Digital wellbeing on a budget:

exploring the online lives of children receiving free school meals

Foreword

Carolyn Bunting and Rachel Huggins,
Co-CEOs, Internet Matters

It has been four years since Internet Matters published 'Vulnerable Children in a Digital World'. Its central finding was that children who are more vulnerable offline are more vulnerable online too, and in particular need of support.

Since then, we have made it our mission to champion the needs of vulnerable children and their families, across the whole spectrum of our work – through our research, our online safety resources and our advocacy. Notably, it has been our pleasure to chair the Vulnerable Users Working Group (part of the UK Council for Internet Safety), which brings together a coalition of organisations who are equally committed to improving vulnerable people's experiences online.

And it has been so encouraging to see progress being made. Both the Government and Ofcom have put forward media literacy strategies with a strong emphasis on providing tailored support to vulnerable and hard-to-reach users.

But the job is not complete. Our data continues to show disparities in how different groups of children experience online technology, including groups we have not previously considered.

This report explores one of these: children receiving free school meals. It highlights that in line with the experiences of other vulnerable children, children receiving free school meals are more likely to experience harm online than their peers. As a result, their digital wellbeing is worse.

But it is not all doom and gloom. Although it is deeply concerning that children receiving free school

meals experience more of the negative impacts of being online, the data also shows that their parents are highly engaged on the issues, and looking for help and support.

A natural avenue for parents to receive this help is from the school. Parents are in regular contact with the school, schools already teach children about online safety, and they know who the children receiving free school meals are. There is a huge opportunity for schools to play a pivotal role in this space – but they cannot do so without clear direction, resources and support.

Furthermore, children's online safety is not the responsibility of just one actor. It is a shared responsibility. The forthcoming Online Safety Bill will put a much bigger emphasis on the role of industry in promoting positive experiences for children online – and rightly so.

We are delighted that Tesco Mobile have sponsored this important research. They share our commitment to helping families ensure that their children have safe and age-appropriate experiences online, including those at the acute end of financial disadvantage, and we look forward to our continued work together.

Rachel Swift,
Chief Customer Officer at Tesco Mobile

At Tesco Mobile, we know the importance of staying connected for all communities, and we know that technology creates opportunities to help build those connections. For children, technology also unlocks vital opportunities to learn, play, and explore their creativity.

Unfortunately, it's not all good news. This report illuminates a worrying reality – a pressing reminder that not all children share the same digital experiences. For children that receive free school meals, the digital landscape can be a realm of both promise and peril.

The report highlights that this demographic is more likely to encounter some of the challenges that can result from being online, with negative impacts upon their digital wellbeing. Despite these challenges, there are some positives, with the majority of children receiving free school meals still reporting that being online makes them happy.

At Tesco Mobile, our purpose of caring for human connection guides our decisions and actions. We are dedicated to supporting parents and carers in keeping children in all demographics safe online, and helping families make informed decisions about their mobile devices so they can enjoy the benefits of connectivity safely and smartly.

We welcome you to read this report and consider how we can help bridge this divide and enable safe, insightful, and inspiring digital journeys for all children.

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Executive summary

This report explores how children and families receiving free school meals experience the online world.

Previous research by Internet Matters has shown that children who are vulnerable offline are more vulnerable online too. This includes children with care experience, those with special educational needs and disabilities, young carers, and children with mental health problems.[1]

But our research has not previously considered the needs of families facing financial disadvantage, as an additional vulnerable group. Against a backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis, for which there is no end in sight, this report looks at the experiences of children receiving free school meals, comparing them to children not receiving free school meals. It is based on data drawn from our annual digital wellbeing survey, along with our wider data from children and parents.
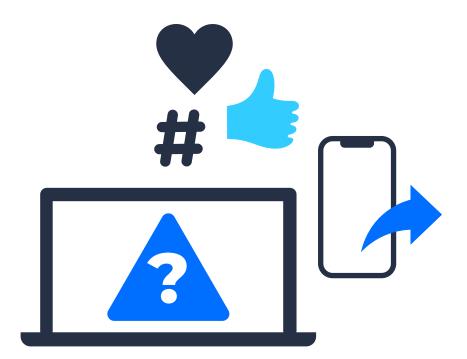
The key findings are:

- **Families receiving free school meals face greater difficulty in accessing digital devices as a result of financial pressure.**

  - Nearly one-in-five (19%) parents in these families say that they cannot afford to buy or replace all of the digital devices they need. A similar proportion (18%) say that they have been donated devices for their children.

  - Nevertheless, families receiving free school meals clearly see digital connectivity as valuable, with over a third (34%) cutting down on other expenses to afford their online subscriptions and accounts.

- **There are not significant differences in time spent online, but there are differences in what children are doing online.**

  - Children receiving free school meals are more likely to be participating in certain high-risk activities. For example, 17% of children receiving free school meals engage in live-streaming, compared to 12% of their peers.

  - They also use social media more actively: 21% say they are more likely to post and comment a lot compared with 11% of children who do not receive free school meals.

- **Children who receive free school meals report greater exposure to online harms and have worse digital wellbeing than their peers.**

  - Nearly three-quarters (74%) report that they have experienced at least one online harm, compared to six-in-10 of those not receiving free school meals.

  - 14% of children receiving free school meals say that being online makes them sad compared to just 4% of other children. 17% say that it makes them worried about their appearance, compared to 8% of other children. Despite that, nearly six-in-10(59%) of children receiving free school meals say being online makes them feel happy.

- **Generally speaking, families receiving free school meals talk regularly about online safety. But they are less likely to than other families to have a conversation when a child has had a negative experience online.**

  - Regardless of free school meals status, the most common action taken by parents after their child experiences harm online is to have a conversation about itBut fewer parents of children receiving free school meals do this – 47%, compared to 57% of parents of children not receiving free school meals.

  - In contrast, parents of children receiving free school meals are more likely than others to respond by setting up parental controls – 36% in free school meals families compared to 27% in others.

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1. For example see https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Internet-Matters-Refuge-And-Risk-Report.pdf and https://www.internetmatters.org/about-us/vulnerable-children-in-a-digital-world-report/

- **Parents of children receiving free school meals are more likely to look for greater help in supporting their child online.**

    – More than six-in-ten parents (61%) say that they seek out information about how to talk to their child about online safety before starting a conversation with them on it, compared to less than half (44%) of parents of children not receiving free school meals.

    – When seeking help and advice, parents of children receiving free school meals are more likely to go to the child's school (52% vs. 42%), friend networks (30% vs. 23%) and other parents (30% vs 21%) compared to those not receiving free school meals.

The report ends with **conclusions and recommendations for what needs to happen to improve the online lives of children receiving free school meals,** so that they can better enjoy the benefits of being online while avoiding the risks.

Introduction

Digital technology offers children an extraordinary array of opportunities. It can enable children to learn, to stay in touch with friends and family – even when they are far from home – as well as to simply play, have fun and unwind. But as in all areas of life, there are risks, and as a result children can come to harm.

Introducing the Digital Wellbeing Index

In 2021 Internet Matters established our Digital Wellbeing Index – a pioneering measure of both the positive and negative effects of digital technology on children's lives. The Index is grounded in a four-dimensional model, developed with the University of Leicester, which breaks down digital wellbeing into four components: developmental, emotional, physical and social.[2] In 2021 and 2022 we worked with research agency Revealing Reality to measure children's digital wellbeing through the Index. This was based on a nationally representative survey with children and their parents, and was combined with qualitative research. Overall, we find that children's online lives are mixed – although the picture worsened from 2021 to 2022, with children experiencing fewer of the positive impacts of digital technology.[3]

But the Index offers a rich tapestry of findings, and one of its key advantages is shedding light on the experiences of different groups of children. The two previous annual reports looked at children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those with mental health problems, showing that these children experience more of the negative impacts of digital technology than their peers.

Deep dive: children receiving free school meals

The purpose of this deep-dive report is to use our digital wellbeing dataset (and wider data from parents and children) to explore another key group: children receiving free school meals. Free school meals status is a known marker of disadvantage, and closely correlated to low income. Previous evidence has suggested that children receiving free school meals are more likely to see harmful content online.[4] At a time when families are facing ever growing financial pressure, it is more important than ever to understand the online experiences of families on the acute end of financial disadvantage.

This research set out to understand:

- How do children receiving free school meals access digital technology, and what behaviour do they exhibit?

- What benefits and harms do they experience, and what is the net impact on their digital wellbeing?

- How do parents of children with free school meals approach online safety and wellbeing, and how are they supported to do so?

This report sets out our findings. It finishes with conclusions and recommendations for what needs to happen to enable children receiving free school meals to flourish online.

Methodological note

The data in this note is based on nationally representative, online surveys with both parents and children as part of our Digital Wellbeing and Tracker projects.

The analysis considers those families who self-reported as recipients of free school meals and compares them to those families who reported not receiving free school meals. This is distinct from asking about eligibility. The sample was cut to only include parents of 8-16-year-olds to remove under-8s, who have universal access to free school meals in most areas of the UK (see Appendix 1).

Fuller details of our methodology and the characteristics of the sample can be found in the Methodology section.

2.   https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Internet-Matters-Wellbeing-In-A-Digital-World-1.pdf
3.   https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/resource/childrens-wellbeing-in-a-digital-world-index-report-2022/; https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/childrens-wellbeing-in-a-digital-world-index-report-2023/
4.   https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/digital-childhoods-a-survey-of-children-and-parents/

Key findings

Access, usage, and behaviour on digital devices

Families receiving free school meals face greater difficulty in accessing digital devices as a result of financial pressure

In families where children receive free school meals, access to digital devices and services is more challenging, with parents in these families more likely to state that they are not able to afford to buy or replace all the digital devices they need and that they have been given digital devices by othe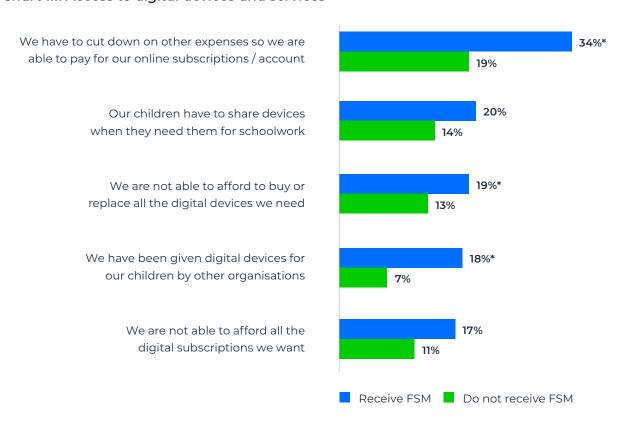r organisations (chart 1.1). Access to the digital world is clearly considered important though, as one in three families where the child receives free school meals say they have cut down on other expenses to pay for online subscriptions.

Chart 1.1: Access to digital devices and services

We have to cut down on other expenses so we are able to pay for our online subscriptions / account	34%* / 19%
Our children have to share devices when they need them for schoolwork	20% / 14%
We are not able to afford to buy or replace all the digital devices we need	19%* / 13%
We have been given digital devices for our children by other organisations	18%* / 7%
We are not able to afford all the digital subscriptions we want	17% / 11%

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents), Wave 2 – Q19. Do any of the following statements reflect your own and your family's experience?
Base: Total sample of parents of children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=291), Do not receive FSM (n=828)
* Significantly higher than the other group

All children we surveyed had used at least one digital device in the past month, including children on free school meals. However, children who receive free school meals are less likely to have used certain types of digital devices in the last month than their peers, including mobile phones, PCs/laptops and smart speakers (chart 1.2). Furthermore, some of their usage may have occurred at school rather than in the home.

Chart 1.2: Usage of digital devices by children in the last month

Device	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
Mobile phone – with internet access and apps	79%	89%*
Games console (e.g. Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo Switch)	69%	66%
Smart TV – a TV that connects to the internet for streaming video	65%	70%
Tablet (e.g. iPad, Samsung Galaxy Tab)	59%	61%
PC/laptop (e.g. MacBook, Chromebook)	54%	66%*
Smart speaker (e.g. Google Home or Amazon Echo/Alexa)	41%	52%*
Virtual reality headset	16%	13%

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Children), Wave 17 – A2. In the last month which of the following things have you used? Please select all that apply. Total sample of children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=314), Do not receive FSM (n=705)

* Significantly higher than the other group

Note that the true proportion of children receiving free school meals accessing devices may be lower still than that estimated by this data due to the use of online surveys in the research, which skews towards families with greater access to digital technology.

Children receiving free school meals are more likely to participate in certain high risk activities

Despite the greater difficulties in accessing digital devices and services among children who receive free school meals, the average time they spend online is similar to that of their peers: around three and a half hours on weekdays and around four and a half hours on weekend days.

Furthermore, both groups engage in a similar range of activities online (between six and seven) and the most common activities carried out online are the same regardless of free school meal status: watching online videos and playing single-player games (table 2.1).

But despite these similarities, there are some important differences in the ways children spend their time.

- **Children receiving free school meals use social media more actively rather than passively.** They are much more likely to post and comment a lot on social media - 21% compared with 11% of children who do not receive free school meals. Just 18% say they really only browse/scroll through, compared with 27% of children who do not receive free school meals.

- **Children who receive free school meals are more likely to engage in certain high-risk activities.** In particular, 17% of children receiving free school meals engage in live-streaming, compared to 12% of their peers. 16% of children receiving free school meals use chatrooms and forums compared to 11% of other children. These activities can bring children into contact with strangers and therefore pose a higher risk.

- Although games are played by a similar proportion of children who do and do not receive free school meals, c**hildren who receive free school meals are more likely to spend more time each week gaming:** almost half (45%) of children who receive free school meals play single player video games for more than 2 hours a week, compared with 33% of children who do not receive free school meals (chart 2.2). The same proportion (45%) of children who receive free school meals play multi-player video games for more than 2 hours a week, compared with 38% of children who do not receive free school meals.

- Conversely, **children not receiving free school meals are more likely to use social media and messaging apps** including WhatsApp (70% to 57% on free school meals) and BeReal (8% to 4% on free school meals). More detail is available in Appendix 2.

These differences in activities are significant because they are likely to contribute to disparities in outcomes between the groups – as seen in the next section of the report.
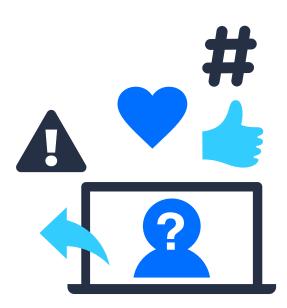
Table 2.1: Activities carried out by children aged 9-16 on digital devices

	Receive free school meals	Do not receive free school meals
Base: Children aged 9-16	*n=314*	*n=705*
Watch videos online on services such as YouTube and TikTok	73%	78%
Play games on your own (single-player)	67%	68%
Use messaging apps, e.g. Snapchat, WhatsApp or one-to-one video calling e.g. Zoom	57%	67%
Play games online against others (multi-player)	55%	54%
Watch on-demand TV programmes/catch-up TV services e.g. Netflix, iPlayer	54%	63%
Search and visit websites for school or education	49%	54%
Watch videos streamed live, e.g. YouTube Live, Facebook Live	48%	47%
Search and visit websites for personal reasons/ interests	41%	51%
Stream or download music, e.g. Apple Music, Spotify	39%	52%
Use social media services e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram	38%	45%
Upload or share videos you've made yourself e.g. onto YouTube and TikTok	29%	25%
View videos, or visit websites or apps to support wellbeing	25%	22%
Spend money online, e.g. buy products, game credits, paid-for apps	18%	21%
Broadcast videos streamed live, e.g. on YouTube Live, Facebook Live	17%	12%
Use chatrooms and forums	16%	11%
Play or use software in the metaverse	11%	11%
Purchase, trade, or use cryptocurrencies or NFTs – digital-only currencies or assets	2%	1%
Average number of activities done online	**6.4**	**6.8**

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Children), Wave 17 – A4. What do you do on these digital devices? Please select all that apply.

Shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group.

Chart 2.2: Amount of time spent in a normal week by children aged 9-16

Playing single player video games

3.3   2.4

Playing multi player video games online

3.3   2.7

Average (hours per week)^

- More than 5 hours
- 2 to 5 hours
- 1 to 2 hours
- Less than an hour
- Don't do this

Playing single player video games — Receive FSM:
- 21%* More than 5 hours
- 24% 2 to 5 hours
- 24% 1 to 2 hours
- 20% Less than an hour
- 12% Don't do this

Playing single player video games — Do not receive FSM:
- 14%
- 19%
- 27%
- 24%
- 15%

Playing multi player video games online — Receive FSM:
- 20%
- 26%
- 21%
- 15%
- 18%

Playing multi player video games online — Do not receive FSM:
- 17%
- 21%
- 21%
- 17%
- 24%

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Children), Wave 2 – Q46. How much time do you spend doing this in a normal week?
Base: Total sample of children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=291), Do not receive FSM (n=828)
* Significantly higher than the other group
^ Average hours spent playing video games taking the midpoint of the time bandings

Experiences and wellbeing online

Children who receive free school meals report greater exposure to online harms

In line with the experiences of other vulnerable groups, children on free school meals report having a worse experience online than their peers – although they do also experience benefits.

The child perspective

Children receiving free school meals report benefits from being online. For example, nearly six in ten (59%) say that being online makes them feel happy – a significant proportion although slightly lower than their peers (but not significantly so). Furthermore, children receiving free school meals are more likely than their peers to say that being online makes them feel confident (chart 3.1).

However, on the whole children receiving free school meals experience more negative emotions than their peers as a result of being online. They are more likely to say that being online makes them sad (14% compared to 4% of children not receiving free school meals), worried about their appearance (18% compared to 8% of children not receiving free school meals), and jealous of other people (18% compared to 7% of children not receiving free school meals) (chart 3.1).

Chart 3.1: Feelings experienced by children aged 9-16 when online (includes responses Definitely and Mostly to how spending time online makes children feel)

	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
Make you feel happy	59%	63%
Make you feel confident	41%*	34%
Let you show people things you are proud of	41%	37%
Make you feel worried about how you look	18%*	8%
Make you jealous of other people	18%*	7%
Make you feel worried about your body shape or size	17%*	8%
Make you feel sad	14%*	4%

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Children), Wave 2 – Q50. When you spend time online, does it… (Definitely/Mostly)

Base: Total sample of children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=291), Do not receive FSM (n=828)

* Significantly higher than the other group

In addition to asking how being online makes children feel, our surveys also ask children if they have experienced anything online which has concerned or bothered them in the preceding few weeks, and if so, what. The data shows that three in ten (29%) children who receive free school meals state that something concerned or bothered them online in the past few weeks, compared with 22% of children who do not receive free school meals (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Issues concerning or bothering children online

	Receive free school meals	Do not receive free school meals
Base: Children aged 9-16 years old	n=314	n=705
Included a response to something that has concerned or bothered them online	29 %	22 %
Nothing has concerned or bothered me	71 %	78 %

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Children), Wave 17 – B2B. Please tell us about anything that has concerned or bothered you about being online in the past few weeks? This could be anything that you have read or seen online.

Shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group.

Free text responses from children who receive free school meals when asked if anything had concerned or bothered them online recently

"I have heard kids my age saying they are on tinder. I had to ask my mum about this" **(Girl, 10)**

"when strangers try to talk while playing online game, I don't like it, I don't talk to them" **(Boy, 10)**

"Some friends of mine made me search for Momo on the internet and when I saw it I got so scared that I failed to sleep that night and had to go to my parents' room for comfort" **(Girl, 9)**

"How easy it is for porn and horrible images can appear on my phone" **(Girl, 14)**

One in four (25%) children who receive free school meals say that they have more friends online than they do at school, compared with 19% of children who do not receive free school meals. This points to the role of digital technology in helping these children make connections, although raises significant concerns about who these 'friends' might be. This may be linked to the earlier finding that children receiving free school meals are more likely to live-stream and use chatrooms/forums than their peers, possibly bringing them into contact with strangers.

Chart 3.2: Statements from children aged 9-16 on online life relating to school – I have more friends online than I do at school

Legend: ■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Slightly disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know

Source: Internet Matters Tracker (Children 9-16), Wave 17 – X11. How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Base: Total sample of children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=314), Do not receive FSM (n=705)
* Significantly higher than the other group

The parent perspective

In line with what children tell us, parents of children who receive free school meals are consistently more likely to report that their child has been exposed to a wide range of online harms – 74% have experienced at least one online harm, compared to 60% of non-free school meal, with an average of experience of 2.8 different harms, compared with 1.8 for children who do not receive free school meals.

Table 3.3 illustrates the differences between the groups in terms of the specific harms they have experienced, according to parents. It shows that as well as experiencing more harms overall, children receiving free school meals are particularly vulnerable to specific harms – including some of the most serious. For example, parents of children on free school meals are more than twice as likely to say that their children have a poor body image or low self-esteem as a result of what they have seen online. They are more than three times as likely to say that their child has proactively viewed content from, or communicated with, radical or extremist groups.

Table 3.3: Exposure to online harms

	Receive free school meals	Do not receive free school meals
Base: Parents of children aged 8-16	n=269	n=701
NET: Online bullying, peer pressure and hate speech	**34 %**	**26 %**
Online bullying from people they know	18 %	12 %
Online trolling or abuse from strangers	9 %	6 %
Peer pressure to do things online that they wouldn't normally do	10 %	7 %
Exposure to hate speech, e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance	9 %	9 %
NET: Harm to mental and physical health	**32 %**	**19 %**
Having a poor body image or low self-esteem as a result of what they've seen online	16 %	7 %
Viewing content promoting self-harm or suicide	11 %	6 %
Viewing content which promotes dangerous eating habits (e.g. bulking up, unhealthy dieting, pro anorexia and bulimia content)	8 %	8 %
Suffering mental health issues as a result of what they see or do online	9 %	6 %
Suffering damage to their current or future reputation as a result of what they do online now	9 %	3 %
NET: Contact with strangers and exposure to sexual abuse/content	**27 %**	**17 %**
Contact with strangers e.g. online grooming	12 %	6 %
Viewing sexual content	11 %	11 %
Sexual abuse or harassment from other children online	7 %	4 %
Sharing inappropriate or sexual images of themselves or others	6 %	3 %
NET: Being scammed and giving away personal information	**22 %**	**13 %**
Giving away personal information online	13 %	7 %
Being scammed / defrauded / lied to / impersonated by a stranger / someone they don't know	6 %	5 %
Being scammed / defrauded / lied to / impersonated by another child or someone they know	11 %	4 %
NET: Spending money and gambling	**26 %**	**17 %**
Spending money in games/apps	21 %	15 %
Gambling on websites or in games/apps	8 %	3 %
Spending too much time online or on connected devices	**26 %**	**28 %**
NET: Violent content and extremism	**22 %**	**15 %**
Viewing violent content	14 %	13 %
Proactively viewing content from and communicating with radical / extremist groups	11 %	3 %
Being affected by exposure to fake news, misinformation or disinformation	**12 %**	**13 %**
None of these	**26 %**	**40 %**

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Parents), Wave 17 – B5. And which of these issues are you aware your child or children has had direct experience of online?

Shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group.

Related to greater exposure to online harms, parents of children who receive free school meals show a greater tendency to be concerned about online issues (table 3.4). In particular, parents of children who receive free school meals are nearly twice as likely to be concerned about gambling than other parents. This may be linked to the fact that children who receive free school meals spend more time playing games, where gambling-type behaviour can occur, and also the fact that these families are likely to be under greater financial pressure.

Table 3.4: Top parental concerns about issues relating to online harms (Somewhat concerned and Very concerned) between children receiving free school meals and those not. Ordered by top 10 differences between those receiving FSM and those not receiving FSM.

	Receive free school meals	Do not receive free school meals	Difference FSM to non-FSM % pts (+/-)
Base: Parents of children aged 8-16	*n=269*	*n=701*	
Gambling on websites or in games/apps	60 %	32 %	+28 %
Spending money in games/apps	63 %	40 %	+23 %
Proactively viewing content from and communicating with radical / extremist groups	62 %	39 %	+23 %
Online trolling or abuse from strangers	77 %	58 %	+19 %
Suffering mental health issues as a result of what they see or do online	74 %	56 %	+18 %
Sharing inappropriate or sexual images of themselves or others	64 %	46 %	+18 %
Exposure to hate speech, e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance	70 %	53 %	+17 %
Viewing content which promotes dangerous eating habits (e.g. bulking up, unhealthy dieting, pro anorexia and bulimia content)	66 %	49 %	+17 %
Giving away personal information online	75 %	58 %	+17%
Contact with strangers e.g. online grooming	75 %	60 %	+15%

Children receiving free school meals have worse digital wellbeing than their peers

Unsurprisingly, given the evidence around their exposure to harm online, digital wellbeing outcomes are more negative for children who receive free school meals. This is the case across all four domains which make up digital wellbeing according to our framework: physical, social, emotional and developmental.

Our Digital Wellbeing Index summary reports have shown that children who spend more time online can experience greater positive and negative effects on their digital wellbeing simply due to the level of exposure they are receiving. However, this report has shown that children who receive free school meals spend a similar amount of time online to those who do not, so the differences in digital wellbeing highlighted below cannot be explained by this. Instead, the drivers are at least in part related to what children are doing online, as well as the effectiveness of support they are receiving.
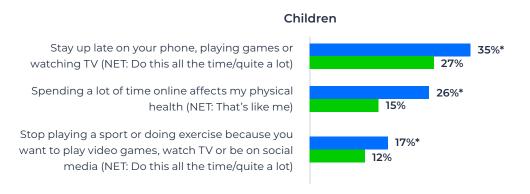
Extended versions of the data included in this section (concerning the negative digital wellbeing outcomes compared across the two groups) can be found in Appendix 3.

The physical domain

Children who receive free school meals are more likely to experience negative effects of being online on their physical wellbeing, such as poor engagement with sports and exercise, or impacts on sleep or physical health in general.

Playing online games is important to children who receive free school meals and is something with which they engage heavily. However, it is likely that this may be at the expense of physical activity and exercise, possibly playing games late into the evening. Both parents and children recognise that the child has stopped doing sport or exercise to be online and that spending a lot of time online is having an effect on the child's physical health and sleep (chart 4.1) – although note that parents are more likely to recognise this than children.

Chart 4.1: Negative factors affecting physical digital wellbeing

Children

Stay up late on your phone, playing games or watching TV (NET: Do this all the time/quite a lot)	35%* / 27%
Spending a lot of time online affects my physical health (NET: That's like me)	26%* / 15%
Stop playing a sport or doing exercise because you want to play video games, watch TV or be on social media (NET: Do this all the time/quite a lot)	17%* / 12%

Parents

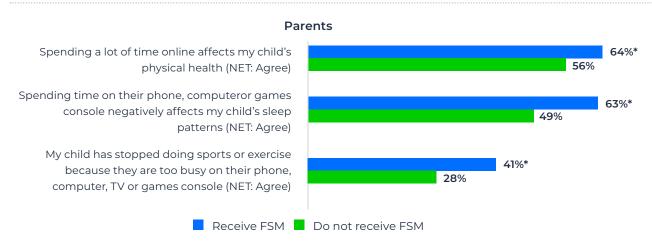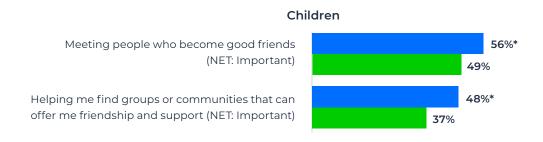|	
Spending a lot of time online affects my child's physical health (NET: Agree)	64%* / 56%
Spending time on their phone, computeror games console negatively affects my child's sleep patterns (NET: Agree)	63%* / 49%
My child has stopped doing sports or exercise because they are too busy on their phone, computer, TV or games console (NET: Agree)	41%* / 28%

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

The social domain

Children who receive free school meals are more likely to experience the negative effects of being online on their social wellbeing – but also the social benefits.

Being online is more likely to make children who receive FSM find friendship and feel part of a group (chart 4.2), but can also lead to negative social experiences (chart 4.3). They are more likely to turn down opportunities to meet with friends so that they can be online, potentially driven by having fewer opportunities to participate in real life social activities due to the cost-of-living crisis or household factors. But communicating with others online can lead to negative and upsetting interactions and also loneliness and a fear of missing out.

Chart 4.2: Positive factors affecting social digital wellbeing

Children

Meeting people who become good friends (NET: Important)	56%* / 49%
Helping me find groups or communities that can offer me friendship and support (NET: Important)	48%* / 37%

Parents

Digital devices/ being online has enabled my child to feel part of a group that they otherwise wouldn't have (NET: Agree)	70%* / 57%

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents/Children), Wave 2 – Q30, Q55.

Base: Total sample of (parents of) children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=291), Do not receive FSM (n=828).

* Significantly higher than the other group

Chart 4.3: Negative factors affecting social digital wellbeing

Children

If I miss out on things that are happening on social media among my friends I get upset (NET: That's like me)
- 29%*
- 22%

I feel upset or uncomfortable because I see people being mean or unpleasant to each other online (NET: All the time/quite a lot)
- 20%*
- 11%

I turn down opportunities to meet with friends so I can stay in on my phone, computer, or games console (NET: All the time/quite a lot)
- 19%*
- 9%

Spending time online makes me feel lonely (NET: That's like me)
- 19%*
- 8%*

I have upsetting experiences interacting with other people online (e.g. bullying) (NET: All the time/quite a lot)
- 13%*
- 5%*

Parents

My child gets upset or uncomfortable because s/he sees people being mean or unpleasant to each other online (NET: Agree)
- 47%*
- 35%

My child has had negative experiences interacting with other people online (NET: Agree)
- 37%*
- 27%

My child turns down opportunities to meet with friends so they can stay in on their phone, computer or games console (NET: Agree)
- 35%*
- 23%

Spending time online makes my child feel lonely (NET: Agree)
- 27%*
- 16%

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents/Children), Wave 2 – Q30, Q56, Q57

Base: Total sample of (parents of) children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=291), Do not receive FSM (n=828)

* Significantly higher than the other group

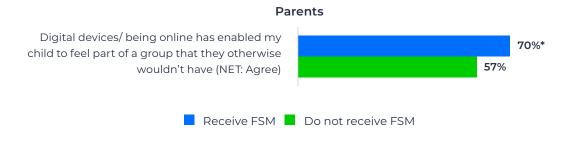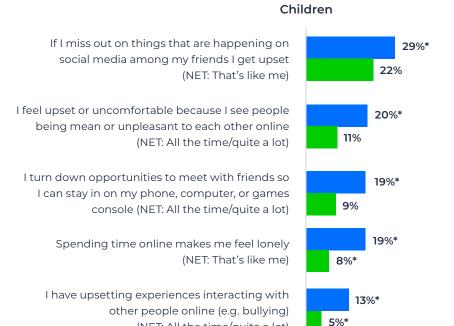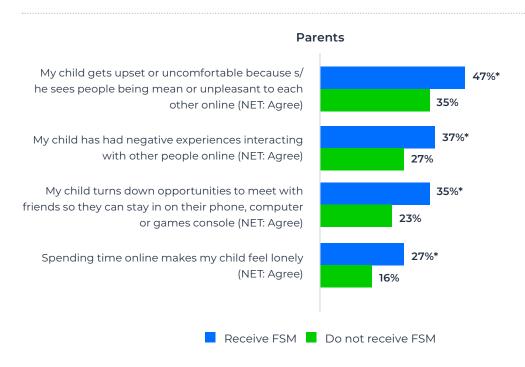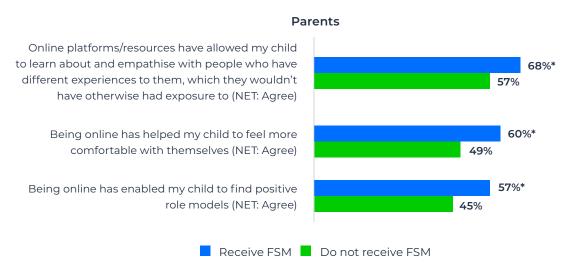### The emotional domain

Similarly to the social domain, children who receive free school meals are more likely to experience both positive and negative effects of being online on their **emotional** wellbeing.

Being online gives children who receive free school meals a greater opportunity to find positive role models, develop empathy with others and find somewhere that they are comfortable being themselves (chart 4.4). This fits with the earlier finding that children who receive free school meals are more likely to feel that they have more friends online than in school.

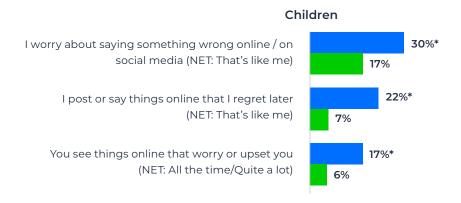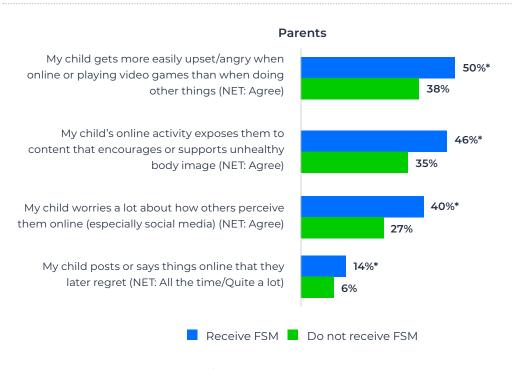*Chart 4.4: Positive factors affecting emotional digital wellbeing*

Children

Being online has helped me to feel more comfortable with being 'me' (NET: That's like me)	47%* / 37%

Parents

Online platforms/resources have allowed my child to learn about and empathise with people who have different experiences to them, which they wouldn't have otherwise had exposure to (NET: Agree)	68%* / 57%
Being online has helped my child to feel more comfortable with themselves (NET: Agree)	60%* / 49%
Being online has enabled my child to find positive role models (NET: Agree)	57%* / 45%

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents/Children), Wave 2 – Q33, Q58
Base: Total sample of (parents of) children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=291), Do not receive FSM (n=828)
* Significantly higher than the other group

However, there are also many negative factors which affect the emotional wellbeing of children who receive free school meals (chart 4.5). They are more likely to worry about how others perceive them, are more easily upset if they do not receive positive affirmation of content they post and may even post things which they later regret. Furthermore, they are more likely to be exposed to harmful content, such as that promoting unhealthy body image.

Chart 4.5: Negative factors affecting emotional digital wellbeing

Children

I worry about saying something wrong online / on social media (NET: That's like me)
- 30%*
- 17%

I post or say things online that I regret later (NET: That's like me)
- 22%*
- 7%

You see things online that worry or upset you (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)
- 17%*
- 6%

Parents

My child gets more easily upset/angry when online or playing video games than when doing other things (NET: Agree)
- 50%*
- 38%

My child's online activity exposes them to content that encourages or supports unhealthy body image (NET: Agree)
- 46%*
- 35%

My child worries a lot about how others perceive them online (especially social media) (NET: Agree)
- 40%*
- 27%

My child posts or says things online that they later regret (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)
- 14%*
- 6%

■ Receive FSM ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents/Children), Wave 2 – Q33, Q34, Q58, Q59
Base: Total sample of (parents of) children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=291), Do not receive FSM (n=828)
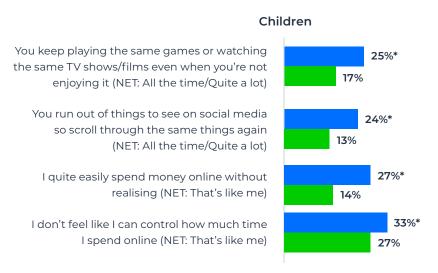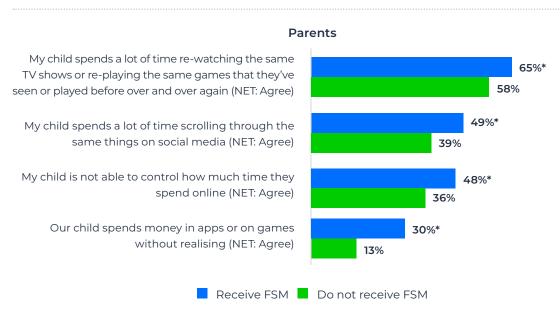** Significantly higher than the other group*

The developmental domain

Children who receive free school meals demonstrate greater negative effects of being online on their developmental wellbeing.

Children who receive free school meals are more likely to exhibit a lack of control in their online behaviours, for example in being unable to control how much time they spend online or by spending money in games or apps without realising it. They are also more likely to display repetitive online behaviours, such as scrolling through the same things on social media or watching the same TV shows or playing the same games over and over again (chart 4.6).

Chart 4.6: Negative factors affecting developmental digital wellbeing

Children

You keep playing the same games or watching the same TV shows/films even when you're not enjoying it (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)	25%* / 17%
You run out of things to see on social media so scroll through the same things again (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)	24%* / 13%
I quite easily spend money online without realising (NET: That's like me)	27%* / 14%
I don't feel like I can control how much time I spend online (NET: That's like me)	33%* / 27%

Parents

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 (NET: Agree)	65%* / 58%
My child spends a lot of time scrolling through the same things on social media (NET: Agree)	49%* / 39%
My child is not able to control how much time they spend online (NET: Agree)	48%* / 36%
Our child spends money in apps or on games without realising (NET: Agree)	30%* / 13%

■ Receive FSM ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents/Children), Wave 2 – Q35, Q59, Q61

Base: Total sample of (parents of) children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=291), Do not receive FSM (n=828)

* Significantly higher than the other group

Parental support

Conversations about online safety are common in all families, but appear to be more regular in families receiving free school meals
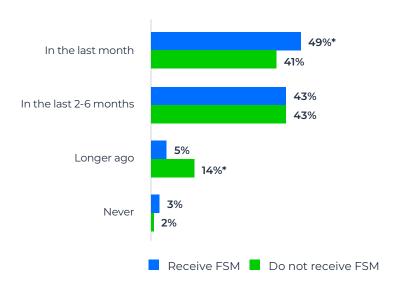
One of the most effective ways that parents can support their children to stay safe online is through conversation: showing an interest in what their child is doing online, listening to what they enjoy, but also staying alert to risks, and helping them to navigate situations when things go wrong.

Given the importance of conversations, our surveys look at this topic in detail, exploring how often conversations are happening and what is motivating them. We start by considering conversations in general, before looking into conversations happening in response to harm.

In encouraging news, conversations around online safety take place regularly amongst parents overall – nine in ten said a conversation had taken place in the past six months.

Furthermore, when comparing according to free school meal status, the data shows that families receiving free school meals have had a conversation more recently than others: nearly half (49%) say their last conversation was within the previous month, compared to four in ten (41%) of those not receiving free school meals. Just 5% of parents of children receiving free school meals say that their most recent conversation was more than six months ago, compared to 15% of other parents (chart 5.1). While it cannot be claimed with certainty, this evidence suggests that conversations about online safety are more regular in families receiving free school meals.

Chart 5.1: Parents last conversation about online safety with their child

Receive FSM   Do not receive FSM

In the last month: 49%* / 41%
In the last 2-6 months: 43% / 43%
Longer ago: 5% / 14%*
Never: 3% / 2%

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Parents), Wave 17 – B6. When was the last time you talked to your eldest child aged 4 to 16 about online activity, including online safety, if ever?

Base: Parents of children aged 8-16 who have spoken to their child about online safety – Receive FSM (n=269), Do not receive FSM (n=701)

* Significantly higher than the other group

Following conversations of these kind, children who receive free school meals are more likely than their peers to look up more information on how to be safe, although they are equally satisfied that their parent answered their questions and they feel more confident that they know how to stay safe online (chart 5.2).

Chart 5.2: Attitudes towards conversation about online safety (Strongly agree, Slightly agree)

Children

	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
I feel more confident that I know how to stay safe online	87%	87%
My parents / guardian answered all my questions	84%	83%
I looked up more information online about how to be safe	58%*	48%

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Children), Wave 17 – B10. Having had a conversation about online activity and online safety, how far do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: Children aged 9-16 who have spoken to their parents about online safety – Receive FSM (n=306), Do not receive FSM (n=666)
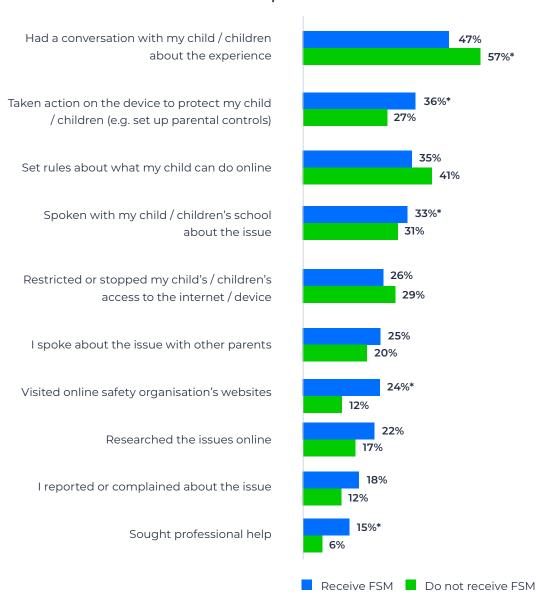
* Significantly higher than the other group

However, when something goes wrong online, parents of children on free school meals are less likely to talk to their child about it and more likely to use parental controls

In general, families receiving free school meals are just as likely to be talking to their children about online safety as others – if anything, they appear to be having these kinds of conversations more frequently.

But the same story does not hold true when considering how parents respond when a child has already experienced harm online.

For both groups, the most common action taken in these cases is still to have a conversation with the child about the experience (chart 6.1). But significantly fewer parents of children receiving free school meals do this – 47%, compared to 57% of parents of children not receiving free school meals.

Chart 6.1: Actions taken when child is exposed to online harms

Action	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
Had a conversation with my child / children about the experience	47%	57%*
Taken action on the device to protect my child / children (e.g. set up parental controls)	36%*	27%
Set rules about what my child can do online	35%	41%
Spoken with my child / children's school about the issue	33%*	31%
Restricted or stopped my child's / children's access to the internet / device	26%	29%
I spoke about the issue with other parents	25%	20%
Visited online safety organisation's websites	24%*	12%
Researched the issues online	22%	17%
I reported or complained about the issue	18%	12%
Sought professional help	15%*	6%

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents), Wave 17 – You mentioned that your child / children has experienced issues when being online, what action have you taken as a result of this experience? Please select all that apply. Receive FSM (n=200), Do not receive FSM (n=419)

* Significantly higher than the other group

In contrast, parents of children receiving free school meals are significantly more likely than others to respond by setting up parental controls – 36% compared to 27%. It might be hypothesised that this is because they are less likely to have set up parental controls in the first place, but further data shows this is not true: parents of children receiving free school meals are more likely to say they have used parental controls generally, as well as after a child has experienced harm (chart 6.2).

Chart 6.2: Parental controls and online safety tools used by parents

Tool	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
Screentime management apps	35%	30%
Broadband parental controls	42%	36%
Gaming console parental controls	36%	30%
Social media parental monitoring	29%*	15%
Safety software	17%	14%
Streaming and search safety settings	30%	30%
Device setting modes	16%	20%
NET Use any parental control or online safety tool	85%*	76%
None of these	13%	23%*

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents), Wave 17 – B23. And do you use any of these types of technical tools or controls to manage your child's access to online content? Base: Parents of children aged 9-16 who have been exposed to online harms – Receive FSM (n=257), Do not receive FSM (n=636)

* Significantly higher than the other group

Figure 1. Parents of children receiving FSM. Source: Internet Matters Parent Tracker W17.

"Parental controls ensure he's safe "
(Mum of 13-year-old boy)

"Given the prevalence of technology it is crucial for parents to keep an eye on and control their kid's online behaviours"
(Dad of 10-year-old boy)

"My daughter was approached through a game by a stranger pretending to be a 14 year old boy and then gave him her social media account details where their conversations showed he was not a child... I have now put additional protection on all devices and parental watch controls so I get notifications of new followers. I think social media should allow you to do this up the age of 17 "
(Mum of 11-year old girl)

The reasons behind these differences are likely complex. They could be related to the severity of the incident prompting the action. As outlined previously, children receiving free school meals experience the more serious harms online to a greater extent than their peers – including contact with strangers, sharing of personal information and sexual images, and exposure to harmful and extreme content. Parents confronting these issues may feel less able to deal with them themselves, or to know how to talk to their child about them: this possibility is supported by wider evidence which shows that parents in families receiving free school meals are more likely to feel out of depth talking about online safety and activity (Chart 6.3). At the same time, they may feel more justified in using parental controls due to the issues faced by their child being more serious. Further research is needed to understand this.

Chart 6.3: Attitudes towards conversation about online safety (Agree strongly + Agree slightly)

Parents

I felt out of my depth talking about online activity/safety
- Receive FSM: **51%***
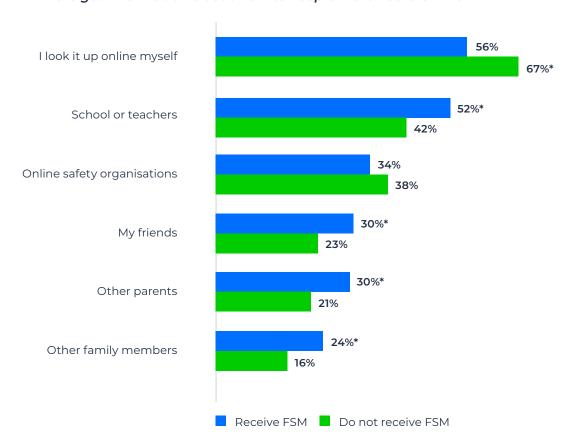- Do not receive FSM: **23%**

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Parents), Wave 17 – B10. Having had a conversation about online activity and online safety, how far do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: Parents of children aged 8-16 who have spoken to their child about online safety – Receive FSM (n=261), Do not receive FSM (n=684)

* Significantly higher than the other group

Parents of children receiving free school meals are more likely to look for greater help in supporting their child online

The evidence shows that parents of children receiving free school meals are more likely to seek help from external sources than other parents. More than six in ten (61%) say that they seek out information about how to talk to their child about online safety before starting a conversation, compared to less than half (44%) of parents of children not receiving free school meals (chart 7.1).

Chart 7.1: Attitudes towards conversation about online safety (Agree strongly + Agree slightly)

Parents

I sought out information about how to talk about online activity/safety before my conversation with my child
- Receive FSM: **61%***
- Do not receive FSM: **44%**

I wanted some guidance about having the conversation on online activity/safety but didn't know where to go for help
- Receive FSM: **50%***
- Do not receive FSM: **27%**

■ Receive FSM   ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Parents), Wave 17 – B10. Having had a conversation about online activity and online safety, how far do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: Parents of children aged 8-16 who have spoken to their child about online safety – Receive FSM (n=261), Do not receive FSM (n=684)

* Significantly higher than the other group

As well as seeking support to have conversations with their child, the data shows that parents of children receiving free school meals are also more likely to seek help for general information about online safety. This includes help from teachers, friends and family in their networks for information. In contrast, parents of children who do not receive free school meals are more likely to look up information online themselves (Chart 7.2).

Chart 7.2: Where get information about how to keep children safe online

Receive FSM ■   Do not receive FSM ■

Category	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
I look it up online myself	56%	67%*
School or teachers	52%*	42%
Online safety organisations	34%	38%
My friends	30%*	23%
Other parents	30%*	21%
Other family members	24%*	16%

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Parents), Wave 17 – B1a. Where do you tend to get information about how to keep your children safe online? Please select all that apply.

Base: Parents of children aged 8-16 – Receive FSM (n=269), Do not receive FSM (n=701)

* Significantly higher than the other group

Further data explores the support received by parents through the child's school in greater detail (Table 7.3). It reinforces the point that families receiving free school meals rely on the school more for support. It also shows that they are particularly more likely to have received more intensive forms of support (e.g. attending a dedicated session on online safety, having active conversations with the teacher), rather than more passive forms of help (e.g. information being sent home). Wider work by Internet Matters has shown that these more intensive forms of support are more impactful for parents.[5]

Table 7.3: Experience of online safety provision from school

	Receive free school meals	Do not receive free school meals
Base: Parents of children aged 8-16	*n=269*	*n=701*
Received information from the school about how to keep child/children safe online (e.g. leaflets, online materials)	43 %	51 %
Received information about how the school plans to talk to/teach children about online safety	46 %	41 %
Read the online safety section of your child's school's policies	38 %	34 %
Attended an event or session about children's online safety hosted or organised by the school	25 %	15 %
Asked my child's teachers about how they teach children about online safety	24 %	12 %
Spoken to the school/teachers about an incident/problem my child experienced online	23 %	11 %
Asked my child's teachers about how to keep my child safe online	21 %	10 %
Been alerted to an issue about my child's online behaviour/experience by the school/teachers	19 %	11 %

Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking (Parents), Wave 17 – X3. Thinking about your child or children's school(s), which of the following have you ever done or experienced, if any?

Shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group.

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5.   https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/data-briefing-online-safety-in-schools-june-2023/

Conclusions and recommendations

It is well known that children receiving free school meals have worse outcomes than their peers in many areas of life. Their educational attainment is poorer[6] and they are less likely to go on to higher education.[7] There is an earnings gap between people who received free school meals and those who did not,[8] and free school meals eligibility is also associated with increased mental health problems.[9]

The findings of this report show that, sadly, the online world is no different. Children receiving free school meals have a worse experience of digital technology than their peers: they are more likely to engage in activities deemed as high-risk (such as using chatrooms) and are more likely to have come to harm online, whether through contacting strangers, spending uncontrollably or simply not getting enough sleep as a result of their online activity. Overall, their digital wellbeing is poorer than other children's – although there are still some benefits to being online for this group, such as building their confidence, fighting boredom and pursuing their interests.

The reasons behind children on free school meals having worse digital wellbeing are likely to be varied and complex. Further research is needed to better understand the drivers. For example, why do children receiving free school meals engage more heavily in certain online activities than their peers? How does free school meals eligibility interact with other vulnerabilities, such as special educational needs, to shape a child's experiences? What is the impact of reduced access on children's outcomes online? Going forward, Internet Matters is committed to further research into children receiving free school meals as part of our vulnerability programme, which has an existing focus on children with special educational needs and mental health problems. And of course, this group will remain a key focus as we develop the third report of the Digital Wellbeing Index.

But while further research will help, the evidence contained in this report, and of the wider evidence base,[10] provides enough insight to begin tackling the problem now. Below are our recommendations for what needs to happen to level the playing field in children's online safety and wellbeing.

These recommendations sit against a wider backdrop of ongoing media literacy strategies from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and Ofcom. Children and families must remain a focus of this work. But more than that, these findings indicate an imperative for closer working across Government and its agencies, including the Department for Education, to improve vulnerable children's experiences online. Children receiving free school meals are known to schools, and their parents rely on schools for support in this space. Schools are a critical part of the solution but cannot play this role without clear guidance and resource.

Bolstering access

In recent years, and especially since the Covid pandemic, there have been greater efforts to enable all children and families to get online. For example as part of its pandemic response the Government provided 1.3 million laptops and tablets to education settings, to distribute to children without devices,[11] while Good Things Foundation is providing free data to 500,000 people through its network of community partners.

6.   https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/equalities-analysis-further-insights-from-2022
7.   https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/whyfreeschoolmealrecipientsearnlessthantheirpeers/2022-08-04
8.   https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/whyfreeschoolmealrecipientsearnlessthantheirpeers/2022-08-04
9.   https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/5-steps-to-mental-health-and-wellbeing/understanding-need/identify-pupils-at-risk/
10. https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2022/09/cc-digital-childhoods-a-survey-of-children-and-parents.pdf
11. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/laptops-and-tablets-data

Nevertheless, our research has found that children on free school meals still have less access to digital devices and data than their peers. These children are missing out on the full breadth of opportunity offered by the digital world. The picture has likely worsened since our data was collected, in light of the cost-of-living crisis, with no end in sight.

Internet Matters is a member of the Digital Poverty Alliance, a network of organisations working together to tackle digital exclusion head on. The Alliance's National Delivery Plan[12] sets out what needs to happen to make digital poverty a thing of the past, and we endorse its recommendations.

Tailored media literacy support

It is sad to see that children receiving free school meals are coming to harm more frequently than their peers. But the good news is that children on free school meals are known to services, especially schools, and can therefore be targeted with support. Furthermore, the findings in this report can be used to tailor support to the specific needs of this group – for example, the fact that they engage heavily with online games, live-streamed content and chatrooms. The media literacy sector should look to provide these tailored resources, bearing in mind that children on free school meals are more likely to have other vulnerabilities too, such as special educational needs and/or experience of mental health problems.

Schools (and other services supporting children) should be aware of these findings and pay special attention to children on free school meals as part of online safety lessons and safeguarding responses. The government should amend its guidance on RSHE[13] (which is currently being reviewed) and Teaching Online Safety in Schools to reflect this,

calling out children who receive free school meals as a group which needs particular attention.[14] Internet Matters will be sharing the report and relevant resources with schools in our networks.

For children receiving free school meals, it is vital that support offered (whether by schools or by the media literacy sector) focuses on helping children recover from negative experiences, not simply on preventing these from happening in the first place.

Our findings underline the importance of close working between the media literacy organisations, such as Internet Matters, and organisations focused on getting people online. When a child, young person, or family is provided with digital connectivity, they also need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to use it safely. For example, Internet Matters is proud of our work with Good Things Foundation to get online safety advice in the hands of those receiving devices and data through their network of community partners,[15] along with our work with Tesco Mobile in which parents and carers receive tailored online safety plans through our Little Digital Helps Toolkit when they set up their child's device.[16]

Empowering parents

Children's online safety is a shared responsibility. Even in a world with greater online regulation and more responsibility lying with platforms, schools and parents will still have an important role to play.

It is clear that parents in families receiving free school meals appreciate the importance of their children being online, and that they are committed to supporting them to be safe. But in some areas they seem to be less confident – for example, when something has gone wrong online they are less likely to talk to their children than other parents (although

12. https://digitalpovertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/National-Delivery-Plan-Overview-2023.pdf
13. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education
14. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-online-safety-in-schools/teaching-online-safety-in-schools
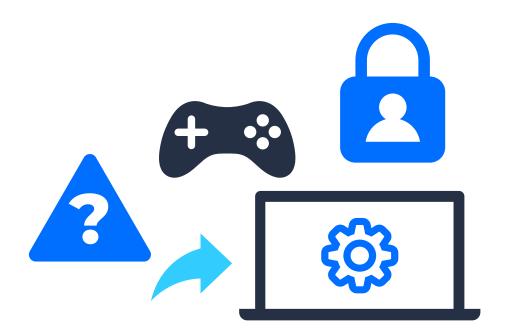15. https://www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/news-and-activity/news/new-resources-internet-matters
16. https://www.internetmatters.org/little-digital-helps-toolkit/

notably, they are more likely to use parental controls). And ultimately, children receiving free school meals are still experiencing harm to a greater extent than their peers.

There is no single right or wrong way to support a child online. Parental controls and having a conversation with children are particularly important parts of the solution, so more work needs to be done to help all parents feel confident in these areas – in response to particular issues faced by their children, but also as more preventative measures.

For parents receiving free school meals, access to external sources of support is key – especially from schools. It is vital that in addition to providing online safety support directly to pupils, schools are equipped to provide support to parents too. Of course, schools cannot do this without clear guidance, training, resources and time – something which the Department for Education needs to facilitate.

Methodology

Data sources

Findings in this report are taken from data analysis of the following nationally representative surveys carried out for Internet Matters:

- Wave 2 of our Digital Wellbeing Index survey which included 1,138 parent and child interviews, where the selected child was aged 9-16 (fieldwork in August 2022).

- Wave 17 of our regular tracking survey with parents and children, which included 970 interviews with parents of 8-16 year olds who attend state schools and 1,030 interviews with children aged 9-16 who attend state schools (fieldwork in May-June 2023).

Data cleaning

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of children receiving free school meals on a means-tested basis, rather than through a universal entitlement.

Families responding to our surveys self-identify as recipients (or not) of free school meals. We only asked families whether they received free school meals, rather than whether they were eligible. Some families choose not to receive free school meals even though they are eligible.

At the time the data used in this report was collected, many primary school pupils were entitled to free school meals by virtue of their age alone. These entitlements are detailed in Appendix 1. For this reason, parents of children under eight were removed from the parent sample of the Tracker data. We also removed parents of children attending independent schools to remove possible confusion around school meals supplied via overall school fees.
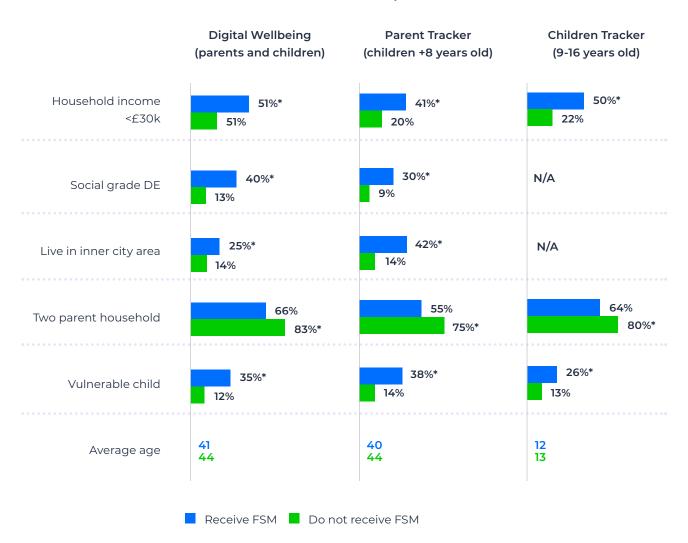
The final sample does include a percentage of households on higher incomes. This is likely due to a range of factors, which may include:

- Some parents may misinterpret the term 'free school meals'.

- Some families continue to receive free school meals despite falling out of the formal eligibility criteria, as a result of current 'transitional protections' currently in place (see Appendix 1).

- Some areas, including several London boroughs, already offer free school meals to all primary school pupils (including those aged over eight).

Key characteristics of final sample

In our sample, families with children who receive FSM are more likely to have a household income of under £30,000, be in social grade DE and live in inner city areas. They are less likely to be two parent households and the child is more likely to have special educational needs or mental health problems (Chart M.1).

Chart M.1: Demographic profile of children who receive FSM vs. children who do not receive FSM across the datasets used in this report

	Digital Wellbeing (parents and children)	Parent Tracker (children +8 years old)	Children Tracker (9-16 years old)
Household income <£30k	51%* / 51%	41%* / 20%	50%* / 22%
Social grade DE	40%* / 13%	30%* / 9%	N/A
Live in inner city area	25%* / 14%	42%* / 14%	N/A
Two parent household	66% / 83%*	55% / 75%*	64% / 80%*
Vulnerable child	35%* / 12%	38%* / 14%	26%* / 13%
Average age	41 / 44	40 / 44	12 / 13

■ Receive FSM ■ Do not receive FSM

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing, Wave 2 – Q9, SEG, Q6, Q3, Q13
Base: Total sample of parents of children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=291), Do not receive FSM (n=828)
Source: Internet Matters Impact Tracking, Wave 17 – S7c/S9, S25, S14, S23, A1
Base: Total sample of parents of children aged 8-16 – Receive FSM (n=269); Total sample of children aged 9-16 – Receive FSM (n=314), Do not receive FSM (n=705)
* Significantly higher than the other group

Appendices

Appendix 1: free school meals eligibility

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Universal FSMs	Ages 4-7	Ages 4-7	Ages 4-9	None
Means-tested FSMs				
Universal credit threshold	Earnings below £7,400	Earnings below £7,400	Earnings below £7,920	Earnings below £14,000
Working tax credit threshold	Cannot claim FSMs	Cannot claim FSMs	Earnings below £7,920	Earnings below £16,190
Child tax credit threshold (in families not claiming working tax credit)	Earnings below £16,190	Earnings below £16,190	Earnings below £17,005	Earnings below £16,190

Note:

- Universal free school meals are in the process of being rolled out to extended age groups in Wales and Scotland. FSM status here is taken from when the research was conducted.

- Some London boroughs already offer universal free school meals to primary school pupils, ahead of a London-wide entitlement being introduced for one school year from September 2023.

- Since 1 April 2018, transitional protections have been in place which will continue during the roll out of Universal Credit. This has meant that pupils eligible for free school meals on or after 1 April 2018 retain their free school meals eligibility even if their circumstances change.[17]

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17. *https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics*

Appendix 2: full list of sites, platforms, apps and games regularly used or visited by children

Table A.1. Sites, platforms, apps, games regularly used or visited.

	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
Base: Children aged 9-16	*n=314*	*n=705*
YouTube	77%	77%
Netflix	69%	69%
WhatsApp	57%	70%
TikTok	53%	53%
Roblox	45%	38%
Disney +	43%	42%
Minecraft	43%	32%
Snapchat	40%	43%
Instagram	32%	38%
Spotify	32%	38%
Fortnite	31%	30%
Facebook	30%	25%
Facebook Messenger	24%	17%
Facetime	22%	21%
Xbox Live	20%	17%
PlayStation Network	19%	14%
iPlayer	18%	23%
Apple Music	12%	11%
Twitter	12%	13%
Discord	11%	11%
Pinterest	11%	12%
Zoom	11%	7%
Steam	10%	8%
Twitch	9%	7%
Apple TV+	7%	6%
Reddit	5%	5%
BeReal	4%	8%
Episode	3%	1%
Sendit	1%	2%
Other (please specify)	1%	1%
None of these	1%	1%

Source: Internet Matters Children Tracker, Wave 17 – A5) Which, if any, of the following sites, platforms, apps, or games do you regularly use or visit? Please select all that apply. Shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group.

Appendix 3: extended data tables on negative digital wellbeing outcomes

Table A.2: Negative factors affecting emotional digital wellbeing

	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
Base: (Parents of) children aged 9-16	*n=314*	*n=705*
Parents		
My child gets more easily upset/angry when online or playing video games than when doing other things (NET: Agree)	50%	38%
My child's online activity exposes them to content that encourages or supports unhealthy body image (NET: Agree)	46%	35%
My child compares themselves to people they see online/on social media in a way that I think is unhealthy (NET: Agree)	44%	30%
My child worries a lot about how others perceive them online (especially social media) (NET: Agree)	40%	27%
My child sees things online that worry or upset them (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)	21%	6%
My child gets upset because something online or social media does not get the response they wanted it to (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)	15%	7%
My child posts or says things online that they later regret (NET: All the time/ Quite a lot)	14%	6%
Children		
I get more easily upset/angry when online or playing video games than when doing other things (NET: That's like me)	31%	22%
I worry about saying something wrong online / on social media (NET: That's like me)	30%	17%
I worry a lot about what other people think of me online (e.g. on social media) (NET: That's like me)	26%	18%
I post or say things online that I regret later (NET: That's like me)	22%	7%
I see people online/on social media who make me feel sad because I'm not like them (NET: That's like me)	19%	11%
You see things online that worry or upset you (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)	17%	6%
You get upset if something you post online / on social media does not get many likes or nice/positive comments (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)	16%	7%

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents/Children), Wave 2 – Q33, Q34, Q58, Q59. Shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group.

Table A.3: Negative factors affecting developmental digital wellbeing

	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
Base: (Parents of) children aged 9-16	*n=291*	*n=828*
Parents		
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 (NET: Agree)	65%	58%
My child spends a lot of time scrolling through the same things on social media (NET: Agree)	49%	39%
My child is not able to control how much time they spend online (NET: Agree)	48%	36%
Our child spends money in apps or on games without realising (NET: Agree)	30%	13%
My child sees things online that worry or upset them (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)	21%	6%
Children		
I don't feel like I can control how much time I spend online (NET: That's like me)	33%	27%
I quite easily spend money online without realising (NET: That's like me)	27%	14%
You keep playing the same games or watching the same TV shows/films even when you're not enjoying it (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)	25%	17%
You run out of things to see on social media so scroll through the same things again (NET: All the time/Quite a lot)	24%	13%

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents/Children), Wave 2 – Q35, Q59, Q61. Shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group.

Table A.4: Negative factors affecting social digital wellbeing

	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
Base: (Parents of) children aged 9-16	*n=291*	*n=828*
Parents		
My child has had negative experiences interacting with other people online	37%	27%
My child turns down opportunities to meet with friends so they can stay in on their phone, computer or games console	35%	23%
My child gets upset or uncomfortable because s/he sees people being mean or unpleasant to each other online	47%	35%
My child avoids using certain apps, websites or games because of the way people act or talk to each other on them	56%	40%
Spending time online makes my child feel lonely	27%	16%
NET: 9-10 out of 10 (where 10 is completely describes our household)		
How well do the below describe what life is like in your home/household. We often find it difficult to get our child(ren) out of the house because they want to stay in and play video games, stream and watch TV programmes or be on their phone	14%	5%
Children		
NET: That's like me		
Spending time online makes me feel lonely	19%	8%
If I miss out on things that are happening on social media among my friends I get upset	29%	22%
NET: All the time/quite a lot		
I have upsetting experiences interacting with other people online (e.g. bullying)	13%	5%
I turn down opportunities to meet with friends so I can stay in on my phone, computer, or games console	19%	9%
I feel upset or uncomfortable because I see people being mean or unpleasant to each other online	20%	11%
I avoid using certain apps, websites or games because of the way people act or talk to each other on them	23%	18%

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents/Children), Wave 2 – Q30, Q56, Q57. Shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group.

Table A.5: Negative factors affecting physical digital wellbeing

	Receive FSM	Do not receive FSM
Base: (Parents of) children aged 9-16	*n=291*	*n=828*
Parents		
NET: Agree		
My child has stopped doing sports or exercise because they are too busy on their phone computer TV or games console	41%	28%
Spending time on their phone, computer or games console negatively affects my child's sleep patterns	63%	49%
Spending a lot of time online affects my child's physical health	64%	56%
Children		
NET: Do this all the time/quite a lot		
Stop playing a sport or doing exercise because you want to play video games, watch TV or be on social media	17%	12%
Stay up late on your phone, playing games or watching TV	35%	27%
NET: That's like me		
Spending a lot of time online affects my physical health	26%	15%

Source: Internet Matters Digital Wellbeing (Parents/Children), Wave 2 – Q28, Q54, Q58 Shaded cells indicate significantly higher among this group.