EVERY CHILD SAFE ONLINE

Supporting children with additional needs

June 2026

internet matters.org

Contents

Introduction

Children with additional needs represent a significant and growing cohort of young people. Across the UK, over 2 million children in education now have identified additional needs, and this number continues to rise.[1] These children often face greater challenges in their daily lives compared to their peers, and their online experiences can be markedly different.[i]

Previous Internet Matters research has consistently found that children with additional needs are more susceptible to encountering harm online, yet also stand to gain significantly from the educational, social, and creative opportunities that digital platforms can provide when used safely.[ii]

In this report, we set out to understand how children with additional needs can be best supported by the stakeholders across their online lives: their parents, their educational institutions, government and online platforms.[2] To do this, we explore how and where they spend their time online, and the importance they place on those spaces. We examine the benefits that these children report feeling as a result of their online lives, as well as their experiences of harm and the negative impacts that time online can have on their wellbeing. Finally, we look at how both these children and their parents navigate digital safety, and what actions schools, platforms and government are taking to support them.

This research comes at a critical time, as the UK debates children's access to digital spaces and as nations explore what more can be done to support children with additional needs. With concern about the harm young people are encountering online at an all-time high, understanding how these children engage with digital spaces is becoming increasingly important. It is vital that their voices, and those of their families, are heard within these conversations.

Online environments can serve as vital spaces for learning, connection, and self-expression – but only if we ensure they are safe and accessible for all children.

Methodology

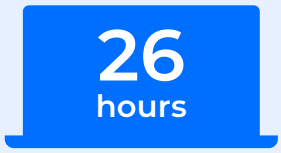
This briefing primarily draws on data from Internet Matters' Digital Wellbeing Index, which is now in its fifth year. The Digital Wellbeing Index is an annual UK household survey of 1,000 children aged 9-16 and their parents, exploring children's online lives through four indices of wellbeing: physical, emotional, social and developmental.[iii]

In this research, we define children with additional needs as: children who receive Special Educational Needs (SEN) Support, children with a physical or mental health condition that reduces their ability to carry out day-to-day activities, and/or children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or equivalent. There are an estimated cohort of over 2 million children with additional needs in education across the UK, based on reported numbers from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The definition used in the report is closely aligned with how England, Wales and Northern Ireland categorise children's additional needs. Scotland uses a broader definition, which encompasses a wider set of vulnerabilities including having English as an additional language, bereavement and being a young carer.[iv] As a result, the percentage of children with Additional Support Needs (ASN) in Scotland is significantly higher (27%) than the other UK Nations, and with the definition in this report.

1. Based on the most recent data, there are 1,766,924 pupils with additional needs in England, 43,885 in Wales and 68,200 in Northern Ireland. There are 299,445 pupils in Scotland with a registered additional need support, with an estimated 150,000-250,000 pupils aligning with Internet Matters additional need definition. Overall, this adds up to over 2 million children in total.
2. In this report we use the term parent to refer to both parents and caregivers of children. We know that parents and carers go by many names.

A snapshot of the online lives of children with additional needs



online per week –
5 more than their peers

play games online

use AI chatbots

Two-thirds say being online makes them happy

say being online is important to meet people who become good friends

Three-quarters say that being online helps them to participate in activities and events that are important to them

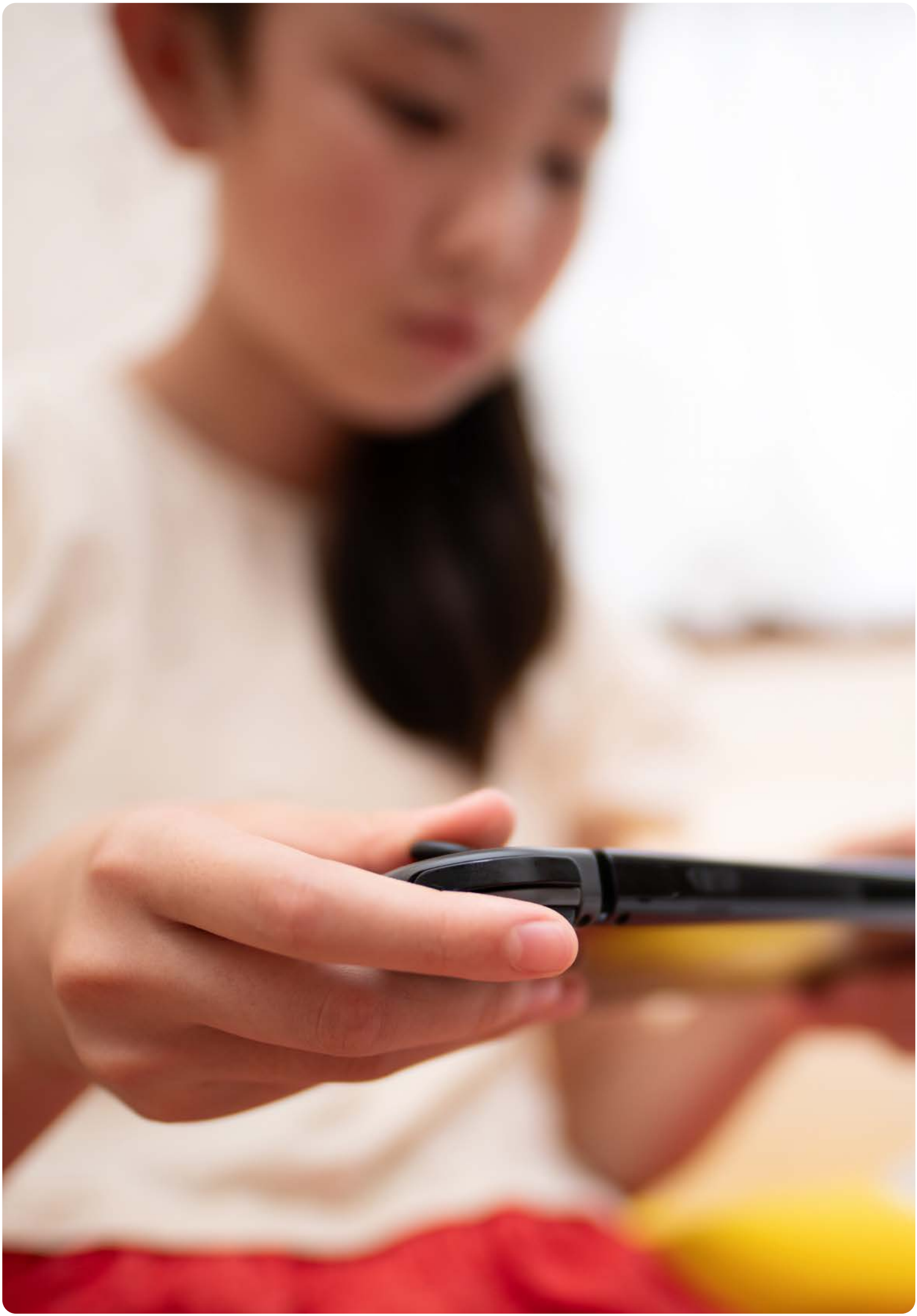
struggle to control how much time they spend online

Four out of five have experienced harm online

They are twice as likely as their peers to be bullied online

Four in five children turn to a parent when something goes wrong online

Parents of children with additional needs are twice as likely to reach out to someone for help

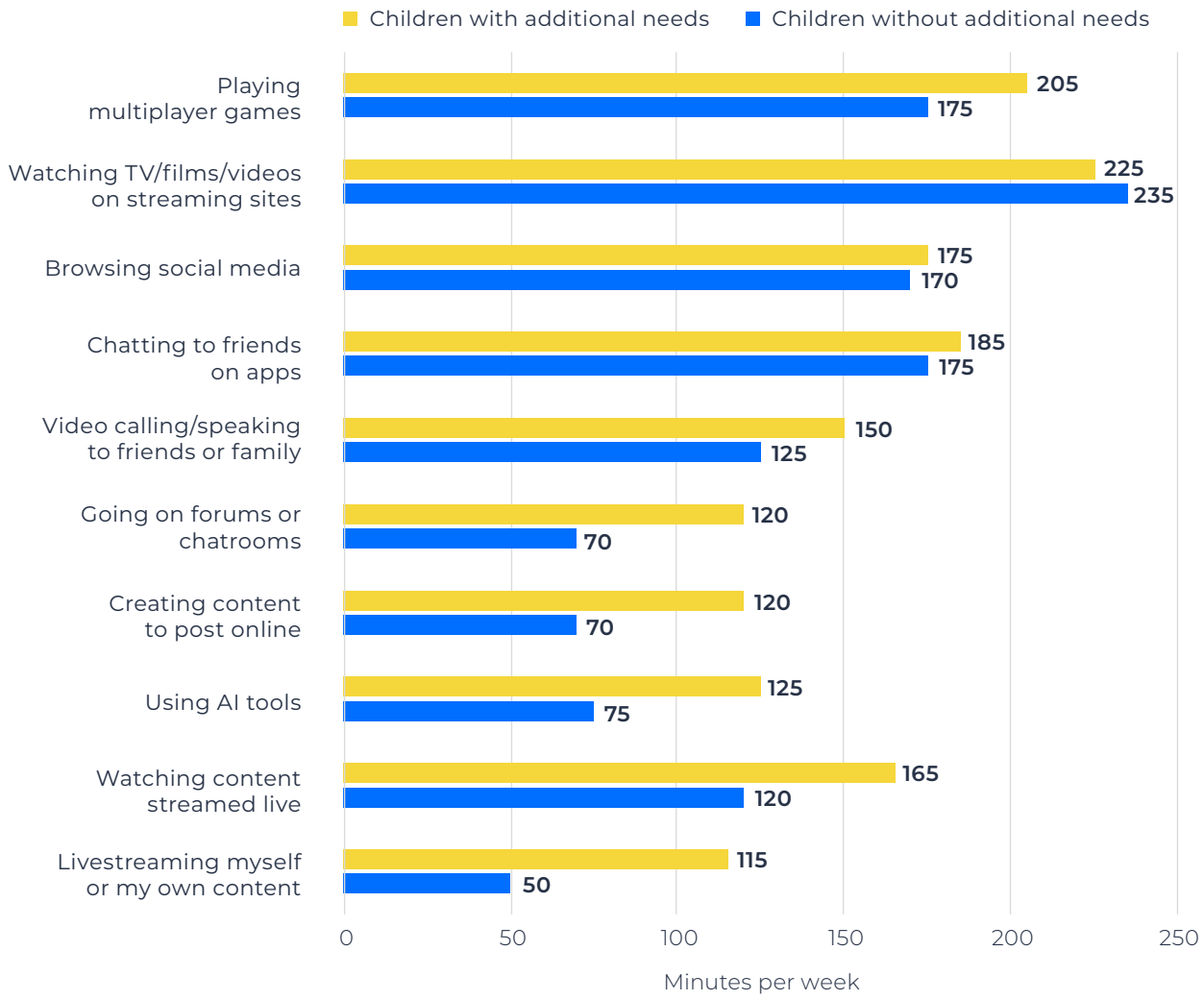


Life online

Children spend a significant amount of time online, and this is especially true for those with additional needs.

They spend on average 26 hours online per week, up from 17 hours in 2022. This is 5 hours more per week than their peers. While all children engage with a variety of online activities, those with additional needs are spending more time per week in interactive ways such as livestreaming themselves or their own content (1 hour 55 minutes cf. 50 minutes), creating content to post online (2 hours cf. 1 hour and 10 minutes), and using online forums or chat rooms (2 hours cf. 1 hour and 10 minutes). While interactive time online can be highly beneficial to socialising and building confidence, these spaces can also lead to a heightened risk of harm, as explored more in following sections.

Figure 1: *Differences in how children spend their time online*



Base: Children with additional needs: 390. Children without additional needs: 871. Question: How much time do you spend doing each of these things in a normal week? (Rounded to the nearest 5 minutes)

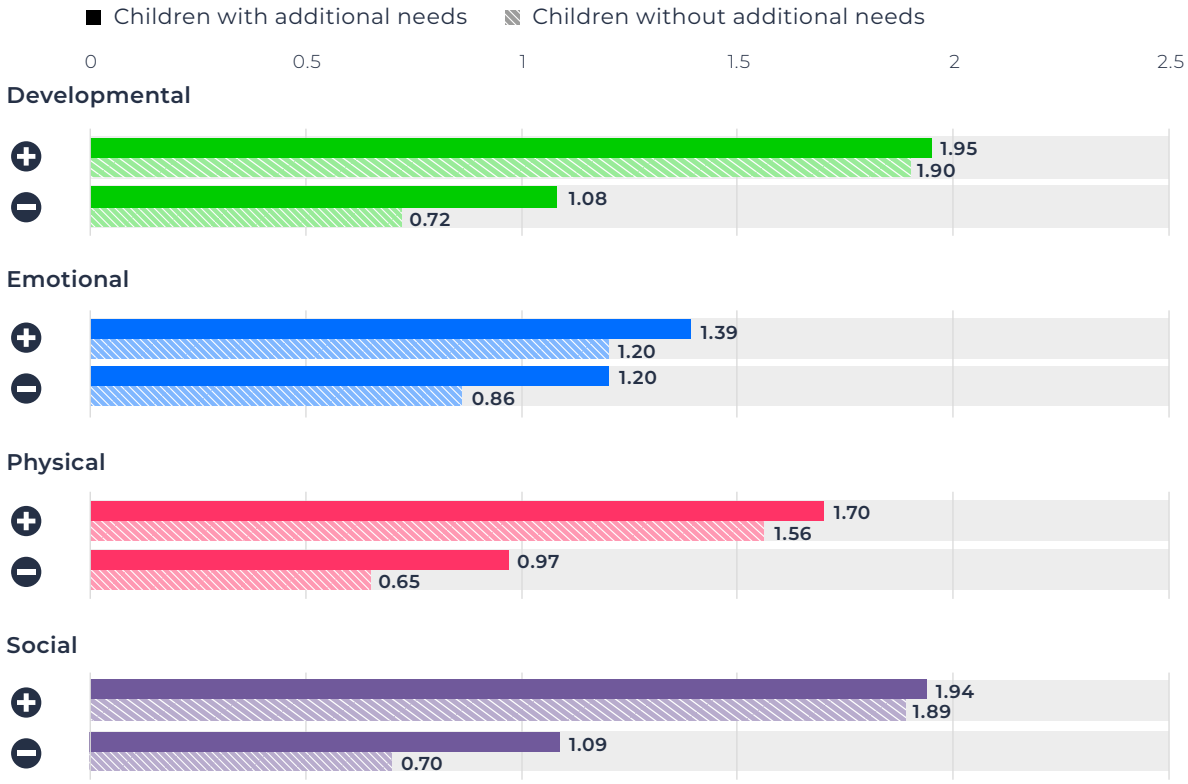
Children with additional needs also spend nearly an hour more per week than their peers using AI tools such as ChatGPT, Snapchat's My AI or character.ai (2 hours and 5 minutes cf. 1 hour and 15 minutes). This mirrors research conducted last year by Internet Matters which explored children's AI chatbot use. The research found that children with additional needs were using AI tools at higher rates and in different ways from their peers, such as for companionship and escapism.[v]

Children with additional needs experience more of the good and the bad of online life.

Internet Matters' Digital Wellbeing Index shows that children with additional needs experience the best and the worst of online life.[3] As outlined in Figure 2, all positive and negative indices are higher for these children than their peers.

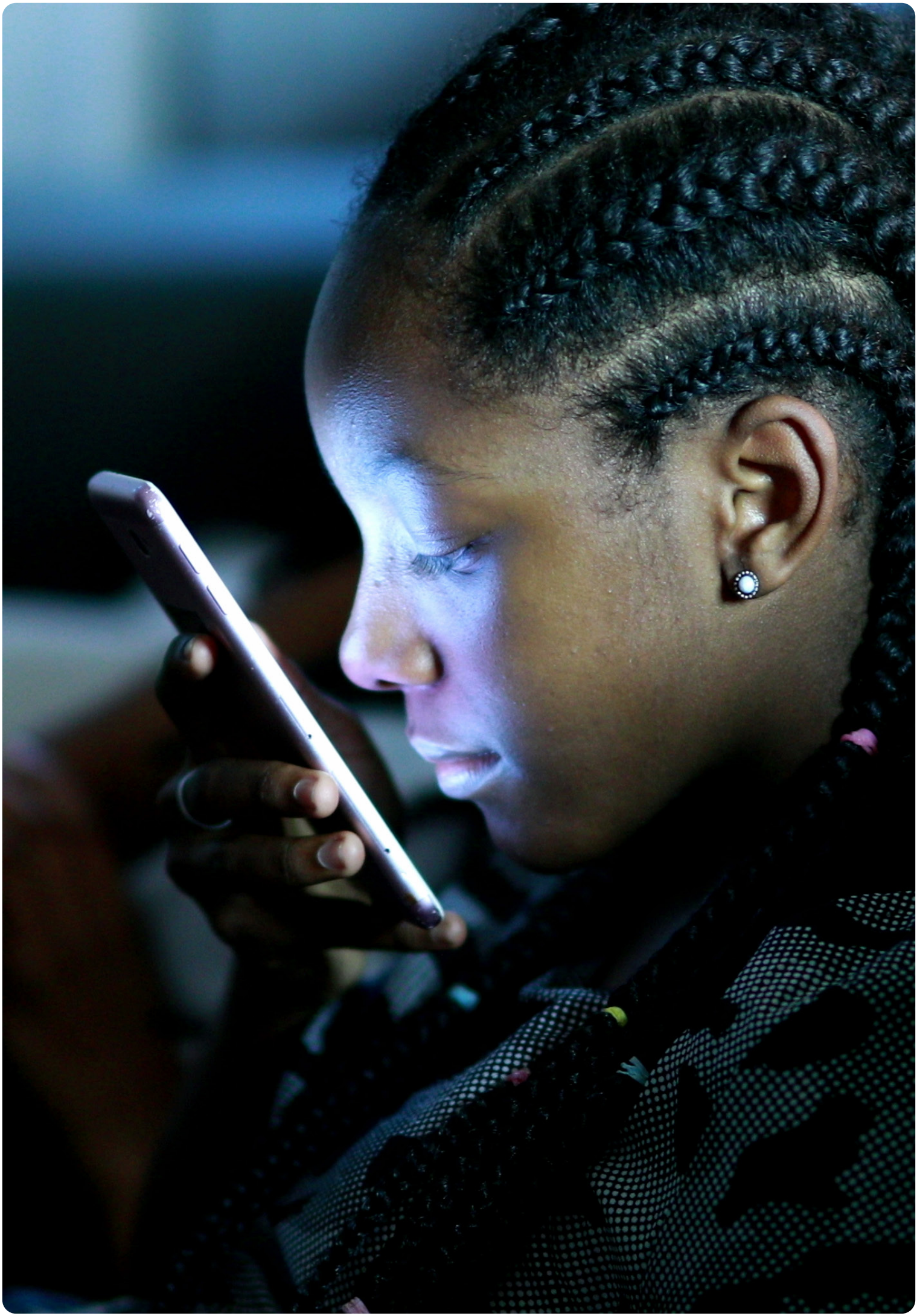
Furthermore, all positive and negative indices have risen for children with additional needs over the last three years, reflecting how children's online experiences are becoming increasingly polarised.[vi] The following sections explore in greater detail what is driving these trends.

Figure 2: *Index scores for children with additional needs compared to their peers*



Base: Children with additional needs: 390. Children without additional needs: 871. Indices calculated through combination of answers throughout children's questions.

3. Our Index scores are derived from several questions that explore positive and negative elements of wellbeing, which are combined to give an overall index rating. This Index is derived from a framework, developed in collaboration with Internet Matters, by Dr Diane Levine and her team at the University of Leicester. For more information visit Internet Matters' website.



Digital empowerment

Online spaces help build friendships and confidence.

For children with additional needs, online spaces are particularly important for socialising and raising their confidence. Two-thirds (64%) report that technology and being online is important to helping them find communities that offer friendship and support, while a similar proportion (65%) say it is important for meeting people who become good friends.

These children are more likely than their peers to report that the time they spend online makes them feel confident (57% cf. 49%). Parents reinforce this, with 49% saying that being online has helped their child feel more comfortable with themselves, compared to just 36% of parents of children without additional needs.

Children use online life to participate, learn and create.

Being a part of online spaces is also central for providing these children with a sense of belonging and achievement. Three-quarters (73%) say that being online helps them to participate in activities and events that are important to them, and they are significantly more likely than their peers to say that time online lets them show people things they are proud of (56% cf. 43%).

Young person, 15-17

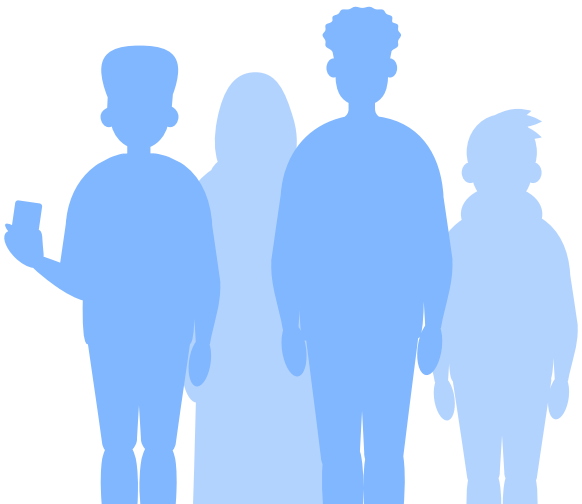
"I feel completely accepted online."

Young person, 15-17

"I've learned more social skills, communication skills than anything else has taught me, via online gaming."

Young person, 15-17

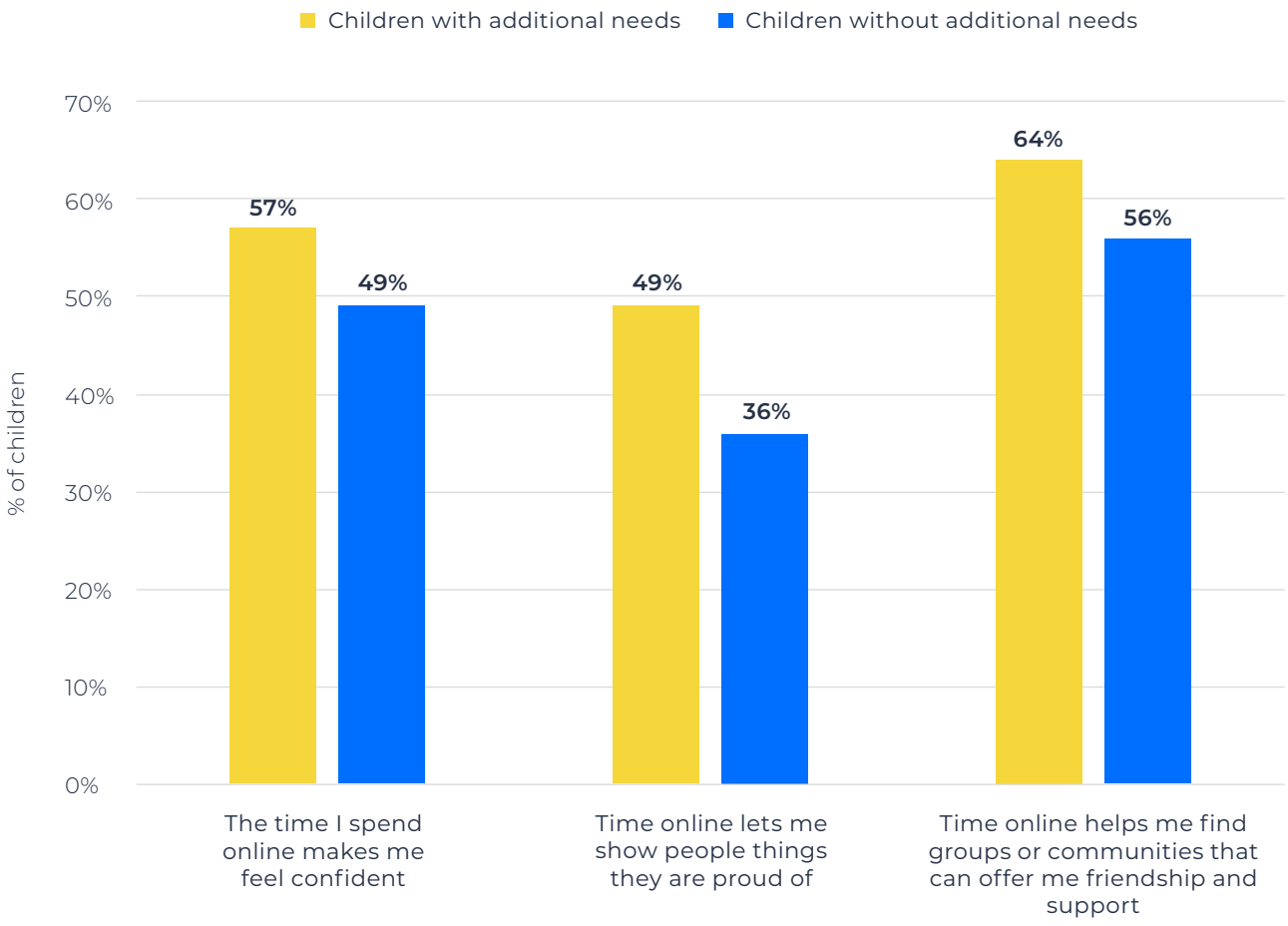
"[Being online] means you can meet people with similar interests and so on, which I quite like, sort of like a community of people."



As well as supporting their social and emotional wellbeing, children with additional needs are more likely to use online spaces to support their physical health. Three in four (76%) children with additional needs use the internet to learn a new sport or a physical skill (cf. 66% of their peers), and 46% use apps or websites to find out about new sports or exercises they want to try out (cf. 35% of their peers). In general, they are more likely to use apps, websites and devices to help them stay healthy (42% cf. 30%).

Given these positive outcomes, it is perhaps unsurprising that overall, two-thirds (66%) of children with additional needs say that the time they spend online makes them happy – with just 8% disagreeing. Ensuring that children continue to enjoy these benefits must be a central part of any future digital safety policy.

Figure 3: *Children with additional needs report greater social benefits from time online than their peers*



Base: Children with additional needs: 390. Children without additional needs: 871. Questions: How important do you think technology and being online has been for you for these things? And How often do these things happen?

The cost of connection

The same spaces that give children with additional needs belonging, confidence and connection can also take a physical and emotional toll. They can create feelings of anxiety, and despite the social benefits they derive from their time online, can lead them to feel isolated.

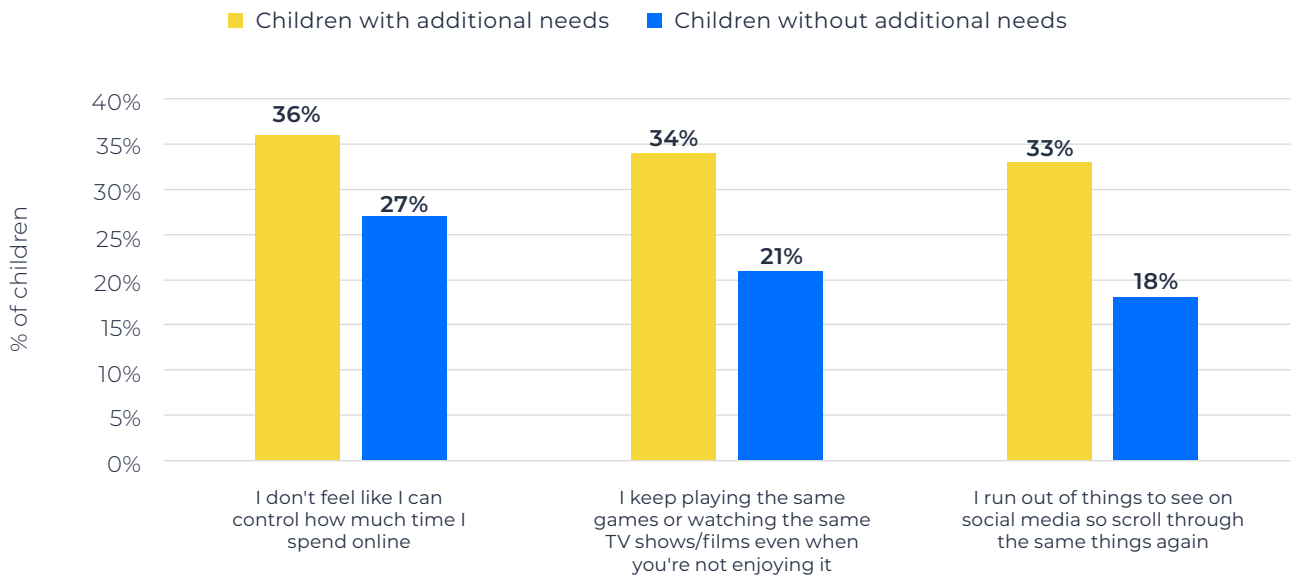
Children are struggling to regulate their time online and this impacts their physical health.

Children are increasingly reporting that they struggle to control how much time they are spending online, and children with additional needs are particularly likely to say this (36% cf. 27%). They are more likely to report that they keep watching the same things even when not enjoying them (34% cf. 21%) and that they scroll through the same things on social media because they have run out of things to see (33% cf. 18%).

This is having a negative impact on their physical wellbeing. Two in five children with additional needs (42%) say that spending a lot of time online affects their physical health (such as making them tired or unable to concentrate, or affecting their eyesight or posture), compared to 23% of their peers. This is backed up by their parents, with two-thirds of parents of children with additional needs saying that being online affects their child's sleep patterns (68% cf. 54%). They are also more likely to say their child has stopped doing sports or exercise because they are too busy on their devices (52% cf. 30%).

One of the reasons that children with additional needs may struggle to regulate how much time they spend online is the importance they place on the social side of online life. Nearly half of children with additional needs report that they get upset if they miss out on things that are happening on social media among their friends (43% cf. 37%).

Figure 4: *Children with additional needs struggle more to control the amount of time they spend online*



Base: Children with additional needs: 390. Children without additional needs: 871. Questions: How often do these things happen? (Answers: 'All the time' or 'Quite a lot'. How much do each of these things sound like you? Answers: 'That's exactly like me' or 'That's quite like me'

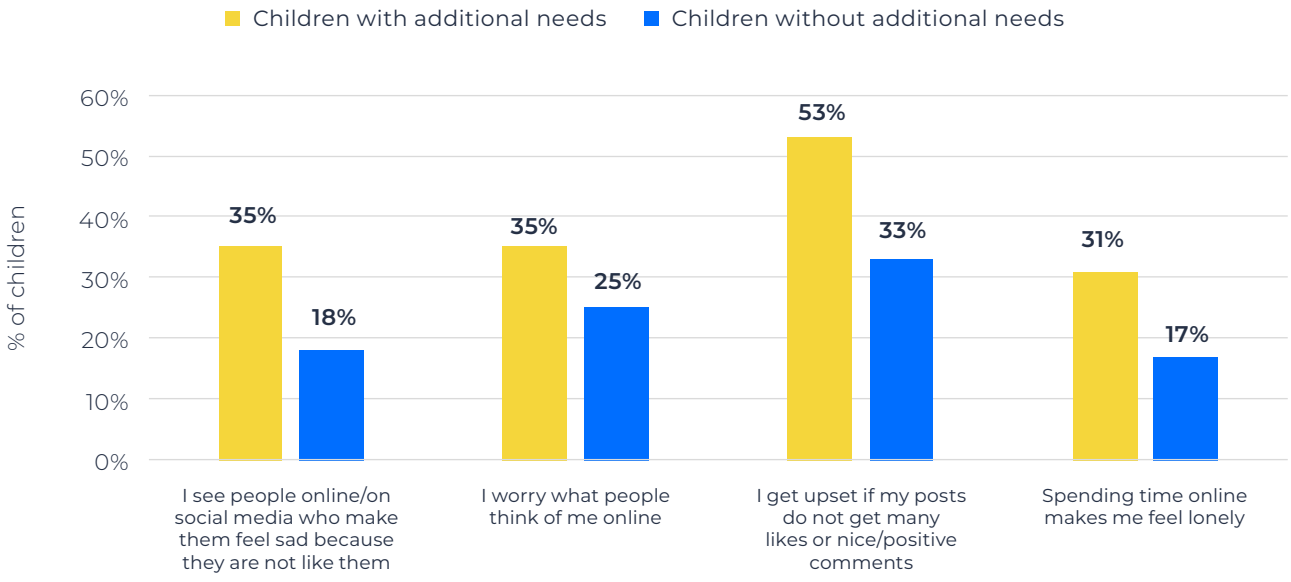
Time online can leave children feeling isolated and insecure.

Despite online spaces building confidence, they can also lead to anxiety about how they are perceived. Perhaps driven by the added importance these children place on online spaces for their socialising, children with additional needs are more likely than their peers to worry about what people think of them online (35% cf. 25%). When they post things online, they are more likely to get upset if it does not get many likes or positive comments (53% cf. 33%), and are twice as likely as their peers to report that they see people online or on social media who make them feel sad because they are not like them (35% cf. 18%).

The time they spend online can also impact their offline relationships: they are twice as likely as their peers (30% cf. 15%) to turn down opportunities to meet with friends so they can stay in on a device. This, coupled with the increased emotional investment they place in online spaces, can leave them feeling isolated. A third (31%) say online life makes them feel lonely: a figure which has doubled since 2022 (16%) and which is significantly higher than their peers (17%). Parents also echo this: 44% of parents of children with additional needs say time spent online makes their child lonely, compared with only 24% of parents of children without additional needs.

If we are to support children to thrive in a digital world, we must do more than simply protect them from harmful content. Online safety policy must also focus on promoting healthy digital engagement, including protecting children from the persuasive design features and functions that keep users engaged. Without this, we cannot meaningfully improve the overall digital wellbeing of children with additional needs.

Figure 5: *Children with additional needs experience more isolation and insecurity than their peers*



Base: Children with additional needs: 390. Children without additional needs: 871.Question: How much do each of these things sound like you?

Playing games online

Playing games online is important for many children with additional needs, with 92% doing so weekly. These environments reflect many of the complexities and contradictions that define the online lives of children with additional needs, making them a valuable context for examining these dynamics.

For many children with additional needs, especially those who are neurodivergent, playing games online offers more than entertainment. Previous research suggests that playing games online can support friendship and social interaction by enabling children to connect with others through shared interests.[vii] It can also encourage creativity, with 82% of neurodivergent children who play games online creating their own content.[viii] As a result, it is unsurprising that 58% of neurodivergent children who play games online report feeling happy while doing it.[ix]

However, alongside these benefits come significant challenges. Children with additional needs can find it particularly hard to regulate the amount of time they spend playing games online, while parents often struggle to support their child to strike a balance and maintain healthy digital habits. Over half (52%) of parents of children with additional needs think their child spent too much time playing games online.[x] Children themselves also recognise that they can become obsessive, with a quarter (26%) of neurodivergent children who play games online reporting they spend too much time doing it.[xi]

Given the immersive and interactive nature of many online games, children also face heightened exposure to harm. Two in five (44%) children with additional needs report often seeing or hearing bad things when playing games online.[xii] They are also more likely than their peers to report spending money in games and on apps without realising it (39% cf. 20%).[xiii] As a result, this is a top concern for parents of children with additional needs, with 66% saying they are worried about their child spending money online.[xiv]

To support children and parents in navigating these challenges, Internet Matters has developed a range of tailored resources to help families respond to the situations children face online, from managing communication in games and social spaces, to understanding online boundaries. Alongside this, Internet Matters has created interactive guides and video content to help young people stay safe while gaming and socialising online. Parents can access practical support on topics such as managing screen time, navigating online friendships and understanding community guidelines.[xv]

Parent

"If we see they're playing a certain type of game, we talk about it and make sure they're not playing things that are beyond their level of comprehension."

Parent

"There was the obsession where it literally was all he could think about, all he could focus on at one point. It did become silly with {an online game}, a huge addiction."

Young person, 15-17

Like summer this year I basically isolated myself because I was too addicted to my phone and Xbox and whatnot.

Ailish's story

Ailish is mum to 15-year-old and 12-year-old boys. Her 12-year-old was diagnosed with autism 18 months ago. He changes games often, but is currently playing Jurassic World, Blobtown, Roblox and Planet Coaster Two. Her neurotypical 15-year-old enjoys playing Minecraft and Roblox.

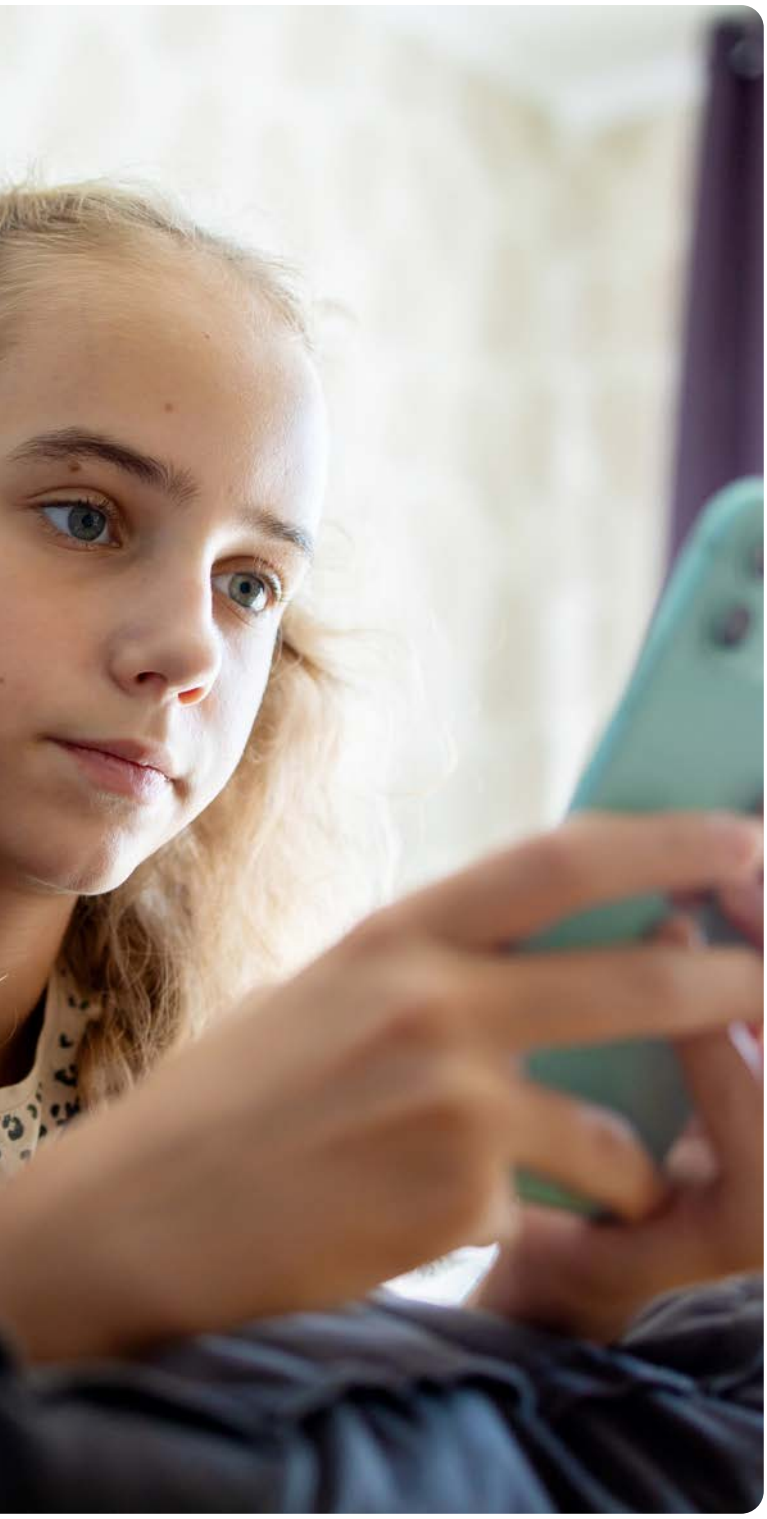
"Both of them are similar in that they sometimes want to play with friends and sometimes they're happy playing on their own," says Ailish, when describing her children's online gaming habits. "The big difference is that my 12-year-old will refer to strangers as friends." She says this is true for people he's just met in these online spaces. "One day he might fall out with someone and the next day he'll be really anxious because of the falling out, even though they've only met in the virtual world."

Ailish says that both of her children have different experiences with interactions online. "My 12-year-old might get frustrated when playing with his friends. He sometimes misreads social cues, which can make him very angry and upset." She says that he can appear confident online because he's in a space where people are talking about something he enjoys. "But he can have intense reactions and emotions to people or things he doesn't know."

When asked whether her children perceive online risks differently, Ailish says: "It really depends on the situation." Her 12-year-old is unlikely to arrange a meet-up with someone he's interacted with online. However, he does struggle with in-game purchases. "A lot of these games have those deals where you can buy certain bundles now or the price goes up later. It can put a lot of pressure on him as he feels like he needs to have things immediately," she says. "That pressure can be intense on us financially as a family."

When asked what advice Ailish would give to other parents with children who have different social needs, Ailish said "It's a balance. You don't want to be over your child's shoulder the whole time, but equally, there is a need for a 'listening ear' to pick up on anything that intuitively does not feel quite right, whether that be the conversation they are having, the language they are using or the meltdown that they might be experiencing."

Exposure to harm



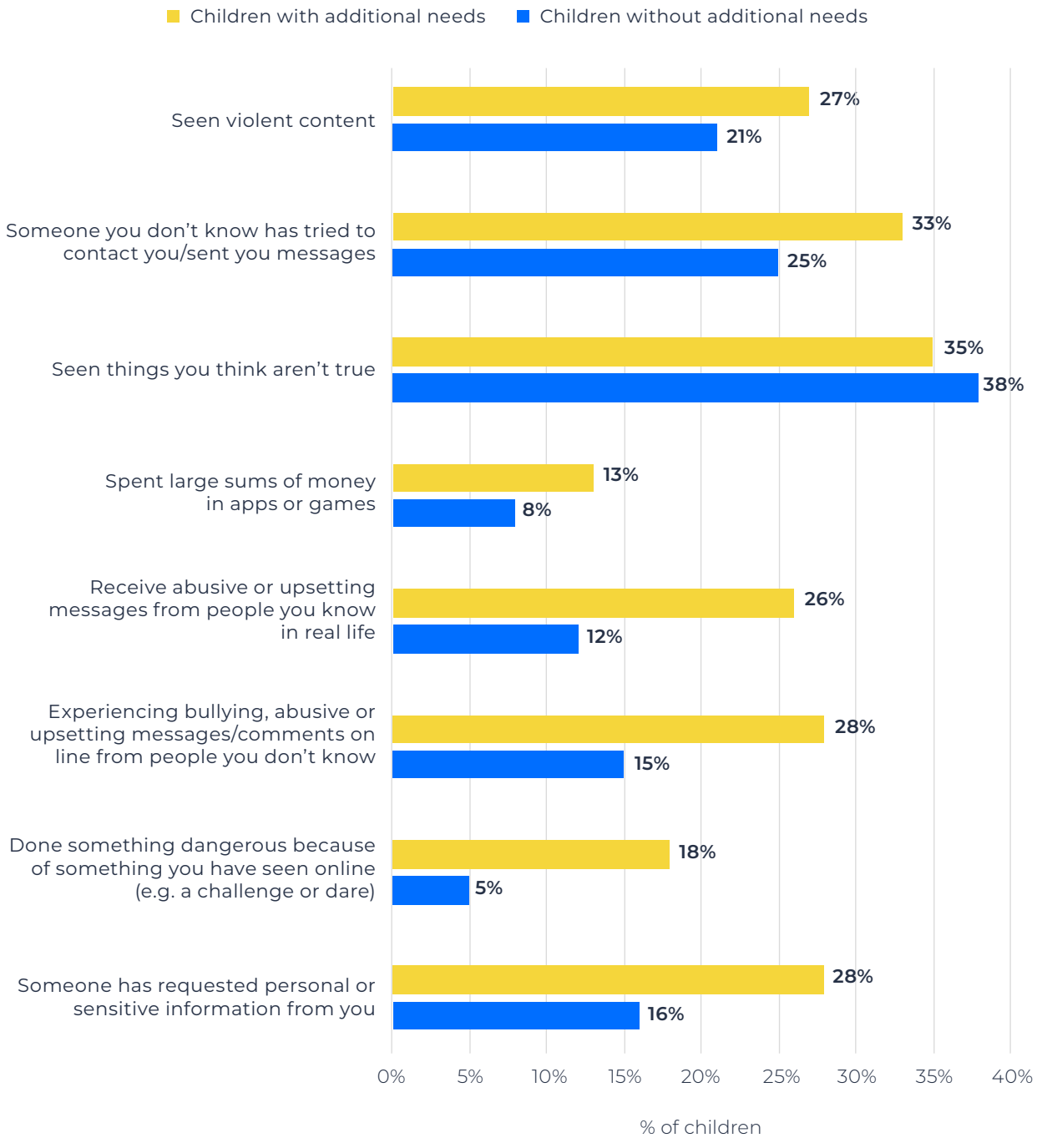
Children with additional needs encounter more harm online.

Four in five children with additional needs have experienced harm online, which is significantly higher than their peers (79% cf. 63%). Some of the most common harms experienced include seeing things they think are not true (35%), being contacted by strangers (33%), and having their personal information requested by someone online (28%).

When comparing to their peers, we find they are nearly four times more likely to do something dangerous because of something they have seen online (18% cf. 5%) and twice as likely to be bullied by people they know in real life (26% cf. 12%) or by strangers (28% cf. 15%). These children also report that this happens to them more frequently: 27% of children with additional needs report that they have upsetting experiences interacting with other people online (e.g. bullying) all the time or quite a lot, compared to 12% of their peers.

These disparities are likely in part driven by the online spaces where these children spend their time. As explored above, children with additional needs tend to gravitate towards more interactive spaces and activities, such as playing games, going on chat forums and doing livestreams. These environments are typically less regulated and can allow for greater contact with strangers.[xvi] This correlation is supported by our 'Connected and Conflicted' report (2025), which found that the more a child actively engages and interacts within less-regulated spaces, the higher their likelihood of encountering harm.[xvii]

Figure 6: *Children with additional needs experience more harm online than their peers*



Base: Children with additional needs: 390. Children without additional needs: 871. Question: Have you had any of the following experiences online?

Girls with additional needs face heightened risks.

Previous research has found that, while girls are more at risk of certain online harms than boys, such as being abused and harassed, their overall rates of harm are comparable.[xviii] Worryingly, we find that girls with additional needs are much more likely to have encountered harm online than boys with these same needs (84% cf. 75%).

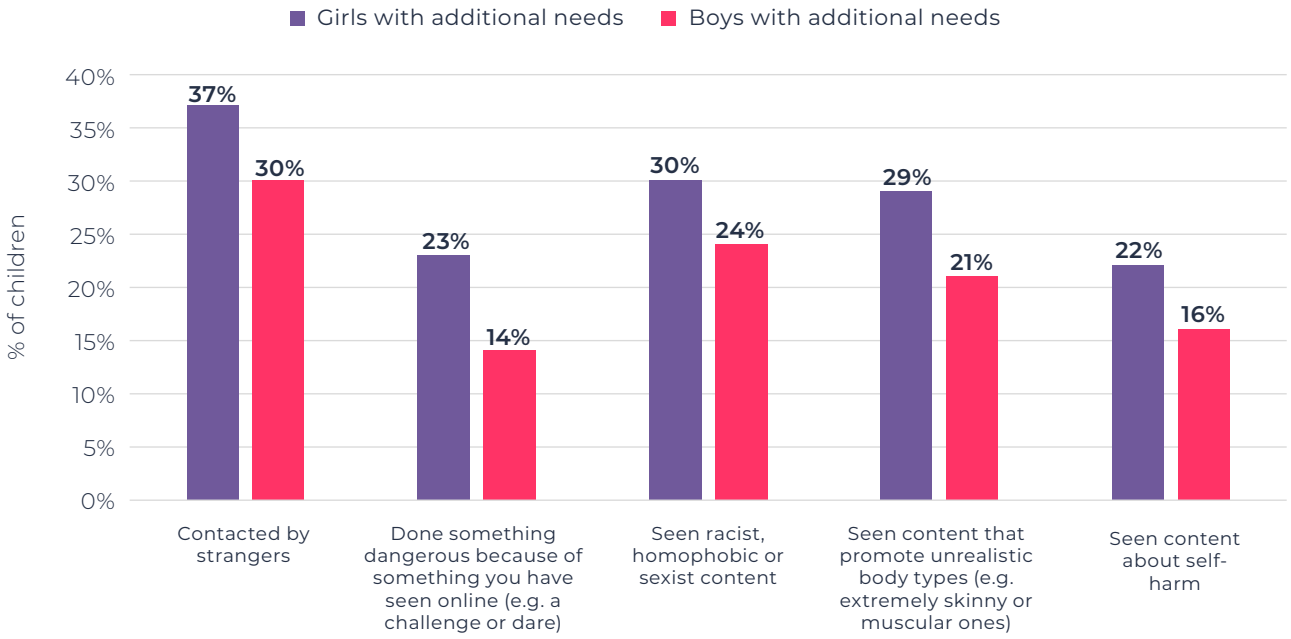
Areas where they encounter significantly more harm than boys with additional needs include exposure to self-harm content (22% cf. 16%), content that promotes unrealistic bodies (29% cf. 21%), and hateful content like sexist content (30% cf. 24%). These differences are significantly larger than the differences in the harms experienced by girls and boys without additional needs.

One reason for this may relate to how platform design can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Children with additional needs have notably lower overall wellbeing than their peers, including being less likely to feel calm and relaxed (63% cf. 72%) or cheerful (68% cf. 80%). This can shape how they interact with digital environments, including a likelihood to engage more with negative content or communities.

This intersects with established patterns in girls' online experiences, where content relating to body image, misogynistic harassment and contact from strangers is more prevalent.[xix] As a result, girls with additional needs may be more likely to interact with certain types of harmful content and behaviours. This is then further exacerbated by platform algorithms which aim to deliver a personalised online experience by showing content that mirrors and reinforces users' interests and moods, rather than disrupt them.[xx]

While the Online Safety Act is aimed at reducing children's exposure to harmful content and contact, these figures suggest that further action is needed. Protecting children from harmful content must also extend beyond social media, to cover all platforms where children are – including new and emerging spaces like AI chatbots.

Figure 7: *Girls with additional needs are more at risk of harm online*



Base: Girls with additional needs: 173. Boys with additional needs: 212. Question: Have you had any of the following experiences online?

New and emerging risks: Generative AI

Children with additional needs use AI chatbots more than their peers (82% cf. 64%) and are engaging with them more frequently. They are also using AI chatbots in different ways, being much more likely than their peers to use them for companionship (16% cf. 4%) and escapism (33% cf. 22%).[xxi] While this can be positive for building confidence, learning and creativity, this use also presents heightened risk.

This is especially true when we consider that 50% of children with additional needs who use AI chatbots have no concerns about following their advice and 26% say they would rather talk to an AI chatbot than a real person. This heightens the risk of overreliance and blurred boundaries, as they may struggle more than their peers to distinguish between a helpful, sycophantic software response and authentic human empathy. This can further lead children with additional needs to be less likely to question incorrect or dangerous information that AI chatbots provide.

Generative AI also presents greater challenges for children with additional needs in other ways. For example, they are more likely than their peers to have used a declothing app,[4] or know someone who has (7% cf. 3%). Children with additional needs are also more likely to say they have believed fake or AI-generated news content (43% cf. 23%) and more likely to say this has led to upset (23% cf. 12%) and embarrassment (16% cf. 9%).[xxiii]

As with other aspects of online life, generative AI presents significant opportunities for children with additional needs – as well as significant harm. This highlights why we must ensure that any platforms used by children are made safe by design, before they are made available for children.

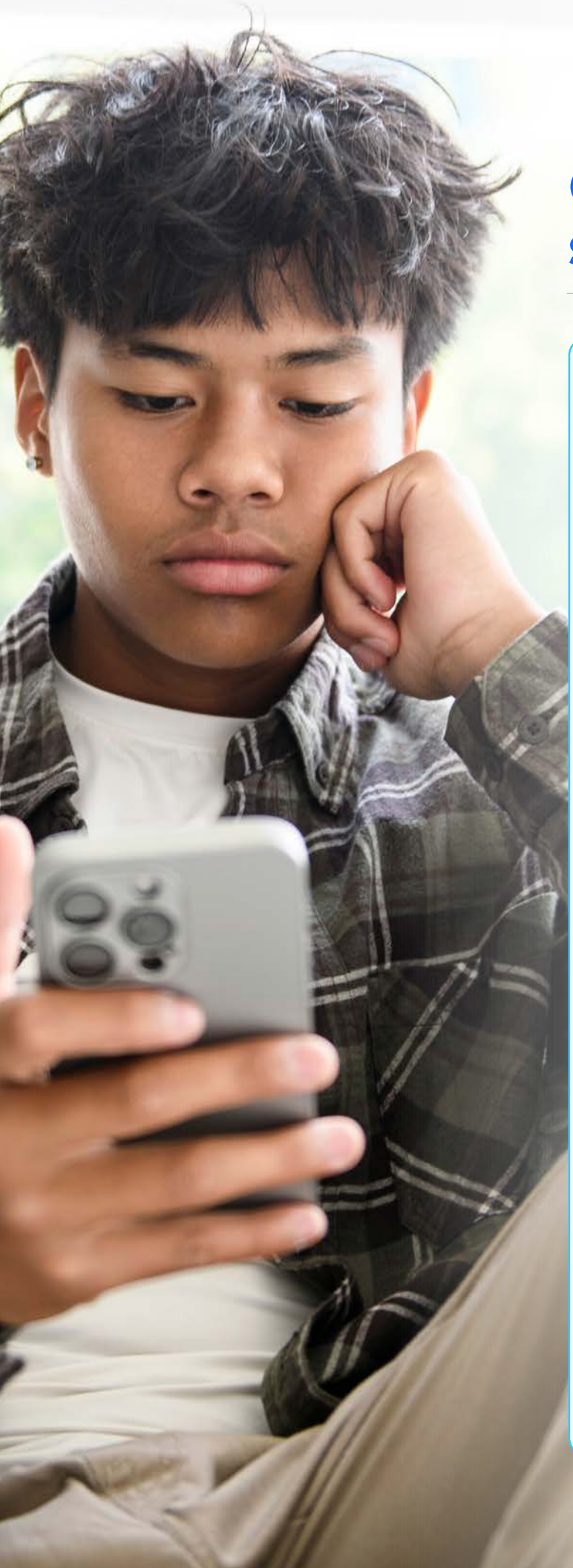
"In our experience, young people are increasingly turning to AI chatbots not only to extend their learning and deepen their understanding of topics, but also for emotional reassurance, guidance, and decision-making support. Many students benefit from the accessibility and immediacy of AI, using it to revisit concepts, ask questions they may feel uncomfortable raising in class, and build confidence in their independent learning.

However, we are also seeing students use these tools to seek deeply personal advice and support that would traditionally come from a trusted, responsible adult who understands their individual communication styles, vulnerabilities, and complex needs.

While AI has significant educational potential, there is a growing concern that some young people may place undue trust in chatbot responses without the contextual safeguarding, empathy, or nuanced understanding that trained adults provide. This highlights the need for balanced, well-informed approaches to AI use in SEN environments, ensuring technology enhances - rather than replaces - meaningful human relationships and specialist pastoral care."

Jack Sharpe and Rebecca Watson, Brookfields Specialist SEN school

4. A declothing app is an AI tool which strips the clothes from images of real people.



Children's support ecosystems

Children and young people

Children with additional needs take a range of actions to manage their online experiences.

When encountering harm online, the most common action they take is to talk to someone in their life about it. The most likely person these children turn to is a parent or guardian (76%), followed by friend or sibling (48%) or teacher (34%). As well as talking to parents when harms occur, 59% report talking to their parents about things they see online that worry or upset them. This highlights how important it is that the people in their lives are equipped to support and help them get the best out of the digital world.

Alongside speaking to a trusted person, children also take action on platforms to keep themselves safe and in response to harm. We find that children with additional needs are more likely than their peers to take action on a platform. For example, in response to harm, children with additional needs are more likely to change their privacy settings (40% cf. 28%), choose not to use the app it happened on (38% cf. 23%) or to deactivate their account (34% cf. 13%). They are also more likely to avoid using certain apps, websites or games because of the way people act or talk to each other (48% cf. 27%). This higher likelihood to take action in response to harm may be driven by a stronger emotional response to it, perhaps driven by the elevated importance that children with additional needs place on these environments for their positive wellbeing, or could be because they are experiencing harms at higher rates than their peers.

Although it is positive to see children taking action to keep themselves safe and support their digital wellbeing, we cannot leave online safety to children and young people alone. Children's online safety and wellbeing is a shared responsibility with government, industry, schools and families all having a role to play.

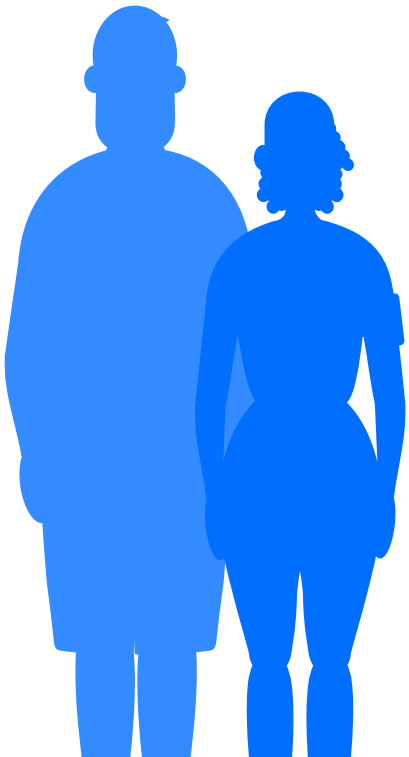
Parents

Parents take relatively similar actions to manage their children's online lives, regardless of whether their child has additional needs or not.

This includes setting parental controls (50% of parents of children with additional needs cf. 51% of parents of children without these needs), using tools to limit screen time (33% cf. 30%) and looking up any apps, websites or games before letting their child use them, to check they are suitable (41% cf. 40%).

Where they differ is that parents of children with additional needs are less likely to have clear rules about how much time they can spend online (41% cf. 52%) and are less likely to take devices away at certain times (29% cf. 39%). This echoes previous research, which found that parents of children with additional needs find it harder to set boundaries with their children about their online lives due to the fact that online spaces often play a more prominent and important role in these children's lives. Given we know that regulating the amount of time children spend online is a key issue for families of children with additional needs, supporting parents with this is central to improved digital wellbeing.

When harm does occur, parents of children with additional needs are more likely to reach out to someone for help, for example a teacher or counsellor, (32% cf. 16%) or reach out to a specialist organisation who deal with online harms (26% cf. 13%). It is therefore critical that, alongside reducing children's exposure to harm, we ensure that those around families are equipped to provide support and that parents know who to turn to when something goes wrong online.



Parent

"We started talking about online safety quite early on. It's been an ongoing conversation that's changed as they've gotten older and as the types of games they play have changed."

Parent

"If they think they'll lose access, they won't tell you what's happening. Instead, we focus on setting reasonable boundaries, so they feel safe coming to us when they need to."

Parent

"He could be on it from the moment he wakes up to the moment he's gone to bed. I struggle with trying to limit the amount of time that he has and it does get to be quite a battle sometimes."

Schools

Schools and other educational settings play an important role in educating children about different areas of media and digital literacy.

Media and digital literacy can be defined as: being able to evaluate information and distinguish between what is true and false online; being able to create and share digital content responsibly and safely; and awareness and ability to protect yourself from the risks of being online. Taken together, these will enable children to flourish in digital environments.

Internet Matters research finds that media literacy education in UK schools is a postcode lottery, due to a lack of guidance for schools on what to teach and where, limited teacher training and varying access to high-quality resources.[xxv]

This uneven approach leads to many children not being taught central media literacy knowledge and skills needed in a digital world. For example, 67% of children with additional needs have never talked to their school or teachers about AI in general,[xxvi] while over a quarter (29%) say that they have never talked to their school or teachers about how to tell if online news is true.[xxvii]

These gaps in learning are also likely exacerbated by the fact that children with additional needs are more likely to miss school days,[xxviii] and when media literacy education is delivered infrequently and on a one-off basis such as through school assemblies (as it often is), this can lead to them missing out.

Upcoming changes, such as those being made to the English school curriculum, are central to improving children with additional needs' media literacy. However, the success of these changes will depend on the support that teachers and schools receive from government to deliver them.

Platforms

As platforms allow children to socialise, learn and play in a digital world, industry have a fundamental role to play in children's digital wellbeing and keeping children safe from harm.

Some platforms are taking steps to support children with specific additional needs. For example, TikTok's photosensitivity filters and Meta's real-time captions and voice commands have been designed to support children with epilepsy and deafness respectively. Other platforms, such as Roblox, support the development of resources that help parents manage their neurodivergent children's online lives.[xxx]

However, as evidenced by the levels of harm that children with additional needs report, and the negative impacts on their wellbeing, we know that more needs to be done. Platforms must take more steps to mitigate children's experiences of harm, and to help children to better manage how much time they spend online. Children are typically early adopters of technologies, which makes it vital to ensure that platforms are not released to market without sufficient safeguards in place.

Additionally, parents tell us that they know their child best and what may be right for one child of a certain age, may not be for another due to an additional need. Therefore, offering parents more control on platforms is central to support these families.

Government and Ofcom

The role of government in supporting the online lives of children with additional needs is multi-faceted.

Education

Each nation of the UK is responsible for setting their curriculum, and for ensuring schools and teachers are equipped to provide children with a comprehensive media literacy education. To improve children's media literacy, government must ensure that schools have clear guidance, and that teachers are trained for a digital world and have access to high-quality resources. Individual nations are also responsible for ensuring that children with additional needs have adequate educational support and the attention being given to this across the nations presents an opportunity to improve the media literacy of hundreds of thousands of children with additional needs.

Online safety

Outside of education, the UK Government sets the rules for protecting children online across all four nations. The 2026 consultation 'Growing up in the Online World', and the new powers through the Children's Schools and Wellbeing Act, provide an opportunity for government to do more and go further.[xxxi]

When it comes to existing legislation, the Online Safety Act and Ofcom's codes of practice do include mention of children with additional needs. Ofcom's risk assessments, which platforms must carry out to be compliant with their Protection of Children codes, state that services must consider children who may be more vulnerable to different harms.[xxxii] This includes children with special educational needs and disabilities, as outlined in the Children's Register of Risk.[xxxiii] It is critical that Ofcom and government hold platforms to account and act firmly and decisively where legislative requirements are not being met.

There also remain many untapped opportunities for government to improve the digital lives of children with additional needs. Recent publications, such as the Media Literacy Action Plan,[xxxiv] the Freedom from Violence and Abuse Strategy,[xxxv] and the Government's online safety parent hub,[xxxvi] do not consistently signpost where the online lives of children with additional needs can be supported.

Recommendations

Children with additional needs experience the best and the worst of online life. As a result of this, ensuring that they are well supported has always been a central component of Internet Matters' work. In that time, however, we have seen their lives become increasingly polarised. As they stand to gain – and lose – more from the time they spend online, it is critical that they are supported effectively by all those who are responsible for their online safety and wellbeing.

Below, we outline our recommendations for platforms, schools and government to ensure that children with additional needs can maximise the enrichment that online spaces bring to their lives, while mitigating the risks they are exposed to. While many of these recommendations would support all children, they are especially important for children with additional needs, who are more at risk of harm in online spaces.

Government and schools

Take a risk-based approach to regulating platforms. Children's access to online spaces should be determined by the level of risk a platform or service presents, and the effectiveness of the safeguards it provides. When assessing risk, the harms that children with additional needs experience, and the dynamics that underpin them, must be considered.

Mandate robust age assurance. Fundamental to delivering the above is online platforms and services' ability to reliably determine the age of users. Highly effective age assurance should be used to accurately establish users' ages, allowing services to tailor age-appropriate experiences and to enforce age requirements, ensuring children cannot access platforms not designed for them.

Monitor the efficacy of existing legislation and regulation and take further action where needed. Government and Ofcom must consider whether all children are being adequately protected and whether platforms and services are taking the steps they are required to, under law, to safeguard children that use their products. Where they are not, action must be taken to mitigate this, especially in relation to the new and emerging risks presented by technology such as AI.

Include tailored support for parents of children with additional needs in the Government's online safety parent hub.[xxxvii] This should include advice and guidance relating to the harms we know children with additional needs are particularly at risk of, and which recognises the different dynamics at play for such children. This should include advice on contact from strangers, bullying and recognising mis- and disinformation, as well as guidance and support to help parents manage screentime. To avoid duplication of efforts, the hub should also signpost parents to existing, proven resources.

Support schools to deliver high-quality media and digital literacy education to all children, including those with additional needs. This should be done through:

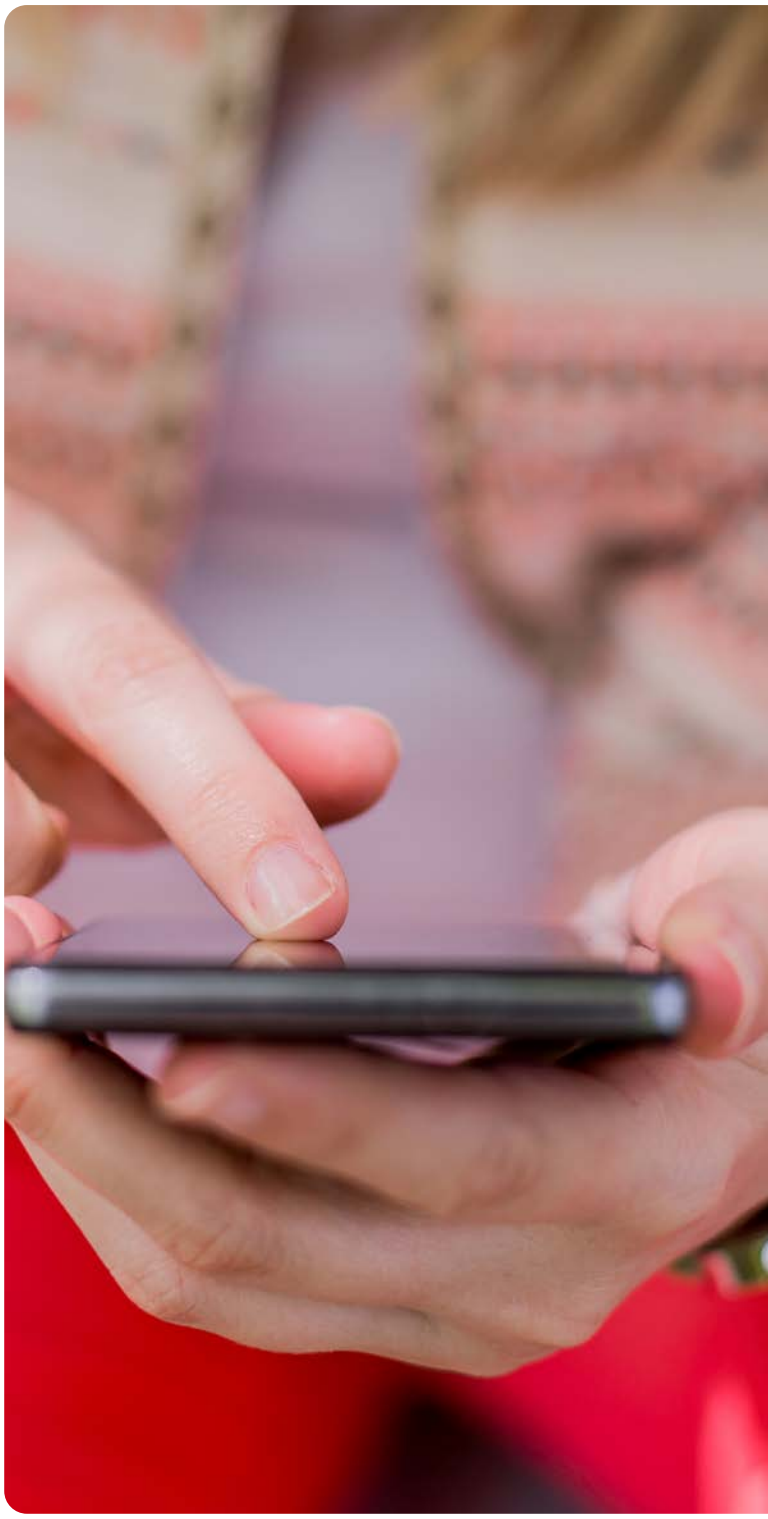
- **Clear guidance for schools** on what elements of media and digital literacy to teach, when and where. This should be kept up to date with emerging risks, such as AI.
- **Access to a repository of high-quality and adaptable resources to teach media and digital literacy literacy.** This should be kept up to date with emerging threats and trends and must contain resources to teach media and digital literacy to children with additional needs, with different recommended approaches based on different children's needs and behaviours.
- **Training for teachers to be able to confidently teach about all areas of media and digital literacy. This must include support teaching assistants, classroom assistants and pupil support workers,** who are most often supporting children with additional needs in educational settings. This should include training and support to adapt resources to match the individual needs of these children.

Platforms

Take a safety-by-design approach to the development of products and services, including by providing children with developmentally appropriate experiences. Platforms should design features and functionalities from the outset with the safety of children in mind, ensuring that they are safe for use before being made accessible to users. Platforms should offer experiences that can be tailored to children's ages and their stages of development, so that children with different needs can have appropriate online experiences and these can be easily set up and supported by their parents, where needed. High risk features and functionalities, such as those that keep children engaged for longer or increase the risk of harm, should be restricted from child users.

Support parents by providing easy-to-use and easy-to tailor-parental controls, alongside clear guidance and support. Providing parents of children with additional needs with the ability to change settings is central because parents will know their child's needs best. This must be accompanied by clear guidance, and making these controls as accessible and standardised as possible to support parents to manage their children's online lives. However, these tools cannot come at the expense of other measures.

Incorporate media literacy-by-design into platforms. Media literacy-by-design means including features that actively help users to evaluate, question and contextualise the content they encounter, as well as functionalities that allow users to understand and tailor their experiences. This could include features such as signposting to community guidelines, intuitive and easy to change settings and controls, clear labelling of AI-generated or manipulated content in algorithm feeds, content warnings for graphic content or prompts showing users how to change their feed. These could be developed and refined through testing with children with additional needs.



Supporting Parents

Parents and carers remain children's main source of support and guidance when it comes to online safety and digital wellbeing.[xxxviii] At internetmatters.org, we provide expert advice and practical tools to help families navigate children's digital lives with confidence. Our website offers hundreds of free resources, including tailored support for families of children with additional learning needs and vulnerabilities.

- New additional needs hub: This hub brings together accessible guidance, activities and practical support to help parents understand how different needs can shape children's online experiences. The hub includes advice on communication, emotional wellbeing, managing online interactions, screen time, gaming and responding to online issues in a way that meets children's individual needs.
- Online issues advice hub: This hub includes guidance on a wide range of online safety concerns, including bullying, harmful content, online relationships, misinformation and privacy, with practical steps to prevent or respond to harm.
- Step-by-step parental controls guides: These are easy-to-follow instructions to help parents set up safety controls across devices, apps, broadband and gaming platforms to support safer online experiences.
- Guidance on harassment and abuse online: this includes conversation starters and practical advice to help parents support children in recognising, responding to and challenging harmful behaviour online.
- A wellbeing apps guide: This is a guide to a curated selection of apps that support children's emotional wellbeing, healthy habits and positive online interactions through mindfulness, reflection and wellbeing tools.

EVERY CHILD SAFE ONLINE

Supporting children with additional needs

internet matters.org

About Internet Matters

Internet Matters is an independent, not-for-profit organisation. Since our launch in 2014, we have provided information and advice to parents and carers to help their children navigate the ever-changing digital landscape. We conduct regular research into children's online lives, and parents' perspectives, and use this to develop resources and recommendations to policymakers and industry.

References

i. *Internet Matters, Children's wellbeing in a digital world: Year 5 Index Report (March 2026), link.*

ii. *Internet Matters, Children's wellbeing in a digital world: Year 5 Index Report (March 2026), link.*

iii. *Internet Matters, Digital Wellbeing Research Programme (Accessed 11th May 2026), link.*

iv. *BBC, What is SEND and how many children get support? (February 2026), link.*

v. *Internet Matters, Me, myself and AI (July 2025), link.*

vi. *Internet Matters, Children's wellbeing in a digital world: Year 4 Index Report (March 2025), link.*

vii. *Internet Matters, More than a game (April 2024), link.*

viii. *Internet Matters, More than a game (April 2024), link.*

ix. *Internet Matters, More than a game (April 2024), link.*

x. *Internet Matters, More than a game (April 2024), link.*

xi. *Internet Matters, More than a game (April 2024), link.*

xii. *Internet Matters, More than a game (April 2024), link.*

xiii. *Internet Matters, Children's wellbeing in a digital world: Year 5 Index Report (March 2026), link.*

xiv. *Internet Matters, Pulse (November 2025), unpublished.*

xv. *Internet Matters, More than a game (April 2024), link.*

xvi. *Internet Matters, Connected and conflicted (April 2025), link.*

xvii. *Internet Matters, Connected and conflicted (April 2025), link.*

xviii. *Internet Matters, The Gender Gap (January 2026), link.*

xix. *Internet Matters, "So standard it's not noteworthy" (March 2024), link.*

xx. *Internet Matters, Informed or overwhelmed? (October 2025), link.*

xxi. *Internet Matters, Me, myself and AI (July 2025), link.*

xxii. *Internet Matters, The new face of digital abuse (October 2024), link.*

xxiii. *Internet Matters, Informed or overwhelmed? (October 2025), link.*

xxiv. *Internet Matters, Children's wellbeing in a digital world: Year 4 Index Report (March 2025), link.*

xxv. *Internet Matters, A Vision for Media Literacy (June 2024), link.*

xxvi. *Internet Matters, Me, myself and AI (July 2025), link.*

xxvii. *Internet Matters, Informed or overwhelmed? (October 2025), link.*

xxviii. *The Conversation, Children with special educational needs are more likely to miss school (October 2025), link.*

xxix. *Internet Matters, Data briefing: online safety in schools (June 2023), link.*

xxx. *Internet Matters, What is Roblox? Guide (Accessed 11th May 2026), link.*

xxxi. *UK Government, Growing up in the online world: a national consultation (March 2026), link.*

xxxii. *Ofcom, Online safety regulatory documents and guidance (October 2025), link.*

xxxiii. *Ofcom, Online Safety regulatory documents and guidance: Children's Register of Risks (April 2025), link.*

xxxiv. *UK Government, A safe, informed digital nation (March 2026), link.*

xxxv. *UK Government, Freedom from violence and abuse: a cross-government strategy (December 2025), link.*

xxxvi. *UK Government, Help your child stay safe online (Accessed 12th May 2026), link.*

xxxvii. *UK Government, Help your child stay safe online (Accessed 12th May 2026), link.*

xxxviii. *Internet Matters, Pulse (November 2025), link.*

internet matters.org

Faraday Buildings, Ground Floor,
1 Knightrider Street, London, EC4V 5BT

info@internetmatters.org

InternetMatters
@InternetMatters
Internet Matters Ltd
@internetmattersorg