

Growing Up Online

Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report



Spotlight Report on Parents and Carers

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Dr Leanne York, Mrs Heather Lyle,
Prof Noel Purdy, Dr Mark Ballantine



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Introduction and Aims

This Spotlight Report on Parents and Carers is based on the data from the broader research study entitled '*Growing up Online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland – an Evidence Report*' (Purdy et al., 2023), funded by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) and conducted by a team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

The project set out to undertake an evidence-based report relating to children's online activities, harms and safety. The project aimed to:

- address the emergence, nature and impact of online risks of harm and trends among all groups of children and young people in Northern Ireland, including risk and protective factors, access to support and intervention when issues arise and the implications for safety policy and practice.
- review online safety provision including educational initiatives to safeguard and protect children online.

Literature Review

Mobile technologies, such as internet accessible mobile phones (smartphones) and tablet computers, have almost everywhere resulted in easier access to the internet. Unsurprisingly, online technology is very popular amongst children and young people, with many engaging in numerous online activities such as gaming, using social media to communicate with friends and make new friends, watching television programmes and films, listening to music and researching information for school projects (Notar et al., 2013; CCEA, 2015). Consequently, there is high ownership of smartphones and this increases as children and young people become older. Ofcom (2022) reports that 15% of three-year-olds owned a mobile phone, increasing to 62% at age 10, and 100% for 15–17-year-olds. Similar findings are reported in the '*Growing up Online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland – an Evidence Report*' with 91.74% of 8–13-year-olds and 98.87% of 14–18-year-olds reporting that they owned their own mobile phone (Purdy et al., 2023).

Parents are aware that being online is advantageous for children and young people particularly in relation to education and maintaining friendships (Ofcom, 2023). However, technology such as smartphones and social media has added a new challenge to parenthood (Auxier et al., 2020). Parents are apprehensive about their children being online because of a variety of reasons including concerns about online bullying; the accessibility of inappropriate sexual and violent content; online sexual predators; sharing personal information with strangers; the long-term impacts of online technology on child development and screen time (Auxier et al., 2020; Ofcom, 2023). Screen time was not only an issue in relation to children and young people. In their US study Auxier et al. (2020) report that many parents themselves struggle with their own screen time with 56% reporting they spend too much time online, and 68% claiming they are distracted by their phone when in the company of their children. Parents face the dilemma of being aware of the potential online dangers whilst not wanting their child to be left out if all their friends have smartphones (Blodget, 2017).

Parental supervision can be categorised into three groups; active (supervising or monitoring), evaluative (discussing online risks) and restrictive (rule setting or restricting access) (Baldry et al., 2019; Aljasir and Alsebaei, 2022). The degree of parental supervision changes depending on a child's age. As would be expected, parents are more involved with younger age groups. Ofcom (2023) reports that while 97% of parents of 8–11-year-olds supervise their child's online activities, this falls to 79% of parents of 12–15-year-olds. For 16–17-year-olds, 44% of parents reported that they did not supervise their child's online activities. Parents of this group were more likely to trust their child to be sensible in relation to keeping safe online (Ofcom, 2023).

The extent of parental supervision and involvement can also be influenced by their child's gender. In their study of 4390 young people aged 13–20 years in Italy, Baldry et al. (2019) report that girls who had been cyberbullied were more likely to report higher levels of parental supervision, for example controlling their online activities and monitoring their activity on social networking sites. This is likely because parents are concerned and wish to 'keep an eye' on their daughters (p.306). There was a perception amongst boys who have been cyberbullied of less support and involvement from parents. Perceptions regarding parental interest and communication with parents are also highlighted by Willems et al. (2023) in their recent article based on the *Blurred Lives Project* (which surveyed 2594 young people aged 14–16 years in five European countries). Only 19.4% of participants claimed that they always communicate with their parents regarding websites they visit, while more girls ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.10$, $n = 1079$) than boys ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.07$, $n = 1372$) were likely to discuss this with parents. Few young people had the perception that their parents were quite or very interested in their online activities, with girls ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.93$, $n = 1080$) more likely to report higher levels of parental interest than boys ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.96$, $n = 1365$).

The role of parents in the promotion of cyber-kindness and prevention of cyberbullying was explored in a study by Cassidy et al. (2018) with 177 students in Grade 8–10 (aged 13–16 years) at one school in Western Canada. One of the themes to emerge from the young people's survey responses was that parents should be teaching their children about various issues including 'bullying, cyberbullying, online privacy, and the kinds of long-term effects that may come from posting certain types of messages online' (p.6). The young people also suggested that parents should have these discussions regularly with children and that such discussions should be informal. The young people in this study also referred to the importance of parents role-modelling behaviours in relation to their online activities and also showing kindness. This was also linked to the relationship between parent and child where the young people suggested that parents need to talk more with their children and not only about issues such as cyberbullying. One of the young participants reported that a kind and supportive home with a close child-parent relationship 'was most conducive to the promotion of cyber-kindness and elimination of cyberbullying' (p.6). Some of the young people also thought it was important that parents employ restrictions on technology use, impose limits on the time their children spend online and monitor their child's online activities. In the event of their child engaging in cyberbullying behaviour, some of the

young people believed that technology should be removed from the child. However, other participants did not think restricting access strategies are effective because 'they will always find some other device unknown by parents; either a friend's or at school' (p.7). In this study 15 teaching and non-teaching staff were also interviewed, and they highlighted the importance of schools and parents working together to prevent cyberbullying but acknowledged this can be challenging given the 'diversity of perspectives (and varying degrees of realism) among parents about the role of information technology in their children's lives and on what are appropriate restrictions to impose' (p.8). The school staff discussed that parents need to be made aware of the 'nature and extent of cyberbullying' which would help schools and parents work together and would involve 'all stakeholders (including students)' in a discussion about cyberbullying (p.8).

For parents it is a fine balance in allowing children and young people a degree of autonomy in their online use whilst also supervising, setting clear restrictions, and being available when a negative online experience occurs (Wright, 2018; Baldry et al., 2019; Faltýnková et al., 2020; Petruzelka et al., 2020). A strategy of restricting online access, although successful in protecting children from online risks, can, according to Livingstone and Byrne (2017), result in children missing out on opportunities to develop digital resilience and skills which will aid them in the future when managing and dealing with online dangers. Baldry et al. (2019) report that controlling and limiting internet access can be advantageous; however, it can result in the relationship between child and parent becoming distant, resulting in children and young people being less likely to share any negative online experiences with their parents. Young people not reporting online incidents such as cyberbullying or sexting to their parents may also be due to adolescent perceptions that only younger children would ask for help from their parents, as well as embarrassment, fear of being negatively judged, and fear of losing access to their online devices (Tokunaga, 2010; York et al., 2021). A good connection between parents and their children is, according to Doty et al. (2018), more associated with lower levels of cyberbullying, than parental monitoring of online activities. Consequently, Doty et al. (2018) suggest that prevention and intervention strategies should focus on developing and strengthening parent-child relationships while also providing realistic information about online contexts. Too often, however, it appears that contemporary parental fears in relation to their children's online exposure has served to create a 'battlefield' (Livingstone, 2021, p.91) and a locus of conflict between parents and children, where parents try to control and police how much time their children are spending online, rather than focusing on what they are actually doing online.

Levels of parental confidence can however impact on their role in relation to their child's online activity. Parents are generally aware of their responsibility but often realise that they require assistance and advice as many lack confidence in helping their child deal with an online issue (Livingstone et al., 2010; Davidson, 2014; Suchitra et al., 2022). This may be due to young people being under different pressures to participate in online activities such as the sharing of self-generated indecent imagery (or 'sexting'), pressure that adults may not have experienced at such an age. As a result, parents may feel ill-equipped to help their children (MacKenzie et al., 2017). It is important that adults are willing to find out why young

people engage in online behaviours such as sexting and to discuss sexual issues with them (Kowalski et al., 2007, cited in D'Antona et al., 2010, p.524). Children also need educated in an age-appropriate manner when they first start accessing any internet device, which will most likely be during pre-school years (D'Antona et al., 2010; Green, 2019). To help increase parental confidence and knowledge in relation to online safety education schools organise training events. However, some schools have reported lack of interest from parents when invited to attend online safety training meetings (Purdy & McGuckin, 2015; York, 2019).

Methods

The 'Growing Up Online in NI' study adopted a mixed methodological approach. Two online surveys were administered to children and young people from across Northern Ireland, aged between 8-18 years. One version of the survey was administered to 8-13-year-olds (with slight amendments made to ensure age appropriateness) and another version was given to 14-18-year-olds. The surveys remained open for a period of 4 weeks, from 6th February to 6th March 2023. In total 6481 children and young people responded to the surveys.

In addition, a wide variety of different target populations were recruited to take part in interviews and focus groups. In total 95 participants took part in the qualitative aspects of this research, including children and young people in primary, post-primary, special schools and youth club settings, as well as parents, teachers/school leaders, and professionals working in the field of online safety. The qualitative engagement included children and young people in mainstream schools, Traveller/Roma children, LGBTQI+ young people, children with (severe) learning difficulties, young people in a youth club setting in a disadvantaged urban context, and pupils from a post-primary Irish-medium school (see Table 1).

Two children and young people's advisory groups were established, one involving primary school children and another involving post-primary school children. These groups helped inform the design of the qualitative engagement with children and young people and made recommendations regarding the dissemination. The project was also supported by an expert advisory group convened by the SBNI.

Table 1. Participant (qualitative) Details

Mainstream Primary (MP)	Two focus groups were held in mainstream primary schools, one with pupils in Key Stage 1 (MP1), the other with pupils in Key Stage 2 (MP2). Each focus group comprised a mixture of boys and girls from different age groups, with 6 participants in each group.
Mainstream Post-Primary (MPP)	A total of three focus groups were held in mainstream post-primary schools: one co-educational, non-selective Catholic Maintained school (School MPP1), one co-educational Voluntary Grammar school (MPP2) and one co-educational non-selective Irish-medium school (MPP3). Each focus group comprised a mixture of boys and girls from a single year group as follows: School MPP1 (year 11: 4 boys, 3 girls), School MPP2 (year 10: 4 boys, 4 girls), School MPP3 (year 11: 4 boys, 4 girls).
Special School (SS)	Two focus groups were held in one post-primary special school, one with KS3 pupils (SSY, n=5), the other with KS4 pupils (SSO, n=4). The groups, as is reflective of the composition of pupil enrolment, were mainly male with one female in the older group.
Youth Group (YG)	One focus group was held with a youth group operating within a disadvantaged community in West Belfast. The focus group consisted of females only (n=12) aged between 12-17 years.
LGBTQI+	One focus group was held in a mainstream post-primary school with pupils in their LGBTQI+ club. The group consisted of seven pupils: boys, girls, and pupils who identified as non-binary. Participants represented a range of school year groups, from Year 9 to Year 14.
Roma Traveller Primary School (RTPS)	One focus group was held with primary school aged children from the Roma Traveller community (RTPS). The focus group consisted of two children (one boy and one girl) from a Key Stage 2 class.
Teachers	One comprehensive focus group took place comprising a selection of teachers from different schools as follows: 3 post-primary schools (1 non-selective co-educational controlled school; 1 non-selective controlled girls school; 1 Catholic maintained co-educational non-selective school); 3 primary schools (1 Irish-medium school; 1 controlled school in a rural setting; 1 controlled school in an urban setting) and 1 special school. Additionally, one separate interview took place with a vice-principal in an Irish-medium post-primary school. Altogether, 2 participants were school principals, 2 were vice-principals and 4 were class teachers.

Other Professionals

A total of 15 professionals employed by various organisations were invited to complete an online survey consisting of three core open-ended questions. The organisations represented are concerned with looking after children and young people in the areas of health and social care, education, regulation of the communications sector, working with survivors of sexual abuse, and providing support to parents, children and young people, and information on various issues. Some of the organisations have conducted or commissioned research focusing on the online safety of children and young people.

**Parents/
Carers**

Two focus groups were held with parents/carers, one in-person with a group of primary school parents (P) and one online with a group of post-primary school parents (PP). The post-primary focus group comprised 5 mothers and 1 father and was held after school hours. The primary group comprised 5 mothers and was held during school hours in the school which their children attended. The children of the post-primary parents attended a range of Integrated (n=1), Grammar (n=5) and non-selective/high schools (n=1). Of these, 2 were single sex and 4 were co-educational. Parents were invited to attend, but this mainly female profile is in line with other research of this kind, which finds fathers difficult to recruit.

Quantitative Results

The relevant SBNI survey results for this spotlight report are presented in this section.

Perceived Levels of Parental Interest

One of the most significant survey questions related to levels of parental engagement in their children's online activities. In particular, children and young people were asked to rate how interested their parents were in what they were doing online.

Among both age cohorts (8-13 and 14-18) levels of parental interest, as perceived by their children, were low, and were especially low in respect of the older cohort (14-18).

For instance, among the younger cohort (8-13), just one in six respondents (16.60%, n=635) reported that their parents were 'very interested' in what they were doing online. Most felt that their parents were 'a little interested' (63.62%, n=2434) while almost one in five (19.79%, n=757) claimed that their parents were 'not at all interested' (see Appendix 1).

Among the older cohort (14-18), reported levels of parental interest were lower still. Less than one in ten (8.44%, n=224) respondents reported that their parents were 'very interested' in what they were doing online. Again, just over half felt that their parents were 'a little interested' (58%, n=1540) leaving just over a third of young people (33.56%, n=891) claiming that their parents were 'not at all interested' (see Appendix 2). Perceived parental interest data were also analysed in relation to gender. For both age groups, girls were more likely to report higher levels of parental interest than boys.

In the 8-13 cohort, more girls (20.13%, n=366) than boys (13.4%, n=259) responded that their parents were 'very interested' in their online activities. Just over half of girls (62.87%, n=1143) and boys (64.41%, n=1245) believed that their parents were 'a little interested'. Boys (22.19%, n=429) were more likely to report that their parents were 'not at all interested' than girls (17%, n=309) (see Appendix 3).

Overall, in the 14-18 cohort the rates were low for both girls (8.77%, n=105) and boys (7.83%, n=106) who reported that their parents were 'very interested' in what they are doing online. Just over half of girls (59.65%, n=714) and boys (57.58%, n=779) claimed that their parents were 'a little interested'. More boys (34.59%, n=468) than girls (31.5%, n=378) stated that their parents were 'not at all interested' (see Appendix 4).

Source of Online Safety Information

The children and young people were asked about who had spoken to them about online safety, and this revealed very similar results for both cohorts. Teachers were the most common source of online safety information (8-13 years: 89.62%, n=3429; 14-18 years: 89.57%, n=2378), followed by parents/carers (ages 8-13; 64.40%, n=2464; ages 14-18; 62.15%, n=1650) (see Appendices 5 & 6).

Responsibility for improving the safety of young people online

One of the questions asked the children and young people who in their opinion is responsible for improving the safety of young people online. For both cohorts, 'parents/carers' was the most popular response.

Among the 8-13 group nearly three quarters (74.59%, n=2854) believed that online safety is the responsibility of parents/carers. This was followed by schools (66.44%, n=2542), government (43.02%, n=1646) and social media companies (39.75%, n=1521). Nearly a quarter (24.78%, n=948) believed that youth clubs/organisations and phone companies (22.61%, n=865) should make the internet safer for young people (see Appendix 7).

The results were slightly different for the 14–18-year-olds. Although almost two-thirds of the older cohort also felt that online safety is the responsibility of parents/carers (64.33%, n=1708), the lower rankings differed: among 14–18-year-olds, parents/carers were followed by social media companies (62.11%, n=1649), schools (57.51%, n=1527) and government (46.10%, n=1224). The least common responses included phone companies (28.78%, n=764) and youth clubs/organisations (24.90%, n=661) (see Appendix 8).

How would your parent/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?

The children and young people were asked how they thought their parents would describe the amount of time they spend on the internet. Respondents in both cohorts believed that their parents would have negative opinions about the time they spend online.

For ages 8–13, 56.77% (n=2172) of respondents reported that their parents/carers would describe their time spent online as too much. Conversely, 42.03% (n=1608) reported that their parents would think their time spent online was just about right, and 1.2% (n=46) that they do not spend enough time online (see Appendix 9).

For the 14-18 cohort, a higher percentage (62.64%, n=1663) responded that their parents think that they spend too much time online, with fewer (35.71%, n=948) feeling that they spent just about the right amount of time online. A very small minority (1.66%, n=44) reported that their parents believe they do not spend enough time online (see Appendix 10).

These results were also analysed in relation to gender and for both age groups, girls were more likely than boys to report higher levels of parental disapproval in relation to how much time they spent online.

For instance, among the younger cohort (8-13), more girls (61.06%, n=1110) than boys (52.56%, n=1016) responded that their parents believed that they spend too much time online (see Appendix 11). This is replicated among the older cohort (14-18) where once again girls (68.92%, n=825) were most likely than boys (56.54%, n=765) to say that their parents think they spend too much time online (see Appendix 12).

Qualitative Results

This section consists of data from focus group interviews with parents, teachers, children and young people as well as survey responses from other professionals. The following six main themes were identified using thematic analysis:

1. Benefits of Being Online
2. Time Spent Online
3. Online Dangers
4. Parental Anxiety Caused by an Unwelcome Presence in their Home
5. Online Safety, Whose Responsibility?
6. Online Safety Training and Education

Theme 1: Benefits of Being Online

Parents who participated in the focus group interviews were asked about the benefits of children having access to the internet. Responses included being able to search the internet to help with homework, keeping in touch with family, and learning and developing new skills:

 "One of my children loves to use the internet to put little songs on and make up fun little dances or little skits and things." (P)

 "He's allowed to, he likes to make up videos for his drone...he'll look at other people's YouTube clips of how they've put stuff together." (P)

Participants also expressed the affective benefits. One participant explained how in using the internet to learn new languages, "*it meets their reward system because it's all the right noises*" (P). Another participant noted, "*in some ways in the past, we've used it to prepare our children for maybe for the next stage or whatever is coming ahead of them*" (P) going on to mention going on a trip, or an up-coming event and helping with some of the anxieties of something uncertain in the future, "*that can be a benefit at times for them*" (P).

The post-primary parents also referred to research for projects and learning and talked about the benefits of connecting with friends which had been especially important during the Covid-19 lockdowns. One father of an only child stated, "*I think it sort of reduced that isolation in learning, you know, that she was able regularly to still link in with her peers at school every day*" (PP). Another parent highlighted skills that can be acquired whilst researching, "*I think that in itself can help them develop a skill with the management and selection of information*" (PP). The same parent highlighted the benefits of the amount of research material now available to every child, as in the past only some had access to specialised books like encyclopaedias "*it speeds up the process as well and... giving them access to a lot more than they ever would have done*" (PP).

As noted above, being able to communicate with friends and family was viewed by some parents as a benefit. However, parents of post-primary children highlighted the subtle effects on meaningful relationships of spending time online. One parent presented a pseudo-physiological analogy, “*but I do feel like that it’s an extension of their hand*” (PP) whilst another parent was critical of the value of online connections:

“It’s that idea I think of zoning in and connecting, or trying to connect with people... but in fact, you’re zoning out, you’re zoning out of the present, you’re zoning out of what’s happening around you...at the same time really, how kind of valuable are those connections?” (PP)

This was contrasted in the primary group by one parent whose child connects meaningfully whilst playing online with her grandparents.

Theme 2: Time Spent Online

Parents were asked questions around how long their child spent online and how much time they felt their child spent in relation to others their age. As anticipated, responses varied depending on the age of the children and the nature of the online activities. Post-primary parents referred to opportunities for their child to be online as they travelled to school and at school, in addition to the time they allowed them to be online at home:

“I would say [name of child] is on a lot from she gets on the school bus in the morning they’re recording themselves doing these TikTok dances and that runs right through to bedtime.” (PP)

Participants’ responses showed intentionality of thought but considerable variation in approach in the time they allowed their children to spend online. This ranged from “*I limit it to an hour a day...and it takes a lot of energy to do that*” (PP) to “*we don’t limit the use of the internet because I feel that when you put a control on something, then you’re making an example of it*” (P).

Parents were asked if they felt that the amount of time that their children spent online was the same as for others of their age. Whilst most felt that it was on a par, one respondent’s comments summed up the overall feelings of both groups, that whatever limitation they placed, other children spent more time and as a result put their children under pressure:

“When I lift the phone in the morning, at seven o’clock, there’s 26 snapchats, at seven o’clock already ... it’s already buzzing, it’s going from seven o’clock!” (PP)

Interestingly, two mothers of boys (PP) pointed to the mitigating effects of being involved in playing sports, as a natural encouragement to spending less time online. Furthermore, this interest also seemed to influence the choice of two of these boys to use their time online for catching up with sporting fixtures as opposed to being on social media. The primary parents also remarked that time spent together as a family or when friends came to visit reduced the desire to be online, at this stage in their lives at least.

The young people in their focus group discussions were asked if they spent more or less time online compared to their parents. Some of the young people claimed that it would be “*roughly the same*”. Others reported that their parents spent less time online and some of their online activity would be work related:

“*My mum uses it a lot for her job because she has to do stuff online. But like recreational, a lot less, maybe two hours.” (girl, MPP2)*

Some young people declared that parents spent more time online whilst telling them they were using their phone too often:

“*My mum complains a lot that I’m on my phone all the time. But meanwhile, if you look at her any free time in the day, she’s sitting scrolling on Facebook or Instagram, laughing her head off at everything she sees and I’m like, and you say I’m bad.” (girl, MPP2)*

This highlights the importance of parents modelling online behaviours to their children. Professional 7 also referred to parents as role models and how children will model their behaviour on what they see from their parents:

“*Children are initially learning from experience, i.e., watching parents/caregivers on their own phone scrolling or online socialising and therefore the children will want to be on the phone just like their adults.”*

Theme 3: Online Dangers

In response to questions around online dangers, several parents relayed experiences of their children coming to harm online, through what is able to be seen, often despite their careful precautions. One primary parent highlighted an incident on YouTube where inappropriate adult material suddenly appeared in the middle of a much-loved children’s programme. A second (post-primary) parent talked of their child sending an inappropriate picture, which required a lot of effort to rectify. Another post-primary parent shared what happened to their daughter which required intervention from the PSNI:

“*My 16-year-old, when she was 13, there was an issue on WhatsApp...one of the children’s phones it seems to have gotten hacked....and this person actually started video calling all the girls in the chat and showing themselves to the group. The police got involved and all of that...” (PP)*

Parents expressed concern regarding the nature of the information available to children who are not ready for it:

“ “She’s ten, she doesn’t understand what she puts out there.” (P)

“ “The amount of information out there is vast, and it’s so much, and they don’t have that filter, they don’t know what they are reading...and it’s just so big that this to me is scary.” (PP)

“ “It’s, it’s, it’s terrifying.” (P)

The permanency of what has been seen or experienced was expressed as a major concern for many of the parents in the focus groups:

“ “It’s that irreversible nature of it is my biggest concern.” (P)

“ “They cannot unsee it, or unknow what they’ve been told.” (P)

“ “She doesn’t understand that once it’s there, it’s there for ever.” (P)

“ “Once it’s out there, once it’s seen, once it’s done, you can’t undo it.” (P)

“ “If my child sees something that’s not appropriate, they can’t erase that from them as much as you can delete it from the screen. They can’t delete it from their mind.” (P)

A concern for several parents was cyberbullying and they identified that this could arise for various reasons, including their child’s physical appearance, and especially after a picture or video has been shared:

“ “.. the bullying is the one that really scares me. Obviously, my children are all mixed race and I have a daughter that is blonde and blue eyes. And because she has curly hair, you know, it seems to, she seems to get it on both sides. So that bullying aspect of it scares me.” (PP)

“ “.... somebody’s just recorded this poor fella doing this or somebody, you know, and I don’t, that’s, that’s scary for me, sort of having things recorded, having things photographed, having it all shared around, which obviously can lead to all the cyberbullying and, and so many other instances, I mean, that just for me, it’s completely frightening.” (PP)

Reporting Online Incidents to Parents

The younger children discussed that telling parents was how they would deal with an online incident. Most participants in the Special School focus group responded that they would report to their parents.

For some young people, it would depend on the online incident. When discussing the sexting scenarios, embarrassment appeared to be a deterrent in reporting to parents:

 "She can tell her parents, her parents can help that is if she wants to tell her parents because some teenagers wouldn't want to in this situation." (boy, LGBTQI+)

 "Some teenagers are just like, oh, this involves me being naked. I'd rather not bring my parents into it." (girl, LGBTQI+)

Theme 4: Parental Anxiety Caused by an Unwelcome Presence in their Home

A fourth theme to emerge from the parental focus groups was the notion of the internet as an unwelcome presence in the family home resulting in a negative impact on the quality of relationships within the family. One parent stated:

 "They come home from school, but they bring those relationships home with them on their phone, at an age where historically they weren't able to, and they come home to that family time." (P)

The participants' interjections and nods during the following statement, highlighted the consensus of anxiety.

 "Like, it is that idea of inviting strangers into your, your home." (P)

Participants indicated how giving their children access to online provision is counter to their intuitive desire to keep their children safe:

 "...and that, nearly, safe space, that we're now exposing our children, if they have an ability to stay in contact with friends outside of school, that world is entering into our homes then and it can be quite hidden in the device." (P)

Another participant summed up this dichotomy of giving something so potentially harmful as a gift to their child stating:

 "if it was something else that was addictive, we would run a million miles from it, but it seems with technology that we have this 'But it can still be good, we're willing to take the risk'." (P)

It seems that while parents may wish not to expose their primary-aged child to technology (*"I would quite happily give up technology in a heartbeat"* (P)) there is a realisation that it cannot be avoided.

Furthermore, there was a sense of unhappiness, yet resignation and feeling responsible for the parenting choices in both groups of parents. *"I have to say I'm sort of feeling like a very bad mum here."* (PP) This was echoed in the primary group, *"okay, I sound like the worst."* (P) Some of this was around the confrontation that it brings:

 *"I'm trying to connect with her..., have a conversation...we're in a space, I'm here, you're here, let's use this opportunity... It's one of those things, you're fighting all the time."* (PP)

For some parents, there was an unspoken feeling that in denying their child, they would become out of step with other parents. One mum talked about putting the *Snapchat* app on her daughter's phone:

 *"It's the most horrible experience...and you know I wish I'd never put it on her phone... But I bowed to peer pressure... when you see what the kids can look at, it's just horrendous, you think I'm freely giving this to my child."* (P)

One parent quoted information that they had received during a *"keeping your child safe online"* information course and advised *"do not ban your child from everything, talk to your child because as soon as your child goes outside the gate, and wee Jimmy has a phone, your child will stand beside wee Jimmy and do everything that you said not to do."* (P)

Theme 5: Online Safety, Whose Responsibility?

Views of Parents

The consensus in both groups of parents was that online safety was the responsibility of several stakeholders: parents, schools and, ultimately, government. While the excellent work of schools in providing training for online safety was mentioned, parents in the post-primary school group expressed fears around their children being allowed to bring their phones to school and even being asked to use them during class for surveys or information retrieval:

 *"It's a mixed message, you know, because then the phones are on and they're sneaking, sneaking messages and snapchats to each other during class."* (PP)

The role of parent modelling and responsiveness was also highlighted: *"I think it's just about the balance for me...it's just about keeping the communication lines open and keeping talking and being aware of what is right and wrong."* (PP)

Collective responsibility was discussed and raised by a parent whose friends' like-minded rules for their children helped to reinforce good practice with her children. The issue of trust was threaded through both interviews:

 "We have a very good bond, but that's a bond we started when she was very little....so let's keep building this." (P)

Ultimately, there was a strong sense across both focus groups that despite the acknowledged benefits of technology, parents have serious reservations and fears for their children, and yet feel powerless to completely deny them access. Parents in these focus groups appear torn between the desire to facilitate their children's online access (as a means to fit in with their peer group) and a corresponding concern that they are exposing their children to online dangers. For some parents, there was a sense of exasperation and an appeal to government to step in and take more decisive action to limit children's online activity:

 "But to be honest, I hate technology. I wish that there was a law that said that children under the age of 16, couldn't have technology." (P)

 "That should be a government thing that they're stepping in and saying, we have to protect what the kids can see under 16 or under 11...then it's much easier for families... for the parents, much easier for the schools." (P)

Views of Children and Young People

The topic of responsibility for online safety was also discussed with the children and young people in their focus groups. They acknowledged the key role to be played by their parents in terms of online safety. The younger children described how their parents and sometimes grandparents told them not to share personal information online, while others reported that their parents would keep a check on their online activities:

 "My dad asks what things I buy online." (boy, MP2)

 "My dad has to check the game before I download it." (boy, MP2)

 Interviewer: "Does anyone or anything help make sure that you're safe when you're online?"

 Boy: Probably good parents. If it's something very dangerous they [parents] will probably call the police." (RTPS)

The young people acknowledged that various people spoke to them about staying safe online and it was more likely to be parents for younger age groups as the young people who attend the Special School explained:

“ Interviewer: *Do your parents talk to you about it at home? Does mummy and daddy ever tell you how to keep safe?*

“ Boy: No.

“ Boy: *It was mostly our teachers... and the school.*

“ Interviewer: *So, nobody's mummy or daddy?*

“ Boy: *Well, when we were all younger, yes.*

“ Boy: *When we started to know about social media stuff.*

“ Boy: *And now we are like in our teen years, so that's why we stop getting notifications from our parents about this safety.*

“ Boy: *My parents trust me so they're just happy with what I'm doing.*" (SSY)

The young people discussed the role of parents, and their suggestions for parental responsibilities ranged from checking phones, being stricter, and openly discussing their concerns about online risks. They also acknowledged that it is a balance of giving young people privacy whilst also being concerned:

“ Boy: *Parents could like check for your phone to see what you're doing. Like, what app activity you have. So, like, Snapchat, I think you have to be 15 to use it. So, if your child has Snapchat, and you know they're lying about their age to other people and they're pretending to be someone they're not.*

“ Interviewer: *Do you think children would like that?*

“ Everyone: No!

“ Boy: *Parents need to give them their own privacy if you know what I mean.*

“ Interviewer: *It's a balance, isn't it?*

“ Boy: *Yeah, there is a wee balance.*

“ Girl: *Yeah, they need to be a bit more stricter.*

“Boy: And it depends on the way the parent approaches their child. So, it all matters on how the child thinks about what the parent is trying to do. So, if the parent is afraid for the child's safety, he should tell the child and show them their emotions, what they're feeling and what they're thinking. Not make the child feel like they have to do something because then the child will just want to do the opposite.” (MPP1)

In response to the sexting scenarios used as a stimulus for group discussion, one of the boys in particular spoke with considerable maturity about the role of parents in instilling moral values in their children, which would serve them well in such circumstances:

“*It's also like how you're brought up, if you know what I mean? Like, if you're brought up right, as a boy, you wouldn't ask for anything off a girl, and I think that's, I never would, ever, because that's what you're brought up to do, that's what your parents have said to you. But just some people haven't been said that, they don't know if it's right or wrong.*” (boy, MPP1)

Views of Teachers

Parental responsibility was further highlighted by the teachers in their focus group interviews. One teacher discussed that some pupils are playing online games at night resulting in them coming into school the next day having had little or no sleep. The suggestion was made that parental responsibility is crucial:

“*Boys, with like online gaming and things I would be saying are spending an awful lot of time, I had a wee boy there just last week and I said, 'Why are you so tired?' and he said because literally he was up, I don't even think he had slept, he'd been playing some online games. It all comes down to parental control. You know, some parents when you phone are keeping a really good eye on how much that they're using and removing the phone from them at night, whereas other parents have no idea how long they're on for.”* (teacher, post-primary)

Views of Professionals

When considering the main issues relating to the online activity of children and young people, one of the professionals also raised concerns about children from younger ages accessing devices without supervision:

“*This is not to judge parents as they themselves are under increasing societal and financial pressures. The lack of supervision could be seen as negligent and/or as a consequence of poor parental support/health where the parent is 'happy' to get 5 minutes' peace. The lack of supervision has also not been overseen as there is often an assumption that the children are doing something educational as a result of Covid implementation procedures in education.”* (Professional 7)

Theme 6: Online safety training and education

Parents reported a change in their online habits in response to their child's online activities and acknowledged how this can be challenging because of limited knowledge and understanding. They talked about adding themselves onto sites, which otherwise would have had no interest for them, to enable them to understand what their child was doing and talking about. The difficulty of the time needed to do this was not just in terms of monitoring their child's activity, but in having to learn things and in feeling insecure and exposed as they did so:

“I can go with my limited knowledge, but they can be clever.” (P)

“It’s also not second nature to us, as we were born into an era when there wasn’t that technology.” (P).

One parent admitted to feeling, “*ill-equipped in some ways, with time and the understanding,*” adding something raised in both groups “*because it changes so quickly*” (PP). Parents in the primary group supported the view of one parent who seemed to sum up their frustrations in stating:

“I wish that I could clone their devices. Can I? Like?” (P)

“What’s real time you know and what they can access because they can… delete things.” (P)

The professionals were asked in their survey what changes are required to better equip children and young people to engage safely when online. Responses included informal training for parents (and other adults) with a focus on the benefits of online technology along with realistic information about online risks:

“Parents need educated around online safety and how to best talk to their children about concerns as well as what measures can be put in place to protect children and young people. They need reassured that young people being online can be a positive thing but only if it’s done with awareness of risks and how to maintain safety.” (Professional 5)

“More support and educative work with parents/young people around relationship education and sexuality which would include technology-based behaviours. Providing online awareness raising to adults and caregivers, not as a formal training but in a conversational approach may increase their awareness of things to watch out for, in particular, regarding online bullying or abuse.” (Professional 7)

“Children and parents need to be informed on the positive use of online activities but also provided with realistic information about the risks that present. This should be focused at growing trends such as the persistence of bullying and the impact and how to manage that.” (Professional 10)

Professional 13 also highlighted the importance of parental training but also the importance of involving young people in programme design to ensure such courses are relevant and realistic:

"I would advocate for updated online safety training, that is designed with input from young people to ensure that all risks, and the prevalence of those risks are realised. This training should be provided to all parents, and any professional working with children. It is vital that the information is updated regularly to adapt to the advances within technology."

The issue of sharenting (where parents publish potentially sensitive content about their children online without their consent) was identified by Professional 3 as an area that needs to be included in training for parents:

"Issues like sharenting need to be addressed – children no longer have any privacy and have their information shared online often from pre-birth putting them at increased risk."

The teachers in their interviews discussed the need for and importance of parent online safety training events. However, one of the teachers expressed their frustration at the apparent lack of parental interest for online and face-to-face online safety education events run by an expert:

"One of the things with the parents evening is we really struggled with engagement. We tried both in-person nights with the professional coming in from outside and online and the turnout was really, really poor and the in-person one, despite a lot of, you know, promotion by us and text messaging home and everything else, two parents turned up, which is a disgrace in a school of nearly 800 pupils. It's really frustrating." (Vice-principal, post-primary)

Conclusion

This spotlight report on the experiences and perspectives of parents, based on the data from the broader research study entitled '*Growing up online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland- an Evidence Report*' (Purdy et al., 2023) highlights important areas for future guidance, training, research and policy making.

Whilst acknowledging that being online brings many benefits to their children, the parents who took part in the focus group interviews clearly voiced their sense of fear and frequently described the issue of their children's screen time as a locus of conflict or a 'battlefield' (Livingstone, 2021, p.91) within their homes with a very real sense that, for the most part, they were not winning the battle. Indeed, the feeling of a loss of agency was frequently articulated. Despite being the ones who had consented to and provided the technology, deep regret was unanimously admitted that they had unwittingly 'invited strangers' into the 'safe space' of the family home. Parents did not shy away from blaming themselves however, and some of them, by way of making up, were trying to keep up with what their children were doing. Others claimed to have given up.

Some of what was discussed was no different from age old battles between parents and children who want to become more independent as they grow up and fit in with their friends. Indeed, Livingstone (2021) refers to this current battle as the latest manifestation of age-old anxieties raised in relation to any technological change, dating back as far as Plato's fear that writing would erase memory or more recent concerns that children were becoming more aggressive as a result of watching too much television.

More positively, parents talked about having to trust their children and keep constantly working on their relationship with them. This echoes the views expressed by the young people in Cassidy et al.'s research among young people in Canada (Cassidy et al., 2018) who recommended that parents invest in positive relationships with their children rather than focusing solely on restrictions, and is further confirmed by Doty et al. (2018) in their emphasis on strong parent-child relationships alongside guidance and information around online safety.

It should be noted that the sample size of parental views in this study is small and limited in its scope, therefore further studies are needed to capture more of this cohort of interested parents. Furthermore, questions remain as to how to measure how many do not engage at all with what their children are doing online and to give voice to their feelings and experiences.

A key finding of this report is however the disconnect between, on the one hand, the views expressed by the children and young people in their survey responses, and, on the other, the views expressed by the small group of self-selecting parents who volunteered for the focus group interviews. Survey findings highlight that very few young people had the perception that their parents were 'very interested' in their online activities, and yet the parents who were interviewed very clearly expressed strong feelings and were very concerned indeed.

The issue of gender is also highly significant. In the online survey, girls were more likely to report higher levels of parental interest than boys, especially among the younger cohort (aged 8-13 years), and girls were also more likely than boys to report that their parents felt they were spending too much time online. Given the rise in incidence of the sharing of self-generated indecent images (or 'sexting') and the higher victimisation among girls in terms of exposure to and encouragement to share such images (see Purdy et al., 2023), it is perhaps understandable and to be expected that parents would take a keener interest in their daughters' online activities, but it also raises the concern that boys have been 'left to their own devices' to a large extent, where there is an urgent need for greater parental support, guidance and monitoring to help prevent such behaviours.

While the children and young people reported low levels of parental interest in their online activities, nonetheless it is significant that they consistently felt that parents in general were most responsible for the safety of young people online, ahead of schools, government and social media companies. This is a view shared by the professionals and teachers, whereas parents saw safety messaging as only partly their responsibility, along with schools. Some even felt that government was to blame for not sanctioning the use of devices in schools.

There is also evidence from this study that some parents have not always set the right example as digital role models, using devices as convenient 'babysitters' to entertain and pacify young children, setting unhelpful examples through their own excessive screen time usage, and 'sharenting' information and images of their children on social media platforms (as early as ante-natal scans) without their informed consent. The current study paints a picture of parents who realise their shortcomings, but who feel isolated, ill-informed and ill-equipped to navigate the challenges posed by their children's online activities.

Children, conversely, welcome parental interest and open discussion, while still respecting their desire for growing independence and connectivity with their friends. Children expressed a preference for informal dialogue rather than lectures or strict rule-making. Pupils who described being challenged for being on their devices too long, felt that it was an accusation that could be levelled just as much at their parents. It is clear that if parents genuinely want their children to establish and maintain healthy boundaries around device usage, then they must set the example first themselves. One of the parents spoke from a professional perspective of working with young mums whose babies she believed were not receiving those 'serve and return' opportunities, so vital for their early social and language development. There is a paucity of research into appropriate adult usage and clear messaging for adults into the effects of their usage on their children (Beamish et al., 2019). This gap urgently needs filled.

Perhaps the most disturbing finding of this Spotlight Report is that parents who have voiced their fears and described very clearly how interested they are in their child's online activity, often fail to avail of opportunities to become more informed and connected to their children when offered the opportunity to do so. Teaching professionals reported very little engagement with parent evenings and training events, both in-person and online.

Further research is needed to explore how best to engage parents and to equip them with the knowledge and tools they clearly need to support their children.

Technology such as smartphones and social media has undoubtedly added a new challenge to parenthood (Auxier et al., 2020). However, many of the challenges it raises can be identified and addressed within the wider context of positive parenting: setting boundaries, keeping communication lines open and modelling appropriate behaviours. Furthermore, this report highlights the need for prevention and intervention strategies that focus on developing and strengthening parent-child relationships while also providing realistic, up-to-date and age-appropriate guidance and information to help ensure our children and young people remain safe and happy online (Doty et al., 2018).

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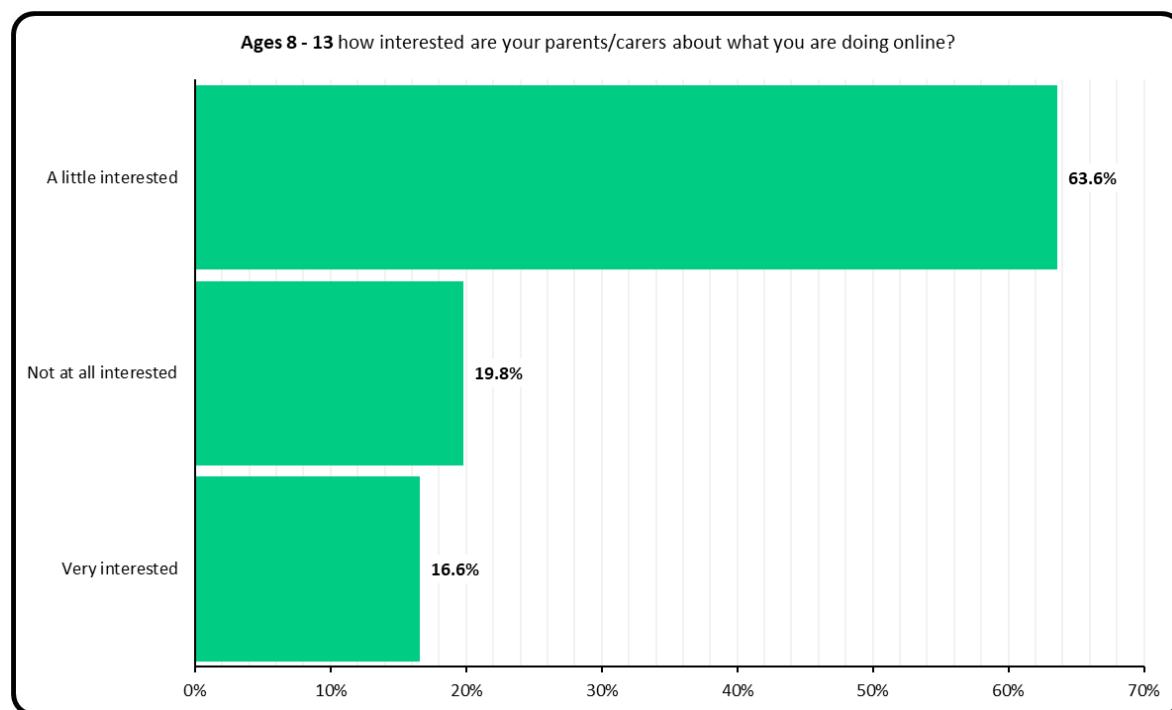
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Appendix 1

(Ages 8-13) How interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?

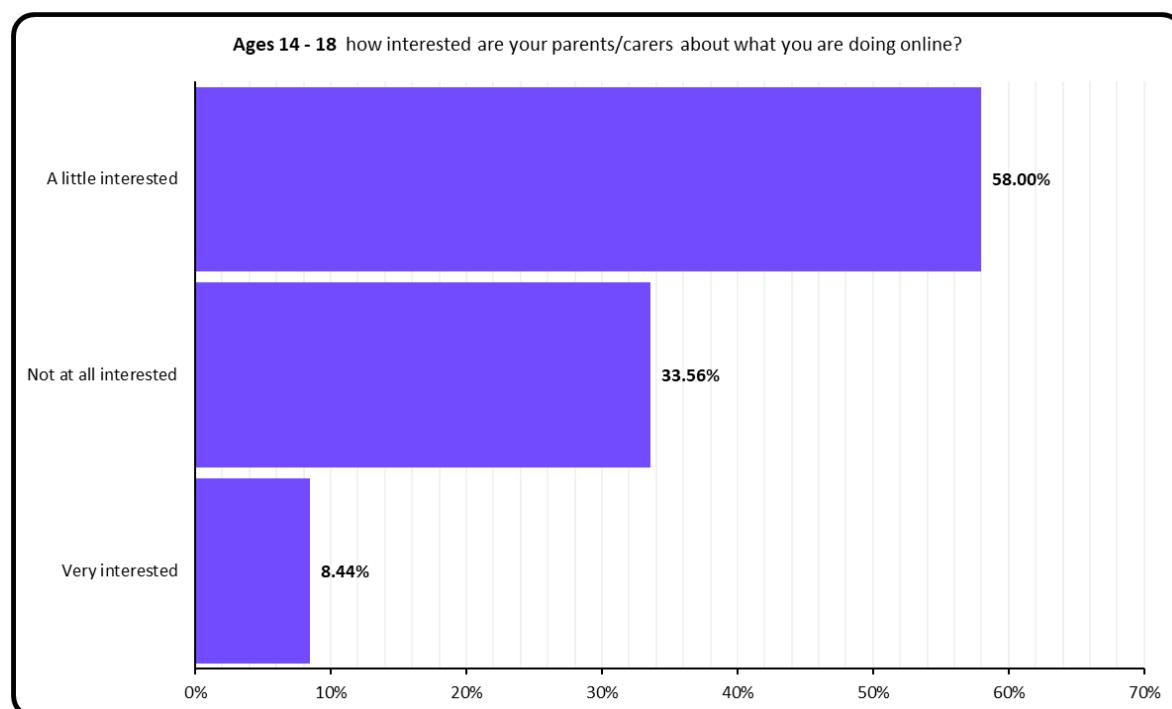
Ages 8-13 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Very interested	16.60%	n = 635
Not at all interested	19.79%	n = 757
A little interested	63.62%	n = 2434
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826



Appendix 2

(Ages 14-18) How interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?

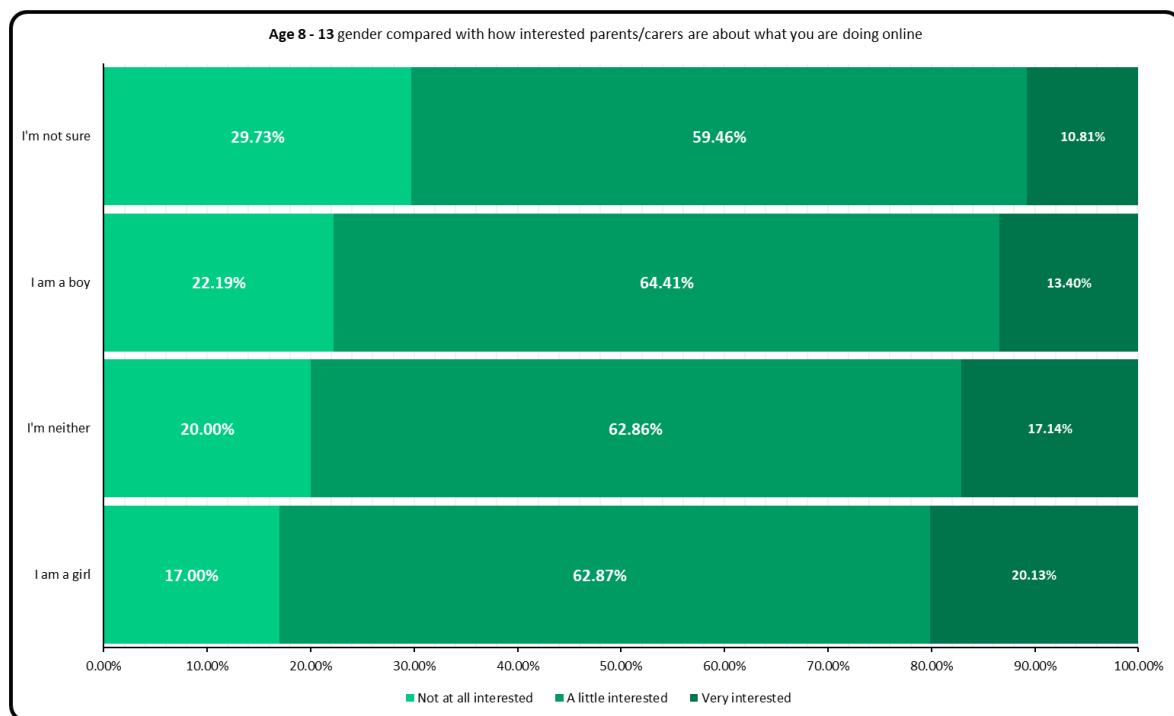
Ages 14-18 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Very interested	8.44%	n = 224
Not at all interested	33.56%	n = 891
A little interested	58.00%	n = 1540
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655



Appendix 3

(Ages 8-13) Gender compared with how interested parents/carers are about what you are doing online.

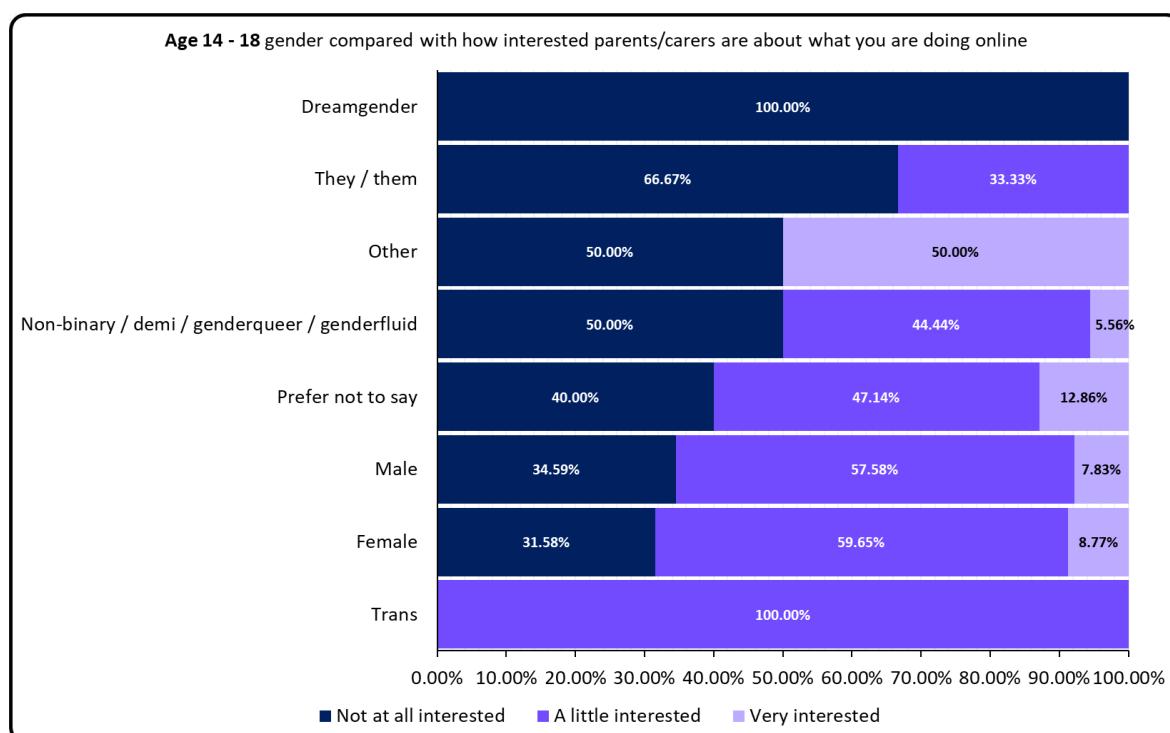
Ages 8-13 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?				
Gender	Not at all interested	A little interested	Very interested	Grand Total
I am a girl	17.00% (n=309)	62.87% (n=1143)	20.13% (n=366)	100.00% (n=1818)
I'm neither	20.00% (n=7)	62.86% (n=22)	17.14% (n=6)	100.00% (n=35)
I am a boy	22.19% (n=429)	64.41% (n=1245)	13.40% (n=259)	100.00% (n=1933)
I'm not sure	29.73% (n=11)	59.46% (n=22)	10.81% (n=4)	100.00% (n=37)
Grand Total	19.78% (n=756)	63.61% (n=2432)	16.61% (n=635)	100.00% (n=3823)



Appendix 4

(Ages 14–18) Gender compared with how interested parents/carers are about what you are doing online.

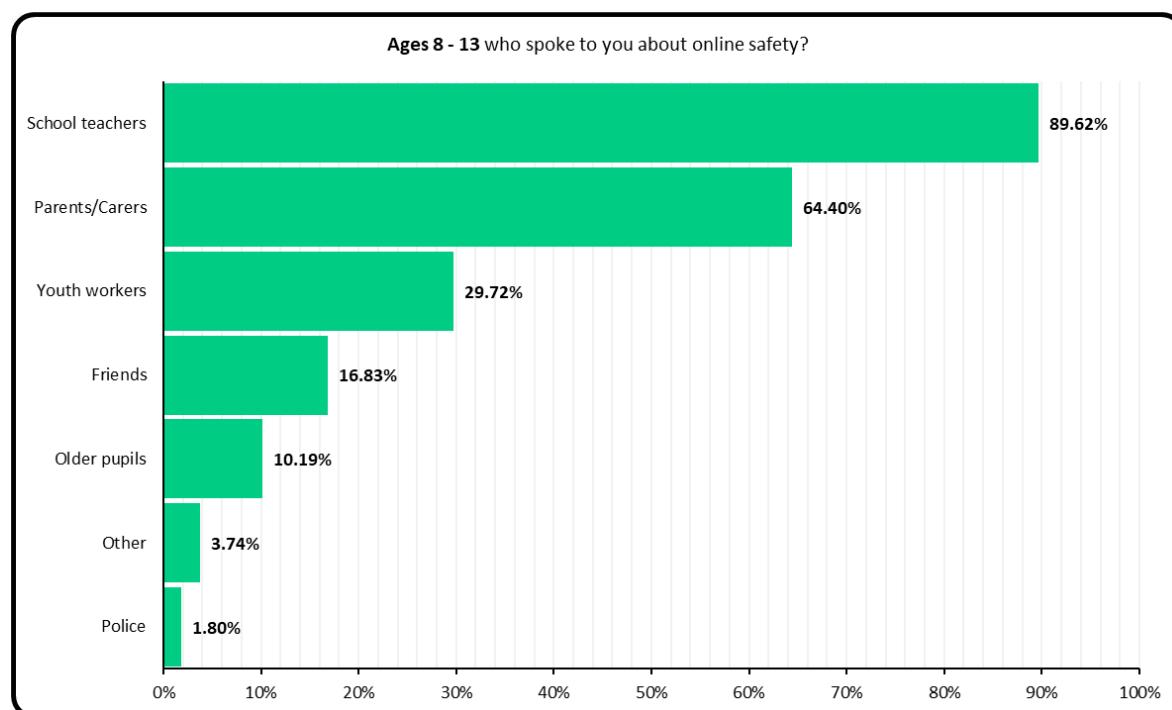
Ages 14–18 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?				
Gender	Not at all interested	A little interested	Very interested	Grand Total
Trans	0.00% (n=0)	100.00% (n=2)	0.00% (n=0)	100.00% (n=2)
Female	31.58% (n=378)	59.65% (n=714)	8.77% (n=105)	100.00% (n=1197)
Male	34.59% (n=468)	57.58% (n=779)	7.83% (n=106)	100.00% (n=1353)
Prefer not to say	40.00% (n=28)	47.14% (n=33)	12.86% (n=9)	100.00% (n=70)
Non-binary/demi/ genderqueer/genderfluid	50.00% (n=9)	44.44% (n=8)	5.56% (n=1)	100.00% (n=18)
Other	50.00% (n=2)	0.00% (n=0)	50.00% (n=2)	100.00% (n=4)
They/them	66.67% (n=2)	33.33% (n=1)	0.00% (n=0)	100.00% (n=3)
Dreamgender	100.00% (n=1)	0.00% (n=0)	0.00% (n=0)	100.00% (n=1)
Grand Total	33.53% (n=888)	58.04% (n=1537)	8.42% (n=223)	100.00% (n=2648)



Appendix 5

(Ages 8-13) Who spoke to you about online safety?

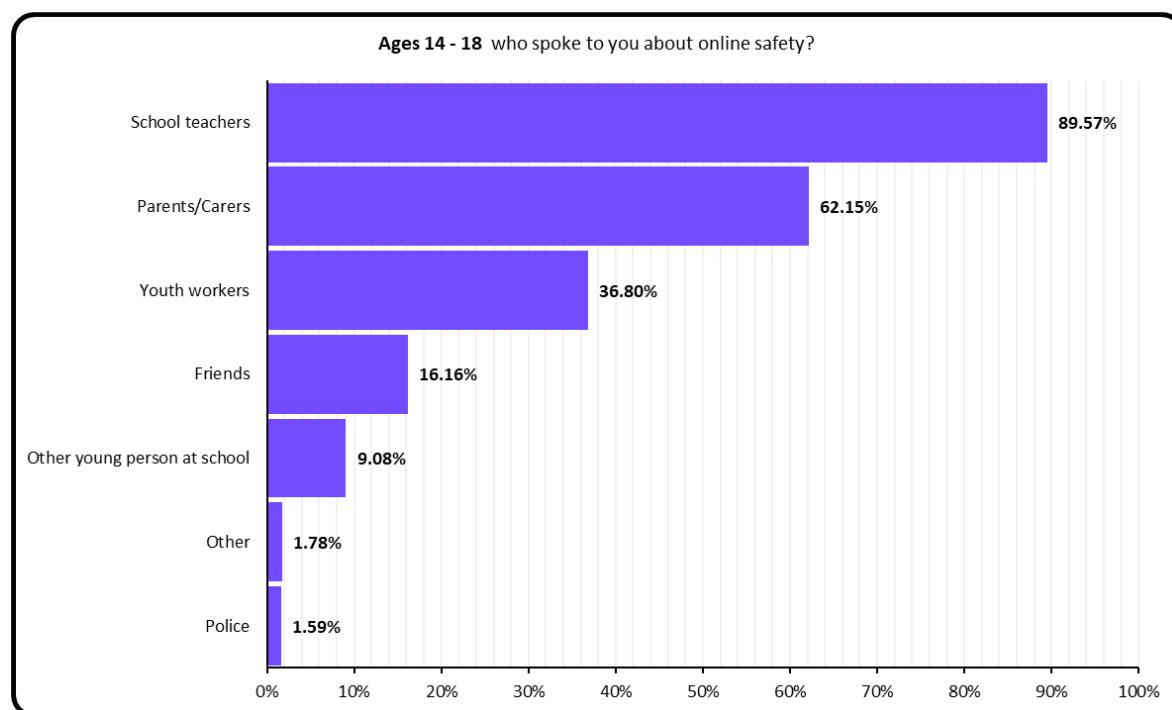
Ages 8-13 who spoke to you about online safety?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Police	1.80%	n=69
Other	3.74%	n=143
Older pupils	10.19%	n=390
Friends	16.83%	n=644
Youth workers	29.72%	n=1137
Parents/Carers	64.40%	n=2464
School teachers	89.62%	n=3429



Appendix 6

(Ages 14-18) Who spoke to you about online safety?

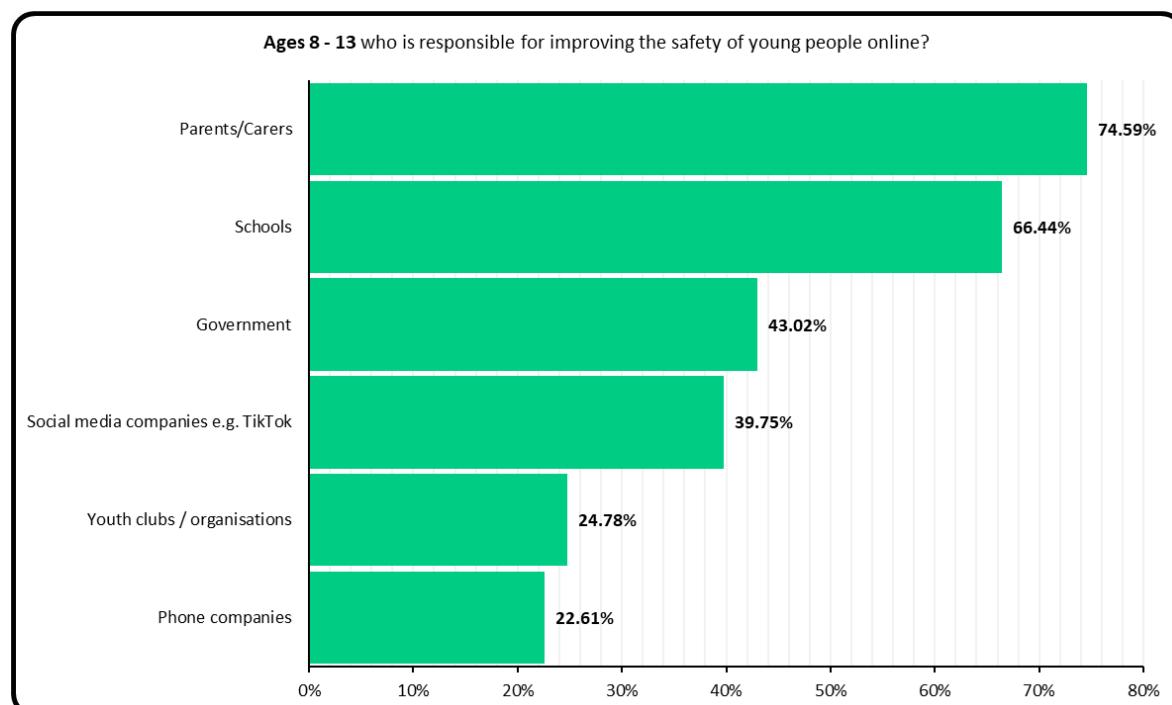
Ages 14 - 18 who spoke to you about online safety?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Police	1.59%	n=42
Other	1.78%	n=47
Other young person at school	9.08%	n=241
Friends	16.16%	n=429
Youth workers	36.80%	n=977
Parents/Carers	62.15%	n=1650
School teachers	89.57%	n=2378



Appendix 7

(Ages 8-13) Who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?

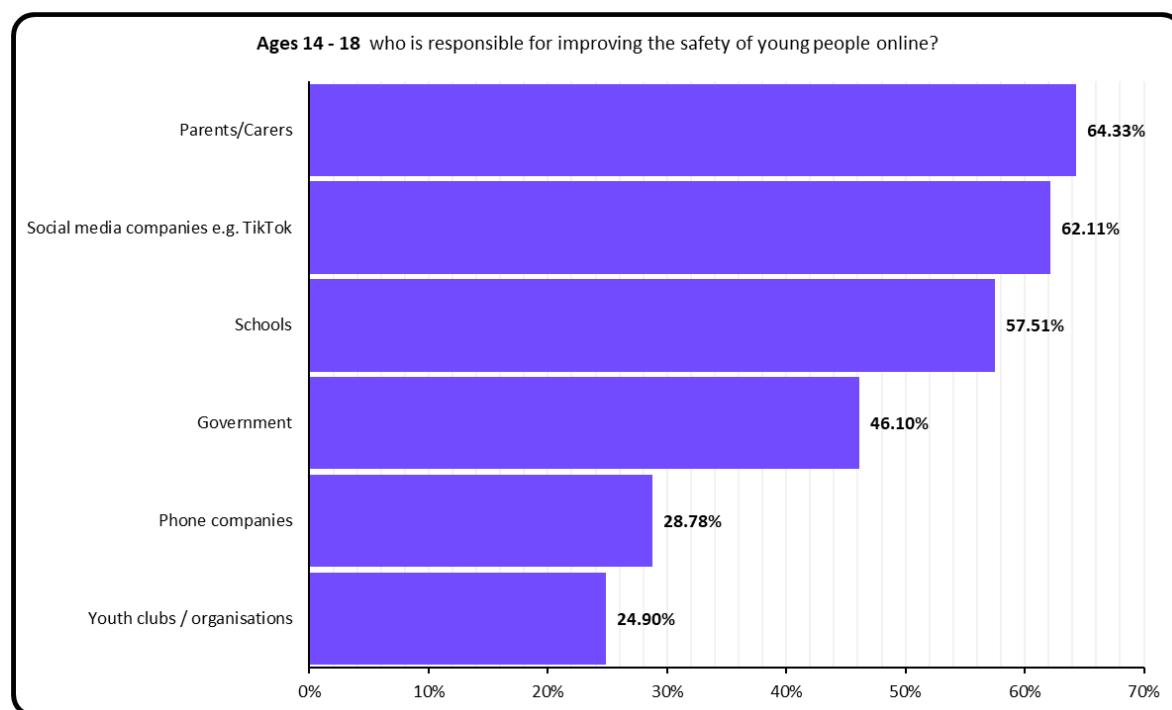
Ages 8 - 13 who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Phone companies	22.61%	n=865
Youth clubs/organisations	24.78%	n=948
Social media companies e.g., TikTok	39.75%	n=1521
Government	43.02%	n=1646
Schools	66.44%	n=2542
Parents/Carers	74.59%	n=2854



Appendix 8

(Ages 14-18) Who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?

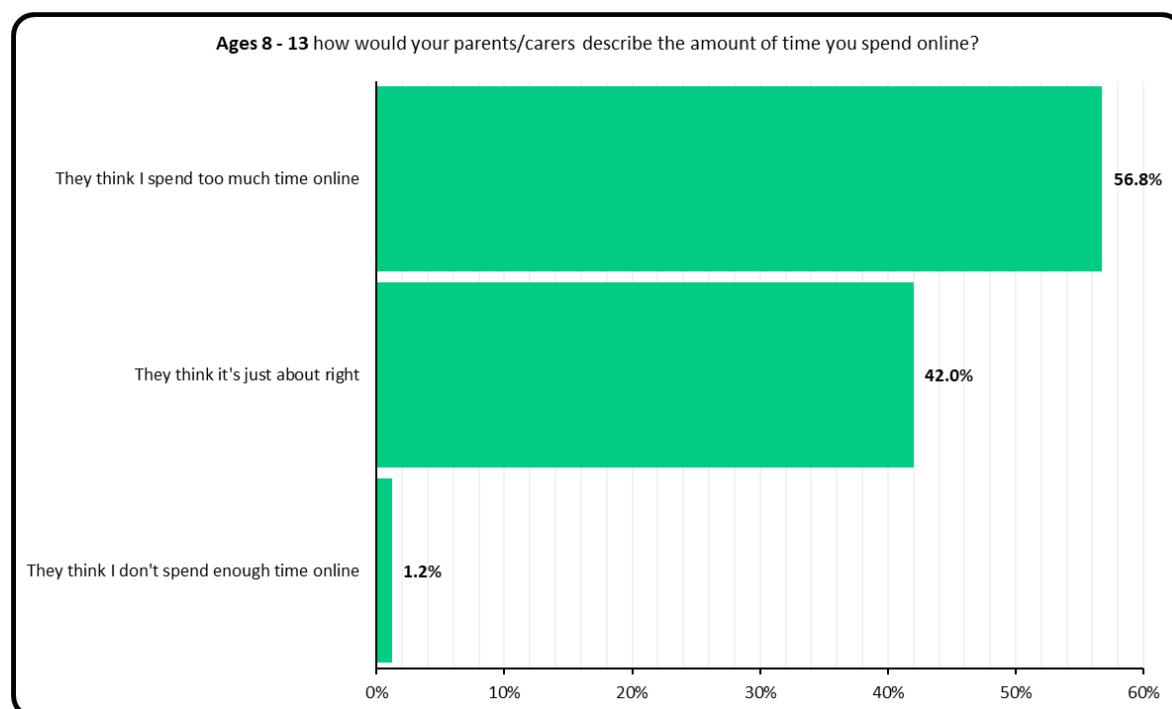
Ages 14 – 18 who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Youth clubs/organisations	24.90%	n=661
Phone companies	28.78%	n=764
Government	46.10%	n=1224
Schools	57.51%	n=1527
Social media companies e.g., TikTok	62.11%	n=1649
Parents/Carers	64.33%	n=1708



Appendix 9

(Ages 8-13) How would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?

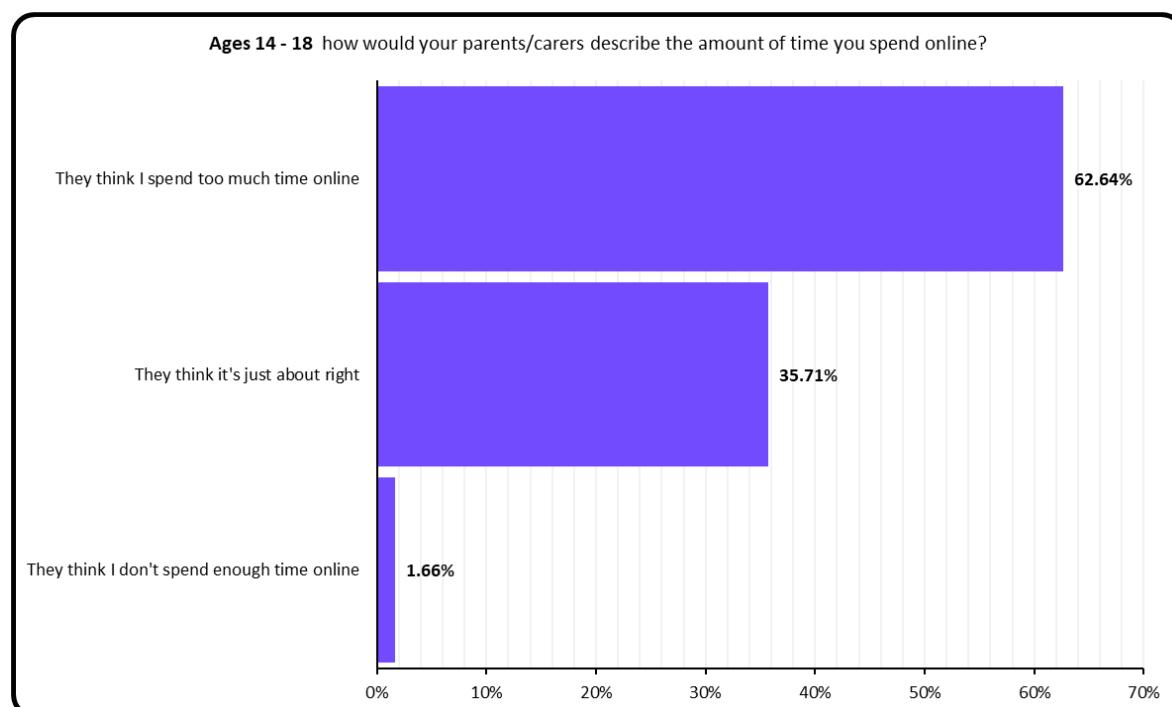
Ages 8 - 13 how would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
They think I don't spend enough time online	1.20%	n = 46
They think it's just about right	42.03%	n = 1608
They think I spend too much time online	56.77%	n = 2172
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826



Appendix 10

(Ages 14-18) How would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?

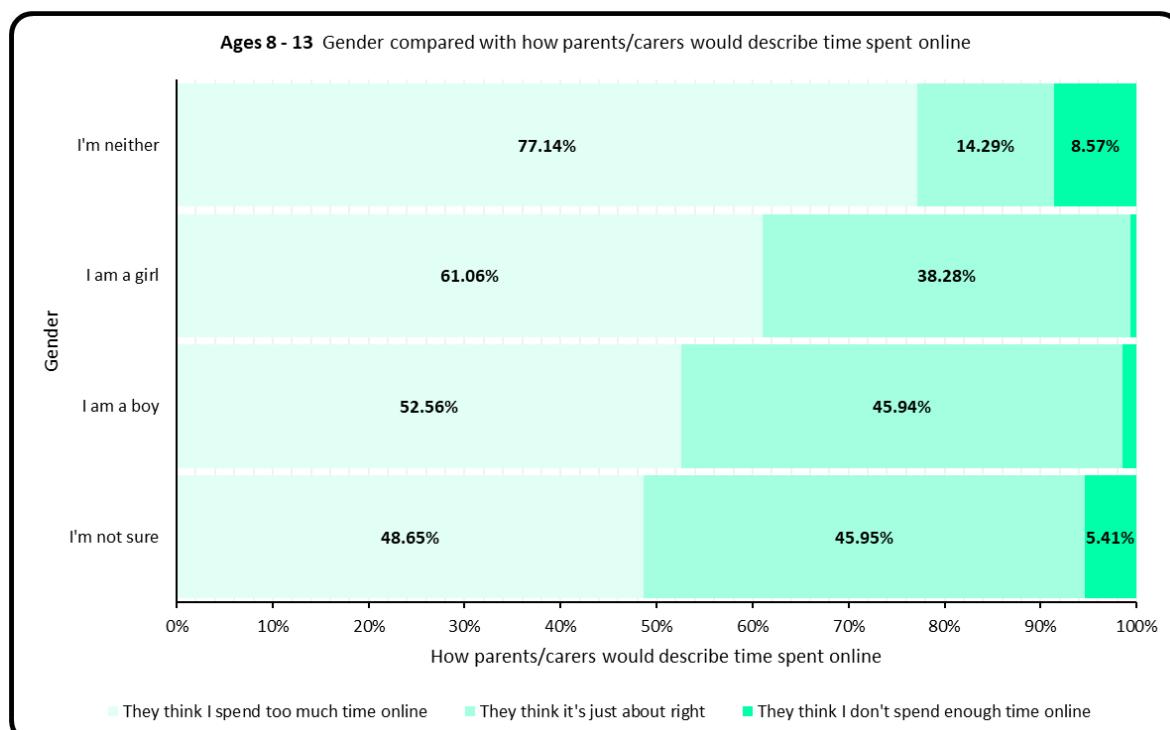
Ages 14 - 18 how would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
They think I don't spend enough time online	1.66%	n = 44
They think it's just about right	35.71%	n = 948
They think I spend too much time online	62.64%	n = 1663
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655



Appendix 11

(Ages 8-13) Gender compared with how parents/carers would describe time spent online.

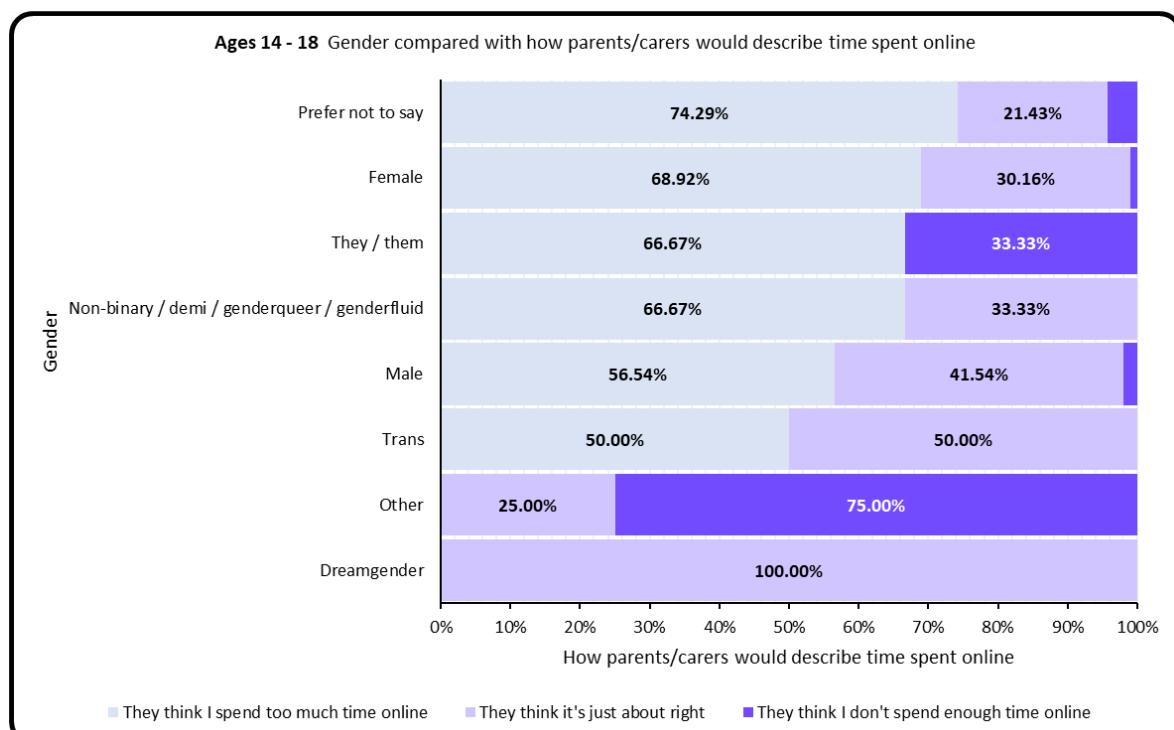
Age 8 - 13 How would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?				
Gender	They think I spend too much time online	They think it's just about right	They think I don't spend enough time online	Grand Total
I'm not sure	48.65% (n=18)	45.95% (n=17)	5.41% (n=2)	100.00% (n=37)
I am a boy	52.56% (n=1016)	45.94% (n=888)	1.50% (n=29)	100.00% (n=1933)
I am a girl	61.06% (n=1110)	38.28% (n=696)	0.66% (n=12)	100.00% (n=1818)
I'm neither	77.14% (n=27)	14.29% (n=5)	8.57% (n=3)	100.00% (n=35)
Grand Total	56.79% (n=2171)	42.01% (n=1606)	1.20% (n=46)	100.00% (n=3823)



Appendix 12

(Ages 14-18) Gender compared with how parents/carers would describe time spent online.

Age 14 - 18 How would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?				
Gender	They think I spend too much time online	They think it's just about right	They think I don't spend enough time online	Grand Total
Dreamgender	0.00% (n=0)	100.00% (n=1)	0.00% (n=0)	100.00% (n=1)
Other	0.00% (n=0)	25.00% (n=1)	75.00% (n=3)	100.00% (n=4)
Trans	50.00% (n=1)	50.00% (n=1)	0.00% (n=0)	100.00% (n=2)
Male	56.54% (n=765)	41.54% (n=562)	1.92% (n=26)	100.00% (n=1353)
Non-binary/demi/ genderqueer/ genderfluid	66.67% (n=12)	33.33% (n=6)	0.00% (n=0)	100.00% (n=18)
They/them	66.67% (n=2)	0.00% (n=0)	33.33% (n=1)	100.00% (n=3)
Female	68.92% (n=825)	30.16% (n=361)	0.92% (n=11)	100.00% (n=1197)
Prefer not to say	74.29% (n=52)	21.43% (n=15)	4.29% (n=3)	100.00% (n=70)
Grand Total	62.58% (n=1657)	35.76% (n=947)	1.66% (n=44)	100.00% (n=2648)





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