Children's Data Lives 2026

A report for the ICO

REVEALING REALITY

Contents page

Executive summary 4

Introduction 6

Chapter 1: The role of digital in children's lives 9
Digital devices continue to dominate much of children's everyday lives 9
Parents' wider priorities shaped rules around children's digital and data use 12

Chapter 2: How children are spending their free time 15
Social media platforms continue to offer children endless, personalised streams of content 15
Mobile games remained a popular pastime for children 21

Chapter 3: Technology and learning 32
Technology felt like an inevitable part of children's learning 32
Education platforms gave parents the potential for detailed insight into their children's school lives 37

Chapter 4: Children's relationships with emerging technologies 42
AI offered children new ways to play, learn, and get advice 42
Few children reported encountering more robust age verification mechanisms 48

Chapter 5: A day in a child's life 52

Conclusion 55

Annex 1: Respondent summaries 57
Annex 2: Glossary 68
Annex 3: Summaries of Years 1 and 2 69

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
Three years of Children's Data Lives

Children's Data Lives is one of the ICO's flagship longitudinal research projects, starting from children's everyday lives, homes, families, and friendships to explore data from their perspective. The research combines child-led ethnography with researcher-led platform analysis to capture elements of children's data journeys that may be unseen or forgotten.

Childhood is now dominated by digital experiences, shaping how children play, learn, socialise, and are entertained. An inevitable part of these devices and platforms is the data which underpins how these digital services function. Every account created, feed scrolled through, or game level lost contributes data that shapes how platforms and systems operate.

Children's lives continue to be dominated by the digital world

Alongside new and emerging findings, Year 3 shows some clear continuity with Years 1 and 2: digital technologies continue to shape where and how childhood is lived. Much of childhood unfolds in commercialised digital environments, where attention and user data operated as key currencies. The need to exchange data to access these digital spaces was rarely understood as a decision, but was instead a normal and accepted part of using technology. This was also shaped by parents, whose approaches to rules around technology often impacted the ways and extent to which their children shared their information online. Across the sample, parents' priorities regarding their child's wider, non-digital life shaped how they approached and set rules around their child's digital lives and online privacy.

Social media continued to dominate much of children's free time. Children showed some awareness that their social media feeds were personalised to their interests and generally enjoyed this, though many found it hard to disengage from these feeds. Advertising and shopping opportunities were routine parts of these environments, sometimes leading directly to in-app purchases.

Year 3 themes

Mobile games monetise children's time, attention, and behaviour

Almost all children were engaging with some form of mobile gaming. Alongside well-known titles sit a seemingly never-ending long tail of simple, advert-heavy games. As children downloaded a large number of games – many of which were played only briefly, with 'copycat' versions quickly emerging to follow popular trends – some parents found it challenging to keep up with and manage the games their children were playing. Many of these games are easy to access and quick ways to fill moments of boredom, while quietly capturing children's attention for advertising and their behavioural data for refining platforms.

Explored in a new finding for Year 3, many of these examples show how children's time, personal information and behaviour are being monetised and shared with hundreds of vendors across the world. Despite this access to data about players, some children reported being exposed to adverts on these games for potentially age-inappropriate platforms and products, including adverts for AI chatbots.

Educational technology collects more data and expands children's experience of surveillance

Technology was embedded in children's learning and schooling, which many children and parents seemed to instinctively trust when adopted and approved by the school. For many children, digital devices and platforms formed an inevitable part of their learning. Few could recall being consulted about its use, and due to the fun and efficiency they felt it added to their learning, many were generally positive about its role in their school experience. Children's data appeared to be used widely across these platforms, with pictures, behaviour

records, progress data, and more shared with parents, teachers, and the school itself. However, both children and parents knew little about what data is shared, with whom, and for what purpose, often spread across the multiple platforms and applications schools have adopted. The adoption of these platforms appeared to be driven by what was trackable and measurable for schools, which raises questions about whose priorities inform the design and application of learning platforms.

Technology in education offered an additional mechanism for parents to have oversight over their children's lives, which was explored in-depth as part of Year 3. Alongside tools that track location or activity at home, these platforms offered parents visibility into what children were learning, how they were behaving, and how they were performing. This extended parental oversight into the classroom, highlighting new forms of data sharing between parents and children, and raised questions about how this may affect children's independence as they grow up.

Children's contact with new and emerging technologies is already shaping the ways they share data

In a notable development in Year 3, most children were using AI – including to help with homework and play games; a small number also turned to it for more sensitive or personal reasons. Some children used AI with parental or teacher oversight, while others turned to it independently for instant homework answers – with some acknowledging the potentially detrimental impact on their learning. AI has become an increasingly relied-upon resource that is firmly embedded in children's lives, with some children turning to it before their parents or teachers if they have questions.

Across the sample, children showed limited understanding of how AI works or what data it collects. Despite this knowledge gap, some children were turning to AI for personal or emotional problems, unaware of how their data might be used or processed. Some children recognised that sharing more information elicited better responses from AI, with others feeling encouraged to share more due to the social nature of their interactions with AI.

A further emerging finding in Year 3 related to how children navigated account creation and age verification in the context of the Online Safety Act. Overall, despite the implementation of the Online Safety Act, children reported limited interactions with stricter age verification methods, which remained largely limited to self-declaration of age. Children also discussed the use of VPNs, but there was little reported awareness of their ability to circumvent more robust forms of age verification. Children's views of VPNs varied. Some identified them as tools for online safety, while others used them to access restricted or adult content.

Introduction

Children's lives continue to be deeply shaped by digital technologies. As this longitudinal research has explored over the past two years, much of childhood now unfolds in online spaces: places where children play, learn, socialise, explore their interests, and maintain relationships. These digital environments are not separate from children's everyday lives, but form much of the backdrop to them.

Across Years 1 and 2 of Children's Data Lives, the research demonstrated that children were routinely sharing information about themselves as part of simply being online. They traded data to gain access to platforms and services they valued, were tracked as they moved through the world, and generated behavioural and profile information that was collected, processed and monetised. While children's platforms, preferences and behaviours shifted as they grew up, these underlying dynamics remained strikingly consistent.

This third year of the study returned to many of the same children and families to understand what had changed, what had stayed the same, and how children's data lives continued to evolve as they grew older. As in previous years, the research showed that children rarely framed their experiences in terms of 'data' or 'data rights'. Instead, their engagement with digital platforms was shaped by social priorities: access, inclusion, friendship, becoming independent, and how others perceived them. These priorities continued to influence what children shared, who they shared it with, and how much control they felt they had over their online lives.

Children's social worlds were not static. As they moved through different stages of childhood and adolescence, their relationships, routines, and priorities changed. These shifts shaped how children used platforms, how visible they were, and how they managed privacy and sharing over time. At the same time, the digital environments they inhabited continued to change, with new features, platforms and forms of data use becoming part of everyday life.

To understand contemporary childhood, it is no longer possible to study children's lives without also studying the online spaces where they spend their time. Digital ethnography is therefore not an optional addition to research with children, but a necessary part of understanding how childhood is lived today. This research treats children's online and offline experiences as deeply interconnected, recognising that decisions about data, privacy and sharing are embedded within the ordinary routines of growing up.

Research objectives

As part of its strategic plan, the ICO aims to empower and safeguard all individuals and their data, including vulnerable groups such as children. Alongside this, the ICO's Age Appropriate Design Code and Children's Privacy Strategy set out safeguards intended to protect children's privacy rights in the digital age.

To support these goals, it is important to understand children's digital lives as they are lived, including their behaviours, interactions, incentives, and disincentives, and how they understand concepts such as privacy and transparency.

Children's Data Lives is one of the ICO's flagship longitudinal research projects, rooted in children's everyday lives, homes, families, and friendships to explore data from their perspective. Returning to the same children every year provides valuable insight into how their digital behaviours change as they grow up, and how data continues to shape their experiences across their home, school, and social lives.

The research combines child-led ethnography with researcher-led platform analysis to capture elements of children's data journeys that may be unseen or forgotten, such as historic account creation or privacy notices – and to examine how children's information is collected, shared, and used to shape their online experiences.

Building on the first two years of the study, the Year 3 aims were to:

- Explore how children behave online and how this affects their data rights – including the devices and platforms they use, what content they consume and share, and how they engage with privacy settings and age verification mechanisms.
- Understand how changes in children's social worlds, responsibilities and independence affect what they share online, how they manage privacy, and how they experience data-driven systems.

- Examine children's awareness, understanding and feelings about data use, including how their information is collected, shared and monetised across different contexts, and their exposure to messaging and information about data rights.
- Understand children's worries and concerns about their online lives more broadly and how they share personal information, and what changes they would like to see going forward.
- Explore the role of parents, families and institutions in mediating children's data lives, including how oversight, boundaries and expectations evolve over time.
- Investigate how new and emerging technologies, including generative AI, are becoming embedded in children's lives, and what this means for children's data and rights.

Methodology: A 'life first' approach to researching data

Children's Data Lives takes an ethnographic approach to understanding data from the perspective of the child, starting from their everyday lives. Because data is often abstract and difficult for children to talk about, the research takes a life-first approach, exploring data through children's ordinary experiences rather than as a separate or technical topic. The focus not only on what children say, but also on the technology and platforms they use. The research therefore combines in-depth ethnography with digital and platform analysis to capture how data operates in practice within children's lives.

In Year 3, the research included:

- Filmed ethnographic interviews with children and their families, conducted in their homes. The interviews explored children's everyday lives, focusing on how digital devices and platforms fit into their routines, relationships and activities.
- Group conversations with friends or family members, where appropriate, to explore how children make sense of digital experiences together and how data-related behaviours play out in social settings.
- Platform and UX analysis of the digital services children were using, mapping key user journeys, defaults and design features that shape data sharing, privacy and access to platforms and services.

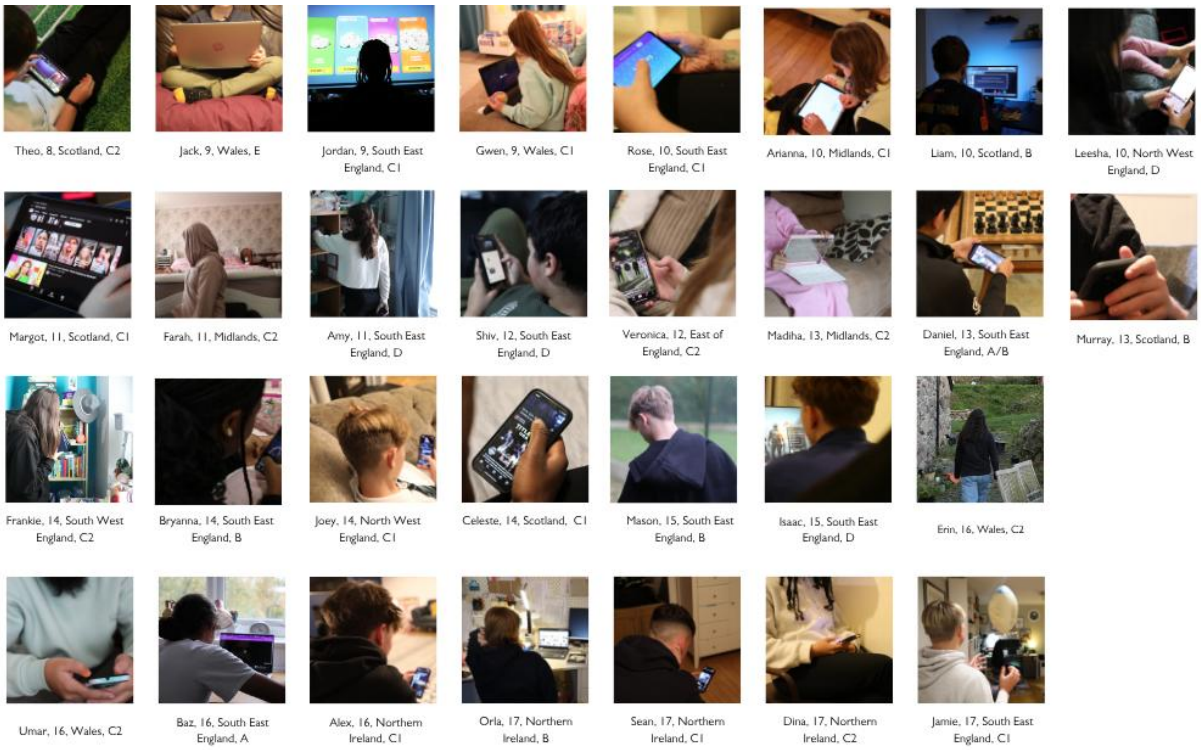
For Year 3 of *Children's Data Lives*, interviews, group conversations, and platform analysis took place between October 2025 and January 2026.

Sample: Exploring the 'data lives' of 30 children across the UK

The Year 3 sample consisted of 30 children aged between 8 and 17 years old. Nineteen children took part for the third year running, six had joined in previous years, and five were new participants joining the study for the first time this year. Some children from previous years of the project 'aged out' upon turning 18 or dropped out of the research. This longitudinal approach makes it possible to track change over time, while also ensuring the sample continued to reflect a broad range of experiences.

The sample was purposively designed to represent diversity across children's lives and backgrounds, including:

- Representation across all four nations of the UK, with a mix of urban, suburban and rural households.
- Variation in household income and socio-economic circumstances.
- Children with specific experiences, including a child in foster care and children with long-term health conditions and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) including autism.
- A wide range of parental approaches to digital oversight, from restrictive rules to more permissive arrangements using parental controls and household agreements.
- Variation in access to devices, platforms and types of digital activity.



Children's Data Lives sample for Year 3

Together, this sample reflects the range of children and families the ICO serves and provides a rich picture of how children's data lives continue to unfold over time.

Chapter 1: The role of digital in children's lives

Chapter summary

The children continued to grow up in a world where digital technology was embedded in their everyday lives. This year, some children had been allowed new devices as they became older, impacting their wider hobbies and routines as devices took up more of their time.

The last three years have shown the important role played by parents in managing their children's online habits, with most attempting to apply some form of oversight. While the nature of oversight evolves as children grow older, it is also shaped by parental priorities about how children are spending time outside of technology, as well as the time they have to dedicate to overseeing their children's device use, their awareness of and ability to apply rules over device use, and their own goals for the way they want their children to grow up.

Digital devices continued to dominate much of children's everyday lives

For many in the sample, digital technology continued to play a central role in their childhoods. As in Years 1 and 2 of Children's Data Lives, digital devices and platforms shaped how children spent much of their time day to day. Across the sample, large amounts of time were spent on screens – playing games, watching videos, messaging friends, completing schoolwork, or filling moments of boredom. These digital spaces were not peripheral, but the places where much of children's play, socialising and learning took place.

Children were still trading their data to gain access to the spaces that formed the backdrop for much of their world. Participation in digital life continued to require children to share personal information, accept tracking, and generate behavioural data as a routine part of being online. These exchanges were rarely experienced as choices about data, but as necessary steps to access platforms and stay connected to friends.

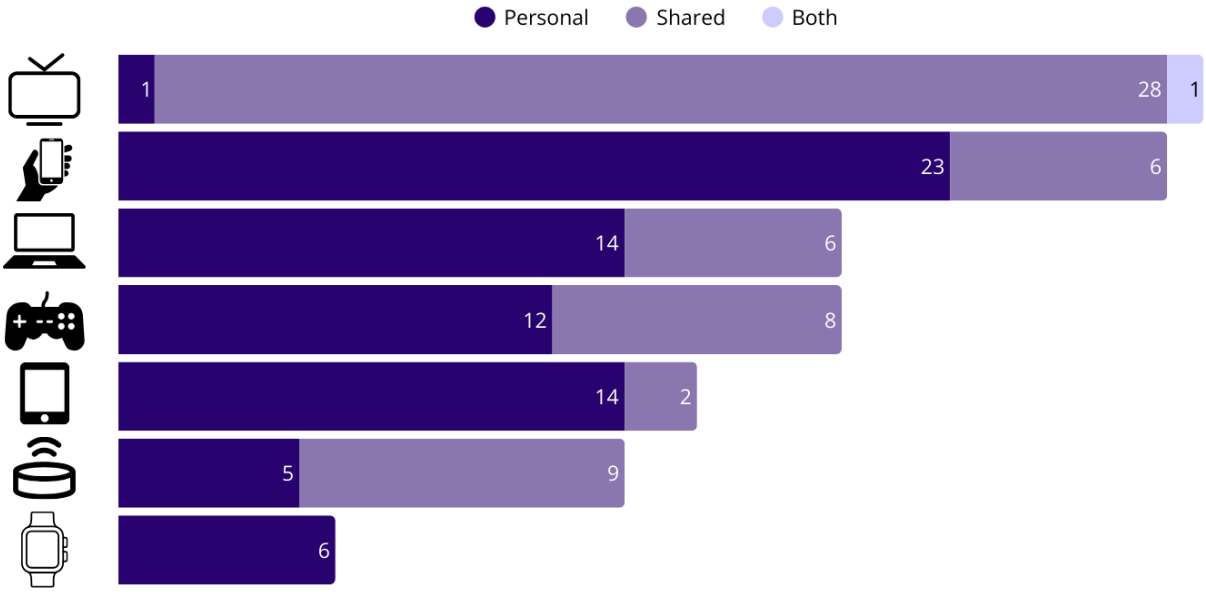


Diagram representing the devices across the sample, including personal and shared devices

As the diagram above illustrates, all children in the sample had access to at least one digital device, with all of them having access to a Smart TV. Most also had personal smartphones, tablets, laptops or gaming consoles. While the use of devices varied by age and each family's rules, these devices were central to where children were playing, learning, communicating, and being entertained.

For children, these devices continued to be used for many of their everyday activities. The same phone or tablet might be used to message friends, scroll social media feeds, watch videos, play games, listen to music, and complete homework. For many children, particularly older ones, their smartphone was the primary way they interacted with their friends outside of school.

As in years one and two, some parents raised concerns about the amount of time their children were spending on screens. Several talked about how difficult it felt to limit use once devices were part of everyday routines, particularly when they were tied to staying in touch with friends or keeping up with schoolwork. Parents described struggling to reduce screen time – or remove devices altogether – without it becoming a source of tension, or without worrying that their child would miss out socially.

Case study: Leesha's (10) mum reflected on the challenges of keeping her children away from technology

Speaking about Leesha, her mum suggested she was prioritising her digital life over everything else.

"She loves to do mostly online things, stuck to online things. The change in her behaviour I have seen is that she avoided to go outside mostly and mostly try [sic] to stick with the devices like TV, phone, tablet, laptop […] Whenever I ask her if you want to go out, she says no, I don't want to, I'd rather stay here […] she finds it boring outside."

When Leesha's mum tried to take away her devices, Leesha did not react well, a pattern her mum has seen across her children:

"In holidays, she wakes up at seven o'clock, before me, and she comes downstairs and is watching TV, videos, phone. And then after two hours, three hours, I try to take it from her, and it's making very irresistible [sic]. She is finding it irresistible. If I'm taking the phone, she finds it like panicking, 'where is the phone?', or 'when am I going to get it?'. So these days, children, I think it's most affected by apps or they are just like, have no emotional control over them."

Specifically, Leesha's mum felt her children were addicted to reels and games, which she found difficult to manage.

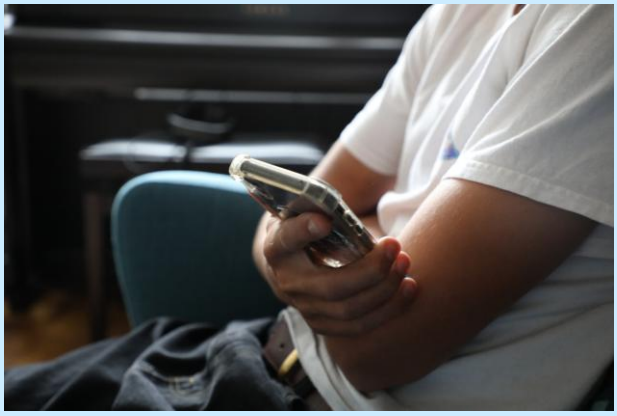
"Like they just don't want to do anything. They don't want to look outside the world. They don't want to do anything. They just want to keep watching reels and reels and reels and they just want to keep playing games."
Leesha's (10) mum

Some children's behaviours or preferences for specific devices changed

There were some changes in the devices children used or prioritised compared with Year 2. Some children had new devices, like a mobile phone for the first time, or changes in their wider lives or interests had shaped how they used devices or which they preferred.

For those who had a smartphone or tablet for the first time, their hobbies and routines changed. In some cases, the new devices completely replaced activities or shifted them from offline to digital.

Case study: Baz (16) has now got a phone and described moving away from non-digital hobbies

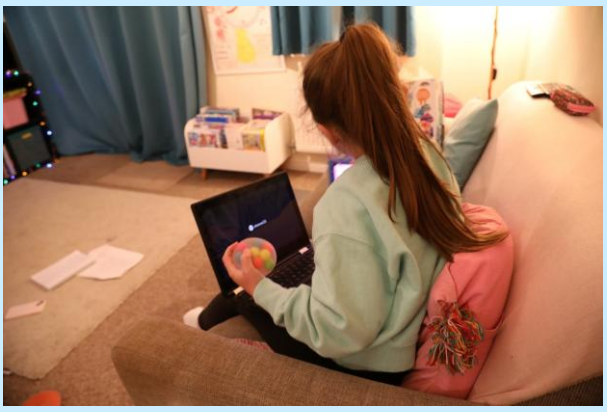


In the previous two years of *Children's Data Lives,* Baz was not allowed a smartphone and had been using a 'brick phone' to text his friends. Baz had Snapchat and Instagram, which he had access to on his mum's phone and the family computer respectively, but he also had a wide range of hobbies, including hockey, windsurfing, and music, as well as reading magazines and newspapers. His parents had always said he would be allowed a smartphone once he finished his GCSEs, which he completed over the summer term.

In Year 3, Baz had a smartphone for the first time and was enjoying using social media on his own device. Reflecting on the changes in his life, Baz was positive about the opportunities a smartphone had given him, such as access to his own debit card and being able to buy his own train tickets if going out with friends. However, he also felt his phone use was having an impact on his hobbies.

"I don't do as much stuff. I haven't played my bass in quite a while or I might read a bit less, but I don't think there's many [downsides] […] I think it's easy to get distracted. I use my phone to play bass because it's got a metronome and tuner, but it's easier to do things on your phone. It takes less effort than reading or going upstairs or going outside."
Baz (16)

Case study: This year, Gwen (9), was allowed to bring her tablet to her mum's house – it had previously just been at her dad's



Last year, Gwen's device use in her mum's house was limited to her mum's phone and their shared smart TV. Her free time was filled with multiple hobbies and after-school activities, including cheerleading, football, dodgeball, gymnastics, swimming and musical theatre. She also frequently had friends round to play, where they spent most of their time together playing board games or make-believe games.

This year, Gwen had a tablet that she was using every day. It was a Christmas present from her dad that she was previously only using at his house, but was now using at her mum's too. While she still does cheerleading and spends time with friends and family after school, she's dropped some of her other after-school clubs and is spending more of her time on the tablet. Most of this time is spent calling friends using Kids Messenger and playing games online with them, particularly Roblox, as well as watching YouTube. Her mum reflected that there's been a noticeable shift in what Gwen now wants to spend her time and money on, with Roblox now overtaking other forms of play.

"She had a treat from Mummy and Daddy… oh, she spent it on Roblox. That was it. She spent it on Robux. She had the option of a new teddy, some money to buy whatever she wanted, and yeah, she chose Robux."
Gwen's (9) mum

Some of the older boys in the sample were using their gaming consoles less than they had in previous years. While gaming remained part of their lives, it was no longer always the dominant activity it had once been.

> *"There's not really games that I like to play on [my PlayStation] anymore. I might start playing Fortnite soon again just because someone told me to start playing it again."*
> **Daniel (13)**

> *"My hobbies would probably be baking with [my girlfriend] sometimes. I couldn't really say there's anything else at the minute. I've been really focused on driving and my job […] I haven't touched my computer in two months, so it's definitely a big change from being a big gamer to not really using it."*
> **Sean (17)**

> *"I used to go on my games, my PlayStation, but I'm not really interested in that anymore […] I'll get home, go upstairs, go on my phone for a bit, sit on my guitar for maybe half an hour, go off it. Phone, food, guitar, that's mainly me."*
> **Joey (14)**

It was not that these children's overall screen time had reduced or that they were moving away from digital technologies altogether. For all of them, smartphones continued to play an important role. For example, Joey used his smartphone to play music, learn chords, and message his new girlfriend.

Sean (17), who had left college and was working full time, was spending time on mobile games and using TikTok while travelling for work, as well as regularly staying in touch with his girlfriend and arranging for them to meet. He was also sharing his location on Life360 with her, a departure from his negative attitude towards location sharing in Year 2. As the children grew older, began new relationships, and transitioned into adulthood, the way they spent time on screens evolved with them.

Parents' wider priorities shaped rules around children's digital and data use

Years 1 and 2 of *Children's Data Lives* highlighted the importance of the role of parents in relation to children's data. This included observing how rules and attitudes around topics like privacy settings, devices, and age assurance changed as children grew up, as well as parents' approaches to setting boundaries, limits, and increasing their children's independence.

Most parents in the sample exercised some level of oversight or control over their children's online access and behaviour, but the approaches to and extent of this oversight varied considerably. Some of these approaches were at the device level, with screen time limits or confiscation of devices.

> *"He was getting to the part where he wasn't really listening to us and he was being a bit cheeky, we'll just take [the phone] away from him"*
> **Theo's (8) dad**

Some parents preferred to limit access to specific platforms or manage what their children could do on those apps. This ranged from not allowing their children to use social media at all, to implementing rules about whether profiles could be public or private, or overseeing what, if anything, they shared on these platforms.

> *"I put it on public, but I deleted all the videos that had like me and my friends on it […] Then I asked if I was allowed to post on my public and they said only to post videos that are of like a TV show or something, like edits."*
> **Liam (10)**

> *"I downloaded [TikTok] for [my mum] because she wants to see everything I do since my thing's on private, so I don't post public."*
> **Bryanna (14)**

Approaches to technology sometimes extended to network-level controls, with parents switching off Wi-Fi at night to enforce time boundaries on internet use.

> *"I cut the Wi-Fi off […] I have different profiles set up. I have stuff for the PC and then I had one for the phones and then I had different times set for different things."*
> **Alex's (16) dad**

> *"We had our Internet changed as well, so it's like you can't even search up about a gun. If you searched up a gun, it wouldn't come up."*
> **Veronica's (12) dad**

Other parents, often alongside other oversight measures, held conversations with their children to set expectations about appropriate platform use and online behaviour.

> *"There was a time when he was watching these YouTube Shorts for long periods of time, and I wasn't too happy about that."*
> **Daniel's (13) mum**

> *"I used to [use YouTube Shorts] for a bit, but I don't really anymore. […] my parents told me not to."*
> **Daniel (13)**

Some parents took a lighter-touch approach to managing online access, allowing their children to use technology as they pleased with limited intervention. Without consistent oversight of their activities, these children were generally using technology more but were encouraged to speak to their parents about what they encountered or experienced online.

> *"I genuinely think he's a sensible lad. That may be naivety. We're quite an open family, so we do talk about things that probably wouldn't be a table conversation in other people's household […] We're not blinkered to what children, what teenagers, what young adults do and I think [we] had similar thoughts in terms of if you stop somebody from drinking, as soon as they turn 18, they go mad drinking. If you stop them from looking at horror movies, they're going to do it behind your back. They're going to find a way."*
> **Mason's (15) mum**

Parents' approaches to rules were often tailored to children

How parents managed and oversaw their child's online behaviour depended on a variety of factors, relating both to the child themselves and the parent's time, ability, and priorities.

A key factor from across the three years of the project was the level of independence granted to children as they matured. Some children, like Joey (14) and Orla (17), had stricter controls over their device and internet use in earlier years of the project, but have since had these controls removed to reflect their transition into young adulthood.

Parents also made decisions on access and control to avoid excluding their child from apps their peers were already using regularly. As covered extensively in Year 1 of *Children's Data Lives,* the fear of missing out, or 'FOMO', experienced by many children drove decisions about what platforms children used, which also involved parents making decisions to keep up with wider trends.

> *"We didn't allow him to have a phone until he went to secondary school, but lots of his friends were having mobile phones and stuff when they were a lot younger in primary school. It's hard."*
> **Joey's (14) mum**

Parents also implemented controls on their child's online behaviour in line with when they had first granted access to specific devices and platforms. For example, Arianna (10), who had been regularly playing games on a tablet for years, presented a more challenging case for her parents when it came to implementing controls, with Arianna already having ingrained habits and behaviours around her tablet access to the internet.

> *"The only thing that we can actually sort of punish her with is no Internet. Because that's the only thing that seems to work […] it's literally like withdrawal symptoms."*
> **Arianna's (10) parents**

Some children in the sample had older siblings from whom their parents could draw experience, having already navigated transitions with technology as children got older. However, for parents going through it for the first time, navigating this transition felt daunting.

> *"This is new, she's my oldest child. This is the first time I've tried to look at a phone or setting up a phone for her, so I will definitely be looking to try to learn about how to do that. But I don't know right now."*
> **Margot's (11) dad**

For some parents, implementing and enforcing parental controls was more of a burden than it was for others. For Alex's (16) dad, who works in IT, implementing controls was straightforward. However, for Jack's (9) mum, who was less familiar with technology, this was more challenging, and she was looking for support from elsewhere.

> *"I'd like to know how to put in controls on stuff and kind of limit. My partner said that he would the other day and said that there was ways of like taking shorts off YouTube and stuff and to kind of limit his activity and also to be able to see what he's doing."*
> **Jack's (9) mum**

Other parents mentioned not feeling confident enough to set up or enforce controls. These parents either avoided implementing controls, feeling they wouldn't know where to start, or felt their children would be able to find workarounds, rendering their efforts futile.

> *"I made so many times [sic] the parental control account, and they just create the different fake [accounts] […] I try put on some parental control and then she made a new [Roblox] account with any email, it's very easy."*
> **Leesha's (10) mum**

Parents' prioritisation of technology-related trade-offs shaped the rules they implemented

Regardless of time or ability to implement controls, most parents' approaches to rules around technology were informed by how they navigated the trade-off between online and offline behaviours. Some parents had priorities for their children away from technology, for example their education, active hobbies, and in-person time with friends and family.

This often went hand-in-hand with tighter restrictions on how their children could use technology. For example, Baz's (16) parents strictly limited his access to technology, not allowing him a smartphone until after he completed his GCSEs. Baz had a range of hobbies and interests that kept him occupied away from screens.

> *"We've explored sports over the years, the other things we talked about, enjoying reading, making things, all those things would immediately be encroached by increasing screen time. You only have so many hours in the day. […] I think it's about having that balance, I think we understand [technology] is part of life now and you do need to be introduced to it, but it's just to try and retain some of the experiences that we had as children in a pre-smartphone era."*
> **Baz (16)'s dad**

In other cases, parents took a different approach, with some feeling technology was an important part of their children's lives and thus being less inclined to limit access. For Murray (13), who struggled with anxiety and was not regularly attending school, technology was his sole means of connection to other children, and his parents prioritised his online hobbies and ability to build social connections. Murray therefore spent much of his time online, with minimal oversight or control over his use.

> *"We're very lenient, but we've been driven by [Murray's] reaction, by his needs, because we understand he needs that… stimulation. If you take that away from him, he'll get his stimulation elsewhere, that stimulation will generally come from negative stimulation from his brother or from us and it's not fun when that happens, and we understand that his life kind of revolves around [technology]."*
> **Murray's (13) dad**

While individual children's needs and ages shaped parental approaches, the priorities parents put in place for their children – whether online or offline – were an important factor in deciding whether they implemented strict controls or adopted a hands-off approach to their child's use of technology. Across the sample, many of the children whose parents had implemented tighter controls over technology were generally more careful about what they posted, aware of information they shared, and had a range of interests away from technology. While there were exceptions, and children's ages and needs were important in this context, this was a notable general trend across the sample.

Chapter 2: How children are spending their free time

Chapter summary

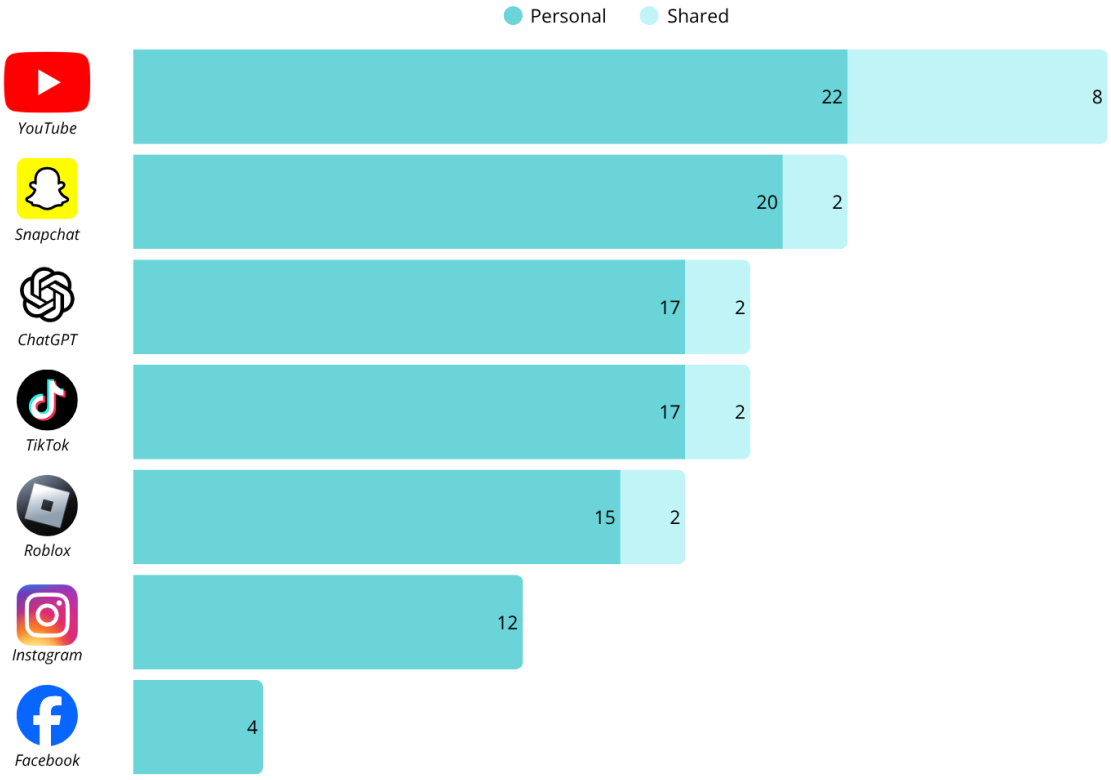
Social media platforms including TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp remained popular among the sample, with children demonstrating different ways they were consuming, creating, and sharing content. Most children on social media had some awareness that the content they were recommended was based on their own interests and behaviours. Whilst many enjoyed seeing personalised content, some reflected it can be difficult to stop scrolling on social media once they started.

Commercialised content in the form of adverts and marketing continued to be prevalent on children's feeds, with several choosing to buy items advertised to them online.

Almost all children were playing mobile games this year. Many of the games incentivised data-sharing, including locations and bank details for enhanced gaming experiences. Simple, free games monetised children's time and behaviour through personalised adverts and sharing precise geolocation with partners worldwide, with little awareness of this among children or parents.

Social media platforms continued to offer children endless, personalised streams of content

Overall, the social media platforms children preferred remained largely unchanged from Years 1 and 2. Messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Snapchat continued to play a central role for children in staying in touch with friends and family, while platforms including TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, were primarily used for content consumption through algorithmically driven feeds.



A diagram illustrating platforms used across the sample

As the diagram illustrates, every child in the sample had access to YouTube, with platforms like Snapchat and TikTok used by roughly two thirds of the children.

For some children, access to platforms had expanded since Year 2. This included being allowed to join certain platforms for the first time, or the children themselves deciding to use new platforms after making new friends who communicated there.

A small number of younger children were also keen to create and share their own content. In some cases, this included posting videos on public profiles rather than only sharing content privately with friends or family.

Case study: Bryanna (14) is now on social media

Since Bryanna joined the project in Year 1, she had been looking forward to being allowed on TikTok. After conversations with her mum, she was allowed it this year:

"I recently got TikTok for my 14th birthday. My mum said, you can get TikTok, you can get Instagram, you can get Snapchat, and I was like, 'Yes! The day I've been waiting for my whole life!'."

Since creating her account, Bryanna felt she had received good advice on fashion and relationships and discussed turning to TikTok for advice.

"If I want advice, I'll either turn to TikTok, my mum, or my friends."
Bryanna (14)

In the two days prior to the interview, Bryanna had spent two-and-a-half hours on one day and close to five hours on the other on TikTok, which she described as *"horrifying"*.

Case study: Theo (8) was posting videos of himself on YouTube

Theo, new to the sample this year, had two YouTube accounts where he uploaded videos of himself mimicking viral 'sound' trends and dancing or posting edits of his favourite football team. Theo posted on both profiles interchangeably, as he had logged in to one on his tablet and the other on his dad's phone. The accounts were both registered under his full real name and included multiple videos with his full face visible. He would also share updates about what he was doing, including the football matches he was planning on attending.

On one of his profiles, Theo had 64 subscribers (he was looking forward to reaching *"six seven"*). He claimed to not know most of the people who subscribed to his channel or watched his videos.

As Theo was logged in on his dad's phone, Theo's dad said he would review videos before Theo uploaded them, but appeared surprised at some of the posts Theo had made, including one without his shirt on. Theo also regularly received comments from strangers – one of whom he described as "some idiot" who would repeatedly comment "I don't care." on his videos. When asked about why he makes these videos, Theo said:

"I just do […] I just want to. I want to make my own videos."
Theo (8)

Most of the children continued to understand what shaped their algorithmically driven social media feeds to some extent

Children spoke about seeing more of what they already liked and were able to compare how their own feeds differed from those of friends with different interests. They described how the recommended content served on these feeds reflected their interests and hobbies – with many recognising how their behaviours on the platform, like 'liking', 'sharing', or watching a video in full resulted in them being recommended more of that content.

> *"So, there's a general range of videos that are up, so a lot of it will be specialised towards you. So as I said, I like cars, so I'll often get videos about cars on my stuff. But my friend, he's a barber, so he'll obviously get haircuts and stuff on his. So it just varies on the different type of person you are. TikTok is probably the most popular app today because of how addicting it is. Scrolling watching, scrolling watching"*
> **Sean (17)**

> *"I see this man one time and then I showed [my dad] the song and then that one constantly kept on coming on my For You Page now [...] Like, if I watch a video, like someone dancing or something, If I constantly watch that, like, over time it'll keep coming up with people dancing."*
> **Veronica (12)**

> *"On a For You page on TikTok, the videos that I interact with, like liking it or favouriting the video or something like that, then realising that that's what I'm interested in."*
> **Jamie (17)**

While many children enjoyed being shown content they found entertaining or interesting, some described how hard it could be to stop scrolling once they had started. Several used the term 'addicted' to describe this experience.

> *"She's addicted. [She uses it] every single day. It means that you're like. You cannot come off of it. Like you do it. Yeah. Like you're on drugs. Like. Not on drugs. Like you just can't get off of it. It's glued to your hands."*
> **Conversation between Jordan (9) and his family about his cousin, Siena (11)**

> *"For me it's like the scroll. Like you sort of just get like addicted to it. You can't get off it."*
> **Adam (15), Mason's (15) friend**

> *"I think I just like scrolling it for no reason. Like I like watching them like videos and stuff but I think it's just like a waste of time. But it's just like. It's like an addiction really."*
> **Joey (14)**

Children continued to encounter advertising, shopping, and commercial opportunities online

Children were able to describe adverts they saw within their social media feeds, including promotions from brands as well as content that featured products they wanted to buy, or hoped others would buy for them. For example, Rose (10) wanted 'Labubus' after seeing them on YouTube Shorts, getting excited about the suspense and reveal of unboxing videos.

Case study: Rose (10) wanted Labubus after seeing them on YouTube Shorts

At home, Rose's (10) mum kept her to YouTube Kids only, with no social media. At her dad's and her cousin's house, however, she was allowed to use regular YouTube and other social media platforms. YouTube offered her an endless stream of entertaining, funny videos – including one of her favourite latest trends: Labubu unboxing videos.

Labubu are stylised collectible characters from the Pop Mart designer-toy range that have become popular with children and teens through TikTok and other social platforms.

The toys are sold in 'blind boxes', meaning buyers do not know which character they will receive until opening, introducing an element of chance that can heighten anticipation and repeat purchasing.

Rose enjoyed the drama of the videos, the excitement content creators showed if they unboxed a particularly rare Labubu, and equally, the disappointment when instead they received a more common one.

When it came to spending her pocket money or writing a wishlist for her Christmas presents, a Labubu – or the counterfeit 'Lafufu' that could be purchased from the corner shop – were among her most wanted Christmas gifts.

As in previous years, weak age assurance on many social media platforms meant children in the sample often registered using a false age or couldn't recall entering one at all. This meant some children were seeing adverts that were not appropriate for their age group on these platforms, like Alex (16), who was shown offers for betting websites on TikTok, and Daniel (13), who was shown adverts for a Bingo platform on YouTube.

Daniel (13) (L) and Alex (16) (R) both saw adverts for gambling platforms

In some cases, children described purchasing items directly through social media apps. For example, Frankie (14) and Sean (17), talked about using their own bank cards on TikTok to make purchases. Sean had bought a keyring for his car, while Frankie had used TikTok shop to buy items including sweets and a card game.

> *"You can literally search for whatever you want and it's just on there like, like, it's like Amazon but for TikTok … Hoodies, Crocs, phone cases, stickers, sweets, keyrings, teddies, joggers, P. Louise makeup stuff, jeans, ducks, card games, record holders, record players. Don't know why it showed me that. Lego, coasters, very random. I don't really know. It's obviously showing me stuff that I've bought before, like sweets."*
> **Frankie (14)**

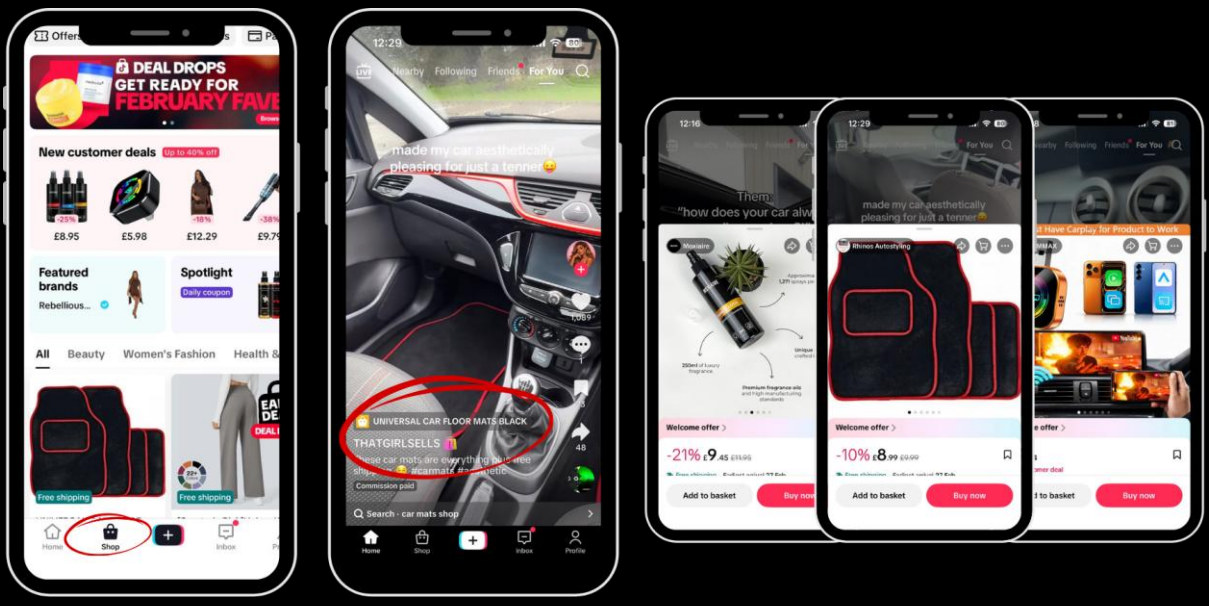
Platform analysis: TikTok shop shows highly personalised adverts in users' ForYou page

TikTok Shop is integrated within TikTok and allows users to buy products directly inside the app, without having to go to an external website.

Users can browse items on the TikTok shop page or can click on products advertised within videos to be directed to the page to purchase that product.

To test how TikTok shop is linked to users' feeds, researchers created a new TikTok account and searched for car videos. After spending a few minutes liking and watching car videos, multiple adverts started appearing of car accessories that could be bought via TikTok shop. This included items such as a car mat, a cleaning spray, and a car play adapter, with all products shown including either a discount or a welcome offer.

Minimal steps were required to purchase the product – simply clicking on the TikTok shop link, selecting 'buy now', and checking out. The minimum age requirement to sell and make purchases on TikTok shop is 18, but without robust age assurance in place, children in the sample were regularly able to access the feature.



While no concerns about TikTok Shop were raised by children or parents in the sample, there are risks associated with the platform. There have been reports of TikTok Shop hosting fake listings[1], with users not only at risk of losing money purchasing fake items, but also of sharing their personal and payment information with unknown sellers. Without robust age assurance to prevent children from accessing the service, children who regularly use TikTok and its shop, like Frankie and Sean, are exposed to these risks.

As was the case in Year 2, commercial incentives were still frequently shaping children's behaviours around data sharing. Year 3 revealed a new example. Shiv (12) was regularly performing tasks to work towards a commercial reward for one of his favourite online games: Roblox.

[1] TikTok Shop Says It's Fighting a New Wave of AI Scammers, Dupes – Business Insider. Available at: https://www.businessinsider.com/tiktok-shop-exec-ai-is-powerful-tool-for-ecommerce-fraud-2025-11 (accessed 26/03/2026)

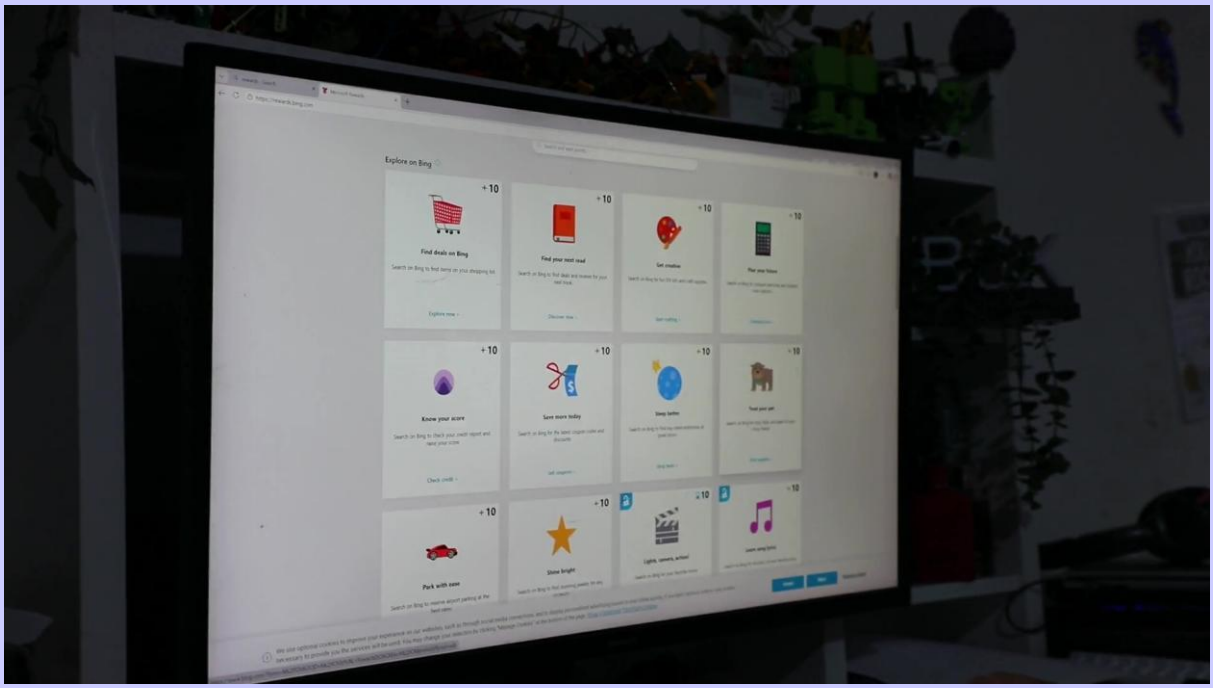
DEEP DIVE: Is Shiv working for under the minimum wage?

"I do the tasks every day. I don't really search on Microsoft Edge, but I do the tasks every day."

Incentivised by the promise of Robux, Shiv logged on every day to a browser he didn't normally use.

In exchange for searching on Bing and completing daily tasks, Shiv earned 'points' through the Microsoft Rewards feature on Edge that accumulated in his account. The points he had earned so far were redeemable for 400 'Robux' – Roblox's in-game currency – which was worth, according to Shiv, *"about £5."*

Shiv demonstrated the tasks he completed every day, which primarily consisted of searching a series of prompts outlined on the Rewards page. These included searching for 'top rated mattresses', 'daily discounts and deals', and his 'credit score'.



Shiv's PC showing the tasks he completed on Microsoft Rewards

Each search was rewarded with ten points. To redeem the Robux voucher, Shiv needed 6750 points.

Shiv was able to complete tasks worth 40 points in one minute, meaning to redeem the Robux voucher by completing these tasks alone, he would need to log around 168 minutes of work – just under three hours. Shiv's efforts would be rewarded at a going rate of approximately £1.78 per hour.

It is illegal to employ children under 13, but regardless of Shiv's age, this falls well below the National Minimum Wage, which is currently at £7.55 per hour for those aged 16.

Shiv said he tried to log on every day but was especially concerned with completing the tasks on Sundays, as this was rewarded with five times the points, lightening his workload and moving him towards his target quicker.

When asked why Microsoft has this feature, Shiv suggested that, with Microsoft being a rich company, it may want to *"give back to the community"*. He did not see many implications for his data, except for one prompt which asked Shiv to search for a film that he'd like to see:

> *"I just gave Avenger's Endgame, so they might just take that data. But that's not really big data to me. I just picked it out at random."*

Further investigation into Microsoft Rewards following Shiv's interview showed other ways to earn points, including completing quizzes, puzzles, and implementing settings. Points could also be earned through

purchases on Microsoft Store, which, if combined with an Ultimate Game Pass on Xbox, were rewarded at a rate of 20:1 (20 points earned per pound spent).

While Shiv was logged in under his mum's name, further analysis suggests any Microsoft user was able to access Microsoft Rewards, including accounts registered as children. As part of researcher platform analysis, an eight-year-old profile was set up (which had to be linked to a parent account), as well as accounts aged 13 and 18. All accounts were able to immediately start earning points, suggesting there was no minimum age requirement in place to use Microsoft Rewards.

It was difficult to find any publicly available information about how Microsoft Rewards generated these prompts and for what purpose. Under Microsoft's Terms, a "search" is considered "*an act of an individual user manually entering text for the good faith purpose of obtaining Bing search results for such user's own research purposes.*" – at odds with Shiv's speed-focused approach, where he did not engage with the results in any meaningful way.

Mobile games remained a popular pastime for children

Gaming continued to be a popular form of entertainment among children of all ages across the sample, played on mobile phones, tablets, laptops or PCs and gaming devices. Years 1 and 2 of *Children's Data Lives* drew attention to how some mobile games encouraged users to interact with one another, with a range of in-game features and incentives to do so. They also highlighted how several popular mobile games had little to no age-verification processes in place, despite age restrictions being present in their privacy policies.

This year has focused on children's use of mobile gaming in greater depth. Specifically, it has explored how mobile gaming fitted into children's daily lives, as well as the data children were sharing with mobile games, where this data goes, and to what extent children were aware of the data implications of playing these games.

Mobile games offered an easy way for children to 'kill' time

This year, almost all the children in the sample had access to at least one mobile game – whether on their own smartphone or tablet, or a shared device, including their parent's phone.

These games were fun, simple, bright, and repetitive. For younger children not yet on social media, they were one of the main activities to do on their smartphones or tablets. They were also what their friends talked about at school. While most played alone, some children played them together, in-person or online.

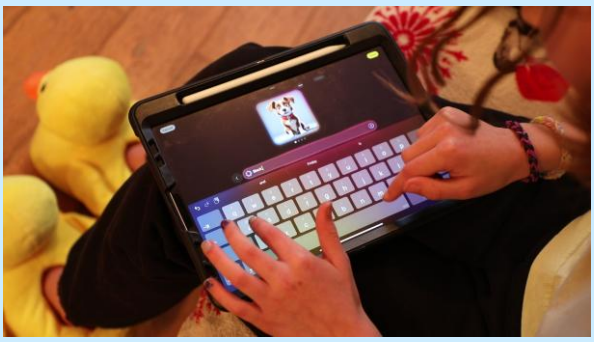
Older children tended to use mobile games when they couldn't access social media or go online – for example, when their mobile data had run out or they had no internet connection. Mobile games were seen as something to do during this 'dead' time – a way for their phones to still keep them occupied when other, more attractive options were unavailable.

Case study: Mobile games continue to consume Arianna's (10) free time

Arianna continued to be an avid gamer – but over the last two years, had been spending less time on her PlayStation and Nintendo Switch, and more time playing games on her tablet.

When asked what the most important thing in her life was, she immediately said her tablet.

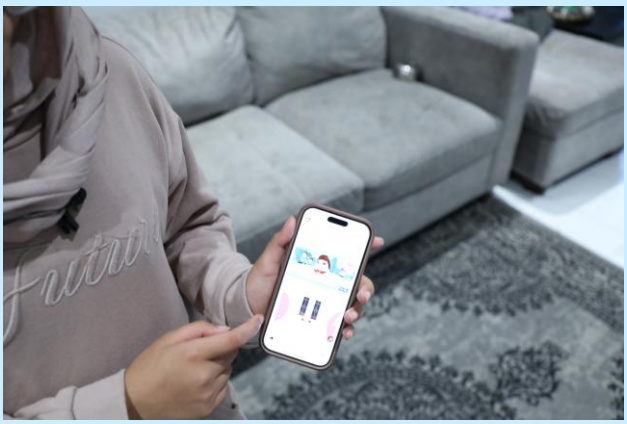
"My tablet. It's like my whole life is on there… Like hours and hours and weeks and days and months of grinding on one game."



At the time of the interview, her favourite game was WildCraft, an online survival game where players inhabit wild animals, play with others to fight 'enemy' animals, and aim to unlock 'legendary' creatures. However, her tablet was filled with free games that she swaps between once she becomes bored with one, providing an endless loop of entertainment.

"As soon as I get home from school, my dad yells at me to get upstairs and get changed. Then after that I come downstairs, I play on my games, and then I call my friends, I chat to my friends, play Wildcraft, my new favourite game."
Arianna (10)

Case study: New updates to Farah's (11) favourite games means she keeps on playing them

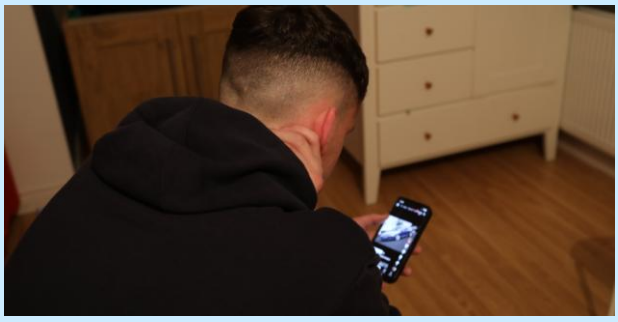


This year, Farah had begun playing mobile games on YouTube Playables on her mum's phone, enjoying the variety of games it offered. She was also still playing mobile games such as BlockBlast on her tablet, reporting that she was spending more time playing them than last year.

Recent updates to BlockBlast had expanded the types of games available to play, such as a variations of sudoku, stopping her from getting bored with the game.

"I like BlockBlast as well…Probably more [than last year] … Because now I think, like, I know how to do it more, and as they added a new feature where there's, like, more games."
Farah (11)

Case study: Sean (17) played mobile games when other options weren't available



Sean had a handful of games on his phone that he played to unwind, or when he needed some easy entertainment.

This included BlockBlast, which Sean was also playing in Year 2. He had seen the game advertised on TikTok, saying it claimed playing the game for thirty minutes a day would help you "sleep like a baby." Whilst it wasn't necessarily his favourite thing to do on his phone, BlockBlast was a useful backup when other options weren't available.

"I find it satisfying, it's good to have because you never know when you're going to go into a black zone of no service or need a bit of entertainment […] I would never really go out of my way to play it. But if I was in the situation where I had nothing else to do, I definitely put a bit of BlockBlast on."
Sean (17)

Parents had mixed views about their children's mobile game use

Many parents saw most games as harmless entertainment, a way for children to relax and spend their free time with little risk of being exposed to inappropriate content. Some even played games alongside their children, or would check-in to make sure they were using games appropriately.

> *"Honestly, he's a good boy… With him I'm quite happy that he knows what is good and what is bad. So he uses very safely the internet. So I don't put that much of an eye on him. Like I do checks but I know that he plays games…he plays games with his cousins or friends."*
> **Shiv's (12) mum**

> *"He likes to play Fortnite over at my mum's and rings me. So I play Fortnite with him."*
> **Jack's (9) mum**

However, other parents voiced concern about the amount of time their children were spending on mobile games, particularly when it replaced other activities. The games, such as Roblox, had become central to their children's free time.

> *"She had her iPad for last Christmas…It started just with her playing normal games, just herself on it and then Roblox…The only change I've really noticed is that desire to go on it, that desire to rush home and not go out, when you've got the option to go and do something quite fun with me or with friends and wanting to rush home, and the reason is to go on the iPad. So I've limited time spent on that."*
> **Gwen's (9) mum**

> *"We've tried to explain to her as well that, you know, spending six hours playing a game, she doesn't realise how quick the time's gone. Yeah, it's like you've just wasted six hours."*
> **Arianna's (10) mum**

Mobile games incentivised children to share different types of data

Mobile gaming encompasses a huge range of different types of games, with varying types of gameplay, modes of interaction, and features. These differences have different data implications. Some games, like BlockBlast, do not require account creation or personal information such as age or email address. Other games, particularly those with social or multiplayer features, require this information to create an account, such as Roblox and Minecraft.

Several of these games played by children in the sample include in-game currency or options to spend money. These spending options often revolved around upgrading avatar 'skins' or unlocking exclusive features within the game.

For example, Wildcraft, a game Arianna was playing and shown in the images on the right, included options to spend upwards of £100 at once to buy the gems, which could be used in the game to buy rare animal avatars or in-game accessories.

Screenshots from 'Wildcraft', demonstrating how in-game currency could be purchased in large quantities and used in the game to purchase animals.

> *"There's the online currency [on Roblox] which you have to pay for, so I've got some [Robux]…I bought some stuff for my avatar…There's a VIP server and I bought VIP game passes…So I got 'run faster' [level up] and custom makeup."*
> **Amy (11)**

> *"Yeah, [I've bought] clothes [on Roblox]…because I don't want to be a salmon head [basic female Roblox avatar]."*
> **Gwen (9)**

> *"So the game [Wildcraft] has a subscription, sort of like a premium in-game subscription…One month membership is 150 gems, unlimited access to unlocked premium items, 5 gems every day, 2X experience and club pass and then bonuses …So I would like to have it because it's only £6 for a month and you get a bunch of stuff… plus you're also supporting the game which is really good."*
> **Arianna (10)**

Other mobile games included features which required location sharing, such as Pokémon Go which Daniel (13) has been playing for the last few years, or Landlord, which Mason (15) was playing this year. These games incentivise location-sharing through gameplay features and rewards that can only be activated by users sharing their precise location. Location-sharing is presented as necessary for gameplay, rather than an option that children have to make a decision over, personalising the game to their local area.

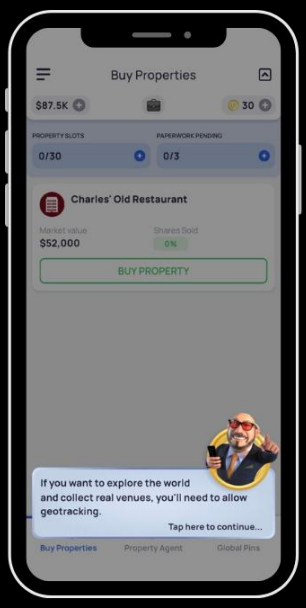
Platform analysis: Some mobile games incentivise location sharing

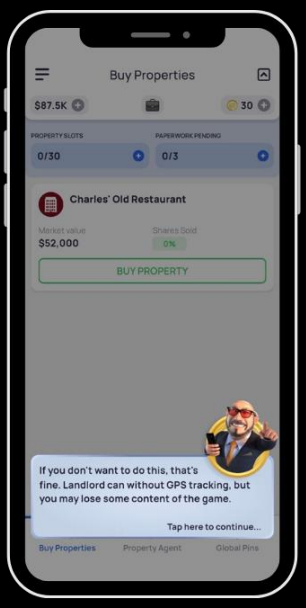
Mason (15) was a fan of tycoon games, games where users build and manage a virtual world. The main game of this genre he was playing was Landlord, a game where users are able to buy, sell and manage real world locations.

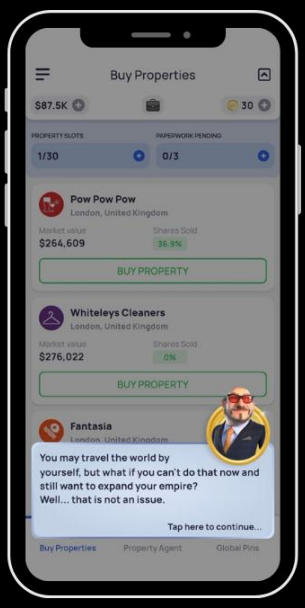
> *"See, some places are selling, like the whole of [nearby town]. I think there's the Eiffel Tower, that's probably out there somewhere."*

When setting up, users are encouraged to share 'geotracking' with the game to access these real-world locations. This was important to Mason, who had bought a local restaurant and was looking to grow his 'portfolio' in the area. The below screenshots from Landlord demonstrate how sharing location is introduced in the game, with the avatar informing users that it is possible to use the game without GPS tracking, although this will cause the user to lose access to some features of the game.

In the Landlord privacy policy, location is collected for the purposes of the game, and to offer "special deals, sales, and bargains to you" as part of their data profiling.

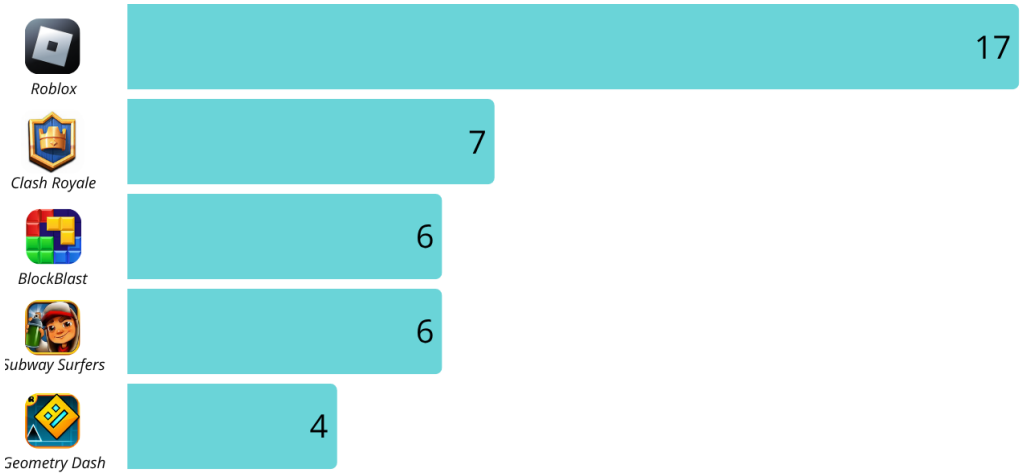






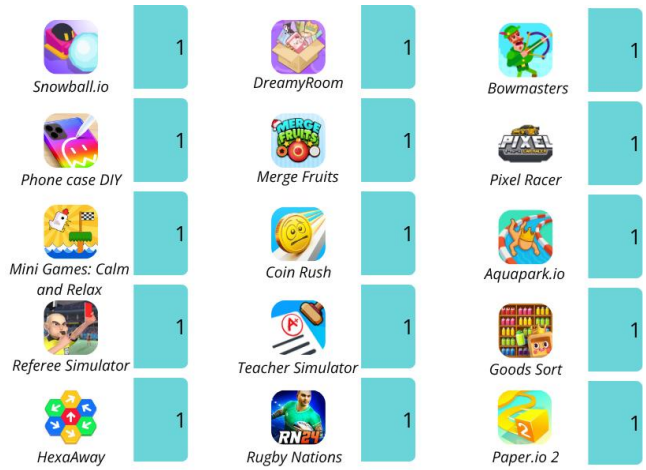
Free mobile games offered ways for companies to monetise children's time and behaviours

Alongside these more developed, interactive games, there were also many simple, repetitive games that children were playing.



A diagram illustrating a number of games played by multiple children in the sample.

This diagram demonstrates that while a few games were played by multiple children in the sample, there exists a 'long tail' of games played by only one child.



A diagram illustrating games that form part of the 'long tail' of games played by children in the sample.

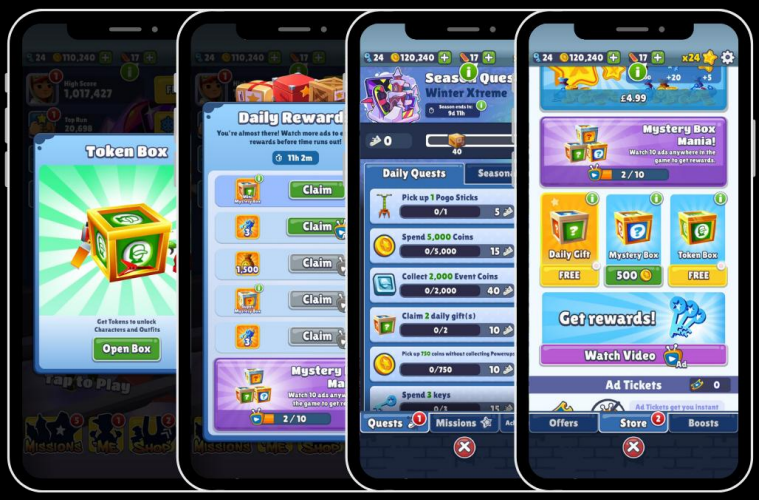
These games were generally free to download, available to play offline, with little to no user-to-user interaction. Many of these games were premised around completing simple tasks to score points and get to a higher level. They were largely enjoyed for being free, simple, and frictionless forms of entertainment, requiring little effort or thinking. Others involved users playing job roles such as teachers or football referees, providing a means of digital make-believe. As the diagram demonstrates, games like Roblox were widely played across the sample.

The design of these games tends to be bright, colourful and attractive, with gameplay features that encourage users to keep coming back. These can include prizes for each day you play, extra in-game currency for playing the game for longer, and time-limited events where users can earn big rewards for completing a number of challenges before the event ends. These are elements of persuasive design, used by platforms to influence user behaviour. On mobile games, by capturing children's attention for extended periods, these games are monetising their time and behaviour through ad revenues and prolonged gameplay.

Platform analysis: Design features of Subway Surfers incentivise players to return to the game to win prizes

Subway Surfers is a popular mobile game played by some of the children in the sample, such as Amy (11) and Dina (17). Like other free mobile games, it incorporates gambling-style mechanics through game features that give randomised rewards. Users can spend in-game 'coins' – which can be collected by playing the game, watching adverts or purchased with real money – on mystery boxes and spin wheels for a chance at rewards.

Adopting various features of persuasive design, Subway Surfers uses limited-time events, missions and daily rewards to encourage repeated engagement. While users can't cash out winnings on the game, the features share core elements with gambling: randomisation, risk, anticipation, and unpredictable rewards that keep users coming back.



Platform analysis: Free mobile games like TeacherSimulator are frictionless forms of play

These mobile games are highly accessible with few steps required to download and begin playing. For example, on TeacherSimulator, which Gwen (9) was playing this year, users do not need to create an account or provide an age to begin playing.

There are very few steps required to start playing TeacherSimulator – a free mobile game where users play as a teacher, control the class, and punish misbehaving students.

After opening the game for the first time, users choose whether to consent to sharing their data with 319 partners, then accept the terms of use. Users are then shown two prompts for the game's social media account and premium features before they can start playing. At no point do they need to input any personal details, but children's personal information, such as behaviours, IP address, and cookies, are shared with a wide range of partners.

Users' data on these games is shared with third parties, sometimes across the world, meaning there is little preventing children from having their data shared worldwide through these games.

For example, Bryanna (14) had a folder on her phone called 'Arcade Games', which included all the games she had downloaded over the last few years. Whilst she didn't play many of them often, one game she was enjoying playing this year was called HexaAway. HexaAway is a simple mobile game that was advertised to her on Tassomai, an app she uses for homework. Like many children, Bryanna had never looked at the privacy policy of HexaAway before and was unaware of the number of vendors she was sharing her data with.

> *"HexaAway…You have to be quite strategic. You have to match the colours, but you have to, like, get all of the blocks off without, like, bumping into one."*
> **Bryanna (14)**

Platform analysis: HexaAway shares data with third parties around the globe

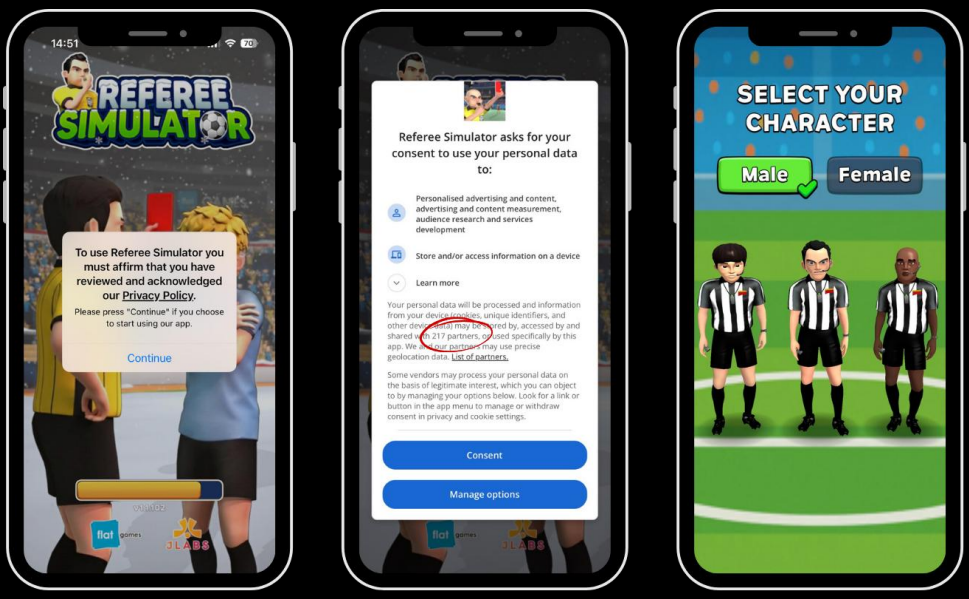
HexaAway is a very simple block matching game that Bryanna enjoyed playing. Like other, similar games, setting up the game required few steps, with no need to input personal details, such as a name, age, or email address to start playing.

Yet, at the start of the game, users are prompted to share their data with HexaAway's 305 partners – including their precise geolocation. These include third parties and ad vendors across the globe. Locations include North America and across Europe, to Saudi Arabia, China and Japan, where the headquarters of HexaAway's creators is located. Under the 'manage options' tab, data sharing options can be automatically agreed to in one 'accept all' button, but to reject all data sharing and vendor partners, each option must be manually rejected. This means accepting data sharing on HexaAway can be done at the push of a button, whereas rejection involves manually rejecting multiple default settings that agree to 'legitimate interest' sharing.

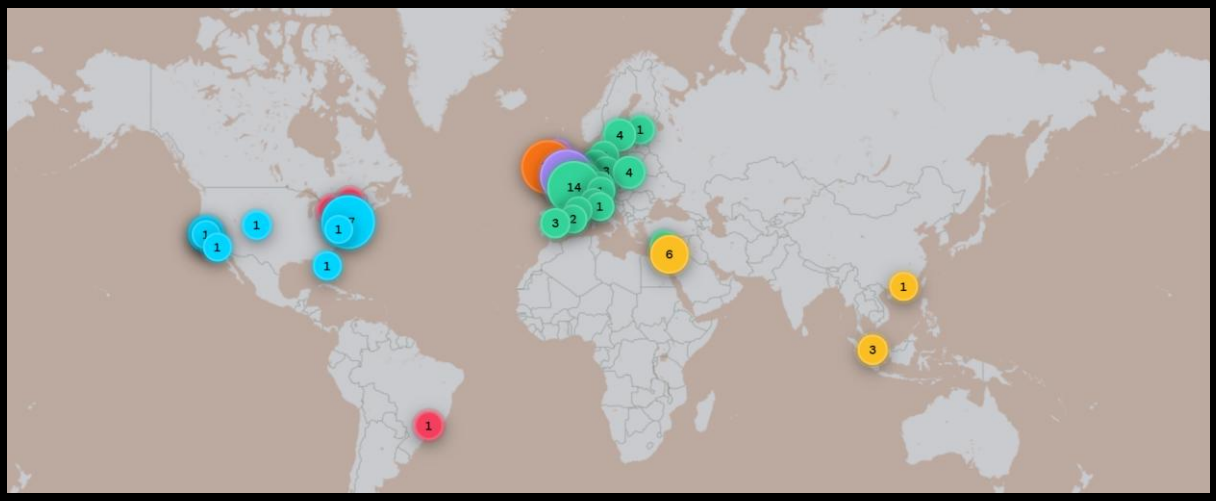
Similarly, Theo (8) was playing a game on his phone called Referee Simulator, one of 38 games on his phone, where users get to act as a football referee and are rewarded for making correct decisions and controlling the game. Like Bryanna, he was completely unaware that he was sharing data about himself by playing the game, as seen by his response to a pop-up asking for consent to share personal data.

> *"I just pressed consent…It's just to get it away… I don't know [what consent means], but I think it means close. It just stops it [the pop-up]."*
> **Theo (8)**

Platform analysis: Referee Simulator shares Theo's precise geolocation with 141 vendors and 71 ad partners around the world



Like HexaAway, users wanting to play Referee Simulator are prompted to consent to sharing their data with a huge number of third parties. Each of these vendors have their own privacy policies, and many are based abroad. Again, this data can include precise geolocation. As Theo did, pressing 'consent' gave permission for his data to be shared internationally, across 38 cities in 19 countries around the world.



A map illustrating the global data sharing Theo allowed by pressing 'consent' on Referee Simulator

HexaAway and Referee Simulator are not alone in sharing children's data, including precise geolocation, with hundreds of vendors across the globe – this was true for many of the games played by children across the sample.

The features that make these games so easy to access – no sign-up or account creation – also make it easy for children's data to be collected and shared on a global scale.

In-game adverts were a normalised part of free mobile gaming

For several children in the sample, adverts were almost as big a part of free mobile gaming as playing the games themselves. Age-inappropriate adverts in games such as BlockBlast were explored in Year 2, and this year showed just how prevalent and frequent adverts could be in many of these free mobile games. This was unsurprising, given the number of third parties and ad vendors with whom these games were sharing children's data with, but raised important questions about how targeted adverts affected children's behaviour on their devices.

Rose (10) (L) and Jordan (9) (R) encountering adverts on games they were playing

Children often found these adverts annoying and frustrating. This was because they prevented children from playing the actual game they wanted to play, with some getting 'stuck' playing games in adverts and struggling to close them.

> *"If an app has a lot of adverts, I don't really download it, because, like, I downloaded the app to play the game, not to watch a bunch of adverts."*
> **Arianna (10)**

> *"Another advert…Mummy, every time I come over it, there's an advert and there's this thing at the bottom and I can't get away…They're annoying, they just keep coming. No one wants an advert."*
> **Jordan (9)**

Several of these adverts were interactive, where children could test out playing the game being advertised before being encouraged to download it. For several children, this form of advertising was successful, and they reported downloading games after playing these interactive adverts.

> *"It's like the games are interactive, so, like, you do it and see if you like it. And I was like, oh, I like this game. And then it kept popping up, 'Do you want to install?' And I was like, no, no. And then I gave in and I installed it."*
> **Bryanna (14)**

> *"Well, let's say I'm playing four-in-a-row, every time I win, it comes up saying I win, and then there's an advert… Sometimes it will be a game or sometimes it'll be something else. Then if it's a good game, then I'll look at the game and I'll see if I want it or not. And if it's a bad game, then I'll just press 'X'."*
> **Siena (11), Jordan's (9) cousin**

> *"Whenever like an ad game comes up, like, it lets you play for a bit, but when you lose, you have to download it. But like, I played for a very long time on the advert because it was a losing game. But when I decided to download it so I could play it more longer [sic]."*
> **Leesha (10)**

As with Year 2, not all of these adverts felt age-appropriate. While most adverts were for other, similar games, some showed platforms that did not appear to be intended for children or appropriate for them.

> *"AI adverts…I don't know the name of the app, but it just shows, like there's this girl and boy talking and then it sounds so weird… they just sound weird and look weird."*
> **Farah (11)**

While many children chose to ignore these adverts, Jack's mum was shocked to find him speaking with an AI chatbot after he saw the platform advertised on a free game.

Case study: Jack (9) started messaging a 'flirty' AI chatbot after seeing it advertised in a game

Jack enjoyed playing a variety of free mobile games on his tablet, such as Geometry Dash, Clash Royale and Scratch Games. Most of the games he played were free to download, although during the interview he said he couldn't remember having seen adverts on them. He also reported never having used AI before, but understood it as 'pretend people'.

"I do [know about AI], but I don't go on it… AI is just, like, pretend people."

Jack's mum, however, had a different account. His mum described how he frequently downloaded free games or apps after seeing them advertised in other games he was already playing. This included an AI chatbot app, where she found him speaking to a chatbot of an older, flirty woman. She subsequently reset his tablet and stopped him from being able to download new apps without her permission, fearing what else might be advertised to him on these games that may not be appropriate for him.

"I found him, previously when he was on his iPad, talking to an AI robot…and it was a woman saying stuff back, and it freaked me out… it was almost like, flirty… I think it was a pop-up, just on the free – because he's tapping on the free games, there's lots of free things that keep coming up… I took off Google Play after, so it wasn't as easy for him to download things."
Jack's (9) mum

The long tail of simple games meant it could be hard for parents to have oversight of what children were playing

Given the sheer volume of games available and the ease with which new games could be downloaded, some parents reflected that it was difficult to maintain oversight of what their children were playing.

> *"What's happening is he's playing games and then new ones popping up and he's downloading them... We had to have a discussion about him asking me before doing it, because he was just downloading absolutely everything."*
> **Jack's (9) mum**

> *"I think they see it in an advert and think, we'll try that. I don't know how to describe them, they're just little logic-y sort of games [...] she just likes little games – but like I said, they continually... there's another one, and another one, and another one."*
> **Rose's (10) mum**

> *"Every time he gets on my phone, you end up with five different games that you hadn't had before."*
> **Theo's (8) dad**

Whilst some parents have tried to restrict their child's access to certain mobile games, this was sometimes made more difficult with the availability of similar, copycat games or websites designed to mimic other well-known games.

For example, CrazyGames, was used by Rose (10), who was not allowed to play on Roblox. Rose was, however, through CrazyGames, able to access very similar games to those available on Roblox, including popular Roblox experiences like 'Grow a Garden' and 'Steal a Brainrot'.

Children's engagement with these games was often short-lived, with new games becoming popular quickly and the games they used to play being discarded. Often, these games were discovered through adverts, such as on YouTube videos, or on in-game adverts during games they already played, which seemingly kept children in cycles of games capturing and redirecting their attention.

Despite the level of data collection involved in many of these free mobile games, their data-related risks were generally not visible or obvious to parents. Being available offline, often requiring no sign-in, and with children unable to interact with other users, these games appeared relatively harmless in comparison to the fears many parents had about user-to-user platforms, like Roblox or Fortnite.

> *"Roblox was a concern because just by chance I remember you could hear him talking […] stuff like that scares you obviously because you know like it can be so easy for like strange people to get in touch and stuff."*
> **Theo's (8) dad**

> *"We said you can't talk to people you don't know [on Fortnite]… you think they're other kids, but they might not be."*
> **Daniel's (13) mum**

Even away from social, multiplayer gaming platforms, parents also voiced concerns about the impact of games on their children's behaviour, such as angry outbursts or addictive tendencies that they attributed to the games their children were playing.

> *"They are much deeper in games. Like they don't want to move themselves and they don't want to do any other activity."*
> **Leesha's (10) mum**

> *"He played Fortnite before but now we stopped him because when he played it was a very bad addiction to him. Like he plays so much and I felt some aggression in him."*
> **Shiv's (12) mum**

When weighing up the harms associated with the games their children play, extensive data collection is almost invisible in comparison to the observable and immediate risks of behavioural issues and user-to-user interactions.

Chapter 3: Technology and learning

Chapter summary

Technology appeared as an inevitable part of school life for most children. Use of devices and technology for learning was embedded across schoolwork, homework, revision, communication with teachers, and school admin such as calendars and events. Yet, children often showed little awareness of how school platforms might use their personal information.

Education platforms were also commonly used by parents, providing them with detailed insight about their children's school lives. This could include information about their child's behaviour, lesson content, homework, and activities.

Technology felt like an inevitable part of children's learning

Over the last two years, *Children's Data Lives* has explored the role of technology and data sharing in different areas of children's lives, from friendships and relationships to shopping and playing. However, a huge part of children's lives is their learning. This year, *Children's Data Lives* took a closer look into how children were using technology to learn, and what this means for their data rights.

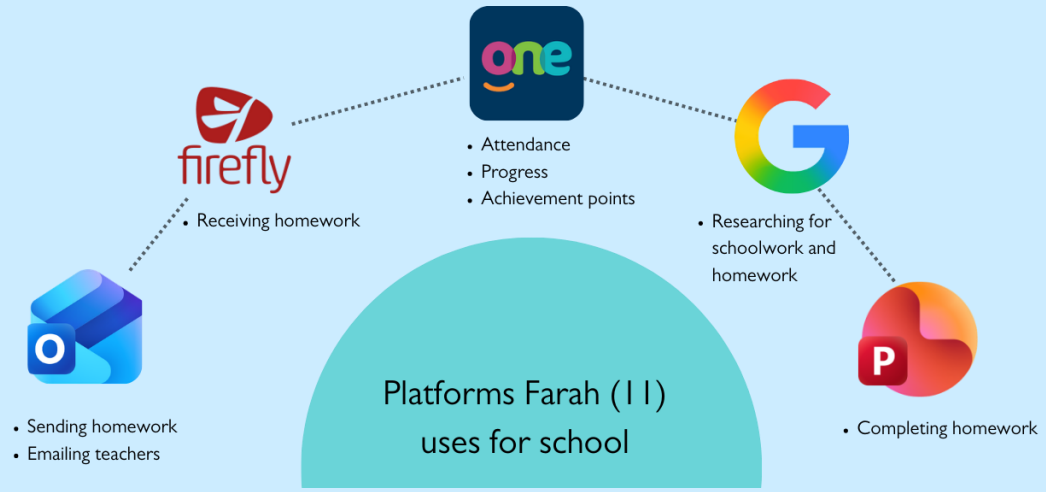
For almost all children in the sample, technology played a role in their learning

Whether in school, completing their homework, or for extra-curricular learning, technology featured in some way across almost every child's education.

For some children, this was limited to one or two platforms that their school used, but for other children, like Farah (11), the wide range of educational technology they used almost every day covered most parts of their school life.

Case study: Farah (11) used technology for homework, contacting teachers, tracking her progress, and organising her school day

Now in secondary school, technology was heavily integrated into Farah's school life. She used computers regularly at school during lessons and for completing homework, and had multiple apps relating to her school life on her tablet.



A diagram illustrating platforms Farah used for school

This included platforms to receive and send homework such as Firefly and Outlook, which she had to regularly check to keep on top of everything. Farah was still getting used to receiving her homework this way and sometimes forgot – during the interview, she realised she had several overdue pieces of homework that she didn't know about, but decided to mark them as completed anyway.

> *"I got so many overdue of these homeworks [sic]. I thought there was only one and now they've sent four more. I'm just gonna mark it as done."*
> **Farah (11)**

She also used Edulink, an app where she could see her attendance, achievement points and behaviour points. It also helped her organise her school day, by showing her timetable, having a digital school noticeboard, and information about after-school clubs.

Farah also regularly relied on technology to help her complete her homework, using Google to complete most of her research and PowerPoint to create presentations.

Most children were using digital platforms offered by their school that helped them track their lessons, timetables, and keep on top of their homework to-do list. Some of these platforms offered direct contact to their teachers to ask questions or communicate absences, as well as publishing their results.

One platform, ClassCharts, was frequently mentioned by children in the sample. It enabled children to see their homework tasks, timetable, and attendance, but also tracked their behaviour points on the app. Mason (15) described how behaviour points accumulated across the year on the app, with positives awarded for good behaviour and negatives for bad.

> *"The teacher has this set out on her computer. What she'll do is click on the person and that will generate one of these behaviour points and she can just like put negatives, put multiple on at a time, whatever."*
> **Mason (15)**

Each child was able to see their 'score' – which for Mason's school was used as an incentive in multiple ways.

> *"I've got 356 [points] so far. You have to get 600 to go to prom […] Soon there's gonna be a shop apparently so you can buy like queue jump passes and stuff like that […] so you can use these points that we have, it's like in-game currency but for school. So you can use those points to go towards like items which is what they're gonna put in soon."*
> **Mason (15)**

Technology was shaping children's behaviour in multiple ways, through visual representations of how 'good' they have been at school, to introducing a commercial element that their behaviour could pay for.

Away from school settings, technology was also being used by children to research topics and learn skills outside of the school environment.

> *"It's all in one app… I use this app to get my guitar music. Chordify gives you the chords for all the songs for a song you want to play."*
> **Baz (16)**

> *"I do an online class on teams with my teacher… That's my Quran, that's not related to school… I'll finish it twice, it's going to be the last time now. I'm almost finished with it, I have like six chapters left."*
> **Shiv (12)**

> *"People are shocked when they see [my DuoLingo streak] is 1231 days… [I'm learning] Welsh, but sometimes I didn't really do any new lessons."*
> **Erin (16)**

In a significant change from Year 2, many children now used AI platforms to help with tasks – researching topics, generating ideas, or explaining how to approach questions.

> *"On Google there's this AI mode and it will just tell you, or sometimes on Microsoft Edge there's Copilot… If I'm asking a really complicated question or I want some help with, let's say writing a story, 'Do you have any themes or ideas?'"*
> **Amy (11)**

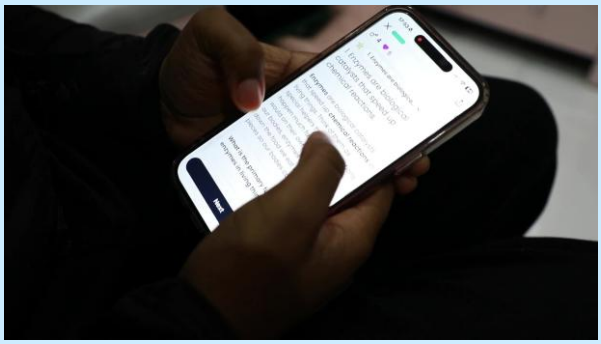
"I use [ChatGPT] for inspiration sometimes if I need, like I was looking for a picture of a fairy, so like 'generate me a photo of a fairy.'"
Orla (17)

"[ChatGPT] can explain to me how to do a question, like show me techniques and stuff… I don't really ask it for the answer, I just ask it how to answer."
Daniel (13)

However, others relied on AI tools more heavily, using AI to produce answers for them rather than working through tasks themselves.

Case study: Bryanna used AI to make sure she got her homework answers right

Bryanna was assigned much of her homework on the platform Tassomai, which her school required her to download. On Tassomai, Bryanna completed multiple choice quizzes set by her teachers on different topics.



During the interview, Bryanna demonstrated how she would screenshot the question and upload the image to the Google Lens feature on the Google App.

This would then generate an automatic AI response to the question, along with a short explanation of why that answer was correct.

Bryanna would then return to Tassomai and enter the correct answer. Her phone library was full of countless screenshots of Tassomai questions, which Bryanna said would "speak for itself" regarding how much she used this to complete her homework.

In a similar way to Bryanna using Google AI mode to answer homework questions for her, several children in the sample were using an app called GauthAI, which allowed users to scan homework questions and generated answers for them.

"You just take a picture of the problem and then it will solve it and they give the worked solution."
Baz (16)

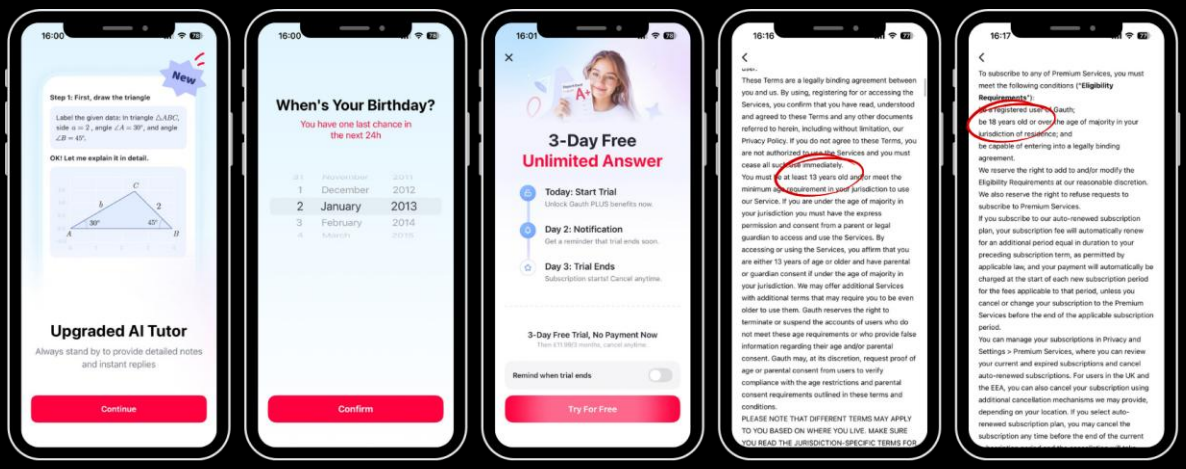
"What I'm going to do is I'm just gonna take a picture of that… It goes through AI, it gives you an explanation and it gives you the answer… I find it really useful when they give us like a test paper back and I've messed up a questions. Let's say I like to just pass it through that and it will go through every sort of detail and the step by step of it."
Erin (16)

"I used to use this app called Gauth. I used to screenshot the question and I used to send it over to Gauth and it gave the answer. My friends were telling me about it. So I used to use that for my homework, so if I had to do it really quick I'd use Gauth straight away."
Joey (14)

Platform analysis: GauthAI is meant for users aged 13+, but has no age verification in place

GauthAI, used by several of the children in the sample to help with schoolwork, is shown as for ages 4+ in the app store. Its terms of service state it's for users aged 13+, with premium features only for users 18 or over.

However, there are no age verification measures in place – users can simply input their birthday to whichever date they choose in order to start using the platform.



Most children felt technology enabled their learning to be fun and efficient

Given the embedded nature of technology in children's learning, most children reflected positively about how technology was used at school. Younger children in the sample described playing fun games in class that they felt was helping their learning and breaking up their day from work on paper.

> *"I like doing it on a laptop because it answers the question for me… I do it more quicker [sic] and I get better marks."*
> **Tariq (11), Madiha's (13) cousin**

> *"With Language Nut you get these things set and then you do the quiz after…My Spanish teacher is really nice and sometimes we play this quiz game and that's quite fun."*
> **Amy (11)**

Older children were often more reliant on technology for completing their schoolwork, with most seeing it as the default way of completing tasks.

> *"I don't think I could live without it now, to be fair. Like, especially in school, because most of it's surrounded by school. I even use my iPad to write notes."*
> **Dina (17)**

> *"Say we didn't have computers, it would take definitely a lot more time to do coursework… if I didn't have computers it would be pretty worrying with the amount I am typing up anyway. So I think using computers in school is very useful."*
> **Jamie (17)**

Technology was also sometimes used as a reward at school for good behaviour or for doing well in assignments or homework. For example, some children spoke about getting to use tablets to play educational games in lessons or being allowed screen time as a treat. One child had received a tablet as part of doing an additional enrichment course.

> *"We normally use iPads [at school]...We have a game on there. It's like a times table game and teachers get us to play the times table games if we're done."*
> **Arianna (10)**

"We have, like, our own personal iPads… But then the thing is, if you don't pass the course next year, you get it taken back."
Celeste (14)

"They have something called Dojo points So if they've done well, then the teachers will award them dojo points... So they get to pick sort of 'Golden time', which is like screen time in school."
Jack's (9) mum

Case study: Alex wanted more technology at school

Alex (16) attended a school he described as generally "against technology" and had limited access to technology in-school compared to other children in the sample. He still carried a homework planner and had to have his phone placed in an electromagnetic sleeve at the beginning of the day. When reflecting on the use of technology in his learning, Alex felt he was missing out, especially when other schools nearby were given iPads.

"Instead of everything just being pen and paper, it'll be mixed. So you could have your iPad in one class and then paper in another class. It'll be better throughout the day instead of just having one thing the whole day."
Alex (16)

When asked what the pros and cons of using an iPad in school would be, Alex suggested access to a tablet could be distracting, but could be mitigated by restrictions in school and spot checks to make sure people were using them appropriately.

As Alex demonstrates, some children believed technology would enhance their education, even when it was not the default teaching method in their school. Their familiarity with digital tools outside school and awareness of its use in friends' schools made the prospect of technology in the classroom appealing.

With technology being used so widely, introducing more fun games to their learning, and in some cases being used as a reward, it is perhaps unsurprising that many children thought positively of the impact of technology on their learning. However, some children reflected on the downsides of using technology at school, including their increased dependence on screens.

"In school my mum, the teacher, they all say 'don't stare at screens for long', even though we're staring at a screen for at least six hours a day, looking at work. Well sometimes in English you write in your book, in maths you write in your book, but you're still always looking at a screen."
Hamza (10), Madiha's (13) cousin

"I'll probably be a lot smarter [without technology] [laughs]. Yeah, I think I would have to read books all the time because I don't read books."
Dina (17)

Technology was the default for much of children's learning and school life

For most children, technology was seen as an ordinary and inescapable part of school life and learning. It was a normal part of their education that they ultimately didn't have a choice over, often with technology automatically set up for children to use. For example, at Amy (11)'s school, all students were given Chromebooks for them to complete homework on. Others, like Orla (17) and Dina (17) couldn't imagine doing schoolwork without technology – it felt too essential to their learning to do without.

"My Chromebook, which is where we just do all of our homework…So they already had it all set up for you. So you have a school email, you have all the information that you actually need on there. So we didn't actually

have to do anything."
Amy (11)

"I think it's [technology] very necessary...for like getting our like journal work done and our research and like there's loads of that we have to do. So yeah, it's definitely needed."
Orla (17)

"Obviously they use computers and laptops for all this stuff […] They'd obviously have a personal information, wouldn't they, date of birth, etc. So I'm sure they hold that as data isn't there? But apart from that, I don't know, I'm not really sure because they don't really discuss, do they, what kind of data they store? I don't think."
Madiha's (13) dad

Both children and parents tended to assume that schools – and the platforms selected by schools – were appropriate and had children's best interests in mind, with limited discussion or questioning of how these systems worked or how personal information might be used.

Children often showed little awareness of how school platforms might use their personal information

Farah (11) used Edulink at her new school, an app that shares information about herself and her progress. When reflecting on who may have access to her information, Farah felt only her parents and teachers would be able to see her information on the app.

"Edulink is to see your achievement points, your behaviour points, and like your grades maybe…Your parents or, if you want, your family [see these points]. The teachers. And I think that's it."
Farah (11)

Amy (11) did acknowledge that platforms like Sparx might see the information she puts on there. However, she wasn't quite sure what they would do with this information – thinking it might be to notify schools if an individual student has performed particularly well on a piece of homework.

"I think because there's so many schools using it, I don't think they pay attention to every single student. I think if there's someone who's doing really, really well, like getting, I don't know, a million points in a week, which is much above the standards that they set, I think then they'll look at that. And be like, well, this person's really good. And then they might notify the school and say, we haven't seen someone this good in, I don't know, five years, maybe you could get some recognition for them."
Amy (11)

Erin (16), used Google Classroom for completing schoolwork and sending it to teachers. When going through the platform, she came across an option within the settings to limit the information she shared, such as web activity and search history, but was confused about why this would be necessary.

"I don't really go on Google Classroom that much, and when I do it's only for schoolwork, so it doesn't really have much personal information about me…I think maybe it's in case, I don't know, you decide you don't want to show as much about you anymore. I honestly don't know."
Erin (16)

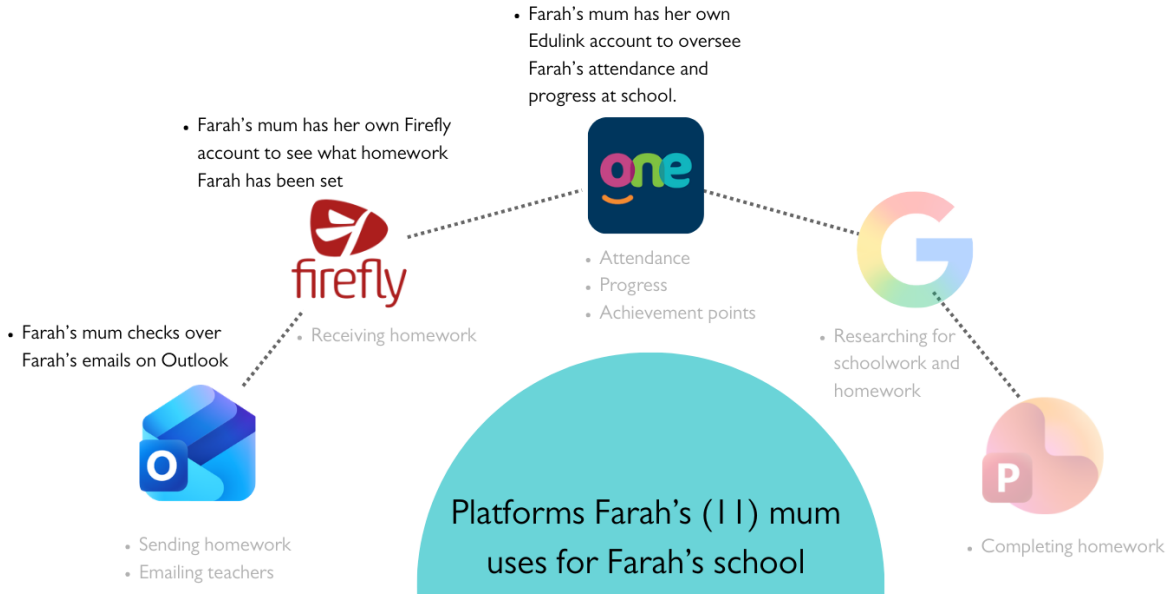
Many aspects of school life were mediated through digital systems, with learning, behaviour and attendance commonly recorded and communicated through multiple apps, making these elements of education visible and trackable on an ongoing basis.

Education platforms gave parents the potential for detailed insight into their children's school lives

Education and learning platforms were a big part of most children's learning, and were increasingly important for parents, too. By enabling parents to monitor and track their children's school lives, educational technology provided another means of parental surveillance. This form of surveillance is used in addition to location sharing and the use of smart home devices that was explored in Years 1 and 2.

Parents often had access to multiple sources of information about their children's schooling

Many parents had access to at least one digital platform linked to their child's school and extracurricular life. For example, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, Farah (11) used multiple platforms to help with her organisation, homework, and learning at school. Farah's mum also used many of the same platforms to monitor her performance and school life. These enabled her to also keep track of Farah's schedule, homework and upcoming tests, as well as seeing how she was behaving at school without having to communicate directly with Farah's teachers.



A diagram illustrating how Farah's mum uses the platforms linked with Farah's school

Most parents spoke positively about this level of visibility, describing it as a way to stay informed about how their child was doing at school. This could be both in addition to and instead of having conversations with their child and teachers about what they were getting up to.

> *"Without [Seesaw], I wouldn't know what was going on in school. It's very hard to get her to tell me what they do all day, every day and for her to remember. So just sending through photos of the poster she's been working on about Katherine Johnson and, you know, the work she did on Uranus, just seeing little glimpses of what she's working on. Technology like that is brilliant."*
> **Gwen's (9) mum**

> *"I'm glad that it's online because you can keep up with everything. All the homework is online. Everything is online. So if they're behind, the email just comes out, you know that they're going to be staying in the next day...every week it sends out a reminder, look at [Amy's] assignments and you can check in. It's pretty good really."*
> **Amy's (11) dad**

Many of these platforms went beyond sharing information about upcoming school events and payment portals, allowing parents to have direct lines of communication with teachers, receive live updates on their attendance and progress, and view information about behaviour. This could include both positive feedback and any sanctions or punishments they had received.

However, some parents found the number of different platforms confusing or overwhelming, especially where their children attended different schools, moved schools, or where the platforms used by schools changed over time. Others found it frustrating having to rely on their personal devices for their children to access their homework.

> *"There are so many apps...When he first started, so if you think about it, that's a span of five years...They've got Sims, Class Charts... Google Classroom."*
> **Mason's (15) mum**

> *"It really annoys me, because their homework is only online and she can only access it through the app on my phone, which is Learning With Parents… And they just sort of send updates whenever they want throughout the week."*
> **Arianna's (10) mum**

> *"My downfall is that the school are constantly emailing me and letting me know that this is what he needs to do and [Isaac] knows how to do it and it's on his phone but I don't have access to it because I tend to not be very good with remembering passwords and things like that. So I get very stressed about [that]. I actually prefer just the emails or paper formats for homework."*
> **Isaac's (15) mum**

For Celeste's (14) mum, her daughter's use of technology for schoolwork became particularly problematic when it contradicted the rules she had established over device use at home. Celeste felt as though the time limits she had on her phone shouldn't apply to a device she'd received from school.

> *"She got into a program in school and they gave her, like, a new iPad. And then that iPad, I was like, how do I monitor what's on the iPad?... It was such a toss up because she was like, oh, it's not you that bought that one, or like, it's school's one... if I give consent for it to be given to you, then I have to make sure that what you're doing on it and stuff like that, I can, like, have access to it."*
> **Celeste's (14) mum**

Parental oversight of school life was normalised and encouraged

While children were at school, some parents had access to detailed and ongoing information about their day, ranging from test results and behaviour points to practical details such as what their child had eaten for lunch.

> *"That's all done through the parent portal as well. So you get all of that information in relation to him specifically, to […] his reports get published, his grades get published, attendance record is there as well."*
> **Daniel's (13) mum**

> *"Everyday I look at the behaviours, always an interesting talk point at the end of the day. 'So tell me what happened in that lesson then.'"*
> **Mason's (15) mum**

> *"The My Child at School app… They're sending behaviours. Negative, positive. If she's got detention. Or dinner, obviously we pay for her dinner, so even what she's had for dinner."*
> **Madiha's (13) dad**

This steady stream of information and updates on precise details of their child's school activity was a celebrated function of these platforms, which advertise this monitoring as enhancing children's education and personal development.

As well as closer monitoring of their children's school lives, some platforms also provided parents with more direct access to their teachers. For example, Seesaw, a platform used for education in the sample, promoted its messaging functions available to parents which '*provide a continuous communication loop all year long*' between parents and teachers. Similarly, ClassDojo was a platform used by a few of the parents in the sample, including Jack's mum.

Case study: Jack's (9) mum was using ClassDojo to monitor his behaviour points and directly message his teachers

Jack's school used ClassDojo – a platform where teachers can share information about how children are doing at school with parents. This included a feature where parents could directly message teachers through the app. Jack's mum said she used the app daily, and enjoyed the ease with which it enabled her to directly contact his teachers. For example, Jack recently had Dojo points removed for talking over another student in class, and his mum used the app to message his teacher to ask what exactly happened and why he had his points removed.

> *"It is good because it is a direct, quick link to them…He had a couple of Dojo points removed which I didn't know was possible. So I messaged his teacher… and was like, you know, could you explain to me sort of, like, why. And she did."*
> **Jack's (9) mum**

ClassDojo uses 'Dojo points' where teachers and parents can reward children for good behaviour, resulting in prizes at school such as certificates, toys, or even screen time. The free version of the app caps parents on the number of points they can give their children, but Jack's mum explained that if you pay for the premium version of the app, this limit is lifted.

> *"Dojo points kind of all add up. And I think when they get to about 10, they get a certificate and it's kind of a little bit like a child of the week. So they get to pick sort of - what's it called? Golden time, which is like screen time in school. So that they get to pick a picture, like a picture, a film to watch or whatever…You get up to three [Dojo points]. You could get more, basically, if you paid for the app."*
> **Jack's (9) mum**

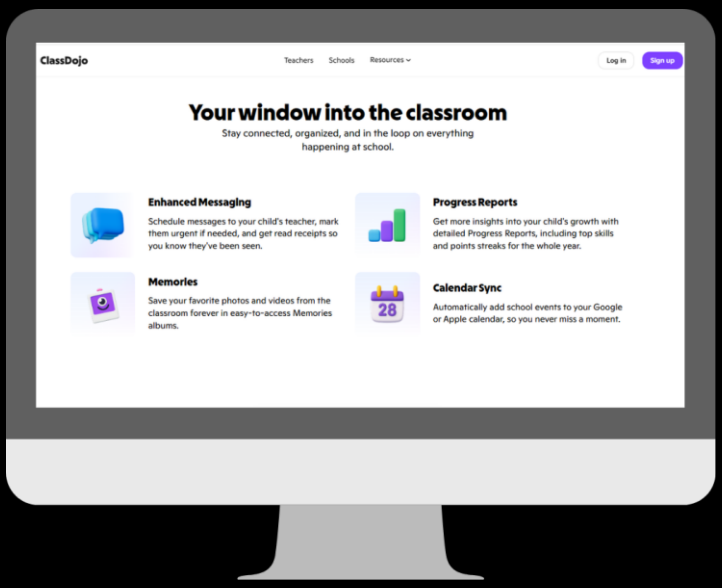
Platform analysis: ClassDojo allows parents to pay for premium features that give them greater access to their children's teachers and school lives

ClassDojo markets itself as a platform where parents can 'stay connected-instantly' through its messaging features between parents and teachers. It also promotes how it can 'offer a window into their world', where teachers can share photos and videos from children's lessons directly with parents.

The oversight into children's school lives offered by ClassDojo is enhanced with ClassDojo Plus – a premium version of the platform where parents pay for extra benefits. These include being able to award their children additional Dojo points, get instant homework help using an AI homework tool, and have enhanced messaging with teachers – such as marking their own messages as urgent.

This paid tier introduces a form of data-mediated hierarchy within the classroom. Children whose parents can afford and choose to pay for the subscription may gain Dojo points faster than their classmates, and their parents gain enhanced access to teachers through 'urgent' message flags.

Jack's mum didn't know of any parents who were paying for ClassDojo Plus. However, its existence raises questions not just about data privacy and oversight, but about fairness in the classroom – whether children's rewards and parental access to teachers should be influenced by their family's ability to pay.



The widespread use of education platforms continued a pattern seen in Years 1 and 2 of *Children's Data Lives*: parental monitoring of children's daily lives had become routine and largely unquestioned and could be bound up with ideas or worries about what it means to be a good parent. Just as location-sharing and smart home devices had normalised surveillance at home and when out with friends or travelling to school, educational technology extended this oversight into the classroom. For several children in the sample, nearly every aspect of their school day – where they were, what they were doing, how they were behaving – was visible to their parents in real-time.

This constant visibility may have consequences beyond data privacy. When children know their behaviour is being tracked and reported home, it may influence how they act in the classroom – potentially discouraging risk-taking, experimentation, or the kind of social learning that happens through mistakes.

Minor acts of misbehaving that might previously have been resolved in the moment become permanent records, visible to parents and stored by platforms. For children to participate fully in school life, data sharing through these platforms is often required, not optional. Parents and children may view this as beneficial, but the long-term implications for children growing up in an education system where so much information about them is tracked, shared and stored remains unclear.

Beyond immediate behavioural effects, this environment of continuous monitoring may contribute to the normalisation of surveillance. When children grow up accustomed to parents, teachers and platform providers having access to granular, real-time information about their movements, behaviour and performance, extensive data visibility can come to feel routine rather than exceptional. The normalisation of such visibility in the classroom may therefore have implications that extend beyond schooling, shaping expectations about surveillance and data sharing in other areas of social life.

Chapter 4: Children's relationships with emerging technologies

Chapter summary

This year saw a marked increase in the number of children actively using AI. For most, they were using AI to learn or play, often in a way that was integrated in their existing use of technology.

A few children were using AI for advice or more personal reasons, sometimes sharing extensive personal information with AI platforms to get the help they were seeking. However, few children knew much about how AI worked or how it might be using their personal information – despite the high levels of trust in AI some children showed.

Effective age verification measures remained limited this year, with self-declaration being the main means of age assurance. Some older children were aware of or using VPNs to bypass restrictions and access content – but with none of these children being able to explain what the data implications of using VPNs might be.

AI offered children new ways to play, learn, and get advice

Compared with Year 2, when only a small number of children were actively using AI, Year 3 marked a clear change: almost all children in the sample were engaging with AI in some way, either through specific Generative AI platforms or through AI features embedded within platforms they already used.

Children were largely using AI to learn or play

As seen in the first year of Children's Data Lives, younger children were exploring this new technology through play. ChatGPT was one of the AI platforms being used most commonly, with younger children using it to generate funny images, make up games, or ask questions when they were curious. Some children accessed these tools through their parents' devices, while others had access on their own devices.

> *"I done create [sic] an image of a fridge on a dog. It's like a dog carrying a fridge on its back."*
> **Liam (10)**

> *"He started to like ChatGPT a little bit more, so he'll use my phone for that rather than the [Apple] HomePods because with the HomePods it's a bit annoying sometimes because if you want a lot of information, it will say it's going to send it to your phone instead, whereas he just wants it to be read out. So he likes ChatGPT because it just reads it out so he can have a conversation where he puts the voice bit on and he's talking about whatever animal he wants to find [out about]."*
> **Jordan's (9) mum**

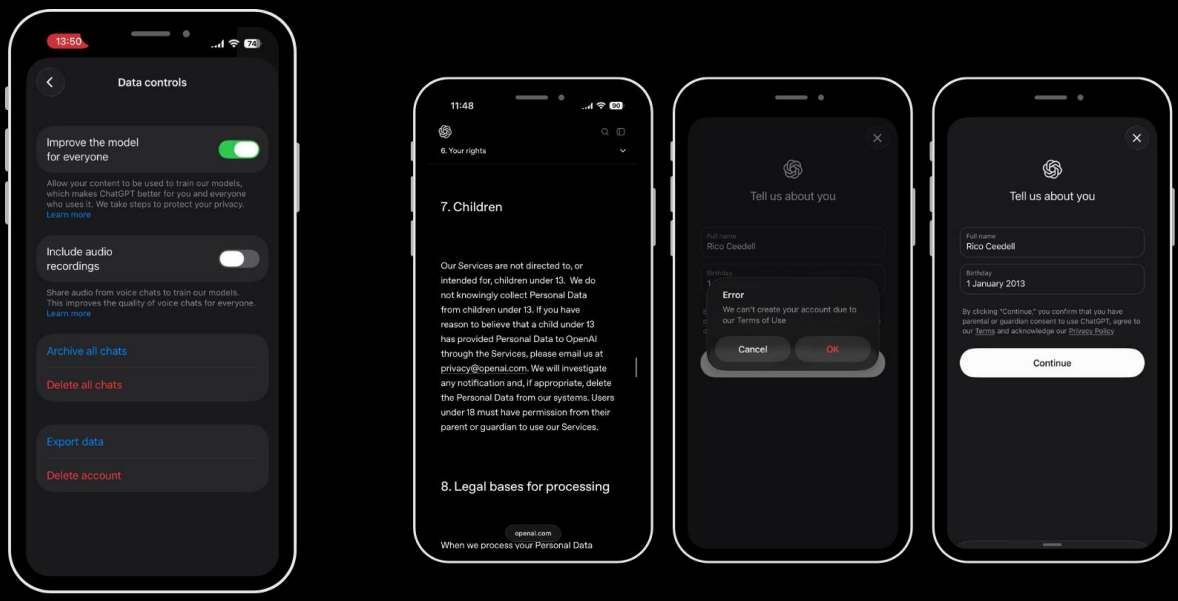
Platform analysis: ChatGPT said it was explicitly not for children – but did nothing to stop children using it

ChatGPT – the most popular AI platform used in the sample – outlines in its terms that its services "are not directed to, or intended for, children under 13." However, across the sample, multiple children under 13 were using ChatGPT.

When downloading the app, users can begin using ChatGPT without creating an account or verifying their age. Account creation requires users to self-declare their age, where an error message appears if users attempt to enter an age under 13. This could be overridden by selecting cancel and simply changing the birth year, with access then granted to the user.

By default, the 'improve the model for everyone' setting is turned on, meaning data from conversations with ChatGPT could be used to facilitate machine learning.

Without robust age assurance in place, there was no meaningful way for ChatGPT to prevent children using its services and sharing its data with OpenAI, which many children in the sample were doing regularly.



For some children, engagement with AI did not involve using new platforms. Instead, AI features had become integrated into platforms they already used and trusted. AI-generated summaries of search results and Google's AI mode were widely used.

> *"When Google has the thing at the top that's sometimes there's stuff highlighted in blue, that's AI. So normally that's what you use and that's AI."*
> **Amy (11)**

Similarly to previous years, a small number of children used MyAI on Snapchat. This included Madiha's cousin Hamza (10), who would use the feature when his friends were slow to respond to him, which shaped how quickly he expected people to reply.

> *"Sometimes in Snapchat, if you don't add anybody, you see at the top, the AI tool. So when you say 'hi' on the [AI] chat, it'll quickly send it [a reply], like it won't wait. I talk to my friends, my cousins… he might reply like AI, but maybe not, he might reply [in] two hours."*
> **Hamza (10), Madiha's (13) cousin**

In Hamza's case, having the option available to him of an integrated AI chatbot on Snapchat that always responded immediately, kept conversations going, and did not ignore him, had influenced his expectations about what ordinary human interactions should look like – getting frustrated when his friends and cousins didn't "reply like AI", regardless of what else they might have been doing.

As outlined earlier in the report ('Chapter 3: Technology and learning'), some children were using AI for their schoolwork. Some reported this largely involved receiving constructive feedback on work they had already completed, for others it was a way to quickly obtain direct answers to questions. Children differed in how they felt about this: some described these uses as unhelpful for their learning and framed them as 'cheating', while others saw AI as simply a way to complete homework as efficiently as possible.

In some cases, children were encouraged by their parents to use AI as a learning tool, particularly where parents were already using AI themselves in their personal lives or at work.

> *"We got stuck on a maths question and he was able to take a picture of the whole sheet, put it on Chat [GPT] and it broke it all down, and we went through because I was like, oh, this is hard. I can't remember*

how to do this maths equation. It's year five and I can't remember."
Jordan's (9) mum

For many children, the use of AI had been formally banned by their schools. Despite this, a small number described receiving informal guidance from teachers, including advice on how to prompt AI to give answers that sounded more like those of a child their age.

"The teachers catched [sic] on to what they were doing…. They made it too obvious that it was made by a ChatGPT AI… [my teacher] said something about make it look like it wasn't made by AI, or say, like, I'm a year 10 student, can you, like make this answer but make it not look like it was made by AI or something like that."
Isaac (15)

"The school says you can't use AI for homework, but then some teachers kind of allow it a bit. We had one homework where the teacher just says, use AI whatever you want, and everyone was really surprised, they just didn't expect them to say that. But most teachers they'll allow it if it helps you to learn, but if you're just using it for the answers, then they won't allow you to do that."
Daniel (13)

As with other digital platforms explored in this research, children's use of AI was driven by what it allowed them to do, rather than by an understanding of how it worked. Broadly, there was a lack of understanding about how AI systems functioned or how their data was being used when they interacted with them.

Most children were unsure how AI worked or how their data was being used

Despite widespread engagement with AI, most children were unclear about how AI worked, with some not equating use with sharing information about themselves or considering how it may be used by the platform.

Unsurprisingly, younger children in the sample were often unsure about what AI was, let alone how it worked.

"We do not know who they are."
"It could be a human."
"I think it's a robot, but sometimes maybe they switch around. So the AI comes off and the human goes on."
Conversation between Jordan (9) and his cousin Siena (11)

"I will look at Google [about skincare products], because AI, it's a robot. They're not going to be putting it on their face."
Margot (11)

This extended to older children, who, when asked, were often unable to explain how AI worked, and were largely unaware of the information it collected or how it was used.

"To be honest, I never fully looked into it. Obviously I know it's artificial, stands for artificial intelligence, but I've never looked into AI that much […] I think it's a cool bit of technology to be fair, the way it can just like make posters and then write all these essays and whatnot if you ever needed it. But yeah, I don't really know how it would be able to do that, to be fair."
Jamie (17)

"You put in the question and it gives you an answer that's been pre-placed. But I don't know how they would get all the questions in because it's some pretty, like high technology stuff, like really advanced and I don't know how they do it."
Mason (15)

Even children in the sample who considered computers and technology among their main hobbies or were high achieving were often unable to articulate exactly how AI worked. Few had thought about data implications at all.

"I don't really know [how it works], no… I think we just like use it and we just ask questions and expect us to get the answers. We've never actually spoken about what goes on behind… [The information] probably gets saved into some database. I don't know, I've never bothered to think about that before."
Celeste (14)

> *"[I don't] completely know [how it works] I know when it gives answers, it'll answer off what it's researched […] the way it formats the question, it's got that from Google or the Internet […] Maybe it remembers [my conversations]."*
> **Umar (16)**

Shiv (12) was one of the few children in the sample who reflected on the fact that ChatGPT had changed over time. He described this improvement as the result of OpenAI expanding and investing more in the technology, rather than linking it to the way people use the tool or the information they share with it.

> *"Now they've like built on top of it […] I know it's got really popular nowadays, like really popular. I think [OpenAI] have expanded their company, now they can put a lot more effort into it and they're trying to get as many people as possible hooked onto it, so they start using it a lot, which means they get the money, they get all the profits."*
> **Shiv (12)**

When looking at his settings, Shiv had the 'Improve model for everyone' setting turned on but disregarded it as a function that used *"mistakes to improve the software in general",* rather than as something that involved his own interactions being used by the platform.

Across the sample, children demonstrated they knew what AI could do, but not how it did it. This held across ages and technical abilities, with all children unaware or unable to articulate precisely how information was collected and used by AI platforms.

A small number of children were using AI for more personal support and advice

Beyond play and schoolwork, a small number of children described using AI for advice. This included turning to AI for help instead of people in their lives, such as asking it questions they did not understand at school rather than approaching a teacher, or seeking quick answers instead of asking their parents.

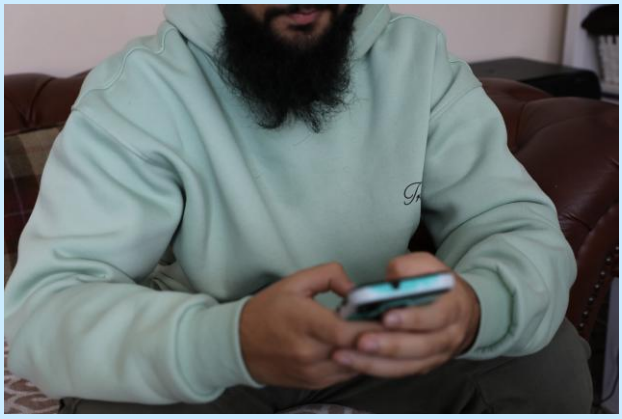
> *[Researcher] "If you wanted advice about something, who would you ask?"*
>
> *[Jordan] "ChatGPT"*
> **Jordan (9)**

> *"If you're trying to help someone and they keep on asking questions like tons and tons, you just get like fed up, but ChatGPT will never get fed up because it hasn't got any emotions… It won't stop replying to your chat because it's tired. It can't get tired like that […] When I was little I used to ask [my mum] to help [on my computer]. She'd be like oh, you already know that, I've told you a thousand times. So if I asked ChatGPT… it would just keep on telling me and telling me."*
> **Shiv (12)**

> *"I think I'd Google it or ChatGPT it or Safari it or something like that. And then I'd ask [mum] or Dad. I don't know, it depends what it is."*
> **Frankie (14)**

A few children went further, using AI platforms such as ChatGPT to ask for advice about personal situations or to share more personal information.

Case study: Umar (16) - "If I need a conversation or advice, then I'll go to ChatGPT"



ChatGPT was Umar's second most used app, which he used around three hours a week. He described using it to "vent" and help settle arguments with his friends. Using ChatGPT's voice feature, Umar would share his frustrations, liking that the platform would often endorse his position and back him up against his friends.

He felt ChatGPT was like having "someone cheering for you", being always present, supportive, and more likely to understand the minor details of the game he was playing. He appreciated that, rather than going downstairs to tell his mum about the game – something he felt she neither understood nor was interested in – he could speak directly to ChatGPT, which he felt did understand.

Umar understood that ChatGPT was drawing information from internet sources and could sometimes be inaccurate. He didn't think ChatGPT knew anything about him, despite making an account under his real name and never having opened the settings.

While Umar acknowledged that AI wasn't a human with emotions, he clearly valued the support it provided him. Umar was not engaging with the platform and sharing data as a transaction for information, instead sharing in return for an engaged and supportive response.

"I just told it I go fishing to be honest, and that's it […] Maybe it has an idea [of how old I am] but I don't know if it's smart enough to do something like that, because I've told it I'm taking A-Levels and I asked for A-Level help and stuff, so it might have sense, but I don't think ChatGPT [does]."
Umar (16)

Case study: Murray (13) turned to ChatGPT when he was feeling low

Murray had struggled with his mental health for many years and was not attending school. He described feeling that advice from adults, doctors and mental health professionals had not been helpful. One day, he asked ChatGPT for advice about his mental health. He provided his age and location, reasoning that the more information he shared, the better the advice would be.

"I was really down and I asked it [ChatGPT] for advice on how to get my mood back up… it's not got a proper, it's not got an opinion… So stupid. I don't know why I did it. [It] was really dumb because I felt like no human could give me the answer I needed, which is why I went to ChatGPT."

Afterwards, Murray panicked that ChatGPT might be a real person who could take him away from his parents. He told his dad what he had done, who reassured him that AI did not work in that way. His dad said he was proud of Murray for trying to find ways to help himself when he was feeling low, and was not concerned about the data implications of the interaction.

"He came to me because he was scared that… it was an actual human talking, that he was talking to, and he was scared that they were going to contact somebody. And either come and take us away because we're bad parents or they were going to take him away because he needed help. I explained to him how it worked and what it was based upon and that it just takes information from information that's out there and sort of assesses it. But I actually praised him because like the way he had written, what he was asking was really good and really descriptive."
Murray's (13) dad

Case study: Dina (17) regularly used AI for diet and weight loss guidance

In Year 2 of *Children's Data Lives*, Dina had started to use ChatGPT for advice on exercises to do at the gym and how she could lose weight. She was still using ChatGPT extensively this year, with even more chats relating to dieting, exercise, calorie counting and weight loss. Whilst some of these were recipe suggestions or tips on how to eat more protein, others were more explicitly about losing weight – for example, 'weight gain concern' and 'lower stomach fat causes' were some of her recent chats, as well as asking multiple times how many calories are in different types of food.

In addition to ChatGPT, Dina had also started using more platforms to help with her fitness and dieting goals. This included Hevy, a workout planning app, and MyFitnessPal, which used AI tools to help users track their calories, exercise and macros.

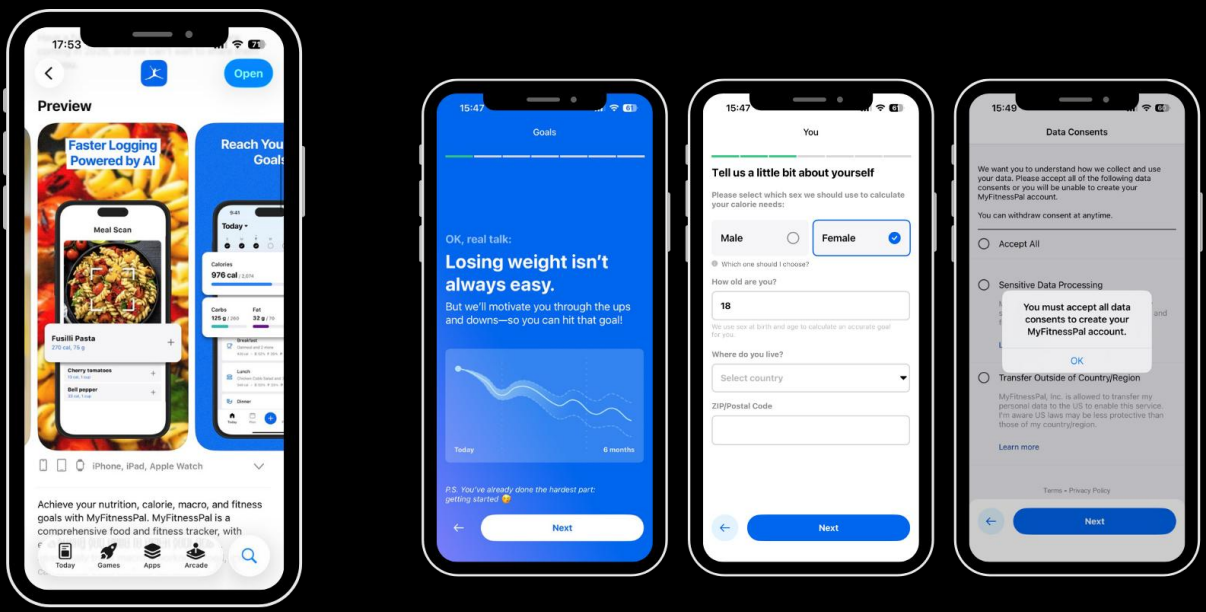
"When I wasn't using MyFitnessPal because I wasn't bothered to weigh my food and put it in, I just used ChatGPT to like, see how much calories there is in the food."

Like last year, Dina's mum was worried about her daughter's focus on weight loss, but believed this behaviour was more influenced by social media and comparing herself to others, and did not mention the role AI might be playing.

"Yeah, she became very, I would say, almost obsessed with her body. She lost a lot of weight, I don't know if you noticed, in the past few years, but she, she became very obsessed with certain parts of her body, like her belly and things like that…She even shows me sometimes photos as well, and videos of certain girls, you know, and say, oh, her body's tea."
Dina's (17) mum

Platform analysis: Dina was surprised that MyFitnessPal may be sharing her data abroad

Dina found tools like MyFitnessPal useful to track her food and exercise. However, she reflected that she hadn't thought much about what it might be doing with her data until going through the app's privacy policy.



"What is this? I will probably have to take this out. Because it's saying it's allowed to transfer my personal data to the US to enable this service…I didn't really think about it until now. I guess I feel fine, but at the same time, I don't know, a bit shocked. Because I did not know about this. The US laws may be less protective…I don't know, I just know that

like if someone gets your data, they can steal your identity and I don't want that."
Dina (17)

When users sign up to MyFitnessPal, they must consent to 'sensitive data processing' and transferring their data to the US to use the platform. Users must also consent to sharing this data with the 117 vendors that the platform works with. The terms of service states that all users must be over 18 to use the app – yet users simply input an age to start having their calories, steps, exercise patterns and weight tracked and shared.

In Year 3, AI had become an ordinary part of many children's lives. This included children actively using new AI platforms, as well as AI features becoming a routine part of the platforms they already used. Most children in the sample showed limited understanding of how AI worked, and an even more limited understanding of how AI might use their data and information from their conversations.

As Umar and Murray's case studies show, there were children who were already turning to AI for advice or support, sharing personal, sensitive information in the process. In these cases, the incentive for sharing was less a transaction for knowledge or efficiency than a desire for social interaction – unlike most children who used AI for schoolwork or play.

As AI becomes embedded in children's digital lives – as a tool for learning, play, and social support – the disconnect between children's trust in AI and their limited understanding of its data implications raises important questions about children's privacy and data rights in the context of AI.

Few children reported encountering more robust age verification mechanisms

Overall, children's experiences of age assurance online remained limited. While age restrictions were a familiar feature of many platforms, few children described encountering more advanced or multi-step age verification processes when signing up for or using online services.

For most children, age assurance was experienced as something lightweight and easily navigable, rather than as a meaningful barrier to access.

Self-declaration remained the primary age assurance method children were familiar with

Self-declaration continued to be the main way children encountered age assurance online. As with Years 1 and 2, many children were using platforms with age requirements above their actual age and described entering an age when signing up without being required to verify or update this information later.

Among children who had created profiles, self-reporting age was common. Children described entering a random or approximate age when registering and not being prompted again to confirm or verify their details. This method was widely seen as easy to circumvent, with many children already registered as older than they were. In some cases, parents continued to help children sign up to platforms by entering an older age on their behalf.

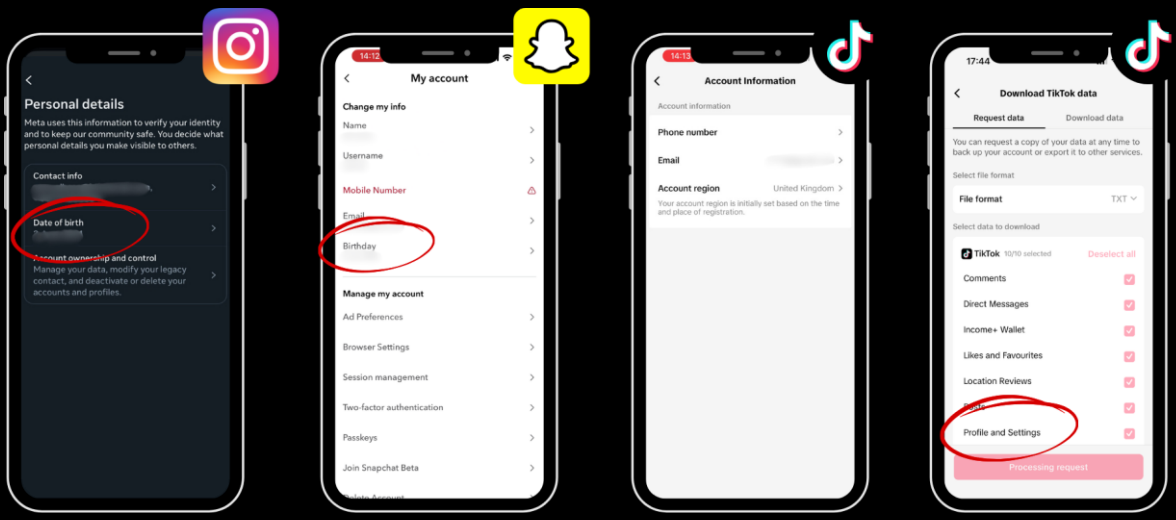
> *"I always put it a couple years older […] Just to make sure that I can actually use it. Instead of putting an age and they say 'you're too young'."*
> **Mason (15)**

> *"When I was first getting the app, I was actually younger than what the actual restriction was. On Instagram, I was probably 12 when I got it, when the age you have to be is 16. So I would have changed it to where I was old enough to get on rather than not getting it and actually waiting for the next, whatever four years."*
> **Alex (16)**

In many cases, children did not know what age they had entered when registering for platforms. Some described finding it difficult to locate age or date-of-birth information within their account settings. This was particularly noted on TikTok, where children were unsure where this information was stored or whether it could be changed.

Platform analysis: Finding age or date of birth on TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram

How apps presented user's ages varied. On Instagram and Snapchat, inputted birthdays were easy to find in three steps from the user's profile page.



On TikTok, the age of the account was much harder to find, with children in interviews struggling to work out what age they had signed up to TikTok with. Unlike Instagram and Snapchat, the date of birth registered to the account was not shown under the intuitive 'account information' tab. Children were not able to quickly view what information TikTok held about them.

When creating an account, users must provide a date of birth. Further analysis showed that, to reveal what date of birth accounts are registered with, users must request a copy of their data to be downloaded from the app as a ZIP file. When the file is opened on a computer, the date of birth registered on the account is readily available under the profile information section, but when opened on a mobile, where the majority of users would be accessing, this was far less intuitive to navigate, with researchers scrolling 40 pages through various data to access this information.

More advanced age assurance methods, such as age estimation through facial scanning or verification through official identification, had not been encountered by most children in the sample. Where children did report experience of these methods, this was typically in relation to digital services outside of social media, such as bank verification processes.

> *"NatWest banking, that's pretty much it."*
> **Bailey (16), Mason's (15) friend**

> *"Banking apps, sometimes you'll have to insert a photo of your passport. I've had to do government apps and stuff for my job and you have to insert your ID."*
> **Sean (17)**

A small number of children described being restricted from using specific platform features following the introduction of stricter age assurance requirements. This included being prevented from accessing Facebook Marketplace after changes to age verification on the platform.

> *"You have to verify your age or something for going on Facebook Marketplace […] I'm not 18 yet so I can't get on."*
> **Orla (17)**

> *"If you want to access Facebook Marketplace you need to be over 18… they have a face scan thing."*
> **Baz (16)**

Children only reported encountering stronger age assurance checks in isolated contexts, such as on specific platforms like Facebook Marketplace or on online banking apps, despite the widespread introduction of age assurance measures after the Online Safety Act in July 2025, which limited access to adult and violent content. However, the majority of apps they used relied on self-declaration, a method they widely understood as easy to bypass when accessing age-restricted services such as TikTok and Snapchat.

Some older children were aware of or using VPNs to bypass restrictions to access content

A small number of older children, particularly boys, mentioned awareness or use of VPNs. These were most commonly described as a way to access content from other countries or to bypass restrictions on school Wi-Fi networks.

> *"Say you live in the United States and you're like, oh, I want to watch that programme, you can use a NordVPN, so it doesn't know where you are in the world."*
> **Joey (14)**

> *"Sometimes when I want to watch F1 streams, the usual streams aren't working. So when you turn on the VPN… it'll say I'm in Oregon."*
> **Umar (16)**

> *"[The school] block Snapchat so when you're on the school Wi-Fi you can't send or receive messages and all you need to do is change location. So say France, and then you're connected in France and instead of being in the school Wi-Fi, you're connected to the school Wi-Fi through France."*
> **Adam (15), Mason's (15) friend**

Awareness of VPNs was also linked to advertising children had seen online. Some referenced VPN services by name, such as NordVPN, describing promotions they had encountered within YouTube videos they watched.

> *"Like a promotion […] 'if you download NordVPN, you'll get 10% off on your first three months' or something […] I used to watch this YouTuber a lot called Mr Who's the Boss, he used to promote it every video."*
> **Shiv (12)**

> *"I've heard people advertising it online before… I've never signed up for it but I've heard about it. I've heard, is it an app? I have no clue."*
> **Joey (14)**

Children generally saw VPNs as protective, with limited understanding of how they used data

None of the children who discussed VPNs were able to clearly explain how they worked or what implications they might have for personal data. Instead, VPNs were generally understood as tools that kept them safe and secure online, as well as enabling access to content they wanted to view.

Only one child, Mason, explicitly linked VPN use to age assurance measures introduced under the Online Safety Act, describing VPNs as a way to circumvent new restrictions.

Case study: Mason (15) wanted to access restricted content on Reddit.

Mason (15) claimed that he had deleted Reddit since it had introduced age verification, having previously used it to view violent and gory content that was censored on TikTok.

"Reddit, it was like the most unfiltered thing."

Mason was aware of the introduction of new restrictions, suggesting Reddit may have been told it would be *"shut down unless they restrict some areas"*. He had redownloaded the app to see what had changed and claimed to be shown *"only news"*. When asked what he did when he encountered age verification, he said he would just *"leave it, because it's not a thing I need to see."*

When asked if there was any way around age restrictions, Mason said:

"I've been told how to do it, but I don't know how to do it and I can't be arsed to try it because you have to change your VPN […] I know that if I try and download Reddit again, it just won't work, I can't be arsed to try and do the VPN thing because if it doesn't work and I get stuck in another country or something, it'll be a bit of a pain."

However, Mason also referenced a video he was able to see on Reddit – the assassination of Charlie Kirk – which took place in September 2025, two months after the introduction of age verification methods on the platform. This suggested either the video was incorrectly flagged when uploaded to Reddit, or he had bypassed the restrictions to access it.

"The Charlie Kirk shooting I wasn't allowed to see on TikTok, it was blurred out. I then searched on Reddit and the blood went everywhere and stuff like that."

Researcher reflection

Mason was invited to take part in a follow-up group session with his friends, where this topic of VPNs and age assurance, among others, was explored further. Beyond one of the boys mouthing the word '*porn*' to the others, Mason and his friends, all aged 15-16, were evasive of the topic: laughing, covering their faces, and trying to trick each other into admitting they'd accessed restricted content. While some of the boys discussed having VPNs, they gave other reasons besides accessing restricted content for using them.

This isn't entirely surprising, considering the sensitive nature of the content children may have wanted to access and the research effect from the setting they were in, with their responses recorded on audio and video. While Mason was the only child to make this link explicitly, it is possible that other children were as reticent as Mason's friends, given the potentially 'awkward' nature of the conversation that may have followed.

VPNs are widely marketed as tools to protect people's privacy, masking locations and keeping their data safe. However, VPNs are also recognised as one option for bypassing age verification restrictions introduced under the Online Safety Act. There is an inherent tension in how children used and understood these tools: VPNs were advertised online as tools to keep people safe and private online, but they have also enabled children to access content that age restrictions were designed to prevent.

Chapter 5: A day in a child's life

Technology is heavily used in children's everyday lives, with devices central to how they socialise, learn, and play. This chapter illustrates the key data-related findings from this year's report, providing an overview of how information sharing is built-in to children's daily uses of technology, across almost all their activities.

A typical weekday in Liam (10)'s life

Liam is 10, and lives with his parents and older sister in Scotland. He is in his final year of primary school and is enjoying being a 'buddy' to help some of the younger pupils settle into school life. He loves football, playing with his local team two evenings a week or with his friends in the park. Most of his time is spent at home, often playing on his Xbox or watching videos on TikTok.

Time of day	What is Liam doing?	What information is he sharing?
At school	Liam attends school, where most learning is done on paper, alongside the occasional use of Chromebooks. In maths, he prefers worksheets so he can show his working, but the class sometimes uses platforms like Sumdog or MyMaths for warm-up activities. House points are awarded for behaviour and effort and announced weekly.	• Log-ins, task completion, and accuracy recorded on learning platforms • Difficulty levels set by teachers using pupil performance data • Behaviour and achievement logged digitally for house points • Parental consent for photos and data use collected via school app
After school	Liam goes to football practice, training as a goalkeeper with his team. On days without training, he sometimes plays football informally with friends who live nearby. Liam checks Snapchat, mainly using a group chat with children who live nearby to ask who wants to go out and play. He finds Snapchat "annoying" and says there are too many features and too many stories. He has his Snap Map turned off and remembers entering an older age (13) when signing up.	• Age self-declared during sign-up, not verified • Messaging metadata collected (contacts, frequency, timing) • Location-sharing disabled through settings • Group chats support offline social activity
After football practice	Liam plays on his Xbox. He plays games on Roblox – his current favourite being Brainrot Royale, a game similar in design and vibe to Steal a Brainrot, where he builds up the defences for his 'town's towers' from increasingly advanced waves of attacks from automated characters. He also plays Among Us – an online multiplayer game with a similar premise as 'Mafia' or 'Traitors'. He usually plays with friends, but sometimes joins public lobbies if no one else is free. He uses the in-game chat to share tactics, and other players sometimes ask who he is or how old he is.	• Gameplay behaviour and time spent logged by platforms • Parental controls limit playtime to two hours • Downloads require parental approval; 18+ games blocked • In-game chat moderated by platform systems
Evening	Liam watches videos on TikTok, most of them about his latest favourite films and TV shows. He occasionally posts content on his public profile,	• Public account increases visibility of content and engagement • Viewing, likes, and posting behaviour shape recommendations

	although with the agreement that these are only edits and don't include any videos or photos of his real life. He has a 128-day streak with a friend, sending each other a video every day. He thinks the age limit is around 12 and remembers entering an older age when signing up. His mum follows his account to see what he posts.	• Streaks encourage daily return and continued sharing • Parental oversight via following rather than direct controls
Late evening	Liam receives a message from his parents telling him to get off his phone and go to sleep.	• Screen time managed through household rules rather than automated shut-off • Usage patterns still logged by platforms up to sign-off

A typical weekday in Erin's (16) life

Erin is 16 and lives with her parents and brother in a rural village in North Wales. She started college this year, and is studying Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Welsh Bacc. Outside of school, she goes to air cadets, goes to the gym, and spends a lot of time with her brother and friends visiting nearby towns. She uses her devices most days to help with school work, as well as for gaming and going on social media.

Time of day	What is Erin doing?	What information is Erin sharing?
At college	Erin has a laptop from her college which she uses in lessons, as well as a personal laptop which she uses to complete homework, assignments and help with revision when she's at home. Her college uses Google Classroom to assign homework, share timetables, and for communication, and has a school website where teachers assign quizzes and track attendance. She also brings her smartphone to school, and uses apps like Gizmo and GauthAI to help her with her schoolwork.	• Name, year group and school on Google Classroom • Log-ins, task completion, and accuracy recorded on learning platforms • Difficulty levels set by teachers using pupil performance data • Age self-declared during sign-up on GauthAI and Gizmo, not verified
After college	Erin goes to the gym most days after school, which she enjoys to clear her head and make sure she's doing regular exercise. If she's not at the gym or at air cadets, she often spends time with friends visiting nearby towns, especially now some of them can drive. When travelling between college, the gym and home, she's always listening to music and likes sharing her favourite songs with friends on AirBuds. She also likes checking her social media, preferring Instagram to TikTok as she's had the app for longer and believes its better personalised to her interests. However, her main form of social media is Snapchat. She currently has over 90 snap streaks that she's maintaining, including one of over 1,000 days. She	• Location-sharing enabled on Snap maps. • Age on social media self-declared, not verified • Accounts set to private on Instagram and TikTok • Viewing, likes, and posting behaviour shape recommendations • Messaging metadata collected (contacts, frequency, timing) • Group chats support offline social activity • Streaks encourage daily return and continued sharing

	shares her location with some friends on Snap maps so they know when they're at college or in town at the same time.	
After the gym	When at home, Erin enjoys gaming - both on her phone, PC, PlayStation, and Nintendo Switch. She often games with her brother and friends, using platforms like Discord to call when they're not gaming in-person so they can still play Roblox together. Her mum uses Family Sharing to block 16+ apps on her phone, meaning she can't download some games rated as 17+ on the app store, such as BlockBlast.	• Gameplay behaviour and time spent logged by platforms • Downloads require parental approval; 18+ games blocked • In-game chat moderated by platform systems
Evening	Erin doesn't often watch traditional TV or streaming platforms, instead preferring to watch YouTube videos to relax in the evening. She mostly watches gaming videos, and uses two accounts – one that she recently made with her brother, where the age on the account was set to over 18 so they could access more content.	• Viewing habits and likes shape recommendations
Late evening	Erin is often on her laptop in bed before she goes to sleep, continuing to watch gaming videos on YouTube. She also wears a Fitbit to bed which she uses to track her sleep, as well as her steps and heart rate during the day.	• Screen time managed through household rules rather than automated shut-off • Usage patterns still logged by platforms up to sign-off • Collection of data on sleep patterns and heart rate whilst Erin sleeps

Conclusion

The third year of *Children's Data Lives* continued to show digital technologies shaping where and how childhood is lived. From the moment children woke up to the point they went to sleep, digital devices and platforms formed the backdrop for large parts of their days. Participation in these spaces still required children to trade personal information, behavioural data and attention in return for access. These exchanges were rarely experienced as decisions about data; instead, they were understood as the ordinary cost of being included in the spaces where much of childhood took place.

Children's engagement with digital platforms remained driven by social priorities: staying connected, avoiding exclusion, managing reputation, filling time and becoming more independent. These priorities consistently outweighed concerns about privacy or data use. Data sharing continued to be normalised, largely invisible, and deeply tied to access, convenience and participation.

Digital technologies continue to dominate children's everyday lives

All children in the sample had access to at least one digital device, with smartphones playing a particularly important role for older children. Some children's preferences had shifted compared with Year 2, reflecting changes in interests, relationships or responsibilities, such as reduced time spent on gaming consoles or increased reliance on phones. These changes reflected how children's use of technology evolved with their lives as they grew up, while remaining integral to their everyday lives.

Social media and games monetise children's behaviour, time and attention

Children's free time was largely spent in commercialised digital spaces, particularly social media platforms and mobile games. Social media continued to offer personalised, algorithmically driven feeds that children enjoyed but often found hard to disengage from. Advertising and shopping opportunities were a routine part of these environments, sometimes leading directly to in-app purchases. Mobile games, especially free-to-play games, provided easy and accessible entertainment, particularly for younger children or during moments of downtime.

While often perceived as low risk, mobile games were frequently underpinned by extensive data sharing with advertising networks, which exported user data to vendors globally. In many cases, games also incorporated design features intended to maximise consistent engagement, meaning children shared their data extensively and were incentivised to continue doing so over prolonged periods. For children and parents, these commercial dynamics were largely invisible and rarely questioned.

Technology across learning increases parental oversight into children's lives

Technology remained embedded across children's learning, both in school and at home. Digital platforms structured much of school life, from accessing homework and timetables to tracking behaviour, attendance and progress. Many children were using multiple educational platforms simultaneously, often with little choice over which systems they engaged with or what data was collected. Most viewed technology as a normal and generally positive part of learning, supporting efficiency, organisation and engagement. Parents were also active users in these systems, using education platforms to monitor their children's school lives in detail – from homework and attendance to behaviour and school lunch orders. Behaviour was widely 'scored', with points often redeemable for rewards, including further screen time. Following findings from Years 1 and 2 around location sharing and in-home smart technology, this again pulled into focus how children's independence was shaped as they grew up, as surveillance of their lives extended to granular detail of their school lives. This visibility was widely welcomed and rarely framed as a data issue, instead being understood as a practical tool for parental oversight.

Children's lives are being quickly shaped by new technologies

Emerging technologies, particularly generative AI, had become an ordinary part of many children's digital lives. Compared with previous years, AI was no longer novel or exceptional. Children used AI tools to play, support

learning, search for information and, in some cases, seek advice. Children's use of AI was shaped by convenience and perceived usefulness rather than an understanding of how these systems worked. Across ages, children demonstrated limited awareness of how AI generated responses or how their interactions might be stored or used. While most engagement was light-touch, a small number of children shared personal or sensitive information when seeking support or reassurance. These interactions were more social than transactional in nature, and given the design of AI platforms providing instant, frictionless support, they encouraged children to return and continue to share more intimate information with the platform. AI had grown into a trusted, always-available presence across children's learning, play, and social support networks.

Children's experiences of age assurance were variable and often minimal across the platforms they used. Self-declaration continued to be the primary method children encountered, with many reporting that entering an older age was straightforward and rarely challenged, even following the introduction of the Online Safety Act. On games, children were rarely asked to input their birthday. As a result, across social media and games, some children were encountering age-inappropriate adverts for chatbots and gambling. Few children described encountering more robust age verification processes, and some were unsure where age or date-of-birth information was stored within their TikTok accounts especially. Some children expressed an awareness of VPNs, connecting them to safety and privacy online. However, one child identified them as a tool to circumvent age assurance measures online, which revealed a tension between VPNs as a tool for online safety and their ability to expose children to restricted adult content

Concluding thoughts for Year 3

Taken together, the findings from Year 3 underline how deeply embedded digital technologies and data practices are in contemporary childhood. Children continue to grow up in environments where participation, connection, and opportunity are closely tied to commercialised, data-driven systems that operate largely in the background. While children are often confident users of technology, their understanding of how data is collected, shared and monetised remains limited.

As digital spaces continue to expand across learning, leisure and relationships, this gap between everyday reliance and meaningful understanding persists.

Annex 1: Respondent summaries

This annex contains summaries of all the children interviewed in Year 3.

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

Where there is no blue/purple doc, the platform was used without a registered account

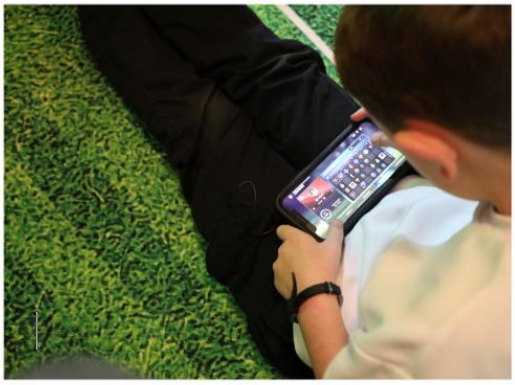
Private account

Public account

Parental controls

Device owned or accessed by parents

Theo, 8, C2, Scotland



Theo is a football-obsessed eight-year-old who likes playing as a goalkeeper and loves going to watch his favourite team's matches with his dad.

When he isn't at school or the football, he likes to play Roblox on his sister's 13+ account. He has exactly 1000 friends who are mostly people he has played in games before but has not met in real life. He also posts football edits and lip-sync videos on his YouTube Shorts profile under his real name, but his parents say they review his videos before he uploads them.

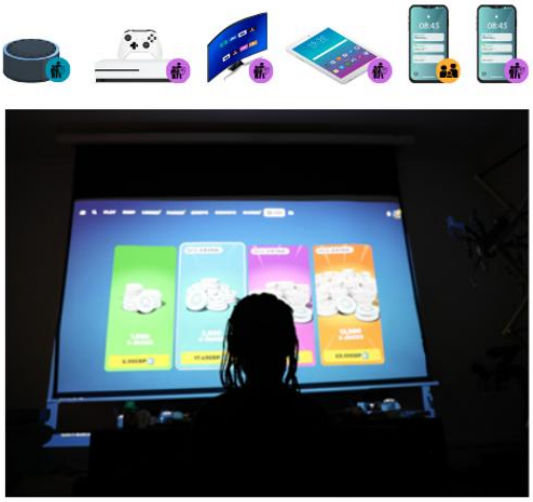
Theo uses his mum's old phone as his own and uses Snapchat on there to message his cousins. He has exactly 38 games installed, many of which are football related.

Jordan, 9, C1, London

Jordan lives with his 12-year-old brother and mum in London. As in Wave 2, he spends most of his free time playing Fortnite on his PlayStation or watching YouTube Shorts on his phone.

Jordan frequently downloads free mobile games, often prompted by adverts on YouTube or within other games. His most-used app is a minigame platform that exposes him to many interactive adverts, some of which he finds difficult to identify or exit.

On YouTube, Jordan has encountered what he calls "fake videos" and feels confident spotting them, though he doesn't understand how they are created. Although he has limited understanding of AI, Jordan often uses ChatGPT on his mum's phone for homework, with his mum monitoring his usage cautiously.



Gwen, 9, C1, Wales

Gwen is now in Year 5 and continues to enjoy school, alongside weekly cheerleading, though she has dropped other after-school activities. She splits her time between her mum's, dad's and grandma's homes and has an active social life with regular play dates.

On her new iPad, she spends much of her time on Roblox and has started using Xooloo Messenger to call friends while playing. She regularly watches YouTube and plays free games, finding most adverts annoying – except interactive ones that let her try out games, which she will often go on to download.

She has begun using Adobe Generative AI and ChatGPT for schoolwork, with her mum closely monitoring her technology use.

Jack, 9, E, Wales

Jack is new to the project this year and lives with his mum. He has a busy routine outside school, including various sports, Cubs, and cycling with friends and family. At school he enjoys playtime and has a close friendship group, though he finds concentrating in lessons challenging.

Jack has used his own tablet since he was three and now has access to multiple devices, including a PlayStation, smart TV and his mum's laptop. He spends most of his screen time playing games and watching YouTube. His accounts use his mum's details and have no parental controls, though his mum tries to limit Shorts.

While Jack said he hadn't used AI, his mum later imposed app restrictions after she found him interacting with a flirty AI chatbot.

Arianna, 10, C1, Midlands

Arianna lives with her parents and younger sister and spends most of her free time on her iPad, which she describes as her "whole life". She prefers being online at home rather than joining clubs or meeting friends in person, with most of her socialising now taking place through daily FaceTime calls.

Arianna's parents are concerned about her heavy reliance on the device and have introduced screen time limits. She primarily plays Wildcraft with her friends and knows how to bypass the parental controls.

Much of her time is spent scrolling YouTube Shorts and she has limited awareness of algorithms or AI-generated content.

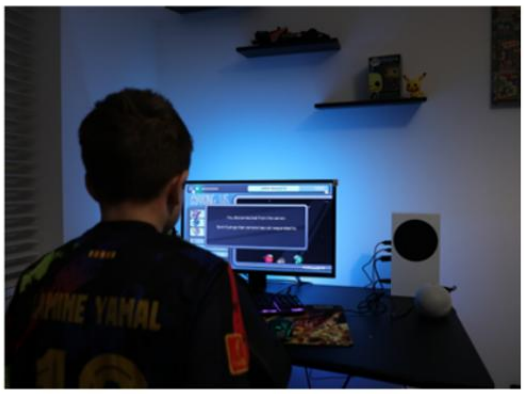
Rose, 10, C1, South East England

Rose lives with her mum, younger brother and her mum's boyfriend. Since her tablet recently stopped working, most of her screen time now takes place on the family smart TV. She enjoys using Disney+ and has noticed that recommendations change depending on who is watching.

Rose sometimes uses her mum's old phone when walking home from acting club, mainly to message her mum and play simple games. She would like her own phone to watch YouTube and play games, though her mum is cautious, especially about YouTube and Roblox.

Rose enjoys playing free games and watches Shorts at her dad's – mostly toy unboxing videos, which have encouraged her interest in collecting surprise toys such as Labubus.

Liam, 10, B, Scotland



Liam is in his final year of primary school and continues to enjoy school life, especially his role as a 'buddy' to younger pupils. He feels positive about moving to secondary school, influenced by his sister's experience and his recent visits.

Liam has his own phone, which he uses for TikTok, Snapchat and gaming, having bypassed age restrictions when signing up. He also plays Among Us on his Xbox, mainly with friends but occasionally on an open server.

Although he uses ChatGPT for fun, he chooses trusted sites for learning because he's been told by teachers that using AI for homework makes everyone's work look the same.

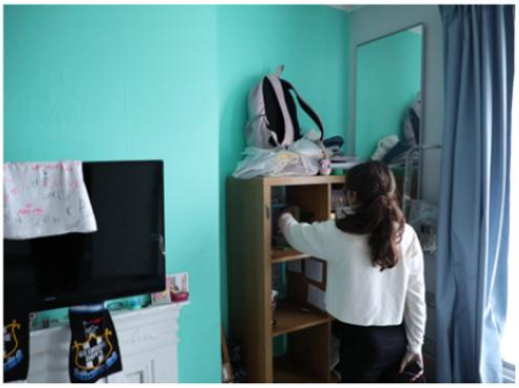
Leesha, 10, D, North West England

Leesha lives with her parents and two younger sisters. She has her own phone and laptop, and typically spends four to five hours a day online. Her mum is concerned about the family's heavy screen use and finds parental controls difficult to enforce, as the children know how to bypass them.

Leesha primarily uses Shorts, Roblox and Snapchat and, at school, she is encouraged to use ChatGPT to support her writing.

Leesha regularly comes across AI-generated content on Shorts and her mum has observed that some clips contain adult content. Leesha stopped using TikTok after seeing a "scary" video that she felt she shouldn't have seen.

Amy, 11, D, South East England

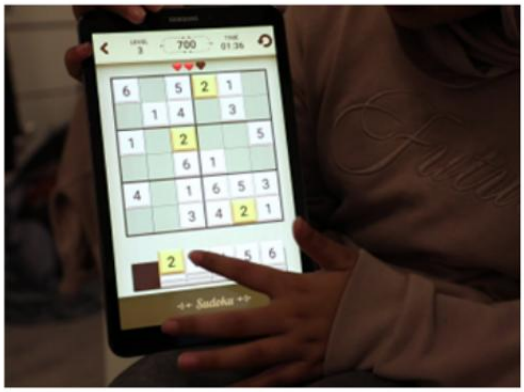


Amy started Year 7 in September and is enjoying her new subjects, friendships and feeling more independent. Outside of school, she stays busy with jiu jitsu, Scouts, reading, writing, and playing with her brothers.

She received her first smartphone over the summer with a one-hour daily screen time limit that she now self-manages. She is mostly on WhatsApp, Google and Roblox, but prefers to use the shared laptop or TV for YouTube and gaming.

Amy shows strong awareness of privacy and data, saying she always declines cookies and doesn't share personal details. She wishes there was a way to see where her data goes and then delete it.

Farah, 11, C2, Midlands



Farah has started secondary school and spends much of her free time with her three siblings and cousins, playing games and making slime. She has also recently started doing kickboxing with her mum. She doesn't have her own phone but uses her mum's for an hour a day.

Farah uses her mum's TikTok to make videos with her cousins and edits them with CapCut. Both Farah and her mum have been influenced by TikTok to purchase 'viral' products like Dubai chocolate.

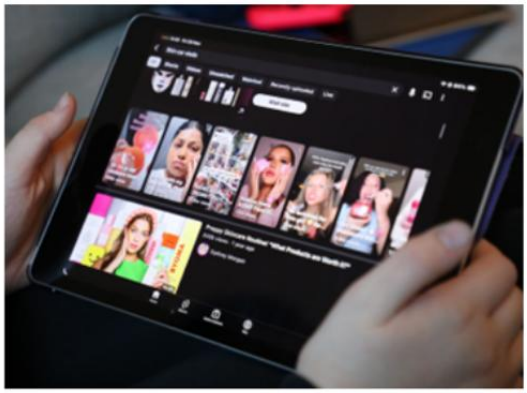
Farah still plays BlockBlast but has now expanded to YouTube Playables. She has limited understanding of data collection and is worried about people finding her location to stalk or kidnap her.

Margot, 11, C1, Scotland

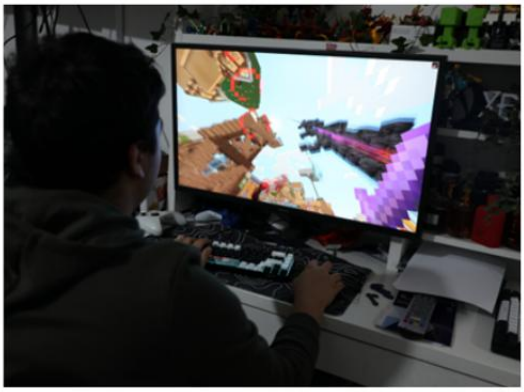
Margot, who lives with her parents and younger sister, is in her final year of primary school and remains active in clubs like netball, football, art and drama.

She spends two-to-three hours a day on her iPad, mainly watching skincare content on YouTube and playing private server games on Roblox. Although she hasn't used dedicated AI platforms, she regularly double-checks them on another device.

Margot's dad plans to set up her new iPhone with parental controls in advance and expects there will be more conversations around online experiences.



Shiv, 12, D, South East England



Shiv is in Year 8 and spends much of his time on his computer, especially playing Minecraft and Roblox with his cousins, but no longer on Fortnite as his mum has stopped him playing it. Shiv is in Year 8 and spends much of his time on his computer, usually playing Minecraft and Roblox with his cousins, though his mum has stopped him playing Fortnite. She tries to limit his gaming to an hour on school nights, but finds this is hard to enforce.

Shiv also uses TikTok and Instagram, mainly to watch gaming-related content, and plays other games such as Clash Royale and BlockBlast on his phone. He earns Robux through Microsoft Rewards without fully understanding the data exchange involved.

Shiv uses ChatGPT for homework and family tasks. He likes to use it because it "never gets fed up" of him asking too many questions.

Veronica, 12, C2, East of England

Veronica is a new participant and lives with her foster family, including two foster siblings, two dogs and a cat. Her older biological sister visits every other weekend.

Due to her past experiences, her foster parents closely supervise her online activity, including screen time limits, app permissions, Snapchat location settings, and Wi-Fi filters. Veronica's online accounts usually reflect her real age, though she joined TikTok early to not miss out on "normal experiences".

She feels in control of her personal information and trusts popular platforms like TikTok because of the large number of children who use them.

Murray, 13, B, Scotland

Murray lives with his parents and younger brother. He has been out of school since early 2024, recently returning for one hour twice a week, but does no schoolwork at home and spends most of his time gaming or watching TV.

Murray mainly plays Roblox and spends time on Discord and TikTok. He has been scammed numerous times, including through viruses caught from downloading mods online.

Murray has only used ChatGPT a few times, once asking it for mental health advice only to become anxious about privacy when the AI said it might have to disclose his information if it had concerns.

Madiha, 13, C2, Midlands

Madiha is enjoying the independence of secondary school and has a close group of friends who she says avoids drama. She spends most of her free time with family, cooking, watching TV, or shopping.

Her main devices are a tablet, her mum's phone, and the family smart TV, all managed with parental controls via Qustodio that limit screen time and app access. She mainly watches YouTube Kids and YouTube, enjoying Roblox videos, cooking, makeup content, and Turkish dramas.

Madiha likes browsing clothes on Shein, influenced by friends and YouTubers, but can only purchase them through her mum.

Daniel, 13, A, South East England

Daniel is in Year 9 and has a busy routine with increased homework and hobbies including rugby, tennis, fives, and playing guitar with his dad. He is not allowed social media, as his parents feel it would be distracting, so he keeps in touch with friends via WhatsApp.

Daniel now uses a laptop for nearly all schoolwork and homework. He uses ChatGPT only for help when stuck, avoiding asking it to provide full answers to protect his learning.

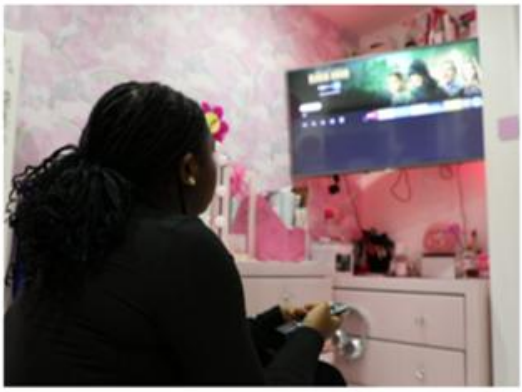
He is cautious with his data, rejecting cookies and limiting data sharing where he can. His daily screen time is around six hours including his schoolwork, with limited gaming and YouTube use under parental controls.

Bryanna, 14, C1, South East England

Bryanna is now in Year 10, and has cut back on some extracurricular activities to focus on her GCSEs, but still attends piano lessons and musical theatre, where she also helps out with younger children.

Two months ago, Bryanna's mum allowed her to download TikTok and Instagram – a moment she'd been looking forward to. Both accounts are private and registered with her real age. She often spends more than three hours a day on TikTok.

For homework, Bryanna uses Tassomai, a school-required maths and science app. She uses Google Lens and Google's AI summaries to help answer questions. The app shows adverts after completed tasks – one recently showing a game which she downloaded.



Joey, 14, C2, North West England

In Year 2, Joey had just taken up the guitar, which now takes up a lot of his free time – alongside scrolling on his phone. These activities, as well as a new relationship, means he rarely uses his PlayStation or VR headset anymore.

The main apps he uses are TikTok and Snapchat. On Snapchat he shares his location with all his friends, except five who don't share theirs back with him. He considers Temu "dodgy", having signed up for a discount he felt he never received, and doesn't trust it with his information, though he still receives promotional emails.

Joey's school was hacked earlier this year, but he didn't know what it meant beyond the Internet not working in school.

Celeste, 14, C1, Scotland

Celeste lives with her mum and brother and is preparing for her exams. She's part of a programme for high achieving girls, which provided her with a new iPad, and which her mum is struggling to apply parental controls on as a school device.

She communicates mainly through WhatsApp with friends and also uses TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat, mostly seeing football and sports content. After a high screen time over summer, Celeste tried to reduce her phone use, though her mum also enforces a rule requiring phones to be handed in at 8.30pm.

Celeste uses ChatGPT for schoolwork and music practice and tries to cross-check information for accuracy. She is aware her data may be stored but is not overly concerned about privacy.

Frankie, 14, C2, South West England

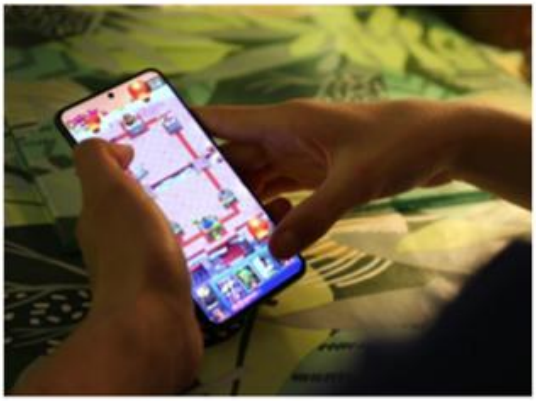
Frankie lives with her parents, younger sister, and foster brother. She attends an all-girls grammar school and plays netball or cricket most days after school. She also attends a performing arts academy, and enjoys arts and crafts like scrapbooking.

She has a close group of friends who communicate through Snapchat and WhatsApp, though she finds large, noisy group chats annoying.

She gets £20 monthly pocket money which she uses to buy items from TikTok Shop and Temu.

All of her social media accounts are private, she doesn't share her location on Snapchat, and has a 'spam' TikTok for candid photos. She uses ChatGPT for homework and personal advice like helping to solve arguments with friends, but has some awareness of its limits.

Isaac, 15, D, South East England

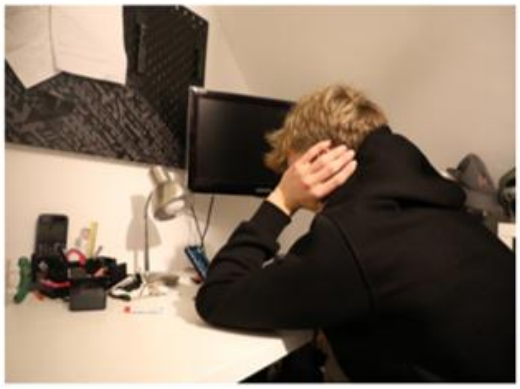


Isaac lives with his mum and older brother. He attends a specialist SEND school and studies construction at college. He has autism, learning difficulties, and OCD, and still rarely sees other children outside of school in-person, although he has started mixed martial arts which his mum says has helped his confidence significantly.

Gaming remains central to Isaac's social world. He plays mainly on his PS5 and PC, with Clash Royale currently being his favourite game. He watches YouTube Shorts and TikTok for 1-2 hours a day, but prefers gaming or watching TV.

Recently, a classmate created a fake Snapchat message in Isaac's name, and his mum used ChatGPT to confirm the image could have been faked. Isaac worries about being hacked and losing his game data, and is cautious about online privacy.

Mason, 15, B, South East England



Mason is now in Year 11 and is very active outside school, playing golf, attending Army Cadets, mountain biking, and playing cricket. His most used apps are TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat, with a screen time average of 6-7 hours daily, including 2-3 hours weekly of background activity from Google's ad tracking, which he wasn't aware of.

Mason has stopped using his PlayStation but plays tycoon games on his phone, including ones that use his location. He buys and sells clothes on Vinted, where he is registered as 22 to bypass age restrictions.

Mason used Reddit to find uncensored violent or explicit versions of TikTok videos, but deleted it after age verification made his feed "boring". He regularly uses Gauth AI for homework answers, despite recognising its impact on his learning.

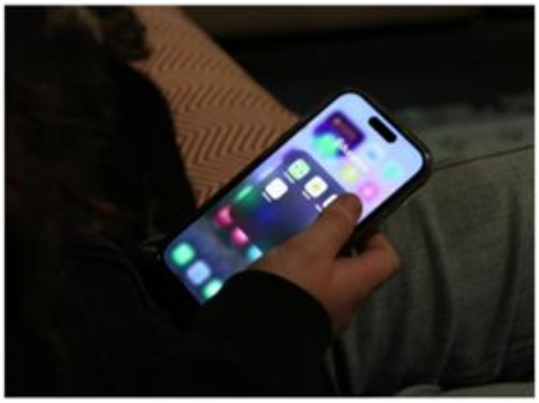
Erin, 16, C2, Wales

Erin has started college this year, and likes the independence but finds the work a big step up. Outside of college she attends Air Cadets, goes to the gym, and spends time with her brother and friends.

Her mum still uses Family Sharing to block 16+ apps. Erin finds this frustrating, so has a shared YouTube account with her brother using an age of 24, without her mum's knowledge.

Most of Erin's screentime is Snapchat, which she uses to message friends. She was allowed TikTok at 16 but prefers Instagram because the content is more 'relatable' and personalised to her interests.

She's careful with what she shares online, keeping accounts private, but doesn't seem aware she could be sharing data with platforms themselves.



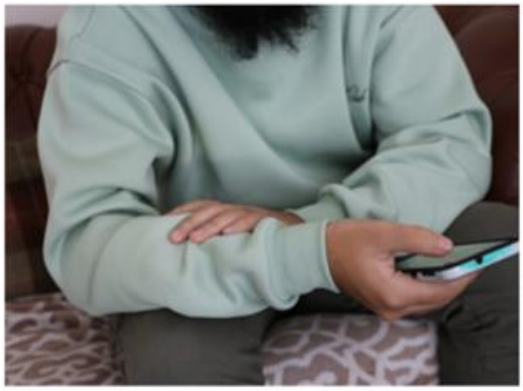
Baz, 16, A, South East England

Now in Sixth Form, Baz is finally allowed his own smartphone, which has started replacing hobbies like reading and guitar. He uses it extensively for schoolwork – his maths textbook is on an app, he's in WhatsApp groups for each subject, and he uses Gauth AI to help with difficult maths problems by uploading photos of questions.

He also uses Snapchat, browses Instagram's Explore page, and plays Clash Royale, with a screen time of about three hours a day.

Baz accepts in-app adverts as necessary and showed a strong understanding of how algorithms work, explaining that apps collect data like watch time, likes and skips to recommend content. He thinks his Instagram feed reflects his interests well and feels in control, saying he can mark content as "not interested" if he wants.

Umar, 16, C2, Wales



Umar is no longer homeschooled, having started college in September. He initially found the transition challenging but feels more used to it now. He uses the PC he built last year to play games with friends most days.

TikTok is by far Umar's most used app, with almost 40 hours of use in a week. He sees content about fishing and Formula 1 – his main interests – and wants to create content himself about these topics.

Umar deleted Instagram, finding it too distracting and preferring TikTok's hyper-specific recommendations. He is aware of how the algorithm works but didn't think his data would be used for adverts.

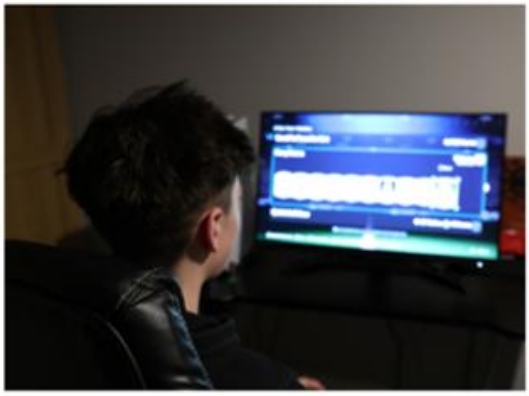
After TikTok, Umar's second most used app is ChatGPT, which he uses for learning, as a search engine, and to "vent" to while gaming.

Alex, 16, C1, Northern Ireland

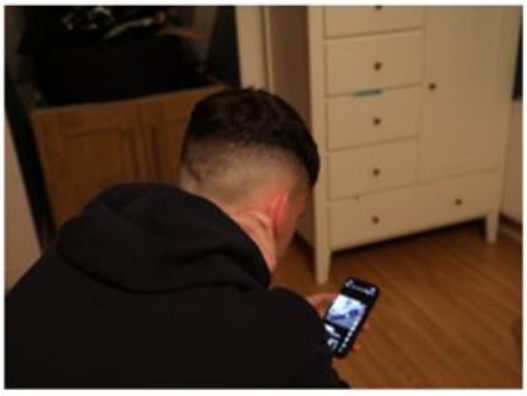
Alex lives in a small village in Northern Ireland with his parents and three younger siblings, plus around 30 cousins living nearby. He loves football and plays it three times a week.

Alex spends up to eight hours a day on his phone, mostly on TikTok, and keeps in touch with friends over Snapchat. All of his social media profiles are public, under his real name, and registered with fake ages, though he doesn't post content about himself. He also plays games most nights, usually Call of Duty or FC26. He's bought in-game currency but once felt "scammed" after spending £15.

His school restricts technology use with electromagnetic pouches for phones and uses no EdTech platforms. However, Alex uses ChatGPT for homework, but isn't sure what information he shares with it.



Sean, 17, C1, Northern Ireland

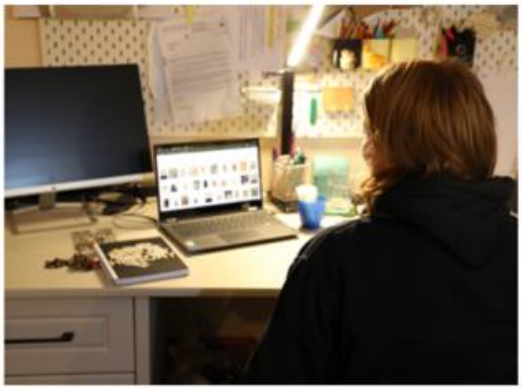


Sean left school in earlier in the year to start work as an apprentice plumber, travelling around Northern Ireland. He now spends evenings with his new girlfriend and hasn't played computer games for around two months, a big change from Year 1.

He uses Life360 and Snapchat location sharing with his girlfriend for peace of mind, checking where she is when she doesn't respond, and is happy to be un-banned from Snapchat. Sean's most used app is TikTok – his feed is dominated by car content and he uses TikTok shop most days.

Sean is "obsessed with money", researching passive income, dropshipping, cryptocurrency, and stocks, claiming he's saving for a house deposit by 20.

Orla, 17, B, Northern Ireland



Orla's family recently moved to a larger house where she has her own art studio. She's enjoying studying art at college, and works part-time as a waitress twice a week.

Most of her time is spent on her phone using Instagram, Netflix, Snapchat and TikTok – her average screen time is over six hours daily. She has a separate Instagram art account for college work and understands that liking videos affects what she sees, but couldn't explain what an algorithm is.

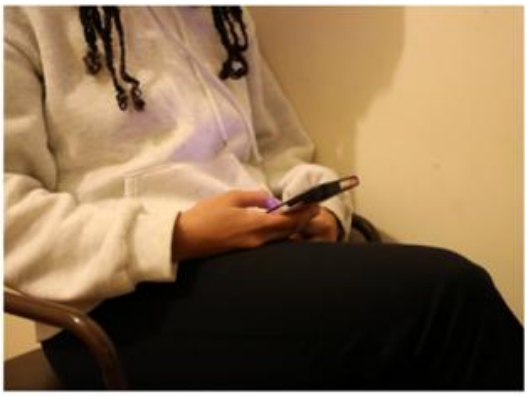
Orla has started using ChatGPT and DeepAI for art inspiration and image generation. She said she wouldn't share her exact location online, but most apps have location permissions turned on. She uses Life360 to share her location with friends.

Jamie, 17, C1, South East England

Jamie is in his final year of his rugby programme, hoping to break into the professional game. While he was in-and-out of the school team, he remains obsessed with the sport, watching rugby content, playing rugby games, and doing extra training in his spare time.

Jamie likes to unwind on TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram. He has public accounts on TikTok and Instagram and isn't concerned about sharing information, including his school name and full name, as nothing bad has happened so far. His location, Instagram, and photo are on his Vinted account, which he uses regularly. He did not know about Vinted's age restrictions.

Dina, 17, C2, Northern Ireland



Dina is in her first year of A levels studying Criminology, Spanish and Digital Technology. She's enjoying it much more than secondary school, saying people are nicer and don't gossip as much.

Dina goes to the gym several times a week. She recently got a smartwatch and uses fitness apps including MyFitnessPal and Hevy to track steps, workouts and food intake, aiming for 10,000 steps daily after seeing it recommended on TikTok. She also uses ChatGPT for nutrition advice and workout suggestions.

She follows many fitness influencers and often wants to buy the products they use. Although she describes herself as private, she had many apps with location services enabled and hadn't reviewed her privacy settings since the last interview.

Annex 2: Glossary

Body Tea Slang for having a nice body.

Edits Short videos made by fans that combine clips, images, and music about a TV show, sports team, or public figure.

For You Page (FYP) The main feed on TikTok, where videos are recommended to users based on their past behaviour on the app, such as which videos they have watched, liked, or shared.

Labubus Collectable toys sold in 'blind boxes' that means the buyer does not know which character they will receive until they open it. A popular toy made viral through creator unboxing videos.

Reels Short video clips, typically between 15 seconds and a few minutes long, shared on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Like TikTok videos, reels are served to users through algorithmically driven feeds, meaning the platform selects which content to show based on a user's past behaviour.

Salmon head Describing the default female avatar appearance on Roblox – a basic character with no additionally purchased clothing or accessories.

Snap Map A feature within Snapchat that allows users to share their real-time location with friends. When enabled, a user's location appears on a map that selected contacts can view.

Six seven (67) A viral social media meme popular with children, infamous for its nonsensical nature.

Steal a Brainrot A popular game experience within Roblox, in which players compete to steal and collect internet characters based on memes from one another. The term 'brainrot' is used to describe viral content that is nonsensical or absurd, with little purpose or meaning to it.

Streaks A feature on platforms such as Snapchat and TikTok that tracks how many consecutive days two users have sent each other a message or piece of content.

TikTok Shop A shopping feature built directly into TikTok, which allows users to browse and purchase products without leaving the app.

VPN (Virtual Private Network) A tool that masks a user's internet connection by routing it through a server in a different location, making it appear as though they are browsing from another country.

Annex 3: Summary of Years 1 and 2

The first two years of Children's Data Lives explored how children's everyday experiences online intersect with their data rights as they grow up. Across both years, the research shows that children's data-related behaviours are shaped more by social and developmental factors than by an understanding of data rights, policies or regulation. While the specific contexts and behaviours evolve as children get older, many of the underlying dynamics remain consistent.

Children rarely think about their 'data rights', with social priorities shaping what they share and with whom

Across both years, children did not typically frame their online behaviour in terms of data or rights. Instead, decisions about sharing information were driven by social goals: access, inclusion, friendship, status and avoiding embarrassment. These social pressures could either encourage sharing (to fit in, connect, or gain visibility) or incentivise privacy (to manage reputation, avoid judgement, or control who has access).

In year one, younger children often experienced technology as a form of play, while older children were more focused on managing social relationships and self-presentation. Year two showed how these social dynamics continue to evolve over time, as friendships shift, new peer groups form, and norms around what is 'acceptable' or 'cringe' change.

Access to platforms remains a stronger driver of behaviour than engagement with data agreements

In both years, children were exchanging data to access platforms, devices and features they felt were essential to their social lives. Privacy policies, terms and conditions and data-sharing agreements were sometimes recognised, but rarely understood or engaged with in a meaningful way.

Even when children became more aware of personalisation or algorithms shaping their feeds, they rarely connected this back to earlier data agreements or saw it as something they could meaningfully influence.

Year one highlighted how the desire to access platforms reduced children's motivation to question data use, with data often feeling like the 'currency' required to participate online. Year two reinforced this, showing how platform design – including incentives, default settings, and frictionless sign-up processes – continued to normalise data sharing as part of "how things work", rather than as a conscious choice.

Children's growing independence brings new forms of data sharing and tensions

As children grow older, their expanding independence reshapes how data features are used. In year one, location sharing emerged as a key example of how trust, care and safety were negotiated through data. Year two showed how these practices became more fluid over time, with children turning location sharing on and off in response to changing relationships, arguments or feelings of pressure.

Parents navigate a difficult balance between safety, oversight, and inclusion

Across both years, parents played a central role in mediating children's data lives. Their primary concern tended to be safety – particularly risks related to contact with strangers, harmful content or physical danger – rather than data protection, which could feel more abstract.

Year one highlighted how this often placed the practical burden of managing controls, settings, and accounts on parents. Year two showed how this role evolved as children got older, with some parents relying on tools such as parental controls, location sharing, and, in some households, home surveillance technologies.

Across both years, parents continued to face pressure to ensure their children were socially included, sometimes leading to compromises around age restrictions or platform access in order to prevent children from being left out.