

A photograph of a man with a beard and a young girl with curly hair sitting together. The man is holding a white tablet, and the girl is pointing at the screen. They are both looking at the tablet with interest. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

OCTOBER 2026

First Steps in a Digital World:

How families with
children aged 5
and under navigate
digital technology

Foreword

The early years are an important stage of childhood, laying the foundations for later life. Giving every child the best possible start is a shared goal of parents, educators and policymakers. With these early experiences taking place in an increasingly digital world, we need to understand the use and impact of technology on young children.

From dancing along to their favourite nursery rhymes on a smart speaker in the living room to watching videos that make toothbrushing more fun, digital technology is already embedded in the everyday lives of many young children. The digital habits children develop, and the choices about how technology fits into family life, all begin to take shape during these formative years. It is therefore unsurprising that many parents are thinking carefully about screen use in early childhood and the role they want technology to play in their children's lives.

As this report demonstrates, however, the decisions parents face around device usage are rarely straightforward. While screen use in the early years should be carefully considered, for many parents, deciding when, how and why their young children should engage with digital technology has become a defining challenge of modern parenting. Parents are weighing concerns about their children's development and wellbeing against the opportunities for learning, creativity and connection that technology offers, while also relying on it to support busy family life – all in an environment that is evolving rapidly and can often feel difficult to navigate.

For parents to make informed choices about how children engage with technology, they need support from trusted sources. Recent government action including the publication of screen time

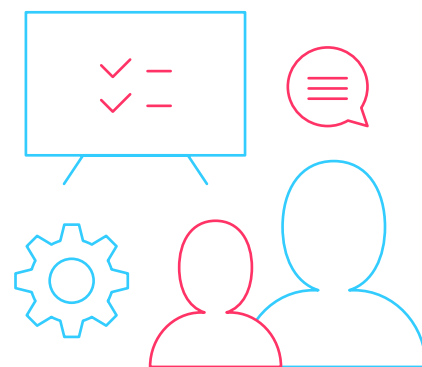
guidance for parents of children under-5 and guidance on screen use for early years settings are welcome steps that recognise the importance of healthy screen use in early childhood.

But helping families navigate the digital world requires more than guidance and advice. This must also come alongside access to age-appropriate platforms designed with young children in mind, so if parents choose to let their child use these platforms they can ensure their child is safe. For many, digital habits and choices about technology are also shaped by factors outside of the digital environment, such as the availability of childcare or access to affordable, high-quality activities for children.

If we want every child to have the best possible start in an increasingly digital world, we must listen to parents and understand the reality of modern family life. Only then can we support them to address the new challenges they face as parents and ensure that we collectively set the foundations for young children to use technology safely and appropriately, and to continue this as they grow.

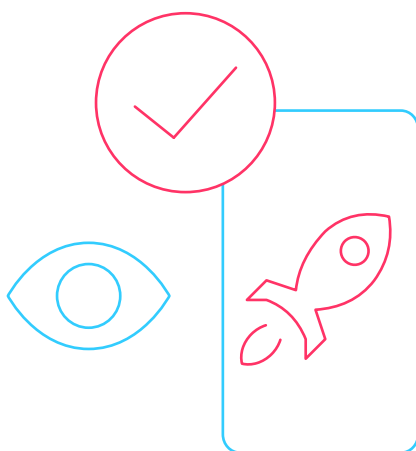
Rachel Huggins

CEO of Internet Matters



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Executive summary

Children are growing up in a world with digital technology all around them. As a result, parents and carers¹ are navigating questions about their children's digital device use earlier than ever before.

While recent public debate about children and technology has focused largely on older children and teenagers, the foundations of children's digital lives are laid much earlier. The digital experiences of children in their early years, the content they consume, and the screen use habits that are established can all shape how children continue to engage with technology as they grow up. Yet, very young children's use of screens often generates polarised debate, with parents faced with competing views around whether technology should be used by this age group at all.

As a result, parents are making decisions about technology from the earliest stages of childhood, often while navigating an expansive and overwhelming landscape of advice. Importantly, most parents feel it's essential to prepare their children for a digital future, not shield them from it. They recognise that digital technology will be a necessary part of their children's lives and want to help them develop the skills, confidence and resilience needed to navigate a digital world. While welcome steps have been taken to support families to make informed decisions, such as the Government's recent screen time guidance for under-5s, families continue to need access to advice and resources, alongside healthy digital environments.

Drawing on survey data and in-depth interviews with parents, this report explores how and why children aged 5 and under are engaging with digital technology. It highlights the realities of digital parenting in the early years, including how parents are already handling issues of online safety and media literacy, alongside the support families need to confidently navigate a world where digital technology has become an essential part of life for many.

Digital technology is embedded in early childhood

- **Children aged 5 and under are engaging with a range of digital devices.** Most children (95%) have access to at least one digital device, with smart TVs (86%) and tablets (77%) being used the most. Over half (56%) of children already have access to smartphones, primarily through their parent.
- **Screen use increases significantly throughout the early years.** Children aged 5 and under spend over 9 hours using screens per week, equivalent to around 1 hour and 22 minutes a day. Under-2s spend on average 44 minutes on screens, rising to 1 hour and 40 minutes among children aged 4-5.
- **Family environments play a key role in shaping children's earliest digital experiences.** Parents' attitudes towards devices and previous parenting experiences influence when and how devices are introduced. Older siblings and other family members can expose younger children to technology or content at an early age.
- **Access to digital devices is not equal across families.** Children from lower-income households are significantly less likely to have access to devices than those from higher-income households, including tablets (65% vs. 84%) and smart TVs (78% vs. 94%).² While access to digital devices may not be necessary in the early years, inequalities in access could have longer-term implications, including fewer opportunities in the future to develop media and digital literacy skills essential for later life.

1. 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.
2. In this report, lowest-income household refers to households where annual pre-tax household income is up to £20,000 a year. Comparatively, highest-income household refers to households where household income is over £80,000 a year.

Parents see value in digital technology for their children and family life

- **Parents see digital technology as an important tool to support learning and development.**

Children use games, video content, apps, audio stories and books to practice skills including literacy, numeracy and problem-solving. Parents also described how technology can support language learning, strengthen connections to cultural heritage, and help children develop a range of other skills, including communication and fine motor skills.

- **Vulnerable children³ gain additional benefits from digital technology.** A third (33%) of parents with a vulnerable child say that their child uses devices to support a learning or development need. Parents described technology supporting areas such as speech and communication, as well as helping their child develop soft skills they may struggle with such as sharing and collaborating with others.
- **Digital devices play a practical role in helping families manage everyday life, but parents still feel conflicted by their role.** Two in five parents (41%) say they give their child a device to keep them occupied. This could be to help balance the competing demands of work, childcare or household responsibilities. Despite recognising these benefits, two in five parents (41%) say they feel judged by others when using a device to occupy a child in public.

Concerns about screen use, online content and platform design are common among parents of young children

- **Screen use is one of the defining challenges of modern parenting.** Nearly two-fifths of parents (38%) are concerned about the amount of time their child aged 5 and under spends on screens. A third (34%) worry that device use may displace offline play and 32% are concerned about its impact on behaviour, and particularly on children's ability to disengage from devices. A quarter are also concerned with how device use and the content their children consume impacts development and wellbeing.
- **Concerns about age-inappropriate content start early.** Nearly a third (31%) of parents are concerned about their child accessing age-inappropriate content, while a quarter (26%) are already aware of their child having encountered such content, including violent or mature material. These concerns stemmed both from children accessing platforms not designed for their age group and from unsuitable content appearing within platforms perceived as child-friendly.
- **Platform design creates further challenges.** Unlike traditional broadcast TV, many digital services now continuously recommend, personalise and surface content to children which poses new challenges. Parents described how platform features like autoplay, recommender systems and the ability to quickly flick through endless content can increase exposure to unsuitable content, prolong screen engagement and, in their view, make it harder for children to sustain attention.

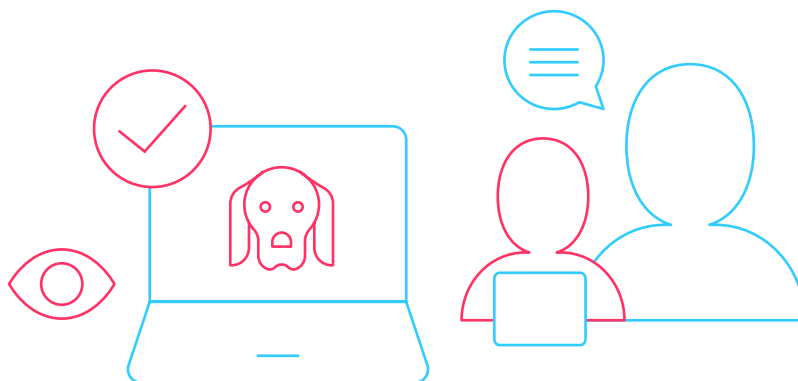
3. For the purposes of this report, we refer to children who have been diagnosed with or identified to have a learning, physical or development need as 'vulnerable'.

Parents are taking steps to support their children's online safety and media literacy

- **Most parents are actively involved in their children's digital lives.** Supervising their child is the main approach, while the vast majority (89%) also have at least one rule to manage device use and 83% have set up at least one parental control on the devices their child uses. Parents are also having conversations with their children about digital technology, including about screen time (43%), household rules (38%) and how technology works (27%).
- **Parents recognise that online safety extends beyond children's device use to their own digital habits.** Three in five parents (59%) worry about the impact of their own device use on their children, while 43% say they feel distracted by their devices when spending time together. Many parents identified role-modelling healthy digital behaviours as an important part of supporting their children.

Families need support to navigate digital technology and support healthy digital habits in the early years

- **Industry should ensure digital services are safe and age-appropriate by design.** Services should also make it easy for parents to identify appropriate content and to find, set up and manage safety settings and parental controls.
- **Government should build on its screen time guidance for under-5s and support parents and early years settings to put it into practice.** This should include practical support for parents on selecting age- and developmentally appropriate content, alongside funded training for early years professionals.
- **Parents remain central to decisions about how young children use digital technology.** They need clear, practical and age-appropriate advice to help them make informed decisions about the devices and content their children access, and the routines and boundaries they set at home.



Introduction

Digital technology is now a familiar part of childhood from the earliest years. Before they even start school, many children are engaging with a range of digital devices, platforms and content as part of their everyday lives.

For families, devices can play a valuable role in daily life. They can support children's development, learning and connection with others, while also helping parents juggle the demands of busy modern life. However, alongside these benefits come challenges and concerns. Questions about screen time, the impact of digital technology on development, and exposure to unsuitable content can create uncertainty and anxiety for parents. These concerns can feel particularly acute during the early years, both because of the polarised opinions existing around young children's use of digital devices, the lack of consistent guidance and because many parents are navigating these decisions for the first time.

Across the UK, many families are actively choosing how technology is used in their homes: setting

rules and boundaries, supervising use, selecting age-appropriate content and making decisions about when, where and how devices are used. Yet responsibility cannot rest with parents alone. Families need access to trusted guidance, practical tools and support that reflects the realities of raising young children today. Should they choose to use them, they also need products, services and online environments that are designed with very young children's best interests in mind.

Drawing on insights from parents, this report explores how children aged 5 and under engage with digital devices, the role they play in family life, the challenges parents encounter, and the strategies families use to manage device use. It highlights where further support is needed to help families maximise the benefits of technology while navigating its risks with confidence. This report sets out recommendations to help ensure that children's very first experiences of the digital world are positive, enriching and age-appropriate, laying the foundations for them to thrive as they grow up in an increasingly digital society.

Methodology

Quantitative survey

The quantitative findings are based on a UK nationally representative survey of 1,000 parents of children aged 5 and under. The survey asked questions to parents about the digital devices children are using and what they are using devices for, parents' attitudes and concerns, approaches to digital parenting and online safety, and the support parents need. The survey also explored parents' views on the Government's screen time guidance for under-5s.

Fieldwork was conducted by Opinium Research and was carried out between the 17th and 29th June 2026.

Qualitative interviews

Internet Matters conducted 20 interviews with UK parents of children aged 5 and under. Participants were a mix of genders, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, family make-up and spanned a range of regions and parenting experiences – from being first-time parents, to having multiple children. The children of these parents were also a mix of genders, ages and other demographic factors such as vulnerability. Discussions covered how technology fits into everyday family life, attitudes and concerns about children's use of technology, how parents manage their children's device usage, and further guidance and support needed.

Recruitment was handled by Roots Research and online interviews were conducted by Internet Matters researchers in July-August 2026.



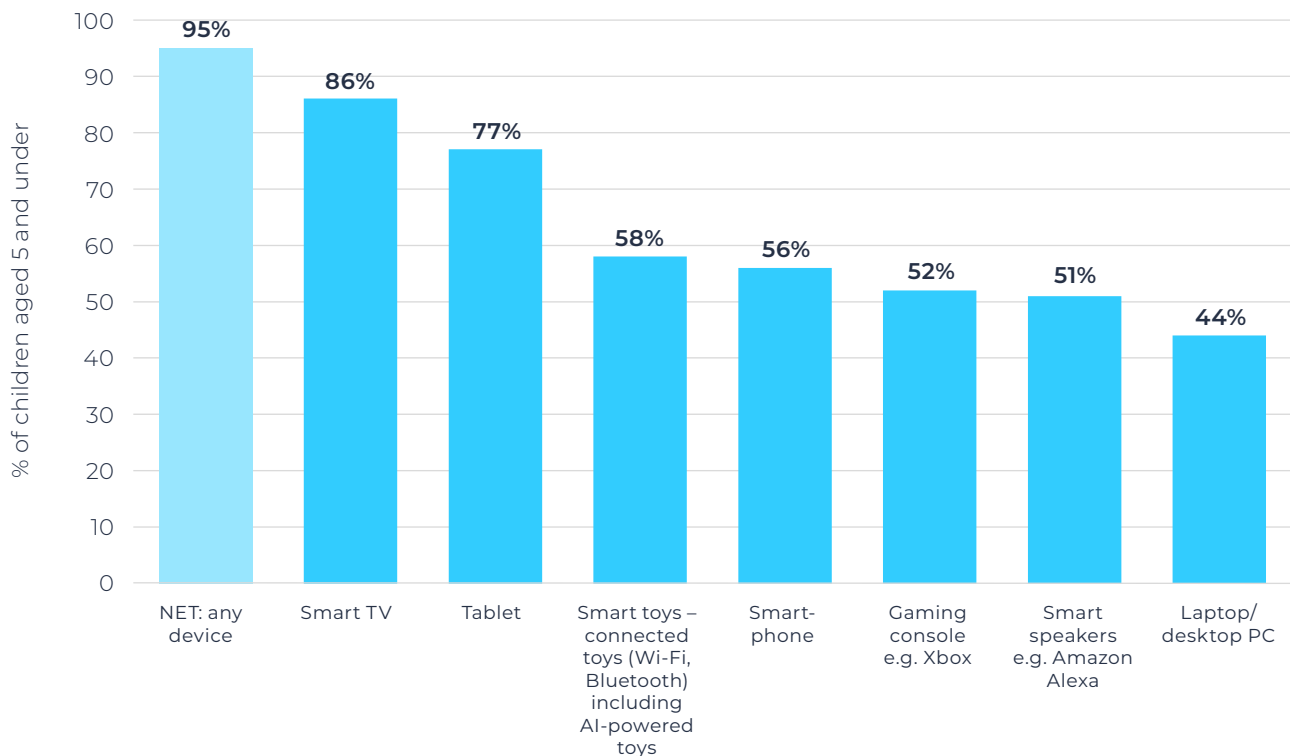
Section 1: Understanding digital technology use in the early years

Even in early childhood, digital technology is a fixture of daily life for the majority of children. Children aged 5 and under are engaging with a range of digital devices, with their introduction to technology shaped not only by parents and wider family members, but also broader factors such as socioeconomic circumstances.

Digital devices are embedded in children's lives from a young age

Most children aged 5 and under are engaging with at least one digital device (95%). While screen-based devices are the primary technology used, their interaction with technology extends beyond screens, including new and emerging technologies such as smart and connected toys (58%).

Figure 1: Digital device usage by children aged 5 and under



Base: All parents (1000). Q: How much time, if any, does your child spend on each of these digital devices in an average week?
[NET Usage: Less than 30 minutes – More than 15 hours]

Smart TVs are the most popular device throughout early childhood, with two-thirds (68%) of children under-2 watching content on smart TVs, rising to 92% of children aged 4-5. Television has long been a fixture of children's lives: research from the 1990s found that 45% of children aged 3-10 watched television for between 7 to 16 hours a week, while Ofcom's research from 2011 found that television access was near universal among children age 5-15, with 51% of children aged 5-7 having a TV in their bedroom.^{4,5} However, the nature of television viewing has changed considerably in recent years. Unlike older TVs, smart TVs are internet-enabled devices that provide access to online services, streaming platforms, and video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. As a result, they introduce new concerns about children's engagement with this technology as it is very different from broadcast television.

Tablets are the dominant portable device children aged 5 and under use, with usage nearly doubling through early childhood from 49% of under-2s to 88% of 4-5-year-olds. Not only are they widely used to access digital content, but they are already

individual and personal devices with nearly half (48%) of children who use a tablet having their own. Meanwhile, a quarter (23%) of children use a shared family device or a parent's device (24%).

Over half (56%) of children aged 5 and under are already engaging with smartphones, and by age 5, two-thirds (65%) of children are using a smartphone. Access is primarily facilitated through a parent's device (45%), although a fifth (21%) of children aged 5 and under already have their own smartphone. It should be noted that smartphones are often used to play offline games or watch pre-downloaded content rather than to access online services such as messaging and social media.

Despite this prevalence, smartphones are the device parents in interviews most frequently identified as one they would delay giving their child. Although most children in this age group are not using their own smartphones yet, parents are already engaging with the broader debates around smartphone ownership and the appropriate age at which children should gain access to these devices.⁶

Mum of four, 1 (twins), 3 & 13

"[I would] definitely delay a phone because with my older daughter, I got her one for going into primary seven so that she got used to it for a year before she was going to high school and it is the worst thing that I've ever bought her because she's constantly on the phone."

Dad of two, 2 & 5

"I know some of his friends his age actually have an iPhone they take into school [...] My son has hinted at wanting to have one [because they do] but I have to tell him no, you don't need one."

4. Bernard-Bonnin, A. C. et al. (1991) 'Television and the 3- to 10-year-old child', *Pediatrics*. [Link](#).

5. Ofcom (2011) UK Children's media literacy. [Link](#).

6. BBC (15 September 2022) 'What's the right age to get a smartphone?' [Link](#).

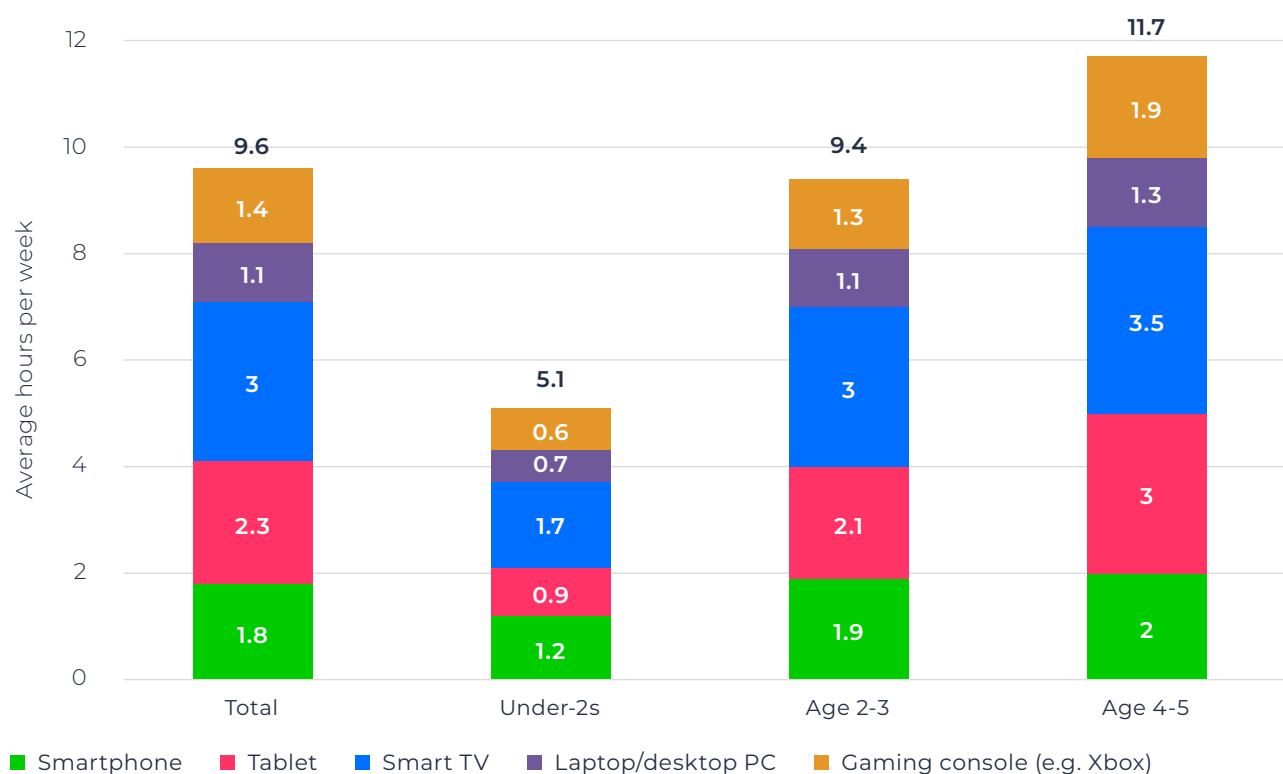
By age 2, children are spending over an hour a day on screens

Beyond the range of screens children use, the amount of time they spend on them is also an important part of understanding their digital lives. In a typical week, children aged 5 and under are spending 9 hours and 36 minutes on screens, equating to around 1 hour and 22 minutes on screens a day.

This broadly changes with age, with under-2s spending 44 minutes on screens a day, increasing to 1 hour and 20 minutes for children aged 2-3 and 1 hour and 40 minutes for children aged 4-5. On average, these figures are higher than the Government's screen time guidance for the early years, which recommends avoiding screen use other than for shared activities for under-2s and limiting screen time to one hour a day for children aged 2-5.⁷

Most of this screen time is spent using smart TVs, at 3 hours a week on average, followed by tablet use at 2 hours and 18 minutes a week.

Figure 2: Average hours per week spent on screens by children aged 5 and under



Base: All parents (1000) – Under-2s (179); Age 2-3 (338); Age 4-5 (484). Q: How much time, if any, does your child spend on each of these digital devices in an average week? {Average time spent in hours}

7. Best Start in Life (Last updated 29 June 2026) Baby and toddler screen time guidance: Screen time guidance for under 5s. [Link](#).

Introduction to digital devices is shaped by attitudes, experiences and family environments

Parents' attitudes, values and previous experiences of parenting shape decisions about their children's digital device usage. For example, many parents were cautious about introducing digital devices to young children. This was often because

they were either a first-time parent and were taking a cautious approach to screens or had learned a lesson from having older children.

Young children's introduction to devices can also be shaped by engagement with other children. For instance, older siblings or cousins can play a distinct role by introducing younger children to devices, platforms and content. As a result, younger children may be exposed to technology earlier, or in different ways, than parents originally intended.

Mum of one, 1

"I think we've got that first-time parent attitude right now that our child's not getting their own tablet [...] Right now in my mind, the perfect scenario is that if we go out to a restaurant, he's got books, toys, colouring and be more into that."

Dad of one, 4

"She wanted TikTok because her older cousin had it but I had to tell her it isn't safe for her."

Dad of two, 11 months & 3

"I do have concerns about older family members playing games on the iPad and watching YouTube Kids and streams that aren't appropriate."



Household income shapes access to digital devices

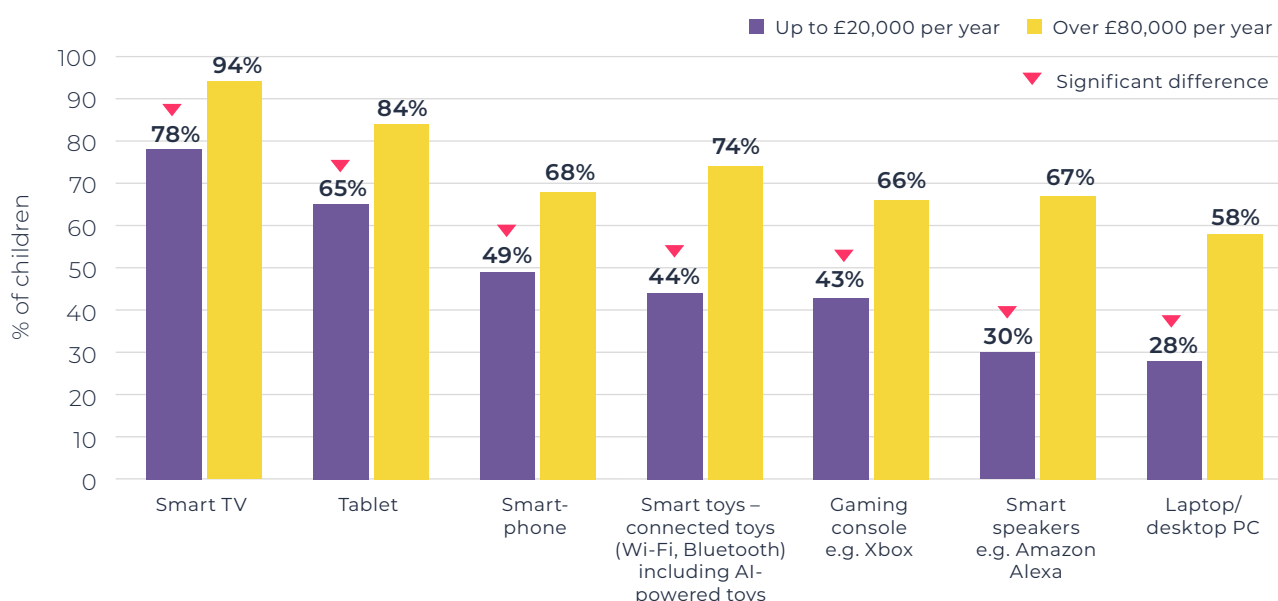
Another factor that shapes children's introduction to and usage of devices is socioeconomic circumstance. Across all digital devices, children from the lowest-income households are significantly less likely than those from the highest-income households to have access to any digital device, for instance tablets (65% cf. 84%) and smart TVs (78% cf. 94%).

While children aged 5 and under may have limited need for access to digital devices, socioeconomic disparities in access and use at this age can have implications beyond early childhood. If children face barriers to using technology with support from a family member from a young age, they may have fewer opportunities to develop necessary media and digital literacy knowledge and skills.⁸

These inequalities are not confined to the early years and may have longer-term implications. The Digital Poverty Alliance estimates that one in five children (20%) are digitally excluded, lacking the devices, connectivity or skills needed to get online, with these disadvantages often persisting into adulthood.⁹ As access to information, services and opportunities increasingly depends on digital skills and connectivity, persistent barriers risk compounding existing socioeconomic inequalities and limiting children's ability to participate fully in a digital society.

Digital devices are a significant feature of early childhood. However, the ways in which children engage with, and access devices differ considerably across families. These differences are shaped by a combination of family circumstances, individual parental decision-making and wider socioeconomic factors which influence how children use technology, and how it is supported and managed.

Figure 3: Digital device usage by children aged 5 and under by household income



Base: Parents with household income of up to £20,000 per year (66); Over £80,000 per year (316). Q: How much time, if any, does your child spend on each of these digital devices in an average week? [NET Usage: Less than 30 minutes – More than 15 hours]

8. Good Things Foundation (2026) Our Digital Nation. [Link](#).

9. Digital Poverty Alliance (2023) Digital Poverty in the UK: A socio-economic assessment of the implications of digital poverty in the UK. [Link](#).



Section 2: The role of digital technology in family life

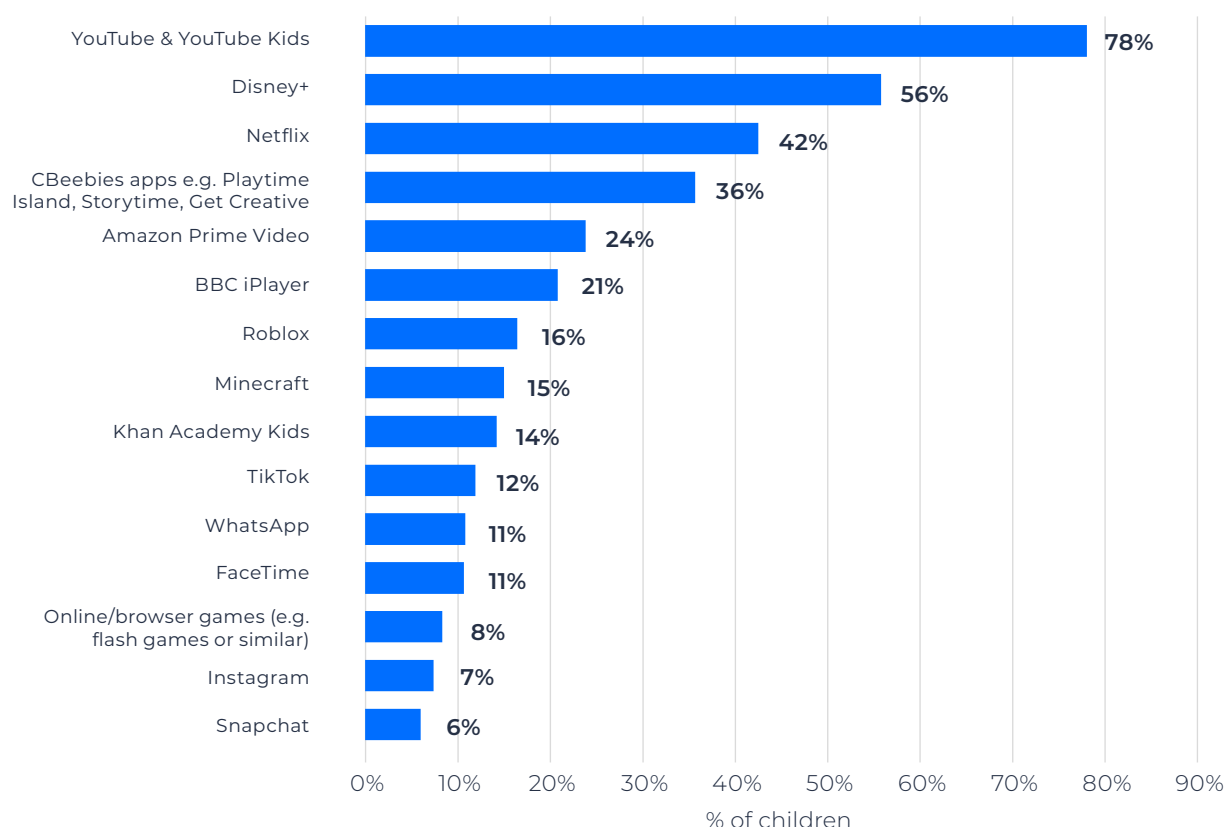
Digital devices fulfil a range of purposes in young children's lives from education and entertainment, to connection and creativity. They also play a practical role, helping parents manage the busy demands of modern life. Yet, despite recognised benefits, parents are often conflicted over the role technology plays in their children's lives.

Children are doing a variety of activities across a range of platforms

Virtually all (97%) children aged 5 and under are watching content on digital devices, either on video-sharing platforms or streaming services. Over three-quarters (78%) of children are using YouTube and/or YouTube Kids to do so, followed by Disney+ (56%), Netflix (42%) and Amazon Prime Video (24%).

The next most common digital activity among children aged 5 and under is playing games, which increases from 67% of under-2s to 93% of children aged 4-5. By age 5, a quarter of children are already playing games on popular gaming platforms Roblox (26%) and Minecraft (23%).

Figure 4: Platforms and apps accessed by children aged 5 and under on any device



Base: All parents (1000). Q: What platforms or apps does your child aged 5 or under access on any device (including yours)?

Digital devices help support children's education and development

Parents see many positives associated with their children's digital device usage in the early years, particularly in supporting learning and development and accessing educational content.

Some of the most popular educational apps used by children are the CBeebies range of apps (36%) and Khan Academy Kids (14%). Parents see these as accessible and engaging ways to develop literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills. Parents also report that their children are more likely to play educational games or apps compared to games for entertainment (82% cf. 75%).

Digital learning also takes place in the form of other activities beyond educational apps. Many children read or listen to books (77%), listen to audio stories or music (68%), and create content using digital media (62%). Engagement in these activities increases as children get older. For example, 73% of 4-5-year-olds listen to music or audio stories, compared with 58% of under-2s.

In some families, digital content is also used to support language learning and help children build connections with their cultural heritage. One parent described how she selected shows in her mother tongue that her daughter was already familiar with in English, using familiar stories and characters to support exposure to vocabulary and speech in another language.

Mum of one, 1

"[Digital devices] do have educational benefits. My daughter plays ABCmouse which teaches her the alphabet."

Dad of three, 1, 3 & 5

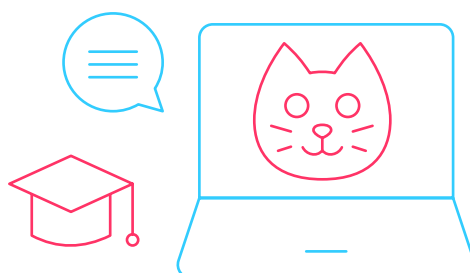
"[Devices] give them access to educational activities, cultural activities and inspires them to do activities in real life themselves."

Mum of two, 4 & 6

"We've downloaded a few educational games like number blocks and colour blocks. She likes to play colour by numbers because she loves drawing and colouring but also it's practicing her maths."

Mum of one, 1

"I make sure I select shows in my mother tongue as well as English so that she gets an opportunity to learn and be bilingual. I show her Bluey in English and Tamil and there's also a YouTube channel she watches in Tamil as well."



Vulnerable children gain additional benefits from technology

For vulnerable children, parents feel that digital technology plays a particularly important role in aiding their development and health needs. A third (33%) of parents with a vulnerable child say that their child uses devices to support an individual learning or development need. Existing research supports this, finding that digital technologies can be valuable learning tools for children with additional needs, especially when tailored to their requirements (e.g. a voice-assisted reading app).¹⁰

Parents of vulnerable children gave a number of examples of how devices have benefitted their children and family. For one family, digital devices helped their child develop speech and language skills. For another, using devices aided in teaching their child important soft skills such as sharing and collaboration.

Supporting families to understand these benefits and how they can best implement technology in family life is key for ensuring digital devices in the early years can support positive developmental outcomes, rather than reinforcing existing disadvantages.

Mum of one vulnerable child, 2

"My 2-year-old is speech delayed so I downloaded some apps [to help] with his development."

Mum of one vulnerable child, 1

"Watching the TV, interacting with iPads and stuff has actually helped bring her on... she's dancing to the songs that's on the TV. She's singing along to them. She's doing the actions and stuff."

Mum of one vulnerable child, 6¹¹

"We got [a Nintendo Switch] to help him with his fine motor skills and to teach him more about collaborating and taking turns together. [The siblings] play with it together...It's that sort of collaboration, turn-taking, using his mind in a different way."

10. Kumaş, Ö., Yıldırım, A.E.S. & Dada, Ş.D. (2026) 'Digital Parenting in Early Childhood: Digital Technology Use and Parental Experiences of Children with Special Needs'. Early Childhood Education Journal. [Link](#).

11. This quote is from a parent of a child with special educational needs, whose developmental progress – according to the parent – is approximately a year behind that of their peers.

Digital devices are used to support connection with others

Rather than being solely an individual activity, digital devices often provide opportunities for family interaction, shared experiences and connections with others. They are used as part of shared family activities, such as watching TV or films, and playing games. These forms of co-use can encourage bonding, interaction and conversations and reflect government recommendations for young children to engage with screens alongside parents or carers.¹²

Devices can also help young children maintain relationships beyond the immediate household, allowing them to connect with grandparents and extended family members. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of children use digital devices to video-call family or friends. Technology-facilitated interaction, alongside a parent, again reflects the co-use approach recommended for this age group. These shared digital experiences can support communication skills, strengthen family relationships and foster a sense of connection and belonging with wider family networks.

Mum of two, 5 & 7

"[My daughters] will often sit and play two-player games, where they might play against each other rather than one playing against a computer. Sometimes they'll sit and use the same device to watch the same thing...They spend quite a lot of time doing stuff [on screens] together."

Dad of one, 4

"We'll sit down with her when she's on her iPad and learn how to trace the letters or numbers together."

Dad of two, 2 & 5

"They'll video call their grandparents and other cousins."

Mum of two, 3 months & 3

"A lot of my family live in Suffolk, which is about a two-hour journey from me. She FaceTimes her grandparents and shows them what she's doing in school, her awards...It helps her keep connected with other people."

12. Best Start in Life (Last updated 29 June 2026) Baby and toddler screen time guidance: Screen time guidance for under 5s. [Link](#).

Digital devices help parents manage busy family life

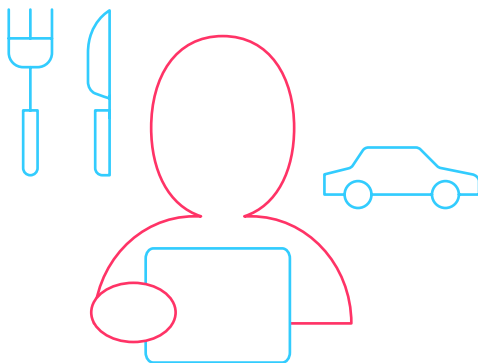
As well as fulfilling multiple roles for children, digital devices help parents manage the demands of modern family life. For many, decisions about device usage are shaped by the need to balance work, childcare, household responsibilities and other commitments. Two in five parents (41%) report giving their child a device to keep them occupied and 40% say that digital devices allow themselves to have some downtime.

How and when parents use devices in this way varies according to family circumstances. Parents in interviews described using devices while they completed tasks such as cooking dinner, while others faced more specific challenges such as limited childcare.

These experiences highlight why there can be a gap between how parents would prefer their children to engage with devices and the reality of everyday life. Rather than being a simple parenting choice, digital devices are often a practical tool that helps families navigate everyday pressure.

Mum of one, 1

"We couldn't secure five days in nursery [...] so when we're in a meeting, we give her something to watch."



Mum of two, 1 & 4

"The main reason I give them a device is because I live alone with them...it gives me that freedom to cook, clean and to occupy their time."

Dad of two, 2 & 5

"There may be an odd day where things are going wrong or we need to get stuff done and we can't get a childminder, so we let them have their tablets."

Device use extends outside of the home

Outside the home, some parents use screens to help keep children occupied. A quarter (24%) of parents say that their child uses a portable device (e.g. tablet or smartphone) in public spaces such as a café or restaurant and a third (35%) give their child a portable device during travel.

However, many feel that this exposes them to judgement: 41% of parents feel judged when they let their child use a device in public. Even though device use is accepted by many as a helpful tool for parents, it can carry a degree of stigma which shapes how parents choose to use them. Despite this, most parents we spoke to in interviews did not judge other parents when they saw a child using a device in public. This non-judgement was informed by the recognition of their own parenting challenges and that every family is different.

Children are also exposed to screens and digital technology in education settings. A third (33%) of children aged 5 and under currently use a digital device in an education or child-minding setting, such as nursery. The most common devices they use in these environments are smart toys (22%), tablets (19%) and laptops or desktops (18%). Parents in interviews had differing awareness of their child's usage of technology at nursery. These experiences suggest parents may not always have the full picture of their children's technology use.

Digital technology is deeply embedded in the routines of many families with young children, and this offers a range of benefits; whether for children's education and development, or for juggling the demands of busy family life. But this integration into everyday life does not come without complexity. Parents balance these benefits against feelings of judgement, which are influenced by wider concerns about the role of screens in children's lives. The following section explores these concerns in greater depth.

Mum of one, 5

"I just think if [a device is] what they need to [eat] a meal then leave them alone."

Dad of two, 11 months & 3

"I think it used to be really frowned upon but times have changed – it's a bit of the norm."

Mum of one, 1

"I did judge before but since becoming a parent I realised that everyone has their own situations..."

Mum of one, 1

"[At nursery] they have an Alexa for music and dancing time."

Mum of four, 1 (twins), 3 & 13

"My 3-year-old uses a tablet before nursery, and they do use it at nursery as well."

Mum of one, 5

"She went to a preschool where they basically had screens all day, on YouTube and BBC iPlayer."



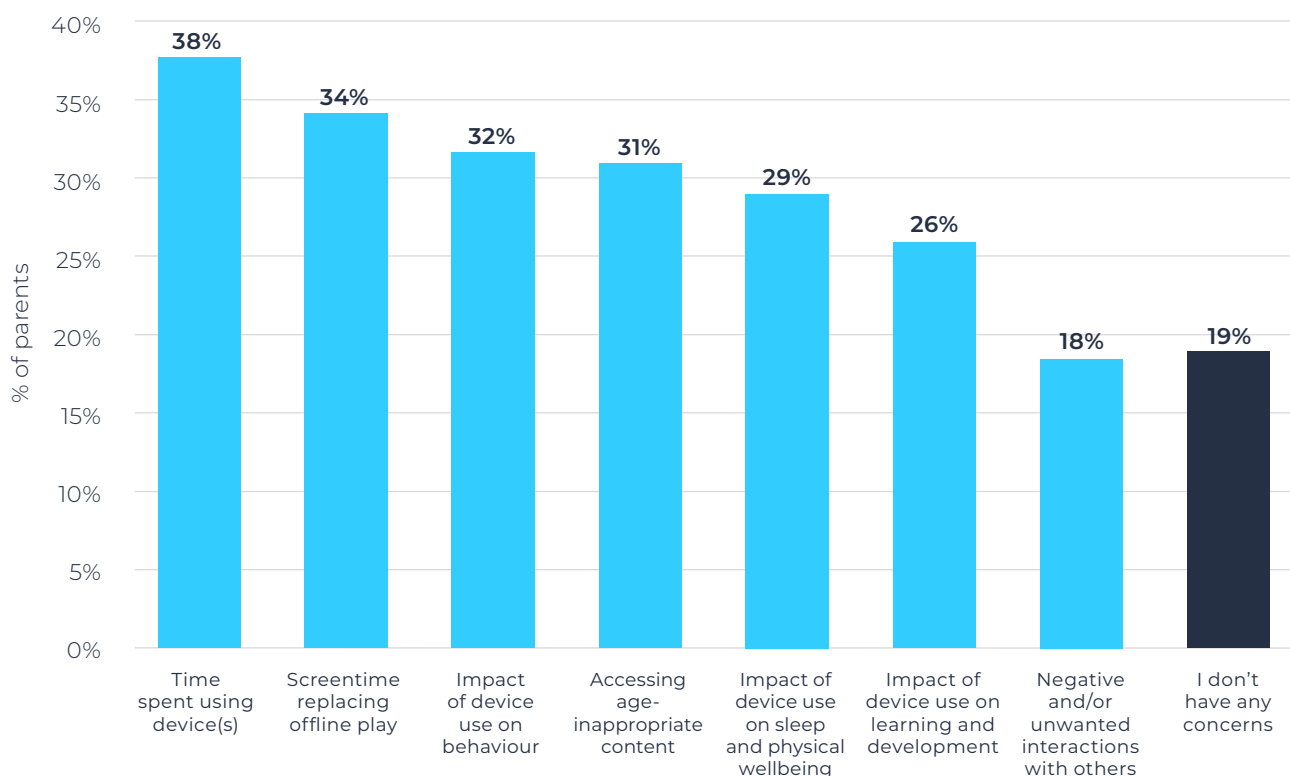
Section 3: Challenges and concerns around children's digital device usage

While parents recognise the value digital technology brings to their children's lives, this comes hand-in-hand with a wide range of concerns. These range from worries about the impact of screen time and exposure to inappropriate or unsuitable content, as well as platform features designed to encourage prolonged engagement, on their children's development and wellbeing.

Concern about appropriate device usage begins in early childhood

Most parents (78%) have at least one concern about their children's digital device usage. This concern increases as children get older: 64% of parents with children under-2 have concerns, compared to 79% of parents of children aged 2-3 and 83% of parents of children aged 4-5. This is unsurprising given that children under-2 are limited in the devices and activities they have access to, with parents typically playing a greater role in managing and supervising their usage.

Figure 5: Parental concerns about digital device use by children aged 5 and under



Base: All parents (1000). Q: Do you have any of the following concerns regarding your child aged 5 and under's digital device usage?

Time spent on devices

Time spent using devices is the leading concern of parents of children aged 5 and under, cited by nearly two-fifths (38%) of parents. This concern emerges early, with a third (33%) of parents of under-2s already raising it as an issue. Additionally, 40% of parents say they feel guilty about how much time their child spends on devices. This sentiment is further supported by polling from the Centre for Early Childhood which finds that 27% of the public think the amount of time spent on screens is one of the biggest issues facing children aged 5 and under today.¹³

While these worries may begin in the early years, they often intensify as children get older and gain independence over their device use. Internet Matters Pulse finds that three-quarters (75%) of parents of children aged 6-10 are concerned about their child spending too much time online.¹⁴ This emphasises how these concerns about screen time persist throughout childhood and illustrates why adopting healthy digital habits at a young age is important.

Linked to this concern is the activities that time on screens may displace. Around a third (34%) of parents are concerned that screen use can come at the expense of offline play. This represents a broader concern about how digital activity fits alongside other critical aspects of early childhood, including physical play, imaginative activity, sleep and interaction with family members and peers.¹⁵

Some parents report that screen usage generates behavioural issues and conflicts. A third (32%) of parents are concerned with the impact of devices on their child's behaviour, particularly evident in how parents describe the difficulty of transition periods (i.e. moving from digital devices to other activities). For some parents, the transition away from screens and devices is a recurring source

of conflict, with children becoming distressed and resistant when asked to stop. Two in five parents (39%) say that getting their child to stop using their digital device causes conflict.

Mum of one, 5

"When she's at school or nursery, she doesn't watch her tablet in the morning because I can't get her off it."

Mum of two, 5 & 7

"I don't think it is necessary for a child to have access to that stuff. I rather her play imaginary games rather than virtual games."

Dad of two, 2 & 5

"When I try to take the tablet off him, it's World War Three. He's so engrossed, he's tired and he thinks you're taking away what's only his."

Impact of digital technology on children's development

Though many parents recognise the benefits of digital technology for learning, a quarter (26%) of parents say they are concerned about the negative impacts of device use on their child's development. Some parents raised concerns about the physical effects of prolonged screen use, particularly the potential impact on eye development, poorer sleep and neck support from extended periods spent looking at devices.

13. Centre for Early Childhood (2025) Public Perceptions Survey 2025. [Link](#).

14. Internet Matters Pulse. [Link](#).

15. Sticca, F., Brauchli, V. & Lannen, P. (2025) 'Screen on = developmental off? A systematic scoping review and developmental psychology perspective on the effects of screen time on early childhood development', *Frontiers in Developmental Psychology*. [Link](#).

This is supported by wider research in this space, which finds higher screen exposure is linked to poorer sleep and health behaviours.¹⁶

Other parents are concerned about the effect on their children's attention span linked to what were felt to be 'addictive' features on certain platforms. Attention span is a critical aspect of early childhood development, supporting children's ability to engage with different activities, learn, control impulses and self-regulate.¹⁷ Some parents in interviews felt that technology was affecting their children's ability to sustain and maintain attention. This was partly attributed to platform features, such as recommender systems or autoplay, that allow children to quickly skip or move between pieces of content, which they believe can make it harder for children to remain engaged with slower-paced or offline activities.

Parents also raised concerns about fast-paced, loud or over-stimulating content and the impact of this on their children's attention span and development. Popular children's channel and show CoComelon was frequently named by parents as an example of this type of content. At the time of writing, CoComelon has over 200m subscribers and over 220bn views on YouTube, marking it the third most-subscribed and second most-viewed channel on YouTube globally. It has since expanded further, with content also being streamed on services like Netflix and Disney+.

Although CoComelon is explicitly designed and marketed for young children, some parents in our research nevertheless saw the content as too over-stimulating for their child. Parents described difficulties with calming their child down, which they saw as an aftereffect of watching CoComelon. Criticism is not just limited to parents' own views: child development experts have also raised concerns over shows like CoComelon being too fast-paced as well as for its use of attention-grabbing features

that can overwhelm children's ability to learn from the content.¹⁸ This highlights an important distinction between content marketed towards young children and content that parents perceive to be developmentally appropriate for them: a distinction that parents can find difficult to navigate.

Given this, it is important we equip parents with the knowledge to make these judgements. However, the responsibility should not rest with parents alone. Content creators must ensure that content designed or marketed for children is developmentally appropriate and aligned with children's needs and stages of development.

Mum of one, 5

"Attention span is a concern for me, how quickly she can watch something and then flick onto the next one or flick on to the next. I feel like that's just such an awful habit to get into at such a young age."

Mum of two, 4 & 6

"There's too much of it out there. It does become overwhelming. It's good to have a choice, absolutely, don't get me wrong, but I also think on the flip side of that, there's too much, because they can scroll and scroll and scroll and scroll."

Dad of two, 11 months & 3

"I noticed with CoComelon, the content is so overstimulating that [my son] wasn't happy when I took it away from him."

16. 1001 Critical Days Foundation (2026) Screen time research: 1 in 10 babies fall asleep with a screen. [Link](#).

17. Center on the Developing Child (2021) 3 Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families. [Link](#).

18. The New Yorker (10 June 2024) How CoComelon captures our children's attention. [Link](#).

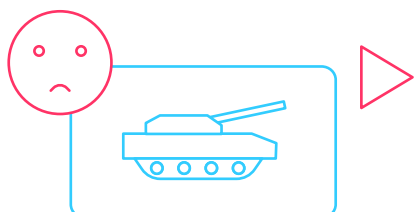
Young children are exposed to age-inappropriate and unsuitable content

As well as concerns about developmentally inappropriate content, parents were also concerned about their children encountering content with unsuitable themes or intended for older audiences. Nearly a third (31%) of parents are concerned about their child accessing age-inappropriate content, with this concern rising significantly with age (25% of parents of under-2s cf. 35% of parents of 4-5-year-olds). Growing concern likely reflects the broadening of children's digital activities and the content they engage with, alongside a natural reduction in parental supervision while on devices.

This concern is reflected in the actual experiences of families, with a quarter (26%) of parents reporting that they are aware of their child coming across age-inappropriate content on devices. As we explore below, parents' concerns about inappropriate content ranged from overtly harmful material, such as violence and mature themes, to more subtle influences including portrayals of unrealistic lifestyles and behaviours.

Mum of one, 5

"It was cartoon-style content that included violence or scary scenes, possibly on YouTube Kids or a similar platform."



Violent and frightening content

Violent and scary content were the most described examples of age-inappropriate and unsuitable content, with YouTube and YouTube Kids the most commonly cited platforms where children had come across this content. Parents often described content that initially appeared child-friendly – using cartoons, child characters, and child-friendly music – which then escalated into violent, frightening or otherwise disturbing material.

Parents also raised concern about violent content reaching their child through advertising embedded within otherwise age-appropriate, correctly-rated games and content. This included interactive ads which allow users to sample gameplay for a short period of time, exposing children to violence such as shooting games.

Beyond the immediate impact of children finding violent content frightening or upsetting, some parents were concerned that repeated exposure could normalise violent or aggressive behaviour at an early age.

Mum of two, 1 & 4

"Even though these games are safe to download, and they are the correct age rating, a lot of them have ads on them that you can't remove. One of these ads I was concerned about was a zombie shooting game [...] Because I saw [violent ad] first-hand, it triggered me to being much more aware of what is being shown."

While sometimes this content appeared in platforms marketed or designed for children, parents also spoke about their child encountering violent content on platforms that are not designed for young children.

Two-fifths (41%) of children 5 and under have access to content on popular social media platforms, most commonly through an adult's device.¹⁹ As these platforms are aimed at older users, mostly aged 13 and over, use of these platforms by young children is much more likely to expose them to content that is age-inappropriate.

This presents a distinct challenge from concerns about inappropriate content appearing within child-friendly spaces, and highlights the importance of supporting parents to understand the minimum ages for different platforms and the type of content they may be exposed to on them.

Mum of two, 1 & 4

"[One of the YouTube Shorts] I caught my son watching was a woman hitting a husband with a frying pan [as a joke]. That kind of content normalises silly and aggressive behaviour. And my son found it really funny because obviously he associates the pan with cooking...once a child sees something, they can't unsee it."

Dad of one, 5

"It was a ragdoll game, and you could test ads of really violent games which randomly included references to suicide."

Dad of one, 3

"I'm concerned that being exposed to content that is foul [and violent] might make him want to recreate it physically, in the real world and he might end up being one of those bullies."

Dad of one, 4

"It was a video on YouTube which had kids featured in it, but the themes being discussed were very dark - almost sinister such as horror stories, discussions about murder and gore..."

Dad of one, 3

"They came across content where people were fighting and assaulting each other on TikTok and I think it's not good for their age."

Mum of one, 5

"He went on Facebook and saw a video of people fighting and got upset."

19. Included in this figure are: TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube (excluding YouTube Kids).

Mature themes

Content related to more mature themes, such as sex and pregnancy, was also a concern of parents. These experiences were most commonly described in relation to online environments and streaming services, where content has historically not been subject to the same regulatory standards as traditional children's broadcast television.²⁰ This raised questions about the effectiveness of age-based content controls and ratings in these environments, and the extent to which parents can trust these platforms even when services are marketed towards children.

Dad of two, 2 & 5

"My daughter was on YouTube Kids but it was still giving her videos talking about pregnancies, and getting pregnant. You would have thought it would have been filtered."

Mum of one, 5

"There was a video about how Elsa is pregnant and Spider-Man is cheating on her. It was really inappropriate."

Lifestyle and influencer content

Alongside these more explicit concerns, some parents also felt uneasy about influencer and lifestyle content that appeared to promote unrealistic lifestyles and everyday experiences. Unlike violent or other inappropriate themes, parents found this harder to articulate as overtly 'harmful' content but nonetheless expressed real unease about the messages it could send to their child and the values it appeared to model.

Mum of one, 5

"She's getting this idea that this is what life should be like, that every day should be a new episode where something really thrilling happens."

Mum of four, 1 (twins), 3 & 13

"[My children] don't really understand why influencers have all this nice stuff and they don't have it."

Peer influence

Children's exposure to age-inappropriate content can also be influenced by those around them. This can be outside of parents' direct control, such as through interactions with peers or the sharing of devices within families. These pathways are often less visible to parents and can be difficult to manage. This underlines the importance of safe device set-up, establishing boundaries, and regular conversations with children about their digital experiences.

Dad of three, 4, 8 & 10

"Some of our friends have things like Roblox and stuff and having done research into Roblox, I'm not really happy for her to go on there so we asked the parents at their house not to allow them on Roblox, if my daughter is there."

Dad of two, 11 months & 3

"I do have concerns about older family members playing games on [the] iPad and watching YouTube Kids and streams that aren't appropriate."

20. Ofcom (14 May 2026) 'Stronger protections for UK audiences under new content and accessibility standards for streaming services'. [Link](#).

Deep dive: YouTube and YouTube Kids

YouTube is a staple platform in the digital lives of young children and their families. YouTube and YouTube Kids are used by nearly 8 in 10 families (78%), with YouTube Kids being the most popular platform watched by children aged 5 and under (66%). Its breadth of content and accessibility means that YouTube Kids is often one of the first digital platforms children encounter, with almost half of under-2s (49%) already engaging with the platform.

For many parents, YouTube Kids has become an indispensable part of family life. Parents describe it as a valuable source of entertainment, learning and age-appropriate content – especially in comparison to YouTube. However, interviews with parents revealed a divide between parents who place considerable trust in YouTube Kids and those who remain sceptical of safety claims and feel as though parental supervision is still necessary. This is further supported by the fact that a third (36%) of parents are unconvinced or unsure that they can trust platforms marketed specifically to children.

Dad of one, 4

"On YouTube Kids there will be nothing inappropriate anyway on it because it's for kids."

Dad of one, 4

"YouTube Kids is safer. YouTube has so many ads. We started off with normal YouTube but she kept clicking on links."

Mum of four, 1 (twins), 3 & 13

"I leave him unsupervised because it's YouTube Kids that he puts on, and so then I'm putting my trust in YouTube."

Mum of one, 1

"Just because it's YouTube Kids, it doesn't mean it's safe for kids."

Mum of two, 4 & 6

"If you click on one video, it will show other videos or other things. YouTube is a massive jumbled-up portal of bits and bobs."

Mum of two, 3 months & 3

"I know that even with YouTube Kids [...] there's still stuff on there that may pop-up or is inappropriate so I will always make sure that I skip forward a bit, know what they're watching [...] I'll always be in earshot."

Concerns were not just limited to content, with parents articulating worries about platform design features that can increase exposure to age-inappropriate content. Algorithmic recommendations and autoplay can lead to children quickly moving from suitable to inappropriate content²¹. These concerns are particularly relevant on platforms like YouTube and YouTube Kids which host large volumes of user-generated (and increasingly AI-generated) content, where outcomes can be less predictable – and where parents may have less control over content selection.

Content on YouTube Kids is governed by their 'Made for Kids' principles, and both YouTube and YouTube Kids offer child-safety features, such as age profiles (including pre-school) and the option to disable autoplay. However, their effective use often depends on parents having the awareness, understanding and time to navigate settings and configure appropriate safeguards.

Parents' concerns about platform design were also associated with how these features could encourage prolonged engagement in ways that feel fundamentally different from 'traditional' television. Unlike traditional children's media which has natural endpoints and a variety of shows in limited numbers, depending on the settings in place, YouTube Kids can provide an endless stream of short-form content. One parent raised questions about routine design features, such as visible countdowns showing how much of a video remains and the ability to rapidly flick between videos.

While individually these design elements may appear relatively unproblematic, they can reduce the pauses between pieces of content and encourage more passive, continuous viewing. Research on persuasive design has

highlighted concerns that such features can contribute to prolonged use and patterns of constant stimulation among children²². Importantly, these are not just features unique to YouTube but are characteristic of most streaming and video-sharing platforms.

YouTube Kids serves as a case study for many of the challenges parents are facing in the digital age. Parents value the platform's educational content and convenience, but their experiences also highlight concerns about age-appropriate content and platform design features designed to keep children engaged. Platforms such as YouTube Kids have a key role to play in ensuring children's experiences are age-appropriate with content, design features and recommendations that are suitable for the developmental needs of the youngest children. Parents must therefore also be equipped with the knowledge and practical tools to navigate and configure these digital environments for young children.

Dad of two, 11 months & 3

"CBeebies is good because there is a variety of content but [with YouTube Kids], I'm conscious that he's just watching the same things over and over again. With CoComelon on YouTube [Kids], he was just obsessively watching it."

Dad of two, 4 & 5

"They were watching YouTube Kids and an automated autoplay video started showing a scary cartoon character with violence that wasn't appropriate for a 4-year-old."

21. JAMA Network (29 May 2024) 'Algorithmic Content Recommendations on a Video-Sharing Platform Used by Children' [Link](#)

22. Ofcom (21 May 2026) 'Children's Online Experiences' [Link](#)

Parents are worried about the future – but recognise children need to develop skills for a digital world

Parents acutely expressed their anxieties about the challenges they will face in the future, as their children gain greater independence and access to the digital world. Access to the internet, social media and the rapid development of technology were described by many parents as a looming challenge that becomes more urgent as children get older. In particular, smartphones were seen as a symbolic milestone of this anxiety, marking the point when digital devices stop being a controllable space and becoming a gateway to the wider internet and other people.

In spite of this, parents overwhelmingly felt that technology is a necessary part of modern life. Rather than wanting to shield children from technology completely, most parents want to prepare children for a digital world and ensure that they are equipped with the skills, confidence and knowledge to navigate the risks and challenges of technology.

Parents' concerns span from the amount of time children spend on devices, to the nature of the content they encounter online and the impact this may have on their development and wellbeing. Understanding these concerns is important, as they underpin the choices parents make about when, how and why their children engage with digital technology. The next section explores how families navigate these challenges in practice.

Mum of one, 1

"In 2026 one of the scarier parts of parenting is internet and technology."

Mum of two, 5 & 7

"We don't want them to be behind... We need them to not be afraid of it."

Mum of one, 1

"Back in my day, we just put on the TV. But it's not like that anymore. The TV couldn't talk to you, the TV couldn't groom you, the TV couldn't show you something different than what was scheduled."

Mum of one, 1

"Technology is all around us so I don't want her to be excluded from it."

Mum of one, 5

"I feel like I'm getting more scared as she gets older."

Dad of three, 1, 3 & 5

"They're not going to live in a world without technology so the sooner they get used to doing basic things on screens...I think that will be helpful for them."

Mum of one, 5

"At the minute we know more than her, but she will eventually know more than me."

Mum of two, 1 & 2

"If they are using technology appropriately it's a good thing. I don't want to keep them away from the internet, I want them to use the internet safely."



Section 4: Digital parenting in the early years

Despite the concerns around screen use, parents continue to see a role for digital devices in their children's lives. Parents of young children take a wide range of steps to keep their children safe on screens such as setting boundaries around device use, implementing parental controls and modelling healthy digital habits themselves.

Parents are closely involved in their young children's digital lives

Supervising their child is the primary way parents manage their young children's digital device usage. Supervision helps protect children from unsafe content and supports their wellbeing. Some parents take a more active approach – as recommended by the Government guidance on screen time for under-

5s - for instance watching content with them and discussing what they are seeing. Others take a more passive approach to supervision amid busy routines, such as being aware of what their child is doing by being in the same room, listening and checking in.

Most parents (70%) say that an adult is present when their child is using digital devices. In interviews parents told us that when they were not supervising their child, this was mostly because they could hear what their child was watching or felt as though the content was age appropriate. Of parents who say that their child uses devices without an adult present at least sometimes, this is mostly because parents deem the content or apps they are viewing as suitable for their age (38%), followed by having parental controls or settings in place (36%). Rather than indicating a lack of parental involvement in children's digital lives, this suggests that supervision is being supplemented with other forms of safety and digital parenting approaches.

Mum of two, 5 & 7

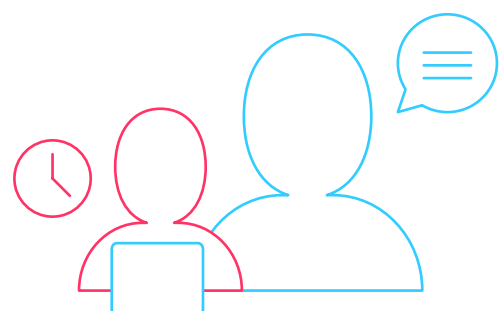
"We tend to try and be around them, mainly because we want to build a culture of positive tech use. Especially for our youngest, spending time with her on her device helped us to learn she loves mazes... I wouldn't know if I wasn't there."

Mum of one, 1

"When we've got the TV on with YouTube, I'll sit and we'll talk about it together. Just like how I'll sit with her and play, and then we'll talk about it [...] We've never left her alone with a device."

Mum of two, 1 & 2

"I always make sure I stay with them [...] because they are too young, I supervise them."



Parents remain closely connected with their children's digital lives at this early age, but levels of supervision decrease as children get older and they gain greater autonomy over how they use digital devices. 76% of parents of children under-2 say that an adult is present at least most of the time when their child is using a device

compared to 65% of parents of 4-5-year-olds. With children's growing independence and reduced supervision, parents start to become more concerned about children's device usage (as discussed in Section 3). As a result, parents draw on a range of other digital parenting strategies.

Mum of four, 1 (twins), 3, 13

"They are left unsupervised...I can see what they're watching on the TV and obviously I can hear it when I'm out of the room. With my 3-year-old, if he's on the phone or if he's on the iPad, I'm not watching him maybe as much as I probably should be."

Mum of one, 1

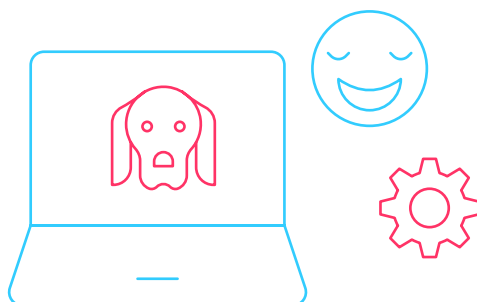
"I leave him alone a minute here or there while cooking but he doesn't have access to the remote [to change the content]."

Dad of one, 4

"Most of the time, he only has access to YouTube Kids, so I don't necessarily have to be there to supervise because I trust it."

Dad of two, 11 months & 3

"If it's Bluey, for example, because I know it is 0+ rated and I've watched it as well...I can just leave him unsupervised watching it."



Age appropriateness, pace and trust are all factors shaping the content parents choose

Beyond supervision, another way children aged 5 and under are protected from inappropriate and unsafe content is by their parents taking an active role in selecting content.

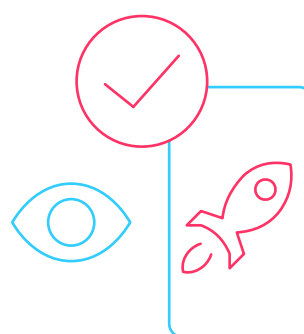
Over four in five parents (85%) say they feel confident in judging whether apps, platforms or content are age-appropriate for their child aged 5 and under. However, only half of parents (49%) say they look for content that is age-appropriate, or safe and free from upsetting and inappropriate material. This highlights a gap, as we are aware that children are not always supervised and are sometimes accessing platforms that are not child-friendly. Parents need support in translating confidence to practical action, particularly as children get older and the content and platforms they use become more expansive.

Gaps between confidence and action are also more pronounced among parents from the lowest-income households. These parents are considerably less confident in judging whether content, apps or platforms are age-appropriate compared to highest-income households (66% cf. 89%), as well as less likely to seek out content that is age-appropriate, or safe and free from upsetting material (35% cf. 55%). Together, this suggests that some families face greater barriers navigating an increasingly complex content landscape with differences in media literacy, confidence, familiarity with platforms, access to information or even the time and resources required to evaluate content. Consequently, these barriers mean that children from lower-income households may be less likely to access high-quality and age-appropriate digital content, which can exacerbate existing socioeconomic divides.²³

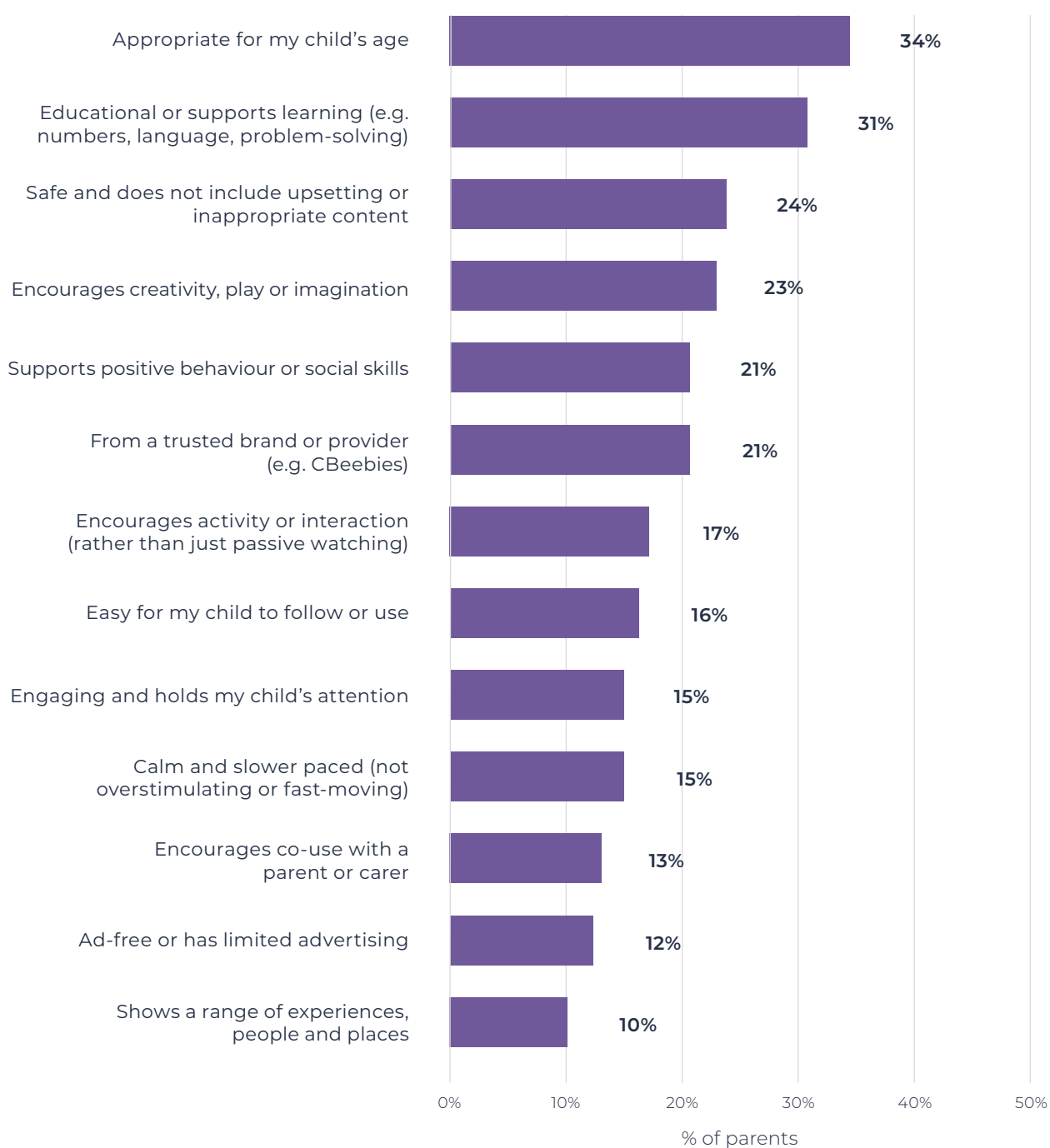
Age-appropriateness is only one factor parents consider when it comes to selecting content. Parents also look for content that supports children's development and individual needs. Around one-third (31%) prioritise content that is educational and nearly a quarter (23%) look for content encouraging creativity, play or imagination and content supporting positive behaviour or social skills (21%). To a lesser extent, parents were also interested in content that offers a calmer or slow-paced viewing experience for their child (15%), reflecting concerns about fast-paced and 'addictive' content, and content that exposes their child to a diversity of experiences, places and people (10%).

This was all meaningfully reflected in interviews, with parents telling us they valued content that teaches kindness, reflects different cultures and communities, and provides gentle experiences. These findings suggest that age-appropriate content is only one aspect of selecting content for children, and parents are actively curating experiences that support children's learning, social development and understanding of the world around them.

A fifth of parents (21%) also consider whether content comes from a trusted brand or provider. Parents rely on this as a signal of quality, safety and credibility particularly in a digital environment where the volume of available content can be overwhelming.



23. Internet Matters (2025) Informed or Overwhelmed? Understanding the impact of online news on children and young people's wellbeing. [Link](#).

Figure 6: *Parents' considerations when selecting content for children aged 5 and under*

Base: All parents (1000). Q: What do you look for when selecting digital or online content for your child aged 5 or under?

Mum of two, 1 & 4

"Some content is good and teaches good lessons like be nicer to younger children, brush your teeth, be nice to your parents."

Dad of three, 1, 3 & 5

"They get to see children from other cultures and different groups of people playing together."

Dad of three, 4, 8 & 10

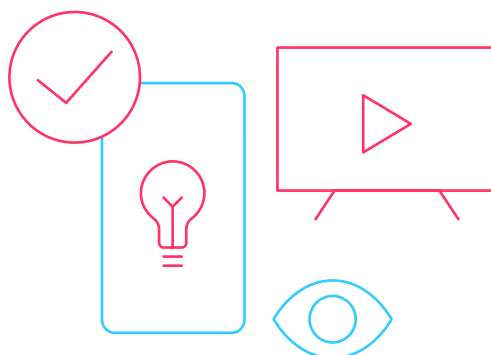
"I want my kids to watch content with some form of representation [...] I don't want her to watch this type of content because she's not seeing anybody that looks like her."

Mum of one, 1

"[In the Night Garden] has quite low, slow-paced, gentle graphics, gentle sounds."

Mum of two, 4 & 6

"CBeebies is really good. It's got such a good variety of educational programmes as well as stories and cartoons. A lot of the inspiration [of what to let my children watch] came from CBeebies."



Parents set boundaries and rules around device use

To manage their children's screen time, parents set boundaries and rules around device usage. Nine in ten (89%) parents tell us they have at least one rule in place to manage their children's device use. Rules are mostly focused on when and how devices are used, with popular rules including restricting device use at mealtimes (51%), setting consistent daily limits (46%) and restrictions on screens before bedtime (43%).

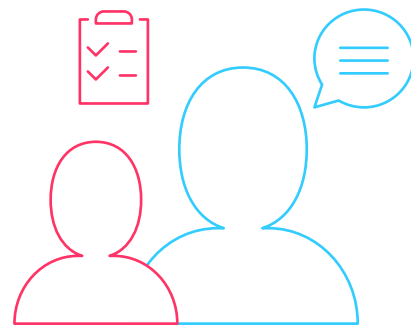
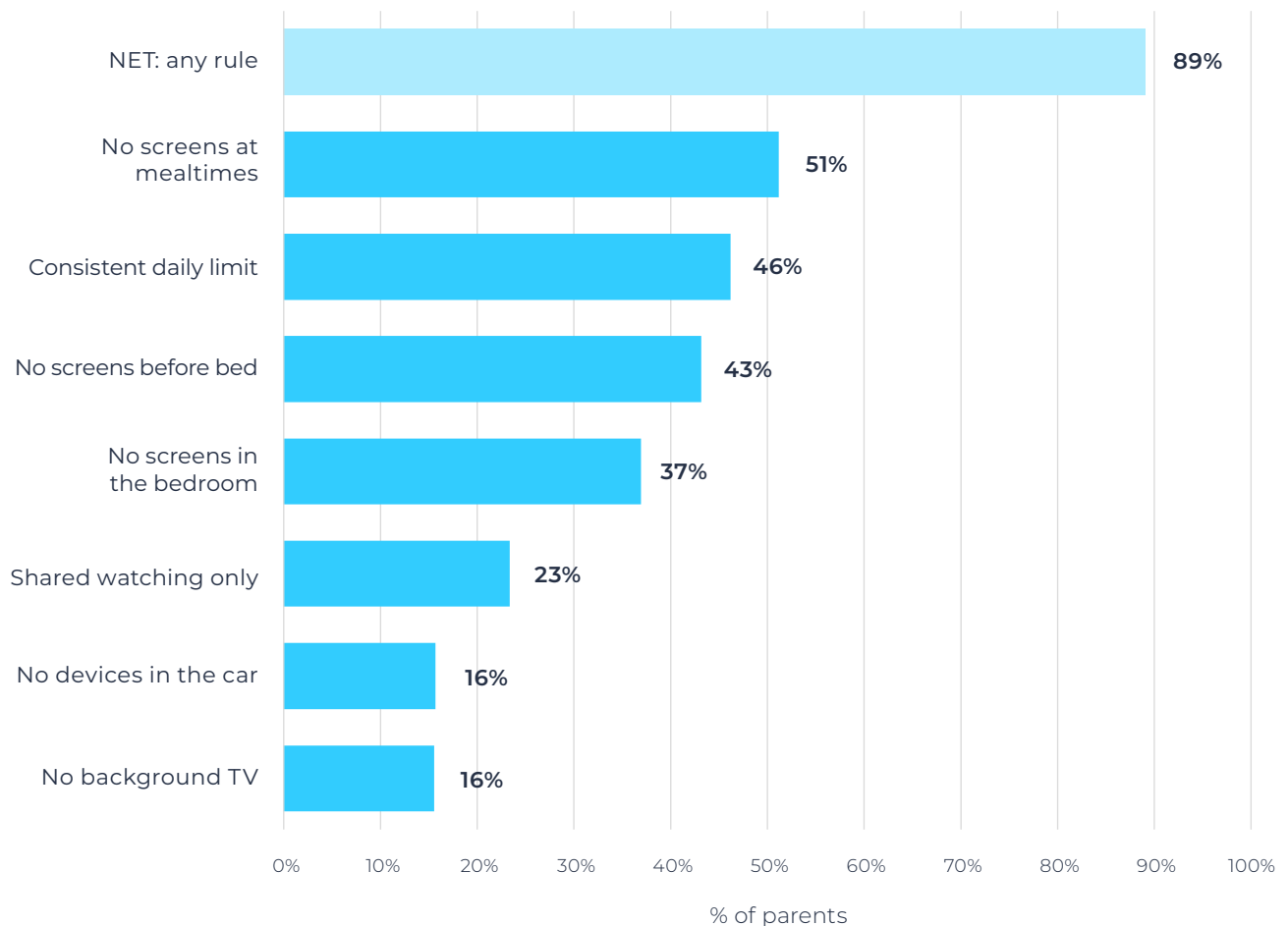


Figure 7: Household screen and device usage rules



Base: All parents (1000). Q: Do you have any of the following time boundaries in place in your home, if any, when it comes to the use of screens and devices?

In interviews with parents, they shared the household rules they have in place and how they enforce them. Some identified that setting rules were important to avoid conflict and upset that can be caused by device usage, such as when it is time to stop using devices. Applying boundaries consistently and communicating clear expectations to children can make routines easier for children to follow. Parents also saw boundaries as important for creating positive digital habits for their children. In some families, screen use was used as a reward and was not a given.

Parents can sometimes find it challenging to maintain consistent boundaries and rules, particularly when other relatives or even their partner or co-parent takes a more relaxed approach. As a result, children may encounter different expectations depending on who is caring for them, reducing individual parents' ability to fully influence or monitor what their child is doing online. Parents are also aware that as their child grows up, enforcing boundaries and rules will become even more difficult as parents lose oversight and control over their digital lives.

Mum of one, 5

"We set expectations for how long she's allowed to use the tablet and now 9 times out of 10, she's fine when she stops."

Mum of one, 5

"My partner doesn't always stick to these boundaries which makes it more difficult. He lets her watch it for a bit longer."

Mum of two, 1 & 4

"No technology after half 7, because I read that screens are not recommended right before bedtime."

Dad of two, 2 & 5

"Screens are definitely for the weekend only during term-time."

Mum of two, 4 & 6

"[We] do not watch TV and have devices at the table. When you're all together, it's family time. You eat all together and talk with one another, and that's really important for us."

Mum of two, 1 & 2

"When they wake up, it's 2 to 3 hours of no internet, no mobile phone, no TV."

Dad of two, 2 & 5

"We do reward them with more screentime if they're good, if they've done their chores, if they've listened last time."

Mum of one, 1

"I've tried to have a conversation with [the grandparents] about not giving her a smartphone to play with but it kind of gets nowhere."

Parental controls are an important part of device management even in the early years

Being able to set up and manage parental controls and other technical tools is an important part of parenting in a digital age, allowing parents to manage what children can see and do on digital devices. This allows them to further support healthy device usage and safe content viewing. Overall, 83% of parents of children aged 5 and under have at least one control set up on the digital devices their child uses.

Parental control usage increases with age, with 64% of parents of under-2s using parental controls, compared to 83% of parents of children aged 2-3 and 89% of parents of children aged 4-5. As explored earlier, younger children are more likely to be directly supervised by an adult during device usage, which can reduce the need for parental controls. Younger children also tend to have more limited independence when

using technology, such as not making decisions about what content they view. As children grow older and begin to navigate devices more independently, parents increasingly turn to parental controls as an additional tool to help manage their digital experiences.

The most common controls used by parents are safety settings or child profiles on streaming services, with 58% reporting this. Given that watching content on devices is the most popular digital activity of children aged 5 and under, it is positive to see that the majority of parents use these settings.

The second most common controls used are device-level controls. However, among parents whose child uses devices such as tablets, smart TVs or smartphones, fewer than half (47%) have enabled the built-in controls on these devices. These device-level controls can include features such as content restrictions, parental approval to download apps, screen time limits and parental PINs for access. While lower levels of use do not necessarily indicate a lack of recognition of their value, some parents may need additional support to understand and use the full range of controls available to them.

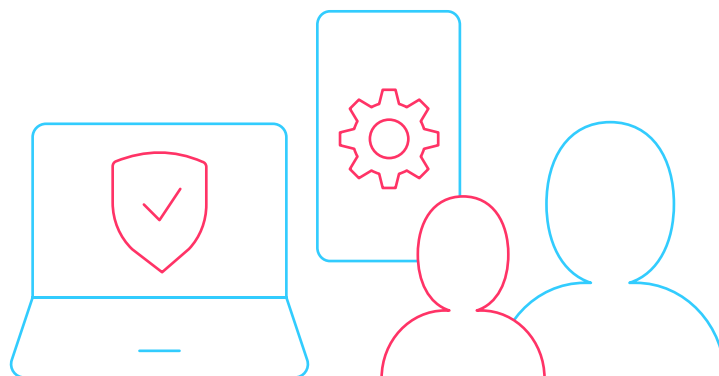
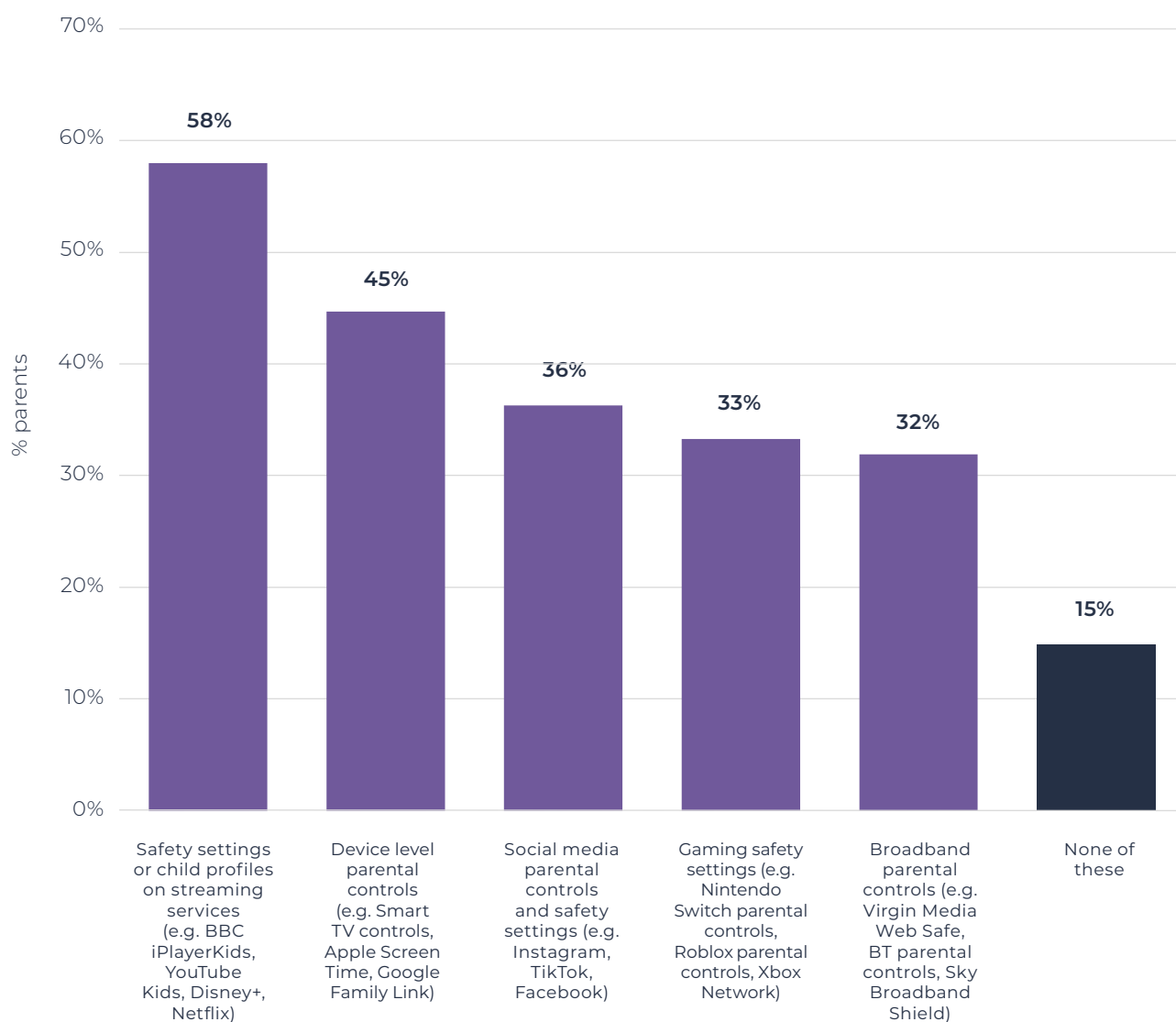


Figure 8: *Parental controls and safety settings usage*

Base: All parents (1000). Q: Have you set up any safety controls or settings, including on your own or shared devices?

Shared device use is also common among this age group. While shared access can offer practical or financial benefits for families, it can also create additional challenges when children of different ages or adults use the same device. This highlights the importance of parents understanding how to use features such as child profiles, content restrictions and parental controls which can help tailor the experience to different users. Supporting parents to confidently set up and manage these tools can help ensure a shared device meets the needs of the whole family while providing children with age-appropriate digital experiences.

Parents are also finding other technical tools to manage their children's digital device usage at this young age. For instance, some parents mentioned using screen pinning features found in device settings, which pin an app's screen to keep it in view until it is unpinned. This was particularly used for younger children, where parents felt that there was less of a need to implement the full suite of controls.

Mum of two, 1 & 2

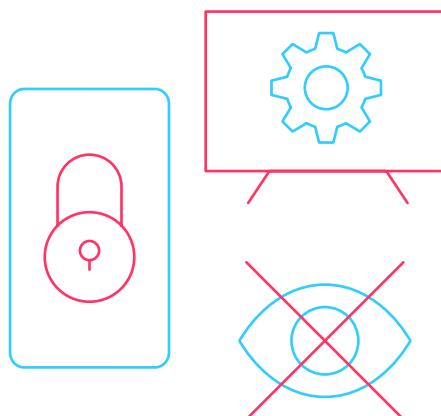
"It's screen locked. They can't do anything, swipe or something. They only see the show."

Dad of three, 1, 3 & 5

"[We don't have a kids tablet] because me and my partner use it as well. The kids mainly use it, but we have it in case we need to use it for anything [...] So we just use the parental controls on it."

Dad of three, 1, 3 & 5

"We use a screen pinning app so they can't go off that [particular app]."

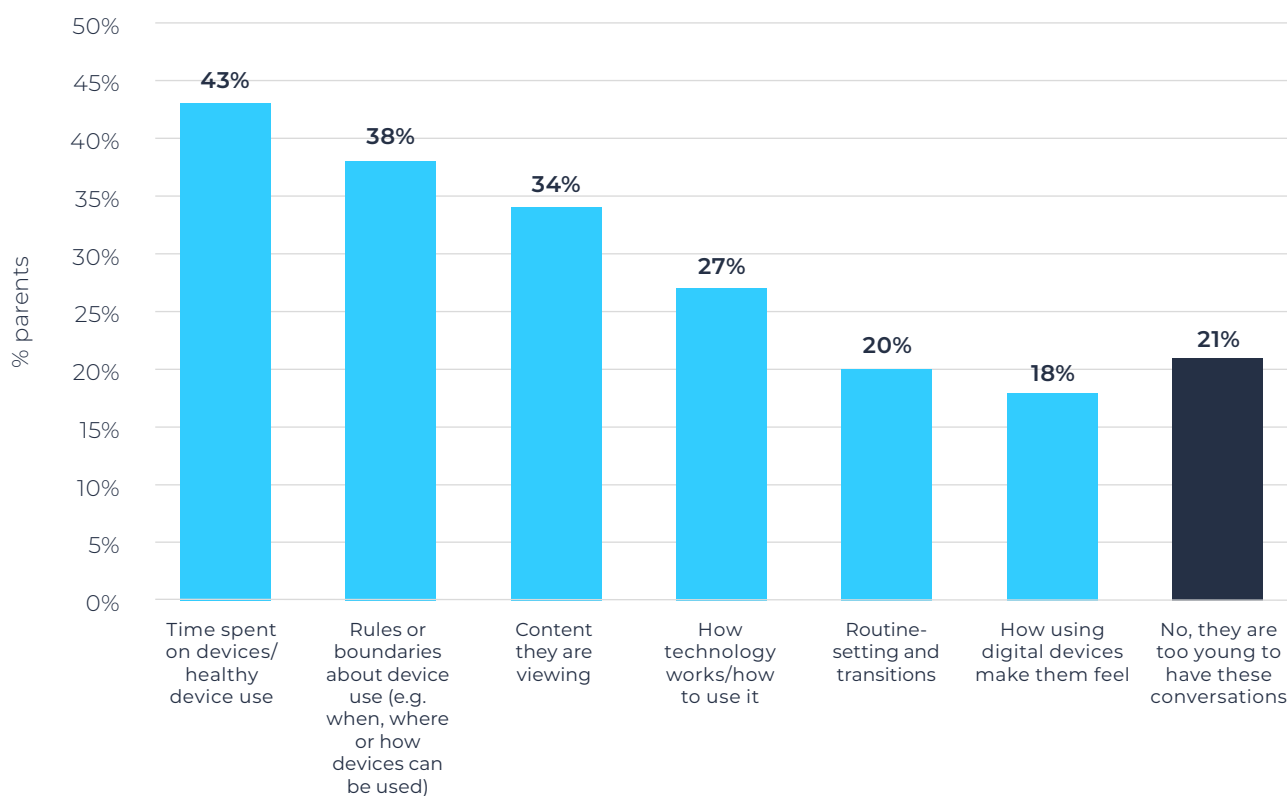


Parents are having conversations about digital technology with their child from a young age

Parents are children's number one source of information when it comes to online safety and the online world, and conversations about these topics start from a young age.²⁴ At age 2, 37% of parents are having age-appropriate conversations with their children about their device use, rising to 83% by the time children are 5.

The conversations reflect parents' top concerns and priorities, with the most common topics being time spent on devices (43%), rules and boundaries about device use (38%) and content children are viewing (34%). However, parents are not only talking about risks and limits, with over a quarter (27%) discussing with their child how technology works and how to use it, while 18% talk about how using digital devices make them feel. It is positive to see that parents are not only having conversations to set boundaries, but also to help children develop an understanding of technology and to build the skills they need to engage with it positively as they grow older.

Figure 9: Conversations about digital device usage with children aged 5 and under



Base: All parents (1000). Q: Have you spoken to your child about any of the following topics in relation to their device use?

24. Internet Matters Pulse. [Link](#).

Role modelling healthy digital habits for their children is important to parents

While parents are concerned about their children's engagement with screens and technology, parents themselves also tell us they struggle with their own digital device use. Three in five (59%) parents of children aged 5 and under say that they worry about how their own device use may impact their children, and a further 43% admit they feel distracted by their digital devices when spending time with their child. Experts label this 'technoference' to describe how parent-child activities are interrupted by technology, which can impact relationships, lead to behavioural issues and increase conflict.²⁵ This was reflected by parents in interviews, with many expressing feelings of guilt for being on their device.

These feelings of guilt stemmed from how devices could distract them from spending time with their child, but also to concerns about the behaviours they might be normalising. Parents recognise that role-modelling healthy digital habits was one of the most powerful ways for them to shape their children's relationship with technology, particularly at a young age. As a result, many parents are making a conscious effort to model good habits that they want their children to learn and adopt.

Parents of children aged 5 and under are already adopting a wide range of digital parenting strategies, from supervision and setting boundaries to using parental controls and having conversations about technology. However, the findings also reveal variation in confidence, knowledge and access to tools, highlighting the need for support that helps all parents navigate their child's digital world with confidence. The next section explores the guidance, information and support parents need to do this effectively.

Dad of one, 4

"I feel like I have a duty not to use it around him. It's not about feeling guilty, it's about setting an example and not being a hypocrite."

Mum of two, 3 months & 3

"We tend to just try and be present with them, because obviously we can't turn around to them and go 'no, you only have a certain amount of screen time' and then I'm on my phone all the time."

Mum of two, 1 & 4

"It trips your guilty conscience being on your phone. Even that one second checking a message means a lot to them."

Dad of two, 11 months & 3

"I do feel guilty. It plays on my mind. I don't want my child to associate me with being on my phone."

25. Radesky, J. (23 November 2025) "Technoference and young children's social and emotional development." Centre for Early Childhood. [Link](#).



Section 5: Supporting parents of young children in a digital age

Parents are already taking meaningful steps to help children navigate digital devices and screens safely. However, balancing this alongside the other demands of family life, while also keeping pace with a rapidly changing technological environment is not always easy. Although they currently access support from a variety of sources, many parents continue to want more guidance to address the challenges of digital device usage.

Parents turn to a variety of sources for support navigating digital devices

Digital parenting involves many day-to-day decisions and parents draw on a range of sources for advice and support to stay on top of these and help guide them. Primarily, parents turn to the people closest to them such as their partner or co-parent (38%) and other family members (30%). Parents also turn to their own informal parent networks, such

as WhatsApp group chats and school groups. This reflects the collaborative and informal ways digital parenting decisions are navigated and made.

Parents are also turning to online sources of information with search engines (33%), social media (26%), online forums (24%) and even AI chatbots (24%) cited as sources of digital parenting information. This reflects an evolving information landscape in which parents are increasingly comfortable seeking answers from less traditional sources. However, with concerns about the accuracy of AI-generated information and the circulation of misinformation on social media and messaging platforms, there is a growing need to ensure parents can confidently identify trusted sources of information by strengthening their own media literacy skills.²⁶

The range of sources they draw on for support illustrates that there is no single channel through which parents want to receive guidance and support. Instead, it highlights the need to provide trusted resources in multiple accessible formats and meet parents where they already are.

Mum of one, 5

"There's a woman who I follow on Instagram...I really like her – she is a child psychologist, and she has a way of framing questions [to ask to children] or how you can explain things to children."

Mum of one, 1

"We asked ChatGPT when the best age is to introduce a tablet [to my child] as part of our research."

Dad of one, 3

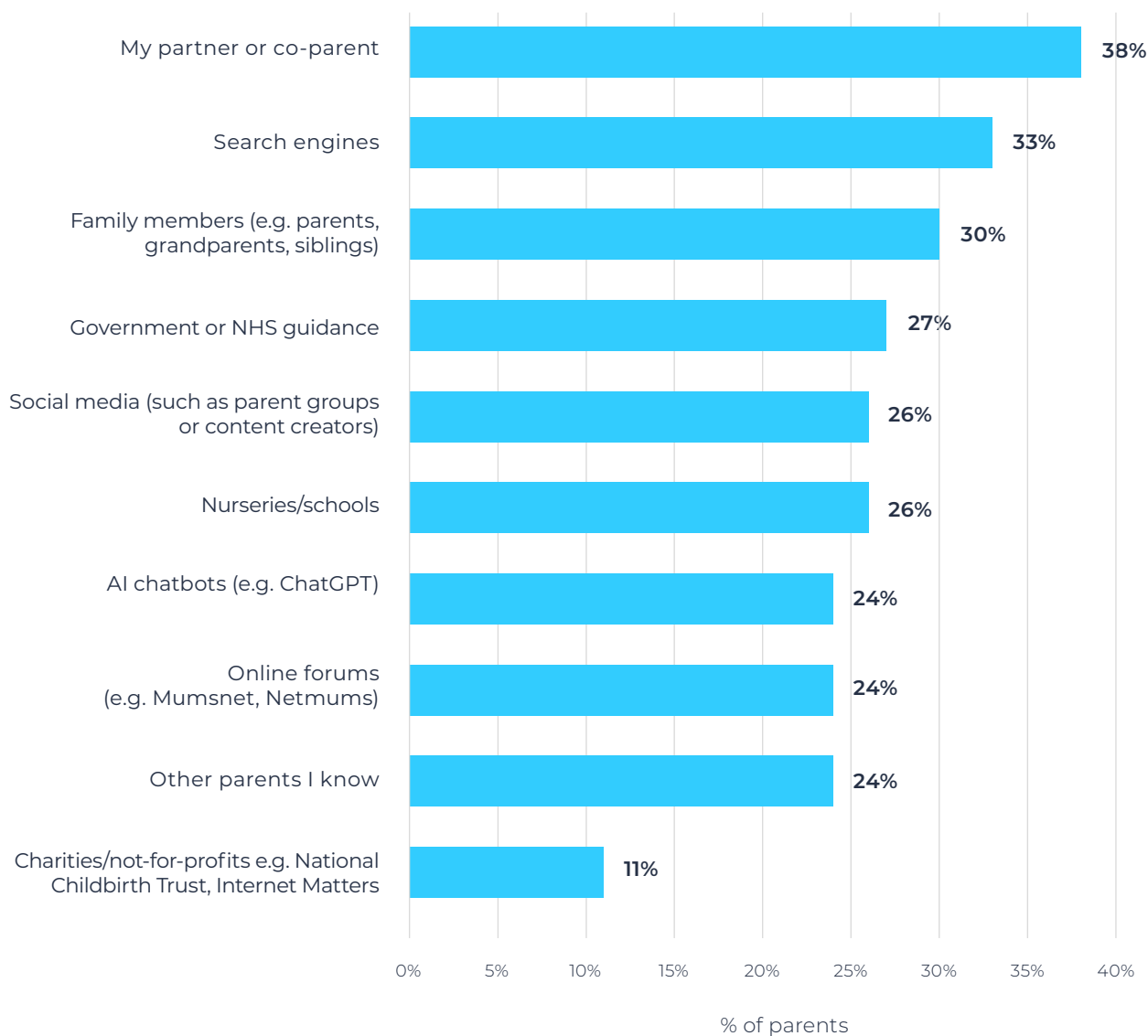
"I search on TikTok for specific names of apps or content or go on YouTube and the comment section to get reviews."

Mum of one, 1

"I saw an Instagram post about what's suitable for kids and the difference between Peppa Pig and Bluey...it's about behaviour, storytelling, the pace. I probably wouldn't have thought about it otherwise."

26. The Atlantic (16 June 2020) 'When Your Family Spreads Misinformation'. [Link](#).

Figure 10: Parents' sources of support or advice to help manage digital device usage



Base: All parents (1000). Q: Where do you get support or advice to help manage your child's digital device use, if at all?

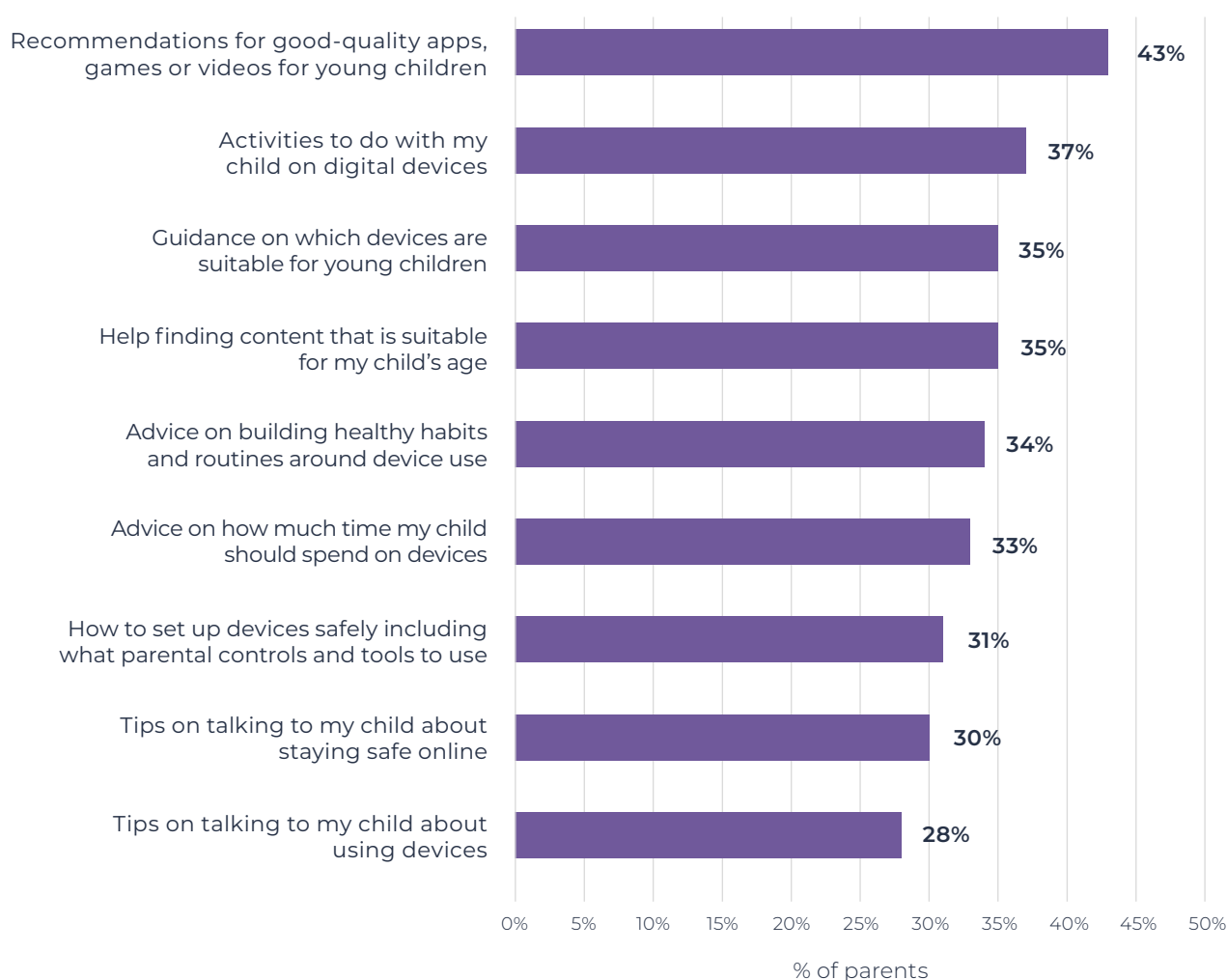
Identifying good quality and age-appropriate content is parents' primary need

Parents want support to manage their child's safe digital device usage, and this support closely mirrors their concerns.

Primarily, parents want recommendations for good-quality apps, games and videos (43%) and help with finding content that is age-appropriate for their

child (35%). Given that watching content is the most common digital activity of children aged 5 and under this is unsurprising. It also points to a clear appetite for support with one of the more time consuming judgement calls parents must make. While some parents in interviews told us that they check whether content is appropriate for their child by taking time to watch or use the content beforehand, not all parents are able to take the time to do this and therefore need quick, accessible ways to get this information.

Figure 11: Advice parents want to support safe digital device usage



Base: All parents (1000). Q: Thinking about your child aged 5 or under, what support or guidance would you find most helpful for your child's safe digital device usage?

Building healthy digital habits is also something parents recognise as important. Parents want more support with building healthy habits and routines (34%), with parents of vulnerable children more likely to say this (36% cf. 23%). A similar number (31%) of parents also want help with setting up devices safely including what parental controls and safety tools to use.

Finally, parents want support with talking to their children about digital life such as about staying safe online (30%) and using digital devices (28%). This is particularly relevant as children grow older, with parents of 4-5-year-olds significantly more likely than under-2s to say they want advice about online safety (32% cf. 21%) and how to use devices (31% cf. 22%). Parents recognise the need to equip children with the confidence and understanding to navigate an increasingly digital and technological world independently as they grow.

Dad of two, 2 & 5

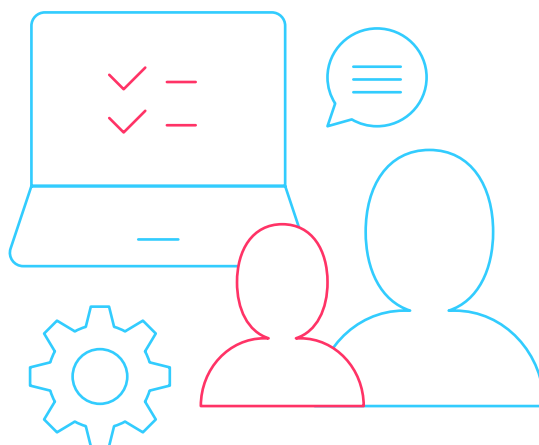
"More guidance on what is verified as safe would be good."

Mum of one, 5

"For me, it's how to have the difficult conversations. How do you have really difficult conversations with a small child about what they're watching? I want the language to explain [to my daughter] that not everything she sees online is real."

Dad of two, 11 months & 3

"Guidance on how to set up devices safely."



Supporting families and children to use devices safely is a shared responsibility

Supporting children to use digital devices safely and appropriately is a shared responsibility, and parents recognise this. While parents see themselves as playing a central role in their children's lives, they also expect government (45%), education settings (40%), technology companies (38%) and the NHS (33%) to help support families in navigating young children's digital device use.

Parents felt early years settings like nurseries and schools had a role to play in supporting families practically. This could be, for instance, by providing leaflets, signposting trusted resources and sharing guidance with parents.

Alongside this, there was a great sense that technology and social media companies should also take responsibility for supporting safe and healthy digital habits and provide clearer guidance on appropriate screen use. Some parents noted that device manufacturers tend to promote engagement and usage.

Parents are already taking meaningful steps to support their young children's use of digital technology but doing so consistently is not always easy and new challenges emerge as children grow. As a result, many parents continue to seek practical guidance around content, safety and healthy digital habits. While families play a central role in children's digital lives, helping them navigate these challenges confidently requires support from government, educators, healthcare professionals and technology companies.

Dad of one, 4

"I'd like more guidance and information on what sort of legislation government is putting in place and keeping us up-to-date as parents so we know what we need to do."

Mum of one, 1

"It would be great if nurseries provided leaflets or sent links out."

Mum of two, 5 & 7

"I think people selling you the tablets should be saying we're selling it to you [and your child] but remember, you shouldn't be using it for more than 30 minutes a day or whatever."

Dad of three, 1, 3 & 5

"Companies offering kids services should be responsible for providing this information."

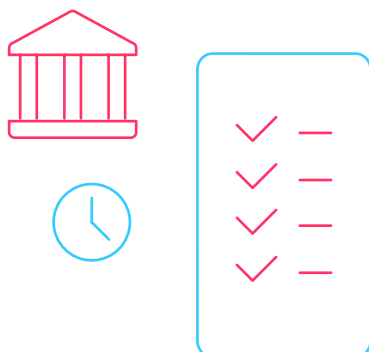
Mum of one, 1

"[Tech companies] are providing the media and the route to access it. They should make sure everything is safe before it goes out."

Evaluation: Parents' perspectives on the Government's screen time guidance for under 5s

In March 2026, the UK Government published healthy screen time guidance for parents of children under-5. This evidence-backed guidance is based on an independent review conducted by the Early Years Screen Time Advisory Group, chaired by the Children's Commissioner for England and Professor Russell Vine (Professor in Adolescent Health, University College London).²⁷ The Group was jointly established by the Department of Education and Department of Health and Social Care.

This guidance is available on the Best Start in Life website, and includes suggestions for screen time limits, alongside tips for choosing appropriate content and using screens together for healthy child development.²⁸



Awareness of the guidance

Our survey found that three in five (62%) parents of children aged 5 and under have heard of the Government guidance. Within this, 32% of parents have read the guidance, and 30% have not. A further third (35%) tell us they have never heard of this guidance. Of parents who had heard of the guidance in interviews, many told us that they had come across it through the news or podcasts. The guidance therefore has been successful in reaching a significant proportion of its intended audience.

However, there is still further progress to be made. Parents from the lowest-income households were less likely to have heard of the guidance (51% of lowest-income households had not heard of it cf. 33% of highest-income households) as well as being less likely to have read it (22% of lowest-income households cf. 38% of highest-income households).

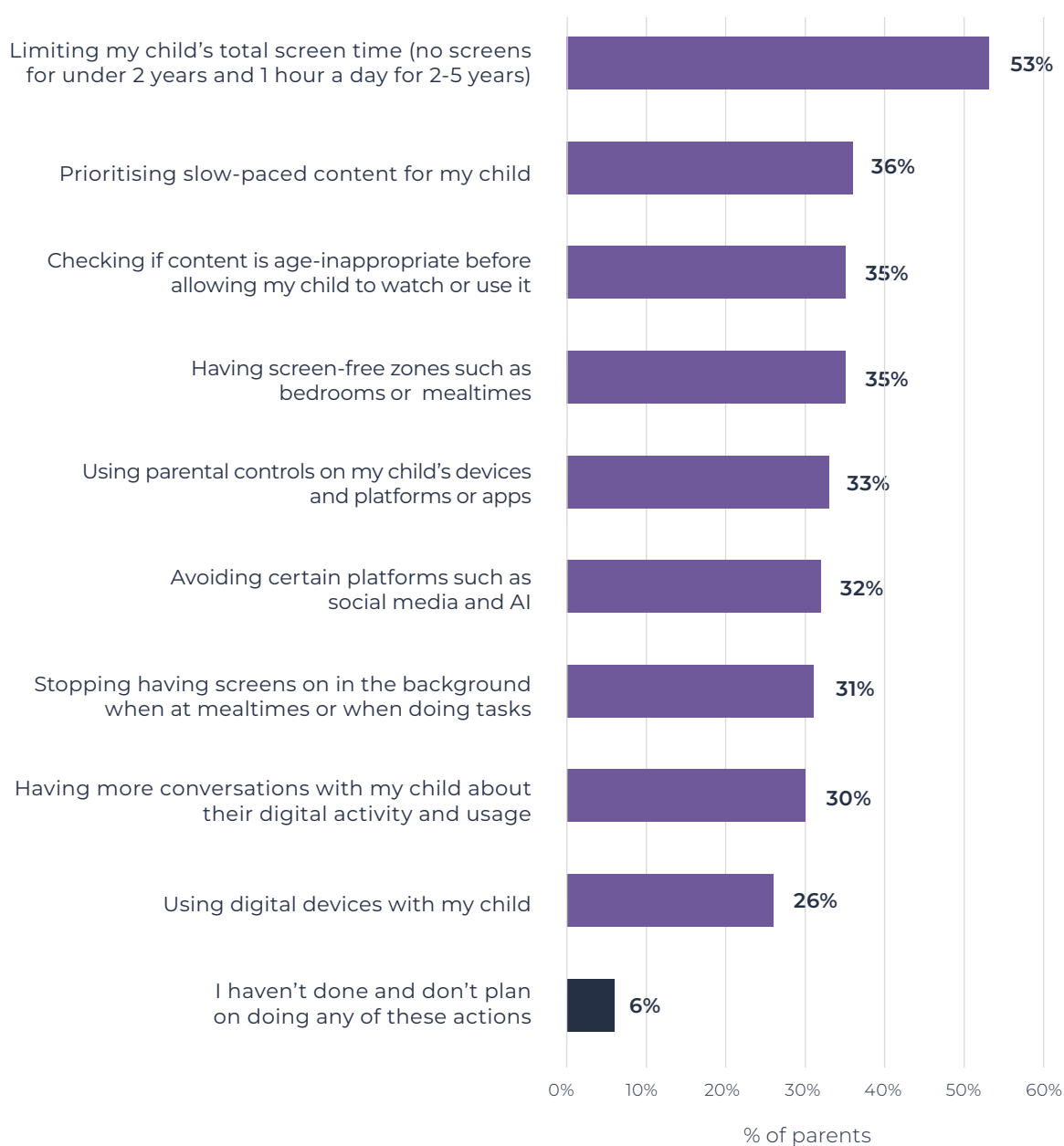
Taking action

We asked all parents in our survey to review the Government's guidance on the Best Start in Life page. Following this review, the majority (94%) told us they were already taking or planning to take action. The most common actions parents would take or are planning to take were limiting their child's total screentime (53%), prioritising slow-paced content (36%), checking if content is age-appropriate (35%) or having screen-free zones at home (35%).

27. Early Years Screen Time Advisory Group (2026) Screen use by children aged under five: independent report. [Link](#).

28. Best Start in Life (Last updated 29 June 2026) Baby and toddler screen time guidance: Screen time guidance for under 5s. [Link](#).

Figure 12: Actions parents are taking or planning to take after reading government screen time guidance



Base: All parents (1000). Q: After reading the Government's guidance on screen time, have you done or plan on doing any of the following?

Perspectives on the guidance

While parents overwhelmingly viewed the guidance positively, with 88% of parents saying they found it helpful, some parents in interviews felt it did not fully reflect the reality of raising young children in a digital world. A small number expressed concerns that the recommendations around screen use limits felt difficult to achieve in practice, given the prevalence of screens in everyday family life. One parent even admitted avoiding the guidance altogether because they anticipated it would make them feel judged or guilty about their current approach towards digital technology. However, parents generally considered that there was a role for this guidance and thought about how they would use it in their own family contexts.

Overall, parents see clear value in the Government creating guidance on screen use. To have the greatest impact, government should ensure it reaches all families – including low-income families – and for recommendations in the guidance to reflect the realities of everyday family life.

Dad of one, 3

"It is a very useful thing. It would give parents some sort of confidence that the Government cares about parents and children."

Mum of one, 1

"It would be great for parents who aren't aware of the harms or issues."

Dad of one, 4

"Some parents might not have the time, knowledge or know-how to understand what their children are doing."

Mum of one, 1

"It would be useful to have realistic guidance, because I know that the actual advice is, like, kids under 2 shouldn't have any screen time at all, or something like that."

Mum of one, 1

"I'm aware it exists. I haven't looked at it in depth because I knew that what we were doing is what they said we shouldn't do [...] so I haven't looked at it because I didn't want to feel guilty."



Conclusion & recommendations

Children are growing up in a digital world, where technology is often woven into everyday family life. While there are concerns with young children's technology use, it can also bring many benefits from allowing children to stay in touch with grandparents who live far away, to giving busy parents the opportunity to get on with household tasks such as cooking or caring for other family members.

Despite these positives, parents recognise the critical importance of healthy, age-appropriate use of technology in the early years and the need for devices to be used safely and deliberately. Parents are already seeking out advice and support and using tools to help them make these decisions about their children's digital lives. However, the vast, complex and evolving digital landscape means families continue to need clear, practical and accessible support to make informed decisions. This includes choices about how much time children should spend using digital technology, and the quality and context of these digital experiences.

The recommendations that follow focus on what more industry and government can do to support families to make informed decisions about technology use in the early years. However, improving children's digital experiences and supporting digital wellbeing requires a broader approach. Children's digital habits are shaped by the wider environments in which they grow up, with factors such as high quality childcare, SEND support and access to books in the early years all having a role to play.

Through improved support and safe, age-appropriate digital spaces, alongside action to improve the wider conditions that shape families' lives, we can ensure children develop healthy digital habits from a young age and build the media literacy skills and knowledge needed to thrive in a digital world.

Industry

From the content children watch to the devices, platforms and apps they use, industry has an important role to play in ensuring children's digital experiences are safe, age-appropriate and support healthy development.

Platforms, channels and apps should make it easy for parents to identify content that is appropriate for young children. This could include the use of existing trusted signals, such as BBFC or PEGI ratings. Services should also provide clear and accessible information about the content. This labelling should be concise and include the themes and age suitability of the content, and whether it encourages offline interaction with others as per government guidance. This information should be easy to find, particularly where parents are logged in on a child account.

Digital platforms and services, including child modes, should be safe-by-design.

This means considering and addressing young children's safety and development needs from the outset, rather than just adapting products designed for adults or older children.

Age-appropriate design could include simpler interfaces and limiting features that encourage prolonged or passive use, such as recommended videos or autoplay. Content and recommendations should also be appropriate for the child's age. Platforms and services should differentiate the experiences of children at different developmental stages, so, for example, a 4-year-old and 10-year-old do not have the same experience.

Devices or platforms that can be used by young children should come with clear guidance for parents on how to set them up for safe, age-appropriate use. Providers of devices and platforms that can be used by young children

should make safety settings and parental controls easy to find, set up and manage, alongside clear guidance for parents on how to use them. This is particularly important where devices or services are designed for a range of ages.

Government

Parents and carers

Government should act as a trusted source of information for families. The under-5s screen time guidance for parents and carers is therefore a welcome first step to support healthy digital engagement in the early years.²⁹

To ensure it has the greatest impact, **it should reach all parents, including those in low-income households who are less likely to have heard of the guidance.** To do this, we recommend that the Government works with providers who are already reaching this group of parents and are trusted by parents, such as the NHS.

The guidance should also be expanded to better support parents to select age and developmentally appropriate content.

As this was parents' most commonly identified support need, providing further information on this topic, or making it clear where this information can be found, should be a priority for future iterations of the guidance.

Alongside providing content guidance, **the Government should also ensure that high quality, suitable children's content is widely accessible to families.** This means that this content should be freely available and easy to discover on the services that parents allow their children to use in the early years.

Early years settings

Early years settings have an important role to play in supporting children's safe, positive use of technology from a young age. This is recognised by the Government, who have recently developed screen use guidance for early years settings in England³⁰ which has been included in the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework.³¹

To make the most of this guidance, **early years professionals should be supported to implement it effectively.**

Practitioners need the knowledge and confidence to make appropriate decisions about the use of digital devices within their settings. They should also be able to: explain to parents how devices are used within the setting, signpost families to relevant government guidance and share evidence-based approaches for supporting healthy digital habits at home.

To enable this, **staff working in early years settings must receive appropriate, funded, training on the guidance.** This would provide practitioners with the knowledge and confidence to apply the guidance consistently in their setting and engage effectively with parents.

Government should also **evaluate how the guidance is being implemented in practice,** to understand where gaps exist and where further support or advice may be needed.

29. Best Start in Life (Last updated 29 June 2026) Baby and toddler screen time guidance: Screen time guidance for under 5s. [Link](#).

30. Department for Education (2026) Screen use: How to limit children's screen use in settings and ensure it supports children's learning and development. [Link](#).

31. Department for Education (2026) Early years foundation stage statutory framework. [Link](#).

Researchers and universities

Research is needed to understand what age-appropriate media literacy looks like in the early years, and the most effective ways to support its development. This should include evaluation of existing media literacy interventions for children aged 5 and under. Findings from this research should be used to refine existing guidance to reflect the learning needs of young children in a digital world.

More widely, research is also needed to understand the impact of new policies and regulation on children's online lives and how parenting is changing in the digital age, such as through the use of generative AI.

Parents and carers

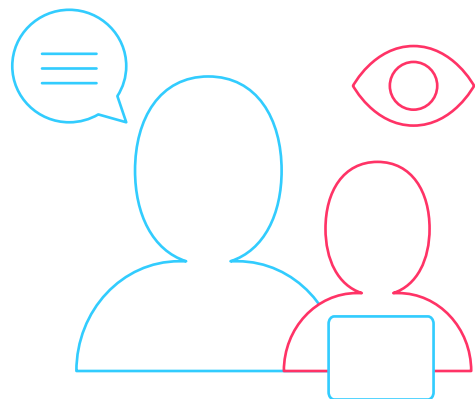
Parents play a central role in shaping young children's early experiences with digital technology: they decide what devices children have access to, and establish many of the routines and boundaries that influence digital habits beyond early childhood.

To support them to make these important decisions, parents need clear, practical and age-appropriate advice that reflects the issues they are facing and gives them the confidence to make decisions that work for their family.

Internet Matters has developed a range of resources specifically for parents of children aged 5 and under. The resources are informed by this research and experts in the field and provide practical advice to help parents navigate their child's use of digital devices safely and to support their digital wellbeing. On our website internetmatters.org, parents can access the following resources, alongside hundreds of other free, evidence-informed tools and guidance.

In our [Early Years Hub](#) you can find:

- Guidance to support the [safe set up of devices](#) for children aged 5 and under
- Age-specific advice on [screen use](#), alongside tips to support healthy screen use
- Tips and guidance to help parents and carers find [content that is suitable](#) for children aged 5 and under
- Advice on how to [start conversations](#) with children in the early years





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