

# The digital lives of Aussie teens

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# eSafety research program

The eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) supports, encourages, conducts and evaluates research about online safety for Australians. The eSafety research program tracks trends and collects, analyses and interprets data and uses this to provide an evidence base to develop eSafety resources and programs. eSafety also works closely with domestic and international agencies to proactively identify and explore current and emerging online safety issues.

eSafety research is available at: [esafety.gov.au/about-us/research](https://esafety.gov.au/about-us/research)

For any enquiries about the eSafety research program, please contact [research@esafety.gov.au](mailto:research@esafety.gov.au)



# Overview

In September 2020, eSafety looked to explore the online behaviours and experiences of the first generation of Australian teens to be surrounded by digital devices and the internet since the day they were born. Questions for these teens – those aged between 12 and 17 years – were included in an omnibus survey conducted by Omnipoll.

Since eSafety last looked at the online experiences of youth back in 2017, this research shows the evolution of teens' online behaviours in a positive way. In particular, how teens deal with negative online experiences, barriers to help seeking, the types of information they need to help them stay safe online and trusted information sources. It also looks at the steps teens have taken to build positive relationships online.

Results in 2020 show that this group spend a large amount of their time online on a range of activities. This is not particularly surprising given the critical role the internet played in connecting people to services, information, friends and family during the recent COVID-19 restrictions. It highlights that while social media preferences are changing, mainstream players such as YouTube and Facebook continue to capture much of this group's attention. Newer services, including TikTok and Discord have, however, made significant inroads into the youth market in Australia over a relatively short period of time.

While teens' increased use of technology offers many benefits such as being able to research topics of interest and connect with family and friends, there is a downside – teens continue to deal with negative online experiences including unwanted contact, cyberbullying and harassment. We can see from this research (when compared to 2017) that teens are proactively taking some form of action after a negative online experience whether that is managing it themselves, such as reporting, or speaking to friends and family. However, more work needs to be done to drive behavioural change given a large percentage of teens continue to ignore potentially harmful experiences or believe nothing will change.

A surprising finding was that Australian teens are active in helping build positive and inclusive online relationships, which could help others when dealing with similar issues online. This was even more apparent with teens who had previously had a negative online experience. This is a heartening result and something to be further nurtured to help build a safer and more positive online world. This is particularly important when the downsides of online engagement are often the focus of attention in the media.

# Key highlights

The internet is an integral part of the digital lives of young people in Australia. However, engaging online can be confronting. Although Australian teens are increasingly well informed in dealing with negative online experiences, they are keen to find out more about how they can ensure their online safety.

Where available, historical comparisons have been made.

## Online lives

- Teens spent an average of **14.4 hours** a week online – males spent more time online (15 hours) than females (13.8 hours).
- Teens used the internet for a range of activities, including:
  - researching topics of interest – **95%**
  - watching videos, movies or TV – **93%**
  - chatting with friends – **93%**
  - listening to music – **92%**
  - online gaming – **77%**.

## Social media

- Teens used an average of four different social media services with social media preferences shifting from mainstream social media to new services.
- Top social media services used were:
  - YouTube – 72% (compared to 86% in 2017)
  - Instagram – 57% (66% in 2017)
  - Facebook – 52% (66% in 2017)
  - Snapchat – 45% (63% in 2017).
- TikTok, formerly known as Musical.ly, had substantial growth in active Australian teen users, increasing from 12% in 2017 to 38% in 2020. Discord, established in 2015, was used by 19% of Australian teens in 2020.
- Teens used multiple social media services with the average number increasing with age. Those aged 12 to 13 used an average of 3.1 services compared with 4.5 for those aged 16 to 17.

## Negative online experiences

- Just over **four in 10 teens** had at least one negative online experience in the six months to September 2020 with this increasing to over 50% of those aged 14 to 17.
- The top five negative online experiences of teens included:
  - being contacted by a stranger or someone not known to them – **30%** (26% of males and 35% of females)
  - receiving inappropriate, unwanted content such as pornography or violent material – **20%**
  - being deliberately excluded from events/social groups – **16%**
  - receiving online threats or abuse – **15%** (18% of males compared with 11% of females)
  - having things said online to damage their reputation – also **15%**.
- Almost **one third** (30%) said that their negative online experience related to bullying that occurred at school.

## Actions taken

- Teens were more likely to deal with a negative experience themselves or talk to family and friends.
- The most common actions to address a negative online experience included:
  - blocking the account or person – **54%**
  - speaking to family/friends – **43%**
  - reporting it – **40%** (21% reported to social media companies).
- Teens who did not report their negative online experience said this was for a range of reasons:
  - they just ignored it – **41%**
  - they didn't think it wasn't serious enough – **34%**
  - they didn't think anything would change – **21%**.

## Online safety information needs

- Three quarters of teens wanted more online safety information delivered through trusted channels.
- The top three online safety information needs of teens were:
  - how to support a friend who is in trouble – **46%**
  - how to block someone or use privacy settings on their device – **44%**
  - how to report negative online experiences – **40%**.



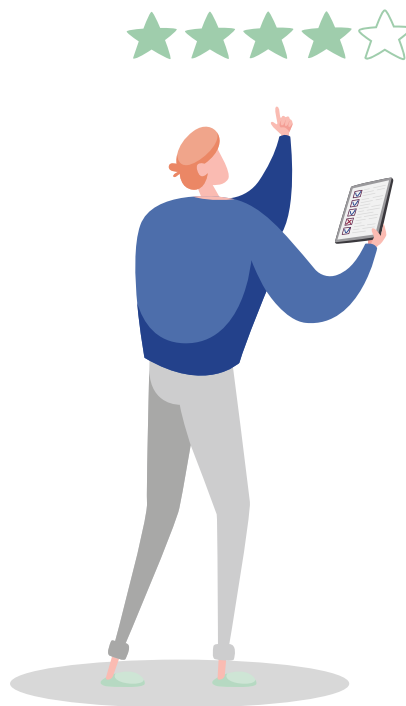
## Trusted sources of information

- Teens' trusted channels for accessing online safety information included:
  - their school or an online safety class – **43%**
  - a trusted eSafety website – **40%**
  - from a parent/carer – **38%**.



## Positive online behaviours

- 9 in 10 teens sought to build positive online relationships.
- Having negative online experiences made teens more aware of the impact of their actions and motivated them to engage in more positive online behaviours. Nearly 100% of teens who had a negative online experience engaged in positive online behaviour compared with 82% of teens who had not had a negative online experience.
- The top three positive behaviours were:
  - posting positive/nice comments about others (86% of those who had a negative online experience compared with 66% of those who had no negative online experience)
  - supporting or listening to a friend who had a bad experience (88% compared with 59%)
  - making sure that peers were not excluded online (83% compared with 60%).

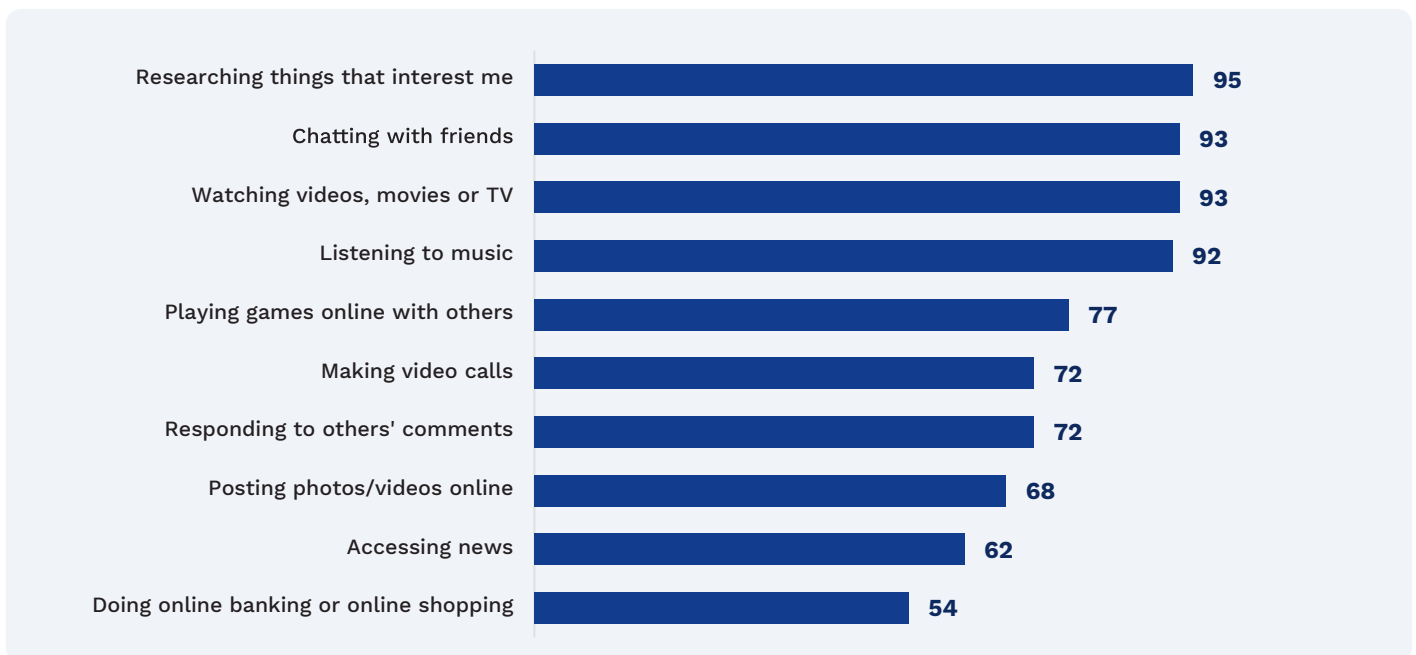


# Detailed findings

## Online lives

In September 2020, teens spent an average of 14.4 hours each week online – just over 2 hours a day. Males spent more time online, 15 hours per week on average, compared with females at 13.8 hours a week. Teens aged 16-17 year olds spent 16.1 hours compared with 14.5 hours for those aged 14-15 and 12.5 hours for those aged 12-13. Teens also engaged in a wide range of activities (see Figure 1), and almost all teens went online to research topics of interest, chat with friends and for entertainment purposes such as watching videos, listening to music and playing online games.

**Figure 1:** Teens' online activities (%)



**Q1:** Thinking now about what you do online, please indicate which activities you do online? **Base:** All teens aged 12 to 17 (n=627).

The level of engagement in online activities was similar for males and females (Table 1), with two key exceptions:

- 87% of males played multiplayer games online (with others) compared with 66% of females
- 67% of males read news online compared with 56% of females.

A larger proportion of 14 to 17 year-olds engaged in online activities than those aged 12 to 13 years (Table 1).

The most notable differences were:

- 75% of 14 to 17 year-olds responded to others' comments compared with 65% of 12 to 13 year-olds
- 71% of 14 to 17 year-olds posted photos/videos online compared with 60% of 12 to 13 year-olds
- 69% of 14 to 17 year-olds accessed news compared with 48% of 12 to 13 year-olds
- 65% of 14 to 17 year-olds conducted online banking/shopping compared with 30% of 12 to 13 year-olds.



**Table 1:** Teens' online activities (%)

	Total	Gender		Age (years)	
		Male	Female	12 to 13	14 to 17
Researching things that interest me	95	96	94	93	95
Watching videos, movies or TV	93	94	92	90	94
Chatting with friends	93	94	93	90	95
Listening to music	92	91	94	89	94
Playing games online with others	77	87	66	80	75
Responding to others' comments	72	72	72	65	75
Making video calls	72	70	74	67	74
Posting photos/videos online	68	66	69	60	71
Accessing news	62	67	56	48	69
Banking or shopping online	54	51	56	30	65
<b>Base (number)</b>	627	313	314	191	436

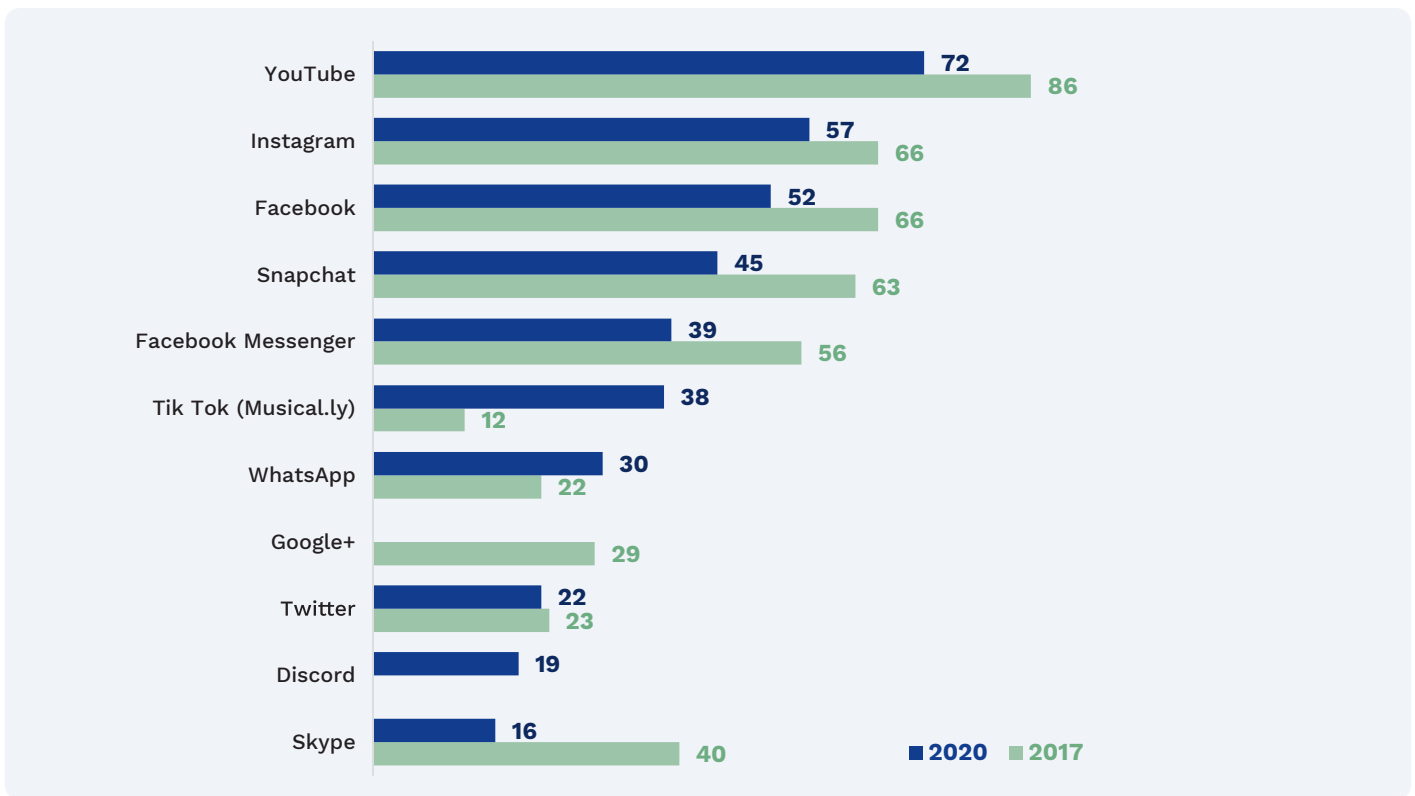
Q1: Thinking now about what you do online, please indicate which activities you do online?

Teens used an average of four social media services with the top three being YouTube (almost three quarters), Instagram (around 6 in 10) and Facebook (just over half) (Figure 2).

The type of social media services used by teens in Australia has changed since 2017:

- while YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat remain the most popular app/platforms in 2020, fewer teens accessed them than in 2017
- Tik Tok (formerly Musical.ly) – a service established in 2014 that allows friends to create and share short videos – has shown the greatest growth, from 12% of teens in 2017, up to 38% in 2020
- Discord – a service established in 2015 that allows friends to communicate directly via voice, video, or text, and during online gaming – was used by less than 1% of teens in 2017, up to 19% in 2020
- Google+ was no longer available in 2020 and was previously used by 29% of teens in 2017.

**Figure 2:** Social media services currently used by gender and age (%)



Q2: Which social media platforms or apps do you currently use? **Base:** All teens aged 12 to 17 (n=627).

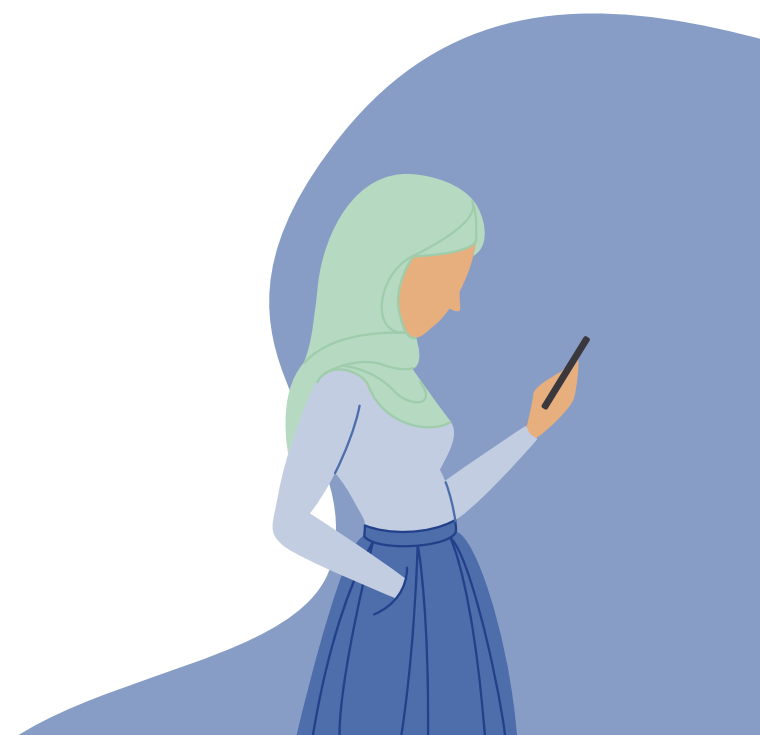
Older age groups were more likely to use social media services (Table 2), with 12 to 13 year-olds using an average of 3.1 services compared with 4.5 for 14 to 17 year-olds – noting that for many, the minimum age for social media accounts is 13. This suggests that some 12 year-olds may not be providing accurate age information in their profiles.

More females used Snapchat (51%) than males (39%), while more males used Discord (27%) than females (11%). Females and older youth were also more likely to use TikTok – 43% females compared with 32% of males, and 41% of teens aged 14 to 17 compared with 30% of those aged 12 to 13.

**Table 2:** Social media services currently used by gender and age (%)

	Total	Gender		Age (years)	
		Male	Female	12 to 13	14 to 17
YouTube	72	75	70	66	76
Instagram	57	54	60	39	66
Facebook	52	53	50	42	57
Snapchat	45	39	51	26	54
Facebook Messenger	39	39	40	34	42
Tik Tok (formerlyMusical.ly, established 2014)	38	32	43	30	41
WhatsApp	30	35	26	28	32
Twitter	22	22	21	11	27
Discord (established in 2015)	19	27	11	12	23
Skype	16	13	18	12	17
<b>Base (number)</b>	627	313	314	191	436

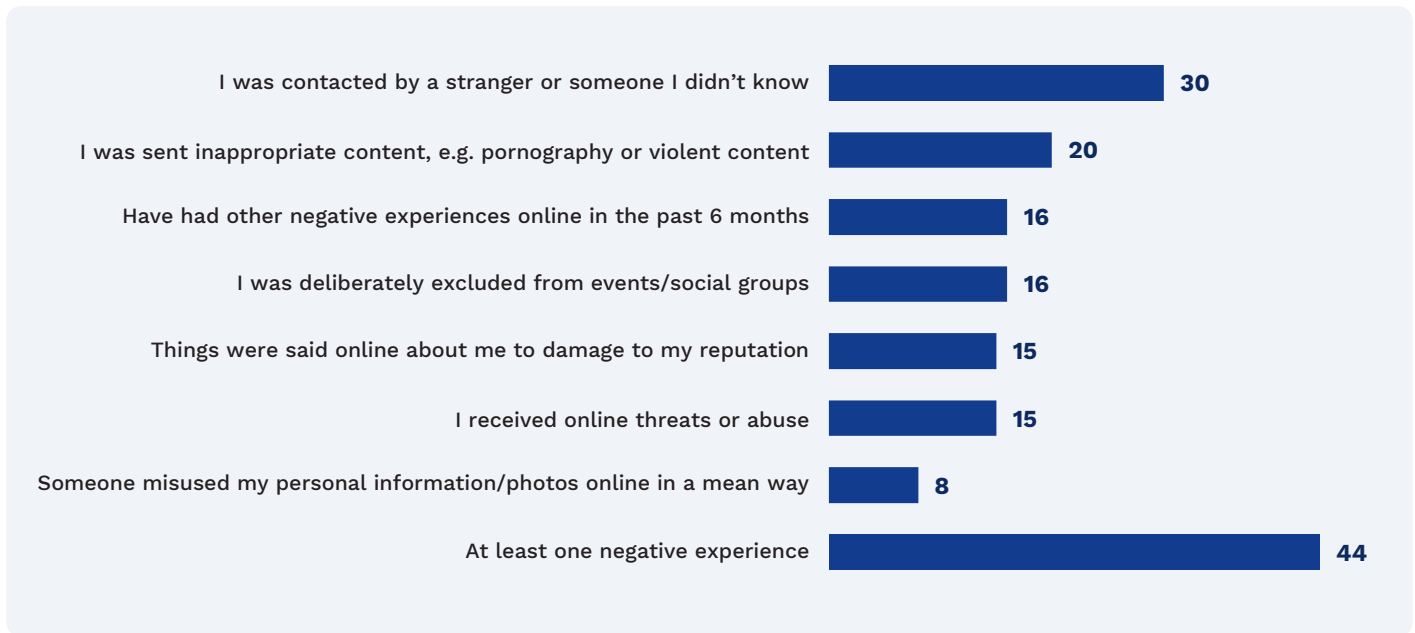
Q2: Which social media platforms or apps do you currently use?



Four in 10 teens (44%) had a negative online experience in the six months to September 2020 (see Figure 3). Age played a large part in this.

The top three negative experiences for teens online were being contacted by a stranger or someone they didn't know (30%), being sent unwanted inappropriate content such as pornography or violent content (20%) and being deliberately excluded from events/social groups (16%). While detailed comparisons with 2017 data is not possible due to different survey methodologies, the type of negative online experiences reported by young people in 2020 and 2017 remained consistent.

**Figure 3:** Negative online experiences in the six months to September 2020 (%)



**Q3:** Have you experienced any of the of the following [negative online experiences] in the past 6 months?

**Base:** All teens aged 12-17 (n=627).

The likelihood of having a negative online experience increased with age and gender (Table 3). Just over half of 14 to 17 year-olds had a negative online experience in the six months to September 2020 compared with 32% of 12 to 13 year-olds. In comparison, 47% of females had a negative online experience compared with 41% of males. Females were more likely to be contacted by a stranger (35% compared with 26% of males) while males were slightly more likely to receive online threats or abuse (18% compared with 11% of females).

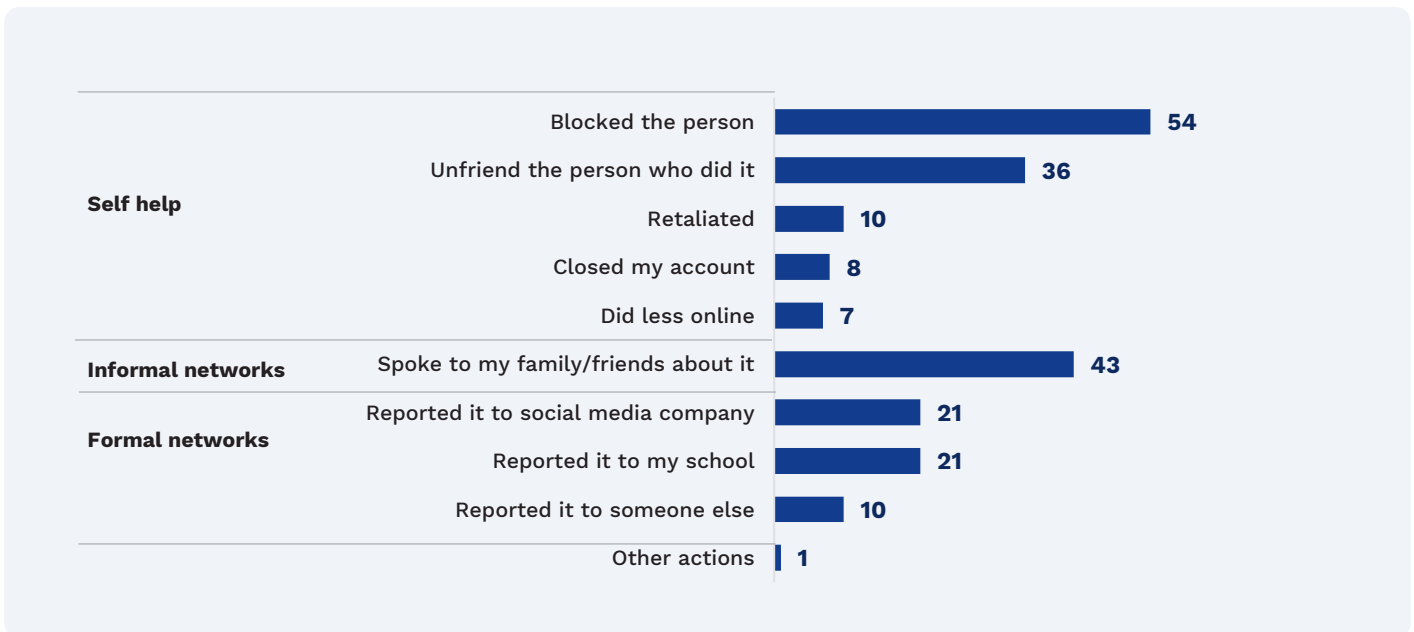
**Table 3:** Negative online experiences in the six months to September 2020, by gender and age (%)

	Total	Gender		Age (years)	
		Male	Female	12 to 13	14 to 17
I was contacted by a stranger/someone I didn't know	30	26	35	19	36
I was sent inappropriate unwanted content*	20	20	20	13	23
I have had other negative experiences online in the past six months	16	14	18	14	17
I was deliberately excluded from events/social groups	16	16	17	11	19
Things were said about me to damage my reputation	15	16	13	12	16
I received online threats or abuse	15	18	11	14	15
Someone misused my personal information/photos online in a mean way	8	9	6	5	9
<b>At least one negative online experience</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Base (number)</b>	627	313	314	191	436

**Q3:** Have you experienced any of the of the following [negative online experiences] in the past 6 months? \*e.g. pornography or violent content.

More than 80% of teens took some form of action after a negative online experience and this mostly related to self-help or speaking to family or friends (Figure 4). While there is no comparative total for 2017, some comparisons can be made for individual categories, with teens taking a more active approach in 2020. The data shows that there may be a shift in the way teens deal with negative online experiences, from informal approaches such as talking to family and friends to more self-help (e.g. blocking, unfriending) and formal reporting. In 2020, 54% of teens blocked the person responsible for their negative online experience (compared with 43% in 2017), 43% spoke to family/friends about it (compared with 64% in 2017), and 36% unfriended the offending person (no comparative data from 2017). Overall, four in 10 formally reported their experience, 21% to the social media company (13% in 2017), and 21% to their school and 10% to someone else.

**Figure 4:** Actions taken by those who had a negative experience (%)



**Q4:** What actions, if any, have you taken after this or these negative online experience(s)?

**Base:** Teens who had a negative online experience (n=276).

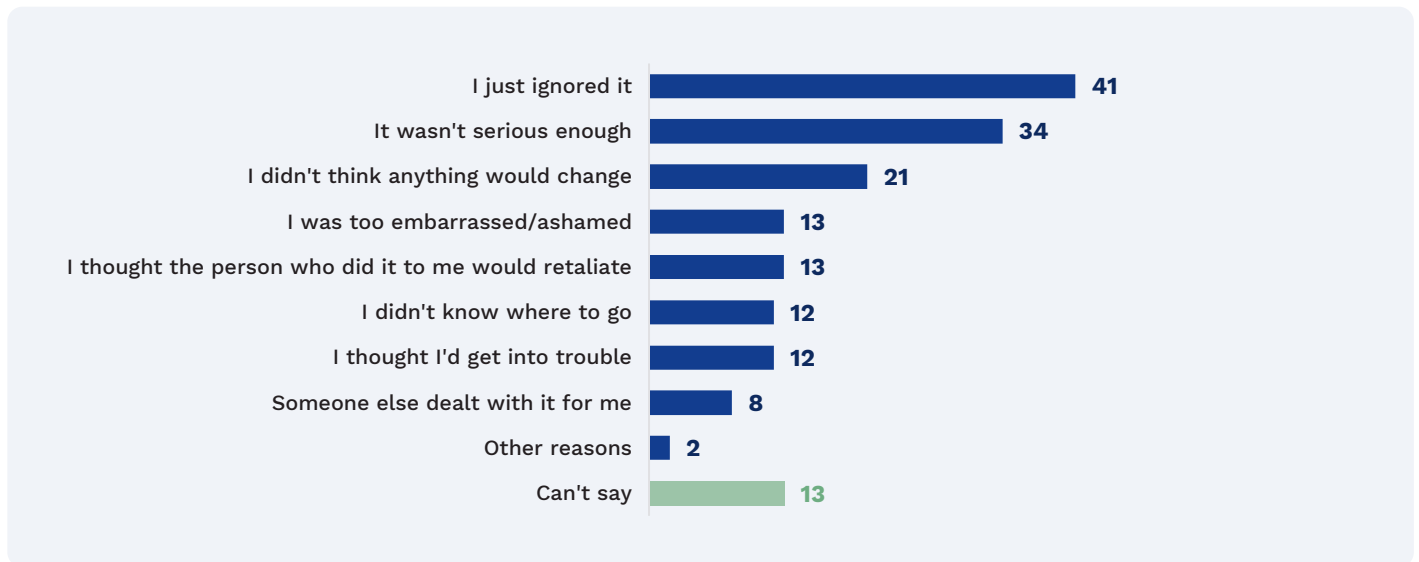
### Experiences related to bullying at school

For those who had a negative online experience, almost one third (30%) said that it related to bullying that occurred at school. This decreased with age – just over one third of those aged 12 to 13 (36%) said their experience(s) related to bullying at school compared with three in 10 for those aged 14 to 15, and two in 10 for those aged 16 to 17.

### Reasons for not reporting

The main reasons for not reporting a negative online experience were that teens chose to ignore it (41%), didn't consider the experience to be serious enough (34%), didn't think that anything would change (21%), felt embarrassed/ashamed or feared retaliation (13% for each) (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5:** Reasons why teens did not report their negative online experience(s) (%)



**Q5:** Why didn't you report this or these negative online experiences?

**Base:** Teens who had reported negative online experience to their school, a social media company, or someone else (n=156).

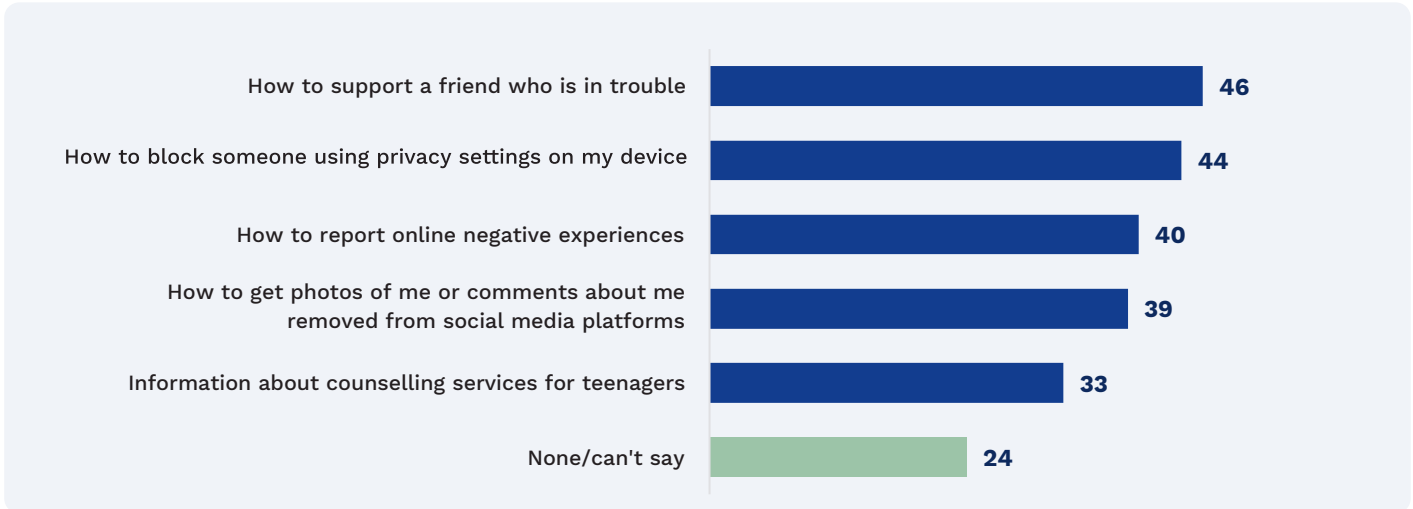




## Online safety information needs

Three in four teens identified a range of online safety information that they would like to be able to access (Figure 6). Teens would most like to find out how to support a friend who is in trouble (46%), closely followed by how to block someone using privacy settings on a device (44%). Four in ten teens would like further information about how to report negative online experiences (40%) and would like to know how to get photos or comments about themselves removed from social media platforms (39%).

**Figure 6:** Types of online safety information teens would like to access (%)



**Q6:** What online safety information would you like to have access to? **Base:** All teens aged 12 to 17 (n=627).

Females (43%) and older teens (41%) were more likely than males (35%) and younger teens (35%) to want information on how to remove photos or comments from social media (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Types of online safety information teens would like to have access to, by gender and age (%)

	Total	Gender		Age (years)	
		Male	Female	12 to 13	14 to 17
How to support a friend who is in trouble	46	46	46	43	47
How to block someone using privacy settings on my device	44	43	45	44	44
How to report online negative experiences	40	38	43	37	42
How to have photos of me or comments about me removed from social media	39	35	43	35	41
Information about counselling services for teenagers	33	30	36	29	35
Other	0	0	0	1	0
None/can't say	24	24	24	30	21
<b>Base (number)</b>	627	313	314	191	436

**Q6:** What online safety information would you like to have access to?





## Trusted sources of information

Teens had definite preferences for how they want to access information about online safety (Table 5). The three top ways were through their school or an online safety class (43%), through a trusted website (40%) or from a parent/carer (38%). Those aged 12 to 13 preferred information through school or an online safety course (47%) and from a parent/carer (42%) while those aged 14 to 17 wanted information through a trusted website (44%) or through school/online safety course (41%).

**Table 5:** How teens want to access online safety information (%)

	Total	Gender		Age (years)	
		Male	Female	12 to 13	14 to 17
Information provided through my school/ online safety class at school	43	42	43	47	41
Through a trusted eSafety website*	40	41	39	33	44
From a parent/carer	38	36	40	42	36
Through discussion with friends	29	28	30	31	29
Via social media	33	35	30	21	38
Through online or telephone counselling	19	17	20	15	21
Via online newsletter	15	16	14	15	15
Other ways	1	2	0	3	0
Can't say	11	11	10	13	10
<b>Base (number)</b>	627	313	314	191	436

**Q7:** How would you like to access online safety information? \*Attitudes and awareness of specific sites were not explored in this survey.



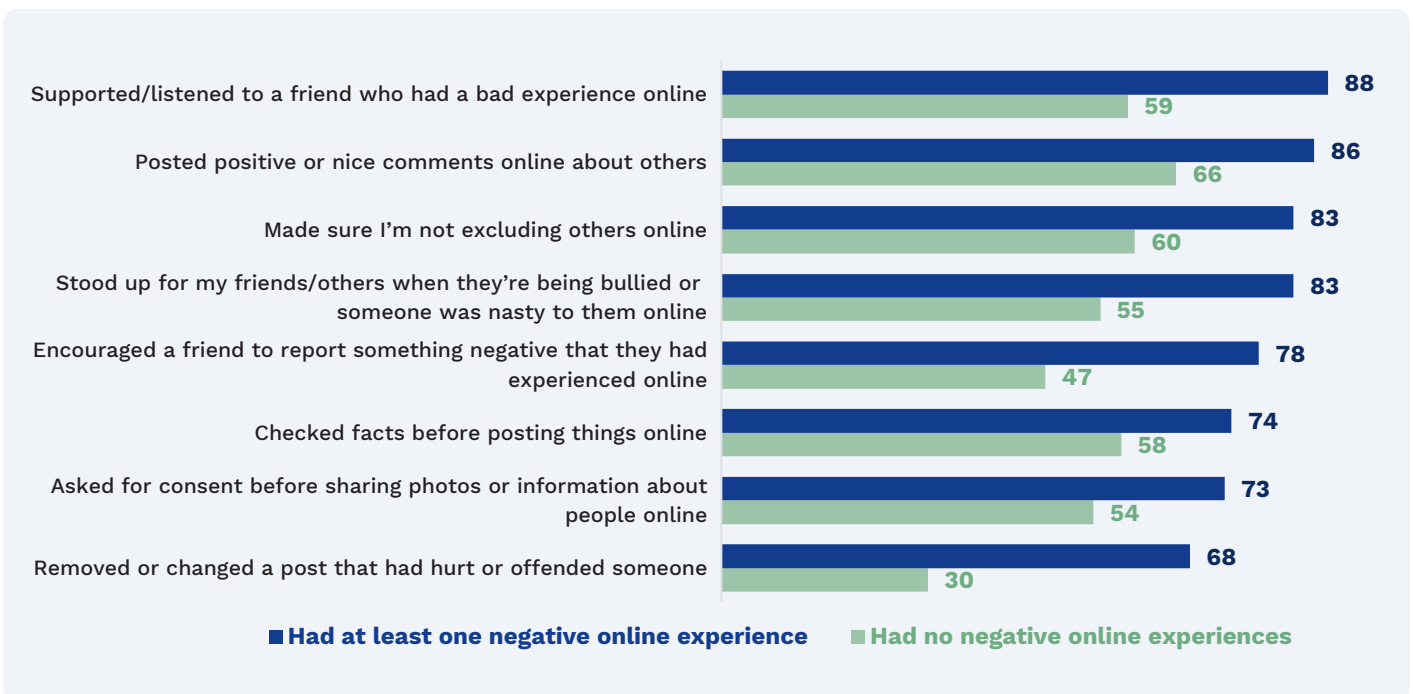


## Positive online behaviours

While faced with online safety challenges, it's heartening that teens in Australia do act to build a safer and inclusive online environment in several ways. Given their wealth of online experience, most teens (9 in 10) reported that they have done at least one positive thing online. Those who have had negative online experiences were more likely to say that they engage in positive behaviours (see Figure 7). These included:

- supporting or listening to a friend who had a bad experience (88% of those who had a negative online experience compared with 59% who hadn't)
- posting positive/nice comments about others (86% compared with 66%)
- making sure that peers are not excluded online (83% compared with 60%).

**Figure 7:** Type of positive online behaviours (%)



**Q8:** Finally, have you done the following [positive online behaviours]?

**Base:** Teens who had a negative online experience (n=276), teens who had no negative online experiences (n=351).

While there were minimal differences between genders, older age groups were more likely to say that they had done something positive online – 92% of those aged 14 to 17 years compared with 84% of those aged 12 to 13. These differences were evident across all types of behaviours (Table 6).

**Table 6:** Positive online behaviours by gender and age (%)

	Total	Gender		Age (years)	
		Male	Female	12 to 13	14 to 17
Posted positive or nice comments online about others	75	73	77	63	81
Supported/listened to a friend who had a bad experience online	71	71	72	60	77
Made sure I'm not excluding others online	70	69	71	66	72
Stood up for my friends/others when they're being bullied or someone was nasty to them online	67	65	70	56	73
Checked facts before posting things online	65	65	65	51	72
Asked for consent before sharing photos or information about people online	62	59	66	47	70
Encouraged a friend to report something negative that they had experienced online	61	61	61	48	67
Removed or changed a post that had hurt or offended someone	47	47	46	39	50
At least one positive behaviour	89	88	90	84	92
<b>Base (number)</b>	627	313	314	191	436

**Q8:** Finally, have you done the following [positive online behaviours]?

# Conclusion

Compared with 2017, teens in Australia appear to be adapting to their online environment, moving from informal discussions to more active approaches in dealing with online safety issues. Negative online experiences influence and shape the way teens behave online, with those having these experiences more likely to engage in positive online behaviours as a result.

This report, however, highlights that teens do feel that there are information gaps – not only to address their own negative experiences but also to help support others going through similar experiences. One of the challenges is to make sure that teens are aware of, and have access to, trusted sources of information about online safety, with this group preferring the information to be delivered through schools or via a trusted website.

While this report provides a snapshot of teens' experiences at the top level, the size of the sample, 627, does not allow the findings to be reported by at-risk groups such as LGBTQI+ or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. eSafety research released in 2020 relating to adults<sup>1</sup> has shown that these groups experienced online hate speech at more than double the national average. Future eSafety research projects will investigate the experiences and needs of these diverse communities to highlight the voices of those who are potentially most at risk. In 2021, eSafety will undertake a major youth online safety survey comprising 3,500 young people aged 8 to 17. This survey will provide critical intelligence which will aid in the roll out of programs as a part of eSafety's **Protecting voices at risk online**<sup>2</sup> statement.



<sup>1</sup> eSafety, Adults' negative online experiences. August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> [esafety.gov.au/diverse-groups/protecting-voices-risk-online](https://esafety.gov.au/diverse-groups/protecting-voices-risk-online)

# Methodology

## Sample and weighting

The target audience for this research was Australian teenagers aged 12 to 17 years old. Data collection was undertaken by Omnipoll<sup>3</sup> using the non-probability based Lightspeed consumer panel to access sample members. Non-probability sampling means that not everyone has an equal chance of being selected to participate in the research. Results may be subject to a range of biases when compared with results from research using probability-based sampling<sup>4 5</sup>. Sample quotas were set for each state and territory with interlocking gender by age quotas. Survey responses were weighted based on age, gender and geographical area using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2016 Census. All findings presented in this report use weighted data, unless otherwise noted.

## Data collection and quality assurance

Data was collected from 17 to 28 September with 627 in-scope teenagers responding to the survey via mobile phone. Data presented in this report have been disaggregated by gender (male and female) and age (12 to 13 years and 14 to 17 years).

The total number of completed surveys in the current research, however, does not allow the findings to be reported separately by LGBTQI+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other diverse communities.

## Notes about analysis

Data from 2017 is calculated for 12 to 17 year-olds from eSafety's Youth Digital Participation survey. Overall results of this survey were published in State of Play – youth, kids and digital dangers available at [esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/youth-digital-dangers](https://esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/youth-digital-dangers) 'Don't know' and 'Refused' responses are not excluded. Multiple response questions and data may total greater than 100%

<sup>3</sup> For further information about the approach taken by Omnipoll, see [omnipoll.com.au/omnibus](https://omnipoll.com.au/omnibus)

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, May 2016, Evaluating Online Nonprobability Surveys. Retrieved 10 November 2020 from [pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org)

<sup>5</sup> Australian National University Centre for Social Research & Methods and the Social Research Centre, May 2018, The Online Panels Benchmarking Study: A Total Survey Error comparison of findings from probability-based surveys and nonprobability online panel surveys in Australia. Retrieved 10 November 2020 from [csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au](https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au)



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