

# ***A Life Behind The Screens***

*Uncovering the Realities of Digital Childhood*



**CYBERSAFE  
KIDS**

Trends and Usage Report Academic Year 2024-2025

# Mission

**Our mission is to make online safer for children and children safer online.**

**We do this through education, giving voice to children's online experience and by being a fierce advocate for children's online safety.**

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# Foreword

## by Sonia Livingstone

This has been an important year for child online protection, with Ireland's Online Safety and Media Regulation Act, Europe's Digital Services Act (DSA), and other regulation around the world. This year's CyberSafeKids Trends & Usage Report provides both new insights into Irish children's digital lives, and a benchmark for improvement. When these regulations come into force, the public expects that children will encounter fewer risks of harm, freeing them to enjoy more opportunities in coming years – online and offline.

In other words, the stats reported here set the agenda for needed improvements in children's online safety:

- Two-thirds of 8-12-year-olds have accounts on social media where the T&Cs require 13+, so clearly more and better age assurance is needed.
- While some prominent apps are declining in popularity, gaming platforms like Roblox are gaining the attention of young children; let's hope they also attract the attention of policymakers.
- Worryingly, a fifth of younger children and a quarter of teens have been upset or bothered by something they saw online in the past year – most often, content or contact that is scary, horrifying or threatening.
- Between a third and a half of children haven't spoken to their parents about online safety in the past year.

Will the percentages of underage users using social media or being upset by what they see be lower next year, following the newly introduced platform regulation? Meanwhile, parents are not waiting passively – it seems they are delaying giving their young children a smartphone compared with previous years. Still, while adults worry about exposure to sexual content, children are more concerned about horror and scary content. How can society support them? And do we worry about the platforms highlighted in this report that concern children?

Big Tech continues to innovate rapidly, and huge interest centres on children's use of GenAI. With a quarter of younger and a third of older children engaging with AI chatbots – way more than last year – it's worrying that even the latest regulation only partially applies to such services. This report shows the most popular use of generative AI is to look up information: so we need to keep an eye on the information they get this way, and children's capacity to identify disinformation. Is it really their new best friend?

Simultaneously, it's important to address these problems seriously, while not getting our worries out of proportion. Children themselves often relish new digital opportunities unique to their generation. 'Digital' means they can spend lots of time looking up information, messaging friends, creating their own content, and more. Being online makes them feel entertained, connected or informed, distracted from their worries. Taking a holistic approach means it's important to develop policy to enhance benefits as well as mitigate harms. Perhaps the coming year will see policymakers consider this challenge also.

After all, if children are provided with wonderful ways to spend their time, problematic platforms may lose their appeal.



*Sonia Livingstone*

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Sonia has published 21 books on media audiences, children and young people's risks and opportunities, media literacy and rights in the digital environment. Since founding the EC-funded "EU Kids Online" research network, and Global Kids Online (with UNICEF), she has advised the European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Europe UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, OECD, ITU, UNICEF and UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. She leads the Digital Futures for Children centre at LSE with 5Rights Foundation.

# CyberSafeKids

## Trends & Usage 2025:

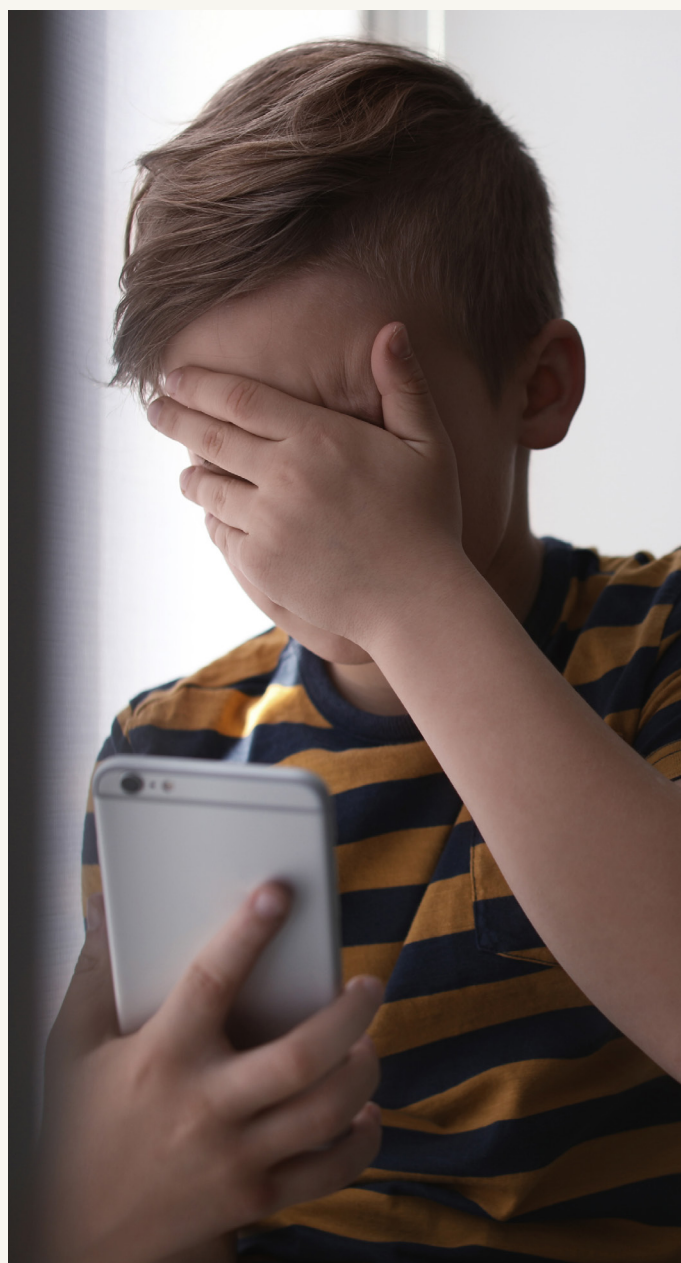
### Are children any safer online?

***“I feel like online is a good thing but a bad thing.”***

This is the opinion of one 10-year old boy, but his feeling is one echoed by many of the children we surveyed this year. The digital world offers so many opportunities to learn, play and connect but in accessing the benefits, children also face many challenges and risks. They are often left to navigate alone through a complex landscape that was never designed with their safety and wellbeing in mind.

This report presents a comprehensive overview of children’s experiences in the digital world this academic year, revealing a considerable number of vulnerabilities along the way. Our findings are based on surveying over 9,000 pupils in primary and post-primary schools across Ireland.<sup>1</sup> We explore key aspects of their online lives: from their interests and choices to the role of their parents and digital environments.

Since 2016, CyberSafeKids has surveyed and reported on children’s online usage, which allows us to identify trends and shifts in their ever evolving online world. This year we observed a reduction in smartphone ownership and use of age 13+ apps among 8–12 year olds. The appearance of multiple primary school community movements across Ireland encouraging new approaches to smartphone ownership for children and young people, may have been one element in this reduction; this reduction was not replicated among 12–15 year olds. The changes, for a number of reasons that we will discuss, have not led to improved digital outcomes. It is also clear that new regulatory powers of Coimisiún na Meán and the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) have not yet made a meaningful difference, and that digital environments are still rife with problems that must be addressed before young people can expect to thrive. The numbers in this report tell the real story of today’s digital childhood.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup>All participating pupils complete an anonymous online survey and no personal information is recorded or stored by CyberSafeKids. <sup>2</sup>We use the term ‘parent’ throughout the report for brevity, but we acknowledge that in many cases a parent is not the sole caregiver. The use of the word ‘parent’ in the report is intended to encompass all caregivers including guardians, grandparents, adult siblings etc.

# Digital Childhood: What the Numbers Say

## 8–12 YEAR OLDS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

OWN THEIR OWN  
SMART DEVICE

**93%**  
62% TABLET | 53% GAMES CONSOLE | 39% SMARTPHONE

SPEND MOST OF THEIR  
TIME ONLINE

**48% GAMING**  
28% WATCHING VIDEOS | 11% MESSAGING WITH FRIENDS

MOST POPULAR ENVIRONMENT

**63% ROBLOX**

HAVE ACCOUNTS ON 13+ SOCIAL  
MEDIA/MESSAGING APPS

**71%**  
60% YOUTUBE | 29% WHATSAPP  
25% SNAPCHAT | 23% TIKTOK

EXPERIENCE CYBERBULLYING

**22%**  
MOST COMMONLY;  
13% KEPT OUT OF CHAT/GROUPS  
10% RECEIVE HURTFUL MESSAGES  
28% KEEP IT TO THEMSELVES | 54% TELL A PARENT  
30% FOR THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE IN GROUP CHATS VS 11%

HAVE BEEN BOTHERED  
BY SOMETHING SEEN OR  
EXPERIENCED ONLINE

**28%**  
MOST OFTEN OCCURS ON;  
60% YOUTUBE | 59% ROBLOX | 25% TIKTOK  
MOST COMMONLY RELATES TO;  
47% HORROR | 34% HATE  
28% KEEP IT TO THEMSELVES | 53% TELL A PARENT

TIME SPENT

**28% CAN GO ONLINE WHENEVER THEY WANT**  
**50% THINK THEY SPEND TOO MUCH TIME ONLINE**

MONITORING/SUPERVISION

**77% CAN USE DEVICES IN PRIVACY OF THEIR BEDROOM**  
**63% PARENTS CAN'T SEE WHAT THEY DO ONLINE**

TALK TO PARENT ABOUT  
ONLINE SAFETY

**34% HADN'T IN THE LAST YEAR**  
**18% HAVE NEVER DONE SO**

PLAY 18+ GAMES

**19% DO | 32% BOYS | 9% GIRLS**

ENCOUNTER SEXUAL  
CONTENT OR CONTACT

**16% WHO ARE BOTHERED REPORT NUDITY/SEXUAL CONTENT  
OR CONTACT IN GAMES/APPS**

ENGAGE WITH PEOPLE THEY  
HAVE NEVER MET THROUGH  
APPS AND GAMES

**41% WHILE GAMING**  
**18% ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND MESSAGING APPS**

ENGAGE WITH AI CHATBOTS

**26% DO | 19% LOOK UP INFORMATION | 8% JUST TO CHAT**

## 12–15 YEAR OLDS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

**99%**

96% SMARTPHONE | 55% GAMES CONSOLE | 52% TABLET

**36% WATCHING VIDEOS**

34% MESSAGING WITH FRIENDS | 22% GAMING

**88% WHATSAPP**

**99%**

88% WHATSAPP | 83% SNAPCHAT  
80% YOUTUBE | 71% TIKTOK

**34%**

MOST COMMONLY;  
26% KEPT OUT OF CHAT/GROUPS  
15% RECEIVE HURTFUL MESSAGES  
37% KEEP IT TO THEMSELVES | 34% TELL A PARENT

**26%**

MOST OFTEN OCCURS ON;  
51% TIKTOK | 40% SNAPCHAT | 24% YOUTUBE  
MOST COMMONLY RELATES TO;  
32% HORROR | 31% HATE  
43% KEEP IT TO THEMSELVES | 27% TELL A PARENT

**58% CAN GO ONLINE WHENEVER THEY WANT**  
**64% THINK THEY SPEND TOO MUCH TIME ONLINE**

**80% CAN USE DEVICES IN PRIVACY OF THEIR BEDROOM**  
**79% PARENTS CAN'T SEE WHAT THEY DO ONLINE**

**48% HADN'T IN THE LAST YEAR**  
**17% HAVE NEVER DONE SO**

**32% DO | 54% BOYS | 14% GIRLS**

**21% OF THOSE BOTHERED REPORT ENCOUNTERING NUDITY/  
SEXUAL CONTENT OR CONTACT IN GAMES/APPS**

**12% OF BOYS AND 7% OF GIRLS ACCESS SEXUAL CONTENT  
EITHER ACCIDENTALLY OR INTENTIONALLY**

**36% WHILE GAMING**  
**41% ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND MESSAGING APPS**

**36% DO | 28% LOOK UP INFORMATION | 10% JUST TO CHAT**

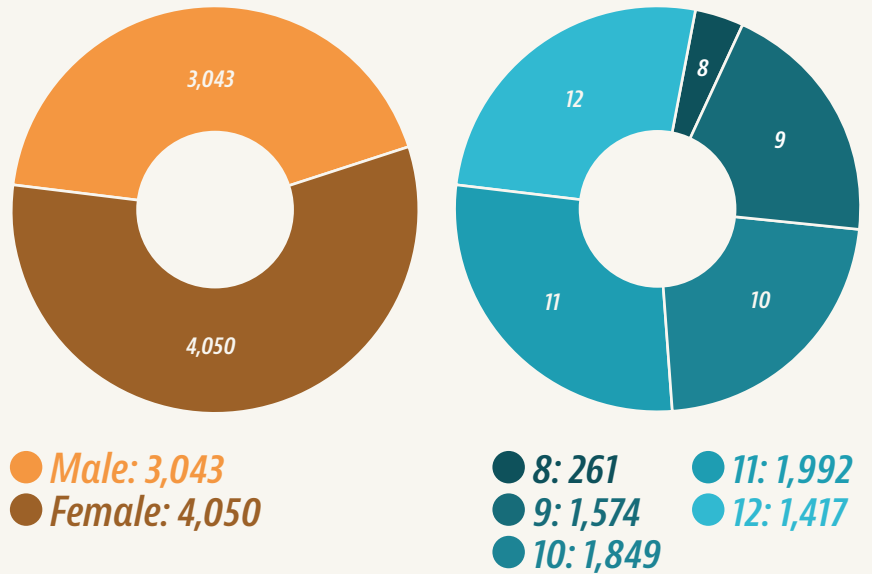
# A Life Behind the Screens: Our Dataset Explained

This research data was collected during the 2024–2025 academic year (September–June) via an anonymous online survey.<sup>3</sup> In total, 94 primary schools and 23 secondary schools across Ireland took part, resulting in over 7,000 responses from 8–12 year olds in primary schools and more than 2,000 responses from 12–15 year olds in secondary schools. It represents a diverse range, from small rural schools to large urban ones, including DEIS and non-DEIS schools, Gaelscoils, and private schools. A breakdown of the dataset by gender and age is provided below.<sup>4</sup>

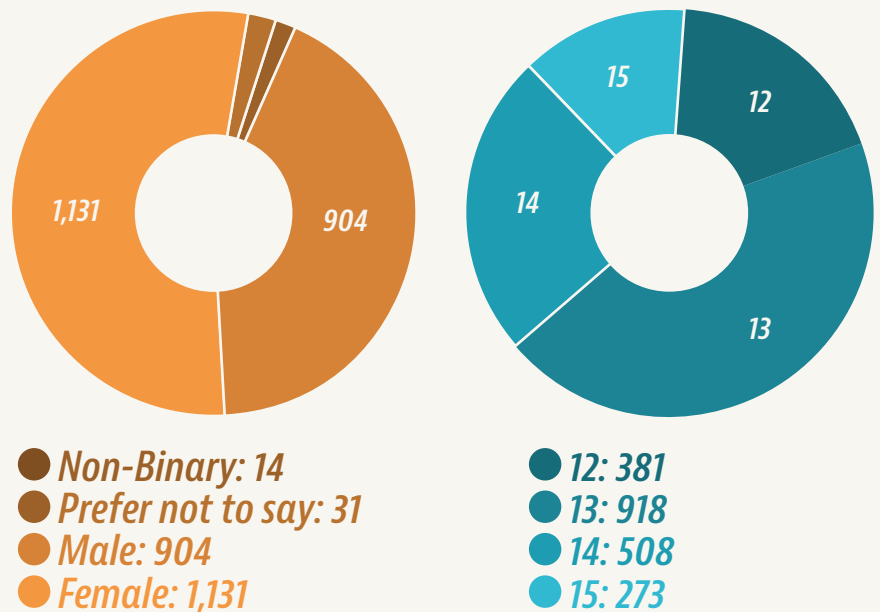
Throughout this report the figures presented include all genders and ages above. At times we note gender differences and where we observe significant differences between the genders, we have included our findings by gender instead. A version of this report with an appendix of the full findings is available.<sup>5</sup>

Children, of course, are more than data points and no one is better placed to tell their stories than the children themselves, so we have quoted children’s voices directly throughout the report. Some of the observations presented were captured via the anonymous school surveys, and others during focus groups conducted with children who came together from a number of different schools to share their experiences. No child is identifiable by name, and no personal data other than age and school is stored as part of the survey process.

## Primary School Dataset: 7,093 8–12 year Olds



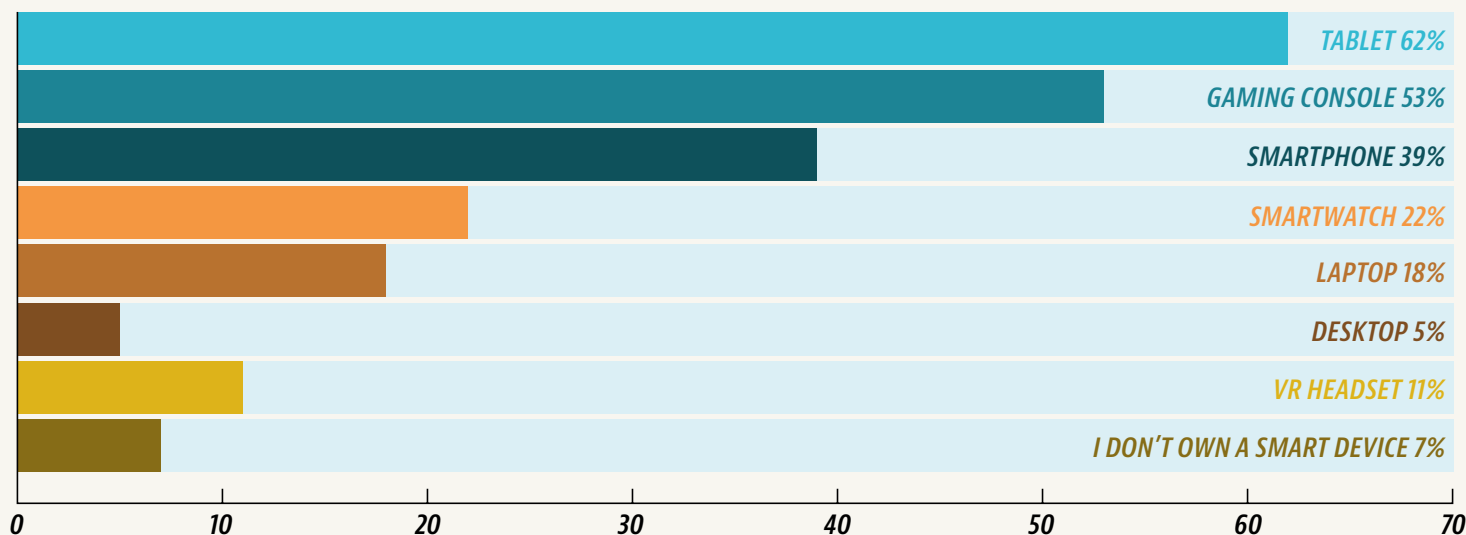
## Secondary School Dataset: 2,080 12–15 year Olds



<sup>3</sup>You can request a report with appendices of the full findings, methodology and limitations at [www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025/](http://www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025/) <sup>4</sup>All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number throughout. <sup>5</sup>This includes a breakdown of responses by both age and gender for all questions posed in the survey, providing further insight into different demographics. Further details on the methodology and limitations are also provided. Available on request from: [www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025/](http://www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025/)

# The Multi-Device Childhood: It Was Never Just About Smartphones!

Figure 1. Which smart devices do you own yourself?<sup>6</sup> (8–12 year olds)



An essential requirement for children's digital engagement is their access to, or ownership of, smart devices. Our research shows that children's digital lives are not confined to a single screen or the smartphones in their pockets. Today's digital childhood involves multiple devices and usually the first smart devices owned by 8–12 year olds are, in fact, tablets and games consoles (Figure 1).

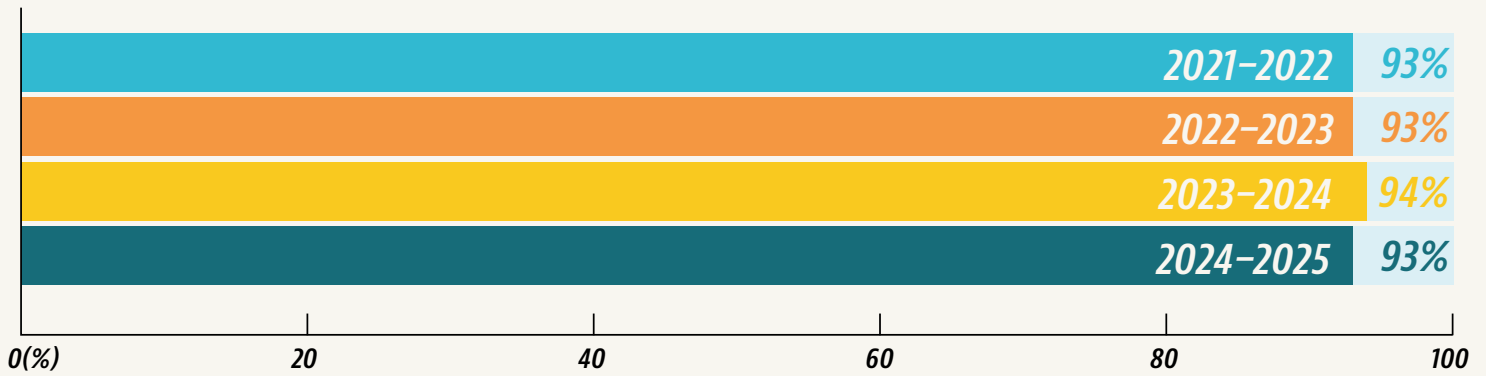
Boys are more likely to own a smart device than girls, with ownership levels of 96% and 91% respectively this year. While gaming is the favourite activity for both genders, the types of games and interactions that appeal influence the devices used. Boys remain more likely to own a games console (80% vs. 34%) or a VR headset (19% vs. 6%) and less likely to own a tablet (51% vs. 70%) than girls.

Smartwatches are very popular with boys and girls of this age (22%), with some parents using these to stay in touch with their child to alleviate safety concerns. Some app providers are now adding support for smartwatches, e.g. Snapchat's dedicated app for the Apple Watch enables a child to send and receive messages via this app, so the functionality available to a child – and therefore the risk profile of this device – may change in the future.

This year sees a significant decrease in smartphone ownership among 8–12 year olds: 39% overall, rising to 66% by the age of 12. We believe that the recent emergence of localised and national parent-led groups that seek to delay (or even ban) the purchase of smartphones may be reflected in these lower numbers, on account of the fact that for this age group a parent is still typically involved in its purchase. While grassroots-related community movements are to be applauded, we must not overlook the prevalence of other smart devices, especially tablets and consoles. Comparing our findings from a four-year period, although there has been some variation in individual devices (e.g. tablets, 62%, up from 54% in 2021-2022), there has been no decline in smart device ownership overall (Figure 2). This underlines the point that reduced smartphone ownership does not necessarily indicate safer outcomes for children: it may be that the inherent harms and risks of being online have simply been shifted to alternative devices. A child left alone – and particularly in a bedroom overnight – with any smart device is vulnerable to risk and harm.

<sup>6</sup>The question posed here was, "Which smart devices do you own yourself? Please tick any that you own yourself (don't tick if it is a device that your parents own and just let you use sometimes)."

**Figure 2. Smart device ownership trend, 2021-2025 (8–12 year olds)**



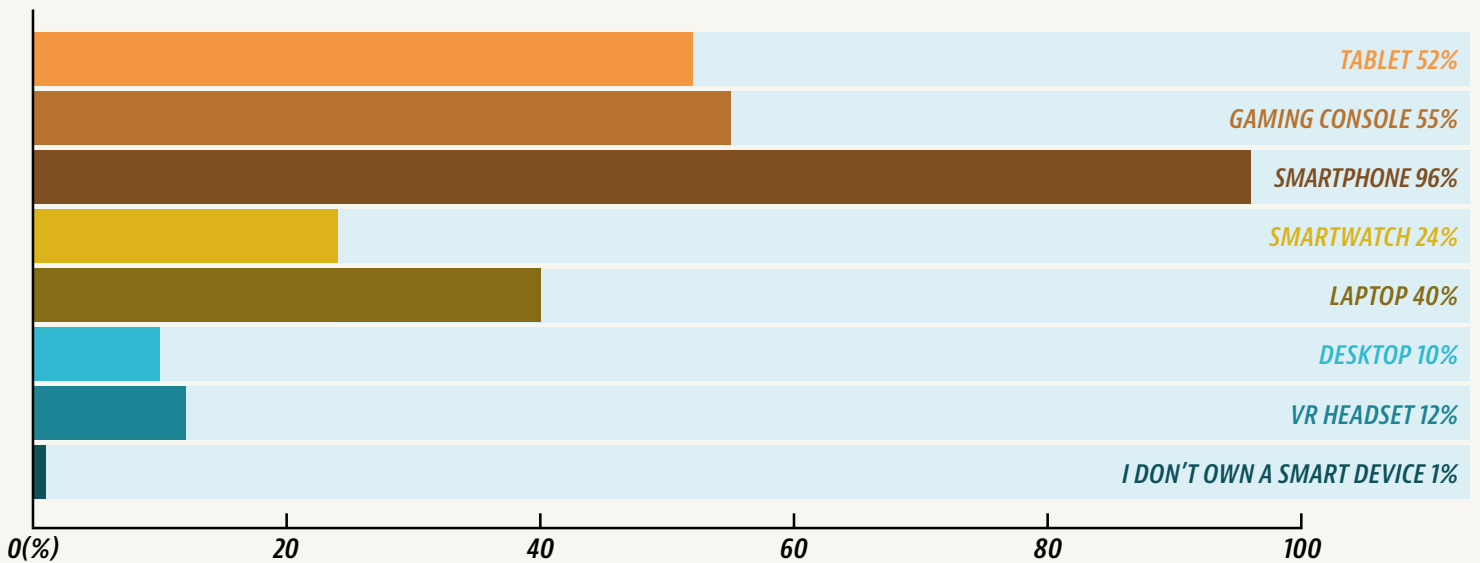
Access to smartphones remains the norm in secondary schools, with no similar decision to delay that purchase: 96% of 12–15 year olds own a smartphone, including 94% of 12 year olds (Figure 3).

Again, in line with their interests, far more boys than girls own a console (82% vs. 34%) or a VR headset (20% vs. 6%). Girls are more likely to own a tablet (60% vs. 42%).

All smart devices open up a range of different digital environments to young people, and where they spend time is determined by their individual interests.



**Figure 3. Which smart devices do you own yourself? (12–15 year olds)**

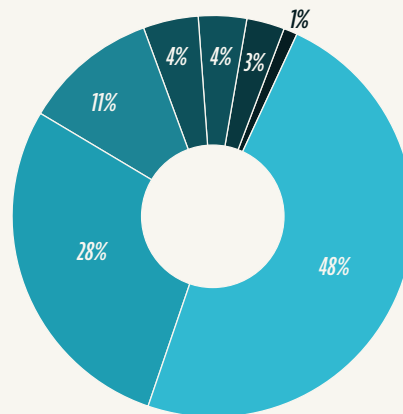


# Digital Hotspots: Where Children are Spending Their Time



Nearly half of 8–12 year olds spend the majority of their online time in gaming environments (Figure 4), compared with 28% who primarily watch videos and 11% who focus mainly on messaging with friends. Interest in gaming has increased with this age group over the last 4 years (Figure 5), while other interests have remained fairly constant.

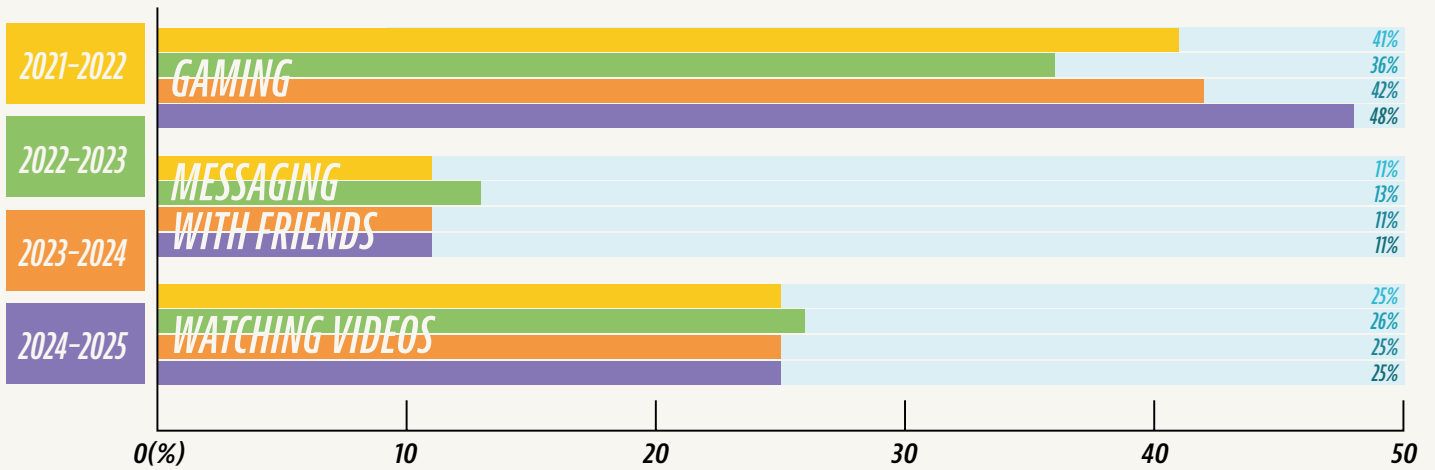
**Figure 4. I spend most of my time online...(8–12 year olds)<sup>7</sup>**



- **Gaming 48%**  
(e.g. Roblox, Fortnite, mobile apps)
- **Watching Videos 28%**  
(e.g. on YouTube, TikTok)
- **Messaging with friends 11%**  
(e.g. on Snapchat, WhatsApp)
- **Connecting with family 4%**  
(e.g. on WhatsApp)
- **Looking up information 4%**  
(e.g. Google, TikTok, ChatGPT)
- **Posting content 3%**  
(e.g. on TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat)
- **Looking up information 1%**  
(e.g. on Google, TikTok)

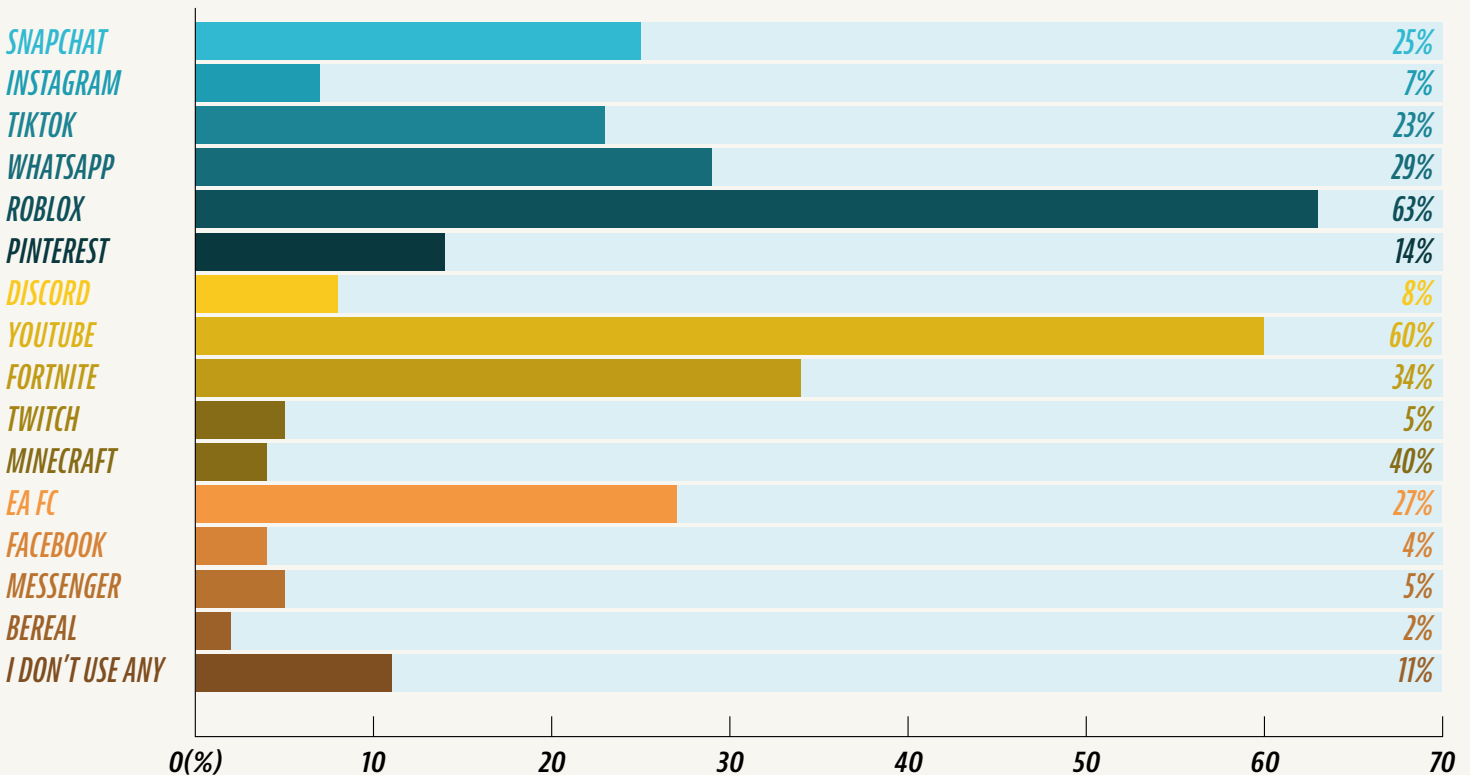
<sup>7</sup>Pupils check the option that best describes the majority of their time spent online.

**Figure 5. Online activity trend, 2021–2025 (8–12 year olds)**

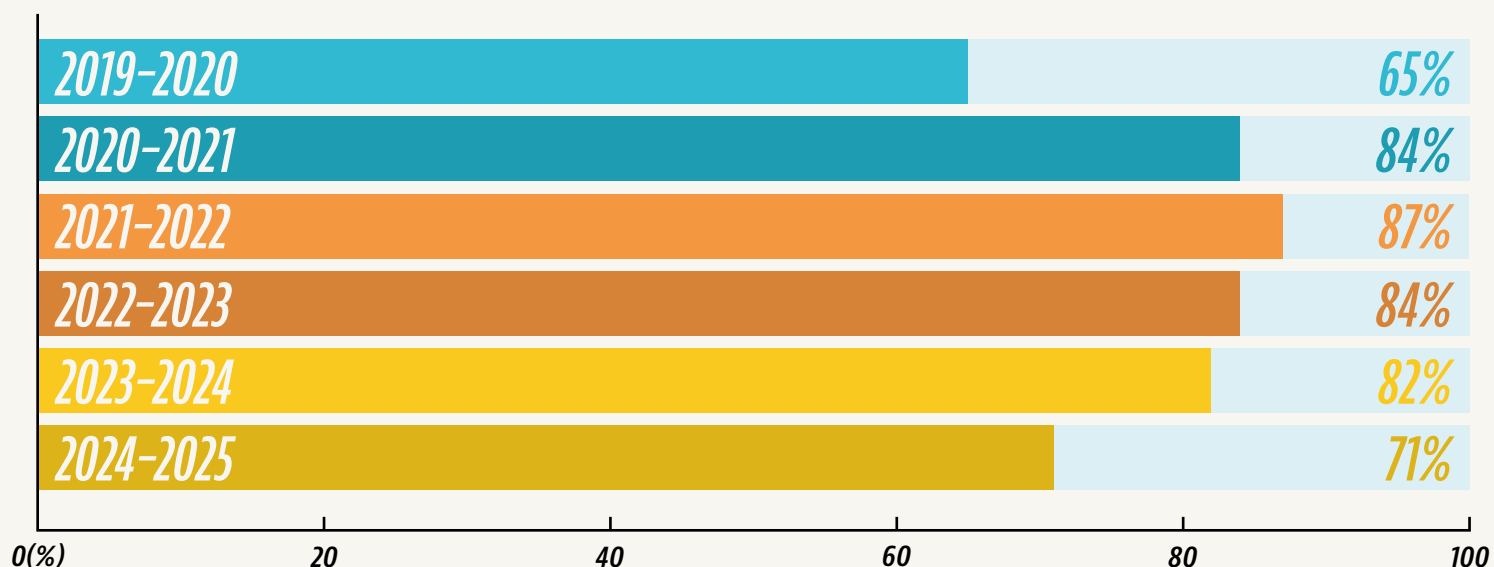


Three of the top five online environments where children have their own accounts are gaming platforms, and Roblox replaces YouTube as the most popular platform with this age group (Figure 6). Just 11% of 8–12 year olds do not engage with any online platforms.

**Figure 6. Popular digital environments (8–12 year olds)<sup>8</sup>**



<sup>8</sup>The question posed here was, "If you are using any of the following social platforms online with your own account, please tick beside it (please tick only the ones that you use yourself and have your own account for!)."

**Figure 7. 13+ Social media and messaging apps trend, 2019-2025 (8–12 year olds)**

Age verification is still largely ineffective. 71% of 8–12 year olds have their own accounts on social media and instant messaging apps with a minimum age restriction of 13.<sup>9</sup> This is a decline compared with the numbers we reported during the academic years (2020–2021, 2021–2022) in which the pandemic resulted in school closures. During these years, usage increased significantly (65% in 2019-2020 to 84% in 2020-2021) (Figure 7). In theory, this number (71%) should drop sharply next year if the new legislation around age verification in Part B of Ireland’s Online Safety Code<sup>10</sup> are successful.

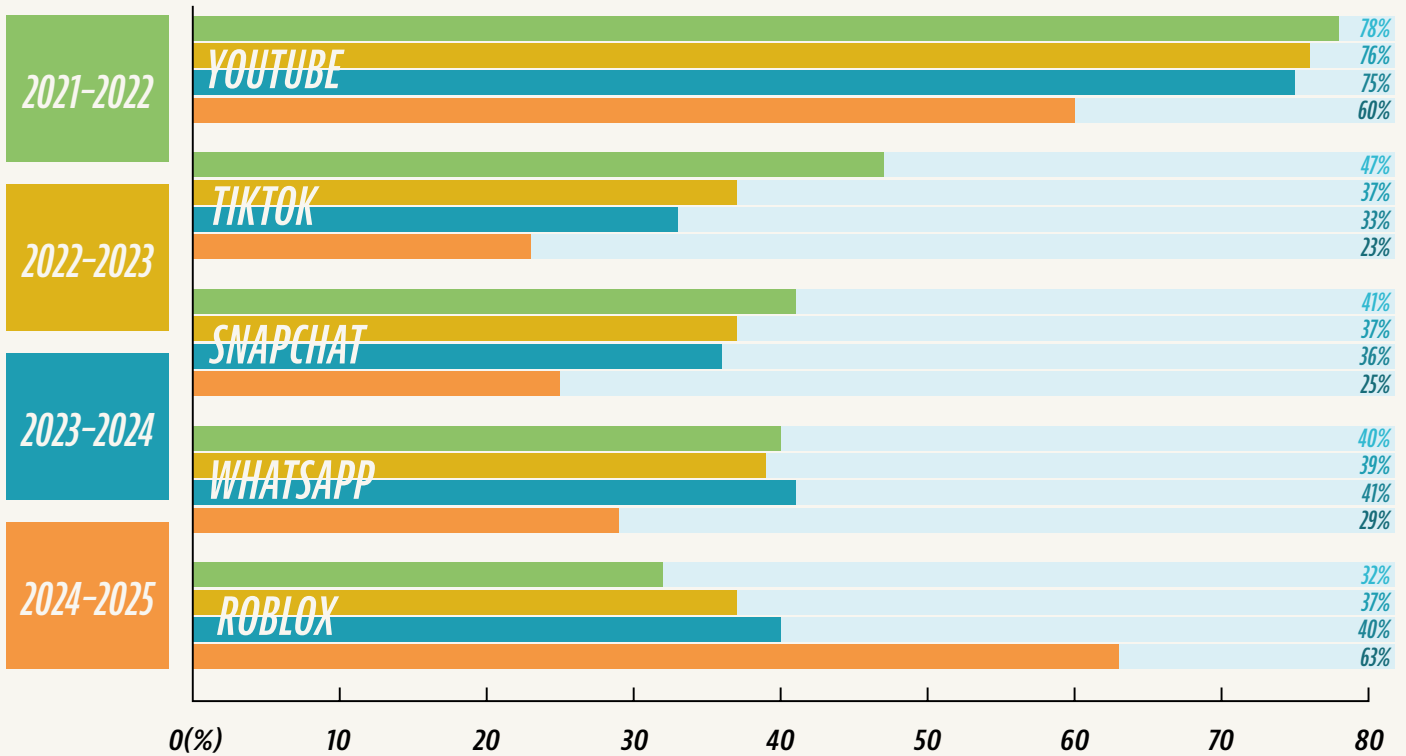
Between 2021 and 2025, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and TikTok were the 13+ apps where 8–12 year olds were most likely to have accounts. This year, 60% have their own accounts on YouTube, 29% on WhatsApp, 25% on Snapchat and 23% on TikTok. Newer apps that emerged during this period, such as BeReal, have failed to retain the interest of young people.

Comparing our figures for this question over a four-year period shows a marked decline in the usage of the four most popular apps (Figure 8). Without effective age verification in place for this period, this decline may in part be due to greater parental awareness of the safety risks for children, and desire to delay access (to both devices and social media) for this age group. By contrast, Roblox has steadily expanded its user base, offering a virtual playground where children as young as five can socialise online, with gaming serving as the principal backdrop to their digital experience.



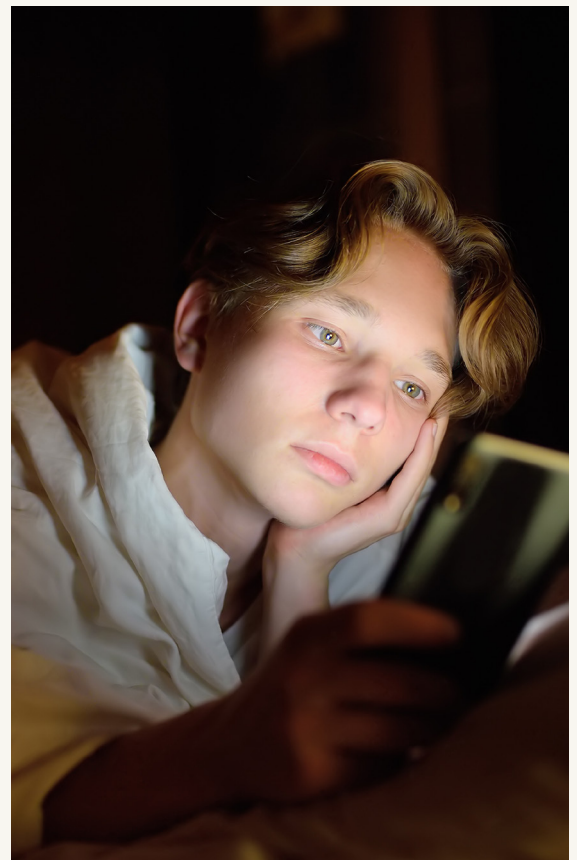
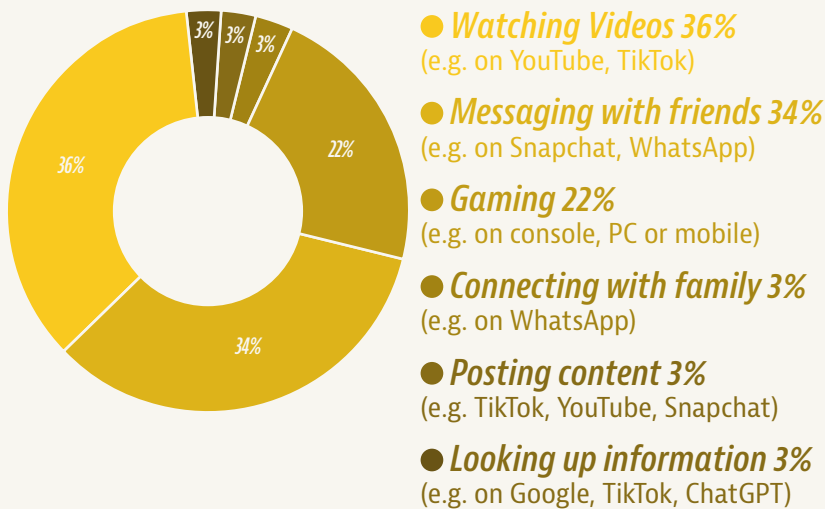
<sup>9</sup>You can request a report with an appendix of the full findings – including this figure – from [www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025](http://www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025) <sup>10</sup>Effective from July 21st, 2025.

**Figure 8. Popular digital environments trend, 2021–2025 (8–12 year olds)**

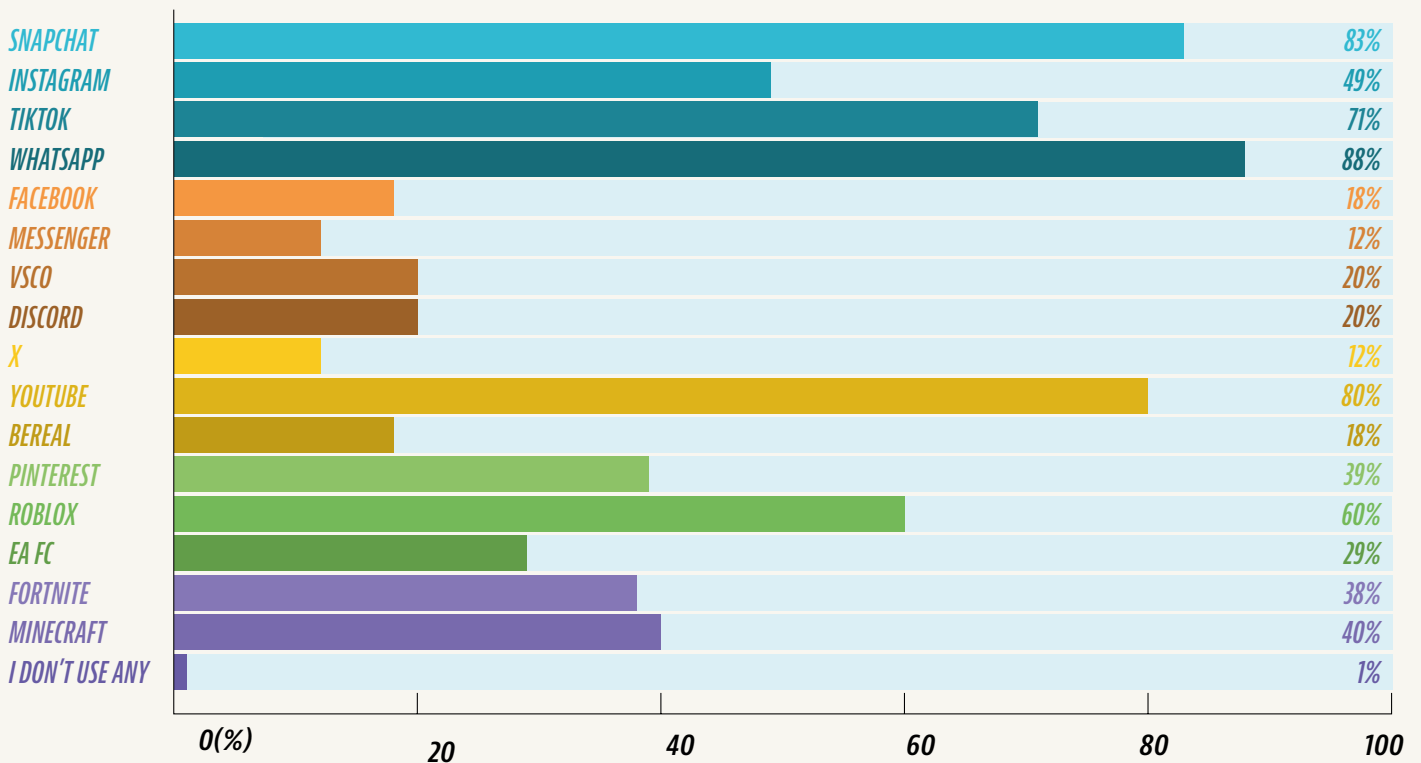


The figures demonstrate a marked difference in the interests of 12–15 year olds compared with 8–12 year olds, particularly for older girls. Overall, 36% of 12–15 year olds are primarily interested in watching videos on apps such as YouTube and TikTok, while 34% spend most of their time messaging friends on apps, including Snapchat and WhatsApp (Figure 9).

**Figure 9. I spend most of my time online... (12–15 year olds)<sup>11</sup>**



<sup>11</sup>Pupils check the option that best describes the majority of their time spent online.

**Figure 10. Popular digital environments<sup>13</sup> (12–15 year olds)**

This is the age group where the interests of boys and girls diverge: 44% of boys spend most of their time gaming, while the corresponding figure for girls is only 4%, who favour social media and messaging environments over gaming.<sup>12</sup>

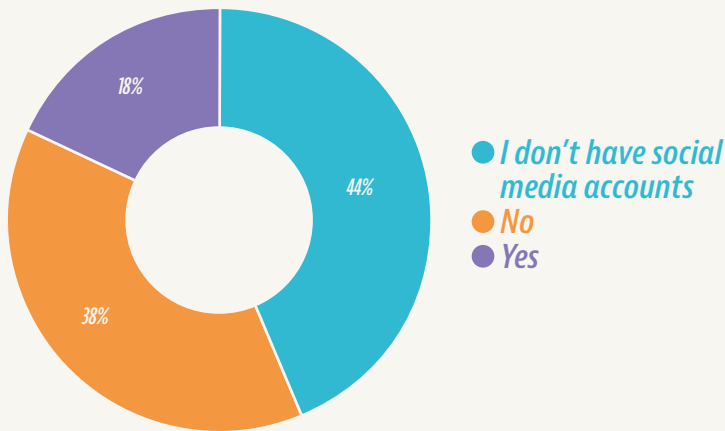
This is also the age at which children sign up to a large number of apps, although they may only use a handful of these apps on a frequent basis (Figure 10). Based on conversations in the classroom and survey feedback from children, e.g. where they post content and where they have group chats, it appears that Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram are the environments used most regularly. There has been little change in interests and choice of digital environments in recent years (Figure 10) for this age group.

The rapid increase in social media and instant messaging use among children over twelve appears sometimes to be associated with risky decision-making. With less parental oversight for this age group (See *Beyond Parental Controls*) and little preparation for this next stage of access, it is not surprising that many fail to recognise the implications of oversharing. For example, 41% of 12–15 year olds have friends and followers they have not met offline, and 34% post videos or photos of themselves, compared with 18% and 16% of 8–12 year olds (Figures 11–14).

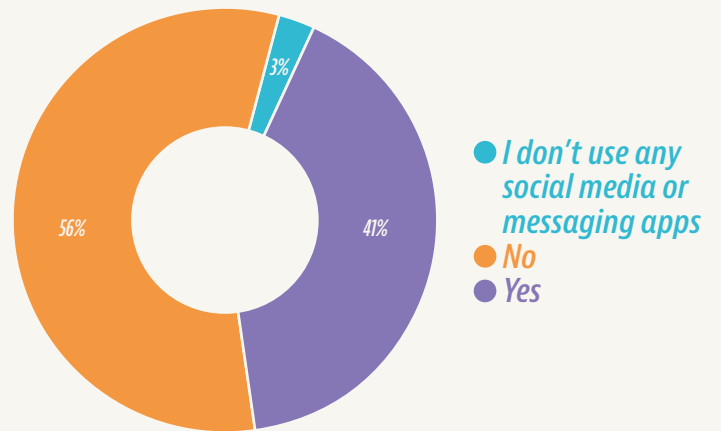
Beyond the devices and environments discussed so far, we need to also consider the digital experience itself. As the next section shows, our findings indicate that this experience has not improved this year.

<sup>12</sup>You can request a report with an appendix of the full findings, including a view by gender, from [www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025](http://www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025) <sup>13</sup>The question posed here was, "If you are using any of the following social platforms online with your own account, please tick beside it (please tick only the ones that you use yourself and have your own account for!)"

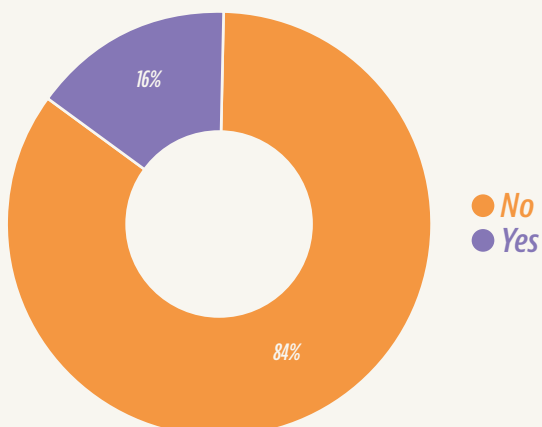
**Figure 11.** Do you have friends and followers on social media apps that you have not met in real life? (8–12 year olds)



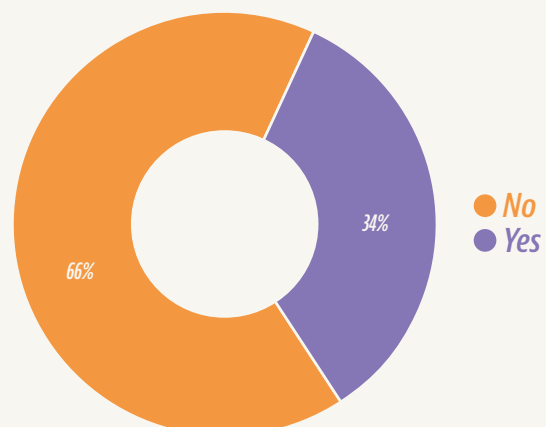
**Figure 12.** Do you have friends and followers on social media apps that you have not met in real life? (12–15 year olds)



**Figure 13.** Do you post photos or videos of yourself online? (8–12 year olds)



**Figure 14.** Do you post photos or videos of yourself online? (12–15 year olds)



# Young People's Online Realities: It's Not All Fun and Games

Less than half of young people indicate that spending time online is a mostly positive experience: 41% of 8–12 year olds and 46% of 12–15 year olds (Figure 32, 33). Negative experiences are commonplace, even for the younger age group, in spite of a reduction in smartphone ownership and social media usage.

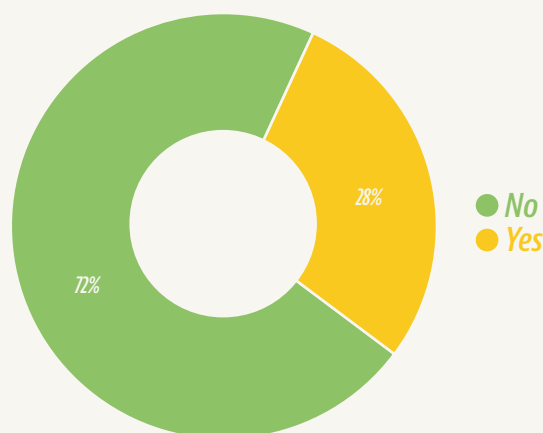
At a recent focus group with 7–9 year olds, it quickly became apparent that they struggle to protect themselves from bad actors and upsetting content in the digital environments that they use most often, i.e. Roblox (5+) and YouTube (13+). These are environments that may have a child-friendly appearance or lower age rating (for example, a child as young as five can set up an account on Roblox) or may be considered to have educational, as well as entertainment value. Their stories highlight disturbing interactions with, or observations of, bad actors especially in RPG (Role Play Games) on Roblox and seeing very distressing content, comments and inappropriate ads when they engage with YouTube Shorts.

Words that frequently crop up in both focus groups and surveys are “weird” and “freaky,” words that perhaps provide safe and accessible ways for children to express confusion or discomfort when speaking about their experiences. Those who did provide more detail recount stalking in games, stripping of avatars, nudity in short-form videos, advertisements by adult entertainers in the comments, and requests to engage in sexualised behaviours or exposure to others engaging in such behaviours (Roblox Experiences/YouTube Shorts). One 10-year-old described experiences in Roblox in which she saw people “trying to do sex” and was asked “do you want to get on the bed with me” by another user.

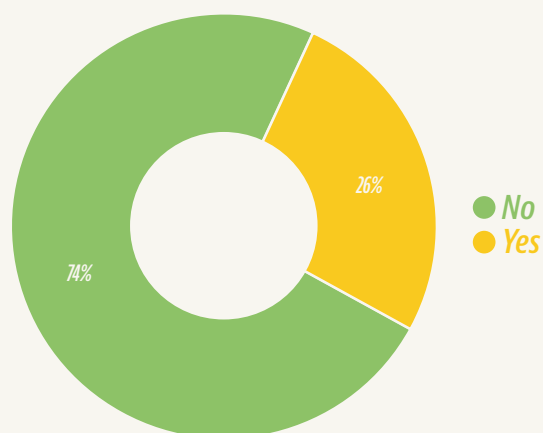
We asked children, “In the last year, have you seen or experienced something online that bothered you (e.g. made you upset, or scared, or wish you had never seen it)?” 28% of 8–12 year olds said that they have (Figure 15), and the trend for the four-year period (2021–2025) shows an 8% increase (i.e. 20% said “Yes” in 2021-2022<sup>14</sup>). For 12–15 year olds, this number is 26% (Figure 16).



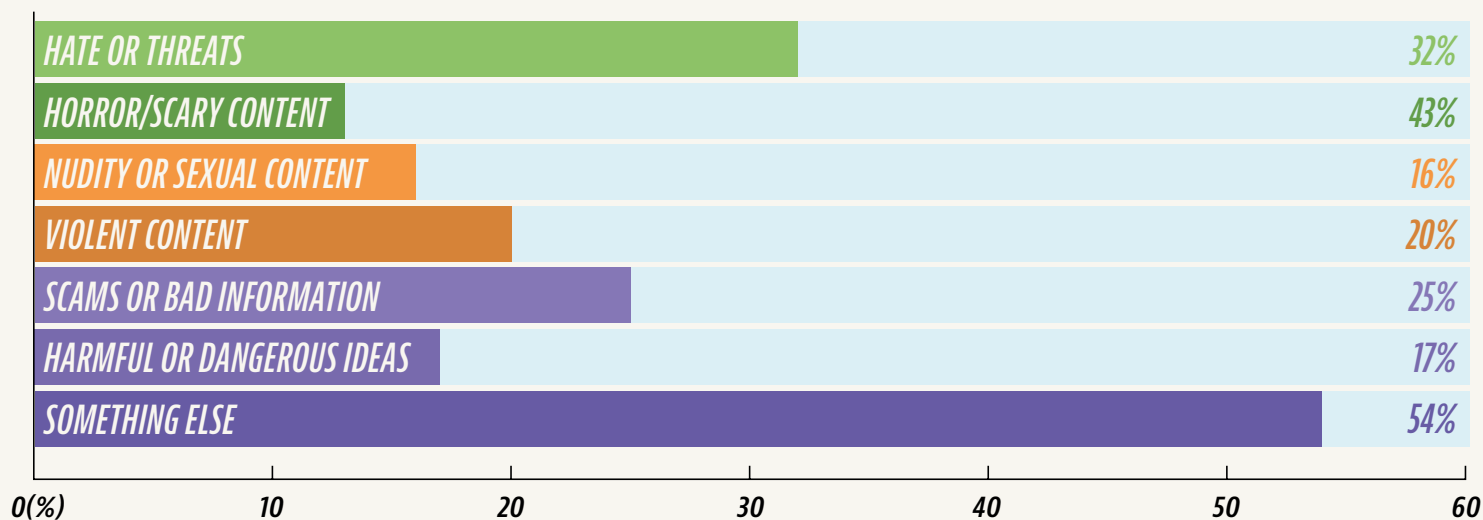
**Figure 15. Have you seen or experienced something online that bothered you? (8–12 year olds)**



**Figure 16. Have you seen or experienced something online that bothered you? (12–15 year olds)**



<sup>14</sup>CyberSafeKids reports for all years, including 2021-2022, are available from [www.cybersafekids.ie](http://www.cybersafekids.ie)

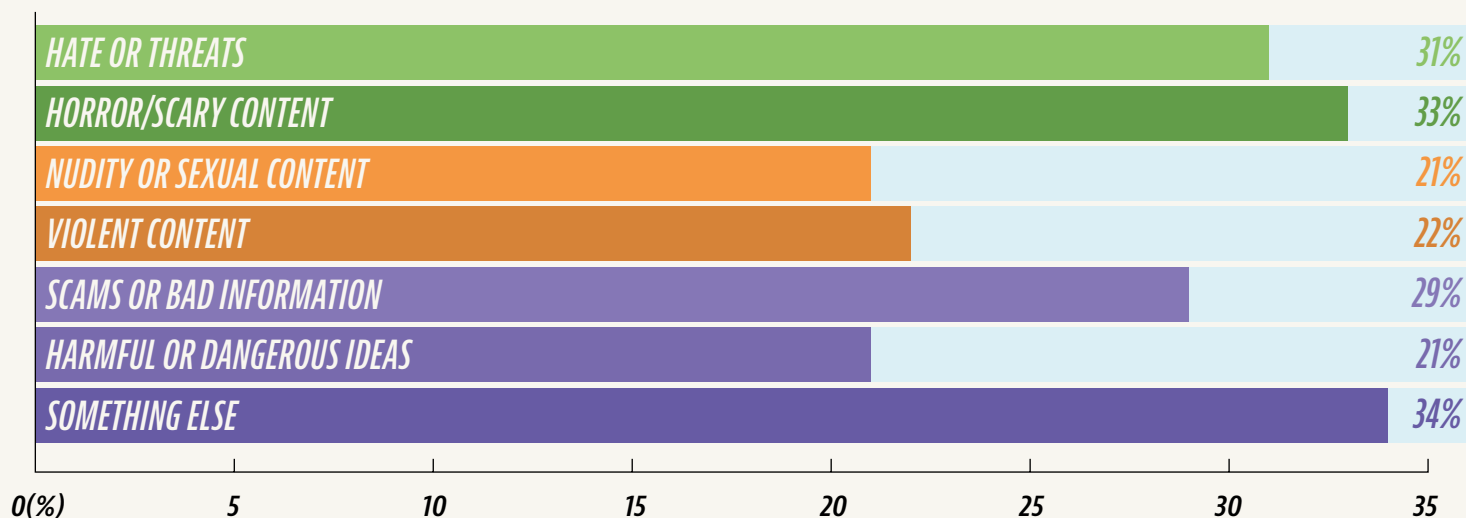
**Figure 17. Did this involve..? (8–12 year olds)**

To provide further clarity, we have categorised the experiences (Figure 17, Figure 18) and found that horror or scary content/contact is the most frequent, and exposure to hate/threats is the next most common for both age groups. 12–15 year olds report being bothered less by horror, and more by violence, sexual/nudity, scams, and harmful/dangerous ideas. At this older age, it is likely that young people are less sensitive about horror content and their choice of digital environments – TikTok/Snapchat/Instagram rather than Roblox – is also a factor in the type of content they are consuming.

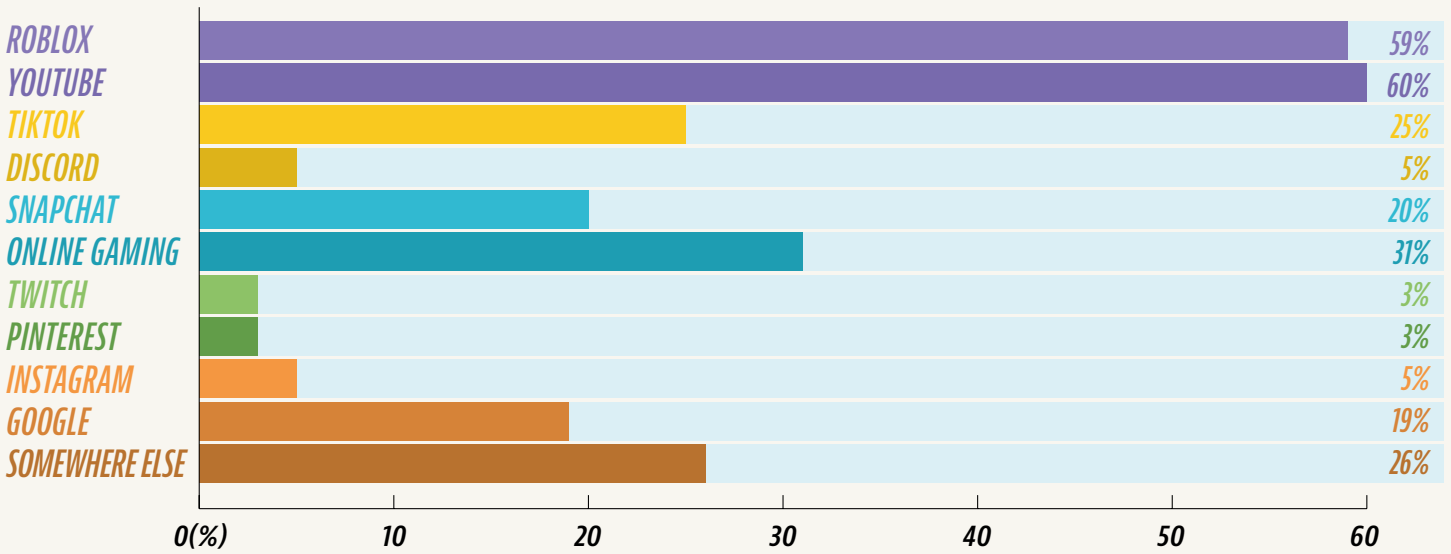
We have also clarified the digital environments where these experiences take place: 8–12 years olds report encountering problems on YouTube and Roblox significantly more often than on other environments (Figure 19). While this is partly due to

their higher usage, it also underscores, once again, that these platforms are unsafe for children. The situation has actually worsened, with reported issues rising from 37% to 60% on YouTube, and from 23% to 58% on Roblox between 2023–2024 and 2024–2025.<sup>15</sup>

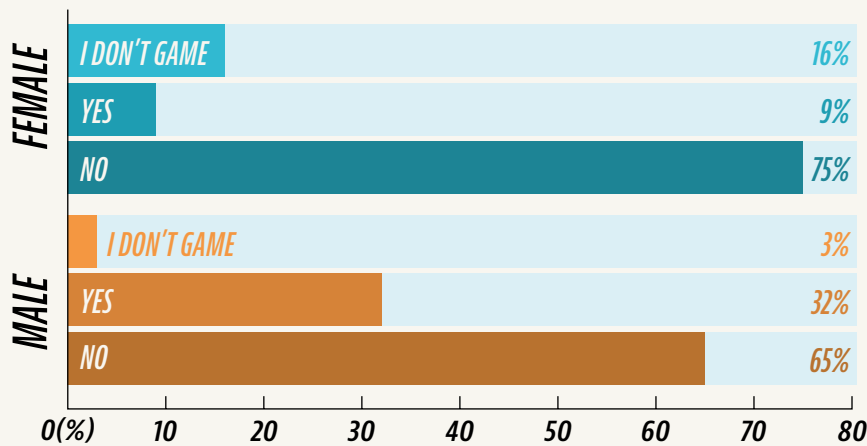
Boys are more likely to report problems with online gaming than girls: 58% vs. 11%. This likely reflects usage levels, but can also be linked to boys' choice to play over-18s games (Figure 20), that can expose them to extreme levels of violence, sexual encounters and more, as well as a greater inclination to game with people they do not know in real life (Figure 21). These choices increase the risk of coming across harmful content and contact, and point to a lack of guidance when it comes to gaming.

**Figure 18. Did this involve..? (12–15 year olds)**

**Figure 19. If this happened to you what social platform were you using? (8–12 year olds)**

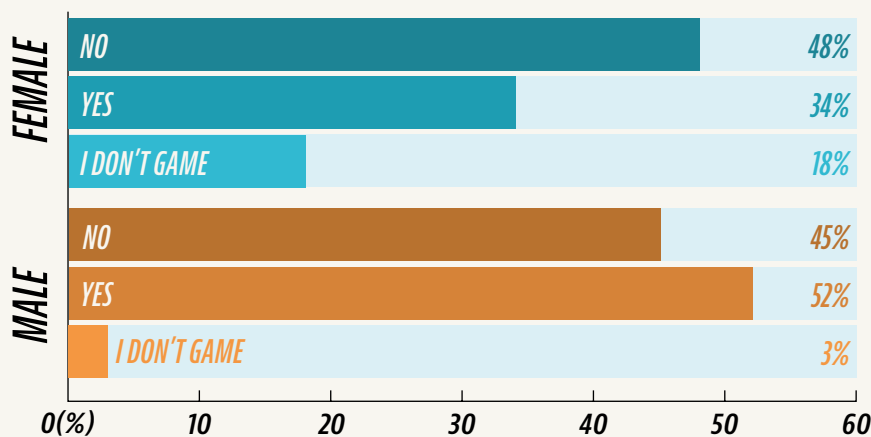


**Figure 20. Have you played a computer or video game that has an age rating of over 18s in the last year? (8–12 year olds)**



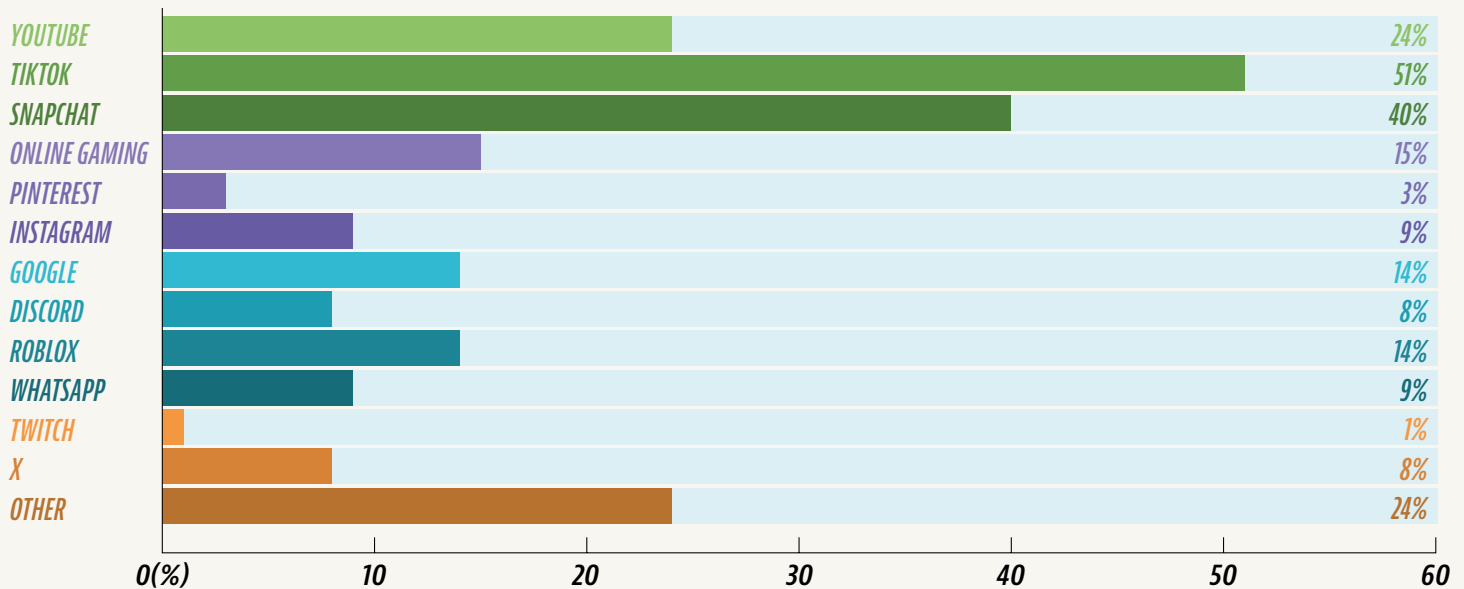
26% of 8–12 year olds indicate that the problems they encounter occur “somewhere else”. We do not specifically ask about WhatsApp in the question, so problems on WhatsApp could be reported under this “somewhere else” category (this is the same for other communication apps, such as Telegram and Viber, which a very small number of children report using). Based on feedback from the 8–12 year olds, other difficulties reported under this category include streamed content on Netflix and Disney+. Two examples of this are the “disgusting scary stuff on Netflix”, which one 10-year-old boy mentions, and the 10-year-old girl, whose access is limited to these streaming services, sharing that “I’ve seen sexual stuff online and felt uncomfortable”.

**Figure 21. Do you game with people you have not met in real life? (8–12 year olds)**



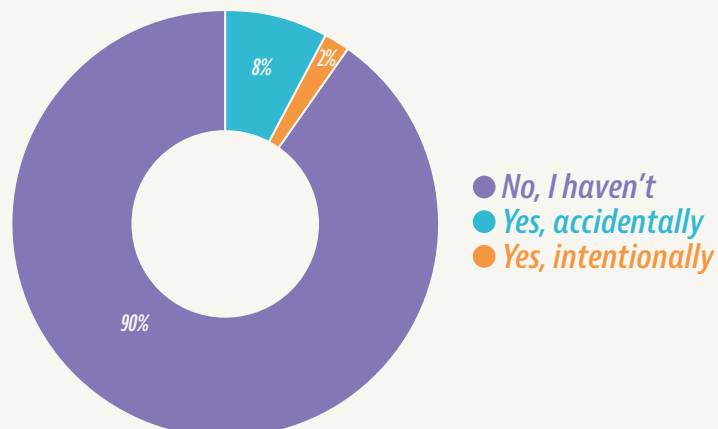
12–15 year olds are most likely to report problems on TikTok or Snapchat (Figure 22), with TikTok holding the top position this year. 24% report YouTube, which is considerably higher than the 6% who report engaging with this online environment last year. Usage levels are similar this year to last, but, as we see with the younger age group, problems are much more common. This prompts the question whether the content being curated across both age groups is more extreme this year on YouTube, or if it is the result of its greater prominence of YouTube Shorts.

<sup>15</sup>This question was first added to the survey in 2023-2024, so it is not possible to present any trend going further back than last year.

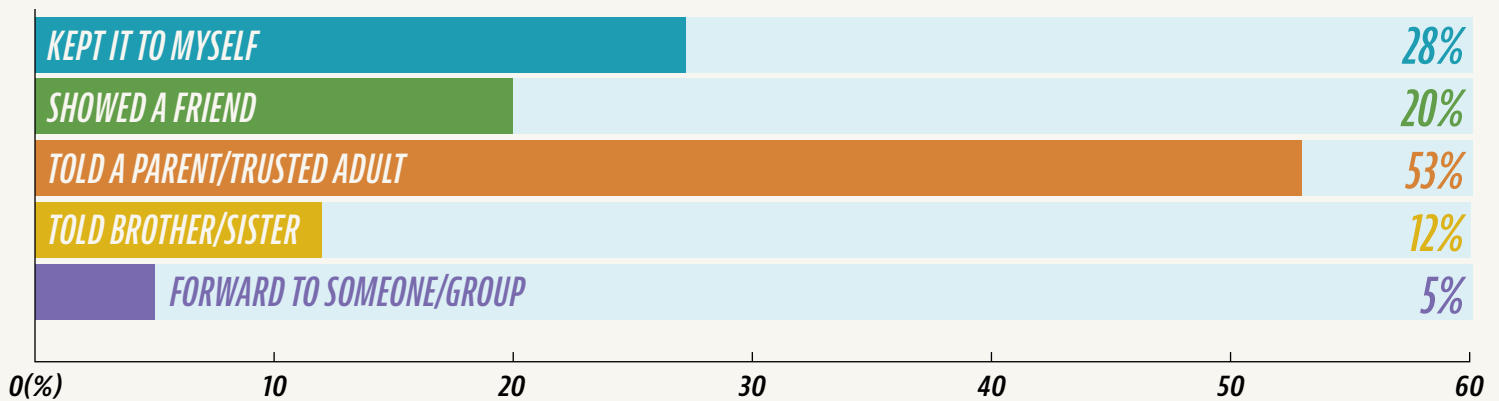
**Figure 22. If this happened to you what social platform were you using? (12–15 year olds)**

Beyond the gaming and video sharing environments, children also reported problems with messaging apps. This includes experiences of hate and threats (see also Section 4) but also of problematic content being shared. The jaded tone of one 12-year-old girl this year is notable when speaking about messages that she received – *“sometimes dick pics but I don’t really care I just block”* – or the story told at a focus group of someone older being added into their 5th class group chat who then started sharing highly inappropriate images. A real concern is that these things, once viewed by children and young people, can’t be unseen.

In order to better understand exposure to sexual content online we asked the 12–15 year olds to indicate if they “accessed” sexual content. This of course differs from being “bothered” by it. Of the 9% who report coming across sexual content, 8% did so accidentally (Figure 23). Boys are more likely than girls to access it (12% vs. 7%) and unlike girls, may do so intentionally, i.e. 3% of boys vs. 0% of girls. As perhaps can be expected during adolescence, the numbers who access this kind of content rises, with 14% of 15-year-olds accessing sexual content and 21% of 16-year-olds surveyed.<sup>17</sup>

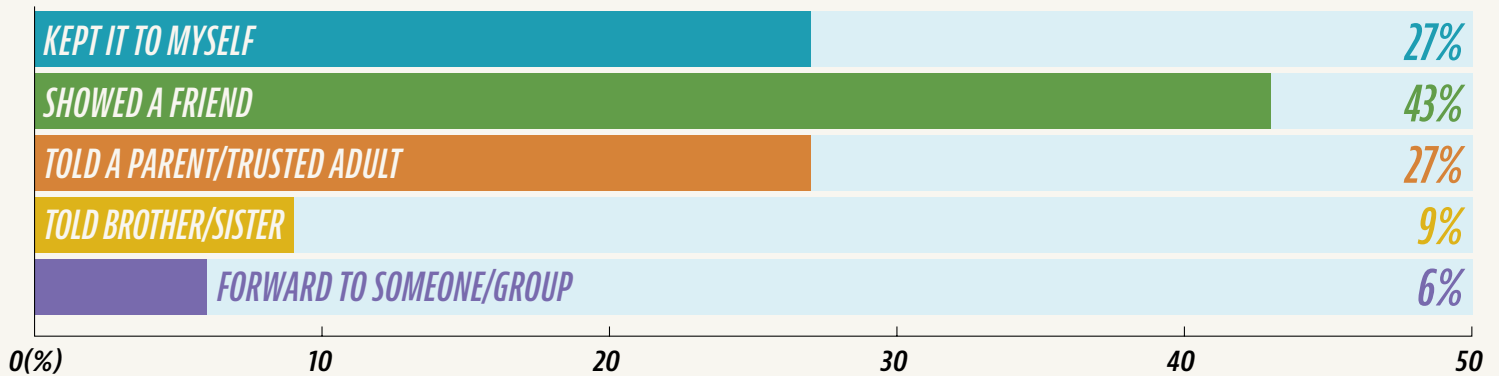
**Figure 23. In the last year have you accessed sexual content online? (12–15 year olds)**

<sup>17</sup>127 responses were collected from 16 year olds this academic year. Given the smaller number of responses for this age (and bearing in mind that Ireland’s digital age of consent is set by law at 16 years of age), we have excluded them from the dataset in this report, choosing to focus primarily on the 12–15 year old age category for post-primary school respondents.

**Figure 24. If this happened to you, what did you do about it? (8–12 year olds)**

For those who access sexual content, most do not seek it out initially. A 14-year-old boy's comment illustrates the risks of early exposure and emphasizes the necessity to self-manage in the absence of effective safeguards: "I experienced sexual content at first accidentally but I am now hooked to a small degree and I'm hoping to ease myself away from it. I am creating other habits so every time before I access it I do something which gives me time to stop and think before I do."

Despite the serious nature of online harms, only 53% of children aged 8–12, and an even smaller 27% of those aged 12–15, report telling a parent or trusted adult after having a negative experience online (Figure 24, 25). 28% of 8–12 year olds and 43% of 12–15 year olds keep it to themselves, leaving them to navigate harmful or distressing situations alone. There are a number of possible reasons why children do not ask for help, including embarrassment, peer pressure and a fear that speaking up will lead to restricted access in the future.

**Figure 25. If this happened to you what did you do about it? (12–15 year olds)**

"I love to look at fanart so when I was looking up some I saw something that said look up this number with fanart and you will get really good stuff. I was really excited and did it without thinking. When the stuff came up it was all blurry so I made it unblurry and it was porn. I was eleven. I clicked out and deleted my history...I never told my parents cause I was scared they wouldn't let me look at fanart any more."

This response, in which the victim anticipates parental sanctions rather than support, and does not reach out for help is typical. For those who do speak to parents, however, the benefits are clear:

"Last year a catfish messaged me on TikTok pretending to be my singing coach, he asked me to download an app so I could chat with him privately but I told my mum and older sister and they said that was a fake account and that person was pretending to be my singing teacher."

Overall though, despite progress in reducing the use of 13+ apps and smartphone ownership among 8–12 year olds, young people's experiences do not appear to have improved this year. In the next section we examine in more detail children's online communication, particularly through messaging platforms, and peer-related digital harm.

# Real Children, Real Stories: More Than Just Data Points

This is just a selection of the many, many anonymous comments we received from pupils who completed our survey this year. We think you will agree they speak for themselves, and demonstrate not only the importance of youth voice in solving the problems the online world poses to those who grow up in it, but the urgency of a societal approach to tackling them.<sup>16</sup>

**"A DUDE SENT ME A VIDEO OF HIM SLAPPING A GIRL'S 🍑. THE GIRL WAS TIED UP ON HER WRIST. I HAVEN'T TOLD MY PARENTS ABOUT THIS BECAUSE I'M KIND OF AFRAID OF WHAT THEY'LL THINK." GIRL, 14**

**"A PERSON WAS COMMENTING ON A VIDEO AND HE/SHE WAS PROMOTING THEIR PORNOGRAPHY ACCOUNT." BOY, 12**

**"IF I SPEND A LOT OF TIME ONLINE LIKE SCROLLING ENDLESSLY ON TIKTOK OR SOMEWHERE I'M WAY MORE DISTRACTED AND IN A WORSE MOOD AND I CAN'T CONCENTRATE ON ANYTHING AFTER" GIRL, 16**

**"I REMEMBER SEEING CARTEL AND BEHEADING VIDEOS AND SOMEONE COMMENTED A HOMOPHOBIC COMMENT ON A FRIENDS POST" BOY, 16**

**"I FEEL LIKE ONLINE IS A GOOD THING BUT A BAD THING. IT CAN HAVE A LOT OF MEAN, DISTURBING, INAPPROPRIATE AND SCAMMING COMMENTS...LIKE LET'S SAY FREE V-BUCKS BUT IT'S ACTUALLY A NAKED PERSON OR INAPPROPRIATE THING" BOY, 10**

**"I HAVE EXPERIENCED SOME RUDE AND NASTY MESSAGES AND COMMENTS ABOUT ME FROM SOME PEOPLE LIKE SHAMING ME FOR MY BODY AND DIFFERENTNESS OF MY CULTURE" GIRL, 11**

**"I LOVE TO PLAY ROBLOX AND PLAY GAMES ON SUCH AS DRESS TO IMPRESS AND BERRY AVENUE. DTI IS PERFECTLY FINE TO PLAY BUT SOMETIMES I SEE RANDOM PEOPLE ON BERRY AVENUE DOING FREAKY THINGS" GIRL, 10**

**"SOMETIMES I CAN FEEL NERVOUS WHEN I'M ON MY PHONE. IT IS VERY EASY TO COME ACROSS RUDE CONTENT THAT YOU DON'T WANT TO SEE" GIRL, 13**

**"TWO GIRLS IN MY CLASS SENT ME DEATH THREATS AND TALK BAD ABOUT ME AND ONE OF THOSE GIRLS KEPT SPAMMING MY REAL LIFE NAME IN A PUBLIC SERVER FILLED WITH STRANGERS." GIRL, 11**

<sup>16</sup>These are all genuine quotations from children aged from 10–16 years old and are presented here as received with only minor edits of spelling for sense.

# **Real Children, Real Stories: More Than Just Data Points**

**"I FIND THAT ONLINE GAMES LURE ME IN AND SOMETIMES I FIND IT HARD TO GET OFF BUT USUALLY MY PARENTS KICK ME OFF AND I END UP GOING OUTSIDE AND HAVING A GREAT DAY" GIRL, 12**

**"IT'S MOSTLY BECAUSE OF MY COLOUR, MY SKIN.. MY HAIR.. MY EYES. BASICALLY HOW I LOOK IS WHY I GET BULLIED AND TREATED DIFFERENTLY. IN OTHER WORDS, IF I WAS WHITE, BLONDE OR BRUNETTE, GREEN OR BLUE EYES.. I WOULDN'T HAVE THESE PROBLEMS" GIRL, 14**

**"I USED TO USE APPS LIKE YOUTUBE AND I SAW SOME WEIRD STUFF SO ME AND MY MUM CHATTED AND I DECIDED TO DELETE YOUTUBE AND DOWNLOAD YOUTUBE KIDS OTHER THAN THAT I HAVE ONLY POSITIVE EXPERIENCES ONLINE!" GIRL, 11**

**"I AM ONLINE MOSTLY BECAUSE I AM TRANSGENDER AND I CAN BE A BOY THERE. MANY PEOPLE DON'T SEE ME AS THE PERSON WHO I WANT TO BE. SO THE INTERNET GIVES ME SOMEWHAT COMFORT. AND DISTRACTS ME FROM HOME ISSUES." BOY, 13**

**"I SEEN A CAT IN A BLENDER GETTING BLENDED ON SNAPCHAT AND A LOT MORE" BOY, 11**

**"WHEN I WAS NEW TO ROBLOX AROUND 6 OR 5 YEARS OLD, SOMEONE IN BROOKHAVEN (ROBLOX GAME) TRIED TO MAKE ME REMOVE MY ROBLOX OUTFITS CLOTHES AND SAID WEIRD STUFF" GIRL, 12**

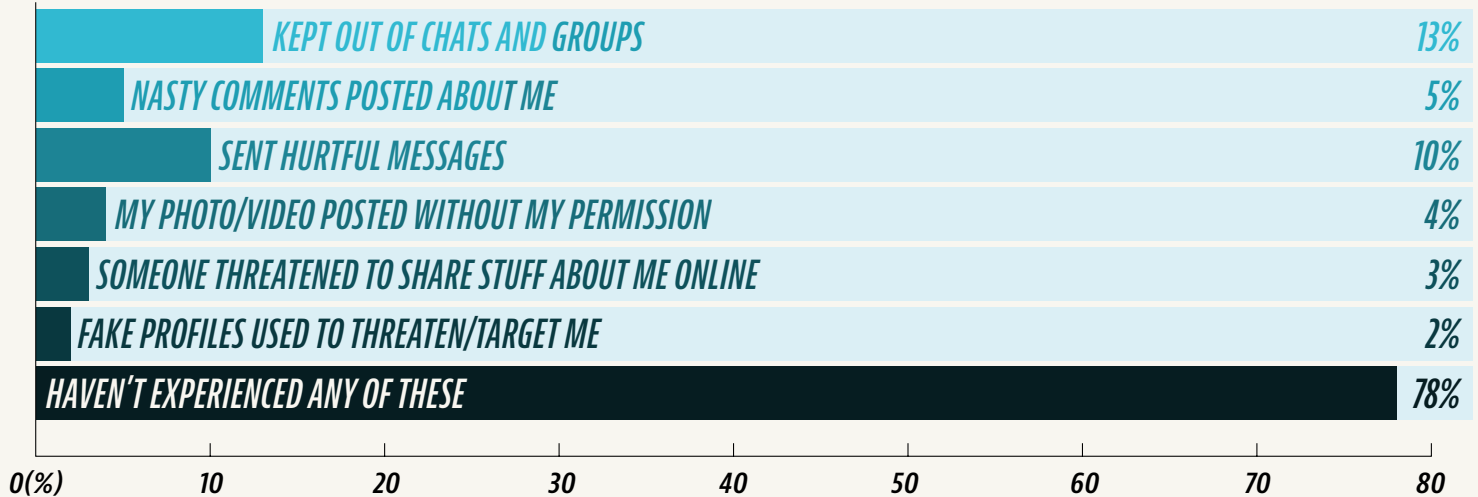
**"THE INTERNET IF USED CORRECTLY IS A VERY USEFUL TOOL AND RESOURCE TO COME INTO CONTACT WITH FRIENDS AND LEARN MORE ABOUT DIFFERENT SUBJECTS AND PEOPLE'S OPINIONS." GIRL, 15**

**"MY FRIEND CAME OVER TO MY HOUSE AND WHILE I WAS IN THE BATHROOM, THEY MESSAGED MY OTHER FRIENDS HATEFUL STUFF AND THEY BELIEVED THAT IT WAS ME. I THEN GOT SENT THREATS AND BLACKMAILED...THOSE HATEFUL THINGS REPORTED MY XBOX ACCOUNT SO MANY TIMES IT GOT PERMANENTLY BANNED." GIRL, 13**

**"I WASTE TOO MUCH TIME WATCHING STUPID VIDEOS OF NONSENSE" GIRL, 12**

# The Dark Side of DMs: Hidden Harms in Private Messaging

Figure 26. Tick any of these experiences that you have had online: (8–12 year olds)

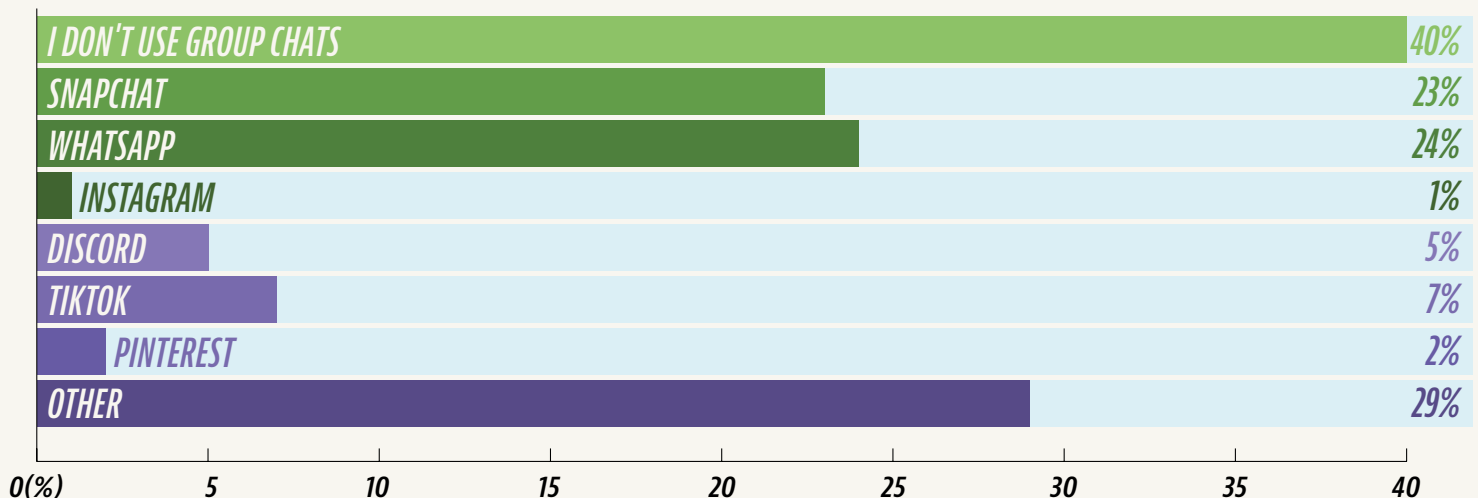


At a focus group with 10–12 year olds this year, when prompted to talk about cyberbullying, the children quickly and unanimously called out class group chats as the source of a lot of 'digital drama'. They spoke up about children being openly targeted for having different interests or culture. Exclusion from a group chat so others can gossip about someone, inclusion in a group chat created so members can ridicule someone openly, tagging their target on a reshared post intended to insult, and baiting someone to overshare are just some of the behaviours

they discussed. One boy described how racist comments are part of the vernacular, and inescapable when gaming with others online. Such stories illustrate the darker side of group messaging, especially in relation to cyberbullying.

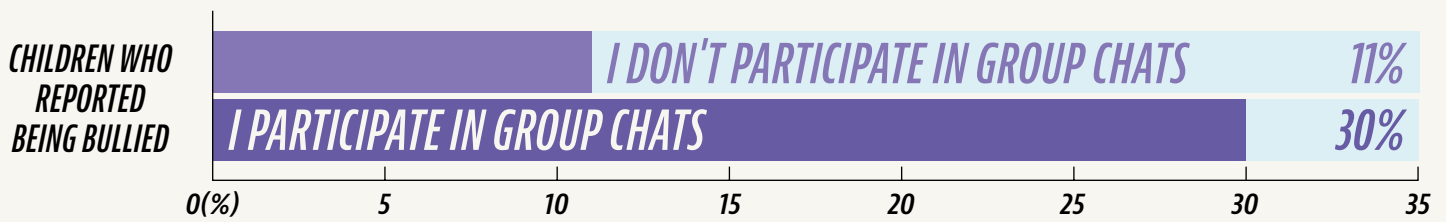
This year 22% of 8–12 year olds indicated that they have experienced one or more common cyberbullying behaviours in the last year (Figure 26) and most of the problems are linked to messaging, either one-to-one, or in groups.

Figure 27. Do you use group chats with classmates and friends? (8–12 year olds)



<sup>18</sup>While this pattern is interesting, it is not proof of causation and there may be other contributing variables. Causation may also work in reverse as we can't say which comes first, the cyberbullying or the group chat. So children who are cyberbullied may be more likely to participate in group chats for a number of reasons, such as being added to group chats without their consent in order to target them, seeking out social support, or even confronting their bullies.

**Figure 28. Group chat participation as a factor in likelihood of experiencing cyberbullying (8–12 year olds)**

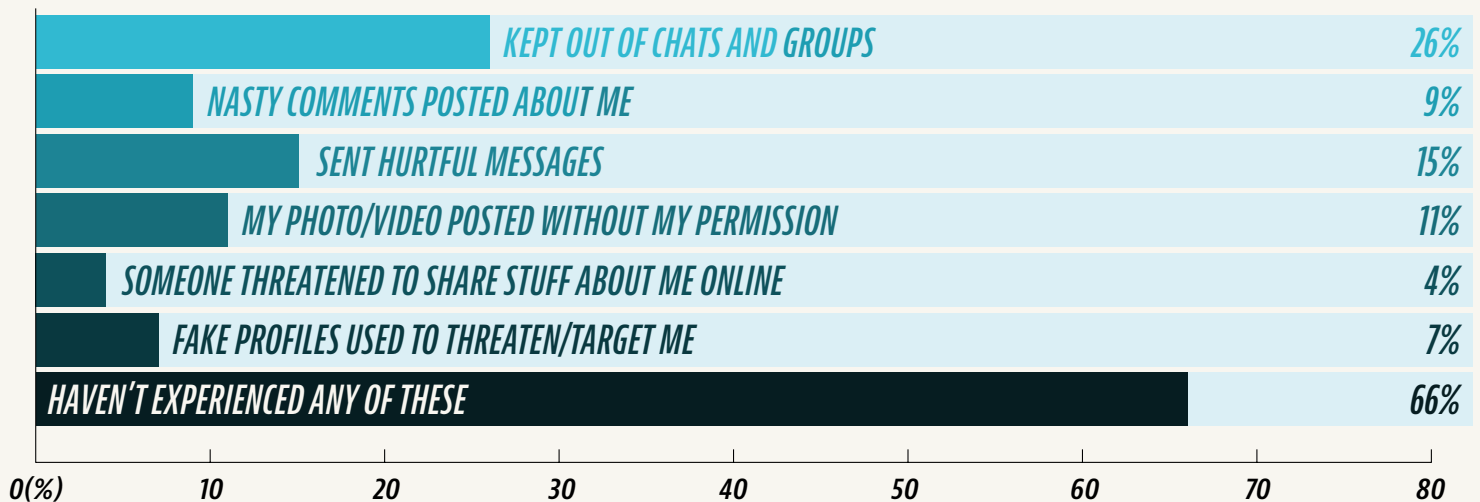


As mentioned above, 22% of 8-12 year olds report being cyberbullied but it is higher for those who participate in group chats than for those who do not: 30% vs 11% (Figure 28).<sup>18</sup> This aligns with the observations made at focus groups that group chats are rife with digital drama and can be used to target a particular child. 'Bandwagoning' can be a common occurrence in these kinds of chats, where individual users are swept up in the group dynamic and more easily participate in negative behaviour in these environments. We also need to be cognisant of the fact that empathy is being developed through childhood and adolescence so children may not have the social skills required, especially when stripped of face-to-face social cues in these online chats, when they observe or participate in these kinds of behaviours.

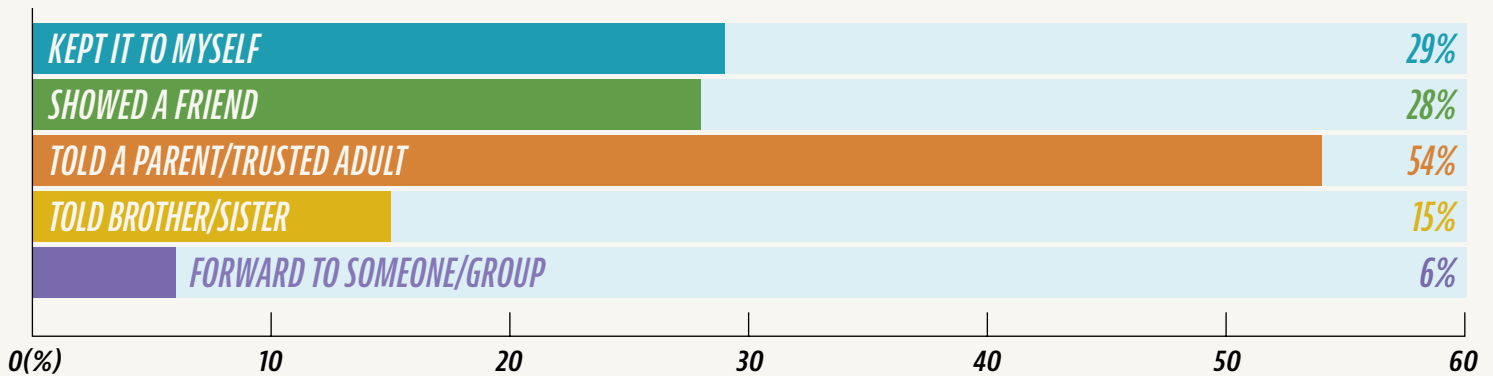
Children can also be reluctant to call out cyberbullying fearing that they will be targeted themselves if they do. As this 10-year-old girl describes: "I got bullied online on Snapchat by a girl and she was bullying my friend and I was trying to help my friend and then when I was trying to help my friend the girl was bullying me so bad, she was calling me bad words saying my dad left."

The situation is considerably worse for 12–15 year olds (Figure 29), with over a third (34%) reporting problems. Girls are more likely to be impacted than boys (38% vs. 29%), which aligns with the fact that girls chose to spend more of their online time messaging with friends, where problems most commonly occur. Increased use of Snapchat and WhatsApp makes it hard to monitor or report problems or to hold people to account.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 29. Tick any of these experiences that you have had online: (12–15 year olds)**



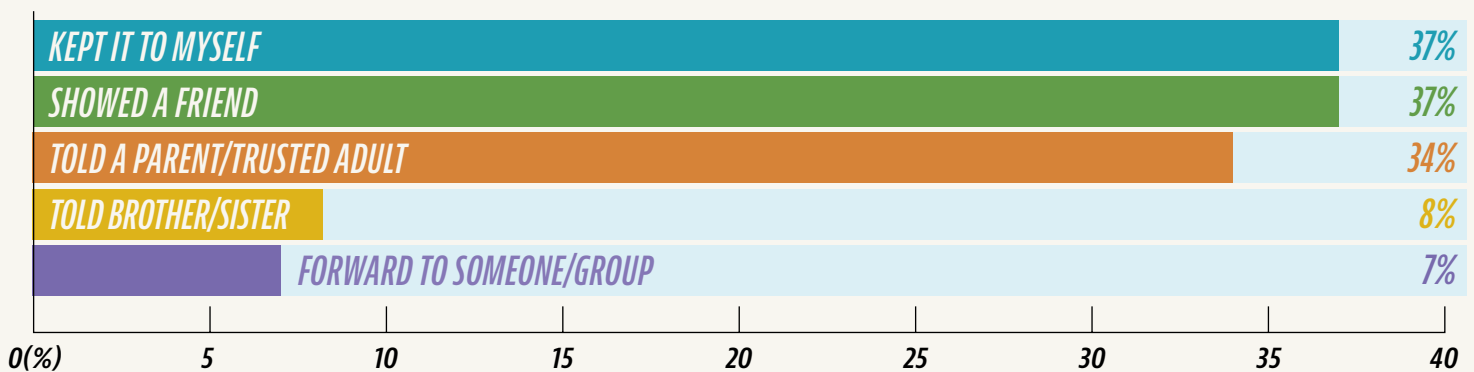
<sup>19</sup>WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption (E2EE) for security, and the Snapchat platform is designed around time-sensitive messages that 'disappear' and as such, are untraceable by users. WhatsApp now also has a 'disappearing messages' feature, and their 'chat lock' facility allows users to create chats that can't be opened without a passcode, and provides the ability to hide these locked chats by making them 'secret'.

**Figure 30. What did you do about it if you had any of these experiences? (8–12 year olds)**

A comment from a 13-year-old boy that *“a lot of cyberbullying has happened to me but all my friends get it from each other”* begs the question, is hateful speech online considered the norm for this age group? The term *“death threats”* comes up often across both age groups, as do racial slurs, sexism, body shaming, references to learning disabilities and family structure, and being excluded from platforms as a result of a targeted campaign by their peers to report their accounts. The psychological impact on children can be severe, as illustrated by the thoughts of two 12-year-olds who described the lasting effects as *“anxiety for two years”* and that *“it brought me to an all-time low.”*

It is concerning that those who are targeted often fail to seek support. 28% of 8–12 year olds do not speak to anyone about this kind of occurrence and only 54% turn to a parent or another trusted adult for help (Figure 30). The situation is considerably worse for 12–15 year olds, with 37% keeping it to themselves and only 34% opening up to a parent (Figure 31).

Some of the features available within apps such as Snapchat and WhatsApp (e.g. disappearing messages, locked chats) can lead to a sense of disinhibition amongst children, which is compounded by the fact that they are rarely being educated on how to communicate online in an appropriate way. Children are being left to figure out how to socialise online, often using apps and games that circumvent attempts to monitor communications and lack suitable moderation of their chat features.

**Figure 31. What did you do about it if you had any of these experiences? (12–15 year olds)**

# From Play to Prey: Invisible Forces Manipulating Children

Some of the negative experiences that children have are unquestionably happening as a result of the design of the digital environments themselves. We have just considered features of messaging apps that could facilitate disinhibition (see also *The Dark Side of DMs*). In this section we will share observations about the impact of algorithms, video game mechanics, and the early adoption of AI.

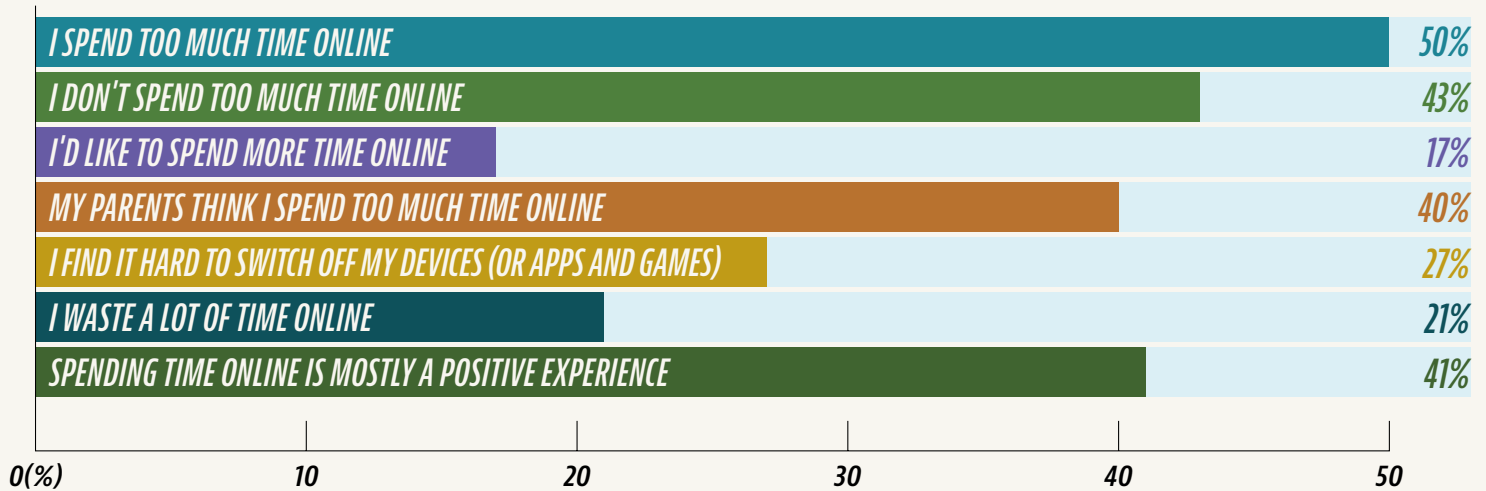
## The Algorithm

From recommending harmful content to time lost down online rabbit holes, it is hard to overstate the negative impacts of the algorithm.

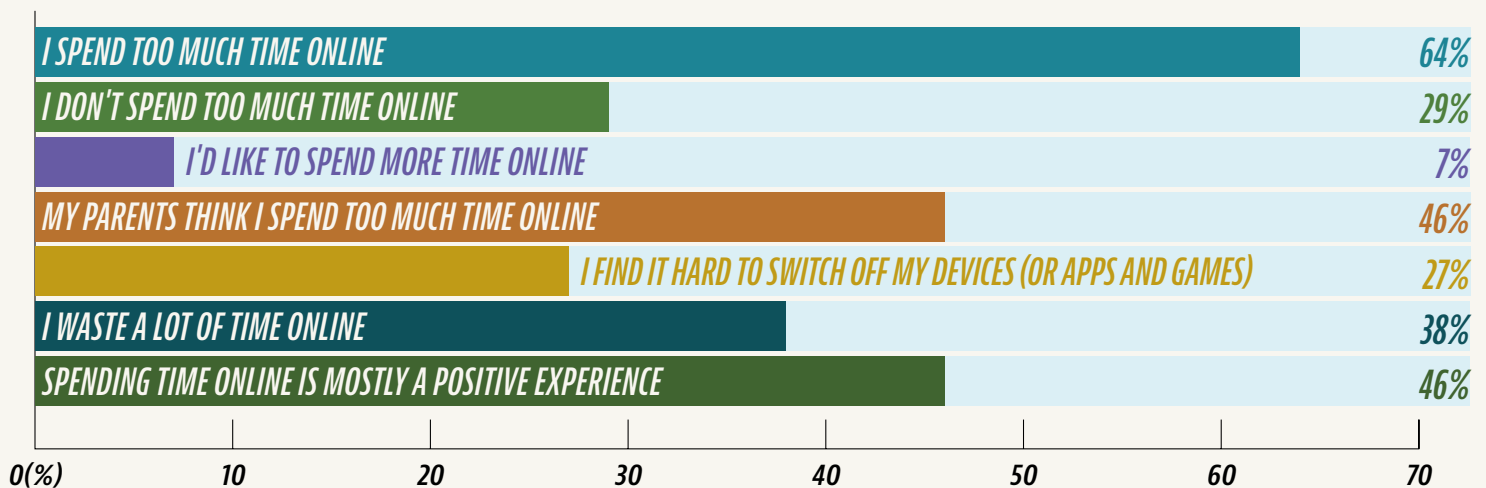
Young people are not choosing to seek out problematic content, rather it is being curated for them in the digital environments they use. We learned of many instances about harmful content appearing in their feeds, unprompted. A 12-year-old girl's comment sums this up: *"I have seen inappropriate videos pop up on TikTok without searching them and YouTube."* In addition, children who try to control the content using the tools provided told us that they are left frustrated with the results. As one 14-year old girl explained, *"These really weird videos started popping up on my Snapchat which I obviously reported but they kept popping up so I eventually stopped using the spotlight part of Snapchat."* We previously highlighted that the vast majority of young people who accessed sexual content do so accidentally (Figure 23) and this is just one category of many when it comes to problematic content. This is the algorithms at work – designed to maximise engagement, retention and ad revenue – and it is not limited to one platform, but rampant on many that children and young people are using.

Young people are also struggling to manage their time online when faced with digital environments designed to grab and retain their attention. This gets worse for teenagers, with increased access and reduced parental involvement. In their own opinion, 50% of 8–12 year olds and 64% of 12–15 year olds spend too much time online this year. Just 17% and 7% respectively wish they could spend more time online (Figures 32, 33).

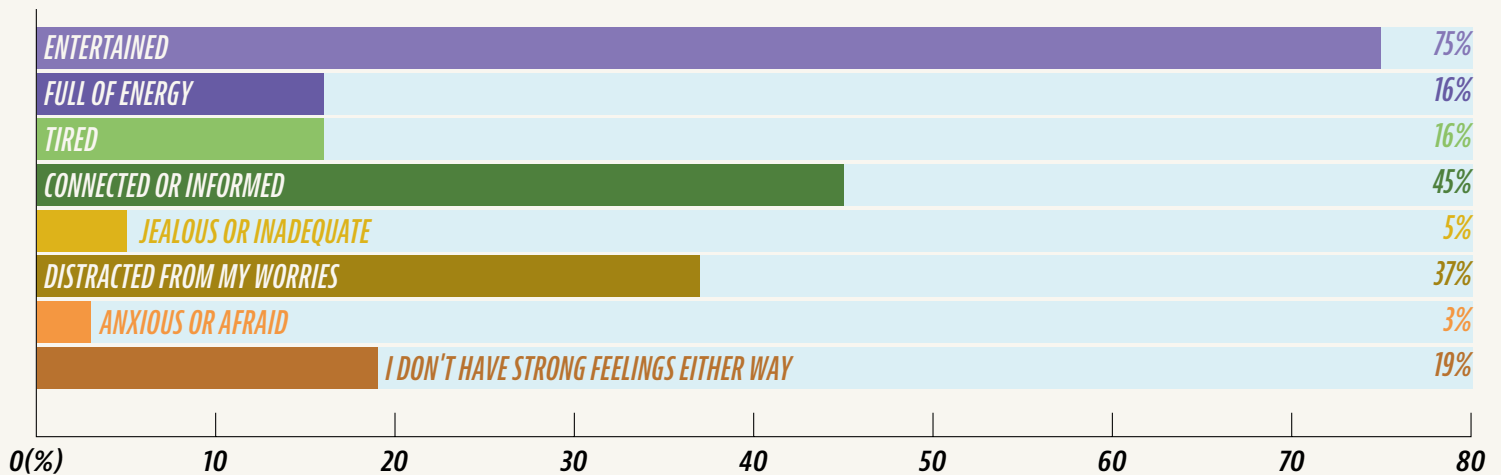


**Figure 32. Choose all the statements you agree with: (8–12 year olds)**

Of course, some of their time spent online is viewed positively: many 12–15 year olds report feeling connected, informed or entertained (Figure 34). Attempts to impose an outright social media/online ban could – in an effort to protect – end up punishing these young people and risks pushing digital activity underground, away from parental guidance and support. That said, many young people also report wasting a lot of time online – 21% of 8–12 year olds rising to 38% for 12–15 year olds. One 14-year-old boy explained, “sometimes when I’m online I lose track of time and zone out which can slow me down from getting things done.” It is hard to switch off when faced with the power of the algorithm – a finely-tuned phenomenon created by smart people to hold our attention and keep us coming back for more.

**Figure 33. Choose the statements you agree with: (12–15 year olds)**

**Figure 34. Being online makes me feel... (12–15 year olds)**



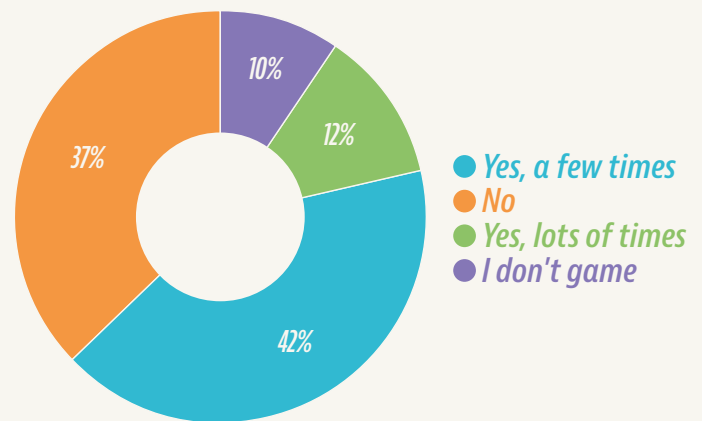
**Mechanics in Games**

Game monetisation has changed so much in the last decade and it can be challenging for children and their parents to track and control in-game spending. We asked children if, in the last year, they had purchased (not earned) items in games, providing them with the examples of 'skins', 'loot boxes', and 'virtual currency'.<sup>20</sup> While overall, 53% of 8–12 year olds and 51% of 12–15 year olds say they have done so, a more concerning finding is that 12% of 8–12 year olds and 9% of 12–15 year olds report doing so "lots of times" in the last year (Figures 35, 36).

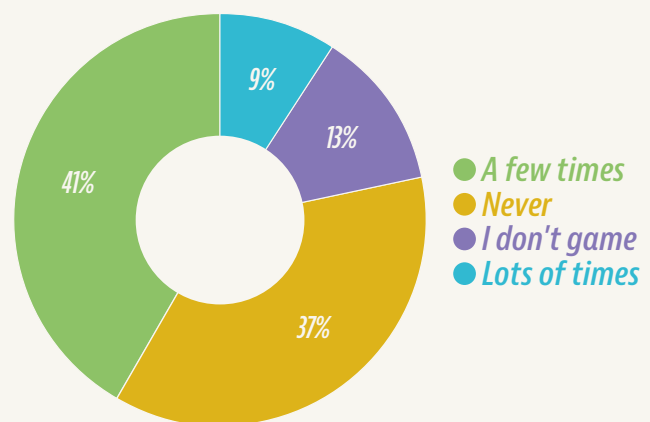
Boys are much more likely to do so "lots of times" than girls: 18% vs. 7% for 8–12 year olds and 13% vs. 6% for 12–15 year olds.<sup>21</sup> We do not know whether randomised purchases, commonly referred to as loot boxes, are involved for those making lots of purchases, but they are a key feature of some of the more popular games with boys, e.g. *EA FC*, *Call of Duty*. This feature is concerning, as they have been associated with overspending and are controlled in some countries by gambling legislation. Addressing this will involve raising awareness amongst parents that setting boundaries around in-game spending – like limiting spend, turning off in-app purchases or focusing on gift cards for special occasions only – can play a role in managing both financial strain and behavioural issues.

Gaming can also introduce children to gambling-like behaviours at an early age. 12% of 12–15 year olds said they have gambled in a video game this year, e.g. "via an in-game casino or in a casino game."<sup>22</sup> Problem gambling prevalence rates among teenage boys in particular is an acknowledged public health concern so it is notable that almost one in four (24%) boys of this age said they had been able to gamble in a video game (Figure 37).<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 35. In the last year did you buy items in games? (8–12 year olds)**

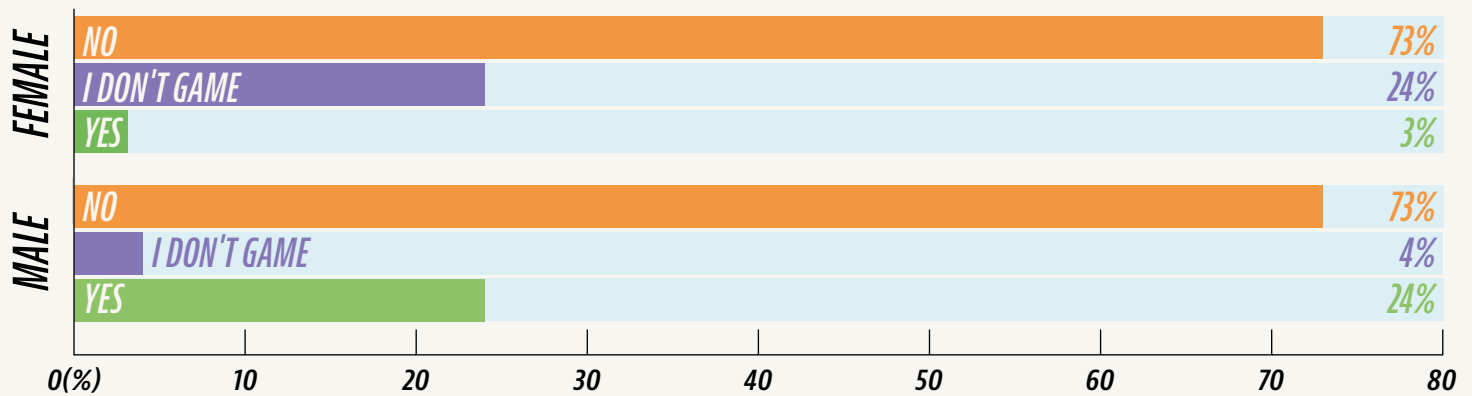


**Figure 36. In the last year did you buy items in games? (12–15 year olds)**



<sup>20</sup>The question posed here was, "In the last year did you buy items in games, e.g. skins, packs, lootboxes, virtual currency? (this is NOT things earned in-game)" <sup>21</sup>Figures with gender breakdown available from [www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025](http://www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025) <sup>22</sup>You can request a report with an appendix of the full findings from [www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025](http://www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025) <sup>23</sup>The question posed here was, "In the last year have you gambled in a video game (e.g. in-game casino or casino game)"

**Figure 37. In the last year have you gambled in a video game? (12–15 year olds)**

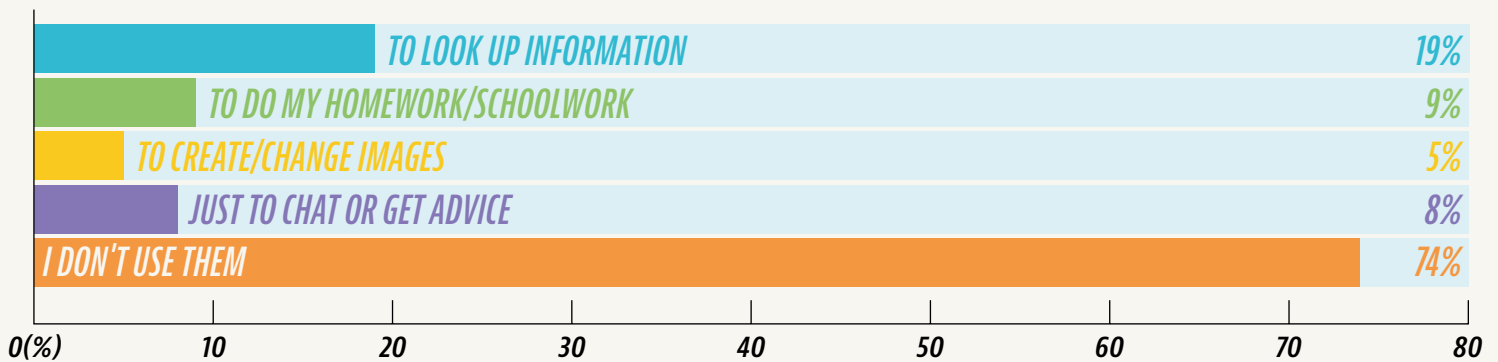


**The Future is AI**

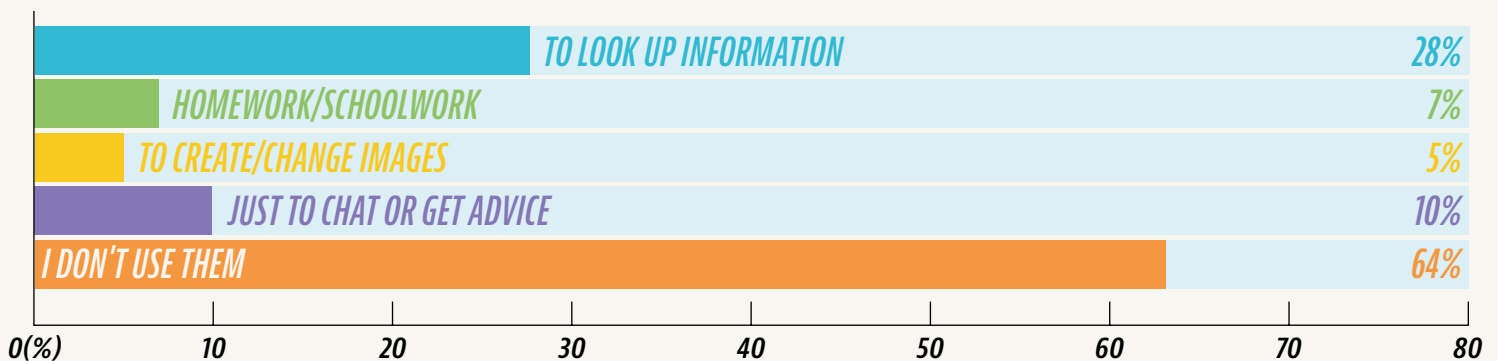
This year we asked young people to tell us about their use of AI chatbots and for what purposes they primarily used this new technology. We provided two examples for them, ChatGPT and Snapchat’s *My AI*. This was to focus the question on the intentional, proactive use of AI, rather than the return of an AI overview from a Google search or the algorithm working behind the scenes on their social media feed. Their responses are illuminating and engagement with chatbots

has increased significantly this year. 26% of 8–12 year olds indicated engaging with AI chatbots and 36% of 12–15 year olds (Figures 38, 39). This compared with just 5% and 12% respectively in the previous academic year. AI is increasingly built into environments that are popular with young people, e.g. Snapchat’s *My AI* is presented as ‘your friend’ and Meta’s AI is now front and centre in WhatsApp, so the increase in usage is not surprising.

**Figure 38 . Do you use AI apps, like ChatGPT or My AI? (8–12 year olds)**



**Figure 39. Do you use AI apps, like ChatGPT or My AI? (12–15 year olds)**



<sup>22</sup>You can request a report with an appendix of the full findings from [www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025](http://www.cybersafekids.ie/report2025) <sup>23</sup>The question posed here was, “In the last year have you gambled in a video game (e.g. in-game casino or casino game)” <sup>24</sup>How Emotional Manipulation Causes ChatGPT Psychosis, Psychology Today, 2025. Available from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/dancing-with-the-devil/202506/how-emotional-manipulation-causes-chatgpt-psychosis>. <sup>25</sup>Character.AI Is Hosting Pro-Anorexia Chatbots, Futurism, November 2024. Available from <https://futurism.com/character-ai-eating-disorder-chatbots>.

While the most popular use of chatbots is to look up information, some young people are using AI to produce their school work for them: 9% of 8–12 year olds and 7% of 12–15 year olds admitted to doing so. This raises questions about plagiarism, accuracy and reduced learning outcomes. These findings demonstrate the importance of better educating young people on both the limitations and capabilities of this rapidly developing technology so that if they do adopt AI into their learning, it is done in a responsible, effective and ethical way.

8% of 8–12 year olds and 10% of 12–15 year olds used chatbots “just to chat or get advice this year”. There have been concerning reports of ChatGPT amplifying existing negative behaviour when advice is sought, something that is being referred to as “chatbot psychosis”<sup>24</sup> and can affect the wellbeing of users when brought down rabbit holes that distort reality. Chatbots, like the social media algorithm, are radically indifferent to nuance, designed to care more about the engagement than the topic. There is also a concern that companion apps, such as Character.AI, which was mentioned this year in some surveys and allows users to design their own companion or interact with user-generated companions, can become a crutch for young people who may be feeling lonely or seeking comfort. For some vulnerable young people, it might prove less challenging to open up to an AI companion than a peer because it offers one-way validation, lacks judgement and requires no social compromises. In doing so, however, young people may lose out on developing much needed interpersonal skills at a key stage of their social maturation. Importantly, users could also be provided with harmful advice, e.g. Character.AI has been accused of hosting pro-anorexia chatbots.<sup>25</sup>



Young people may also overlook privacy considerations or may not review the terms and conditions of these apps, leaving them unaware of how their (sometimes personal) information may be used in the future. This is valid for all of their inputs, including images they may upload to be modified, a practice that 5% reported doing in both age groups. From speaking with parents this year, we received reports of harmless images subsequently being “nudified” and shared in groups or posted online. The accessibility of this technology is of great concern, at an age when young people may not fully grasp the impact on the injured party or the implications for the future of the offenders, who may themselves be minors. These findings align with other well-documented evidence by organisations, such as Internet Watch Foundation in the UK, that there is a marked increased use of this technology to create Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM).<sup>26</sup>

There are clearly insufficient safeguards in place to protect children. No attempt is yet made to verify the users age by these platform providers, beyond the self-declaration of date of birth during account creation<sup>27</sup> and there are no parental controls. As it stands we are repeating past failures to design and build technology with children in mind. The usage cases presented in this report highlight the urgent need to educate young people in the safe and productive use of these new AI features that have much to offer them and will undoubtedly play an even greater role in their lives moving forward.<sup>28</sup>

Today’s digital environments are not designed with children’s best interests at heart, and technology companies, and those who regulate them, have a crucial role to play in addressing the many problems documented here. However, parents are not powerless – they can take steps to reduce their children’s exposure to some of these online risks.

<sup>26</sup>Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Production of Child Sexual Abuse Imagery, The Internet Watch Foundation, 2023; 2024. Available from: <https://www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/why-we-exist/our-research/how-ai-is-being-abused-to-create-child-sexual-abuse-imagery/> <sup>27</sup>ChatGPT indicates that users must be 13+ in T&Cs but it can be used via a browser without the need to create an account. Character.AI has an age rating of 16+ across the EU, the AppStore lists as 17+ while the PlayStore lists as Parental Guidance. <sup>28</sup>Further reading on AI can be found in the Me, Myself and AI Report, Internet Matters, 2025. Available from: <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Me-Myself-AI-Report.pdf>

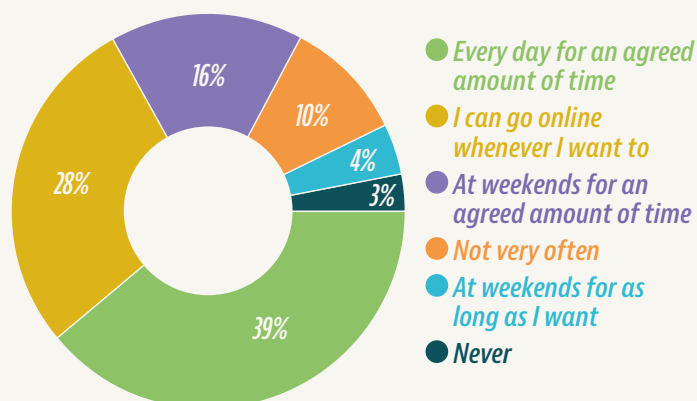
# Beyond Parental Controls: Be Present & Practice What You Preach

Children today are spending time in digital environments fraught with risk, so parents have a vital role to play in safeguarding and guiding them. Although engaging technical filters and controls can be worthwhile, there is so much more involved in effective digital parenting. Working with other parents helps, as demonstrated by the success of grassroots movements to delay the purchase of smartphones and use of social media apps for younger children that have emerged across the country. However, a parent's role in the home must also include ongoing support from whatever age their child first has access to the digital

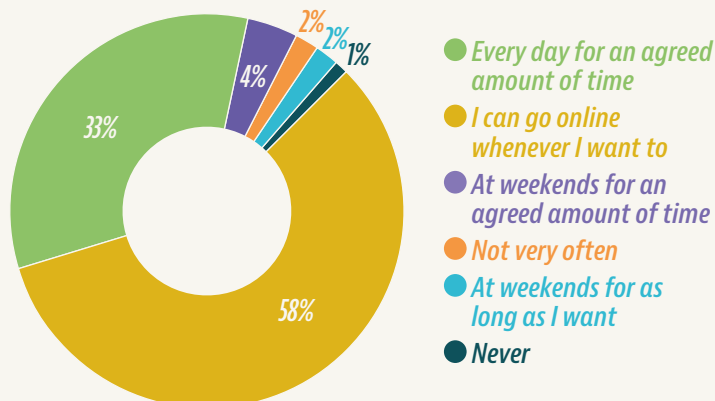
world, whether it is through shared (family) or personal smart devices. The numbers this year indicate that once online access is granted, a largely 'hands-off' approach to digital parenting is all too common across both age groups.

We have already seen how difficult it is for young people to switch off (see also *From Play to Prey*). But 28% of 8–12 year olds (Figure 40) and 58% of 12–15 year olds (Figure 41) indicate that they are left to manage their time without guidance or restriction from their parents.

**Figure 40. When are you allowed to go online? (8–12 year olds)**



**Figure 41. When are you allowed to go online? (12–15 year olds)**



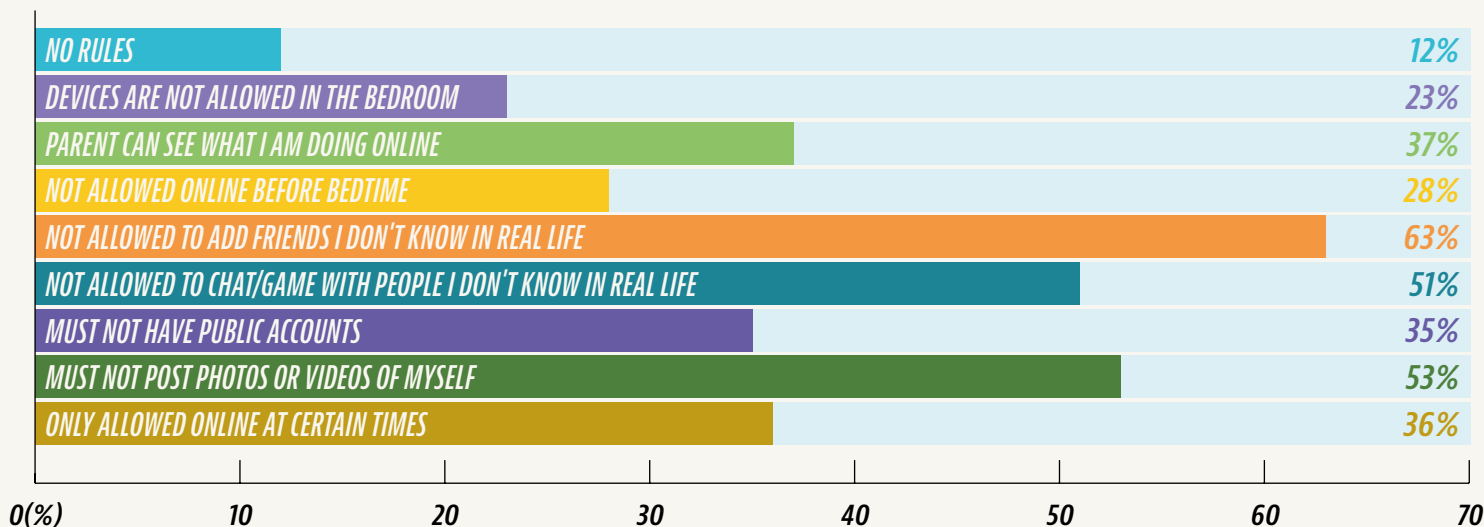
There are a number of ground rules that parents can deploy to try to improve digital outcomes but many of these rules are being overlooked by the vast majority (Figures 42, 43). Our data reveals the most common approach to take is to impose rules that reduce the risk of interactions with strangers and protect children's privacy. But parents in general are not encouraging healthy digital habits, e.g. only 28% of 8–12 year olds and 21% of 12–15 year olds are not prevented from going online before bedtime, even though screen use before bedtime has been linked to poorer sleep quality and duration.<sup>29</sup>

Very few parents are regularly monitoring their children's online engagements and there is little difference between the two age groups when it comes to using devices in the privacy of their bedrooms. An astonishing 77% of 8–12 year olds and 80% of 12–15 year olds are allowed this freedom, and only 37% of 8–12 year olds and 21% of 12–15 year olds said their parents "can see what they are doing online". This hands-off approach contributes to the problem that often children who encounter harm also fail to tell a parent about it (Figures 24, 25, 30, 31).



<sup>29</sup>Bedtime Screen Use Behaviors and Sleep Outcomes: Findings from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study, Nagata et al., 2023. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37098449/>

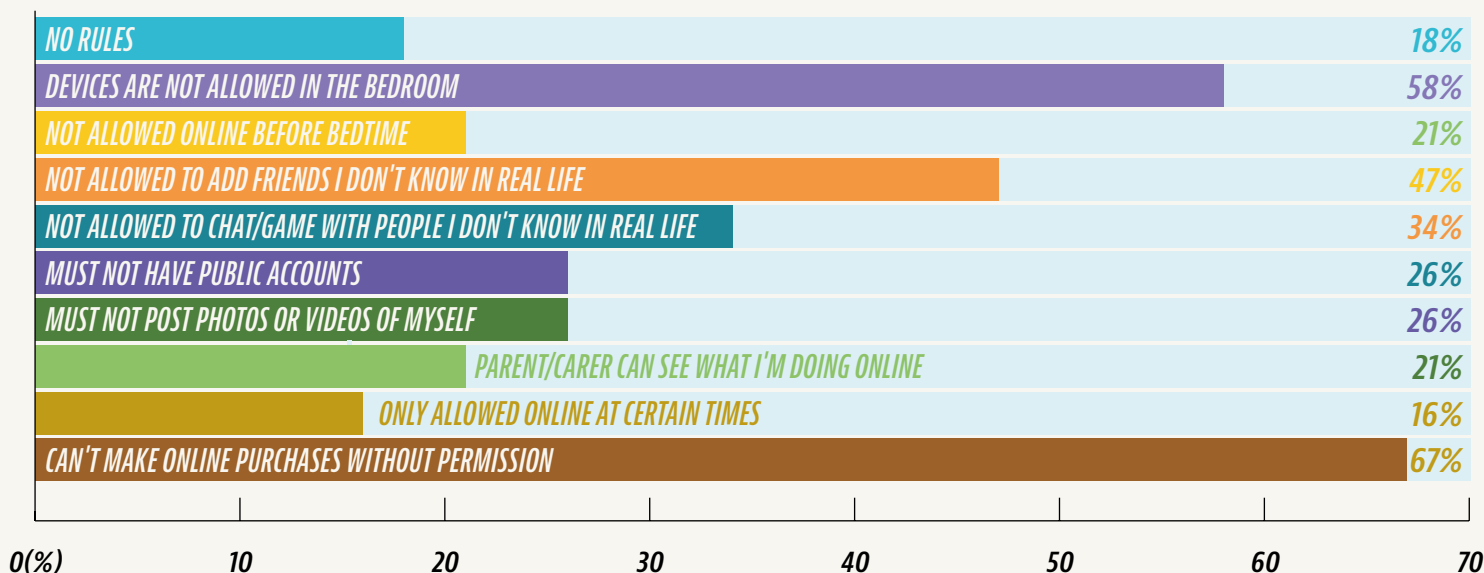
**Figure 42. What are your rules for going online? (8–12 year olds)**



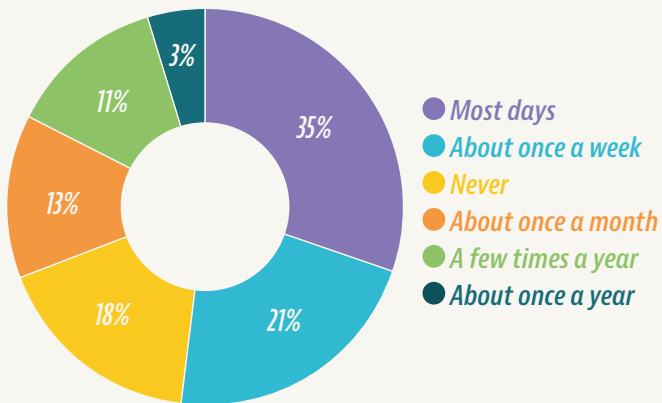
Children will open up more to parents who take an active and ongoing interest in their digital engagements, but many children report that their parents do not talk to them regularly about “what you see, hear or do online, e.g. videos, photos or posts that you see, games you are playing or chats that you have.” More than 17% of children said they “never” do so across both age groups (Figures 44, 45). Parents can also model healthy digital practices, but this is not always the case. A 9-year-old girl told us of the time her “mom sent photos and videos (I don’t approve of) on Instagram,” highlighting concerns around privacy, consent, and respectful online practices.



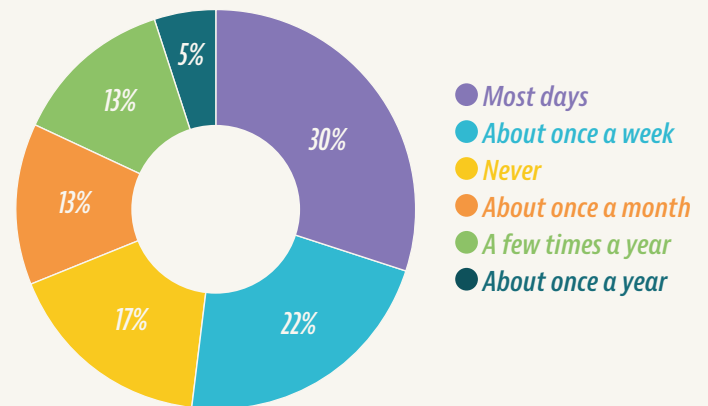
**Figure 43. What are your rules for going online? (12–15 year olds)**



**Figure 44.** How often do you talk to your parents about what you see, hear and do online? (8–12 year olds)



**Figure 45.** How often do you talk to your parents about what you see, hear and do online? (12–15 year olds)

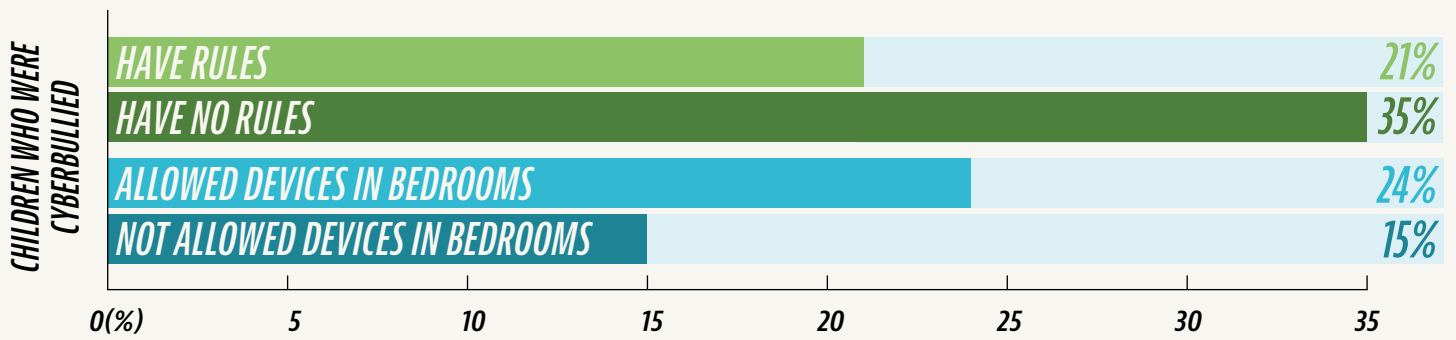


These outcomes may potentially improve if parents get more involved in what their children are doing, enabling them to better enjoy their time online. We have observed some interesting patterns below between engagements and outcomes.<sup>30</sup>

We first looked at whether a parent might impact the likelihood of their 8–12 year old experiencing cyberbullying by setting rules at home. We observed that children with household rules are less likely to experience cyberbullying – 21% compared to 35% among those without such rules (Figure 46). For this younger age group, we also looked at the effect of allowing devices to be used in the privacy of bedrooms, possibly late at night, and found that the likelihood of being cyberbullied is lower (24% vs 15%, Figure 47) when devices remain in common areas where parents may be present.

<sup>30</sup>These are observations only and not necessarily proof of causation. There may be additional variables that contributed to these outcomes. It is also possible that causation may work in reverse, i.e. it is not possible from the findings to establish whether engagement or outcomes came first.

**Figure 46. The effect of rules at home on likelihood of being cyberbullied (8–12 year olds)**

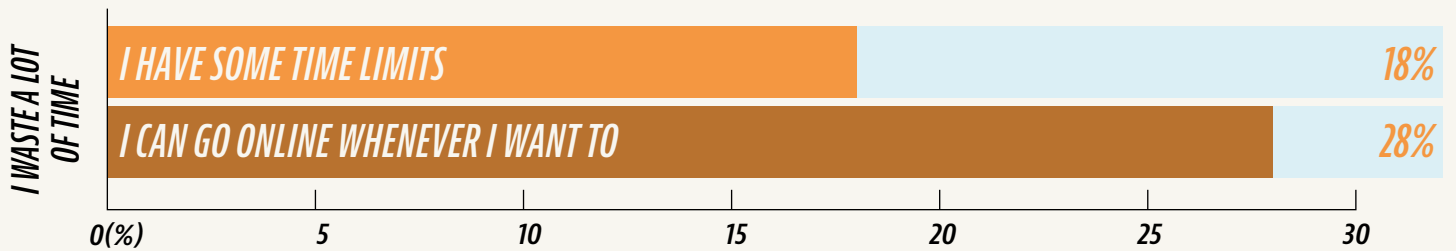


This year, 21% of 8–12 year olds and 38% of 12–15 year olds feel “I waste a lot of time online” (Figures 32, 33), so we considered if time is spent more productively when it is restricted by parents. Our findings suggest that young people are more likely to report wasted time if they have no time limits at home. 28% of 8–12 year olds and 43% of 12–15 year olds who can “go online whenever I want” feel they waste time online vs 18% and 33% of those whose parents restricted access to set times (Figure 47, 48).

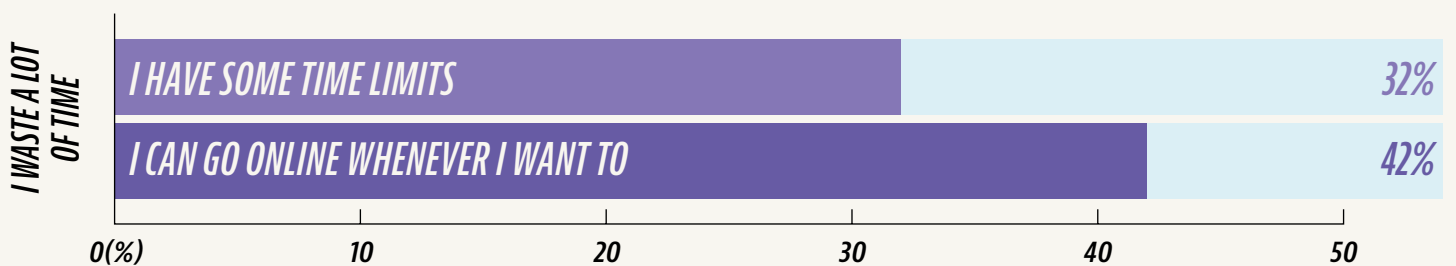
Implementing good digital practices at home can lead to better outcomes and also lay the groundwork for long-term digital wellbeing. As one 12-year-old boy explained, “I can now relax and only watch appropriate content or play appropriate games. I know that I am safe online because my parents check.” With some children spending more time online than in school, it is essential that parents take an active role, so children can have a safer, more positive digital experience.



**Figure 47. Setting of time limits and wasting time online (8–12 year olds)**



**Figure 48. The effect of having time limits on wasting time online (12–15 year olds)**



# CyberSafeKids Recommendations

## Only Meaningful Action Will Make A Difference

The digital environment was not built with children in mind, and as we can see from this report, it consistently fails to respect, protect, or fulfil their rights. The consistent inability of regulation to keep pace with the speed of development in the online world has led to an environment in which children are still frequently exposed to harmful contact, content, conduct, and contracts, and yet they still do not benefit from the same protections – legal and societal – they are entitled to offline. Children must be afforded the same rights in the virtual world as they are in the physical one, including the right to privacy, safety, participation, freedom of expression, information, and protection from harm.

Our long-term goal must therefore be a digital society in which children's rights are fully recognised and upheld. This includes restricting access to harmful or inappropriate content and ensuring that the platforms children access are age-appropriate, and meet the highest standards of safety and design, with children's evolving abilities taken into consideration.

Although the last few years have undoubtedly seen positive legal and societal developments in Ireland with the passing into law of the OSMR Act<sup>31</sup> and the growth of grassroots community movements such as *GenFree* and *Smartphone-Free Childhood Ireland*, based on our ongoing work, and the picture painted in this report, there is much, much more work to be done. Truly meaningful change will only come with a societal shift in which all stakeholders are prepared to accept and uphold their responsibilities.

As such, CyberSafeKids is making the following recommendations:

**1. Coimisiún na Meán must be fully empowered to assess both new and existing online platforms against Child Rights by Design principles<sup>32</sup>.** Platforms that fail to meet these standards – or implement robust age verification, regardless of jurisdiction – should face geo-blocking. Regular reviews and appropriate sanctions must be applied where platforms fail in their duty of care to children. Legal loopholes must also be closed. This could include enacting the European Digital Fairness Act<sup>33</sup> to strengthen consumer rights – especially for children – against dark patterns, addictive design, manipulative personalisation, and targeted marketing. Recommender systems based on profiling should be entirely removed from children's accounts. Finally, Ireland's Children First Act (2015) should be extended to digital services, ensuring statutory safeguarding duties apply online to protect children from cyberbullying, exploitation, and other harms, as they do offline.

**2. Digital & Media Literacy Education must equip pupils for the digital age they are living in.** It must become the fourth pillar of the education system, embedded right across the curricula in primary and post-primary classrooms. As our report shows, starting at secondary level is simply too late for younger children. Similarly, incorporating this education under broader objectives such as 'wellbeing' is insufficient: most children spend part of their day online, and so schools must deliver the requisite critical thinking skills and knowledge – on an ongoing basis – to help enable them to have safe and positive experiences online. Digital & Media Literacy Education must also be an integral part of teacher training courses, and in-service training at colleges and schools across Ireland.<sup>34</sup>

**3. Digital parenting is an unavoidable part of raising children in our increasingly interconnected age.** Parents and caregivers feel understandably overwhelmed, but when it comes to online vs. offline lives, the same rules must apply. It's vital that we keep in step with the online lives of our kids, and establish appropriate, common sense boundaries in the same way we do in their offline lives. Do we expect our children to cross a road or ride a bike without knowing the rules? Do we let them interact with complete strangers at the local park? Keeping ourselves informed of what children are doing online is essential, and it will continue to be the role of CyberSafeKids to provide support in the form of national awareness campaigns, advice, and resources to help parents and caregivers become active – and ongoing – participants in their children's online lives.

<sup>31</sup>Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, Ireland. <sup>32</sup>Child Rights by Design, The 5Rights Foundation, 2025. Available from: <https://childrightsbydesign.5rightsfoundation.com>  
<sup>33</sup>Digital Fairness Act, European Commission. Available from: <https://www.digital-fairness-act.com> <sup>34</sup>This year data collected from teachers showed that 82% of respondents consider online safety to be a significant issue in their school, but only 57% indicated that they have sufficient knowledge and skills to effectively deliver educational messages related to online safety.

# Thanks

This academic year we have delivered impact and support through our education programmes to:

**19,270 Children**

**3,123 Parents**

**955 Educators**

We would like to thank the supporters who make our work possible:





**CYBERSAFE  
KIDS**

Trends and Usage Report Academic Year 2024-2025