Life in ‘likes’: Children’s Commissioner report into social media use among 8-12 year olds

# Details

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English

## Authors

Children’s Commissioner for England

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Children’s Commissioner for England

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London

## Topics

## Sample

32 children aged 8-12 years

## Implications For Educators About

Digital citizenship

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Creating a safe environment for children online

## Implications For Stakeholders About

Industry

# Abstract

Executive summary
Most social media platforms have a minimum age limit of
13, but research shows a growing number of children
aged under 13 are using social media, with 3 in 4 children
aged 10-12 having their own accounts.
While much is known about how teenagers use social
media, this research provides the missing piece to the
story, exploring the social media lives of children before
they reach the teenage years. In October and November
2017, we conducted 8 focus groups with 32 children
aged 8-12 to understand the impact of social media on
the wellbeing of this age group. The findings of this
research are summarised below.
How I use social media
My social media:
Across all ages, the most popular social media were
Snapchat, Instagram, Musical.ly and WhatsApp. Younger
children had less routine around when they accessed
social media, while older children started to get into the
habit of using all their social media apps multiple times a
day, and for some, it had come to dominate their day.
Social media makes me feel happy
Children knew how to cheer themselves up or calm
themselves down using social media, from getting funny
Snapchats from a friend to watching slime videos on
Instagram. It allowed children to be creative and play
games, two things that appealed to children from a very
young age.
How I stay safe online:
Parents and schools had successfully ingrained messages
in children about online safety from known risks such as
predators and strangers. Yet children were less aware of
how to protect themselves from other online situations
that could affect their mood and emotions.
My friends and family
‘Following’ my family:
Younger children were particularly influenced by their
family’s views and usage of social media, and parents may
be unaware of how their use of social media affects their
child.
Going on my mum’s phone
Parents sometimes gave children contradictory safety
messages when they let children use their social media
accounts, and unknowingly exposed them to unsuitable
content.
Sharenting
Many children felt uncomfortable and bothered by their
parents posting pictures of them on social media, yet felt
they could do little to stop it.
My sister showed me Snapstreaks
Children learned how to do new things on social media
from their older siblings, but were also put off by things
that their siblings had experienced. In some cases,
children worried about their siblings’ behaviour online,
such as excessive use and ignoring safety messages.
My online friends:
Social media was important for maintaining
relationships, but this got trickier to manage at
secondary school, where friendships could break down
online.
Keeping in touch
Children used social media as a tool to maintain
friendships, and they recognised the value of face-toface interactions for more serious conversations, like
discussing worries and resolving arguments.
Falling out online
Younger children were more likely to see mean
comments from strangers on apps like Roblox, whereas
older children, who were communicating with a greater
number of people on group chats, faced issues and
confusion around the blurring of ‘jokes’ that were posted
publicly.
I need to reply now
Maintaining online friendships could be stressful for
some and a source of distraction from other offline
activities.
Growing up on social media
Who should I be?
Children are conscious of keeping up appearances on
social media, particularly when they start secondary
school, and identity and seeking peer approval become
more important.
Do I look okay?
Despite talking about the importance of ‘staying true to
yourself’ and being authentic on social media, girls were
worried about looking ‘pretty’ and boys were more
concerned with looking ‘cool’ and having the right
clothing.
Can we all look like celebrities?
When children started to follow celebrities and people
outside their close family and friends, many became
aware of how they looked compared to other people on
social media, and felt that comparisons were
unattainable.
Will my picture get any likes?
Children felt good when they got ‘likes’ and ‘comments’
from friends, and some Year 7 children were starting to
become dependent on them, using techniques to
guarantee they would get a high number of ‘likes’.
Is this shareable?
Children started to see offline activities through a
‘shareable lens’ based on what would look the best on
social media.
The world and my future:
Social media could inspire children and help them learn
about new things.
I want to be a YouTuber when I am older
Some children developed new aspirations about what
they wanted their future to be like and copied things they
saw on social media.
Learning about the world
Some children actively gathered information on social
media platforms like YouTube and Instagram, and were
exposed to ‘news’ via celebrities and ‘explore/discover’
pages.
Conclusion
recommendations
Based on these findings, we have developed a series of
recommendations, which are outlined on page 38.
Government:
Digital literacy in schools: Broaden digital literacy
education beyond safety messages, to develop
children’s critical awareness and resilience and
understanding of algorithms, focusing on the transition
stage from primary to secondary school.
Guidance for parents: Inform parents about the ways in
which children’s social media use changes with age,
particularly on entry to secondary school, and help them
support children to use social media in a positive way,
and to disengage from it.
Schools:
Improve teachers’ knowledge about the impacts of
social media on children’s wellbeing and encourage
peer-to-peer learning
Social media companies:
Recognise the needs of children under 13 who are using
their platforms and incorporate them in service design or
do more to address underage use.

# Outcome

See abstract