Children's Data Lives 2025

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 exploring how children in the UK interact with the digital world and how this intersects with their data rights. Children's online experiences are shaped by a constantly evolving, complex mix of social influences, platform design, and parental intervention.

Year one highlighted the importance of social factors in these interactions and raised the question as to how meaningful children's data-related decision-making could ever be given the dominance of a small number of platforms in their social worlds.

As children grow up, their worlds and priorities are rapidly changing. Making new friends, being allowed to walk to school without their parents or go into town alone, and getting new devices – year two explores how these changes play out in terms of data.

Of course, these changes don't happen in a vacuum. The functionality, tone, and design of the digital services children are using shape their ability to meaningfully engage with decisions about their data.

Building on last year's deep dive into the accessibility of privacy policies and the effect of data being children's central 'currency' to get online, year two explores the design of platforms in greater detail. Children's ability to share information, maintain privacy, and ultimately make informed decisions about how their data is shaped by the digital environment they navigate.

How do the normal parts of growing up play out in terms of data?

Children grow closer with some people and fall out with others

This affects how much they want to share or keep private with different people

As children grow, their motivations and priorities evolve. Friendships change, peer influence increases, and awareness of what others are doing online becomes more important as children grow up. At the same time, what makes something popular and socially desirable is constantly shifting too, shaping how children engage with digital platforms.

All of this influences how they share information online and their privacy choices. Children joined new platforms and gained access to new devices this year, allowing them to connect with friends in new ways. They also made information more private after falling out with friends, by turning off locations or blocking people they no longer wanted to share information with.

Among older children, data sharing was often shaped by what their peers saw as acceptable. Oversharing was sometimes labelled as "cringe", while sharing embarrassing photos of others was sometimes used to assert or challenge status or popularity. These behaviours showed how peer dynamics continued to shape how and what children chose to share online.

As children grow up, they start to explore different ways to become more independent

Some parents respond to this with a desire for more oversight

Testing boundaries and seeking independence is a normal part of growing up, both online and offline.

As was reported last year, parents continue to face a tension between keeping their child safe and allowing them to be included. This balance is increasingly tested as children grow older and begin to push previously agreed upon boundaries, forcing parents to constantly balance between oversight and autonomy.

Location sharing continues to be one tool for parents to navigate changes to independence. This year researchers explored how new forms of home surveillance, such as smart devices and home security systems, are being used by some parents to maintain oversight over their families and households.

Children begin to work towards financial independence

Which motivates them to sign up to platforms and share their data

As children grow up, having their own money – and control over how it's spent – becomes increasingly important. Children continue to exchange data for in-game rewards or access to services, reinforcing the idea that sharing data is necessary to 'make things work', as reported last year.

This year, researchers noticed some older children using digital platforms to earn money through selling items online or engaging in trading and 'side hustles'. Beyond the immediacy of having money in their pockets, some children were beginning to look to the long term, considering their future work or career and how this tied in with their public presence online.

How do digital platforms reflect children's changing lives?

Children do not grow up in a vacuum. Their digital lives unfold within environments shaped by specific design features – ones that often prioritise access and sustained engagement. These features frequently work in tandem with children's own motivations to join, use, and stay on platforms. This year, researchers explored how these dynamics played out across three core areas of design: data agreements, age assurance, and algorithms.

Awareness and understanding of data agreements remains limited

As reported last year, the children in the sample were constantly engaging in data exchanges – but few had a clear sense of when or how that was happening. Terms like "cookies" or "privacy policy" were familiar to many, but rarely well-understood. Clicking "accept" was simply part of the process of getting to what they wanted to do – not a moment of meaningful decision-making.

Even when platforms made efforts to simplify or 'gamify' their privacy policies, this rarely led to meaningful engagement. Beyond formal agreements, many platforms also encouraged data sharing by design – through incentives like extra features, in-game rewards or quicker access – reinforcing the idea that sharing information was just part of how things worked, or a currency to be traded in to gain rewards.

Age assurance measures are inconsistent and often ineffective

Many of the sample continue to create profiles with inaccurate ages. Bypassing age requirements was often easy, with some platforms requiring age verification in policy, but not in practice upon sign up. Some platforms only provided options for people to input ages above their minimum age thresholds, passively encouraging children to input ages older than their own.

Parents were often aware that their children were using these workarounds. Sometimes they directly helped; other times, children simply knew how to navigate the system themselves. As a result, many children were spending time in digital spaces not designed for their age group – often without realising they'd broken any rules.

Children's recommender feeds shape their online and offline lives

Most children recognised that what they saw online was shaped by what they had previously liked, watched or searched for. This often made platforms feel more enjoyable and tailored to their interests.

The mechanisms behind personalisation, and their implications, were rarely reflected on. Children didn't tend to question how content arrived on their feeds – even when it was confusing, unexpected, or inappropriate. They also did not connect these feeds to earlier agreements they had made or understand them as part of a wider system responding to their behaviour.

As children continue to grow up online, the digital environments around them are evolving too – often in step with their changing interests and behaviours. Recommender systems appear to be shaping not just their online experiences, but parts of their offline lives as well – usually without their full understanding. In environments designed to encourage use rather than reflection, is it realistic to expect children to navigate these systems responsibly on their own?

Introduction

Project context and background

As children grow up, their digital lives and the ways they share information evolve. Today, children's lives are increasingly lived online, with more data flowing between devices, platforms, and users than ever before. As children mature, their motivations – driven by social influences, evolving goals, and growing awareness of their digital footprints – affect how they engage with data and make decisions about their privacy.

The ICO recognises the importance of understanding these dynamics in its efforts to protect children's privacy as they grow up. In line with its strategic goal outlined in ICO25, the ICO aims to empower individuals – especially vulnerable groups like children – by safeguarding their personal data. Through the Age-Appropriate Design Code and Children's Privacy Strategy, the ICO seeks to uphold privacy rights and ensure that platforms meet children's needs in the digital age.

To effectively safeguard children, the ICO needs to understand children's online experiences from their perspectives. This research is the second year of a longitudinal ethnographic study to understand children's 'data lives', from their point of view: What are their behaviours related to data? How do they make decisions around data? How do they feel about information being shared, either by themselves or others? How do these dynamics evolve as children grow up?

This research offers a holistic understanding of the role of data across all aspects of children's lives. It incorporates perspectives from children of various backgrounds, with a focus on those often underrepresented in research.

Project approach and methodology

Children's Data Lives is a longitudinal study tracking the lives of **30 children, aged 8 to 17** through a combination of filmed ethnographic interviews and UX and platform analysis.

Research Objectives

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 communicates the key findings from the second year of the ICO's longitudinal 'Children's Data Lives' research project. It provides insight into how children are behaving online, how they view privacy, perspectives on sharing or not sharing personal information, and how these perspectives evolve as children grow up. It summarises findings from researcher-led analysis of the platforms where children spend their time.

Methodology

Children's Data Lives takes **an ethnographic approach** to understanding data from the perspective of a child. Data is an abstract and often difficult topic to articulate, requiring an observed approach, to see not only

how children articulate their feelings around data, but also their behaviours. Starting from the child's world, researchers return year on year to undertake **filmed ethnographic interviews** to track how children's perspectives, choices, and behaviours change as they grow and navigate evolving digital landscapes.

This year, the study included **friendship triads** as a build on one-to-one interviews. This involved talking with participants and a small group of their friends to explore how they shared data with each other, what influenced their decisions, and what mattered to them in those moments. Being with friends helped children feel more at ease and their conversations showed how they made sense of things together. It also gave a chance to see how they talked about and understood data in a more social setting.

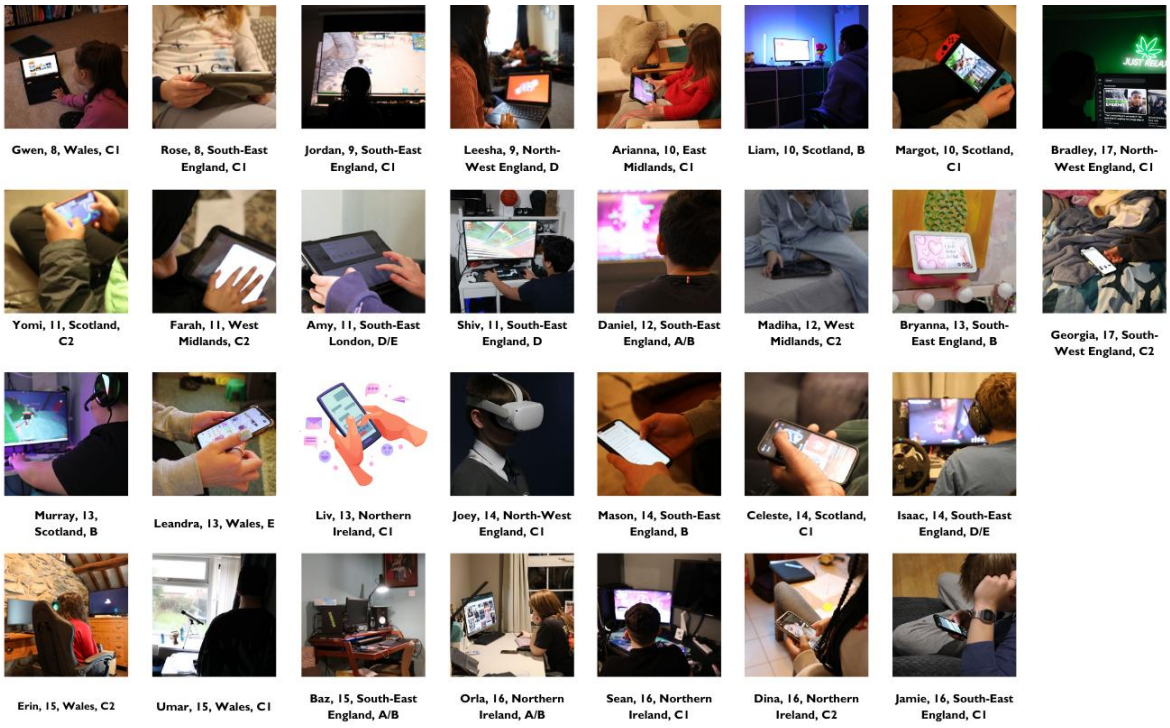
Children's behaviours and feelings around data do not exist in a vacuum; they unfold within a wider digital infrastructure, making it essential to understand the design of the platforms children engage with. Therefore, the research includes **UX (user experience) and platform analysis**, enabling researchers to examine how these digital platforms shape children's behaviours and experiences, adding an additional layer of insight to reveal how platform design influences children's digital engagement and interactions.

Meet the participants: 30 children from across the UK

We spoke to 30 children aged between 8-17 years old. Some aged out of year one, which meant we had six new participants taking part for the first time and revisited 24 participants from last year. The sample 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.
- House income level and socio-economic groups.
- Some in specific circumstances, including: children whose second language is English, a family who has sought asylum in the UK, and children with long-term health conditions and SEND, including autism.
- A range of parental oversight approaches, from restrictions on which devices children could use to the use of parental controls and household rules shaping how and when devices were accessed.



To ensure the research captured a spread of the ways children interact with devices and share data, the project sampled for a range of types of device and platform usage.

Children used a range of devices. The below represents all devices that children were interacting with, with their own, personal devices represented by the dark blue squares, and shared devices shown in light blue. Smart TVs were the most commonly shared devices across the sample, but all children in the sample had access to either a smartphone or tablet.

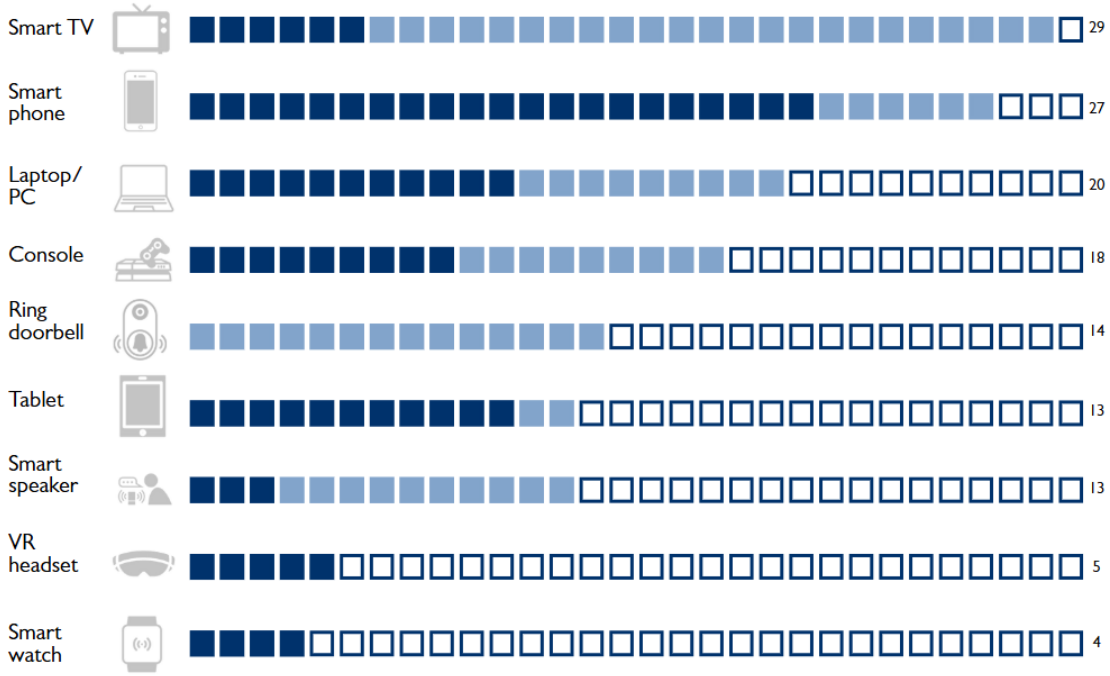


Diagram summary of devices used by all children in the sample. Darker blue represents devices that belonged only to the child, and lighter blue represents shared devices.

The below represents a summary of the main platforms children were using, as well as platforms of particular interest for this year. As with devices, some children shared accounts, for example, younger children sometimes used a parents' accounts on their devices. This is represented by the lighter blue squares below.

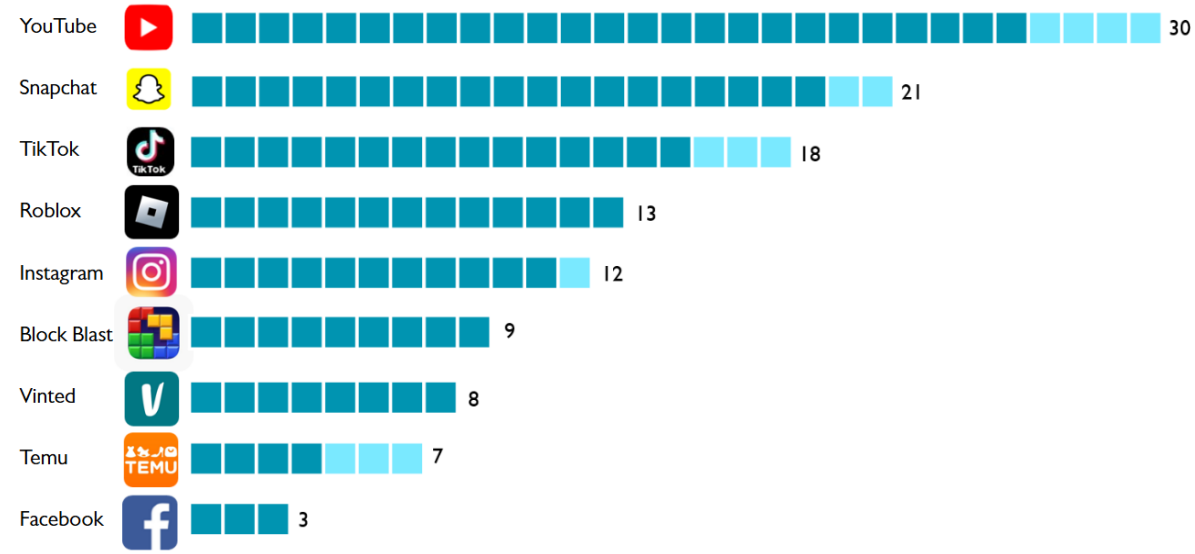


Diagram summary of the most popular platforms used by children in the sample, or platforms of particular interest for this year. Darker blue represents accounts belonging to the child, and lighter blue represents shared accounts.

Year one – summary

This report summarises findings from the second year of this longitudinal study. Year one outlined key factors that are shaping children's decision-making and behaviours online, and therefore shaping their data lives.

Year two builds on many of the ideas and findings from year one, offering new manifestations and outcomes.

Here is a summary of the key findings from year one that have acted as a foundation for the second year of this research.

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

- When children are young, technology is seen as a toy – something they don't want to miss out on if their friends are using it. As they grow up, social dynamics pull them towards different platforms and devices.
- At the same time, children become more aware of what it is to be 'cool', and what could cause embarrassment, which can lead to greater privacy awareness. However, the desire for likes and access to popular apps often conflicts with data privacy, making them more willing to share personal information.
- What results is a push and pull dynamic around how much children are willing to share, primarily motivated by social factors.

Children's motivation to be on platforms reduces how much they consider data agreements

- Children often struggle to understand how companies use their data, and even when they do, they tend not to care. The complexity and hidden nature of privacy policies reinforce this disengagement.
- Social factors were important for the sample in different ways, and the desire to be on the platforms their friends were using was a priority for many. Sharing data to access a platform becomes less of a choice, and more of a necessary step.
- For most children, data acts as a currency for accessing the online spaces they value.

Parents navigate a tension between wanting to keep their children safe and feeling pressure to ensure their children don't miss out

- Parents' primary concern tends to be to keep their children safe, online and offline. Many parents utilise technological tools like parental controls and location sharing to aid them in doing so.
- However, they also feel a pressure from their children to access platforms so they can stay connected with their peers – they don't want their child to be left out.
- This balancing act sometimes results in parents helping their children bypass age restrictions, prioritising social inclusion while still attempting to manage risks.

Chapter 1

How do the normal parts of growing up play out in terms of data?

Chapter summary

Year two has revisited many of the same group of children as year one, enabling Children's Data Lives to explore the changing factors that shape how children behave online – and therefore, their relationship with data. Social factors remain a strong influence, both incentivising and disincentivising data sharing, depending on the situation and relationships involved. As children's relationships shift and their social worlds evolve, they make different decisions about how and when to share their data.

As children grow up, they begin to explore 'independence' in different ways. For their parents, this means a continuing tension between wanting to keep children safe and ensuring they are included, spending time in the same places – whether on or offline – as their friends. Some parents respond to this by increasing oversight, particularly as children grow older and begin to spend more time without their parents or away from home. Year one reported on this playing out through location sharing; year two explores additional manifestations of this through home surveillance.

Children also become more motivated to have their own money. Children's information continues to act as a kind of currency – their personal information, specific settings, or actions like watching a video enable them to access content, set up devices, and create profiles on digital services – or even to earn small amounts of money. For older children, these shifting commercial incentives affect short-term use of digital marketplaces and long-term considerations of their career.

Changing relationships

Year one highlighted how central children's social lives were to their decisions about technology. What their friends were doing – or what was seen as 'cool' – often shaped which devices they wanted, the platforms they signed up to, and how they behaved once online. These social factors played a major role in how and when children shared their data.

Rose (8)

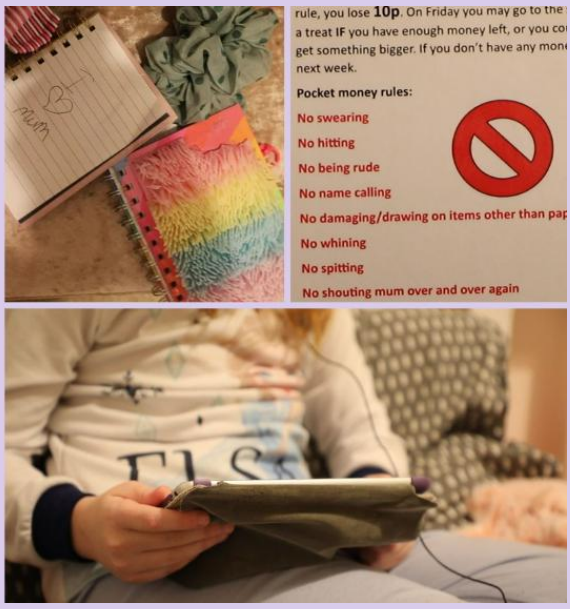
"I don't think I need [a smartphone], but I would like it if my friends had it because I don't want it if my friends don't have it."

Rose is eight years old and lives with her mum, younger brother, and her mum's boyfriend. She doesn't have a smartphone yet, and won't be allowed one until she is in year 7 or 8. She doesn't feel as though she needs one yet, especially as only two or three of her classmates have their own smartphones.

Rose likes the idea of having a phone, but only if her friends had one too, otherwise who would she be texting and talking to?

She thinks it would be useful to text her mum to tell her where she is and be able to share her location, but doesn't see herself needing to do this until she's older.

Without the social motivation to get a smartphone, Rose is content without one – for now.



But children's social worlds don't stand still. What's popular can shift quickly, and relationships change as children grow up. New friendship groups form, priorities evolve, and platforms rise and fall in relevance.

This year explores how these changing relationships continue to shape children's decisions about what data they share, who they share it with, and why. It builds on the social dynamics outlined in year one, showing how the passage of time – and the experience of growing up – can subtly but significantly shift how children understand and navigate data sharing.

Longitudinal research allows these changes to be tracked over time. By returning to the same children over time, it's possible to observe how their social priorities and relationships evolve – and what that means for their engagement with privacy, platforms, and control over personal information.

Fluctuating relationships play out in decision-making around data

Year two revisited many of the same children from year one, to understand how their lives – and the dynamics within them – had changed. Children's friendships and relationships with their peers had also evolved. For some, friendship groups had stayed consistent. For others, there were new schools, new friends, and new social challenges to navigate. These changes, while expected parts of growing up, had a noticeable impact on how children thought about their online lives – including how, when, and with whom they shared their data.

Yomi (11)

After starting year 7 this year, Yomi has been posting less on his YouTube channel. He wasn't sure he was very good at posting and was dissatisfied with the amount of engagement he was getting.

"It's easy to get likes, but it's hard to get followers … your video has to be good enough for them to just automatically follow you."

Margot (10)

Now in year 6, Margot has been given a new iPad by her school, which she is encouraged to use for homework and her lessons. She's also started to use Outlook to message her friends.

"In P6 you get iPads … I have Outlook, we usually just email each other … like messaging messages … emojis … you can add group chats."

Shiv (11)

Shiv's new school means more homework, but also the chance to play on the school computers. He and his friends play '1v1.LOL', a similar game to Fortnite, to get round the school internet bans on more popular, well-known games.

"If the teacher lets us do whatever we want we usually do 1v1.LOL, it's like Fortnite but a browser version … I just found it on YouTube."

Whether building friendships with classmates by playing the same games or following each other on social media, children's relationships continue to play out online. Being in the right group chat, using the same gaming platform, or reacting to each other's posts all form part of how children connect, communicate, and maintain their friendships. These behaviours also create new moments where data is shared – sometimes intentionally, sometimes unknowingly – as part of simply trying to stay socially-connected.

Farah (11) and Meera

Meera is Farah's older cousin and is a school year above Farah. She started secondary school this year, so has been given a smartphone. Meera still uses JusTalk, the children's messaging platform her cousins use to communicate with each other, but says that she started using Snapchat this year to message her new school friends. Farah expects she will do the same next year.

"I have Snapchat, it's where I mostly talk to my friends, and it has videos you can watch … I used to use it on my mum's old phone because we used to share … [my friends] don't really have 'kids apps'."

Sean (16)

Sean is in a new relationship. He and his girlfriend have set up location sharing on Life360.

"I do life360 with my girlfriend … [my girlfriend] wanted me to start sharing it … I understand because she doesn't live around here, she's a wee bit further out, and it gives her peace of mind. And I know where she is as well … so I feel like it's good, you can also see if their phone's charged, if their phone's on."

Children's behaviours and decision-making online fluctuate and evolve as their social worlds and relationships do. Many of the children described changes in who they spent time with – from starting new schools or clubs, to arguments and fallouts with friends or in romantic relationships. These shifting relationships were sometimes reflected in how they chose to share or withhold access to their data.

In year one, sharing live location was often seen as a sign of trust or closeness – whether with friends, family or romantic partners. Year two builds on this by exploring how changes in children's relationships shape their decisions about who to share their location with, and why.

> *"It's just my girlfriend who sees my location, that's it. So she knows where I am and stuff and so I know she's alright…but when we've had arguments, we both removed each other…then obviously the location goes."*
> **Bradley (17)**

Even in close friendships, children were selective about who could see their location. While the feature was often used to stay connected, some felt uncomfortable when it led to pressure or scrutiny. A few chose to remove friends or turn off location sharing altogether, using these controls to manage relationships on their own terms.

> *"I actually took some of my friends off my location because I'd be out on a walk or something, and one of my friends would be like, 'oh, so you can go on a walk but you can't go out with me?'"*
> **Liv (13)**

> *"Some people can get a bit stroppy … I had a friend say something like, 'how come you turned your location off?' which I didn't even realise I did … she was like 'can you just turn it back on' … I guess it's just one of those things that people have started doing loads. It's just a trend to share your location, which can be a problem. So a lot of stuff's just trends."*
> **Jamie (16)**

As children grew up, some care more about how they were perceived online

In year one, what children saw as 'cool' or socially desirable shaped much of their behaviour online. Some shared personal data to access apps, set up devices or create social media profiles. But concerns about social status and self-image also led others to limit what they shared or choose more private ways of interacting.

These patterns continued in 2024/5, particularly among older children who were more aware of wider social groups and how they were perceived by others.

> *"The last time I posted on Instagram … if I go into my archives, it was 27th March 2021 … I've never posted since then."*
> **Jamie (16)**

> *"I'm not really a big poster … I'm not someone who like vlogs their life or whatever … I don't like people knowing too much about me because then they've got something to say about me … but if you don't know about me then you've got nothing to say."*
> **Bradley (17)**

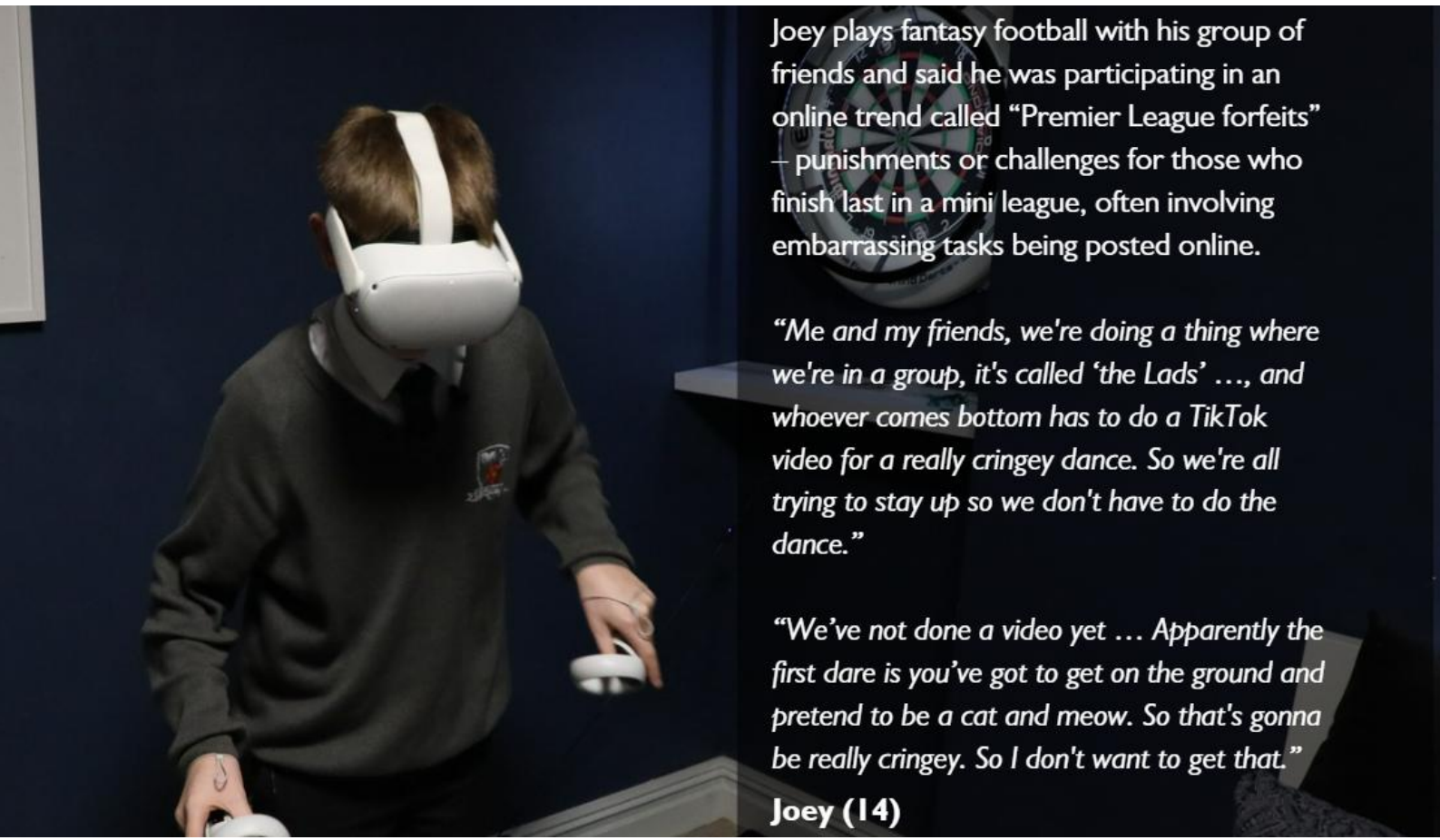
> *"I don't really post stories ... I probably did have a private story from years and years ago."*
> **Orla (16)**

> *"The only reason that I put anything on my public [Snapchat] story would be to wish someone a happy birthday … and then [sometimes] I'd make a private story because sometimes people don't want their faces in public for everyone to see."*
> **Liv (13)**

> *"I'm not really posting anymore … I don't see the need, all you get is likes and it's not like I'm gonna get like a million likes and get money from it … It's only my friends that see it."*
> **Mason (14)**

For some of the older children, posting too often or oversharing was seen as 'cringe' – a sign that someone was trying too hard. Holding back, or being selective about what they shared, was sometimes a way to protect their image and avoid judgement from peers.

> *"I think people that spam their Instagram stories are kind of cringe … I don't need to know what you're doing every single second of your life … unless you're an influencer and getting paid to do it … it's just so random to me."*
> **Sean (16)**



Joey plays fantasy football with his group of friends and said he was participating in an online trend called "Premier League forfeits" – punishments or challenges for those who finish last in a mini league, often involving embarrassing tasks being posted online.

"Me and my friends, we're doing a thing where we're in a group, it's called 'the Lads' …, and whoever comes bottom has to do a TikTok video for a really cringey dance. So we're all trying to stay up so we don't have to do the dance."

"We've not done a video yet … Apparently the first dare is you've got to get on the ground and pretend to be a cat and meow. So that's gonna be really cringey. So I don't want to get that."

Joey (14)

> *"People don't really [post pictures of themselves] on Snapchat. It's not really a thing people do, like you wouldn't just randomly post a picture of yourself and put it on your public story because it's seen as embarrassing on Snapchat … I know famous people do it, but I wouldn't."*
> **Liv (13)**

For some children, social policing had shifted from the playground to online spaces. Posting embarrassing content – like private jokes or unflattering photos – was sometimes used to humiliate others and enforce social norms. What happened offline could quickly be amplified online.

Children shared examples of others being posted about online – often in ways meant to embarrass them. Unflattering photos were sometimes shared without the person's knowledge, turning private moments into public ridicule. These incidents highlight how data – especially images – can be used in ways that feel outside of a child's control, raising questions about consent, trust and the permanence of what gets shared online.

> *"So on Snapchat, they will make group chats and then they'll just be bombarding each other with messages, horrible voice notes, picture slips and stuff like that…like caught off-guard, so not a nice picture, and then they might add something else silly to the picture to make it look even worse…and then the whole group will start to bully that person."*
> **Jordan's (9) mum**

> *"I just kept getting people following me [on Instagram], so I put it private. I removed all of them because it was annoying…I didn't know them because they were people that my boyfriend followed…One time my boyfriend's friend screenshotted my post and sent it to him, laughing at me, apparently."*
> **Georgia (17)**

Murray (13)

"My main [TikTok] account, I don't have private so people can see proof that I did a route so I can get ranked higher and higher and higher until I'm at the top rank."

Murray still enjoys spending much of his free time playing games. As he's currently being home schooled, he doesn't spend as much time with other children and so his online life is still an important part of his social world, where he interacts with others and tries to build a community.

Part of this is interacting with people who enjoy the same games as him.

When he's done something cool and beaten his high score, he's keen to post about it on his public social media profiles. This means getting 'likes' on his story, or even getting 'ranked' on Discord servers about his favourite games, such as Gorilla Tag.

Some children looked for validation or to share success online

Like many of us, some children shared online when things were going well. Posting about a 'win' – whether a new purchase, a good result or something they were proud of – was a way to display success. These moments also encouraged connection, giving others a reason to respond, react or reach out.

> *"I don't know if you'd count it as a game, but I do use Duolingo quite a lot…got a 924 day streak… I would [make her own account] but that would mean losing my streak, so yeah, that would be upsetting."*
> **Erin (15)**

> *"I post videos on TikTok…my older cousin got me into it…I started getting more followers recently…[he posts] Fortnite stuff, edits, stuff like that."*
> **Shiv (11)**

In sharing these updates, children were also revealing personal details – about where they'd been, what they'd bought, or who they were with. Even when the intent was positive, these posts added to the digital footprint they were creating, often without much thought about how long that information might stay online or who might see it.

Online public profiles continued to offer children a space to connect with people they don't know in real life

As seen in year one, public profiles create opportunities for children to interact with people online. Some were meeting and chatting with others online, often through gaming platforms. For many, especially those who gamed regularly, friendships formed in these spaces felt familiar and routine.

> *"I like how you can connect to other people… and can like, grow friendships… I have an absolute best, best, best online friend. Her name's StickBug and she's the absolute best. She goes out of her way to help me on games, like she gives me really cool dragons and some fish. She even helps me understand games*."
> **Arianna (10)**

> *"I play Fortnite with them [his cousins]…Those are the people I can talk to. They're my friends."*
> **Jordan (9)**

Games with built-in social features remained a key part of this. A few children who felt less socially connected offline were particularly drawn to games designed to make open-world interaction easier. These platforms offered a low-pressure way to meet new people and feel part of something bigger – while also creating new routes for data to be shared.

> *"I was ranked top 13 in the world [in Ropes]…Top three is Earth, he's actually my friend. There's my friend who's top nine and then my other friend who's top ten and my other friend who's top 8, so they're all getting really good."*
> **Murray (13)**

> *"In terms of creating friendships and face to face encounters outside of school, that's something that is still quite difficult for Isaac. So he's still quite isolated in that respect. So that's where sort of his online learning comes into play, because it totally fills that void."*
> **Isaac (14)'s mum**

It wasn't only children who felt more isolated offline who were finding ways to connect with others online. Some were also using public social media platforms to meet people in their local area – often through features that suggested friends of friends or highlighted nearby users. These connections blurred the lines between online and offline social lives, expanding children's networks beyond the classroom or neighbourhood.

> *"My TikTok account is public… There's some people that you know, or like, your friends know … and then you, like, follow them on TikTok to say 'oh, hi', and they're like, 'hi', and you've actually met them in person…and then you can get closer with them."*
> **Liv (13)**

> *"I like that I can share stuff with my friends, like we share TikToks to each other and then I can, like, talk to my friends…On Facebook I don't post anything, I just use it to see my school Facebook and my church… I've been using WhatsApp a bit more now just because it's for my church."*
> **Dina (16)**

Evolving boundaries between parents and children

As children grow, so too do their experiences – online and offline. These shifts shape how families navigate parenting in a digital world, particularly around issues of freedom, safety and control. Last year's research highlighted the difficult balancing act parents face: keeping their children safe without cutting them off from their social worlds. This often meant setting up parental controls or, in some cases, helping children sidestep age restrictions to avoid social exclusion.

This year, the research delved further into how those boundaries evolve over time. As children become more independent, the role of the parent shifts – from gatekeeper to negotiator, and sometimes observer. Digital tools, such as smart devices and location sharing features, are becoming more embedded in some family routines. These tools offer parents a means of oversight, but their use also reflects the compromises and conversations that define growing up in a connected home.

The tension parents felt between keeping their children safe and allowing them independence evolved as their children grew up

As children get older, their exposure to the online world tends to grow gradually – gaining access to new platforms, apps and devices. Last year, we reported on the tension many parents feel at this stage: a desire to protect their child from harm while also recognising the importance of digital inclusion. For many families, this continues to be a careful negotiation.

Some parents were still choosing not to let their child use certain platforms or devices they felt were inappropriate or unsafe – drawing firm boundaries even when their child's peers were already online. In contrast, others took a more permissive stance, allowing access to the same platforms friends were using but maintaining close oversight through tools like account sharing, password access or regular check-ins.

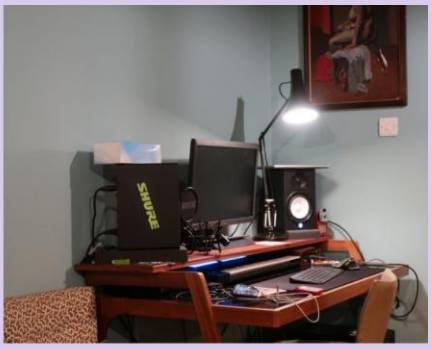
A small number of parents were more hands-off in their approach. These parents were conscious of their child's ability to connect with others, sometimes prioritising inclusion and trust over strict supervision. While each family's approach varied, all were navigating the same underlying challenge: how to introduce children to the digital world in a way that feels both safe and socially acceptable.

Baz (15): a device-ban approach

Baz is still not allowed his own smartphone. In his household, the children are not allowed their own personal devices until they are 16 – his older brother got his last year.

He can access platforms like Instagram and Snapchat on his mum's phone and on the family PC in the living room, but can't go online privately, since his family can always see what he's doing.

"My Snapchat's on my mum's phone. It's like a way to get it, because my mum won't let me have a phone."
Baz (15)



Madiha (12): a parental controls approach

Madiha's parents allow her to use a tablet, but only in a carefully monitored way. They use a parental control app called Qustodio to monitor and restrict her usage.
She was allowed to use Snapchat, but only on her mum's phone – she was not allowed to have her own Snapchat app on her tablet.

"I have made a YouTube account using my Gmail, but I have restrictions on there, and I can't see comments, I can't see any offensive or inappropriate videos or words on there…I have to ask permission if I can download an app."
Madiha (12)

Isaac (14): a light-touch approach

Isaac has struggled socially, and does not have many friends from school or the local area. He relies on online spaces for a lot of his social interactions. His mum said she adopts a very relaxed approach to his online life. When she has tried to enforce screentime limits or controls, this can result in 'meltdowns'. She was also happy with the social interaction his online life provided him.

"That's another reason why I don't really impose limits on what they're doing, because in the past we've had things smashed when you sort of impose [limits]."

Isaac's (14) mum

Conversations about privacy rarely happened in isolation. Instead, they were often woven into broader discussions about 'safety' – a term that carried different meanings for different families. For many, safety encompassed everything from exposure to inappropriate content to being contacted by strangers or sharing too much personal information.

These conversations were often reactive, sparked by a moment of concern. Sometimes it was a risky behaviour a child had engaged in or observed, such as sharing a location or chatting to someone they didn't know. In other cases, it was a rumour circulating among children or parents – stories of hacked accounts, strangers turning up at homes, or viral challenges gone wrong. These prompts acted as catalysts, creating opportunities for parents and children to talk about privacy, even if those conversations were brief or informal.

> *"I have had the conversation with her that, you know, it could be a 60-year-old man pretending to be a little girl talking to her."*
> **Arianna's (10) mum**

> *"There's a rumour going around that someone told someone their address and they went there and they found out he's an old man."*
> **Farah (11) and her cousins**

For some parents, awareness around privacy and data sharing was shaped by what they encountered online themselves. News stories about data breaches, scams or harmful online trends – often shared via social media – acted as triggers, prompting more serious reflection and, in some cases, sparking conversations within the family. These stories made abstract risks feel more immediate, encouraging parents to set clearer boundaries or revisit existing rules.

> *"I used to post things about the kids [on Facebook]…But I think there's been so much press locally, nationally, about, you know, these predators and just people snooping…that side of things just scares me, so I've stopped putting anything up about the kids now."*
> **Orla's (16) mum**

> *"If I hear anything on the news, I'll bring it up to the children and talk to them about it."*
> **Erin's (15) mum**

Moments of transition, such as a child receiving a new device or joining a new platform, were also key opportunities for these discussions. These milestones gave parents a natural opening to talk about expectations – whether around screen time, privacy settings, or appropriate behaviour online. While not every parent took this opportunity, for many, it provided a structured moment to set guidelines and reinforce family norms around digital life.

> *"On my phone there's an app that's a Google app that kind of restricts her being able to access any adult content, any inappropriate images…I've probably used it over the last six months when she's kind of upped her usage on the Internet."*
> **Gwen's (8) mum**

> *"Before I got my phone, I had to do a course, so my social worker knew that I was going to be safe on social media platforms … There were questions like 'what do you do if a random guy texts you?' … So just questions like that … I obviously passed and then was allowed my phone."*
> **Liv (13)**

Gaining independence is a natural part of growing up, with implications for data sharing between parents and children

As children mature, gaining more independence becomes a natural and necessary part of growing up – and this extends to their digital lives. This year, some parents described loosening the controls they had previously put in place, stepping back from strict monitoring as their children got older. In these cases, parents often felt that their child's increasing age or maturity meant they no longer needed such close oversight.

Rather than a complete removal of boundaries, this shift tended to reflect a recalibration of trust. Parents spoke about giving their children more autonomy over certain devices or apps, often with the understanding that rules could be revisited if needed. For these families, reducing controls was less about stepping away from parenting, and more about adapting their approach to meet their child where they were in their development.

> *"We did have parental controls in terms of, you know, a time limit at night, but I don't do that anymore…She's nearly 17 now and she is a college student, so I think, you know, she has to learn herself as well."*
> **Orla's (16) mum**

There was no clear age at which this shift in control happened. Instead, parents' decisions were shaped by a mix of individual expectations, their child's behaviour, and the dynamics within the household. For some, age alone was enough to warrant more freedom. Others waited for signs of responsibility – such as how their child handled previous access – before loosening restrictions.

> *"I still have [parental controls]. But as she's grown up now, on her tablet there is no restriction. … On TV there are no restrictions. On phone, no restrictions. But on the laptop, there is a restriction. Time limit."*
> **Leesha's (9) mum**

Growing up didn't just mean more freedom online – it also brought greater independence in the real world. As children began going out more on their own, meeting friends, or travelling to and from school independently, many parents sought new ways to stay connected and informed. Just as in year one of the project, features like live location sharing remained a popular tool for maintaining a sense of oversight.

In some cases, this desire to keep track of their child's movements led to an increased reliance on technology. Apps and devices offering real-time updates became part of everyday routines, offering parents reassurance without needing to be physically present. For some, this felt like a practical compromise – allowing children space to grow while still maintaining a level of visibility and, when needed, intervention.

> *"We've got the trackers and things to see where the kids are…Basically it's like a GPS. It shows you exactly where they are at any time, as long as they've got their phones on. So you can basically watch them. I've just recently started to let them walk home from school so I can watch them from where they leave school to every street they're going along."*
> **Liam's (10) mum**

> *"On my parent's parental control app, my mum can see my location on my phone, where I am. So it tells her if I come here or like it tells me if I've arrived home."*
> **Farah's cousin (10)**

> *"He' s got a lot of separation anxiety around going into school and thinking that nobody's going to come pick him up or we're all going to run off…The teachers suggested I put my sharing location on…But it's actually quite handy for when he goes out that I can see his location. It's helped him…he can go and be a bit more independent."*
> **Murray's (13) mum**

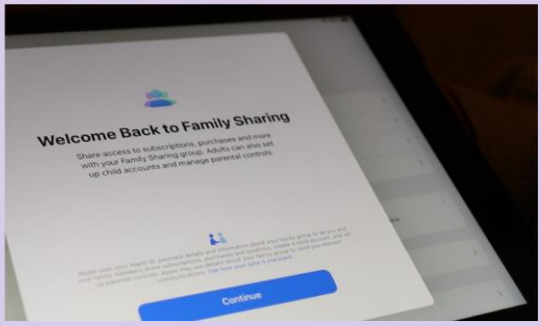
Margot's (10) dad

"We're all adjusting to it, she's adjusting to being able to walk around and we're adjusting to not knowing where she is. … We didn't want [Margot] to miss out on being independent and hang out with her pals, but we didn't want to give her a smartphone … so this made sense."

Margot has started occasionally going on walks with a few friends her age who live nearby.

Margot's parents have not yet given her access to a phone, and are quite clear that they don't intend to until she's a bit older – ideally 12 at the youngest. But they don't like the idea that she would be out unsupervised without the ability to contact a parent in an emergency, or that they might not know where she is.

To mitigate this fear, Margot's parents bought her a smart watch that tracks her location. Margot has to wear this when she goes on walks, to ease her parent's concerns. They see this as a compromise that means Margot doesn't miss out on going out with her friends, but they can still keep an eye on what she's doing.



A deep dive into smart home devices as parenting tools

This year's research also explored how families were using smart devices in the home—and the ways these technologies introduced new dynamics of data sharing between children and their parents.

Nearly half of the families in the sample had at least one smart home device. These included voice assistants like Alexa and Google Home, as well as connected devices such as doorbell cameras and home security systems that connected to family members' phones. These products are designed to make daily life easier – offering entertainment, reminders, or the ability to monitor and control the home remotely. But they also brought new questions around visibility, privacy and control, particularly in households with children.

For some families, smart devices became another way for parents to keep an eye on things – whether it was checking who was at the door or overhearing conversations through voice assistants placed in communal areas. While these tools weren't always used deliberately for supervision, their presence sometimes blurred the boundaries between shared family tech and private space.

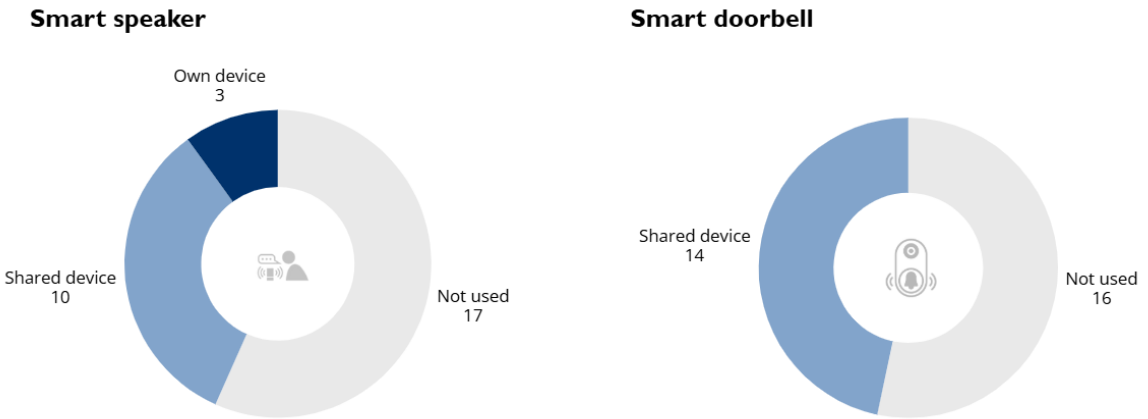


Diagram summary of smart home devices used by the children in the sample. Darker blue represents devices that belong only to the child, and lighter blue represents shared devices.

For many parents, the appeal of smart devices lay in their potential to enhance safety and security at home. Features like doorbell alerts offered a sense of reassurance – particularly when children were home alone or coming and going independently. In these cases, smart technology was framed by some parents not just as a convenience, but as a tool for keeping the household safe.

However, this kind of monitoring – while often well-intentioned – also introduced subtle shifts in how privacy and autonomy were experienced within the home.

> *"The Google [devices] in the bedroom don't have a camera, just the one in the kitchen and the living room. So they're more for safety. If anyone breaks in, they can see as well. But in the bedrooms, we would never have a camera in the bedrooms."*
> **Bryanna's (13) mum**

> *"So everyone has a smart device in their room…we have Alexas, Echo dots…and then there's a ring…the other camera…I think for me it's just the heightened sense of security…So I like that it gives me like eyes around, so knowing that I can always keep an eye on my immediate environment."*
> **Celeste's (14) mum**

Beyond safety, some parents saw smart devices as convenient tools for everyday parenting. Voice assistants and smart speakers, in particular, were used to manage routines, play music, or answer homework questions. Others used intercom functions or drop-in features to communicate with their children in different rooms.

In these homes, smart devices became part of the family infrastructure – another layer in how parents stayed connected to their children and managed daily life. While not always framed as surveillance, their use often gave parents an added level of awareness about what was happening in the household. For example, Celeste's (14) mum used these devices to stay in touch with her children when they were in different rooms. She also kept an eye on when they were watching TV, having connected the TV to her phone. Other parents also used smart devices to communicate with their children.

> *"I've got a camera especially for the kitchen…they're getting to that age, I can pop out [for] shopping, they don't want to come. [I'll] be like, okay, you can stay but just make sure you keep the camera and the Home Pods on… [Jordan's brother] has one in his room now…So if they're not answering, I can do an intercom. So I will say to him, answer your phone. And it will echo throughout the house on all the pods… I will probably get one soon [for Jordan], but I just thought he's a little bit young."*
> **Jordan's (9) mum**

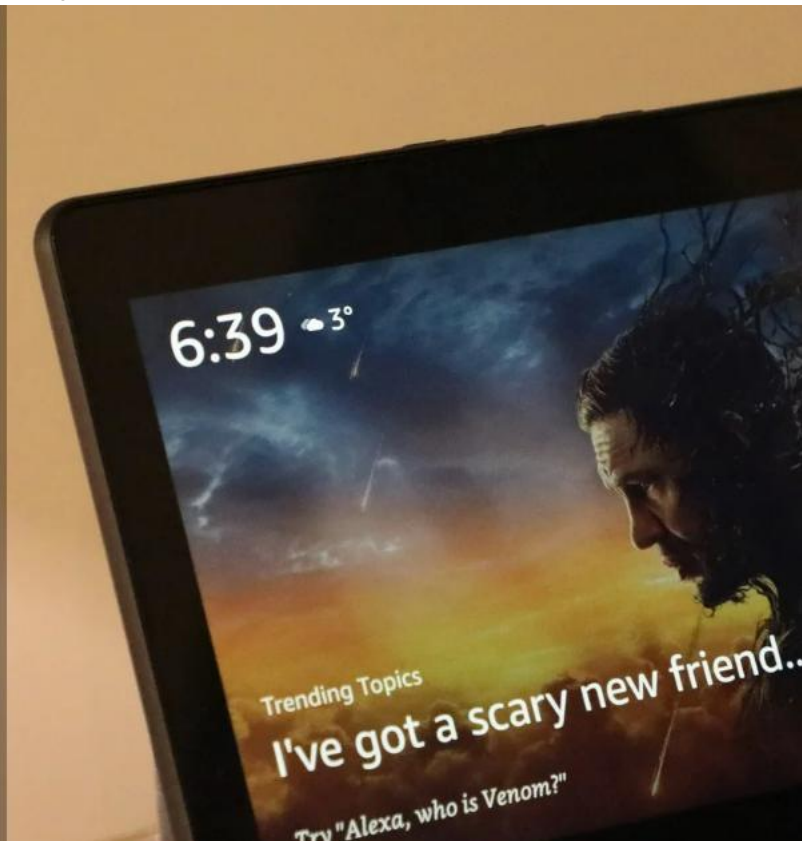
It's also worth noting that for some families, the presence of smart devices was less about safety or practicality and more about enthusiasm for technology itself. A few parents spoke openly about their interest in owning the latest gadgets—driven by curiosity, enjoyment, or a desire to stay up to date.

Even when the initial motivation for purchase wasn't directly related to parenting, the features offered by these devices often led to their gradual integration into family routines.

Mason's dad has installed a home surveillance system with Alexa devices and security cameras placed throughout the house. While he primarily uses the cameras for security purposes, he also leverages the technology as a convenient parenting tool.

This setup allows him to monitor whether his children are doing their chores, for example. He also said it allows him to 'drop in' to rooms to ask the family a question if he is out shopping.

"I can control the whole house from my phone. I can control every Alexa and camera around the house...I can hear what's going on, so then I go, 'Excuse me, can somebody answer their phone, please?'"
Mason's (14) dad



Implications of data sharing through smart home devices

Across both online and offline spaces, concerns around safety remained central to many parents' decisions to adopt smart technologies. Whether it was a smartwatch that tracked location or a doorbell camera that showed who was coming and going, these tools offered parents a sense of oversight – especially when their children were becoming more independent. For many, this visibility was seen as essential, providing comfort in a world where children are increasingly mobile and digitally connected.

But as these technologies become more deeply embedded in family life, they may also shape the way children understand concepts like privacy and autonomy. Being monitored – whether through a device in the living room or a location-tracking app on a phone – may become more normalised. For some children, this could reinforce the idea that constant oversight is simply part of growing up, both online and offline.

What this means for children's long-term attitudes towards data sharing and online privacy remains unclear. While smart devices offer practical benefits and reassurance to parents, they also introduce new dynamics around trust, independence, and visibility. Understanding how children experience and internalise these dynamics over time will be important in shaping future guidance and policy.

Growing commercial aspirations

Year one highlighted that for many children, data often acted as a form of currency. Sharing personal information, accepting cookies, and clicking through terms and conditions were often seen as necessary steps to access the digital platforms that felt central to their social lives.

Year two builds on this by exploring further examples of the commercialisation of children's online environments and how this affects their engagement with data. For younger children, sharing data could be a way to gain extra lives in a game or collect in-game currencies. As children get older, their motivations extend beyond rewards or features. Commercial incentives begin to shape a broader range of behaviours. From earning money in the short term to developing skills for future careers, financial and commercial drivers are increasingly influencing the choices children make when using digital services.

For younger children, data remained their main currency

Sharing personal information in exchange for rewards in games felt like a good deal for many of the children – especially the younger ones. Sharing their age or contact details to create a profile or share an invite link felt like an easy choice when the benefit included gaining extra 'lives' or in-game currency.

Year one showed examples of this on shopping apps like Temu and AliExpress, where easy, bright and child-friendly games offered children the chance to save up 'coins' to spend on real life purchases.

In 2024/5, examples of commercial interactions extended beyond in-game purchases. Many children described watching advertisements as a routine part of gameplay, using ads as a way to access free lives, level-ups, or in-game currency. This was often seen as a normal and expected trade-off.

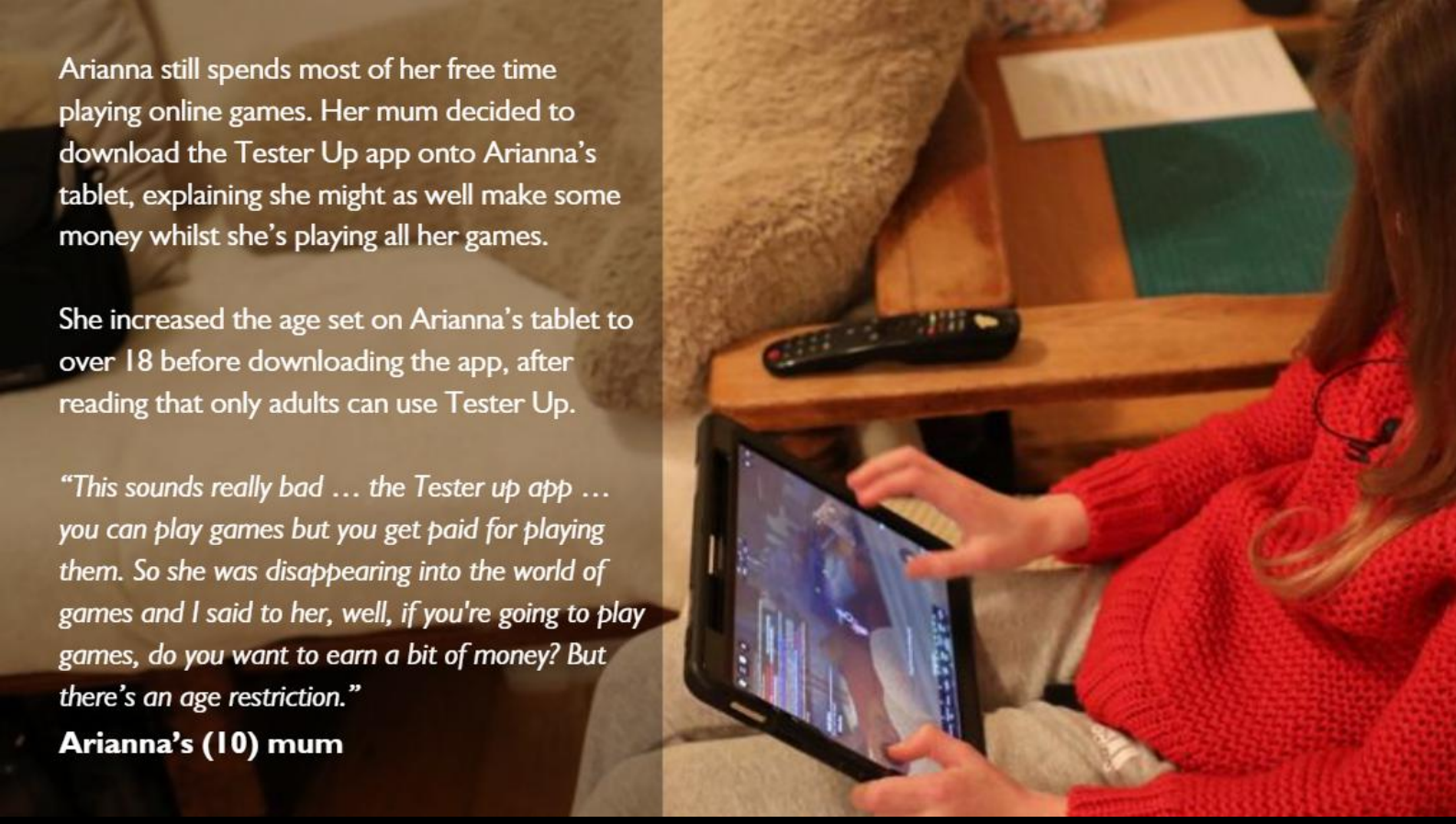
> *"My Hotel is like where you can create loads of rooms and toilets and loads of customers come…when you have [in-game] money and you give it to the family to help them and sometimes there could be one thing you miss, so you just watch an ad to get the clue."*
> **Leesha (9)**

> *"So when you play and die, this [advert] comes up. So you can press that, but it doesn't waste anything. You just go to the ad…it's for Temu…and then you can start fresh again."*
> **Farah (11)**

> *"I've also got Phone Case DIY…you glue it, then you spray the colour you want. And [sometimes] you have to watch an advert and you can choose any colour you like…On the Snake Clash game, if you wanted a [new] skin, you would watch an advert."*
> **Gwen (8)**

> *"I have one game in mind called DOP, where you have to draw or delete one part of the picture so it makes sense. But then loads of ads just come up while you're trying, and it says get a hint for an ad. So you have three free hints, but then you have to watch an ad to get more."*
> **Amy (11)**

Beyond watching adverts, children's behaviours on apps could earn them money. For example, some parents were sharing opportunities to make money with their children that they had seen on social media. Others were encouraging them to download specific apps.



Arianna still spends most of her free time playing online games. Her mum decided to download the Tester Up app onto Arianna's tablet, explaining she might as well make some money whilst she's playing all her games.

She increased the age set on Arianna's tablet to over 18 before downloading the app, after reading that only adults can use Tester Up.

"This sounds really bad … the Tester up app … you can play games but you get paid for playing them. So she was disappearing into the world of games and I said to her, well, if you're going to play games, do you want to earn a bit of money? But there's an age restriction."

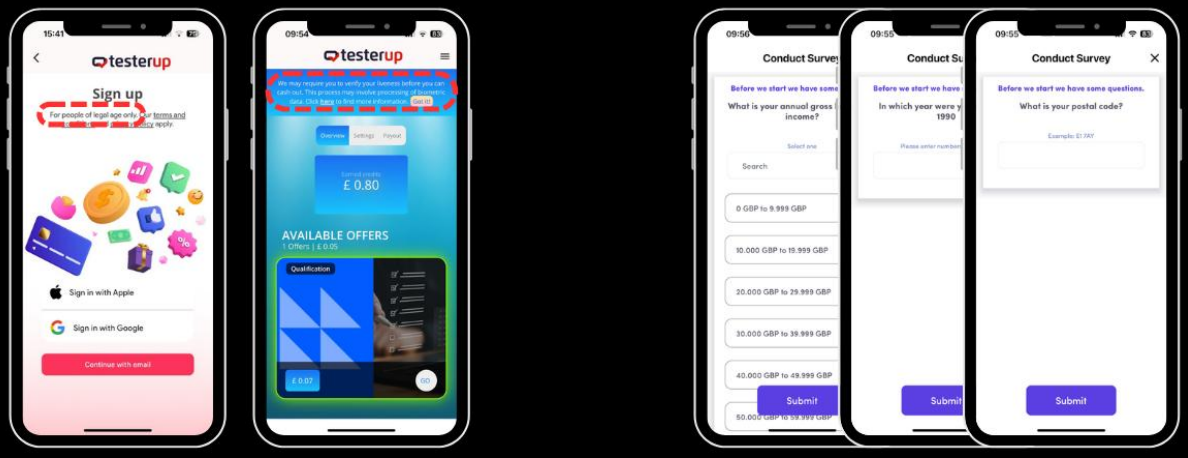
Arianna's (10) mum

Platform analysis: Tester Up App

Tester Up is a platform that allows users to earn money by testing apps, playing games, completing surveys, and evaluating products.

Users can earn real money by completing various tasks, with rewards starting at £0.05 for a two-minute survey. Users can also earn additional money by referring friends, gaining 10% of a friend's earnings on the platform over the next year after getting them to sign up. The cash-out threshold in the UK is £20, which requires face verification to process payout to users.

The app is rated age 4+ on the App Store, although the platform states that users must be 18+ to use the app in the UK. However, when inputting an age of 15 in the first survey used as part of the signup process, researchers were still able to use the platform. Other questions asked in this initial survey included users' gender, household income, and postcode.



Tester Up: *"For people of legal age only."*

"We may require you to verify your liveness before you can cash out. This process may involve processing of biometric data."

These motives shaped some children's decisions around their settings on different digital services. For example, choosing to share additional information with a game in return for getting a better game experience or a better chance of 'winning'.

Daniel (12)

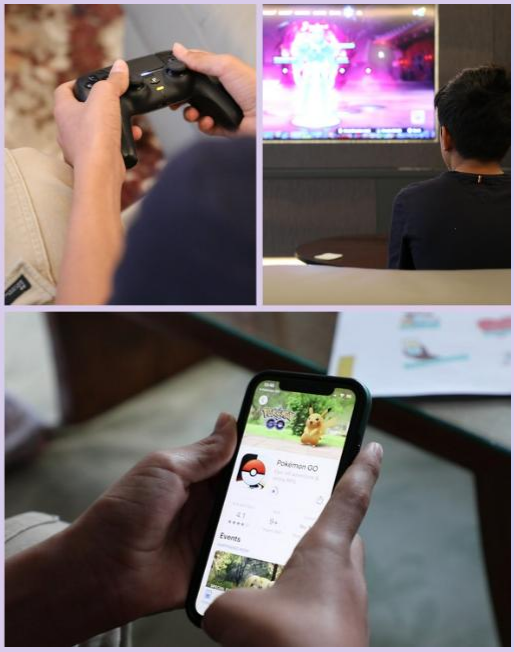
"I rarely put always unless I know [the app] isn't going to use [his location] for anything bad…On Pokémon Go, there's settings which, like, help your game if you put [location sharing] on always…It can catch Pokémon whilst you're off the game."

Daniel usually only allows apps to access his location when he is using the app, and rarely clicks 'always' when an app asks whether he wants to share his location.

However, Pokémon Go is one of the few apps which he always chooses to share his location with. Pokémon Go is a mobile game that uses GPS to collect, train, and battle virtual Pokémon, which appear on-screen as if they are in the player's real-world location.

Daniel explained that he chooses to always share his location with Pokémon Go to enable features that collect new Pokémon even when he's not using the app.

In this way, Pokémon Go incentivises users to share information that they otherwise may choose not to, such as providing constant access to their device's location, by rewarding this behaviour with new Pokémon.



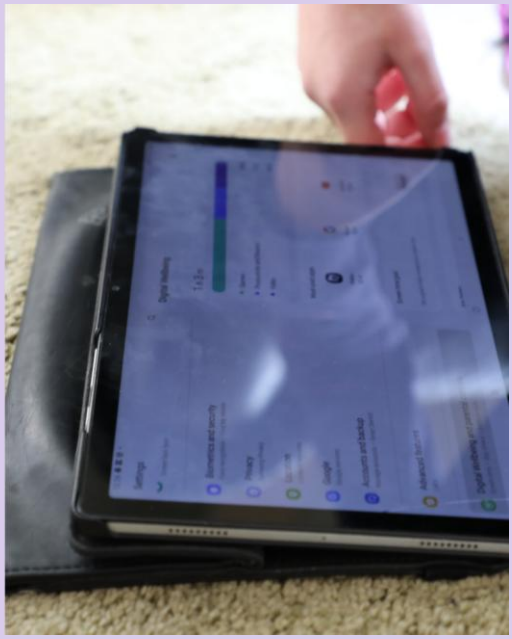
Amy (11)

"So his livestreams are Pls Donate and Broken Bones. So Pls Donate is where you can give people money or get money yourself...all the games on Roblox just come with it."

Amy lives in London with her parents and three brothers. Among her many other hobbies, she enjoys playing a variety of games on Roblox, such as Dress to Impress, Insomnia and Pets Sim X, and regularly spends Robux, the in-game currency, to customise her avatar.

One Roblox experience she mentioned was called 'Pls Donate', where players set up 'stalls' to ask other players to donate Robux in exchange for their items such as clothes and game passes. Her 13 year-old brother also used 'Pls Donate', and even did livestreams on his YouTube channel showing him playing the game with his friend.

Through games like Pls Donate, Roblox encourages greater interaction between users so that they can earn more Robux to enhance their game experience.



"I don't really have time for a job, but I do get a bit of pocket money for helping out around the house and stuff. I had thought about getting a job which I probably will try and do in the summer and stuff, but the most money I've probably made is just from doing a couple jobs like babysitting and then selling stuff on Vinted as well."
Jamie (16)

"I wanted to go to a warehouse or something just to get myself a little bit of money, but I can't find any that'll take on 17 or younger."
Bradley (17)

For children who faced barriers to earning money through in-person jobs, digital services accessed through their phones provided alternative routes to generate income. For example, online marketplace apps enabled children to make extra money by selling second-hand items.

Platforms such as Vinted, eBay, Depop, and Facebook Marketplace allowed children to sell old clothes and belongings, often earning real money quickly. This process typically involved setting up profiles, messaging buyers directly, and entering bank details to enable payments and withdraw funds from the app.

The visual below shows the number and ages of children who reported using these platforms in 2024/5, with boys shown in dark blue and girls shown in light blue. It was typically the older children in the sample, and often boys, who were using these apps.

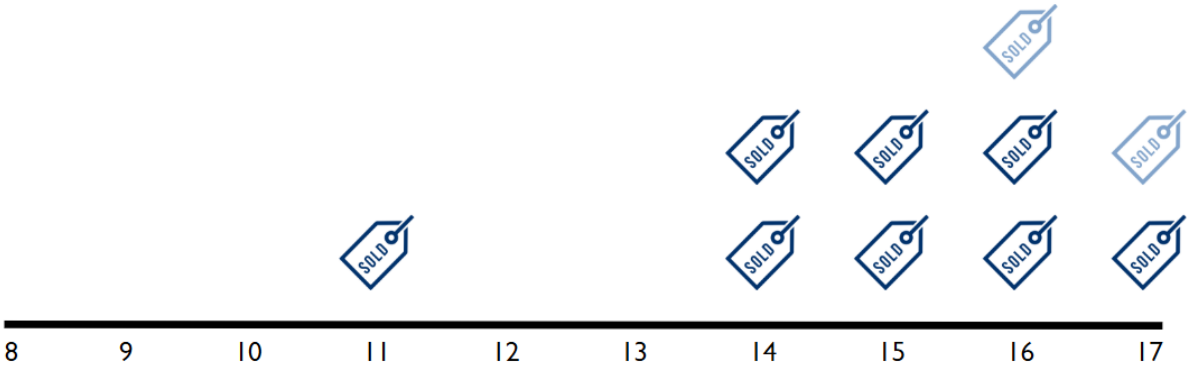


Diagram of children who reported using online marketplace platforms. The numbers represent the ages of the children, and each symbol represents one child, with boys shown in dark blue and girls shown in light blue.

Whilst Vinted was the most popular of these platforms, used by eight children in the sample, eBay, Facebook Marketplace and Depop were also mentioned. However, age restrictions limited use among some children, whilst others used their parent's account instead in order to make money from these apps.

"[Vinted] is pretty much just eBay, but for clothes and some random stuff…I've made £137.50 off of it …I downloaded a Facebook account but I couldn't get onto Marketplace because I have to be 16, but I only put my age as 15 even though I'm 14."
Mason (14)

"I started selling stuff online which I didn't need, so I sold quite a bit of stuff on that. I usually sell on my mum's account though, because she knows how to do posting and shipping."
Shiv (11)

"I definitely like to purchase a lot of stuff on Vinted…If I could, every chance I got! But not that often honestly because, especially right now, I'm trying to save."
Orla (16)

Beyond online marketplaces, commercial opportunities were advertised to children on social media. These tended to offer a more professionalised version of exchange, such as investor trading.

Bradley (17)

"I look at trading things…I can make money by watching TikTok… I didn't really trust it but my mum sent it me the other day and she was like, look at this. And I was like, oh, that looks good. So I was like, I'll give it a chance."

Bradley is eager to earn money and is working towards a college course while looking for job opportunities. However, he has been turned away from warehouse jobs due to his age.

To make money, he has turned to online platforms such as Vinted to buy and sell clothes, and Telegram, where he was a part of groups sharing trading tips as well as a scheme where he was paid for completing different online tasks. His mum had recommended him to the scheme and he had earned £6 from engaging with content as instructed.

Bradley also wanted to make money off TikTok, as he uses it a lot and thought, "Why don't I make some money from it?". He had heard of people using AI to make TikTok videos, which he could then upload with minimal effort. He had looked into it, but he believed he had to pay for ChatGPT, which had stopped him generating these videos.

With the incentive to earn money being high and the barriers to entry feeling low compared to in-person work, Bradley had been drawn to online platforms he was already using day-to-day.

Longer term career goals seemed to motivate some children to create public personas

Commercial motives weren't only shaping children's decisions in the short term. A small number of children were thinking further ahead. In these cases, sharing content publicly wasn't just about the moment; it was part of something more deliberate. For these children, building an online presence was tied to personal ambition, identity, or even future career aspirations.

Leesha (9), for example, posted videos thanking her followers when she reached a new milestone – celebrating audience growth and engagement in a way that mirrored the behaviour of influencers and content creators. For her and others like her, public data sharing was more than just participation – it was a performance of identity, and a step towards something they hoped to build for themselves.

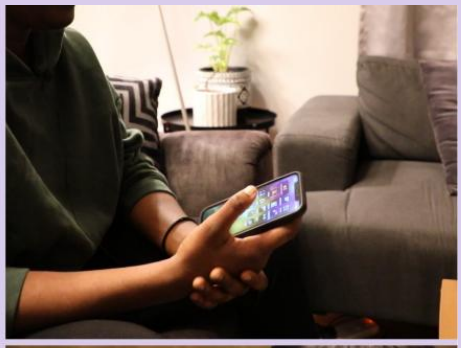
In these moments, children were not only navigating platforms, but shaping their own sense of visibility, value, and voice within them. These behaviours raise important questions about how children understand digital identity, and how their early experiences of managing audiences and curating content may influence their expectations of online life in the future.

Celeste (14)

Celeste loves football and wants to get a sports scholarship to go to university in America.

Celeste said that she has been encouraged to create a public profile with the aim of increasing engagement to build an online brand for scouts to notice her.

"Eventually it [her Instagram account] is probably gonna go back to public again…It has a lot to do with the sports scholarship thing. So, like, the people who run it kind of have a policy thing where to get interest from schools outside the country, you have to share more about your sport and what you do…it's called your profile engagement."



Jamie (16)

Jamie wants to be a professional rugby player, and has all his accounts set to public. He rarely posts, but does receive messages and follow requests.

For Jamie, having a public profile was seen as the natural thing to do for an aspiring sports person, citing older boys in his school and celebrities that also have public accounts.

"I do play rugby as well, so maybe someone knows me because of that… I know a lot of people that are a couple years up and their account is just public because you don't see many sports professionals with private accounts and stuff ."

In these examples, aspirations to build a public profile were closely linked to children's goals outside the digital world – particularly those with ambitions to pursue sport professionally. There was a sense that having a visible online presence wasn't just desirable, but necessary.

Motivations ranged from direct to indirect. One child had been encouraged by coaches or adults in their lives to post content that might appeal to scouts or scholarship decision makers – suggesting that social media could act as a portfolio or proof of commitment. Another had simply observed that professional athletes tend to have active public profiles, and assumed that curating an online persona was part of what it meant to 'go pro'.

In these examples, the act of sharing data – posting videos, tagging locations, collecting followers – became intertwined with a longer-term view of success. Rather than seeing data privacy and visibility as something to be managed or questioned, some children framed it as a step towards opportunity. This underscores how commercial and cultural narratives can shape children's digital behaviours, even when those influences go unspoken.

Chapter 2

How do digital platforms reflect children's changing lives?

Chapter summary

As children grow up, the platforms they use evolve alongside them. The ages they input into platforms mature as they do, and their algorithms continuously adapt to reflect their changing interests and behaviours. The design of the digital environments the children in the sample inhabited played a key role in shaping their interactions, influencing what they shared, how they shared it, and their basic understanding of the data exchanges taking place.

Year one highlighted how children's digital lives often revolve around a small number of platforms that all their friends are using, leaving them with limited meaningful choices when it came to sharing their personal information. Not only do social norms and peer pressures make being online feel non-negotiable, but the tone, design, and functionality of these dominant services often incentivise children to share data – making personal information feel like the price of participation.

After children have made this transaction to join a digital platform – knowingly or not – they have consented to those platforms evolving alongside them. Year two revisits a thread outlined in year one: children continued to struggle with understanding the terms they were agreeing to – or even recognising that they were agreeing to anything at all – when creating profiles or using digital services.

This year explored platform design and its implications, focusing on two common user experiences for the children in the sample: inputting an age as part of creating a profile and being serviced content by an algorithmically-driven feed shaped by their behaviours. As digital services age up and evolve alongside children, what does meaningful choice really look like in an environment that appears to be designed to encourage engagement over understanding?

Awareness and understanding of data sharing agreements

Children were constantly engaging in data transactions with and on digital platforms, but their understanding of what they were agreeing to when they click 'accept' remained limited. Children were regularly encountering terms like privacy policies or cookies, but did not always recognise these as moments where they were agreeing to something; nor did they think much about how their personal information may be being used by the platforms they were engaging with.

Few children understood what they were agreeing to online

All of the children recognised data-related terms like 'cookies', 'terms and conditions', and 'contract' from their interactions on digital platforms, but their understanding of what these terms meant varied widely. As in year one, some of the youngest children showed very limited understanding of the language and concepts related to data and privacy.

> *"Cookies are things you can share with people, sometimes people bring cookies into the class and just share them about."*
> **Margot (10)**

> *"Contract … when you're like looking somewhere? Like eye contact? … cookies, I don't know what it looks like but it's like biscuits I think."*
> **Farah's cousin (7)**

Some of the older children had a stronger grasp of the language used around data, though their explanations were not always clear or confident.

"Privacy policy is probably just, like, how they keep your stuff private I assume. I don't think I've ever read them because they take too long to read."
Umar (15)

"Mostly I accept the cookies – depends if I trust the website or not, sometimes I decline it… I think [cookies] mean they download stuff onto the computer and stuff goes onto it, so they can see what…I think it's more they can see your ad choices and stuff, don't really know."
Baz (15)

"Terms and conditions…I guess it's like you agree to them keeping your data or for them to not keep your data or whatever the website is. Something like cookies…Whatever cookies is…Probably like keeping your data or something like that."
Georgia (17)

"I try to avoid accepting cookies because I know that means they'll try to take my information from me to like advertise."
Erin (15)

Children didn't always recognise terms and conditions or privacy policies as agreements. Creating an account or clicking 'accept' didn't feel like making a decision. For example, while some were familiar with terms like 'cookies', they rarely connected them to choices about sharing personal information.

"I don't know if I've ever agreed to a contract online, but I've definitely agreed to a contract in real life."
Jamie (16)

"But then there's some cookies that I'm pretty sure you have to agree to for some reason… probably, like, so no one does stupid stuff on the internet."
Shiv (11)

"You normally have to accept [cookies] to be able to make an account…I don't really know what they are, but you always get them on apps, if they can have access or something like that on websites."
Orla (16)

Data sharing with online platforms felt less tangible than 'real world' examples

When children thought about sharing information, companies rarely came to mind. Instead, they mostly mentioned sharing with friends or family, strangers, or official contacts like school or doctors. Sharing with companies felt more abstract – harder to grasp and less present in their everyday thinking.

"[I share] what I do at school, with my best bestie Stickbug, and she tells me how annoying her brothers are and how confusing her school is…And maybe how I feel, so if I've had a bad day, then she can cheer me up and stuff."
Arianna (10)

"If I'm at a nice place, like the Sky Garden, yesterday I posted a few videos of that…I just showed my friends it. But I won't show you, like, my house area, because when you think about it, people could, like, track the location."
Shiv (11)

"We play stuff on the Xbox as well where we have, like, a mic and you're able to talk to people. On Instagram I'd have photos up of what I look like and, like, who I am. I suppose I probably have my name on some of my accounts online."
Orla (16)

"[I don't share] too much information really. Just conversations, that's all… I don't like to talk about things just to random people…Your private life's your private life, innit, so I don't let people know too much about me."
Bradley (17)

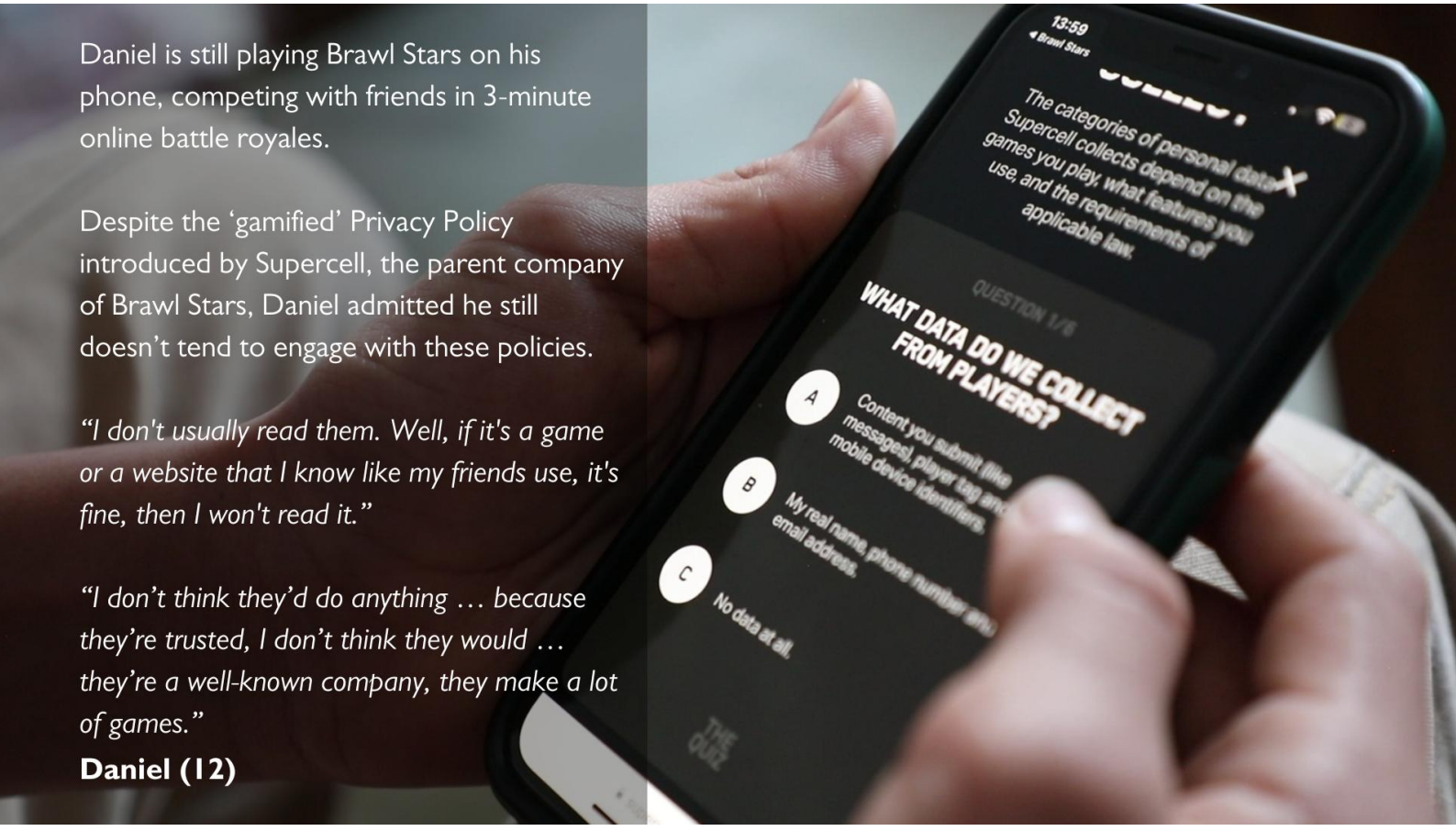
Beyond privacy policies and terms and conditions, platforms often encouraged data sharing through their wider design. Children were offered in-game rewards, like skins or currency, in exchange for watching ads, sharing personal details, or inviting friends to join. Sometimes, these translated into offline rewards, such as discounts on websites or real money to spend on the platform. These mechanics made data sharing feel routine, transactional, or even rewarding – further distancing it from any sense of informed consent. In these moments, children weren't being asked to agree to something – they were being nudged to play along.

"So you go into AliExpress. You go into your account and then you wait till it loads and then there's Play and Earn, Go Go Match, Mers Boss and Prize Land…I got like £4 already that I can spend on things…You have to make an account for AliExpress and then you get to play because they know you're going to order something."
Bryanna (13)

"All my other games I think are linked to the same email…They always send emails, everything sends emails…I think it's just offers on games and new games that are released…It is annoying, but at least I get to know the discounts and games."
Georgia (17)

"There was this thing where Temu were giving out money or something like that, and my friend actually got £50 from it and then like loads of people were sending out surveys so you could get stuff sent to you for free."
Jamie (16)

There were examples where platforms had tried to make privacy policies or data sharing agreements clearer or more engaging and, therefore, easier for children to understand. As highlighted in year one, this doesn't lead to meaningful engagement or consent to how their data is used.



Daniel is still playing Brawl Stars on his phone, competing with friends in 3-minute online battle royales.

Despite the 'gamified' Privacy Policy introduced by Supercell, the parent company of Brawl Stars, Daniel admitted he still doesn't tend to engage with these policies.

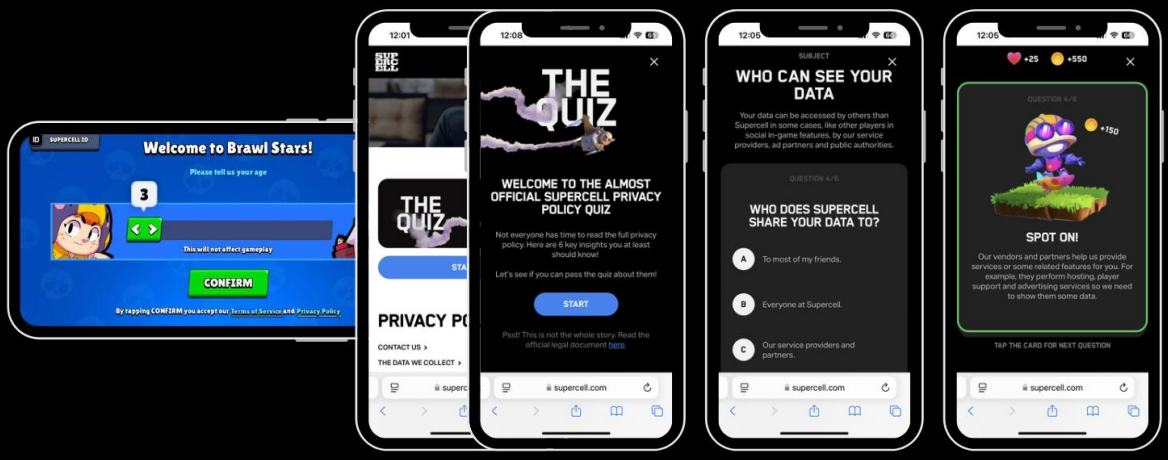
"I don't usually read them. Well, if it's a game or a website that I know like my friends use, it's fine, then I won't read it."

"I don't think they'd do anything … because they're trusted, I don't think they would … they're a well-known company, they make a lot of games."
Daniel (12)

Platform analysis: Brawl Stars

Brawl Stars rewards users who connect with friends on the game by offering double XP (in-game points) in battles when teaming up with friends, as well as having a suggested friends tab. The game encourages players to connect with friends through a 'suggested friends' tab and the use of 'Supercell IDs', which players can share round in order to add friends on the game.

Creating an account for Brawl Stars is easy. After downloading the app, users input a nickname, select their age via a slider (the youngest option being just 3 years old), and clicking confirm. Like many other online games, creating an account requires users to accept Terms and Conditions – without needing to read them first. Hyperlinks at the bottom of the account creation page directs users to the Terms and Conditions and Privacy Policy of Supercell, the parent company of Brawl Stars.



Supercell have 'gamified' their Privacy Policy, creating a child-friendly quiz with questions about how their information and data is used, rewarding correct answers with coins that can be used in their games.

However, users must actively choose to view Supercell's Privacy Policy page to play the quiz, so it's unclear what impact this has on children's engagement with how their data is used.

Data sharing agreements was a step, not a decision

Regardless of whether information about data agreements or the use of personal information was designed to be accessible, children across the sample consistently reported that they tended to overlook or ignore it.

> *"I never really read [the terms and conditions] but it's probably about the information and everything you put it in and stuff like that … it's normally like a big, long page and I just don't want to sit and read that."*
> **Orla (16)**

> *"I don't read terms and conditions, I just go and accept it … it would probably take me two hours to read the whole thing."*
> **Shiv (11)**

> *"I don't know what any of it means … I think people probably just type out a load of rubbish and just put one thing in that means people can't sue them."*
> **Baz (15)**

Agreeing to a contract or privacy policy was seen as just another step in the process of using a platform, searching for information, or playing a game. For children, it wasn't viewed as an important part of the experience – just something to click through on the way to what they actually wanted to do.

> *"I just always accept them [cookies] because it gets in my way. So you have to accept the policies basically."*
> **Umar (15)**

> *"Sometimes I just can't be bothered like personalising my settings, you know, because it'll ask you oh do you want to? It'll say, you know, 'personalise how you want us to take any information'. Sometimes I just can't be arsed so I just click 'accept all' and get the information I need."*
> **Erin (15)**

> *"If I just share [personal information] on one game, then that one game could share it to like a tonne of other games and then pretty much every single game would know my personal information…but I have to in order to play the game."*
> **Arianna (10)**

Children are deeply embedded in digital environments that are designed to keep them engaged, not necessarily informed. The platforms that dominate their online and social lives are easy to access and hard to question – streamlining participation while sidelining opportunities for meaningful understanding. For most children, clicking 'accept' is simply part of the process of getting to what they want to do, not a moment of informed agreement. In a digital world that prioritises seamless entry and constant engagement, genuine understanding of data sharing remains out of reach for many young users.

Age assurance: Ensuring children spend time in spaces designed for them

It was common for children to lie about their age to access the platforms they wanted. Year one highlighted the strong motivation children feel to join the platforms their friends are on - and the pressure parents feel to ensure their child isn't left out, sometimes resulting in support or permission to bend rules.

But these social pressures don't operate in isolation. In many cases, platform design made entering inaccurate information easy – and at times, even necessary. Some platforms didn't ask for a birthdate at all, while others made it impossible to input a truthful one, nudging children toward claiming they were older than they really were. Without meaningful design, age restrictions functioned more like a checkbox than a safeguard.

In year two, we explored how platform design shapes age assurance, and what it means for children when they're regularly exposed to content and communities without effective age verification measures in place.

Many children had found straightforward workarounds to create older profiles

Platforms used a range of methods to ask for children's ages. Children tended to find ways to work around them to get the outcomes they wanted.

Where age was requested during setup, many children reported finding easy ways to bypass these checks. Inputting an inaccurate age was common across the sample – often seen as the simplest route to access a platform. Many children admitted to doing so on at least one service, with some parents fully aware of how easily their child could navigate around these systems.

> *"Sometimes on Roblox you have to choose your age and I just do like … born in 1987 or something, and then I make up a random birthday like October 1st or something like that. Because what's the point in having your age? So that they can do age restrictions?"*
> **Amy (11)**

> *"If you're lower than 13 you can't get some of the games … so I decided to put 13 … so I can get all the game access."*
> **Leesha (9)**

> *"Whenever I make the parental control on Roblox, she makes a new account … she's had several accounts … instead of asking me she just creates a new account."*
> **Leesha's (9) mum**

> *"I did make this account like a long time ago … I'm sure it's because before when Roblox was old … it used to say if you're under 12 you couldn't play … I put in my brother's birthday."*
> **Madiha (12)**

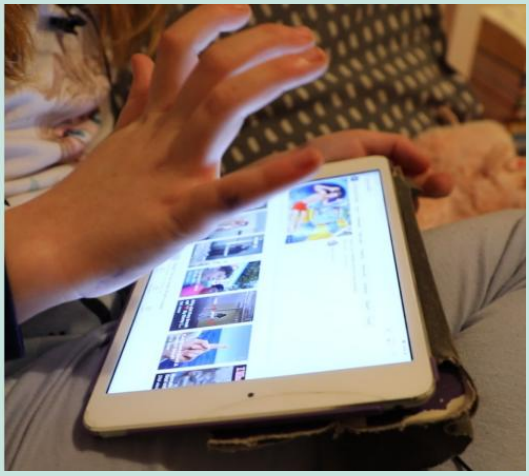
In some cases, parents were aiding their children to create profiles that were older than their intended use, either directly or indirectly. As reported in the previous chapter, Arianna's (10) mum chose to increase the age entered into Arianna's iPad to allow her to download the Tester Up app to earn money whilst Arianna was playing games.

Rose (8)

Rose splits her time between her mum and her dad's house, who have different rules around what platforms Rose is allowed to be on. Rose's mum prefers Rose and her younger brother to use YouTube Kids over YouTube.

She feels the content is more likely to be age appropriate and ensure they aren't shown content less suited for children their age. However, when Rose is at her dad's, there seemed to be different rules in place.

"I normally use [regular YouTube] at my dad's … To me it's better than YouTube Kids because YouTube Kids has younger things on it and then YouTube adults … It's not like really adult things … I would say it's 8 or 9 and higher, but I don't really know."



Occasionally, when she feels Rose has been watching too much, Rose's mum deletes the YouTube Kids app from her iPad. But Rose knows how to get around this.

"When you first get it, you need to put all the things in. But it's kind of easy … Well, a parent's actually meant to do it, but I know how to do it … first you put the year they were born in … then there's stuff that you need to read through and then there's an arrow … I normally just press the arrow because I don't want to read through all of it."

This came as a surprise to Rose's mum, who did not realise Rose knew how to download and set up apps from the App Store on her own. She wondered how Rose knew what age to enter upon setup. Rose explained she remembered from when her mum told her to put her birthday as 1990 when downloading a game.

Rose didn't necessarily realise she was setting up her account incorrectly - it's unclear whether she even saw it as doing something naughty. But her experience shows how quickly a barrier to entry becomes a minor hurdle when platform design, digital know-how, and motivation align.

Age verification was not always part of the setup process

Sometimes, children weren't given the opportunity to share their age as part of the setup process of a new platform. Children could create accounts and begin using the service without ever being meaningfully asked how old they were. This absence of age checks made it even easier for children to access platforms technically not intended for them – often without realising they were doing anything wrong.

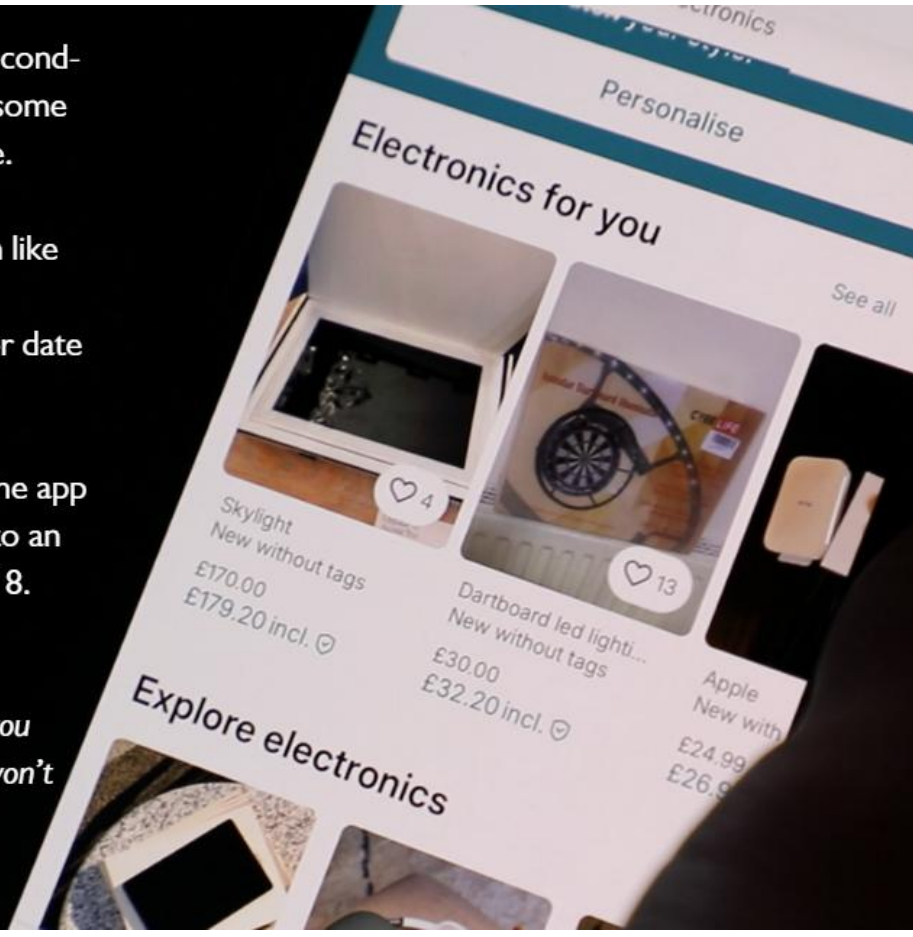
Vinted was a favourite platform among some of the older children in the sample for buying and selling second-hand clothes and making a bit of their own money. In Vinted's T&Cs, it asks users to be *"at least 18 years old"*. However, the platform does not ask users their age to create a profile when they first use the app. Inputting age is an optional additional step a user can choose to add in their profile settings if they wish.

Bradley enjoys using Vinted to buy and sell second-hand clothes and other items, to both make some extra cash and get clothes for a cheaper price.

He reflected that, despite sharing information like his bank details and home address with the platform, he'd never been asked for his age or date of birth.

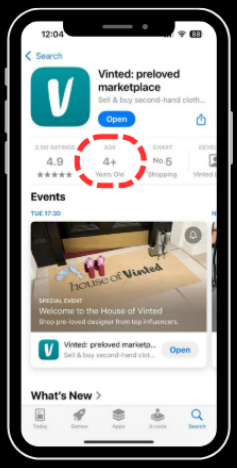
When he attempted to input his actual age, the app would not accept it – automatically scrolling to an earlier birth year that would make him over 18.

"Not even put any birthday or anything yet – nothing… It won't let me go to 2008 because you have to be 18. So look, I put it to 2008 and it won't work… [but] I can still use it."
Bradley (17)

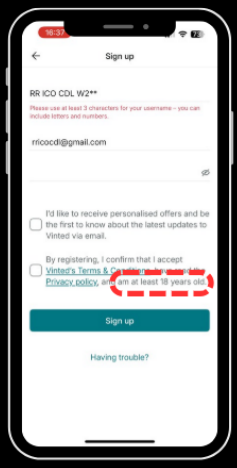


Platform analysis: Vinted

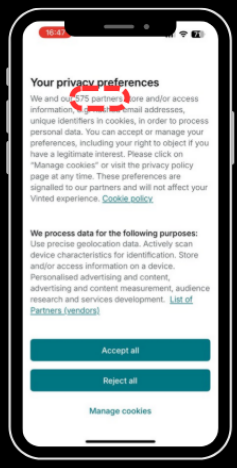
Vinted is an online marketplace where users can buy, sell, and swap second-hand clothing, accessories, and other items. It allows individuals to list items for free, earning money for unwanted clothes and items.



Vinted is rated age 4+ on the App Store, but its Terms and Conditions state users must be at least 18 years old. But there is no age verification in place – users simply have to tick a box to 'confirm' they are 18 or older.



There is an option in the app's settings to input a date of birth, but this is completely optional and not necessary to use the platform.



Vinted also shares user information with 575 partners. In some cases, this includes precise geolocation.

Without proper age verification mechanisms in place, Vinted is therefore sharing children's data with the hundreds of third parties it partners with.

Sometimes age was required in policy, but not collected in practice

Many children were playing free games like *Block Blast* and *PixelArt*, which are free to download and easy to access. With simple controls and engaging sound effects, these games are designed to be instantly playable and appealing to users of all ages. They require little to no setup – users can simply open the app and start playing.

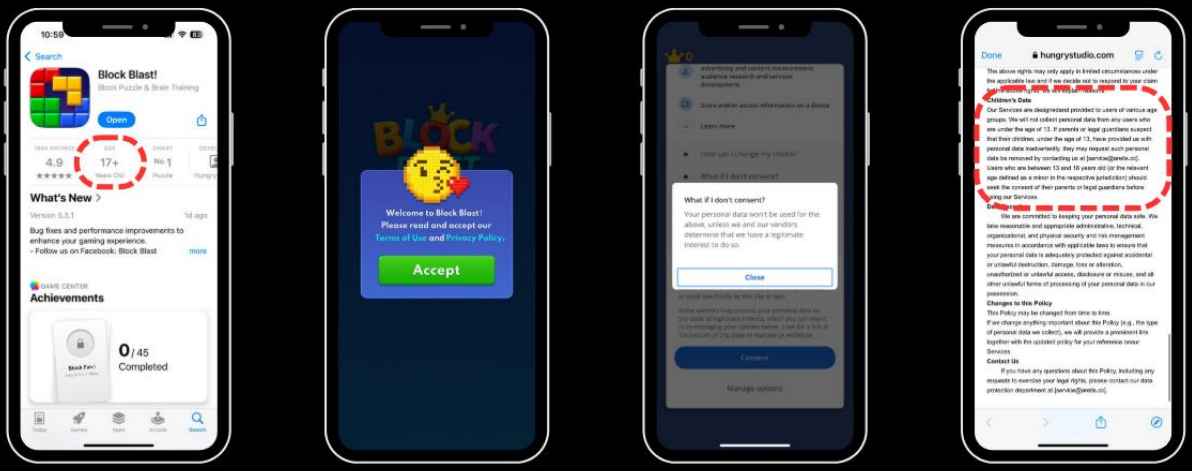
These games are typically designed to be easy to pick up and hard to put down, using bright visuals and simple, satisfying gameplay to hold players' attention. Their commercial model relies on frequent in-app advertising, which appears regularly throughout the user experience. Rather than encouraging account creation or collecting personal details, the design focuses on quick access and repeat use, generating revenue through ad exposure over time.

Block Blast, a particularly popular mobile game this year, was played by nearly a third of the children in the sample. Like Vinted, *Block Blast* does not ask for a user's age before use. The game does not require login or account creation, and crucially, it provides no opportunity – at any stage in the game or in its settings – for users to input their age, even if they wanted to.

Platform analysis: Block Blast

Downloading Block Blast and beginning to play the game does not require any account creation or inputting of age, despite the app being rated as 17+ on the App Store. To start playing the game, users simply click a button to accept the platform's Terms of Use and Privacy Policy, with no option to reject these.

Whilst there are options to stop sharing some information with third parties if users go onto Block Blast's Privacy Policy, data sharing for "legitimate interests" with certain companies cannot be turned off – with no explanation of what "legitimate interests" might be. Despite stating users' right to withdraw consent in its Privacy Policy, further research found no method to change consent options on the app after initial consent had been given.



In Block Blast's Terms of Use, it states that:

"We will not collect personal data from any users who are under the age of 13," and *"Users who are between 13 and 18 years old…should seek the consent of their parents or legal guardians before using our Service."*

Yet, with no option for users to input their age, it's unclear how – if at all – these policies are upheld.

Where age wasn't set, neither were limits on the advertising that followed in the game

Adverts were a frequent feature of free-to-play games like *Block Blast* and *PixelArt*. They appeared throughout the gameplay experience – often as banners along the bottom of the screen, or as full-screen ads triggered after levelling up or losing a life. These ads typically required children to watch for a set amount of time before continuing play.

> *"This game has ads … everything has ads."*
> **Farah (11)**

> *"I got this game because of an advert… This [advert] I don't really like because it's just buying things, but I also do like it because it also makes you want to shop on Temu…it's a minute long so we might be here a while."*
> **Gwen (8)**

A few children even described using workarounds – such as turning off their internet connection – to stop advertising from interrupting their experience.

> *"If you have [internet] turned off, then it doesn't give you ads … so no ads pop up and take me away from my game."*
> **Liv (13)**

> *"With airplane mode on, it can't process the ad. So it can't actually show you the advert … [Ads] are really annoying, which is why I turn airplane mode on."*
> **Murray (13)**

Some children described how difficult it could be to click off adverts on games, with fake 'X's' used in adverts to direct players to the App Store or Play Store.

> *"Sometimes, it makes a fake X so that you press it and then you go onto the app … that's why I wait for a bit just in case another [X] comes up because I don't know if it's real or fake."*
> **Farah (11)**

> *"That is really messed up … but smart at the same time."*
> **Farah's (11) mum**

Two of the girls in the sample reported that they had seen advertising on Block Blast for content or platforms they deemed inappropriate for their age group.

UX analysis ('X' in free game advertising)

The way advertising content was displayed often encouraged children to engage with it – even unintentionally. When an advert appeared, a small 'X' or arrow would sometimes show in the corner of the screen. If users tapped the 'X' before a set period (such as 30 seconds) had passed, in an attempt to close the advert, they were sometimes redirected to the App Store or Play Store, prompting them to download the advertised game or platform.

Others would place the arrow or 'X' directly next to the button that redirects users to the App Store, making it difficult to click off the advert without being taken to a screen to download the app.

In this advert, the button to download the app is placed directly next to the arrow to exit the advert.

This advert includes a fake 'X', which instead of clicking off the advert, will direct users to download the game.

Farah (11)

Farah reported a similar experience, describing adverts she had seen on Block Blast as promoting “fake girlfriends and boyfriends”.

Farah and her 12-year-old cousin Amira said they regularly see these types of adverts, and were not sure why they were advertised to children – they described them as “disgusting” and not appropriate for “children or teenagers”.

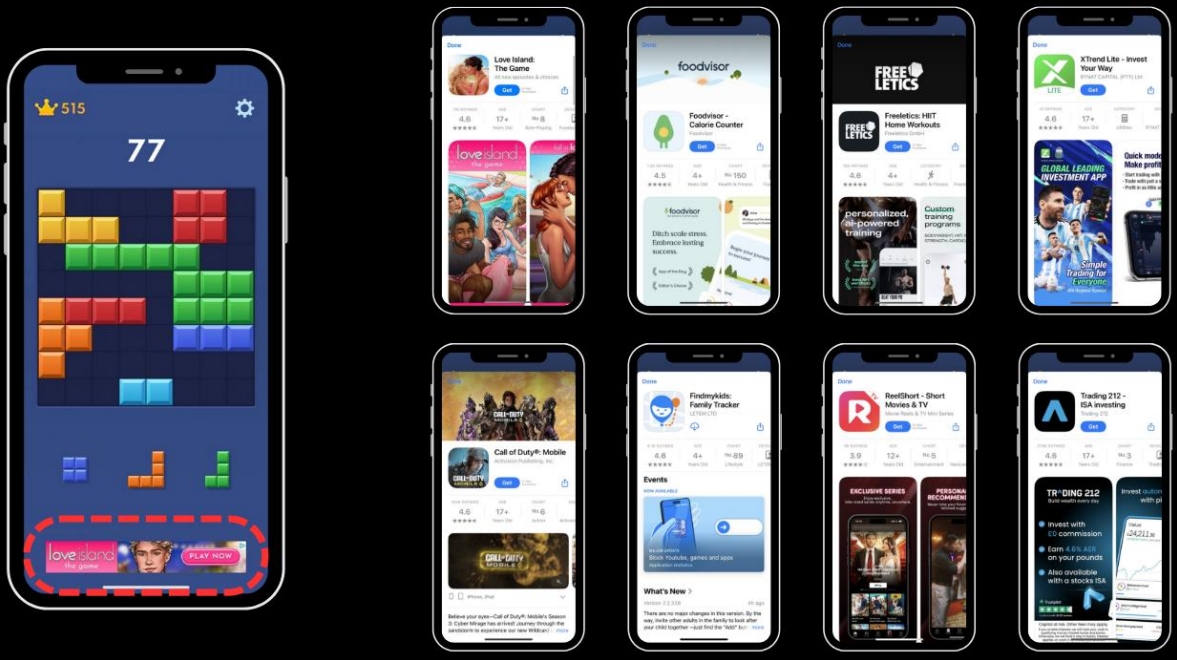
Leandra (13)

Leandra enjoys playing Block Blast. However, she finds the in-app advertising disruptive – and in some cases, inappropriate.

One advert Leandra recalled promoted adult-themed content on Character.AI, which she felt was not suitable for her age. She was not sure why she received this type of advertising.

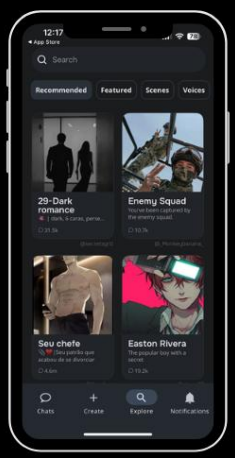
Block Blast: adverts

Whilst many adverts on Block Blast were for other games aimed at younger audiences, others showed games for more mature or violent games, and some included apps for investing, location tracking, and calorie counting.



Platform analysis: Character.AI

Character.AI is a platform where users can create and interact with AI-generated characters through chat-based conversations. While many of these characters resemble characters from films, books or popular culture, some characters and scenarios contain mature or suggestive themes.



Farah and her cousins (aged 7-11) also regularly encountered adverts for platforms like Shein, Temu, and TikTok while playing games. Although they didn't view these ads as inappropriate in tone, the platforms themselves are technically for older users – 18+ and 13+ respectively.

Some children were left guessing about the age of who they were interacting with online

The ease with which children were able to input false ages, or access platforms without having to verify their age at all, raises questions about the possibility of other users doing the same. As discussed in the first chapter, many children were interacting with friends and other users on online platforms, from social media to gaming. In some cases, children had friends they knew only through online interactions – they had never met in person.

Children tended to assume that the people they were interacting with online were children, of a similar age to themselves. However, they rarely had reliable ways of confirming this, leaving assumptions largely unchecked.

> *"You can tell [players' ages] by how good they are. If they're good, they're probably about my age. They're not like 50-year-old men or something."*
> **Liam (10)**

> *"I think I've met a player in Gorilla Tag who was six years old…And because you have arms in Gorilla Tag, that's what you move with, you can see how long their arms are, so you can kind of see if they're tall or not. So the way you kind of tell if someone's older or not is by their voice and their arm length."*
> **Murray (13)**

Jordan (9) spends most of his free time playing on his PlayStation, particularly enjoying *Fortnite* and *Roblox*. He regularly plays with friends via voice chat – friends he only knows from within these games and has never met in person. Jordan hadn't asked any of them their age before, but assumed they were children like him because, as he explained, he "could hear his grandma and grandpa, and mum and stuff" in the background of their audio. During the interview, he asked one of his friends on the call how old they were. When they replied, "seven," that was enough to reassure him.

Even when age verification was in place, it was not always effective

Some of the children reported that there were instances when they experienced seemingly more robust age verification processes, in apps of websites online. These processes required users to upload photos or images of identification. Some children had used websites or apps that required AI facial recognition scanning to verify a user's age. The extent to which children thought these worked varied.

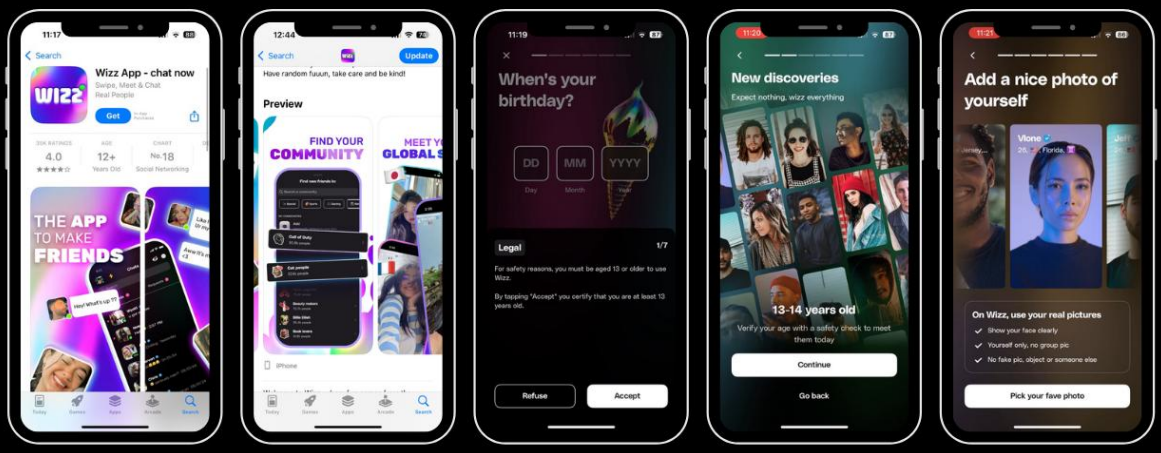
> *"So Roblox keeps updating, so now it's made games like age rated…you have to verify that's actually your birthday…You have to take a photo of like a driving license or passport."*
> **Georgia (17)**

> *"I've never actually made a fake Tinder account or something. I know people that actually do that…Like one of our mates, he's 17 but he's on Tinder because all of his mates are like 18, 19. So that's what he did, texting a 20-year-old…you have to be 18."*
> **Sean's friend (16)**

Some of the older children had been using the social networking platform Wizz. Wizz is a social networking app advertised to help users connect with new friends. The platform allows users to swipe through profiles, engage in real-time chats, and join group conversations based on shared interests. The app emphasises age-matched chatting, aiming to connect individuals within similar age groups. Users can personalise their profiles with photos, bios, and their favourite music, enhancing their social presence.

Platform analysis: Wizz

Wizz is a social networking platform, which advertises itself as "the app to make friends" where you can "find your community" among other young people. Users must be at least 13 years old to use the app, but marketing images show profiles of older teenagers and young adults. The app advertises prioritising safety, age verification and moderation, employing an AI-powered age verification technology to maintain its secure environment.



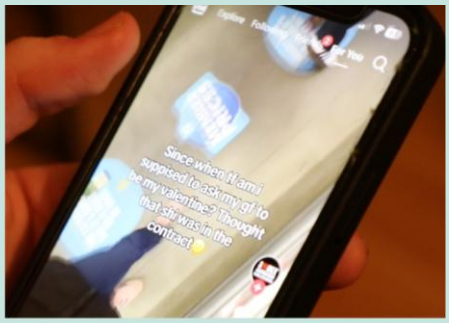
After inputting their birthday, Wizz asks users to turn on their cameras so that the platform's AI-powered tool can verify their age before using the app. However, as Sean and his friends mention below, this age verification doesn't prevent children from putting in fake ages.

Sean (16) and his friends

"It's advertised as 'Wizz – find friends', but like it's known as the under-aged dating app."

Kamran (16)

Sean and his two friends had been using Wizz on and off for a few years. They explained that whilst the platform was advertised as a place to "make friends", most people used it for romantic intentions.



Similar to a dating app, children can create profiles and share interests and hobbies with other users. They swipe through profiles to connect with other users and specify which gender they are looking to chat to.

The boys explained that Wizz was often the first point of contact, but due to strict content moderation and limitations to what users can send one another, they tended to move onto other platforms. Eddie explained, "most of what happens is like, you'd get their Snapchat and you'd snap them." Kamran added, "you end up having like a 100-day streak with them and you don't know even know them".

Sean admitted that he himself had "been banned so many times on Wizz", their tight moderation guidelines meant "You say one thing and you get banned." To get around this, Sean explained, "That's why you always add them on Snapchat so you can say whatever you want to them." Two of them said they had input their own ages to use the platform, but one, Eddie, said that when he was 13, he had input that his age was a year older, in order to interact with older girls.

"I always said I was a year older whenever I was on … better looking women, older women."

Eddie (16)

They had also heard of other people they knew inputting fake ages on the account.

"There was a girl in [the area] that made a whole fake persona on [Wizz] and she was going out with some … 19-year-old … she was 13 but she told him that she was like 16 … she met up with this boy in real life."

Sean (16)

Algorithms: What shapes what children see on their feeds?

All children within the sample were using platforms with algorithmically driven feeds, shaping their online experiences in subtle but powerful ways. Many recognised that their behaviour – what they liked, watched, or engaged with – influenced the content they saw. Some even enjoyed the sense of personalisation, finding it made their feeds more enjoyable or relevant.

However, children rarely paused to consider the role of algorithms or how the content they were fed intersected with their wider lives and interests. This year explores children's awareness of algorithms, the role recommender feeds play in their everyday digital lives, and the impact – both positive and negative – that these systems may have as children grow up online.

Most children understood how their actions shaped their feeds

Most children could explain why they saw the content that came up on their feeds, tying it to what they liked, watched more of, shared, or interacted with. Older children were generally clearer and more confident in their understanding of how algorithms worked.

> *"Let's say you follow someone that goes to the gym, there'll be more content that comes up revolved around the gym. Or like funny videos, if you follow, like Impractical Jokers, they will just come up with more jokes."*
> **Mason (14)**

> *"Because I'm more into fitness now, sometimes I'm watching a YouTube video and then it just starts talking about fitness and stuff…an ad about fitness just comes up… I think it's the cookies thing."*
> **Dina (16)**

> *"Stuff that you've liked, the algorithm, if you like something it probably recommends you more posts like that."*
> **Georgia (17)**

> *"If [a video's] three minutes and you watch the full thing, then TikTok will realise that you're engaged in this kind of thing and to obviously keep you on the app for longer... And if you like it or favourite it or share it or something like that, then it will think you're interested in that type of stuff…So I think that's what an algorithm is."*
> **Jamie (16)**

Younger children also showed some awareness that platforms were recommending content based on their previous activity.

> *"So the app takes your data and uses it to suggest more things that you searched up. So if you search up, like, French fries, then you might come up with ads of French fries."*
> **Arianna (10)**

> *"If you watch something, and you start watching it quite often, that kind of stuff…it would start recommending it to you…"*
> **Shiv (11)**

Yomi (11) had quite a detailed view on how different types of algorithms worked from research he had done when he was trying to grow his online profile on YouTube last year.

> *"So TikTok shares your video with, like, a little amount of people, and if it does well with them, they'll push it out more and they'll keep pushing and pushing and pushing until it can't push anymore. … . That's not how the YouTube algorithm works. Basically, YouTube algorithm is random, there's no way around it. You can have zero views like one month, but then three months later it skyrocketed to 6 million because, like, it's random."*
> **Yomi (11)**

Some of the children reflected that they liked algorithmically driven feeds; they preferred their feeds being filled with content they liked or that was relevant to them to receiving random content.

> *"If I repost an Oasis video, it's gonna keep popping up on my for you page. Because it knows I like that. So I'll keep watching TikTok … because it knows what you like, you're gonna just keep staying on TikTok. Then there'll be more people on TikTok"*
> **Joey (14)**

> *"I think [YouTube] matches the type of stuff that I like … but also at the same time, it could just be something super random … But overall, I would say its pretty good."*
> **Isaac (14)**

> *"It's nice that you can … watch something fun…it's everything that you like to watch."*
> **Shiv (11)**

Some children encountered inappropriate content they could not always explain

While many children enjoyed the sense of personalisation they experienced on their recommender feeds, not everything they were shown fit with their expectations. In some cases, children were served content they hadn't expected – and were not always sure why.

There were a few examples of children, particularly mid-teen-to-older boys, having encountered content they didn't like, describing it as violent or disturbing, or sexually inappropriate. They tended to be less sure of why this type of content appeared on their feeds, sometimes hypothesising that the content moderation on the platforms they were using may have changed, or glitched.

> *"I think TikTok's moderating system is really weird because sometimes you'll see a video and you'll be like how did this bypass … like sometimes you'll be just scrolling and bang – a woman sitting there with her boobs out. … and Instagram, there's barely any moderation … you could be scrolling and bang – car crash just right in front of you …. But I don't really let it upset me, like I'm not a snowflake about it."*
> **Sean (16)**

> *"My Instagram's messed up, like the feed's just weird stuff, bad recommendations … just inappropriate stuff … I'll be scrolling and then I'm just trying to watch normal videos and then it's just comes up … like someone having very bad injuries and it's not censored at all … I don't know why it's coming up, I don't like stuff like that. Stuff you wouldn't want children to see."*
> **Umar (15)**

> *"Strange videos … where TikTok for some reasons like guidelines just stop. They became unrestricted and people were just posting explicit stuff … All sorts of things, women, sex, those kinds of things. Pictures that I just found weird because like there are kids on there as well."*
> **Jamie (16)**

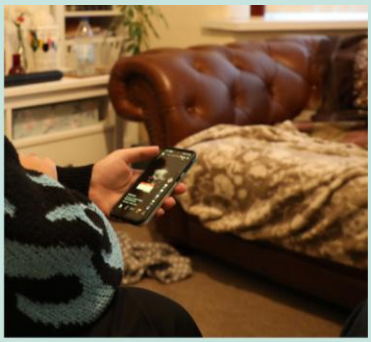
Children who reported coming across such material seemed less clear about why it appeared on their feeds than when they were when talking about content they liked – things they deemed 'funny' or 'popular'. They did not always relate this type of content to their wider algorithm, seeing it as more random or sporadic content that appeared on their feed seemingly without explanation.

For good or bad, recommender feeds are playing a role in children's experiences online

All children were using at least one social media platform with a feed that was algorithmically driven – and many were using several. These recommender feeds played a significant role in shaping their *online* experiences, but they also sometimes intersected with their *offline* lives.

The connection between the content children engaged with online and their real-world is complex and nuanced. This study didn't aim to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the two – due to the multiplex variables influencing both. However, across the sample, researchers observed multiple examples of some level of interaction between the content children saw online and their behaviours beyond the screen.

Umar (15)



Umar had recently become more interested in fitness and going to the gym, with his TikTok feed showing more gym-related content. Among the videos he watched, one figure stood out – David Goggins, an ex-Navy SEAL and motivational fitness influencer known for promoting extreme discipline and mental toughness.

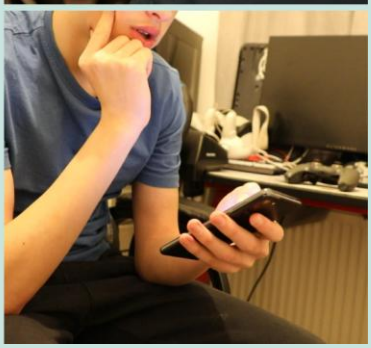
"It started with just regular gym videos … I'd watch them just for motivation, like someone talking, explaining how to get better. Then David Goggins came up a lot, so I started watching more videos about him."

Umar went on to buy Goggins' book, Can't Hurt Me, after seeing it advertised on TikTok. The content he'd seen, along with the book, seemed to have influenced his routines and outlook.

"If you read the book and watch his videos, you realise all the stuff he's done. It's inspiring … That's why I got the book – it's helped me lose weight and stuff as well. I've lost a few kilos in a month because of him. It helps motivate me to go gym, I go and run sometimes now"

Now, Umar wakes up at 4am a few times a week to go for a run - something he never did before. He credits the shift in both his mindset and behaviour at least in part to the content that started appearing on his feed.

Isaac (14)



Isaac, who has ASD and OCD, was receiving some health-related content through his recommender feeds. When asked about the types of videos he saw, Isaac described them as "food reviews… sports and people playing games... mostly like food and stuff."

His mum shared that beyond food, Isaac's feed also included a lot of content and advertising about health products - particularly skincare which she thought was "targeted at teenagers". She reflected that, due to Isaac's autism, this type of content could have a heightened effect on him:

"Being autistic and just sort of having this hyper focus … I do believe it's being very much driven by social media and TikTok … he loves to go on Amazon and he just names these things out to me - products and very strange things I've never heard of ."

She was in two minds about the effect of Isaac's recommender feeds on his wider life. At the same time, she had noticed positive shifts in Isaac's behaviour, particularly around food and body image. Isaac's experience highlights how recommender feeds can surface content that resonates in both helpful and challenging ways for children and their families. Isaac's mum did not view this as entirely positive or negative, but something she continued to observe as it seemed to intersect with parts of Isaac's everyday life.

Dina (16)

This year, Dina told researchers she had started going to the gym more – she wanted to lose weight to be able to feel more confident wearing particular outfits in the summer, and because she thought she wasn't at a healthy weight before.

Her growing interest in the gym was reflected in her Instagram and TikTok feeds, which showed multiple videos of gym tips, healthy recipes, and weight loss stories. Dina reflected that this content started appearing around six months ago, after she searched up gym content when first started getting interested in fitness, and liked that it helped motivate her with her workouts.

"It's my sixth month going to the gym now because before I wasn't really at a healthy weight. So now I'm just trying to get to a healthy [HC1] weight for summer, then I can dress better and just look better."

"Most of my TikTok's just fitness, like going to the gym and stuff…I like it because it helps me get motivated."

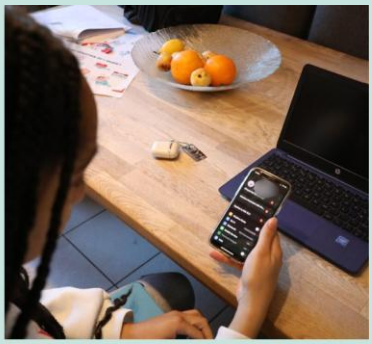
Dina's interest in fitness went beyond social media, and she frequently sought advice from ChatGPT about workout plans, weight loss tips and low-calorie recipes. One of the questions she'd recently asked it was 'Is it okay to do an exam then go to the gym straight away without eating?' Another was simply 'Should I stop eating?'

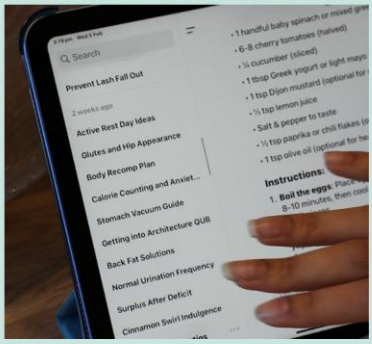
Although Dina's mum thought it was good that she was going to the gym to improve her health and de-stress, she was concerned about the amount of fitness and beauty content Dina was seeing on her social media feeds.

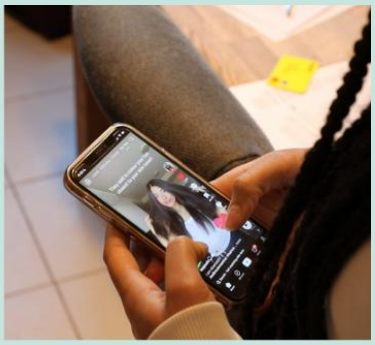
"My only concern [with social media] is that she will be constantly, like, comparing herself to others in terms of body image…she started doing diets, and she's constantly picking up on her image, like she sees imperfections that I don't see or nobody else does, so it's really affecting her offline as well."

She was particularly concerned that Dina's exposure to unrealistic body standards was affecting her behaviour, and was keeping a close eye for signs of disordered eating.

"I have to step in so many times, and so does her father, because sometimes she can, like, avoid eating because of that. And I'm afraid that she might develop an eating disorder or a mental health problem."







These case studies each highlight different ways in which recommender feeds intersected with children's everyday lives – whether through shaping routines, reinforcing interests, or introducing new ideas. But what was consistent across the sample was that children rarely reflected on why they were being shown particular content, or that it was being shaped by systems they had consented to. As children continue to grow, and as their interests and identities develop, it will be important to understand how their relationships with these systems evolve too.

Conclusion

Children's digital experiences are not shaped by a single factor, but by a dynamic mix of evolving social relationships, family context, personal motivations, all playing out across a terrain of platform design. This second year of research builds on the first by showing how children's online lives evolve with sometimes increasing complexity as they grow up – affecting their relationships with personal data.

Social factors remain central. Children's relationships with peers continue to drive decisions around what they share, where, when and with whom. Whether it's a new friendship, a romantic relationship, or a fallout, these moments influence the visibility of their lives online. For some, sharing location or posting online is a sign of connection; for others, turning off features is a way to regain control. These behaviours are rarely driven by data-related concerns – rather, they are manifestations of changing relationships.

At the same time, children's priorities shift as they grow up. Earning money, building a public presence, or exploring future aspirations all introduce new motivations to engage with digital platforms. For some, data becomes a tool not just to access services, but to promote themselves, gain recognition, or earn income. For many children, the opportunity to earn or gain money or status seems to outweigh any concern for the data they may be exchanging along the way.

Parents continue to play a significant role over their children's data lives, although their influence also changes over time. Many are adapting their approaches as children get older – some are stepping back, whilst others are leaning on technology like smart devices to maintain oversight. As children grow up, the increasing presence of monitoring tools and features could make digital oversight feel like a standard part of family life. Conversations about privacy typically happen in response to safety concerns rather than out of an awareness of rights. Data sharing between parents and children increasingly reflects the broader tension between trust, protection and autonomy.

Critically, this research highlights the ongoing mismatch between the complexity of children's digital environments and the opportunities available to them to meaningfully engage. Children want to be on the platforms where their friends are, and where their social lives, entertainment, and growing interests unfold. But the design of these platforms makes participation easy and questioning difficult. Privacy settings, age assurance tools, and data policies are often hidden, confusing, or too easily bypassed. For most children, agreeing to share data isn't a conscious decision – it's just the price of participation, built into the design of the spaces they're encouraged to spend time in, both by their own motivation and design.

Across all of this, what becomes clear is that it is not realistic to expect children to meaningfully engage with their personal data and their data rights. Their choices are shaped more by social needs and platform incentives than by a clear understanding of rights or consequences. As platforms continue to evolve alongside their users, the meaningful protection of children's data rights necessitates a design that prioritises the realities of children's lives, over access and engagement.

Future areas of research

This report summarises the findings of the second year of Children's Data Lives. Children's lives continue to increasingly play out online in rapidly evolving digital landscapes. Over future years, this research project will aim to return to many of the same children to explore how these changes play out in terms of their relationship with data.

These areas could include:

- How do changes in children's lives continue to play out as they grow up? Does changing relationships affects who they share their information with, and how? How do parents and children navigate the shifting digital boundaries and parental oversight as they grow up? How do children navigate earning and managing money and does it affect how they feel about their data?
- What do children and their parents know about AI, how are they using it, what do they think about the data sharing implications, what actually are the implications, where does it become a risk factor?
- How does the evolution of technology affect the ways children grow up and parents navigate having oversight? Relatedly, how do children feel about being monitored by their parents through new devices, and more generally? How do these dynamics change as children get older?
- Do children ever consider surveillance or monitoring by people outside their families, in more public settings or at school? For example facial recognition technology, security cameras, biometric systems.

Annex 1: Respondent summaries

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.
- What platforms they use

Below is a key to illustrate shared devices, parental controls, and the level of privacy each child's social media account was set to.

N.B. Snapchat and YouTube have more nuanced settings for altering levels of privacy and are therefore not marked as private or public.

	Shared device / account
	Own device / account
	Private account
	Public account
	Parental controls
	Device owned or accessed by parents

Gwen, 8, C1, Wales

Gwen is a lively, chatty 8-year-old from Caerphilly who splits her time between her mum and dad's houses. She's always busy, taking part in cheerleading, football, dodgeball, gymnastics, swimming and musical theatre.

Gwen's use of technology is heavily controlled by her mum. She uses her mum's phone, her mum's laptops, and their smart TV, always with her mum's supervision. At her dad's she has a Nintendo switch and an iPad, which she mostly uses for games and for messaging her mum. Gwen's mum has a lot of parental controls in place, mostly using Google Family Link, which links all their accounts across different devices and platforms. She uses it to block out adult content and stop Gwen from downloading any apps or buying anything online without her permission. She got this within the last year when Gwen first started watching YouTube.

Rose, 8, C1, East of England

Rose lives with her mum, little brother, and her mum's boyfriend. She enjoys school, playing with her friends at lunchtime, art and putting on plays. She stays with her dad every other weekend. Her mum is not keen on letting her spend more time online, with her digital life currently consisting of using the TV after school and a tablet she shares with her younger brother.

The shared tablet is mostly for gaming and watching videos on YouTube Kids. Her mum finds getting Rose and her brother to stop using the tablet hard once they've started. Occasionally, she deletes YouTube Kids to try and encourage Rose to do other things. Rose has re-downloaded YouTube and set up another account to watch "Adults' YouTube" as she finds the videos on YouTube Kids can be "babyish". Her mum prefers they only watch YouTube Kids, but knows Rose's dad lets them watch unrestricted YouTube when they stay with him.

Leesha, 9, D, North West

Leesha lives with her parents and is the eldest of three, with two little sisters. Leesha's mum has set screen time limits on all her devices, but when they run out, she usually ends up watching YouTube or Netflix on the Smart TV in the living room.

Last year, Leesha was doing a lot of online shopping on Temu and regularly played the games in the app to win coupons and vouchers. This year, she is playing the games on Temu a bit less, but still regularly scrolls through the app and asks her mum for new things. She also receives a lot of in game advertising on other games she plays and is often incentivised to watch an ad to receive in game currency or bonus points.

This year, Leesha has started her own YouTube channel. Her mum allows Leesha to use her own account, and to have a public profile, as long as she does not use her real name, or show her face on the channel. Her mum also has a public TikTok account where she posts 'travel edits' and other lifestyle updates, anonymously, for her 6000 TikTok followers.

Jordan, 9, C1, London

Jordan lives with his 11-year-old brother and mum in London. Jordan's parents split up about a year ago, which means he and his brother spend two days out of the week at their dad's flat. Otherwise, he mostly spends time with friends at school and with his cousins via gaming.

Jordan doesn't have a wide network of friends. He has a group of school friends, who he only sees during the school day. He has, however, made some friends on Roblox and Fortnite, who he regularly games and chats with. Some of these friends are people he has never met offline. When asked, Jordan said he's fairly confident they are all children because their voices sound child-like.

He plays Fortnite and Roblox from the time he gets home from school at 3pm to around 8pm. These games have time limits on them, so they automatically get shut off, however he is still able to access Grand Theft Auto, which he continues to play if his mum doesn't catch him.

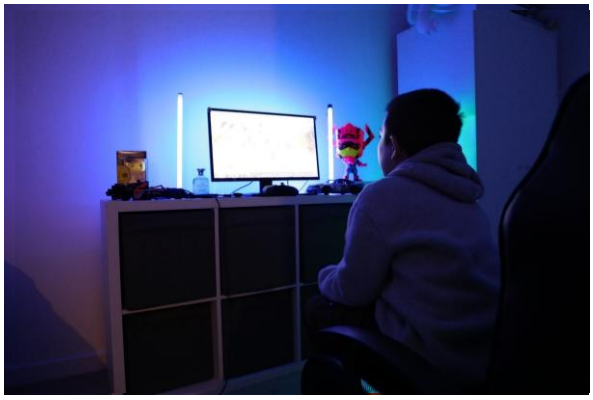
Arianna, 10, C1, Midlands

Arianna's life revolves around gaming. She has two good friends in real life and her boyfriend, all of whom she goes to school with, but the only time she spends with them outside of school is online, gaming.

She lives with her mum, dad, and younger sister. The main device she uses is her iPad (average screen time 5 hours a day), but she also uses the shared smart TV to watch YouTube and go on the PlayStation.

Arianna mostly plays Roblox on her iPad, but also Minecraft and call of duty on her PlayStation, although Roblox is her favourite because it's the only one she plays online with friends. She is quite cautious of what she shares online – she has 22 friends on Roblox and all but two of them are friends she's met in real life, although her best friend is a girl she met on Roblox. Her mum has put in place more controls on her tablet than last year, monitoring her screen time and what she goes on, and also has tried to implement some screen time limits.

Liam, 10, B, Scotland



Liam now lives in his new house with his parents and older sister. He has a busy schedule, with after school activities including playing football and being on the school quiz team. His favourite thing to do is play on his Xbox. He mostly is still playing Fortnite, although there are a few new games that he's been enjoying with friends recently.

Liam's dad has recently set up parental controls, which involves screentime limits on his phone and Xbox (2 hours on each per day) and then no screentime after 10pm. He has to ask permission to download games that are rated 12+. Liam has recently been allowed to download TikTok and Netflix after pestering his parents. Liam has started posting on his private TikTok, most of his content are edits he makes using old family photos and songs on CapCut.

Liam and his sister have also recently started to be allowed to walk home from school, using Family360 which shares their live locations at all times.

Margot, 10, C1, Scotland

Margot lives with her family in a large, comfortable flat, directly across the road from her school, providing her with a strong sense of connection to her local community. Now in Primary 6, she uses a school-issued iPad that teachers can monitor and restrict apps like Roblox but she is unclear about how this works. Her parents have chosen to delay giving Margot a smartphone until she's older, which is in line with the school and community's local anti-smartphone campaign.

As Margot grows up, she's seeking more independence and has started going on local walks with friends. As a compromise to help keep her safe, her parents have given her a trackable digital watch that also allows calls.

Margot uses her dad's YouTube account instead of YouTube Kids, unlike her younger sibling, because the family only found out about YouTube Kids after Margot's viewing habits were already established.

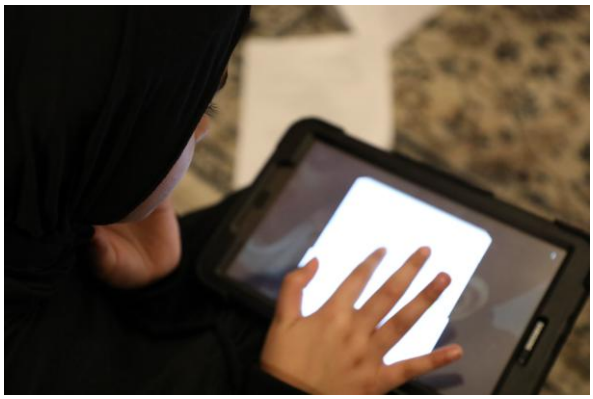
Amy, 11, D/E, London

Amy lives in London with her parents and three brothers. She has a range of creative hobbies and also likes spends time gaming or watching movies with her siblings.

Amy's parents limit device use to the weekend and certain times during the week. She is only allowed a smartphone once she starts secondary school.

Amy has a tablet she uses to play games and likes playing Roblox. Amy has two Roblox accounts in case one of her accounts gets blocked or reported, which she thinks can happen frequently. On Roblox, she isn't sure what age she inputted, but she thinks it's something around 1980.

Farah, 11, C2, Midlands



Farah's household is busy. She lives with her mum, dad, grandma, grandad, two sisters, brother, auntie, and a handful of cousins who are staying with them for a while. Farah has an iPad, which she uses most days after school. She mostly watches YouTube and plays free games like *Block Blast*.

Farah said that she often sees ads she finds inappropriate for children in free games like *Block Blast*. The worst ones, she explained, were for chatbot apps with "fake girlfriends and boyfriends" she described the ads as "disgusting."

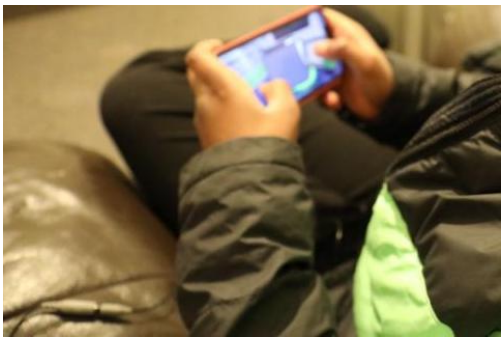
Farah is starting secondary school next year. Her mum might give her an old phone when she starts school so that she can keep in touch while travelling to and from school on her own. Farah said she won't need parental controls on this phone because it will already be set up as her mum's phone, with all of her details. She expects to start watching TikTok and possibly get Snapchat when she gets her own phone.

Farah's friendship triad

Farah and her cousins Meera, 12, Shamima, 10, and Mariam, 7, as well as her younger brother Rafi, 7, have all been playing *Roblox* since they were 4–5 years old. Their mum said they were recently banned from the game after hearing a story about someone in their community who shared their address on *Roblox*, and then someone came to their house to kidnap them. Despite the ban, the children seemed very clued up on new developments in the game, suggesting they may have found ways to continue playing without their parents' knowledge. The children also said they regularly lie about their age to access games or apps restricted to older users. For example, Rafi and Maria both said they do this on *Roblox* to play horror games. Meera has Snapchat and TikTok, and says that she had to lie about her age to be able to access these apps, since all her new friends in secondary school already had them.

All of the cousins communicate online via an app called *JusTalk Kids*. In this app, children can send messages, pictures, video chat, and call each other, both privately and in group chats. The app is designed for kids, with various safety measures in place. However, the children have found a way to set up a new PIN that doesn't require parental approval, and bypasses the need for their parents to check who adds them on the app.

Yomi, 11, C2, Scotland



Yomi lives with his family in a small flat, having moved from Nigeria to Scotland two years ago. Compared to last year, Yomi appears more settled socially and academically, with a close-knit group of friends who regularly visit each other's homes.

Yomi is bright and demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of algorithms and data, such as how personalised content and advertisements work. He wants to be a space engineer when he grows up. His screentime averages 5 hours and 40 minutes daily, primarily on YouTube and Roblox, where his registered age is older than his actual age. Last year, Yomi was posting gaming review videos on YouTube but he has since stopped. He also has an age-restricted Netflix profile on the TV he shares with the rest of the family which he bypasses by streaming restricted content, such as Squid Game, on a website which frequently advertises what he referred to as 'sketchy apps'.

Shiv, 11, D, South East

Shiv lives with his parents, younger sister and younger brother. He is very into his technology, currently developing a game with his cousin, and playing sports.

His main devices are his computer and smartphone. Shiv goes on his computer for gaming, homework and YouTube, and mostly uses his phone for TikTok, Whatsapp, Snapchat and Block Blast. He posts gaming videos on TikTok for more than 1,000 followers. Most of Shiv's profiles are set up with his mum's email address and age, and his uncle downloaded an ad blocker on his computer so he never sees adverts online.

Shiv is cautious about his online life and would never go on any "dodgy" websites because he was scared of being hacked or getting a virus. Shiv also understands cookies and how websites would recommend content based on what he watches, but also thought that companies will sell your data "if you click the wrong box".

Madiha, 12, C2, Midlands

Madiha, 12, lives with her parents, two older siblings, and her brother's wife. This year, Madiha started secondary school. She is dropped off by her parents and doesn't spend much time unsupervised outside, so her parents haven't felt the need to give her a phone yet. However, Madiha is excited to get one at some point in the future. When she does, her parents have suggested they will start tracking her location as a safety precaution.

As was the case last year, her aunties, who both work in social and youth work settings, provide the most oversight of her devices and online activity. They use an app called *Qustodio*, which allows them to implement time limits, restrict apps, and monitor activity.

Madiha does have a Snapchat account, which she only uses on her mum's phone, allowing her mum to oversee what she does and who she speaks to. Her main online activities are playing *Roblox* and watching YouTube. Both her *Roblox* and YouTube accounts were set up with 2005 as the birth year. When asked why, she said it was random and that she didn't know how it happened.

Daniel, 12, A/B, London

Daniel lives in an affluent area in London with his parents and his older sister, who is 8 years older than him and currently at university. His parents are cautious with Daniel, giving him only a small amount of pocket money and closely monitoring and limiting his screen time and gaming.

Daniel has not been allowed to register for any social media accounts apart from YouTube, which he mainly uses to watch gaming videos. Daniel is looking forward to joining group chats on social media with his friends when he turns 13.

On his phone, Daniel sets every app to restrict his location to 'only while using' or 'never'. The only app he constantly shared his location on was Pokémon Go. He explained that he allowed that app to have his location, as it would alert him to when he was close to different Pokémon, encouraging him to launch the app to collect them.

Leandra, 13, E, Wales

Leandra's family's asylum claim was granted towards the end of last year, and they will likely move house soon – although they are unsure where.

She has the same phone as during wave one, which she mainly uses for watching YouTube shorts of make-up and nail art, messaging her friends on Snapchat, or playing Block Blast. She's still not allowed TikTok.

All her accounts are private 'to keep her safe' - apart from her Snapchat which she doesn't know how to change. This means she gets added by random accounts when her account comes up on the 'quick add' function. Her Snapchat is also set to two years older than her, but she doesn't remember inputting this age.

She recognises that her YouTube Shorts are based on things she's interested in which she assumes is shaped by things she's liked or searched for - like 'clean girl make-up' or 'nail art'. Her Shein 'home page' is similarly full of make-up, nail, and hair accessories - but here she assumes the feed is random and everyone gets the same feed.

Liv, 13, C1, Northern Ireland

Liv lives in Northern Ireland with her foster parents, with whom she has a very positive relationship. She has been in care since infancy and has lived in eight different foster homes over the course of her life. Her current foster mum was previously her social worker and stepped in to foster Liv after difficulties in her last placement. Liv sees her biological mother and grandmother once a month, and her biological brothers a few times a year.

Liv spends most of her online time on her phone. She uses Snapchat to stay in touch with friends and often creates new private stories to control who sees what she shares. She also runs a public TikTok account where she posts edits, photos, and videos of herself. While she has received messages from people she suspects are older men (and has blocked them all) she chooses not to make her account private. Liv perceives that it's normal for children her age to have a public TikTok and she sees it as a way to make new friends locally. Liv is quite aware of online safety, having had many conversations with her social workers. Before being allowed a phone, she had to study for and pass an online safety test.

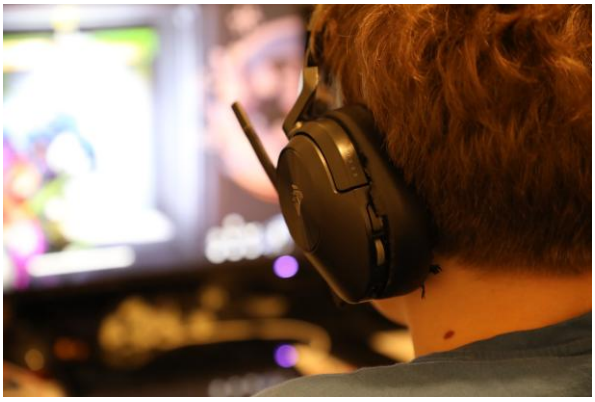
Murray, 13, B, Scotland

Murray lives with his mum, dad, and younger brother. He still does not go to school and has been homeschooled for just over a year now. The last six months has involved a lot of instability - his mum spent a period of time in prison and he's been struggling with his mental health as he has transitioned between ADHD medications.

He still spends majority of his spare time on his Oculus playing Gorilla Tag. He's become more interested in 'modding' games and is learning how to set up macros on his new PC. For example, he modifies his PC games so that he continues gaining experience points (XP) in the background, even while he's asleep, allowing him to progress on the games faster.

Murray posts TikTok videos of himself playing *Gorilla Tag* and believes his account should be public otherwise there's no point, as his goal is to connect with other players. A few months ago, he also started streaming *Gorilla Tag* via TikTok Live, earning around £200 from viewer 'gifts' and gaining about three paying subscribers, bringing in roughly £1 per month. He's spent most of the money gifting to other *Gorilla Tag* streamers and on gaming equipment.

Isaac, 14, D/E, South East



Isaac lives with his mum and older brother. Isaac hadn't gone to school for the last four years of primary school as his autism and OCD made mainstream education too challenging for him. He now goes to an independent school for children with SEND and his mum says he is the happiest he's ever been.

Isaac spends a lot of time gaming online. His two older brothers set him up when he was younger, and he now games for at least 4 hours each evening. He has a headset with a mic so he can talk to other people who are playing the game. He says they are mostly talking about the game rather than making friends. However, he has made some friends online, one of them is the same age and Isaac would describe them as being 'best friends'.

Isaac has fairly low screentime (30mins - 2 hours per day) and chooses not to take his phone to school with him. Isaac's mum thinks social media has influenced him to be more exploratory with his diet, eating a wider range of foods that he would never have tried previously, but also made him obsessive about certain things, like skincare.

Joey, 14, C1, North West

Joey is still an active child, playing sport most evenings. At home, Joey has moved into his brother's old bedroom, set up with a PS5 and Sky box. He still uses his VR headset regularly, playing Gorilla Tag, VRFS (football game), cricket, and golf. He mainly uses the VR headset on his own, but sometimes plays with friends. For example, he used to play *Gorilla Tag* with a friend from the USA he met online, though they haven't been in touch for a while.

Reflecting on his online life, Joey sees only positives. He couldn't recall ever encountering content he didn't like, with most of his feed focused on Oasis. He recently posted a meme he made about Noel Gallagher that got 40 likes from friends. While he admits he might spend too much time on his phone saying it's not "good for your brain" he enjoys keeping up with friends and scrolling through his TikTok feed.

On Snapchat, Joey has a few hundred friends and shared his location publicly with all of them, something he felt comfortable doing. He enjoys seeing their avatars appear in different places when they're on holiday. He has several streaks with friends, which he admits seem pointless, but he keeps them going anyway.

Bryanna, 14, B, London

Bryanna lives with her mum in a flat in London. Bryanna is still chatty, outgoing and a 'social butterfly' and is still working towards becoming an actress. Most evenings she is going to extracurricular lessons or doing creative projects with her friends.

Bryanna still isn't on mainstream social media, as her mum is cautious about her being exposed to inappropriate content. Bryanna is content with this, but she does want to join Snapchat so she can use the 'fun filters' she's seen her friends using.

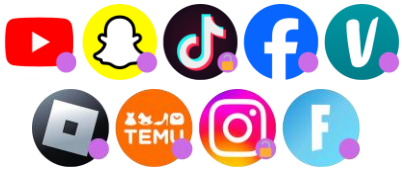
The family has a lot of technology in the home, including smartwatches and Google Home screens in nearly every room, which they use for home security. Bryanna wears her smartwatch all the time to track her sleep and activity, but she's unsure how the data is stored or what the connected health app might do with it.

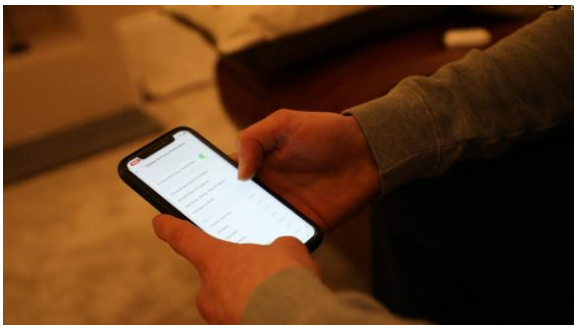
Bryanna's friendship triad

Bryanna had 3 friends to take part in the triad – two friends from school (aged 13 and 14) and one family friend (aged 13). Her two friends from school were quite different from her in terms of their technology use with neither having social media platforms beyond YouTube. They felt that social media was addictive and 'boring' and were more interested in doing other things such as making films and writing stories.

They all said that they had lied about their ages to access platforms, whether TikTok, YouTube or for setting up a Google account. For some they'd set their ages to be adults due to the ease of inputting birth date – one had used the 1st January 2000 as it was the easiest to put in. Others had purposefully done it to access the full features of the apps and not being restricted to children's versions. They did recognise that this could cause them to see 'weird ads' such as for AI chatbots or pregnancy tests, that they did not think were age appropriate.

Mason, 14, B, South of England





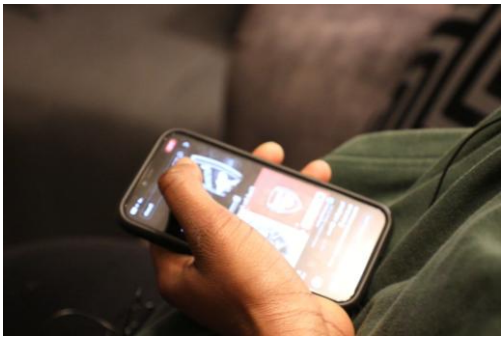
Mason lives with his parents and younger sister. Tech plays an important role in family life.

Mason is earnest and open with his parents, joking with his dad that Mason will share with him any 'rude' content he sees online.

Mason was open in showing his social media accounts and the content he sees and shares. Often, he sees videos of sports related accidents or people being injured. He finds this type of content funny, but he also felt that Instagram more freely allowed this type of content while his perception was that TikTok was moderating it more heavily. Mason thinks that social media companies might be watching him or stealing his data, which is why he won't use the messaging feature on Instagram – but he was unsure how or why Instagram would do this.

The family has 6 smart speakers in the home. The speakers play an active part in their family life, allowing the parents to check in with the children when home alone or leaving messages for them.

Celeste, 14, C1, Scotland

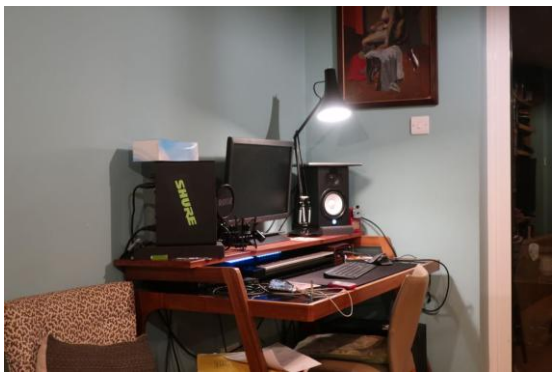


Celeste lives with her mum and younger brother. Celeste is a high academic achiever, particularly in Maths. She loves football but currently is recovering from a knee injury. She is focused on securing a sports scholarship in hopes of attending a US University.

Celeste's use of technology has evolved over the past year. She has made her social media more private, deleting or archiving posts on TikTok and Instagram. She also switched her Snapchat to ghost mode after experiencing a 'friend' "spam her" with her home address, which she described making her feel very uncomfortable. While Celeste doesn't worry about sharing her location with companies or official services, she is cautious about sharing it with 'real people'.

Celeste discussed how online hate towards women's football on TikTok has affected her, particularly noting that a friend who played at a national level quit due to online and in-person hate. This experience has made her question her own desire to continue playing.

Baz, 15, A/B, London

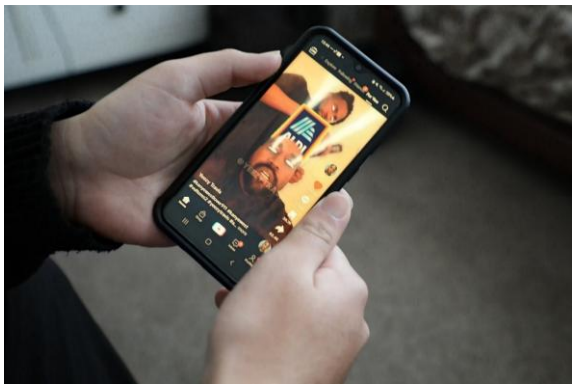


Baz lives with his parents, older brother, and two younger sisters. He plays a range of sports, enjoys the outdoors, and reads both books and newspapers.

He receives around 5 pieces of homework per day, which along with his variety of hobbies, means he feels very busy.

Baz still has a "brick phone" that he uses to text and call his friends. His parents have said he is not allowed a smartphone or laptop until he finishes his GCSEs, which Baz understood and was fine with. He now uses his mum's smartphone most days to go on Snapchat to chat to friends and has an Instagram account he uses on the family computer, in the living room, where the rest of the family can see what he is doing. Baz estimates he will spend around an hour per day on the family computer, using both Instagram and YouTube, while also browsing the web.

Umar, 15, C1, Wales



Umar now lives just with his mum and older sister, after his brother moved out to go to university. Umar misses him, but also misses the PlayStation he took with him. He has a variety of hobbies and interests, including fishing, cars, planes, racing, and games. He has been homeschooled since Year 4 and is preparing for his GCSEs in the summer. After which he hopes to go to a mainstream sixth form before going to university himself to study mechanical engineering.

Umar spends a lot of time on his phone. He has school lessons on his phone, joining calls and submitting homework, as well as watching educational videos and revision tips on YouTube. He spends the most time on TikTok, upwards of 6 hours a day, and trusts them with his data.

All Umar's social media accounts are public as he feels he has nothing to hide. He currently doesn't post pictures of himself, but is planning to start uploading fishing content on TikTok and make documentary-style motor racing videos on his YouTube. He showed a good understanding of how he can bolster his chances on the algorithm. He also uses a free antivirus software that warns him when a website is unsafe, after having a virus on his old tablet.

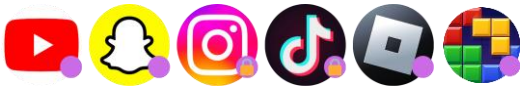
Erin, 15, C2, Wales

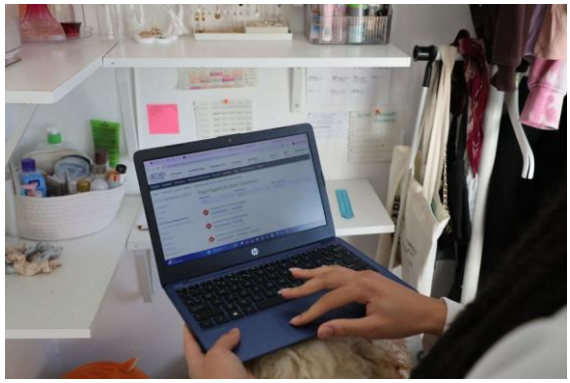
Erin lives with her mum, mum's partner, older brother and step-sister. They moved back to the UK from France 3 years ago now and have lived in the same town ever since. She often plays video games with her brother from their own devices, as Erin bought a PC herself for a better gaming experience.

Erin uses a range of educational apps that she found out about through YouTube for revision and language learning. Two of the apps, Seneca and Gizmo, have social elements which allows to search for people and 'friend' them. Once she becomes friends with someone on Seneca and Gizmo, she can see their scores, which Erin likes as it makes her more competitive to get higher scores.

Erin also recently opened an Instagram account. Her account is private and she hasn't posted anything yet as she says she doesn't feel compelled to share anything on a public platform. Her mum has also spoken with Erin about being careful when sharing images to ensure she protects her privacy online. Erin mostly scrolls on Instagram – she's aware of how the algorithm works and said that she thinks Instagram notes her preferences to show her posts it knows she will like. She is generally positive about this, and believes Instagram only does this to improve her in-app experience.

Dina, 16, C2, Northern Ireland



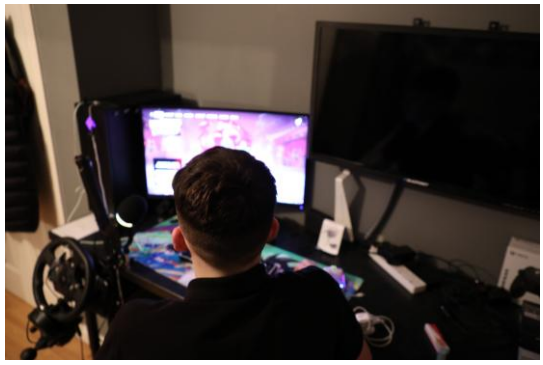


Dina lives with her parents and two younger sisters. She moved to Northern Ireland from Portugal when she was 5 years old. Dina wants to be a lawyer or an architect when she's older. She loves baking, painting, cooking, and going to the gym.

Dina never posts showing her face, and all her accounts are private with no more than 100 followers. Her most used app is TikTok and sees a lot of gym, weight loss and recipe videos. These videos started appearing after she started going to the gym six months ago, when she searched up gym tips. Dina also uses ChatGPT, where she often asks questions relating to fitness and diet.

Dina is aware of cookies and finds it "creepy" how ads come up about things she's just had a conversation about. Dina does not know how many apps had access to her location and doesn't remember being asked to share her location, feeling like a lot of apps don't have "never" as an option, only "always" or "while using app".

Sean, 16, C1, Northern Ireland



Sean lives with his mum, dad, and two brothers - he's the middle child. Sean has autism which he says does not limit his social life: he is always out with his friends going to the park, going for walks, or playing pool and darts around where he lives. He lives for his Saturday job at a bar in a local music club and is starting to take his finances more seriously.

Sean spends a lot of free time online, either messaging friends on Snapchat, watching TikTok, or playing games like Fortnite, Roblox or Grand Theft Auto. He'll rarely speak to people he doesn't know, but his mom revealed he had been scammed for in-game currency when he was younger, which was seen as a 'lesson learned' in talking to strangers on a game.

Sean had been 'device banned' on Snapchat in the week preceding the interview, which he put down to switching between the two accounts he has: a main account with many contacts, and a private account with just his close friends. He set this up because he felt it was easier to keep in touch with his closest friends and cut out the noise of the 'randoms' he had on his main account. After a few days away from Snapchat, Sean was missing talking to his friends a lot, making him realise how much he depends on the app to keep in touch with them. He's planning on getting a new phone with his new job to circumvent this ban.

When asked if he had seen content that made him uncomfortable, Sean recalled seeing nudity on TikTok, as well as violence and car crashes on his Instagram.

Sean was surprised to learn that privacy policies existed, and thought they were a good way of understanding how your data is used. Sean believes app and device manufacturers, as well as the government can listen to him through his devices. He feels this is inevitable in the modern world, but still demonstrates caution giving up his personal data, using fake birthdays (including to make himself older) and not sharing his location with anyone aside from his girlfriend.

Sean's friendship triad

Sean and his other 16-year-old friends all use Snapchat religiously and aren't sure how they would get by without it. Snapchat is also the place for gossip and rumourmongering, with the boys discussing various local accounts that posts embarrassing images and unverified stories of people. Sometimes, this is innocuous 'shipping' of two people, but other times can involve more serious allegations or secrets being leaked to a large audience.

All of the boys also used 'friend-making' social app Wizz to meet girls. They described it as u-18 Tinder and set their location to the United Kingdom to talk to girls all over the country. A lot of the time, they say they do this for fun, such as trying to get themselves blocked with crass pickup lines, or suspended with spamming messages, but also discussed using it privately to add people on Snapchat and start conversations with them. None of them were worried about or considered their safety with this app and saw it as a form of entertainment.

On data-driven algorithmic harm, all the friends had been exposed to nudity and violence on Instagram and TikTok, but 'egged-on' their algorithm by engaging with it and sending it to friends. They also seek out gore, porn, and other 18+ material to watch in school or with friends for the shock value and were more concerned with their parents seeing them be exposed to it than they were about any affect it had on them.

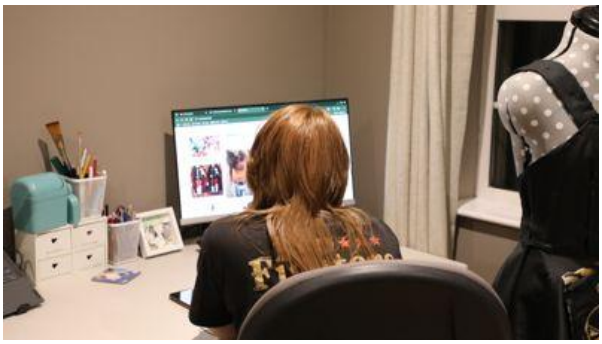
Jamie, 16, C1, South East

Jamie is a rugby mad teenager from a rugby mad family. He is part of an elite schoolboy's programme at his sixth form, spending his days training, playing rugby, and dreaming of becoming a professional when he's older.

He uses his phone mainly to unwind, with his preferred app being TikTok. He is very aware of the dangers of spending too much time on the app and is vocal on being critical of the content he sees. He regularly keeps in touch with his friends, who live locally, over Snapchat. His location is shared with his closest friends but has been confronted for having it switched off for others.

All Jamie's social media profiles are public, as he wants to be a famous rugby player, so considers it as preparing for life in the public eye. His public account on Instagram has received spam messages linking to porn websites. Jamie knows how algorithms work but isn't exactly sure what information he shares.

Orla, 16, A/B, Northern Ireland

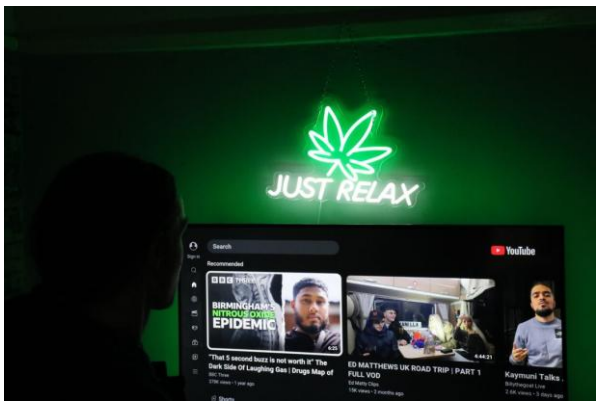


Orla lives in Northern Ireland with her parents and younger siblings. Orla moved from high school to art college this September and her dream is to be a fashion designer. When she's not at college or working on her portfolio from home, she's waitressing at a restaurant; spending time with her family; meeting up with friends or is at home online or listening to music. Orla is dyslexic and doesn't enjoy reading, she prefers to watch TV shows or movies or listen to music.

She is generally quite careful with what she does online - she made her Instagram private a couple of years ago after getting followed by a few bots and has blocked quite a few accounts on Instagram and Snapchat from when she gets added by people who she doesn't know. Orla said she doesn't like sharing much except her first name online, and often uses a fake birthday. She doesn't like sharing her location, but does have Snap Maps on for her friends and most of her location permissions turned on.

Orla doesn't think much about data and information and never reads the terms and conditions but always accepts because "I don't really feel like I have a choice, I have to accept to use the app". Orla's mum has a very hands-off approach to her online life, as she felt like Orla was old enough to make her own decisions.

Bradley, 17, C1, North West



He is looking for an apprenticeship in bricklaying for next school year, as well as currently looking for work, although struggling to find anything at the moment. Socially, he still hangs out with his close friends, mainly smoking or working out together, as well as spending a few nights a week with his girlfriend of two years.

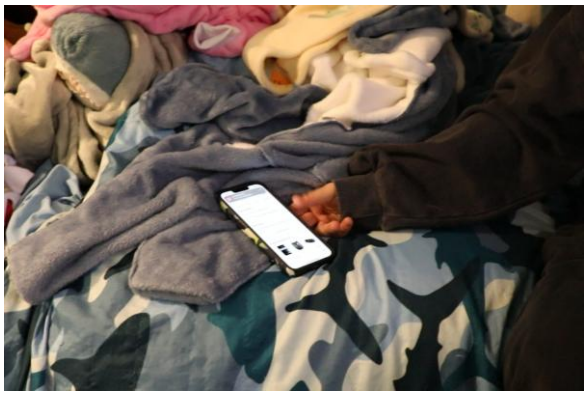
Bradley did not have his screentime on his new phone turned on, but estimated he spends most time on Snapchat talking to his friends and girlfriend. He never uses the discovery feature on that app and only shares his location with his girlfriend - they no longer use Life360 to see each other's location. Bradley mentioned that they stop sharing their locations with each other when in an argument but turn it back on when they've reconciled. Compared to other children in the sample, Bradley's Snap Map was hardly populated, only seeing the locations of 3-4 others. He recalled an old account he had that was populated all around the world with random people, but he no longer accepts requests from people he doesn't know.

Bradley's Instagram is a private, with only 31 followers. He never posts on it and has only recently started to understand how it works. He prefers the algorithm on Instagram, seeing TikTok as a bit more random. His TikTok has 1.3k followers but doesn't ever post content himself.

Despite having a strong dislike for adverts, Bradley had signed up to a scheme on Telegram that was advertised on TikTok. He provided his bank details and was paid based on a series of steps engaging with content on different platforms he was directed to. He had to stop, as it asked him to sign up to Revolut, and he needed to be 18 to register. He was paid £6 for this scheme.

Bradley shared that most of his social media accounts were set to his age, but on Vinted he didn't have an age set. When he went to put in his own age, it wouldn't let him. He simply put his age as a year older and the app accepted it.

Georgia, 17, C2, South West



Georgia is now 17 and lives with her parents and younger sister. She's in the second year of her animal management course, which she is really enjoying although is quite stressed about her final exams. In her spare time, she enjoys her dance lessons, air cadets, and spending time with her boyfriend.

Georgia is generally positive about her screentime. When checking her screentime she was surprised to see that it was over 15 hours, however, most of this is YouTube which she watches to help her get to sleep. She spends 2-3 hours daily 'actively' using her phone. Instagram takes a significant portion of her screentime.

When asked about terms like 'T&Cs', 'cookies', 'privacy policy' she shrugged and said she really wasn't sure what they meant. Despite not knowing what cookies mean, she made a point of saying that she will decline cookies where she can. She believes vaguely that these aren't a good thing, calling them a 'scam.'

For Georgia, her main concern with data sharing is being scammed. She identified this as a risk for most forms of data sharing. By 'scam' she meant that someone might be able to find her data and use it to steal money from her or harass her (although she wasn't clear how this might practically happen)

Annex 2: Glossary

1v1.LOL: An online video game where players compete in a Battle Royale against other users. The game can be accessed on an app or via an internet browser.

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.

DOP - Draw One Part: A free mobile game where players complete puzzles by filling in the missing parts of pictures.

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.

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

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.

My Perfect Hotel: A free mobile game where players build and develop virtual hotels and take care of customers, with in-game money used to unlock more features.

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.

Pokémon Go: An augmented reality game where players 'catch' virtual creatures (pokémon) to battle others or add to their collection.

Phone Case DIY: A free mobile game where users decorate virtual phone cases and earphone cases with bright colours and stickers. Users can unlock more features to decorate their devices by watching adverts.

Picture slip: A photo of someone taken without their consent, usually taken to be deliberately unflattering or embarrassing. These are often shared around on social media.

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.

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.

Telegram: A social media and messaging platform, where users can join 'channels' dedicated to specific topics or discussions.

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.

Vinted: An app where users can buy and sell clothes and other items.