Children and parents: media use and attitudes

# Details

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English

## Authors

Ofcom

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Report and working paper

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London

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* Internet usage, practices and engagement
* Social mediation
* Access, inequalities and vulnerabilities
* Risks and harms

## Sample

2,190 children aged 5-15 recruited via a postal sample and an online panel

# Abstract

This research provides an insight into the media use and attitudes of children today. These children,
and everyone around them, have faced unprecedented disruption to normal life in the wake of the
Covid-19 pandemic. Children’s reliance on the internet and devices during this time was evident; for
home learning, entertainment and keeping in touch with family and friends.
Our research showed nearly all UK households with school-age children had internet access in the
home; however, a small minority relied on smartphone only internet access. Furthermore, a
substantial minority did not have access to an adequate device for online home learning all of the
time, and most of these said they managed this by sharing a device with others.
Children also relied on media for their entertainment during 2020. Use of video-sharing platforms
was almost ubiquitous: mainly for watching content, but for a minority for posting and sharing
content too. Meanwhile, the proportion of children watching on-demand content was almost double
that who watched live TV.
A variety of platforms were used by children to connect to friends and the outside world during the
pandemic. Social media, messaging apps and video calling were used by a majority; with online
gaming being another popular platform – used by boys in particular - for connecting with friends.
Alongside all the benefits of being online, comes the potential for negative experiences. Just over
half of 12-15s claimed to have some form of negative experience online. And, while awareness of
reporting functions on platforms was high, only a minority chose to use them.
Parents also felt the impact of the increased reliance on the internet and devices during 2020. While nearly all parents mediated their child’s online use in some way, some felt the need to relax the rules about their child’s online activities during the pandemic.
But parents also recognised the benefits that being online can bring children; not only did they
continue to appreciate how it helps with their school and homework, but many also realised the
value of the internet in helping their child stay connected to their friends.

# Outcome

"Online access and digital exclusion
• In 2020, nearly all children aged 5-15 went online. Laptops, tablets and mobiles were the most
used devices for going online, used by seven in ten of these children.
• Ofcom’s Technology Tracker 20211 research showed that two per cent of school-age children
relied on internet access via a smartphone only, and one in five children who had been home
schooling did not have access to an appropriate device2 for their online home-learning needs
all of the time.
Content consumption and online activities
• Children were twice as likely to watch TV programmes on video-on-demand (VoD) than live
TV. Almost all children (96%) watched any type of VoD compared to just over half (56%)
watching live TV.
• Children in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were less likely than children in England to
feel there were enough programmes that showed children from the same part of the country
as them: 33% in Scotland, 34% in Wales and 25% in Northern Ireland, compared to 45% in
England.Children’s use of video-sharing platforms (VSPs) was nearly universal, with a majority using
VSPs more during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic than before.
• Seven in ten 5-15s played games online in 2020. This was more prevalent among boys than girls
(78% vs. 64%). Boys were also more likely, than girls, to use gaming to connect with their friends.
• Just over half of 5-15s used social media sites or apps, rising to 87% of 12-15s. The range of
sites and apps used remains diverse; around a third of 5-15s used Instagram, Snapchat and
Facebook.
Online knowledge and understanding
• Just under half of children aged 8-15 who used search engines could correctly identify adverts
on Google searches, and about half realised that some sites within a search engine’s results
could be trusted and some couldn’t.
• Two-thirds of 12-15s recognised that vloggers and influencers might be sponsored to say good
things about products or brands. Children in our Children’s Media Lives study found this helpful
as it showed them products and services that were in line with their interests.
Staying safe online
• Just over half of 12-15s have had some form of negative online experience. The most common
type of these was being contacted by someone they did not know who wanted to be their
friend, which happened to almost a third of children in this age group.
• Awareness of reporting functions was high (70% of children aged 12-15), but only 14% of 12-
15s have ever reported content.
Parental attitudes and mediation strategies
• Parents found it harder to control their child’s screen time during the Covid-19 pandemic and
up to half of parents of children aged 5-15 said they had to relax some rules about what their
child did online during 2020. However, parents also recognised the value of the internet in
helping their child stay connected with their friends.
• Awareness of various technical tools and controls among parents was high (around six in ten),
but only a minority actually used any of them (around a third of parents)." (Ofcom, 2021: 1-2).