

Digital childhoods: a survey of children and parents

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



Young people turning 18 this year were born in 2004, the year that Facebook was founded. This generation hasn't known a world without social media, smartphones and 24-hour communication. This has brought a world of wonderful benefits; never before has a generation been so connected and well-informed. Yet the major social networking platforms, where so much of childhood is now spent, were simply not designed with children's safety, wellbeing, and best interests in mind.

As Children's Commissioner, it is my duty to represent the views and rights of this digital generation. I see it as my responsibility to understand what it is like to grow up within the online world. I want to understand the joys and opportunities, as well as the real risks and harms, to ensure that tech firms, Government departments, teachers, parents, and caregivers take seriously their responsibility to support online childhoods.

I have spent the last 18 months as Children's Commissioner listening closely to children and parents. I have also convened social networking platforms and requested information on their child safety policies.

I am simply not satisfied that enough is being done to keep children safe online. Girls as young as 9 told my team about strategies they employ when strangers ask for their home address online. In a room of 15 and 16-year-olds, three quarters had been sent a video of a beheading. I conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,005 children and their parents to understand families' perspectives on online safety. My survey found that children are frequently exposed to a wide range of inappropriate and harmful content online, included sexualised and violent imagery, anonymous trolling, and material promoting suicide, self-harm and eating disorders.

Children tell me that they rarely seek out this content. It is promoted and offered up to them by highly complex recommendation algorithms, which are designed to capture and retain their attention. When harmful content is reported to platforms, children tell me that little is done in response.

Self-regulation by tech companies has failed; the experiences of so many children are testament to that. Yet we have an enormous opportunity to right these wrongs through the Online Safety Bill and careful regulation by Ofcom. It is vital that the Bill keeps children's safety at its heart.

Throughout all my work on digital policy, my guiding principle is to allow children to be the experts. It's crucial that children's views and experiences are central to the Online Safety Bill. I see it as my role to ensure that children's voices underpin each stage of the legislative process, as well as inform Ofcom's work in drafting the Codes of Practice which will define their regulation.

As a first step in this effort, I am delighted to present in this report findings from a survey of children and their parents. I will soon also convey the voices of children who participated in online safety focus groups. It is vital that the voices of children remain central to the debate.

Executive Summary

This report aims to understand digital childhoods, and what can be achieved through the Online Safety Bill to protect children online. The Children's Commissioner's Office (CCo) commissioned a survey of 2,005 children aged 8-17 and their parents. This survey is nationally representative of children in England, by age, gender and region. All statistics mentioned in this report are from this survey.

Building on Ofcom's research into children's media use and attitudes¹, this research makes several new contributions including a breakdown of children's exposure to harmful content by type of content and platform, by FSM eligibility and by use of parental tools as well as a breakdown of the reasons why children don't report harmful content to social media platforms and the response children receive to reporting harmful content. This report also presents new insights into parents' and children's attitudes to the role of age assurance in protecting children from harm on social media and messaging platforms. The Commissioner also requested information from six major tech firms – Apple, Google, Meta, Snap, TikTok and Twitter – on children's use of their platforms. The companies have committed to continue sharing this data with the Children's Commissioner on a six-monthly basis in recognition of her unique role in overseeing children's rights and views.

A summary of the key findings is below.

Survey findings

- **Social media is an integral part of children's lives.** According to our survey 65% of 8-12-year-olds use a social media platform and 91% of 13-18-year-olds do so.
 - **Underage use of social media platforms is widespread.** Across seven platforms surveyed, between 36%-79% of users aged 8-17 are under the minimum age in the terms of service. This is despite good awareness among children of the platforms' minimum age requirements.
 - **Parents are concerned about the content children can access online.** 67% of parents (and 74% with children aged 8-11) are concerned about the nature of content their children are exposed to online. The majority of parents use online safety tools.
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- **Children are exposed to harmful content online.** 45% of children aged 8-17 have seen content they felt was inappropriate or made them worried or upset. Boys were more likely than girls to have seen harmful content.
- **Children with Free School Meal status were more likely to see every type of harmful content online.** This includes sexualised and violent imagery, anonymous trolling, and content promoting self-harm, suicide or diet restriction.
- **Many children do not report harmful content they have seen.** 50% of children who saw harmful content reported it, older children and girls are less likely to report harmful content. 40% of children who didn't report harmful content told us they didn't report because they felt there was no point in doing so, while only 15% felt that the content didn't need to be reported.
- **Platforms often do not respond to children's reports of harmful content.** Of children who did report harmful content to the platforms, 25% saw no action on their reports and 10% weren't sure whether anything happened as a result of their report. Girls were less likely than boys to see action on a report of harmful content.
- **Children and parents think that minimum ages should be enforced on social media.** 70% of children (increasing to 75% of 16-17-year-olds) and 90% of parents think that social media platforms should enforce minimum age requirements.

Information request of tech firms

- The survey data set against tech firms' submissions to the Children's Commissioner suggest that companies are consistently underestimating the numbers of underage users on their platforms and the volume of harmful content which children are exposed to.

The Children's Commissioner's survey of children and parents

To understand more about children's digital lives and the types of harmful content they may encounter online, the Children's Commissioner commissioned a nationally representative survey of 2,005 children aged 8-17 and their parents.²

Parents were asked a series of questions about online safety, followed by their child. This provides a valuable insight into family perspectives across these issues. Using Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility as an indicator for financial vulnerability, we are also able to explore the relationship between 'offline' and 'online' vulnerabilities.

The questions were designed to speak to four research questions:

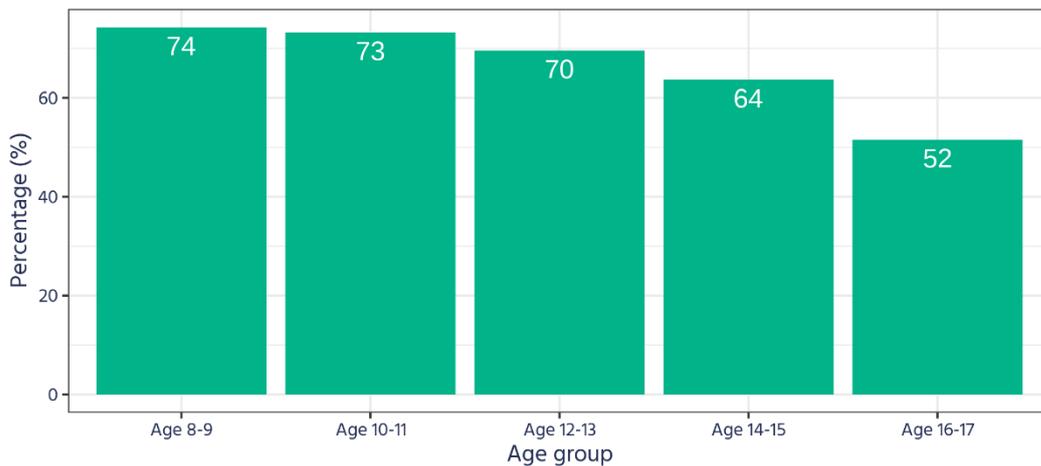
1. How concerned are parents about their child's online life?
2. Which children are more vulnerable to seeing harmful content on social media platforms?
3. Do children report harmful content to platforms, and what happens to reports when they are made?
4. What are children and parents' attitudes towards the role of age assurance in online safety?

Parents' concerns

Parents are concerned about the risks that their children face online

Two thirds (67%) of all parents are concerned about the content that their children are viewing online. This is particularly true among parents of younger children – 74% of those with a child aged 8-9 and 73% of those with a child aged 10-11 said they were concerned about the nature of content on social media, compared to 52% of parents with children aged 16-17.

Figure 1. Percentage of parents concerned about the content their children are viewing by child's age.



Note: Sample size is 1988 (excludes 17 parents who responded 'don't know'). Differences between age groups are only statistically significant between age 16-17 and all other age groups and between 14-15 and age 8-9 and age 10-11.

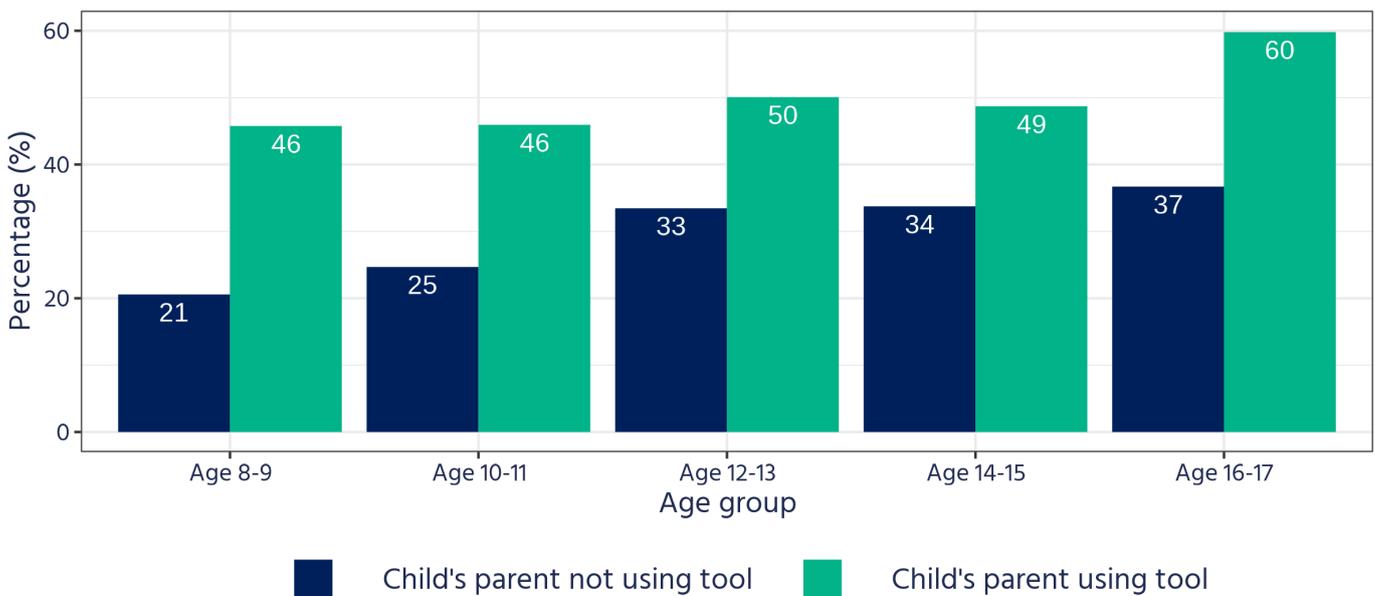
Concerns vary across platforms

Parents are most concerned about the content their child may see on TikTok (66% of parents) and least concerned about messaging apps such as WhatsApp (46%) and Apple iMessage (42%).³

Most parents use online safety tools

Three quarters (75%) of parents use tools to monitor and restrict what their children see and do online. Figure 2 shows that, in all age groups, children of parents who use tools were more likely to have ever come across any content or message which they felt was inappropriate, or made them worried or upset. This could be due to parents using tools in response to their children seeing inappropriate content or pre-emptively using tools because they're concerned their child is at risk of seeing inappropriate content.

Figure 2: Percentage of children who have seen inappropriate content by age and use of parental monitoring/filtering tools



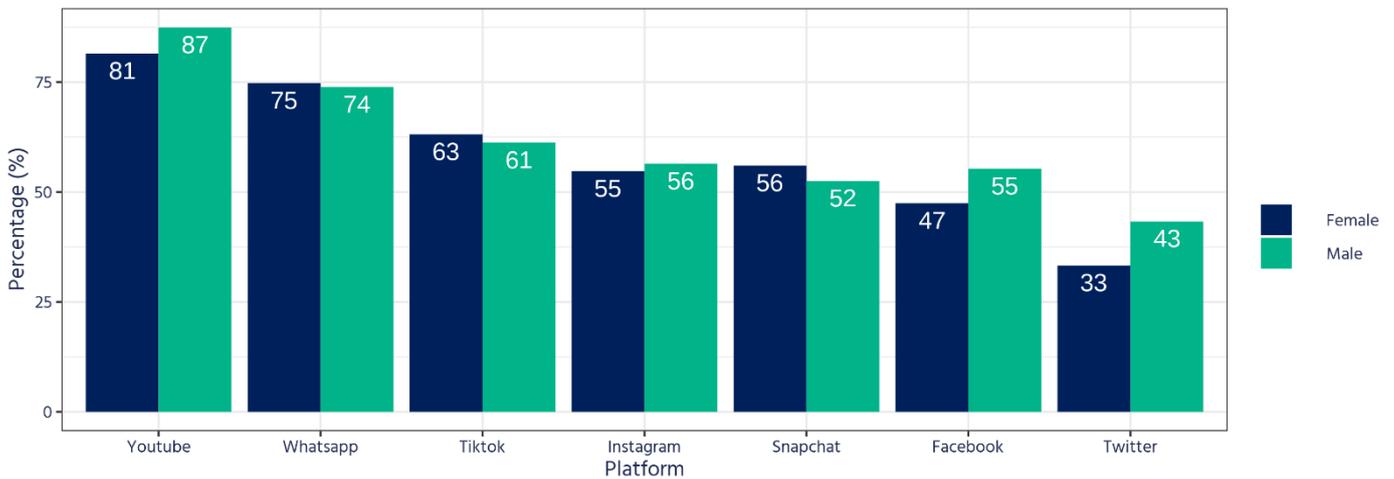
Note: Sample size is 1746 (excludes children who responded 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say').
All differences within age groups are statistically significant

Children’s experiences of platforms

Most children have a presence on social media and messaging (‘user-to-user’) platforms

Most children use some form of social media. Figure 3 shows that the most popular apps are YouTube and WhatsApp followed by TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat and that boys are more likely to access to WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. About 30% of children aged 8-17 use all seven apps surveyed.

Figure 3: Percentage of children aged 8-17 who access platform, by platform and gender



Note: Sample size is 1986 (excluding 19 children who haven't accessed the internet in the last week). The differences between gender are statistically significant for Youtube, Facebook and Twitter. The differences between platforms are statistically significant except between Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook for males and between Instagram and Snapchat for females.

Children are exposed to harmful content on social media and messaging platforms

Almost half (45%) of children aged 8-17 have seen some form of harmful content online.⁴

Table 1: Percentage of children aged 13-17 who saw harmful content in the last month by platform and type of content

	Anonymous Trolling	Sexualised images	Violent or gory content	Images of diet restriction	Pornography	Self-harm
Youtube	12	11	14	8	6	7
Whatsapp	10	9	8	5	6	5
Twitter	18	11	11	8	8	8
Tiktok	15	15	12	7	8	7
Snapchat	12	12	11	8	8	7
Instagram	14	12	10	10	7	6
Facebook	17	10	11	7	8	8

Percentage of children aged 13-17 using a platform that have seen harmful content (%)

5.0 7.5 10.0 12.5 15.0 17.5

Note: Sample size is 848 for Whatsapp, 708 for TikTok, 733 for Instagram, 668 for Snapchat, 857 for Youtube, 470 for Twitter, 657 for Facebook.

Table 1 shows the percentage of children aged 13-17 on a given platform who reported seeing various categories of harmful content on this platform, in the month prior to taking the survey, with darker shades indicated higher prevalence of harmful content.

Anonymous trolling was the harm which children were most likely to report having experienced, this was most prevalent on Twitter and Facebook. Sexualised and violent or gory content were the next most frequently reported, occurring with highest prevalence on TikTok and YouTube respectively.

Between 6-8% of children reported exposure to pornography across the platforms, in the month before taking the survey. Research by the BBFC suggests that almost two thirds of children have seen pornography online at some point, and that this was likely to be accessed on dedicated adult pornography sites.⁵ Nevertheless, the prevalence of pornography on platforms with minimum age requirements of 13 and 16 is cause for concern.

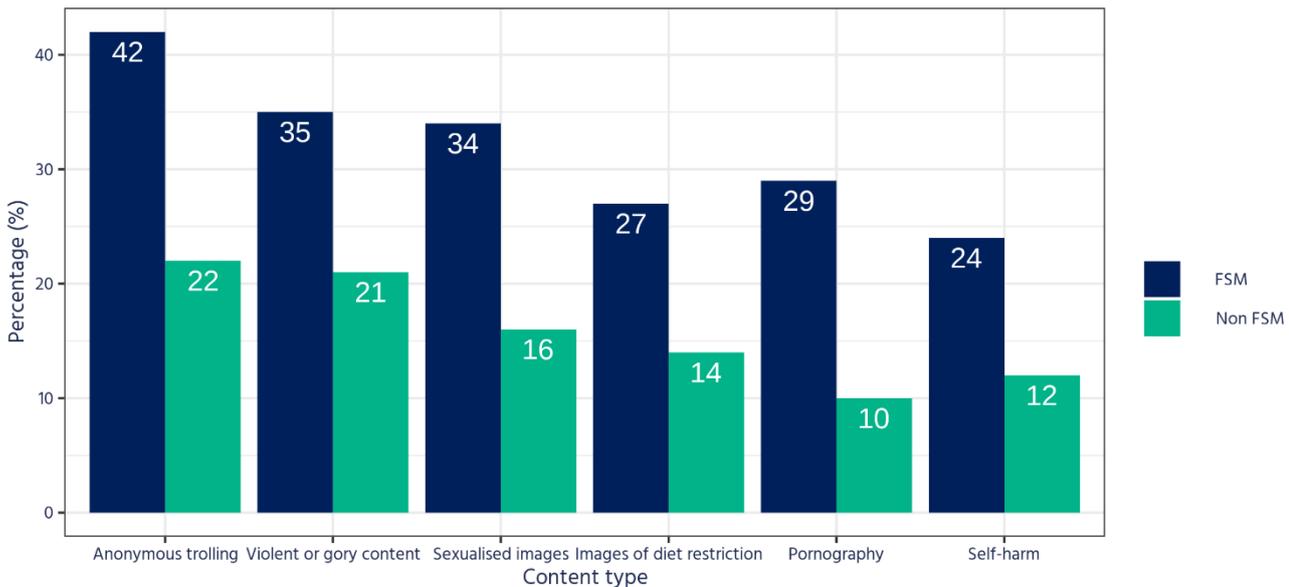
Boys are more likely to have seen harmful content

48% of boys have seen harmful content, compared to 42% of girls surveyed.

Children with Free School Meal (FSM) status are more vulnerable to harmful content

Over half of children eligible for Free School Meals (54%) have ever seen harmful content, significantly higher than their non-FSM peers (at 40%). Children with FSM status were consistently more likely to see harmful content in the last month across the six categories surveyed.

Figure 4: Percentage of children aged 13-17 who had seen harmful content by type of content and FSM status



Note: Sample size is 991 (excludes children under 13 and children who haven't accessed any platforms surveyed). All differences between FSM and non-FSM are statistically significant.

The relationship between FSM status and vulnerability to harmful online content is a particularly stark and worrying finding from the survey. It is consistent with research published recently by Internet Matters.⁶ The CCo will conduct more qualitative research with children to understand this issue in greater depth.

Reporting harmful content to platforms

Many children don't report harmful content to platforms

Of children who had seen harmful content, only half reported this to the platform.⁷ Older children and girls were less likely to report harmful content.

- 46% 12-17-year-olds reported harmful content, compared to 57% of 8-11-year-olds
- 44% of girls reported harmful content, compared to 55% of boys

Children with FSM status were more likely to report harmful content, (73% compared to 32% of children without FSM status). This may be due to the greater severity of content which these children are exposed to.

Children don't report because they don't feel there is 'any point' in doing so

40% of children who didn't report harmful content told us they didn't report because they felt there was no point in doing so. Almost a third (30%) said they didn't know how to report and 25% said they didn't know the content could be reported. Only 15% felt that the content didn't need to be reported.⁸ The older children get, the more likely they are to feel that there is no point in reporting or that the platform wouldn't do anything in response (53% for children aged 16-17 compared to 22% for children aged 8-9). We worry that this speaks to a gradual erosion of children's trust through their childhood and adolescence.

Children's reports are often not acted upon by platforms

Children's feelings of hopelessness are justified. Of children who did report harmful content to the platforms, 63% said the content was removed, but 25% saw no action on their reports and 10% weren't sure whether anything happened as a result of their report.⁹ Girls were more likely to see no action on their reports (32% of girls saw no action on their reports compared to 21% of boys).

Age Assurance

Many under-13s use social media platforms, despite awareness of minimum ages

Underage use of social media and messaging platforms is widespread. The platform with the largest share of underage users, according to the survey, is Whatsapp (min. age 16) followed by TikTok (min. age 13) and Instagram (min. age 13). The percentage of underage users, according to the survey, on each platform is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentage users aged 8-17 who are underage by platform

Platform	% of users age 8-17 who are underage
WhatsApp	79
YouTube	50
TikTok	44
Snapchat	41
Twitter	39
Facebook	38
Instagram	36

This is despite the fact that children, generally, have an accurate understanding of the minimum age across different social media and messaging platforms, with the exception of WhatsApp, as demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Average child's guess of the minimum age compared to the actual minimum age

Platform	Average child's guess	Actual minimum age	Absolute difference in years
WhatsApp	13	16	3
Twitter	14.2	13	-1.2
Facebook	14	13	-1
Instagram	14	13	-1
Snapchat	13.6	13	-0.6
TikTok	13.5	13	-0.5

Children and parents think that minimum ages on social media platforms should be enforced

70% of all children surveyed and 90% of all parents surveyed think that there should be a minimum age on social media platforms. As children get older, they become more likely to favour age restrictions.

Children eligible for FSM are also more likely to say they want age restrictions than other children. (73% compared to 68% of those not eligible for FSM).

Tech firm submissions to the Children's Commissioner

In December 2021, the Children's Commissioner co-hosted a roundtable of 'big tech' firms with the Secretaries of State for DCMS and Education, alongside the Children and Families Minister. The companies represent eight user-to-user platforms: Apple, Google, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter and WhatsApp.

The companies agreed to share information on a sixth-monthly basis with the Children's Commissioner on children's use of their platforms and continued efforts to protect children online, ahead of the Online Safety Bill.

When set against the CCo survey data on children's use of platforms and exposure to harmful content, it is clear that tech firms must do much more to protect children on their platforms. This includes implementing effective and privacy-protecting age assurance, as well as enhanced reporting processes for children and far stronger safeguards against harmful content. The Children's Commissioner will continue to call on tech companies to share information about all they are doing to protect children from accessing harmful content online.

The Children's Commissioner's reflections

Children grow up seamlessly online and offline. Relationships, education and other milestones of childhood and adolescence play out in the digital world, as much as they do at home, in the playground and in the classroom.

The rights and protections which exist in the offline world must, therefore, extend online. And we must hold tech firms to the highest standards on children's safety and wellbeing.

As the Online Safety Bill is shaped and formalised in Parliament, below I set out three key principles for the legislation, distilled from my conversations with children and industry. These are: children's voice, recognition of childhood and a collaborative approach to online safety.

Children's voice

Many of the children and teenagers I speak to are dispirited and despondent. They feel they have no power against the might of global tech firms. My survey found that when children *do* report harmful content, little happens.¹⁰ There is little recourse when platforms don't respond, and children's faith is gradually eroded. As I saw in my survey, the older a child gets, the less likely they are to report harmful content.

I would like to see a strong, independent voice for children enshrined in the Bill.

Recognition of childhood

Platforms can't hope to protect children if they don't first know *which* accounts belong to children. Every platform I have spoken to has terms and conditions setting out a minimum age for signing up to their services. But my survey shows that children do regularly access social media when underage, even though they know the minimum age requirements.

I would like Ofcom to draw up a Code of Practice on proportionate age assurance as a priority. Standards should be privacy-preserving, inclusive, and effective. I urge tech firms to develop and roll-out technology which meets these principles ahead of regulation.

A collaborative approach

My roundtables with tech firms demonstrate just how little information and best practice is shared across industry. Cross-industry collaboration, mandated by the Online Safety Bill, would require companies to work together on key risks which span across multiple platforms.¹¹ Children tell me how often sexual harassment and abuse is perpetrated across several platforms, with intimate images shared across private chats, social media and even gaming channels.

The Bill should require platforms to work together on child safety, sharing insights and best practice. This should include a requirement on platforms to share information on cross-platform child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSEA), such as 'breadcrumbing', and child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

References

¹ Ofcom, [Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2022](#), accessed 28.09.22

² The survey was carried out by CHILDWISE in March 2022. The results were weighted by gender, age and geographic region of the child.

³ Samples size is 1,592 for Apple iMessage, 1,848 for WhatsApp, and 1,808 for TikTok (excludes parents who responded 'don't know' or didn't respond). Differences are statistically significant.

⁴ Sample size is 1,746 (excludes children who responded "don't know" or "prefer not to say")

⁵ BBFC (2020) [Young people, Pornography & Age-verification](#). Accessed 23.09.22.

⁶ Internet Matters (2022) "[Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World: Index Report 2022](#)", accessed 22.09.22.

⁷ Excludes children who responded "I don't know" or "Prefer not to say"

⁸ Note that children could select multiple answers

⁹ 1% said "something else" happened in response to their report.

¹⁰ In terms of illegal child sexual abuse material (CSAM), there have been major improvements over the last decade. I applaud the work of IWF in the UK and NCMEC in the USA, in tagging and eradicating this material.

¹¹ Such as 'breadcrumbing', as highlighted by NSPCC (2022) "[Child sexual abuse crimes reach record levels](#)", accessed 15.09.22



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