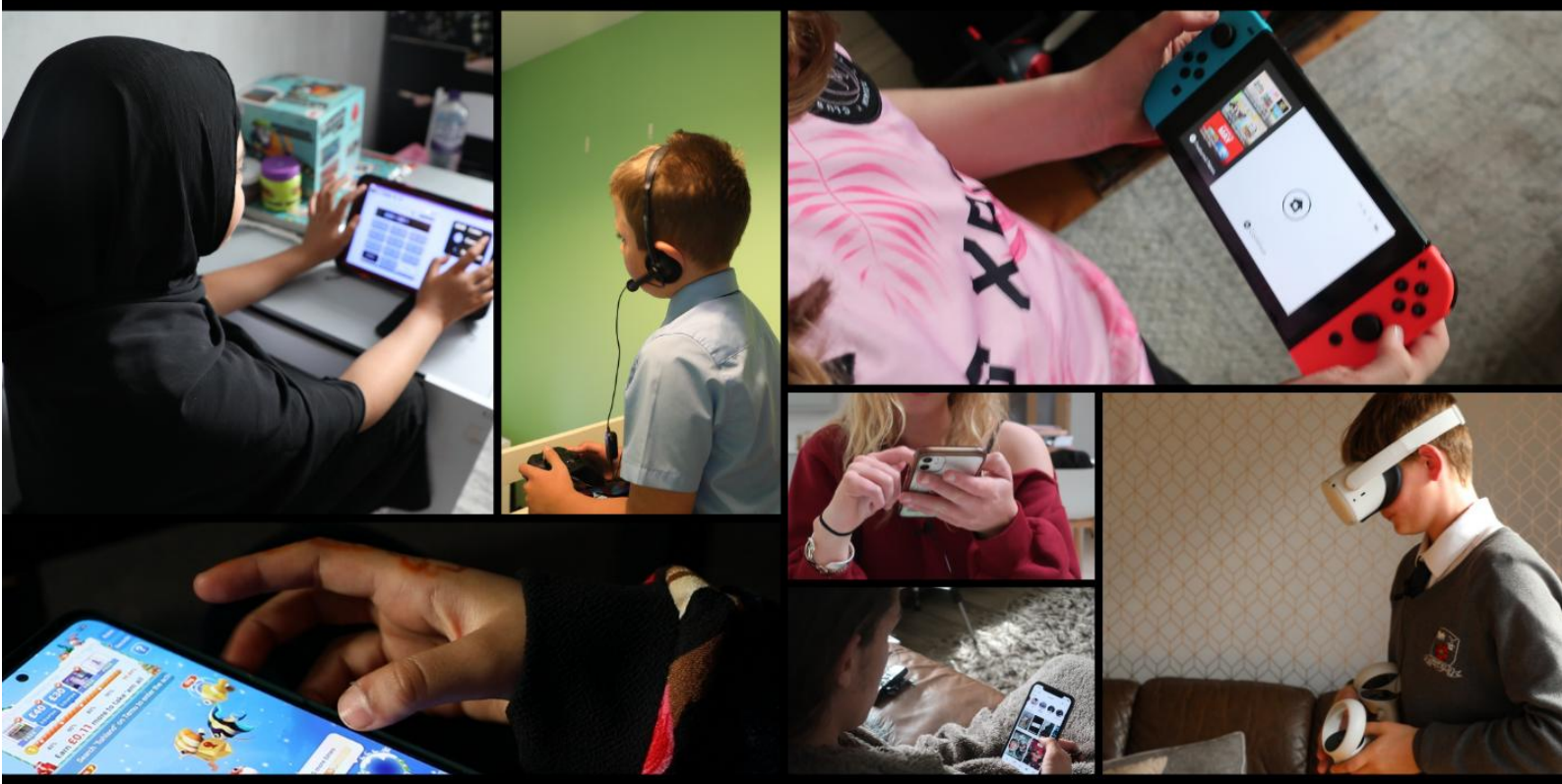
Children's Data Lives 2024

A report for the ICO



REVEALING REALITY

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About Revealing Reality

Revealing Reality is an independent, social research and insight agency. We enjoy working on challenging projects with social purpose to inform policy, design, and behaviour change. This includes working with regulators, government, and charities to provide rigorous insight into young people's online behaviours and experiences. Studying how the digital world is shaping people's lives is something we do every day.

This includes exploring how digital services and platforms are shaping people's behaviour – across relationships, gambling, financial products, the health service, and more.

We frequently conduct detailed qualitative and quantitative research to build in-depth understandings of digital behaviours and observe how people really experience technology and the online world.

Visit www.revealingreality.co.uk to find out more about our work or to get in touch.

Executive summary

Children's Data Lives is a longitudinal research project that tracks the lives of 30 children, aged 9 to 17, over time to understand how data influences their everyday lives. A filmed in-home ethnography was carried out with each child. Additionally, researchers carried out platform analysis on the digital services that children used, to document platform functionality and data privacy settings, and triangulate with respondent testimony.

Children are sometimes behaving in ways that suggests they care about privacy.

However, they rarely think about their data rights.

Children's lives are increasingly online. They frequently share data through apps and devices—entering personal information, posting updates, and interacting with algorithms. Yet they rarely see this as 'data sharing' or think about their data in terms of their data rights or regulations. Instead, their data behaviours are driven by the same priorities that shape their offline and online lives.

What matters to children changes as they grow up. For younger children in the sample (aged 9-11) tech starts as a toy they want to play with, something they don't want to miss out on, especially when their friends have it. They are initially attracted to the game-like features– flashing lights, spinning wheels, earning rewards – as well as colourful, child-friendly illustrations and graphics.

Older children were much more focused on social status and building a network of friends. They care about forming new friendships, what people think of them, and avoiding embarrassment. These priorities can incentivise greater privacy and control over certain data. Fear of embarrassment often drives them to use privacy features, such as restricting who can see their posts or deleting old posts, to manage their online appearance.

However, the desire for likes, views, and access to popular apps can sometimes conflict with data privacy. This leads some to prioritise popularity over engaging with privacy policies, or using privacy settings.

The research showed that many children are using location tracking platforms to share their live location with friends, family, boyfriends and girlfriends. Knowing someone's specific location at any time was perceived to be a sign of closeness or care. This behaviour suggests that location data sharing has become an accepted, even expected, aspect of maintaining relationships, particularly for older children.

Children's motivation to be on platforms reduced how much they considered data agreements.

Hidden policies further discouraged engagement with data agreements.

Children struggle to understand how companies use their data. The risk of companies having access to their data often felt abstract and intangible, compared to the immediate social risks of their peers having access to personal information.

Sharing data with companies is often perceived to be a necessary step to access apps and services and 'make them work'. For example, sharing personal information to set up accounts and accepting cookies to access websites. Certain platforms feel essential to their social lives, meaning the decision to exchange data and accept terms and conditions is often made without attempts to engage with the platform's policies.

This pressure can incentivise children to provide incorrect information in order to access services or specific features. Most of the children had provided incorrect ages to access platforms and bypass age restrictions, and some even had backup accounts to ensure uninterrupted access if their account was shut down.

For most children in this project, data feels like their only currency for accessing what they want online. For platforms that appear to them like mandatory parts of their social lives, exchanging data to gain access doesn't feel like a choice, but a necessary step.

Even if children are motivated to engage with privacy policies, they are often buried and difficult for children to process.

Some platforms have game-like features and engaging design elements that seem to appeal to children and encourage them to share more information, making data sharing behaviours feel like part of the fun rather than something to be cautious about.

Parents bear most of the responsibility for setting up and monitoring controls.

They also feel pressure to ensure their children don't miss out.

Parents in this research are primarily concerned about their children's safety online – the potential to be groomed, exposed to inappropriate content, or bullied online. These fears often overshadow concerns about the potential misuse of their children's data.

Many parents monitor their child's online behaviour through a mixture of parental control features on devices and apps, and offline rules and conversations. However, they shared many examples of how children were able to bypass these controls.

Parents also feel the pressure to enable their children to access platforms, fearing that if they don't, their child may struggle socially, particularly if they're already worried about their children's social lives. This could lead parents to agree to help children set up accounts with false ages.

Introduction: Children's Data Lives Year 1

Context and background

Children's lives are increasingly lived online, meaning more information about them is moving between devices, platforms, and users than ever before. The ICO has a strategic goal, outlined in ICO25, to empower and safeguard all individuals and their data, including potentially vulnerable groups like children. The ICO's Age-Appropriate Design Code and Children's Privacy Strategy aim to protect children's privacy and outline the necessary safeguards to uphold their privacy rights in the digital age.

To empower and safeguard people and their data, the ICO needs to understand children's experiences online from the perspective of children themselves. This research provides an in-depth understanding of children's 'data lives' from their point of view: What are their behaviours related to data? How do they make decisions about data? How do they feel about information being shared, either by themselves or others? How do they perceive 'data' and their 'data rights'? Importantly, it offers a holistic understanding of the role of data across all areas of children's lives, including perspectives from children from diverse backgrounds, particularly those who are often underrepresented in research.

Research objectives:

Children's Data Lives is a longitudinal research project that tracks the lives of 30 children, aged 9 to 17, over time to understand how data influences their everyday lives. For the first year of the project, the research objectives were to:

Objective 1: Explore how children behave online and how this intersects with their data rights

- Understand the technology children use: including the devices, apps, websites, and emerging technologies, such as generative AI and the metaverse.
- Explore what children do online: including activities like creating, sharing, posting, and consuming content, along with interactions with algorithm-driven feeds and recommendations.
- Examine children's behaviours around data: including their engagement with privacy settings, terms and conditions, privacy notices, and age verification processes.

Objective 2: Understand children's awareness and feelings around data

- Awareness and understanding of privacy and data rights, including the value they place on privacy and views on potential harms.
- Exposure to messaging and information about data rights.
- Awareness and understanding of the role of data in tech - e.g., personalisation, advertising.
- Preferences and views on possible tensions - privacy vs access to services etc.
- Worries, concerns, and what they would like to see change.

This report will communicate the key findings from the first year of the ICO's longitudinal 'Children's Data Lives' research project. It will provide insight into how children are behaving online, how they view privacy, the value they place on privacy, and perspectives on sharing or not sharing personal information. It will also summarise findings from researcher-led analysis of the platforms where children spend their time.

Methodology

30 filmed ethnographies, combined with platform analysis

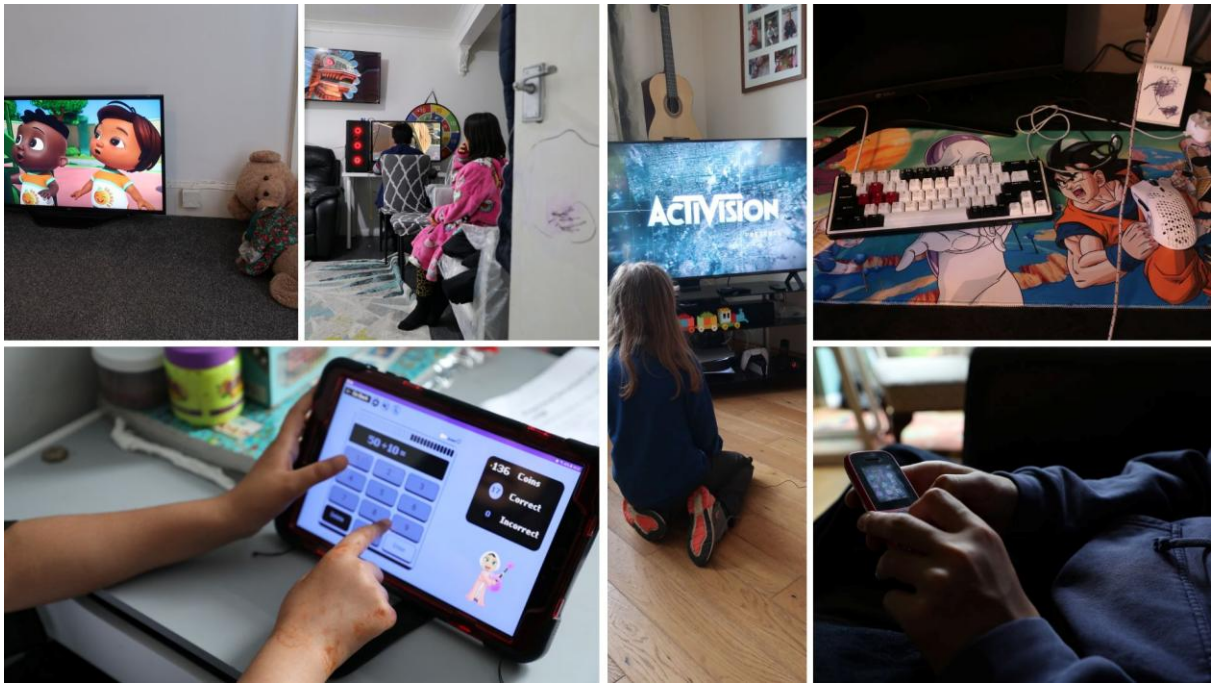
The first year of the 'Children's Data Lives' study included two phases. First, ethnographic, in-person interviews with 30 children from across the UK. Second, in-depth, researcher-led analysis of the platforms children were using to explore users' experiences. This included mapping the different steps, design features, and tone and language used on platforms with a particular focus on those related to data and information sharing.

1. Filmed ethnographies with children

In-home, filmed interviews were conducted with each of the 30 participants between April and July 2024. These interviews explored children's lives, understanding what life is currently like for them, specifically focusing on the digital services they used and how these fit into their lives.

Researchers spent time with each child in their home, observing interactions with family members and devices. Children showed researchers how they used devices, including their privacy settings. All interviews were filmed, to capture respondent's stories, day to day life, and use of technology.

Short interviews with at least one parent or guardian for each participant were also conducted. These offered a further chance to understand household dynamics around digital devices, technology, and rules. Many parents had also set up the devices or platforms children used, making it important to speak to them to explore how some decisions around privacy and data sharing had been made.



A 'life-first' approach to exploring data with children

Data is a difficult topic to research. The concept itself is abstract, making it difficult for people to articulate what it is, let alone explain how they interact with it or understand their data rights. This is even more of a challenge for children, who may never have thought about data before.

When researching children's 'data lives', it was important to start from the perspective of children themselves. Rather than starting with a focus on data, the research was designed with a 'life first' approach. By exploring various areas of life – such as communication, social media, and family life – it was possible to observe where and how data-related behaviours fit into children's lives. This included decisions around whether their social media accounts were public or private, what oversight and controls their parents had of their digital life, age assurance functions across different devices and platforms, and online profiling. This approach allowed data to

be explored through the lens of children's everyday experiences, rather than isolating 'data' as a separate topic.

Topics or 'life domains' included Communication, Social media, Browsing the internet, Entertainment, Shopping, Travel, Education, Finances, Health, and Family, Household, and Home.

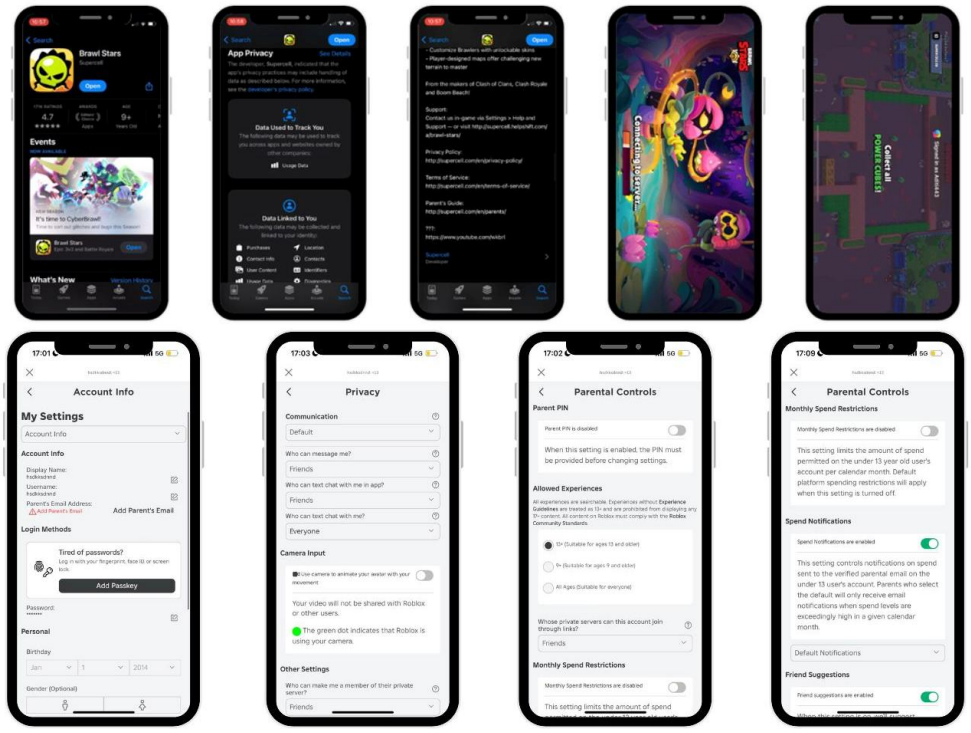
For example, within the 'Entertainment' domain, various behaviours and decisions related to data and data rights were evident. These included privacy settings on a YouTube account, parental controls set up on a child's phone, age-assurance mechanisms or household agreements for Netflix or Disney+ accounts, and children's understanding of how their viewing habits influence the YouTube videos suggested to them.

These life domains naturally overlap. The ethnographic interviews were designed to allow researchers to navigate between topics fluidly, being led by the participant and allowing the interview to reflect the interconnected nature of children's lives. The conversations moved seamlessly across different areas as children shared their experiences.

Not all domains were covered with every participant. For each child, the domains that were most relevant to them and most likely to yield insights into data sharing were prioritised. Social media, entertainment, and family life were the most frequently explored areas across our sample, as these are the domains where children are most engaged and where data plays a significant role in their daily interactions. To ensure all domains were explored across the sample, respondents with specific health experiences or who used financial and education apps were recruited.

2. Platform analysis

When capturing the online experiences that shape children's behaviours, it's essential to consider both the visible interactions and the underlying functionality of platforms. Simply showing what happens during app use misses a crucial part of the picture – the prompts, messages, and functionalities that shape children's behaviour online. Ethnographic interviews with children can explore what it looks like when a child opens their social media feeds, but can't capture the user experience of age assurance during sign-up for example.



An example of analysis of the privacy settings of Brawl Stars, and age assurance policies of Roblox, both popular games among the children.

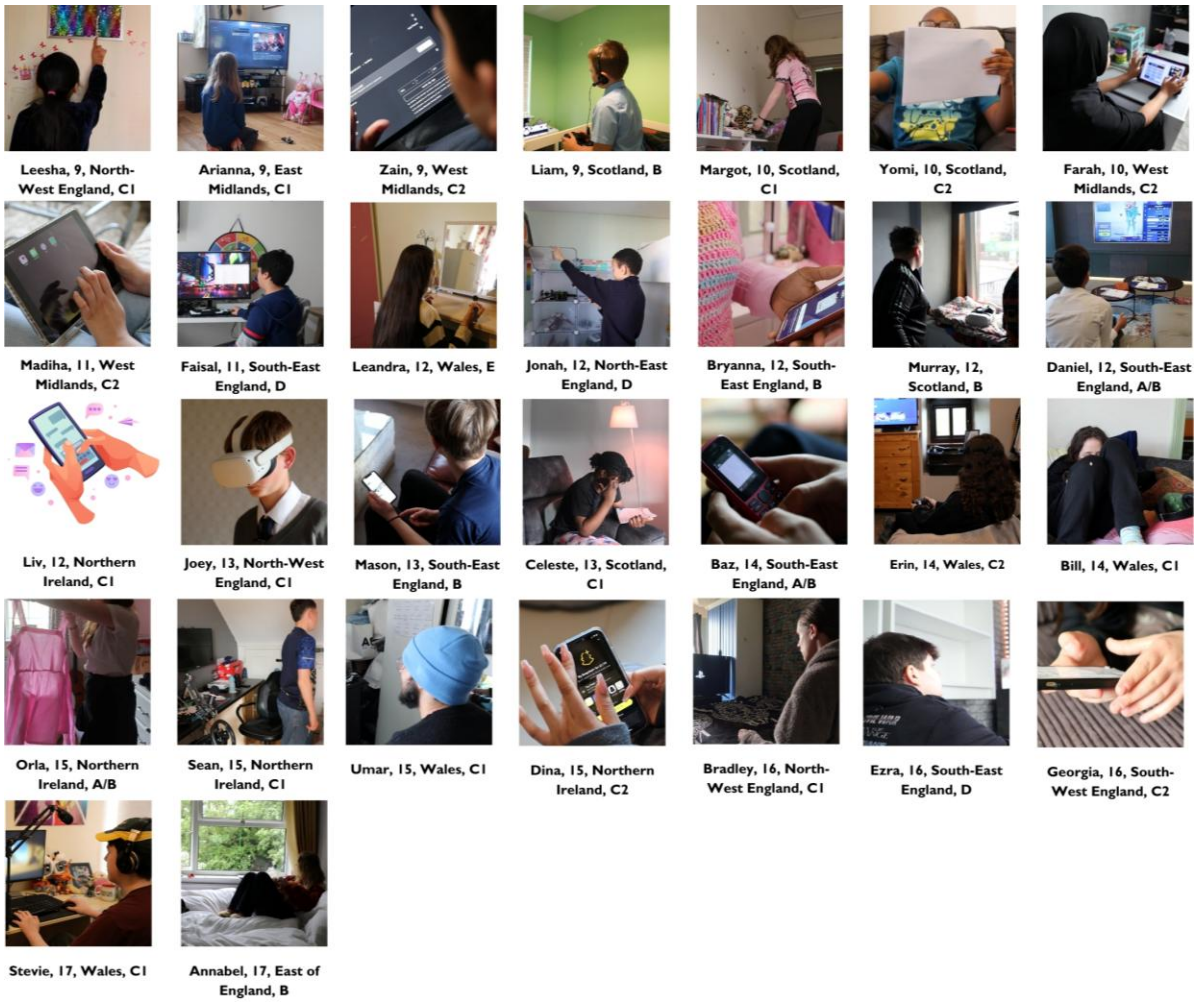
To capture a more complete understanding of children's online experiences, key platforms where children spent their time were analysed. Researchers analysed 14 of the most popular platforms used across the sample, mapping over 100 user journeys to analyse the design of platforms and the data related behaviours they incentivised. Key data-related moments on platforms were examined, such as sign-up journeys, age-assurance mechanisms, privacy settings functionality, and terms and conditions.

Meet the participants: 30 children from across the UK

The sample included 30 participants, children aged between 9 and 17 years old. It was purposively designed to be broad and represent a wide range of experiences, as well as those whose voices are often less heard to ensure the work reflected the individuals and households the ICO serves as an organisation.

Specific quotas included:

- Geographic locations, including representation across all four nations and a spread across urban, suburban, and rural areas
- Genders, including male, female, and transgender
- House income level and socio-economic groups
- Some in specific circumstances such as
    - Children where English is their second language
    - A family seeking asylum in the UK
    - A child with a long-term health condition
    - Children with SEND, including autism
- A range of how much oversight and what types of oversight parents had over the child's digital behaviours
- Diversity of digital device use and app, website and game use



Anonymous photos of the 30x children in Wave 1's sample, with pseudonyms, ages, locations, and socioeconomic group.

Chapter 1:
Children's priorities online: access and social status

To truly understand what children are thinking about data and what is driving their data sharing behaviours, you need to start from their perspective. What is important to them? What are they excited about? What are they worried about?

Understanding children's experiences with technology as they grow up, starting from their very first interactions, helps explain their evolving attitudes to data and how these shape their online behaviours.

Chapter summary:

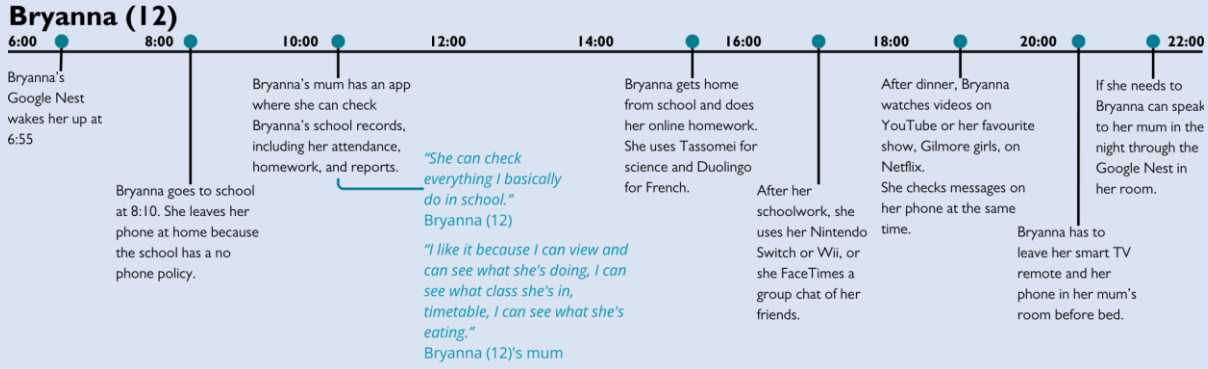
- Children rarely think about their 'data rights', but their behaviours sometimes align with, or sit in tension with, data privacy.
- To understand this, we need to understand what they *do* care about, so this chapter starts by exploring this, and how it relates to their digital lives.
- Younger children are driven by play, access, and avoiding physical danger, while older children are more concerned with social status and managing their relationships.
- These priorities can incentivise greater privacy and control over certain data, using privacy features to manage their online appearance and minimise the risk of embarrassment.
- However, the desire for likes, views, and access to popular apps can conflict with data privacy, leading some to prioritise these over privacy settings and policies.
- Many children were using location tracking platforms. Sharing location through these apps seemed to be a normal part of some respondents' relationships, whether this was with their parents, friends, or in their romantic relationships.

Children rarely think about their 'data rights', but their social priorities do drive what they share and with who

Children's lives are increasingly online. Whether at school, relaxing at home, or playing and chatting with friends, there are a small number of digital services that act as the backdrop for a large proportion of their day.

Children frequently share data through apps and devices—entering personal information, posting updates, and interacting with algorithms. Yet they rarely see this as 'data sharing' or think about their data in terms of rights or regulations. Their data behaviours are influenced more by the same priorities that shaped their offline and online lives.

A day in the life



When you're young, tech is a toy

Younger children in this project, those aged 9, 10, and 11, were excited by getting access to digital devices like phones, tablets and games consoles. This often coincided with birthdays or other exciting times, like Christmas or the end of the school year. The opportunities for playing with new apps, games and features, especially those that they'd seen their friends play with, was the primary motivation for getting new digital devices.

Case study: Meet Madiha

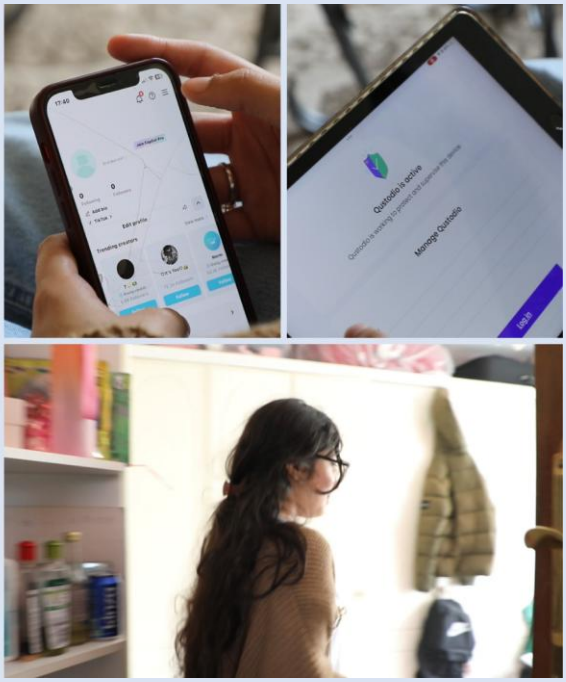
Madiha (11)

"I love food, I really like animals, trying new things, and cooking."

Madiha currently doesn't have her own phone, sharing her mum's phone to use SnapChat and WhatsApp to talk to her friends. She does have her own tablet that she got for her 8th birthday. Her mum doesn't feel confident with technology, so it's Madiha's aunties who have set up controls on her tablet.

Together they want to make sure Madiha is safe online by making sure she can't access inappropriate content and trying to limit the impact of her tablet on her sleep. One of her aunties set up a parental control app called 'Qustodio' on her phone. This sets time limits for specific apps and screen time, allows them to control all downloads, and see everything she does on her tablet.

Madiha spends most of her time online using her iPad, playing games with her cousins or friends. She also uses TikTok Shop and Shein to buy clothes.



Children's online behaviour was often motivated by play

Younger children's use of technology often began with simple interactions, such as playing with filters on Snapchat, sending pictures to family, and playing online games. They started with features that were easy to engage with and typically limited their social use to interactions within their immediate family. Their approach was exploratory, often treating technology more like a toy to experiment with rather than a social tool.

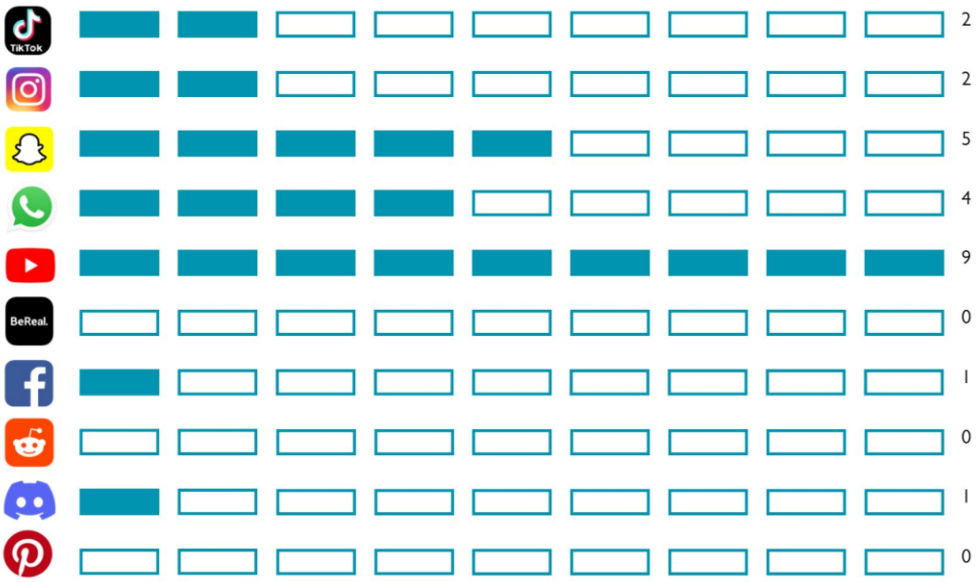


Diagram summary of social media platforms used by younger children (aged 9-11, total 9) in the sample.

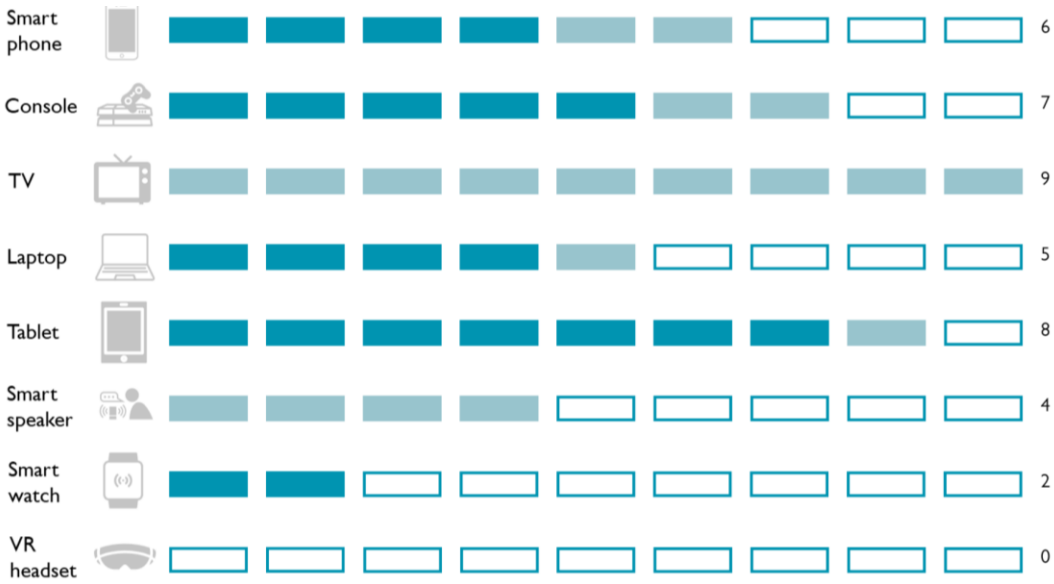


Diagram summary of devices used by younger children (aged 9-11, total 9) in the sample.
Darker blue represents devices that belong only to the child, and lighter blue represents shared devices.

Many of the devices used by children were their own. There was a proportion of children who were also using shared devices. This tended to be younger children who played on their parent's phone, used their social media accounts, or shared a tablet with a sibling. Some children were also sharing gaming consoles with their siblings or parents.

While the majority of the children used Snapchat, many of the younger children explained that they mostly used it to access filters, rather than to chat to friends or post content.

> *"On my mum's phone we use Snapchat because we do filters and it's really fun. Me and my sister do filters and sometimes my mum, we usually laugh a lot."*
> **Margot (10)**

> *"She likes to take photos here on my phone because of Snapchat, they [Leesha and her 4-year-old sister] like filters … she likes to take photos of her little sister."*
> **Leesha (9) mum**

Case study: Meet Liam

Liam (9)

"So far I only have my sister and Olly... that's my favourite filter that Olly sent me, God these filters are so funny."

Liam is 9 and lives with his mum, dad, and older sister in Scotland. He and his sister share a tablet that they use for watching YouTube on a shared account. He's just been given his first phone: an old Android phone that his dad isn't using anymore. His parents have limited the apps he's allowed on at the moment, and plan to set up a limit on the amount of time he can spend on the phone, in the same way they have for his XBOX. He doesn't have social media platforms like Instagram or TikTok nor many contacts - but he was excited to get onto his new phone and use SnapChat filters and send GIFs to his parents and friends. He and his best friend, Olly, are now able to message each other before and after school - which mostly involves organising when they will be able to play Fortnight.

He described pestering his dad to set it up quickly and thinks it took him about five minutes. He couldn't remember or had never known what his privacy settings were, with a mix of more public and more private settings.

Other children were using alternative apps to create videos and photos. Madiha (11) was using a video editor app called CapCut to make 'edits' of herself and her friends. While Madiha will sometimes share her 'edits' with friends directly, she would not post it to social media, despite being prompted to do so by the app.

> *"I just get templates and then I'll get some videos or photos of me and then make an edit… if you press export it says save to device or save and share to TikTok, so you can like post it on TikTok, but I do not do that at all."*
> **Madiha (11)**

A deep dive into gaming

Children's Data Lives is a longitudinal piece of research, meaning each year the changing dynamics and trends of children's online lives, and how data and information sharing plays out in them, will be reported on. Key trends will be pulled out and explored in 'deep dives' each year.

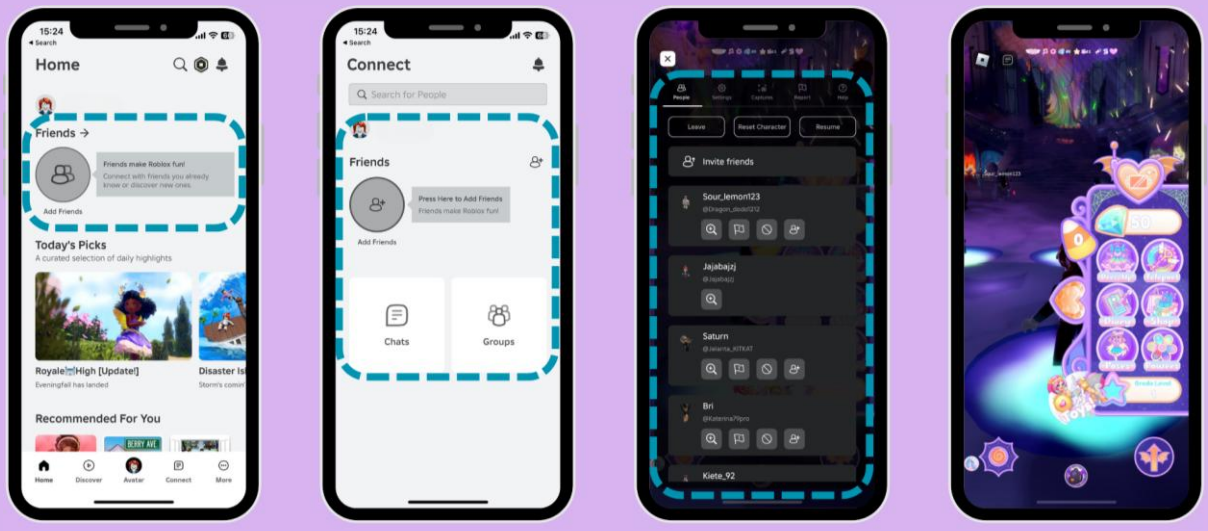
Many younger children regularly played online games – on their phones, tablets, PCs and gaming consoles. Roblox was the most popular, with children noting the variety of games they can play on the gaming platform. Faisal (10) played on his PC every day, whereas Madiha (11) played on her iPad. Leesha (9) especially liked the 'role-playing games' on Roblox.

> *"Roblox I started really young because my cousins showed me, I think when I was four or five. It's a game where you have many games."*
> **Faisal (13)**

Some were playing games with friends and used in-built chat functions on apps like Roblox or called their friends on WhatsApp to communicate while playing. As they got older, gaming often became more focused on playing with others online. Some discussed interactions with both friends and strangers while gaming. This was often on games with more of a focus on interaction or 'chat'.

> *"I play Roblox with my friends, whatever they are playing…some of my friends (on her Roblox friend list) I have no idea who they are, this is just a person who told me to accept a friend request, probably someone I did a role-play with. These are my two friends from Roblox, they speak a different language, maybe Russian, so we use emojis together cos they have no idea what I am saying."*
> **Arianna (9)**

What is Roblox?



Roblox

"Friends make Roblox fun. Connect with friends you already know, or discover new ones."

Roblox is an online platform where users create, share, and play games made by others, offering both social interaction and creative game development. After downloading the app on their phone, tablet, gaming console, or computer, players can choose from thousands of games. These range from Dress to Impress where users walk around and dress up to a theme whilst chatting to each other in a room to Disaster Island, a more action-oriented game set on a tropical island. Many of the games emphasise interaction and creativity, as well as game creation, avatar customisation, and ways to spend and earn 'Robux', the platform's in-game currency.

Implications of game design that incentivises interaction

Not all gaming is the same. Many contain features that allow players to connect with others, often through multiplayer or 'open world' options.

Games like EA Sports FC 24 (formally known as FIFA) or Call of Duty have time pressured objectives. They are competitive, encouraging players to build their skill level (and show off their abilities). While players can interact and connect with others on these games, this isn't the main objective. Interaction in these environments will tend to be focused on objectives, trash talk or attempts at humour.

Some of the games children were playing had goals and features that focus on interacting with other users and building relationships. On Roblox, many of the games appear to be designed to facilitate meeting and interacting with other people: they are multiplayer, offer chances for interaction and chat, allow users to add 'friends' and create groups of users, and facilitate collaboration in virtual worlds.

Other games similarly incentivised interaction.

- Gorilla tag is a multi-player, virtual reality, open-world game for players using a VR headset, where players play a virtual game of 'tag' with any other player in the game. The game enables players to chat with others while using in-game voice chat while moving through the 'world'.
- Animal Crossing is a life simulation game with no set objective or 'endgame'. Players can decorate their home and trade items they collect in their world for clothes and items for their 'house'. Its relaxing atmosphere is one of its key appeals, with soothing music, simple yet engaging tasks, and no penalties for failure, while players can interact with other players and invite them to their 'home'.

Many of these games can be played on VR headsets, which have additional functionality that enables conversation. A search on YouTube will pull up videos showing how to add VR mods (Virtual Reality modifications) that will modify the sound of the user's voice to others – this can change perceived age and gender.

If 'everyone else' had an app, device or account – they wanted it too

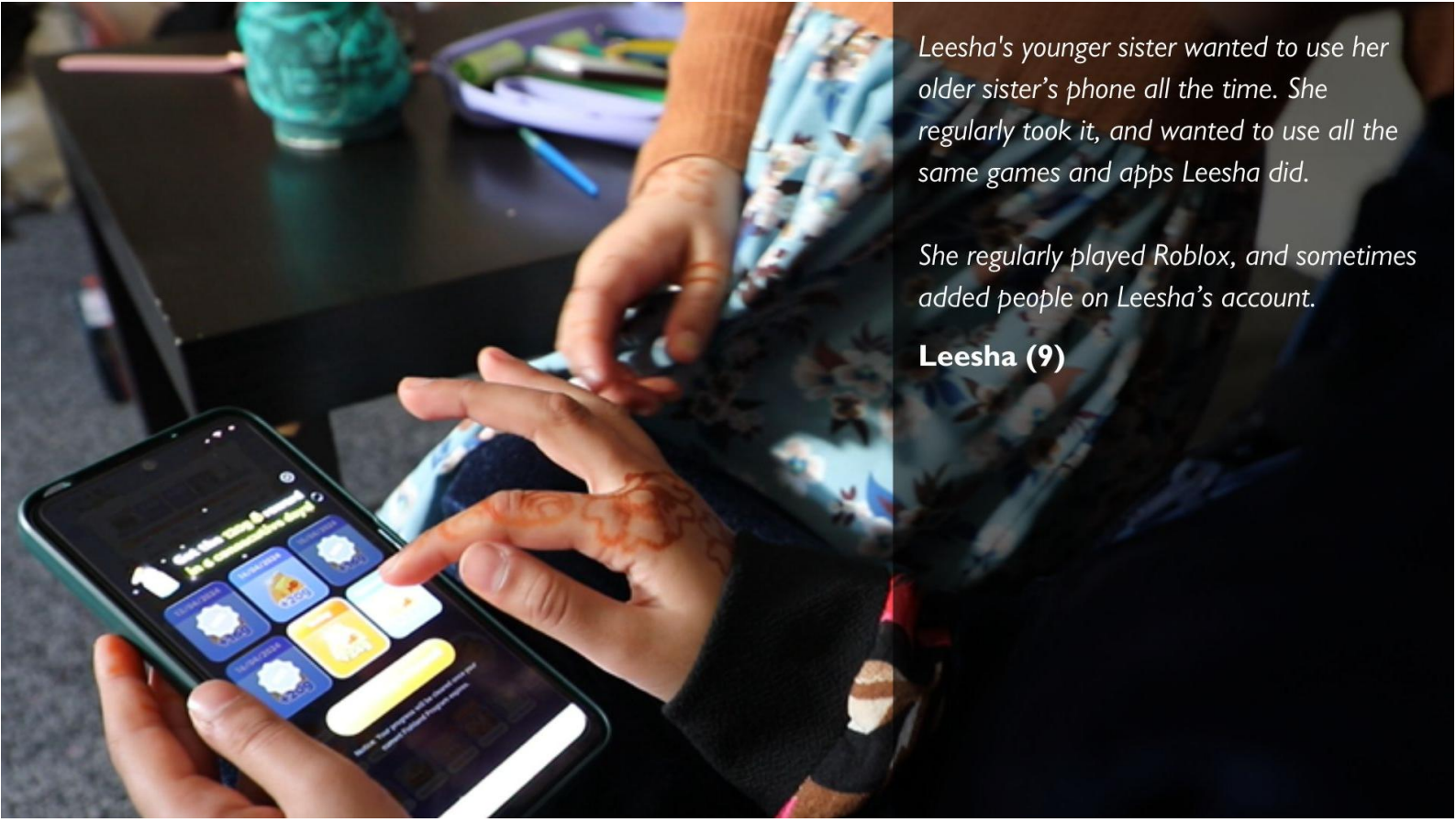
Younger children wanted their own phones, and they wanted to set up accounts on Roblox, TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram. Children spoke about what their family members and friends at school were doing, and how they felt left out when others had access to things that they didn't.

> *"Everyone was talking about it [TikTok] and I was like mum can I download it."*
> **Leandra (12)**

> *"When I had an iPad in Year 6, all my mates had a phone and they all had it [TikTok] and I tried to get it on my iPad and mum said no and no to Snapchat as well. Then I got a phone in Year 7 and mum said I could get it."*
> **Joey (13)**

Some spoke about their siblings wanting to do everything they were doing. Leesha (9) spoke about how her 4-year-old sister takes her phone and "adds random" people on Roblox.

Parents also mentioned the challenge of preventing their children from having a phone, or using certain apps, when all of their peers were already using them.



Leesha's younger sister wanted to use her older sister's phone all the time. She regularly took it, and wanted to use all the same games and apps Leesha did.

She regularly played Roblox, and sometimes added people on Leesha's account.

Leesha (9)

> *"My daughter wanted a phone, and I said there is no chance you're getting a phone until you're at least 13. I think the problem is there are some children that have access earlier and it's the feeling that they are missing out on things but we are just trying to protect her from that online space which is dangerous and not always a pleasant, safe space for young people."*
> **Zain's (9) Dad**

Some were concerned about safety and risks of physical danger

Younger children's main worries were about 'stranger danger', and that someone could find out where they lived or went to school and use that information to kidnap them.

Farah (10) had heard of a situation where an adult had contacted a child online, asking for their address and then coming to their home.

> *"A grown man, they lied about their age, like, they said they were 13 and then they said, you want to be friends … the really little girl or boy said, okay … the grown man said, tell me your address or number … And then she did do it, and then* ***he came to the house****."*
> **Farah (10)**

Margot (10) similarly had a friend who she said had accidentally given his address to someone online and thinks that person then used the information to come to his house.

Some could repeat instructions from their parents or learnings from school that data like their name, address, or the school they went to was very important to not put online.

Some restricted personal information due to safety concerns

Some younger children, wary of physical risks associated with their information being online, took measures to protect their personal information. Leesha (9) became visibly scared after receiving multiple calls from a 'man from India' on WhatsApp. In response, she changed her name and photo on the app, opting for anonymity across all her platforms.

Madiha's (11) older sister had an incident a year ago where a man had threatened her by saying he had "leaked her IP address". Madiha worried that if that happened to her, it meant that people could find out where she lived. As a result, Madiha never posted anything online.

"They could track me. They could do anything…When my sister was around my age, we had a computer, and she added this person, and this person was leaking our IP address and everything, and we told our dad and then she had to delete it and she was banned from her phone."
Madiha (11)

As you grow, your online world becomes more social

As children grow older, they become more motivated to meet new people, build relationships, and have friends. Navigating these increasingly complex social lives and dynamics becomes their priority online; managing relationships, reputation, popularity and gossip across a small number of platforms. This translates to their online lives, shaping how they use technology and the extent to which they feel they can choose to be online or not in the first place.

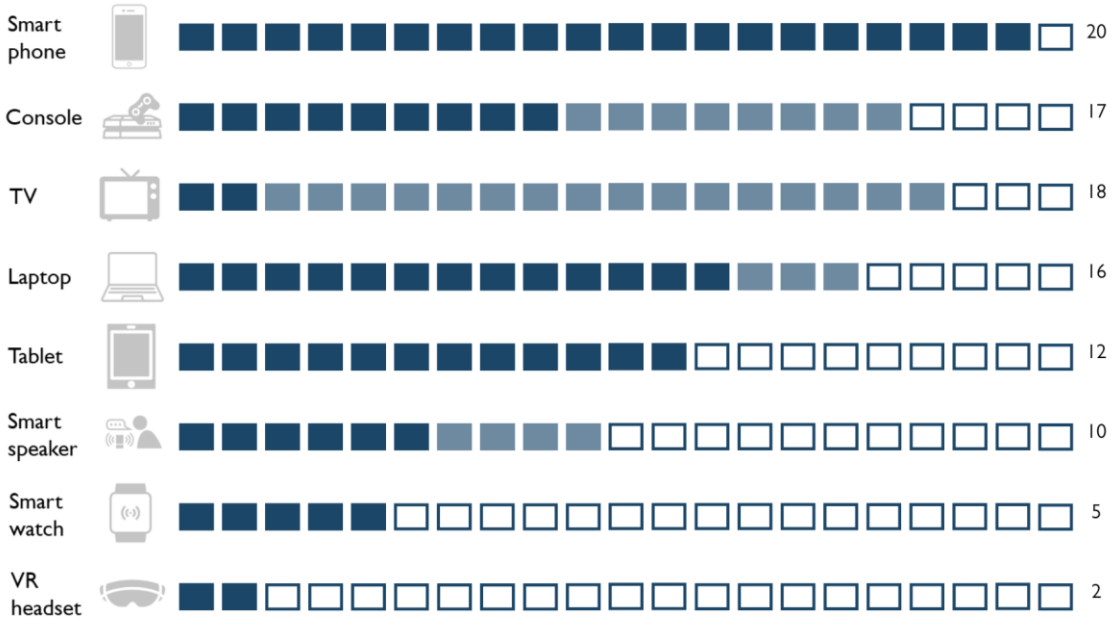


Diagram summary of devices used by older children (aged 12-17, total 21) in the sample. Darker blue represents devices that belong only to the child, and lighter blue represents shared devices.

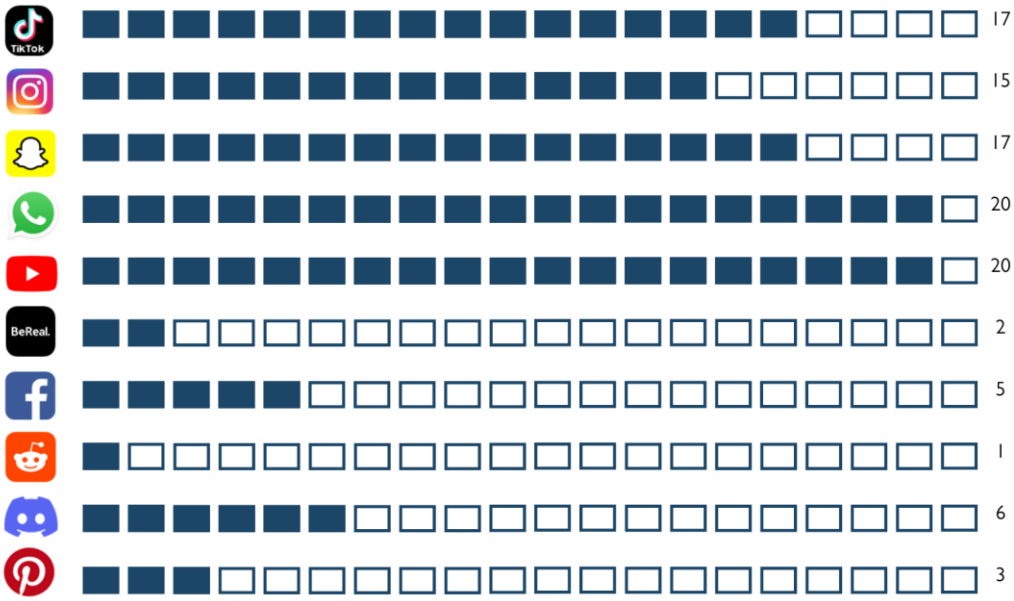


Diagram summary of social media platforms used by older children (aged 12-17, total 21) in the sample.

Case study: Meet Joey

Joey (13)

"Probably football is my favourite thing [to do]... schools very good, I've got lots of mates, I play a lot of football as well."

Joey is 13 and from the North West of England. He's passionate about sports, playing on two football teams and a cricket team which his dad coaches. He's doing okay at school, but has aspirations of being a professional sportsman when he's older, so is often training with his teams or practicing skills in the garden after school. He's close with his parents and his older brother, who has just moved out to a house nearby – which means Joey is moving into his brother's old (and bigger) bedroom which he's been excited to redecorate with a darts board for when his friends come round.

He's had a smartphone since Year 7 – but only recently started to use it more when he was finally allowed to download TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat like his friends had. He's kept his social media profiles private on the advice of his older brother. He's also got a PlayStation and an Oculus VR headset, which he got for Christmas. He mostly games with his friends, who all had Oculus headsets too, although he's made a few online friends on Fortnight and Guerilla tag – despite his brother setting up the devices.

Case study: Meet Annabel

Annabel (17)

"I honestly don't really like social media that much. But then again, I want it. So I feel like a lot of people say that they don't like it, but they're on there anyway."

Annabel lives with her parents and younger sister. She's about to go into her final year of sixth form. While she's enjoyed doing more creative A Levels, she isn't totally sure about what she would like to do after school yet. Outside of school, she's fairly active, with rowing training and competitions, and running a few times a week.

She thinks that her parents were fairly strict with digital devices and screen time when she was growing up. She and her sister, who is 15, still aren't allowed to have their phones in their bedrooms when they have gone to bed. She doesn't mind this too much and now leaves it charging in the kitchen out of habit.

While her parents were strict about screen time, they were more relaxed about social media platforms, as she's had Instagram and TikTok since year 8. Also, unlike many of her friends, her mum and dad don't track her location via an app. While her friends' parents say they need it for safety reasons, Annabel's mum prefers to message or call her if she ever needs to know where she is.

For older children, technology was central to their social lives

Older children, aged 12-17, placed a high value on expanding their social networks, often starting as they transitioned to secondary school and began forming new friendships. Their online activities began to mirror these social priorities, and being online became essential for maintaining friendships.

Baz was the only 12-17 year old in the sample not to have a smartphone. In his family, the children were not allowed smartphones until they were 16. This meant he sometimes missed out on plans with his friends:

> *"Most of my year has Snapchat and this is, like, the main way people communicate outside school…I think I would meet up with my friends more if I did have Snapchat."*
> **Baz (14)**

Orla's mother echoed this, recognising the role of technology in keeping her daughter connected:

> *"To be honest, I think once they go to high school, so that is age eleven, [technology] is a means of communication, it's a means of being in a group, being in touch with people. And at that point, it was almost, if you're not, if your child isn't engaging, then they're outside of a group because the masses are on."*
> **Orla's (15) mum**

Some children were seeking out new friendships online. Ezra (16) is transgender and experienced some mental health issues whilst at school. He has now left school and is being homeschooled. He has met some people online, making one friend who is also transgender.

> *"I've always kind of been like really bad at social things … because I attend online school, I don't really see many people. So one of my friends is online, who I've met a couple times … he's also transgender, which is how we kind of like came across each other…*
>
> *On TikTok someone made a discord server for, like, LGBTQ hangout kind of place … I was just like, you know, I might as well just give it a try, find people like me. So I joined it, and we just kind of got along and started talking more privately and just eventually met up later that year."*
> **Ezra (16)**

This shift highlights how older children use technology not just as a toy or a tool, but as a vital link to their social circles.

Concerns about social status and self-image emerged both on and off-line

Children in their early teenage years were increasingly aware of how they came across to others, both on and off-line. They cared about what others thought of them, they wanted to know that they were liked, and they wanted to be reassured that they fit in.

> *"You have to have kind of a high reputation for people to like you and stuff and be friends … you have to kind of be on that level."*
> **Leandra (12)**

Unsurprisingly, these children were more invested in their online presence, with followers, likes, and other visible signs of social status holding significant importance and reassurance. When asked what young people worried about most online, Dina responded:

> *"Reputation, like getting lots of views online and always looking their best online."*
> **Dina (15)**

Children felt proud of the attention their accounts received, with followers and likes serving as crucial markers of their popularity.

> *"You best be believing I was getting all the follows, all the likes. Famous."*
> **Sean (15)**

Mason, 13's, TikTok account was deleted for being underage. After setting up a new account, he was eager to regain his previous level of visibility.

"I wanted more followers because now I only have 20, and I used to have 2000."

Mason (13)

Some spoke about their accounts being deleted and the disappointment they felt at losing these online markers of popularity. For many children, these digital indicators of popularity became essential to their self-image, reflecting their growing concern with how they were perceived by others both online and offline.

They wanted to protect their reputation and avoid embarrassment

Children's pursuit of being liked came with a high sensitivity to anything that might embarrass them. They worried about doing anything that might expose them to ridicule or draw unwanted attention.

Umar (15) did not post photos of himself online because he was worried about what people could say in the comments.

> *"I'm just not confident with myself like that, the way I look. Not that I think I'm hideous, but I just don't like the way I look, so I wouldn't really share it to people because people online are quite ruthless … everyone in the comments making fun of them … the insults they come up with … I'd rather not get roasted online by, like, so many people."*
> **Umar (15)**

Annabel's Mum used to post photos of her children on Facebook a lot when they were younger, but as they got older, they started to find it embarrassing. Now she rarely posts photos of them online.

> *"I used to post [pictures of the children] on Facebook a lot. … But probably since they were about 12 and 8, I haven't really posted much because [Annabel's brother] quite rightly started to say, you didn't ask me if you could post that photo. And I thought, yeah, that's a valid point actually."*
> **Annabel's (17) mum**

Children wanted to avoid missing out on what their friends were doing

Children cared a lot about what everyone else is doing – they were asking: am I missing out? Do I have access to what everyone else does?

Annabel (17) described the feeling of missing out when she decided to delete Snapchat on a family holiday to take break from social media. Annabel did not want the distraction of apps like TikTok and Snapchat, and thought it would help her enjoy her holiday more. However, she re-downloaded Snapchat as soon as she got home.

> *"To some extent there is, like, without any social media, you'll miss out on, like, things being organised because people will make, like, a group chat to organise a meeting and if you're not on the app, you won't hear about it and then you won't know. … I think there definitely is an element of missing out on things if you're not on social media … because that's how people communicate now."*
> **Annabel (17)**

Daniel (12), described how he did not want to leave a WhatsApp group despite finding them annoying due to people 'spamming' the chats with '100s of messages an hour', as all his classmates were in them and he would not want to be the *only* one not in the group.

Children's priorities sometimes incentivise greater privacy and control over their data

Social pressures and concerns about strangers, drove some children to exhibit behaviours that aligned with data privacy.

Fear of embarrassment often drove children to carefully manage some aspects of their privacy

Children used some of the privacy features platforms provided to manage how they appeared online and minimise the risk of embarrassment.

Children limited who could see what they were doing online

Children's sensitivity to embarrassment often led them to be more selective about who could see what they did online. This often involved using multiple social media accounts, curating what to post on more public vs. private accounts, and using features such as 'close friends' to limit who could see their content.

Annabel (17) managed two Instagram accounts: a 'main' account with a broad follower base and a 'spam' account for close friends. Her 'spam' account allowed her to post more casually, while her 'main' account featured more curated content due to its wider audience.

Similarly, Liv (12) preferred posting Instagram stories on her private account for sharing 'less polished' moments with her close friends. She used her public account with more caution, aware that it was accessible to everyone.

> *"My private story [on Instagram] is only my close friends, so if I'm going to do something dumb, I just put it on there…and, there's obviously my public one [account] where literally everybody can see it."*
> **Liv (12)**

Children removed information about themselves they didn't want others to see

Children often removed information about themselves that they found cringey or embarrassing. Georgia, 16, frequently deleted posts after realising how many people had seen them, starting to question how others would perceive them.

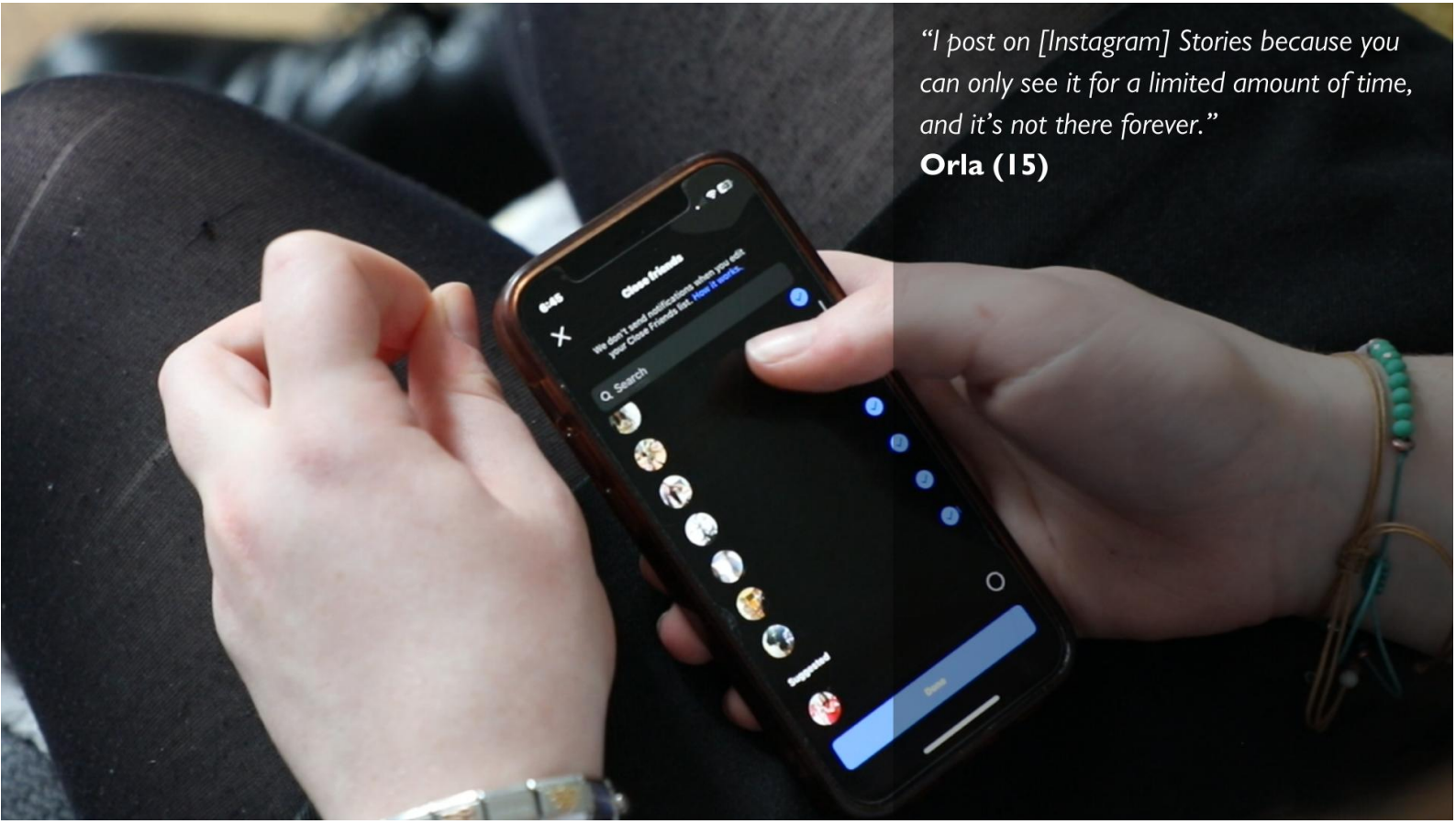
> *"Sometimes I post things thinking I look so great, and then, like, the next day I delete it because so many people have seen it [on Instagram], and I just get embarrassed."*
> **Georgia (16)**

Some older children deleted things they had posted of themselves when they were younger, because they found it embarrassing. Annabel, 17, has had her Instagram account since about year 8, but had deleted most of her old posts.

> *"All of the posts I would have posted when I was like 13 or 14 I've deleted now … because some of them are a bit cringe now, I mean maybe I'll look at this [her current profile] in five years and be like, what was she doing?"*
> **Annabel (17)**

Children limited posting permanently for fear of being judged

Some children avoided permanent posts, opting for features that offered time-limited sharing to reduce the risk of long-lasting scrutiny. Orla (15) rarely posted actual posts to her Instagram account, preferring to use stories.



"I post on [Instagram] Stories because you can only see it for a limited amount of time, and it's not there forever."
Orla (15)

Fear of 'hacking' led some children to be careful about their account data

Some expressed concerns about being 'hacked' or locked out of their accounts. This was frequently driven by social fears, such as the possibility of someone gaining unauthorised access to their social media profiles to impersonate and embarrass them. Additionally, some worried about being unable to access their accounts and potentially having to create new ones, which could lead to losing content and the followers they had accumulated.

Children's anxiety about being 'hacked', particularly on apps where they felt there was lots of 'personal' information about them, drove some to take precautions to protect their accounts online. This included adding passwords to apps, keeping accounts private, using two-factor authentication, and avoiding using their real names online.

> *"I worry about people getting into my stuff because there's a lot of hackers and stuff out there…and stuff like Snapchat they can get all your personal information and it's got more of your personal life in it… but I have like two factor things on my accounts, so if someone went to get into my account I get a code sent to my phone."*
> **Bradley (16)**

> *"I put a password on Snapchat for safety because what if someone picks up my phone and wants to read my messages…my personal information and location and everything,"*
> **Jonah (12)**

Children's priorities could also sit in tension with data privacy

In other scenarios, children's concerns with social status and access to online services were prioritised over any potential concerns about data. This could lead to behaviours that sat in tension with their data rights.

Popularity sometimes prevailed over privacy

For some children, the appeal of gaining likes, views, or followers outweighed any concern for keeping accounts private.

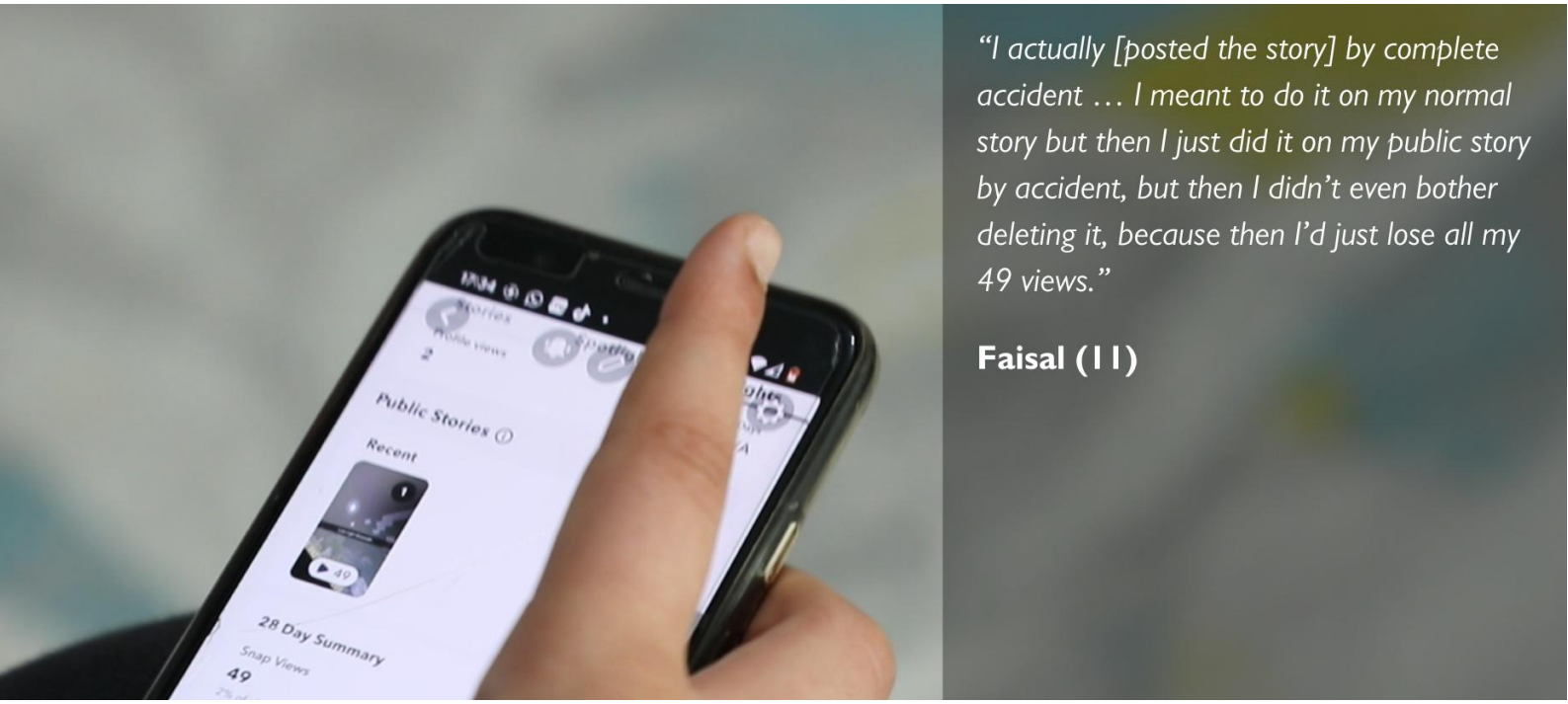
> *"So I'm public, if someone searched me up they don't have to request to follow me, they can just follow me. … I'm friends with actually, many people online. I've made friends off gorilla tag and TikTok community. Online friendships, honestly, can be better than in real life friends because if you have a fallout, they usually just forgive you, like really easily. … it won't cause drama."*
> **Murray (12)**

For Umar (15), having 'random people' he doesn't know in real life view and comment on his TikTok posts is a plus; whether they agree or disagree doesn't matter, as long as it drives engagement.

> *"I don't really know [the people] in real life, random people who see my videos, they'll disagree with it or agree with it … comment this this, this."*
> **Umar (15)**

Faisal (11), who usually keeps his Snapchat stories private, once accidentally posted publicly. When he saw it had 49 views—far more than usual—he decided to leave it up.

Platforms like Discord, Fortnite, Gorilla Tag, and Instagram enabled them to chat and interact with people they didn't know in real life. This included features like instant-chat, discussion pages, and open-world gameplay with voice chat.



Some children, particularly those feeling isolated in real life, sought friendships online by creating more public accounts.

Murray (12) has ADHD and anxiety, and started being home-schooled earlier in the year after having arguments at school. He found school difficult, feeling anxious about interacting with his classmates. He was spending a lot of time each day on digital devices, creating TikTok videos and playing Gorilla Tag on his Oculus. This virtual world has become his main way of interacting with others, through Q&As, giveaways, and open world gameplay with a microphone to talk to other players. He and his mum reflected on the benefit of him being able to talk to other players, the majority of which Murray thought were children. They didn't reflect on the potential risks.

Excitement for new devices and apps overshadowed privacy settings at set up

For many children, the thrill of setting up and using a new device or finally being able to access the popular apps and games their friends were using, overshadowed any concern for data privacy. When setting up a new phone, gaming console, or downloading a new app, their focus was on the excitement of using these new tools, not on adjusting privacy settings or understanding data-sharing policies.

9-year-old Liam had just received his first phone, an old Android passed down from his dad. Following in his older sister's footsteps, he was eager to get started. The excitement of finally being able to message friends and send GIFs to his parents led him to rush through the setup process, barely noticing or caring about the privacy settings.

> *"My dad done it … I don't really know how."*
> **Liam (9)**

Liam's primary focus was simply on accessing the apps he had been eagerly awaiting—WhatsApp, Snapchat, and YouTube. He described pestering his dad to set it up quickly so he couldn't remember or had never known what his privacy settings were, with a mix of more public and more private settings.

A deep dive into location sharing

Live location sharing seemed normal for many children

Location sharing was commonplace among the children, regardless of whether it was with friends, family, followers, or the platforms themselves. Some examples were where the location sharing itself was a necessary feature of the platform. For most children, this seemed obvious and necessary to being able to get what they wanted from the app.

> *"You know, like Uber, you know, like, when you're doing an app, they need your location to see where they're picking you up from. Like, but with a taxi, they don't, because you phone them, you say you tell them your address and they'll turn up. But with Uber, you do it off an app."*
> **Bradley (16)**

> *"When I downloaded the Google app on my phone it asked me if I allow Google to see my location, I just press accept because like, obviously it's going to ask me for like, Google Maps and stuff."*
> **Yomi (10)**

On other platforms, being able to share location was an 'add-on' feature. This included sharing location on SnapMaps, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

> *"For WhatsApp? If I decide to send my live location to my mum or dad. Snapchat, because I like to keep my location on to my brother if I'm looking for him around the town after school."*
> **Erin (14)**

> *"Only my best friends can see where I am, because I didn't know how to turn my snap maps off, so I just made it so only my best friends can see."*
> **Murray (12)**

There were also apps being used where knowing the location of another user was the primary purpose of the app itself. These included apps like FindMyFriends, Life360, and Pingo – where users can connect their accounts to be able to see where another user is.

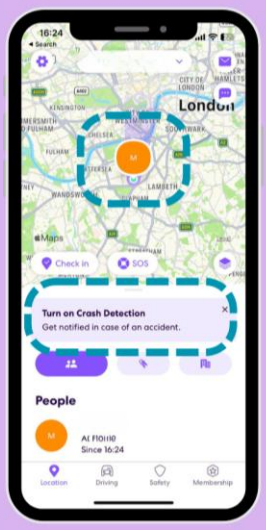
> *"When we went to Reading last summer, we got Life360 … I turned it off, but I can see all of these people … So that's one of my close friends … that's [friend name]. She's driving right now, so I can see exactly where she's driving and what her battery is, and the ETA."*
> **Annabel (17)**

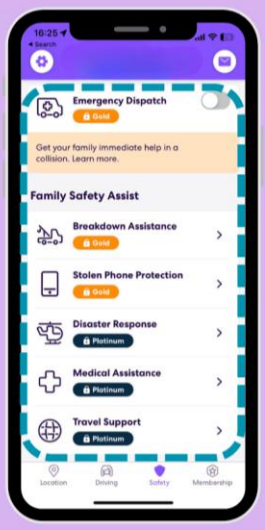
> *"I have [an app] called Life360 with my girlfriend. … it tells me where she is, what percent her phones on, everything like that, really, it's good."*
> **Bradley (16)**

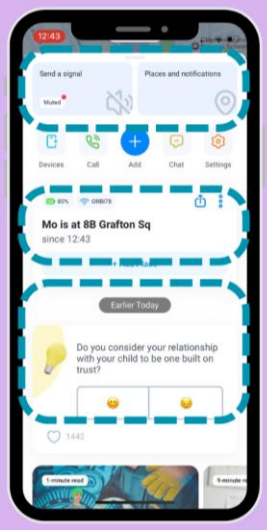
> *"I have pingo, [my mum] has FindMyKids, it's a location app … you can press this, and it goes straight to my mum's phone, it's an emergency thing."*
> **Leandra (12)**

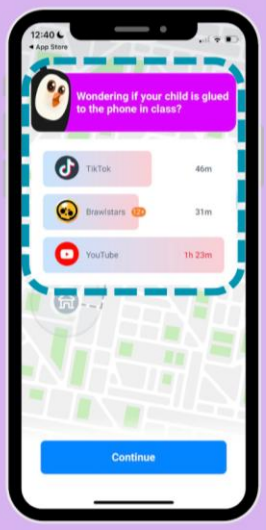
Analysis of the functionality, wording, tone, and overall user experience highlighted additional features on some of these apps that enabled more information to be shared. This included even more detailed, precise knowledge of where someone was and what they were doing. Being able to listen to what another users' microphone could hear, being alerted if the other user is travelling, if they stop suddenly, or being informed about their phone's battery charge.

Platform analysis: Location tracking apps' functionality









Life360
Crash detection
Family Safety Assist Plan including Emergency Dispatch, Breakdown Assistance and more.

Pingo
Parent-Child location tracking
Send signals to child's phone
Platform usage at location.

Life360 is a location sharing app, with additional features promoting safety, such as driving safety features, geofencing alerts, emergency assistance, and family messaging. Pingo, designed to be used in conjunction with the Find My Kids app (for parents), focuses on real-time location tracking for kids, task reminders, safe zone alerts, emergency notifications, and communication between parents and children. Both apps aim to keep families and friends connected and promote the idea of safety.

Sharing location through these apps seemed to be a normal part of some respondents' relationships, whether this was with their parents, friends, or in their romantic relationships. It tended to be more of the younger participants sharing with their family, and older children with their friends or in relationships.

For those in relationships, there were examples where knowing the other's location seemed to signal intimacy or closeness.

Case Study: Meet Georgia

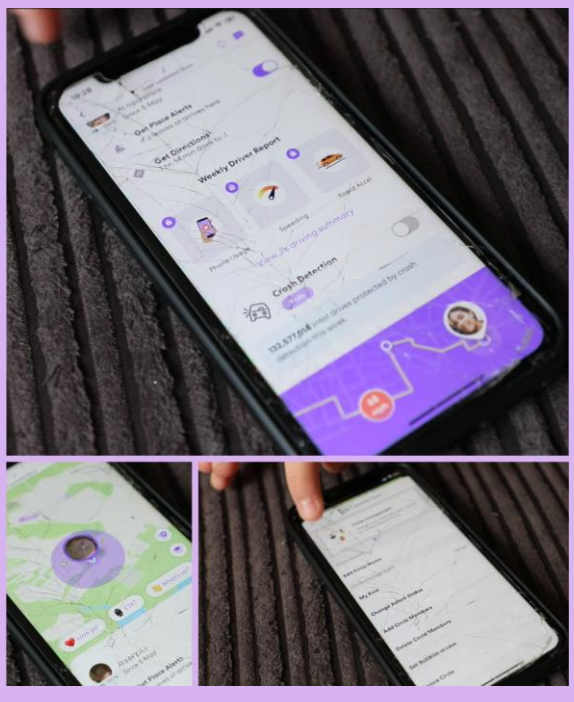
Georgia, 16

"I have life 360, which is like a... I don't want to call it a tracking app, because that sounds a bit weird, but it's like an app... if you press on it, it tells you exactly where you are."

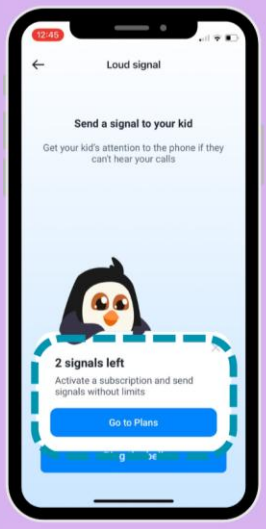
"So when he went in like a car, it would say he has left where he's at ... it says the time, distance and how fast and where he went to. It's weird. It just sends you random notifications ... if I was to leave my house, it would send my boyfriend a notification."

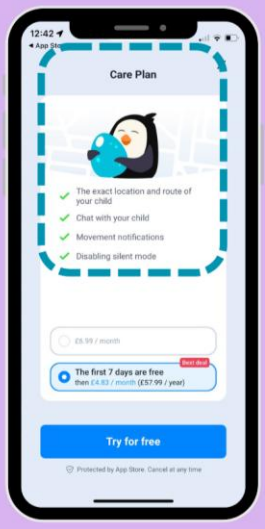
Georgia lives in Exeter with her parents, but her boyfriend, Lewis, joined the navy last year. This means he's moved from the South West to Portsmouth, and is soon going to be moving to Scotland for his work.

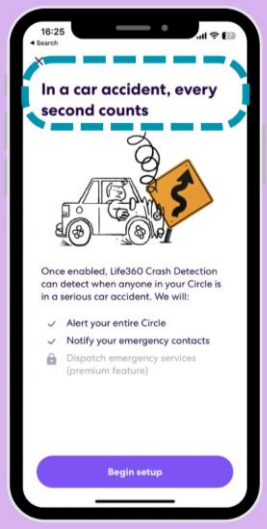
Georgia and Lewis use Life360 to help them stay connected. Georgia only uses Life360 with her boyfriend, but uses Snapchat to share her location with her friendship group.

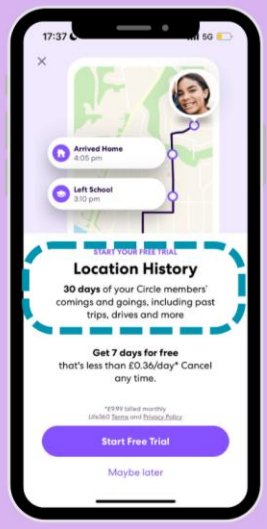


Platform analysis: Location tracking apps' comms and tone









Pingo
"Use Findmykids and Pingo apps to locate your child in real time."
"Find out what your child is doing during the day."

Life360
"Get peace of mind with the #1 family safety app."
"SOS alerts in case of emergency."
"Check their location history."

Life360 and Pingo appeal to parents' safety concerns by linking their services to peace of mind and security. Life360 emphasizes reliability with phrases like "Get peace of mind" and "SOS alerts in case of emergency," while Pingo connects knowing a child's location with reassurance that "everything's fine." Pingo's subscription model, called a "Care Plan," and its cuddly penguin mascot reinforce tracking as an extension of parental care. Both apps leverage the desire to protect and stay connected, making them feel essential for ensuring family safety.

Another person or a platform knowing their precise location was not a concern in and of itself – depending on who it was that was going to know and why. Overall, the decision seemed more to be about *who* to share their location with and for *how long*, rather than whether they would at all. Knowing someone's specific location at any time was a sign of closeness or care.

Implications of increased location tracking

While it is understandable that parents would want to know where their children are, and younger children will get some sense of reassurance from parental oversight, the normalisation of location sharing during formative years could have significant implications for future relationship dynamics. What happens when a child decides they no longer want their parents to know where they are? The same issue could arise in relationships. Could being unwilling to share location data become an indicator of distrust or a lack of loyalty?

Chapter 2:
Buried and inconsistent polices limit children's engagement with data rights

Children care about what they can access online and what that means in terms of their peers and social networks – so it's unsurprising 'data rights' don't feature significantly in their decision making or behaviours. However, this is only part of understanding what shapes children's behaviours and perceptions around data.

When we consider the digital environment they operate within – even if data rights were part of children's online priorities – is it realistic to expect they could meaningfully engage with these policies?

Chapter 2 summary

- Children struggle to understand how companies are using their data. Compared to the immediate social risks of their peers having their personal information, the risks feel abstract and intangible.
- Some platforms incentivise or necessitate children sharing information about themselves, making their data the main 'currency' available to children to access what they want online.
- The platform features that inform children about their data rights or prompt them to make decisions are often hidden or inconsistent with the behaviours incentivised by the rest of the platform.
    - Age assurance mechanisms were either non-existent or easy to circumvent, regardless of age restrictions outlined in privacy policies. This meant most of the participants had at least one platform profile with an inaccurate age.
    - Game-like features capture children's attention and can incentivise children to share their data.
- The framing and language was often beyond what a child could reasonably be expected to understand – making it too difficult for children to meaningfully engage.

Children struggle to imagine how companies might use their data

The ways companies used their data often felt abstract and intangible

While many children felt confident using their devices or favourite apps, they were less clear on what was happening in the background in terms of their data. Few children were confident about the detail of how companies might use their data.

Annabel (17) and Georgia (16) felt unsure about different data features and what companies might use them for.

> *"Sometimes you hear about companies stealing your information, but if they are, why and what do they actually use it for?"*
> **Annabel (17)**

> *"No one really tells you [what cookies are] … people say it's not important."*
> **Georgia (16)**

Despite this, a few of the children had gained a general sense of the fact that companies used their data – often from PSHE lessons about their online life or from overhearing their parents or other adults talk about the topic. Some repeated messages they'd heard elsewhere about companies' use of data.

> *"I don't really think they [cookies] mean any harm as long as they don't share it to third parties then that's fine… companies that want your data for some reason… maybe some bad reason."*
> **Faisal (11)**

A few of the older children in particular, had picked up information through news stories, so felt more informed about how companies used their data.

> *"Sometimes when you're on a site, it says 'will you accept these cookies' – that are basically just like information about you. So they give you the thing to decide whether or not you want to… sometimes you don't actually get a choice."*
> **Stevie (17)**

Children could name some potential downsides or risks of companies using information about them. These included their data being used for targeted advertising or their bank account or card details being 'hacked'. However, these were rarely top of mind and often felt less tangible and direct compared to the immediate social consequences of sharing their information with people they knew.

Overall, children tended to trust the security and integrity of 'big' platforms or companies, particularly those that were well known and had established reputations. Some also felt that larger companies were more likely to take measures to ensure safety and security – which they thought would extend to the safety and security of their data.

Faisal (11) trusted "big companies", especially those that lots of people used all the time. Yomi (10) did not mind Google having access to his location data because he did not think that Google would do anything "shady" with his information.

> *"Google is one of the biggest companies in the world right now. If they were doing shady things, then everyone would know about it.*"
> **Yomi (10)**

Accessing the platforms their friends were using required accepting Terms and Conditions and sharing data

Sharing data was often perceived to be a necessary step in order to access apps and services, and 'make them work'. This included inputting personal information to set up accounts and accepting cookies to access websites that their friends were using.

There were certain platforms that children felt a lot of pressure to be on in order to maintain and build their social lives. Given these platforms' social importance, children don't feel they have a choice of whether to be on them or not. This meant the decision to exchange data and accept terms and conditions was often made without attempting to engage with a platform's policies. This pressure could also act as an incentive to enter false information to gain access.

Data was often children's only available currency

In terms of accessing social media platforms, games, or shopping apps, it seemed that data was often the only way children could get what they wanted online. Sharing personal information was often seen as a necessary step in order to access apps and services. This included personal information to set up accounts or create profiles and accepting cookies to access websites. As children often found they couldn't access all or parts of platforms without these actions, sharing their data here was seen as necessary to 'make them work'.

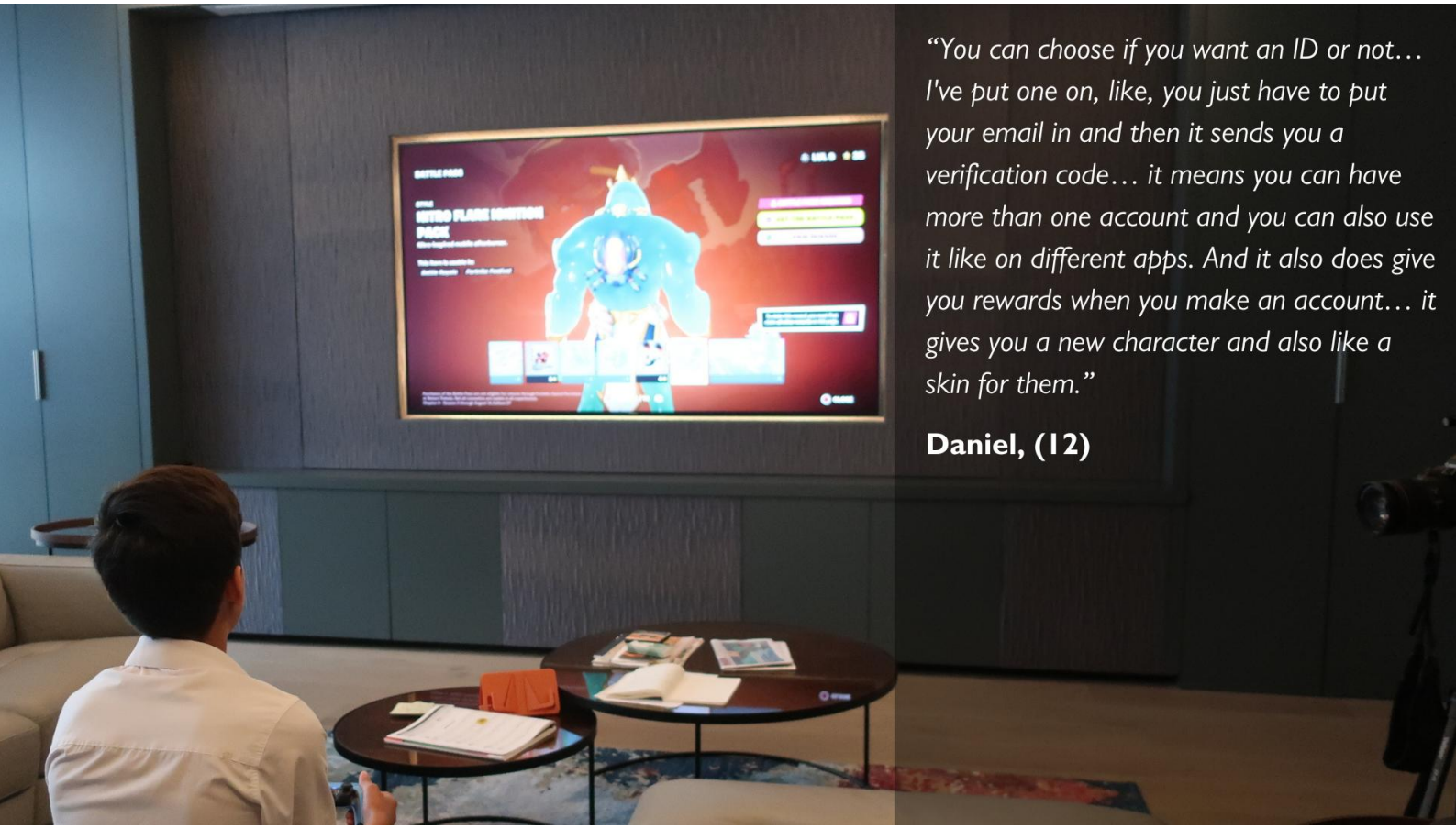
> *"I feel like in order to use the app, you have to accept for them to access your data and stuff, because sometimes you might decline terms and conditions, and they'll just be like, you can't use the app unless you accept it or something. So, I guess it's like, if you want to use the app, you have to, like, let the app take some of your data."*
> **Ezra (16)**

> *"I don't 'share' [data], but I have to give it to actually log into the thing."*
> **Mason (13)**

There were also examples where sharing information was part of specific exchanges in return for rewards or new items on platforms. Daniel (12) created an account in return for a 'skin' on Brawl Stars, a gaming app. He

explained that having an account wasn't compulsory to be able to play, but it allowed him to receive rewards such as new characters and skins.

Whether it's to access platforms or receive additional add-ons online, children were actively exchanging data with companies or accepting terms and conditions. In some scenarios, the very action of clicking 'accept all' to a cookies notification or signalling they had read the Terms and Conditions felt so frictionless, some children didn't attribute it to an agreement around data sharing. In other scenarios, the exchange felt more overt. But as children don't have access to money in the same way an adult does, they didn't have the option to pay as an alternative to sharing data.



"You can choose if you want an ID or not… I've put one on, like, you just have to put your email in and then it sends you a verification code… it means you can have more than one account and you can also use it like on different apps. And it also does give you rewards when you make an account… it gives you a new character and also like a skin for them."

Daniel, (12)

Privacy policies were often buried and difficult for children to process

Engagement with the privacy aspects of online platforms was minimal. Few children actively read terms and conditions, privacy policies, or understood the concept of cookies. Only a small number had interacted with these privacy features at all.

> *"When we agree... most of us don't read whatever is there... No one's going to read that."*
> **Dina (15)**

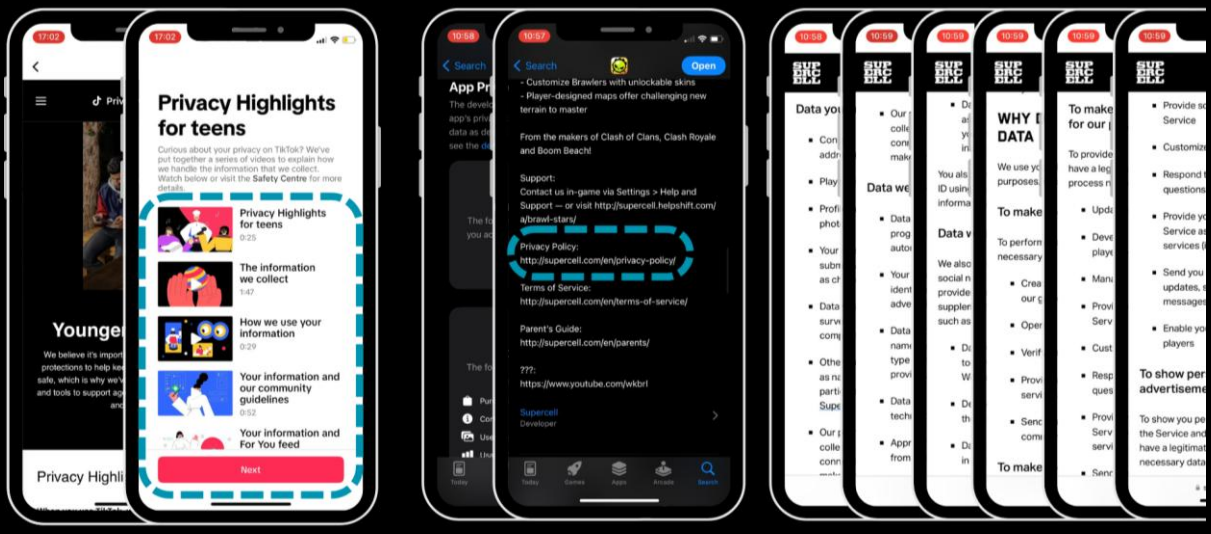
Where children could remember seeing specific privacy features, few had fully engaged or understood them. Most of the younger children had either no understanding, or a very limited understanding of what cookies were – even when researchers probed around cookies specifically on the internet.

> *"I always accept them [cookies], but I don't really know what they are. I thought they actually gave you, like, cookies, and, like, I was collecting cookies."*
> **Bryanna (12)**

> *"Cookies are basically a sweet, basically…it's chocolate and bread."*
> **Margot (10)**

Even if a child did want to find out about how their data and information was being used or what privacy meant on a platform they were using, there was often a disconnect between a child's level of understanding and what they would be expected to comprehend. In analysing the platforms children used, privacy policies often seemed 'buried'.

Platform analysis: Privacy policies' accessibility



TikTok
"We believe it's important to ensure even stronger protections to help keep minors and young people safe, which is why we've introduced privacy features and tools to support age-appropriate privacy settings and controls"

Brawl Stars X Supercell
"Privacy policy: http://supercell.com/en/privacy-policy/"

Some platforms make efforts to tailor the accessibility of their privacy policies toward younger users, as illustrated by TikTok's use of short videos to explain how the company processes users' data. Other platforms' privacy policies are harder to find and do not make adaptations for younger users. Brawl Stars' privacy policy is not accessible directly through the app. Instead, users must find the platform's policy via a non-hyperlinked link in the App Store description, which directs them to the Supercell privacy policy on their website where they can read the policy in full.

While some apps made an effort to inform users, even in those cases, users could easily bypass prompts directing them to the policies. Additionally, when examining the language and framing of privacy policies, it raises the broader question of how children could reasonably be expected to engage with or even be aware of these policies.

Platform policies do not always translate into reality

The reality of using the platform did not always align with the platform policy, particularly with age restrictions.

Most of the children had provided incorrect ages to use platforms

Only a limited number of apps being used by children required visible or user-driven age verification beyond simply asking users to input their age. This approach made it easy for children to bypass restrictions. It was found that most children had at least one platform where they had provided an incorrect age, a trend consistent across all age groups.

There were a range of reasons children were doing this. Many chose to alter their age to bypass age restrictions, enabling them to access games, TV shows, and social media platforms that their peers were also

using. Others did so as part of the transition from using their parents' accounts, often with encouragement from their parents, who were keen to regain control of their logins and social media feeds. Some children found it easier to scroll to a random birth date rather than input their actual age.

> *"Basically, with Roblox, if, say like, you're 9 years old, you have to put a higher age because otherwise they wouldn't let you go on the account."*
> **Madiha (11)**

> *"You can just change it [birth date] though. No one uses their real date."*
> **Zain (9)**

Children didn't have many concerns about inputting an incorrect age. Any potential risks seemed minimal. Even when accounts were frozen or shut down by platforms due to discrepancies between a user's stated age and their actual age, some children had already created backup accounts to ensure uninterrupted access.

Few had considered the long-term consequences of inputting an older age. The initial adding of a few years to access a social media platform or game often meant the age on the profile was still under the age of 18, like the user themself. Few identified the risk of the age gap between their age and the older age on the profile continuing into the future, with the profile's age becoming 13, 16, or 18 before they themselves were – and therefore being shown content and app features appropriate for that age.

Sometimes parents were helping children overcome age-assurance features

In some households, shared devices between siblings or parents and children made monitoring and adhering to age restrictions more challenging.

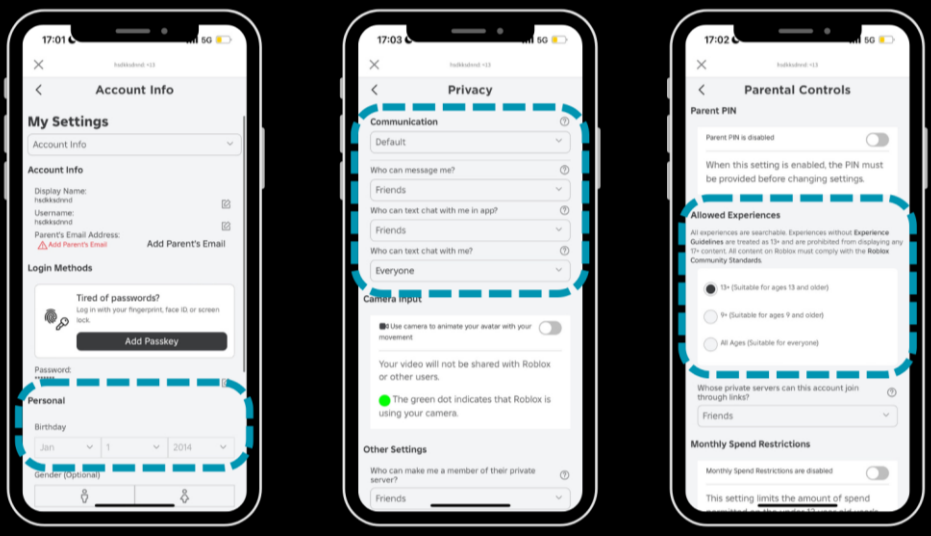
Despite concerns about safety online some parents helped their child to bypass age assurance features when setting up accounts or were unconcerned if they found out their child had set up an account with the wrong age. They felt it was important that their child would be able to play on the same games or see the same social media content as their friends.

There were some discrepancies in the policies stated in platform's privacy policy, and what was in place to enforce that

Some platforms lacked mechanisms to ensure accurate age verification for each profile, even though their privacy policies emphasised age restrictions. Shopping apps Temu and AliExpress state in their privacy policies that they are designed for users 18 and older, yet their sign-up processes include no checks to enforce this.

On other platforms, the user's age did not appear to impact potentially related settings. When researchers created a Roblox account for a 10-year-old, the default privacy setting was set to '13+' rather than '9+' or 'suitable for all ages.' Additionally, the platform automatically allowed 'Everyone' to 'text chat' with them in a game.

Platform analysis: Privacy and age assurance on Roblox



Roblox

"All experiences are searchable. Experiences without Experience Guidelines are treated as 13+ and are prohibited from displaying any 17+ content. All content must comply with the Roblox Community Standards."

Roblox requires users to input their age when setting up an account, but it does not require any age verification, making it easy for users to input fake ages.

Roblox has a three-tiered age categorisation system, with tailored content suitable for ages 9+, 13+, and "All Ages," which is accessible to users who are 17 and above. However, all users under 17, including those who are between 9 and 11, are categorized as 13+ under Roblox's default settings.

Researchers at Revealing Reality tested this by setting up a profile as a 10-year-old (left image). The default settings of this profile were automatically set to receive text chats from any user (middle image) and to be exposed to 13+ content (right image) despite inputting an age under 13.

Platform design could disguise data sharing

User experience design could hinder children's understanding and control over their data, with features that appear to obscure information and incentivise data sharing.

Game-like features appeared to incentivise users to share their data

Across a range of platforms children were using, there were examples of features where fun, game-like features and UX appeared to incentivise users to share their data. Key examples were on shopping apps, where social media and game-like design seemed to be applied to grab users' attention and keep them on the platform.

While these apps often stated they were intended for those aged 18 or older, age assurance mechanisms didn't exist and the content and design appealed to children. This included using features such as colourful child-like illustrations and graphics, creating games such as Temu's 'Fishland' in which users can earn rewards by 'feeding fish' on the app, and spinning wheels where users could win prizes in the form of coupons.

Case study: Meet Leesha

Leesha (9)

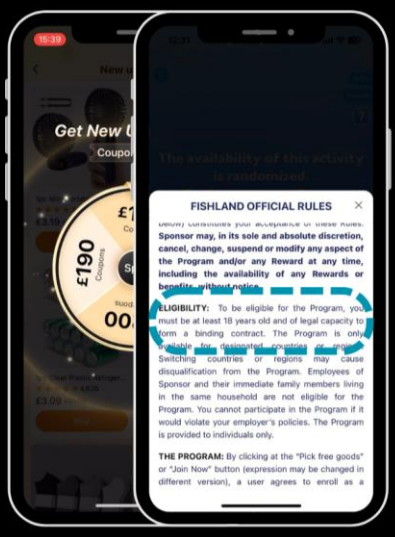
"There's a game on here ... fishland, like, you claim the thing, the food for the fish.
If you keep feeding the fish, once its gets to 100 ... then you get your order ... whatever you want.
Sometimes it says you can invite people, then you'll get even more [fish]."

Leesha lives with her parents and two younger sisters, aged four and eight months. She has had her own phone since she was eight. She loves playing games on it, taking pictures with funny filters on Snapchat, and online shopping.

The shopping app she uses the most is Temu, where she buys toys and gadgets for herself and her sisters to play with. Temu has in-app games that incentivize users to play in order to gain rewards, such as vouchers or discounts on products. Leesha loves playing Fishland, where you feed fish in exchange for points. She earns extra points by inviting friends to play a match with her.

Leesha shared her phone number with the platform when she signed up. Temu regularly sends her WhatsApp messages with discounts or vouchers, encouraging her to buy things from the platform.

Platform analysis: Game features and age assurance



Temu

"To be eligible for the Program, you must be at least 18 years old or the age of majority in your jurisdiction, whichever is greater, and of legal capacity to form a binding contract."

AliExpress

"Only natural persons who meet the age of majority under higher national law are eligible to participate in the Promotion (such as being older than 18 or 21)"

In Temu's *Fishland*, *Temu Planet*, or Ali Express's *Merge Boss*, users gain rewards for completing game-based tasks. The games use playful, colourful illustrations and simple mechanics with the allure of rewards, which might incentivise younger users to engage with the games. When exploring the 'Rules' of the game, the small print describes that users must be over 18 to be 'eligible' to participate in the promotional games. However, there is no option to input age at any point in the Temu or Ali Express account set up process.

Chapter 3:
Parents bear most of the responsibility for setting up and monitoring controls

What children do online, and how they perceive risk, is often shaped by their parents, especially for younger children. But what are parents' priorities? How deeply are they involved in their children's digital lives? And how much influence do they really have over their children's online privacy?

Chapter 3 summary

- Parents prioritised online safety over data privacy, focusing on risks like exposure to inappropriate content, online bullying, grooming, and excessive screen time.
- The responsibility for setting up and managing parental controls fell primarily on parents, who used both digital tools and household rules to monitor and regulate their children's online activities.
- Despite these efforts, many children found parental controls easy to bypass, leading to a sense of helplessness for parents and a belief that platforms should enhance protections.

Parents were more concerned with their child's safety online, rather than their data rights

Parents expressed a range of concerns about their children being online. These included the potential to come across content they felt was inappropriate, online bullying, as well as the potential of being groomed or contacted by strangers.

Madiha's aunt and Farah's mum were worried about the risks their children might face from online predators, while Bryanna's mum was most concerned about the content her daughter could be exposed to. Some parents also expressed concern about the amount of time their children spent online.

> *"You can start on one page and end up somewhere completely different because of these recommendations…before you know it, it's saying words I don't want her to hear."*
> **Bryanna's (12) mum**

> *"Her new set of friends play the same games as her… we've got rules in place to manage if she is on it too long she can be a misery guts and not very talkative and gets what we call 'iPad face'… also she really enjoys doing other things, when she starts doing them, but getting her off the iPad is something that is a tough transition."*
> **Margot's (10) dad**

Despite these risks or downsides, many parents also reflected on the potential benefits of their child being online. Often these centred around social factors.

> *"There's a huge online community for kids with anxiety or ASD who struggle to go out and do face to face relationships, so for them online is a huge part of their world, because the world is restricted enough, so that's why we realised that there needs to be some flexibility with the online stuff."*
> **Murray's (12) mum**

Many parents also talked about perceived social benefits of their child being online. They wanted their child to be able to talk to and play with their friends. They didn't want their child to be left out, meaning they could be reluctant for their child to be the only one of their friend group who wasn't on a platform or game.

Generally, parents were more concerned about these potential harms than they were about data and privacy issues. Fears of exposure to inappropriate content, grooming, and concern about the time spent online overshadowed concern about the potential misuse of their children's data.

As privacy policies and terms and conditions were challenging for many of the children to access and understand, some of the parents struggled as well. Parents found it hard to imagine how companies could use their children's data, again making it difficult to assess the potential risks this could pose.

> *"I don't think he needs to worry about his data at his age, probably more as he gets older."*
> **Mason's (13) mum**

The labour burden of setting up controls mainly falls on parents

Parents actively monitored their children's digital lives through a combination of digital tools, household rules, and having conversations with their children. This included parental control features on devices and apps that enabled parents to set daily screen time limits on applications or devices, or completely block usage at certain times of day. A few parents had set up their child's devices to require parental approval before any apps could be installed, or in-app purchases made.

Some parents also sought out information and guidance on digital safety. Orla's mum turned to online resources via Google to find tailored advice on parental controls. Similarly, Margot's dad conducted research before purchasing anything for his children, ensuring it included appropriate safeguards.

> *"I think that it's more about when you're purchasing or sourcing things for your children... you kind of do a little bit of homework."*
> **Margot's (10) dad**

Sometimes older siblings or other adults within the family were supporting their younger siblings to set up new devices or apps, which meant that they were responsible in those situations for setting privacy settings.

> *"Sean would ask his older brother if he was going to download something…. He wouldn't ask me or his mum because he knows we're less tech-savvy…You might as well ask the four-legged furball downstairs, to be honest!"*
> **Sean's (15) dad**

Other parents were choosing non-digital routes, such as in-person conversations or rules around what age children could get smartphones or where in the house phones were allowed. This included restricting access to devices at nighttime, asking children to give them access to devices and apps and to share their passwords, checking their children had private accounts, or making children wait until they are a certain age to have access to certain apps.

> *"We're not allowed smartphones till we're 16, and then they have to stay downstairs. And then the computer's downstairs, the TV's downstairs, the PS four's downstairs, the laptop."*
> **Baz (14)**

> *"She's also put into place a daily limit system on my phone… so three hours and then the phone turns off."*
> **Jonah (12)**

> *"I think I've got it set up so that his iPhone is on the family account, so I have to approve anything you download like apps and things on my phone."*
> **Joey's (13) mum**

Some children felt reassured by parental controls. Madiha was happy with her aunt using Qustodio to monitor her iPad and her dad tracking her location. It made her feel "safe."

> *"We're aware of everything she tries to access, which ultimately is positive because we can come back and have conversations if its something we don't agree with … its just an added measure, you have to put it in."*
> **Madiha's (11) aunt**

Others found these controls restrictive or irritating. Jonah's mum mentioned that he frequently asked for more time on his phone after his screen time had been used up for the day. Some children were unaware of the extent to which their parents oversaw their online activities. Liv's (12) mum regularly checked her phone without her knowledge.

Both parents and children shared examples of how children were able to bypass parental controls on devices or platforms. This was often around screen time limits or age assurance features.

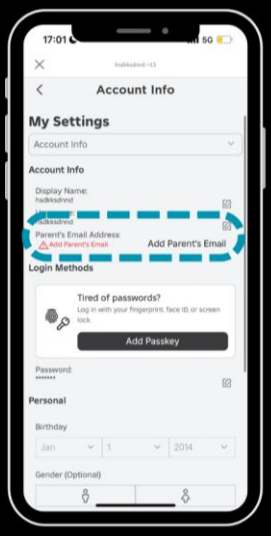
> *"My mum used to have like parental controls on the computer, but then [Baz's older brother] managed to find ways around it and then so there was no point."*
> **Baz (14)**

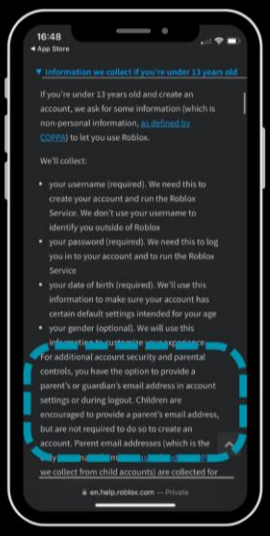
> *"I put parental controls on … but she's bright enough, she could turn them off … If I can do it, she can definitely do it."*
> **Bryanna's (10) mum**

> *"I remember when I wanted to watch a video, I put my mum's ID on it [YouTube]… You've got to have a form of ID, so a bank card or a driver's license… it was only one video… it wasn't anything rude, it was more gruesome."*
> **Bradley (16)**

Bypassing these features left some parents feeling helpless, believing that more should be done by the platforms to address these vulnerabilities.

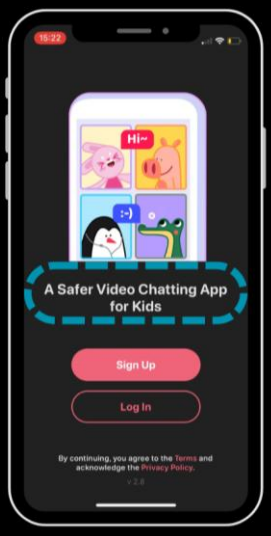
Platform analysis: Parental controls and age assurance

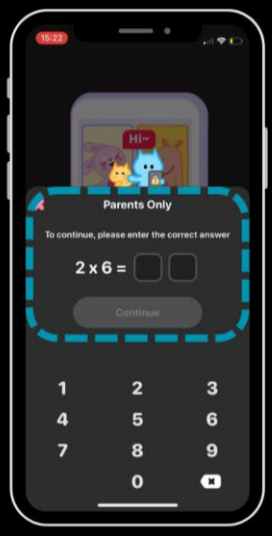




Roblox
"For additional account security and parental controls, you have the option to provide a parent's or guardian's email address in account settings or during logout. Children are encouraged to provide a parent's email address but are not required to do so to create an account."

Roblox seems to incentivise children to add their parent's email address by highlighting it in red with a warning a signal. However, there is no noticeable change to the gaming-experience for a user that does not enter a parent email address. It is the child and parent's own prerogative to add parental controls.





JusTalk Kids
"To continue please enter the correct answer: 2x6 ="

JusTalk Kids is advertised as a 'safe' messaging and video-chat platform for kids. It requires parental permission to set up the child's account, and to access account settings, or add new contacts (far right image). Once parents have set up accounts, they can use a 4-digit pin code at these permission points. However, before an account has been registered with a parent, the platform uses a simple maths question intended to prevent a child from passing onto the next screen.

Conclusion

Children's online behaviours and attitudes are primarily driven by social factors: making friends, gaining social status, being seen as "cool" or popular, and avoiding exclusion. This extends to their experiences around data and information sharing. Rather than being concerned with privacy policies or data rights, social factors shape their interactions with 'data'.

In some scenarios, social factors encourage privacy-conscious behaviours. The fear of embarrassment or the wish to present themselves positively often leads children to manage their online presence more thoughtfully. They use privacy settings to control who can see their posts or to shape how they appear to others. While these actions may not always be based on a clear understanding of data privacy, they demonstrate that children use privacy tools to navigate social pressures online. This highlights the need to consider social influences when creating privacy features that are effective for young users.

Social pressures can also drive children to prioritise connection and popularity over privacy. The desire to fit in, gain approval, or connect with others online can lead them to make their profiles more public or share more information. The need to be seen and accepted by others outweighs concerns about privacy, with children sometimes overlooking or bypassing privacy settings altogether to stay connected and relevant in their social circles.

Giving access to their personal data often seems like the only currency available to many children online, necessary to use the apps, games, and features they enjoy. Once shared, many children are unaware of how companies collect and use their data. Some design features on platforms can make it difficult for children to understand and make informed decisions about their privacy. Game-like features and engaging design elements can encourage users to share more information, making data sharing feel like part of the fun rather than something to be cautious about.

Sharing location data is common among children and often viewed as a normal part of their relationships. Younger children tend to share their location with family members, while older children also share with friends or romantic partners. In some cases, knowing someone's exact location or letting someone know yours is a way to express intimacy, care, or closeness. This behaviour suggests that location sharing has become an accepted, even expected, aspect of maintaining relationships, particularly for older children. This normalisation may be reinforced by some platforms' messaging, which emphasises 'safety' and 'protection' as benefits of sharing location.

Many parents are more concerned about protecting their children from immediate online dangers, such as inappropriate content or interactions with strangers, than the potentially longer-term implications of data sharing. Whether parents opt for 'offline' or 'digital' parental controls, children are frequently finding ways to bypass them.

Both parents and children balance safety and data privacy concerns with the need and desire for children to fit in, make friends, and establish social networks. At any given age, a large proportion of children are using a small number of popular platforms for social interaction and entertainment. Due to their popularity, these online spaces feel almost essential for making and maintaining friendships or accessing content that provides vital social currency with peers.

Many children in this research do not yet have strong, established social networks. They don't often play or interact with friends or meet new people outside of school or beyond the supervision of adults. Compared to adults, they have less choice about when, how, and who they socialise with. Opting out of socialising online comes with the very real risks of feeling disconnected, excluded, and isolated.

In this context, consenting to share your data to gain access to the space where all your peers hang out may not feel like a meaningful choice for children, and it is no surprise that parents often feel access to friends ultimately takes priority over other concerns.

Future areas of research

This report summarises the findings of the first 'wave' of Children's Data Lives. Given the rapidly evolving digital landscape and changes to children's online lives, the longitudinal nature of this project provides the opportunity to explore how these areas evolve in the future. These areas could include:

- **Location sharing**: The project will monitor behaviours and attitudes towards live location sharing over time, to explore if children continue to be happy about this or raise any new concerns
- **Gamification and data sharing:** The project will track children's online behaviours and the apps and platforms they use, to explore where data sharing may be gamified or incentivised.
- **Engagement with privacy policies:** As platforms evolve how they present this information, we will monitor whether children's ability to process and understand it improves.
- **Engagement with privacy settings and controls, including age assurance controls**: As new features are introduced, we will explore why children engage with these, and analyse whether they align with children's priorities.
- **Role of emerging technologies**: We will track how this affects views on data privacy, for example whether children continue to accept data privacy policies in order to have access to new forms of technology and if they understand how these new technologies use their information.
- **Parental controls:** The project will continue to explore trends in the controls parents use, and how children circumvent them.

Annex 1

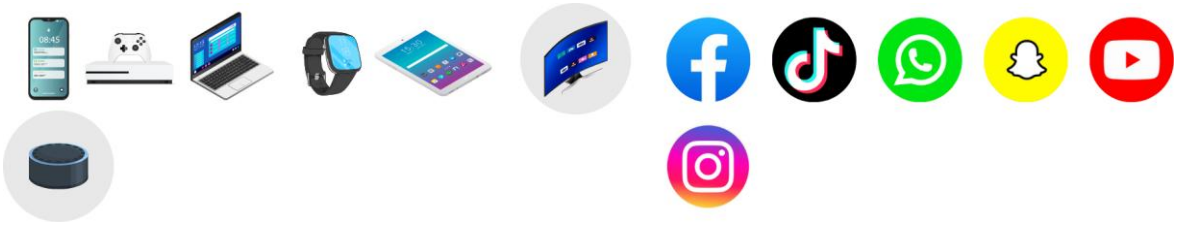
This annex contains summaries of all the children interviewed in wave 1.

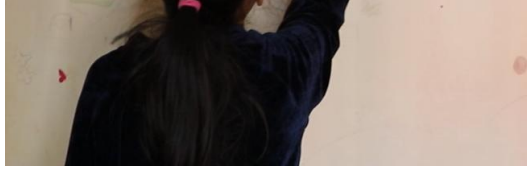
It provides an introduction to each child, and includes icons illustrating:

- What **devices** each child has access to. Those that are shared are signified by the grey circle around the icon.
- What **platforms** they use

Annex 1: Respondent summaries

Leesha, 9, C1, North-West England

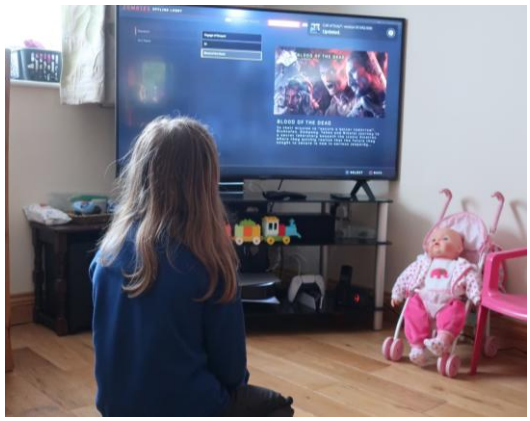




Leesha lives in the South-East of England with her parents and two younger sisters, aged 8 months and 4 years. Her dad works as an Uber driver and also sells products online. Leesha spends much of her free time on digital devices, including her phone, laptop, tablet, and the family's smart TV. She's had her phone since she was 8 and uses it without much supervision. Leesha enjoys using apps like TikTok, Roblox, and Temu, often spending time online by herself.

Leesha's mum helps set up her accounts by using her own date of birth for apps that are meant for users aged 13+, such as TikTok. Although her mum put age restrictions on her Roblox account, Leesha created a new account without restrictions by using a different email. One of her favourite activities is playing 'Fishland' on Temu, where she tries to win points and cash prizes to spend on the app. Temu also sends her deals via WhatsApp. Leesha's younger sister often borrows her phone and sometimes adds random people on Roblox and Snapchat, which Leesha then has to block. She's had negative experiences online, including strangers calling her on WhatsApp, which made her feel unsafe. Since then, she avoids using her real name or photo anywhere online to protect her privacy.

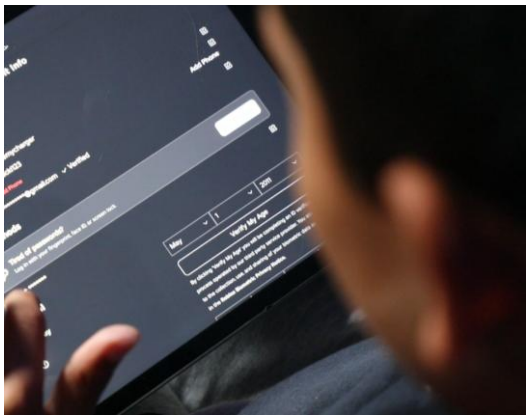
Arianna, 9, C1, East Midlands



Arianna is a 9-year-old avid gamer. She mostly games on her PlayStation and Nintendo Switch, but also has a tablet she spends a lot of time on. She enjoys games like Roblox, where she has an account set up under parental guidance. But also plays other games with her dad on the PlayStation that she does not meet the age requirements for, such as War Zone and Call of Duty.

Arianna's mum is personally concerned about data privacy, especially after a cyber-attack on their local Council. She closely monitors Arianna's technology use. Arianna understands concepts like virtual reality, automation, chatbots, and AI, explaining how AI is used in games to control non-player characters. She also has some awareness of online privacy risks learned from her mum's guidance, and from PSHCE lessons in school. However, she is less confident in explaining the reasons behind privacy risks or safety protocols.

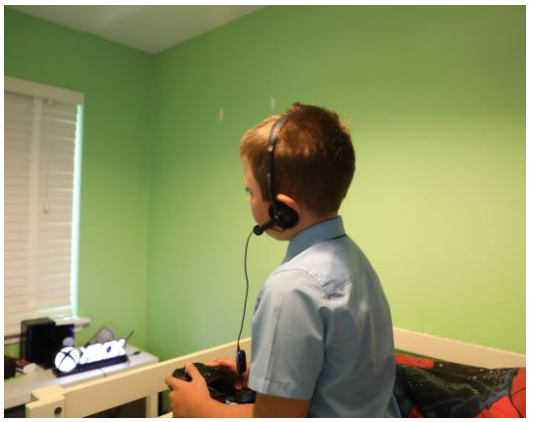
Zain, 9, C2, West Midlands



Zain lives with his parents, his 11-year-old older sister and 3-year-old younger brother. His dad is a youth worker and his mum is a social worker. Zain's week is filled with football training sessions and attending the Mosque after school. He enjoys playing FIFA on his PS5 and has a keen interest in sports and religious activities.

Zain uses a personal iPad for Roblox and YouTube. He mainly plays Roblox, where he uses a fake age to access more content, and watches YouTube videos. Zain's understanding of online safety centres on avoiding hacking and stranger danger. He had a troubling experience on the app 'Adopt Me,' a Roblox game in which users can adopt and trade pets, where he was scammed out of £10 by another player. This incident involved a misleading trade where Zain was promised valuable in-game items but ended up losing real money instead. The scam left him upset and embarrassed, making him more wary of online interactions. His parents are cautious with screen time and prefer to delay introducing phones until Zain is 13 or 14, focusing on concerns about content and safety rather than data privacy.

Liam, 9, B, Scotland



Liam lives in Scotland and with his parents and his older sister. Liam spends most afternoons after school playing outside with other kids from the neighbourhood. They often go to the local park or ride their bikes together.

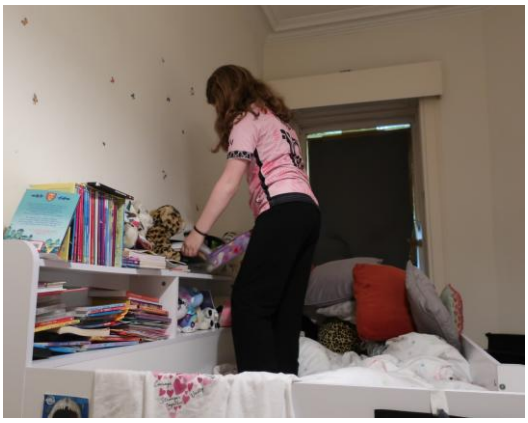
Liam just got his first phone recently, an old Android passed down from his dad. He's currently only allowed to use WhatsApp, Snapchat, and YouTube, and he mostly communicates with his parents, his sister, and his three closest friends. He's still getting used to it and has been enjoying sending gifs to his mum and dad.

Although Liam's phone settings aren't fully configured yet, his Xbox and tablet have time limits of 1 to 1.5 hours to make sure he isn't spending too much time on them. The idea of sharing data or information online is far from Liam's mind. When asked what he shares online, he said "nothing" and mentioned learning at school not to share personal details. He doesn't think apps like WhatsApp or Snapchat know much about him apart from his name and who his friends are. As for Fortnite, he thinks the only thing it knows about him is that he's a good player.

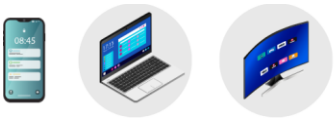
Margot, 10, C1, Scotland

Margot, 10, lives with her younger sister and parents. Her interests are swimming, football, and drama. Her online activities include playing Roblox with friends on her mum's iPad and watching YouTube/Disney. Though restricted from having her own phone until she turns 12, she bypasses her Disney+ kids profile by using another family members profile, so she can watch Marvel movies.

Margot grasps the basics of online safety like not sharing addresses. However, she lacks awareness of data privacy and targeted advertising - believing apps/websites knew little about her if she uses fake usernames. While understanding age-appropriate content recommendations, she didn't know about cookies and pop-ups.

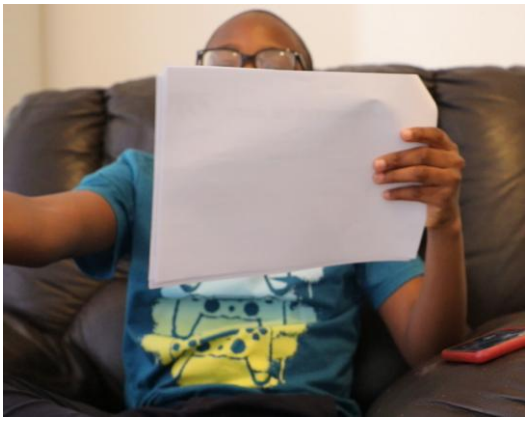


Yomi, 10, Scotland

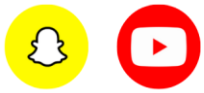


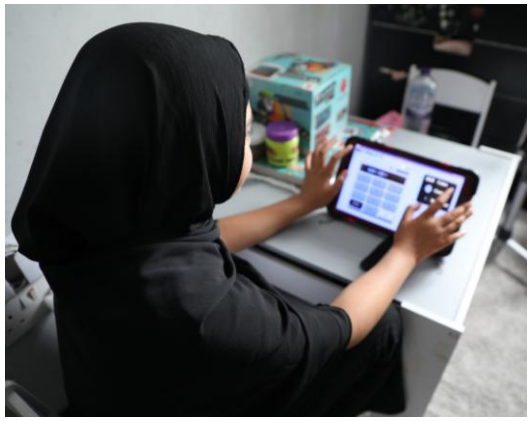
Yomi, 10, lives with his parents and younger siblings after moving from Nigeria in 2022. While initially quiet, he shared that he enjoys writing, reading, and posting his own Roblox videos on YouTube - having recently verified his account via facial recognition at 50 subscribers.

Quite tech-savvy, Yomi understands concepts like targeted ads and online profiling before being prompted. He used a hand-me-down iPhone from his mum, which is restricted by parental controls. He mostly uses his phone to watch YouTube and play Roblox. He also uses it to watch Netflix, where he is set up with a child's profile. His parent's aim is to instill balanced screen time and have restricted him from using social media apps like Snapchat until he turns 13.



Farah, 10, C1, West Midlands

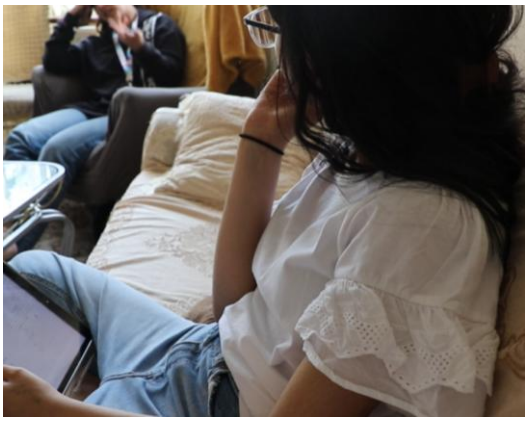




Farah has a busy household – living with her parents, three younger siblings and grandparents. Recently, her aunt and cousins, moved in temporarily from next door whilst they were having some work done. Farah enjoys creative writing, making slime with her friends and watching funny videos on YouTube on her tablet. She also sometimes records videos with her friends using a mini microphone but does not post these online anywhere.

Farah regularly attends her local mosque with her dad, who teaches there, and she appreciates learning from the female teachers in the separate girls' classes. Farah does not have any social media accounts and says she does not have much time at the moment to spend on her iPad, balancing her time between school, homework and religious studies at the mosque.

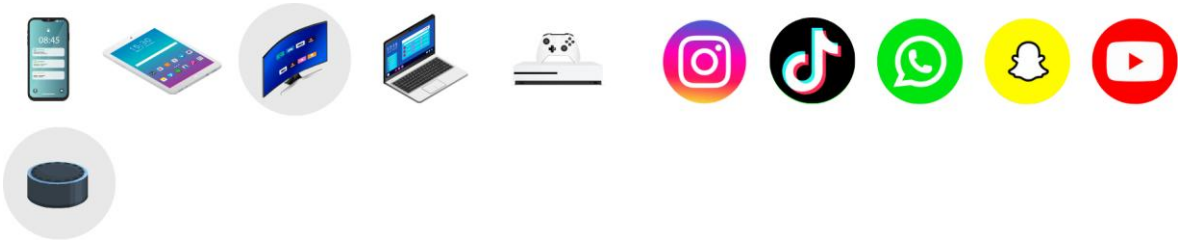
Madiha, 11, C2, West Midlands

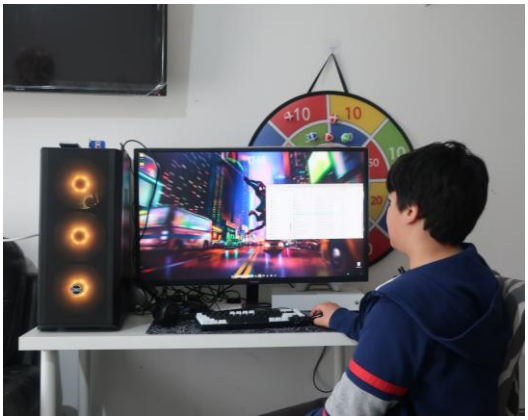


Madiha lives in the Midlands with her parents and three older siblings. She loves K-pop, watching food videos on YouTube, playing on Roblox, and making edits of her friends using the video editor CapCut. Madiha does not have a phone, but sometimes uses her mum's phone to use her snapchat or WhatsApp to message her friends on her mum's account. She does not have any social media accounts of her own. Her parents do not allow it, but she also believes that children her age should not be on social media because of the negative comments they could receive online and the risk of predators.

Madiha spends a lot of time with her two aunties, both in their 20s, who work in social-care settings. She has a very close relationship with them, and they play a significant role in her upbringing, especially in supervising her online activities. One of her aunties asked her to download a parental control app called Qustodio, which allows her to limit Madiha's screen time, block certain websites and apps, and monitor everything Madiha does on her iPad. Madiha sometimes finds the screen time limits a bit annoying, but overall, she does not mind her aunties supervising her online life, it makes her feel safer.

Faisal, 11, D, South-East England

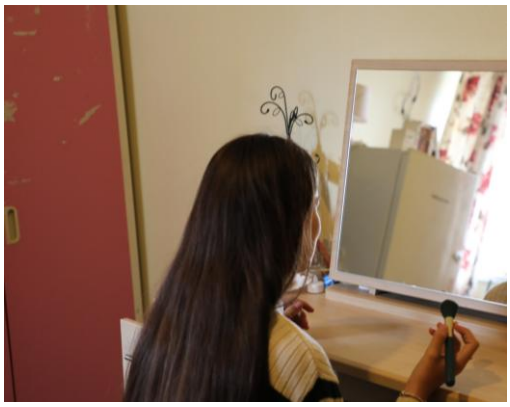




Faisal lives with his two parents, both originally from Pakistan, and two younger siblings. He loves all things tech and wants to be a digital animator when he grows up. Faisal has his own phone and has recently been gifted a PC by his uncles who run a tech business. He is very excited by his new PC, and uses it for gaming, and for 3D model development, which he has learnt from his uncles. He enjoys creating and watching content on TikTok, where he has amassed at least 600 followers. He takes pride in tracking his follower count in his bio and now prefers TikTok to YouTube due to the higher number of views he receives.

Faisal trusts well-known companies like Google and Meta, feeling they are safe because so many people use them. However, he is more cautious about lesser-known websites, which he considers less reliable. He's most concerned about sharing sensitive data like his full name, location, or financial information online.

Leandra, 12, E, Wales



Leandra lives in Wales with her mum and younger brother. Originally from Albania, her family moved to Wales nearly five years ago after applying for asylum. Leandra enjoys attending her nearby school, particularly because of her friends and art, which is her favourite subject. Outside of school, she spends her time doing nail art, playing football, and occasionally visiting the beach or parks with her family.

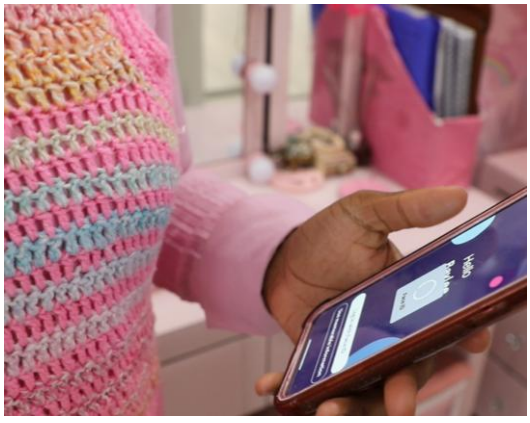
Leandra uses her phone mainly for communication and entertainment. She frequently uses WhatsApp to stay in touch with her mother and her mother's friends, sharing updates and stories. She enjoys watching song lyric videos on YouTube and searches Google for topics related to her hobbies, especially nail art. Although she used to have TikTok, her mum deleted it due to safety concerns. Leandra and her family currently don't have Wi-Fi at home, which has made completing schoolwork through Teams and other online resources difficult. The Wi-Fi was disconnected around four to five weeks ago, which has been frustrating for them, and now Leandra relies on mobile data and offline methods to finish her assignments and watch videos online.

Jonah, 12, D, North East England

Jonah lives with his mum in a small town in the North East. He describes his area as "a bit rough" and has recently seen some fights near his house. For him, life feels "just normal," attending school in a neighbouring town, taking the bus to meet his friends early each morning. Outside of school, Jonah enjoys building Lego models, proudly displaying his creations on a shelf in his bedroom. He has also recently restarted piano lessons, committing to daily practice. His mum has struggled with her mental health recently and has left work, so Jonah has been helping with tasks like food shopping.

Jonah spends most evenings gaming with his friends on his Xbox, although he only plays with people he knows from school. He also has a phone, which he mainly uses for Snapchat, WhatsApp, and TikTok. His mum has put a three-hour time limit on his phone usage to help him focus more on homework and piano practice. While Jonah admits it's for the best, his mum notes he wasn't as happy about the rule at first. When it comes to online privacy, Jonah feels confident and in control, believing that as long as he's the one sharing information, he can manage what happens with it or retract it if needed.

Bryanna, 12, B, South-East England



Bryanna lives with her mum in a flat equipped with various smart home devices, including CCTV on the exterior and a Ring doorbell that was installed during lockdown. She is a bubbly child with a love for all things pink, and enjoys playing the piano, singing, and acting. Bryanna has a range of devices, including an iPhone, laptop, iPad, Nintendo, and a smart TV in her bedroom. Her favourite apps are YouTube and Spotify.

Bryanna also uses a school app that her mum is connected to, allowing her mum to check her timetable and see whether she has completed her homework. Bryanna mentioned that some children at school don't have their parents on the app, but she believes this is why they often don't complete their homework. She is aware of age restrictions and thinks they are important, noting that her mum frequently talks to her about online safety and staying secure on the internet.

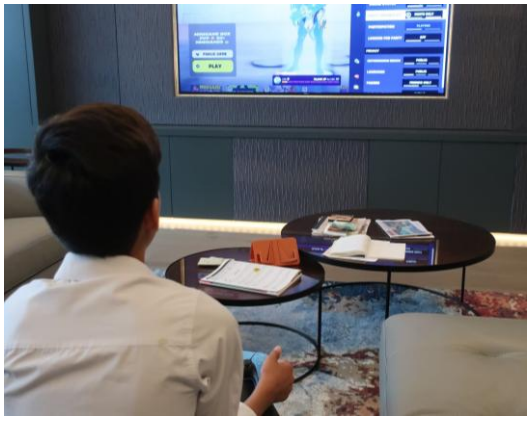
Murray, 12, B, Scotland

Murray lives in Scotland with his mum, dad, and younger brother (5). Murray has ADHD, which he and his parents have found more challenging since the Covid-19 lockdowns. Murray has been home-schooled for about a month, with his return to school uncertain until September.

His home-school routine includes morning walks with his dog, Dolly, to help with his mental health, followed by some maths and English from a website his dad found. He spends a lot of his day playing on his Oculus VR headset or drawing on his iPad. Murray is active online, creating and posting content on TikTok about Guerrilla Tag and working to "build a community" through his posts. His TikTok, Discord, and Oculus accounts are all public.

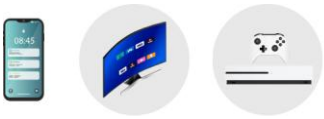
Daniel, 12, A/B, South-East England

Daniel lives with his parents and older sister just outside. He participates in a range of extracurricular activities including judo, fencing, tennis, and football, and attends a high achieving, academically focused school. At school, he enjoys subjects such as maths, drama, and engineering, and has a strong passion for sports.



Daniel uses several digital devices, including a PlayStation, iPhone X, and an iPad he has received from school. He primarily engages with his devices for watching YouTube, playing Fortnite and FIFA, and occasionally chatting on WhatsApp about games and school. While he shares information online mainly with friends and family, he avoids sharing personal details or photos. Daniel is somewhat concerned about privacy, particularly with YouTube's tracking, and he has adjusted game settings to control who can join his sessions. His parents manage his screen time and monitor his gaming, and Daniel's minimal online shopping is done with family assistance. For school, he uses a school iPad to access Google Classroom and complete assignments. His family uses location tracking for safety, though he notes some inaccuracies in the app.

Liv, 12, C1, Northern Ireland

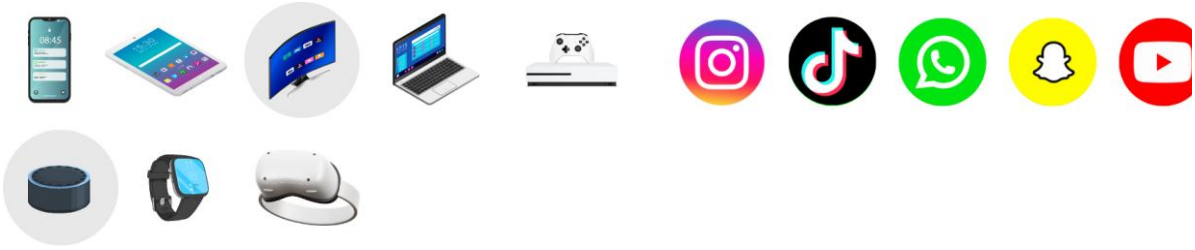


Liv, 12, is currently in foster care and has experienced being placed with about seven different families. Her current placement with a social worker she has known since age 7 is a significant improvement, providing her with a stable environment and open communication. Liv enjoys Gaelic football, drama, and spending time with her old school friends. She maintains a mature perspective and positive attitude despite her challenging circumstances.

Liv uses multiple social media platforms. She has three TikTok accounts: a public one with 416 followers, a private one with 13 followers for fun videos, and another private account with 193 followers. On Instagram, she follows friends and celebrities but does not post. Liv's Snapchat activity includes private and public stories, with her private story used for sharing silly photos with close friends. She shares her location with select individuals but has concerns about privacy, sometimes turning off location to avoid unwanted social interactions.

Liv's foster mother manages her phone with time controls and monitors her online activity, though Liv is unaware of some of these monitoring practices. Liv maintains a relationship with her birth mother, who also enforces her own rules about Liv's online presence. For example, she has asked that Liv's school not be allowed to take any photos or videos of Liv. She also asked for Liv not to be photographed for this project.

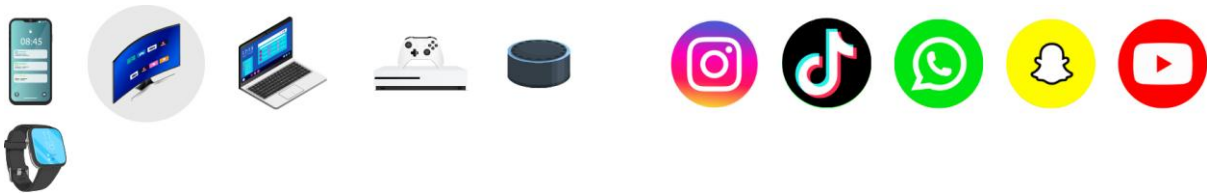
Joey, 13, C1 – North-West England

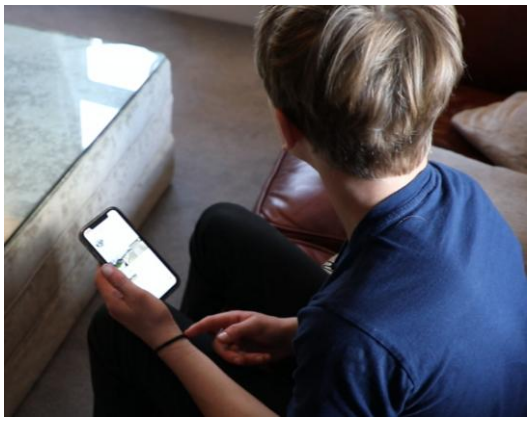


Joey is from the North West and lives with his parents, who work in social work. He's passionate about sports, playing on two football teams and a cricket team which his dad coaches. He's doing okay at school, but has aspirations of being a professional sportsman when he's older, so is often training with his teams or practicing skills in the garden after school.

He's had a smartphone since Year 7 – but only recently started to use it more when he was *finally* allowed to download TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat like his friends had. He's kept his social media profiles private on the advice of his older brother. He's also got a PlayStation and an Oculus VR headset, which he got for Christmas. He mostly games with his friends, who all had Oculus headsets too, although he's made a few online friends on Fortnight and Guerilla tag – despite his brother setting up the devices.

Mason, 13, B, South-East England

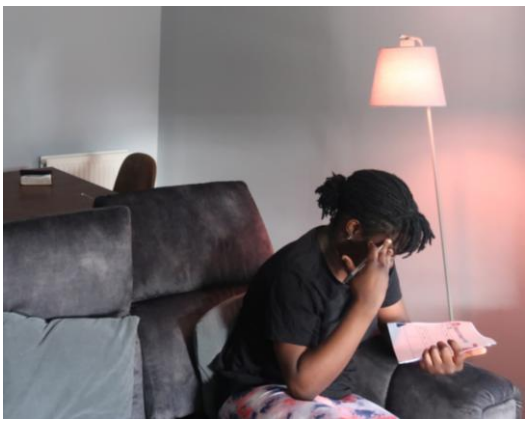




Mason, 13, lives with his parents and younger sister, and is in Year 9 at school. He likes seeing his friends, gaming, playing sport, and going scooting, which he posts videos of on TikTok and Instagram. He personally has an iPhone, laptop, and PS4, and the family also has an Amazon Echo in kitchen and living room, and several TVs. Mason is not worried about too much, with the only slight concern being GCSEs on the horizon.

Generally, Mason is not particularly concerned about his data and does not think about with whom or how it might be shared. He has had to create a new TikTok account recently as his previous account was banned on account of age, and both times he put in fake ages that were older than his age to feel like he would be less likely to be banned on the app. His main concern with data sharing is having his location shared to strangers.

Celeste, 13, C1, Scotland



Celeste, 13, lives with her parents and younger sibling, having moved from Nigeria in 2022. She loves football and plays for her school team. She also likes to have a kickabout with her brother in their garden.

Celeste was given her first smartphone at the age of 12, however, she must ask her mum for permission to use it. She's not allowed to take her phone to her bedroom at night-time. Her favorite apps are YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok, and she likes playing Fortnite on their PS5. She also has an Amazon Echo in her room which her mum has the primary controls for. Celeste said she mainly uses her Echo for playing music and for setting alarms in the morning, which her mum has set up.

Celeste said she is quite conscious of not sharing personal information online, besides her date of birth, mobile number, and email address, in order to set up accounts. She is familiar with targeted ads and online profiling, as well as pop-ups and cookies. Her parents said they monitor Celeste's online activity, including checking her search history on platforms like YouTube.

Baz, 14, A/B, South East England

Baz lives with his mum, dad, two sisters, and a brother, aged 9, 12, and 16. Baz is super outdoorsy and is passionate about a variety of hobbies, including judo, skateboarding, fencing, tennis, and football. He also loves building projects, he recently built a treehouse with his brother and a workbench using local materials.

At school, he participates in extracurricular activities such as explorers (similar to scouts), tennis, swimming, and hockey, and volunteers at a local theatre. Baz finds school pressurising but enjoys subjects like history and geography. He is in year ten, has started his GCSEs, and is considering future careers ranging between music, tech, physics, maths, and history.

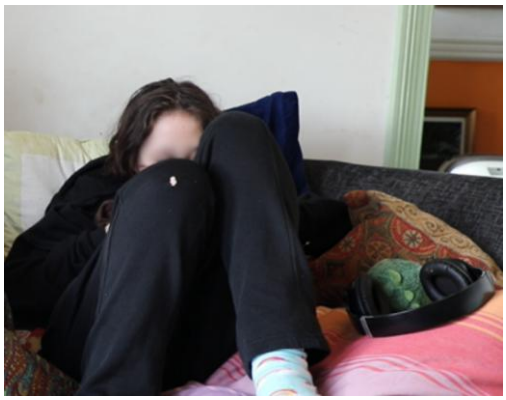
Baz uses a basic Nokia phone, which only has call and text functions. His mum has decided that the children are not allowed smartphones until they turn 16, believing this will help them avoid excessive screen time and focus more on his hobbies, studies and emotional wellbeing. He values privacy online, but does reflect that he might miss out on certain plans due to him not having a smartphone and social media. He says if he had snapchat he would likely meet up with his friends more than he does now.

Erin, 14, C2, Wales

Erin recently moved from France and now lives in Wales with her mum, step-dad, brother, and sister. Erin's week is filled with school during the weekdays, and she enjoys hanging out with her friends on the weekends. She loves playing football, hiking up mountains, and playing video games with her brother.

Erin uses her phone mainly to stay connected with her friends through Snapchat and WhatsApp. She enjoys scrolling through these apps, reading books, and revising for exams in her free time. Her favourite apps are Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Duolingo, which she uses to learn Welsh. Erin's mum has placed restrictions on apps like TikTok and Instagram until she turns 16, which Erin has accepted and feels okay with.

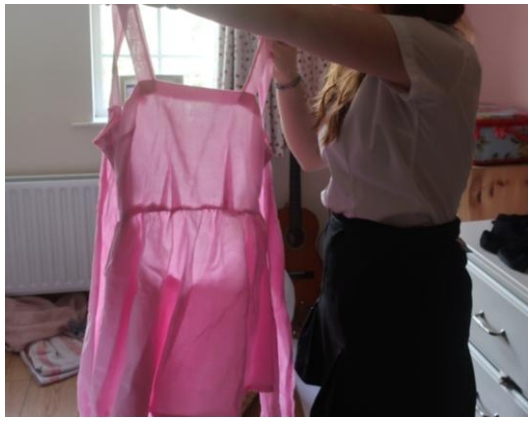
Bill, 14, C1, Wales



Bill is a transgender boy in Year 9 at a youth-worker led school charity project, which has about 20 pupils in total. It is much more focused on crafts and student-led supportive education than academic attainment, which he much prefers to previous schools which he and his family regarded as too prescriptive. Bill lives with his parents, two older brothers, and one of his older brother's friends. He has recently also got into gaming because his brothers play it and his friend plays it too.

Bill has a phone, shared Xbox, and uses shared TVs to watch things with his family. His mum is generally very relaxed with what they do or watch, and instead prefers to have conversations about things when they have questions about what they are doing online or what they are seeing. Bill is generally quite savvy about how data is shared and is aware of third-party information on apps like TikTok and has even read some Terms and Conditions while browsing on Google (which is how he knows about cookies). In Bill's opinion, his email, name, location, and card details feel much more private and personal, but sharing his interests and likes with apps feels much less traceable, and more beneficial. Bill spoke about the development of AI and is concerned that this will have big implications for artists, and even spoke about potential issues with artists having their art used to train AI tools without their consent.

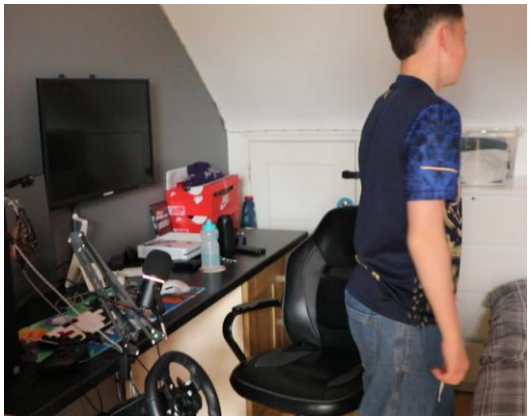
Orla, 15, A/B, Northern Ireland



Orla, 15, lives with her parents and younger siblings in a remote part of Northern Ireland. She recently started two part-time weekend jobs in hospitality and has her own bank account. Outside school and work, she spends most of her free time revising for her GCSE mock exams. She wants to study fashion design at college and enjoys designing and making clothes at school and as a hobby.

Orla has an iPhone and was active on social media, using Snapchat and Instagram the most. Both of her accounts are set to 'public' and said this was because she rarely posts anything. She sometimes posts on her Instagram Stories and likes how the posts disappear after 24 hours. She uses 'Snap Maps' on Snapchat which allows her to see where her friends are in real-time as well as share her own location. Her parents used to set time-limits on her phone as they worried, she was 'staying up too late' using it, but no longer had them. Generally, her parents seemed to have a hands-off approach with minimal restrictions.

Sean, 15, C1, Northern Ireland



Sean lives with his parents and two brothers. After being diagnosed with autism and Type 1 diabetes at 13, and being moved into a streamlined schooling setting to help support his needs, his parents explained he initially became reclusive. However, he has gained confidence in recent years, and enjoys spending time outdoors, playing sports, and socialising with friends. He has a keen interest in shoes, particularly Nike Air Maxes.

Sean is active on Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and WhatsApp, with public profiles on TikTok and Instagram. He is comfortable with this visibility, avoiding posts that might be embarrassing. He uses technology frequently for gaming and social interactions, often relying on it as a form of entertainment when not going out. Although aware of data privacy concerns, he is not overly worried. Sean spends a lot of time online watching content creators like KaiserNat and Danny Duncan.

Sean's parents try to monitor his screen time, and limit the inappropriate content he is exposed to, but have struggled with this in recent years. Sean usually finds ways to bypass parental controls and keeps what he does online private from his parents. He also uses an app to track his glucose levels for his diabetes, which he used to share with his mum, but recently turned this off because he didn't want her tracking his diet.

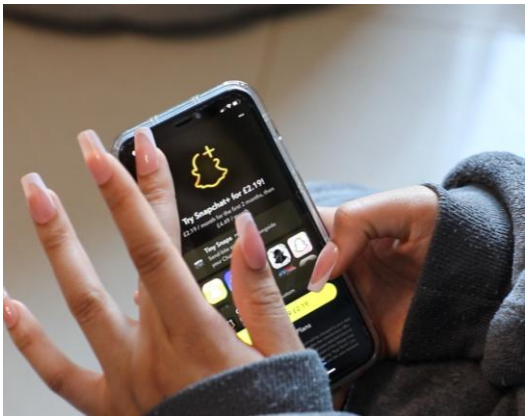
Umar, 15, C1, Wales

Umar lives with his mum, older brother, and sister, two of his older brothers have moved out. He has a large extended family nearby, with around 50 cousins on his mum's side living in the same city. Umar often spends time with them during the week, as well as visiting his grandparents and one close friend he's known for seven years. He has been home-schooled since Year 4, and although he sometimes misses the school environment, he is focused on preparing for his GCSEs.

Umar has a phone, PS5, TV, and uses his mum's laptop for schoolwork. He mainly uses TikTok, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and enjoys gaming online. While he feels it's necessary to share some data with big apps like TikTok (such as microphone access to make videos), he is cautious about sharing more and believes TikTok doesn't share his data with third parties. He remembers being repeatedly asked by TikTok to share data and agreed only because the pop-up annoyed him. Umar is more trusting of major

apps like TikTok but was uncomfortable downloading a game he described as similar to Clash Royale because it required microphone access, he did not know why the platform needed access to that.

Dina, 15, C2, Northern Ireland



Dina, 15, lives with her parents and younger siblings. Born in Portugal, her family moved to Northern Ireland 7 years ago. She has an iPhone and primarily uses Snapchat for communicating with friends. She also uses 'Snap Maps' with her friends. However, she said she would sometimes 'hide' her location when she doesn't want people to know where she is. Dina said that her mum has enrolled on Family Centre on Snapchat, meaning that she is restricted from seeing certain content. Dina also uses the menstrual cycle tracker in the health app on her phone to document her periods and keep track of her cycle. She finds it useful and doesn't think that her information would be shared beyond the app but hasn't checked.

Dina isn't allowed to take her phone upstairs at night-time as her mum doesn't want her to use her phone in her bedroom when she is meant to be resting. Dina said she's happy with this arrangement. Her mum said she trusts Dina when it comes to her online activity and thinks they are open with each other about it

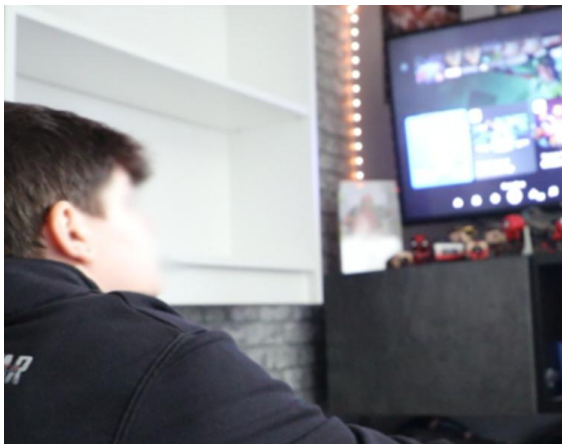
Bradley, 16, C1, North West England

Bradley lives in the North West with his mum and younger brother. He is in Year 11 and currently preparing for his upcoming exams. Diagnosed with ADHD at age nine and dyslexia in primary school, Bradley has faced academic challenges but is now more independent in his studies, requiring less assistance from teachers than before. Looking ahead, Bradley plans to pursue an apprenticeship in either bricklaying or joinery, preferring practical, outdoor work over office-based roles.

Bradley spends much of his free time playing Fortnite on his PlayStation. He is active on social media, with TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram being his go-to platforms, though he favours TikTok due to its endless stream of new content that keeps him engaged. While his mum manages online activity limits for his younger brother, she trusts Bradley to manage his own privacy and security

settings. Bradley says he's become much more private compared to when he was younger. He also uses the Life360 app with his girlfriend to share locations, which he's comfortable with, seeing it as a way to stay connected and ensure she can reach him when needed. In his wider social circle, he mainly communicates with friends through Snapchat and FaceTime.

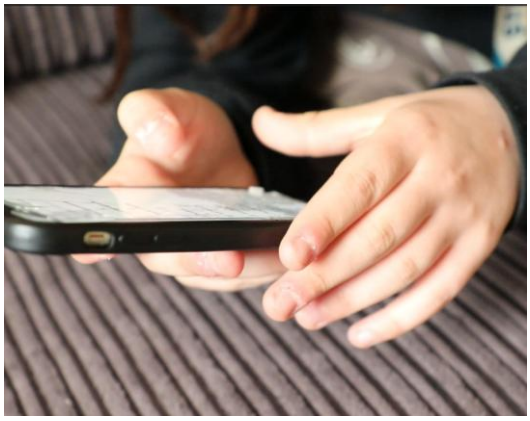
Ezra, 16, D, South-East England



Ezra is a transgender boy living with his mum, two younger twin siblings, a dog, and seven cats. His grandparents live nearby. Ezra is autistic and has struggled with in-person schooling, he now attends online school from 10:45 to 1:30 and is preparing for five GCSEs.

Ezra has an iPhone, iPad (which he mostly uses for Facetiming a friend from Blackburn), and an Xbox. He uses Discord to chat with friends in America, and the family home is fitted with a Ring doorbell, Amazon Echoes, and security cameras. He manages three TikTok accounts, two of which he still uses: one is a private account for close friends, and the other is for anonymously sharing his interests, like Marvel and gaming. Ezra is cautious about sharing personal data and prefers to get to know people on private social media rather than giving out his phone number, as he's had negative experiences with unknown callers in the past. While generally sensible about his data, he feels limited control over what apps require him to share.

Georgia, 16, C2, South-West England

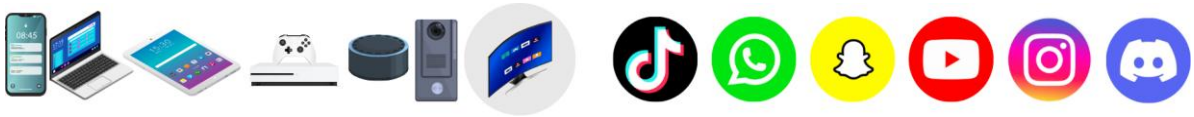


Georgia lives with her parents and younger sister. Georgia was born with a congenital heart condition and is autistic. Her dad has become her full-time carer, while her mum works as a community nurse. Despite her health challenges, Georgia has left school and is now in her first year of college, with dreams of becoming a marine biologist. In her free time, she enjoys dancing, socialising with friends, watching Netflix, and horror films. She also has a boyfriend in the army.

Georgia uses an iPhone, iPad, and TV, while the family shares a smart TV, Xbox, PS5, computer, and Nintendo. Having had her phone since Year 7, she stays connected with friends and family primarily through WhatsApp and iMessage. She also uses Life 360 to share her location, but only with her boyfriend. She enjoys playing Roblox on her iPhone and has had an account since 2016. After changing her email, she encountered Roblox's age restrictions, which she supports, as she believes they help prevent people from lying about their age.

Due to her health, Georgia's family has set up Wi-Fi restrictions that block certain websites, which she finds both helpful and frustrating. She frequently shops online using the SHEIN app, with money sent by her mum. Georgia is aware of targeted ads and has a basic understanding of cookies and IP addresses. Due to past uncomfortable experiences online, she prefers to keep her social media accounts private and is cautious about sharing too much about herself.

Stevie, 17, C1, Wales



Stevie lives in Wales with his parents and his older brother, who works in engineering and at a café. He attends school four days a week and is currently preparing for his exams while also taking driving lessons. Stevie has autism, which he feels affects his social life. In his free time, he enjoys a mix of activities, including baking, gaming, and revising for school.

Gaming plays a major role in Stevie's life. He spends much of his time playing games such as Call of Duty and Risk of Rain on his PS4, Nintendo Switch, and computer. Gaming is not only a hobby but also a way for Stevie to connect with friends, often communicating with them via Discord. This allows him to unwind and socialise, blending entertainment with his social interactions.

Stevie is cautious about his online presence, using a pseudonym to protect his identity and two-factor authentication for added security. He is mindful of the information he shares online, especially on platforms like YouTube, Discord, Twitter, and Facebook, ensuring he maintains control over his personal data.

Annabel, 17, B, East of England

Annabel lives in Huntington with her mum, dad, and younger sister. Annabel is studying for her A-Levels, although she's unsure about what she wants to do after sixth form. She rows competitively, training three times a week, and also enjoys running. In her free time, she reads a mix of fantasy books and more serious literature for her English Literature A-level.

Annabel grew up with strict rules around technology, and still leaves her phone charging in the kitchen overnight. She got her first phone in Year 6 and began using Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat around age 12. She has two Instagram accounts: a main private account with around 700 followers, mostly friends and friends of friends, and a smaller "spam" account for about 20 close friends. Her "spam" account is more casual and for sharing with close friends.

Annabel doesn't use tracking apps, although she did get Life360 to keep track of friends during Reading Festival last year. She uses the app Flo to track her period but hasn't created an account. Recently, she's started to wonder about where her data goes and what companies do with it but isn't overly concerned, as she feels that her personal data, like her name or contact details, isn't that important.

Annex 2: Glossary

Age assurance mechanisms: Methods or processes used to verify a user's age.

AliExpress: An online retail service made up of small businesses in China and other locations, such as Singapore, that offer products to international online buyers.

Animal crossing: A life simulation video game series where players interact with anthropomorphic animals, build communities, and engage in various activities like fishing, bug catching, and fossil hunting.

Close friends feature: A privacy setting on Instagram allowing users to share specific stories with a select group of followers, labelled their 'close friends'

Discord: An instant messaging and digital distribution platform designed for creating communities.

Filters: Filters are effects that can be applied to photos or videos on platforms such as TikTok or Snapchat to enhance or augment certain features of the video, such as colour, appearance, voice changing, or other effects.

FindMyFriends: An app that allows users to share their location with friends and family.

Fortnite: Fortnite is a multiplayer online combat video game with six different game modes and can played on multiple gaming platforms (e.g. Xbox, PlayStation). Predominantly, it is a combat game where players can fight and cooperate with other players, collect and upgrade items and build structures and fortifications. In the most popular game mode, Battle Royale, the game pits players against each other to be the last survivor on an island.

Giveaways: Promotional events where users can win prizes or rewards.

Gorilla Tag: A multiplayer virtual reality game where players swing and climb through a virtual jungle using their arms as motion controllers.

IP Address: A unique numerical label assigned to each device connected to a computer network.

In-built chat functions: Chat features integrated within an app or platform, allowing users to communicate with each other without leaving the app.

Life360: A family safety app that allows users to share their location, communicate, and receive alerts about each other.

Likes: This feature allows users to express their appreciation of a particular post on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, by either giving it a 'thumbs up' (Facebook) or clicking the heart (on Instagram).

Minecraft: Minecraft is a creative computer game with blocky, pixelated visuals where players can explore their world, build structures, craft items, extract materials, and sometimes fight or cooperate with other players.

Mario games: Mario is a renowned Italian animated character, who is the lead character in a franchise of games such as Mario Kart, Super Mario Bros., and many more.

Oculus headset: A virtual reality headset that can be used for gaming, entertainment, social interaction, and other things.

Open-world gameplay: A type of video game design that allows players to freely explore a virtual world.

Pingo: An app that allows parents to track their child's location and receive alerts about their activity.

Post: A post is an image, comment or video uploaded by the user to a social media platform.

Privacy features: Tools or settings within digital platforms that allow users to control the visibility and sharing of their information.

PSHE lessons: Personal, Social, Health, and Economic education lessons taught in schools.

Q&As: Question and answer sessions, often used in online communities for interactive discussions.

Qustodio: A parental control app that allows parents to monitor and manage their child's activity online

Roblox: Roblox is an online gaming platform that allows users to access and play millions of games. Roblox includes a vast array of different genres in their games, and both single and multiplayer games.

Snapchat: A messaging platform where users can send photos, videos, messages, post stories, to other individuals and group chats.

Stories (Instagram/Snapchat): Stories allow users to post photos and videos for their followers to see that last for 24 hours on the platform before vanishing.

Terms and Conditions: A legal agreement between a user and a platform outlining the rules and responsibilities of both parties.

TikTok: TikTok is a video-sharing social networking platform which is used to watch algorithmically generated short-form content (lasting between 15 seconds and 10 minutes) in a feed, and create short-form videos. Users must be 13 or over to use the platform and 18 or over to stream on TikTok Live.

TikTok Shop: This is a shop in the TikTok app, where users can shop directly within the app, and content creators can showcase products.

Two-Factor Authentication: A security process requiring two forms of identification to access an account, typically a password and a code sent to a device.