# DSIT
# Children's Wellbeing Online: Final Report

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Make better decisions

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# Introduction

This report presents the final findings from a mixed-methodology research project which includes surveys with children and young people (CYP), parents, teachers and youth practitioners, and findings from seven in-person, deliberative youth Hack events with young people around the UK. This research was commissioned 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), children and young people (CYP), and teachers and youth practitioners view both the benefits and harms of social media, and how they assess the likely impact of different approaches to regulation.

This research was designed and delivered by a consortium led by Savanta, who were responsible for overall project management, reporting, and the design, data collection and analysis of the quantitative research. UK Youth, Volunteering Matters and the #iWill Movement provided advisory support across research design and delivery, including stakeholder engagement, supporting the Children's Online Wellbeing Advisory Group, evidence gathering and reporting. Their role also involved leading youth participation by recruiting and supporting Youth Collaborators, contributing to data analysis, campaign development, and facilitating nationwide 'Hack' events. Eight Youth Collaborators, aged 16-21 and drawn from across the UK, played a central role throughout the programme: co-leading the design and facilitation of the hack events, contributing to the analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative findings, and shaping the reporting of this research. The Hack events were co-delivered by Youth Collaborators along with 18 other #iWill ambassadors from across the UK. Youth Collaborator profiles can be found at https://www.iwill.org.uk/growing-up-in-the-online-world-consultation/. This report reflects a genuinely collaborative process in which the voices and analytical contributions of young people were embedded at every stage of data analysis and throughout the qualitative research programme, not only as research participants but as active members of the research team.

This report incorporates four complementary streams of 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 third is a nationally representative survey of teachers and youth practitioners, referred to throughout as the 'teacher and practitioner survey'. The fourth is the programme of seven in-person, deliberative youth Hack events held across the UK, which forms the qualitative strand of this report. The Savanta panel surveys provide the primary, statistically representative evidence base on which the quantitative analysis is built. The public consultation data sits alongside the panel surveys as a secondary, self-selecting source used for triangulation. The teacher and practitioner survey provides a distinct professional perspective, weighted to be nationally representative of both audiences. The deliberative youth Hack events provide qualitative depth, context, and the

lived perspectives of the young people most directly affected by any policy change; these findings were also triangulated and refined through workshops with Youth Collaborators.

The policy context for this research 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 several 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, particularly around age limits
- Attitudes towards age assurance measures

Including findings from parents, CYP, teachers and practitioners, and the deliberative youth Hack events is important because each audience and method offers a distinct view on how social media affects children and how policy responses may work in practice. Their perspectives are not always aligned and comparing them adds analytical depth that no single source can provide. A more detailed explanation of the methodologies and how they are used analytically is set out in the Methodology sections at the end of this report. Throughout this report, panel findings are explicitly labelled 'panel', public consultation findings are explicitly labelled 'public consultation', teacher and youth practitioner findings are explicitly labelled 'teacher and practitioner survey', and qualitative findings from the deliberative youth Hack events are presented in clearly labelled subsections within each chapter. Statements of statistical significance refer to within-survey subgroup differences at the 95% confidence level. The teacher and practitioner survey does not cover children's device access, time spent on social media or children's direct experience of social media, so Sections 1, 2 and 5 contain no teacher and practitioner findings. Similarly, the deliberative youth Hack events did not specifically address Section 1 usage and access topics, so Section 1 draws on survey evidence only.

### A note on platforms discussed in the qualitative findings

Throughout the qualitative findings that follow, young people discuss social media in both general terms and with reference to specific platforms. At each of the seven deliberative youth Hack events, participants were invited at the outset to agree collectively on one or more platforms they all used and felt were worth examining in detail. This was an organic, participant-led process: no platforms were suggested or steered by facilitators. Young people chose platforms on the basis that they were in common use across the group and that they had

distinctive features, whether beneficial or harmful, that they felt were worth discussing specifically.

The platforms selected varied to some degree by location and age group, reflecting the different social media habits of participants across the programme. The platforms discussed and that the qualitative analysis in this report relate to were: TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube.

Where specific platform features are discussed in the findings, they are referenced in that context. References to named platforms have been removed from the main analysis in line with the approach taken in this report; the analysis focuses on the features and design choices that are common across platforms, or that young people identified as distinctive to a particular type of platform, rather than on the platforms themselves. It is important that this report mentions specific features and functionalities identified organically by CYP as this level of detail is critical to making informed policy and platform design choices. This approach ensures the findings remain applicable as platform landscapes change, and avoids the report being read as commentary on any individual company. The platform context is preserved here so that readers understand how the feature-level discussion in the qualitative section took place.

# Executive Summary

This report examines how parents, Children and Young People (CYP), teachers and youth practitioners, and young people in deliberative youth Hack events view social media, its impacts on children's wellbeing, and the case for restrictions including an under-16 blanket social media ban. AI chatbots and age assurance are also examined as an emerging area of policy interest, treated alongside the social media findings rather than as a separate exercise.

Parents, and teachers and youth practitioners show support for an under-16 social media ban, while CYP are 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. Teachers and practitioners express similar views to parents, with 83% agreeing on a minimum access age of at least 16. 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 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%). Teachers and youth practitioners closely mirror the panel parent ordering, placing a minimum age for the most risky functions first (50%) and a blanket ban third (17%), providing corroboration for the preference for targeted approaches when a direct choice is required.

The qualitative evidence from the deliberative youth Hack events adds depth and nuance to the CYP picture. The most consistent finding across the entire qualitative programme is that young people do not support an outright ban on social media for under-16s. Resistance is both practical: the argument that young people will still find a way to get on social media was made across multiple events and age groups, and principled: young people reframe the ban as a potential injustice, the removal of a digital space they did not choose to grow up in but which has become central to their social lives, sense of community and access to information. The rejection of a ban does not mean satisfaction with the current situation, however. Almost everyone agrees that something needs to change, and every group easily and organically identified serious structural problems with social media that they want addressed.

More targeted interventions command broader shared support across all audiences. Across all five survey sources, 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 would make children's online experience safer. Time-based controls are similarly popular: 89% of panel parents, 84% of panel CYP and 93% of the teacher and practitioner survey support daily app-level limits, overnight restrictions, or both. The qualitative evidence reinforces this support and adds detail to the

concerns around specific functions of social media. Algorithmic design and infinite scroll are the single most widely discussed concerns across all events and age groups, and the most widely supported alternative to a ban is the development of age-segmented versions of existing platforms in order to allow younger users to access content-safe, restricted-feature environments while retaining the connection, entertainment and information benefits that young people say they value from social media.

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, while CYP are more likely to focus on circumvention, exclusion and lost opportunities for socialisation. The qualitative evidence gives further context to this: young people present circumvention as fact and describe in detail why they believe that the social losses of a ban would fall unevenly on those who comply while others work around the rules.

Social media remains a near-universal feature of CYP daily lives, with 97% of panel CYP having smartphone access. Attitudes are not evenly distributed: in the panel surveys, female CYP and disabled CYP are significantly more likely to report worry and anxiety, and to view social media negatively overall. The deliberative youth Hack events add qualitative depth to this finding, with many participants describing a relationship with social media characterised less by enthusiasm than by a sense of having little alternative.

On AI chatbots, parents and older CYP show a notable degree of convergence in the surveys, and AI also emerges as a major unprompted theme across the deliberative youth Hack events. Both survey audiences see AI's main value as functional and educational, and both identify relationship-simulation features as the leading risks. Support for AI restrictions is high: 84% of panel parents support minimum age requirements and 85% support feature restrictions; among panel CYP aged 16-21, the equivalent figures are 83% and 90%. In the deliberative youth Hack events, the single most consistently proposed practical measure is mandatory labelling of AI-generated content, alongside strong calls for AI literacy to be embedded in the formal school curriculum.

Taken together, the evidence from all four streams points to a policy landscape in which support for stronger intervention is clear, but where the form of that intervention remains contested. Parents, teachers and youth practitioners show a strong appetite for an under-16 ban, while CYP are more likely to favour selective access and targeted restrictions. Across all audiences, however, there is more consistent support for a wider package of feature-level controls, time-based limits and AI-specific safeguards than for a blanket ban.

# 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 a greater proportion 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.

This section draws on the panel surveys and public consultation only; the teacher and practitioner survey does not cover device access or time use, and the deliberative youth Hack events did not specifically address these topics.

**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 [12]) and among ethnic minority parents (76% vs 56% White).

[2] ABC1 and C2DE are standard social grade classifications. ABC1 covers higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations (grades A, B and C1); C2DE covers skilled manual occupations through to unemployed and lowest-income households (grades C2, D and E).

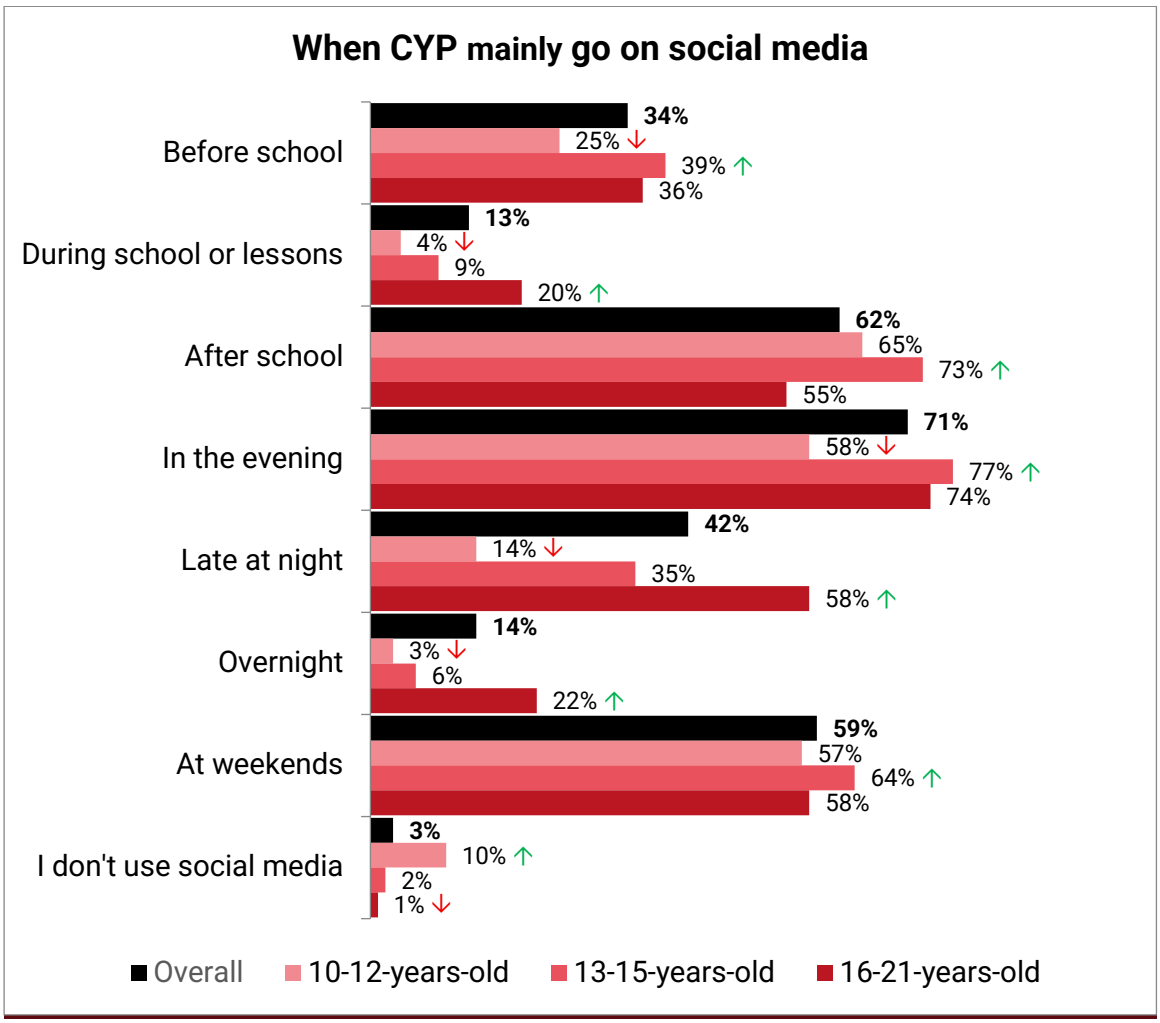



***Figure 1:*** *Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q2 = "When do you mainly go on social media?" (Multiple choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages*

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 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.

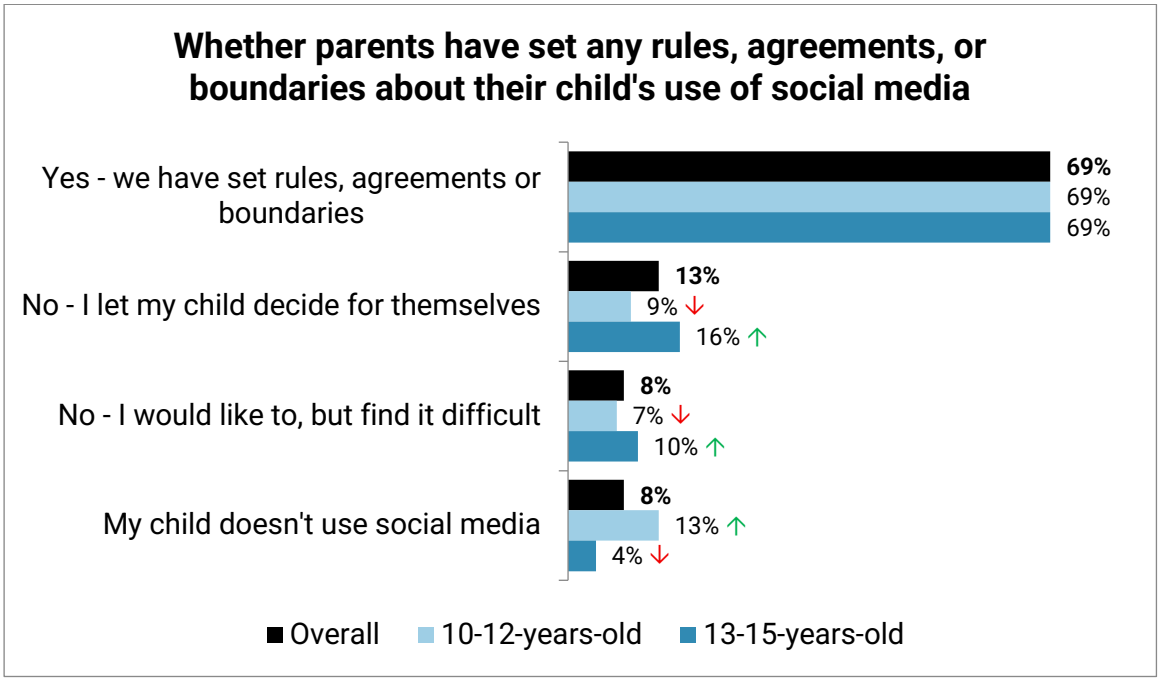



***Figure 2:*** *Sample size: n = 2,275 | Base = All parents of 10-15-year-olds from the panel survey | Q5 = "Have you set any rules, agreements, or boundaries about your child's use of social media?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from counterpart*

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%).

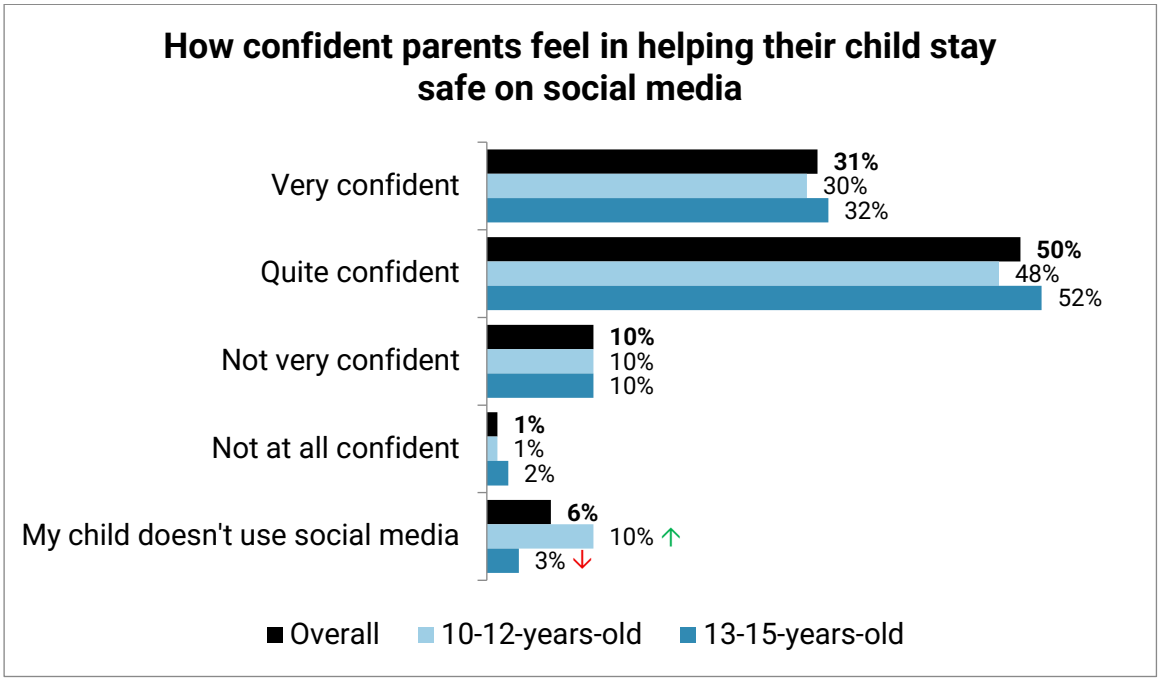



***Figure 3:*** *Sample size: n = 2,275 | Base = All parents of 10-15-year-olds from the panel survey | Q6 = "How confident do you feel in helping your child stay safe on social media?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from counterpart*

Despite high levels of use, parents express mixed levels of confidence in 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 the 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, with female CYP, older CYP and disabled CYP tending to hold more negative views.

The qualitative evidence from the deliberative youth Hack events adds substantial depth to this picture, capturing not just what young people think but the lived experience behind those views. The teacher and practitioner survey does not cover perceptions of social media benefits and harms directly, so the quantitative element of this section draws on the CYP and parents panel surveys and public consultation only.

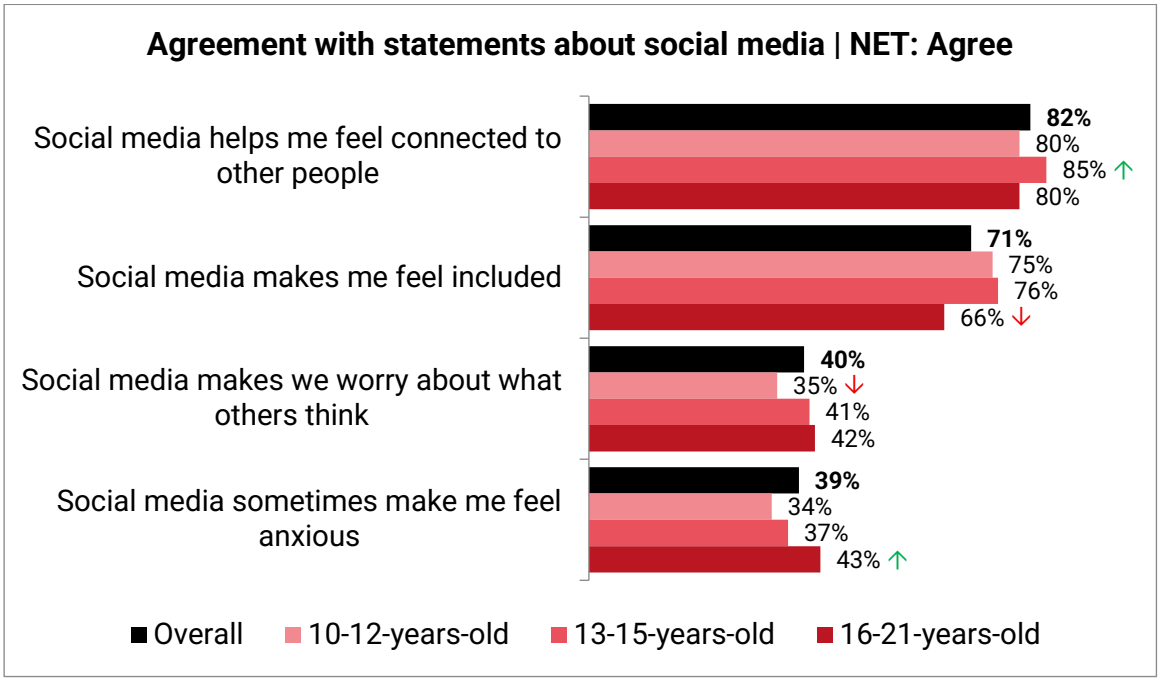



***Figure 4:*** *Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q8 = "How much do you agree or disagree with the sentences below?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages*

**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 benefits 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).

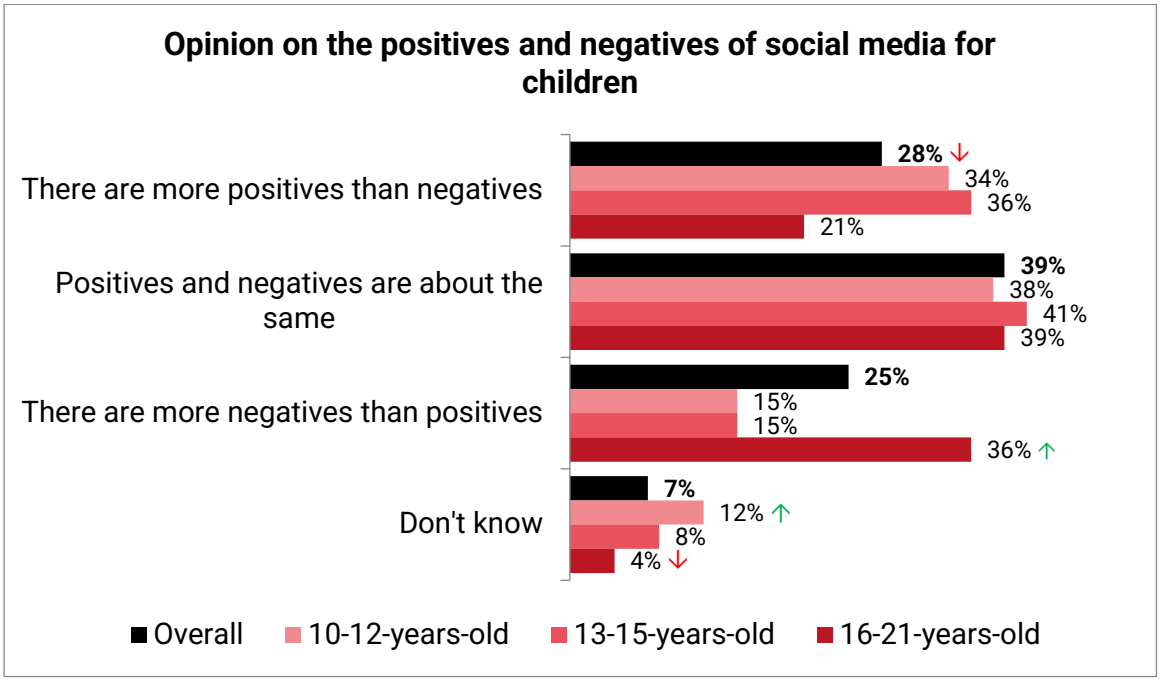



***Figure 5:*** *Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q8 = "What is your opinion on the positives and negatives of social media for children?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages*

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 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 there are more positives (40% vs 28% panel) but a higher share also say that there are more negatives (29% vs 25% panel), consistent with the more motivated and oppositional character of consultation respondents on each side.

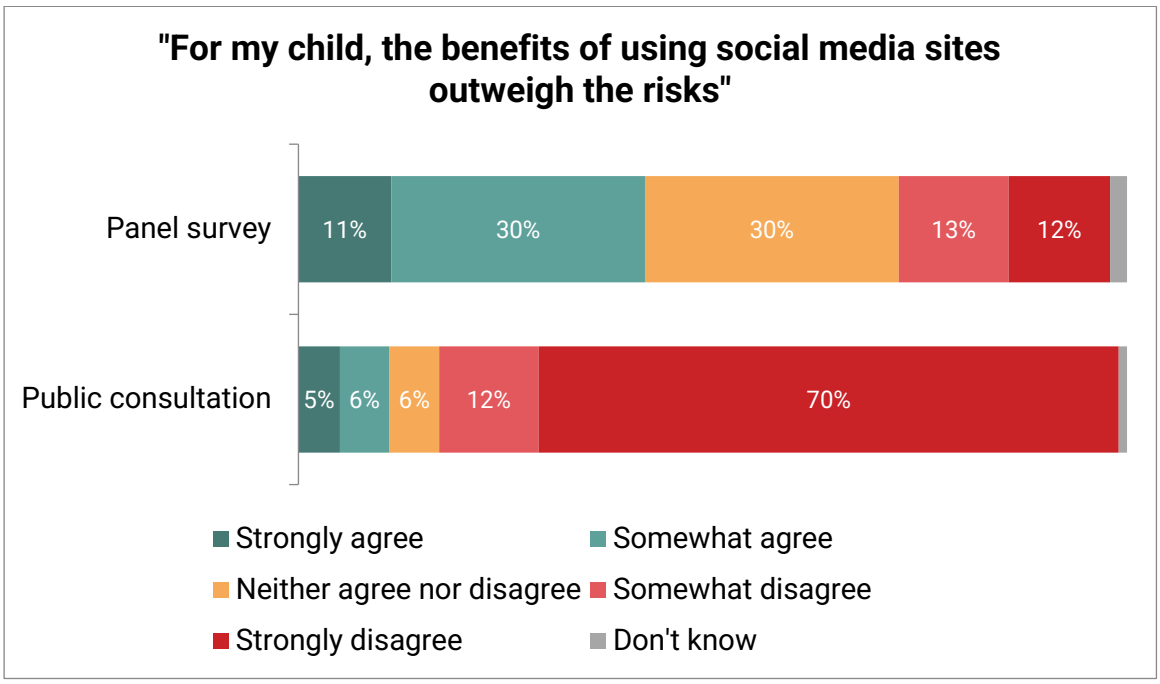



***Figure 6:*** *Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 2,275); Public consultation (n = 19,810) | Base = All parents of 10-15-year-olds | Q9 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? 'For my child, the benefits of using social media sites outweigh the risks'" (Single choice)*

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. This very large gap reflects the strongly restriction-favouring orientation of the public consultation respondents, and is 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 64% of parents from the panel survey, and rises to 93% in the public consultation. Other prominent concerns in the panel include sharing personal information (57%) and the ability to send nude images or videos (57%); in the public consultation, both rise to 89% and 90% respectively. In the panel data, 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%). Concern about content generated through AI chatbots or creative tools is examined further in Section 8.

## Qualitative evidence: deliberative youth Hack events

The deliberative youth Hack events supplement the survey data by explaining *why* young people hold these views about social media, based on their lived experiences.

### *Social media as environment, not choice*

A consistent theme across the deliberative programme was a sense among participants of feeling 'trapped'. Across the sessions, CYP expressed limited enthusiasm for social media. The mood was cautious and, in many cases, notably negative, even among those who were clear that they did not want to lose the positive dimensions of social media. All supported some form of restriction, and concern about social media's effects was evident across all age groups.

CYP said that they do not experience social media as something they actively chose, but as the environment they have grown up in. Many described a relationship with social media characterised less by enthusiasm than by a sense of having little alternative. The mechanism of this relationship was articulated clearly by participants: CYP acknowledged they are on platforms more than they would like, and that this is partly a function of design. Some described efforts to curb their own use using tools such as app timers and break reminders, but these were widely acknowledged as ineffective, because when control rests with the individual it is too easily overridden.

Several participants also drew comparisons between adult and children's use of digital technology. Across sessions, there was a perception among CYP that their parents and adults in their lives used social media extensively, yet restrictions were framed as applying specifically to children, which some described by some as inequitable.

> ***'Why do adults use it if they don't want us to?'***
> *Young person at the Brighton Hack*

### *What young people value*

Across all seven Hack locations, CYP identified a consistent set of things they value about social media and would be reluctant to lose:

**Connection with friends:** The peer-to-peer dimension of social media such as direct messaging, group chats and knowing what friends are doing, was consistently cited as something worth protecting. This was not simply about entertainment or social validation; for many CYP, particularly those in rural or isolated areas, social media represented a low-cost or free means of maintaining the social connections that are central to their wellbeing. Groups in Ipswich and Brighton noted that going out physically costs money that many young people do not have, framing social media as a genuine social infrastructure.

**Information and access to the wider world:** Particularly among older participants (aged 16 and above), social media was consistently identified as a primary source of news and current affairs. CYP expressed concern that a ban applying only to under-16s would restrict their access to information available to everyone else.

**Finding communities around shared interests:** Multiple groups articulated the concept of online 'third spaces': communities organised around specific games, genres of music, fandoms, or interests that participants could not find locally. This was particularly valued by those with niche interests who said they could find their communities online in ways that may not be possible in their immediate geography, giving them an important sense of belonging in formative years.

**Studying and learning:** CYP, particularly those in secondary education, described substantive use of social media for academic purposes. This included following 'study influencers', watching 'study with me' live streams to feel less alone while revising, asking questions they would feel awkward raising in class, and using AI tools to generate past papers and revision materials. The Gloucester and Caerphilly sessions specifically raised how study live streams provided a form of peer accountability for revision.

### *What young people find harmful*

**Algorithms and 'doomscrolling':** Algorithms and infinite scrolling were the single most discussed topic across all the groups. The dominant concern raised in groups was a sense of powerlessness: feeling like the algorithm decides what one sees and that platforms are actively designed with an infinite scroll to keep users addicted rather than serve their interests. CYP across all age groups showed awareness of how algorithms function, and several groups made an explicit connection between engagement-driven design and the profit motive of tech companies. There was a split along age lines: older teens (16-18) were more likely to feel they have 'cracked' the algorithm through deliberate curation; younger children, however, felt more at the mercy of it, with several participants in the Gloucester and Caerphilly sessions describing having been unable to stop seeing things they do not want to see despite having actively signalled disinterest.

**Comment sections:** CYP viewed comment sections as unregulated, unpredictable, and prone to escalation. This was one of the few features that attracted near-universal negative sentiment in qualitative discussions. Participants described the content of comment sections as 'shocking', and the absence of effective moderation was experienced as a serious and persistent failure. A prominent concern was the inconsistency of content moderation across formats: young people noted that an image banned as a standalone post was not always subject to the same ban when posted as a comment, meaning banned content could re-enter a platform through a moderation loophole.

**Influencer culture and the attention economy:** Influencers attracted criticism across locations. While some were praised as genuine role models, CYP frequently mentioned the culture of increasingly extreme behaviour to attract attention, alongside unrealistic imagery and filters and the pressure this placed on their sense of their own appearance, affordability and self-worth.

> ***'It makes me feel bad about myself as I can't afford some of the things they post and I lose my confidence.'***
>
> *Written by a young person at the Belfast Hack*

**Likes, follower counts, and social comparison:** Likes and follower counts were consistently described as tools for social comparison rather than genuine connection. Several groups expressed appreciation for the existing feature on some platforms allowing users to hide like counts from public view, because it eliminated the risk of competition and comparison. There was a clear age distinction: younger children cared more about likes and follower counts than older teens, who were more likely to say they have moved past that concern, though they recognised the harm it does to younger children.

**Group chats, disappearing messages, and read receipts:** Several concerns were more prominent among younger age groups. Group chats were flagged as a vector for bullying, and disappearing messages features were identified as problematic in this context, making it harder to report bullying because the evidence disappears. Read receipts were identified as a source of anxiety, as was the 'half swipe' feature available on some platforms, which allows a user to preview a message without technically opening it.

**Contact from strangers and online predation:** Across multiple events, concern about contact from unknown adults was raised. In the Caerphilly session, every participant indicated that they had been contacted online by someone they didn't know. The desire for settings that restrict who can contact you, comment on your posts or view your profile is a frequently raised proposal across the programme.

# 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 are more polarised than 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. The teacher and youth practitioner survey shows the highest level of agreement with a minimum age of 16 of the representative surveys in this study (but lower than parents from the public consultation), providing important professional corroboration of the overall direction of parent opinion. The qualitative evidence from the deliberative youth Hack events shows consistent opposition to an outright ban among CYP, while emphasising that this rejection does not mean acceptance of the status quo.

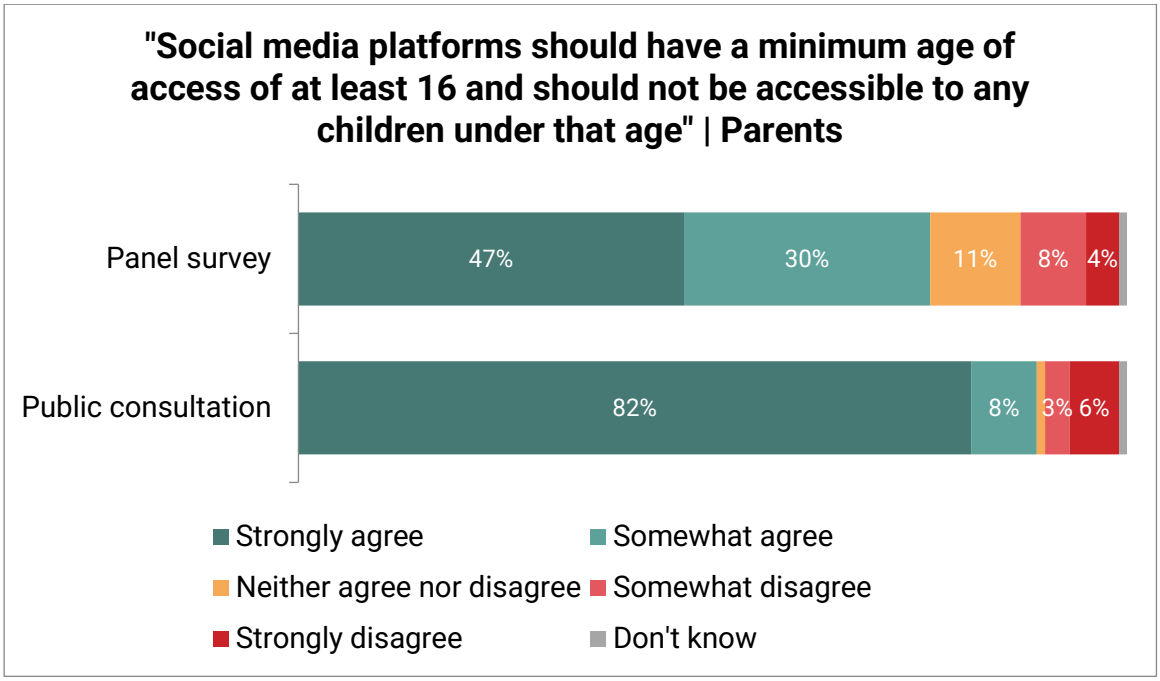



***Figure 7:*** *Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 5,010); Public consultation (n = 39,116) | Base = All parents | Q10 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? 'Social media platforms should have a minimum age of access of at least 16 and should not be accessible to any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

**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%).

The public consultation sample shows a similar gender pattern: mothers agree at 93% while fathers do so to a lesser extent at 85%.

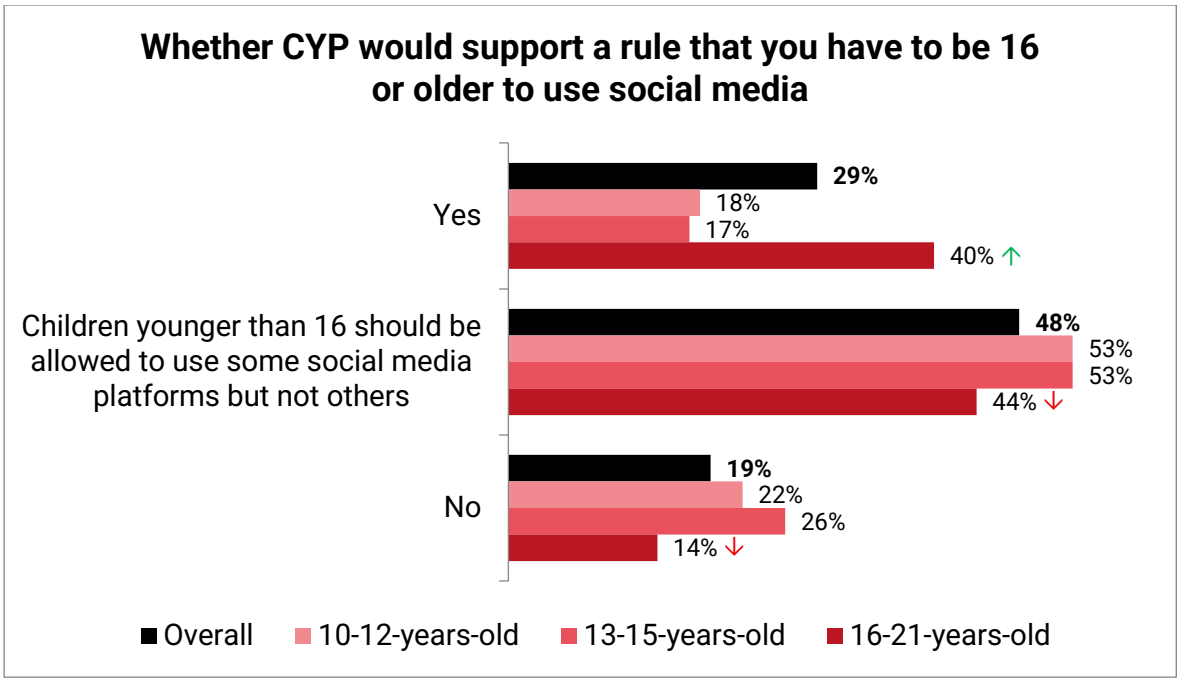



***Figure 8:*** *Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q16 = "Some people are talking about making a rule that you have to be 16 or older to use social media. Would you or would you not support this rule?" (Single choice) | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different 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 rises significantly to 40% among 16–21s and stands at 18% among 10–12s and 17% among 13–15s. The preferred option is 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 CYP public consultation results are broadly similar, albeit more pro-access: 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. Across both sources, male CYP are significantly more likely than female CYP to reject any restriction.

The teacher and practitioner survey provides important further support on the question of a minimum age of 16 for social media. In the teacher and practitioner survey, 83% of respondents agree that social media platforms should have a minimum age of access of at least 16, with 52% strongly agreeing and only 10% disagreeing, making it the highest level of net agreement recorded across any of the representative survey sources in this study. Teachers and youth practitioners respond similarly on this question: 84% of school staff agree compared with 81% of youth practitioners, the difference not being significant. On preferred minimum age, 51% of teachers and practitioners say the legal minimum should remain at 16, while 47% would support a lower age, broadly similar to panel parents (54% at 16, 41% open to lower) and more flexible than public consultation parents (85% anchored on 16).

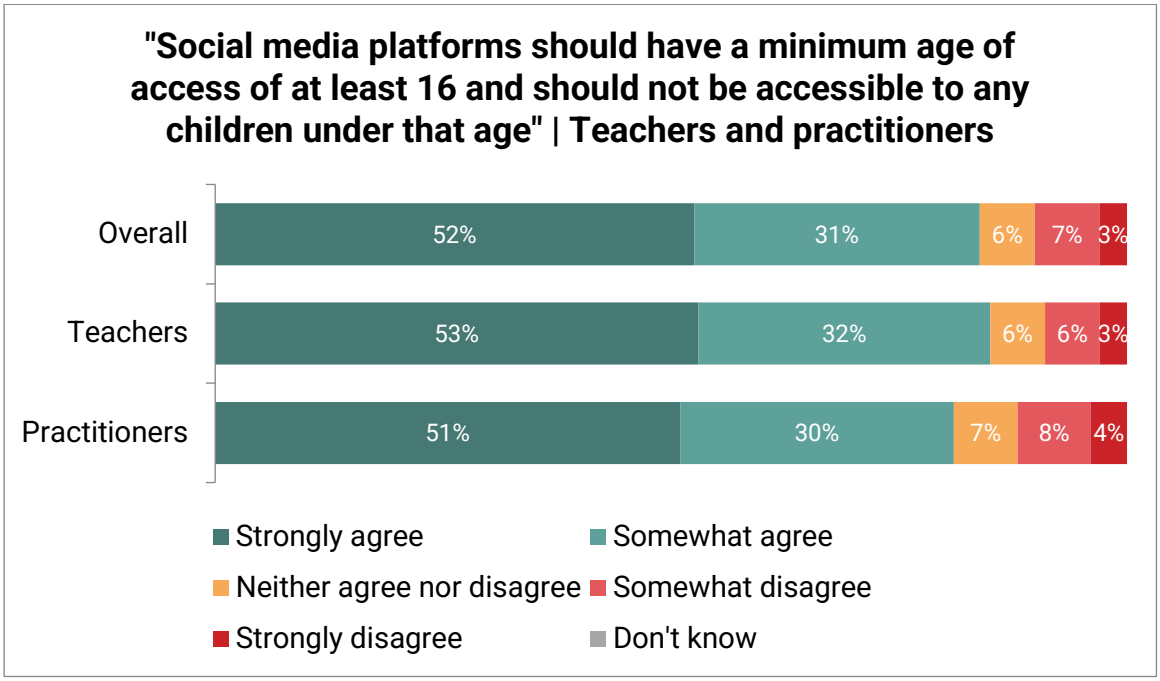



***Figure 9:*** *Sample sizes: Teachers (n = 1,218); Practitioners (n = 1,016) | Base = All teachers and practitioners | Q10 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? 'Social media platforms should have a minimum age of access of at least 16 and should not be accessible to any children under that age'" (Single choice)*

## Qualitative evidence: deliberative youth Hack events

A consistent finding across the qualitative programme was that CYP did not support an outright ban on social media for under-16s. Across all seven events, strong support for an outright ban was not expressed in any group, and resistance took several forms.

The most practical objection, raised in multiple sessions and by participants of varying ages, was the perception that a ban would not work. Existing age verification mechanisms were thought to be easily circumvented, with several participants describing parents routinely logging into platforms on behalf of their children, and photo-ID checks being simple to bypass.

The second objection was made on principle: that a ban would be unfair to a generation that did not choose to grow up with social media but for whom it has become unavoidable.

> ***'Young people were born and almost forced into using social media. It is unfair to completely ban it and take away a 'safe space' for young people.'***
>
> *Young person at the Brighton Hack*

Participants noted that social media fills a social function for which there was no obvious existing replacement, and that a ban would remove access to these spaces without providing an alternative. The rejection of a ban was not equivalent to satisfaction with the current social media landscape, however. Opposition to the ban centred less on contentment with the existing situation than on scepticism about its practical implementation: what a ban would look like and how it would be enforced.

**Trust and delivery:** Even where there was support for action, CYP expressed scepticism about whether it will be carried out effectively. Tech companies were widely distrusted by CYP, rooted in the perception that the features CYP find most harmful are the same ones that drive platform

revenue. Government was trusted slightly more as a rule-setter, but there was also scepticism about enforcement. There was openness to hard verification, including uploading ID, passports and birth certificates, but this was paired with low confidence that it would be implemented properly. CYP were broadly clear about the need for action and about who should be responsible for delivering it, but doubtful about whether effective change would follow. They also emphasised the importance of young people's voices being included in policy discussions, given their direct experience of the platforms affected.

# Section 4: Alternatives to a blanket ban

**Summary:** The headline support for a 16-and-over rule does not capture the full picture of preference across audiences. When parents from the panel survey are asked to rank policy approaches against each other, more targeted alternatives become more salient. The teacher and practitioner survey closely mirrors the panel parent survey preference ordering, providing professional corroboration for the view that targeted restrictions are the preferred mechanism when a direct choice is required. Among CYP, the clearest preference in both the panel and public consultation surveys is for selective access. The qualitative evidence reinforces this, with CYP independently proposing age-segmented versions of platforms as the most widely supported alternative to 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 ranking), followed by restrictions on time spent such as curfews (31% first; 68% included), and a blanket social media ban last (16% first, although 45% still include it in their ranking). Parents from the public consultation invert this ranking, placing a blanket ban first by 63% with 83% including it in their ranking.

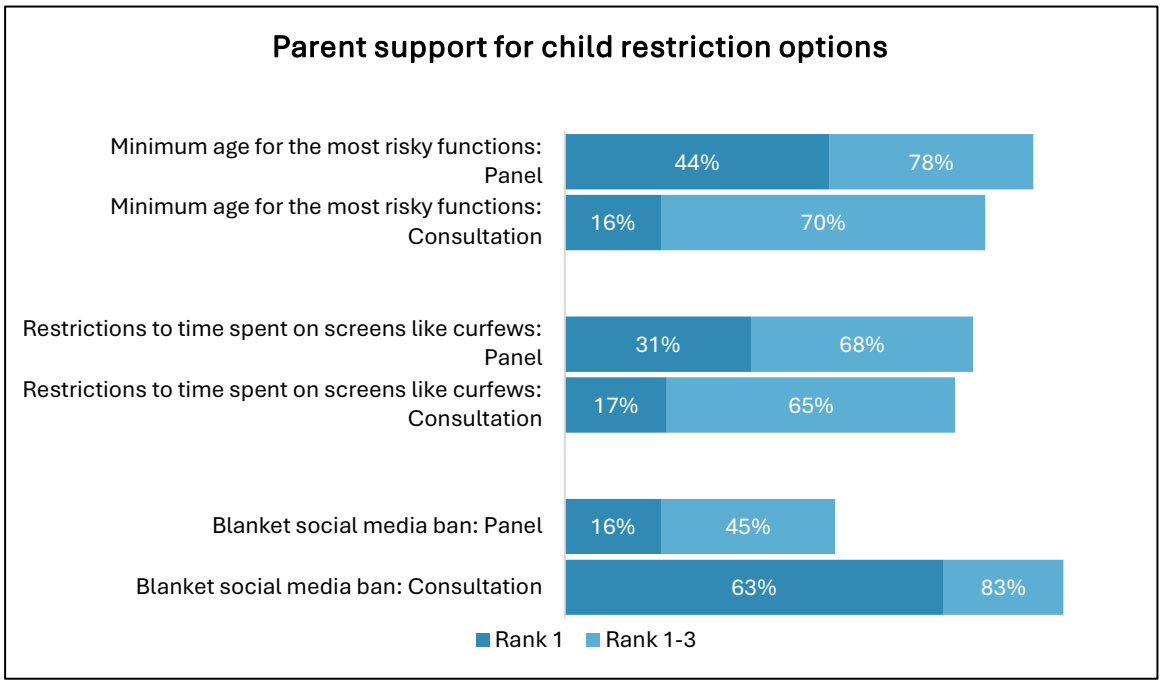



***Figure 10:*** *Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = All parents from the panel survey | Q15b = "Which of the following options, if any, would you support?" (Rank 1–3 question)*

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. 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.

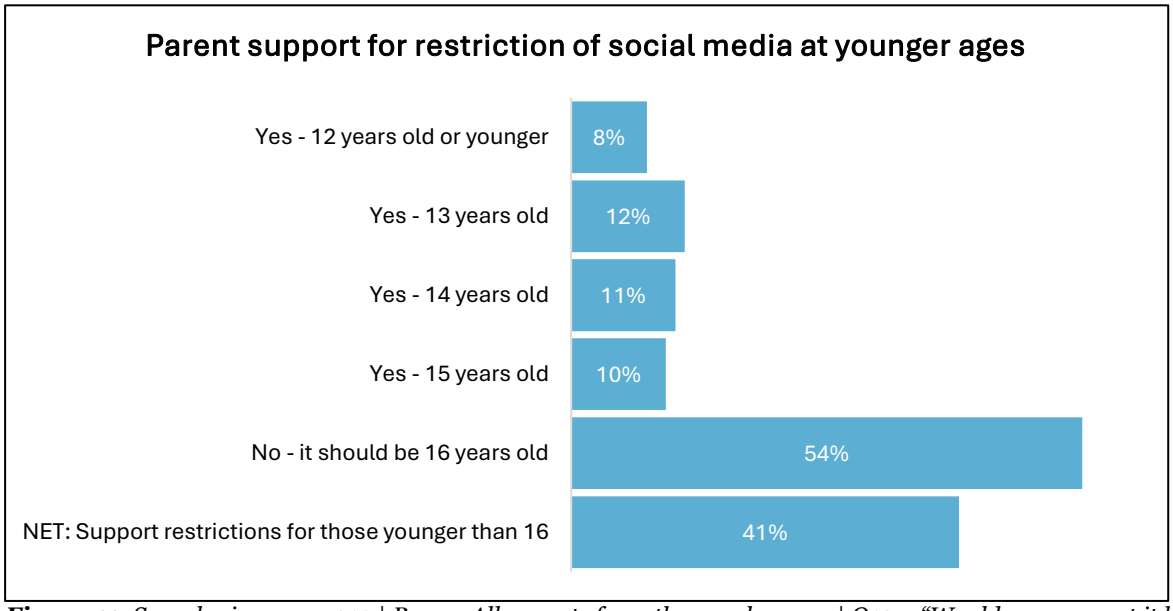



***Figure 11:*** *Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = All parents from the panel survey | Q12 = "Would you support it being a legal requirement for social media platforms to have a minimum age lower than 16? If so, what age should it be?" (Single choice)*

The teacher and practitioner survey shows a similar preference ordering to panel parents. Half (50%) place 'a minimum age for the most risky functions' first, with 84% including it in their top three. Restrictions on time spent such as curfews rank second (29% first; 72% top three), and a blanket social media ban ranks third (17% first; 50% top three).

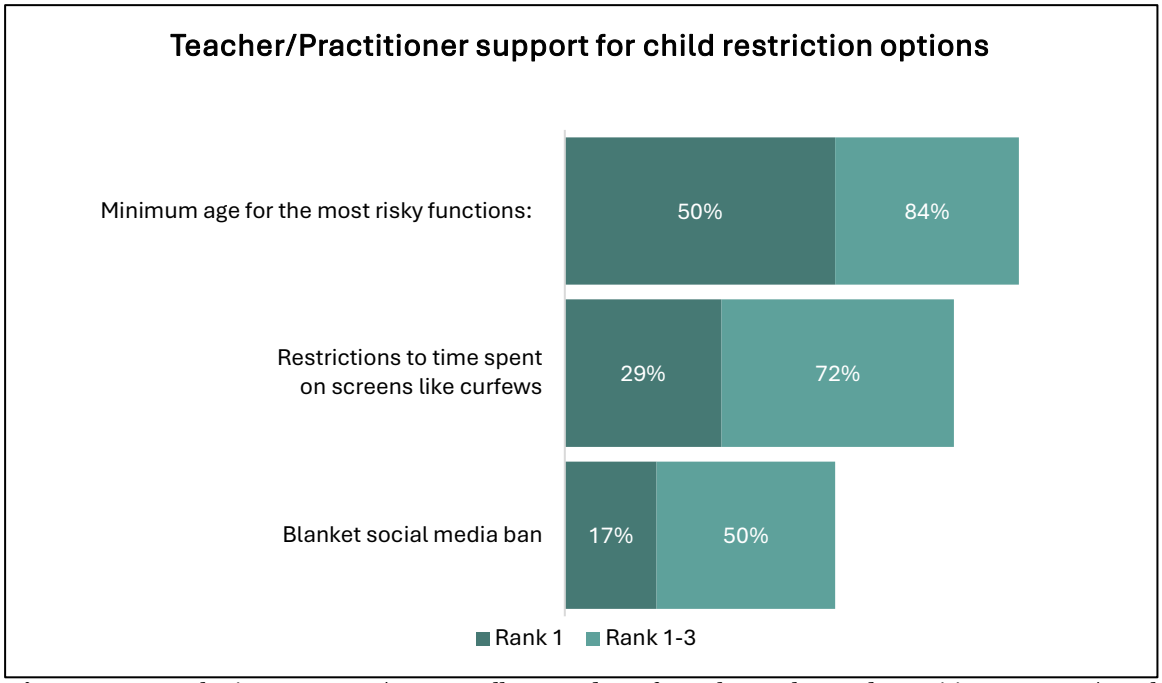



***Figure 12:*** *Sample size: n = 2,234 | Base = All respondents from the teacher and practitioner survey | Q15b = "Which of the following options, if any, would you support?" (Rank 1–3 question) | Ranked bar chart showing first-choice and top-three proportions | Source: Savanta teacher and practitioner survey*

CYP in both surveys lean towards a more nuanced approach to 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.CYP in both surveys lean towards a more nuanced approach to 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 13:*** *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*

## Qualitative evidence: deliberative youth Hack events

The most widely supported alternative to a blanket ban across the deliberative youth Hack events was the development of age-segmented versions of existing platforms, analogous to existing child-safe platform models.

> ***'Mental Health Improves Because of Different Age Groups in Apps'***
>
> *Written as an aspirational headline by young people at the Caerphilly Hack*

The concept was proposed independently across multiple Hack events and took varying forms: separate apps, restricted versions of the same app, or the same app with different feature sets for different age ranges. The core logic, as it emerged across the sessions, was that younger teens should still be able to access information and community but should not be exposed to age-inappropriate content or creators. Participants at Hacks gave considerable thought to what this would mean in practice: proposals included no direct messaging or video sending for younger users, and a platform-level financial penalty system for inappropriate posts by older users. The key value of the tiered model was seen as protecting those first encountering social media, particularly children in the 10-13 age range, from content and design features that they are not yet equipped to navigate.

Young people also expressed notable openness to robust age verification as a companion measure. Multiple sessions discussed the possibility of uploading official identity documents to verify age before accessing platforms. This openness was, however, consistently paired with scepticism about implementation: existing verification mechanisms were described as easy to circumvent through technical workarounds such as VPNs, and through parents or older relations logging in on behalf of their children.

# 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 such as feelings of exclusion and circumvention, while parents are more likely to anticipate protective and reassurance benefits. Public consultation respondents on both sides show much higher absolute levels across most expected outcomes, reflecting the more emphatic character of consultation responses, though the rank ordering is broadly consistent with the panel. The teacher and practitioner survey does not include questions on expected outcomes of a ban. The qualitative evidence gives context and lived experience to the survey findings on circumvention and social loss, which are the dominant expected outcomes among CYP.

**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: 88% expect fewer children to be exposed to harmful content, 77% expect children to be safer, and 60% expect easier parental monitoring.

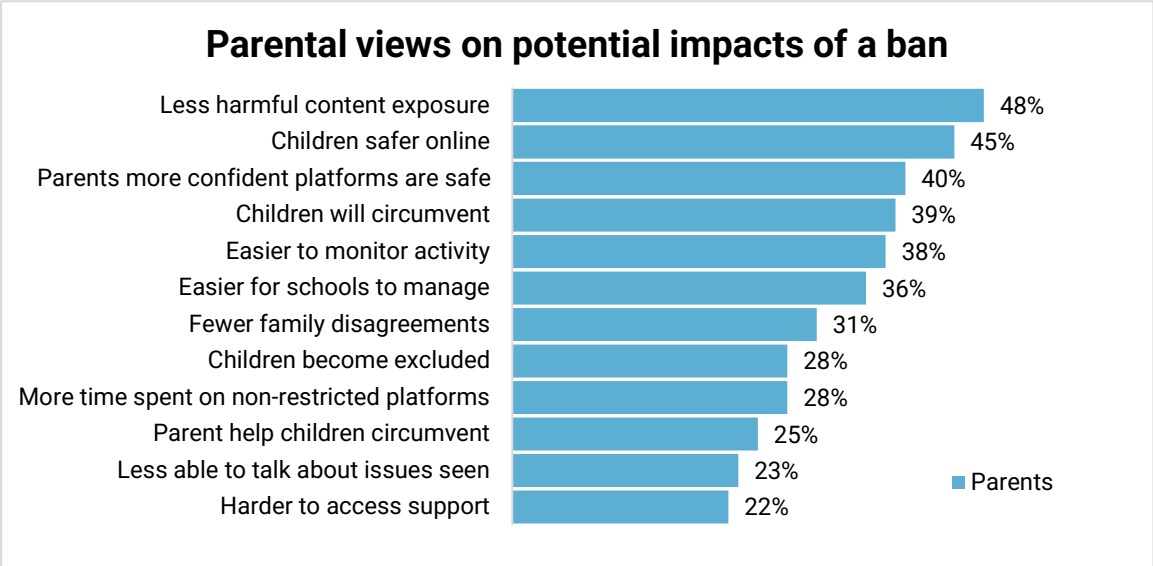



***Figure 14:*** *Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = All parents from the panel survey | Q13 = "Thinking about you and your family, what do you think the impacts of well-enforced age restrictions on social media would be?" (Multiple choice)*

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, with circumvention and social exclusion leading in both sources.

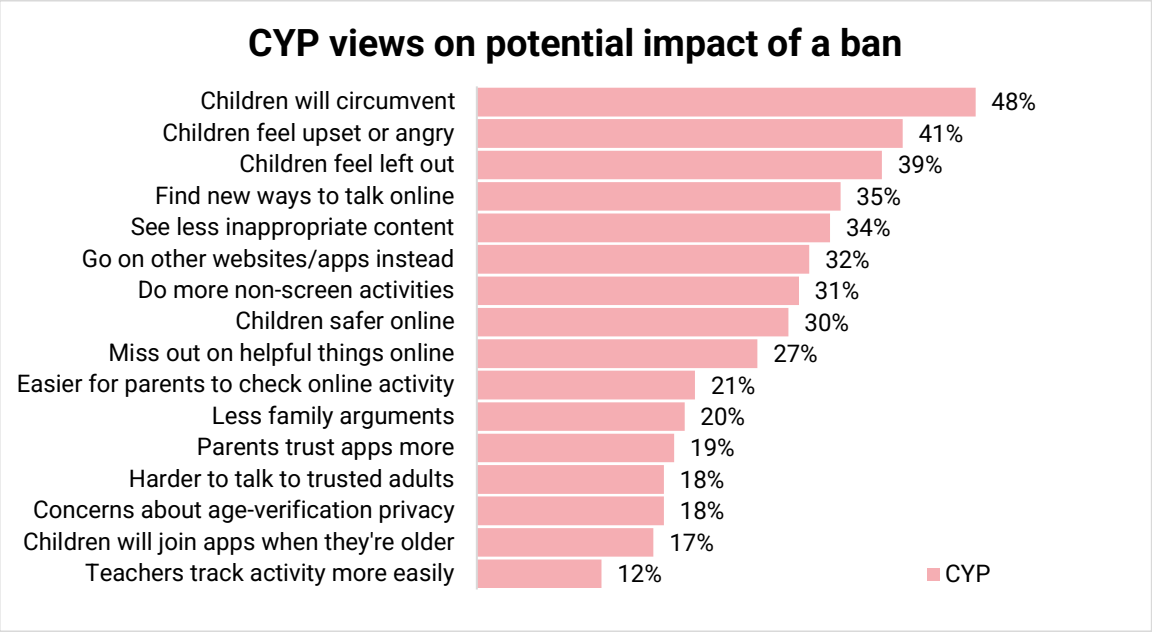



***Figure 15:*** *Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q17 = "If social media apps made it so children could only use them once they were 16 or older, what, if anything, do you think would happen?" (Multiple choice)*

### Qualitative evidence: deliberative youth Hack events

The survey finding that circumvention is the top expected outcome among CYP was given further depth in the deliberative youth Hack events. The argument that CYP would still find a way to get on social media was made across multiple events and age groups, and it was presented by participants not as speculation but as something they saw as a fact. As mentioned in Section 3, participants regularly recalled parents logging into platforms on the behalf of children, leading to a perception among CYP that existing photo-ID checks are simple to bypass.

The consequences of children feeling upset, angry or left out were also regularly articulated. Young people argued that even if a ban was introduced, the social loss would fall unevenly on those who complied while others circumvent the rules. This contributes to the reasons why the demand for platform-level, simultaneous enforcement recurred so consistently in the deliberative evidence: if everyone would be affected equally, the social penalty for compliance would be minimised. This qualitative finding helps to explain the strength of CYP preference for restrictions that are built into platforms themselves and apply to all users at once, rather than relying on individual or family-level compliance.

## 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. The teacher and practitioner survey adds a further layer of corroboration, with 82% of teachers and practitioners agreeing that restricting features would make children safer online. The qualitative evidence provides granular, feature-by-feature detail that reinforces and substantially adds to the survey findings. Around three quarters of both parent and CYP panel groups agree that restricting specific features would make children's online experience safer, with broad consensus on which features matter most: contact with unknown users tops the list across all audiences, alongside sharing of sensitive content and 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%, 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).

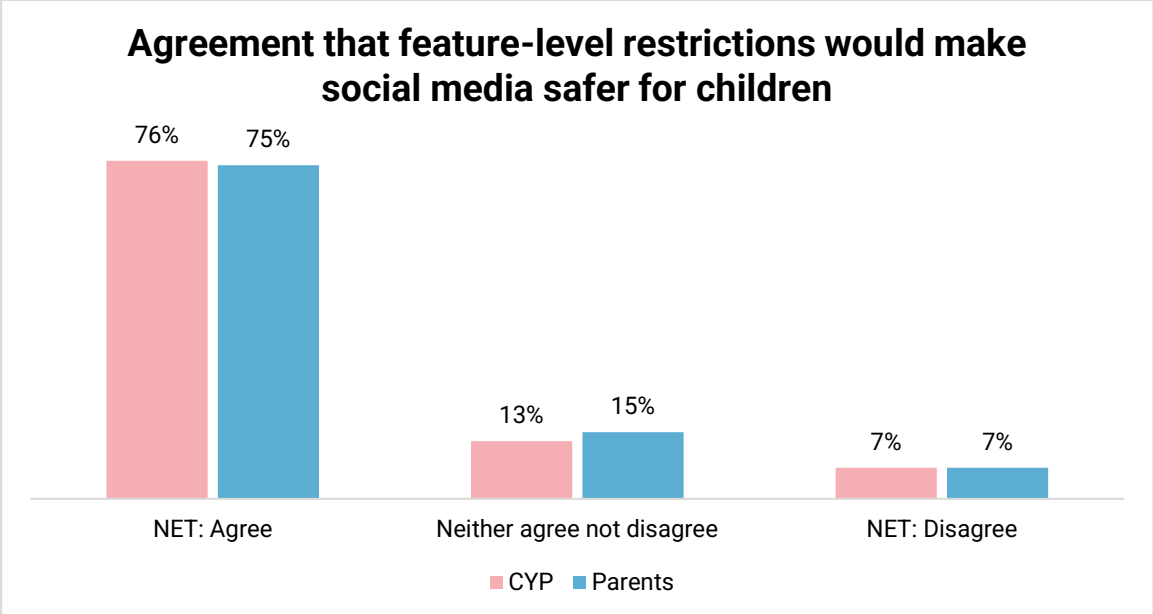



***Figure 16:*** *Sample sizes: Parents (n = 5,010); CYP (n = 9,017) from the panel survey | Base = All parents; All CYP | Q16 (parents) = "To what extent do you agree or disagree that restricting children's access to these features/functionalities would provide for a safer online experience for children?" | 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 teacher and practitioner survey reinforces the picture of broad cross-audience support for feature-level restrictions. In the teacher and practitioner survey, 82% agree that restricting children's access to features such as disappearing content, location sharing, sharing personal information and connecting with strangers would make social media safer for children, with 49%

strongly agreeing. There is no statistically significant difference between teachers (83%) and youth practitioners (81%).

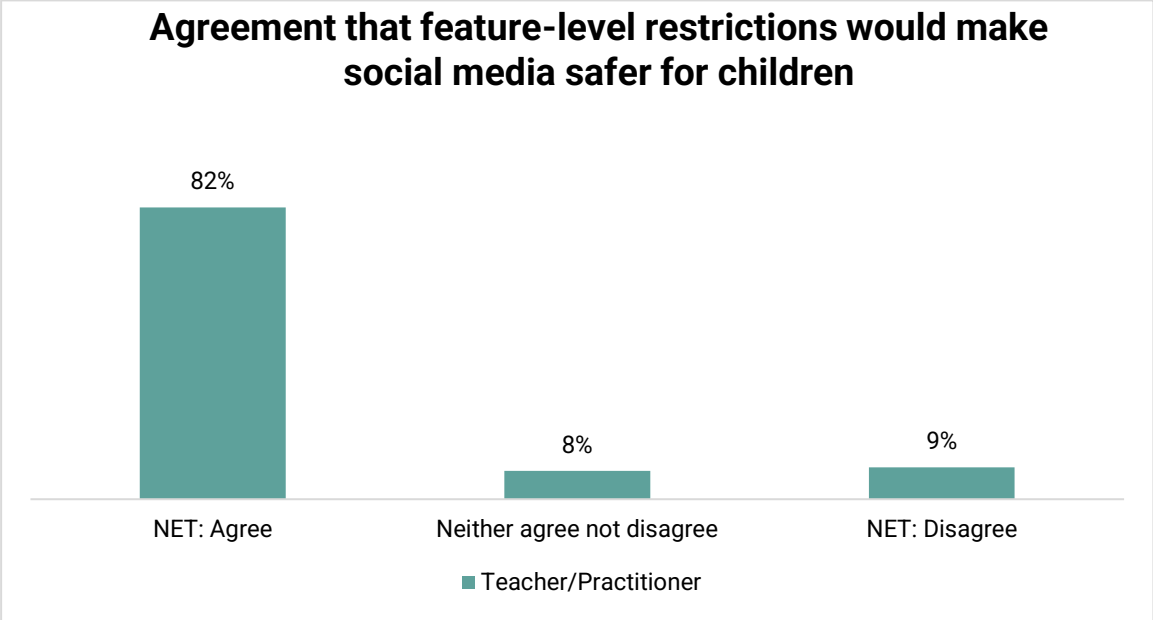



***Figure 17:*** *Sample size: n = 2,234 | Base = All respondents from the teacher and practitioner survey | Q16 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree that restricting children's access to types of features/functionalities would provide for a safer online experience for children?" (Single choice) | Stacked bar chart | Source: Savanta teacher and practitioner survey*

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%).

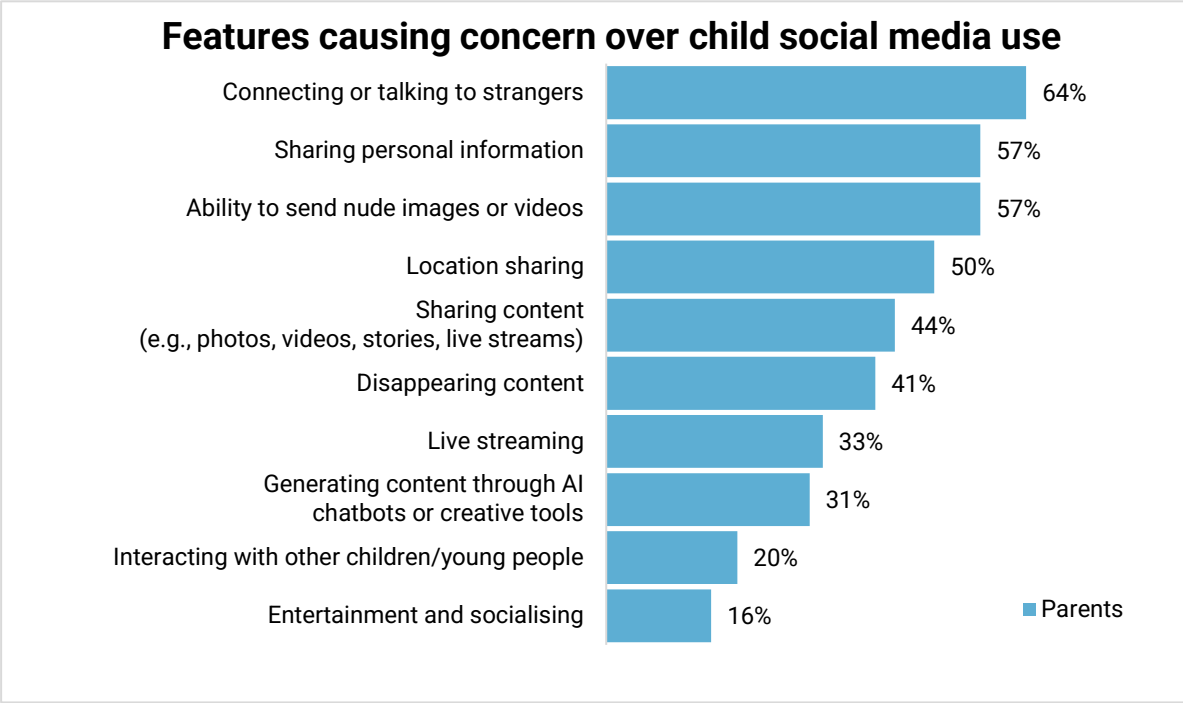



***Figure 18:*** *Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = All parents from the panel survey | Q14 = "Which, if any, of the following features/functions cause you to worry about your children using social media?" (Multiple choice)*

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%).

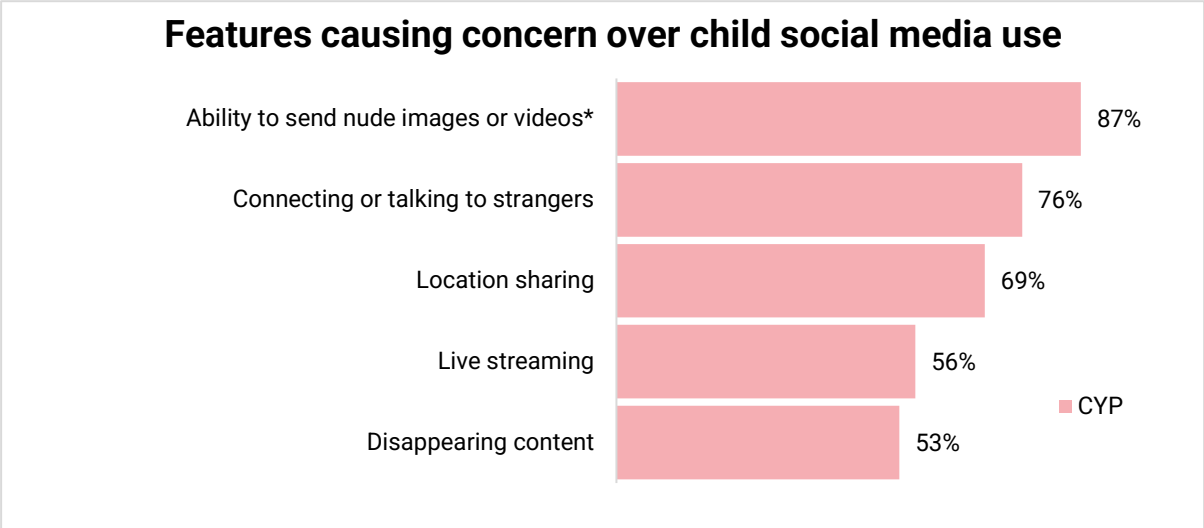



***Figure 19:*** *Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q19 = "Social media platforms let people do the below things. Which, if any, of these things should be blocked for people under 16?" (Multiple choice) | * Option only shown to CYP aged 16–21*

## Qualitative evidence: deliberative youth Hack events

The strong survey support for feature-level restrictions was given granular, platform-specific detail in the deliberative youth Hack events. Young people discussed social media feature by feature and age by age, and their analysis reflected a digitally sophisticated user base capable of engaging substantively with platform design questions.

**What should be kept:** Connection with friends through peer-to-peer messaging, group chats and knowing what friends are doing was the most consistently protected feature across every event and age group. It was described as valuable and something worth protecting even if it meant accepting trade-offs elsewhere. Access to news and current events was particularly important for older participants. Access to communities built around shared interests such as niche fandoms, gaming communities, music scenes and study groups were also highlighted among all groups.

**What needs to be fixed – algorithms:** Most participants did not want to get rid of algorithms entirely but wanted more user control over what they see and more transparency about how they work. The concept of a 'content slider' that allows users to adjust the balance of content types in their feed was proposed in Brighton. Greater transparency about why specific content is being recommended was also requested.

**What needs to be fixed – comment sections:** The dominant ask was for proper, consistent moderation, with conversations around using AI to detect and remove harmful content in real time. Suggestions included AI-assisted filtering of harmful language, only mutual connections having the ability to comment on each other's posts, and applying the same content standards to comments as to videos.

**What needs to be fixed – likes:** The most commonly proposed change was to hide the public like count by default, or to remove it altogether. The feature was seen as designed for comparison and competition, not genuine connection.

> ***'Remove the like feature - then the need for validation will be eradicated and less people will post on social media apps'***
>
> *Written by young person at the Ipswich Hack*

**What should be replaced or removed:** Autoplay and infinite scroll were mentioned across all events as aspects of social media that were seen as addictive, harmful and needing to be removed. These were distinguished from social media itself: CYP were not calling for the removal of platforms, but for the removal of the design choices that make them addictive. Age-inappropriate advertising was also consistently identified as warranting removal, with several young people at the Gloucester Hack having described being served adverts for explicit games or adult content with no apparent mechanism to prevent this. AI-generated accounts and bots were flagged as features that should be removed from social media altogether, with the major concern being the use of AI accounts to amplify content and spread misinformation.

> ***'Social media companies finally cracked down on inappropriate content due to backlash from members of the community'***
>
> *Written as an aspirational headline by young people at the Gloucester Hack*

# 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. The teacher and practitioner survey closely tracks the panel parent picture on both persuasive features and time-based controls, with 93% of teachers and practitioners supporting at least one time-based restriction. The qualitative evidence reinforces the survey findings on both themes: algorithms and infinite scroll are the single most discussed concern across all events and age groups, and the deliberative evidence provides important insight into why young people prefer platform-level enforcement over individual controls.

**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: content recommendation algorithms appear in the top three rankings of 63% of parents, followed by autoplay (56%) and infinite scrolling (54%); affirmation features 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 consultation respondents are particularly focused on algorithmic design as a driver of extended use.

The teacher and practitioner survey shows an almost identical ranking of persuasive features to parents from the panel survey. Content recommendation algorithms rank first in the top three for 70% of respondents, followed by infinite scrolling (62%), autoplay (55%), affirmation features (48%) and alerts and push notifications (40%). This ordering matches the panel parent ranking closely, and the similarity across a professional sample with direct classroom and practitioner experience provides further corroboration that algorithmic personalisation is seen as the primary driver of children's extended use.

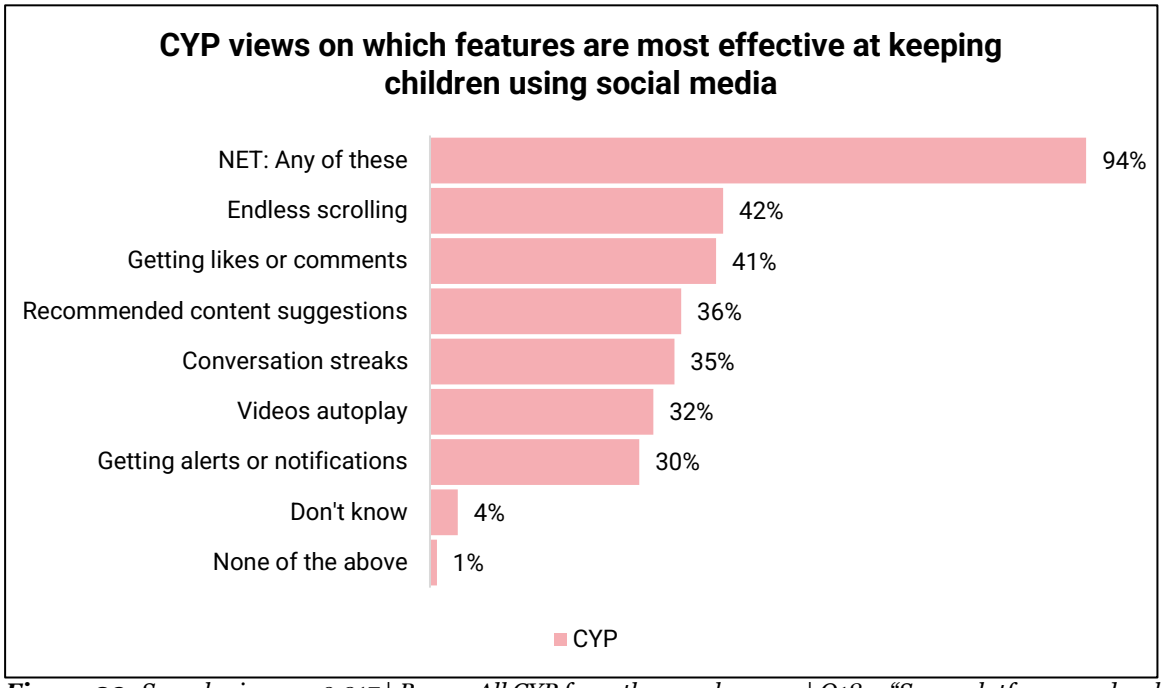



***Figure 20:*** *Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q18 = "Some platforms and websites have features that can make you want to keep using them for longer. Which, if any, of the things below do you think make children want to keep using social media?" (Multiple choice)*

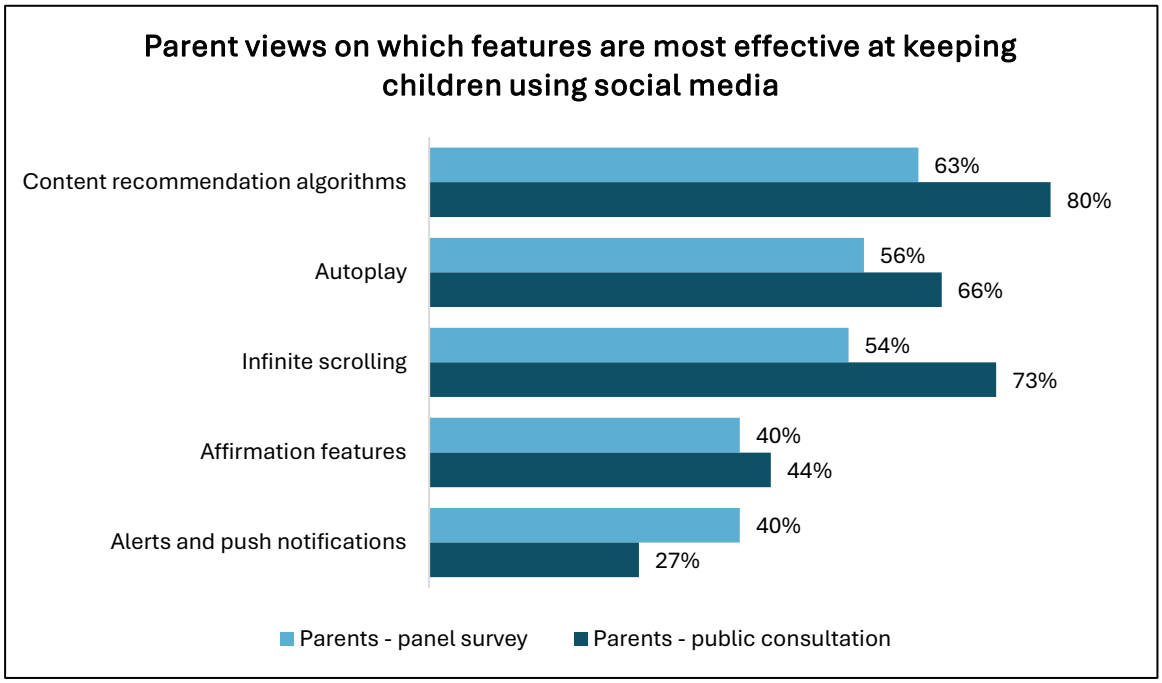



***Figure 21:*** *Sample sizes: Parents from the panel survey (n = 5,010); Parents from the public consultation (n = 39,116) | Base = Parents | Q18 = "The following platform design features are sometimes known as 'persuasive'... From the following list, please select and rank the three features you think are most 'persuasive' to children" (Rank 1–3 question)*

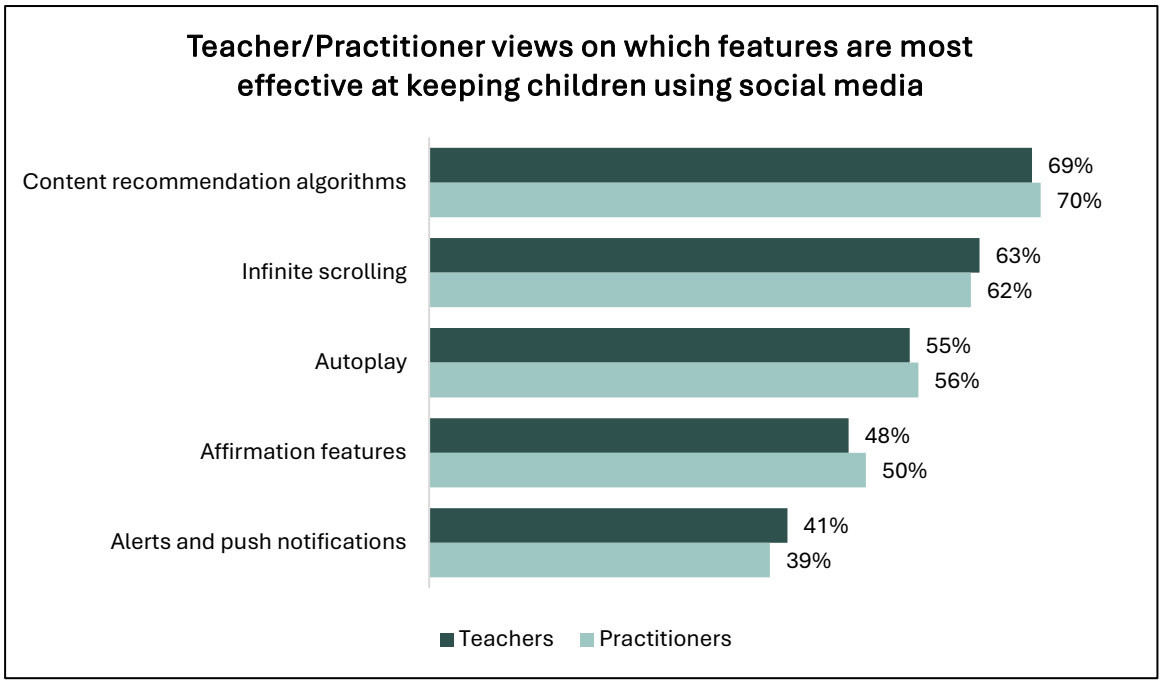



***Figure 22:*** *Sample size: n = 2,234 | Base = All respondents from the teacher and practitioner survey | Q18 = "From the following list, please select and rank the three features you think are most 'persuasive' to children" (Rank 1–3 question) | Ranked top-3 bar chart | Source: Savanta teacher and practitioner survey*

Support for time-based controls is high across both parents and CYP from the representative surveys and public consultation. 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 (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), consistent with their more pro-access view. Within the panel, CYP support for time-based controls rises significantly with age: 87% of panel CYP aged 16-21 back at least one of these measures, compared with 82% of 10-12s and 80% of 13-15s.

Time-based controls command even stronger support among teachers and practitioners than among any other survey group. In the teacher and practitioner survey, 78% support daily screen time limits for individual apps and 73% support restricting overnight access, with 93% supporting at least one. This is the highest net figure across all five survey sources, and it holds consistently across both teachers (94%) and youth practitioners (92%), with a small but statistically significant gap between the two sub-groups on the net measure.

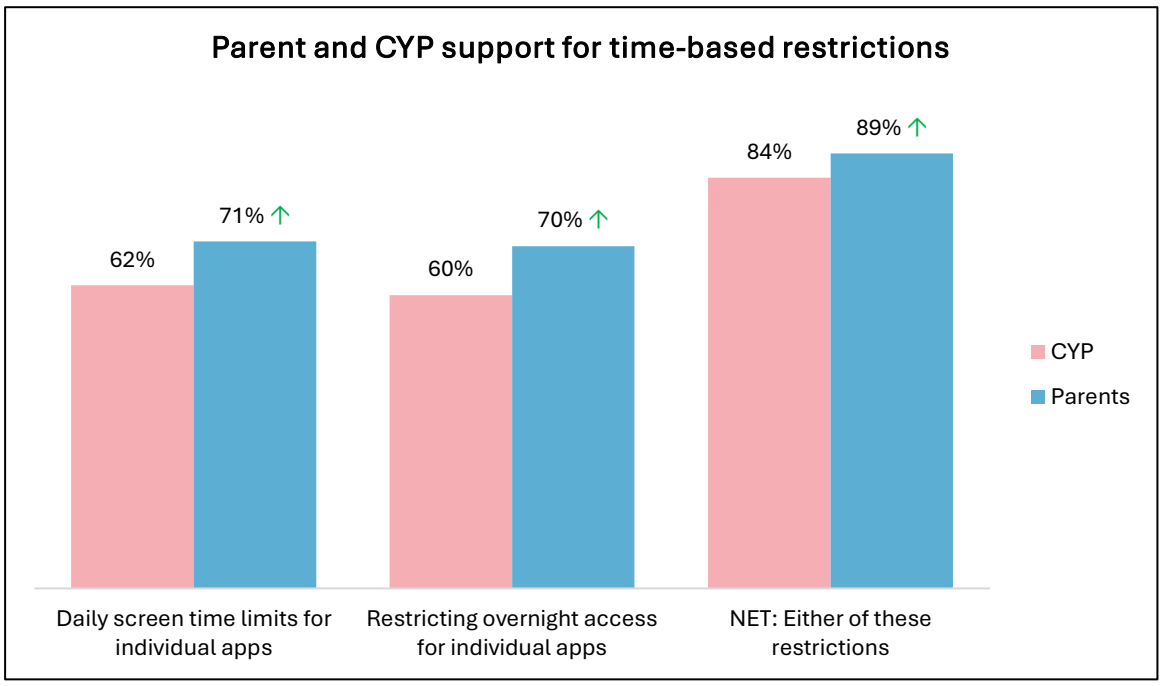



***Figure 23:*** *Sample sizes: Parents (n = 5,010); CYP (n = 9,017) | Base = All respondents from the panel survey | Q21 = "Here are some ways that apps and websites could be limited for children. Would you or would you not support any of these?" (Multiple choice) | Significance Level: 95% | Significantly different between parents and CYP*

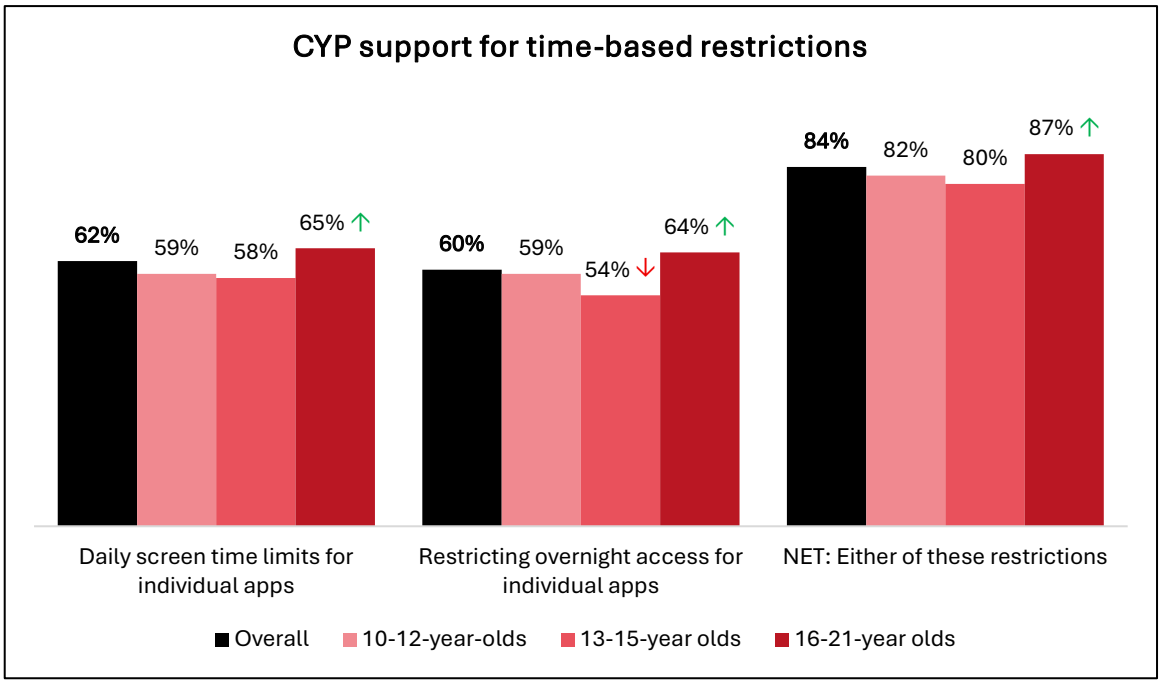



***Figure 24:*** *Sample size: n = 9,017 | Base = All CYP from the panel survey | Q21 = "Here are some ways that apps and websites could be limited for children. Would you or would you not support any of these?" (Multiple choice) | Significance Level: 95% | Significantly different from all ages*

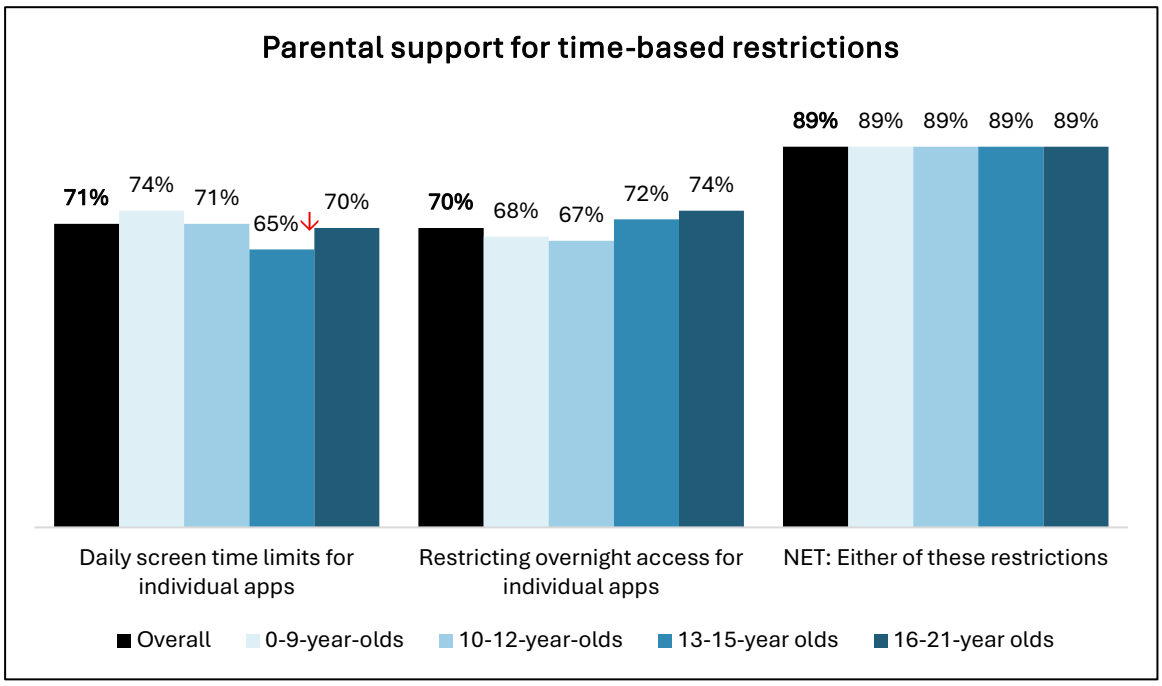



***Figure 25:*** *Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = Parents from the panel survey | Q21 = "Here are some ways that apps and websites could be limited for children. Would you or would you not support any of these?" (Multiple choice) | | Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from all ages*

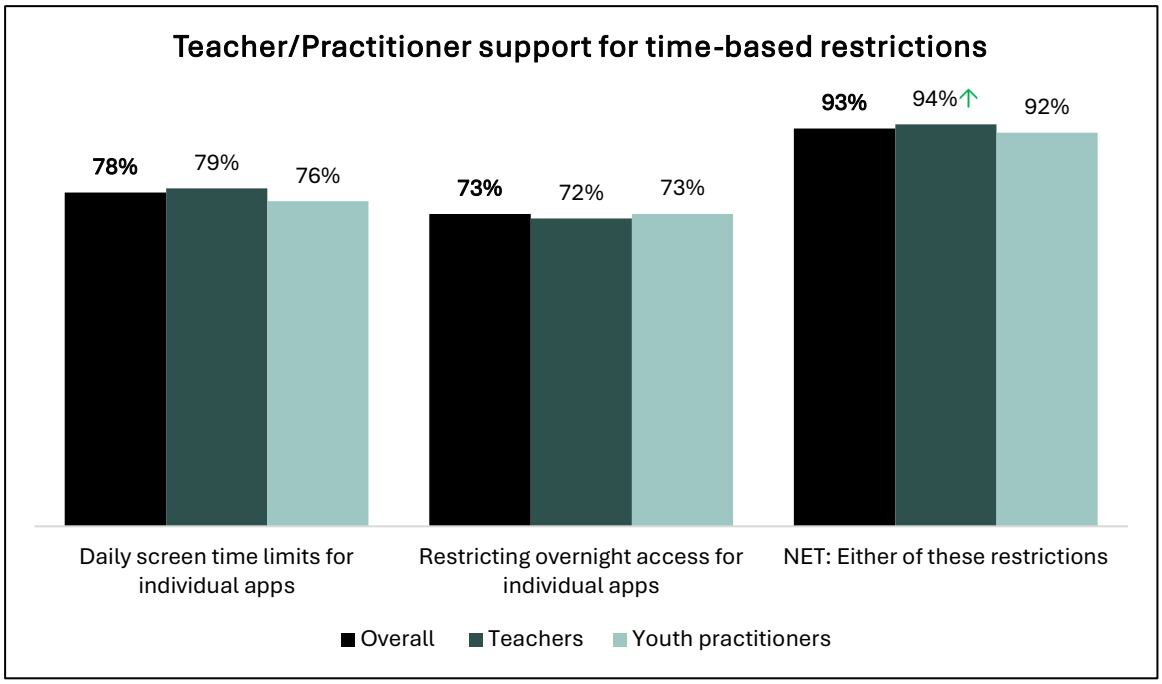



***Figure 26:*** *Sample size: n = 2,234 | Base = All respondents from the teacher and practitioner survey | Q21 = "Which, if any, of the following restrictions to children's access to online platforms would you support?" (Multiple choice) | Grouped bar chart; teacher vs youth practitioner sub-groups shown | Source: Savanta teacher and practitioner survey| Significance Level: 95% | ↑↓ Significantly different from other group*

## Qualitative evidence: deliberative youth Hack events

The qualitative evidence from the deliberative youth Hack events maps directly onto both the persuasive design and time-based control findings from the survey data, and provides important insight into why young people strongly prefer platform-level enforcement over individual or family-level controls.

Young people across the deliberative sessions were sceptical that existing self-management tools, such as screen time limits or app reminders, were enough to change behaviour. Many described simply ignoring them, and argued that the problem lies less with individual discipline than with platform design. Instead, they favoured measures built into the platform itself, particularly enforced breaks that apply to all users at the same time, reducing the social penalty of logging off. In Caerphilly, this took a particularly concrete form: a proposal for a hard stop after 100 videos, followed by a compulsory hour offline, with no override except for educational content.

Views on algorithms varied by age. Older teenagers were more likely to describe themselves as having learned how to manage their feeds by shaping what they engage with, and therefore felt they had some control over what the algorithm showed them. Younger children were less confident of this, and more likely to describe the feed as something that happened to them rather than something they could influence. In both Gloucester and Caerphilly, some said they continued to see unwanted content even when they actively signalled disinterest.

On the question of content moderation, the demand was consistent across the programme. Themes included misogynistic and radicalising content, AI-generated misinformation and deepfakes, and inappropriate advertising served to underage users. Some groups proposed using AI as a moderation tool for comment sections, combined with a three-strike ban system.

> ***'AI Clears Out Bullying on Social Media for Under 16s'***
>
> *Written as an aspirational headline by young people at the Caerphilly Hack*

Media literacy emerged as a consistent demand, viewed by many participants not as a supplement to regulation but as a condition for it to be effective. The content that young people wanted to learn about included how algorithms work, how to identify misinformation and disinformation, how to spot AI-generated content, and what their data rights are. Several groups in the older age ranges called for media literacy to be embedded in the formal school curriculum at secondary level.

> ***'Media literacy. Educating people on how to spot misinformation.'***
>
> *Written by young person at the Ipswich Hack*

# Section 8: AI chatbots – benefits, risks and restrictions

**Summary:** Across the questions tested, parents from the panel survey and CYP from the panel survey aged 16-21 show a 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. The teacher and practitioner survey adds an important professional lens: teachers and practitioners frequently observe children treating AI as human-like, are broadly divided about whether AI is improving outcomes or building independence and are almost unanimous in their support for AI restrictions. The qualitative strand adds further depth: AI emerges as a major unprompted theme across the deliberative youth Hack events, and young people articulate technically informed concerns about misinformation, deepfakes, over-reliance, and the environmental cost of AI. The most consistently proposed practical measure across the deliberative youth Hack events is mandatory labelling of AI-generated content.

**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%). CYP rate companionship-related benefits more highly than parents do (22% of 16-21s), although this remains a lower-tier benefit overall.

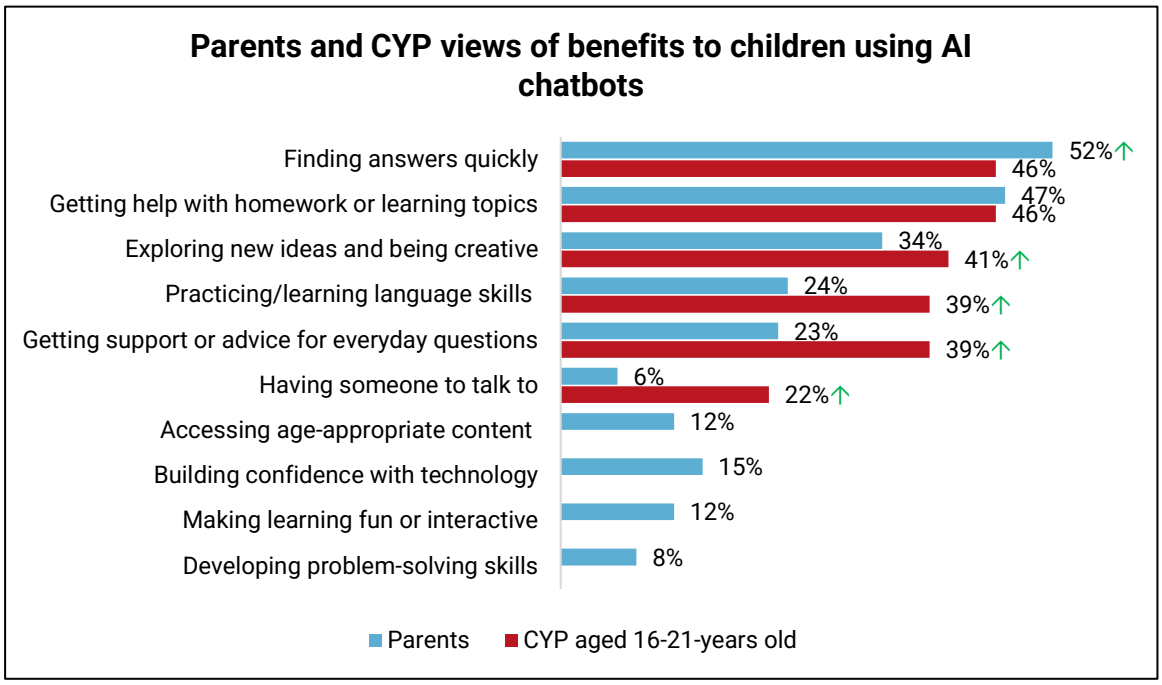


***Figure 27:*** *Sample sizes: Parents n = 5,010; CYP aged 16–21 n = 4,550 | Base = Respondents from the panel survey | Q26 = "What do you think are the benefits of children using AI chatbots?" (Rank 1–3 question)*

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%). 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.

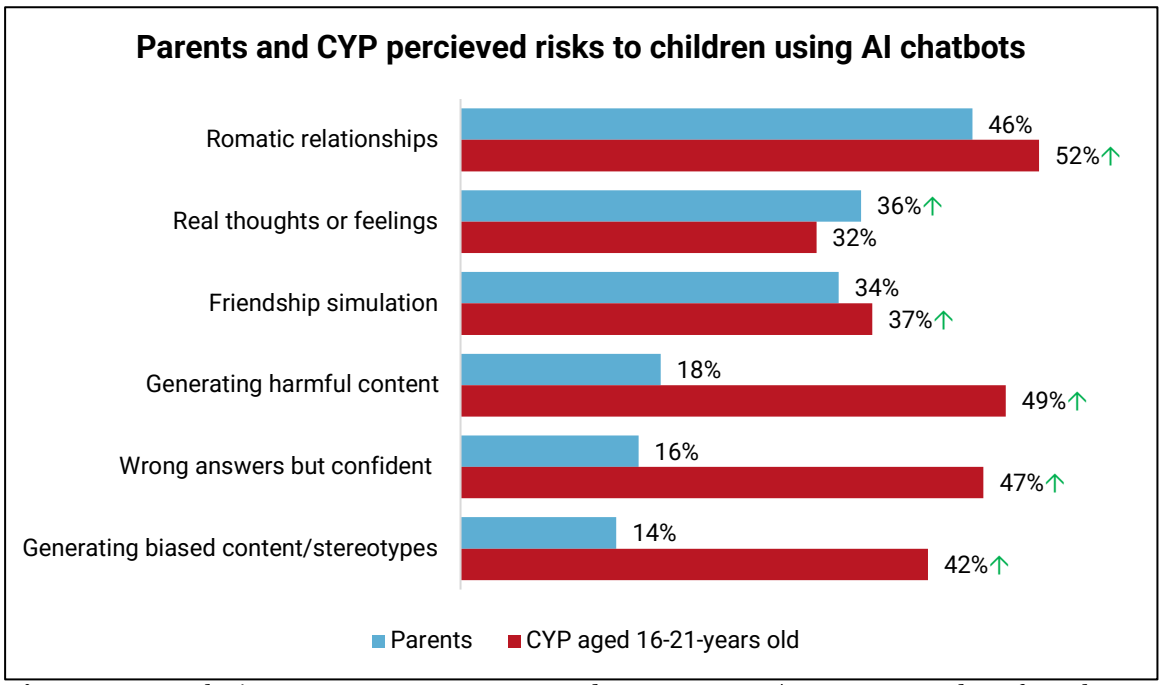



***Figure 28:*** *Sample sizes: Parents n = 5,010; CYP aged 16–21 n = 4,550 | Base = Respondents from the panel survey | Q27 = "Which AI chatbot features do you think are most risky for children?" (Rank 1–3 question for parents; multicode for CYP aged 16-21)*

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 (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.

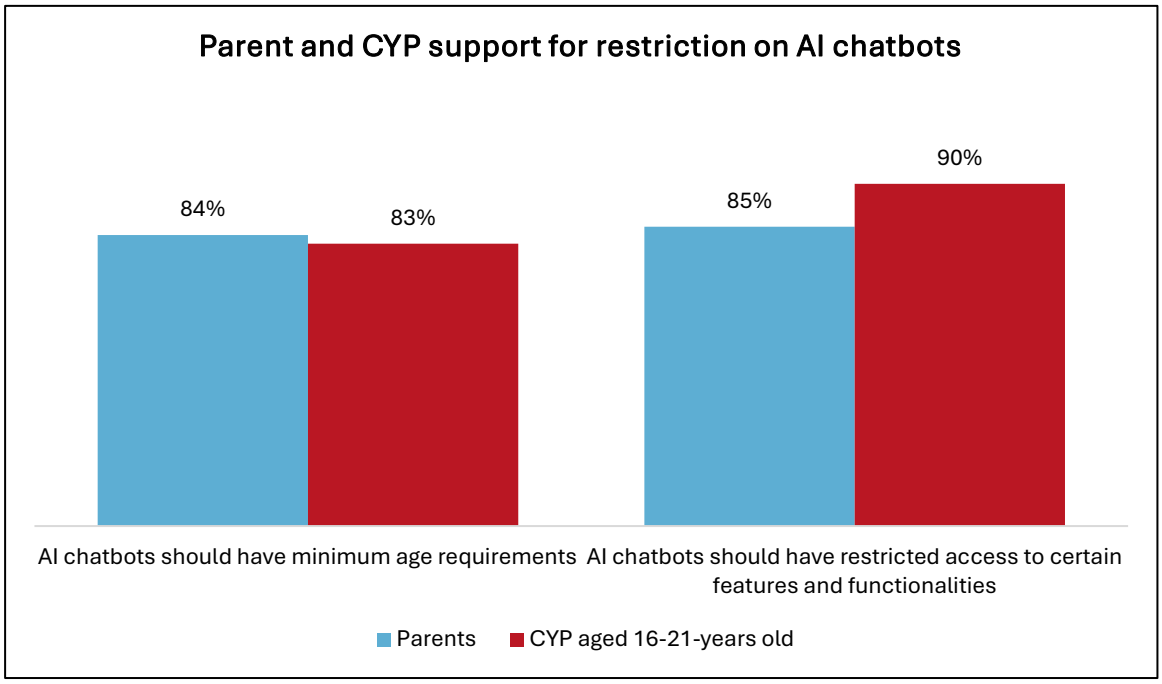



***Figure 29:*** *Sample sizes: Parents n = 5,010; CYP aged 16–21 n = 4,550 | Base = Respondents from the panel survey | Q29 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree that...? AI chatbots should have minimum age requirements / AI chatbots should have restricted access to certain features and functionalities" (Single choice each)*

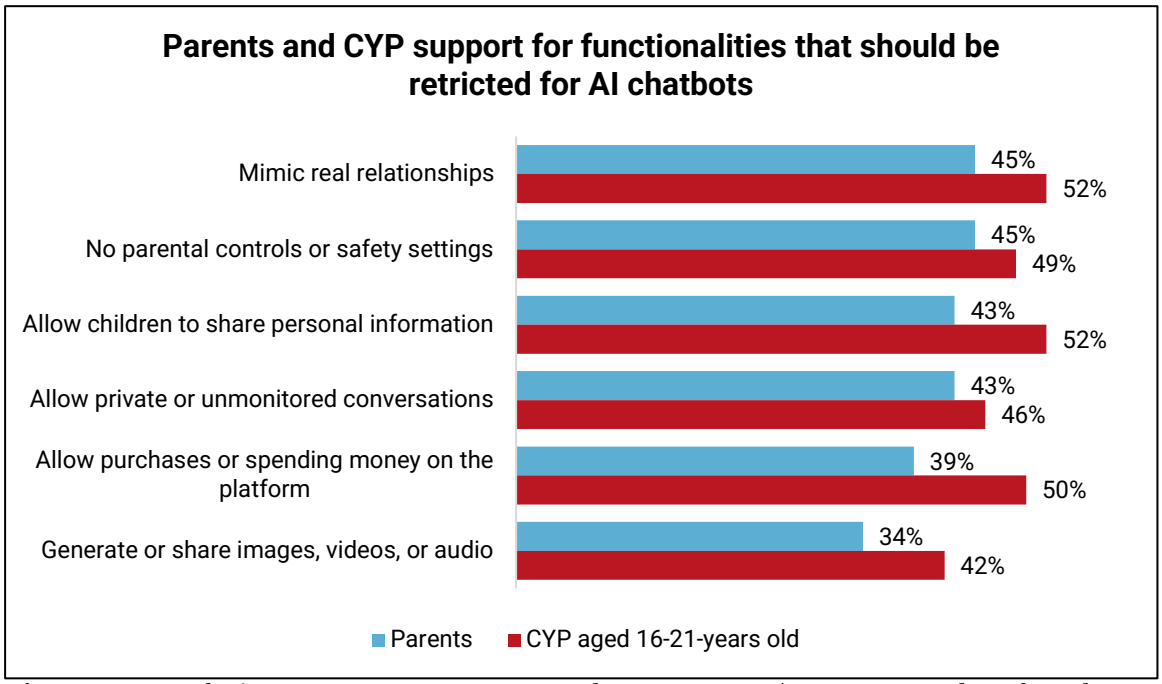



***Figure 30:*** *Sample sizes: Parents n = 5,010; CYP aged 16–21 n = 4,550 | Base = Respondents from the panel survey | Q28 = "Which functionalities of AI chatbots do you think restrictions should apply to?" (Multiple choice)*

## Teacher and practitioner perspectives on AI chatbots

The teacher and practitioner survey had some specific questions only asked to that audience and adds a distinctive professional dimension to the AI findings. In the teacher and practitioner survey, 71% of respondents think children are using AI tools very or quite frequently. Among teaching staff with direct classroom responsibilities, 57% estimate that their pupils use AI tools for classroom work or homework frequently or very frequently, and only 3% say this never happens.

On the overall impact of AI, the view is mixed, 37% of teachers and practitioners agree that AI has a positive impact on outcomes for children and young people, with 35% disagreeing and 27% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. The question on which teaching staff are clearest is the need for additional support: 69% of those with teaching responsibilities agree that using AI tools in the classroom requires additional input to ensure children and young people use them correctly.

A further concern visible only in the teacher and practitioner data relates to children treating AI as human-like. When asked how often they observe children engaging with AI in a way that suggests they view it as real or human-like, 47% of school staff say they have seen this very often or frequently. Among youth practitioners asked the same question, 49% give the same response. Fewer than one in eight in either group say they have never observed this behaviour. This professional observation provides direct empirical grounding for the relationship-simulation risks identified by parents and older CYP in the AI risk-ranking questions, and suggests the concern is not merely hypothetical.

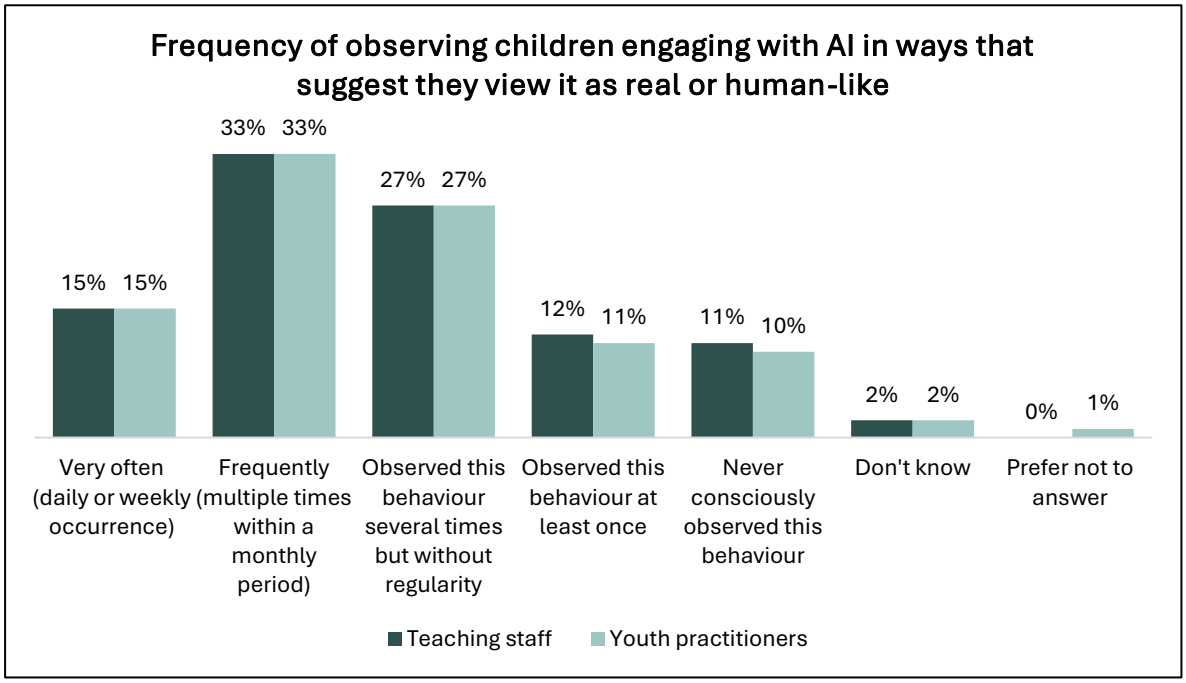



***Figure 31:*** *Sample sizes: Teaching staff n = 1,218; Youth practitioners n = 1,016 | Base = All teaching staff (NQ6); All youth practitioners (NQ31) | NQ6/NQ31 = Frequency of observing children engaging with AI in a way that suggests they view it as real or human-like | Grouped frequency bar chart; teachers and practitioners shown side by side | Source: Savanta teacher and practitioner survey*

On AI tools' impact on the independence of children's learning, the teacher and practitioner survey shows a predominantly negative professional assessment. In the teacher and practitioner

survey, 43% say AI tools are having a somewhat or very negative impact on children and young people's independence in learning, compared with only 30% who say the impact is positive. There is no statistically significant difference between teachers and youth practitioners on this question.

Despite mixed views about AI's impacts, support for AI restrictions among teachers and practitioners is very strong and closely matches the panel parent picture. In the teacher and practitioner survey, 85% agree that AI chatbots should have minimum age requirements (56% strongly) and 86% agree they should have restricted access to certain features and functionalities (56% strongly). The features teachers and practitioners most often identify as warranting restriction are those giving harmful, inappropriate or biased content (51%), those that mimic real relationships (51%), those that allow children to share personal information (48%), those with no parental controls or safety settings (48%) and those allowing private or unmonitored conversations (46%).

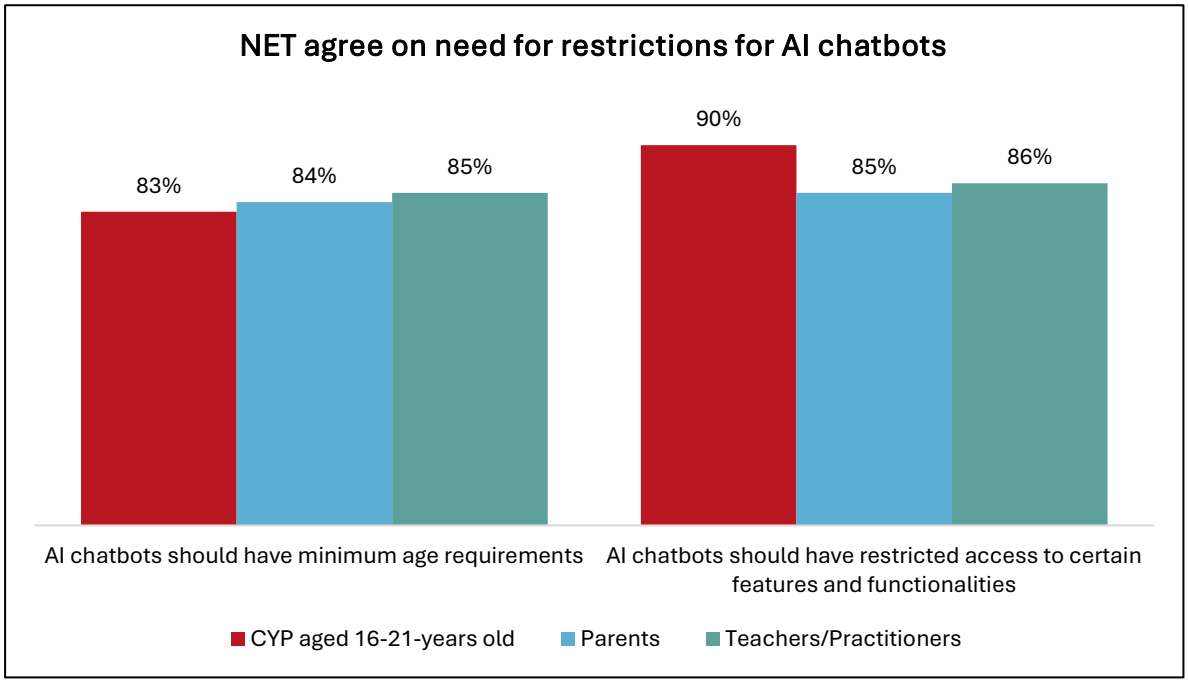



***Figure 32:*** *Sample size: n = 2,234 | Base = All respondents from the teacher and practitioner survey | Q29 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree that…? AI chatbots should have minimum age requirements / AI chatbots should have restricted access to certain features and functionalities" | Grouped NET agree bar chart comparing teacher and practitioner survey, panel parents, and panel CYP 16–21 | Source: Savanta teacher and practitioner survey*

## Qualitative evidence: deliberative youth Hack events

AI emerged as one of the most prominent themes across the qualitative research programme, and in many sessions was mentioned more frequently than social media itself, though children recognise that the two are in many ways interconnected. Discussions on AI arose organically, without prompting, across all age groups and locations.

**Misinformation, deepfakes, and the erosion of trust:** The most widely and consistently raised concern about AI was the inability to trust what one sees online, due to misinformation

and disinformation, deepfakes and AI-generated videos and images that are indistinguishable from authentic content. Across the Ipswich and Gloucester sessions, older participants distinguished between misinformation (false content spread without intent to deceive) and disinformation (deliberate propaganda), identifying the latter as a more serious structural problem requiring government and platform intervention. The connection with AI was its use in the creation and wider dissemination of this disinformation, which they saw as linked directly to the radicalisation concern raised more broadly around algorithmic design.

> ***'Risk of someone developing an extremist view without being educated on the opposing side'***
>
> *Young person at the Ipswich Hack*

**AI in schools and the use of AI by young people:** A parallel theme was the widespread use of AI tools by CYP themselves for schoolwork, including generating past papers, drafting essays and answering questions. CYP were largely aware of both uses and the ethical distinction between them, though this awareness did not always translate into restraint. A notable tension emerged between heavy personal use of AI and genuine concern about its effects. Several groups called for specific AI literacy to form part of formal education: guidance on how to use AI tools responsibly, how to evaluate their outputs, and how to understand the sources they draw on. A further strand to this is the comparison drawn between teacher and children's use of AI, across sessions, there was a perception among CYP that their teachers used AI for lesson planning and any restrictions on their own use would feel hypocritical if teachers could still use it in the educational context.

> ***'Teaching how to use AI tools responsibly'***
>
> *Written by young person at the Newcastle Hack*

**AI as a tool for good:** Despite the widespread concern, CYP across the Hacks also identified genuine and valued uses for AI. Using AI to detect and remove harmful comments, videos and accounts was widely proposed. A group in Newcastle developed the idea of a government-backed AI health tool drawing only on NHS-approved sources, recognising pragmatically that CYP are already using AI to ask about health concerns and that improving those tools may be more achievable than replacing them. There was also consistent recognition of AI's value for disabled users, language translation, educational support and accessibility.

> ***'Helpful (for people with disabilities, document writing) keeping translation abilities and accessibility features for disabled and foreign-language users'***
>
> *Written by young people at the Caerphilly Hack*

**The environmental dimension:** A distinctive strand of AI critique across CYP, most developed in Caerphilly and Newcastle, was the environmental impact of AI. The water consumption required to cool data centres was raised repeatedly, representing a dimension of young people's concerns about AI that was distinct from the safety, misinformation and wellbeing harms that dominated wider discussions.

> ***'AI is polluting our environment day by day. The amount of water used to cool down the systems is unimaginable.'***
>
> *Written by young people at the Caerphilly Hack*

**Mandatory AI labelling as a demand:** Across all the AI concerns raised, the single most consistently proposed practical measure was mandatory labelling of AI-generated content through watermarks on images, videos and written content, so that people always know what they are looking at. This was seen as important in a media landscape that for CYP feels increasingly difficult to navigate.

> ***'AI watermark mandatory by law I can now use social media confidently, knowing AI content is highlighted to me'***
>
> *Written as an aspirational headline by young people at the Newcastle Hack*

# Section 9: Age assurance – support and potential outcomes

**Summary:** Findings from the panel surveys, public consultation and teacher and practitioner survey show that support for age assurance is strong among parents and professionals, while views among CYP aged 16-21 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, and a majority also back universal age checks for VPN access. The teacher and practitioner survey closely matches the parent panel picture on both measures. Among CYP aged 16-21, the panel survey suggests many recognise the intended safety benefits of age checks, while respondents to the public consultation are more sceptical. CYP from the panel survey broadly accept parental oversight of which services they can access, but trust in government and technology companies to set standards is low. The qualitative evidence, drawn from across the deliberative programme, adds important context: young people broadly accept the need for more robust age verification but are sceptical about whether it can be effectively implemented, and a minority raise data privacy concerns.

**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.

The majority of parents from the panel survey also back VPN-specific age checks. Around seven in ten (69%) agree that everyone should go through age checks to access a VPN if it would prevent children using them, with 42% strongly agreeing. Support is higher among parents from the public consultation: 77% agree, with 63% strongly agreeing. The data on VPN use among children gives this additional context: among parents with a child aged 10-15, 11% from the panel survey say they know their child has used a VPN, and a further 13% think they might have. Combined, this means around a quarter of parents are either aware of or suspect VPN use among their child, which points to the practical limits of age restrictions that can be bypassed through VPN access, and reinforces the case for age checks to apply at VPN level as well as platform level.

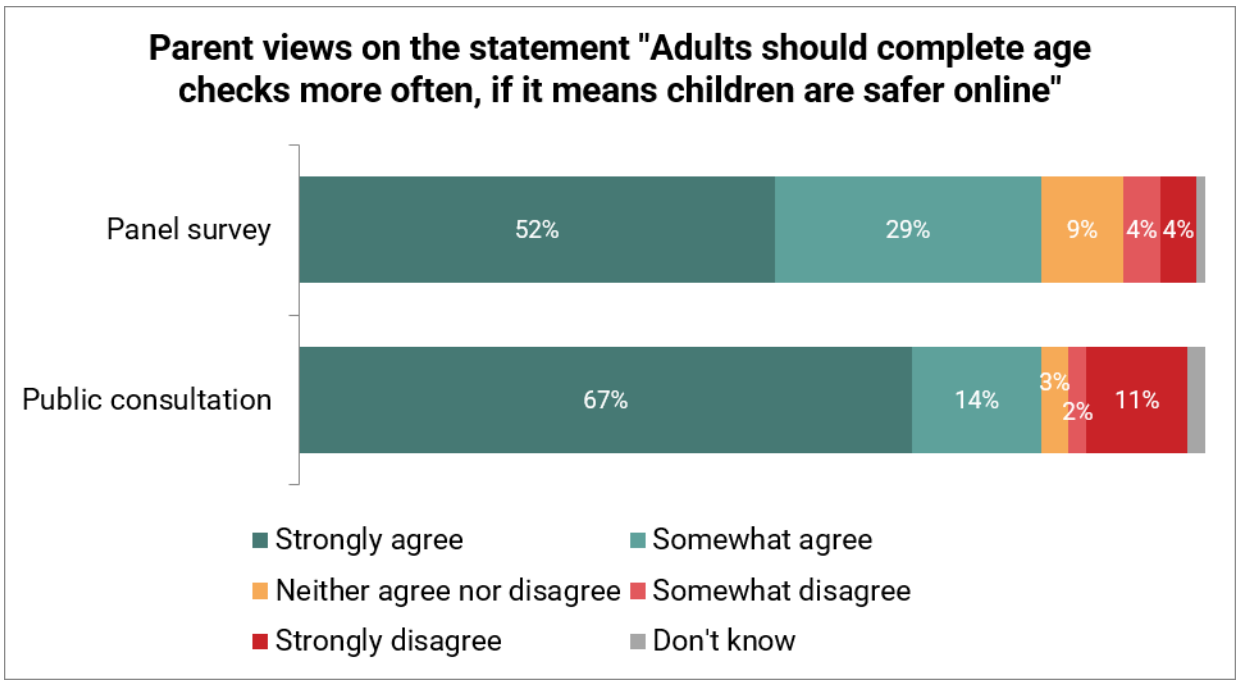



***Figure 33:*** *Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 5,010); Public consultation (n = 39,116) | Base = All parents | Q34 = "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'Adults should complete age checks more often, if it means children are safer online'" (Single choice)*

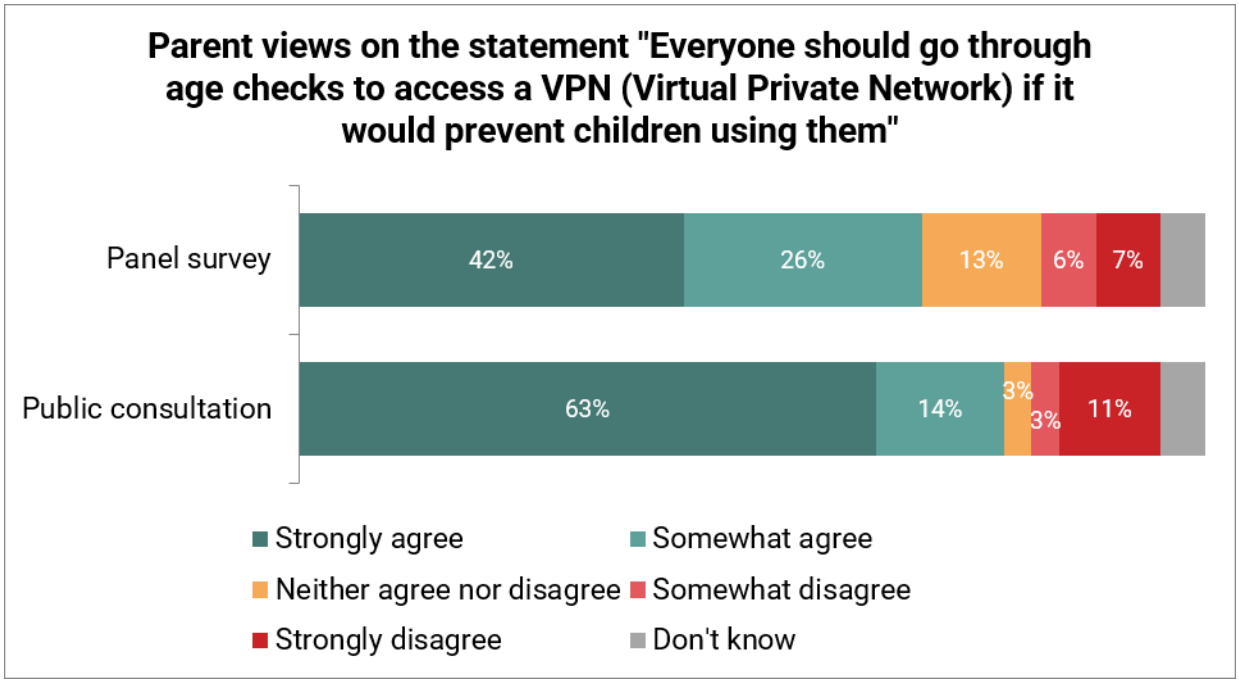
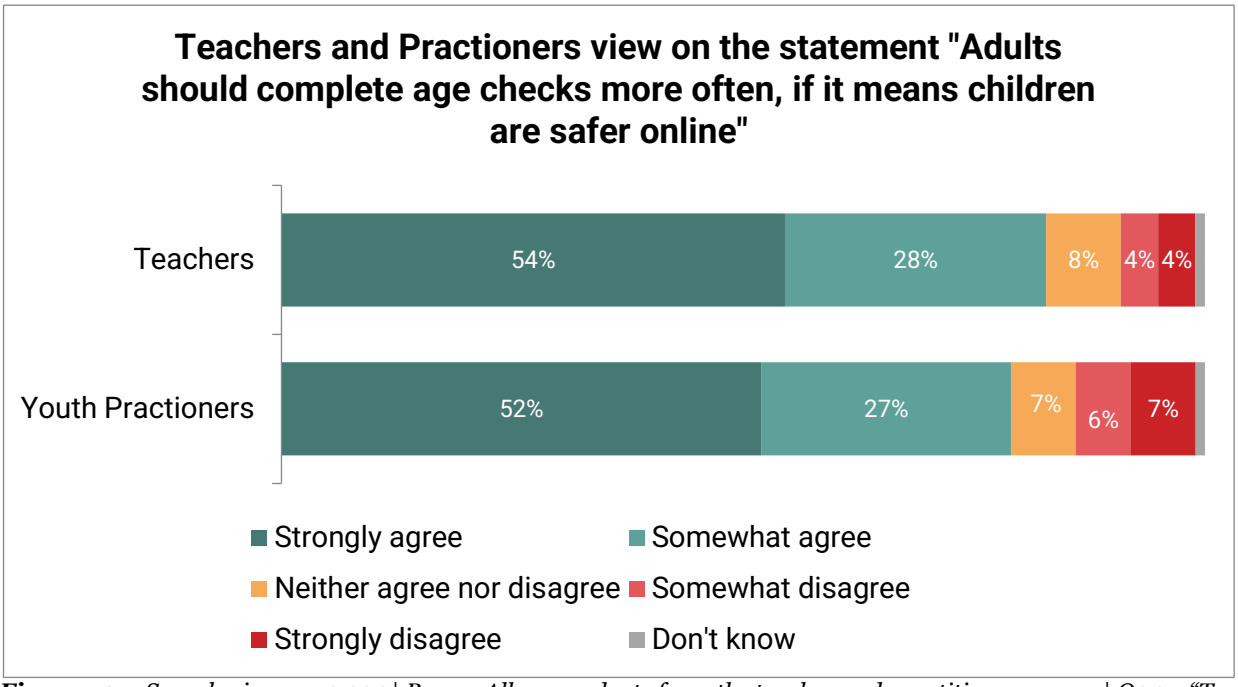



***Figure 34:*** *Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 5,010); Public consultation (n = 39,116) | Base = All parents | Q38 = "To what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'Everyone should go through age checks to access a VPN if it would prevent children using them'" (Single choice)*

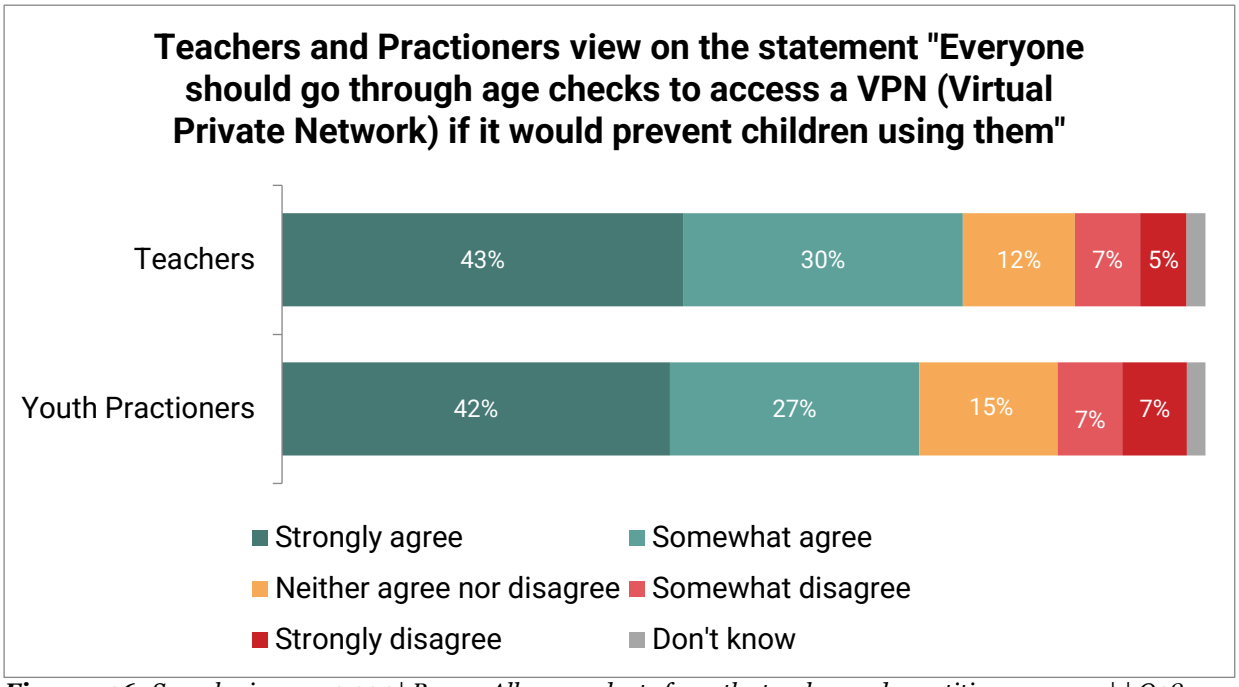
On the age of digital consent, 58% of parents from the panel survey say the UK digital consent age should be set at 16, with the remaining 35% spread across ages 13-15. This is consistent with the wider pattern of parental preference for a 16-year threshold across other questions in the

survey and suggests that the preferred minimum age is broadly stable across different but related policy questions.

The teacher and practitioner survey closely matches the parent panel picture on age checks. In the teacher and practitioner survey, 80% agree that adults should complete age checks more often if it means children are safer online (53% strongly agree), with only 10% disagreeing and no significant differences between the two audiences. On VPN age checks, 71% agree that everyone should go through age checks to access a VPN if it would prevent children using them, with teachers significantly more supportive than practitioners (74% vs 68%). On the age of digital consent, 55% of teachers and practitioners say the UK digital consent age should be set at 16, with the remaining 40% spread across ages 13-15.




***Figures 35:*** *Sample size: n = 2,234 | Base = All respondents from the teacher and practitioner survey | 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)*




***Figures 36:*** *Sample size: n = 2,234 | Base = All respondents from the teacher and practitioner survey | | Q38 = "To what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'Everyone should go through age checks to access a VPN if it would prevent children using them'" (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.

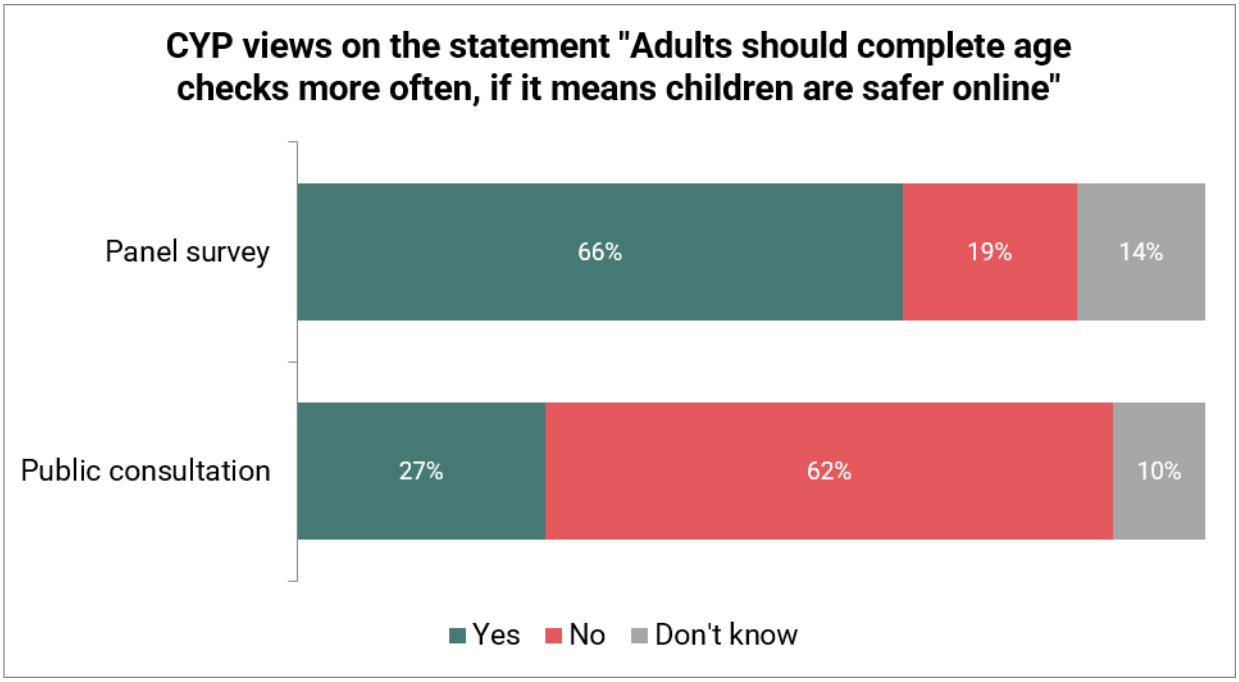



***Figure 37:*** *Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 4,981); Public consultation (n = 3,687) | Base = All CYP aged 16-21 | Q29 = "Do you think online companies checking people's ages would help keep you safer online?" (Single choice)*

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.

The public consultation paints a more cautious picture. 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, and 34% say children could be safer online. 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.

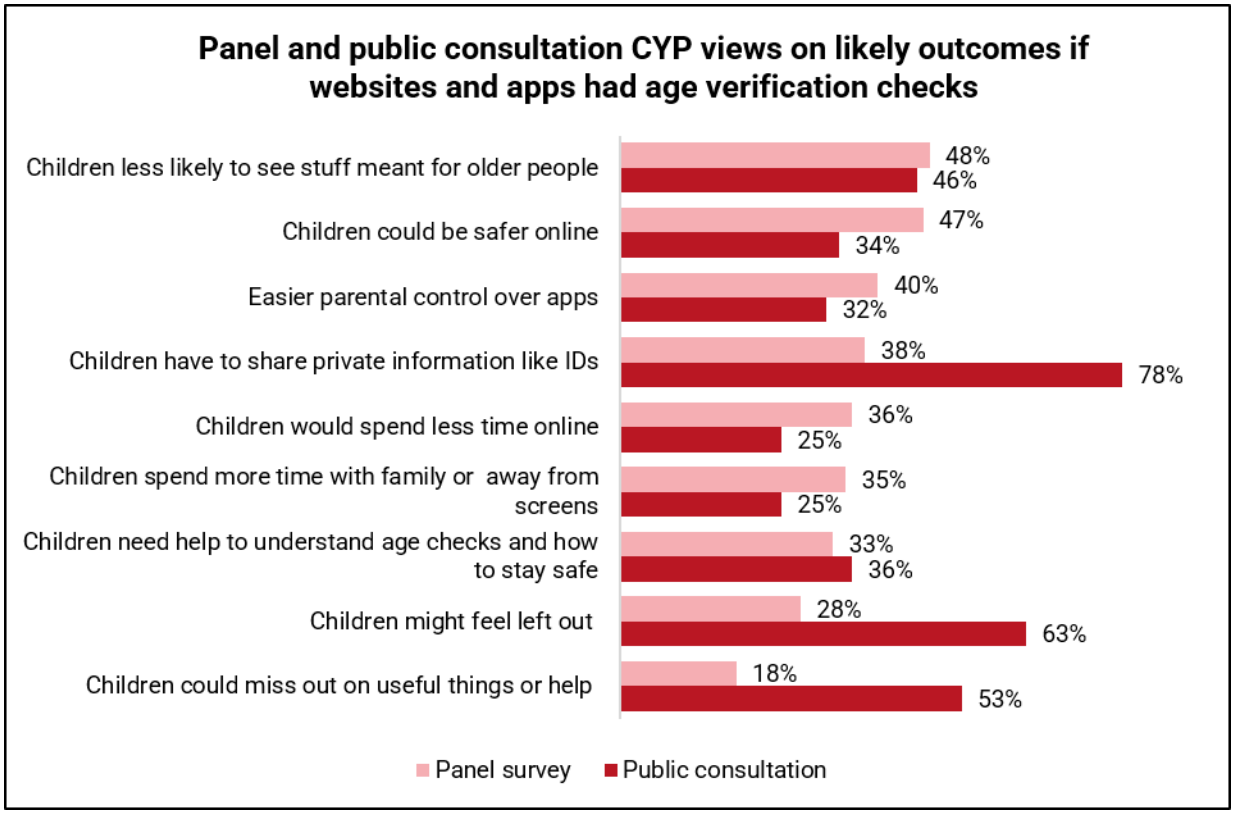



***Figure 38:*** *Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 4,981); Public consultation (n = 3,687) | Base = All CYP aged 16-21 | Q29 = "If websites and apps had to check how old you are before you can use them, what do you think would happen to children?" (Multiple choice)*

Alongside their views on age checks, CYP from the panel survey show broad acceptance of parental oversight as a mechanism for managing access to online services. Around two thirds (68%) agree that parents should have control over which services they are allowed to use, with agreement significantly higher among 10-12-year-olds (71%) than among 13-15-year-olds (64%) or 16-21-year-olds, pointing to a pattern of decreasing parental authority that is broadly

consistent with age-related expectations of autonomy. When asked who they trust to determine what is good, safe or positive online content for children, CYP aged 16-21 in the panel survey most often identify parents, carers or trusted adults (65%) and teachers (41%). Child development experts are trusted by 39% and regulators by 33%. Children and young people themselves are cited by 21%, while people from the government are the least trusted of any group listed, selected by only 19%. This low level of trust in government as a content arbiter is consistent with the wider scepticism about enforcement that runs through both the survey and qualitative evidence and suggests that the legitimacy of any regulatory intervention may depend partly on how it is designed and communicated to young people.

Overall, findings from the panel surveys, the public consultation and the teacher and practitioner survey suggest that age assurance is viewed by parents and professionals as a potentially important part of wider efforts to make the internet safer for children. The VPN data adds a practical dimension in that a substantial minority of parents are already aware of VPN use among their children, and strong majorities across all adult audiences support age checks at VPN level, not just at platform level. Among CYP, support for age assurance appears more conditional, and the success of any 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, particularly in the context of a low baseline of trust in government as a rule-setter.

## Qualitative evidence: deliberative youth Hack events

The qualitative evidence from the deliberative youth Hack events is consistent with the contested survey picture among CYP. Young people across the programme expressed notable openness to robust age verification, describing willingness to upload official identity documents including passports, birth certificates and government-issued ID to verify age before accessing platforms. This openness sat alongside scepticism about whether such systems could be made to work in practice. Existing verification mechanisms were consistently described as easy to circumvent, whether through parents logging in on behalf of their children or through technical workarounds.

A minority concern about data privacy and cybersecurity was also raised. One participant in Ipswich specifically flagged the vulnerability of government databases to Hacking:

> ***'I would advise against the use of ID through the government as the databases in which this information is stored can be easily hacked.'***
>
> *Young person at the Ipswich Hack*

The Caerphilly session proposed facial recognition combined with VPN-resistant verification as a more robust technical solution. The overarching finding from the qualitative strand on this theme was that young people wanted verification that works, and that their openness to stricter checks was real but conditional on meaningful implementation that feels more thorough than and distinct from existing measures that were viewed as easily bypassed.

# Section 10: Media and digital literacy

**Summary:** Across all four research streams, media and digital literacy emerges as an area where demand is strong and consistent, but where current provision does not fully meet it. Parents from the panel survey and the public consultation identify staying safe online and keeping personal information private as the areas where children most need extra help, with the parent panel placing government websites as the most trusted source of support. CYP from the panel survey prioritise similar areas but are more focused on personal information and online safety than on spotting AI-generated content, which they are least likely to rank highly. The teacher and practitioner survey shows that most schools currently deliver media literacy through assemblies rather than embedded curriculum teaching, and that while teaching staff are broadly confident in delivering existing content, more than half want professional development and updated curriculum guidance to do so more effectively. Qualitative evidence from the deliberative youth Hack events reinforces the demand for formal media literacy provision, with young people identifying it as a structural necessity rather than an optional addition to the curriculum, and calling specifically for content on algorithms, AI, misinformation and their own data rights.

**Findings:** Among parents from the panel survey, the areas of digital literacy where children and families most need extra help are led by staying safe online, including how to have conversations about online safety (32% rank in their top three), and keeping personal information private (also 32%), followed closely by reporting harmful or upsetting content (30%), and online behaviour and experiences such as bullying, respect and peer pressure (29%). Managing screen time and online habits (23%), checking if information is true (23%) and understanding possible consequences of online behaviour (24%) each attract around a quarter of panel parents placing them in their top three. Less commonly prioritised are spotting adverts, sponsored posts or AI-generated content (11%) and understanding how social media works, including likes and algorithms (15%). Parents from the public consultation show a similar pattern but with stronger overall levels: staying safe online leads at 46%, followed by online behaviour and experiences (42%), keeping personal information private (30%), understanding consequences of online behaviour (28%) and checking information is true (25%). The rank order across the two parent sources is broadly consistent, strengthening confidence that the priorities identified are not specific to either sample.

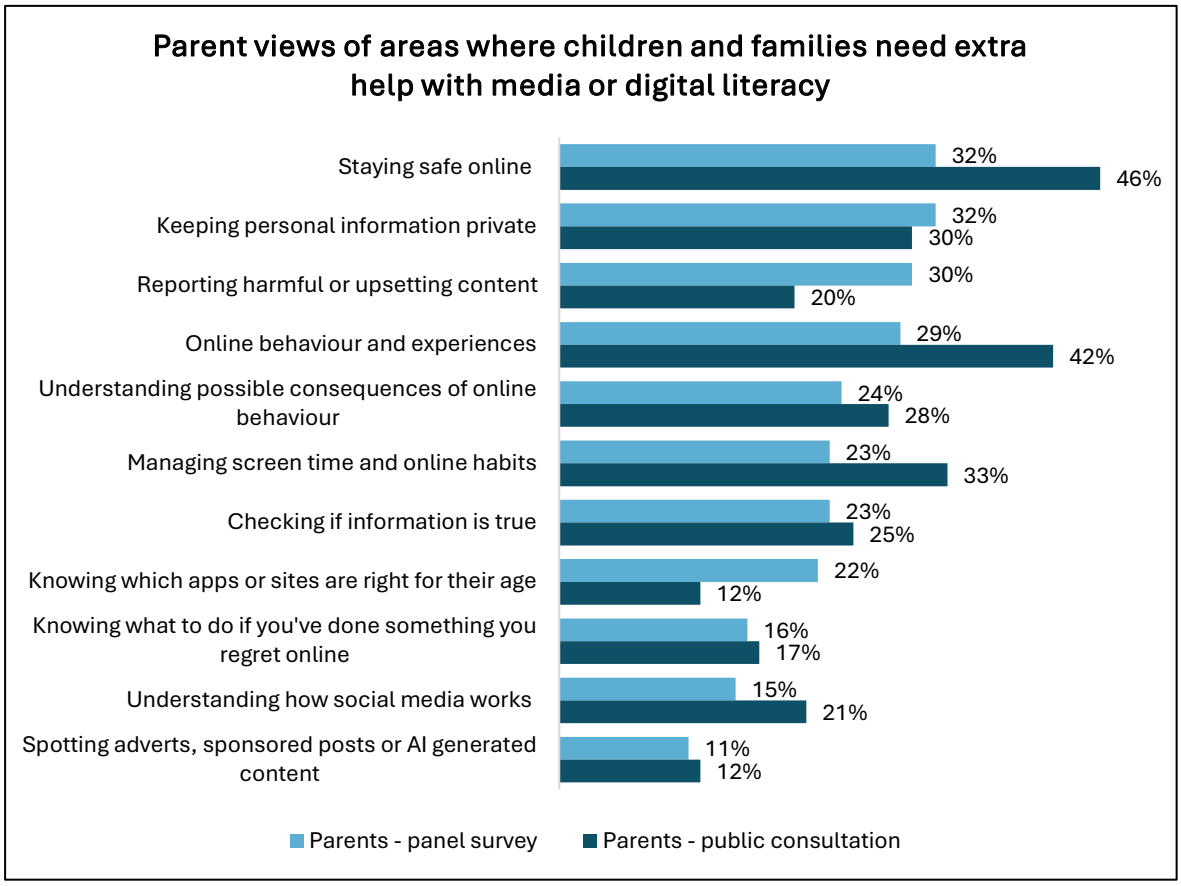



***Figure 39:*** *Sample sizes: Parents from the panel survey (n = 5,010); Parents from the public consultation (n = 39,116) | Base = Parents | Q42 = 'Which areas of media or digital literacy do children and families most need extra help with?' (Rank 1–3 question)*

CYP from the panel survey identify a broadly consistent set of priorities to parents, but with some differences in emphasis. Keeping personal information private is selected by 43% of panel CYP as one of the top three areas where children most need help, making it the highest-ranked item among this audience. Learning how to stay safe online and talk about online safety follows at 41%, and knowing how to behave online, including not bullying, being respectful and not feeling pressured, at 37%. Reporting anything upsetting or harmful online is cited by 34% and checking whether information is true or false by 29%. Managing screen time and not spending too long online is ranked by 28% of panel CYP. Notably, spotting adverts, sponsored posts or computer-made content is ranked by only 9% of panel CYP, the lowest-ranked item and a notable contrast to the qualitative evidence, which places concern about AI-generated content among the most prominent themes raised by young people at the deliberative events. CYP from the public consultation show higher absolute levels across most areas, led by keeping personal information private (51%), checking if information is true or false (45%) and knowing how to behave online (44%), with spotting AI-generated content much higher in this sample at 21%.

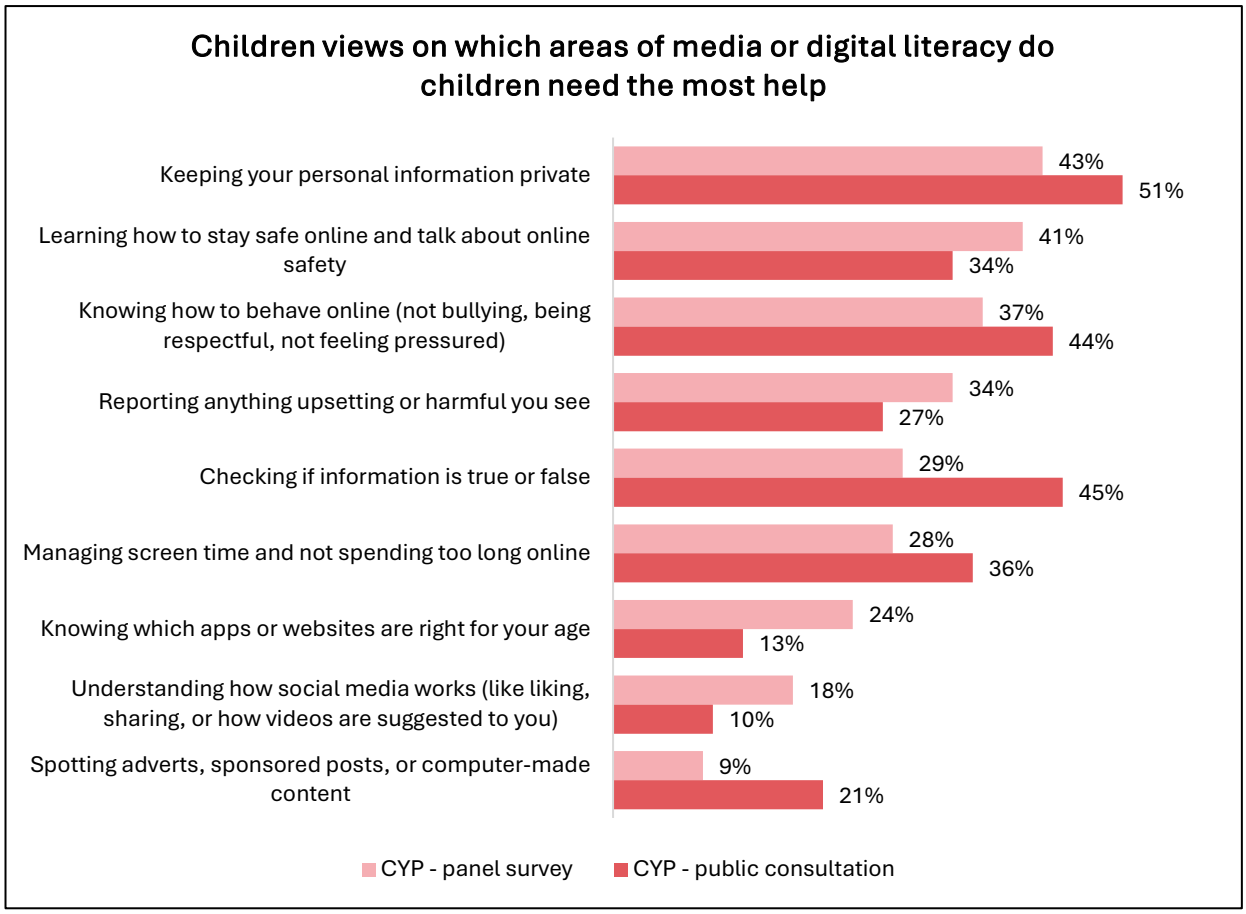



***Figure 40:*** *Sample sizes: Panel survey (n = 9,017); Public consultation (n = 5,112) | Base = All CYP | Q34 = "Which areas of media or digital literacy do you think children most need extra help with?" (Rank 1-3 question)*

When parents from the panel survey are asked where they would turn for help with media and digital literacy, government websites are the most commonly trusted source, cited by 48% of panel parents. Schools or childcare settings are trusted by 39%, parent or carer groups or networks by 35%, and public platforms such as family hubs, GP surgeries or community centres by 32%. Community or youth spaces including libraries and youth clubs are cited by 27%, and non-governmental online sources by 20%. Only 5% say there is nowhere they would trust. Parents from the public consultation are more likely to trust government websites (57%) and schools or childcare settings (52%) than panel parents, with the rank order of sources otherwise closely matching the panel. The relatively high trust in government websites as a source of support provides a meaningful signal for the design of any national digital literacy offer.

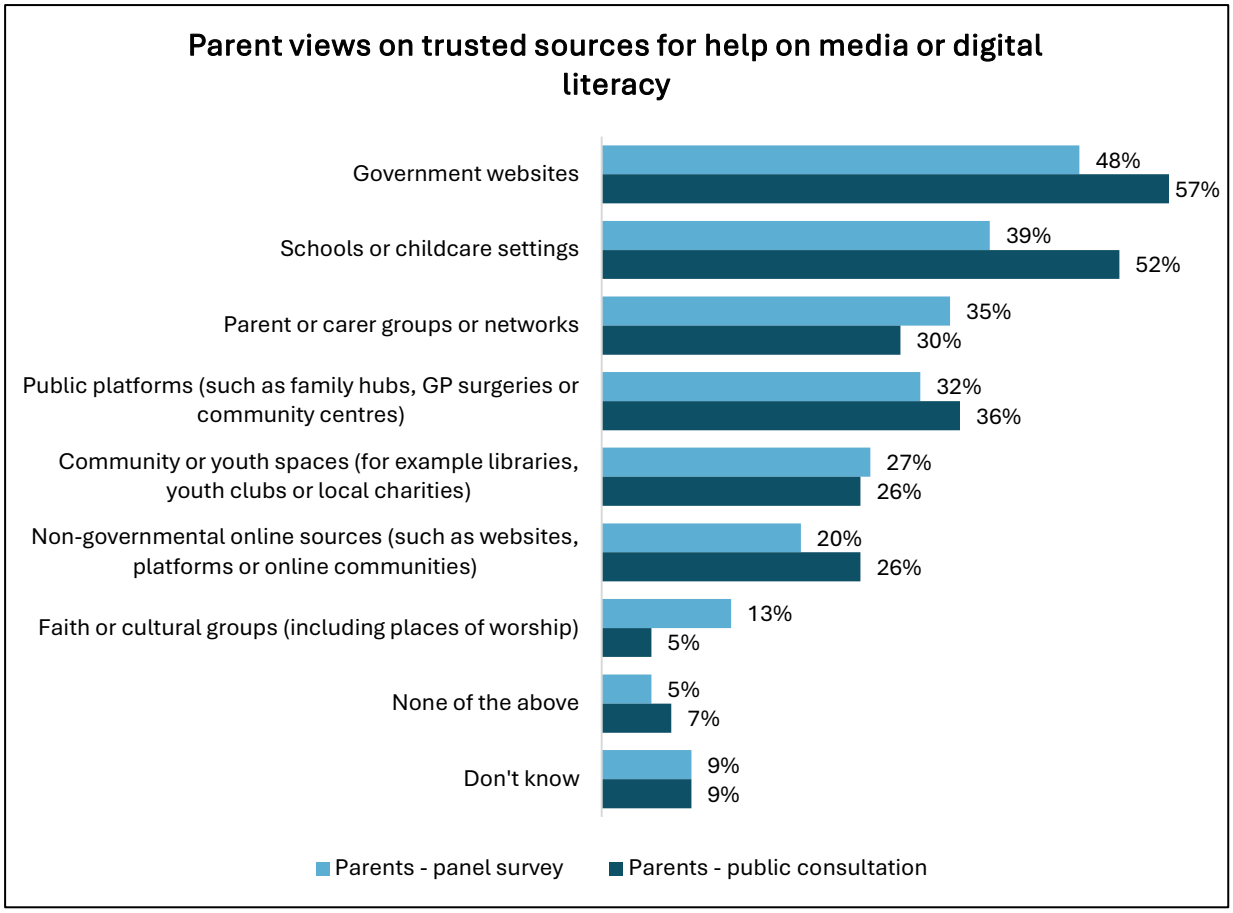



***Figure 41:*** *Sample sizes: Parents from the panel survey (n = 5,010); Parents from the public consultation (n = 39,116) | Base = Parents | Q43 = 'Where, if anywhere, would you trust to go to for help with media and digital literacy?" (Multiple choice)*

Parents from the panel also express a clear view on what government should prioritise outside of schools to support children's online safety. Supporting parents and carers to support children online is the most commonly ranked priority, placed in the top three by half of panel parents (50%), followed by working with platforms children already use (46%), providing clear guidance children can use on their own (42%), and making help or advice easy to access when something goes wrong online (41%). Involving children and young people in designing support and supporting youth organisations and community groups to help children are each ranked in the top three by 33% of panel parents. The emphasis on supporting parents directly, and on working through existing platforms, suggests a preference for provision that meets families where they already are rather than asking them to seek out additional resources.

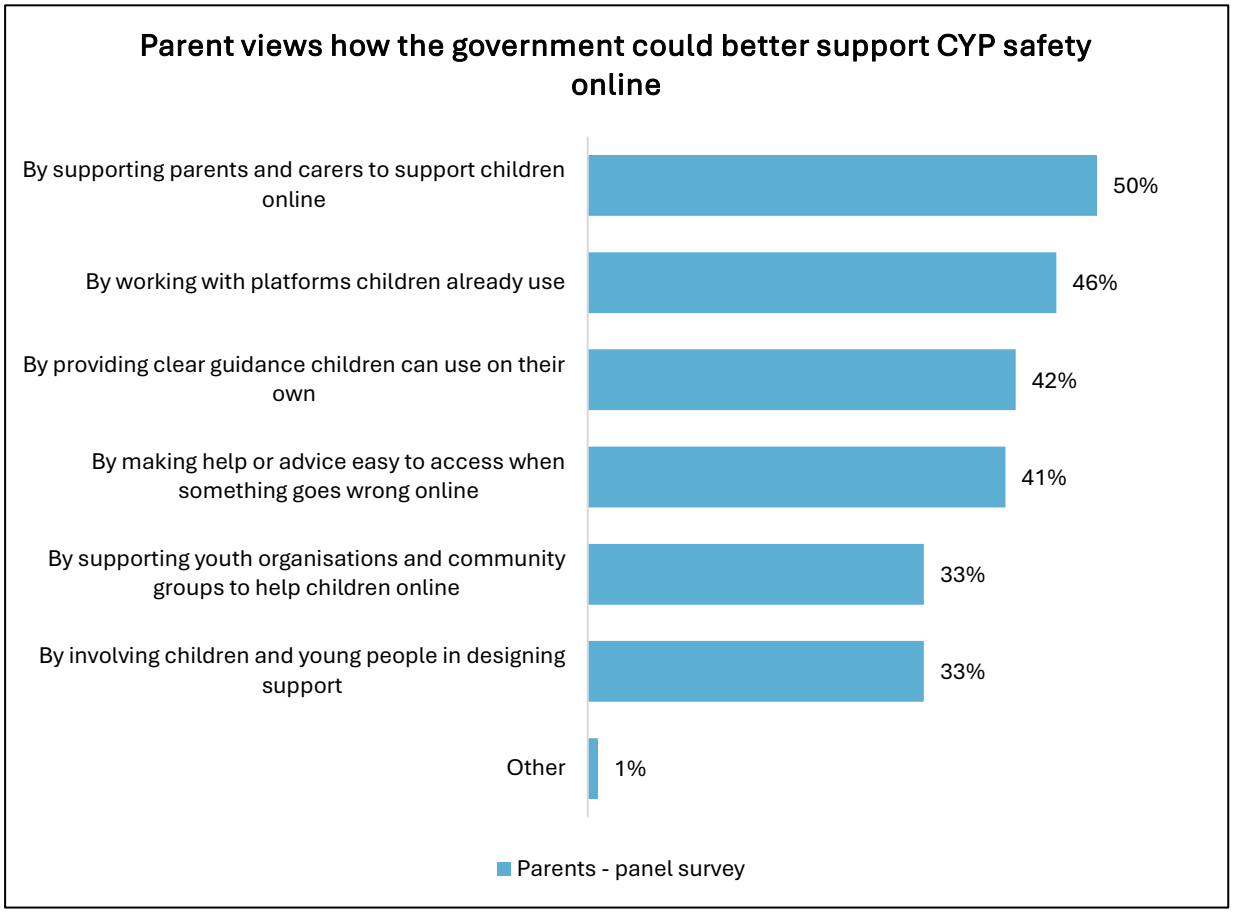



***Figure 42:*** *Sample size: n = 5,010 | Base = All parents from the panel survey | Q45 = "Outside of schools, how could government better support children and young people to stay safe and feel supported online?" (Rank 1-3 question)*

## Teacher and practitioner perspectives on media and digital literacy

The teacher and practitioner survey provides important additional evidence on how media and digital literacy is currently being delivered in schools and youth settings, and on the gaps between current provision and what professionals say they need. The picture it reveals is of a subject that is widely recognised as relevant but unevenly embedded in formal curriculum delivery.

Among school staff, media literacy is most commonly delivered through whole school or year group assemblies, cited by 78% of teaching staff. Only 17% say it is delivered through curriculum subjects, and 11% say it is not delivered or taught at all in their school. Among those with teaching responsibilities who do teach media and digital literacy content, the most commonly taught elements are online behaviour and experiences including bullying, respect and peer pressure (50%), keeping personal information private (48%), checking if information is true (42%), managing screen time (40%), and staying safe online and having conversations about online safety (39%). Spotting adverts, sponsored posts or AI-generated content is taught by 28% and understanding how social media works, including likes and algorithms, by 27%, placing these among the less commonly embedded elements despite their higher salience in young people's own experience of online harm in the deliberative events.

Teaching staff are broadly confident about delivering the media literacy content they currently teach. In the teacher and practitioner survey, 78% of those with teaching responsibilities say they feel confident about teaching these elements, with 32% very confident and 46% somewhat confident. Only 7% say they are not confident. However, when asked what they most need to deliver media and digital literacy effectively, 57% of teaching staff cite professional development, 53% cite updated curriculum guidance and 50% cite lesson plans, suggesting that confidence with existing content does not translate into confidence about keeping pace with how the digital landscape is changing. Three in ten teaching staff (39%) teach media literacy at least once a month, with 15% teaching it at least weekly, and 39% teaching it once per term. Around half of teaching staff (48%) have had engagement with parents on media and digital literacy in the past term, and a further 24% within the past year, suggesting that the school to family connection on this topic is relatively active.

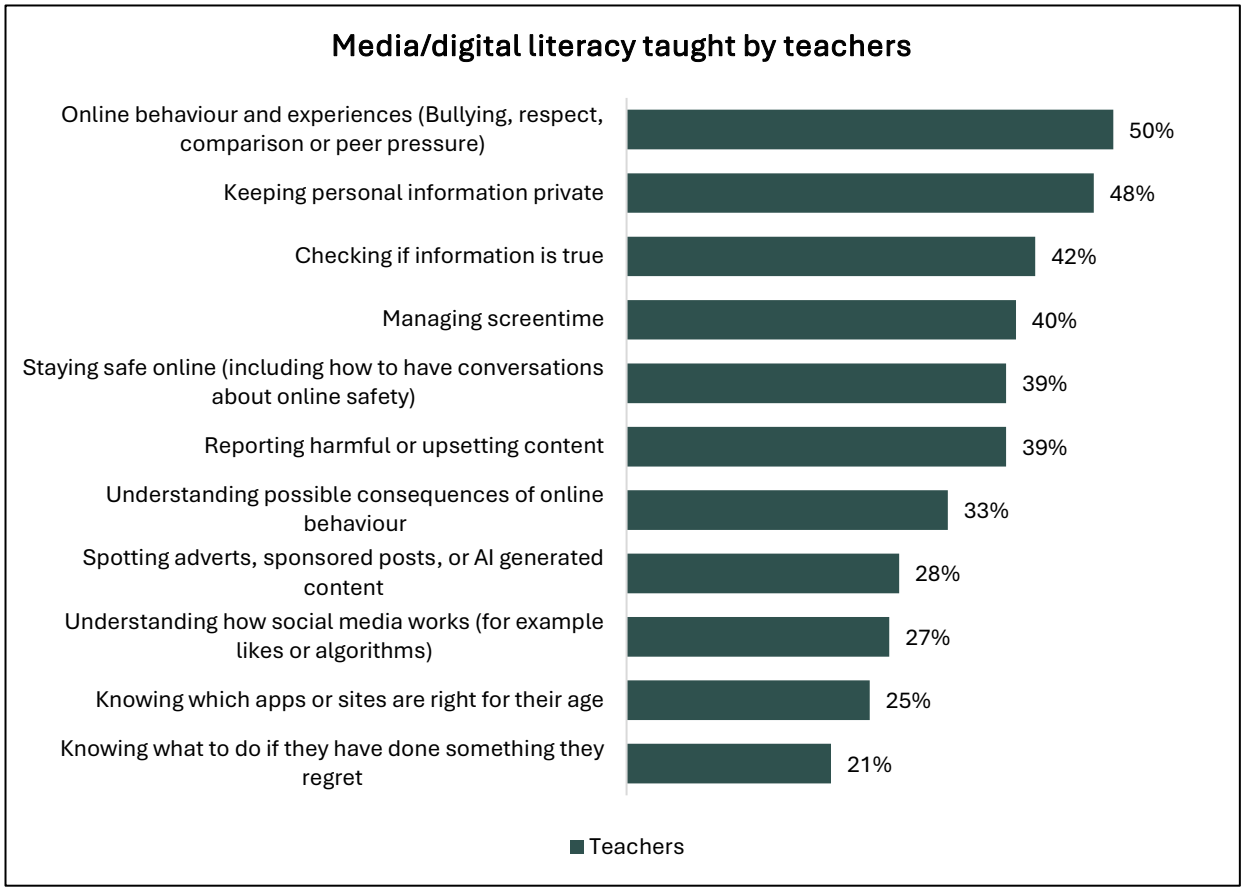



***Figure 43:*** *Sample size: n = 735 | Base = Teachers with teaching responsibilities | NQ20 = "Which elements of media and/or digital literacy do you teach?" (Multiple choice)*

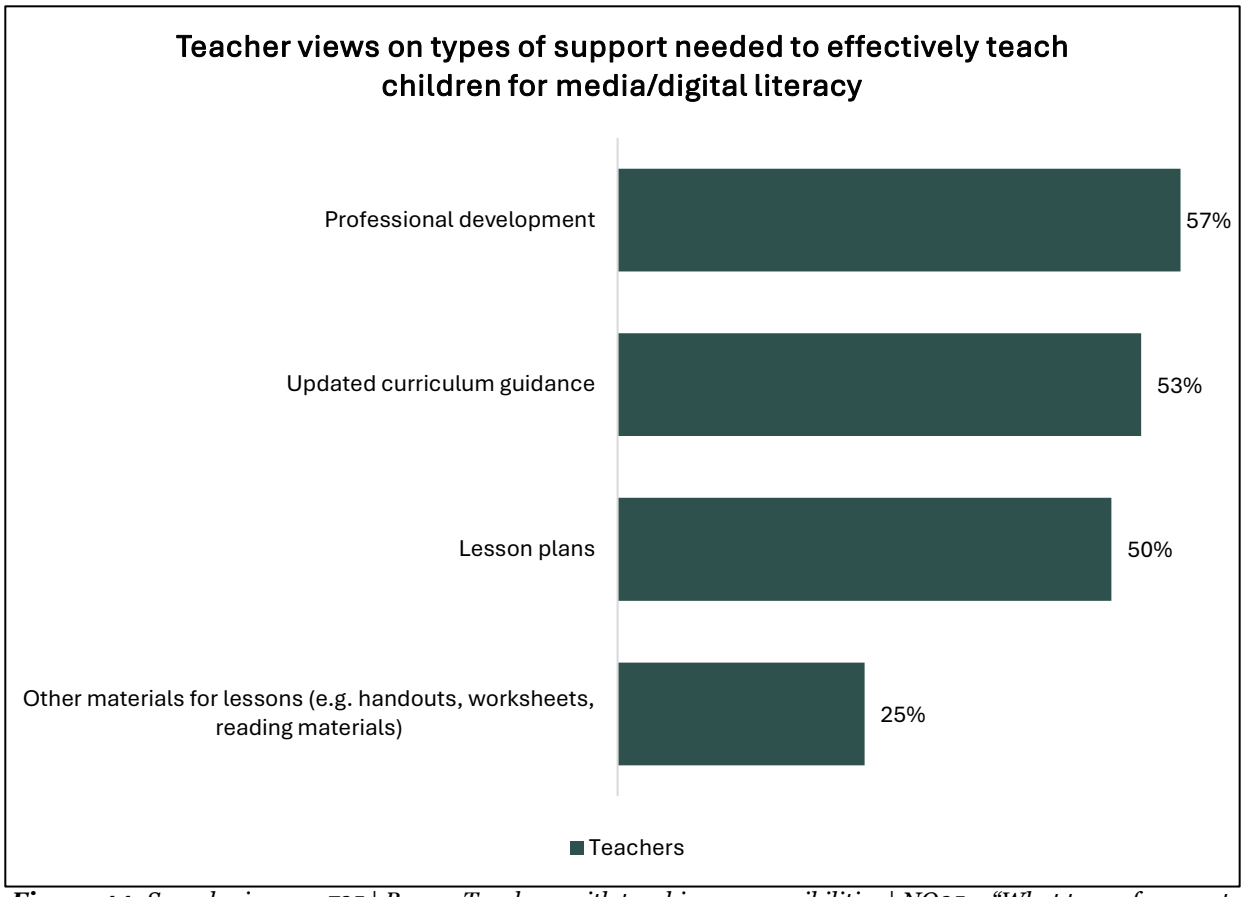



***Figure 44:*** *Sample size: n = 735 | Base = Teachers with teaching responsibilities | NQ25 = "What type of support would most help you teach media literacy and/or digital literacy to children effectively (for example lesson plans, professional development, updated curriculum guidance)?" (Multiple choice)*

Among youth practitioners, 48% say they discuss or teach media and digital literacy to young people they work with very often or frequently. A further 28% do so occasionally and 15% rarely. Youth practitioners are broadly confident in discussing or teaching media literacy: 76% say they feel confident doing so, with 32% very confident and 44% somewhat confident. Only 10% say they are not confident. The practitioner confidence level on media literacy (76%) is notably higher than the equivalent figure for teaching AI tools safely (59%), where practitioners report lower confidence, reinforcing the finding that AI-specific literacy represents an emerging gap relative to more established media literacy content.

When asked what expectations or boundaries would most improve their confidence in the positive role of screens, digital technology and AI on children's learning, professionals across both teaching and practitioner roles converge on a similar set of needs. Strong safeguards for children's safety, privacy and data are placed in the top three by 67% of respondents, followed by better guidance and support for parents and teachers on managing screen time and technology use (63%), clear limits on when and how devices are used for learning (62%), and assurance that AI and EdTech tools are age-appropriate, accurate and evidence-based (57%). The prominence of safeguards and guidance as priorities, rather than resources or lesson plans alone, suggests that professionals want a stronger institutional framework within which to teach these topics, not just better teaching materials.

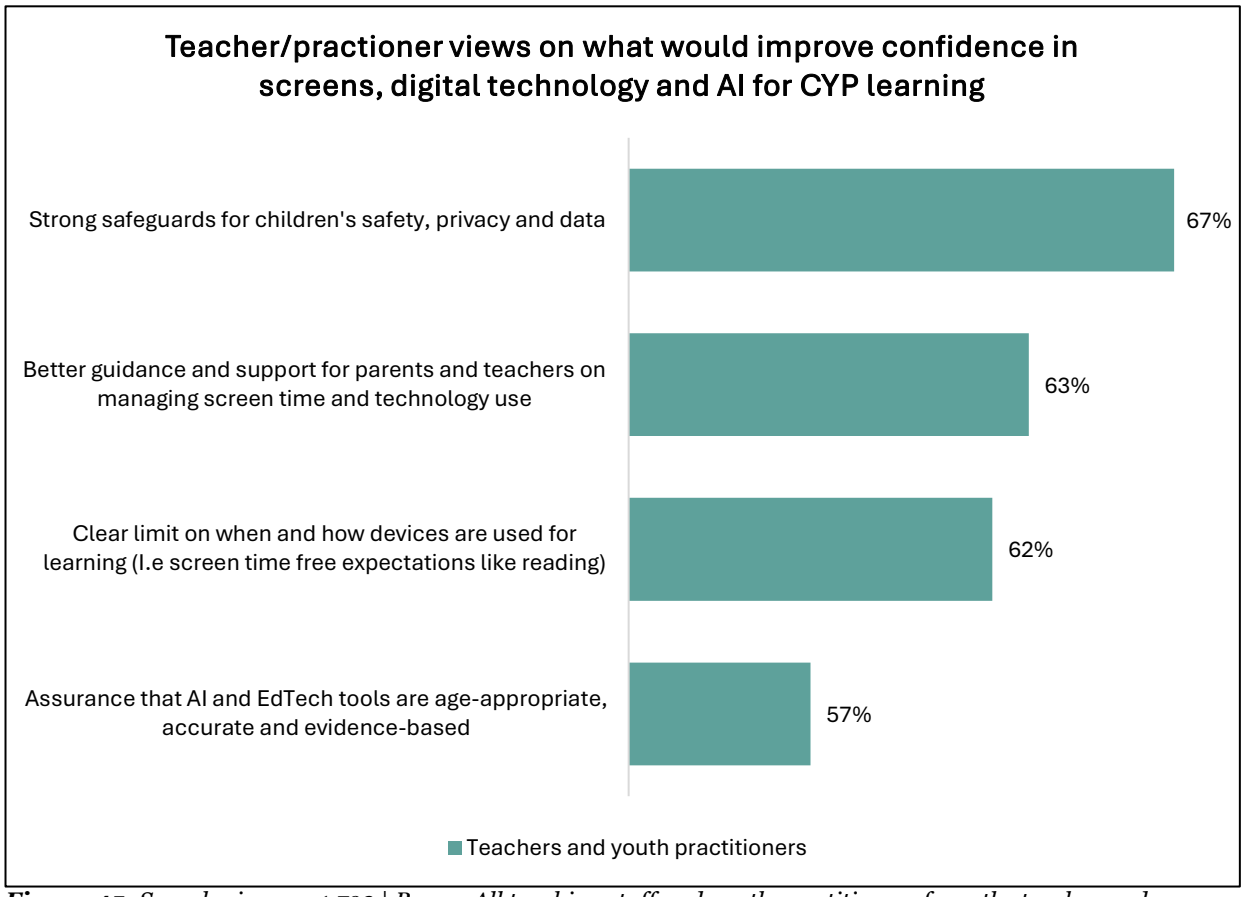



***Figure 45:*** *Sample size: n = 1,793 | Base = All teaching staff and youth practitioners from the teacher and practitioner survey | NQ10 = "What expectations or boundaries would improve your confidence in the positive role of screens, digital technology and AI on children and young people's learning?" (Rank 1-3 question)*

## Qualitative evidence: deliberative youth Hack events

Across the deliberative programme, media and digital literacy emerges as a consistent and strongly held demand from young people, who frame it as a necessary condition for any regulatory intervention to be meaningful. The argument made repeatedly, and independently across multiple sessions, is that platform restrictions and age limits will be circumvented by those with the knowledge to do so, while those without that knowledge remain disproportionately exposed to harm. Media literacy, in this framing, is not a supplement to regulation but a parallel requirement.

The content that young people call for is specific and reflects their own assessment of where their knowledge gaps lie. Across sessions in Ipswich, Newcastle and Edinburgh, participants identify understanding how algorithms work and how platforms profit from extended use as the area they most want covered. Several groups describe this as something they have had to piece together themselves, and express frustration that it is not taught systematically. Understanding how to identify AI-generated content, deepfakes and misinformation is raised consistently across all event locations and all age groups, with older participants in particular making a distinction between content that misleads passively and content that is deliberately designed to radicalise or manipulate. Young people want to understand this distinction and to have practical tools for navigating it.

> ***'I want to know who decides what we see and why.'***
> *Young person at the Ipswich Hack*

Data rights and privacy are also raised, with a number of groups noting that young people routinely accept terms and conditions without understanding what they are consenting to, and they view this as a failure of education rather than personal negligence. The connection between personal data, algorithmic targeting and the commercial model of social media is articulated by older participants, who feel they arrived at this understanding late and through their own research rather than through any formal provision.

Young people also raise the question of who is responsible for delivering media literacy. There is consistent agreement that it should be embedded in the formal school curriculum at secondary level, rather than delivered through one-off assemblies or left to individual families. Several groups express scepticism that a single assembly or personal safety lesson constitutes adequate preparation for the complexity of the online environment young people actually navigate. Older participants in Ipswich and Edinburgh are particularly emphatic that this should begin earlier, ideally at primary level, to reach children before they first encounter social media independently.

> ***'You shouldn't have to work it out for yourself. It should just be taught.'***
> *Young person at the Ipswich Hack*

A linked theme is the role of parents and trusted adults. Young people acknowledge that many parents are not significantly more informed about how platforms work than their children are, and some express the view that any meaningful media literacy programme would need to include parents and carers rather than assuming that adult guidance is available at home.

Finally, young people across the programme make clear that media literacy should not be used as a substitute for platform-level regulation. The view, stated clearly in multiple sessions, is that education and enforcement need to happen together: young people should understand the online environment they are in, and that environment should also be made safer through binding rules.

# Conclusions

The evidence from across all four research streams 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, CYP, teachers and youth practitioners 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. The qualitative evidence makes this divide clearer: across the deliberative youth Hack events, participants expressed consistent opposition to an outright ban, with their objections being both practical and principled, while simultaneously describing the current social media landscape as unacceptable. The deliberative evidence therefore points not to the question of whether to act, but to what form that action should take.

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 to view social media negatively overall. The qualitative evidence adds to this picture: many participants describe a relationship with social media characterised less by enthusiasm than by a sense of having little alternative. For those in areas with limited local provision, those belonging to minority communities not represented at sufficient scale locally, and disabled young people reliant on digital tools, online spaces provide access that has no straightforward offline equivalent. The implication is that while the case for reducing harms is well-documented, removing access without providing alternatives carries its own risks.

On AI chatbots, the evidence sits consistently within this wider story rather than apart from it. Parents, teachers and youth practitioners, 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. The qualitative evidence reinforces this picture adds to the nuance: AI is identified as an urgent and unprompted concern across all age groups and event locations, with

misinformation, deepfakes and over-reliance in schoolwork named as the most immediate harms. The most consistently proposed practical measure across the deliberative youth Hack events of mandatory labelling of AI-generated content is directly aligned with the relationship-simulation and misinformation risks that dominate across all survey sources.

Bringing the panel and public consultation evidence together adds an important layer of interpretation. The panel surveys provide the representative picture of how parents, teachers and youth practitioners, 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: a more strongly restriction-favouring parent sample and a somewhat more pro-access CYP sample. The value of the consultation evidence lies not in replacing the panel findings, but in helping to show where opinion is most intensely held. The qualitative evidence from the deliberative youth Hack events adds a further dimension, capturing not just what young people think but the lived experience and reasoning behind those views – evidence that survey instruments alone cannot provide.

# Quantitative methodology

This report draws on three streams of quantitative 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 third stream of quantitative evidence is a nationally representative online survey of n = 2,234 teachers and youth practitioners, recruited via Savanta's research panels and referred to throughout as the 'teacher and practitioner survey'. The sample comprises n = 1,218 school staff (school teachers, school leaders and teaching assistants) and n = 1,016 youth practitioners[3]. School staff were screened to those working at Key Stage 3, 4 or 5 only, in line with the report's focus on secondary-age children and young people. Weighting was applied post-fieldwork to be nationally representative of both teachers and youth practitioners separately. The teacher and practitioner survey shares several questions with the parent panel survey, enabling direct comparison. It does not include questions on children's device access, time spent on social media or children's direct personal experience of social media; Sections 1, 2 and 5 of this report therefore contain no teacher and practitioner findings.

The secondary quantitative 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 and the teacher and practitioner survey reported alongside. Where sources align, this strengthens confidence in a finding; where they diverge, the difference itself is informative. In this study, open-link respondents divide along audience lines: parents from the public consultation are noticeably more restriction-favouring than their panel

[3] Youth practitioners are defined as those delivering youth provision, enrichment or non-formal learning activities designed to support young people's social, personal and educational development outside of compulsory educational provision.

counterparts, while CYP from the public consultation are somewhat more pro-access than the CYP panel. 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, panel vs open-link surveys, or between survey sources, 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.

Fieldwork for the panel surveys and the teacher and practitioner survey was conducted between 30 March 2026 and 20 May 2026. The open-link public consultation surveys were live from 2 March 2026 until 26 May 2026.

# Qualitative methodology

The qualitative findings in this report are based on primary evidence from seven youth Hack events held across the UK: Belfast, Brighton, Caerphilly, Edinburgh, Gloucester, Ipswich and Newcastle. Participants ranged in age from 10 to 18, with sessions recruiting across this range in different proportions at each site.

- Ipswich (19/05/2026): 60 young people aged 16-18, all studying Politics, Media and Law A-level at the local secondary school
- Newcastle (19/05/2026): 15 young people of mixed ages (10-16)
- Belfast (21/05/2026): 56 young people from broad backgrounds (ranging from youth assembly members to those from local youth clubs and schools)
- Caerphilly (22/05/2026): 40 young people aged 13-15 from a rural village secondary school
- Brighton (28/05/2026): 18 young people aged 10–-5 with council involvement advertising and hosting the Hack
- Gloucester (29/05/2026): 15 young people aged 10-18
- Edinburgh (03/06/2026): 46 young people aged 13-16 from schools in the surrounding area

The research was participatory and qualitative in design. No statistical claims about the proportions of young people holding specific views are made in this report, and findings should be read as qualitative evidence of the range, depth and consistency of young people's perspectives rather than as quantitative data about prevalence. All direct quotations reproduced in this report are drawn verbatim from the original source materials.

The Hack events are designed and facilitated by the #iWill Movement, co-powered by UK Youth and Volunteering Matters with Youth Collaborators and a researcher from Savanta present at all Hack events. Adult facilitation is deliberately light, with young people taking the lead in generating and debating outputs. The primary evidence base for this report is the documentary outputs produced by participants at each session: handwritten posters, sticky-note walls, illustrated proposals, and written reflections, and researcher observation and analysis. These findings were also triangulated and refined through workshops with Youth Collaborators.

Given the participatory nature of the methodology, it is possible that the programme attracts young people with stronger or more considered views on social media than the broader population, and that participation in the sessions itself influences the responses produced. These are standard limitations of participatory qualitative research with young people and do not diminish the evidential value of the findings but should be noted in interpreting them.