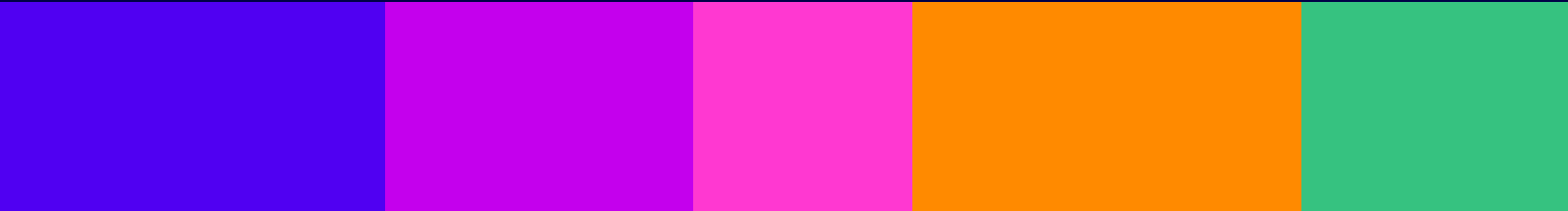


Children's Online Experiences

Including a comparative analysis of the periods before and after the children's safety duties came into force

Published 21 May 2026

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Executive summary

This report examines children's online experiences, their exposure to harm online and safety measures, before and after the Children's Safety Duties came into force on 25 July 2025.¹ It compares findings from two waves of our Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST) survey: Wave 1, conducted before the children's duties came into force (March–April 2025) and Wave 2, conducted after the children's duties came into force (November–December 2025) and references key insights from our Children and Parents Media Use and Attitudes research. This is supplemented by data from our Children's Passive Online Measurement study (CPOM), alongside other data from relevant Ofcom research with children aged 8-17 years and their parents.²

Section 1: Children's online usage

What children are doing online: entertainment, gaming and AI

Almost all 8-17-year-olds are online (99%) and most (78%) have their own mobile phone - with ownership rising steeply between age 10 and 11 (56% to 83%). The mobile phone was the most common device children use to go online (77% among those who go online) - six in ten (59%) used a tablet, and 55% used a games console. Watching video content (89%) and gaming online (72%) were among the most popular online activities for children (aged 8-17).

Much of the video content consumed is likely to be via social media or video sharing platforms with 95% of children saying they used at least one of these services in the last four weeks. More children who use these services told us they tend to consume and react to content (65%) than create it (34%). This behaviour was also true for other online activities. For example, 71% of children said they viewed livestreaming content (49% say they watch it 'live') while 27% say they have created livestreamed content.

As noted above, online gaming was a common activity - participation was higher among boys. Most children played with friends, family, or people they know in person, but many interacted with people they have only met online: over half (55%) did so at least sometimes, and one in five (20%) did so frequently.

While relatively new by comparison, AI tools are becoming widely embedded in children's online experiences, particularly among teenagers. Over half (56%) of children aged 8-17 said they have used AI, rising to 66% of 16-17s. Children said they use AI for learning, creativity and everyday tasks. One in ten (11%) AI users aged 8-17 said they have used AI as someone to talk to or "as a friend".

Services children are using, and accessing below the minimum age

As noted above, social media and video sharing platforms continue in popularity which is reflected in children's reported use of individual services - YouTube (excluding YouTube Kids) was the most popular (67%), followed by WhatsApp – primarily used for messaging (61%), TikTok (60%) and Snapchat (50%). Around four in ten children said they used each of Instagram, Facebook and Roblox - primarily a gaming service.

¹ Sections 12 and 29 of the Act

² See methodology section in the Annex for full details of all studies and methodologies within this report.

The proportion of 8-12s who said they use at least one online service with a minimum age of at least 13 stands at 90%, driven by YouTube (63%),³ followed by WhatsApp (52%) and TikTok (45%). While awareness of the existence of minimum age requirements for social media platforms among parents⁴ was high (83%), fewer (32%) identified 13 as the minimum age used by most services who set one. Just over six in ten (62%) parents of children aged 6 months to 17 years said they would not allow their child access to social media before the minimum age, a quarter (25%) said they would.

How long they are spending online, and attitudes towards this

Children aged 8-14 spent on average 3 hours 36 minutes a day, equating to just over a day a week, online (25.2hrs/week). Of this time, 1 hour and 59 minutes were spent on social media or video-sharing services. Children's online use varied by day of the week, with higher engagement during the weekend. Children spent the most time on YouTube (49 minutes a day, equating to 23% of daily online activity) followed by Snapchat (39 minutes, 18% of their daily online activity). Average time spent online increases with age - older children (15-17-year-olds) spent on average 6 hours 20 minutes a day, equating to just under two days a week (44hrs 20 mins/week).

These averages mask large variations in the amount of time spent online by children in this age group. For example, 8-14s with the heaviest usage spent on average 6 hours and 28 minutes online per day and lightest users spending 55 minutes.

Nearly four in ten 8-17s (37%) told us that their screen time is too high. Parents were more likely to say their child's screen time was too high (55%). Two-thirds (65%) of 13-17-year-olds said they have actively tried to manage their time-online (e.g. disabling notifications (29%), setting aside offline time (28%), and not taking devices to bed (21%)). Children and parents of children who said they spent more time online than they planned or realised, talked about examples of design features which they felt were influencing time on services including infinite scroll, auto-play and streaks.

Section 2: Children's exposure to harmful content

Exposure to harmful content

Fewer (from 29% to 24%) 11-17s said they had been exposed to content (in a four-week period) on an app, website or online game that they considered inappropriate, and that made them feel upset, scared or uncomfortable – potentially indicating a reduction in the most egregious types of content. However, when prompted with a list of harmful content⁵, around seven in ten (73%) recalled being exposed to at least one piece of harmful content in a four-week period,⁶ consistent with Wave 1 (70%). On average, children told us they had been exposed to nearly 5 different types of harmful content in that four-week period.⁷

Almost one-third (31%) of 11–17s said they had been exposed to at least one of the most harmful types of content (PPC) consistent with Wave 1 data (30%). Content relating to bullying (62%) and

³ Users must be at least 13 years old to use YouTube. Under 13s may use YouTube through a supervised account (with parental consent). This research is unable to establish the extent to which U13s were accessing YouTube via their own accounts or a supervised account.

⁴ Parents of children aged 6 months to 17 years.

⁵ See introduction in Section 2 and Annex for the full list of harmful content types, children were asked about

⁶ The term *harmful content* is used to refer collectively to primary priority content (PPC) and priority content (PC) only – it does not include exposure to non-designated content (NDC). Children were not shown harmful content but were prompted with a list of harmful content, see annex for definitions.

⁷ Children were shown between 18 – 20 individual answer codes for different types of harmful content, which were grouped together into 9 categories of harmful content. See Annex for more information.

hateful content (51%) remained the most common types of harmful content recalled by children, with bullying showing a significant increase from Wave 1 (58%).

Services where children are most likely to see harmful content

Reflecting the popularity of services among children, those most likely to be mentioned by children as the source of harmful content were TikTok mentioned the most (53%), followed by YouTube (excluding YouTube Kids) (36%), Instagram (34%), Snapchat (31%), and Facebook (31%). Increases in recalled exposure were noted for both TikTok and Snapchat. Facebook was the only service where exposure to harmful content declined, although it remained in the top five. A quarter (25%) of children said they saw harmful content on Roblox, the same proportion that cited WhatsApp (25%).

Self-reported exposure to the most harmful types of content – content children should be prevented from seeing, defined as PPC in the Act – was highest on TikTok (42%), followed by Instagram (26%), YouTube (25%) Facebook (23%) and Snapchat (18%). Exposure on TikTok rose (from 35% to 42%) but fell for YouTube (32% to 25%), Facebook (30% to 23%), and Facebook Messenger (12% to 8%) – it remained unchanged for Instagram and Snapchat.

Among users, exposure to harm highlights risks on less popular services

While the analysis above indicates where most harm is occurring, it can mask important insights into exposure among *users* of services, particularly those less popular with children. This analysis indicates that children using X (14% of children say they have used this service recently) are as likely as TikTok users (65% of children) to say they have been exposed to harmful content, in the last four weeks, on this platform (61% and 60% respectively).

Pathways to harmful content and children's reactions

Personal feeds continued to be the most likely route through which 11-17s said they were exposed to harmful content (35%), consistent with Wave 1 (37%). A rising proportion said they were exposed through someone's comments (21%, vs 14% at Wave 1). Around one in ten said they were exposed when playing an online game (13%), in group chats (10%) and/or watching livestreaming (9%).

When asked how they reacted, the most common response was to ignore and/or scroll past it (47%). However, six in ten (59%) took some form of action, including using negative sentiment tools like 'not interested' (15%), 'blocking' (11%), or 'reporting' (12%), similar to Wave 1. More children told an adult about harmful content they had seen (15% up from 10% at Wave 1), driven predominantly by girls (20% from 10%) and 11–12s (21% from 9%).

Reporting is an important mechanism to alert services to harmful content which has bypassed other safety measures. Despite most children (87%) being aware of this functionality and saying reporting tools were easy to use (86%), reporting harmful content to the service remained relatively low at Wave 2 (12%). However, among those who did report, around twice as many said they had received a response from the service indicating they would investigate (27% from 13% at Wave 1).

Section 3: Staying safe online

Experiences of age assurance

Since the children's safety duties came into force⁸, children aged 8–17 (with social media profile/s on popular user-to-user services) have increasingly reported being asked to prove their age (51% up from 41%). Among those who had, exposure to age assurance methods, excluding self-declaration, also rose - from 25% in July 2025 to 43% in January 2026.⁹ Age estimation (i.e. facial scanning) was most commonly encountered by these users (28%, up from 5% pre-safety duties), followed by approaches involving uploading a passport or ID and taking a selfie for verification (14%).

Note: Research can only identify whether a child has encountered age assurance methods that are visible to them. Some services use age inference methods to make a determination of age in the background in order to apply their child safety duties.¹⁰

Getting around restrictions

A minority (16%) of children told us that they could circumvent age gates, but even fewer (5%) told us that they had done so. In a different study children (11-17s) were asked about a variety of online activities where a VPN could be used, including accessing geo-blocked content (e.g. content not available in the UK like films, series or gaming), or content with age restrictions. In total, 25% of children told us they had used a VPN in the last 6 months: 14% said they had used it for reasons including those listed above, or to 'hide their identity, keep personal information private' and a further one in ten (11%) said they had used a VPN but did not tell us why. VPN use was more common among boys (29% vs. 20%) and rose with age – with 31% of 16-17s stating they used a VPN in the last 6 months.

Use of safety tools

Children say they are using protective measures to stop seeing unwanted content online. Half of 8-17s said they have used a negative sentiment button to reduce harmful content on their feeds, with the most likely being the 'not interested' button (35%). Around a third have used blocking (36%) and/or muting functions (31%) and a fifth (22%) of children who had posted content said they have disabled comments. Use of these tools remained broadly consistent between waves.

⁸ Please note, not all user-to-user services need to use age assurance to comply with our measures and their duties under the Act. We expect the riskiest user-to-user services to use highly effective age assurance to protect children from harmful content.

⁹ Data based on children who recalled being asked to prove their age, 51% of children in January 2026

¹⁰ As age inference models work by analysing a user's activity while on a service to infer their age, in practice, this means that children have limited awareness and visibility of these age checks compared to on sites where a user is prompted to undergo an age check (e.g. facial age estimation) prior to accessing the site or specific parts of it.

Introduction

Under the Online Safety Act 2023 (the Act'), Ofcom's role is to make online services safer for the people who use them, especially children. This includes ensuring that in scope user-to-user and search services meet their children's safety duties, as well as developing a broad understanding of children's online experiences.

On 25 July 2025 Ofcom's Protection of Children Codes of Practice (Children's Codes¹¹) came into effect, setting out a range of recommended measures. For user-to-user services, these duties include preventing children from exposure to primary priority content (PPC), and protecting children from other types of harmful content, including priority content (PC) and non-designated content (NDC).¹²

To support our role in implementing and assessing these duties we hear directly from children across the UK through a range of research. This tells us how children spend their time online, the services they use and their exposure to harmful content online.

This is the first report that brings together findings from across our programme of research with children - with a focus on comparing children's reported exposure to harmful content online from before and after the children's safety duties came into force.^{13 14}

It draws primarily on data from our *Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST)*¹⁵, our *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes* report and *Children's Passive Online Measurement study (CPOM)*, alongside other relevant Ofcom research with children and their parents.¹⁶

We will continue to invest in and strengthen our programme of research to support ongoing monitoring and reporting of children's online experiences.

Structure of this report

Section 1: Use of online services sets out how children spend their time online, their use of online services and includes analysis on how much time children spend online.

Section 2: Exposure to harmful content examines children's recalled exposure to harmful content and how this has changed over time. It includes analysis of the services and functionalities children tell us they were using at the time and their reactions to this content e.g. reporting it to the service, blocking or muting, seeking help online, or scrolling past it.

Section 3: Staying safe online explores children's experiences of being asked to prove their age before and after the children's safety duties came into force. It also sets out children's awareness of online safety and how they recalled engaging with user controls on services to support their safety online.

¹¹ The Children's Codes apply to providers of online services likely to be accessed by children in the UK, who are legally required under the children's safety duties to take or use proportionate measures to protect children from content that is harmful to them.

¹² The list of content defined as PPC and PC are contained in the introduction of Section 2

¹³ Based on comparisons between the first two waves of data collected through the COST survey. Fieldwork periods: Wave 1 (March–April 2025), conducted before the children's safety duties came into force; and Wave 2 (November–December 2025), conducted four months after the duties came into force.

¹⁴ This report focuses on children's online experiences on user-to-user services only.

¹⁵ See methodology section in the Annex for further details on COST methodology.

¹⁶ See methodology section in the Annex for full details of all methodologies within this report.

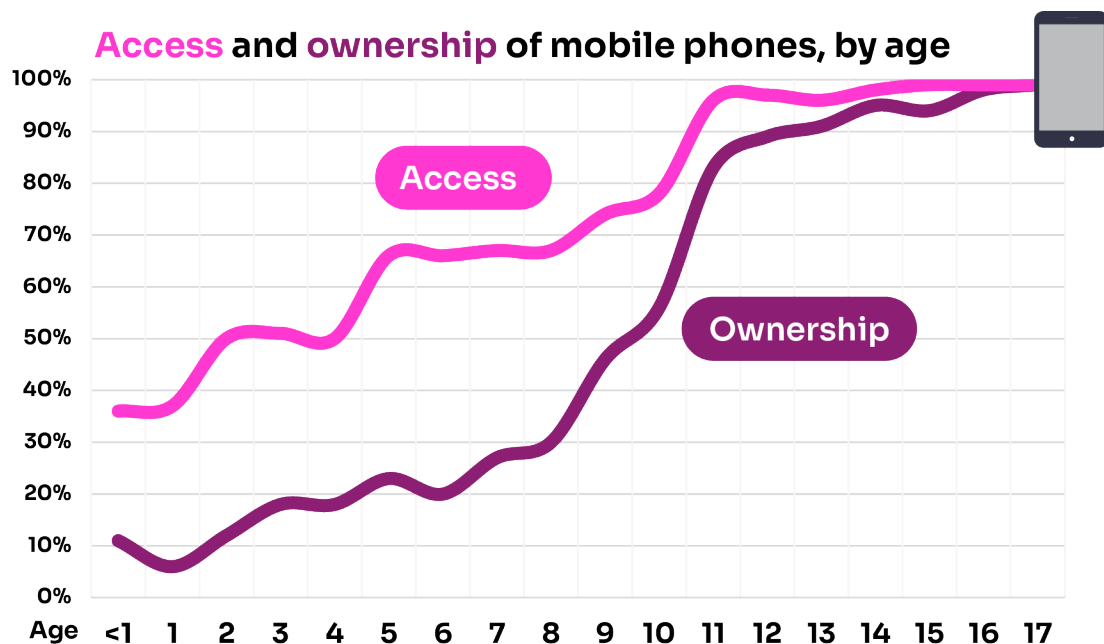
Section 1: Use of online services

Children's online usage

Almost all children (8-17 years) are online (99%) – mainly via smartphones, watching videos and gaming are the most popular activities

By age 6-7 more than 9 in 10 (93%) children are going online, and by age 10 this is almost ubiquitous (98%). The most common devices children (aged 8-17) use to go online with are smartphones (77%) and tablets (59%), followed by games consoles (55%), smart TVs (52%), and laptops (51%). Most (78%) children aged 8-17 own their own mobile phone, with a sharp increase between ages 10 and 11 (56% vs 83% respectively),¹⁷ likely reflecting the transition to secondary school and more independent device use.

Figure 1: Access and ownership of mobile phones among children aged 6 months to 17 years



Source: Ofcom Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2026: Base: All parents (5008)

Children primarily said they go online for entertainment (including watching TV, films and gaming), education and social connection. Nine in ten (89%) 8-17s said they use apps or sites to watch videos and around seven in ten (72%) said they game online.¹⁸ Almost two-thirds (64%) said they use websites or apps to help them with their mental or physical wellbeing, most often to relax, improve their mood, or feel motivated.

¹⁷ Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2026.

¹⁸ Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2026.

Social media and video sharing platforms are ways children can watch video content. 95%¹⁹ of children 8-17 use at least one of the social media or video sharing platforms that we asked about (see Online Services children use below for more information). When using social media, many children say they tend to consume content rather than create it. Two-thirds (65%) of 8-17s who use social media said that they mainly read, watch, follow or 'like' content on social media platforms, compared to around a third (34%) who said they share, comment on or post content.²⁰ This behaviour is also true for livestreaming - 71% of children (aged 8-17) view this type of content vs. 27% saying they have livestreamed.

Livestreaming²¹, gaming and use of AI

Livestreaming activities are popular and while 71% said that they had ever *viewed* a livestream, around half (49%) of 8-17-year-olds had *viewed live* livestreams and 34% watched **recorded** livestreams (some doing both). In relation to creators, 27% of children said they had created a livestream with 10% (in total) doing so frequently i.e. "often" or "all the time".

Most children who said they viewed livestreams in real-time were actively engaged, with 72% saying they took part in at least one interactive behaviour. These interactions most commonly involved features such as reactions (42%), polls (27%) or live chat (26%), while fewer children reported financial engagement, such as sending gifts or spending money (18%).

Gaming dominated livestream viewing, with 63% of viewers saying they watched gaming content. However, livestream viewing patterns were gendered: boys were significantly more likely than girls to watch gaming livestreams (78% vs. 45%). While girls were more likely to watch a broader range of content types, including performing (36% vs 22%), make-up tutorials (39% vs 6%), arts and crafts (28% vs 16%), GRWM (29% vs 8%) and ASMR content (16% vs 11%).²²

As noted above gaming is a popular online activity, 55% of children (8-17) use a games console to go online and 72% say they game online. In our *Children's Media Lives* children described gaming as a way to spend time with friends or family members, as well as an opportunity to meet new people. Some emphasised the social aspects of play, including talking to and messaging others, as well as the gameplay itself. Most children aged 8-17 who game online said they mostly played either by themselves (48%) or with friends or family members (55%). Around one in five (19%) said they mostly play with people they have only ever met online, although over half (55%) of those children who game online said that they play with people they have not met in real life at least some of the time.

Newer tools such as AI are becoming widely embedded in children's online experiences. Children said they use AI tools for learning, creativity and everyday tasks. Over half (56%) of children aged 8-

¹⁹ Taken from social media and video-sharing services in COST: YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, Reddit, Pinterest, YouTube Kids, and X.

²⁰ Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2026.

²¹ Ofcom, Livestreaming report 2026. Note: Caution should be exercised when interpreting livestreaming prevalence data as representative of UK children aged 8-17. A description of one-to-many livestreaming was provided in the survey, but in some cases, children may have interpreted this more broadly to include activities that overlap with or fall under alternative formats. For further information on the data, see our [Livestreaming report](#).

²² Performing (e.g. singing, dancing, musical instrument), Arts and Crafts (e.g. drawing, painting, crocheting), GRWM ("get ready with me") and ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) content. For further detail see [Livestreaming](#).

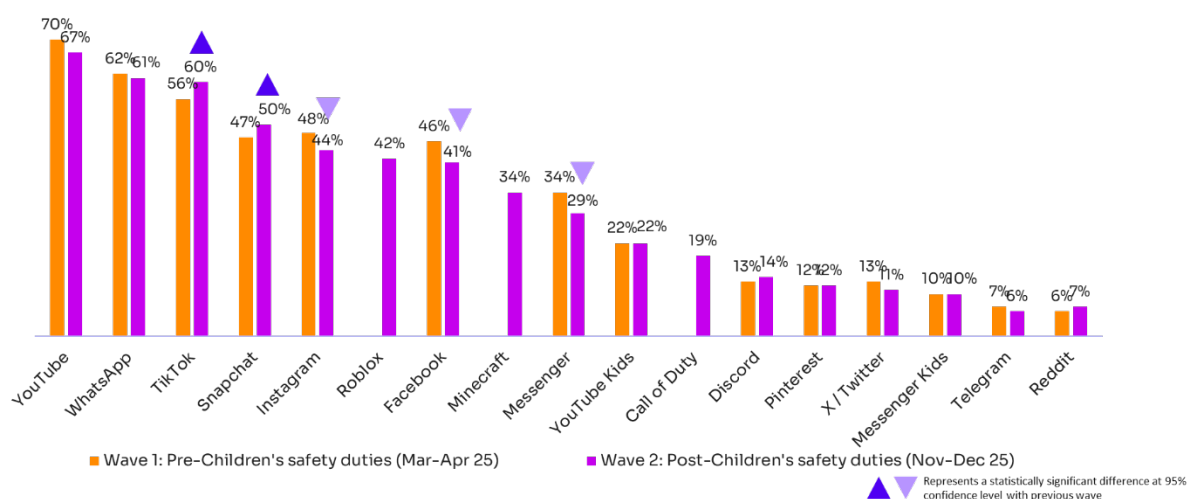
17 said they have used AI for at least one activity - higher among older teens (66% of 16-17s). One in ten (11%) children who have used AI said they had used it as someone to talk to or “as a friend”. ²³

Online services children use

The platforms children say they use are consistent with the activities children report doing online (watching videos and gaming) and include messaging services.

YouTube was the service most children said they had used (67%). Around three in five children (11-17) said they used WhatsApp (61%) and TikTok (60%) and half said they used Snapchat. Around four in ten children said they used Instagram, and this was the same for Facebook and Roblox. ²⁴ TikTok and Snapchat were the only services with higher reported use this Wave with fewer children using Instagram, Facebook and Facebook Messenger than Wave 1.

Figure 2: 8-17-year-olds recalled use of services



Source: Ofcom, Children's Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1, Wave 2. Base: All children aged 8-14

Use of services below the minimum age persists with nine in ten 8-12s using online services with a minimum age requirement of 13+

The proportion of 8-12s who said they had used at least one online service with a minimum age of at least 13 to create their own account (indicated on the chart below) was 90%, the same as Wave 1, ²⁵ driven by use of YouTube (63%) ²⁶, WhatsApp (52%) and TikTok (45%). Among this age group there was a decline in use of YouTube and Instagram but an increase for TikTok, since Wave 1.

When analysed by age, children were more likely to say they had used one of these services the closer they were to the minimum age requirement (e.g. 90% for 12-year-olds). However, three

²³ Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2026.

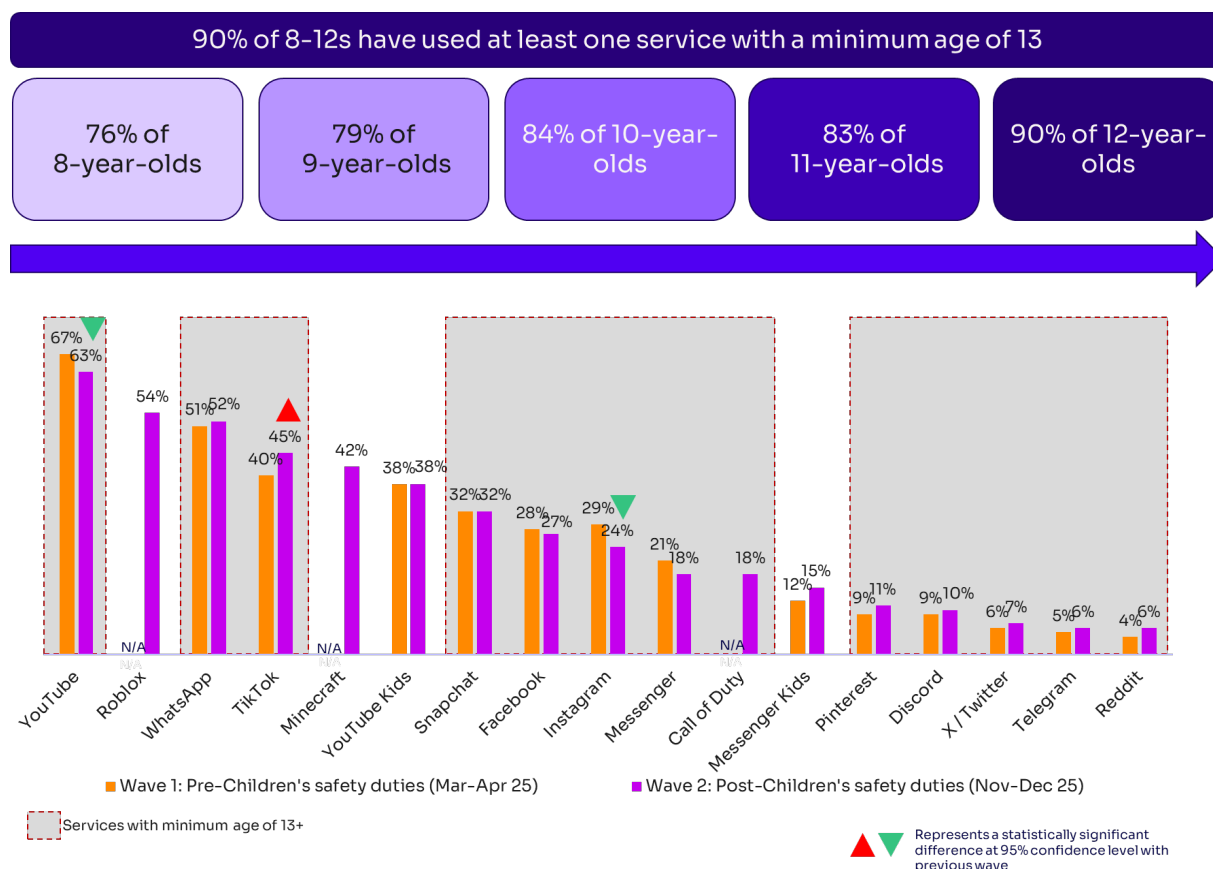
²⁴ Ofcom, Children's online safety tracker 2025.

²⁵ For purposes of comparability across waves, Call of Duty usage was not included in this calculation

²⁶ Users must be at least 13 years old to use YouTube. Under 13s may use YouTube through a supervised account (with parental consent). This research is unable to establish the extent to which U13s were accessing YouTube via their own accounts or a supervised account.

quarters of 8-year-olds said they had used a service in the last four weeks where the minimum age was at least 13 (76%).

Figure 3: 8-12-year-olds recalled use of online services



Source: Ofcom, Children's Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1, Wave 2. Base: All children aged 8-12

Awareness among parents of the existence of minimum age requirements was high: more than eight in ten (83%) parents²⁷ knew that social media services have a minimum age. However, fewer were able to identify the correct age, with just under a third (32%) correctly identifying 13 as the minimum age for most online services.

Just over six in ten (62%) parents of children aged 6 months to 17 years said they would not allow their child access to social media before the minimum age, while a quarter (25%) said they would.

Parents of children aged 10-15 were more likely than parents of children of other ages to say they would allow their child access (c. 30%).²⁸

²⁷ Parents of children aged 6 months to 17 years

²⁸ Agreement with statement 'I would allow my child to have a profile on a social media site or app before they had reached the minimum age required'

Children (8–14 years) spend on average over a day a week online (25.2 hours/ week) rising to almost 2 days a week for 15–17-year-olds (44.3 hours/ week)

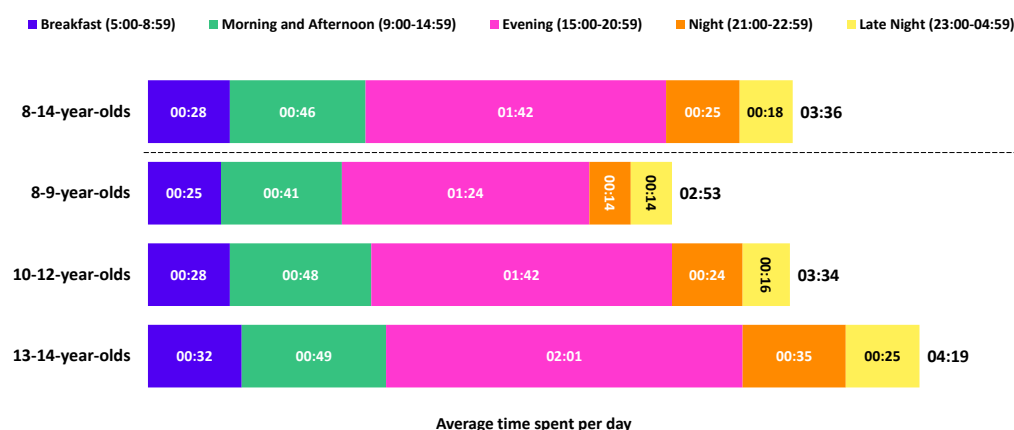
Our children’s passive online measurement study monitors the online usage patterns of a panel of 701 children aged 8-14. It reports on the services children’s devices ‘visit’ over a 28-day period and the amount of time each child spends on each of these services.²⁹

UK online 8-14-year-olds spent an average of 3 hours 36 minutes a day online across smartphones, tablets or computers equating just over a day a week (25.2 hours/ week). Of this time, 1 hour and 59 minutes was spent on social media or video-sharing services.³⁰ Time online increased with age from an average of 2 hours 53 minutes for 8-9-year-olds to 4 hours 19 minutes among 13-14-year-olds.³¹

Children’s online use varied by day of the week, with higher engagement during the weekend - 8-14s spent 43 minutes *more* online per day during the weekend than on a weekday. This was an average of 4 hours 7 minutes (weekend) and 3 hours 24 minutes (weekday).

Use of services extended into late-night hours. 8-9-year-olds spent an average of 14 minutes a day online in the late-night period (23:00-04:59), with 13-14s online for an average of 25 minutes a day in this late-night period.

Figure 4: Average time spent online on smartphones, tablets and computers, per visitor per day: by age and daypart (hours:minutes)



Source: Ofcom Children’s Passive Online Measurement (CPOM), fieldwork October 2025 – March 2026. Note: Use measured across smartphones, tablets and computers, other devices such as TV sets, games consoles and smart speakers not included. Due to rounding totals may be slightly over/under.

²⁹ To align with the UKOM-endorsed Ipsos iris reporting, within the Children’s Passive Online Measurement (CPOM) Study, a visit is classed as a website or app being opened for >1 second, this does not imply that a visitor is actively using a service – accidental visits, visits that can’t get beyond a log-in page, visits that are blocked by age assurance and visits to sites that are used to authenticate access to another site are all included and contribute to the visitor numbers reported.

³⁰ Children also visited a multitude of other categories including search, music and gaming. Overall time spent does not include access to online services via smart TV or games console; time spent gaming is also only registered if on a smartphone/tablet. See CPOM report for further details.

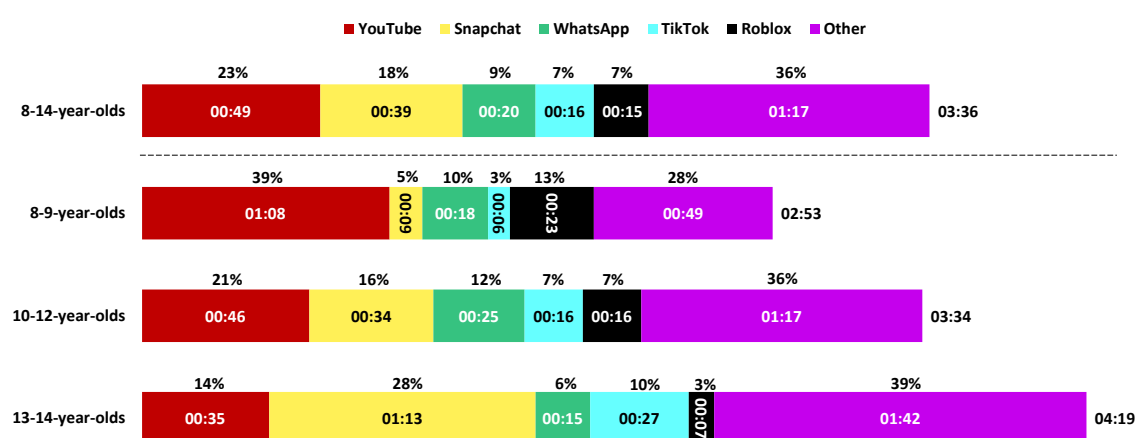
³¹ Ofcom, Children’s Passive Online Measurement (CPOM) Study, age: 8-14 internet users, fieldwork October 2025 – March 2026, each panellist completed 28 consecutive days of study.

YouTube and Snapchat account for 41% of an 8-14-year-olds average daily online use

YouTube was the service where children spent the most time – 49 minutes per day, equating to 23% of daily online activity. Children aged 8-9 spent longer on the service than older children in the 8-14 age group. Snapchat was the service with the second highest time spent, with 8-14-year-olds spending an average of 39 minutes per day on the service – 18% of their daily online activity.

TikTok accounted for 7% (16 minutes) of 8-14s daily online activity, a similar proportion to Roblox (7% - 15 minutes). For Roblox daily time spent decreased with age, whereas the opposite was true for TikTok.³²

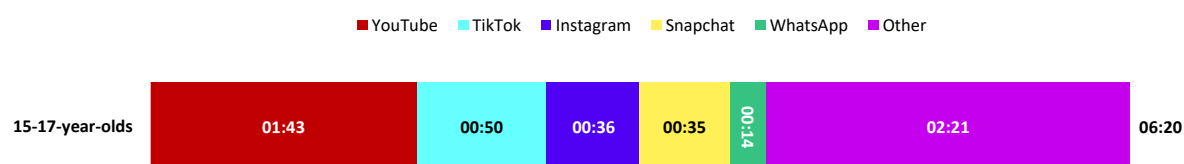
Figure 5: Share of average time spent online per day by UK online children aged 8-14, by service (hours:minutes) and age



Source: Ofcom Children's Passive Online Measurement (CPOM), fieldwork October 2025 – March 2026. Note: Use measured across smartphones, tablets and computers, other devices such as TV sets, games consoles and smart speakers not included. Average time by internet user is based on all online 8-14-year-old children whether or not they visited the service.

Time online increases further for 15–17-year-olds who spent on average 6 hours 20 minutes online per day, just shy of two days a week (44.3 hours/ week). Time spent visiting YouTube peaked for children aged 8-9 (1hour 8 minutes) and those aged 15-17 (1 hour 43 minutes). 15-17s also spent more time than younger children on TikTok and Instagram.

Figure 6: Share of average time spent online per day by UK online children aged 15-17, by service (hours:minutes)



³² Ofcom, Children's Passive Online Measurement (CPOM) Study, age: 8-14 internet users, fieldwork October 2025 – March 2026, each panellist completed 28 consecutive days of study.

Source: Ipsos, Ipsos iris Online Audience Measurement Service, time on smartphones, tablets and computers only, May 2025, age 15-17, UK internet users. Only foreground app use is measured; audio play when Spotify app is closed is not measured.

Some children spend significantly longer than average, online each day

Only exploring the average amount of time children spend online can mask important nuances and variation in children's use of services. Analysis comparing the amount of daily time spent online between the heaviest 8-14-year-old users (i.e. the top-quartile – 25%) and the lightest users in this age group (i.e. the bottom quartile - 25%) highlights substantial variation in how much time children (in a similar age group) spend online.³³

8-14-year-olds with the lightest usage spent an average of 55 minutes per day online, compared with 6 hours 28 minutes among the heaviest users. This increased further to almost 7 hours a day among the heaviest users aged 13-14.

Looking at users of the main services used by children aged 8-14; Snapchat's heaviest users were spending on average around 4 hours 20 minutes per day on the service. For YouTube this was 2 hours 38 minutes and TikTok's heaviest users spent around 1 hour 6 minutes. Among Roblox users - the heaviest users aged 8-14 spent on average 1 hour and 19 minutes per day on the Roblox app. And for WhatsApp this was 1 hour 28 minutes per day.³⁴

More detail on the amount of time children spend online can be found in the [full report](#).

Attitudes towards screen time among children and parents vary

Nearly four in ten (37%) children aged 8-17 agreed with the statement that, in general, their screen time is too high, comparable with the proportion who disagreed (38%). Around one in five children (22%) neither agree nor disagreed.

Parents were more likely than their children to say that their screen time was too high: over half of parents of 8-17s (55%) agreed that their child's screen time was too high.³⁵

Many older children, those aged 13-17, said they were taking active steps to manage their time online, including efforts at reducing their screen time. Almost two-thirds (65%) said they had undertaken at least one device-management step in the last 12 months. The most common actions included disabling notifications (29%), setting time aside time for themselves when they are not online (28%), and avoiding taking devices with them to bed (21%).³⁶

However, qualitative findings suggest that for some teenagers these measures do not always feel very effective.³⁷

³³ Children were grouped into quartiles based on their total time spent across all measured apps and websites over the 28-day period. 'Lighter users' refer to children in the bottom quartile (lowest 25%) by total time spent, while 'heavier users' refer to children in the top quartile (highest 25%)

³⁴ Ofcom, Children's Passive Online Measurement (CPOM) Study, age: 8-14 internet users, fieldwork October 2025 – March 2026, each panellist completed 28 consecutive days of study.

³⁵ Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2026.

³⁶ Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2026.

³⁷ Ofcom, Children's Media Lives Report 2026.

When we spoke to children who reported spending more time online than they planned to or realised, the children and their parents shared examples of service design features that they felt were influencing the children's time on services, including infinite scroll, auto-play, and streaks.³⁸

"You just scroll and scroll and scroll and suddenly it's gone from lunchtime to almost dinner time and you're like, ah, my head hurts." **Boy, 10-year-old. Exploring the relationship between persuasive design on online platforms, and the time that children spend on them: Post-Children's safety duties**

³⁸ Ofcom, Exploring the relationship between persuasive design on online platforms, and the time that children spend on them 2026

Section 2: Children’s exposure to harmful content

Introduction

The children’s safety duties under the Online Safety Act (‘the Act’) require services likely to be accessed by children to protect them from exposure to harmful content.³⁹ On 25 July 2025 Ofcom’s Protection of Children Codes of Practice (Children’s Codes) came into effect, setting out a range of recommended measures.⁴⁰ The Children’s Codes apply to providers of online services likely to be accessed by children in the UK, who are legally required under the children’s safety duties to take or use proportionate measures to protect children from content that is harmful to them.

For user-to-user services, these duties include preventing children from exposure to primary priority content (PPC), and protecting children from other types of harmful content, including priority content (PC) and non-designated content (NDC).⁴¹

Table 1: Overview of content harmful to children

Harmful content category	Kinds of harmful content
Primary Priority Content (PPC)	Pornography content Suicide content Self-injury content Eating disorder content
Priority Content (PC)	Content which is abusive or incites hatred Violent content Bullying content Dangerous stunts and challenges content Harmful substances content
Non-Designated Content (NDC)	Body stigma content Depression content

This section explores children’s self-reported exposure to harmful content. First, it explores online 11-17-year-olds⁴² exposure to harmful content online in the four weeks prior to fieldwork,⁴³

³⁹ Section 12 and 29 of the Act.

⁴⁰ [Statement: Protecting children from harms online.](#)

⁴¹ Section 60 of the Act. The Act sets out kinds of PPC (section 61) and PC (section 62) but not kinds of NDC. We identified two kinds of NDC in our April 2025 Children’s Register of Risks.

⁴² By this we mean children aged 11-17 who are in secondary school or above who used at least one of the services listed in the COST survey in the 4 weeks prior to fieldwork. See annex for list of services.

⁴³ The harms codes used in this research were cognitively tested with children to ensure they were broadly understood as intended. However, as with any self-reported measure, there is likely to be some degree of individual interpretation in how children classify and recall their experiences. Despite this, the results are considered valid, and—crucially—any such interpretation is expected to be consistent across waves. This

specifically PPC and PC. It then includes analysis relating to both the service/s where children said they were exposed to harmful content and the route through which this occurred (e.g. personal feeds). Finally, it looks at how children say they responded to the harmful content they were exposed to.

Where possible we explore experiences of the youngest children in the sample separately (11-12s) and incorporate findings from our pilot study among 8-11s. This was conducted in primary schools in England and Wales, exploring their recalled experiences of exposure to harmful content online.⁴⁴ Data from this pilot should be viewed as indicative only due to the size and nature of the sample (i.e. the sample was not designed nor weighted to be representative) but nonetheless we consider it provides valuable insight into younger children's stated experiences of harmful content online.⁴⁵

Ofcom's Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST)⁴⁶ is the primary evidence source for this section,⁴⁷ enabling analysis of trends in children's exposure both prior to the children's safety duties coming into force in July 2025 (Wave 1, March – April 2025) and approximately four months after (Wave 2 November – December 2025).

Measurement of children's exposure to NDC, was introduced at Wave 2 of COST. As a result, trend analysis in this section is limited to children's exposure to PPC and PC only. Data on children's exposure to NDC relates to children's exposure to the two kinds of such content identified by Ofcom, during Wave 2.⁴⁸ Our research also does not distinguish between one off and more persistent exposure to specific content, which is being considered for future waves of COST, but does provide trend in terms of the number of different types of harmful content children were exposed to.

Throughout this report, the term *harmful content* is used to refer collectively to PPC and PC only.

Content warning: This section contains findings relating to children's exposure to harmful content. Readers should be aware that some material may be sensitive or distressing.

Exposure to harmful content

Seven in ten 11-17s continue to be exposed to harmful content online, in a four-week period, with bullying content increasing

While most 11-17-year-olds said they were 'always or mostly happy' that the things they saw online were appropriate for their age (74%), this is a reduction since Wave 1 (81%). Around a quarter said they were sometimes happy (23%), while a small minority said they were never happy (2%).

means that trends over time remain robust and provide a reliable indication of changes in children's experiences.

⁴⁴ To ensure age appropriateness minor adaptations were made to the primary school questionnaire.

⁴⁵ This is a pilot study and is not representative of children across the UK. We reached 10 primary schools in England, and 1 in Wales, with no participating schools from Scotland or Northern Ireland. The small sample size reflects challenges encountered when trying to obtain parental opt-in consent. The study is skewed towards Year 4 children (aged 8-9), who account for more than half of all interviews. By region, we achieved a reasonable spread across England, although the sample is slightly skewed towards the South East (excluding London).

⁴⁶ See Annex for COST methodology.

⁴⁷ Unless stated otherwise, data from this section is from Ofcom, Children's Online Safety Tracker, 2025.

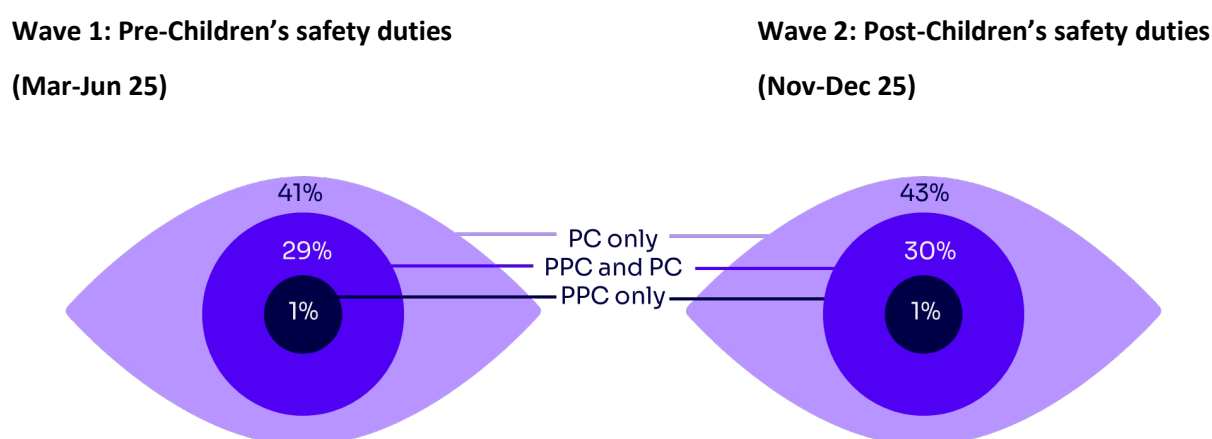
⁴⁸ We identified two kinds of NDC in our April 2025 Children's Register of Risks. These are body stigma content and depressive content.

The proportion of 11-17s who said they had been exposed to content (in a four-week period) on an app, website or online game that they considered inappropriate, and that made them feel upset, scared or uncomfortable fell from 29% to 24%. While this suggests a potential reduction in children’s exposure to distressing online content—possibly reflecting a decline in the most egregious types of content—it should be interpreted with caution. Measures of this kind may be influenced by recall bias, both in terms of the content seen and the emotional impact it had at the time.

For this reason, we also prompt children with a list of harmful content.⁴⁹ At Wave 2, around seven in ten (73%) 11-17-year-olds said they had seen or heard at least one form of harmful content online **in a four-week period**, comparable with that seen in Wave 1 (70%).⁵⁰ Also in line with Wave 1, nearly all this group had seen or heard PC (73%).

At Wave 2, three in ten 11-17s said they had been exposed to at least one form of PPC (31%), in line with Wave 1 (30%). Older children aged 13-17 remained more likely than 11-12s to say they’d been exposed to PPC (34% vs 23%), with the majority seeing this in addition to PC.

Figure 7: Proportion of 11-17-year-olds who recall exposure to harmful content online in the 4 weeks prior to fieldwork



Source: Ofcom, *Children's Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1, Wave 2*. Base: All children aged 11-17 (W1 1396, W2 1625).

Priority Content

Content relating to bullying (62%) and hateful content (51%) remained the two categories of harmful content most mentioned by 11-17-year-olds. The proportion of children who told us they were exposed to any bullying content increased at Wave 2 (62%, up from 58% at Wave 1), with exposure among 13-17-year-olds driving this increase.

⁴⁹ As stated in the introduction of the section the term *harmful content* is used to refer collectively to PPC and PC only. The list of harms that were shown to children was derived from those set out in the Online Safety Act. Cognitive testing with children and parents was undertaken to develop response codes that were child-friendly while aligning as closely as possible with the original definitions. This resulted in a tailored set of harms (ranging from 18 to 20 individual harms) being asked to children aged 11–17, depending on age group. Further detail on question wording for this is provided in the Annex.

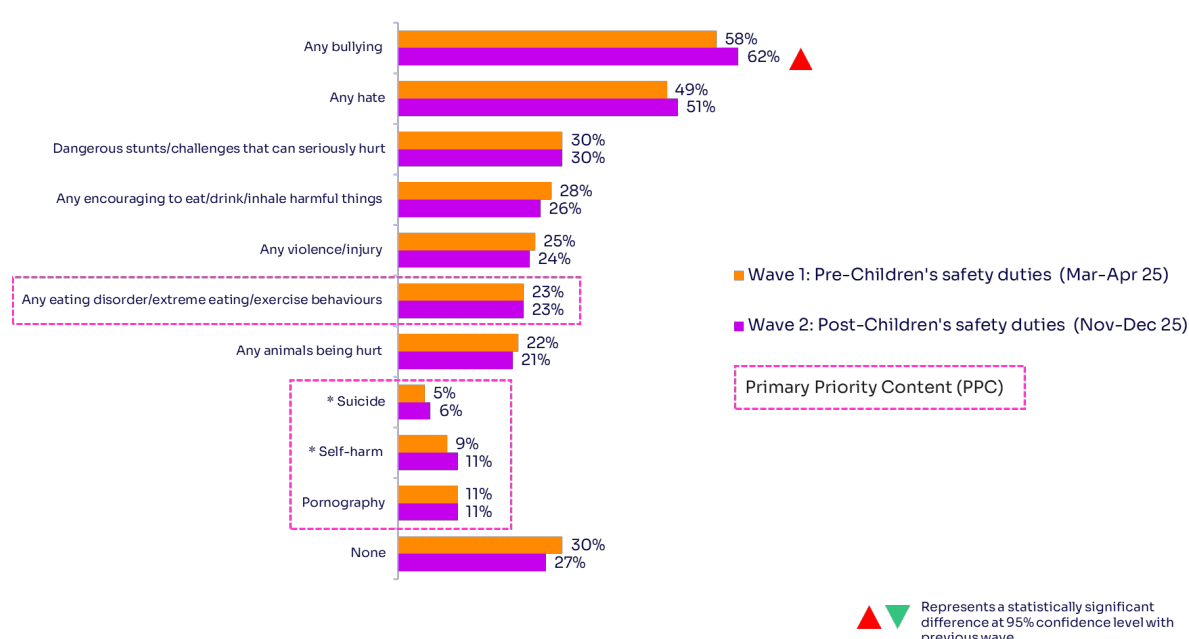
⁵⁰ The NET figure for PPC harms does not include responses to two specific kinds of PPC (suicide and self-harm) for respondents aged 11-12 (Year 7 (England and Wales), P1 (Scotland), Year 8 (Northern Ireland)) as these questions were not asked of this group. Therefore, the NET figure may underrepresent instances where younger respondents encountered this content.

At Wave 2, 30% of 11-17s said they saw content encouraging them to do dangerous stunts and challenges, and 26% said they saw content relating to eating/drinking/inhaling harmful substances. A similar proportion cited being exposed to any violent content (24%). These figures are broadly consistent with what children told us in Wave 1.

Primary Priority Content

Content relating to eating disorders was the most recalled type of PPC exposure among children (23%).⁵¹ In the same four-week period children said they saw content relating to suicide (6%) and/or self-harm (11%). In total 14% said they saw either of these, indicating a minority (5%) were exposed to both.⁵² Just over one in ten (11%) said they saw pornographic content, in the four-week period. Pornography was the only harm type with a gender difference, with boys remaining more likely than girls to recall exposure (13% vs 9%); exposure to other harms was similar for girls and boys.

Figure 8: Proportion of 11-17-year-olds who recall exposure to PPC/PC in the 4 weeks prior to fieldwork



Source: Ofcom, Children's Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2. Base: All children aged 11-17 at secondary school or above who use an online service, (W1 1396, W2 1625). * All children aged 12-17 who have given their consent to be asked about these harms.

The categories of harm noted above are made up of a range of individual content types.⁵³ When looking at the average number of individual harms children said they were exposed to; children

⁵¹ Answer codes for eating disorder content in COST include seeing content showing someone with an eating disorder or encouraging it, and/or seeing content showing or encouraging extreme eating or extreme exercise behaviours.

⁵² Children aged 12 (Year 8 (England and Wales), P2 (Scotland), Year 9 (Northern Ireland)) and above were asked about suicide (seen by 6% who were asked in both W1 and W2) and self-harm content (seen by 11% who were asked in W1 and 14% at W2); the other harms were asked of all 11-17s.

⁵³ See Annex for further details.

mentioned nearly 5 different types of harmful content in that period – comparable to Wave 1. The average number of harmful content types did not vary by gender or age group.

Almost half of children were exposed to Non-Designated Content (NDC), with girls more likely to encounter body stigma content than boys

The two types of NDC identified by Ofcom and explored in this study at Wave 2 were depressive content and body stigma content.⁵⁴ Among children aged 11-17, 45% said they had been exposed to NDC with a fifth (20%) saying they had been exposed to both types of content.

A quarter said they had been exposed to depressive content (24%), with exposure comparable across gender and age groups. Four in ten (41%) said they had been exposed to body stigma content with girls more likely than boys to say they had been exposed (44% vs 38%).

Focus on younger children

Around a quarter of 11-12-year-olds continue to see a type of Primary Priority Content⁵⁵

Among the youngest age group (11-12s), almost three quarters said they were exposed to harmful content (73%), driven by exposure to PC (73%). Around a quarter (23%) said they were exposed to at least one form of PPC, consistent with Wave 1.⁵⁶ Eating disorder content was the most common kind of PPC children in this age group said they were exposed to (20%). 7% of 12-year-olds said they were exposed to suicide content and 11% self-harm content (15% were exposed to either).⁵⁷ Just over one in ten said they were exposed to more than one type of PPC (13%).

In relation to PC, bullying content was the most common type of harmful content this age group recalled being exposed to, in line with Wave 1. Compared to Wave 1, an increased proportion of 11-12-year-olds said they were exposed to hateful content (42% to 54%) and content showing animals being hurt (16% to 23%). At Wave 2, 24% of children aged 11-12 said they had been exposed to at least one of the two types of NDC.

Indicative pilot findings: Recalled exposure of Priority Content among 8-11-year-olds in primary schools in England and Wales

As part of our primary school pilot⁵⁸ which was conducted within 10 schools, 190 children aged 8-11 were asked about their exposure to PC online. In this pilot sample, almost two thirds (64%) of the children surveyed said they had been exposed in the four weeks prior to fieldwork and indicative

⁵⁴ See Annex for answer codes shown to children for NDC.

⁵⁵ This data only includes 11-year-olds in secondary schools

⁵⁶ Children aged 12 in Year 8 (England and Wales), P2 (Scotland), Year 9 (Northern Ireland)) and above were asked about suicide (seen by 7% who were asked in both W1 and W2) and self-harm content (seen by 12% who were asked in W1 and 14% at W2); the other harms were asked of all 11-17s.

⁵⁷ Children aged 12 in Year 8 (England and Wales), P2 (Scotland), Year 9 (Northern Ireland)) and above.

⁵⁸ This is a pilot study and is not representative of children across the UK. We reached 10 primary schools in England, and 1 in Wales, with no participating schools from Scotland or Northern Ireland. The small sample size reflects challenges encountered when trying to obtain parental opt-in consent. The study is skewed towards Year 4 children (aged 8-9), who account for more than half of all interviews. By region, we achieved a reasonable spread across England, although the sample is slightly skewed towards the South East (excluding London).

differences by gender were observed, with boys appearing more likely than girls to say they had seen at least one form of PC (72% vs 56%).

Reflecting patterns seen in the main sample of COST among 11-17s, bullying content was the most common harm type children aged 8-11 in our pilot study said they were exposed to (47%). Older children in our pilot sample were more likely to say they had been exposed to bullying content online (10-11s 58% vs 8-9s 40%).

In our pilot sample, three in ten 8-11-year-olds said they were exposed to hate content. Around one in ten said they saw each of the following: dangerous stunts and challenges (14%), violent content (13%) and content showing animals being hurt (12%).

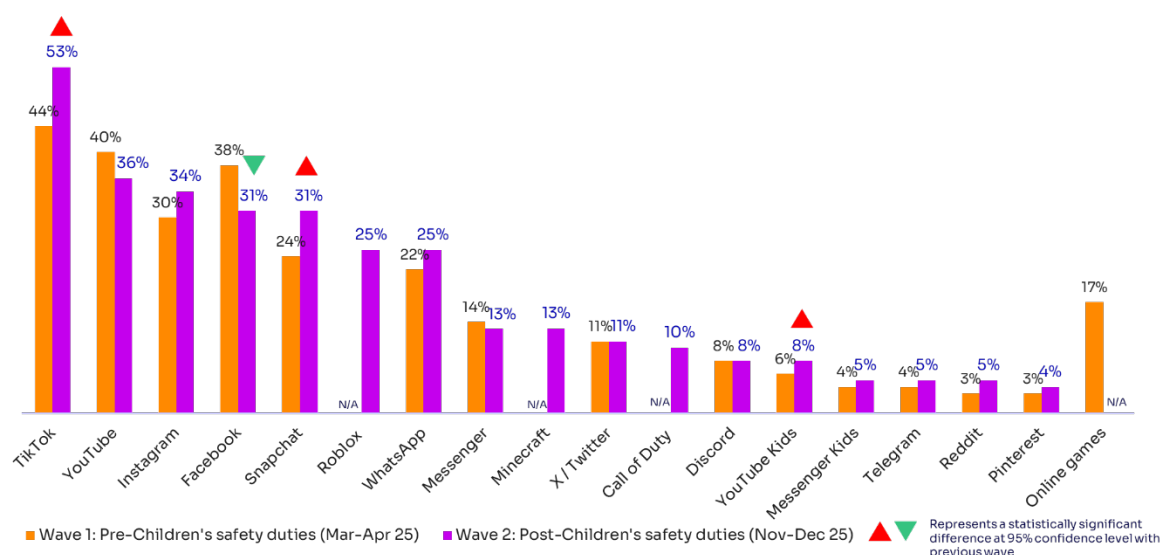
Services where 11-17s recall being exposed to harmful content

TikTok remains the most commonly recalled service for exposure to harmful content

Among children who said they had been exposed to harmful content, the main services they said they saw it on were TikTok, YouTube (excluding YouTube Kids), Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat. Roblox was the most commonly mentioned gaming service and WhatsApp the most commonly mentioned messaging service. This all largely aligns with Wave 1 and reflects the popularity of these services among children.⁵⁹

At Wave 2, we noted a rise in the proportion of children who recalled exposure to harmful content on two of these services – TikTok and Snapchat. The only service to see a meaningful decline was Facebook. However, it remained in the top 5 and comparable to Snapchat.

Figure 9: Service associated with recalled exposure to harmful content among 11-17-year-olds



Source: Ofcom, Children's Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2. Base: All children aged 11-17 at secondary school or above, use an online service and have seen any type of harmful content in the 4 weeks prior to fieldwork (W1 1004, W2 1196). At W2 'online games' was removed and Roblox, Minecraft and Call of Duty added, therefore no trend data on these services is currently available.

⁵⁹ At Wave 2 'online games' as a code was replaced with names of individual gaming services therefore no directly comparable data is available.

Children's reported exposure to harmful content continues to vary by **age and gender**.

Changes by age

There was an increase in under 16s recalled exposure on Snapchat and TikTok compared to Wave 1.⁶⁰ In contrast, 13-17s showed some declines in recall in exposure on Facebook, falling from 42% to 35%. Older teenagers also showed some declines in recalled exposure on X, falling from 15% to 9%.

Changes by gender

Compared to W1, there was a reduction among boys reporting exposure to harmful content on Facebook (33% down from 41%), while there was an increase among boys and girls reporting exposure on Snapchat (28% up from 21% and 34% up from 28%). An increase was also seen among girls in exposure on TikTok (58% up from 44%).

Boys were more likely than girls to report having seen harmful content across multiple services, a pattern that persisted across both waves. This was the case for YouTube (40% of boys cited YouTube vs 33% of girls), Discord (10% vs 5%) and X (16% vs 7%).

Focus on younger children

An increasing proportion of 11-12s who recalled exposure to harmful content cited TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube Kids as the source

Among the youngest age group who said they were exposed to harmful content (11-12s), notable increases emerged across three services at Wave 2. An increasing proportion of this age group recalled seeing harmful content on TikTok (46% up from 34%), Snapchat (28% up from 17%) and YouTube Kids (17% up from 8%).

Indicative pilot findings: Recalled sources of exposure to Priority Content among 8-11-year-olds in primary schools in England and Wales

Children who said they had seen at least one form of PC were asked what service they remember seeing it on.⁶¹ Over half of our pilot sample said they had seen PC on Roblox (60%) and just under half told us they had been exposed on YouTube (48%). Within the pilot, older children (10-11s) were more likely than 8-9s to say they had seen a form of PC on YouTube (62% vs 39%).

Within our pilot, 20% of primary school age children, who recalled seeing a type of PC, said they saw it on TikTok and 13% said they saw it on Minecraft. Boys in our sample were more likely than girls to say they had seen it on Minecraft.

Our pilot suggested that smaller proportions of 8-11s who recall seeing a form of PC, saw it on WhatsApp (7%), Snapchat (6%) and YouTube Kids (6%) and few children saw it on Call of Duty (3%),

⁶⁰ 11-12s - TikTok: 46% up from 34%, Snapchat: 28% up from 17%. 13-15s – TikTok: 56% up from 49%, Snapchat: 32% up from 25%.

⁶¹ This is a pilot study and is not representative of children across the UK. We reached 10 primary schools in England, and 1 in Wales, with no participating schools from Scotland or Northern Ireland. The small sample size reflects challenges encountered when trying to obtain parental opt-in consent. The study is skewed towards Year 4 children (aged 8-9), who account for more than half of all interviews. By region, we achieved a reasonable spread across England, although the sample is slightly skewed towards the South East (excluding London). See Annex for further information on methodology.

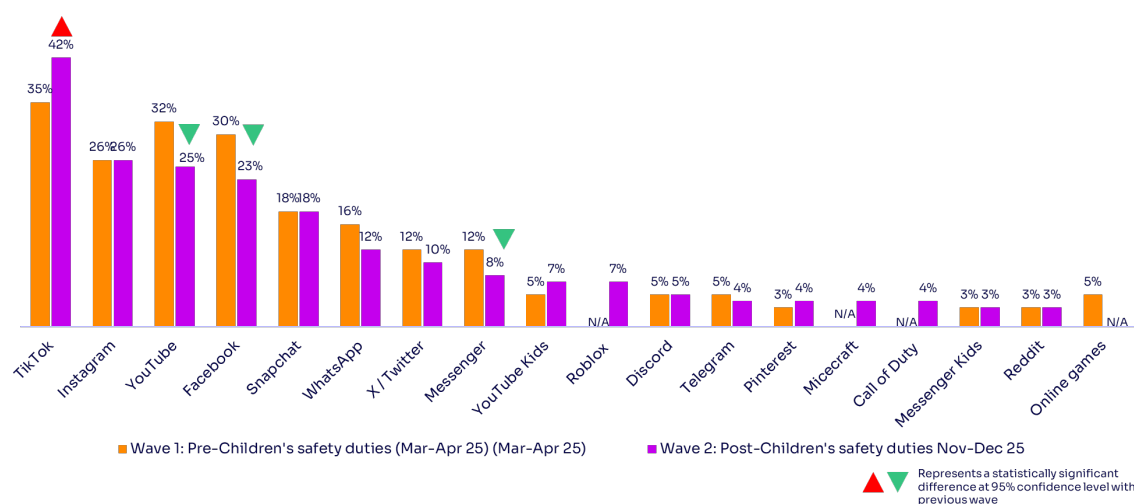
Pinterest (2%) Discord (2%) Facebook (2%) Instagram (1%) and Telegram (1%) possibly reflecting lower use of these services.

No children in our pilot sample who saw a PC said that they saw it on Messenger, Messenger Kids, Reddit or X, again possibly reflecting lower use of these services, although a quarter said they saw it 'somewhere else'.

TikTok also the most likely to be mentioned as the source of exposure to the most harmful content (PPC) – rising to 42%

As illustrated below, looking specifically at where children said they were exposed to PPC among those who said they had seen this type of content, TikTok was recalled the most (42%). This is an increase from Wave 1 (35%). Around a quarter of children who saw PPC said they saw it on Instagram (26%), YouTube (25%) and Facebook (23%). The proportions citing Facebook, YouTube and Messenger as the source of PPC exposure declined at Wave 2.

Figure 10: Service associated with recalled exposure to Primary Priority Content among 11-17-year-olds



Source: Ofcom, Children's Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2. Base: All children aged 11-17 at secondary school or above, use an online service and have seen at least on type of PPC in the 4 weeks prior to fieldwork (W1 467, W2 520). At W2 'online games' was removed and Roblox, Minecraft and call of Duty added, therefore no trend data on these services is currently available.

User-level analysis shows the highest risk of exposure to users on TikTok and X

As noted above, the services children are most likely to mention when asked about their exposure to harmful content tend to reflect the popularity of those services among children. However, this can mask important insights into exposure among users of services less popular with children. Looking specifically at data among children who say they use each service⁶² and examining the proportion who say they were exposed to harmful content while using that service, provides additional insight.

⁶² 'Users' refer to children aged 11-17 who use online services and said they had used the service in the four weeks prior to fieldwork.

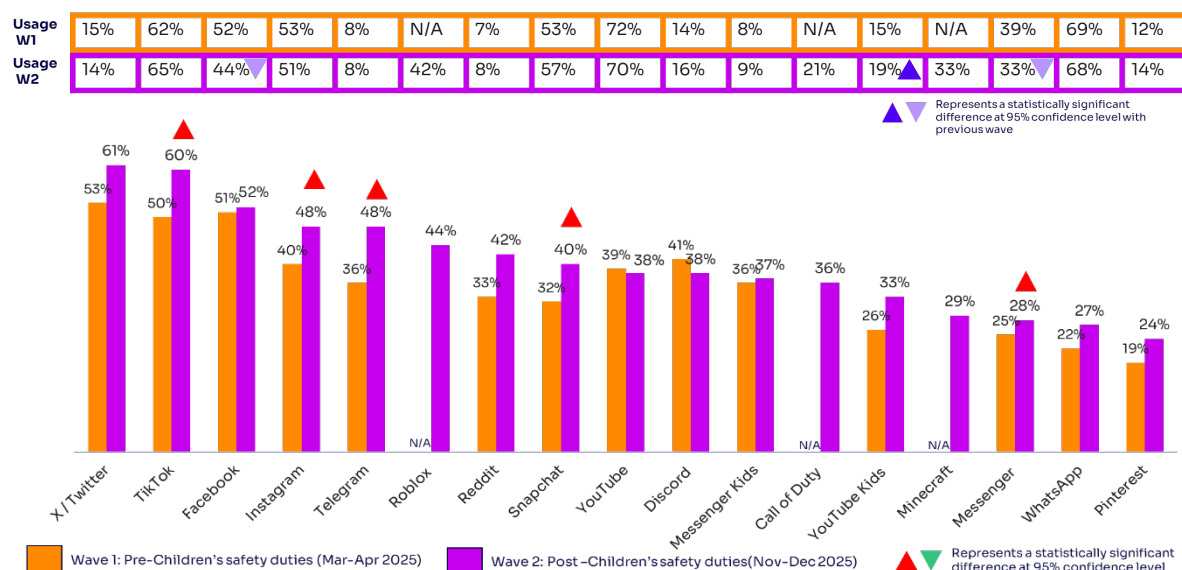
This approach highlights which services may be more likely to expose their users to harmful content, regardless of how widely they are currently used.

As illustrated below at Wave 2, X joined TikTok as the service with the highest proportion of *users* saying they had been exposed to harmful content on that service, at around three in five users.⁶³ Followed by Facebook and Instagram who were joined by Telegram, around half of the child users of each service said they had been exposed to harmful content on that service.

The proportion of children saying they used X (14% of 11-17s) and Telegram (8% of 11-17s) were relatively low in comparison to the other services, but the likelihood of exposure to harmful content among those users was comparably high.

Across some services, a growing share of users said they had seen harmful content at Wave 2, with increases observed on TikTok, Instagram, Telegram, Snapchat and Facebook Messenger.

Figure 11: 11-17s recalled exposure to harmful content among child users of services



Source: Ofcom, Children's Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2. Base: All children aged 11-17 at secondary school or above, use an online service and users of each service who recall seeing harmful content on the service. Bases vary.

⁶³ Reference to 'users' is based on children aged 11-17 who reported using the service in the four weeks prior to fieldwork.

How children were exposed to harmful content

Personalised feeds remain the most common route to harmful content, accompanied with a rise in exposure via comments, and fewer children searching for it

Just over a third (35%) of 11-17-year-olds who recalled seeing harmful content said the harm they were asked about occurred while 'scrolling on their feed',⁶⁴ comparable to that seen at Wave 1 (37%). 13-17-year-olds continued to be more likely than those aged 11-12 to say they were exposed this way (37% vs 28%).

"I've seen a couple videos from the incident where Charlie Kirk was shot dead (I wasn't expecting to actually see the bullet enter his body and then to see all the blood and his body turn limp). I later saw the same video on my TikTok feed. This shocked me that the video had been posted to social media and wasn't removed by the app. I didn't think to report the video, I'm not sure why if I'm being honest." **Boy, 17-year-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Post-Children's safety duties**

"One of the things [I've] seen on Instagram Reels recently did disturb me a bit, it was a video of a man dying in a car crash with audible screams of horror. The video has since been banned by Instagram, but it baffled me that it was still allowed to be posted on the app." **Boy, 16-year-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Pre-Children's safety duties**

At Wave 2, a rising proportion of children who were exposed to harmful content said they were exposed in the comments, with girls (22% up from 14%) and 13-17-year-olds (22% up from 15%) driving this increase.

Across the services for which we have sufficient data, exposure most commonly occurred via personalised feeds on TikTok (57%) Instagram (51%), Snapchat (32%) and YouTube (excluding YouTube Kids) (24%). An exception to this pattern was Facebook, where recalled exposure was more frequently reported through comments (37%).⁶⁵

A minority of children (1%) said they were exposed to harmful content through 'searching for it' - a reduction since Wave 1 (down from 3% to 1%), driven by older teens (16-17s) - from 4% to 1%.

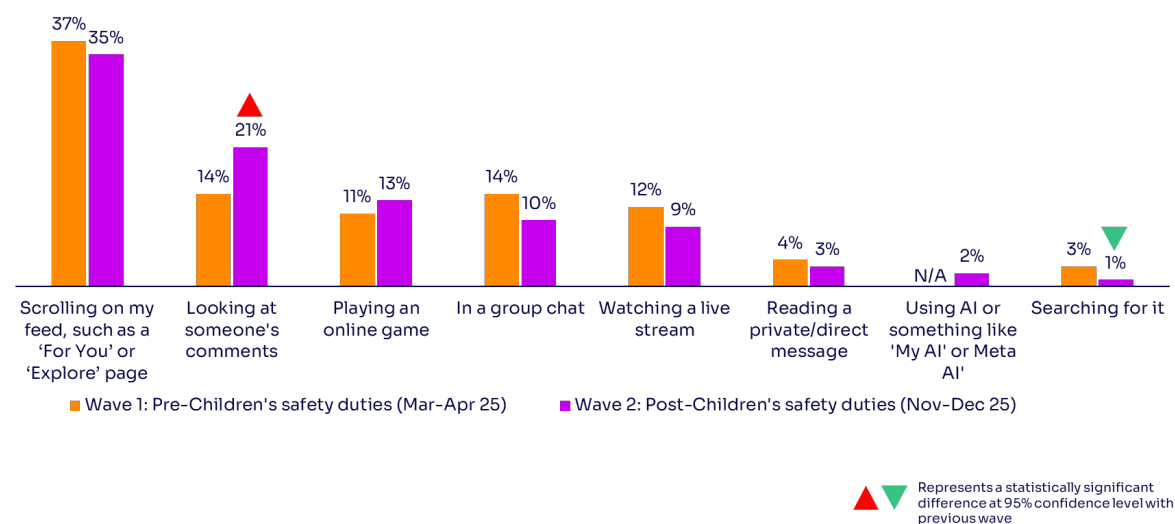
At a total level among 11-17s, recalled exposure through watching a livestream remained consistent at around one in ten. However, exposure through this functionality dropped among 13-17-year-olds

⁶⁴ Ofcom, Children's Online Safety Tracker.2026: At this point in the survey (from M2Q6-M2Q14), the sample were split via a 'least-fill quota' basis by type of content harmful to children encountered, to ensure that we maximised the potential sample size for each type of content harmful to children experienced. Additional weighting was then applied to the data from M2Q6-M2Q14 to reflect the true proportion on type of content harmful to children encountered. See annex for further details.

⁶⁵ These findings provide an indication of the types of functionality children associate with harmful exposure, rather than a comprehensive or service-level comparison.

(8%, down from 12%), driven by 13-15s, whose recalled exposure to harmful content via livestreams fell by half (from 14% to 7%).

Figure 12: Service functionalities linked to exposure of harmful content among 11–17s



Source: Ofcom, Children's Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2. Base: All children aged 11-17 at secondary school or above, use an online service and have seen any type of harmful content in the 4 weeks prior to fieldwork and were asked follow up questions on a specific content and the service they last saw it on (W1 896 W2 852).

Focus on younger children

Recalled exposure to harmful content while playing online games remained higher among 11-12-year-olds than older children (13-17s)

At Wave 2, 11-12-year-olds remained more likely than those aged 13-17 to say they'd been exposed to harmful content while playing an online game (22% vs 10%).⁶⁶ The youngest age group also recalled lower levels of exposure within group chats compared to Wave 1 (10% down from 19%), but an increase was seen via private messages (5% up from <1%).

Indicative pilot findings: Ways in which 8-11-year-olds in primary schools in England and Wales were exposed to Priority Content

Children who recalled exposure to at least one type of PC were asked follow-up questions focusing on one specific type of PC they had seen.⁶⁷ Among this sample, over a third of 8-11-year-olds who

⁶⁶ W1 17% of 11-12s saw it while playing an online game vs 8% of 13-17s.

⁶⁷ This is a pilot study and is not representative of children across the UK. We reached 10 primary schools in England, and 1 in Wales, with no participating schools from Scotland or Northern Ireland. The small sample size reflects challenges encountered when trying to obtain parental opt-in consent. The study is skewed towards Year 4 children (aged 8-9), who account for more than half of all interviews. By region, we achieved a reasonable spread across England, although the sample is slightly skewed towards the South East (excluding London). See Annex for further information on methodology. At this point in the survey (from M2Q6-M2Q14), the sample were split via a 'least-fill quota' basis by type of content harmful to children encountered, to ensure that we maximised the potential sample size for each type of content harmful to children experienced. See Annex for further information on methodology. See annex for further details.

had seen PC said this exposure took place when ‘playing an online game’, the most common source for exposure (38%).

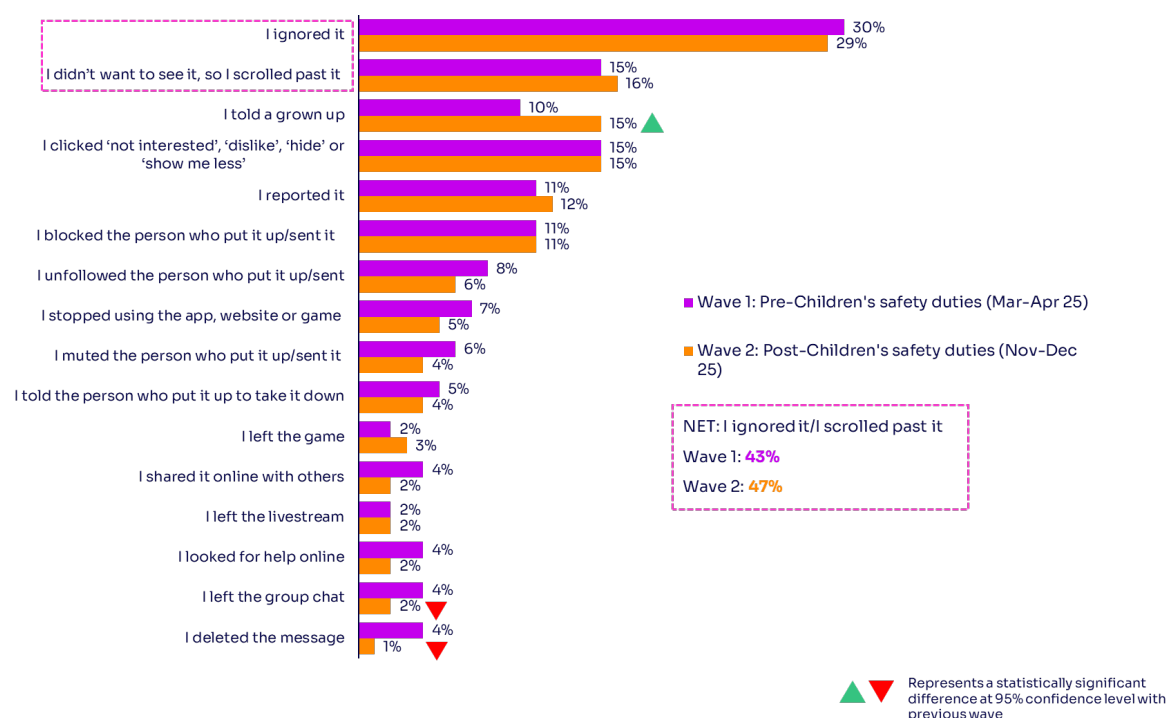
Within our pilot sample, one in ten saw PC while watching a livestream (12%) or scrolling on their feed (10%). A minority said they saw it via a private message (3%), a group chat (3%) or in the comments (1%). None of these children recalled seeing it while ‘using AI or something like My AI or Meta AI’. A notable proportion said they saw it while doing something else (15%), that they didn’t know/ couldn’t remember (10%) or that they didn’t want to answer this (7%).

Children’s response to harmful content

More children told an adult about their experience, though ignoring harmful content was still the most common response

Children deal with harmful content online in different ways. Around six in ten children aged 11-17 took some kind of action after being exposed to harmful content at Wave 2 (59%), which was a similar level to that seen before the children’s safety duties came into force (64% at Wave 1). These included actions children took online as well as steps taken offline.

Figure 13: Children aged 11-17 response to exposure to harmful content



Source: Ofcom, Children’s Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2. Base: All children aged 11-17 at secondary school or above, use an online service and have seen any type of harmful content in the 4 weeks prior to fieldwork and were asked follow up questions on a specific content and the service they last saw it on (W1 896 W2 852).

While the overall level of action stayed much the same, some changes can be seen in how children responded. More children aged 11-17 said they told an adult, such as a parent, after being exposed to harmful content online. This rose from 10% at Wave 1 to 15% at Wave 2.

This increase was mainly driven by girls and by younger children. One in five girls (20%) said they told an adult at Wave 2, compared with 10% at Wave 1. Among 11-12-year-olds, the proportion more than doubled, from 9% to 21%. As a result, children aged 11-12 were more likely than those aged 13-17 to tell an adult about harmful content (21% compared with 12%).

"I usually screenshot things from group chats and share with my mum and I delete groups if I don't like what's being said in them, like, in primary school people would swear or send weird stuff. I sometimes get random scam messages, and I tell my mum and she blocks them." **Girl, 12-year-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Post-Children's safety duties**

"Me and my friend were having a sleepover when this person added me [on Snapchat], and I knew previously that my friend had been texting him so I thought it would be okay to add him back...then we started chatting, that was all okay, when suddenly he kept asking continuously for nude pictures of myself...I blocked them and told my mum. She got it sorted and phoned the police." **Girl, 11-year-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Pre-Children's safety duties**

However, overall, ignoring and/or scrolling past harmful content remained the most common response among children aged 11-17, with almost half saying they took this action (47% at Wave 2). Older children (16-17s) were more likely to say they did this compared to 11-12-year-olds (51% vs 42%).

There was no change in the proportion of children aged 11-17 using controls such as the 'Not interested' or 'Hide' button to signal to the service that the harmful content was not something they wanted to see again (15%).

Very few children aged 11-17 said they deleted a message (1%) or left a group chat (2%) after being exposed to harmful content, with both actions reported less frequently than at Wave 1.

In addition, few children said they sought help online after exposure to harmful content (2% at Wave 2), particularly girls and those aged 13-17 (both 2% down from 5%). There was also a decline among girls and those aged 13-15 in stopping use of the app or site where they were exposed to harmful content (both 3% at Wave 2).

"I just had to scroll past, that was all I could really do. There were so many videos that I couldn't just block one account to move on. It was awful, you can see it happening in the video, it's not a friendly video. I'd love for TikTok to have a better filter, because I feel like people can get away with posting things like that because TikTok doesn't get rid of it quickly enough." **Boy, 15-year-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Post-Children's safety duties**

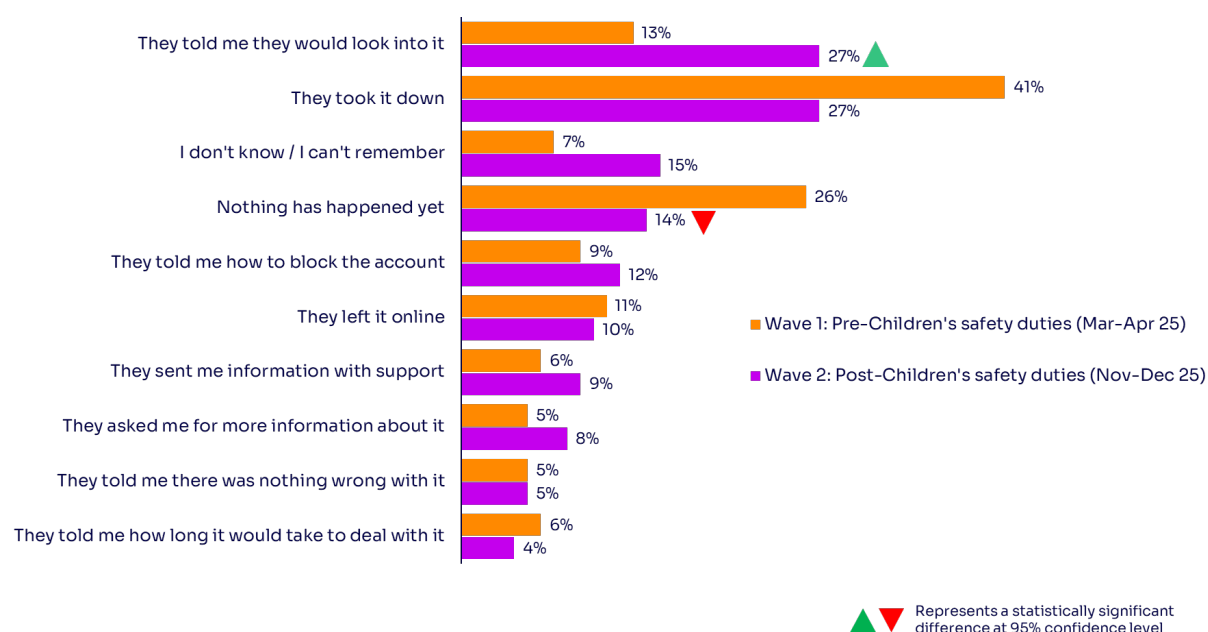
Reporting harmful content remains relatively low, but more children are hearing that services will ‘look into’ their reports

Awareness of the reporting tool was high among 11-17s (87%). Among children aged 11-17 who had been exposed to harmful content at Wave 2, use of the reporting tool remained relatively low at around one in ten (12%). When asked why they chose not to report harmful content, the most cited reason remained ‘I didn’t know how to’ (27% at Wave 2). When looking at children’s general use of reporting tools in the four weeks prior to fieldwork, the picture changes slightly. This broader use of the reporting tool captures those who saw something they wanted to report and then acted on it – including, but not limited to, harmful content online.⁶⁸ Within this context, one in five (19%) 8-17s who wanted to report something did so on at least one service used, in line with W1.

Most children who reported the harmful content they were exposed to said reporting tools were easy to use (86%), compared with 11% who reported finding it difficult. Around six in ten (62%) children who had reported content were happy with the way the service handled it, broadly unchanged compared with Wave 1 (57%).

Despite low overall reporting levels, there were indications that services were more responsive when children did report concerns. A higher proportion of children said that they were told that services would investigate their report (27% at Wave 2, up from 13% at Wave 1).

Figure 14: Outcomes of reporting harmful content among 11-17-year-olds



Source: Ofcom, Children’s Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2. Base: Children aged 11-17 at secondary school or above, who have seen/heard harmful content in last four weeks at the time of fieldwork and were asked follow-up questions on a specific content and the service they last saw it on and reported it (W1 116 W2 119).

⁶⁸ Children who were asked this question were not prompted with a particular type of content.

When asked whether the harmful content they reported had been removed by the service, 27% of children said it had been taken down at Wave 2. Children's perceptions that reporting does not lead to content being removed, or to a reduction in how often harmful content appears, may help to explain current levels of reporting among children – as demonstrated by the quotes below.

"My friend reported something on TikTok, but it still never got sorted and the same content still appeared a few days later... So, there's no point reporting stuff. All social media companies are run by the same person, so there's no hope." **Boy, 14-year-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Pre-Children's safety duties**

"I found this [in-game chat comments on Roblox] very racist, so I reported them and they didn't get banned. This in the game Roblox I think they need a better banning system." **Boy, 13-year-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Post-Children's safety duties**

Section 3: Staying safe online

Introduction

This section provides an overview of children’s experiences of being asked to verify their age on popular services used by children, and their use of VPNs to access content not available to them. It also provides an overview of how UK children aged 8-17, who use online services, engaged with user controls on services to support their safety online. This includes controls that give children the option to block and mute other users’ accounts or to disable comments on their content, which are recommended for some services in the Children’s Codes.⁶⁹

The findings draw from data about children’s experiences of these controls before and after the children’s safety duties came into force (July 2025). It focuses on the ways children responded when they were exposed to content online that they decided to act upon – including, but not limited to, harmful content – and the choices they made on services when doing so.⁷⁰

This section concludes by outlining children’s awareness of online safety and the actions parents take to support this.

Experiences of age checks

Among 8-17s, age checks have become more common since the children’s safety duties came into force, but a minority report the ability to bypass them

Since the children’s safety duties came into force, children aged 8-17 with one or more social media profiles⁷¹ have increasingly reported being asked to prove their age on user-to-user services (51% up from 41%).⁷²

Among those who recalled having to prove their age, exposure to age assurance methods, which excludes methods of self-declaration, also rose – from 25% in July 2025 to 43% in January 2026. This equates to 22% of all 8-17s encountering age assurance methods other than self-declaration by January, up from 10% before the child safety duties came into force.

⁶⁹ Ofcom, 2025. Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user services. Source: [Issued Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user services](#)

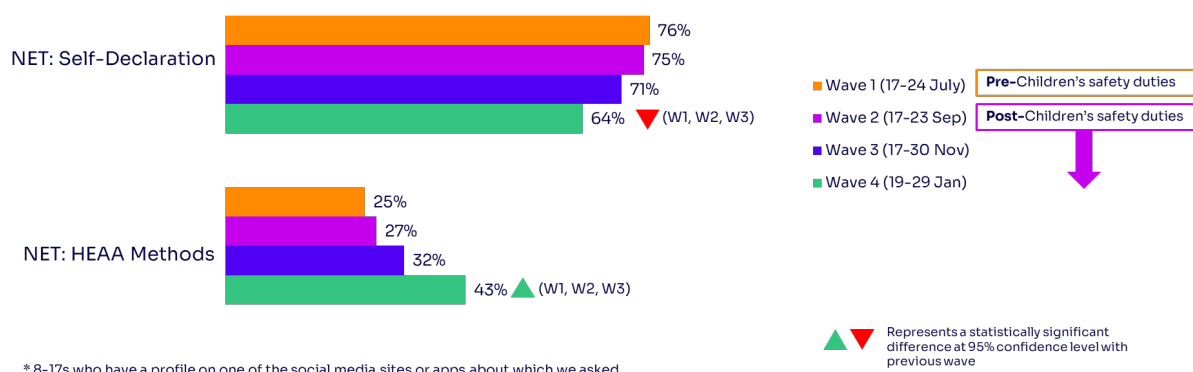
⁷⁰ Unless otherwise stated, findings within this section are from Ofcom’s Children’s Online Safety Tracker 2025.

⁷¹ When we refer to 8-17s in these findings we mean GB children aged 8-17 who had their own profile on at least one of the social media sites or apps about which we asked – Services included Facebook, YouTube (not including YouTube Kids), Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, X/Twitter, Discord, Pinterest, Twitch, Reddit, Roblox, and Other (please specify).

⁷² Note: The 51% does not differentiate between self-declaration methods or highly effective age assurance (HEAA). Under the Online Safety Act, some service providers are required to use HEAA to prevent children from accessing pornography and other primary priority content that they allow on the service.

Note: Research can only identify whether a child has encountered age assurance methods that are visible to them. Of those services that use age assurance, some use age inference methods to make a determination of age in the background in order to apply their child safety duties.^{73 74}

Figure 15: 8–17-year-old social media users recalled being asked to verify their age and the method used



Source: Ofcom, *Children’s experiences of being asked to verify their age*. Base: All 8–17-year-olds who have their own profile and recalled being asked to prove their age: W1 (414), W2 (490), W3 (508), W4 (554)

Age estimation (i.e. facial age scans)⁷⁵ emerged as the most commonly cited form of age assurance (28%) rising from 5% in Wave 1 (mid-July).⁷⁶ Uploading a photo of a user’s passport or photo ID document followed by taking a selfie so the site or app can check they match was the second most common method of age assurance seen by 8-17s (14%).

[Reacting to being asked by Roblox to verify his age via a photo] “I think it’s a good idea because it’s about protecting against sexual predators that we heard about in the Schlep case, but it’s tricky for me because I won’t be able to play Roblox with any of my friends over 16, but I get why they have to do it.” Boy, 13-years-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Post-Children’s safety duties

⁷³ As age inference models work by analysing a user’s activity while on a service to infer their age, in practice, this means that children have limited awareness and visibility of these age checks compared to on sites where a user is prompted to undergo an age check (e.g. facial age estimation) prior to accessing the site or specific parts of it.

⁷⁴ Please note, not all user-to-user services need to use age assurance to comply with our measures and their duties under the Act. We expect the riskiest user-to-user services to use highly effective age assurance to protect children from harmful content.

⁷⁵ When we refer to age estimation in these findings, we refer to those who selected ‘Scan my face to check how old I am’.

⁷⁶ Among 8-17s who recalled being asked to prove their age. (Data: 28% in W4 vs 5%, 11% and 14% in each of waves 1 to 3, respectively. Ofcom, *Children’s experiences of being asked to verify their age*, 2025/2026).

While children are increasingly being asked to prove their age on services, 16% of 13-17s told us that they knew how to get around such age checks, although only a minority (5%) said they had successfully done so in the past 12 months.⁷⁷

“He’s tried to cheat his way around the TikTok live... when he got banned, he had to prove he was over 18 because the account is in my name... so he was trying to take photos of my driving license and then they wanted photos of me to prove that it matched the driving license, and it just kept bouncing back... I don’t know how he got around it the first time because you have to be 18 to go live.” **Mum of 11-year-old: Ofcom Insights Panel: Post-Children’s safety duties**

In our VPN research, children were asked about a variety of online activities where they might choose to use a VPN including accessing geo-blocked content (e.g. content not available in the UK like films, series or gaming), or content with age restrictions. In total, 25% of children aged 11-17 told us they had used a VPN in the last 6 months: 14% said they had used it for reasons including those listed above, or to ‘hide their identity, keep personal information private’. A further one in ten (11%) said they had used a VPN but did not tell us why. VPN use was more common among boys (29% vs. 20%) and rose with age – with 31% of 16-17s stating they used a VPN in the last 6 months.

Children’s experience and use of online safety controls

Children aged 8-12 make increasing use of the muting tool

Ofcom’s Children’s Codes recommend that some services likely to be accessed by children should offer the option to block or mute other user accounts.⁷⁸ Blocking means that a user can no longer receive messages from the blocked account, see any content posted by that user, or remain connected to them. Muting means that a user does not encounter any content posted by the muted account but can still visit the account if they choose to.

Most children aged 11-17 had heard of these controls (blocking: 93% and muting: 89%), consistent with findings from Wave 1 (blocking: 92% and muting: 88%).⁷⁹

Among children aged 8-12 there was an increase in the use of muting, with 32% saying they had muted someone, compared with 26% at Wave 1. However, overall, children aged 8-17s use of online blocking and muting controls remained largely unchanged (blocking: 36% and muting: 31%), reflecting the findings at Wave 1 (blocking: 34% and muting: 28%).⁸⁰

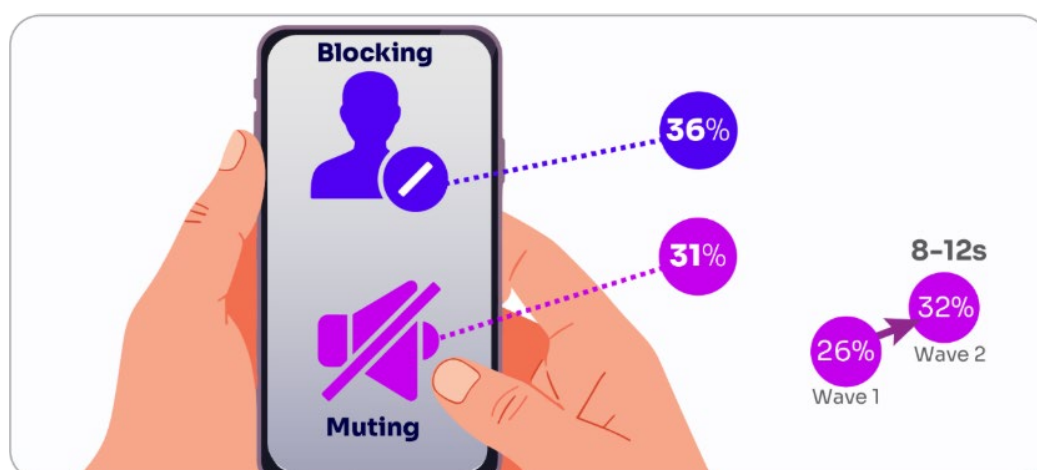
⁷⁷ Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes 2026.

⁷⁸ Ofcom, 2025. Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user services. Source: [Issued Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user services](#)

⁷⁹ Based on Wave 2 pilot data with primary-aged children, 81% said they had heard of blocking controls and 59% of muting controls. As these findings are based on pilot data collected in Nov-Dec 2025 across 10 schools, they should be interpreted as indicative due to the sample size and non-representative sample. See Annex for further information on methodology.

⁸⁰ This data was based on children aged 8-17 who had used blocking or muting control on at least one app or website in the last four weeks.

Figure 16: 8–17-year-olds use of blocking and muting



Source: Ofcom, Children’s Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2. Base: Children aged 8-17 (W1 1746 W2 1735).

More 8-12s are signalling to services that they don’t want to see certain content again, while fewer girls and 13–17s use the ‘Dislike’ button

Ofcom’s Children’s Codes recommend that some services likely to be accessed by children should offer negative sentiment tools. These tools generate data and signals indicating a user’s dissatisfaction with, or lack of interest in, a content recommendation.

Half of children (50%) aged 8-17 said they had taken this kind of action, using controls such as ‘Not interested’ or ‘Hide’ buttons to reduce unwanted content, unchanged from Wave 1 (50%).

However, more younger children (8-12s) said they used controls such as the ‘Not interested’ button (37%, compared with 31% at Wave 1) and the ‘Hide’ button (21%, compared with 16% at Wave 1) on at least one service, indicating greater use of these tools to manage what they saw online.

“Some of those videos can be relatable because I don’t like school, but some are too sad, or I don’t relate to them. You can click ‘not interested’, which means it doesn’t come up on your For You Page as much, and then they go away so that you aren’t seeing as many sad videos.” **Girl, 12-year-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Post-Children’s safety duties**

Meanwhile, there was a decrease in the proportion of children using the ‘Dislike’ button (23%, compared with 27% at Wave 1). This decline was driven primarily by girls (down from 26% at Wave 1 to 21%) and those aged 13-17 (down from 27% at Wave 1 to 20%).

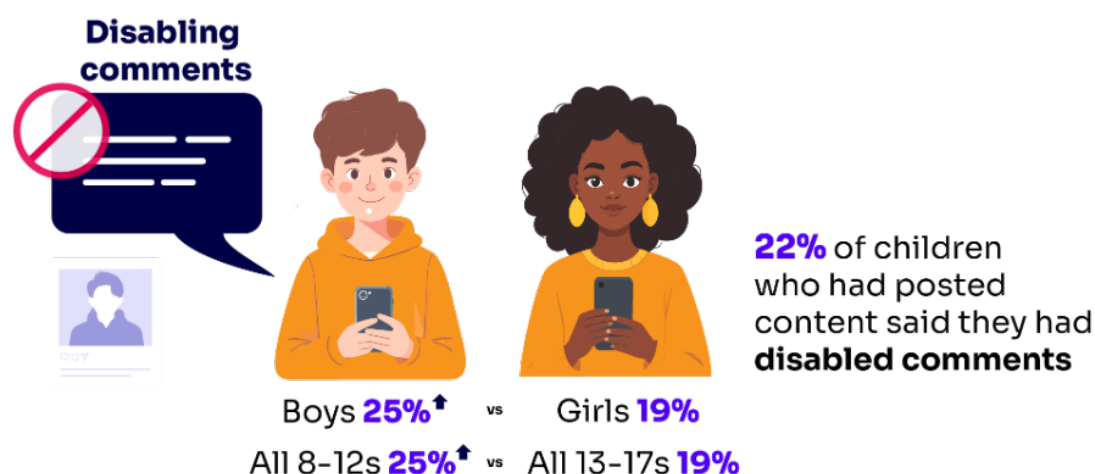
Boys are more likely to turn off comments on their posts than girls

Ofcom’s Children’s Codes also recommend that some services likely to be accessed by children should provide children with the option to prevent other users from commenting on the content

they post.⁸¹ When asked about their awareness of this control, most children aged 11-17 said they had heard of it at (85%), consistent with findings from Wave 1 (86%).⁸²

Around a fifth (22%) of children aged 8-17 who had posted something online said they had disabled comments, consistent with Wave 1 (23%).

Figure 17: Proportion of 8–17-year-olds who have disabled comments



Source: Ofcom, *Children’s Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2*. Base: Children aged 8-17 who had posted something in the 4 weeks prior to fieldwork (W1 1263 W2 1229).

Boys were more likely than girls to disable comments on content they had posted on at least one service (25%, compared with 19% for girls at Wave 2). Looking at age differences, children aged 8-12 continued to be more likely than those aged 13-17 to disable comments on content they posted on at least one service (26%, compared with 19% for 13-17s).

More children say they’re not given a choice to join group chats, but fewer are saying yes when they are asked

Additionally, Ofcom’s Children’s Codes recommend that some services likely to be accessed by children should ensure that a child user only becomes part of a group chat once they have received a group chat invitation and have actively confirmed that they wish to join.⁸³ At Wave 2, most children aged 11-17 said they were aware of this functionality, unchanged from Wave 1 (both 87%).⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ofcom, 2025. Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user services. Source: [Issued Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user services](#)

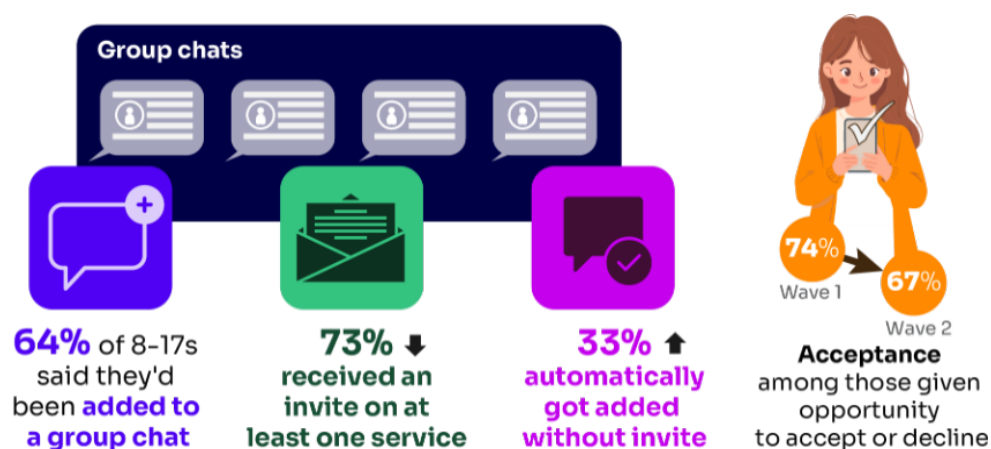
⁸² Based on Wave 2 pilot data with primary-aged children, 54% said they had heard of this control. As these findings are based on pilot data collected in Nov-Dec 2025 across 10 schools, they should be interpreted as indicative due to the sample size and non-representative sample. See Annex for further information on methodology.

⁸³ Ofcom, 2025. Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user services. Source: [Issued Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user services](#)

⁸⁴ Based on Wave 2 pilot data with primary-aged children, 74% said they had heard of this functionality. As these findings are based on pilot data collected in Nov-Dec 2025 across 10 schools, they should be interpreted as indicative due to the sample size and non-representative sample. See Annex for further information on methodology.

Consistent with Wave 1 findings, around two thirds of 8–17-year-olds said they had been added or invited to at least one group chat in the past four weeks at Wave 2 (64%).

Figure 18: 8-17-year-olds experiences of being added to group chats



Source: Ofcom, *Children's Online Safety Tracker.2025: Wave 1 and 2*. Base: Children aged 8-17 (W1 1746 W2 1735) and Children aged 8-17 who have been added to a group chat in the 4 weeks prior to fieldwork (W1 1137 W2 1116)

However, at Wave 2, fewer children aged 8-17 said they had received a group chat invitation on at least one service (73%, down from 81% at Wave 1). This decline was primarily driven by girls (70%, compared with 81% at Wave 1), although there was also a decrease among boys (76%, compared with 82% at Wave 1).

At the same time, a third (33%) of children aged 8-17 said they had automatically joined a group chat without receiving an invitation on at least one service, up from 28% at Wave 1. This experience was more common among girls at Wave 2 (35%), compared with Wave 1 (29%).

Among children who said they had received a group chat invitation, fewer chose to join the group chat at Wave 2 (67%), down from 74% at Wave 1. This decline was primarily driven by children aged 13-17, whose joining rates fell from 76% at Wave 1 to 65% at Wave 2. This pattern may suggest that some children are taking greater control over this aspect of their online experience.

"There's 'add everyone you know' groups and I just leave them straight away sometimes, because everyone spams them. It works like one person will add lots of people they know, then the next person, it could be up to 1,000 people in a group." **Girl, 12-year-old. Ofcom Insights Panel: Pre-Children's safety duties**

Children's awareness of online safety

Alongside the measures that services must implement to protect children from harmful content, there are also other measures taken by parents and schools including online safety education. These help children recognise and respond to harmful content online.

Most parents set rules around device use and two thirds say they talk to their child about staying safe online at least every few months

Conversations about staying safe online and education play a central role in supporting children's online safety. Parents typically seek to support their children's online safety through a combination of rules and discussion.

Nine in ten (91%) parents of children who game⁸⁵ said they had set rules about their child's gaming. A similar proportion (89%) of children aged 8-17 with a smartphone said they have rules about their mobile phone use, most commonly relating to time spent online.

Many parents support their children through supervision and conversation. Around two-thirds (66%) of parents of children aged 6 months – 17 years old said they talked to their child about staying safe online at least every few months, including 43% who do so at least every few weeks. However, 13% of parents said they have talked about online safety less often than every few months but more than once a year, 5% have talked about it only once, and a further 13% said they have never discussed it.

Parents of children aged 10-12 were the most likely to say they had conversations with their child about online safety at least every few months (80%). By contrast, parents of children aged 16-17 were the least likely to have regular discussions, with 62% reporting this frequency.⁸⁶

Nearly nine in ten children say they have had lessons at school to talk about how to use the internet safely

In school, most (85%) children aged 8-17 said they had lessons about being online and about the possible risks and benefits. Children aged 10-12 were the most likely to say they had received lessons (89%), while for 16-17s this figure dropped to 80%. Only around a quarter (23%) of children said they had regular lessons.

Among those who had received lessons, over nine in ten (93%) said they found them useful.

Parents also frequently cited schools as a key source of guidance on how to help their child stay safe online. Among parents who said that they have seen or search for information on how to supervise their child when they are online, nearly half (49%) mentioned schools, while over four in ten (44%) said that they had received advice from other parents in the past month.⁸⁷

Further information about this study and its findings is available [here](#) as well as information about Ofcom's wider media literacy work [here](#).

This report has set out the online experiences of children aged 8-17 before and shortly after the children's safety duties came into force.

Ofcom remains committed to monitoring children's experiences online, particularly their exposure to harmful content, and to ensuring that services do more to protect children online.

Findings from Wave 3 of the Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST) will be included in the Content Harmful to Children report, due for publication in October 2026.

⁸⁵ Based on parents of children aged 3-17 who game, not necessarily online.

⁸⁶ Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2026.

⁸⁷ Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2026.

Annex

Ofcom research sources

Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST)

The **Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST)** is designed to monitor UK children's (8-17) online experiences, including their awareness and use of online safety tools, and their recalled exposure to harmful content online.

COST Methodology outline:

COST is conducted on an online panel, where children are recruited via their parents. At the time of publication, two waves of the study have been analysed.

Wave 1: March-April 2025, prior to Ofcom's Children's Codes coming into effect on 25 July

Wave 2: November- December 2025, approximately four months after the children's safety duties came into force.

The survey uses a **modular design**, with children completing either:

- **Module 1:** Use of online safety tools, or
- **Module 2:** Exposure to harmful content online.⁸⁸

Wave 1

The total sample achieved at Wave 1 was **3,142 children aged 8-17**. Of these, **1,746** children completed Module 1 (ages 8-17) and **1,396** completed Module 2 (ages 11-17).

Wave 2

The total sample achieved at Wave 2 for the online panel was **3,387 children aged 8-17**. Of these, **1,735** children completed Module 1 (ages 8-17) and **1,625** completed Module 2 (ages 11-17).

Timeframe

All survey responses are based on children's recall of experiences during the **four weeks prior to survey completion**.

Recall

Responses reflect respondents' own recall and judgement. The harms codes used in this research were cognitively tested with children to ensure they were broadly understood as intended. However, as with any self-reported measure, there may be some degree of individual interpretation in how children classify and recall their experiences. Despite this, the results are considered valid, and—crucially—any such interpretation is expected to be consistent across waves. This means that trends over time remain robust and provide a reliable indication of changes in children's experiences.

Least fill quota

⁸⁸ This module was delivered via an online panel and restricted to respondents aged 11–17 for safeguarding reasons, given that the questions related to harmful topics.

Module 2 of the survey questionnaire included a 'least-fill quota' based on the online harmful content experienced at question M2Q2 ('Have you seen or heard any of the below online in the last 4 weeks? This could have been a video, picture, written post, a comment or something you have heard'). Respondents were then routed to the follow up questions M2Q6 to M2Q14 for the online harm they had experienced with the lowest number of completed interviews at that point.

The sample has been **weighted to correct the skew introduced by the least-fill allocation**, ensuring that results for the detailed follow-up questions accurately reflect the true distribution of online harms in the population.

Summary:

Module 2 used a *least-fill quota* at question M2Q2 to direct respondents to follow-up questions (M2Q6–M2Q14) about the online harm with the lowest number of completed interviews. This approach ensured robust sample sizes for each harm type but resulted in an **unrepresentative distribution** of harms in the follow-up questions.

While M2Q2 itself remains representative of overall harm prevalence, the least-fill method **distorts the balance** of harms examined in detail. This issue is further amplified because some harm categories consist of multiple specific items, yet receive equal allocation weight as single-item categories.

To address this, an **additional weighting layer** has been applied to M2Q6–M2Q14 only. These weights realign the data with the true prevalence of harms recorded at M2Q2, correcting the imbalance caused by the sampling approach. The weights will be **updated in future waves** to reflect the latest distribution of harms.

Find COST questionnaire [here](#)

Changes at Wave 2

At Wave 2, changes were made to the COST survey. These included:

- Expansion of harmful content included in W2 to include questions about children's recalled exposure with **Non-Designated Content (NDC)**. Trend analysis within this report is therefore limited to exposure of PPC and PC only. Data on children's exposure to NDC is available online.
- Revisions were made to the list of services included. At Wave 2, 'online games' was replaced with individual codes for gaming services i.e. Roblox, Call of Duty and Minecraft.

Primary school pilot: Exposure to harmful content among children aged 8-11

To ensure younger children were appropriately safeguarded during the research, we opted to conduct this research within schools. At Wave 2 a large-scale pilot was run in primary schools with children aged 8-11 in year 4 and above to explore recalled exposure to Primary Content (PC) online. This pilot sample completed Module 2 only and did so exclusively within a school environment.

It should be noted that this pilot is not representative of children across the UK. Ten primary schools in England and one in Wales participated, with no schools from Scotland or Northern Ireland. The achieved sample size (n=190) and skew towards Year 4 pupils, who account for more than half of respondents reflects challenges in securing parental opt-in consent. Regionally, a reasonable spread was achieved across England, although the sample is slightly weighted towards the South East (excluding London).

Further information about COST can be accessed [here](#).

Children's Passive Online Measurement (CPOM)

Children's Passive Online Measurement (CPOM) measures a UK-representative sample of online children aged 8–14s' use of websites and apps across smartphones, tablets and computers. The study captures which services were visited and how long children spent on the service, based on passive monitoring rather than recall.

Recruited children had passive monitoring software installed on the device(s) they used to go online, with data collected anonymously. Each child was monitored for **28 consecutive days**, with fieldwork carried out on a rolling basis between **9 October 2025 and 7 March 2026**. Findings therefore reflect usage patterns during this period and are not necessarily representative of children's internet use across a full calendar year.

The study uses a **single-source sample**, with each child panellist having one or more devices tracked. This approach enables more accurate **deduplicated reach estimates** across devices than methods which fuse together separate device-based panels.

The final achieved sample consisted of **701 children aged 8–14**, recruited via parents or legal guardians. The sample was drawn using UK census data and weighted for age, gender and household socio-economic group using ONS 2024 Mid-Year Estimates and the National Readership Survey, with further calibration using Ofcom's Children and Parents' Media Literacy Tracker.

Smartphone quotas were informed by data from *The Insights Family*, which shows that in early 2025 UK 8–14-year-old smartphone users were split across Apple (52%), Android (47%) and Huawei (1%). A **50:50 Apple/Android soft quota** was applied, and a **55:45 split** was achieved.

The passive technology cannot measure internet use on **Amazon Fire Tablets, Chromebooks or games consoles**, so activity on these devices is outside the scope of the study; parents were asked whether children used such devices to indicate the scale of unmeasured use.

All figures provided are estimates that will have some margin of error.

See the published report for more details [here](#).

Ipsos iris audience measurement service

Launched in early 2021, Ipsos iris is the UKOM (UK Online Measurement)-endorsed currency for the measurement of audiences of online content of UK people aged 15+ who use the internet at least once a month.

Ipsos iris uses a hybrid methodology with several data sources including:

- A passive single-source panel of over 10,000 people aged 15+ who use the internet. Panellists install passive tracking software onto personally used digital devices and in some instances those who also use their device for work (smartphones, computers, and tablets) which access the internet, with data collected continuously. The panel is recruited to be representative of the internet population demographically, geographically and by device type use.
- Census measurement of publisher websites and apps to collect visit measures for time spent and page views at a total level.

Reporting on daily and monthly data, all sources are fused together to create a synthetic dataset with more than one million records to represent the UK online infrastructure of websites and apps. These can be analysed and reported at many demographic and geographic levels. As this is a synthetic dataset, it is not possible to provide confidence intervals/ranges for extrapolated

population estimates. However, all extrapolated population figures provided are estimates that will have some margin of error.

This report draws on data from a sample of roughly 128 15-17-year-olds. Data from this cohort is reported [within CPOM](#).

Children and Parents: Annual Media Use and Attitudes Report (CaP)

The **Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes** Report is an **annual longitudinal study** that provides evidence on media access, use, attitudes and understanding **among children aged 6 months to 17-years-old**. The survey **also captures parents' views** on their children's media use, including how parents monitor and manage media use among children in this age group.

The survey asks questions of children aged 8 to 17 directly, with parents answering on behalf of younger children (6 months to 7 years). It uses a mixed-mode approach, combining online and face-to-face interviews to ensure robust coverage across age groups and demographics. A total of 5,008 interviews were conducted for the 2025/6 tracker, including 1,582 interviews with parents of children aged 6 months to 17-years-old and 3,426 interviews with children themselves aged 8 to 17. **Fieldwork was conducted between November 2025 and February 2026**. Please note that in 2025, we conducted a full review of the survey which resulted in methodological and questionnaire changes. This included streamlining the research into one overarching survey, introducing face-to-face interviews, expanding the sample as well as adapting the questionnaire. This means that this year, our trends over time are indicative rather than absolute as some year-on-year changes are likely to reflect the changes in methodology and question design rather than changes in behaviour alone, although genuine shifts in children's media use may be present.

For the purposes of this report, the data focuses only on children aged 8-17.

Further information about CaP, including detail on methodological and questionnaire changes, and access to previous reports, can be accessed [here](#).

Children's Online Insight Panel

The Children's Online Insights Panel provides Ofcom with regular, ongoing insights into children's online experiences, using a combination of online digital diaries and in-depth interviews.

There are 4 waves per year, each spanning 3 months. A wave consists of 3 monthly online diaries (lasting for 3 days each) and 1 online in-depth interview. These touchpoints allow the research agency to explore the latest apps the panellists are using, the online activities they're engaging in, and any new trends that are emerging. This approach helps us to identify potential risks early and deepen understanding of the digital lives of young people from their own perspective.

The panel is made up of **eighteen children from the UK aged 8 to 17** with diversity across demographics.⁸⁹ We intentionally recruited actively engaged online users to capture a broad range of services, features, functionalities and content the panellists are likely to have encountered or engaged with. As a result, the findings in this report may not fully represent the experiences of the 'average' child online user.

⁸⁹ The research agency recruited in total 20 x 8-17-year-olds (15 plus 5 over-recruits / replacements) for the panel across the year. Each wave, 18 panellists participated: all were invited to complete the digital monthly diaries, with a minimum of 15 taking part in the in-depth interviews.

Insights included in this report are drawn from the first four waves of research (**W1: March-May 2025, W2: June-August 2025, W3: September-November 2025, W4: December 2025-February 2026**). Quotations included in this report are taken from the in-depth interviews with the panellists and from their online diary entries. Panellists' names have also been pseudonymised to maintain anonymity. A full report covering the findings across these four waves has now been published [here](#).

Children's Media Lives (CML)

Children's Media Lives, established in 2014, is an **annual longitudinal study** that follows, as far as possible, the same group of **children aged 8 to 17**, tracking their media use, behaviours, and attitude over time. It provides a small-scale, rich and detailed **qualitative** complement to Ofcom's quantitative media literacy surveys.

The study offers insights into children's motivations for media use and the contexts in which it takes place, including how media fits into their everyday lives and domestic circumstances. It also provides in-depth evidence on how children's media habits and attitudes change over time, particularly in relation to their emotional and cognitive development.

Fieldwork for Wave 12 was conducted between November 2025 and March 2026 and included a **sample of 17 children**.

Further information about CML, including access to previous reports, can be found [here](#).

Children's experiences of being asked to verify their age

The **Age Assurance mini-waves** were a quantitative online study conducted across four waves, each taking place every two months. It was designed to track children's exposure to age-assurance requests between July 2025 and January 2026 and to monitor changes from the pre-implementation to post-implementation of age-assurance measures, particularly the prevalence of age assurance methods that could be classified as Highly Effective Age Assurance (HEAA) across different online services. Ofcom's guidance on highly effective age assurance, including kinds of age assurance that are capable of being highly effective, can be found [here](#).

Each wave surveyed a sample of 1,000 GB children aged 8–17. Wave 1 took place from 17–24 July 2025, prior to the children's safety duties coming into force on 25 July; All other waves ran post implementation of the children's safety duties. Wave 2 ran from 17–23 September 2025; Wave 3 from 17–30 November 2025; and Wave 4 from 19–29 January 2026.

Caveat: the questions were only asked of GB 8–17-year-olds who had their own profile on at least one of the social media sites of apps about which we asked.⁹⁰

Please see published data [here](#).

Children's Use of VPNs

The **Children's Use of VPNs** research is a **quantitative online study** conducted among **GB children aged 11–17**.

The study examined children's use of VPNs by asking whether they had taken part in a range of online activities in the past six months that could involve VPN use, and then which method they used

⁹⁰ This included Facebook; YouTube (not including YouTube Kids); Snapchat; Instagram; TikTok; X/Twitter; Discord; Pinterest; Twitch; Reddit; Roblox; and Other (please specify).

to carry out this activity (VPN being one of the options provided). The survey also measured general frequency of VPN use which was not activity specific.

Fieldwork was conducted between **12 and 26 March 2026**. The total **sample size was 2,167 children aged 11–17**.

Please see published data [here](#).

Exploring the relationship between persuasive design on online platforms, and the time that children spend on them

This is a **deep dive qualitative piece of research** conducted as part of our media literacy programme of work. The research explores the experiences of children who self-reported spending more time than they planned or realised using online services, and the role that service features and functionalities play in their service use and ability to make informed decisions about the time they spend online. In addition, the research asks the children and their parents what they think online services can do to better support media literacy around the impact of such features.

Fieldwork took place between **25 September and 7 November 2025**. We spoke to 40 children aged 8-16 who told us they were spending more time online than they planned to or realised, and 37 parents who shared this concern. The research consisted of a **scoping phase**, including cognitive testing to ensure that fieldwork materials were accessible, a **diary pre-task** to capture online activities and experiences, **qualitative interviews** with children and parents' **focus groups**, and follow up **reflector interviews** with a small number of children and parents.

See the published report for more information [here](#).

Children who create and view livestreams

Report 3 in this suite of research entitled '**Children's usage of livestreaming: viewing and creating**' provides information cited in this report relating to the prevalence of livestreaming (viewing and creating livestreams) taken from two UK representative samples of children aged 8-17 (and parents). The **first survey** was conducted in **July-August 2025** with 1,979 children aged 8-17 (recruited with permission of their parents/guardians). The **second survey** was conducted in **October-November 2025** with 1,500 parents of children aged 8-17, and their child aged 8-17. For more details on sample and data collection see the [full report](#).

Also, in this suite of research:

- '*Research among children and young people who create livestreams*' - findings and supporting methodological information related to qualitative deep dives with 20 livestream creators aged 8-19.
- '*Research among children and young people who view livestreams*' findings and supporting methodological information related to qualitative deep dives with 20 livestream viewers aged 8-17.

COST: Survey Approach to Harmful Content and services

The Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST) drew directly on the harm categories set out in the Online Safety Act. Cognitive testing was used during survey development to check that the language was child-friendly, clearly understood, and interpreted as intended, while still accurately reflecting the Online Safety Act and its harms. Some high-level harms included in COST analysis can also be broken down into more detailed sub-codes (pending sample size) listed below. Primary and secondary aged children were not asked about the same set of harms, the differences are outlined below.

Harmful content category	Kinds of harmful content set out in the Online Safety Act	COST harmful content	COST harmful content code breakdown (Secondary school)	COST harmful content code breakdown (Primary school pilot, conducted in schools)
Primary Priority Content (PPC)	Pornography content	Pornography	Pornography	Not asked to primary school children
	Suicide content	Suicide/ self-harm	Someone showing or encouraging extreme eating or extreme exercise behaviours, or providing instructions for them	Not asked to primary school children
	Self-injury content		Self-harm / hurting yourself on purpose: people showing this, giving instructions for this, or encouraging others to do this	Not asked to primary school children
	Eating disorder content	Eating disorder/ extreme eating/ exercise behaviours	Showing someone with an eating disorder, or encouraging or providing instructions for one	Not asked to primary school children
			Someone showing or encouraging extreme eating or extreme exercise behaviours, or providing instructions for them	Not asked to primary school children

Priority Content (PC)	Content which is abusive or incites hatred	Hate	Someone being hateful or using hateful language/ Someone telling others to do hateful things because they are...	Someone being hateful to a group of people/ Someone telling others they should hate a group of people, or do hateful things to them ⁹¹
			Girls/ Women	Demographics not asked to primary school children
			Boys/ Men	Demographics not asked to primary school children
			Non-binary people	Demographics not asked to primary school children
			Queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual or pansexual people	Demographics not asked to primary school children
			Transgender people (their gender identity is different to the one at birth)	Demographics not asked to primary school children
			People who are part of a particular religion	Demographics not asked to primary school children
			People of a certain ethnicity	Demographics not asked to primary school children
			Disabled people	Demographics not asked to primary school children
			Neurodiverse people (such as being autistic or have ADHD)	Demographics not asked to primary school children

⁹¹ Hate-related response codes were asked at a higher level following feedback from children and parents during cognitive testing.

	Violent content	Violence/ injury	Someone being seriously violent towards another person or encouraging others to do so	Someone being seriously violent towards another person or encouraging others to do so
			A person's serious injuries that were caused by others	A person's serious injuries that were caused by others
			Real animals being seriously hurt and their injuries	Real animals being seriously hurt and their injuries
			Animals who aren't real being seriously hurt and their injuries	Animals who aren't real being seriously hurt and their injuries
	Bullying content	Bullying	Bullying online (e.g. Cyber bullying). Someone putting unkind things about others online	Bullying online (e.g. Cyber bullying). Someone putting unkind things about others online
			Online trolling. Someone trying to upset others online to get a reaction	Online trolling. Someone trying to upset others online to get a reaction
			Griefing in online games. Someone trying to annoy other gamers, or spoil a game on purpose	Griefing in online games. Someone trying to annoy other gamers, or spoil a game on purpose
			People excluding others from being part of games or chats	People excluding others from being part of games or chats
	Dangerous stunts and challenges content	Someone showing or encouraging others how to do dangerous stunts or challenges that can seriously hurt them, or someone else	Someone showing or encouraging others how to do dangerous stunts or challenges that can seriously hurt them, or someone else	Someone showing or encouraging others how to do dangerous stunts or challenges that can seriously hurt them, or someone else

	Harmful substances content	Encouraging to eat/ drink/ inhale harmful things	People encouraging others to eat, drink or inhale harmful things or things that are illegal for children (like cigarettes, vapes, alcohol, or drugs)	People encouraging others to eat, drink or inhale harmful things or things that are illegal for children (like cigarettes, vapes, alcohol, or drugs)
			People encouraging others to eat, drink, or inhale things in <u>large amounts</u> that could be harmful to children	People encouraging others to eat, drink, or inhale things in <u>large amounts</u> that could be harmful to children
Non-Designated Content (NDC)	Body stigma content	Body stigma content	Things that make others feel bad or ashamed about their bodies and how they look	Things that make others feel bad or ashamed about their bodies and how they look
			Things that encourage others to have a certain body type or to keep checking their body shape in the mirror	Things that encourage others to have a certain body type or to keep checking their body shape in the mirror
	Depression content	Depressive content	Things that make it seem cool to feel really low or depressed	Things that make it seem cool to feel really low or depressed
			Things that say you shouldn't ask for help if you feel really low or depressed	Things that say you shouldn't ask for help if you feel really low or depressed

Non-Designated content was added from W2 onwards.

Harmful content category	COST harm	Inclusion in the survey
Primary Priority Content	Pornography	W1 and W2
	Suicide/ Self-harm	W1 and W2
	Eating disorder/ extreme eating/ exercise behaviours	W1 and W2
Priority Content	Hate	W1 and W2
	Violence/ Injury	W1 and W2
	Someone showing or encouraging others how to do dangerous stunts or challenges that can seriously hurt them, or someone else	W1 and W2
	Encourage to eat/ drink/ inhale harmful things	W1 and W2
Non-Designated Content (NDC)	Body stigma content	W2
	Depressive content	W2

The Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST) included services that were popular among children. At W2 the generic code 'online games' was replaced with the names of popular gaming services.

Services included at W1	Services included at W2
Discord	Discord
Facebook	Facebook
Facebook Messenger	Facebook Messenger
Facebook Messenger Kids	Facebook Messenger Kids
Instagram	Instagram
Pinterest	Pinterest
Reddit	Reddit
Snapchat	Snapchat
TikTok	TikTok
WhatsApp	WhatsApp
Telegram	Telegram
YouTube	YouTube
YouTube Kids	YouTube Kids
X/ Twitter	X/ Twitter
Online games	
	Minecraft
	Call of Duty
	Roblox