Social media minimum age evaluation:

A snapshot of participating families

November 2026

Australian Government

eSafety Commissioner

eSafety.gov.au

Acknowledgement of Country

eSafety acknowledges all First Nations people for their continuing care of everything Country encompasses – land, waters and community. We pay our respects to First Nations people and to Elders past and present.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the children, young people, parents and carers participating in this study for their ongoing commitment and generosity in sharing their time and experiences. Their contributions are helping to build a deeper understanding of the implementation and impacts of the social media minimum age legislation for Australian children, young people and families.

eSafety also gratefully acknowledges the contributions of our academic collaborators. Stanford University's Social Media Lab (SML), our Lead Academic Partner, has provided methodological and technical expertise throughout the design, implementation, analysis and dissemination of the evaluation, including co-design of the evaluation approach and instruments. We also thank the members of the Academic Advisory Group (AAG), who have provided independent expert advice, peer review and quality assurance to strengthen the scientific rigour and credibility of the study. We also acknowledge the youth peer researchers, drawn from eSafety's Youth Council, who are supporting the evaluation. Finally, we acknowledge our fieldwork contractor, the Social Research Centre.

To learn more about eSafety's Research and Evaluation team, Stanford University's SML and the AAG, visit the **evaluation hub** on eSafety's website.

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About this report

This report provides a point-in-time snapshot of the cohort of parents and children participating in eSafety's **evaluation** of Australia's social media age restrictions. Drawing on data collected through the baseline survey (conducted between November and December 2025), the report describes the sociodemographic characteristics and the online and offline lives of participating children and families before the age restrictions took effect. As a foundational publication in the evaluation series, the report is intended to be read alongside other publications in the series as a point of comparison. Together, these reports will provide a comprehensive picture of how children and their families experience the implementation of the age restrictions and the extent to which the policy's intended outcomes are being achieved.

The report begins with a snapshot of the sociodemographic characteristics of the parents and children surveyed at baseline. It then explores the home and school lives of the participating children, and their mental health and wellbeing. Finally, the report describes children's digital engagement and online experiences, as well as children's and parents' attitudes towards social media, before the age restrictions took effect.

As the primary purpose of this report is to provide a point-in-time snapshot of the cohort of parents and children participating in eSafety's evaluation of the social media age restrictions, we focus on cohort-level findings only. However, we acknowledge that children aged 10 to 16 are not a homogeneous group and that their development, behaviours and experiences can vary considerably according to various aspects of their identity. Future reports will explore findings among subgroups of children to identify potential differential effects of the age restrictions among certain children.[1]

Beyond its role in helping to establish a baseline for the evaluation, alongside **research into the attitudes of children and parents** to the social media age restrictions ahead of implementation, this report also provides unique insights into the lives, experiences and wellbeing of Australian children and families in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

For further details on the age restrictions and eSafety's evaluation, see the **methodology report**.

[1] Subject to sufficient sample sizes, this exploration may include analyses of First Nations children, children with disability, LGBTQ+ children, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and children living in regional and remote areas.

Notes to readers

- The social media age restrictions require certain social media providers to take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under age 16 from having accounts on their platforms. However, there are no penalties for children under 16 who have social media accounts, or for their parents or carers.
- eSafety acknowledges that families and carers are diverse and come in many different forms. For simplicity and consistency throughout this report, we use the term 'parents' to refer collectively to parents, guardians and primary carers of children aged 10 to 16.
- Similarly, while there are varying definitions for children and young people, for simplicity and consistency throughout the report we use the term 'children' to refer collectively to children and young people aged 10 to 16.
- We acknowledge that children aged 10 to 16 are not a homogeneous group and that their development, behaviours and experiences can vary considerably across this age range. We will examine the role of age throughout the evaluation, including whether the outcomes of the age restrictions vary by age over time.

Key terms

Age-restricted social media: Social media platforms or apps that were assessed by eSafety in November 2025 as meeting the conditions of an age-restricted social media platform as defined under the legislation. These were Facebook, Instagram, Kick, Reddit, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, Twitch, X and YouTube.

AI chatbots, assistants and companions: Computer programs that use generative artificial intelligence.

Baseline: A comprehensive survey of over 4,000 parents and children aged 10 to 16. Data was collected from November to December 2025, prior to the social media age restrictions coming into effect. The baseline survey serves as an initial point of measurement for eSafety's evaluation of the social media age restrictions, to which future surveys will be compared.

Children: Children and young people surveyed aged 10 to 16.

Content associated with harm: For the purposes of this report, this was defined as content seen by children online that depicts dangerous online challenges or fight videos, content that encourages unhealthy eating or exercise habits, sexual content, or content that shows illegal drug taking, extreme real-life violence or self-harm. Doesn't include content seen in TV shows or movies.

Cyberbullying: For the purposes of this report, this was defined as when someone uses the internet to purposefully hurt, upset or intimidate a child with the intention of making them feel bad, humiliated or disliked.

LGBTQ+: An acronym used for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer, as well as others who identify as same or multigender attracted or gender diverse but who use a wide range of different identity terms.

Messaging platforms: For the purposes of this report, this was defined as platforms used to message, chat, call or video call online (for example, Messenger, WhatsApp, Facetime, email).[2]

[2] With the exception of age-restricted social media platforms, we have categorised services in a certain way for the purposes of this report only. This doesn't mean that we have assessed them that way under the Online Safety Act or any subordinate legislation.

Online hate: For the purposes of this report, this was defined as when someone uses the internet to post offensive or threatening things about a person or group because they were hateful of their identity, such as hateful of their race, religion, culture, country of origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability or gender.

- **Exposure to online hate content:** Refers to a child having seen online hate content, excluding content depicted in TV shows or movies.
- **Personal experience of online hate:** Refers to a child having personally experienced someone saying or posting offensive or threatening things to or about them because they were hateful of one or more of their identity characteristics.

Parents: Parents, guardians and primary carers of the children surveyed.

Social media: For the purposes of this report, this was defined as any online platform or app where people can potentially interact with others and post or share content (such as photos or videos), as well as watch content.[3]

Social media minimum age: The social media minimum age (SMMA) obligation requires certain social media providers to take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under the age of 16 from having accounts on their platforms. The obligation took effect on 10 December 2025.

Theory of Change: Sets out how and why a policy is expected to lead to impacts. It identifies key activities, outputs and assumptions that may contribute to intended and potential unintended outcomes, and external factors influencing implementation.

Unwanted sexual contact: For the purposes of this report, this was defined as someone online making a child feel uncomfortable by talking about sex or asking them to do sexual things they don't want to do, such as being pressured to send sexual images, or receiving unwanted sexual messages.

[3] As above.

Methodology

This report draws on data from the baseline survey of eSafety's evaluation of the **social media minimum age** restrictions. The baseline survey included a nationally representative sample of 4,121 children aged 10 to 16 living in Australia, and one of their parents, recruited between November and December 2025. These children and their parents are being followed up over two years, using a range of complementary research methods, to assess the outcomes and impacts of the age restrictions. For further details of the evaluation design, see the methodology report.

The baseline survey included two components: (i) a parent survey; and (ii) a child survey (each taking approximately 20–30 minutes to complete). The report presents findings for select indicators that are relevant to understanding baseline conditions and testing the evaluation's Theory of Change. To ensure the report remains easily understood and focused, not all survey measures are reported. The full instruments for both the parent and child components of the survey can be found on the Open Science Framework. See the Appendix for further details on data collection and analysis.

Theory of Change

The evaluation is guided by a **Theory of Change** developed by eSafety early in the design of the evaluation. The Theory of Change outlines how the age restrictions are expected to lead to impacts for children and families, as well as the assumptions and contextual factors that may shape their implementation and impact. In this way, it can be seen as a 'change pathway'. The theory recognises that the SMMA is being implemented within a complex system and that both intended and unintended consequences may emerge over time.

The Theory of Change has informed the evaluation by helping to determine what information to collect, when to collect it, and how findings should be interpreted over time. It has also highlighted key assumptions, implementation factors and potential unintended consequences for the evaluation to monitor and test.

Throughout this report, we use the Theory of Change to understand how the baseline findings relate to the policy's expected change pathway. In particular, we consider whether the starting conditions are consistent with those expected to support positive change and what shifts may emerge over time if the policy influences outcomes in the ways anticipated. The Theory of Change for the SMMA legislation, including visual and narrative representations, is available on our website.

Positionality statement

We acknowledge the potential for real or perceived bias in conducting and reporting on the evaluation. To support confidence in the findings, we have taken deliberate steps to ensure the process is transparent and rigorous and includes independent oversight. These steps are described in detail in the methodology report. They include the establishment of a Lead Academic Partner and an Academic Advisory Group, who provide independent, evidence-based guidance throughout and have also peer-reviewed this report.

For details about members of the eSafety Research and Evaluation Team, Lead Academic Partner and Academic Advisory Group, see our **website**.

Who are the parents and children participating in the evaluation?

In this section, we describe the sociodemographic characteristics of the cohort of parents and children who participated in the baseline survey of eSafety's **evaluation** of the outcomes of the social media age restrictions.

As illustrated on the following pages, our cohort of children and parents who participated in the baseline survey closely reflects the **demographic profile** of the broader Australian population of children aged 10 to 16 and their parents in terms of age, gender and geographical location.[4]

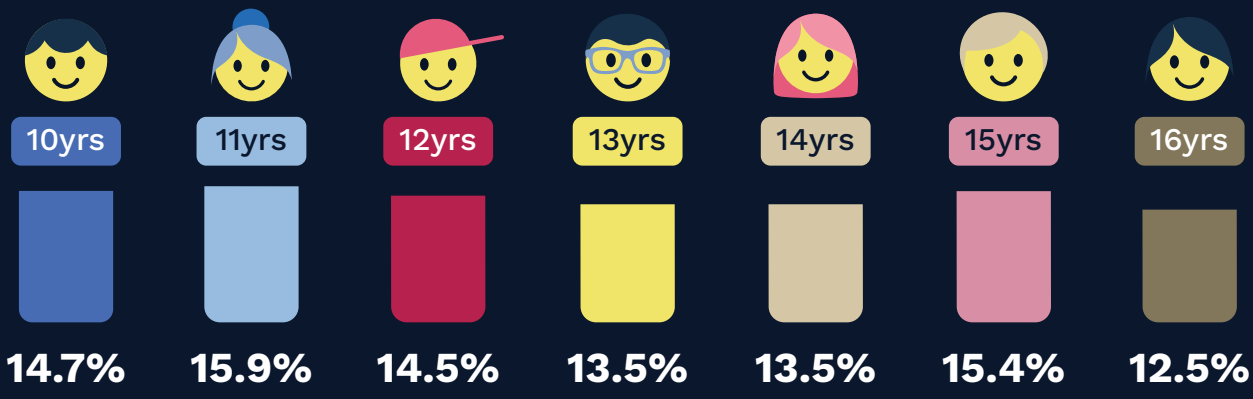
Importantly, the cohort also included strong representation from groups identified as a priority for the study, including children with disability (22.9% of whom were neurodivergent and 10.0% had a diagnosed mental health condition), culturally and linguistically diverse children and families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and parents, and sexually diverse teens.[5]

For further demographic characteristics of the parents and children surveyed, see Tables A1 and A2 in the appendix.

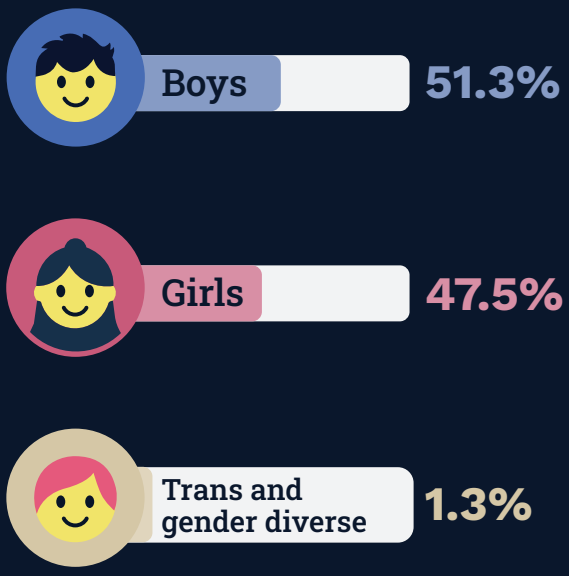
[4] Quota sampling was used to ensure the sample reflected the wider population of Australian children aged 10 to 16, with children recruited to targets on age, gender, state or territory, socio-economic area and region. Weighting was also applied to the sample to correct for minor deviations from the quota targets. Population statistics for weighting were sourced from comparable population estimates published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. For further details, see the methodology report.
[5] Sexuality was only asked of children aged 13 and older (n = 2,407). 'Sexually diverse' includes participants who identified as 'gay or lesbian', 'bisexual', 'queer' or 'asexual', or who used 'a different word'.

Demographic characteristics of children who participated in the baseline survey

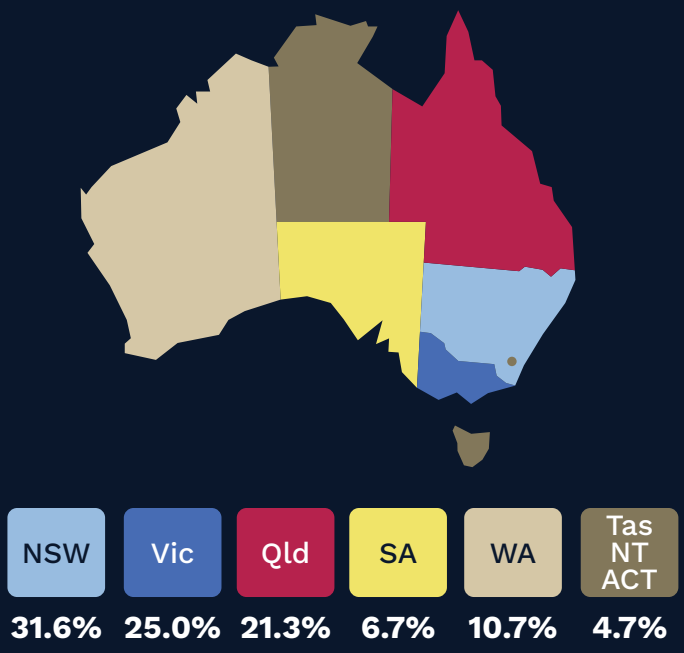
Age



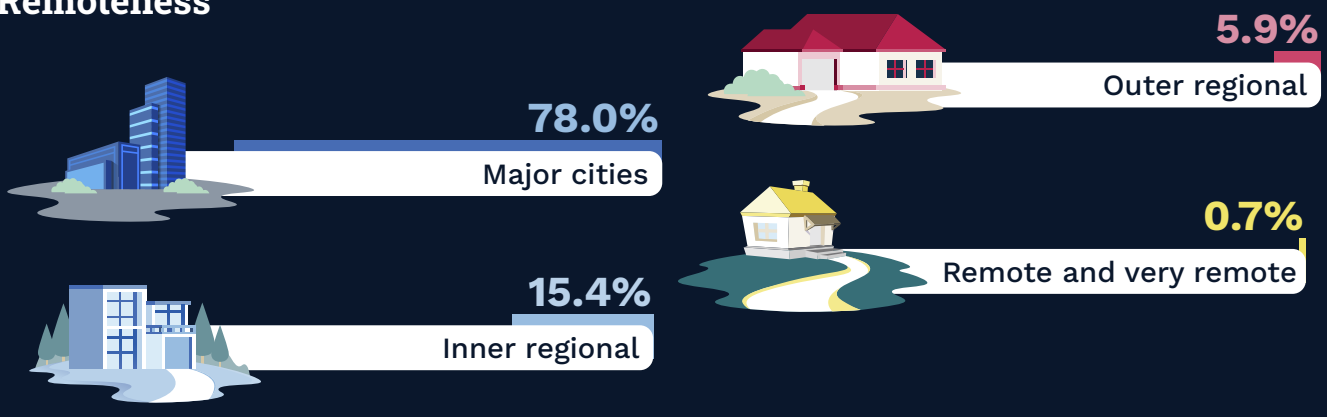
Gender



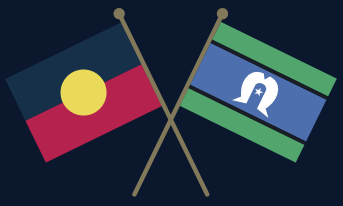
State/territory



Remoteness

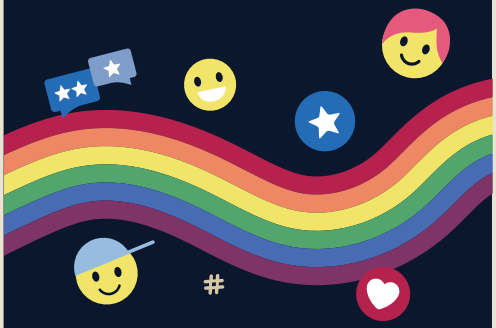


Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity



8.6%

Sexually diverse



7.1%
of teens

Any disability or diagnosis

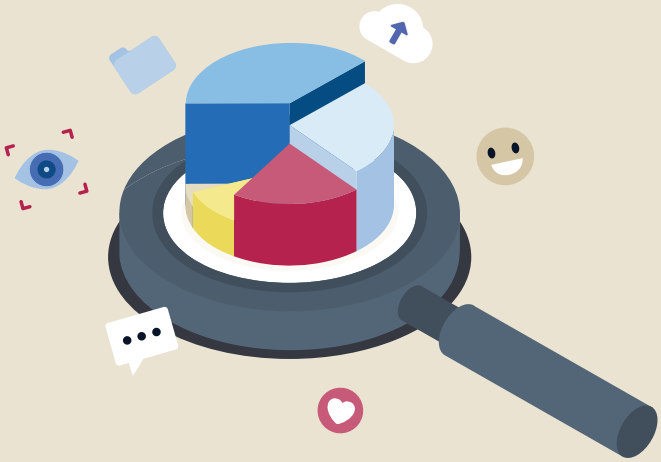


30.4%

Speaks language other than English at home

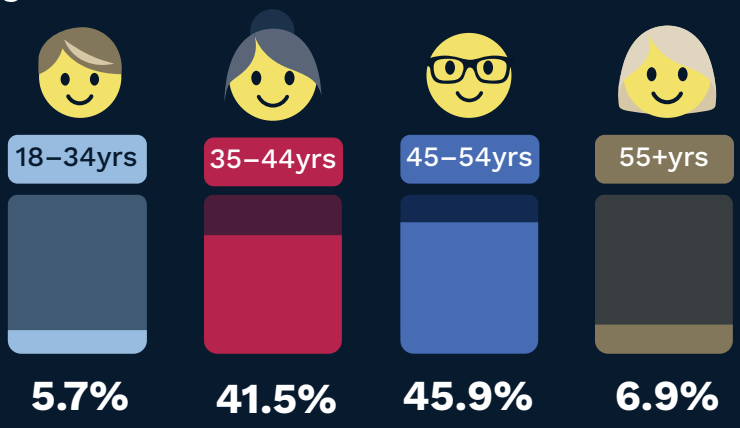
18.0%





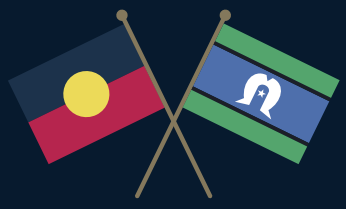
Demographic characteristics of parents who participated in the baseline survey

Age



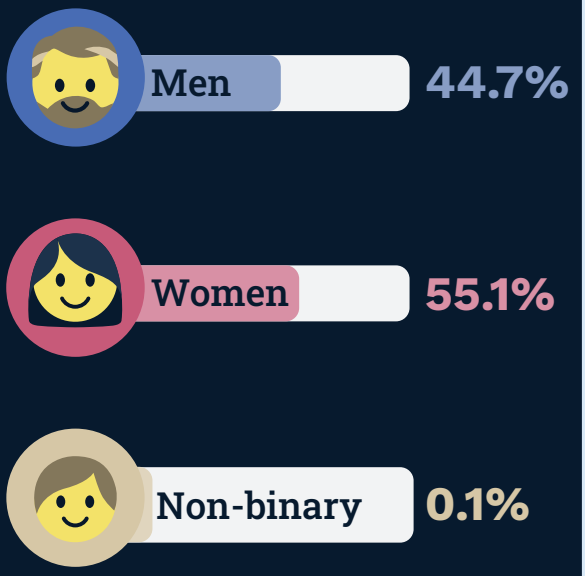
5.7% 41.5% 45.9% 6.9%

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity



5.6%

Gender



Speaks language other than English at home



26.5%

Key findings and implications for the change pathway

The cohort that has been recruited into the evaluation is broadly representative of Australian children aged 10 to 16 years and their parents. In addition, the study intentionally includes children from groups who may both experience heightened exposure to online harms and derive increased benefit from online engagement, including First Nations children, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, LGBTQ+ children, and children with disability.

Consistent with the Theory of Change, which predicts that the age restrictions may affect different groups of children and families in different ways, this diversity provides the necessary foundation to enable the evaluation to examine whether the impacts of the social media age restrictions differ across population groups, and to better understand how children's and families' experiences may vary depending on their circumstances and needs.

What does life at home and at school look like for children?

In this section, we explore what home and school life looked like for children before the social media age restrictions came into effect. As the boundaries between children's online and offline lives become increasingly blurred, understanding the environments in which they live, learn and engage online is essential. We explore family composition, communication and cohesion, parental stress and mental health, and children's engagement and sense of connectedness at school, to build a picture of the contexts that shape their experiences both online and offline.

Who do children live with, and what are their relationships with their parents like?

Most children in the baseline cohort (77.8%) lived in a household with two parents, while 1 in 5 (20.1%) lived in single-parent households. A small proportion (2.0%) lived with three or more parents.

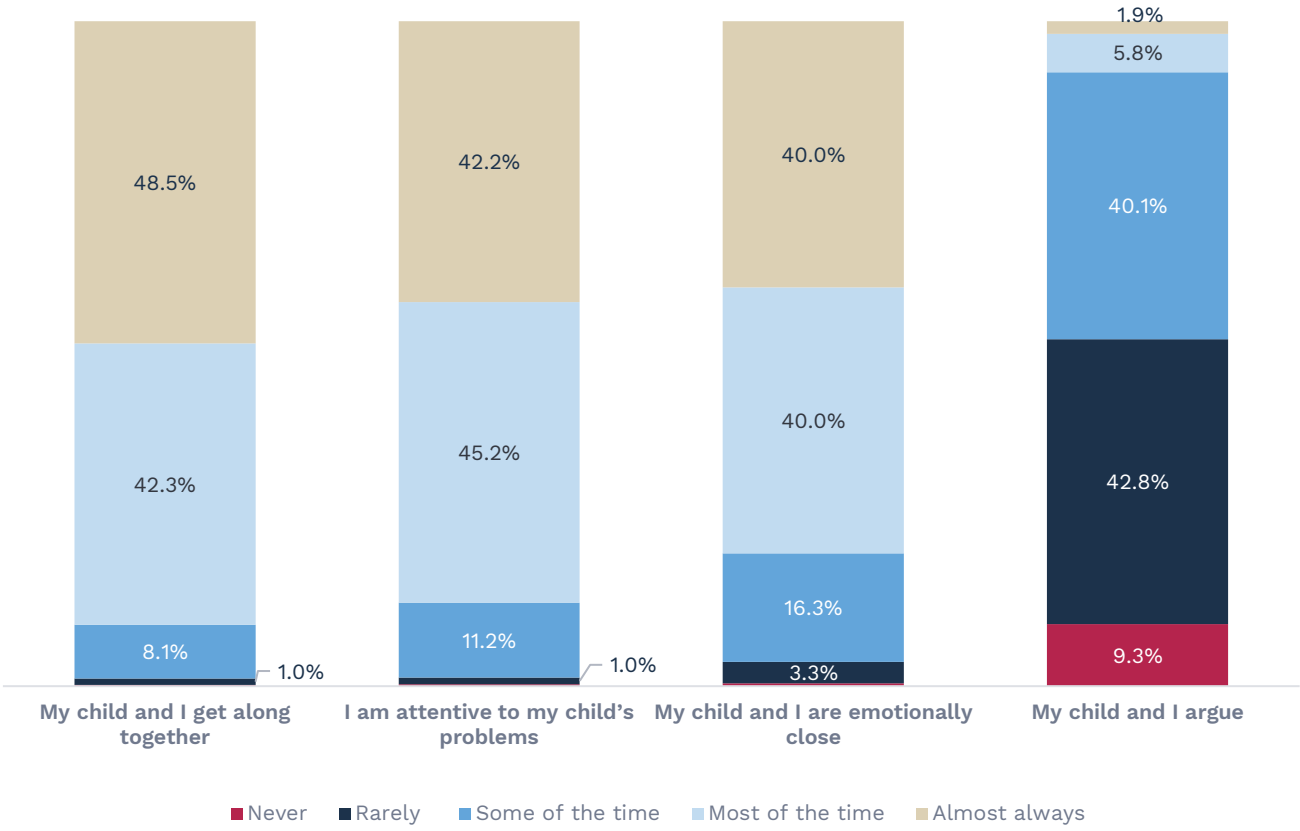
Both parents and children generally reported strong family communication and cohesion in the four weeks prior to the survey, with high levels of communication, emotional closeness and relationship quality (see Figures 1 and 2). For example:

- Nine in 10 parents (90.7%) said they **get on well with their child** most of the time or almost always. A similar proportion of children (84.0%) said they get on well with their parent a lot or all of the time.
- Just under 9 in 10 parents (87.5%) said they were **attentive to their child's problems** most of the time or almost always. Slightly fewer children (76.4%) said their parent pays attention to their problems a lot or all of the time.
- Eight in 10 parents (80.0%) said they are **emotionally close to their child** most of the time or almost always. Similarly, 76.0% of children said they are emotionally close to their parent a lot or all of the time.

Consistent with these findings, **arguments between parents and children** were relatively infrequent, with most parents (92.3%) and children (89.8%) reporting arguing some of the

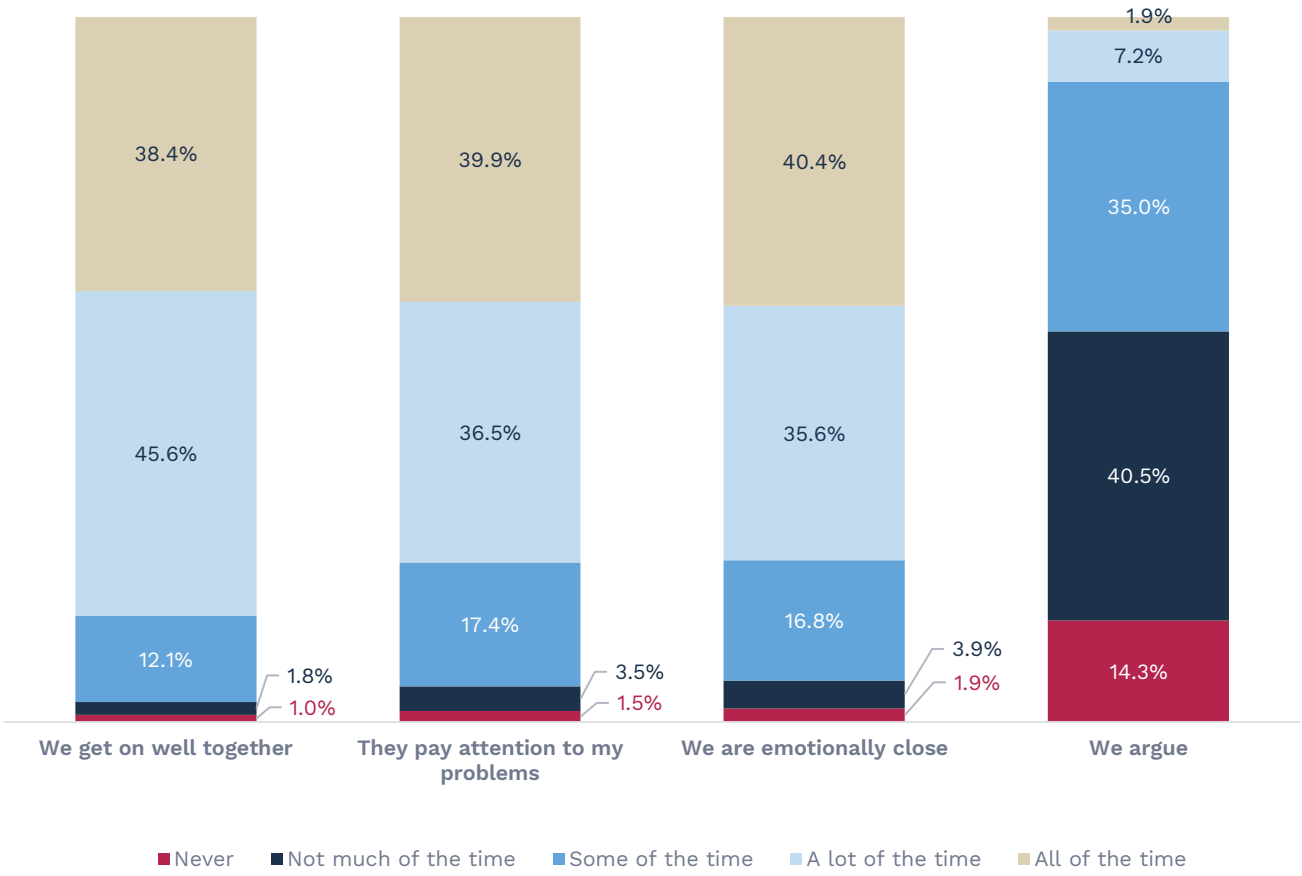
time or less often in the four weeks prior to the survey. A small proportion of parents (7.7%) and children (9.1%) reported arguing most or a lot of the time, or more frequently.

Figure 1: Family communication and cohesion reported by parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: How much of the time, if at all, in the past 4 weeks, have you felt these things about your relationship with your child?
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes those who selected 'Not sure' or 'Prefer not to say'.

Figure 2: Family communication and cohesion reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



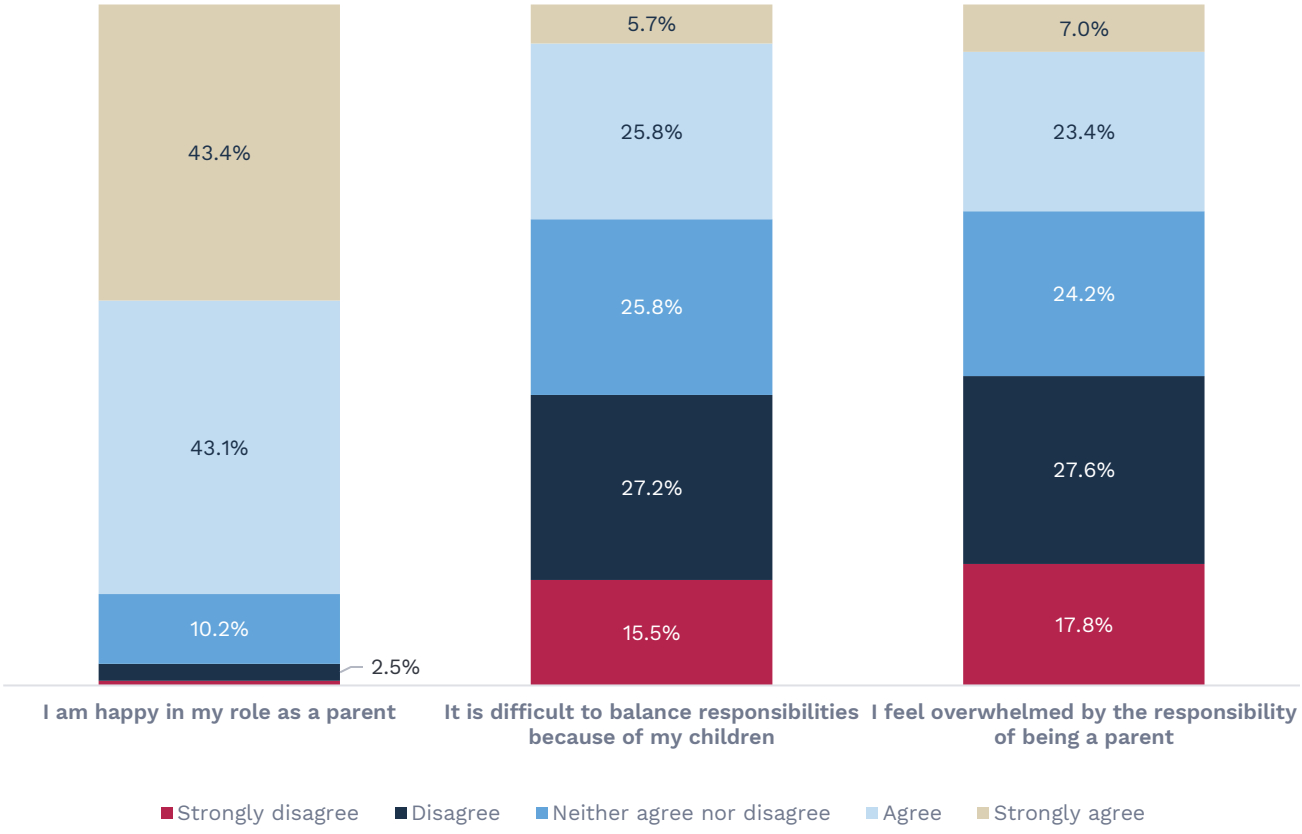
Q: How much of the time in the past 4 weeks have you felt these things about your parent or caregiver?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes those who selected 'Not sure' or 'Prefer not to say'.

How are parents managing family life?

Mirroring the generally positive family relationships reported by both parents and children, most parents reported being **happy in their role as a parent** (86.5% agreed or strongly agreed). However, parental stress wasn't uncommon, as shown in Figure 3, with just under 1 in 3 parents agreeing or strongly agreeing that:

- 'It is difficult to **balance responsibilities** because of my children' (31.5%).
- 'I feel **overwhelmed** by the responsibility of being a parent' (30.4%).

Figure 3: Parental stress reported by parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



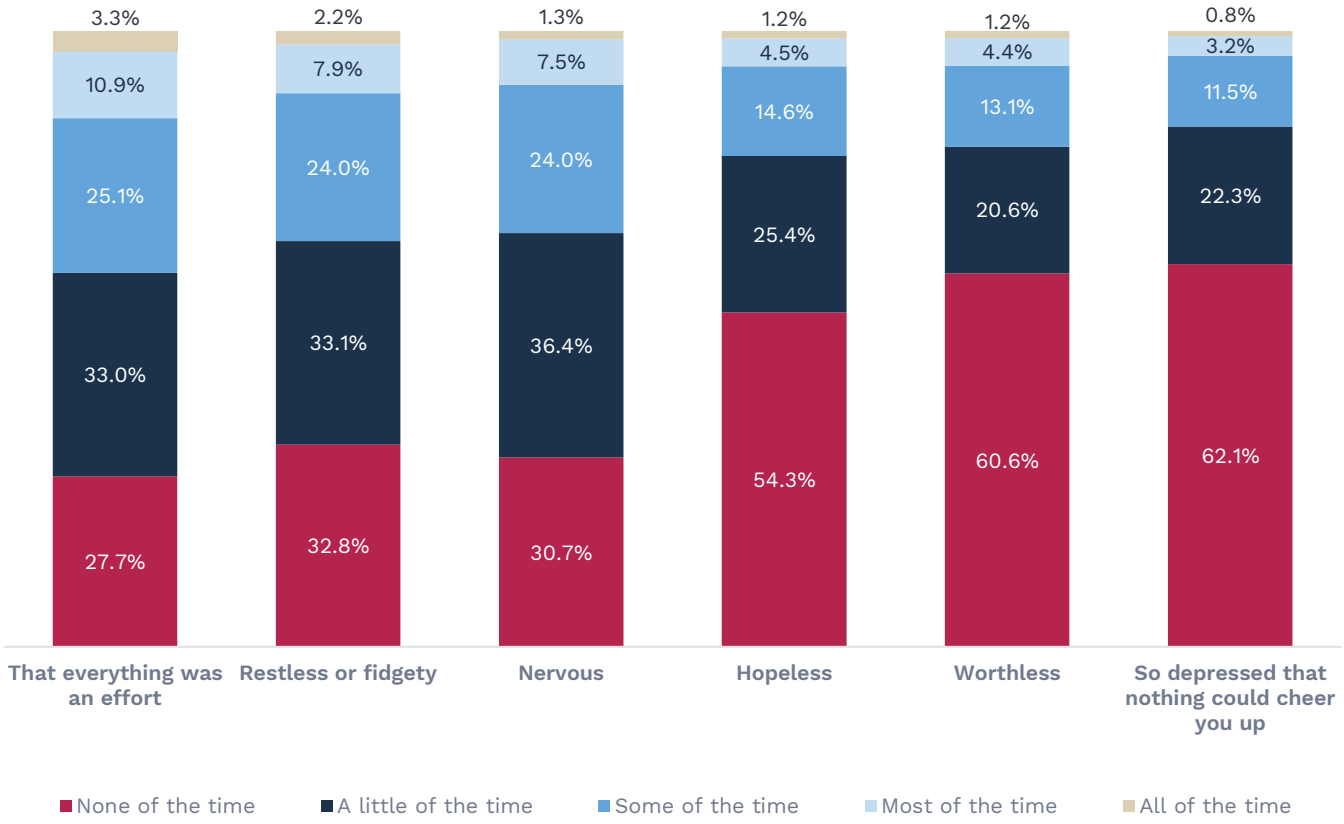
Q: Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following items.
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes those who selected 'Not sure' or 'Prefer not to say'.

We also asked parents about their experiences of **psychological distress** in the four weeks prior to the survey, including the extent to which they felt such things as 'nervous', 'hopeless', 'restless or fidgety', 'depressed' or 'worthless' (see Figure 4). While, overall, most parents reported low psychological distress (70.8%; see Table 1), a substantial minority reported experiencing feelings of psychological distress at least some of the time in the four weeks prior to the survey. For example:

- 39.2% felt that **everything was an effort**
- 34.1% felt **restless or fidgety**
- 32.8% felt **nervous**
- 20.3% felt **hopeless**
- 18.8% felt **worthless**
- 15.5% felt so **depressed** that nothing could cheer them up.

Based on their responses to these questions, we found that just under 1 in 10 parents (9.4%) were experiencing high psychological distress, while around 1 in 5 (19.7%) were experiencing moderate psychological distress (see Table 1).

Figure 4: Psychological distress reported by parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: In the past 4 weeks, how often did you feel ...?
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes those who selected 'Not sure' or 'Prefer not to say'.

Table 1: Psychological distress reported by parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

K6*	
Proportion with high psychological distress	9.4%
Proportion with moderate psychological distress	19.7%
Proportion with low psychological distress	70.8%
Average score	11.5

Q: In the past 4 weeks, how often did you feel ...?
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121). Average score excludes those who selected 'Not sure' or 'Prefer not to say' (*n* = 4,114).
Note: *Psychological distress was assessed using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6). A score of 19 or above indicates high psychological distress. A score of 14 to 18 indicates moderate psychological distress. A score of 6 to 13 indicates low psychological distress (Rioseco et al., 2020).

How are children faring at school?

Children's wellbeing and experience of the age restrictions are likely to be shaped not only by their home life, but also by their experiences at school. We therefore explored how children were faring in the school environment, including their levels of school attendance, connection and belonging, before the age restrictions took effect.

Most children (96.6%) were attending school, with only a minority (3.4%) of parents or their children reporting that they didn't go to school.

Parents of children attending school were asked how often their child had been late or absent from school in the four weeks prior to the survey (see Table 2). Many parents (68.0%) reported their child hadn't been late to school at all during this period. Around 1 in 5 (20.9%) said their child had been late 1 to 2 times only, while smaller proportions reported their child had been late 3 to 6 times (6.9%) or more frequently (4.2%).

School absences were slightly more frequent. Less than half (45.4%) of parents reported their child hadn't been absent from school in the four weeks prior to the survey. Around 2 in 5 said their child had been absent 1 to 2 times only (38.8%), while 1 in 10 reported 3 to 6 absences (10.7%). A small proportion said their child had been absent more frequently than this (5.1%).

Table 2: School attendance and absence in the 4 weeks prior to the survey reported by parents of children aged 10 to 16 who went to school (*n* = 3,978)

	My child was late for school (%)	My child was absent from school (%)
Not at all (in the past 4 weeks)	68.0	45.4
1–2 times	20.9	38.8
3–6 times	6.9	10.7
7–9 times	2.0	2.7
10 or more times	2.2	2.3

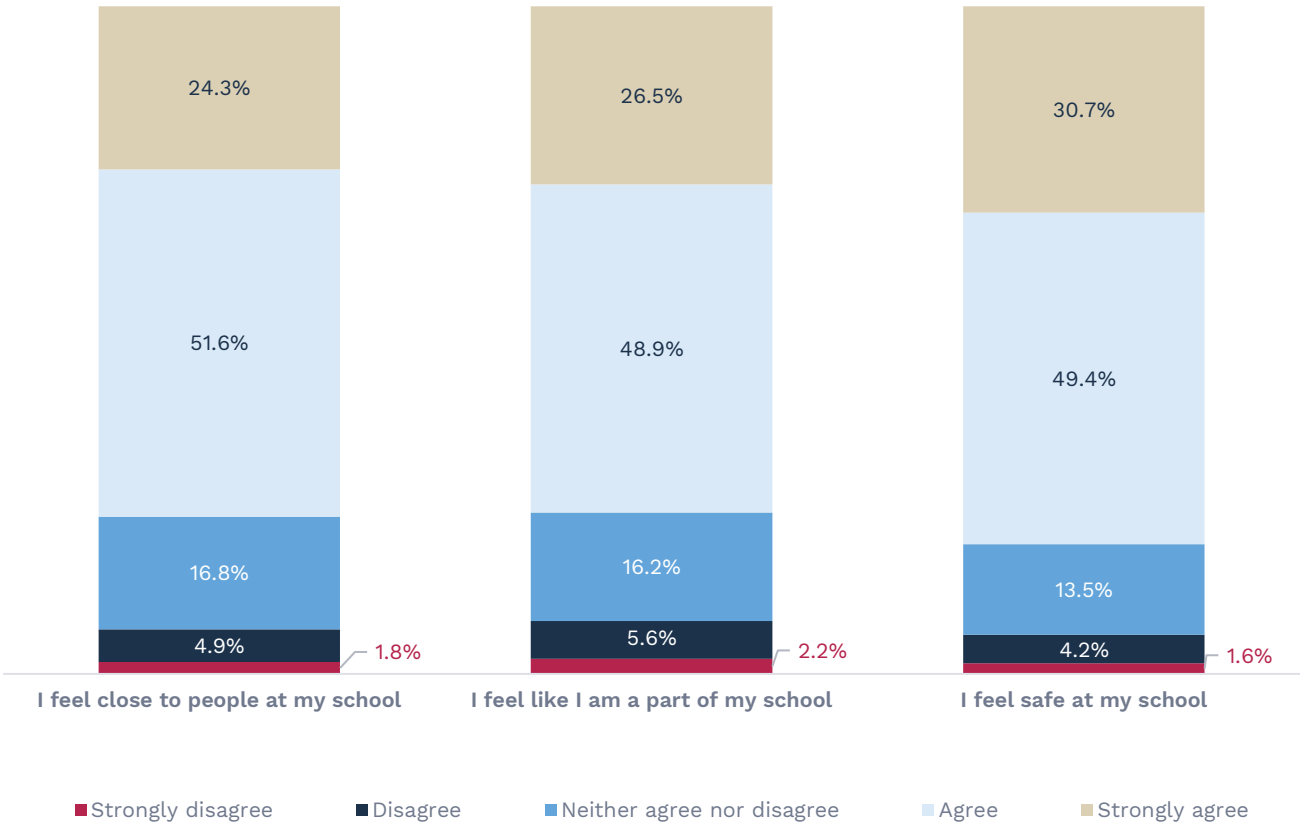
Q: How many times did the following things happen in the past 4 weeks?
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 where both the child and parent stated the child went to school (*n* = 3,978).

Among the 96.6% of children who went to school, most reported a strong sense of **school connectedness**, as shown in Figure 5. For example, around 3 in 4 children agreed or strongly agreed that:

- 'I feel safe at my school' (80.1%)
- 'I feel close to people at my school' (75.9%)
- 'I feel like I am part of my school' (75.4%).

However, a significant minority of children neither agreed nor disagreed with each of these statements, and a small proportion disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 5: School connectedness reported by children aged 10 to 16 who go to school (*n* = 3,978)



Q: How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 who go to school (*n* = 3,978).
Note: Figure excludes those who selected 'Not sure' or 'Prefer not to say'.

Key findings and implications for the change pathway

The findings in this section suggest that the children in the baseline cohort generally reported positive experiences at home and at school, with most describing supportive relationships with parents and a sense of belonging at school. School attendance was high, with almost all children attending school and most attending regularly, reinforcing the broader picture of positive engagement with school observed across the cohort.

Similarly, the majority of parents described feeling close to their children and happy in their parenting role, although many also reported experiencing at least occasional stress related to their parenting responsibilities, and a minority reported experiencing high levels of psychological distress.

The Theory of Change recognises that family, school and peer relationships form an important part of children's everyday lives. Over time, it anticipates that children may experience a greater sense of connection to peers, and that reduced social media-related tensions may contribute to improved family dynamics. However, the theory also acknowledges that those outcomes will depend on many assumptions underlying it, most notably the availability and uptake of alternative opportunities for connection (both online and offline), and parents' capacity and resources to support their children through this transition. The Theory of Change also recognises the possibility of potential unintended consequences, including increased parental burden, family conflict, or shifts in peer dynamics, particularly during the early stages of implementation.

What does children's mental health and wellbeing look like?

The relationship between children's mental health and wellbeing and their online experiences, including their use of social media, is complex and dynamic. Our evaluation of the social media age restrictions examines children's mental health and wellbeing across a range of outcomes, including early indicators such as sleep, loneliness and social comparison, as well as broader measures of psychological distress and overall wellbeing.

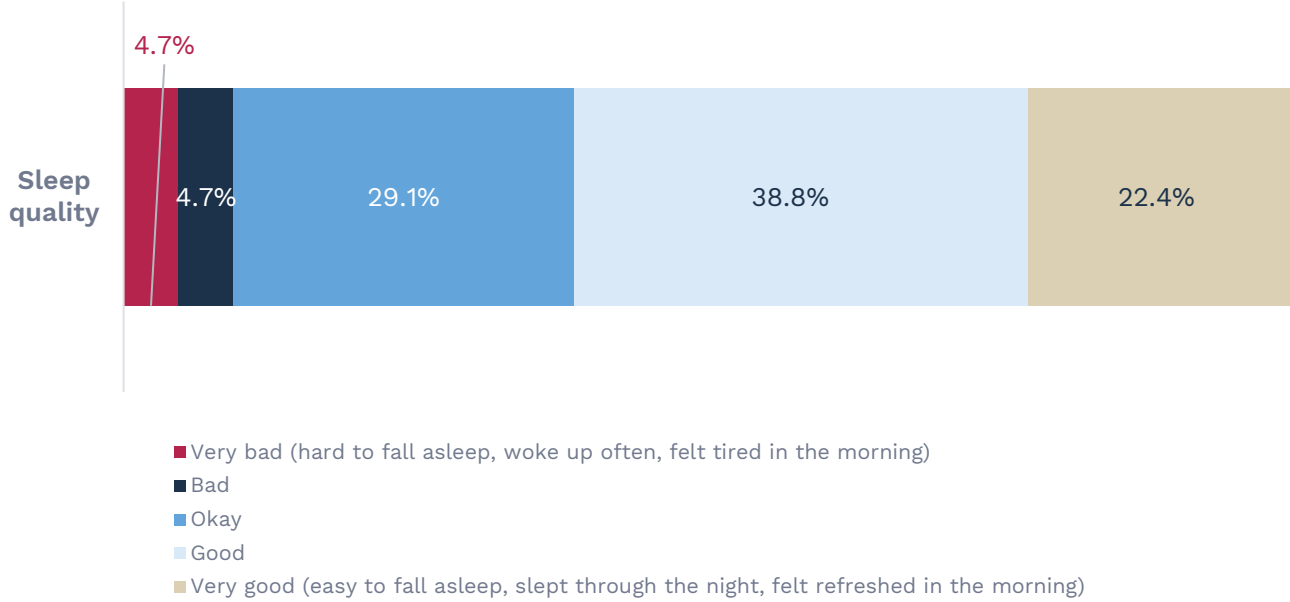
In this section, we present a snapshot of children's mental health and wellbeing prior to the introduction of the age restrictions, providing an important baseline against which changes can be assessed.

How are children faring day-to-day?

Children's mental health and wellbeing are shaped by a range of factors and experiences. Alongside broader measures of psychological distress and wellbeing, we examined several indicators that may provide early insights into children's wellbeing, including how well they sleep, how lonely they feel, and the extent to which they compare themselves to others online.

Most children reported having good **quality of sleep** in the two weeks before the baseline survey. As shown in Figure 6, 61.1% of children said their sleep quality was 'good' or 'very good', while around 1 in 10 children (9.4%) said they had 'bad' or 'very bad' sleep quality. Three in 10 children (29.1%) reported that their sleep quality was 'okay'.

Figure 6: Sleep quality in the 2 weeks prior to the survey reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

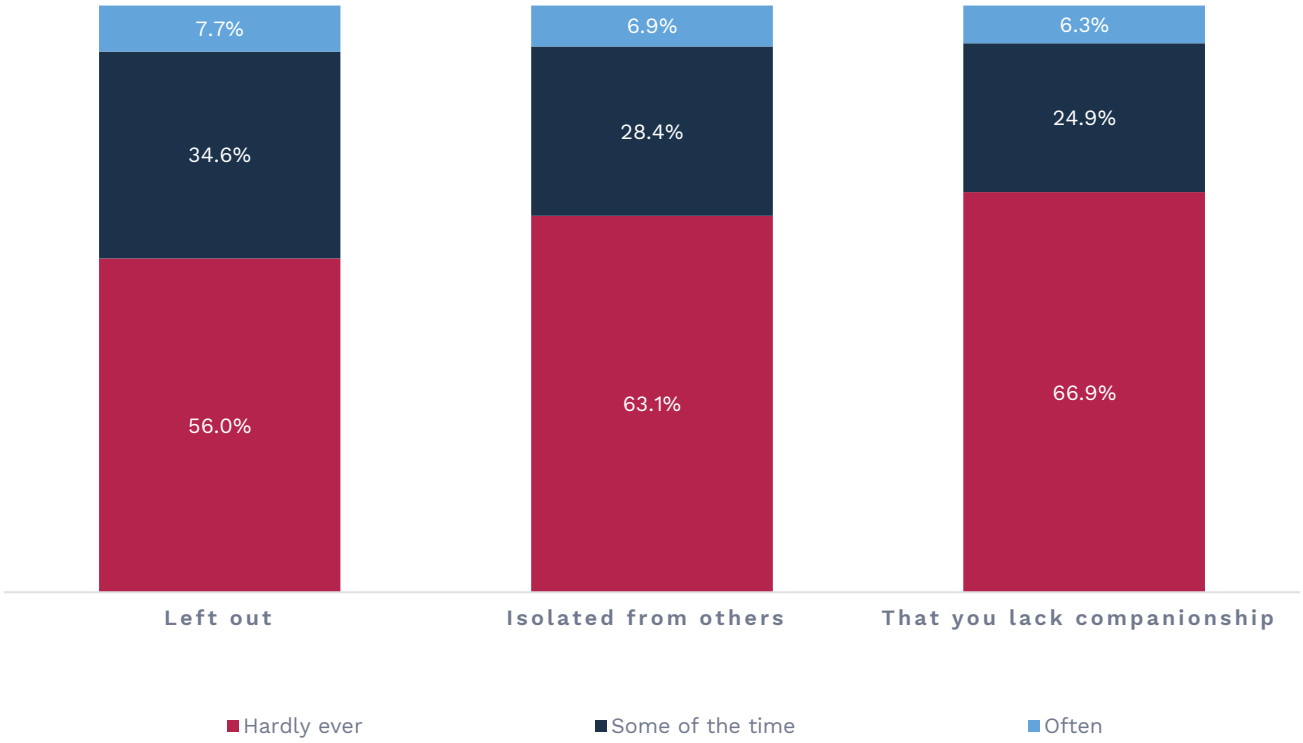


Q: In the past 2 weeks, how would you rate the overall quality of your sleep?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

We also explored children's experiences of loneliness as an indicator of social connectedness and wellbeing. Before the age restrictions took effect, a substantial minority of children reported experiencing **feelings of loneliness** 'often' or 'some of the time' (see Figure 7). This included:

- 42.3% who felt left out
- 35.3% who felt isolated from others
- 31.2% who felt they lacked companionship.

Figure 7: Loneliness reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

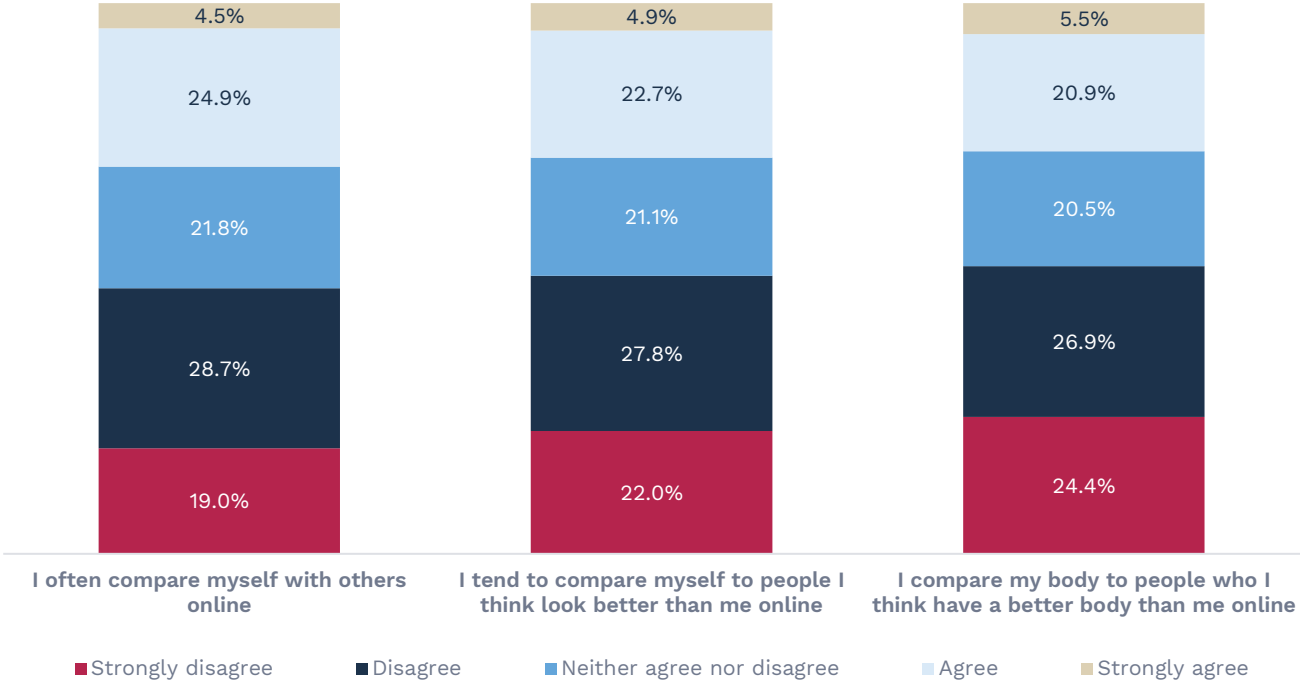


Q: How often do you feel ...?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

Finally, we explored **social comparison** behaviours among children, including the extent to which they compared themselves with people they saw online. As shown in Figure 8, we found that such behaviours were relatively common, with just under 3 in 10 children agreeing (or strongly agreeing) that they:

- often compared themselves with others online (29.4%)
- tended to compare themselves to people they thought looked better than them online (27.6%)
- compared their body to people who they thought had a better body than them online (26.4%).

Figure 8: Social comparison reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

What is the state of children's mental health and wellbeing?

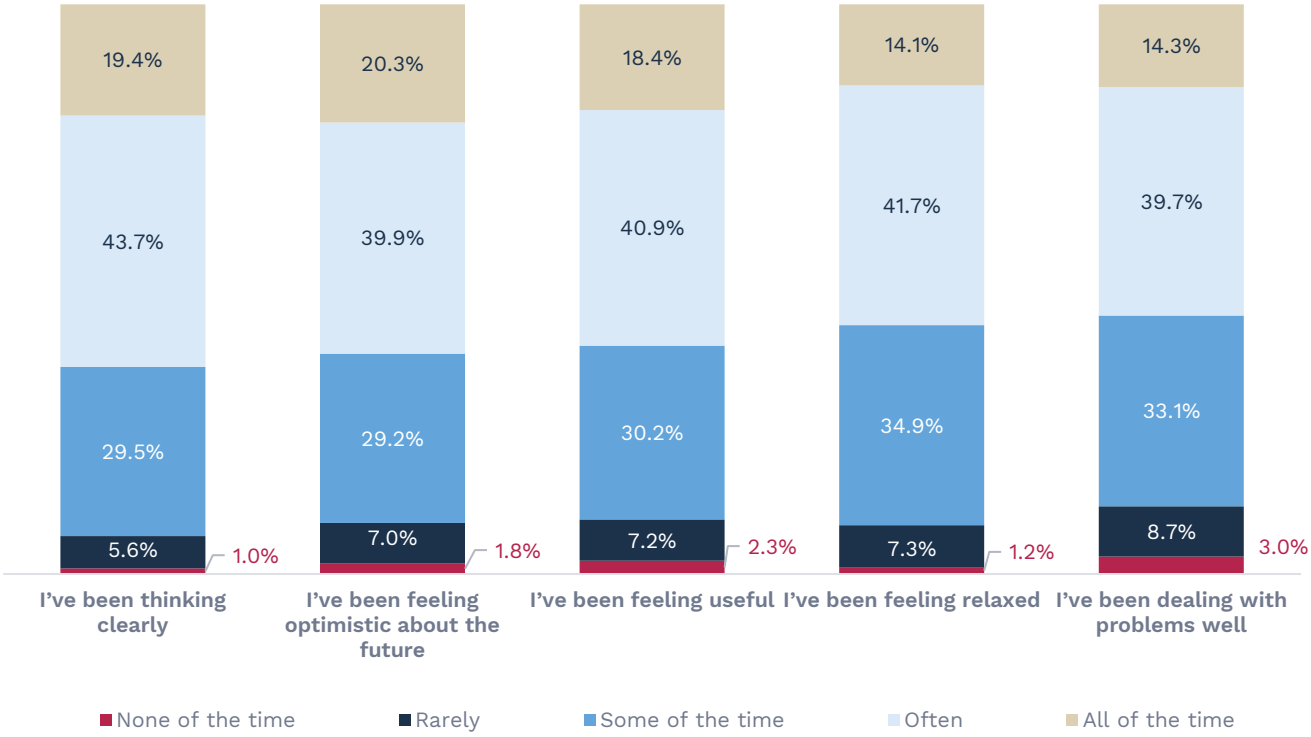
Alongside the earlier indicators of wellbeing, we examined children's psychological wellbeing and distress. Together, these measures provide an important baseline snapshot of children's mental health before the social media age restrictions took effect and will be used to assess changes over the course of the evaluation.

Before the age restrictions took effect, many children reported positive feelings 'often' or 'all of the time' in the four weeks prior to the survey, indicating higher **psychological wellbeing** (see Figure 9). For example:

- 63.1% felt they had been **thinking clearly**
- 60.2% felt **optimistic about the future**
- 59.3% felt **useful**
- 55.9% felt **relaxed**
- 54.1% felt they had been **dealing with problems well**.

However, around 1 in 10 children reported experiencing such feelings 'rarely' or 'none of the time', indicating poorer wellbeing.

Figure 9: Psychological wellbeing reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



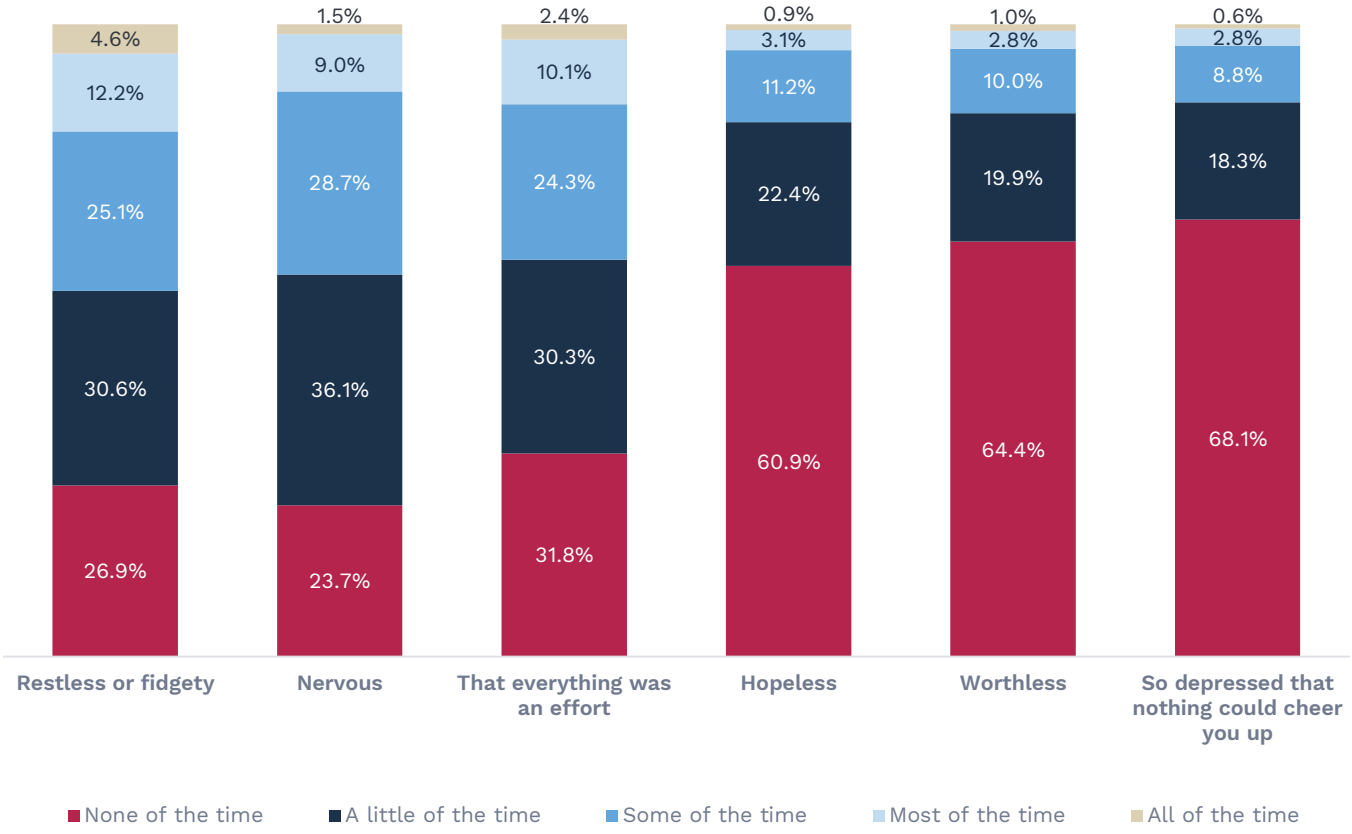
Q: In the past 4 weeks, how often have you felt this way?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

Additionally, we asked children about their experiences of psychological distress. Children were asked how often they felt 'nervous', 'hopeless', 'restless or fidgety', 'that everything was an effort', 'depressed' or 'worthless' in the four weeks prior to the survey (see Figure 10). While, overall, most children reported low psychological distress (70.6%; see Table 3), a substantial minority reported experiencing feelings of psychological distress at least some of the time in the four weeks prior to the survey. For example:

- 41.9% felt **restless or fidgety**
- 39.2% felt **nervous**
- 36.9% felt that **everything was an effort**
- 15.2% felt **hopeless**
- 13.8% felt **worthless**
- 12.2% felt so **depressed** that nothing could cheer them up.

Based on children's responses to these questions, we found that 7.9% of children were experiencing high psychological distress, while 18.5% were experiencing moderate psychological distress (see Table 3).

Figure 10: Psychological distress reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: In the past 4 weeks, how often did you feel ...?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes those who selected 'Not sure' or 'Prefer not to say'.

Table 3: Psychological distress reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

K6*	
Proportion with high psychological distress	7.9%
Proportion with moderate psychological distress	18.5%
Proportion with low psychological distress	70.6%
Average score	11.4

Q: In the past 4 weeks, how often did you feel ...?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121). Average score excludes those who selected 'Not sure' or 'Prefer not to say' (*n* = 3,997).
Note: *Psychological distress was assessed with the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6). A score of 19 or above indicates high psychological distress. A score of 14 to 18 indicates moderate psychological distress. A score of 6 to 13 indicates low psychological distress (Rioseco et al., 2020).

Key findings and implications for the change pathway

Overall, most children in our cohort reported relatively high levels of psychological wellbeing, although experiences varied and a minority appeared to be experiencing significant psychological distress. Feelings of loneliness and social comparison were reported by a substantial minority of children, and a similarly substantial minority rated their sleep quality as 'only okay', 'bad' or 'very bad'. These findings highlight that while many children were doing well, a notable group were experiencing challenges that could affect their wellbeing and development.

Taken together, these results provide an important baseline against which to assess progress against the ultimate intended outcomes of the Theory of Change – improvements in children's safety, mental health and wellbeing. The theory posits that, over time, reduced time spent on restricted platforms will contribute to reduced exposure to online risks and harms, engagement with fewer behaviours that are harmful to themselves or others, and increased engagement with activities that support healthy development which, in turn, may contribute to improved wellbeing among children. More in-person connection with supportive peer and family relationships is also expected to reinforce these benefits. The cumulative effect of these changes is anticipated to enhance children's online safety and contribute to broader improvements in mental health and wellbeing over time. However, these outcomes depend on a range of assumptions holding true, including that children and young people redirect their time and attention towards activities and forms of connection that support their wellbeing and development, and that unintended consequences don't adversely affect their safety, mental health or wellbeing. For example, the theory acknowledges the potential for unintended consequences such as adjustment challenges, reduced access to supportive content and social connections, and reduced disclosure of, or help seeking for, online harms and mental health concerns, which could undermine the achievement of the longer-term intended outcomes.

It is also important to interpret changes in these outcomes within the context of child and adolescent development. As the cohort ages through adolescence, a period associated with increasing social, emotional and developmental demands and a peak in the incidence of common mental health disorders, some deterioration in indicators of mental health and wellbeing may be expected at a population level, irrespective of the introduction of the age restrictions. This means that maintaining current levels of wellbeing, slowing the emergence of difficulties, or observing smaller declines than might otherwise be anticipated could also represent meaningful progress towards the longer-term impacts. Consequently, changes in children's mental health and wellbeing over time should be considered alongside broader developmental trends and the wider context in which young people are navigating adolescence.

How do children engage with the digital world?

In the previous section, we noted that, through reducing time spent on age-restricted platforms, the age restrictions are expected to lead to reduced exposure to online risks and harms, and to engagement with fewer behaviours, both online and offline, that may be harmful to children's wellbeing.

In this section, we provide a snapshot of children's online experiences before the social media age restrictions came into effect. We report on how children were engaging online, including the devices they used and the activities they participated in online. We also examine both the benefits and challenges of being online for children, including their experiences of online harms in the four weeks prior to the survey. These findings provide a useful point of comparison against which future changes to children's online experiences can be assessed as the age restrictions continue to be implemented.

What devices and platforms are children using to engage online?

Before the age restrictions took effect, children reported high levels of digital connectivity and engagement. As shown in Table 4, over 3 in 5 children (64.4%) had their own **mobile phone**, including 61.0% who had their own **smartphone**.

Table 4: Children's mobile phone ownership reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

Type of mobile phone owned	%
Smartphone – one that connects to the internet	61.0
Basic phone – sometimes called a 'dumb phone' – that doesn't connect to the internet or only has very limited app functions	3.4
Owns their own mobile phone	**64.4**

Q: Do you have your own mobile phone? What type of mobile phone do you have?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).

Beyond smartphones (67.4%), children reported having used a range of devices to go online in the year prior to the survey, with **laptops** (60.8%), **tablets** (57.5%) and **smart TVs** (52.4%) being the most popular (see Table 5).

Table 5: Devices used to go online in the past year reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

Devices used	%
Smartphone	67.4
Laptop	60.8
Tablet	57.5
Smart TV	52.4
Gaming console or handheld gaming device	46.6
Desktop computer	26.4
Smart watch	11.2

Q: Which, if any, of the following devices have you used to go online since the start of this year?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).

Children engaged in a diverse range of online activities on these devices, as shown in Table 6. Almost all children had used **social media** (91.9%) or **messaging platforms** (90.4%) in the year prior to the survey, including 91.3% who had used an **age-restricted social media platform**. Many children also had their **own social media account** (63.4%), including 61.3% with their own account on an age-restricted platform that they had used in the year prior to the survey. In addition, 82.1% had used **online video games** and 68.0% had used an **AI chatbot, assistant or companion** in the year prior to the survey.

Table 6: Children's use of social media, messaging, gaming and AI in the past year reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

Type of platform used	%
Any social media	91.9
Any age-restricted social media*	91.3
Any messaging platform	90.4
Any video games online	82.1
Any AI chatbot, assistant or companion	68.0

Q: Have you used any of these social media platforms or apps since the start of this year? Which, if any, of these apps or platforms have you used to message, call or chat to people online since the start of this year? Have you done any of the following things online since the start of this year? Which, if any, of the following have you used since the start of this year?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4121).
Note: *This type of platform refers only to those that have been assessed by eSafety and are considered to meet the conditions of an age-restricted platform under the legislation. It doesn't include those platforms that have self-assessed and notified eSafety of their view that they are age-restricted social media platforms.

We asked children who had used social media in the past year how old they were when they first started using social media. Children who currently held a social media account were also asked how old they were when they first created their own profile or account. The findings suggest that children begin **engaging with social media from a relatively young age**, often through their own accounts. The median reported age of first social media use was 11 years, while the median age at which children first obtained their own social media account was 12 years.

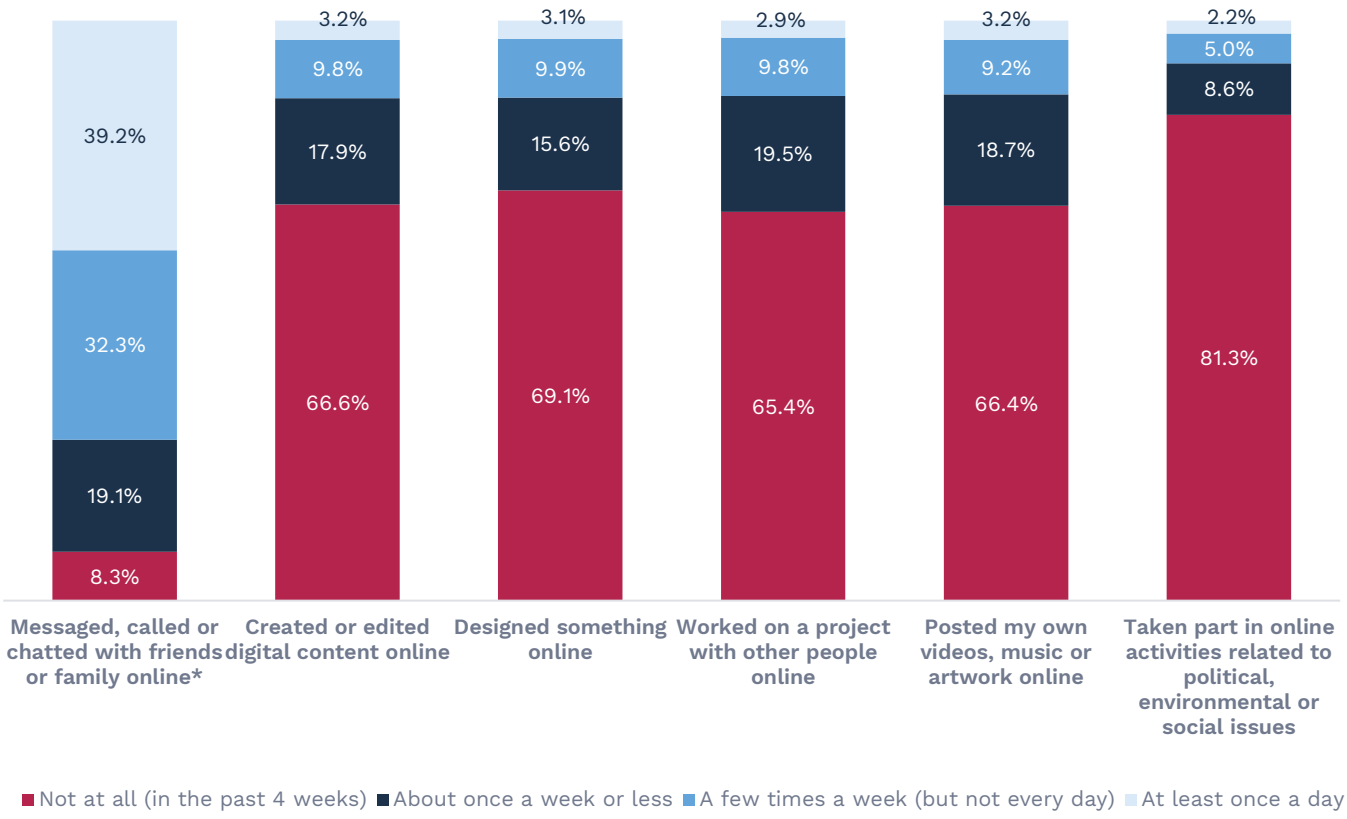
What do children do online?

Children may be motivated to go online for a range of reasons, with online environments offering a place for connection, exploration, learning, entertainment and self-expression. Digital environments also provide an avenue for creative and civic pursuits. As shown in Figure 11, a substantial minority of children reported engaging in such pursuits online at least a few times a week in the four weeks prior to the survey. For example:

- 13.1% had **created or edited digital content** online
- 13.0% had **designed something** online
- 12.7% had **worked on a project** with other people online
- 12.4% had **posted their own videos, music or artwork** online
- 7.1% had taken part in online activities related to **political, environment or social issues**.

Online spaces also facilitated social connection among children. Of those children aged 10 to 16 who had used a messaging platform in the past year, 71.5% reported having **messaged, called or chatted with family or friends** online at least a few times a week in the four weeks prior to the survey.

Figure 11: Online activities in the 4 weeks prior to the survey reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: Thinking back over the past 4 weeks, how often, if at all, have you done the following things online?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121). *Children aged 10 to 16 who had used a messaging platform in the past year (*n* = 3,727).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

Additionally, the internet was an **important source of information** for children in our cohort. As shown in Table 7, children had searched for information on a range of topics in the four weeks prior to the survey, including for information on schoolwork or studies (39.0%), physical health and fitness (26.5%), and paid work (18.7%).

A significant minority of children had also looked for information online about more **personal or sensitive topics**, including:

- mental health (11.9%)
- dating, sex and sexual identity (9.0% of children aged 13 to 16)
- sexual health and development (6.6%)
- being transgender, non-binary or gender diverse (4.0% of children aged 13 to 16).

Table 7: Proportion of children purposely looking for information on different topics in the 4 weeks prior to the survey, reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

Topics looked for in the past 4 weeks	%
School work, TAFE or university studies	39.0
Physical health and fitness (like about an injury or illness, or a healthy diet)	26.5
Paid work or jobs	18.7
Mental health or emotional wellbeing	11.9
Dating, sex, sexual identity (like who you might be interested in romantically, consent, having sex)*	9.0
Sexual health and development (like puberty, safe sex)	6.6
Being transgender, non-binary or gender diverse*	4.0

Q: Have you purposely looked for information on the following topics online in the past 4 weeks?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121). *Items only asked of children aged 13+ (*n* = 2,407).
Note: *n* = 16 children aged 10 to 16 were not asked about looking for information on 'sexual health and development (like puberty, safe sex)' and *n* = 22 children aged 13 to 16 were not asked about looking for information on 'dating, sex, sexual identity' or 'being transgender, non-binary or gender diverse', due to a data collection error during survey piloting. These have been treated as missing data.

What are the benefits and challenges of being online for children?

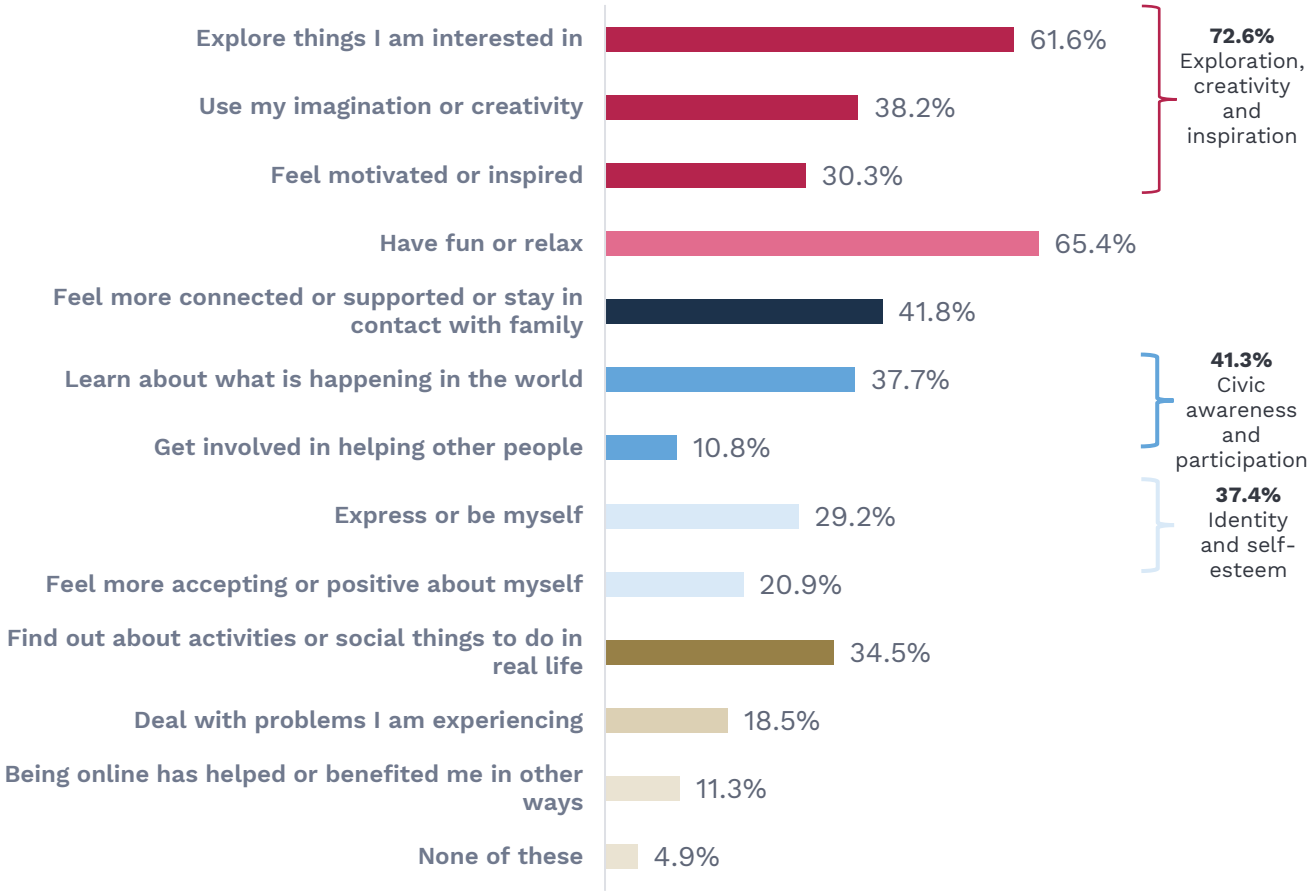
There are both benefits and risks associated with being online, and many digital activities carry the potential for exposure to harmful content, contact and conduct. This pattern was evident among children in the baseline cohort: while almost all reported positive experiences and benefits from being online, many had also encountered online harms.

We first asked children how being online had **helped or benefited them**, with almost all children (92.5%) reporting at least one benefit. As shown in Figure 12, many children reported that the internet helped them to:

- explore their interests or creativity (72.6%)
- have fun or relax (65.4%)
- connect with others (41.8%)
- learn about world events or get involved in helping others (41.3%).

A significant minority of children also reported that being online helped them to express their identity or to feel more accepting of themselves (37.4%), as well as to deal with problems they were experiencing (18.5%).

Figure 12: Reported benefits of being online reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: Overall, how, if at all, has being online helped or benefited you? Being online has helped me to ...?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4121).

We also asked children if they had experienced a range of **online harms** in the four weeks prior to the survey. This included personal experiences of online harms, such as cyberbullying, unwanted sexual contact and online hate, as well as content-related harms, including exposure to online hate content and other types of content associated with harm. Children additionally reported on control-related harms associated with problematic or excessive online use that displaces activities that are protective for wellbeing, such as sleep, physical activity, education, recreation and in-person social connection.

As shown in Table 8, substantial proportions of children reported experiencing online harm in the four weeks prior to the baseline survey, with content-related harms being especially common.

For example:

- Two in 5 children (40.7%) had been exposed to **content associated with harm**, including content depicting dangerous online challenges or fight videos, or content that encourages unhealthy eating or exercise habits.
- Three in 10 children (30.1%) had been **exposed to online hate** content.

In addition, in the four weeks prior to the survey:

- 17.9% of children had experienced **cyberbullying**
- 10.9% had **personally experienced online hate**
- 4.1% had experienced **unwanted sexual contact**.

Table 8: Children's experiences of online harm in the 4 weeks prior to the survey, reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

Type of online harm	%
Exposure to content associated with harm	40.7
Exposure to online hate	30.1
Cyberbullying	17.9
Personal experience of online hate	10.9
Unwanted sexual contact*	4.1

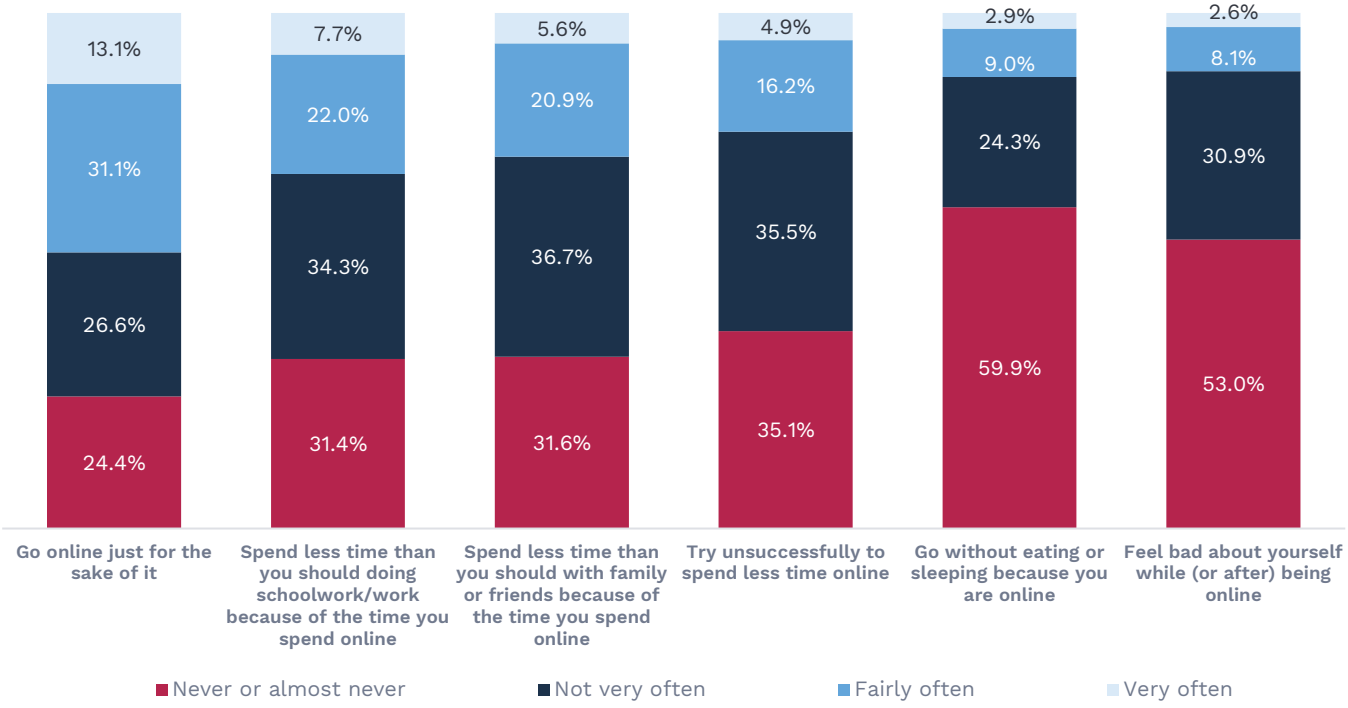
Q: Have you seen or heard any of the following things online in the past 4 weeks? In the past 4 weeks, have you seen anyone say or post offensive or threatening things online, to or about people because they hate ...? In the past 4 weeks, has anyone online done any of the following things to you on purpose because they really wanted to humiliate you, make you feel bad, or make others not like you? In the past 4 weeks, has anyone online said or posted offensive or threatening things to you or about you personally because they were hateful of ...? In the past 4 weeks, how often has anyone online made you feel uncomfortable by talking about sex or asking you to do sexual things you didn't want to do?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121). *Item only asked of children who were comfortable answering questions about personal experience of unwanted sexual contact (*n* = 2,506).

A substantial minority of children also reported experiencing **control-related harms** (see Figure 13). The proportion reporting these experiences as occurring 'fairly often' or 'very often' included:

- 44.2% who said they **go online just for the sake of it**
- 29.8% who said they **spend less time** than they should doing **schoolwork**, and 26.4% who said they spend less time than they should with their **family or friends**, because of the time they spend online
- 21.1% who said they **try unsuccessfully to reduce their time online**
- 11.9% who said they **go without eating or sleeping** due to being online

- 10.7% who said they **feel bad about themselves** while (or after) being online.

Figure 13: Potentially problematic online use reported by children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: How often, if at all, do you personally ...?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

Key findings and implications for the change pathway

Our findings suggest that children are active participants in the digital world, engaging across a diverse range of online spaces and activities. Their experiences reflected both the opportunities and challenges of digital participation. Children reported that the internet provided important opportunities for learning, creativity, self-expression, information seeking and social connection, including, for some, access to information about their health, wellbeing and identity. At the same time, many reported being exposed to harmful content, online hate, cyberbullying and other negative online experiences, while a smaller but still notable proportion reported patterns of online use that may displace activities important for healthy development.

The Theory of Change posits that reducing the number of children under 16 who hold accounts on age-restricted social media platforms will lead to less time spent on those platforms and, in turn, to reduced exposure to online risks and harms. Over time, this is expected to contribute to lower engagement in behaviours that may be harmful to

themselves or others, including cyberbullying, harassment, dangerous online challenges, self-harm behaviours and other forms of risk taking. Reduced time on social media is also expected to create greater opportunities for activities that support healthy development, such as maintaining healthy sleep patterns, being physically active, participating in education and hobbies, spending time outdoors, and engaging in in-person social connection.

This change pathway depends on the assumption that reduced access to age-restricted social media redirects children's time and attention towards online and offline activities that support their wellbeing and development, while preserving opportunities for learning, creativity and connection. If suitable alternatives are not available or taken up, there may be unintended consequences that undermine the intended benefits. For example, if children cannot realise the benefits they report deriving from their online participation on platforms that are not age restricted, some children may experience social isolation, reduced access to supportive content and communities, and reduced opportunity for skill development. They may also seek to bypass the age restrictions, or migrate to less regulated online environments, potentially exposing them to different or greater risks.

How do families navigate digital life?

In the previous section, we learned that children in this study lead active and diverse online lives, deriving meaningful benefits from their participation online while also encountering a range of harms. In this section, we report on the ways in which families navigate digital life, including how parents support children to stay safe online, their confidence in doing so, the conversations they have about social media, and the extent to which digital life is a source of tension or conflict within families.

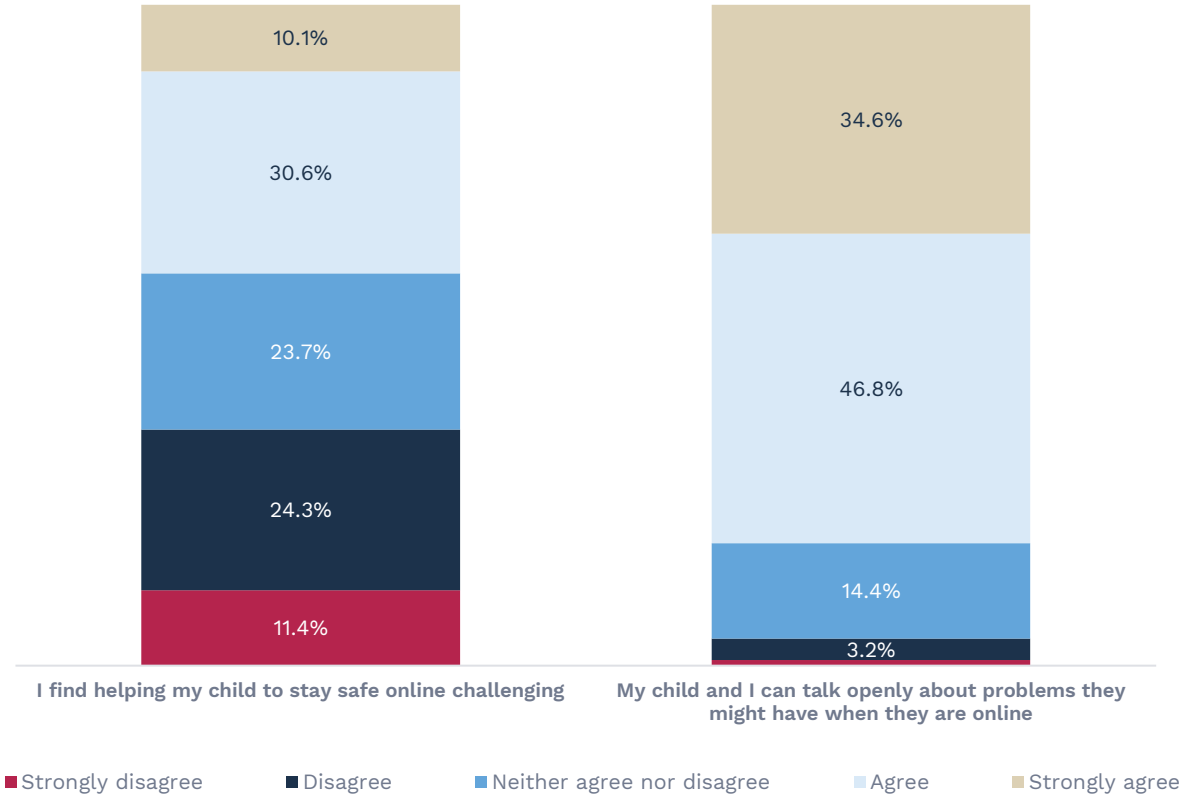
How do parents promote their child's safety and wellbeing online?

Parents play a vital role in supporting children to safely navigate online spaces, helping them to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks of being harmed. We asked parents about the strategies they used to support their children's online safety, their confidence in doing so, and the conversations they had with their children about being online, before the social media age restrictions took effect.

Parents had mixed views about whether helping their child stay safe online was challenging. Overall, 40.6% agreed or strongly agreed that **helping their child stay safe online was challenging**, while a similar proportion (35.7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Figure 14).

At the same time, most parents (81.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that they can **talk openly with their child about problems** they might have when they are online. Only 4.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 14: Parenting digital self-efficacy reported by parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: Overall, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

Despite a significant proportion of parents reporting they find it challenging to help their child stay safe online, many parents reported using a range of digital mediation strategies to support, guide and manage their child's use of digital technologies and their safety on online platforms. As shown in Table 9, almost all parents (94.6%) reported having **online safety conversations** with their child in the year prior to the survey, such as talking with their child about how to keep personal information private online, the risks of dangerous people being online, or online bullying.

Table 9: Digital mediation strategies reported by parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

Types of mediation practices	%
Have online safety conversations with their child	94.6
Rules for their child using online devices at home	72.4
Regularly check or review child's online activity	53.0
Parental controls on devices or apps their child has access to at home	51.7

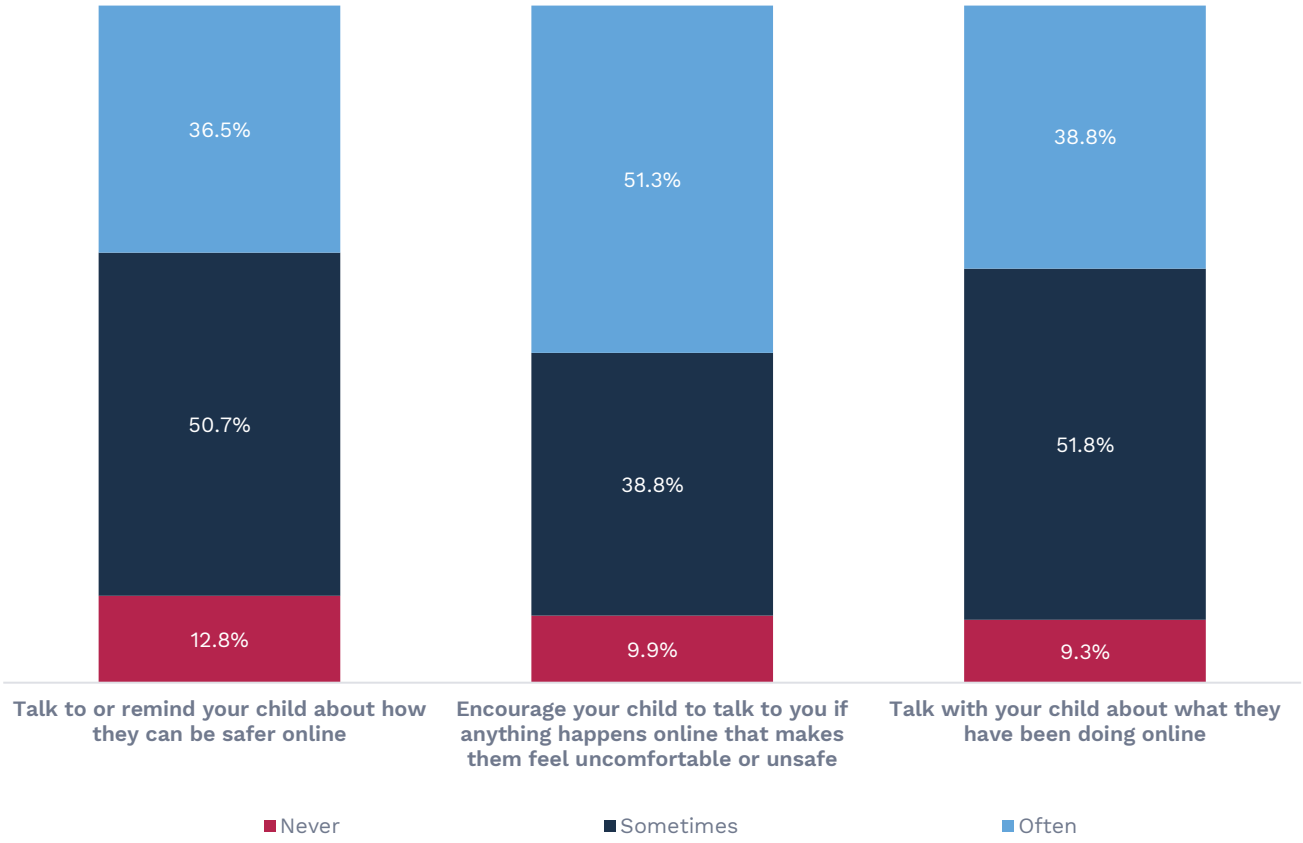
Q: Have you (or another parent or caregiver) talked to your child about any of the following things since the start of this year (i.e. since January 2025)? Think about all the online devices your child has access to at home. Do you have any rules for your child using these devices? Do you regularly do the following (i.e. once a month or more) – check or review your child's online activity? Do you (or another parent of caregiver) currently have any parental controls on the device(s) or apps your child has access to at home (like phones, computers, tablets, gaming consoles)?
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).

Similarly, as shown in Figure 15, most parents reported speaking with their child 'often' or 'sometimes' in the four weeks prior to the survey:

- about what they have been **doing online** (90.7%)
- to encourage their child to **talk with them** if anything happens online that makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe (90.0%)
- about how they can be **safer online** (87.2%).

Additionally, almost 3 in 4 parents (72.4%) reported having **rules in place** for their child's use of online devices at home, and more than half of parents reported **regularly checking or reviewing** their child's online activity (53.0%). A similar proportion had **parental controls** on devices or apps their child has access to at home (51.7%) (see Table 9).

Figure 15: Engagement in online safety conversations reported by parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: In the past 4 weeks, how often, if at all, did you (or another parent or caregiver) ...?
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

What conversations are families having about social media?

To further understand the nature of conversations parents were having with their children, specifically when it came to social media, we asked parents to describe what they often said during these conversations.[6] Responses revealed that parents were having a diverse range of conversations with their children, not just about social media but also about online safety more broadly. Some parents discussed online safety and harms; others provided guidance or set rules to support their children's online safety; some encouraged thoughtful and critical engagement with social media; and others encouraged open communication with their children.

[6] **Q:** What are some of the things you often say when you're talking with your child about social media?

Parents described having harm-focused conversations with their children to differing degrees.[7] Some spoke to their child more generally about being **cautious** on social media (21.4%), telling them to be careful or safe. Others warned their child about more specific **risks associated with their use of social media** (15.1%). For example, some discussed specific types of online harms such as cyberbullying, grooming, scammers and phishing, while others discussed warning signs or behaviours that can increase risk, such as clicking unknown links, interacting with people who may not be who they claim to be, or sharing intimate images.

> **'Be careful don't click on anything.'**
> (Parent of child aged 10 to 12)
>
> **'Stay safe, be aware of predators and don't talk to just anyone.'**
> (Parent of child aged 16)
>
> **'I tell her that it's OK if it's used responsibly and that while most people on the platforms are decent, there are some idiots that may do her harm.'**
> (Parent of child aged 10 to 12)
>
> **'Social media is big cyberspace full of strangers that could have bad intentions towards you. It is [no] different [from] meeting a stranger on the street, only this is thru [the] internet. You need to be very careful … I only do this because I am protecting you from possible harm.'**
> (Parent of child aged 10 to 12)
>
> **'… how to spot hackers or anyone grooming them.'**
> (Parent of child aged 13 to 15)

Parents also described providing guidance or setting specific rules for their child to help them use social media safely. Some mentioned rules about **who their child could and could not interact with**, such as only speaking to people they know in real life (27.2%). Other parents spoke to their child about **privacy**, advising them not to share personal or sensitive information such as their address, school, date of birth or real name (13.1%). Some parents described explicit rules about **posting or sharing content** online (10.3%), encouraging their child not to share images of themselves, including intimate images. A small proportion of parents advised their child to **restrict the time they spent** on social media platforms or devices (8.3%).

[7] Only themes occurring in at least 5% of responses are presented in this report.

'No posts in school uniform showing, no location services on, no sharing personal details or images to anyone. Only allowed to have people we personally know and [who] are actively involved in our life.'
(Parent of child aged 10 to 12)

'If you're scrolling too long take a break. Don't share any personal data. Don't upload photos of yourself to public spaces.'
(Parent of child aged 10 to 12)

'Only talk with family, school friends or people you know well from church. Do not give up names even if you know everyone [else in the chat]. Do not give up any personal details, age or school on the chat as you cannot control what others will do with it. Never share pictures. Never arrange to meet with someone you do not know, even if a good friend of a friend …'
(Parent of child aged 13 to 15)

'Treat others online as you would treat them face to face, don't interact with anyone you don't know, never send naked or partially naked photos to your mates, no matter how many times they ask, or even if they send them to you.'
(Parent of child aged 16)

Parents' responses also suggested that they used these conversations to support their child's capability to navigate social media thoughtfully. Some parents spoke to their child about **thinking critically** about the social media content they consumed, including recognising that online content may not accurately reflect reality, accessing the credibility of information viewed and recognising AI-generated content (13.3%).

'It's not always a true representation of people's lives …'
(Parent of child aged 10 to 12)

'The people you see are not like real people are, a lot of what you see is fake – the way people look, the way they live. A lot of people on social media are doing it for the money …'
(Parent of child aged 10 to 12)

'Question the validity of the content. Find out how they feel about certain content, and how that content is perceived by their friends.'
(Parent of child aged 16)

> **'... verify the source of information to check if it's credible.'**
> (Parent of child aged 13 to 15)

Finally, some parents used these conversations to encourage open communication or to understand what their child was doing on social media. A small proportion encouraged **open conversations about online safety** by reassuring their child that they could turn to them for support if they had a negative experience online (9.2%). Similarly, a small proportion of parents said they **discussed what their child was doing, seeing or using** social media for, such as trending content or what they were viewing online (6.1%).

> **'Please ensure you tell us as your parents what you are doing on social media and let us know if you are communicating with anyone unknown to us as your parents, we are here to keep you safe.'**
> (Parent of child aged 10 to 12)
>
> **'I often ask her if she has found any benefit to her time used on social media. If she has learned anything new about her friends or if she's learned a new skill or heard a funny joke. We like to share funny cat pictures frequently and are in a lot of cat groups together.'**
> (Parent of child aged 13 to 15)
>
> **'To be honest with us, as long as she is honest, she will not be in any trouble. If someone messages her something inappropriate, come to us – it isn't her fault. To be safe and to use your best judgement, but we are here to help always.'**
> (Parent of child aged 16)

Is digital life a source of tension or conflict within families?

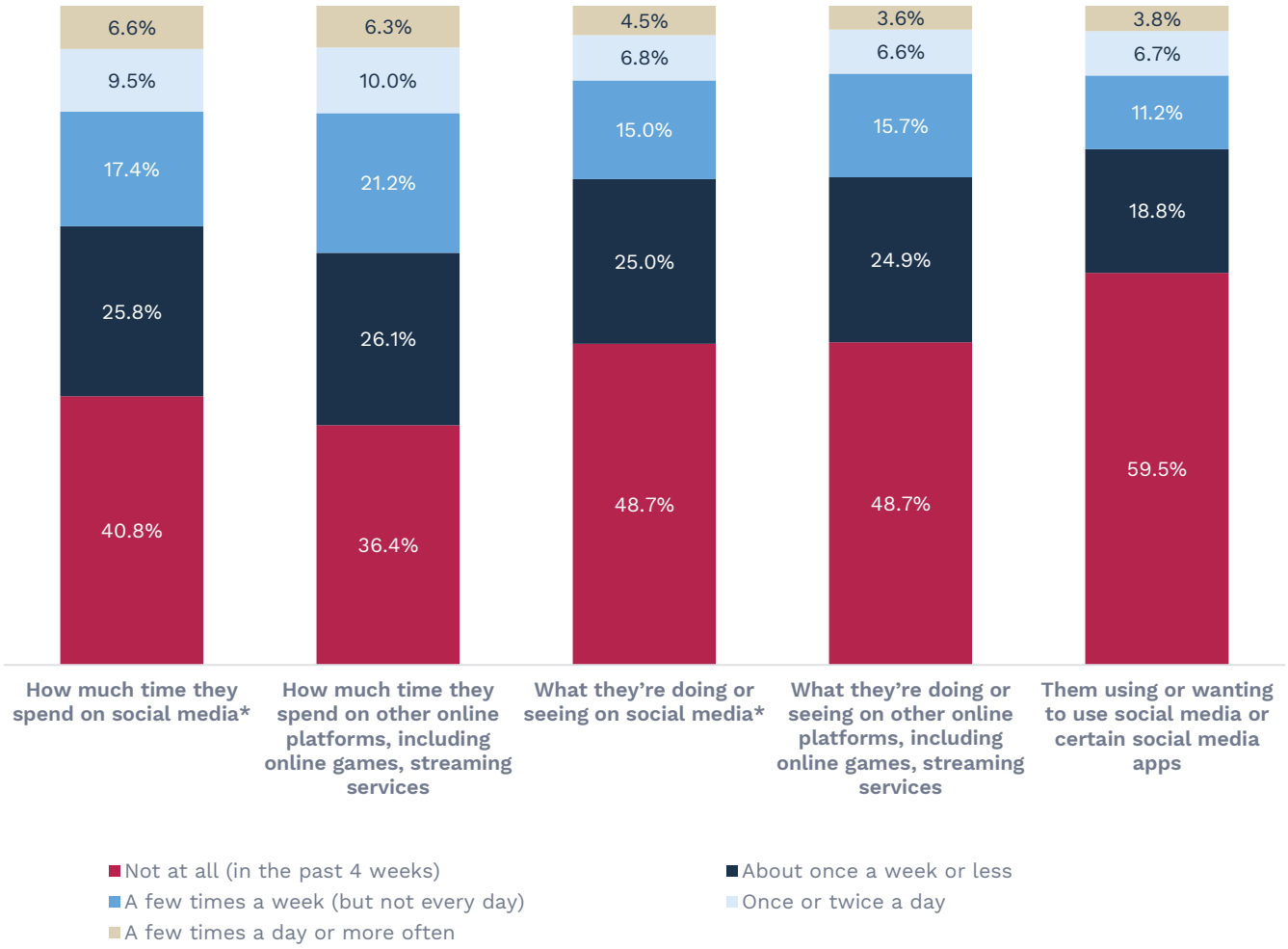
The previous sections explored how parents supported and guided their children's digital lives through conversations, mediation strategies and other forms of support, before the age restrictions took effect. We were also interested in understanding whether children's technology use can contribute to tension or conflict within families, and the extent to which this was occurring before the social media age restrictions started.

As shown in Figure 16, parents most commonly reported **tension or conflict** in relation to the **amount of time** their child spent on social media or other online platforms. For example:

- 33.5% of parents reported arguing with their child a few times a week or more often about how much time they spent on social media
- 37.5% said they argued with their child a few times a week or more often about how much time they spent on other online platforms, including online games and streaming services.

Around 1 in 4 parents also reported arguing with their child a few times a week or more often about **what their child was doing** on social media (26.3%) or other online platforms (25.9%), and 1 in 5 reported arguing about their child **using or wanting to use social media** or certain social media apps (21.7%).

Figure 16: Family tension or conflict regarding digital technology use reported by parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: Over the past 4 weeks, how often, if at all, have you argued with your child about ...?
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121). *Parents of children aged 10 to 16 who thought their child had used any social media platform in the 4 weeks prior to the survey (*n* = 3,047).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'. *n* = 17 were not shown the item '... what they're doing or seeing on other online platforms, including online games, streaming services', due to a data collection error during survey piloting.

Key findings and implications for the change pathway

Our findings highlight the active role that parents report playing in guiding their children's online engagement through discussion, supervision and rule setting, with many conversations focused on helping children to recognise and avoid online risks. They also show that children's digital technology use, and their social media use specifically, is a source of frequent tension and conflict in some families.

The Theory of Change recognises the important role that parents play in supporting the intended outcomes of the age restrictions. As the policy is implemented, it is expected to stimulate broader conversations within families, schools, communities and the public sphere about online experiences, digital literacy, safety and wellbeing. Together with the resources, guidance and support activities accompanying implementation by age-restricted platforms, these conversations may encourage more open discussion within families about children's online lives. In turn, this is expected to support the development of children and young people's digital literacy and critical reasoning skills.

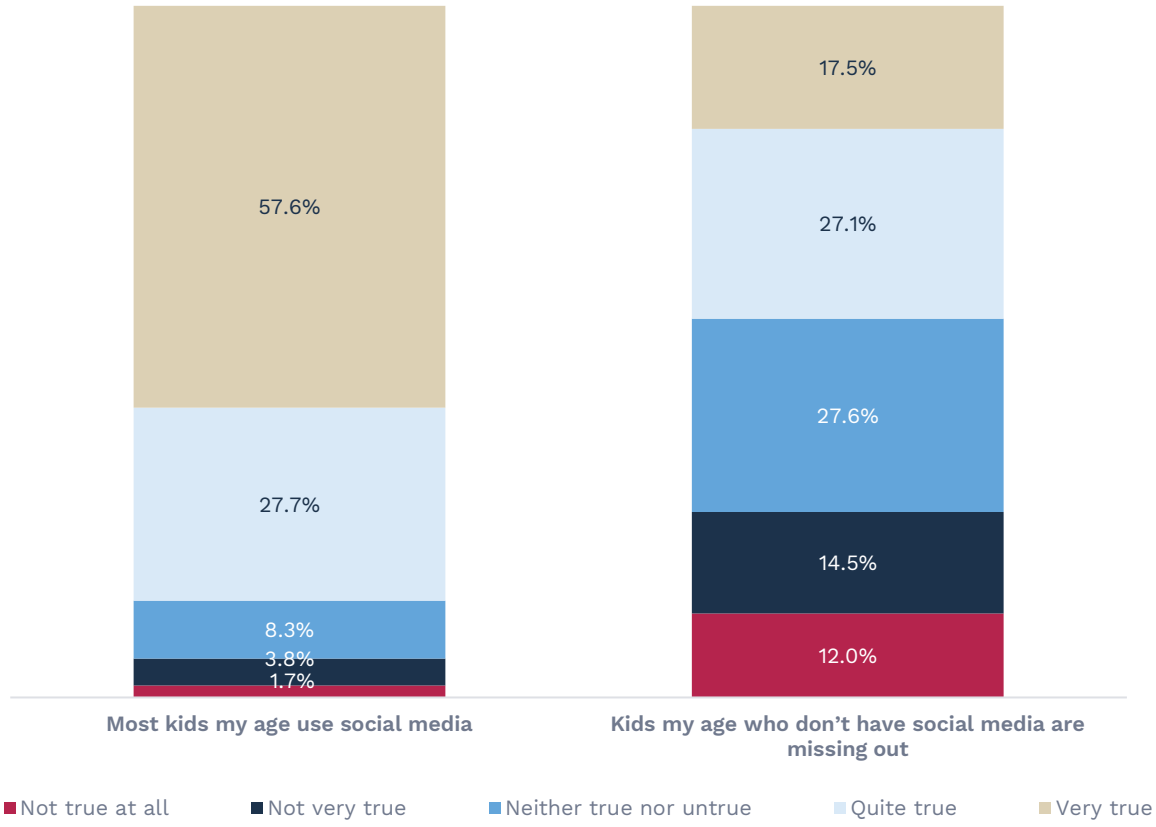
Over time, such development is expected to help children and young people navigate online risks, build resilience and engage more safely with digital technologies as they mature. As delayed account ownership on age-restricted social media becomes more normative, the theory also posits that families may experience less tension and conflict related to children's social media use. An important assumption underpinning the change pathway is that parents have the capacity and resources to continue to actively support their children over this transition and continue to view children's online safety as a collective responsibility.

What are children's and parents' attitudes towards, and norms regarding the use of, social media?

Finally, we explore children's and parents' attitudes towards social media, and the social norms that are expected to shape its use. Both children's online engagement and parents' digital mediation practices are influenced by the attitudes and behaviours of those around them, including other children and parents. We therefore asked both parents and children to respond to a series of statements about their perception of what is considered 'normal' or standard behaviours and attitudes among other children and parents when it comes to social media.

Before the social media age restrictions took effect, most children (85.3%) thought it was (quite or very) true that **'most kids my age use social media'** (see Figure 17). This finding mirrors our finding that 9 in 10 children (91.9%) had used social media in the year prior to the survey. In addition, just under half of children (44.6%) thought that **'kids my age who don't have social media are missing out'**.

Figure 17: Perceived norms about social media use among children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)

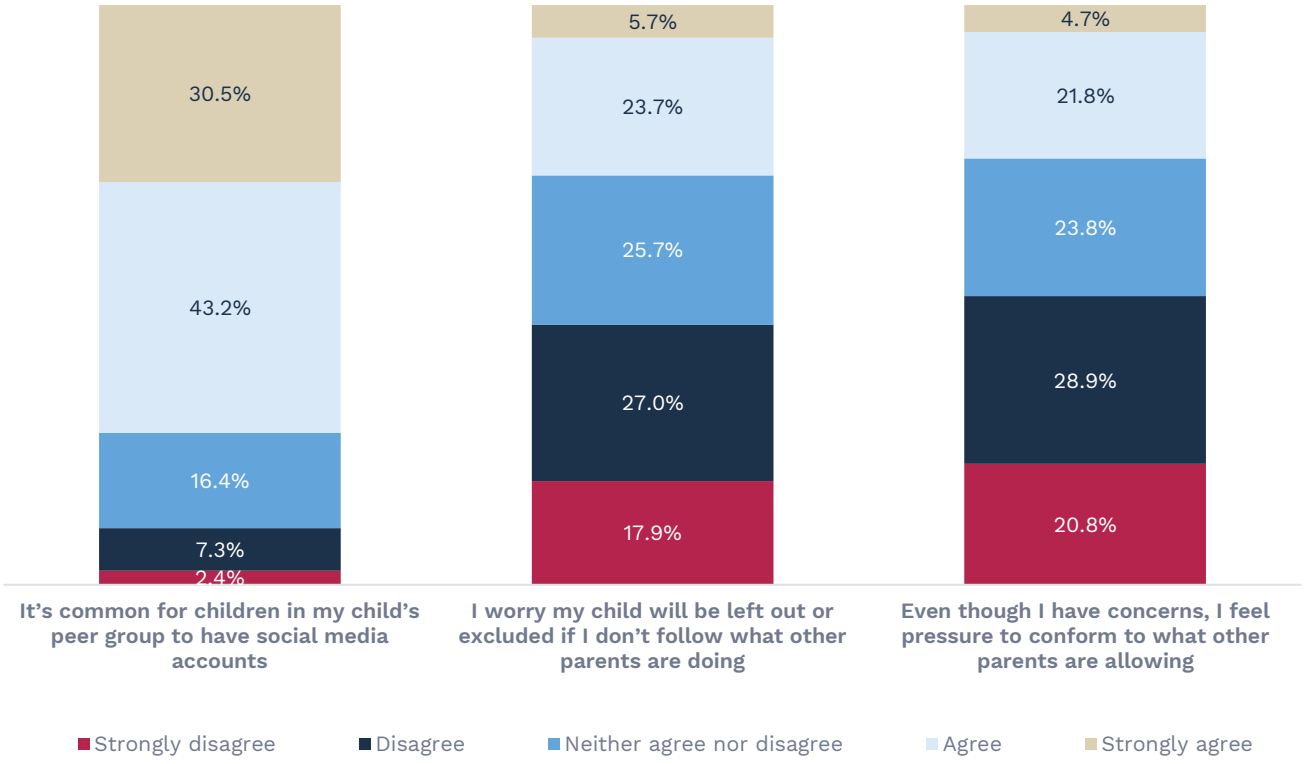


Q: How true or untrue do you think each of these statements about social media is?
Sample: Children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

Parents similarly believed that social media use was common among their child's peer group – 73.8% agreed or strongly agreed that **'it's common for children in my child's peer group to have social media accounts'**.

There was also some evidence of parents feeling pressure to conform to what other parents were allowing when it came to social media – 26.5% agreed or strongly agreed that **'even though I have concerns, I feel pressure to conform to what other parents are allowing'**. A similar proportion of parents (29.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that **'I worry my child will be left out or excluded if I don't follow what other parents are doing'** (see Figure 18).

Figure 18: Perceived norms around social media among parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121)



Q: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social media and kids your child's age?
Sample: Parents of children aged 10 to 16 (*n* = 4,121).
Note: Figure excludes 'I don't know' and 'I don't want to say'.

Key findings and implications for the change pathway

The findings in this section suggest that both children and parents perceived social media use to be widespread among children and young people. Many children and parents also endorsed the idea that not using social media could have negative social consequences for the child, such as feeling like they are missing out or are being excluded from their peer group.

Looking ahead, the Theory of Change anticipates that attitudes and norms may shift over time as the age restrictions continue to be implemented. In particular, if assumptions hold, adherence to the age restrictions may become increasingly accepted and expected among children and parents, so they may feel less pressure to conform, supporting the emergence of adherence as a normative behaviour. If this normative change doesn't occur, there may be resistance, increased attempts to bypass restrictions, or migration to alternative platforms, which could undermine the effectiveness of the policy.

Conclusion

This baseline snapshot provides a comprehensive picture of the conditions under which the social media age restrictions were implemented and the starting position from which children and families are experiencing and responding to this significant change in their everyday lives. It highlights that children are active and engaged participants in the digital world, deriving important benefits from online participation while also being exposed to a range of online risks and harms. Further, it demonstrates the important role that parents, families, peers and schools play in shaping children's experiences. Together, these findings establish the baseline against which changes can be assessed and provide insight into many of the key influences, assumptions and proximal indicators articulated in the Theory of Change. The evaluation reports in this series will follow children and families over the first two years of implementation, examining whether the policy's anticipated changes have emerged, how children and parents experience and adapt to those changes, and the extent to which they contribute to intended and unintended consequences for children's online experiences, relationships, safety, mental health and wellbeing.

Our cohort of children and parents was recruited prior to the commencement of the age restrictions and is broadly representative of the diversity and distribution of Australian children aged 10 to 16 years and their parents. The sample also includes children who may experience both heightened exposure to online harms and substantial benefits from online participation, including First Nations children, LGBTQ+ children, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and children with disability (eSafety Commissioner, 2022, 2023, 2024). The cohort also includes parents from a wide range of backgrounds and identities, reflecting the diversity of families across Australia.

At baseline, most children lived in households with strong family communication and cohesion, although parental stress and conflict related to children's use of digital technologies were not uncommon. This pattern is broadly consistent with Australian research indicating that most families report positive family functioning and cohesion, although experiences are not uniform and some families face challenges that can affect both family and child wellbeing (AIHW, 2022; Mullan & Higgins, 2014).

Most children also reported generally positive mental health and wellbeing. However, a small proportion experienced challenges such as sleep difficulties, loneliness, low school connectedness, and social comparison, all of which have been associated with poorer mental health outcomes in adolescence (Lim et al., 2024; Maston et al., 2025; Ragg et al., 2026; Stevens et al., 2026). Just under 1 in 10 children (7.9%) had high levels of psychological

distress, as did a similar proportion of parents (9.4%). These levels of distress are broadly consistent with, if not slightly lower than, estimates observed in other large population studies in Australia, though methodological differences, including different age cohorts, make direct comparisons between studies challenging (AIHW, 2026; Lawrence et al., 2015; Parenting Research Centre, 2025; Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll, 2023).

Before the age restrictions took effect, children engaged online in a variety of ways. Almost all used social media and messaging platforms, and many used online video games and AI chatbots, assistants or companions. These findings mirror recent national and international research, showing that young people globally are highly digitally engaged across a range of online platforms (eSafety Commissioner, 2026a, 2026b; OECD, 2025; Ofcom, 2026; O'Neil et al., 2026).

Children in the baseline cohort were using the internet for creative and civic activities, as well as to seek information about personal or sensitive topics, including mental health, sex and gender identity. Nearly all children reported experiencing benefits from being online, particularly in relation to exploring interests and hobbies, having fun or relaxing, and connecting with others. At the same time, a substantial proportion had experienced online harms in the past four weeks. Exposure to online hate and other content associated with harm was particularly common, in line with recent research showing that most children in Australia aged 10 to 17 had seen online hate or other content associated with harm online (eSafety Commissioner, 2025a, 2025b). Some children also experienced control-related harms, where time spent online interfered with schoolwork, sleep, or time with family and friends. Consistent with broader Australian and international evidence, the baseline findings suggest that children derive considerable value from their online participation through opportunities for connection, learning, creativity, information seeking and recreation, while also encountering challenges and risks that may affect their wellbeing and online safety (eSafety Commissioner, 2026a; OECD, 2025).

The findings also highlight that families are actively mediating children's digital lives, but with varying approaches and levels of confidence. Parents reported being actively involved in their children's online lives, with most using a range of strategies to support online safety, including encouraging open communication and setting rules or boundaries for online behaviour. However, many parents also reported finding it challenging to support their children's online safety, and some felt pressure to align with the decisions of other parents regarding social media use, despite having concerns. This finding is consistent with broader Australian evidence suggesting that many Australian parents experience digital parenting as both important and challenging, with concerns about online risks often outweighing perceived benefits (eSafety Commissioner, 2026c).

Consistent with the widespread use of social media reported by children, both children and parents perceived social media use and account ownership to be common among children and young people. Implicit in their responses was a concern that not participating could negatively affect social inclusion and peer relationships, an understandable concern given that children reported deriving substantial benefits from being online, including increased social connection. This finding is especially relevant given broader evidence that social norms can be influential in shaping young people's health attitudes and behaviours (Chung & Rimal, 2016; Rivis & Sheeran, 2003). With respect to social media use specifically, Bursztyn and colleagues (2025, 2026) have argued that social media platforms generate strong network effects, whereby participation becomes socially reinforced and non-participation can carry perceived social costs, including fear of missing out and social exclusion. The evaluation reports will examine whether these perceptions shift over time in line with the Theory of Change, which assumes that delayed social media uptake may become increasingly normalised among children and families. Of course, with our baseline cohort recruited just before the commencement of the age restrictions, it's possible that attitudes and norms towards social media had already begun to shift in the lead-up to the implementation of the restrictions.

Overall, the baseline findings paint a picture of a cohort of children who are highly digitally connected, generally faring well, and supported by engaged parents and positive family and school environments. At the same time, alongside the many benefits children derive from online participation, children also report exposure to online harms, social pressures associated with social media use, and varying levels of wellbeing. The findings highlight that the age restrictions are being implemented within a complex social and digital environment, where children's online experiences are shaped not only by technology use itself, but also by family relationships, peer norms, school contexts, and individual experiences and circumstances. Understanding how these factors interact with the implementation of the age restrictions, and whether experiences and outcomes differ across groups of children and families, will be an important focus of future evaluation reports.

Appendix

Data collection and analysis

The Social Research Centre hosted the survey, collected and cleaned the data, and provided eSafety with raw data. eSafety further checked, cleaned and analysed the data using SPSS Statistics and Q Research Software.

In cases where only a subset of respondents was asked a question, the results may have been 're-based' on all participants so as to provide an accurate incidence of behaviours or experiences. 'Re-based' means the results have been recalculated using the full sample of participants as the denominator, rather than only those who were asked the question. This allows the reported percentages to reflect the incidence of a behaviour or experience across all participants in the study. Each table and figure included in the report includes a description of the sample used for analysis purposes.

Certain questions have been 'reverse-coded' so that higher scores consistently represent higher levels of the construct being measured. For example, where respondents answered a question on a scale that ranged from '1 – Strongly agree' to '5 – Strongly disagree', we have reverse-coded responses to ensure that higher scores reflect higher agreement. This approach ensures that scores are aligned in the same direction throughout the report, making findings more intuitive to interpret. Each table and figure included in the report includes a legend with response scales used for analysis purposes.

Percentages in tables and figures may not sum to 100%, due to rounding or to question formats that allowed for multiple responses. Tables and figures may not include the response options 'Prefer not to answer' or 'Don't know' – for example, if the number of respondents was small.

The survey was primarily designed to be analysed quantitatively; however, some free text questions allowed more detailed comments. These free text responses were analysed and coded thematically to identify and interpret key patterns and insights from this data. Selected participant quotes are included to exemplify key themes. Some of the quotes have been minimally edited for clarity.

Additional demographic characteristics

Table A1: Unweighted demographic characteristics of children who participated in the baseline survey (*n* = 4,121)[1]

Demographics	Baseline sample (*n*)	Baseline sample (unweighted %)[2]
Age		
10	559	13.6
11	608	14.8
12	547	13.3
13	516	12.5
14	616	14.9
15	706	17.1
16	569	13.8
Gender[3]		
Boys	2,217	53.8
Girls	1,850	44.9
Trans and gender diverse[4]	54	1.3
State/territory		
NSW	1,272	30.9
Vic	1,118	27.1
Qld	794	19.3
SA	298	7.2
WA	421	10.2
Tas + NT + ACT	217	5.3
SEIFA[5]		
IRSAD[6] Quintile 1	635	15.4
IRSAD Quintile 2	747	18.1
IRSAD Quintile 3	1,008	24.5
IRSAD Quintile 4	940	22.8
IRSAD Quintile 5	788	19.1

Demographics	Baseline sample (*n*)	Baseline sample (unweighted %)[2]
Remoteness		
Major cities	3,186	77.3
Inner regional	669	16.2
Outer regional	240	5.8
Remote and very remote	25	0.6
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity		
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	357	8.7
Disability or diagnosis		
Any disability or diagnosis	1,275	30.9
Neurodivergence	964	23.4
Diagnosed mental health condition	425	10.3
Behavioural disorder	163	4.0
Cognitive or intellectual disability	67	1.6
Sensory disability	44	1.1
Chronic disease, disorder or condition (coded from other)	44	1.1
Physical disability	31	0.8
Neurological condition (coded from other)	17	0.4
Developmental delay (coded from other)	6	0.1
Learning difficulties (coded from other)	5	0.1
Language other than English		
Child speaks language other than English at home	610	14.8
Sexuality[7]		
Straight	1,928	80.1
Sexually diverse	167	6.9
Haven't thought about it yet	60	2.5
Still working it out	35	1.5
Total	4,121	100.0

Notes: [1] Children reported on their gender and sexuality. Parents reported on their child's age, gender, state/territory, SEIFA, remoteness, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity, and disability or diagnosis. Percentages may not sum to 100%, as the table excludes those who selected 'Prefer not to say'.
[2] Weighting was applied to the sample to correct for minor deviations from the quota targets. Population statistics for weighting were sourced from comparable population estimates for children aged 10 to 16 published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).
[3] Where a child declined to provide their gender identity, the gender provided by their parent is reported (*n* = 43). Where the gender provided by the parent and child differed, the gender provided by the child is reported (*n* = 68).
[4] 'Trans and gender diverse' includes children who identified as 'non-binary', 'trans girl', 'trans boy', 'another gender' or 'questioning' their gender.
[5] The Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) is a product developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that ranks areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage.
[6] The Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) summarises information about the economic and social conditions of people and households within an area. A low score indicates relatively greater disadvantage and a lack of advantage in general. A high score indicates a relative lack of disadvantage and greater advantage in general.
[7] Sexuality was only asked of children aged 13 and older (*n* = 2,407). 'Sexually diverse' includes participants who identified as 'gay or lesbian', 'bisexual', 'queer' or 'asexual', or who used 'a different word'. Where a child selected multiple sexualities, sexual diverse responses have been reported (*n* = 12). Children were given the option of skipping certain sensitive questions in the survey, including those asking about sexuality. Among children aged 13 and older, *n* = 184 declined to see the sexuality question. Additionally, *n* = 22 children aged 13 and older were not shown the sexuality question during survey piloting, due to a data collection error.

Table A2: Unweighted demographic characteristics of parents who participated in the baseline survey (*n* = 4,121)[1]

Demographics	Baseline sample (*n*)	Baseline sample (unweighted %)
Age		
18–34	523	12.7
35–44	2,027	49.2
45–54	1,351	32.8
55+	220	5.3
Gender[2]		
Men	1,356	32.9
Women	2,759	66.9
Non-binary	5	0.1
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity		
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	255	6.2
Language other than English		
Parent speaks a language other than English	834	20.2
Education		
Year 12 or equivalent	3,213	78.0
Year 11 or equivalent	243	5.9

Demographics	Baseline sample (*n*)	Baseline sample (unweighted %)
Year 10 or equivalent	392	9.5
Year 9 or equivalent	127	3.1
Year 8 or below	139	3.4
Did not go to school	5	0.1
Highest qualification		
Postgraduate degree	696	16.9
Graduate diploma and/or graduate certificate	342	8.3
Bachelor's degree	1,178	28.6
Advanced diploma and/or diploma level	463	11.2
Certificate III and/or IV level	817	19.8
Certificate I and/or II level	97	2.4
Not completed a qualification	526	12.8
Employment status in week prior to survey		
Had a job of any kind (including unpaid work)	3,467	84.1
Did not have a job	653	15.8
Total	4,121	100.0

Notes: [1] Percentages may not sum to 100%, as the table excludes those who selected 'Prefer not to say'.
[2] Parent gender was asked in accordance with ABS standards for the collection and reporting of gender.

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