents	Boy, 11 and under	Boy, 12-14	Boy, 15-16	Girl, 11 and under	Girl, 12-14	Girl, 15-16
'Definitely / Mostly'							
Makes your child/children feel happy	57 %	59%	59%	60%	54%	54%	57%
Let's your child/children show people things they are proud of	44 %	48%	47%	45%	41%	44%	42%
Makes your child/children feel confident	42 %	46%	46%	48%	39%	39%	43%
Makes your child/children feel worried about their body shape or size	27 %	30%	35%	29%	23%	34%	28%
Makes your child/children jealous of other people	27 %	30%	37%	30%	23%	32%	25%
Makes your child/children feel worried about how they look	27 %	30%	35%	31%	23%	33%	25%
Makes your child/children feel sad	25 %	28%	35%	26%	21%	31%	21%

Table 3. Thinking about how being online and access to digital technologies impacts your child/children's wellbeing, when your child/children goes online, does it do any of these things? Taken from June-22 wave; Total - all parents N-2,000. Boy, 11 and under N-771, Boy, 12-14 N-340, Boy, 15-16 N-308, Girl, 11 and under N-627, Girl, 12-14 N-297, Girl, 15-16 N-286. **Bold** indicates significant difference against the Total score.

However, this positivity was counteracted by parents of boys also being more negative about the impact of the internet. Parents of 12–14 year old boys in particular – scoring higher across all the negative issues (body shape, jealousy, worried about looks, feeling sad). This collaborates with the lower levels of confidence in staying online for this group, just 35% of 12-14 year old boys feel very or totally confident in staying safe online, compared to 39% for girls aged 12-14 year old, and 48% for 15-16 year old boys.

Parents of girls aged 12-14 had similar concerns to parents of boys of the same age. Parents of younger girls (<11) were generally less critical about the role of the

internet on their children scoring lower on the negative impacts of jealousy (23%, 27% total) and feeling sad (21% vs. 25%).

When asking children the same set of questions on the impact of the internet on their wellbeing, the difference between genders was less obvious. The only significant differences between genders were seen in 'makes you feel confident' – 71% amongst boys, 64% for girls --and in 'makes you feel worried about how you look' – this time lower for boys (22%) compared to girls (31%). Similarly, when split by age, the only significant differences were in impacts more associated with older teens. These included 'worried about how you look' (24% for under 13s and 31% for 14–16-year-olds) and in 'worried about body shape or size' (22% under 13s, 30% 14-16).

3. Vulnerable children continue to be impacted more significantly

When looking at digital wellbeing of children more broadly, we can see a familiar pattern¹ of those children with a 'vulnerability' experiencing more of the negative aspects of being online. This results in some of the starkest differences seen between segments in the dataset.

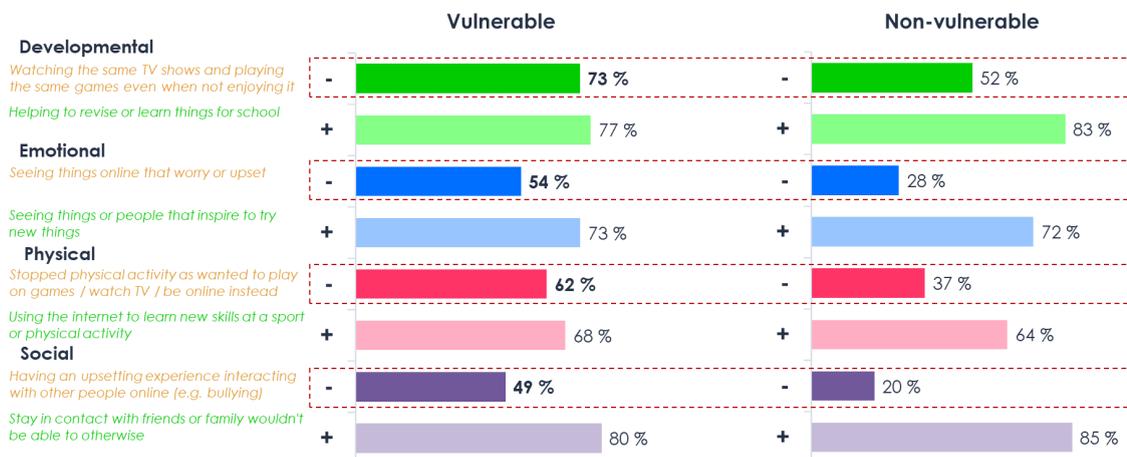


Table 4. Digital Wellbeing index measures asked in June-22 children's tracker. **Bold** figures show the significantly higher score compared to the total. Vulnerable N-202, Non-vulnerable N-805. Full descriptions for each dimension in the Appendix.

When assessing the **social** aspect of children's wellbeing, we used the statement 'having upsetting experiences interacting with other people online (e.g., bullying)'. We can see that nearly half of children (49%) with a vulnerability experienced this ('all the time', 'quite a lot') compared to just one in five of children without any 'vulnerabilities'. Similarly large differences were seen between vulnerable and non-vulnerable in unenjoyable repetitive digital behaviours (73% to 52%; Developmental) and seeing upsetting things online (54% to 28%; Emotional).

However, the positive scores across the digital wellbeing areas were not significantly lower for those classed as vulnerable, and in some cases higher, such as '[the internet] helps me to revise or learn things for school' in **developmental**, where 83% of 'vulnerable' children agreed vs. 77% of non-vulnerable. Again, this shows that this group of children also had similar levels of positive experiences as their non-vulnerable peers.

When we looked at parent scores of vulnerable and non-vulnerable children, the results were even more noteworthy. Parents of vulnerable children scored significantly higher for all measures, both positive and negative ones, compared to

¹ In the [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World report](#), we reported that vulnerable children experience more negative impacts of digital technology on wellbeing than their less vulnerable peers.

parents of non-vulnerable. When looking at the breakdown of the ages of the vulnerable children, we can see interesting differences.

Parents of vulnerable children			
	Aged 4-10	Aged 11-13	Aged 14-16
Developmental			
Watching the same TV shows and playing the same games even when not enjoying it	78 %	79 %	80 %
Helping to revise or learn things for school	58 %	55 %	63 %
Emotional			
Seeing things online that worry or upset	60 %	59 %	58 %
Seeing things or people that inspire to try new things	73 %	70 %	75 %
Physical			
Stopped physical activity as wanted to play on games / watch TV / be online instead	69 %	70 %	73 %
Using the internet to learn new skills at a sport or physical activity	59 %	53 %	58 %
Social			
Having an upsetting experience interacting with other people online (e.g. bullying)	43 %	34 %	39 %
Stay in contact with friends or family wouldn't be able to otherwise	59 %	58 %	64 %

Table 5. Digital Wellbeing index measures asked in June-22 parent's tracker. **Bold** figures show the significantly higher scores against the total. Parents of vulnerable children N-797; 4-10 n-394, 11-13 n-208, 14-16 n-195.

Generally, parents of vulnerable children aged 11-13 have the lowest scores amongst the age ranges. Although still significantly higher than non-vulnerable children, parents of this age group were seeing less of the positives and negatives of the internet for the children compared to parents of older and younger vulnerable children.

The other age groups have more varied responses, this may be explained by some measures being more age specific than others. 'Stopped physical activity as wanted to play on games / watch TV may be higher for those aged 14-16 (73%) compared to under 10s (69%) as media and internet consumption levels differ significantly between these age groups. Whereas being bullied online may be a greater concern for parents of younger children (43%) compared to older children (39%) where maturity levels and greater support networks exist.

Vulnerable children and their parents recognise that their status makes them more at risk of some of the negative aspects of being online. Due to the varied responses by parents of vulnerable children, tailored age-specific guidance is needed for this group to ensure that vulnerable children get the best out of digital and have the correct support in place when bad experiences occur.

We will continue to measure and track these important factors that help us to better understand the impact of digital on children's wellbeing. Our second annual report on Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World will be released in January 2023.

Appendix

Methodologies from research sources

- Parent tracker: N-2,000 UK parents of children aged 4-16 years old
- Children tracker – N-1,000 9–16-year-olds representative of the UK
- Both surveys are conducted twice per year

Digital wellbeing full descriptions

Digital wellbeing dimension	Developmental		Emotional	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Parent – description	Technology and being online has been important for my child being able to engage with schoolwork and educational opportunities	My child spends a lot of time re-watching the same TV shows or re-playing the same games that they've seen or played before over and over again	Being online has enabled my child to find positive role models which inspire them to try new things and work towards new goals	My child sees things online that worry or upset them
Children – description	Helping me revise/learn things for school	Kept playing the same games or watching the same TV shows/films even when I'm not enjoying it	See things or people that inspire me to try new things	Seen things online that worry or upset me
Digital wellbeing dimension	Social		Physical	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Parent – description	The internet and digital devices has helped my child to stay in contact with people they otherwise wouldn't have been able to do	My child has had negative experiences interacting with other people online	Technology and being online has been important for my child to enable them to learn skills or pick up tips for improving a sport or exercise activity they do	My child misses out on opportunities to do activities because they're too busy on their phone, computer or games console
Children – description	Stay in contact with friends or family I wouldn't be able to otherwise (e.g., friends who live far away)	Had an upsetting experience interacting with other people online (e.g. bullying)	Used the internet to learn new skills at a sport or physical activity	Stopped playing a sport or doing exercise because I wanted to play video games, watch TV or be on social media instead

