



Spotlight issue

Digital lives

The purpose of the spotlight issues series is to highlight themes or topics which have arisen across parental contributions. While these issues are reported across chapters, these short papers highlight key aspects for further reflection.

In this Spotlight Issue we look across the Chat to learn more about parenting as our children lead increasingly digital lives.

In small group chats and via the national survey parents have talked about the positive aspects of their child's digital experiences.

There are positive things to social media, that bring support and comfort, so I want them to see it and use it positively too. To find people that get you, find your tribe.

(Group chat 13)

Parents have talked about concerns that their children are spending too much time on screens – this is exacerbated with use at home and at school.

They are on the iPad all day in class, we've decided no screens at home, for anything, it's overwhelming.

(Group chat 11)

Feel overwhelmed even by P4s being given an iPad home - we would prefer this stays at school so not something we need to monitor just yet, and also for reasons of screen hygiene, I'm concerned that being on them a lot through the day, and then having homework on screens at night is detrimental to sleep, focus, handwriting etc- sorry that is a departure into concerns about screens generally, but not sure where to feed that back.

(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

The challenge with my boys is like too much time gaming, too much time on Xbox. You try to get them to self-regulate on that. Being active really helps, well any hobby or interest, something else to help with overall wellbeing. I like that the school does champion sport, there are lots of activities available.

(Group chat 18)

By the time children are in the middle years of primary school there can be peer pressure to be part of online groups and online play – if this is not what a parent wants, or they attempt to limit time online, their child can be or feel excluded.

The impact of the digital age is significant in this especially at the age 8 stage where parents have different standards around what children should have access to online which can result in children being excluded from friendship groups at a point where they are still trying to navigate and understand that not everyone will necessarily all play together anymore. Adding in the digital divide makes an emotionally complex period even more complex.

(Survey response/parent of 6–8-year-old)

We were just speaking about this, like how much computers and phones have taken over their childhood, all the drama that's happening, we've had to take a step back, really limit what's she's getting at home. Her dad is like worried she'll miss out on being able to talk to her pals, but we need boundaries. All these interactions online are really difficult to manage, anyway we are getting out more, walking the dog, watching a movie together.

(Group chat 26)

Parents are concerned that children may not understand that what is online is 'real' or that online relationships should be conducted with the same regard paid to in-person relationships. There are concerns that children do not understand the implications of online behaviours, or that parents – having given their child a smart phone - are not always aware or not paying attention.

More generally some children have difficulty understanding what is real and what is not, like looking at things on a screen.

(Group chat 33)

Kids have been taking pictures in class, of other kids, of teachers. Posting things, and if parents aren't checking what their kids are doing, well the school doesn't know what to do. This is primary kids who don't understand risks, so they're posting on TikTok or Snapchat, pictures of kids with names, the school they're at. How do we stop that? There were pictures with names shared of children who are at risk.

(Group chat 26)

Parents have handed them devices at such a young age, but then not controlling what they can access. Parents that have just not paid attention to what they are accessing and doing. I can control what my child has access to through me, but I can't control what other parents are allowing their children to do, and that has repercussions for all the other children. There are so many group chats I have

taken my son out of connected to children in this school. The things these children are writing in group chats, and I know these children, but I have my son coming to me asking what things mean. Last week he asked me from this chat, what is paedophilia? So, I want him to understand his own safety, but then I have to answer his question. I do look through his phone, that's the rule at home, that my access keeps him safe. But do these other children's parents know what's going on? Its explicit.

(Group chat 9)

She comes home and tells me some of the things going on with children in the class. They've got phones, what friends look at and see and share. it's all sexualised, so young. TikTok content, whatever they view.

(Group chat 11)

As we have already heard, parents worry about what their children are exposed to, or the mistakes they might make. Across our small group chats parents have talked about communication and the importance of their child knowing they can come to them with worries or questions.

I'm thinking that because I am open with my boys, I can see that they are sensible boys. We are free to have conversations. They don't hide things. I decided this very consciously when they were little. As a teenager my son had an experience of sharing an image and then someone trying to extort money from him, under threats of sharing. And he came to me, and we sorted it together. I was able to defend him. He knows I know that people make mistakes. I am so glad he came to me; he was nearly broken, sobbing, others have killed themselves over things like this. He knows the big things; we can find solutions.

(Group chat 29)

If we take the sex bit out of it, and just think about say how children are exposed to violence. On the news. In games. So, I need to anticipate what they might see that they don't have context for, or might be frightened by, or might bring up feelings that they don't know how to manage. So, my approach to that is to try to maintain an open communication in general to the extent I can, make sure they know my love and support is stronger than any transient discomfort. So, when they see things, they don't understand they come to me to talk about it. I can't anticipate everything, of course governments should provide protection here, but my personal strategy is to realise I only have a fixed time to curate this individual – it's all about guidance in any given opportunity.

(Group chat 17)

Having boys, I worry about what's going on on their phones. I just need to keep saying, come to me, I can sort it. With you I can sort anything.

(Group chat 21)

Part of helping them to manage what they see online is that thing about media literacy. To understand when somebody is marketing something to us, who is offering this message and why? What are we consuming? Those are elaborate concepts for adults, let alone children and young people. But they need to understand what they see, what an algorithm shows to them. So, I try to cultivate an environment where nothing is considered out of bounds for conversation. They are comfortable with these conversations, even if I know I'm not always so.

(Group chat 17)

A concern is that children can easily access sexist, misogynistic and pornographic content. The topic pornography is discussed in more depth in Spotlight Issue: Pornography.

I am concerned about the level of sexist and misogynistic content that our children and teenagers are seeing, it's a concern for me as a parent.

(Group chat 28)

There's no way you can't give your high school child a smartphone. Teachers said that to me. I was hoping to delay it as long as possible; it just wasn't possible. Even if you did manage that, they would just see things on a friend's phone, especially when you've got groups of boys. They will be exposed to things that children of that age would have been 10 years ago. It can be extreme what they see at a young age, so they do need to understand that is not normal. For boys and girls that's got to be made so clear to them.

(Group chat 16)

These areas have been the most important for me as my children have aged within the digital era. Their access to the internet at all times gave me worries as I had experienced my son innocently searching 'boobies', same as I would have perhaps gone to a library back in the day and giggled over the word 'sex' in the dictionary.

Only what my son (6 at the time) had seen was links to hardcore porn sites.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

Parents worry about the access that predatory adults can have to their child via the technology they have. They have spoken about how hard it is to have conversations with children about risks but realise how essential these are when we give children and young people access to the online world.

There are some situations where I actually think my neurotypical child is at more risk than my child with autism, I mean in that online space. We are raising a generation of kids who are online. He's on Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, he's gaming. We had to clamp down at one point. I didn't have that growing up, it feels like we're muddling through. But when is the right time to introduce these things about being safe, it being vulnerable being online. It can feel overwhelming. Obviously, vulnerabilities exist for my neurodiverse child, but they are different.

(Group chat 14)

I think if you use hypothetical things its harder to help them understand. So look, it's not nice to have these conversations at home, but we need to understand this stuff is absolutely rife online. We really need to understand when we give our child a phone, well in the past a paedophile was a guy in the street. A phone brings these people into your home, into your child's bedroom, and that thought terrifies me more than the uncomfortable conversation.

(Group chat 30)

Parents have described how despite their efforts to put in place safeguards, children can work their way around them. By a certain age young people may not accept a parental role when it comes to safeguarding.

I deleted the apps; thought I had stopped the 8-year-old from watching YouTube. Then I saw he was just watching YouTube content via google.

(Group chat 11)

Well, he's 16 now, so I'm just blocked, so is his sister.

(Group chat 23)

A real challenge is how your teenager would rather listen to and believe anybody or any source before they will believe you. Anything they come across on TikTok rather than you. Pals seem to know everything, teachers they might listen to, things on social media, but not me.

(Group chat 33)

Parents can find it difficult to find a balance between respect for their child's choices and privacy and with safeguarding them. The issue of trust is mentioned as part of these conversations.

Keeping up with the latest risks can be challenging and also the age of privacy is tricky. Deciding to give more privacy vs looking into concerns can be a difficult balance.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

It doesn't matter how many parental controls you have on their devices, the extent to which you can control their devices, you are never going to see the detail of the conversations they are having. So, what are we teaching our kids just by controlling them? Where's the trust? It's a relationship we have.

(Group chat 28)

I trust my boys, that they are good boys. They know what is right and wrong. I encourage them to trust their instincts if something feels unsafe, or they worry, trust that. Other than that, I'm not very restrictive, but I keep an eye. I'm quite relaxed, I'm not standing over their shoulders, I trust them to do the right thing.

(Group chat 23)

Parents have identified the need to consider the child's use of technology and access online from an early age, this would be best done as a partnership between home and school.

I have concerns about the impact social media/phone use, access to pornography etc is having on children's wellbeing, self-esteem, relationships, understanding of consent, risk taking etc. I think this needs to be raised as early as possible, in particular with parents. No point waiting until p5/6/7 when they are already under pressure to buy children phones/access to online activity. This early protective messaging via schools and parents is so important for building resilient, informed children and who can safely navigate the world they are growing up with and have safe healthy friendships and consensual sexual relationships.

(Survey response/parent of 6-8-year-old)

The whole situation, well it forces your hand, it feels like what we want them to know or understand is out of our control. We're not in charge of what and when we talk about. I suppose I'd like the school to show a wee bit more leadership and support parents who are trying to protect their children. I do think phones should be banned in schools, I think they cause so many issues, things that flow from access to what their phones allow. I hear people responding to that by saying, oh we just need to give them better education about being online, but we need to remember just how young children are.

(Group chat 16)

Parents have asked for legislation from government that better protects children and supports efforts at home to limit how children and young people use some platforms.

As a parent, absolutely terrified by smartphones and the risk of children disappearing into online grooming, sexting, sexexploitation - appreciate any help to get national legislation to keep children off social media as long as possible, and to join safely when appropriate, and know how to keep themselves safe, and that not everyone is who they say they are etc.

(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

We managed to only hold off until primary 7. But I think Government guidance, that they should only have a brick, something to back parents up, we are under such social pressure, children feel they will be excluded. This shouldn't all be on parents. Governments should be doing more to protect children. It's really unfair to dump this huge societal change on parents, we can't as individuals, like King Canut, turning back the tide.

(Group chat 17)

Finally, the Chat national survey explored what support parents would like as their child's first and most important educator. Parents were asked if they agreed with this statement: *I would like learning for me that helps me understand the online/digital world and how to protect my child.* A majority of parents would welcome this offer - 63.9% of parents of 3 to 5 years old; 60.4% of parents of 6- to 8-year-olds; 59% of parents of 9- to 12-year-olds; and 55% of parents of 12- to 18-year-olds indicated I agree. (More on this in the chapter Supporting Parents).

Although I feel somewhat confident about this area, I would welcome some additional resources, especially ones that are suitable for a 14-year-old with literacy issues/mild learning difficulties.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

I'd like internet security advice – apps and games – how to interact online, so help and info on boundaries on what's acceptable and what is not. How are schools supporting this? What are they doing?

(Group chat 7)