

# Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report 2019



Making  
sense  
of media

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# Overview

This report provides evidence on media use, attitudes and understanding among children and young people aged 5-15, as well as about the media access and use of young children aged 3-4.

It also includes findings on parents' views about their children's media use, and how they monitor and limit it.

The report draws largely on *Ofcom's Children and Parents' Media Literacy Tracker* (2019 fieldwork April-July), which has been running since 2005, supported by our *Media Lives* research, our *News Consumption Survey*, and data from audience measurement body, BARB. It is intended to provide a comprehensive picture of children's media experiences in 2019 as a reference for industry, policymakers, academics and the general public. Details on the background and methodology can be found within the [annex accompanying this report](#).

The report forms part of our wider programme of work, Making Sense of Media, which aims to help improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of UK adults and children. We do this through cutting-edge research, and by bringing together organisations and individuals with expertise in media literacy to share ideas and to support their activities.

To find out more about our Making Sense of Media programme and for details on how to join our network, please go to <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/making-sense-of-media>.

## What we have found

### Connected children

- **Half of ten-year-olds now own their own smartphone.** Between the ages of nine and ten, smartphone ownership doubles - marking an important milestone in children's digital independence as they prepare for secondary school.
- **Use of smart speakers among children aged 5-15 has doubled over the last year.** This means that, for the first time, they're more widely used than radios.
- **More children watch video-on-demand (VoD) than watch live broadcast TV.** Viewing of VoD has doubled over the last five years. One in four children do not watch live broadcast TV at all.

## Popular platforms and online activities

- **YouTube remains a firm favourite among children.** 5- to 15-year-olds are more likely to pick YouTube as their platform of choice over on-demand services such as Netflix, or TV channels including the BBC and ITV.
- **Children's social media use is diversifying.** WhatsApp in particular has gained popularity over the past year, joining Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram as one of the top social media platforms used by children.
- **Newer platforms such as TikTok and Twitch are gaining popularity.** TikTok is used by 13% of 12- to 15-year olds – up from 8% in 2018 – while Twitch is used by 5%.
- **Girl gamers are on the increase.** Almost half of girls aged 5-15 now play games online – up from 39% in 2018.

## Online engagement and participation

- **Rise of the 'vlogger next door'.** While high-profile YouTube stars remain popular, children are now increasingly drawn to influencers who are often local to their area, or who have a particular shared interest – known as 'micro' or 'nano' influencers.
- **Elements of children's critical understanding have increased.** Awareness of vlogger endorsement and how the BBC is funded have both increased; while understanding of how search engines (such as Google) work and the ability to recognise advertising on these sites are both unchanged since 2018.
- **The 'Greta effect' and online social activism.** 2019 saw an increase in older children using social media to support causes or organisations, while one in ten signed an online petition of some sort.

## Staying safe online

- **Children are seeing more hateful online content than they used to, and several children in our Media Lives research reported seeing violent and other disturbing content online.** Half of 12-15s say they have seen something hateful about a particular group of people in the last year – up from a third in 2016. Four in ten took some form of action, but the majority ignored it.
- **Parents are also increasingly concerned about their child seeing self-harm related content online and some elements of online gaming.** Almost half of parents of 5-15s are concerned about their child seeing content which might encourage them to harm themselves, up from 39% in 2018. There have also been increases in the proportion of parents of 12-15s worried about in-game spending (from 40% to 47%) and game-related bullying (32% vs 39%).
- **Fewer parents feel that the benefits of their child being online outweigh the risks compared to five years ago.** Just over half of parents of 5-15s feel this (55%), compared to two-thirds (65%) in 2015. However, there are indications that more parents are talking to their child about online safety (85% of parents of 5-15s), than compared to 2018 (81%).

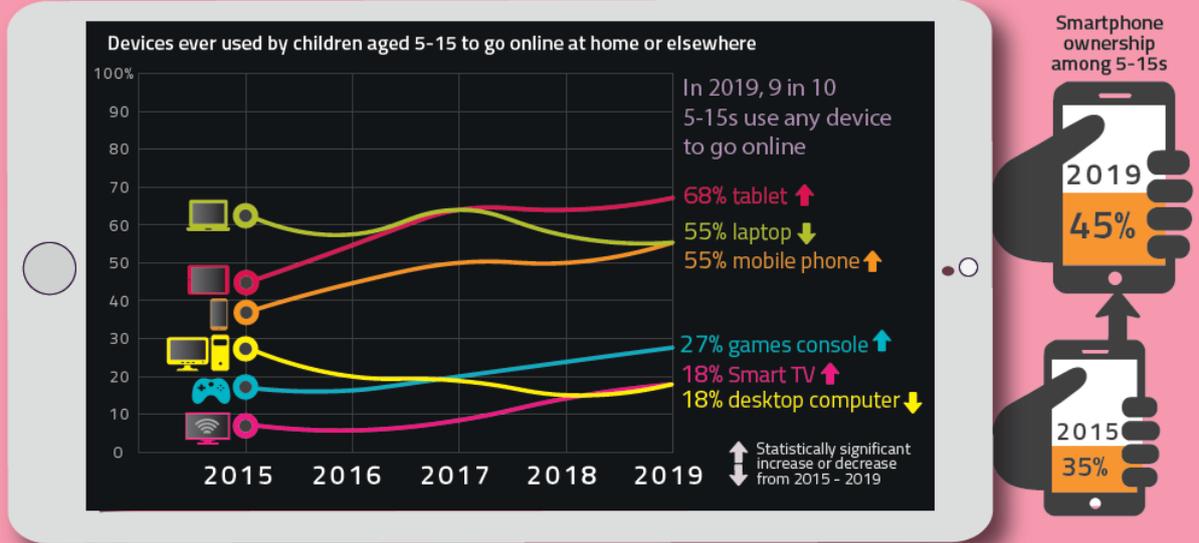
2015

# 5 YEARS AT A GLANCE (5-15s)

2019

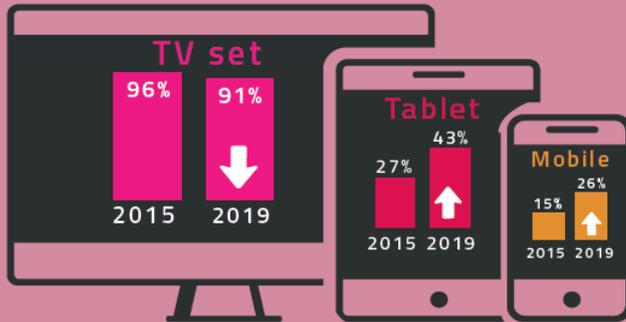
## DEVICE USE AND OWNERSHIP

Compared to 2015, children aged 5-15 are more likely to go online on a tablet, mobile, games console and Smart TV



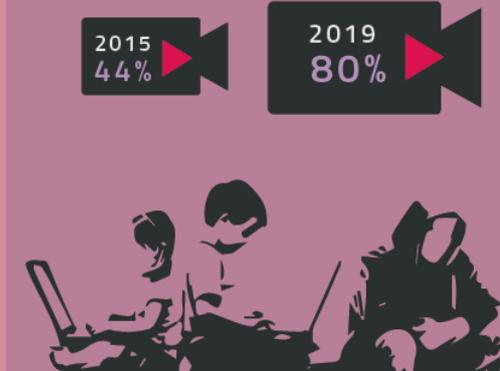
## CONTENT CONSUMPTION

Compared to 2015, 5-15s are more likely to watch TV programmes on mobile devices

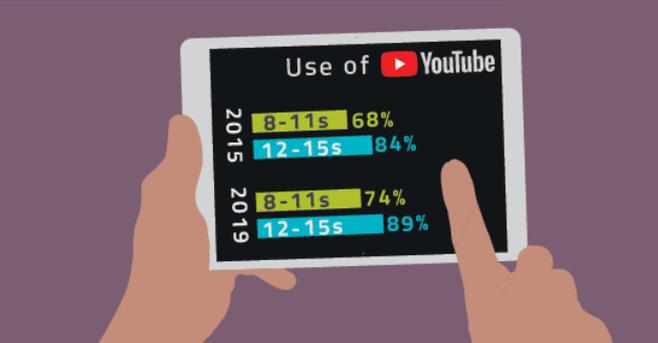


Devices ever used by children aged 5-15 to watch TV programmes

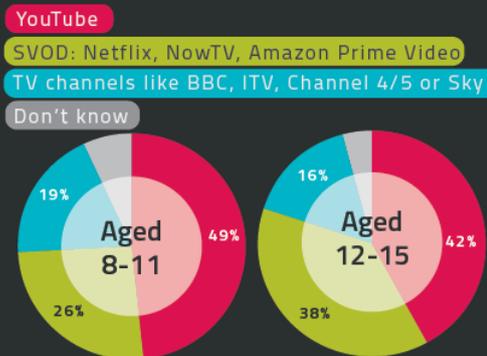
The proportion of 5-15s who watch video-on-demand nearly doubled between 2015 and 2019\*



There has been little change in the proportion of 8-15s who use YouTube between 2015 and 2019



...but in 2019, both 8-11s and 12-15s would prefer to watch YouTube over both SVoD and TV content

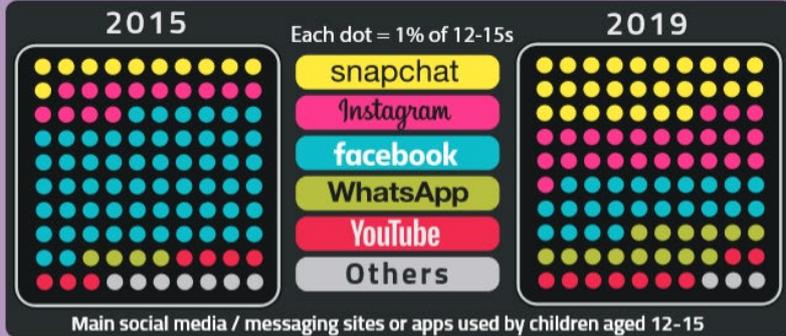
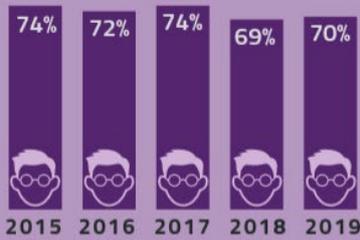


\* We believe this to be a genuine increase due to the magnitude of the change, but please note that the question wording changed between 2015 and 2019.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

However, the sites they consider their main social media / messaging site or app has changed

The proportion of 12-15s with a social media profile has remained stable



## GAMING

The proportion of 5-15s who play games online increased between 2015 and 2019



The proportion of parents of 5-15s who play games, who are concerned about the pressure to make in-game purchases, has doubled



## CRITICAL THINKING



Critical understanding of Google advertising among 8-11s and 12-15s hasn't changed between 2015 and 2019, but 12-15s are getting more savvy in recognising endorsement by vloggers

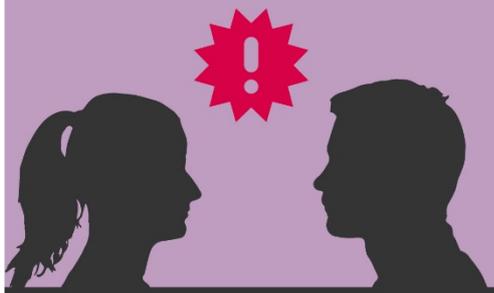


Proportion of 12-15s who think vloggers or influencers are being paid by the company or brand to say good things about products and brands

Proportion of 12-15s, who use search engines, who correctly identified the first four results from a Google search as adverts / paid to appear and recognised that this was the only reason these results appeared first.



## PARENTAL CONCERNS



Compared to 2015, parents of 5-15 year olds are less likely to think that the benefits of their child being online outweigh the risks



However, the majority (77%) of parents of 5-15s feel they know enough to help their child to stay safe online, the same as in 2015 (76%)\*

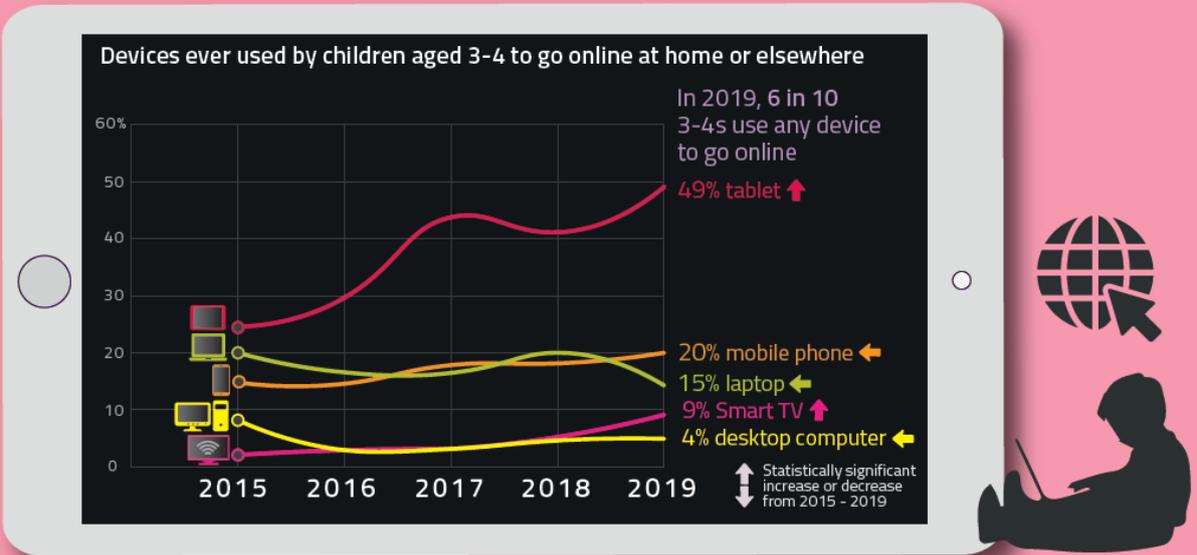
\*Question in 2015 asked whether parents feel they know enough to help their child manage online risks.

2015

# 5 YEARS AT A GLANCE (3-4s)

2019

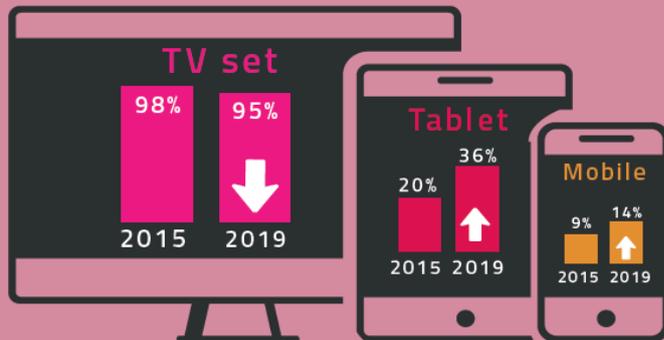
## DEVICE USE



## CONTENT CONSUMPTION

Compared to 2015 children aged 3-4 are more likely to watch TV programmes on mobile devices

The proportion of 3-4s who watch video-on-demand has more than doubled since 2015<sup>\*1</sup>



Devices ever used by children aged 3-4 to watch TV programmes



<sup>\*1</sup> We believe this to be a genuine increase due to the magnitude of the change, but please note that the question wording changed between 2015 and 2019.

<sup>\*2</sup> We didn't ask about use of YouTube among 3-4s in 2015, so 2016 is used for comparison instead.

## Media use by age in 2019: a snapshot

### 3-4 year olds

- ▶ 24% have their own tablet
- ▶ 20% use a smartphone to go online, and 49% use a tablet to go online
- ▶ 15% of tablet owners are allowed to take it to bed with them
- ▶ 11% use a smart speaker in the home
- ▶ 95% watch TV on a TV set, while 36% use a tablet, and 14% use a mobile phone to watch TV
- ▶ 98% watch TV programmes or films (on any device), for 12hrs 42mins a week
  - ▶ 75% watch live broadcast TV, and 65% watch video-on-demand content\*
  - ▶ 39% play games, for 4hrs 42mins a week
  - ▶ 17% play games online
  - ▶ 51% watch YouTube, for 8hrs 6mins a week
  - ▶ 3% watch YouTubers or vloggers
  - ▶ 1% of online users have a social media profile



### 5-7 year olds

- ▶ 5% have their own smartphone
- ▶ 37% have their own tablet
- ▶ 27% use a smartphone to go online, and 63% use a tablet to go online
- ▶ 14% of tablet owners are allowed to take it to bed with them
- ▶ 20% use a smart speaker in the home
- ▶ 96% watch TV on a TV set, while 40% use a tablet, and 12% use a mobile phone to watch TV
- ▶ 98% watch TV programmes or films (on any device), for 11hrs 6mins a week
  - ▶ 73% watch live broadcast TV, and 73% watch video-on-demand content\*
  - ▶ 62% play games, for 6hrs 18mins a week
  - ▶ 35% play games online
  - ▶ 64% watch YouTube, for 8hrs 36mins a week
  - ▶ 11% watch YouTubers or vloggers
  - ▶ 4% of online users have a social media profile



### 8-11 year olds

- ▶ 37% have their own smartphone
- ▶ 49% have their own tablet
- ▶ 49% use a smartphone to go online, and 72% use a tablet to go online
- ▶ 45% who own a mobile phone are allowed to take it to bed with them, while 32% of tablet owners are allowed to do this
- ▶ 25% use a smart speaker in the home
- ▶ 92% watch TV on a TV set, while 42% use a tablet, and 22% use a mobile phone to watch TV
- ▶ 99% watch TV programmes or films (on any device), for 10hrs 30mins a week
  - ▶ 74% watch live broadcast TV, and 78% watch video-on-demand content\*
  - ▶ 79% play games, for 9hrs 30mins a week
  - ▶ 66% play games online
  - ▶ 74% watch YouTube, for 10hrs a week
  - ▶ 27% watch YouTubers or vloggers
  - ▶ 21% of online users have a social media profile



### 12-15 year olds

- ▶ 83% have their own smartphone
- ▶ 59% have their own tablet
- ▶ 81% use a smartphone to go online, and 69% use a tablet to go online
- ▶ 74% who own a mobile phone are allowed to take it to bed with them, while 61% of tablet owners are allowed to do this
- ▶ 36% use a smart speaker in the home
- ▶ 88% watch TV on a TV set, while 46% use a tablet, and 41% use a mobile phone to watch TV
- ▶ 98% watch TV programmes or films (on any device), for 11hrs 48mins a week
  - ▶ 75% watch live broadcast TV, and 88% watch video-on-demand content\*
  - ▶ 81% play games, for 11hrs 36mins a week
  - ▶ 72% play games online
  - ▶ 89% watch YouTube, for 11hrs a week
  - ▶ 41% watch YouTubers or vloggers
  - ▶ 71% of online users have a social media profile



\* Video-on-demand content includes subscription services such as Netflix, broadcast catch-up services such as BBC iPlayer, recorded TV, websites like Vimeo and YouTube, blu-rays/DVDs, and renting online such as from Google Play Store

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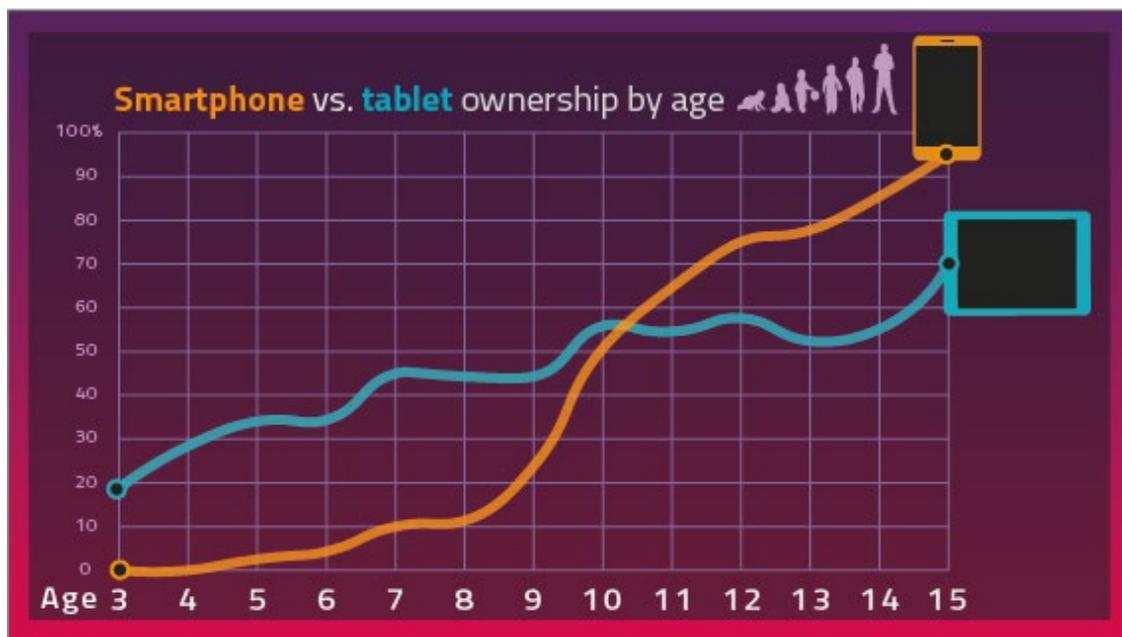
# Key findings

## The connected child

### Half of ten-year-olds own their own smartphone

The proportion of children who own their own smartphones or tablets increases with age. Up until they turn ten, children are more likely to own tablets. However, between the ages of nine and ten, smartphone ownership doubles from 23% to 50% - representing an important milestone in children's digital independence as they prepare to transition to secondary school. At age 15, almost all children own their own smartphones.

#### *Smartphone versus tablet ownership by age*



### Use of smart speakers has doubled since 2018 to overtake radios

Children's homes in 2019 are increasingly 'connected' and smart technology is becoming more commonplace.

The TV set<sup>1</sup> remains the dominant device in children's homes. Ninety-eight per cent of 5-15s use any type of TV set, consistent with last year, however use of smart TVs among children increased from 61% to 67% since 2018.

<sup>1</sup> Any type of television, whether a smart TV or a standard TV set.

Of all the devices children aged 5-15 use, however, the smart speaker has seen the largest increase in use – from 15% in 2018 to 27% in 2019. As such, smart speakers have now overtaken use of radios, which declined from 26% to 22% over the same period. Access to a radio, however, has remained stable, which suggests that this decrease in use is because children are actively choosing not to use this device.

The older the child, the more likely they are to use a smart speaker – more than a third (36%) of 12-15-year olds use one. Use also varies by socio-economic group; DE households are less likely than ABs to use one (21% vs. 40%).

Despite these significant increases in use, our qualitative Media Lives research shows that children do not appear to use smart speakers in any sort of structured way. Instead, they are using them for fun or on an ad-hoc basis. For example, Suzy, aged nine, said her mum barely used their Alexa speaker, and that she used it from time to time, either to “tell her jokes” or to help her with one-off questions she had during homework, such as checking the spelling of a word or times tables.

### **Tablets lead the way for going online**

As we first saw in 2018, the tablet continues to be the most popular device for going online, used by 68% of 5-15s in 2019 - up from 64% in 2018. This increase has been driven by the 8-11-year-old age group – from 66% to 72%.

The proportion of 5-15s using a mobile phone to go online has also increased since 2018 (from 50% to 55%), now matching laptop use which remained stable year on year (55%). As with tablets, the increase in mobile phone use to go online was driven by increased use among 8-11s (from 41% to 49%).

Children in DE homes are less likely than those in AB homes to use either a tablet to go online (59% vs. 72%) or a mobile phone to go online (49% vs. 62%).

#### ***Nations deep dive***

Use of smart technology among children varies by nation.

- Smart TVs are less likely to be used by 5-15s in Scotland (56%) than the UK average (67%) but are more likely to be used by those in Northern Ireland (77%).
- Children in Wales are more likely than those in the other UK nations to use a smart speaker (41%).
- Children in Wales are also more likely, along with those in Northern Ireland, to use a tablet to go online (79% and 75% compared to 67% in Scotland and 68% in England).

## Children’s evolving viewing landscape

### More children watch video-on-demand (VoD) than watch live broadcast TV

Eight in ten children aged 5-15 (80%) watch some form of VoD content – doubling from 44% in 2015.<sup>2</sup> By comparison, three-quarters of 5-15s watch live broadcast TV<sup>3</sup>, meaning a quarter do not watch live broadcast TV at all. Viewing of VoD content increases with age, ranging from 65% of 3-4s to 88% of 12-15s in 2019, while viewing of live TV is comparable among all age groups.<sup>4</sup>

While no *single* VoD provider<sup>5</sup> has surpassed viewing of live TV, children are more likely to watch subscription-video-on-demand (SVoD) services (used by 61% of 5-15s) than other types of VoD. Within this category, more children watch Netflix (used by 55% of 5-15s) than the other SVoD providers.

Reflecting these findings, over the past six years, our *Media Lives* study has shown an increasing consumption of VoD content in favour of live TV. This shift in consumption habits appears to be driven by the instant availability and maximum choice that VoD offers.<sup>6</sup> Summing this up, one of the younger participants in our *Media Lives* study said:

“I don’t really like the TV because you can’t pick what channels are on it”

*Suzy aged 9*

Figures from BARB (the UK TV audience measurement body) also show the overall decline in broadcast television viewing by children on the TV set.<sup>7</sup> Viewing among children aged 4-15 declined in 2018 by over an hour since 2017; and the first half (H1) of 2019 saw a continuation in this decline<sup>8</sup> – down from 8 hours 59 minutes a week of consolidated broadcast TV in 2018, to 7 hours 56 minutes in H1 2019.

Each UK nation saw a drop in the number of broadcast hours that children watched in the first half of 2019 compared to the first half of 2018, with Northern Ireland having the largest decrease.

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<sup>2</sup> We believe this to be a genuine increase due to the magnitude of the change, but please note that the question wording changed between 2015 and 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Trend data is not available for VoD vs. live TV due to a change in the question wording in the 2019 survey.

<sup>4</sup> Children’s viewing based on responses provided by parents

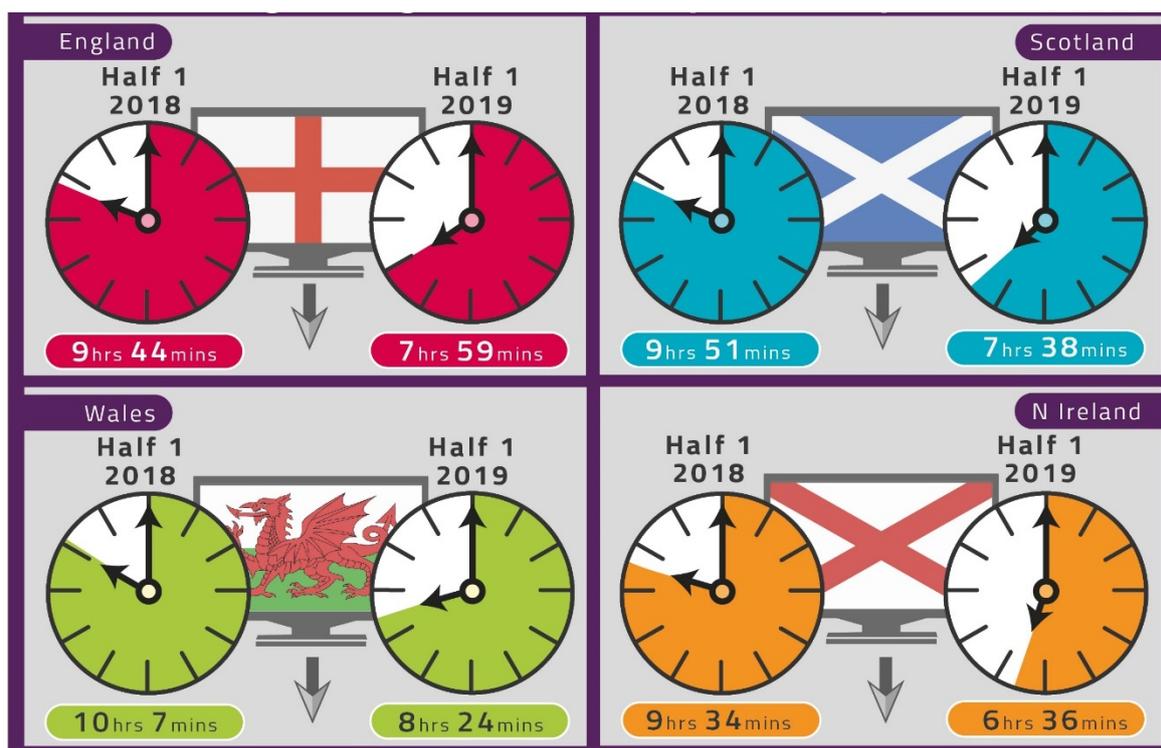
<sup>5</sup> Other viewing asked about included: paid-for on-demand services (e.g. Netflix), recorded content on DVR, advertisement-video-on-demand (watching via sites/apps like YouTube or Vimeo), broadcaster-video-on-demand (BVoD – watching broadcast provided catch-up), Blu-rays/DVDs, and renting/buying content online (e.g. Google Play Store).

<sup>6</sup> Ofcom’s 2018 qualitative research: Life on the small screen: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/what-children-are-watching-and-why>

<sup>7</sup> Broadcast television viewing is seven days consolidated viewing, including live, catch-up and recorded content on the TV set.

<sup>8</sup> At the time of reporting, the full year of 2019 data was not yet available from BARB

### Declining viewing of broadcast TV per week, by UK nation



### Children shifting to smartphones and tablets to watch TV content

Despite the increase in use of smart TVs, the proportion of children watching TV content on a TV set has decreased to 91% (from 94% in 2018 and 96% five years ago).

Meanwhile, the proportion of 5-15s using mobile devices to watch TV programmes or films are increasing, and at a faster rate than the decline in watching a TV set; 43% now use a tablet for this purpose (compared to 33% in 2018), and 26% use a mobile phone (up from 20% in 2018).

Older children especially are shifting to mobile devices for their viewing needs. Forty-two percent of 8-11s and 46% of 12-15s now use a tablet to watch TV content (up from 30% and 35% respectively in 2018). Although a smaller proportion use a mobile phone to watch TV content (22% of 8-11s and 41% of 12-15s), use has also increased significantly for these age groups since 2018 (up from 14% and 33%).

### YouTube remains firm favourite over TV or on-demand content

Used by three-quarters of 5-15s, YouTube remains a significant player in the panorama of children's viewing. This is particularly true among older children; nine in ten 12-15s say they use the YouTube site or app. YouTube is now also used by half of children aged 3-4; up from 45% in 2018.

When asked if they could pick only one platform to watch, 45% of 5-15s chose YouTube – a higher proportion than those who chose on-demand, such as Netflix (32%), or TV channels such as BBC and ITV (17%).

However, opinions differ by age and socio-economic group: 12-15s are as likely to choose YouTube (42%) as they are VoD content (38%), while 8-11s are twice as likely to choose YouTube (49%) over VoD (26%). Children in DE households are more likely to choose YouTube (50%) than those in AB homes (37%); while ABs are more likely than DEs to choose to watch TV channels (24% vs. 16%).

Children are drawn to YouTube for a variety of reasons, and it varies by age. Cartoons and animations continue to be the most popular content among younger children (3-7s), while watching funny videos, pranks and music videos are more popular among older children.

And YouTube has increasingly become the 'go-to' place to find out about hobbies and interests. In 2019, more than half of internet users aged 12-15 (55%) said they would go to YouTube first to find accurate and true information about fun activities – a significant increase since 2018 (38%).

They are also more likely, than in 2018, to use YouTube to learn how to build, create or make things (up from 42% to 60%). In both scenarios, they are more likely to turn to YouTube than to search engines or the BBC (17% would turn to search engines for both hobbies/interests and building/creating things; 3% would turn to the BBC for hobbies/interests, and 7% for building/creating things).

In this year's Media Lives study several of the children talked about using YouTube for informative or educational purposes. One had used the platform to look up reviews before buying a pair of Apple AirPods and another said that she used it to help with revision.

**“I used YouTube for maths when I was revising for my GCSEs.”**

*Jasleen, aged 16*

In addition, a number of children indicated that they felt YouTube content was more relatable and authentic than the perhaps more polished content on other platforms. For example, a 15-year old boy in the study said that he preferred YouTube over Netflix because “it’s made by normal people”.

## Children in the UK's nations feel less well represented on TV

### Attitudes towards representation in TV programmes vary across the UK<sup>9</sup>

There has been a decrease since 2018 in the proportion of both 8-11s and 12-15s who feel there are enough programmes that show children who live in the same part of the country as them; from 53% to 42% for 8-11s, and from 48% to 41% for 12-15s.

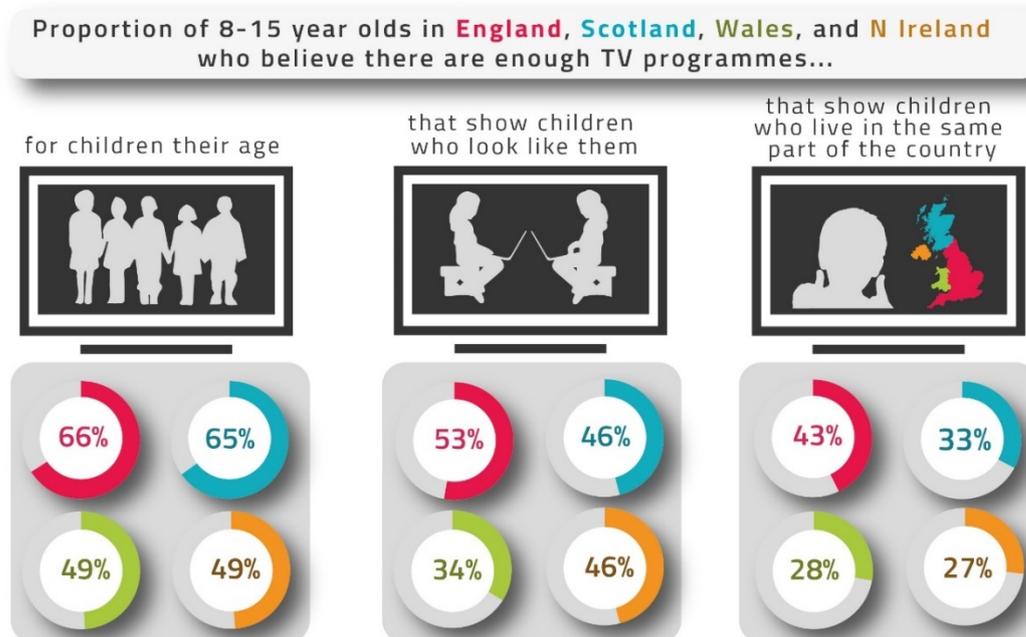
When asked if there are enough TV programmes<sup>10</sup> for children their age, two-thirds of 8-11s and 12-15s say that there were – although this is down since 2018 for 8-11s (from 73%). However, it is more important for 8-11s to see these types of programmes (69%) than it is for 12-15s (59%).

Half of 8-15s feel there are enough programmes that show children that look like them, with two in five of each age group feeling this is important to them.

#### ***Nations deep dive***

Children in Wales and Northern Ireland are less likely to feel there are enough programmes for children their age, or that show children from the same part of the country as them. It is also more important for both nations that there are enough programmes that show children from their country.

### Differing views by UK nation of representation in programmes



<sup>9</sup> Ofcom highlighted its concerns about the lack of programmes that enable children to see themselves on screen in its Children's Content Review. We expect the commercial public service broadcasters' subsequent renewed commitment and new investment from the BFI's Young Audience Content Fund to improve the availability of programmes that better reflect young people's lives from across the UK. [Ofcom's Children's content review](#).

<sup>10</sup> Based on children watching TV at home or elsewhere – therefore, this could be on any device or platform.

## The rise of the 'vlogger next door'

Almost half of 12-15s and more than a third of 8-11s watch vloggers or YouTube influencers, although 2019 has seen a shift in the types of people they are watching.

A key finding in our 2019 Media Lives study reveals that, while children remain keen on big-name YouTube 'stars', they are also following an increasing number of peer-to-peer<sup>11</sup> or local influencers – known as 'micro' or 'nano' influencers (i.e. people with tens or hundreds of thousands of followers rather than millions). This shows they value being able to follow the lives of people in their local area, or those with similar interests to them, and perhaps gain more direct engagement with these influencers than their more-established or 'celebrity' counterparts.

### *Influencers, micro-influencers and nano-influencers*



<sup>11</sup> 'Peer-to-peer' influencers tended to be less well-known names with smaller followings and sometimes more niche interests.

In some instances, children in the Media Lives study were emulating the content posted by micro and nano-influencers. For example, one of the children in the sample, who had a particular interest in bikes, followed 'Wheelie Kay' on Instagram - a micro-influencer with 139,000 followers at the time of the Media Lives research. Wheelie Kay had recently posted a video of himself riding through a busy London street on his bike. Sometime after this video was posted, the child uploaded a similar video of himself riding his bike (the same model as Wheelie Kay) on the road in his home town.

As seen later in this report, children are also demonstrating an interest in their local news via social media or neighbourhood groups.

## **Elements of children's critical understanding have increased**

'Critical understanding' is a way of describing the skills and knowledge children need to understand, question and manage their media environment. This is important if they are to get the benefits that the internet and other media can offer and avoid potential risks.

### **Awareness that vloggers may be paid to endorse products or services is increasing**

In some cases, vloggers or influencers are paid to endorse products or a service. Our research shows that awareness of this among older (12-15) online users has increased over the last five years to 63% in 2019 (from 47% in 2015).

In 2019, differences in awareness are apparent by gender and socio-economic group. Boys aged 12-15 are more aware than girls of paid-for endorsements, while children aged 12-15 in DE households are more likely to be unsure about why a vlogger might say positive things about a particular product (19% vs. 12% average).

We also know that the more time children spend on YouTube, the savvier they are about the potential for product endorsement. Three quarters of 12-15s who spent ten hours or more on YouTube in a typical week were aware, compared with around three in five (61%) who spent less than ten hours each week.

The children in our Media Lives study were generally aware that online influencers make money through the content they post but were not always clear on how this works in practice. For example, one boy said:

"With YouTube, if you have over 10,000 subscribers you start getting paid."

*Ahmed, 13*

### **Awareness of how the BBC is funded has increased since 2018, while awareness of YouTube or Google funding remains unchanged**

Children aged 12-15 who watch TV are now more aware of how the BBC is funded (37% in 2019 vs. 31% in 2018), giving the correct response that it is funded by everyone who uses it (i.e. through the licence fee).

Children in DE homes are less likely than those in AB homes to understand that it is funded by everyone who uses it (29% vs. 41%); and more likely than each of the socio-economic groups to be unsure of how it is funded (35% vs. 20% of ABs, 20% of C1s, and 22% of C2s.).

Over half of both YouTube and Google users (54%) understand that these are funded by the companies that advertise with them – unchanged since 2018.

### **There is no difference between children's belief in the truthfulness of TV and online advertising**

As in 2018, over three-quarters of 8-15s who have seen adverts both on TV and online feel that they mostly or sometimes tell the truth - displaying their ability to make critical judgements about whether the information they see in adverts is likely to be true.

Children in AB households are more likely to be able to make these critical judgements about online advertising – 83% think that online ads mostly or sometimes tell the truth, compared to 74% of DE households. There are no differences between socio-economic groups with regards to TV advertising.

### **Critical understanding of search engines is unchanged since 2018, and a majority of children are unable to recognise advertising on these sites**

One element of critical thinking is the ability to distinguish between commercial and editorial messages online. Our research shows that there is no change in 2019 in the proportion of children who recognise paid-for content in Google searches, signifying that critical understanding on this is not changing.

When shown an image of a Google search result, children gave various responses as to why the first four results were there (distinguished by a green box with the word 'Ad' written in it). Just over a quarter of 8-15s gave only the correct response of the results being adverts/paid to be there – unchanged from five years ago (24% in 2015). As was the case then, in 2019 children aged 12-15 are more likely than 8-11s to give only the correct response (34% vs. 18%). Children in Scotland were the most likely to give only the correct response (34%), followed by children in Wales (28%), England (26%) and Northern Ireland (21%).

Understanding the trustworthiness of search engines such as Google is another element of critical understanding. More than half of children aged 8-15 make any type of critical judgement about the results provided by a search engine, believing that some can be trusted, and some cannot. This response is higher among the older age group, 12-15s (59%) compared to 8-11s (52%). Children in AB households are more likely than those in DE homes to apply this consideration (61% vs. 50%). None of these measures have changed since 2018, showing that children are no more aware in knowing how to assess trust in a site.

## **A quarter of 12-15s say they do not consider whether the information they see on new sites or apps is true or accurate**

Half of 8-15s only visit online sites or apps they have used before – unchanged since 2018. The younger age group (8-11s) are more likely to do this than 12-15s (61% vs. 43%).

The older age group (12-15s) are more exploratory in their online use: 41% say they visit one or two sites or apps they haven't used before (compared to 27% of 8-11s), and 14% say they visit lots of sites or apps they haven't used before (vs. 5% of 8-11s). Each of these measures is unchanged since 2018.

Boys appear to be more inquisitive when it comes to seeking out new online experiences; 12% visit lots of sites or apps they haven't used before (up from 8% in 2018) compared with 7% of girls (unchanged since 2018). Children in AB homes are much more likely than in 2018 to visit one or two unknown sites (40% vs. 28%), while there has been no change among DE homes (27%).

On the whole, children aged 12-15 who visit sites or apps that they have not used before do, to some extent, consider whether the information they find is true or accurate (68%). However, a quarter say they would not give this any thought – both of these measures unchanged since 2018. So, it is evident that children are neither more likely, than previously, to visit new sites or apps or to apply some critical understanding as to the verity of these.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Nations deep dive***

Children aged 12-15 in both England and Scotland are more likely to visit lots of sites they have not visited before (10% and 9% respectively) compared with children in Wales (5%) or Northern Ireland (4%).

## **News consumption among children**

### **TV remains the most used, and most trusted, source of news**

Our *News Consumption Survey* reveals that, overall, TV remains the most-used source of news among 12-15s (64%), followed by talking with family (60%), and social media and talking with friends (both 55%). When asked how they first discovered the various news sources, their parents were most likely to be cited for newspaper, TV and radio, while friends were most commonly cited for social media. For example, eight in ten children who used BBC One or Two for news said they found out about it from their parents, while seven in ten Snapchat news users said they found out about it from their friends.

Over time, our *Media Lives* research has shown that some of the children in the sample who expressed more of an interest with news are from families who also engage with it. Some of the parents actively encouraged their children to reflect on what they understood from, and thought about, particular news stories.

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<sup>12</sup> The sample sizes for children aged 12-15 who used sites they have not used before are too low by socio-economic group or nation to provide additional analysis.

More than eight in ten 12-15s say that TV is an important source of news for them, and it ranks highest for providing the most accurate (85%) and trustworthy (84%) news stories. Overall, social media is seen as the least trustworthy source of news (39%), but this doesn't seem to affect its importance to children. Almost three-quarters say online is an important source of news to them – ahead of radio (65%) - although radio is considered to be twice as trustworthy (77%).

Previous waves of our Media Lives study have shown that accessing news through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat (sometimes using specific social media features like Snapchat Stories) meant that news content was presented in a homogenised fashion, often mixed in with gossip, news, games and advertising. This made it harder for some participants in the study to differentiate between different types of content, or even in some instances to realise that they were consuming news at all.

### **BBC TV channels remain the most important sources of news for children, but use is declining**

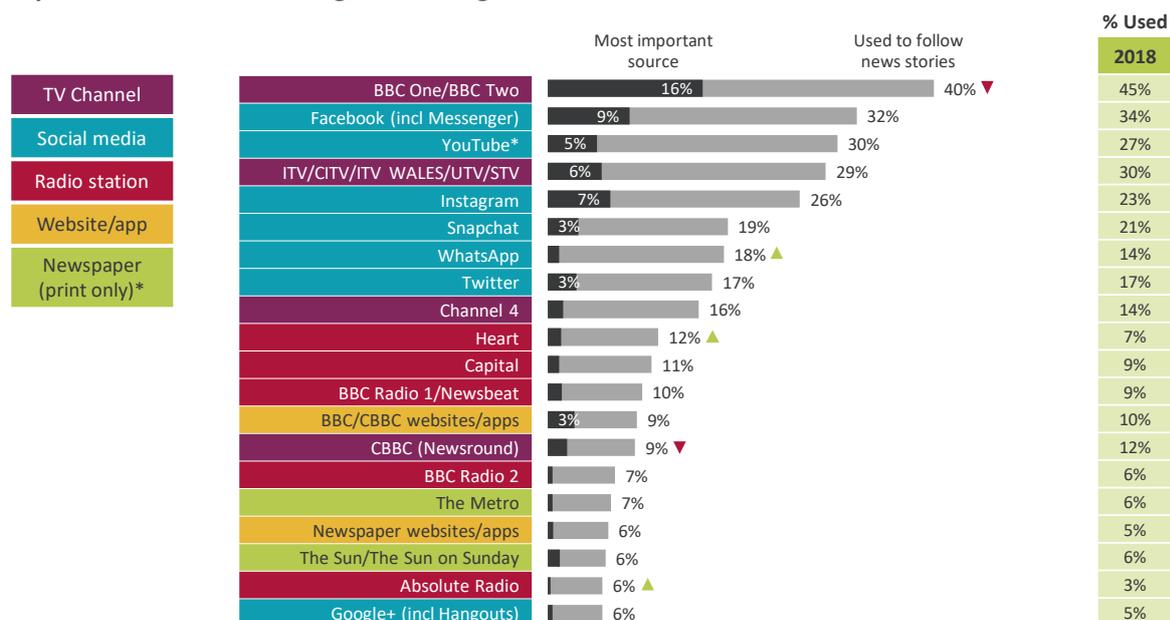
Our [News Consumption Survey](#) finds that among children aged 12-15, 'BBC One or Two' remains the most used, and most important, source for their news consumption. But since 2018 there has been a decrease in the proportion of children who use BBC TV news sources: 'BBC One or Two' is down to 40% in 2019 (from 45%), and CBBC (Newsround) is down to 9% (from 12%).

There are differences in news consumption by socio-economic groups: children aged 12-15 in DE households are less likely to use BBC One or Two (26%) than those in AB homes (48%), or to cite them as their most important source of news (10% vs. 20% ABs). Meanwhile, children in AB households are more likely to use other BBC platforms (such as BBC Radio stations, CBBC Newsround and BBC news sites).

Our children's media literacy tracker shows that while there is no single online source cited by a majority of 12-15s for 'serious things going on in the world', older children are more likely to cite BBC online (30%, unchanged since 2018) than any other source. This is more likely among 12-15s in AB than in DE households (45% vs. 27%).

But children are also seeking out other sources of news: using radio as a news source increased to 36% (up from 31% in 2018) and using search engines increased to 31% (from 27%). Social media also remains a key source of new consumption among children. Six social media sites appear in the top ten news sources, and, when combined, show that 27% of 12-15s claim social media as their most important source – almost double that of BBC One or Two.

## Top 20 news sources among children aged 12-15:



As in previous waves, this year's Media Lives study showed that relatively few children in the sample appeared to be engaging with national news stories. However, an increasing number in this wave, especially among the older participants, said that they followed informal gossip or local news. These children reported using social media as an avenue for news, rather than formal providers or news apps, and some were also keen to keep up with local news stories on social media or via neighbourhood groups. For example, one girl in her mid-teens kept up-to-date with local neighbourhood groups and 'gossip' through Instagram stories, where residents in her area publicly posted news and screenshots of local news and other stories.

### News consumption via social media tends to be more passive

Among 12-15s who use social media as a source of news, more than half access the news via links to, or comments on, stories posted by people they follow. They are less likely to access news via links or comments from news organisations themselves, although they are more likely than in 2018 to click on a story from a news organisation (63% vs.54%).

Engagement with the news via social media tends to be passive (reading comments, looking at links) rather than active (sharing or commenting). It was clear that some children in our Media Lives study were absorbing news through social media rather than actively seeking it out. For example, by looking at informal sites or apps that include news within a broader range of content or reading posts about news stories from their friends.

With only two in five social media news users believing that news reported via this platform is truthful, it is clear that children understand that they should critically assess the stories they see. Compared to 2018, the proportion of children who say they often think about whether a news story on social media is accurate has increased (from 28% to 35%). Children in AB households are more likely to say they always consider this (13%) than those in DE households (5%).

## Children’s social media use diversifies

### A substantial minority of ten-year-olds have a social media profile

Our research shows that a significant proportion of primary school-age children have their own social media profile. A quarter of ten-year-olds who go online claim to have a profile<sup>13</sup>, with this proportion almost doubling to 43% of 11-year-olds. A minority of parents of pre-schoolers (1% of 3-4s) and younger school children (4% of 5-7s) also say their child has a profile.

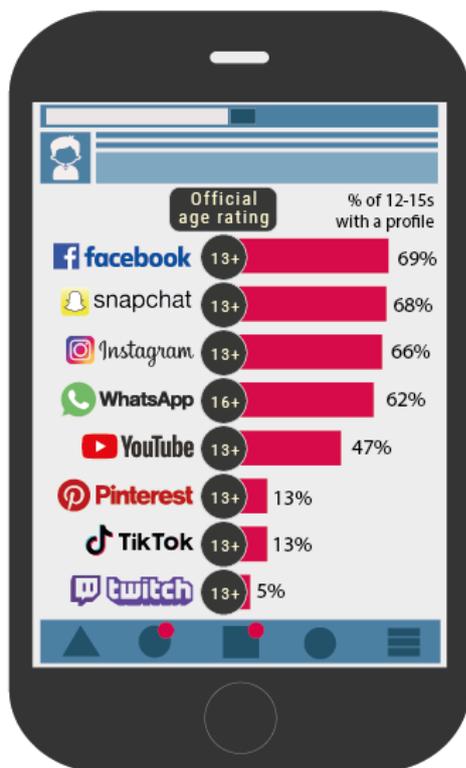
By the age of 13 (the minimum age restriction on most social media platforms) more than half have a profile; and by the age of 15, almost all have one.

Most parents of children with a profile are aware that there is a minimum age requirement to have a profile. However, relatively few correctly identify the minimum age for these sites or apps. Facebook is the most recognised, with 27% of parents knowing the minimum age requirement, followed by 20% for Instagram and 15% for Snapchat.

Almost half of parents are aware that WhatsApp has an age requirement, but only 5% are aware that 16 is now the required age.

A quarter of parents of 5-15s said they would allow their child to have a social media profile before they reached the minimum age requirement. This increases with the age of the child, from 8% of 3-4s to 36% of 12-15s – unchanged since 2018.

### Social media/ messaging sites or apps used by children aged 12-15



<sup>13</sup> Social media users here are based on children who go online, not all children.

## WhatsApp joins Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram in the top social media platforms used by children

The proportion of 12-15s with a social media profile (70%) has not changed over the last five years, however the platforms they are using<sup>14</sup> are becoming more varied.

WhatsApp, in particular, has gained in popularity over the past year and is now used by 62% of 12-15s - up from 43% in 2018. This means that, for the first time, it counts among Facebook (69%), Snapchat (68%) and Instagram (66%) as one of the top social media platforms used by children.

Similarly, no single site or app stands out above the rest when children were asked to name their 'main' site or app in 2019 (i.e. the one they use the most often). Similar proportions of 12-15s cite Snapchat (27%) and Instagram (24%) as they do Facebook (22%) which, in previous years, clearly came out on top. And although fewer children say that WhatsApp is the app they use the most (14%), this is the only platform to see a year-on-year increase (up from 5%).

## Newer platforms, such as TikTok and Twitch, are gaining popularity

At the time of fieldwork, TikTok<sup>15</sup> was used by 13% of 12-15s – up from 8% in 2018. Twitch<sup>16</sup> was used by 5% of 12-15s, and almost exclusively by boys (9% vs. 0%). A similar proportion of girls and boys used TikTok. Awareness of live streaming platforms, such as Twitch and Facebook Live, has increased among children aged 12-15 who go online, from 78% in 2018 to 83% in 2019.

Some children in our Media Lives study, especially the younger children, enjoyed using TikTok to create content by following its set template. For example, one of the younger girls, demonstrated how to use the app to create 'copy-cat' lip-synced dance videos, and explained that she would then share these with her friends.

“On TikTok you can do street-dancing to different music - I normally just scroll down it and make a few”

*Bryony, aged 10*

## The 'Greta effect' and online social activism

2019 saw an increase in the proportion of 12-15s who use social media to support causes and organisations by sharing or commenting on posts (18% in 2019 vs. 12% in 2018). In addition, one in ten have signed petitions on social media in the last year.

As in 2018, many children also use social media as a way to offer personal support to their friends; two-thirds of 12-15s have sent positive messages, comments or posts to friends who are having a hard time.

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<sup>14</sup> The 2019 survey included the following platforms under the banner of 'social media and messaging sites and apps': Facebook/Messenger, Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, Twitch, Pinterest, MySpace, Google Hangouts, and Tumblr

<sup>15</sup> TikTok is a mobile platform enabling users to create and share short-form videos

<sup>16</sup> Twitch is a live streaming platform with a primary focus on video gaming, and was included in the survey for the first time in 2019

## Children experience the same level of social pressures online as they do in ‘real life’

Overall, children are more likely to feel positive, than negative, about social media; as in 2018, the majority of 8-15s who use social media say that it makes them feel happy, or that it makes them feel closer to their friends. But negative online experiences can still occur, with social pressure intensifying with age.

A quarter of 8-11s and even more 12-15s (40%) who use social media say they feel pressure to be popular on these sites or apps all or most of the time. Over a quarter of 8-15s also say that people are mean to each other on social media all or most of the time. Children in DE households are more likely than those in AB households to feel this (32% vs. 18%).

While almost half of 12-15s feel it is not OK for people to be able to say what they want online if it is hurtful to others, three in ten are unsure, suggesting a degree of uncertainty around what is and isn’t acceptable.

The effects of this social pressure were evident in our Media Lives research; children in the study are become increasingly wary about the content they post. Many are so keen that nothing should detract from their online ‘image’ that they keep their profiles virtually empty by deleting old pictures, or those that don’t have enough ‘likes’. This trend has evolved over time, but it is more pronounced this year, with some of the children’s profiles featuring no online images at all.

Our Media Lives study also shows an increase in the use of filtering apps among children. Some children in the study are conscious about their physical appearance online and are using dedicated face-editing apps to alter how they appear to others. This, in itself, is not new. However, some of the older girls in the sample have moved away from using ‘fun’ or novelty filters towards using more hyper-real or aesthetic filters that could completely change the shape of their face, and many of the children in the study appeared to be familiar with the idea of people using these filtering apps to alter the way their face or body appeared.

Three in ten children aged 8-15 who use social media believe that all or most of what they see on there is true – unchanged since 2018. Almost two-thirds believe that only some of what they see is true, and less than one in ten believe it is all true - both measures also unchanged since 2018.

Our Media Lives research also indicates that children value having personal ‘clout’ (i.e. influence)<sup>17</sup> online, as it provides them with a higher status in the offline world too. For example, one girl in the study said:

“People do shout-outs. Say someone was to shout me out, then I’d get adds [people adding me] from that. [You do it] to get more views. They do it for clout, to be known”

*Shaniqua, aged 15*

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<sup>17</sup> Clout refers to a user’s level of influence and status on social media. Users might post photos, stories, or videos with the intent of increasing their ‘clout’.

Importantly, our research shows that children do not necessarily see a distinction between the online and offline worlds; similar proportions of children said they felt pressure to be popular in ‘real life’ as well as on social media. Being online has become the norm for the majority of children, so to them, it is their ‘real life’.

### **Children’s experience of offline versus online bullying**

Around a fifth of children aged 8-15 say they have been bullied in some way. Our research shows that, among older children, the incidence of bullying is consistent between ‘real life’ and online: children aged 12-15 are just as likely to say they have experienced bullying face-to-face (16%) as on social media (14%), or through messaging apps or texts (12%). Whereas children aged 8-11 are more likely to say they have experienced bullying face-to-face (14%), than via social media (3%) or messaging apps or texts (5%).

There is a correlation between the time spent on social media and the experience of being bullied. Children aged 12-15 who spend more than ten hours a week on social media are twice as likely to say they have been bullied through this platform than those who are on it for less than ten hours a week (26% vs. 12%). So, although the likelihood of being bullied in ‘real life’ is similar to online, the more time a child spends on social media, the higher their chance of becoming a target of bullying.

Our Media Lives research found that most children in the study felt that they should treat each other well online and tried to abide by this. However, several described instances in which they had seen people being mean to one another online. One girl in her mid-teens said she had seen other girls sending messages to each other saying “I’ll pull your hair”, while another said she had come across nasty comments like “go kill yourself” on certain YouTube accounts. This behaviour was not limited to the girls, although the boys often saw or heard such comments while gaming rather than when using social media. That said, one boy described an incident of cyber-bullying on social media which had spilled over into the offline world and resulted in physical bullying.

## **Online gaming is on the increase, as are parental concerns**

### **Girl gamers are on the increase**

Online gaming is becoming more popular; 59% of 5-15s now play games online, increasing from 53% since 2018 and 45% five years ago. This increase in 2019 was driven by both 8-11s (66% vs. 58% in 2018) and 12-15s (72% vs. 66% in 2018).

Boys across all ages are more likely than girls to play games online (41% vs. 29% for 5-7s, 77% vs. 55% for 8-11s, and 87% vs. 56% 12-15s). However, gaming is becoming more popular among girls; among 5-15s, the proportion of girls who play games online increased from 39% in 2018 to 48% in 2019; whereas the proportion of boys who played online remained stable at 71%.

### **But boys still spend more time gaming than girls, and are more likely to experience some of the associated risks**

On average, children aged 5-15 spend 9 hours 30 minutes a week playing online games. However, there are considerable differences by gender: boys aged 12-15 spend twice as long as girls gaming online (14 hours 36 minutes vs. 7 hours 30 minutes). This may be a contributing factor to the 35% of boys saying they find it hard to control their screen time, compared to 27% of girls.

Boys are also more likely to experience bullying via an online gaming platform. A third of boys aged 8-15 who say they have ever been bullied say it was via online gaming, compared to one in ten for girls.

But our Media Lives research shows that online gaming and its associated activities also brings benefits, such as strengthening friendships. For example, one boy in his mid-teens said that if he noticed that his friends were streaming on one of Twitch's 'All Live' channels, he would watch it in order to boost his friend by giving them an extra viewer.

### **Parental concerns about in-game spending and gaming-related bullying increase**

Parents of children aged 12-15 who play games are more concerned than they were in 2018 about two particular gaming-related issues: the pressure on their child to make in-game purchases (47% in 2019 vs. 40% in 2018), and the possibility of their child being bullied via online games (39% in 2019 vs. 32% in 2018).

Both of these concerns are higher among parents of boys than girls (48% vs. 34% in-game purchasing, and 38% vs. 32% bullying).

Correspondingly, parents of 5-15s are more likely than in 2018 to impose rules about purchasing or downloading games/ in-app purchases (42% compared to 36% in 2018).

Our Media Lives study sheds some light on what might be causing increased parental concern around spending money in online games. The study indicates that over the last five years there has been an increase in in-game and game-related purchasing. These in-game purchases include 'loot boxes' - a virtual item containing random rewards that could be useful to the player in the game - which is paid for by either real or virtual currency. 'Loot boxes' appeared to generate considerable anticipation and excitement among those children in the study who either purchased and opened them themselves or watched videos of others doing so.

Although levels of other concerns around gaming remained stable year-on-year, they are still significant. Two in five parents of children aged 5-15 who play games say they are concerned about how much time the child spends on them; while over a third are concerned about their content.

A third of parents say they are concerned about whom their child is gaming with. These concerns are not unfounded; a quarter of 12-15s who play games online say they have played against people they don't know - with boys being more likely to do this than girls (31% vs. 17%).

Another trend to have emerged over the last five years of our Media Lives research is children's increased interest in watching other gamers online. These gameplay videos were very popular in this year's study, with many of the children watching them on YouTube or via Twitch - the live streaming platform with a focus on gaming. For example, one boy in the study said he enjoyed watching gameplay videos of Destiny 2 on Twitch, as these gave him "help with games".

### ***Nations deep dive:***

#### **Parents in Wales are more likely to have concerns about gaming**

Parents in Wales are more likely than those in the other nations to be concerned about each of the concerns presented to them: the content of the games, how much time the child spends gaming, who they play games with, the pressures to make in-game purchases, the possibility of their being bullied, and the amount of advertising in games. Parents in Wales were also more likely to have the majority of the rules in place for the child when gaming – such as how much time they spend gaming, only playing games with appropriate content, and who they can play games with.

### **Only half of parents have some sort of technical controls set up on their child's gaming devices**

Younger children are more likely to have technical controls set up by their parents on their gaming devices to control their gaming and online use. Over half of parents of 5-7s and of 8-11s whose child plays games say they have some sort of controls in place: such as time-limiting software, controls to stop the child playing games above a certain age rating, or controls to prevent them from going online. In contrast, four in ten parents of 12-15s (39%) have these controls in place. Each measure is unchanged since 2018.

Parents of younger children are also more likely to have rules or restrictions in place about their gaming (89% 5-7s, 91% 8-11s), than parents of 12-15s (79%) – again, unchanged since 2018. For each age group, the dominant rule is that of only playing games with an age appropriate rating.

## **Negative online experiences and coping strategies**

### **The experience of seeing hateful content online is increasing**

Almost all children who go online recall being told about how to use the internet safely (96%); 8-11s are most likely to say this was from a parent (84%), while 12-15s are most likely to say it was from a teacher (also 84%). In 2019, more 8-15s recall receiving information from teachers at school (82% vs. 74% in 2018), from the police visiting their school (17% vs. 10% in 2018), and from friends (23% vs. 14% 2018).

Despite receiving this advice, children still see content that is inappropriate or makes them feel uncomfortable. In particular, there has been an increase over the last four years in the proportions of children claiming to have seen anything hateful online about particular groups of people (based on, for instance, their gender, religion, disability, sexuality or gender identity). In 2019, half of 12-15s who go online say they had seen something hateful about a particular group of people in the past 12 months – up from 34% in 2016.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the increase in those seeing hateful content, there have been no increases in the proportions choosing to take any form of action over it. Of those that saw hateful content in the past 12 months<sup>19</sup>, the majority (58%) chose to ignore it, while the remainder (39%) took some form of action.<sup>20</sup> The most cited action was to block the person who shared or made the comments (16%), or to report it to the website (14%) – each unchanged since 2018. One in ten chose to either share it with friends in order to say it was wrong or to comment on it, thereby inadvertently giving the hateful content greater exposure.

### ***Nations deep dive:***

#### **Experience of seeing hateful content online is more likely in Northern Ireland**

Children in Northern Ireland who go online are more likely than those in the other UK nations to say they have ever seen hateful content online (62%) - followed by those in England (52%), Scotland (45%) and Wales (37%).

The majority of children in Wales who go online (62%) say they have never seen such content. This may be because parents in Wales are the most likely to have certain rules in place set by parents about their children's online use – in particular, only going online when supervised/ accompanied - thereby safeguarding the content they see.

### **Despite high awareness of online reporting functions, only half who had seen something worrying or nasty reported it**

A third of 12-15s say they have seen something worrying or nasty online, making them almost twice as likely as 8-11s (18%) to see this type of content.

The way that children deal with such content varies by age and gender. Children aged 8-11 who go online are more likely than 12-15s to tell someone (96% vs. 90%), although both age groups are more likely to tell a parent than to tell anyone else (89% vs. 74%). Older children are more likely than younger children to tell someone in authority about the content (such as the police (7% vs. 4%), the websites themselves (5% vs. 2%), or the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre – CEOP (2% vs. 0%). Girls are more likely than boys to tell someone (94% vs. 88%) and more likely to tell a parent

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<sup>18</sup> The question asking if children have seen hateful content was first asked in 2016.

<sup>19</sup> The sample sizes of those that saw any hateful content online are too small in the nations to conduct further analysis.

<sup>20</sup> The remaining 3% said they did not know what action they had taken.

(85% vs. 77%), while boys are more likely than girls to say they don't know if they would tell anyone at all (6% vs. 1%) – increasing to 8% among those aged 12-15.

As in 2018, two-thirds of 12-15s who go online are aware of the reporting function available on many sites, apps and online games; those in Wales are more aware of this than those in the other UK nations (86% vs. 71% Scotland, 64% England, and 60% Northern Ireland). Of all those who are aware of this and who say they have seen something that worried them, half (52%) say they had used the reporting function.<sup>21</sup> Awareness of this function is more likely among heavier users of the internet; 78% of those who spend more than ten hours a week on YouTube, and 82% of those who spend more than ten hours on social media. This suggests that greater online use can make children more aware of how to deal with online risks.

While a minority of 12-15s and 8-11s say they have seen something worrying or nasty online, several children in our Media Lives research could recall seeing upsetting content online – this included violent and other disturbing content. Most of the children saw this content on social media and while some did report seeing a 'sensitive content' label, one girl expressed concerns that this would not be enough to prevent younger children from seeing this type of content.

### **Children display various strategies to cope with negative online experiences**

The older children in our survey (12-15s) were also asked about their own negative experiences, either online or on a mobile phone.<sup>22</sup> Two-fifths said they had ever experienced any of the negative experiences presented to them in the survey, unchanged since 2018. In addition to telling someone, they also used various strategies to cope, which shows a degree of resilience and knowledge in managing online risks.

Of those who opted to answer the question, a quarter said they had ever been contacted online by someone they don't know. Two-thirds say they know how to block messages on social media from unknown people, with half saying they have ever had to do this. Half say they know how to block junk email and spam or to change their settings so that fewer people can view their social media profile. A third say they have ever done either of these.

Fewer older children say they have seen or received something scary or troubling online, like a scary video or comment (16%) – up from 10% in 2018. A similar proportion say they have accidentally spent money online that they didn't mean to (14%) or seen something of a sexual nature that made them feel uncomfortable (12%). Six per cent say they have felt under pressure to send photos or other information about themselves to someone, twice as likely as in 2018 (3%). Girls are twice as likely to have felt this way than boys (8% vs. 4%).

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<sup>21</sup> The sample sizes of those who saw worrying content and were aware of the reporting function are too small in the nations to conduct further analysis.

<sup>22</sup> The face-to-face nature of the survey and the sensitive topic may have resulted in some under-reporting in response to this question. To ensure that the children in the survey felt as comfortable as possible in responding to questions to bullying and online risks, they were allowed to opt in to answer these and given the option of completing them more privately through the interviewer's CAPI unit/tablet. Overall, 87% of 8-11s and 92% of 12-15s opted to complete this section.

While several children in our Media Lives research had been upset by something they saw online, many said they have strategies in place to help them cope with this. These strategies range from telling a parent, to seeking out more information about what they have seen. For example, one girl, who describes seeing self-harm content shared on the Snapchat groups to which she and her school friends belonged, had visited the NHS website to learn more about the issue and what she could do to help. Furthermore, most children in the study had received clear messages from school and parents about how to stay safe online, and the majority say they knew what to do if anything made them feel uncomfortable.

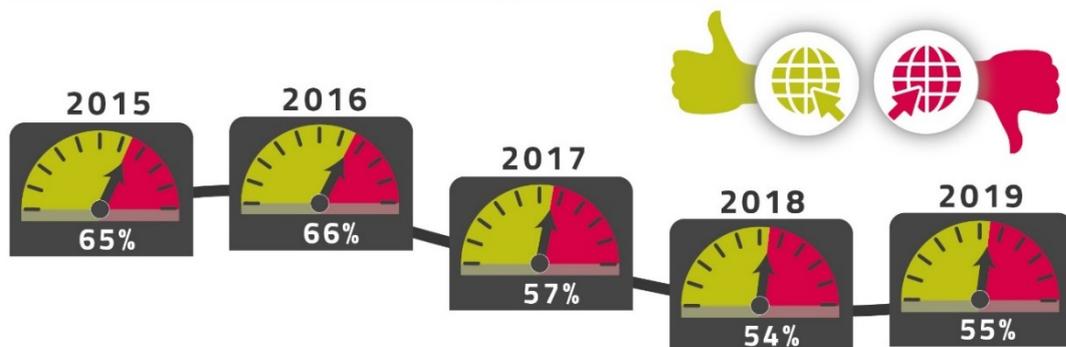
## Striking the balance between parental control and giving children digital independence

### More than half of parents agree that the benefits of their child being online outweigh the risks, but proportions thinking this are declining

As in 2018, more than half of parents of children who go online believe that the benefits of the internet outweigh the risks for their child. However, the proportion of parents who feel this way has declined over the last five years; from 65% in 2015 to 55% in 2019.

Belief that online benefits outweigh the risks increases with the age of the child; 43% of parents of 3-4s think this is the case, compared to 63% of 12-15s. Among the UK nations, parents in Scotland and Wales (64% and 67% respectively) are more likely to agree with this statement, than those in England (54%) or Northern Ireland (55%).

#### *Proportion of parents of 5-15 year olds who agree with the statement: "The benefits of the internet for my child outweigh any risks"*

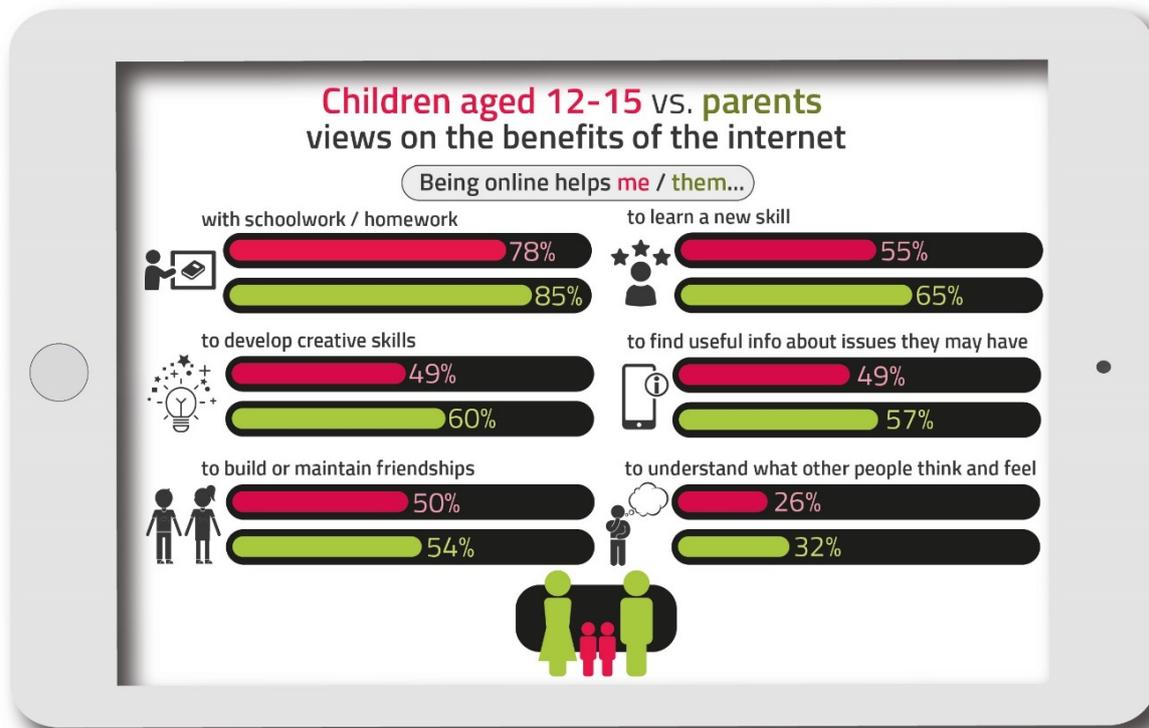


When asked about how their child benefits from being online, three-quarters of parents of 5-15s agree that it helps their child with their school work or homework. This response is more common among parents of 8-11s (79%) and 12-15s (85%) than the younger age group of 5-7s (59%). Around six in ten parents of each age group feel that their child benefits from learning new skills or developing their creative skills.

Our research also shows that parents of children who use a desktop or laptop to go online are more likely to cite a wider range of benefits, than parents of children who only go online on other devices – such as smartphones, tablets, games consoles or smart TVs.

It's not just parents who feel that the internet helps in a range of different ways, children aged 12-15 who go online also appreciate the wide range of benefits of being online.

### Views on the benefits of the internet



### Parents feel less confident that they know enough to help keep their teenager safe online, and find it harder to monitor their media activities

Three-quarters of parents of children who go online feel they know enough to keep their child safe online, although their confidence in their ability to keep up declines with the age of the child – from 81% of parents of 5-7s, to 74% of parents of 12-15s. Parents in both Scotland and Wales are more confident in their knowledge (88% and 89%) than those in England or Northern Ireland (75% and 73%).

While the majority of parents of children aged 3-15 agree with the statement: “I think my child has a good balance between screen time and doing other things”, the proportion who feel this way decreases the older the child gets; from 86% for 3-4s, to 57% for 12-15s. Children’s views of their own screen-life balance is similar to their parents; 62% of 12-15s agree with this statement.

Considering the majority of 12-15s now own their own mobile phone (85%), it perhaps follows that parents of older children find it more difficult to monitor their child's media activities. This struggle may be amplified due to the proportion of children who take either their mobile phone or tablet to bed. In 2019, the majority of 12-15s were allowed to do this (74% mobile, 61% tablet), although fewer 8-11s were allowed (45% mobile, 32% tablet).

Our Media Lives research also shows that most parents of teenagers in the study did not watch closely what their children saw or posted online – trusting that their child would raise any issues or concern with them as they arose. However, at the younger end of the sample, parents continued to monitor their child's online activities quite closely.

### **Parents of 12-15s are more likely than in 2018 to have rules in place about their child's mobile phone and online activities**

As well as using various mediation strategies, some parents impose rules on their child's media activities. Around nine in ten parents of younger children (5-11s) have at least one rule in place about what their child does online. The majority impose one main rule, which is to restrict the types of websites or apps their child can use (73% for 5-7s and 76% for 8-11s).

While parents of 12-15s are less likely to have rules in place than parents of the younger age groups (84% have at least one rule in place), they are more likely to do this than they were in 2018 (77%). Over half of parents of 12-15s have rules about whom their child can contact online (57%); spending money online (56%); the types of websites or app the child can use (55%); and the information they share online (53%).

Parents of 12-15s whose child has their own mobile phone are also more likely than in 2018 to impose rules about their child's use of it (78% vs. 72%). Almost six in ten enforce the rule about how much money their child can spend on their phone, followed by around four in ten who restrict who their child can contact, how much time they spend on their phone, and which apps they can download to their phone.

Parents of 8-11s who own a mobile phone are more likely than parents of 12-15s to have rules in place (88%), unchanged since 2018.

## Parental concerns and mediation strategies

### Parents are increasingly concerned about online content which might encourage their child to harm themselves

The main concern parents have about their child being online is the worry that companies are collecting information about what their child is doing (49%); unchanged since 2018. More than half of parents of children aged 8-11 and 12-15 who go online express concern about this; more than the proportion of parents of 5-7s (36%). Concerns were also more likely among parents of 8-15s in AB than in DE homes (55% vs. 44%).

Compared to 2018, more parents of 5-15s were worried about their child seeing content which might encourage them to hurt or harm themselves – the only concern to see an increase (45% in 2019 vs. 39% in 2018). The increase was particularly driven by parents of 12-15s. Due to the timing of the fieldwork (early summer 2019) this increase may be due to the media coverage earlier in the year of the [Molly Russell case](#) – the 14-year-old girl who took her own life after seeing graphic self-harm and suicide images on social media.

A third of parents of children who go online say they are concerned about the possibility of their child being radicalised – unchanged since 2018. However, there has been an increase in the proportion of parents of 12-15s that are worried about this (from 30% in 2018 to 37% in 2019).

Parents in Wales were more likely to be concerned about all aspects of their children's online use asked about in our survey, than parents in England, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

### More parents are talking to their child about online safety

We asked parents about four approaches to mediating their child's online use: regularly talking to their children about staying safe online; rules about what children do online; supervision when online; and awareness and use of technical tools.

Nearly all parents of children who go online say they use at least one of the four forms of mediation. Almost nine in ten parents apply rules about what their child does online or supervise their child when they are online. And almost seven in ten use any of the technical mediation tools asked about or talk to their child about staying safe online. Using technical tools, rules and supervision are more likely to be used by parents of 5-11s; talking to their child is more likely among parents of 8-15s.

Talking about online safety is a key mediation strategy, and one that is now being used by more parents. In 2019, 85% of parents of 5-15s whose child goes online say they have ever talked to their child (up from 81% in 2018) – driven by an increase in parents of 8-11s (from 86% to 91%).

More parents than in 2018 say they supervise their child when online (from 49% to 54%) - by being nearby and regularly checking what they are doing - or by asking them what they are doing online (from 50% to 54%).

Fewer parents now check the browser/device history after the child has been online (from 37% to 33% in 2019). This may be partly due to them knowing that children know how to delete the history of sites they have visited (45% of 12-15s), and so may feel this action is futile.

## Parents are using a variety of sources to inform them about keeping their child safe online

The majority of parents say they have sought advice on how to keep their child safe online (62% of parents of 3-4s, and 87% of 5-15s). A variety of sources are used, although advice from the child's school is the most common: 29% of parents of 3-4s and 67% of parents of 5-15s. Advice from family or friends follows; parents of 5-15s are more likely than in 2018 to do this (from 37% to 45%).

Websites providing online safety information have increased in popularity among parents of each age group. Around a fifth of parents of 5-15s say they have sought advice from these sites to help them learn how to keep their child safe online (from 12% in 2018 to 21% in 2019): this activity is more likely among parents of 8-11s (24%), and parents in AB homes (24% compared to 16% of DE homes).

## Not all parents use content filters, but those who do find them useful

As in 2018, six in ten parents who have home broadband and whose child goes online are aware of home network-level content filters<sup>23</sup>. Almost half of these actually use them (36%) –parents of 8-11s are more likely to do so (41%) than 5-7s or 12-15s (33% and 34% respectively).

The same proportions are aware of, and use, parental control software.<sup>24</sup> Unlike content filters, parental control software is more likely to be used by parents of the younger age groups (35% 5-7s, and 36% 8-11s), than 12-15s (27%).

Parents in AB households are more likely to use content filters than those in DE homes (39% vs. 31%); although no difference is seen in use of parental control software.

### ***Nations deep dive:***

#### **Parents in Northern Ireland are the least likely to be aware of, or use, content filters and parental control software**

Parents in England and Scotland are more likely to be aware of home network-level content filters (37% and 36% respectively), than parents in Wales (29%). While parents in Northern Ireland are less likely, than any other UK nation, to use these (19%).

Meanwhile, parents in Wales are the most likely to use parental control software (49%), followed by parents in England (33%). As with use of content filters, parents in Northern Ireland are the least likely to use these (15%), along with parents in Scotland (20%).

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<sup>23</sup> BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin Media provide customers with free router-level parental controls, which allow parents to set filters to restrict access to certain types of websites on devices connected to the home wi-fi. This is to limit the inappropriate online content that children in the household might see. However, content filters may not work if the content or websites being accessed are encrypted and may be bypassed using a virtual private network (VPN).

<sup>24</sup> Parental control software includes Net Nanny, McAfee Family Protection, Open DNS FamilyShield.

Parents continue to find these content filters beneficial; nine in ten who use either of these filters say they are useful, with more than seven in ten saying that they block the right amount of content. However, parents also recognise that content filters are not completely failsafe; 14% say their child is able to get around the filter, increasing to 20% of parents of 12-15s. This older age group endorse this belief; 15% of 12-15s who go online say they know how to unset these filters, and half say they have done so.

### **More parents are now using PINs or passwords to grant children access to websites**

The majority of parents of 5-15s (68%) are aware of the ability to set up a PIN or password to enter websites; increasing from 57% in 2018. Forty-two per cent say they now use PINs and passwords – also increasing from 29% since 2018.

Other online strategies that parents of 5-15s are aware of include parental controls built into the device by the manufacturer (51%) and YouTube’s restricted mode (49%). Awareness of both of these has increased since 2018, as has safe search on search engine websites (41%). However, the YouTube restricted mode is the only strategy that parents now use more than they did a year ago (25% in 2019 vs. 20% in 2018).

### **Less than half of parents whose child uses a smartphone or tablet know how to use parental control settings**

There are also various tools available to parents to control their child’s use of mobile phones and tablets. Less than half the parents of both 3-4s and 5-15s who use a smartphone or tablet are aware that they can change the settings on these devices to stop apps being downloaded, and only around a fifth have done this.

Again, less than half are aware of the ability to change the settings on a phone or tablet to stop in-app purchases, although awareness has increased among parents of 3-4s since 2018 (from 36% to 45%). The proportion of parents of 3-4s actually doing this is unchanged at 15%, although parents of 5-15s are more likely to do it (22%).

### Nations deep dive

Parents in both Scotland and Wales are the most likely to feel they know enough to keep their child safe online, and to agree that the benefits of the internet outweigh the risks for their child. But there are stark differences in parents' levels of concern about their child's online use: parents in Scotland tend to be the least likely to be concerned with aspects of their child being online; while parents in Wales are the most likely to have concerns.

#### Levels of concern among parents about their child's online activities

	+	Scotland	Wales	X
 				
 Content on sites or apps that child visits	34%	22%	52%	29%
 How much time child spends online	39%	35%	56%	42%
 Child giving out their personal details to inappropriate people	43%	32%	57%	36%
 Child being bullied online / cyberbullying	42%	41%	63%	41%
 Child damaging their reputation now or in the future	40%	31%	58%	23%
 Child seeing content which encourages them to hurt or harm themselves	45%	37%	65%	43%
 Pressure on child to spend money online	41%	43%	50%	41%
 Companies collecting information about what the child is doing online	49%	42%	59%	38%
 Possibility of child being radicalised	32%	23%	52%	25%

## In summary

This research provides an in-depth look at the media use and attitudes of children today, who've never known life without the internet – and how their parents feel about it too.

In summary, it suggests that parents are trusting their children with digital independence before they leave primary school, with half of 10-year-olds owning their own smartphone. The technology in the home that children use is also getting smarter, and they're using a wider range of social media platforms than ever before.

YouTube remains a firm favourite, albeit there appears to be a shift in the types of vloggers that appeal most to children. Local, small-scale relatable people with a shared interest are increasingly popular alongside high profile or 'celebrity' influencers. Children are also becoming more socially conscious online and are more likely to support organisations or causes than ever before by sharing or commenting on posts.

Children are becoming savvier in some aspects of their media use; compared to 2018 children are more likely to be aware of vlogger endorsement. However, the majority of children still don't understand how search engines (such as Google) work or have the ability to recognise advertising on these sites.

While parents and children acknowledge there are many benefits to being online, they are also mindful of the associated risks. Fewer parents now agree that the benefits of their children being online outweigh the risks than five years ago. Worries about content that might cause children to harm themselves, and concerns about online gaming, are also on the increase.

But the research also shows that more conversations about online safety are happening in homes and schools than before. And parents are now twice as likely than they were in 2018 to seek out support and information online to help keep their children protected.

As mentioned earlier, this report forms part of our wider programme of work, Making Sense of Media, which aims to help improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of UK adults and children. We do this through cutting-edge research, and by bringing together organisations and individuals with expertise in media literacy to share ideas and to support their activities. To find out more about our Making Sense of Media programme and for details on how to join our network, please go to <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/making-sense-of-media>.

For more information on this, and Ofcom's other media literacy research, please visit: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/publications>