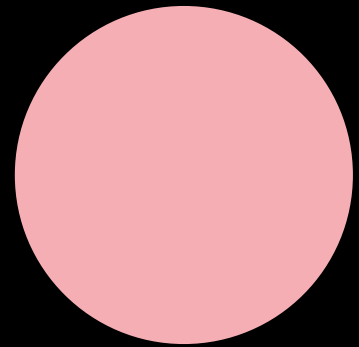
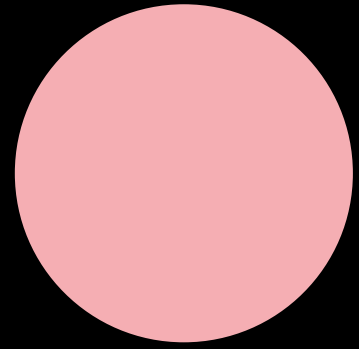

**DSIT
Children's Wellbeing
Online: Social Media
Quantitative Report**



Children's Wellbeing Online:
Social Media Quantitative
Report

Introduction

This report presents the final findings from one stage of a wider mixed-methodology research project which also includes surveys with teachers and youth practitioners, an evidence assessment, and findings from seven in-person, deliberative events with young people around the UK. This research was commissioned in order to build a robust evidence base on children’s social media use and attitudes towards potential restrictions, including the possibility of an under-16 blanket social media ban. The project sits within a wider programme of work designed to inform policy development on children’s online safety and wellbeing, in response to growing public and political interest in the role social media plays in children’s lives. A central aim is to understand how parents and carers (referred to as ‘parents’ throughout) and children and young people (CYP) view both the benefits and harms of social media, and how they assess the likely impact of different approaches to regulation.

This report incorporates two complementary streams of survey evidence. The first is a pair of nationally representative panel surveys: one of parents and one of CYP conducted via Savanta’s research panels and referred to throughout as the ‘panel surveys’. The second is a pair of open-link surveys, with identical questionnaires, hosted on a government website as the public consultation route and referred to throughout as the ‘public consultation’. The Savanta panel surveys provide the primary, statistically representative evidence base on which the analysis is built. The public consultation data sits alongside the panel surveys as a secondary, self-selecting source used for triangulation. Where the two sources align, this strengthens confidence in a finding; where they diverge, the difference itself is informative about the patterns of opinion among those most motivated to respond to a public consultation. An evidence assessment, a separate survey of teachers and youth practitioners and a programme of youth-led deliberative events have been undertaken alongside the surveys; findings from those streams will be incorporated into later iterations of this report. We recommend basing any final policy decision or approach on the final version of this report, which takes into account all streams of research.

This policy context reflects the increasingly central role that social media plays in CYP’s everyday lives. Social media can help CYP feel connected, included and informed, but it is also associated with concerns around inappropriate content, contact with strangers, sharing of personal information, and features designed to encourage prolonged use. The arrival of AI chatbots in widespread public use adds a further dimension to this debate. As a result, the question is not simply whether action is needed, but which forms of intervention are likely to be most effective, proportionate and acceptable to those affected.

The research is designed to address this by exploring a number of related areas:

- Patterns of device access and social media use
- Perceptions of the benefits and harms of social media
- Support for an under-16 blanket social media ban
- Attitudes towards alternatives such as platform-based, feature-level and time-based restrictions
- Expectations about the likely outcomes of different forms of restriction
- Views on the benefits and risks of AI chatbots for children, and the case for AI-specific restrictions

Including findings from both parents and CYP is vital, as their perspectives are not always aligned and each offers a distinct view on how social media affects children and how policy responses may work in practice. A more detailed explanation of the panel and public consultation methodologies and how they are used analytically is set out in the Methodology section. Throughout this report, panel findings are explicitly labelled ‘panel’ and open-link findings are explicitly labelled ‘public consultation’; statements of statistical significance refer to within-survey subgroup differences at the 95% confidence level.

Executive Summary

This report examines how parents and CYP view social media, its impacts on children’s wellbeing, and the case for restrictions on social media usage, including an under-16 blanket social media ban. AI chatbots are also examined as an emerging area of policy interest, treated alongside the social media findings rather than as a separate exercise.

Parents show strong support for an under-16 social media ban, while CYP are far more divided. In the panel survey, around three quarters of parents (76%) agree that social media should have a minimum age of access of at least 16, with 47% strongly agreeing. In the public consultation parent survey, support rises to 91% and is more intense, with 82% strongly agreeing. CYP take a different view: in the panel survey, 29% of 10-21-year-olds support a full ban, rising to 40% among those aged 16-21, while support for a full ban in the public consultation CYP survey is lower still at 19%. Across both CYP sources, the clearest position is selective access rather than a blanket ban, with around half saying under-16s should be allowed to use some platforms but not others.

When parents are asked to weigh more selective restrictions such as restrictions on specific features, or time limits on apps, against a blanket ban, a more nuanced picture emerges. In the panel survey, parents most often rank a minimum age for the most risky functions first (44%), followed by restrictions on time spent such as curfews (31%), with a blanket ban ranking lower (16%). In the public consultation, parents reverse this order and place a blanket ban first by a wide margin (63%). This suggests that, while support for a 16+ rule is strong among parents in the representative panel, many are also open to more tailored approaches when these are considered alongside a full ban.

More targeted interventions command broader shared support across parents and CYP than a blanket ban on its own. Across all four datasets, there is clear support for restricting features and functionalities that are seen to create direct safeguarding risks. In the panel surveys, around three quarters of both parents (75%) and CYP (76%) agree that restricting certain features such as connecting and talking to strangers, and location sharing, would make children’s online experience safer. Time-based controls are similarly popular: 89% of parents from the panel survey and 84% of CYP from the panel survey support daily app-level limits, overnight restrictions, or both. The public consultation parent sample reinforces this pattern, while the CYP consultation sample is softer but remains broadly supportive.

Parents and CYP also differ in what they expect a ban to achieve. In the panel surveys, parents are more likely to anticipate protective and reassurance benefits, including fewer children being exposed to harmful content, children being safer online, and parents feeling more confident in platforms. CYP, by contrast, are more likely to focus on circumvention, exclusion and social costs. Among CYP from the panel survey, the most commonly expected outcome is that children would

try to get around the rules, followed by children feeling upset or angry and feeling left out. Older CYP are somewhat more likely than younger CYP to recognise possible safety benefits, but the overall CYP picture remains more mixed than the parent one.

Social media remains a near-universal feature of CYP daily lives. In the panel data, 97% of CYP have access to a smartphone and 96% report using social media. Parents and CYP recognise clear benefits, particularly around connection and inclusion, but there is also clear evidence of harm. These experiences are not evenly distributed. In the panel surveys, female CYP and disabled CYP are significantly more likely to report worry and anxiety linked to social media, and more likely to view social media negatively overall. These patterns indicate that the effects of social media are experienced unevenly across different groups of children and young people.

On AI chatbots, parents and older CYP (aged 16-21, who were asked these questions on the CYP side) show a notable degree of convergence. Both audiences see AI's main value as functional and educational, such as finding answers quickly and helping with homework or learning. Both also identify relationship-simulation features as the leading risks, alongside harmful, biased or inaccurate outputs. Support for AI restrictions is high across audiences. In the panel surveys, 84% of parents support minimum age requirements for AI chatbots and 85% support feature restrictions; among CYP aged 16-21, the equivalent figures are 83% and 90%. The public consultation parent sample reinforces this picture, while the CYP consultation sample is somewhat less supportive but still remains balanced towards restrictions being in place overall.

Taken together, the panel evidence points to a policy landscape in which parents show a clear desire for an under-16 social media ban, while CYP are more likely to favour selective access and feature-based controls. The open-link evidence reinforces this overall direction on the parent side, where consultation respondents are markedly more restriction-favouring still, and qualifies it on the CYP side, where consultation respondents are somewhat more pro-access than the representative panel. Across both audiences, however, there is broader shared support for a package of targeted restrictions, time-based controls and AI-specific safeguards than for a blanket ban alone.

Section 1: Social media and device usage and access

Summary: In the panel data, over nine in ten CYP have access to smart devices and to social media, both of which increase with age, and reach near-universal levels among those aged 13 and over. Most parents from the panel survey place limits on their child’s device use, with more setting boundaries around social media specifically. CYP from the panel survey nevertheless spend more hours per day on social media than parents from the panel survey estimate, with evenings and weekends being most common. Four in five parents from the panel survey feel confident in helping their child stay safe on social media, although the share saying they are very confident is much smaller, suggesting perceived limits to that confidence.

Findings: The panel survey of CYP shows that 97% have access to a smartphone, with 91% having their own. Access is slightly lower among CYP aged 10-12 (91% any access; 76% their own) and reaches near-universal levels by 13-15 (98% access; 94% their own) and 16-21 (98%; 96%). This is consistent with parents from the panel survey: 91% of those with 10-15-year-olds say their child has access to a smartphone, with 82% saying their child has their own. Parents from the panel survey continue to place limits on device use: three in five parents (60%) of children with their own smartphone restrict access, with limits notably more common in ABC1 households (65% vs 54% C2DE) and among ethnic minority parents (76% vs 56% White).

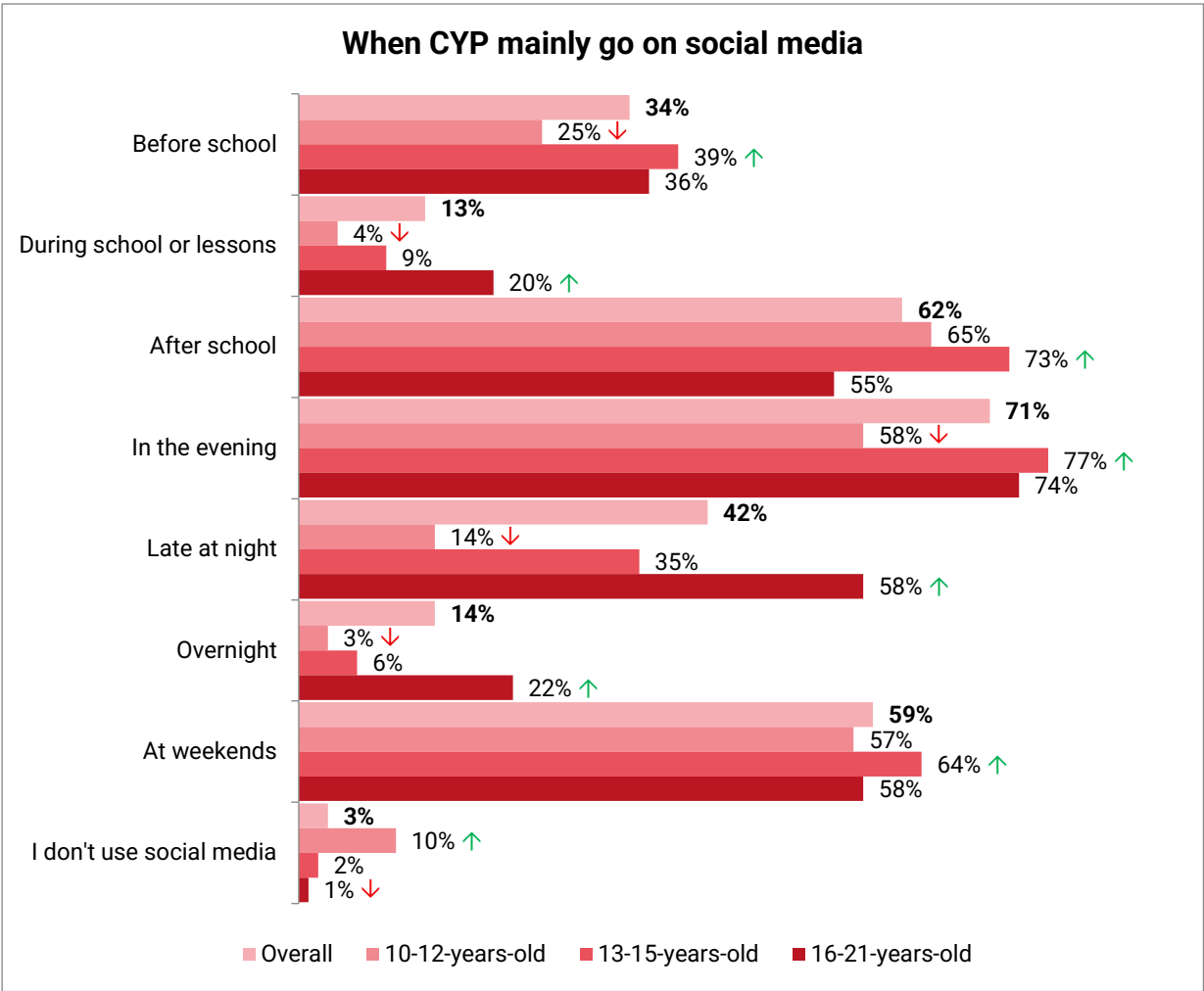


Figure 1: Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q2 = "When do you mainly go on social media?" (Multiple choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages

Social media use among CYP is just as widespread. In the panel, 96% of CYP report using social media. Use is concentrated later in the day, with 71% of CYP from the panel survey reporting they mainly go on social media in the evening (6PM-9PM), 62% after school and 59% at weekends. A smaller but notable share also use social media before school (34%) and overnight (14%). Female CYP from the panel survey are significantly more likely than male CYP from the panel survey to report use across every time band tested. Use also continues during school hours for some, with 13% of CYP from the panel survey saying they go on social media during school or lessons.

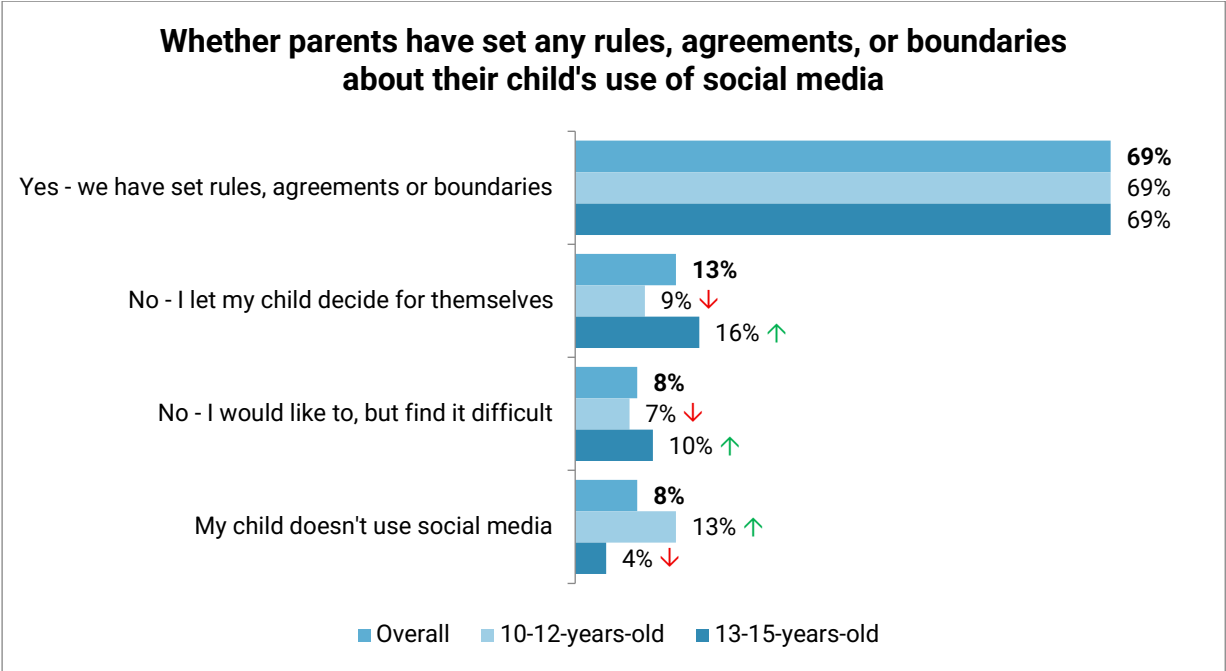


Figure 2: Sample size: n = 2,275 | Base = All parents of 10-15-year-olds from the panel survey | Q5 = "Have you set any rules, agreements, or boundaries about your child's use of social media?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from counterpart

At home, around seven in ten (69%) parents of 10-15-year-olds from the panel survey say they restrict their child’s social media use, with this being significantly more common in ABC1 than C2DE households (73% vs 65%).

CYP from the panel survey report spending more time on social media (4.2 hours avg.) than parents from the panel survey estimate their child spends (2.7 hours avg.). Among CYP from the panel survey, 37% say they spend 3-4 hours per day on social media, 21% say 5-6 hours and 12% say 7 or more hours. Time spent rises significantly with age, with 17% of CYP from the panel survey aged 16-21 in the 7+ hour band compared with 5% of 10-12s. From the parent side of the panel, 47% say their child spends under two hours per day on social media, while 14% say more than four hours.

Parents from the panel survey also see social media as displacing a range of other activities. Around four in ten parents from the panel survey say their child spends less time with family (40%), outdoors or in nature (40%) or reading for pleasure (39%); a third cite less time helping at home (35%) or doing homework (32%); and a quarter mention less sleep (27%). CYP from the panel survey, asked what they would do more of without social media, most often cite watching TV or films (63%), playing games (49%) and spending time with family (49%) or friends in person (46%).

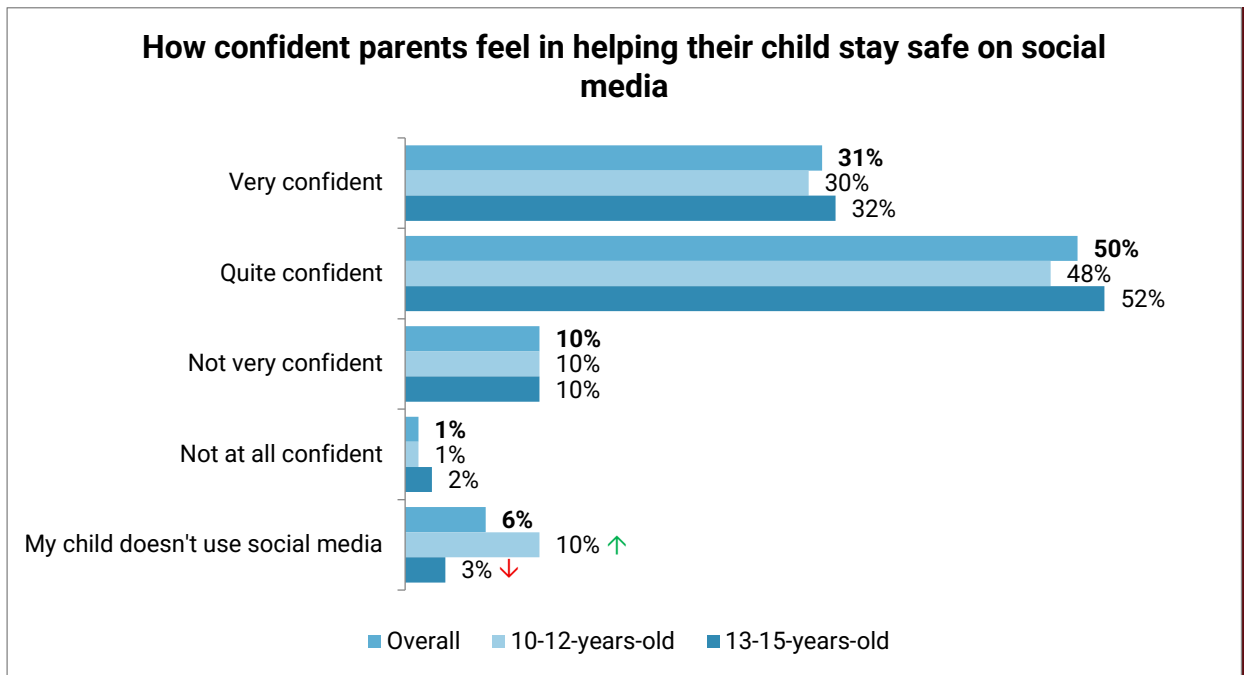


Figure 3: Sample size: n = 2,275 | Base = All parents of 10-15-year-olds from the panel survey | Q6 = "How confident do you feel in helping your child stay safe on social media?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% |
 ↑↓ Significantly different from counterpart

Despite high levels of use, parents express mixed levels of confidence helping their child stay safe on social media. Four in five (81%) say they are confident, but only 31% are very confident, with 50% quite confident. Among parents from the panel survey, fathers are significantly more likely than mothers to feel confident (83% vs 78%), as are those in ABC1 households compared with those in C2DE households (83% vs 78%), pointing to some variation in parents' perceived ability to support safe social media use.

Data from the public consultation has not been included in this section, due to usage patterns in public consultation data closely mirroring that of the panel data.

Section 2: Perceptions of social media – benefits, harms and overall balance

Summary: Across both the panel and the public consultation surveys, parents and CYP are broadly ambivalent about children’s usage of social media, reflecting a tension between its social benefits and its perceived risks. CYP from the panel survey are more likely to describe the positives and negatives as being in balance, while parents from the panel survey lean somewhat more positive on their own child’s behalf. Public consultation respondents diverge sharply: parents from the public consultation are notably more negative about the benefits/risks balance than parents from the panel survey, while CYP from the public consultation are more polarised than the CYP panel. Attitudes are also not evenly distributed across the population, with female CYP, older CYP and disabled CYP tending to hold more negative views.

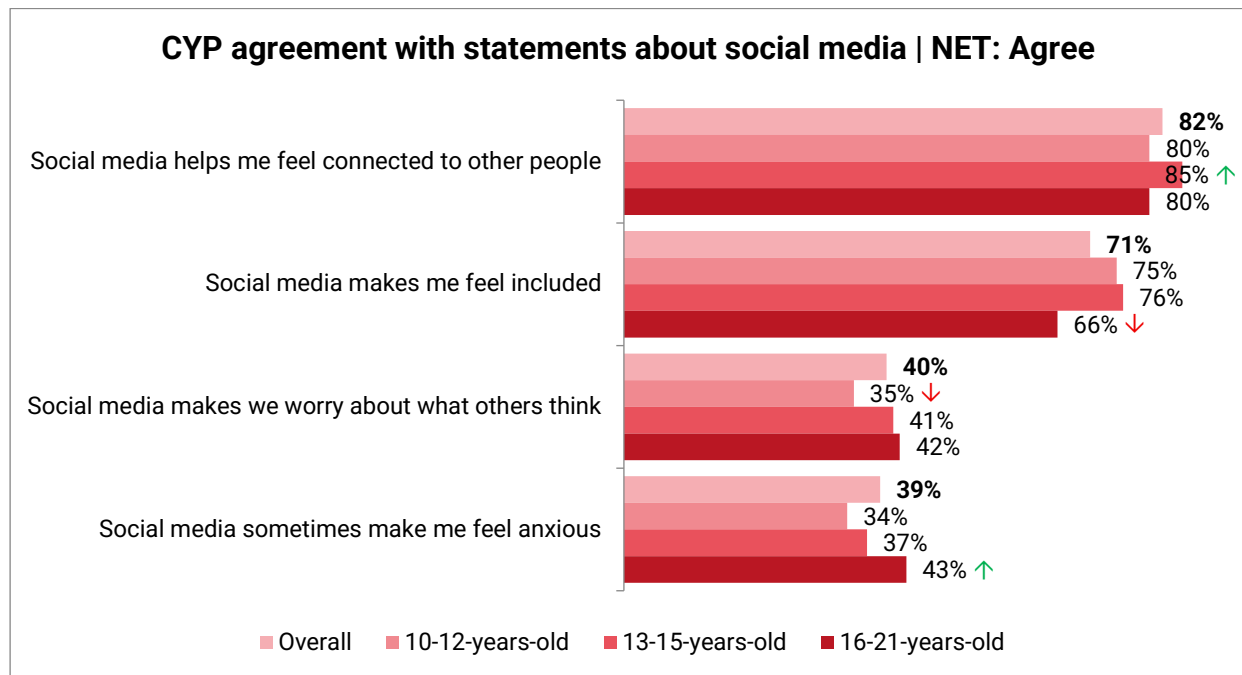


Figure 4: Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q8 = "How much do you agree or disagree with the sentences below?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages

Findings: Among CYP from the panel survey, social media is more strongly associated with connection and inclusion than with harm. Four in five (82%) agree that social media helps them feel connected to other people, and over two thirds (71%) say it makes them feel included. In the panel, agreement with both positive statements is significantly lower among disabled CYP (79% connected; 67% included), pointing to less consistent social benefit for that group. At the same time, around two in five CYP from the panel survey agree that social media makes them worry about what others think (40%) or sometimes makes them feel anxious (39%). These negative experiences are significantly more common in the panel among female CYP (46% worry; 45% anxious, against 35% and 34% for male CYP) and disabled CYP (48% on both, compared with 36% and 34% for non-disabled CYP).

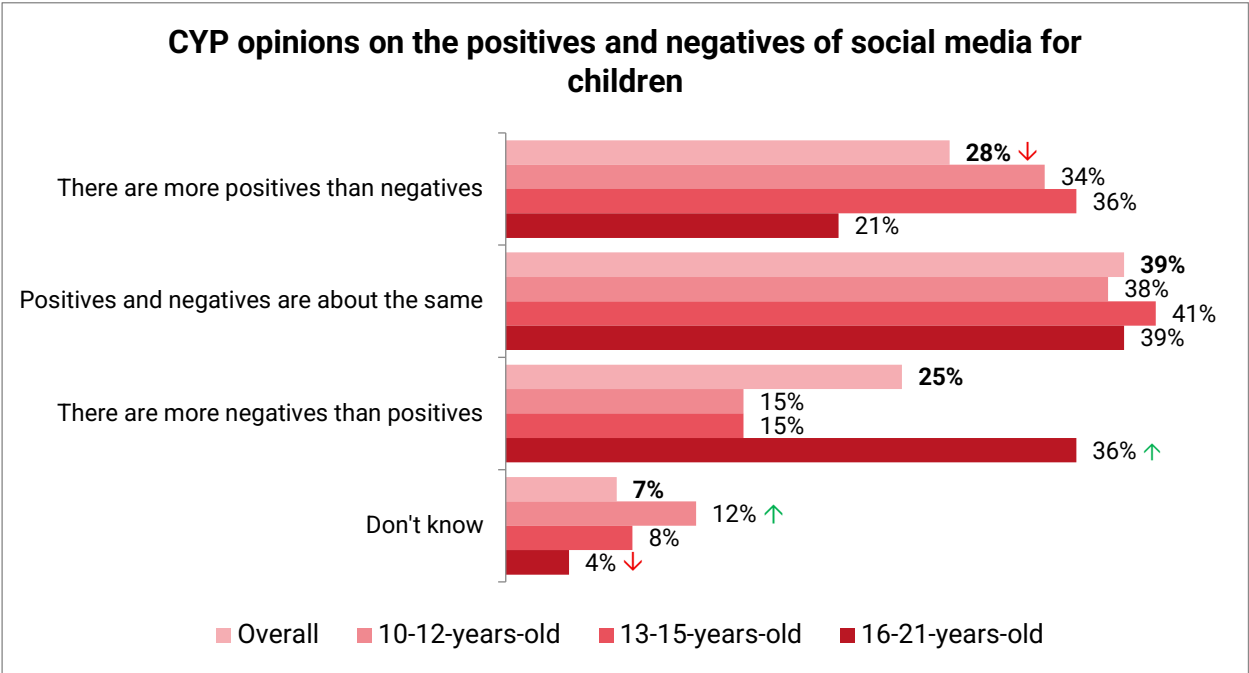


Figure 5: Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q8 = "What is your opinion on the positives and negatives of social media for children?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages

The overall balance of opinion among CYP is mixed and shifts strongly with age. Across CYP from the panel survey, 28% say there are more positives than negatives, 39% say positives and negatives are about the same, and 25% say there are more negatives than positives. Younger CYP from the panel survey have a much more optimistic outlook: 34% of 10-12s and 36% of 13-15s say there are more positives than negatives, compared with 21% of 16-21s. Conversely, 36% of 16-21s say there are more negatives than positives, compared with 15% of both younger age bands. More negative views are also concentrated among particular groups within the panel: female CYP (29% more negatives, vs 22% of male CYP) and disabled CYP (31% vs 22% of non-disabled CYP) are significantly more likely to view social media negatively overall. CYP from the public consultation are more polarised than the CYP panel: a higher share say that the positives outweigh (40% public consultation vs 28% panel) but a higher share also say negatives outweigh (29% public consultation vs 25% panel), consistent with the more motivated and oppositional character of consultation respondents on each side.

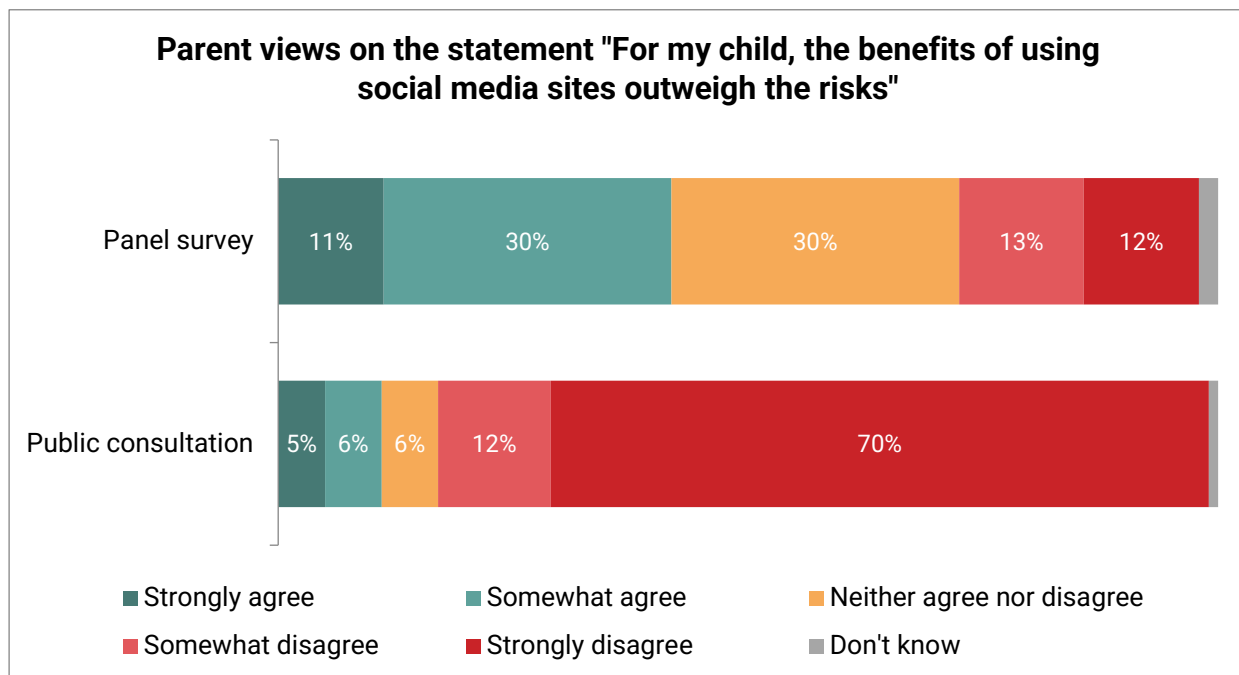


Figure 6: Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 2,275); Public consultation (n = 19,810) | Base = All parents of 10-15-year-olds | Q9 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? 'For my child, the benefits of using social media sites outweigh the risks'" (Single choice)

Parents' views diverge sharply between the panel and the public consultation sources. Among parents of 10-15-year-olds from the panel survey, 42% agree that, for their child, the benefits of social media outweigh the risks; 30% neither agree nor disagree and 25% disagree. The public consultation picture is sharply different: only 11% agree that benefits outweigh risks, 12% disagree somewhat, and 70% disagree strongly; a net 83% disagreement. This very large gap reflects the strongly restriction-favouring orientation of the public consultation respondents, who may tend to view children's social media use through a predominantly protective lens. It is also one of the clearest examples in the dataset of how the public consultation differs from the representative panel.

Alongside these wider judgements, parents in both surveys express clear concern about particular social media features. Connecting or talking to strangers is the most common concern in the panel, mentioned by 56% of parents from the panel survey, and rises to 71% in the public consultation. Other prominent concerns in the panel include sharing personal information (49%) and the ability to send nude images or videos (50%); in the public consultation, both rise to 68%. In the panel data, mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to be concerned about strangers, location-sharing, disappearing content and AI-generated content. Concern about content generated through AI chatbots or created tools is referenced by 24% of parents from the public consultation and is examined further in section 8.

Section 3: Support for an under-16 social media ban

Summary: Parents and CYP differ markedly on their views of a potential under-16 blanket social media ban. In the panel surveys, parents show strong support for a minimum age of 16 while CYP are far more divided, with a full ban remaining a minority view among them. The two public consultation samples diverge in opposite directions from their respective panels: parents from the public consultation are markedly more pro-ban than parents from the panel survey, and CYP from the public consultation are modestly less supportive of a full ban than CYP from the panel survey.

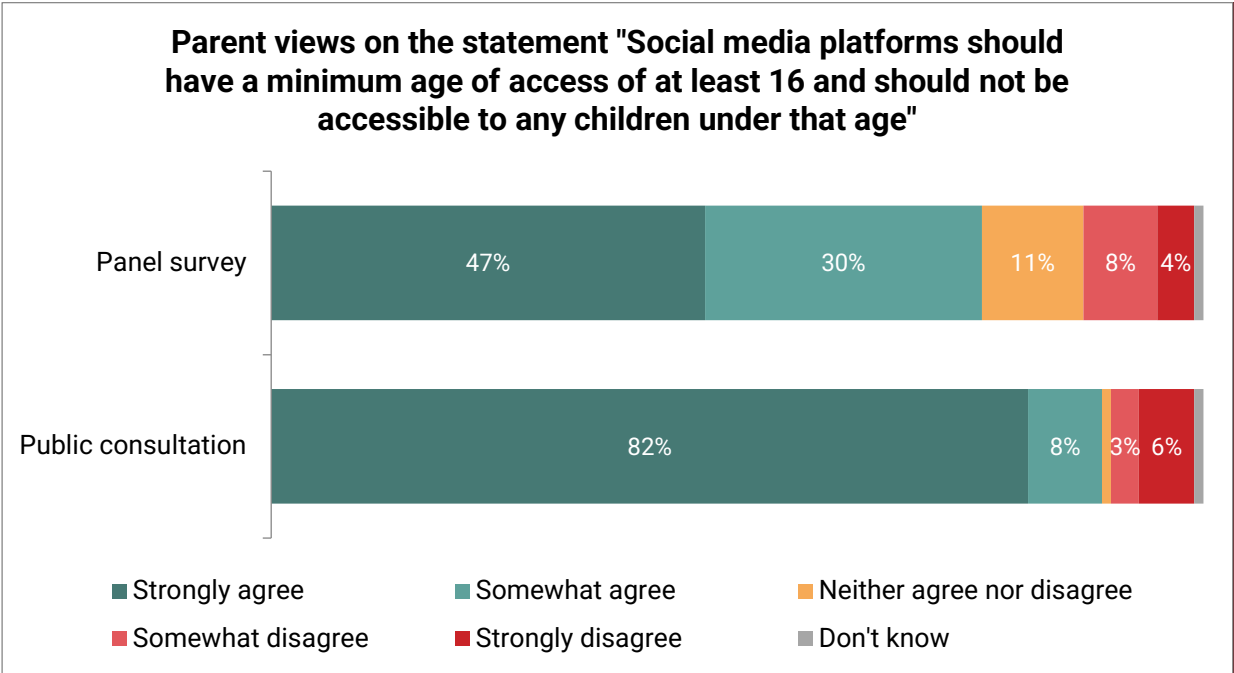


Figure 7: Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 5,010); Public consultation (n = 39,116) | Base = All parents | Q10 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? 'Social media platforms should have a minimum age of access of at least 16 and should not be accessible to any children under that age'" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages

Findings: Parents from the panel survey strongly and clearly support a minimum age of 16. Around three quarters (76%) agree that social media platforms should have a minimum age of access of at least 16 and should not be accessible to any child under that age. This includes 47% who strongly agree and 30% who somewhat agree, with just 12% disagreeing. Parents from the public consultation are far more emphatic: 91% agree (82% strongly) and only 8% disagree.

Among parents from the panel survey, ethnic minority parents are significantly more likely than white parents to agree that an under-16 ban should apply (80% vs 75%), and female parents from the panel survey are significantly more likely than males to strongly agree (50% vs 44%). Differences by socio-economic group within the panel are smaller but consistent with the wider direction of parents from more affluent socio-economic groups being more likely to favour a ban. The public consultation sample shows a similar gender pattern: mothers agree at 93% while fathers do so to a lesser extent at 85%.

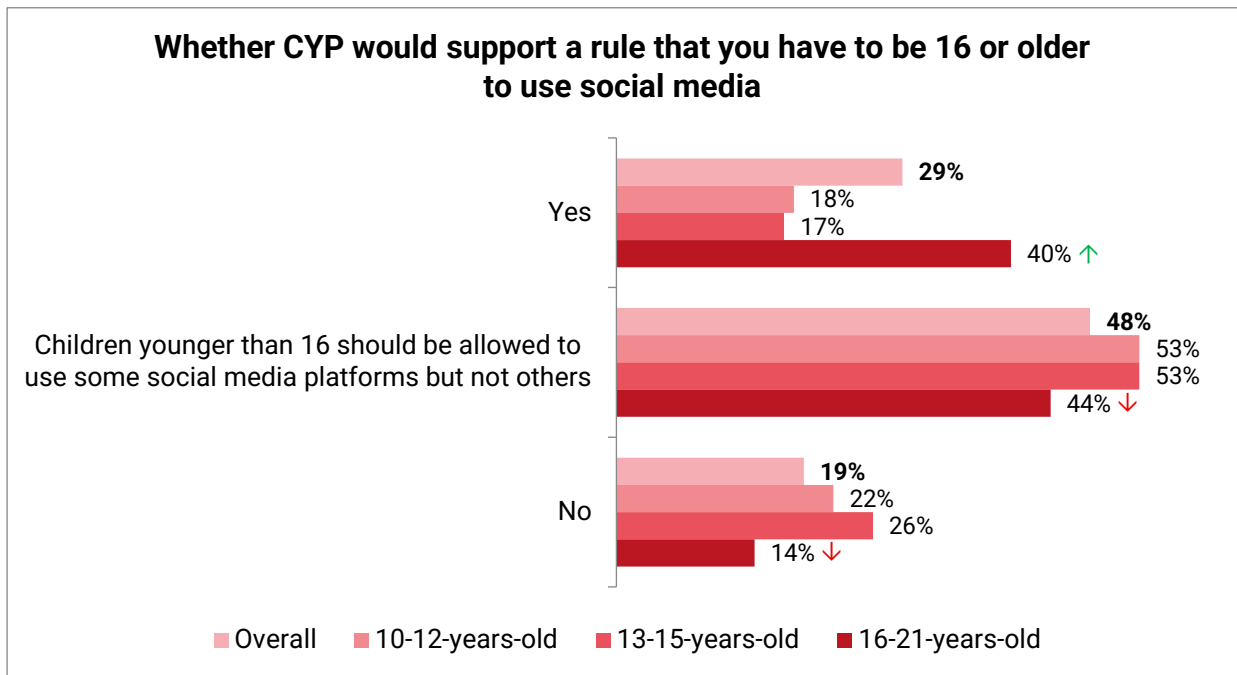


Figure 8: Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q16 = "Some people are talking about making a rule that you have to be 16 or older to use social media. Would you or would you not support this rule?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages

CYP support for a full ban is much lower than parents'. Among CYP from the panel survey, 29% support a ban for under 16s to use social media. Support for a ban rises significantly to 40% among 16-21s and stands at 18% among 10-12s and 17% among 13-15s. The most preferred option is however selective access: 48% say children younger than 16 should be allowed to use some platforms but not others, with this view being especially common among 10-12s and 13-15s (each 53%). A further 19% of CYP from the panel survey say children younger than 16 should be allowed to use all platforms. The public consultation results are broadly similar but with a more pro-access tilt: 19% of CYP from the public consultation support a full ban while 34% would allow under-16s access to all platforms, with 47% favouring selective access, almost identical to the panel figure on this middle option. Across both sources, male CYP are significantly more likely than female CYP to reject any restriction.

Section 4: Alternatives to a blanket ban

Summary: The headline support for a 16-and-over rule does not capture the full picture of parental preference. When parents from the panel survey are asked to rank policy approaches against each other, more targeted alternatives become more salient.

- Among CYP in both the panel and the public consultation surveys, the clearest preference is for selective access.
- The majority of parents from the panel favour a ban at age 16. However, when given the option for more targeted restrictions such as restrictions on specific features, or time based controls, parents are more likely to prefer targeted restrictions over a blanket ban.

Findings: Asked to rank up to three approaches in order of preference, parents from the panel survey most often place ‘a minimum age for the most risky functions’ first (44% rank it first; 78% include it in their top three), followed by restrictions on time spent such as curfews (31% first; 68% top three), and a blanket social media ban last (16% first, although 45% still include it in their top three). Parents from the public consultation invert this ranking, placing a blanket ban first by 63% with 83% including it in their top three. This divergence shows that where targeted and blanket measures are weighed against each other, parents from the panel survey are open to (and often prefer) more tailored approaches, whereas parents from the public consultation clearly prioritise a blanket ban.

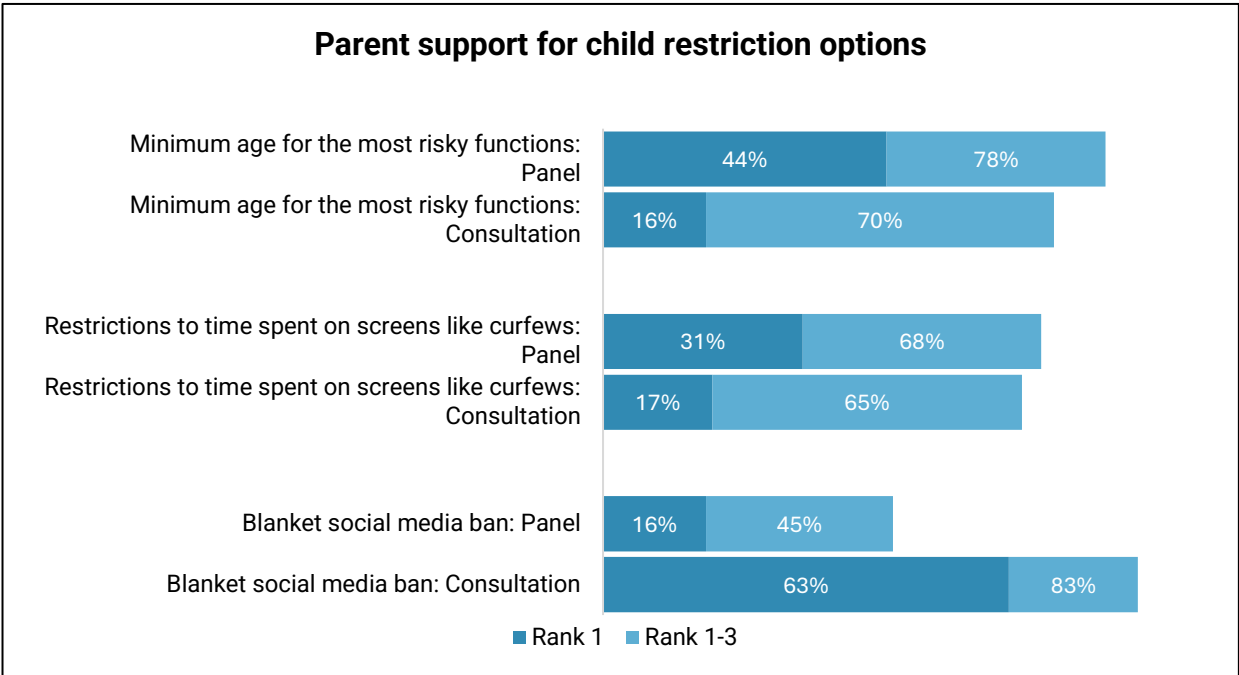


Figure 9: Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = All Parents from the panel survey| Q15b = Which of the following options, if any, would you support? (Rank 1-3 question)

Among parents from the panel survey, 54% say a legal minimum age of 16 should apply for social media platforms, while 41% express support for a minimum age lower than 16 (spread somewhat evenly from ages 13 to 15). Parents from the public consultation are notably more anchored at 16: 85% say the legal minimum should be 16, with only 11% open to a younger threshold. This suggests that, although opinion is focused on a 16+ threshold among parents from the panel,

there is some appetite for a more flexible age boundary, while parents from the public consultation are markedly less flexible on the age question.

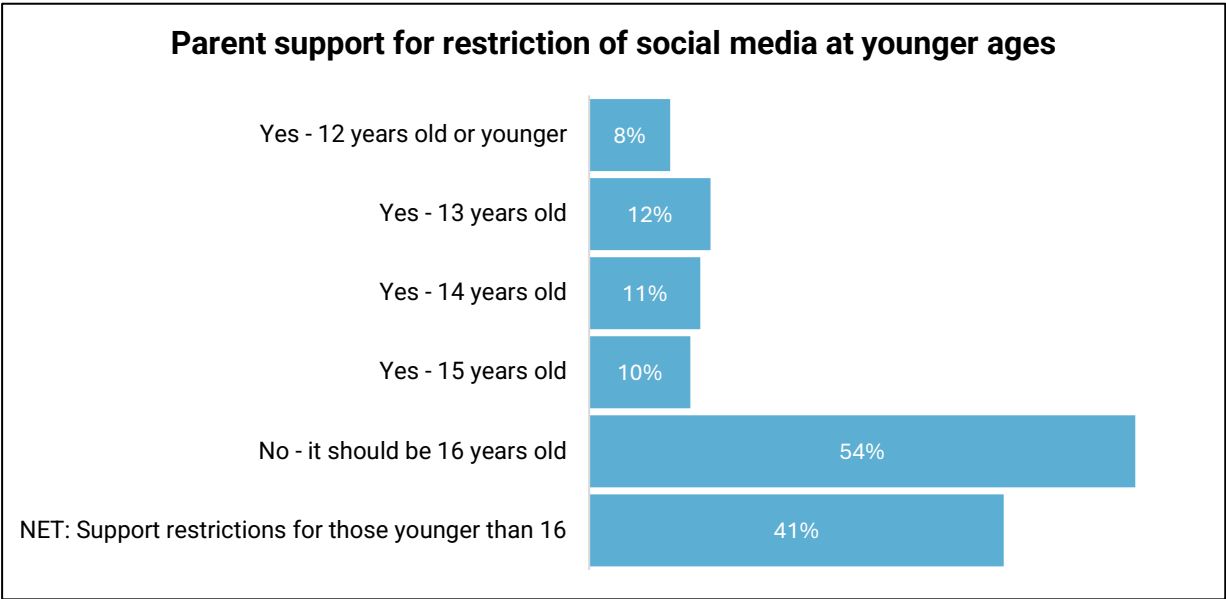


Figure 10: Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = All Parents from the panel survey | Q12 = Would you support it being a legal requirement for social media platforms to have a minimum age lower than 16? If so, what age should it be? (Single choice)

CYP in both surveys lean towards a more nuanced approach towards social media restrictions. Across both the panel (48%) and the public consultation sample (47%), the most common view among CYP is that under-16s should be allowed to use some platforms but not others. The panel data shows this view is especially common among younger CYP (53% of both 10-12s and 13-15s), suggesting that those most directly affected by a 16+ threshold are particularly likely to favour a more tailored approach.

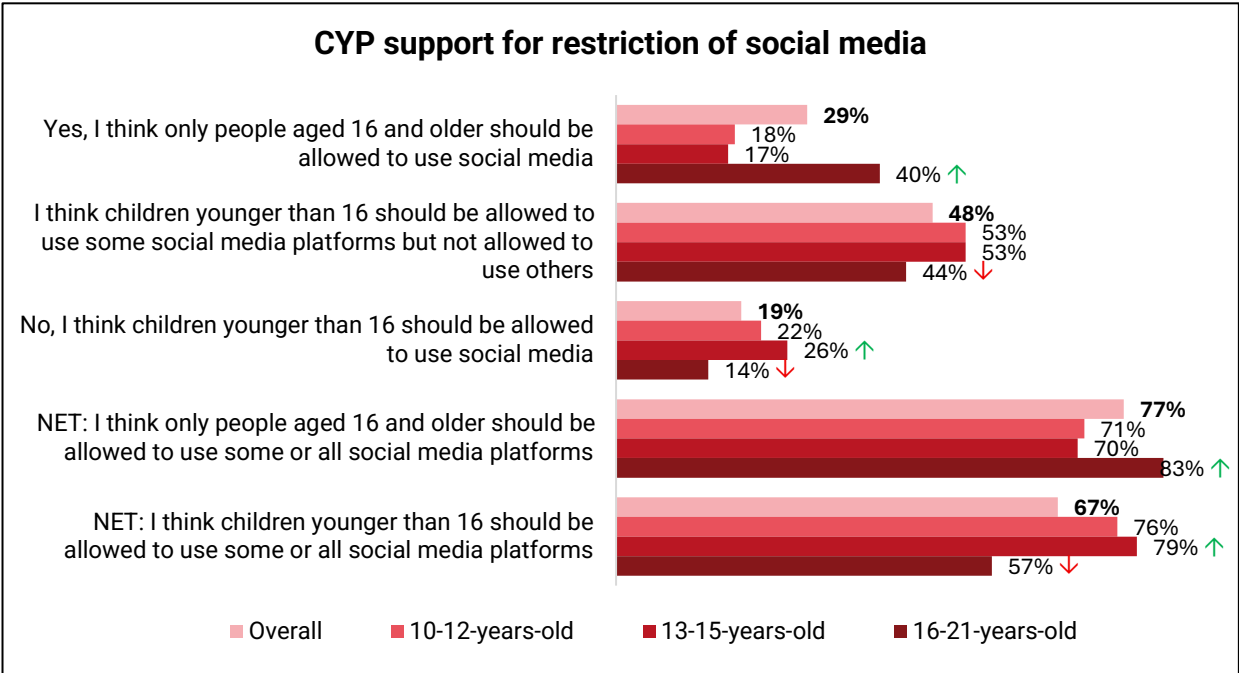


Figure 11: Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q16 = Some people are talking about making a rule that you have to be 16 or older to use social media. Would you or would you not support this rule? (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages

Section 5: Expected outcomes of a ban

Summary: Parents and CYP differ in what they expect a ban to deliver. In the panel data, CYP focus more on the social and practical consequences for children such as feelings of exclusion and how they would circumvent a ban. Conversely, parents are more likely to anticipate protective and reassurance or safety-associated benefits. Public consultation respondents on both sides show much higher absolute levels across most expected outcomes. This reflects the more emphatic character of consultation responses; the rank ordering, however, is broadly consistent between the panel and the public consultation, providing useful triangulation.

Findings: Among parents from the panel survey, the most expected outcomes of well-enforced age restrictions are protective: fewer children would be exposed to inappropriate or harmful content (48%), children would be safer online (45%) and parents would feel more confident that platforms are safe (40%). Practical benefits also feature, with 38% of parents from the panel survey saying restrictions would make it easier to monitor their child. The most common negative expectation among parents from the panel survey is circumvention, cited by 39%, while 28% expect children to feel excluded. Parents from the public consultation emphasise many of the same outcomes but at far higher absolute levels as 88% expect fewer children to be exposed to harmful content, 77% expect children to be safer, and 60% expect easier parental monitoring.

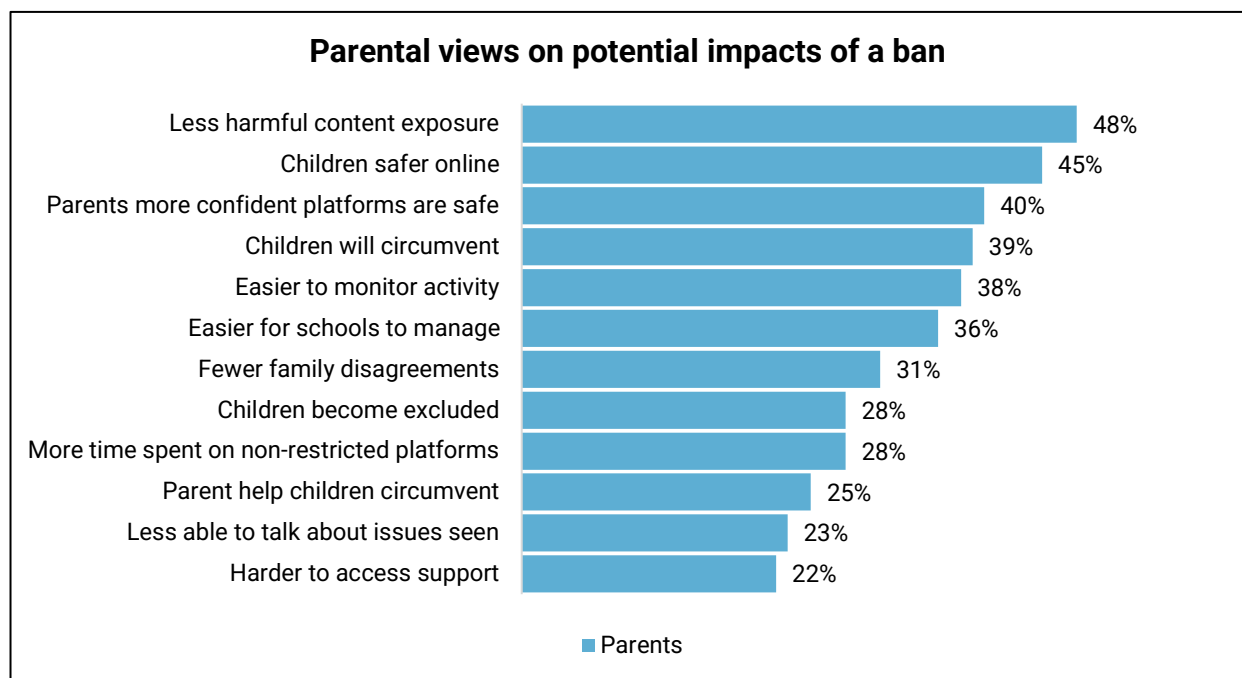


Figure 12: Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = All parents from the panel survey | Q13 = "Thinking about you and your family, what do you think the impacts of well enforced age restrictions on social media would be?" (Multiple choice)

Among CYP from the panel survey, the most commonly anticipated outcome of a ban is that some children would try to get around the rules (48%), followed by children feeling upset or angry (41%), feeling left out (39%) and finding new ways to talk online (35%). In the panel, older CYP (16-21) are significantly more likely than younger CYP to recognise potential safety benefits: 33% say children would be safer online and 37% say fewer would be exposed to inappropriate content, compared with 27% and 30% respectively among those aged 10-12. The CYP from the public consultation sample emphasises the same items at much higher percentages (84% circumvent; 75% upset or angry; 72% left out), but the rank order closely tracks the panel as circumvention

and social exclusion lead in both sources. The most likely reading of the CYP from the public consultation intensity is that consultation respondents are simultaneously more motivated to oppose a ban and more inclined to mark multiple options as expected outcomes.

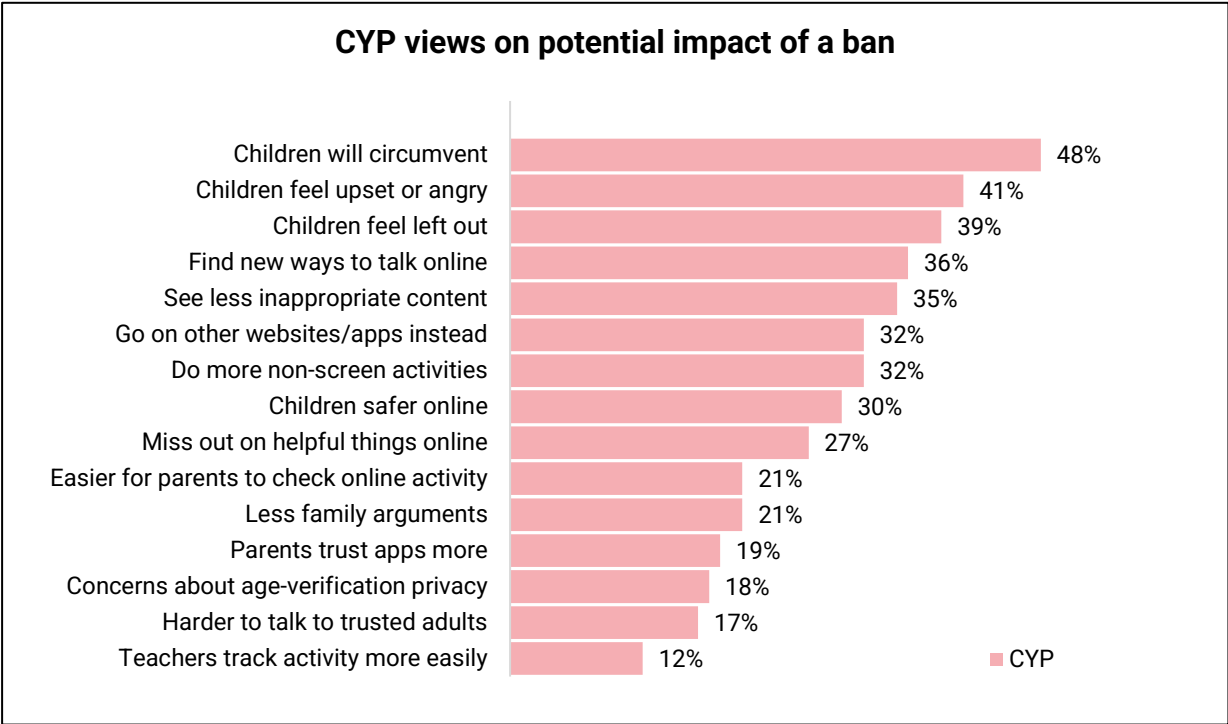


Figure 13: Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q17 = "If social media apps made it so children could only use them once they were 16 or older, what, if anything, do you think would happen?" (Multiple choice)

Section 6: Feature-level restrictions

Summary: In contrast to the divided picture on a blanket ban, parents from the panel survey and CYP from the panel survey are closely aligned on feature-level restrictions, and the public consultation data broadly reinforces this picture. Around three quarters of both groups in the panel agree that restricting specific features would make children’s online experience safer, and there is broad consensus on which features matter most as contact with unknown users tops the list across both audiences along with sharing of sensitive content or sharing other personal information.

Findings: Around three quarters of parents from the panel survey (75%) and CYP from the panel survey (76%) agree that restricting certain features would make social media safer for children. Parents from the public consultation are even more emphatic, with 88% agreeing (72% strongly). CYP from the public consultation are less likely to agree at 62% agreement, again reflecting the more pro-access orientation of that self-selecting sample, but the majority remain supportive. Within the panel, agreement among parents is significantly higher in ABC1 than C2DE households (79% vs 69%), and among CYP it is highest among 16-21s (80% agree, vs 70% of 13-15s and 71% of 10-12s).

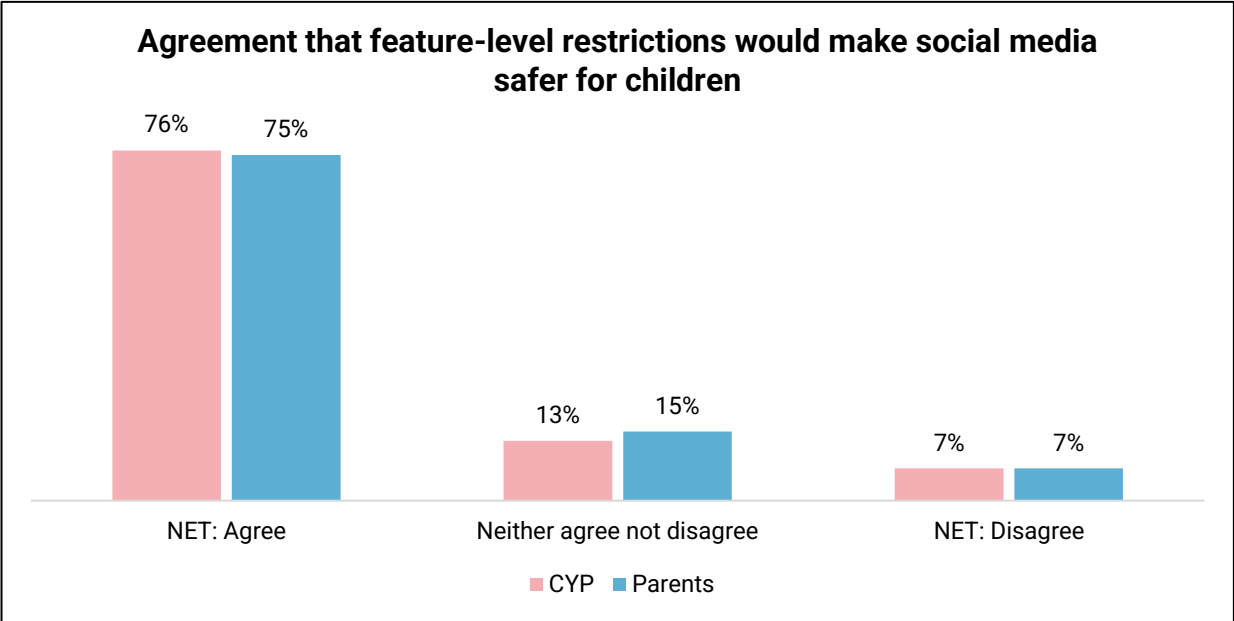


Figure 14: Sample size: All Parents (n = 5,010); CYP (n = 9,017) from the panel survey | Base = All parents; All CYP | Q16 (parents) = "To what extent do you agree or disagree that restricting children's access to these features/functionality, would provide for a safer online experience for children?" (Single choice) | Q16b (CYP) = "Do you agree or disagree that limiting access to these features for children under 16 would make being on social media safer for children?" (Single choice)

The features attracting most concern from parents are connecting or talking to strangers (64% on the panel; 93% in the public consultation), the ability to send nude images or videos (57% panel; 90% public consultation), sharing personal information (57% panel; 89% public consultation) and location sharing (50% panel; 81% public consultation). In the panel, mothers are significantly more concerned than fathers about connecting or talking to strangers (68% vs 60%), location-sharing (55% vs 45%), disappearing content (46% vs 37%) and AI-generated content (35% vs 28%). Parents from the public consultation identify the same set of features but

at consistently higher absolute levels, again reflecting the more restriction-favouring tilt of that sample.

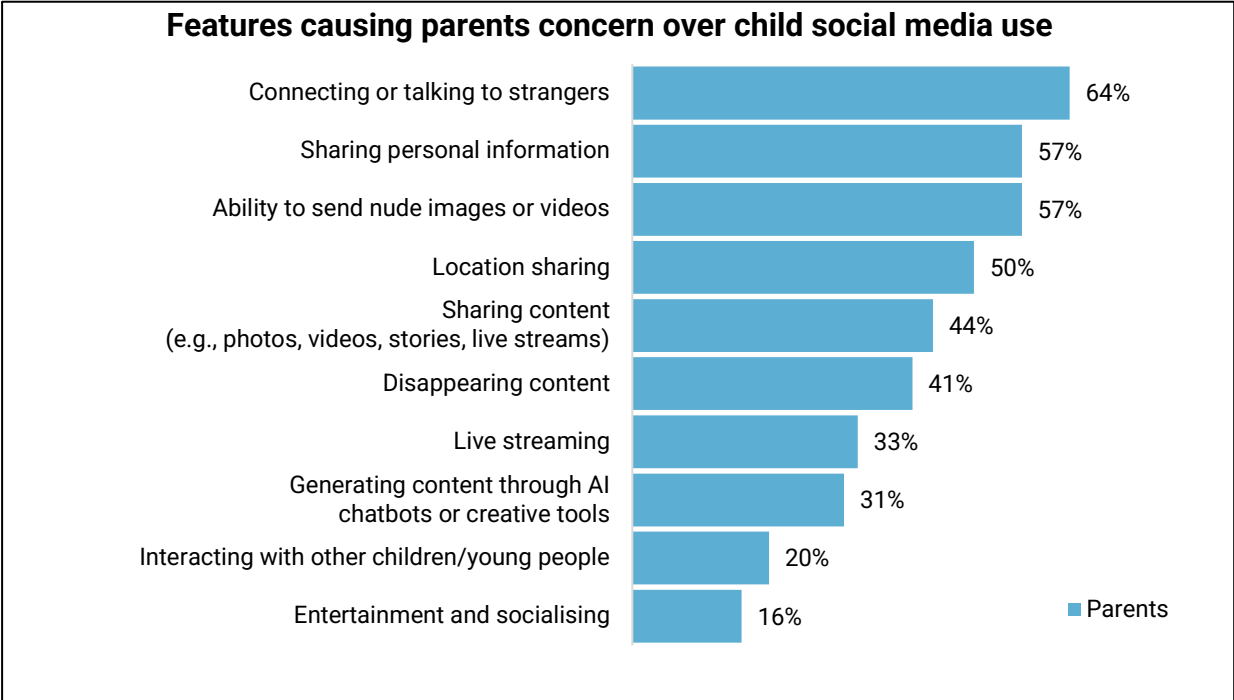


Figure 15: Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = All parents from the panel survey | Q14 = "Which, if any, of the following features/functions cause you to worry about your children using social media?" (Multiple choice)

CYP from the panel survey most often want to block contact with strangers (76%) and location sharing (69%) for under-16s; the ability to send nude images or videos was shown only to CYP aged 16-21 and is selected by 87% of that age group. The net share of CYP from the panel survey who would block at least one feature is 94%. CYP from the public consultation focus particularly on the ability to send nude images or videos (87% among 16-21s) and location sharing (60%), with talking to strangers lower than in the panel data (49%). Overall, the panel and public consultation evidence together indicate strong, cross-audience support for feature-level restrictions where the safeguarding rationale is immediate and easily understood by both audiences.

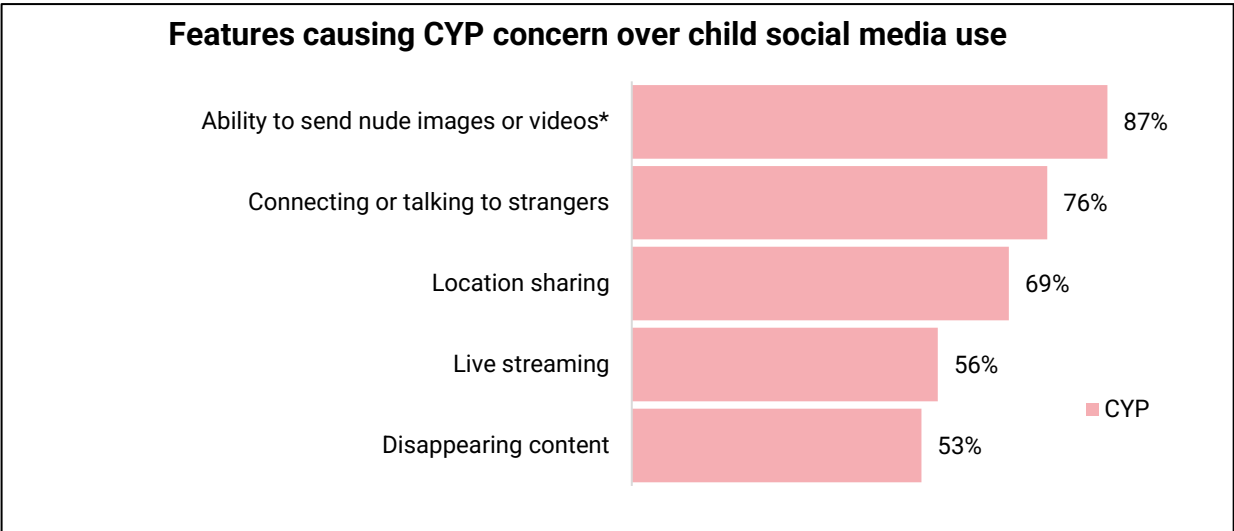


Figure 16: Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q19 = "Social media platforms let people do the below things. Which, if any, of these things should be blocked for people under 16?" (Multiple choice)

* Option only shown to CYP aged 16-21.

Section 7: Persuasive design and time-based controls

Summary: Both parents and CYP from the panel survey show strong and broadly aligned support for restricting the platform features that keep children engaged on social media, and for introducing time-based limits on use. Respondents from the public consultation reinforce this picture on the parent side and soften it on the CYP side. Parents in both the panel survey and public consultation tend to emphasise algorithmic and automated design as the most persuasive features, while CYP cite a broader range of mechanisms that keep them engaged such as endless scrolling and getting likes or comments. Support for daily limits and overnight restrictions is consistently high across all audience group.

Findings: Almost all CYP from the panel survey (94%) identify at least one feature they see as making children want to keep using social media. Endless scrolling (42%) and getting likes or comments on posts (41%) are the most commonly cited in the panel, followed by recommended content suggestions (36%), conversation streaks (35%), autoplay videos (32%) and notifications (30%). CYP from the public consultation show a similar order with somewhat higher levels.

Parents from the panel survey, when asked to rank the most persuasive features, place greater emphasis on algorithmic personalisation: in the panel, content recommendation algorithms appear in the top three rankings of 63% of parents, followed by autoplay (56%) and infinite scrolling (54%); affirmation features (e.g., likes and comments) and notifications are each selected by 40% of parents from the panel survey in their top-three rankings. Parents from the public consultation push the same items but with higher recognition (algorithms 80%, infinite scrolling 73%, autoplay 66%), and notifications notably lower (27%), suggesting that consultation respondents are particularly focused on algorithmic design as a driver of extended use.

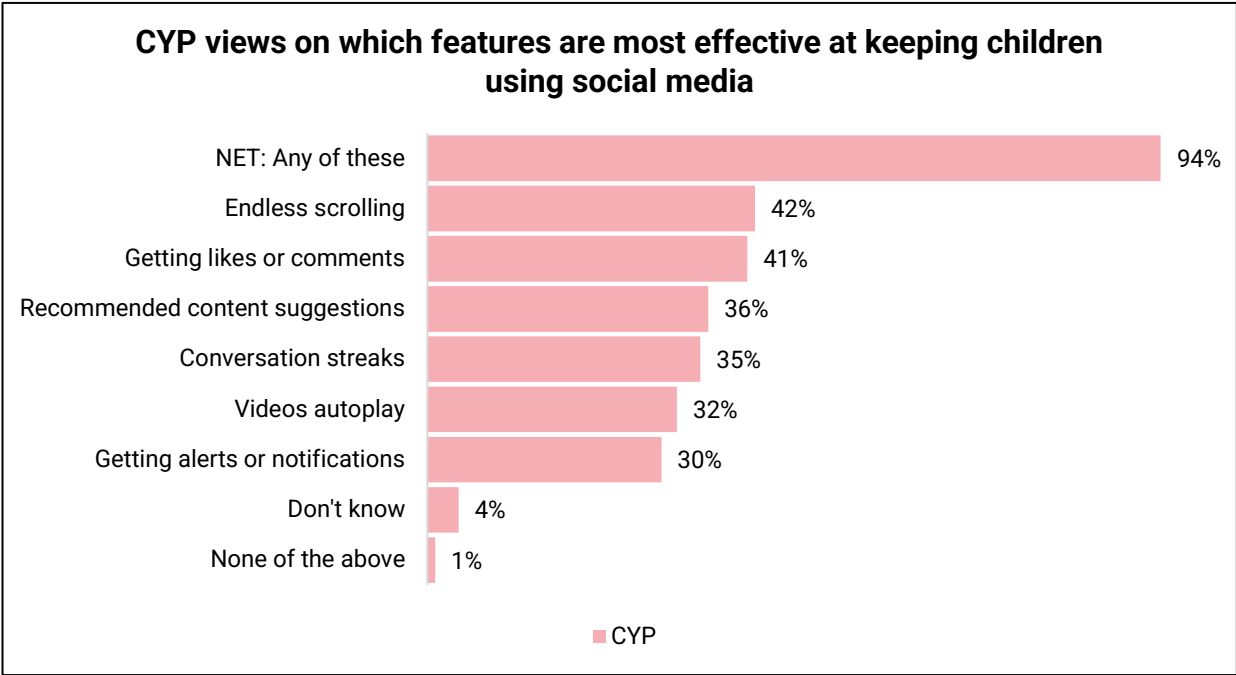


Figure 17: Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q18 = "Some platforms and websites have features that can make you want to keep using them for longer. Which, if any, of the things below do you think make children want to keep using social media?" (Multiple choice)

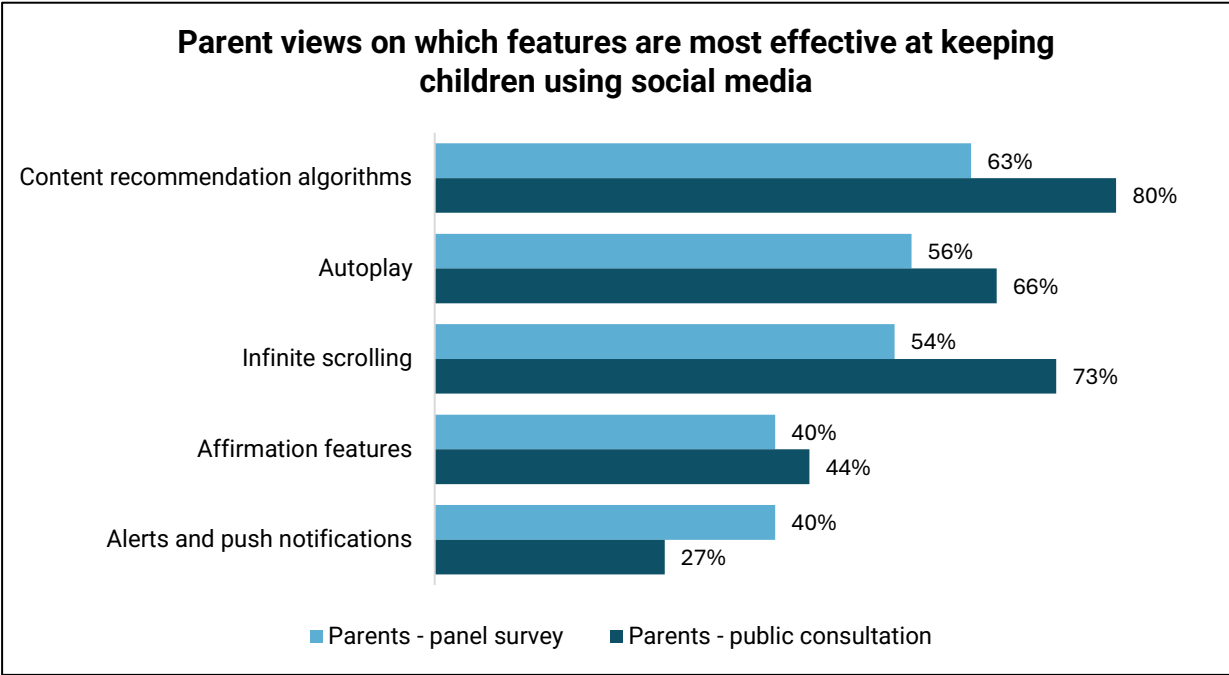


Figure 18: Parents from the panel survey n = 5,010; Parents from public consultation n = 39,116 | Base = Parents | Q18 = "The following platform design features are sometimes known as 'persuasive', meaning they may encourage children to stay online for longer. From the following list, please select and rank the three features you think are most 'persuasive' to children" (Rank 1-3 question)

Support for time-based controls is high across both groups and both sources. Among parents from the panel survey, 71% support daily app-level time limits, 70% support overnight access restrictions, and 89% support at least one of these. Parents from the public consultation are similarly supportive for either of these restrictions (86%), with high agreement on both options separately (83% each). CYP from the panel survey also support time-based measures strongly: 62% support daily limits, 60% overnight restrictions and 84% support at least one. CYP from the public consultation are softer (48% daily, 54% overnight, 64% at least one), again consistent with their more pro-access tilt. Within the panel, CYP support for time-based controls rises significantly with age; 87% of CYP from the panel survey aged 16-21 back at least one of these measures, compared with 82% of 10-12s and 80% of 13-15s, likely reflecting older CYP’s lived experience of managing later-night device use as shown in figure 1.

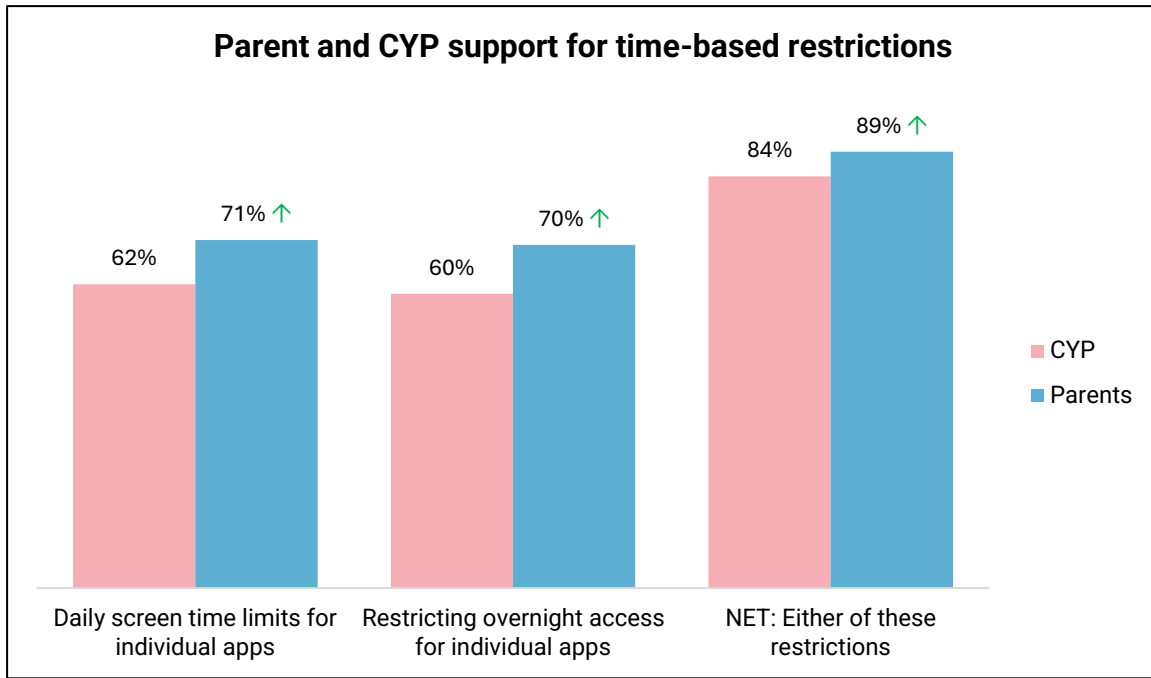


Figure 19: Sample sizes: Parents (n = 5,010); CYP (n = 9,017) | Base = All respondents from the panel survey | Q21 = "Here are some ways that apps and websites could be limited for children. Would you or would you not support any of these?" (Multiple choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different between parents and CYP

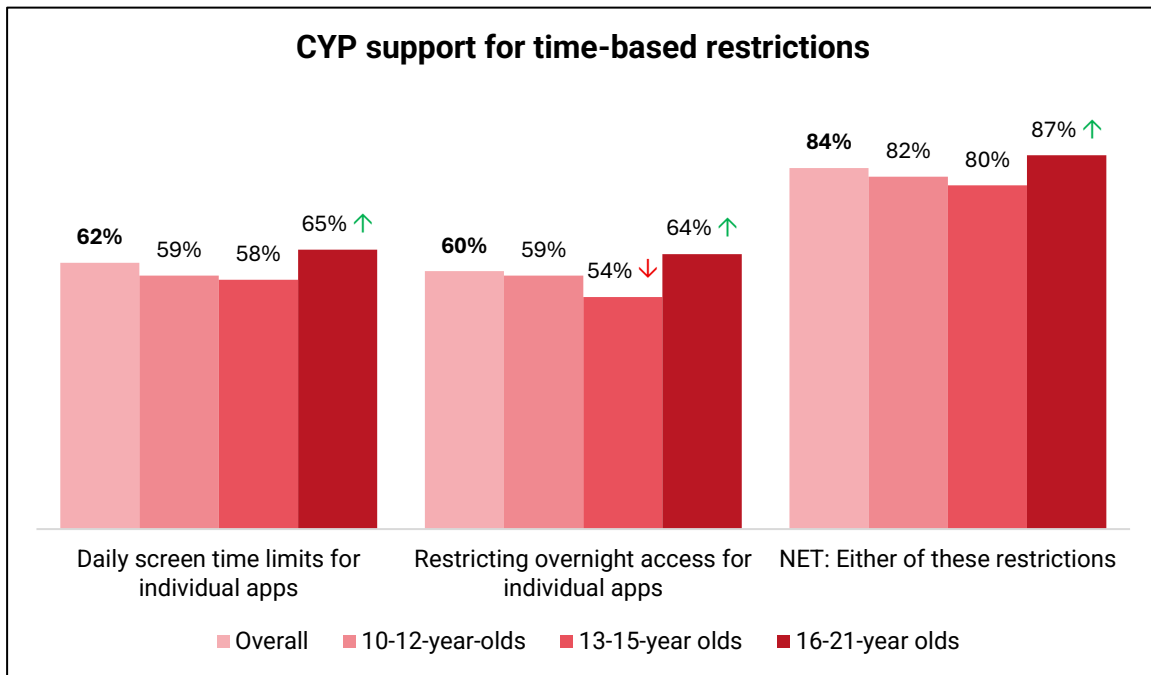


Figure 20: Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q21 = "Here are some ways that apps and websites could be limited for children. Would you or would you not support any of these?" (Multiple choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages

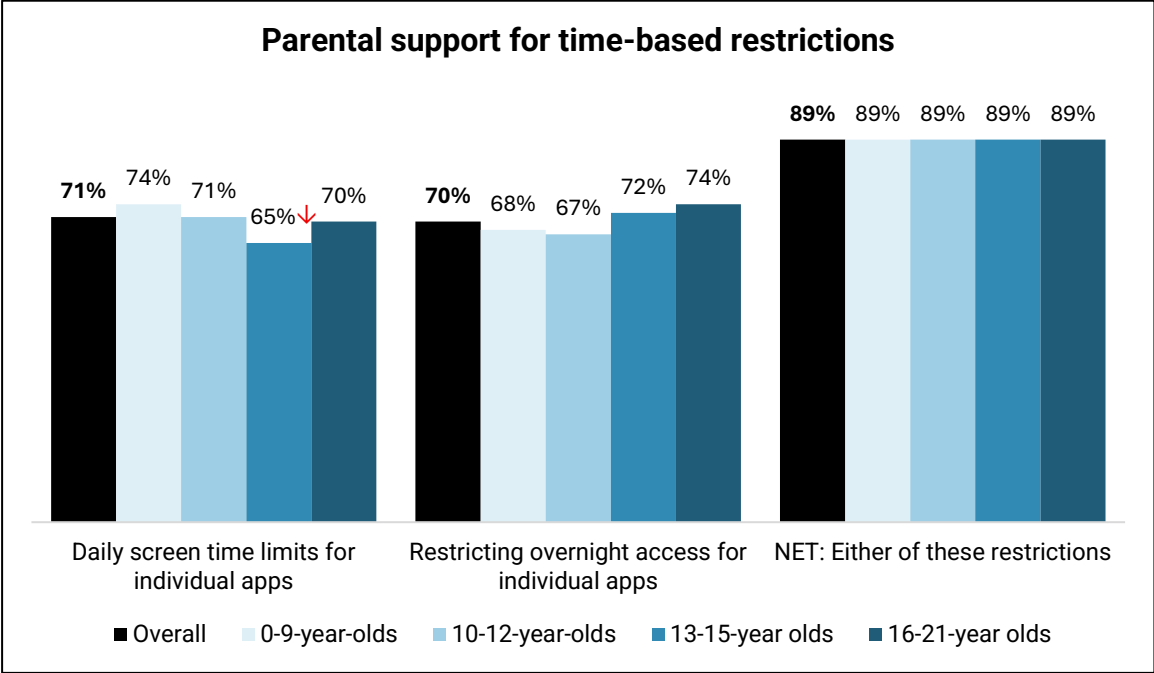


Figure 21: Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = Parents from the panel survey | Q21 = "Here are some ways that apps and websites could be limited for children. Would you or would you not support any of these?" (Multiple choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑ ↓ Significantly different from all ages

Section 8: AI chatbots – benefits, risks and restrictions

Summary: AI chatbots are an emerging area of policy attention in their own right. Across the questions tested, parents from the panel survey and CYP from the panel survey aged 16-21 (who were asked these questions on the CYP side) show a notable degree of convergence: both see AI’s main value as functional and educational, both rank relationship-simulation features as the leading risks, and both back strong restrictions including minimum age requirements and feature-level rules. Public consultation respondents reinforce these findings on the parent side, while CYP from the public consultation are somewhat less supportive of restrictions, in line with their wider pro-access orientation.

Findings: Asked to rank the most important benefits of AI chatbots for children, parents from the panel survey place ‘finding answers quickly’ first (52% rank top three), followed by help with homework or learning (47%), creativity (34%), language practice (24%) and support for everyday questions (23%). The lowest-ranked benefit in the panel is ‘having someone to talk to when friends or adults aren’t around’, cited by only 6% of parents. CYP from the panel survey aged 16-21 select a similar functional set as good things about AI chatbots: homework help (49%), finding answers quickly (46%), making learning fun (41%) and creativity (41%), and only 12% say they see no benefits at all. CYP from the panel survey rate companionship-related benefits more highly than parents from the panel survey do (22% of 16-21s select ‘someone to talk to when friends or adults aren’t around’), although this remains a lower-tier benefit overall.

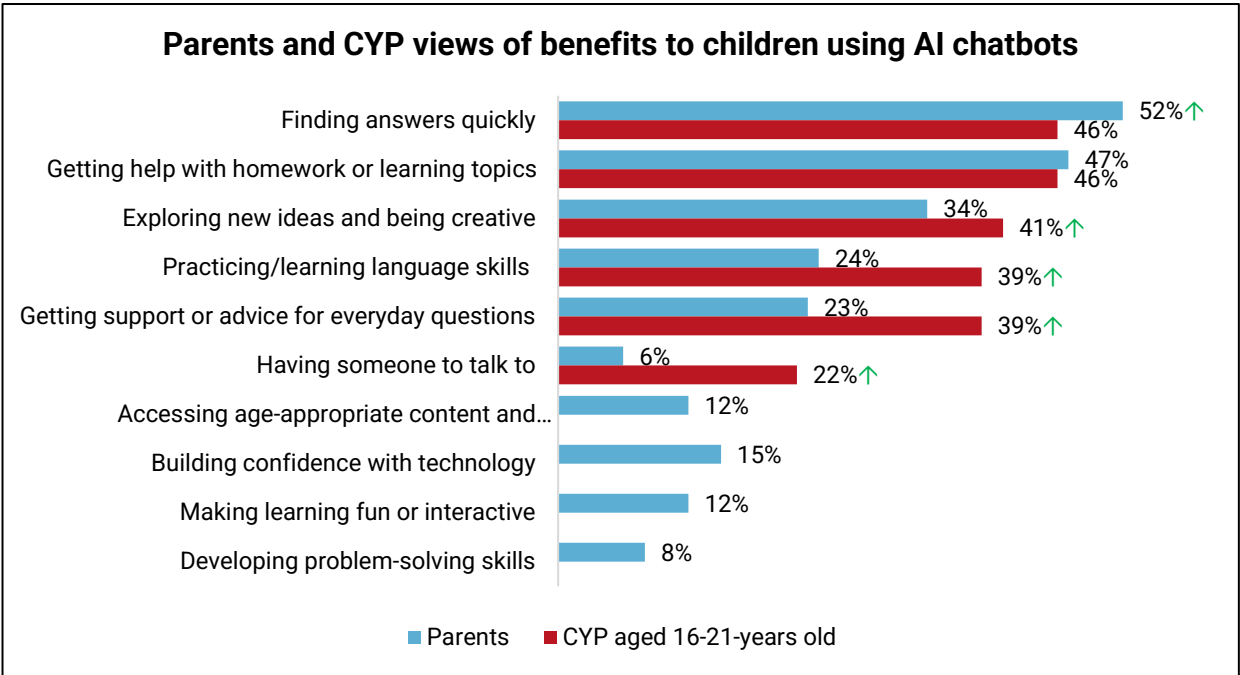


Figure 22: Parents n = 5,010; CYP aged 16-21 n = 4,550 | Base = Respondents from the panel survey | Q26 = "What do you think are the benefits of children using AI chatbots?" (Rank 1-3 question)

Asked to rank the riskiest AI chatbot features, parents from the panel survey place chatbots offering romantic relationships first (46% top three), followed by chatbots that appear to have real thoughts or feelings (36%) and chatbots offering friendship (34%). Other notable risks in the panel include the generation of harmful, factually incorrect or biased content (each 14-18% in top three). CYP from the panel survey aged 16-21 align closely on the leading risk: 52% identify a chatbot acting like a boyfriend or girlfriend as a risky feature, with creating harmful content

(49%) and chatbots that give wrong but confident answers (47%) close behind. In the panel, female CYP are significantly more likely than male CYP to flag almost every risk tested, mirroring the wider pattern of female CYP being more attuned to risk online.

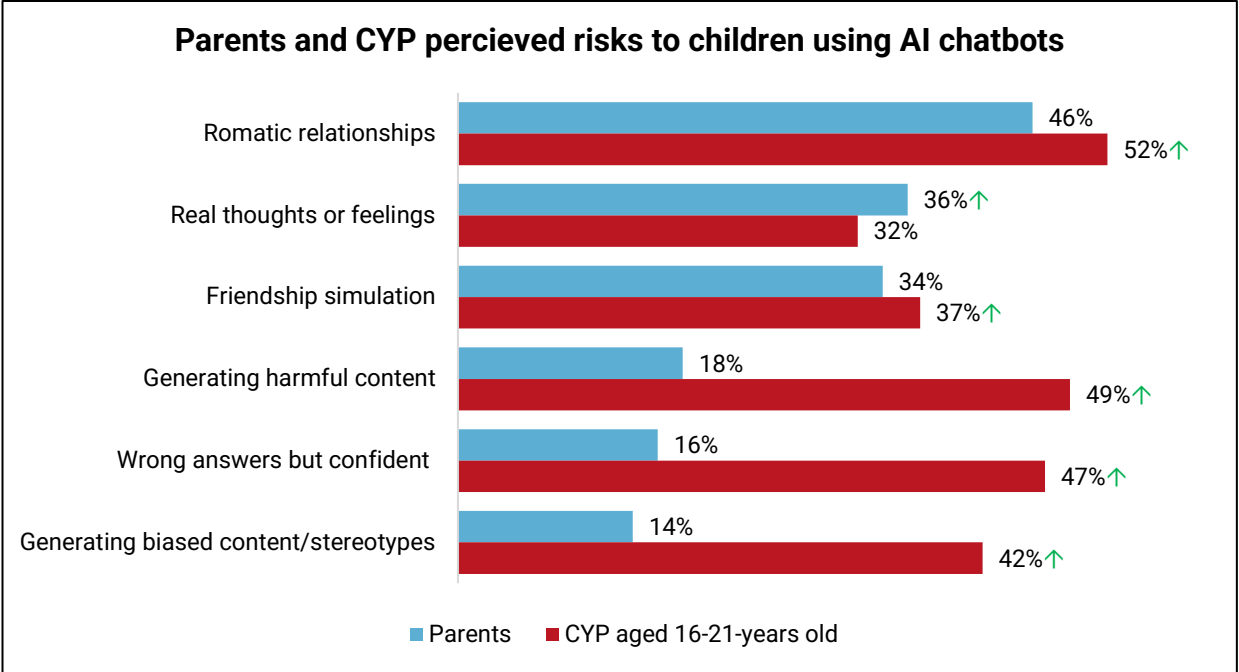


Figure 23: Parents n = 5,010; CYP aged 16-21 n = 4,550 | Base = Respondents from the panel survey | Q27 = "Which AI chatbot features do you think are most risky for children?" (Rank 1-3 question)

Both parents from the panel survey and CYP from the panel survey aged 16-21 show strong support for AI-specific restrictions. Among parents from the panel survey, 84% agree that AI chatbots should have minimum age requirements (54% strongly agree) and 85% agree they should have restricted access to certain features and functionalities (54% strongly agree). Parents from the public consultation are more emphatic again (94% and 95% respectively). CYP from the panel survey aged 16-21 are also strongly supportive: 83% agree with minimum age requirements and 90% agree with feature restrictions. CYP from the public consultation aged 16-21 are softer (66% and 74%), but support remains a clear majority. Across parents from the panel and public consultation, the items most often identified as warranting restriction are those that give harmful, inappropriate or biased content (48%), those that mimic real relationships (45% panel), lack parental controls (45% panel), allow children to share personal information (43% panel) or permit private and unmonitored conversations (43% panel), followed by chatbots that allow children to spend money (39% panel) and those that generate or share images, videos or audio (34% panel). CYP from the panel survey aged 16-21 prioritise the same items, with restrictions on harmful or incorrect content (55%), relationship-mimicking (52%) and personal-information sharing (52%) leading the list.

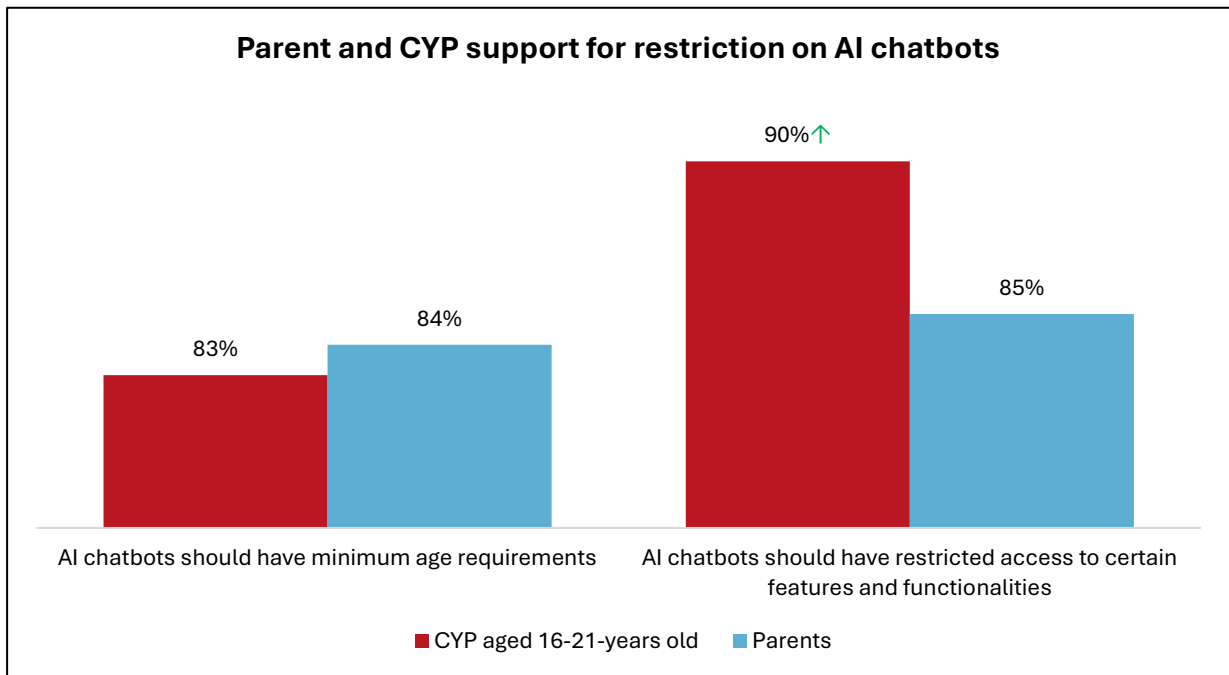


Figure 24: Parents n = 5,010; CYP aged 16-21 n = 4,550 | Base = Respondents from the panel survey | Q27 = " Do you agree or disagree that ...? " (Single choice)

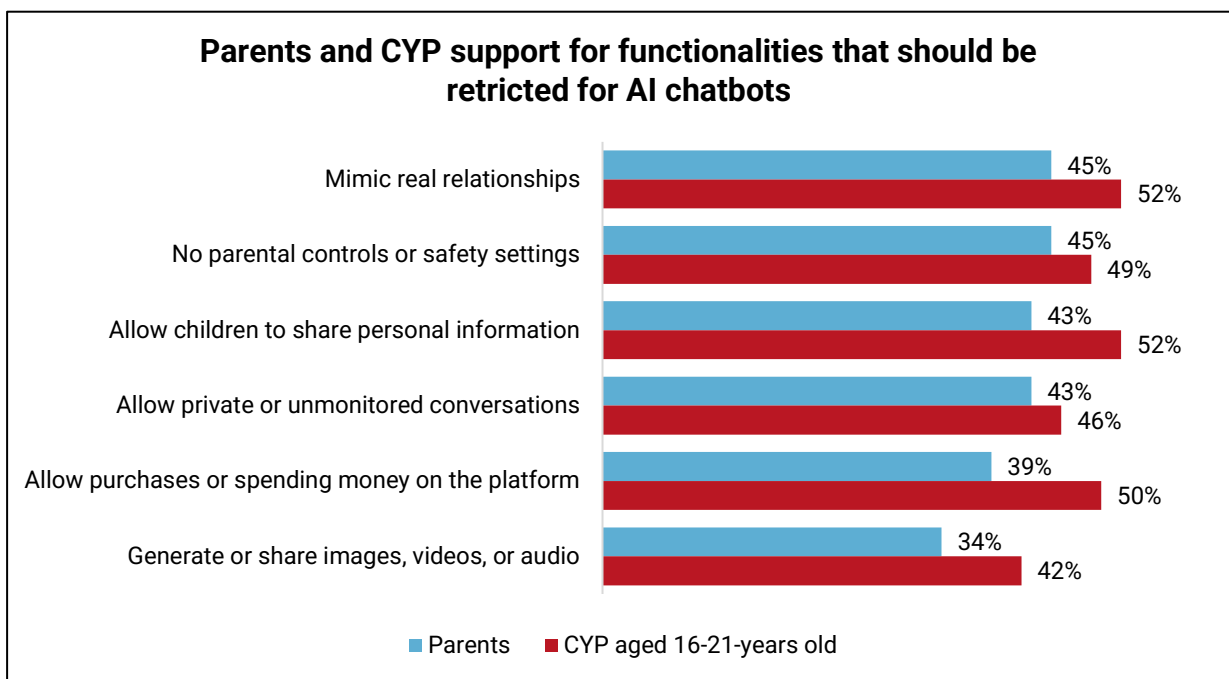


Figure 25: Parents n = 5,010; CYP aged 16-21 n = 4,550 | Base = Respondents from the panel survey | Q28 = " Which functionalities of AI chatbots do you think restrictions should apply to?" (Multiple choice)

Section 9: Age assurance – support and potential outcomes

Summary: Findings from both the panel surveys and public consultation show that support for age assurance is strong among parents, while views among CYP aged 16-21 (age assurance questions were only asked to this age group) are more contested. Parents from both the panel survey and the public consultation are strongly supportive of adults completing age checks if this would help keep children safer online. Among CYP aged 16-21, however, the picture is less settled. While the panel survey suggests many think age checks would help keep children safer online, respondents to the public consultation are more sceptical, and more likely to cite potential negative consequences such as children having to share personal information like ID, and children feeling left out.

Findings: Parents from the panel survey show a high level of support for age assurance in principle when it is framed around child safety. Four in five (81%) agree that adults should complete age checks more often if it means children are safer online, while only 8% disagree. The public consultation points in the same direction: 81% of parents in the consultation agree overall, including 67% who strongly agree. This suggests that support for stronger age checks is robust across both the representative panel and the self-selecting public consultation when the measure is presented as part of a broader effort to protect children online.

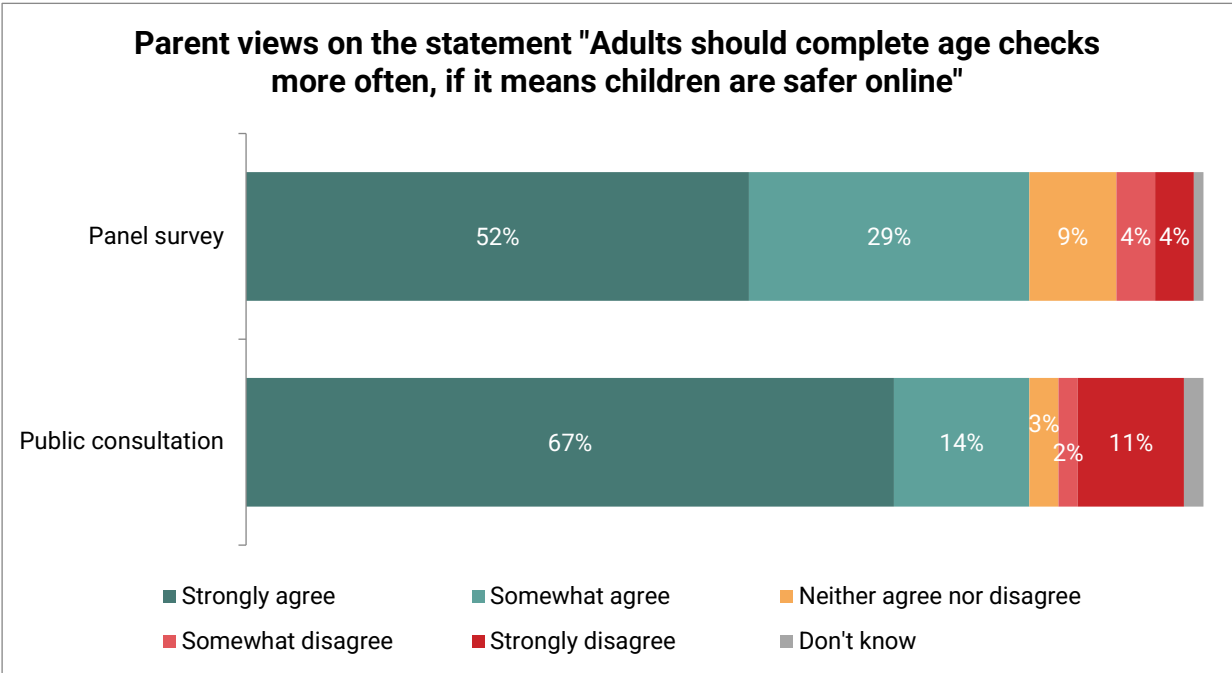


Figure 26: Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 5,010); Public consultation (n = 39,116) | Base = All parents | Q34 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement 'Adults should complete age checks more often, if it means children are safer online' (Single choice)

Among CYP aged 16-21, the findings point to a more contested picture. In the panel survey, two thirds (66%) say that online companies checking people’s ages would help keep them safer online, compared with 19% who say it would not help. By contrast, in the CYP public consultation, respondents are more likely to be negative than positive: 27% say age checks would help keep them safer online, while 62% say they would not. Rather than simply indicating different levels

of concern, this may reflect that CYP in the public consultation are less persuaded by the overall case for age assurance.

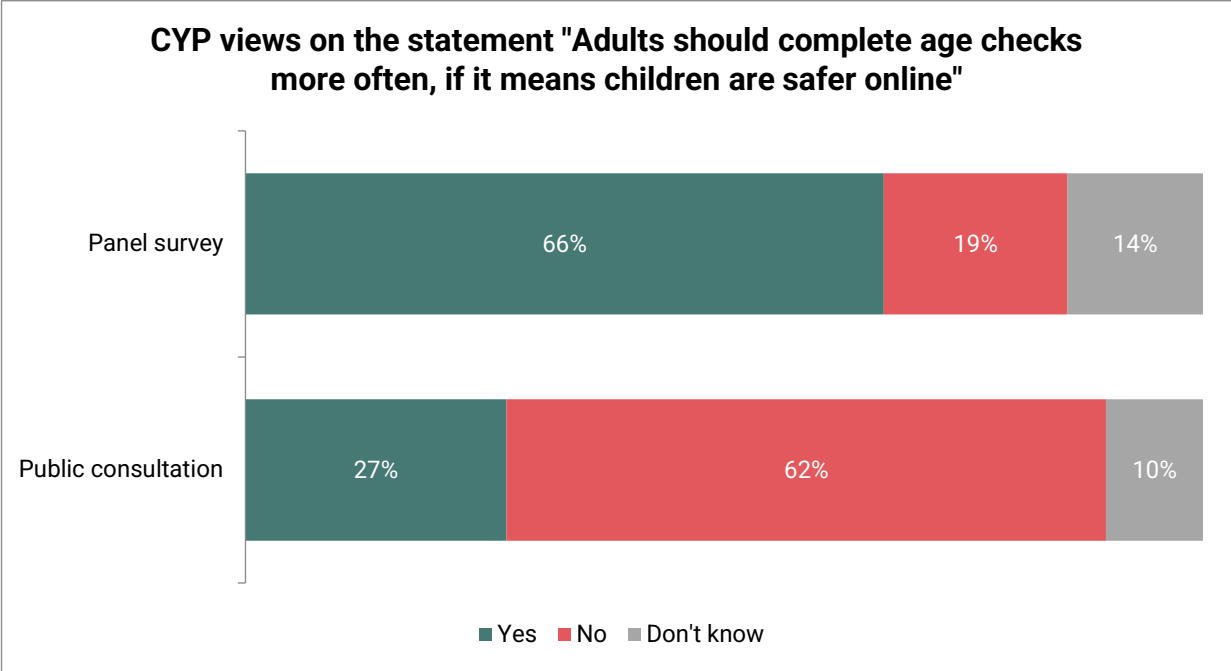


Figure 27: Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 4,981); Public consultation (n = 3,687) | Base = All CYP aged 16-21 | Q29 = Do you think online companies checking people's ages would help keep you safer online? (Single choice)

This difference is also reflected in how CYP describe the likely consequences of age assurance. When CYP aged 16-21 from the panel survey are asked what they think would happen if websites and apps had to check how old users are before they can use them, they most often point to protective outcomes. Around half say children would be less likely to see stuff meant for older people (48%) and that children could be safer online (47%), while four in ten (40%) think it would make it easier for parents to control what websites or apps their child can use. Many also think age checks could affect wider behaviours, with 36% saying children would spend less time online and 35% saying they might spend more time with family or doing things away from screens as shown in figure 28. Taken together, this suggests that panel respondents tend to understand age assurance primarily through its intended protective effects.

The children’s public consultation paints a more cautious picture of the likely consequences. The most common response, selected by 78%, is that some children might have to share private information like their ID. Almost two thirds (63%) say some children might feel left out if they cannot use certain websites or apps, and just over half say children could miss out on useful things or help online (53%). Fewer identify positive outcomes: 46% say children would be less likely to see stuff meant for older people, 36% say children might need help to understand the age checks and how to stay safe, 34% say children could be safer online, and 32% say it would be easier for parents to control what websites or apps their child can use. This suggests that CYP in the public consultation are focused less on the intended protective logic of age assurance and more on its practical consequences, particularly where it is associated with privacy loss, exclusion or reduced access to beneficial online spaces.

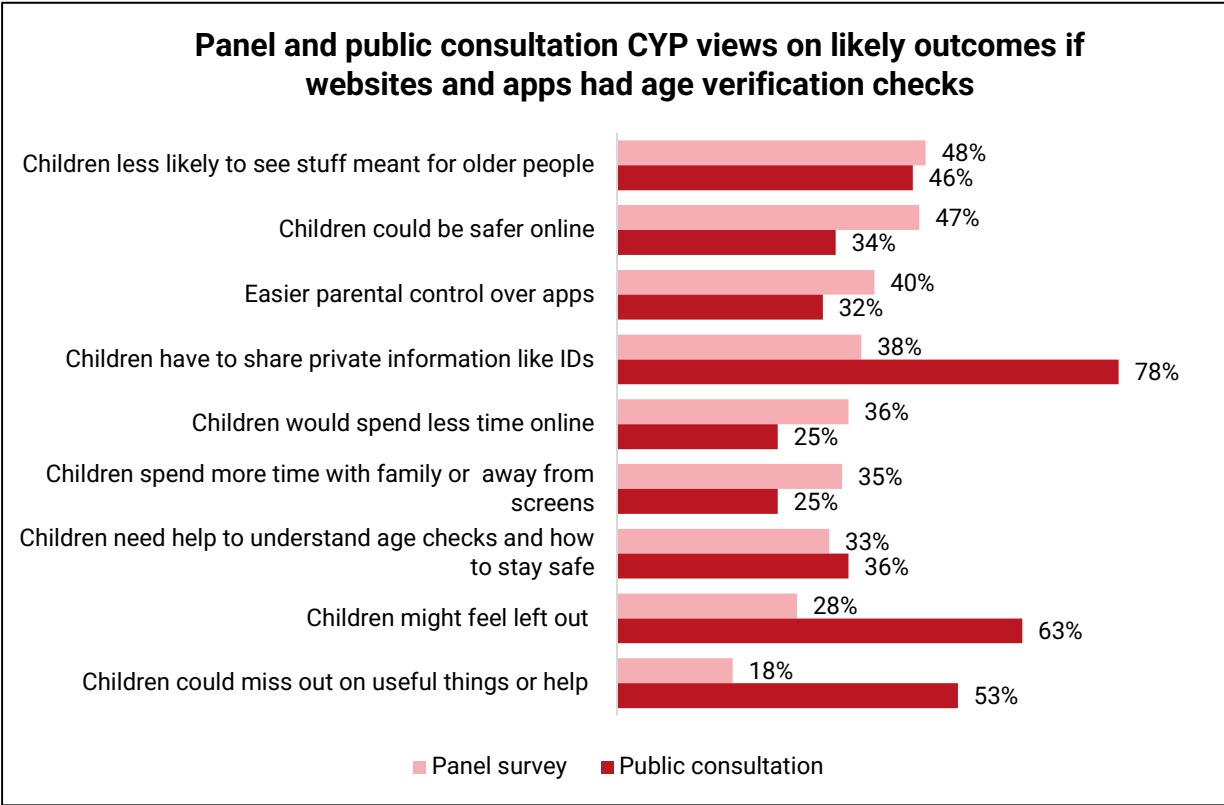


Figure 28: Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 4,981); Public consultation (n = 3,687) | Base = All CYP aged 16-21 | Q29 = If websites and apps had to check how old you are before you can use them, what do you think would happen to children? (Multi choice)

Overall, findings from both the panel surveys and the public consultation suggest that age assurance is viewed by parents as a potentially important part of wider efforts to make the internet safer for children. Among CYP, however, support appears more conditional. While the panel survey indicates that many recognise the intended safety benefits of age checks, the public consultation suggests that some CYP are less convinced that these measures would make children safer overall, particularly where they are associated with sharing personal information, exclusion, or barriers to useful content and support. Taken together, this suggests that the success of any age assurance approach may depend not only on whether it is effective, but also on whether children and young people see it as fair, proportionate and workable in practice.

Conclusions

The survey data points to broad support for stronger action to improve children’s safety online, but a more mixed picture on the form that action should take. Social media is deeply embedded in CYP’s everyday lives, and both parents and CYP recognise that it brings real benefits as well as risks. The debate captured in these findings is therefore not simply about whether intervention is needed, but about which forms of intervention are seen as most appropriate, proportionate and effective.

The clearest divide in the evidence is between parents and CYP on the question of a blanket under-16 social media ban. Parents in the panel survey show a clear appetite for a 16+ rule, and this appetite is stronger still among parents responding through the public consultation route. CYP, by contrast, are much less likely to support a full ban, and in both the panel and the public consultation the most widely held CYP view is that under-16s should be allowed access to some platforms but not others. This points to a clear difference in how the two audiences understand the balance between protection and access.

At the same time, the findings also show that blanket bans are only one part of the wider policy picture. Across both parents and CYP, there is much broader alignment on targeted interventions, including feature-level restrictions, persuasive-design controls and time-based limits. These measures appear to offer a more widely shared basis for action across audiences, even where views on a full ban remain divided. When given the option to choose between a blanket ban, or more targeted restrictions such as on specific features, or setting time limits, parents tend to prefer targeted restrictions. For CYP, targeted controls are clearly closer to the preferred model of intervention.

The findings also underline that the impacts of social media are not experienced evenly. In the panel evidence, female CYP and disabled CYP are more likely to report negative experiences and more likely to view social media negatively overall. This suggests that children’s online experiences vary meaningfully across groups, and that the case for intervention is shaped not only by average attitudes, but also by the fact that some groups appear more exposed to harm than others.

On AI chatbots, the evidence sits consistently within this wider story rather than apart from it. Parents and older CYP broadly converge in seeing the main benefits of AI as practical and educational, while identifying the greatest risks in features that mimic relationships, encourage dependency, or expose children to harmful, biased or misleading content. As with social media more broadly, support is strongest for safeguards that are targeted at particular risks and features. AI therefore emerges not as a separate debate, but as part of a wider set of questions about how children’s digital environments should be made safer.

Bringing the panel and public consultation evidence together adds an important layer of interpretation. The panel surveys provide the representative picture of how parents and CYP view these issues. The public consultation, while self-selecting, helps to show the strength and direction of opinion among those most motivated to respond. In this study, that means a more strongly restriction-favouring parent consultation sample and a somewhat more pro-access CYP consultation sample. The value of the consultation evidence therefore lies not in replacing the panel findings, but in helping to show where opinion is most intensely held, often related to lived experience.

Through the additional strands of research yet to be incorporated into reporting, Savanta has explored key issues around gender differences and emerging evidence on the efficacy of policy changes internationally among other topics through an evidence assessment. Savanta has also conducted survey engagement with teachers and youth practitioners for their unique perspectives on social media and a potential ban. Finally, Savanta has conducted seven in-person deliberative events across the UK with CYP aged 10-18, exploring in depth essential questions related to attitudes towards social media and AI, and the potential positive and negative impacts of a ban to ensure the final policy decision takes into account all additional streams of research.

The final stage of analysis will combine this breadth of survey evidence with the depth of youth-led deliberative events and the teacher and practitioner survey, to inform a fuller understanding of both public attitudes and the practical implications of different policy responses.

Methodology

This report draws on two streams of evidence collected as part of the wider mixed-methodology research programme. The primary evidence base is provided by two online surveys of nationally representative samples, recruited through Savanta’s research panels: a survey of n=5,010 parents and guardians of children and young people aged 0–21, and a survey of n=9,017 children and young people aged 10–21.

Hard quotas were set on key demographic variables. For parents, gender, region, socio-economic group (SEG), child age and ethnicity; for CYP, region, SEG, age and ethnicity. Weighting was applied post-fieldwork to correct for any minor differences between the achieved sample and the latest UK population estimates. All participants aged under 16 were recruited via a parent or guardian, in line with MRS guidance on informed consent by a responsible adult for children and young people. Both the parent or guardian and the child were asked to give their consent to participate, after being informed of all aspects of the research relevant to their decision to take part. For the parent survey, recruitment was direct with the respondent.

The secondary evidence base is provided by two open-link surveys hosted on a government website during the same fieldwork period, using the same questionnaires as the panel surveys. These were a parent survey, which closed at n=39,116 responses, and a CYP survey, which closed at n=5,112 responses. The open-link surveys formed the public consultation route and were not subject to quotas or weighting; the resulting samples are self-selecting and are not nationally representative.

The analytical approach treats the panel data as the primary, statistically representative spine of the report, with findings from the consultation reported separately. Where the two sources align, this strengthens confidence in a finding; where they diverge, the difference itself is informative, typically reflecting self-selection by respondents most motivated to engage with a public consultation. In this study, open-link respondents divide along audience lines: parents from the public consultation are noticeably more restriction-favouring than their panel counterparts, while CYP from the public consultation are somewhat more pro-access than the CYP panel. The CYP from the public consultation sample also skews older than the CYP from the panel survey sample, and has a much higher concentration of specific demographics, such as disabled CYP. These characteristics shape interpretation throughout, and open-link figures are presented and labelled separately from panel figures wherever both are referenced.

Statistical significance is shown in the data tables using letter notation comparing subgroups within each survey. Statements of statistical significance in this report refer to within-survey subgroup differences at the 95% confidence level. Comparisons across parent vs CYP, or panel vs open-link surveys are described descriptively only and are not subjected to formal cross-survey testing in the tables.

Several CYP questions, including all the AI chatbot questions (Q24-Q27) and certain feature-restriction items (notably the ability to send nude images or videos), were asked only of CYP aged 16-21. Comparisons between parents and CYP on these items therefore use the 16-21 CYP base, as flagged in the relevant figure captions. CYP usage and access items are reported among CYP who use social media where the question routing requires it.

Fieldwork for the panel surveys was conducted between 30 March 2026 and 20 May 2026. The open-link surveys were live from 2 May 2026 until 26 May 2026. Other strands of the wider

programme including a survey of teachers and youth practitioners, and a series of youth-led deliberative events across the UK, are reported separately and will be triangulated with the survey evidence in subsequent reporting.