Stances and behaviours of children in online environments

Research results from Greece

Athens, 2024

KMOP – Social Action and Innovation Centre

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CSAPE
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION AND EDUCATION

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KMOP – Social Action and Innovation Centre
Save the Children Finland
Save the Children International (North West Balkans)
Save the Children in Albania
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CSAPE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION AND EDUCATION

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Executive Summary

This report examines the findings of KMOP's survey on children's online experiences, conducted as part of the CSAPE-Child Sexual Abuse Prevention and Education project. The study focuses on the online behaviour, risks, and digital safety awareness of children aged 9 to 12 years in Greece, providing valuable insights into their digital habits and vulnerabilities.

Key findings:

• **Internet usage:** Nearly half of the children use the internet daily, with social media and gaming being predominant activities. Gender differences were observed, with boys engaging more in gaming and girls using social media more frequently.

• **Parental Involvement:** While 75% of children reported that their parents are aware of their social media activities, 4% reported full parental unawareness and 21% partial awareness, emphasising gaps in supervision.

• **Risky Online Behaviours:** Although most children exercise caution, a minority engage in risky behaviours, such as interacting with strangers or sharing personal information. 17.4% of children accepted friend requests from strangers, while 15% share their phone number and 37% an age older than their real one on their online profiles, highlighting significant online safety concerns.

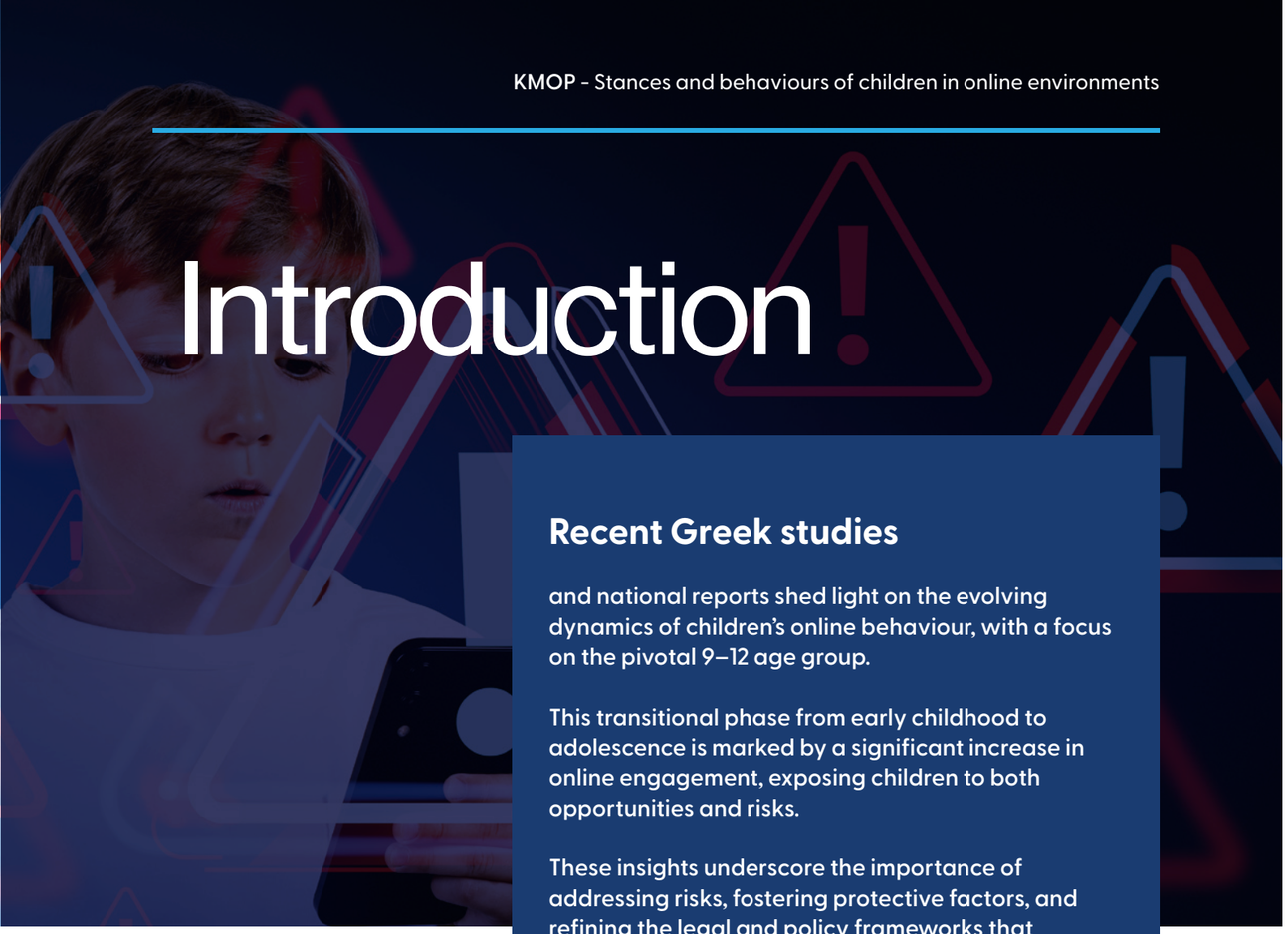
• **Exposure to Harmful Content:** Children are exposed to inappropriate material, including violent imagery, hate speech, and discussions about self-harm. 23% has seen inappropriate material at least once during the year preceding the survey.

• **Online Safety Awareness:** Children demonstrated limited knowledge of how to report harmful online incidents, signalling the need for targeted education on reporting pathways. Nearly half of the participating children reported being unaware or not having seen the report buttons and more than half shared the same about helplines and security centres.

The study underscores the critical role of digital literacy and proactive safety measures in protecting children online. It advocates for:

· Literacy programmes tailored to the developmental stages and needs of children.
· Enhancing parental awareness and engagement.
· Bolstering legal frameworks to address emerging online risks effectively.
· Awareness raising focusing on teaching children how to utilise online safety tools.
· Strengthening digital safety education in schools.

This report aligns with KMOP's broader commitment to child protection and social inclusion. It aims to guide policymakers, educators, and families in fostering safer digital environments for children, promoting both awareness and actionable solutions.
For further details, the full report provides in-depth analysis and data-driven recommendations for addressing these pressing issues.



Introduction

Recent Greek studies

and national reports shed light on the evolving dynamics of children's online behaviour, with a focus on the pivotal 9–12 age group.

This transitional phase from early childhood to adolescence is marked by a significant increase in online engagement, exposing children to both opportunities and risks.

These insights underscore the importance of addressing risks, fostering protective factors, and refining the legal and policy frameworks that govern digital safety.

The 2023 Annual Statistical Report by the Greek Safer Internet Center (SaferInternet4Kids.gr) highlights concerning trends in online risks. Reports of illegal online content have increased by 18.5%, with incidents involving child sexual abuse and exploitation materials rising by 5.4%. Alarmingly, financial fraud and child exploitation make up 78% of the total cases, while child pornography constitutes 39% of the reported incidents. A new and troubling trend involves invitations to websites with illegal material sent to children, encouraging them to share relevant links by awarding points, which grant access to more exploitative content to the initial user. These patterns underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to protect children in digital spaces (Greek Safer Internet Center, 2024).
Parental concerns about excessive screen time and the challenges of setting boundaries are frequent reasons for contacting the helplines SafeLine.gr and Help-line.gr. Many parents also seek support for incidents involving their children's interest in "easy money" schemes promoted by influencers, highlighting the broader societal impact of online behaviours. These challenges reveal the importance of fostering digital literacy and equipping families with tools to navigate the online world safely (Greek Safer Internet Center, 2024).

A comprehensive survey conducted in 2019 by the Greek Safer Internet Center involving 14,000 students sheds light on children's internet usage patterns. The findings reveal that 41% of children

start using the internet between the ages of 7–8, and 20% begin as early as 4–6 years old. By the age of 10–12, 40% own a mobile phone, while 23% acquire one between 8–10 years old. Internet usage is frequent, with 69% of children accessing it daily. Among primary school children, 39% use the internet every day, 25% about half the week, and 23% on weekends. Alarmingly, 86% of children have social media profiles, and 65% of primary schoolers access the internet without supervision (Greek Safer Internet Center, 2019).

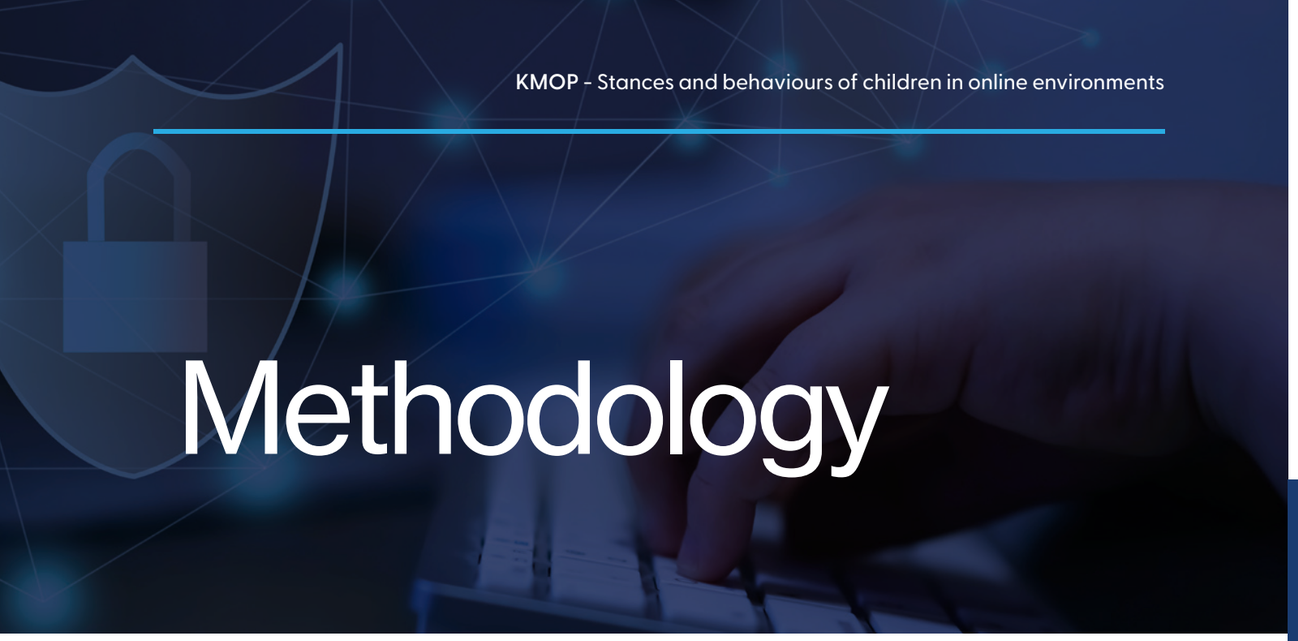
Children primarily use the internet to communicate with friends, watch videos, listen to music, and play games. However, 13% report uploading photos or videos online. Risky behaviours are prevalent, with 41% accepting friend requests from strangers and 21% meeting online acquaintances in person. Exposure to harmful content is also widespread, with 61% encountering inappropriate or violent material and 26% reporting experiences of online harassment. The majority reported blocking the other person in such cases, while many children share it with trusted individuals. While many children perceive themselves as "self-taught" in internet safety, some rely on parents and schools for guidance, and a majority report harassment to trusted individuals (Greek Safer Internet Center, 2019).

The legal framework in Greece plays a critical role in addressing these risks. Article 348A of the Penal Code criminalises the production, distribution, and possession of child pornography, including virtual reproductions that aim to cause sexual arousal. Article 348B addresses grooming, penalising individuals who propose meetings with minors under 15 for exploitative purposes. Articles 386 and 386A focus on fraud for financial benefit (Official Government Gazette, 2019). Law 4411/2016 enhances penalties for cybercrime, including offences like cyberbullying, stalking, and online threats. This law emphasises the protection of minors and promotes the expedited investigation of such crimes (Official Government Gazette, 2016).

The National Cybersecurity Strategy 2020–2025 reinforces Greece's commitment to digital safety through capacity building, public awareness campaigns, and robust responses to cybersecurity threats. The Cyber Crime Division of the Hellenic Police includes specialised subunits such as the Minors' Online Protection and Digital Investigation Unit, further enhancing the country's ability to address online risks effectively (Ministry of Digital Governance National Cybersecurity Authority, 2020).

The project CSAPE-Child Sexual Abuse Prevention and Education aims to contribute to the prevention of child sexual abuse by equipping children, parents, and professionals with knowledge and skills. The programme offers evidence-based sexual education tailored for different age groups, aiming to enhance awareness of online dangers and available reporting mechanisms. In the framework of the project, partners conducted quantitative research, aiming to map the attitudes and practices of children concerning their online behaviour, ability to recognise potentially dangerous situations online, and awareness of available reporting and support mechanisms in case of online abuse in their respective countries.

This initiative aligns with KMOP's longstanding commitment to child protection and social inclusion. Over the years, KMOP has actively addressed issues such as child abuse, maltreatment, children's rights, and bullying. Since 2015, the organisation has been implementing the independent programme "Live Without Bullying", aimed at preventing and combating school bullying. This initiative empowers children, parents, and educators through a range of tools and resources, fostering safer and more inclusive environments for children. Along these practices, CSAPE reinforces KMOP's dedication to safeguarding children's well-being and promoting their rights.



Methodology

KMOP conducted quantitative research to explore children's online experiences and stances, with a focus on the risks they encounter, the harms they face, and their awareness of reporting mechanisms. The research specifically targeted children aged 9 to 12 years and employed LimeSurvey, an online platform designed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity by protecting and rendering respondents' IP addresses undetectable. Participation required explicit consent, with children agreeing to data analysis. Parents also granted permission for their children's involvement. Schools collected the consent forms and provided them to KMOP prior to the survey's commencement.

To ensure a controlled and supportive environment, children completed the survey in their classrooms, away from parental influence but under the supervision of teachers. KMOP briefed teachers thoroughly on the survey's content, objectives, and ethical considerations, ensuring they were well-prepared to address any questions or concerns from students. Additionally, teachers received training on handling sensitive situations and utilising the appropriate referral mechanisms. The questionnaire was provided in both online and printed formats to accommodate varying school resources.

The questionnaire was developed based on the established methodology of Global Kids Online, a UNICEF-supported initiative. KMOP, alongside a team of experts, reviewed and adapted the questionnaire extensively to ensure it was child-friendly and appropriate for the study's scope. During the piloting phase with elementary school teachers in Greece, feedback highlighted several areas for improvement. Concerns about the sensitive nature of certain questions, particularly those related to online sexual risks, led to revisions in language. For example, potentially distressing terms were replaced with phrases like "inappropriate for young children," while still including examples of online sexual abuse to maintain the study's focus. Questions regarding socio-economic status or abilities were removed to avoid discomfort among students, as their inclusion did not outweigh potential harm. Furthermore, the length of the questionnaire was reduced to accommodate the limited attention span of young participants while preserving the study's objectives.

Quantitative Research

- Questionnaire Development & Localisation
- Survey Administration
- Data Collection & Analysis

KMOP translated and localised the questionnaire into Greek, and experts rigorously reviewed and approved the final version. The survey was conducted between May and October 2024, avoiding the summer break and examination periods, which typically limit school availability for additional activities. Recruitment efforts targeted schools previously involved in the CSAPE project and leveraged existing networks to ensure diverse participation. This approach enabled the inclusion of schools from both urban centres like Athens and Thessaloniki and rural regions, enhancing the geographic and socio-economic diversity of the sample.

KMOP employed non-probability (convenient) and purposive sampling to recruit participants. This approach focused on respondents' availability, willingness and accessibility, while intentionally selecting participants based on specific characteristics, such as their area of residence, to ensure a diverse sample. This strategy facilitated the inclusion of children aged 9–12 from varied backgrounds, including minority groups and differing socio-economic contexts, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the target population. After excluding incomplete responses and instances where consent was not obtained, the final sample consisted of 251 participants.

The null hypothesis (H0) was that age, gender and residence area would not have a significant effect on the participants' online experiences. KMOP analysed the data using SPSS, applying descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to outline trends. Bivariate analyses with cross-tabulations were conducted, with chi-square tests used to evaluate relationships between variables. When chi-square requirements were not met, Fisher's Exact Test was applied for small sample sizes, while Likelihood Ratio tests were used to compare the goodness of fit between two hypotheses: the alternative hypothesis (association between variables) and the null hypothesis (no association). The present report synthesises the survey findings, focusing exclusively on results with statistical significance to provide robust insights into children's online behaviour and associated risks.

Findings

Demographic characteristics

The survey gathered responses from 251 students aged 9–12 years old, all of whom provided consent to participate. Among the respondents, a slight majority were girls (53.39%), with boys accounting for 43.03%. A small percentage (2.39%) preferred not to disclose their gender, while 1.20% selected the option "other," with responses including self-identifications such as "boy" or listing their names. The mean age of the participants was 10.67 years, reflecting the study's focus on upper primary school-aged children.

Geographical distribution was nearly even, with approximately half of the participants (50.2%) residing in urban centres and the other half (49.4%) living outside the city centre. This balance suggests that the survey sample successfully captured a mix of urban and suburban or rural perspectives, which is critical for understanding diverse online experiences among children in Greece.

Regarding living arrangements, the overwhelming majority of respondents (88.45%) reported living with both parents, while 7.57% lived with only one parent. A very small percentage (0.40%) lived with neither parent, and 3.59% chose "other," often specifying all family members such as living with parents and siblings or simply with their parents. The survey revealed that the average household size, including the respondent, was 4.039 family members.

Online screen time

Nearly half (49.40%) of the surveyed children reported using the internet one or more times a day, while 31.87% accessed it at least once a week. Monthly internet use was less common, with 12.35% of children falling into this category, and 5.58% indicated they never use the internet. A small fraction (0.80%) was classified as "Other," representing irregular or unconventional usage patterns. For those who never used the internet, the questionnaire concluded at this point, due to their lack of digital engagement.

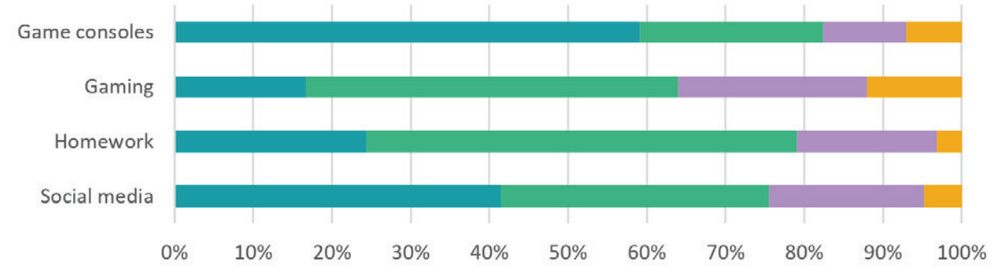
A chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between gender and the frequency of internet use [$\chi 2(6)=15.202$, $p=.019$]. Boys were more likely to use the internet daily, while girls exhibited higher proportions of weekly and monthly usage. However, a limitation was noted due to small expected counts in 33.3% of the cells, suggesting caution in interpreting these findings. No significant correlations were found between internet usage frequency, age or area of residence.
The majority of children (76.6%) reported owning their own device for internet access, while 23.4% used devices belonging to family members. Older children were significantly more likely to have their own device [$\chi^2(3) = 8.954$, $p = .030$], with 12-year-olds being the most likely to report independent device ownership. No significant relationship was observed between device ownership and gender or area of residence.

Chart 1 highlights that most children use the internet for homework, gaming, and social media daily. Social media usage was prominent, with 60% of children engaging with it every day. However, no significant associations were found between the time spent on these activities and the area of residence. Similarly, gender did not correlate with daily time spent on social media or homework.

Nonetheless, boys were significantly more likely to spend more time gaming, while girls were more likely to spend no time at all [$\chi 2(6)= 25.601$, $p < .001$]. Similarly, boys were significantly more likely to spend more time on gaming consoles and girls to report not spending daily time on this activity [$\chi 2(6)= 51.357$, $p < .001$]. Older children (ages 11–12) showed significantly higher levels of engagement with social media, while younger participants (ages 9–10) were more likely to report no engagement with social media platforms [$\chi 2(9)= 29.380$, $p= .001$]. Similarly, older children spent slightly more time on homework compared to their younger peers [$\chi 2(9)= 18.365$, $p= .031$]. No significant results emerged in terms of age and daily time on gaming or game consoles.

Boys' greater engagement with gaming and gaming consoles may reflect cultural norms or differing interests, while girls' higher weekly and monthly internet usage could point to differing priorities or access patterns. Older children's stronger engagement with social media aligns with developmental trends, as older children may often seek greater online social interaction. Device ownership among older children further reinforces their increasing independence in navigating the digital world.

Chart 1: Time spent daily on internet activities



	Social media	Homework	Gaming	Game consoles
No time	41.50%	24.40%	16.70%	59%
Up to 1 hour	34.10%	54.70%	47.20%	23.30%
1-3 hours	19.70%	17.80%	24%	10.60%
More than 3 hours	4.80%	3.10%	12%	7%

No time Up to 1 hour 1-3 hours More than 3 hours

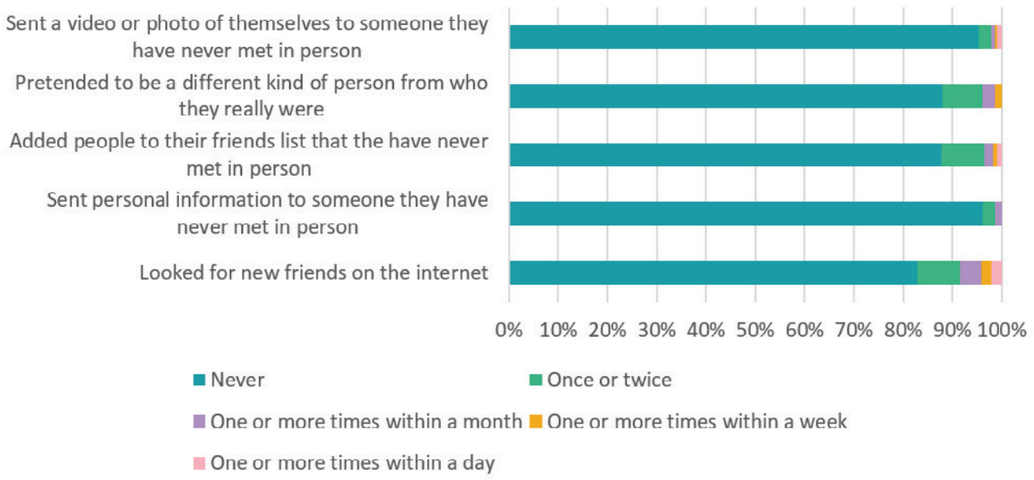
Approximately three-quarters of children (74.9%) reported that their parents are aware of their activities on social media, while 21.2% stated partial awareness. A smaller proportion, 3.9%, indicated that their parents are unaware of what they do online. Similarly, the majority of students (84.2%) noted that their parents know with whom they interact online, with 9% reporting partial knowledge and 6.8% stating that their parents are unaware of their online contacts. Chi-square tests revealed no significant associations between parental awareness of children's online activities and the variables of age, gender, or area of residence.

More than half of the children (65.5%) stated that they discuss everything they do online or on social media with their parents. Another 28.5% reported discussing "almost everything," while 6% said they do not share anything related to their online activities. Similar to parental awareness, no statistically significant differences were observed regarding age, gender, or area of residence in how often children communicate with their parents about their online behaviour.

As presented in Chart 2, the majority of children reported never engaging in risky online behaviours during the year preceding the survey. These include looking for new friends online, pretending to be someone else, sending personal information, photos, or videos to strangers, or adding unknown individuals to their friends list. However, one in eight children shared to have added strangers to their friends list or pretended to be someone else at least once. Additionally, one in 20 reported having sent a photo or video of themselves to someone they had never met in person.

Chi-square tests did not reveal significant relationships between risky online behaviours and children's demographics. However, one exception was noted: younger children were slightly more likely to have sent photos or videos to unknown individuals [$\chi 2(12)= 31.947$, $p= .001$]. Given the limitations of the contingency table, where 80% of cells had expected frequencies below 5, a Fisher's exact test was conducted. It confirmed the finding ($p = .005$), supporting the observation that younger children might be more vulnerable to sharing visual content online.

Chart 2: Children's online activities in the year preceding the survey

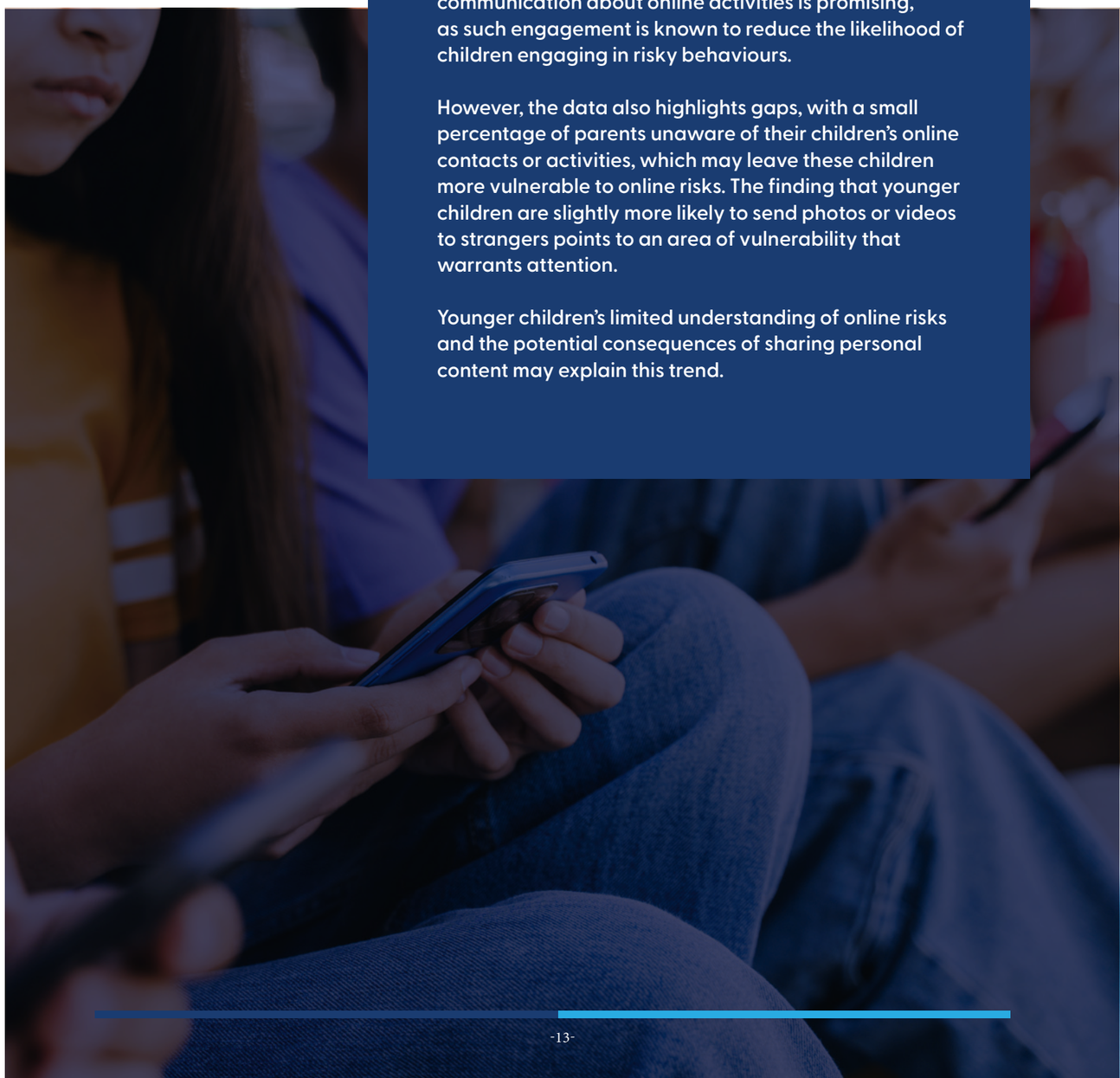


The findings paint

both positive and concerning trends.
The high level of parental awareness and communication about online activities is promising, as such engagement is known to reduce the likelihood of children engaging in risky behaviours.

However, the data also highlights gaps, with a small percentage of parents unaware of their children's online contacts or activities, which may leave these children more vulnerable to online risks. The finding that younger children are slightly more likely to send photos or videos to strangers points to an area of vulnerability that warrants attention.

Younger children's limited understanding of online risks and the potential consequences of sharing personal content may explain this trend.



Online communication

Chart 3 provides insights into the frequency of children's communication with different individuals over the year preceding the survey. The results indicate that parents, siblings, and other relatives were the most frequently communicated with, suggesting that children tend to engage with familiar, trusted individuals for their online interactions.

However, a noteworthy portion of children also engaged with individuals they encountered through online platforms. Approximately one in five children communicated at least once with someone they met online who was a friend of a friend or family member, illustrating the interconnected nature of online relationships. This is a common pattern in online spaces where connections are often established through mutual contacts. Additionally, one in 12 children communicated with another minor (under 18) whom they met online and had no prior connection with, and one in 20 children engaged with an adult (over 18) whom they met online and had no other connection with.

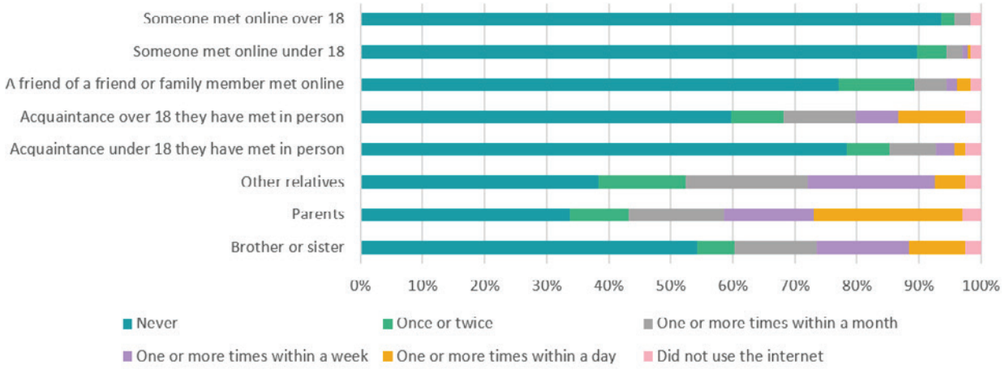
No significant associations were found between children's area of residence or gender and the frequency of communication with the people mentioned in the survey. Similarly, the data did not reveal any statistical significance between participants' age and their frequency of communication with siblings. However, a chi-square test identified a statistically significant association between age and the frequency of communication with parents. Younger children (ages 9-10) were more likely to report less frequent communication with their parents, while older children (ages 11-12) communicated more regularly with their parents [$\chi2(20)= 46.666$, $p= .001$]. Despite 46.7% of the cells having expected counts of less than 5, the Likelihood Ratio confirmed the significance of the association ($p = .001$).

A similar significant association was observed between age and communication with an acquaintance under 18 who the child had met in person before [$\chi2(20)= 33.546$, $p= .029$]. Older children (ages 11-12) were more likely to communicate more frequently with these acquaintances. Although 56.7% of the cells had an expected count of less than 5, the Likelihood Ratio confirmed this association ($p = .007$).

An intriguing aspect of the data is the variation in the percentage of children reporting that they do not use the internet, which fluctuated across different sub-questions, with responses ranging from 1.7% to 3%. This inconsistency could reflect differences in how children understand or interpret internet use in the context of their daily activities.

While the majority of children communicate regularly with family members, the engagement with individuals met online—especially those without direct offline connections—raises concerns about the potential exposure to online risks. Communicating with strangers, or individuals with only indirect connections, can sometimes lead to unsafe situations, particularly when children are not fully equipped to identify or handle potential dangers. The relatively small but concerning percentage of children engaging with individuals they have no offline connection with (including both minors and adults) suggests that there may be a gap in children's awareness of the risks associated with interacting with strangers online.

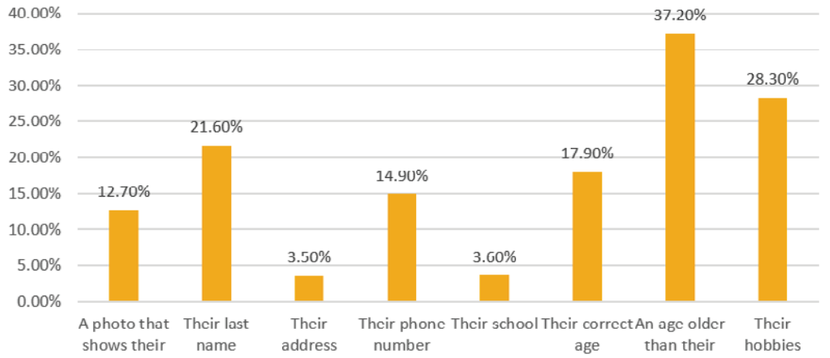
Chart 3: Children's online communication with various people during the year preceding the survey



When examining online profiles, the survey revealed that 25.3% of children had a social media profile, 37.8% had a profile on an online gaming platform, and 37.8% had neither. A Fisher's Exact Test indicated a significant association between gender and the type of online platform used, with boys being more likely to use online gaming platforms, and girls being more likely to have social media accounts ($p < .001$). A chi-square test also revealed a significant relationship between children's area of residence and platform usage [$\chi(2)= 9.591$, $p= .008$]. Children living in the city centre were more likely to use social media, while those living outside the city were more inclined to use online gaming platforms. Moreover, there was a significant association between age and the ownership of social media accounts [$\chi2(8)= 40.271$, $p< .001$]. Although 20% of the cells had an expected count of less than 5, with a minimum expected count of 1.27, the Likelihood Ratio, $p < .001$, confirmed the association.

Chart 4 highlights the types of personal information children share on their profiles. Approximately one in eight children share a photo of their face, one in seven share their phone number, nearly one in five share their last name and age, one in four share their hobbies and interests, and one in three an age older than their real one. No significant association was found between children's residence area or gender and the type of information they shared online. However, a Fisher's Exact Test revealed a significant association between age and the likelihood of sharing their phone number online. Older children were more likely to include their phone number in their online profiles ($p = .002$). Conversely, younger children were more likely to display their school ($p = .038$).

Chart 4: Information children share online

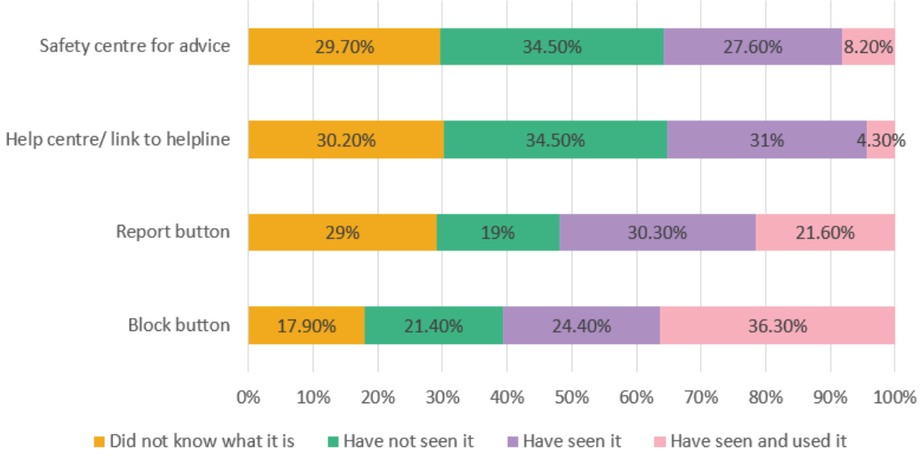


In examining how children respond to friend requests, the results show a range of behaviours. A small proportion (6.1%) of participants usually accepts all friend requests, while 11.3% accepts requests from people with whom they share mutual friends. A larger group, 23.5%, only accepts requests from individuals they know, and 24.8% accepts requests only if they know the person very well. The largest group, 34.3%, accepts friend requests only with the permission of their guardian. No significant associations were found between the acceptance of friend requests and children's gender, age, or area of residence, indicating that these factors may not strongly influence children's online social practices in this context.

Turning to online safety, particularly regarding the visibility and awareness of safety features such as the "report" and "block" buttons, the results indicate a concerning lack of awareness. Approximately one-third of children reported being unaware of or having never seen the "block" button, and nearly half were unaware of or had not seen the "report" button. Additionally, a significant portion of children (more than half) were unaware of safety centres, help centres, or helplines that could provide guidance or support. These findings highlight a crucial gap in children's knowledge about online safety mechanisms, which are essential for protecting themselves from harmful interactions or online abuse.

A chi-square test revealed a significant association between age and awareness of safety buttons. Younger children (9 years old) were less likely to know about the "block" button, while older children (12 years old) were more likely to report being familiar with it or having seen it [$\chi2(12)= 44.489, p< .001$]. Despite some cells having expected counts below 5, the likelihood ratio ($G^2 = 45.106, p < .001$) confirmed the significant relationship between age and awareness of the "block" button. This suggests that older children are more likely to have encountered or been educated about online safety features, which could be attributed to increased digital literacy or more frequent use of social media platforms. No significant associations were found between gender or area of residence and familiarity with safety buttons. The fact that a significant proportion of children is unaware of or has not seen the "block" and "report" buttons, as well as help and safety centres, is alarming. The results also highlight the importance of age-appropriate digital education.

Chart 5: Knowledge of safety buttons online



Online harms

According to the survey results, 21.9% of participants reported that there are things on the internet that cause distress or negative feelings for children of their age, while 24.5% partially agreed with this statement. In contrast, more than half of the children (53.6%) disagreed, indicating that they do not perceive the internet as a source of distress for children in their age group. No significant associations were found between participants' area of residence, gender, or age and their perception of whether there are things online that could upset children of their age.

Additionally, approximately one in four children reported experiencing something disturbing or upsetting online at least once in the year preceding the survey (Pie 1). This highlights that while many children do not see the internet as a source of distress, a notable portion has had negative experiences online. Similar to the previous question, no significant associations were found between gender, age, or residence area and the frequency of encountering upsetting online content.

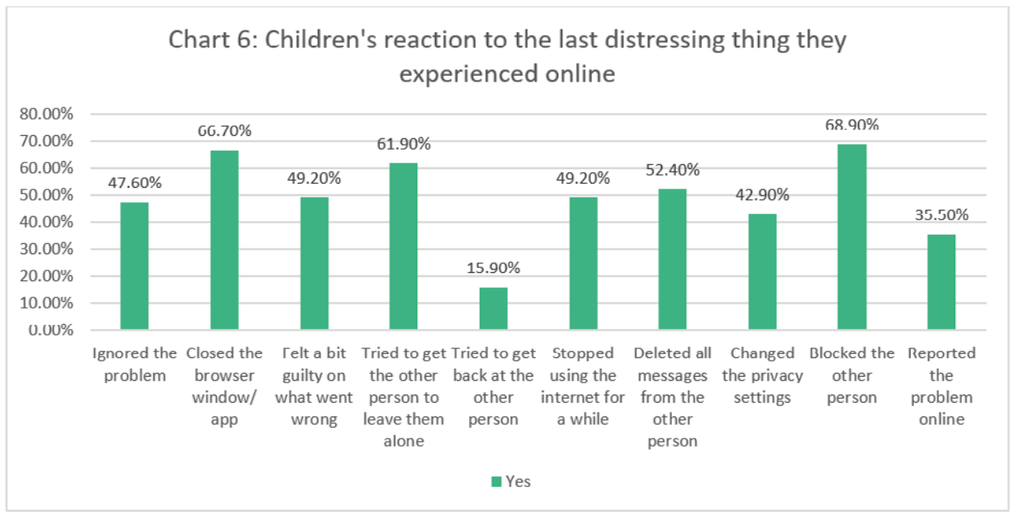
While more than half of the children in the survey did not report feeling that the internet is a source of negative emotions for children of their age, a significant minority (around one in four) reported encountering upsetting content during the past year. This discrepancy indicates that, while many children may not perceive the internet as inherently distressing, a substantial number still experience harmful or troubling content.

Pie 1: Frequency of upsetting or bothering things that happened online during the past year

When children were asked about their reactions to incidents that caused distress or discomfort online or on a phone, a variety of responses were reported. The most common reaction was to block the person responsible for the distressing behaviour, close the browser window or app, and attempt to make the other person leave them alone. These actions reflect children's attempts to remove themselves from the negative situation and regain control. Nearly half of the participants also reported taking steps such as deleting all messages from the other person, stopping internet use for a while, ignoring the problem in the hope that it would resolve itself, and feeling guilty about what went wrong. Approximately one in three children reported changing their privacy settings or reporting the issue online, which shows an understanding of proactive measures to protect themselves. A small percentage of children reported that they have attempted to get back at the person who upset them, highlighting a more reactive or defensive response.

No significant associations were found between age, gender, or residence area and the majority of the various reactions to distressing online situations. However, there were some specific significant associations that were revealed through chi-square tests. Children living in the city centre were significantly more likely to report feeling guilty about what went wrong, compared to their peers living outside the city centre [$\chi2(1)= 5.720$, $p= .017$, $N=63$]. Similarly, city centre residents were significantly more likely to try to make the other person leave them alone compared to children residing outside the city centre [$\chi2(1)= 6.903$, $p= .009$, $N=63$]. Gender differences were also found in the responses. Girls were significantly more likely to stop using the internet for a while after an upsetting incident [$\chi2(1)= 4.585$, $p= .032$, $N=63$] and to delete all messages from the other person [$\chi2(1)= 4.840$, $p= .028$, $N=63$] compared to boys.

The variety of responses reported by children underscores the importance of providing them with multiple tools and strategies to handle online distress. While many children choose to take direct actions such as blocking the other person or deleting messages, others report passive or emotionally driven reactions, such as ignoring the problem or feeling guilty.



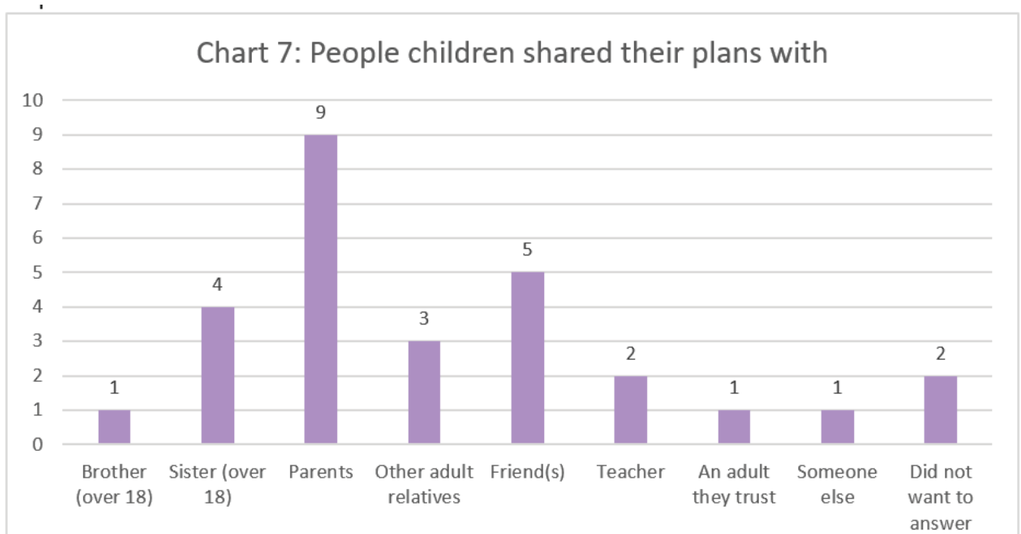
Online risks

The majority of respondents (88.5%) reported that they did not meet anyone in person who they had only met online in the year preceding the survey. However, 6% of children indicated that they had met someone they initially encountered online, while 5.6% chose not to answer the question. The results suggest that in general, most children do not engage in in-person meetings with individuals they meet online, which aligns with expectations around safety and digital boundaries.

There was no significant relationship between children's residence area and the likelihood of meeting someone in person whom they had first met online. However, a Fisher's Exact Test revealed a significant association between gender and the likelihood of meeting someone they had met online or via phone ($p= .032$). Boys were slightly more likely to meet someone they had initially encountered online, which could reflect differences in online behaviour or social interaction between genders.

Furthermore, older students were more likely to meet someone in person who they had first met online, as indicated by a significant relationship between age and this behaviour ($p= .029$). This may be due to older children's greater autonomy, increased confidence in social interactions, and potentially more opportunities to arrange in-person meetings. No significant results emerged between age, gender, residence area and the age of the person children met. Nonetheless, this could also be a result of the small sample.

Among the 14 children who reported meeting someone in person, 11 met someone their own age, one met someone younger than them, and two met an adult. Most shared their plans with their parents, friends, siblings, or other adult relatives. This suggests that, at least for this small group, there is an awareness of the importance of keeping trusted adults informed about their interactions with online acquaintances. However, given the small sample size, no statistical analysis was performed on these responses.

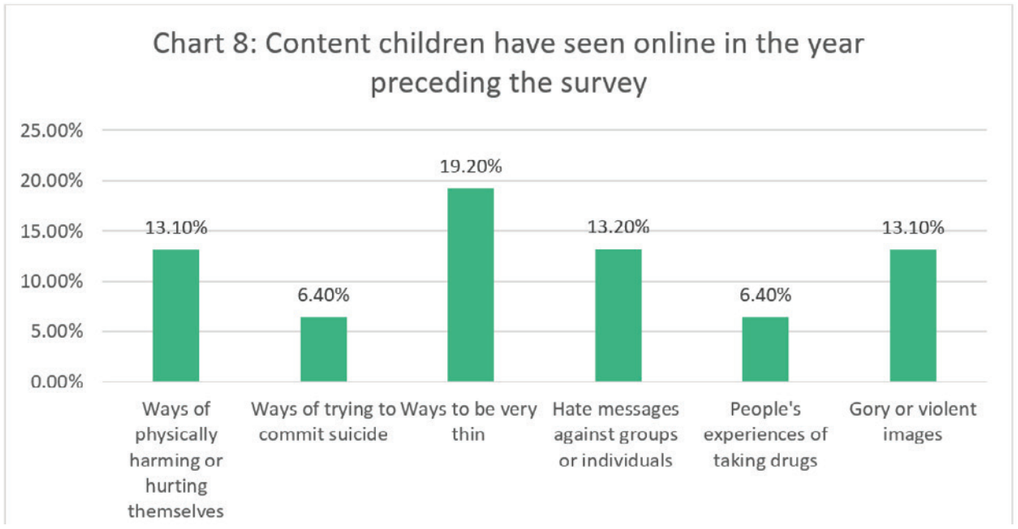


The majority of students (72.9%) reported not encountering inappropriate photos, videos, or text on mobile phones or the internet during the year preceding the survey. About 16.1% had seen such content once or twice, 4.2% had seen it at least once in a month, 0.4% once or more in a week, and 2.1% encountered it daily. 4.2% chose not to answer this question. These results suggest that while most children appear to avoid or not be exposed to inappropriate online content, a significant portion still encounters it occasionally. However, no significant associations were found between the frequency of viewing inappropriate material and children's age, gender, or residence area.

As shown in Chart 8, a number of students reported exposure to specific types of inappropriate content during the year preceding the survey. Approximately one in five children encountered websites or online discussions related to extreme weight loss methods, while one in eight had seen content discussing self-harm, hate speech, or violent imagery. One in 16 children came across online discussions about suicide methods. These findings suggest that a notable portion of children may have been exposed to content related to serious issues such as body image, violence, and self-harm, which could potentially have a harmful impact on their mental and emotional well-being.

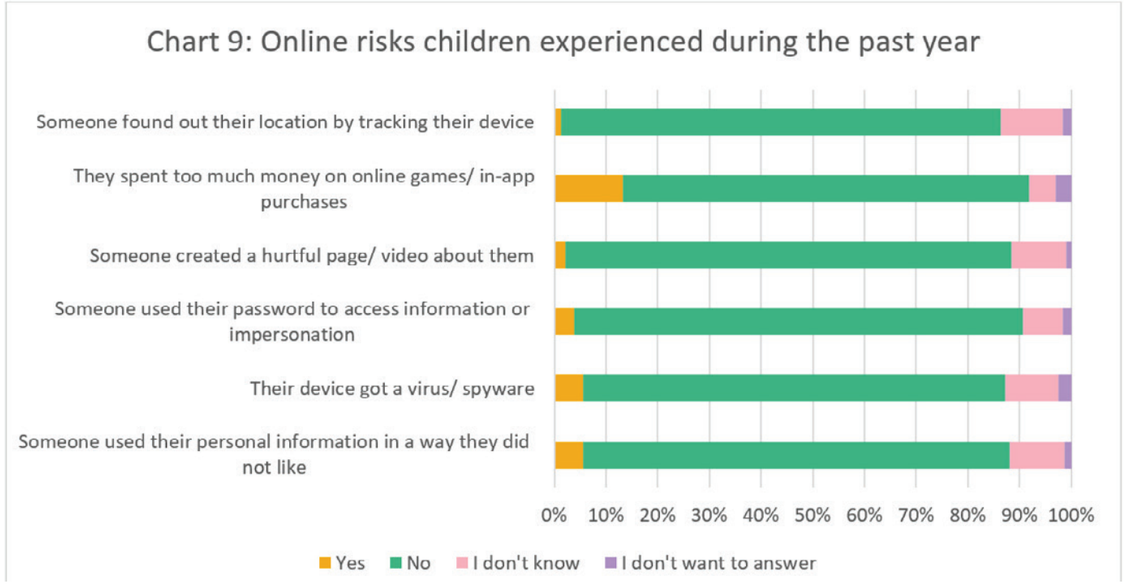
A Fisher's Exact Test showed a significant association between age and encountering online discussions about methods of suicide over the past year (p= .011), with younger age groups (9 and 11 years old) being slightly more likely to come across such content. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to encounter such materials (p= .006). In addition, there was a significant relationship between age and exposure to online hate speech (p= .014), with older children being more likely to encounter such content. Similarly, 11-year-olds were more likely to report encountering online content related to drug use (p= .022).

A Chi-square test revealed a significant relationship between residence area and exposure to violent or gory content, with children living outside the city centre being more likely to report encountering such material [$\chi2(2)= 7.708$, p= .021, N=236]. Children residing in the city centre were more likely to select the "I don't want to answer" option, which might indicate a reluctance to disclose certain types of exposure or a different level of comfort with discussing online experiences.



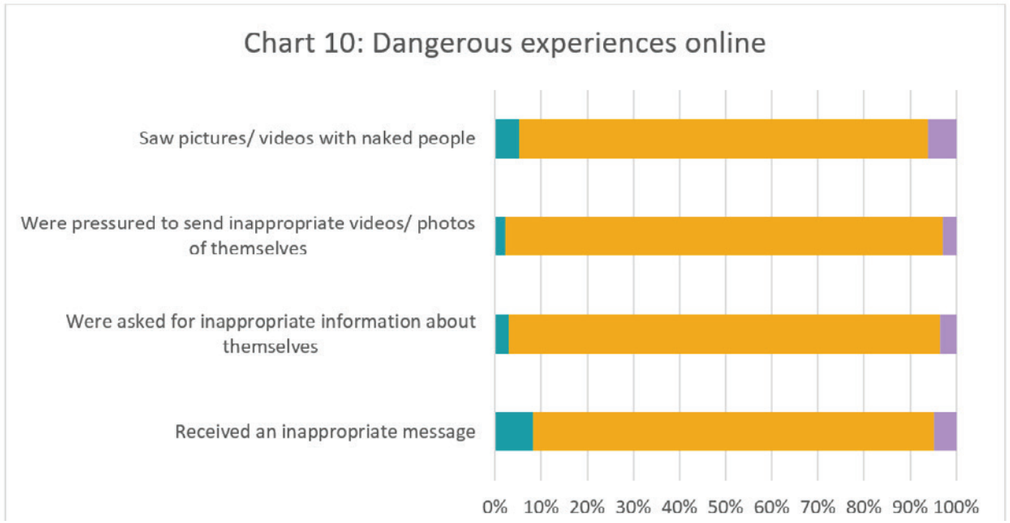
The majority of children reported not encountering significant online risks in the year preceding the survey, as depicted in Chart 9. Most respondents indicated they had not experienced unauthorised access to their personal information or passwords, nor had they been victims of identity theft or harmful online content. Additionally, a large portion of children reported that their devices did not get infected with viruses or spyware, and they did not experience cyberbullying through hurtful pages or videos. Most children also did not experience location tracking or excessive spending on online games or in-app purchases. Approximately one in 10 children remained uncertain about these experiences, which may indicate confusion or lack of awareness regarding potential online risks.

A Fisher's Exact Test revealed a significant association between age and experiences with password misuse (p= .009). Younger children (9-year-olds) were more likely to report uncertainty about whether their passwords were misused, while 11-year-olds were more likely to report having had such experiences. In contrast, 10-year-olds were more likely to report that they had not experienced password misuse. Similarly, younger children were significantly more likely to report uncertainty about whether someone had created a harmful page or video about them online (p= .010), while older children (10 and 11-year-olds) were more likely to report that they had not encountered such incidents. Regarding online gaming and in-app purchases, the results showed that boys were more likely to report spending time on online games than girls (p< .001). This aligns with earlier findings about gender differences in online activities, where boys were found to engage more frequently in gaming. Additionally, older children were more likely to report spending time on online games and making in-app purchases than younger children (p= .033).



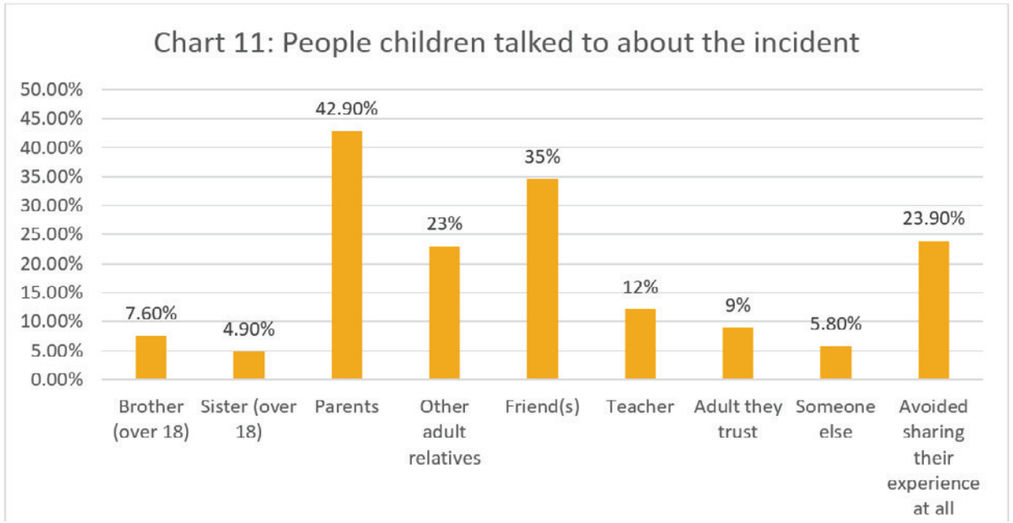
A small proportion of children reported encountering inappropriate online experiences in the year preceding the survey, such as receiving inappropriate messages, viewing explicit photos or videos, being asked for personal or inappropriate information, or being pressured to send inappropriate photos or videos. These incidents are illustrated in Chart 10. The relatively low prevalence of such experiences suggests that, for most children in the sample, online interactions have not involved severe or inappropriate content.

A Fisher's Exact Test revealed a significant association between residence area and the experience of being pressured to send inappropriate photos or videos (p= .018). Specifically, children residing in urban areas were slightly more likely to report experiencing this type of pressure, or they were more hesitant to disclose such incidents. No other statistically significant associations were found between the reported experiences and gender, age, or residence area.



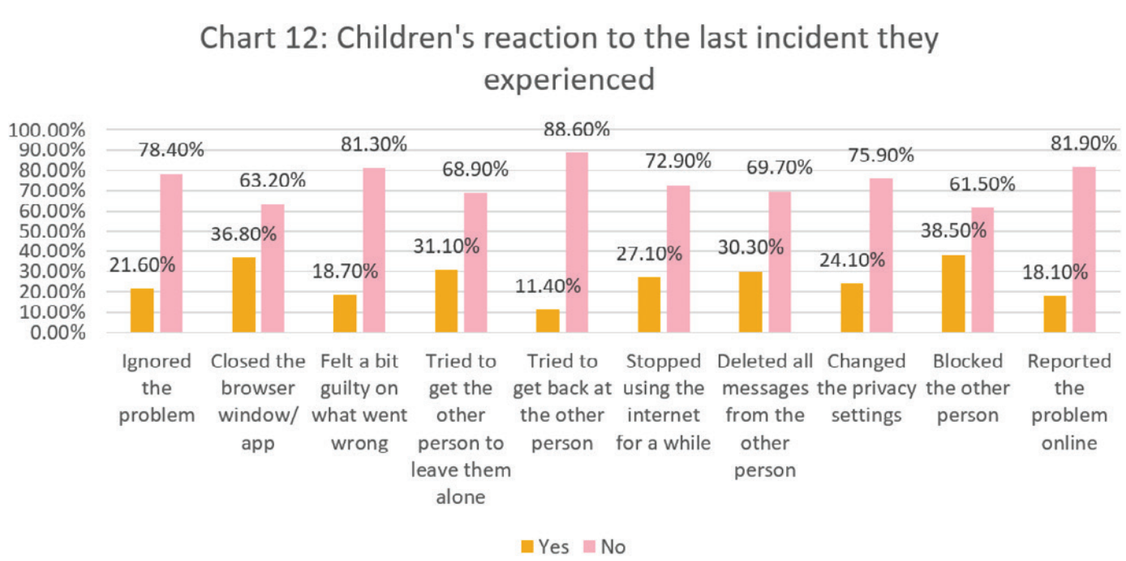
The survey results indicate that more than one-third of children shared an online incident with their parents or friends, while one in five disclosed it to another adult relative, and approximately one in eight informed their teacher. However, Chart 11 shows that about one in four children chose not to share the incident with anyone. This suggests that, despite the availability of trusted adults and peers, a significant portion of children still may not feel comfortable discussing such online experiences.

A Fisher's Exact Test revealed a significant association between age and the likelihood of sharing the incident with a sister over 18 years old (p= .030), with older children being more likely to do so. A Chi-square test also revealed a significant relationship between residence area and the likelihood of children choosing not to share the incident with anyone ($\chi^2(1)= 3.887$, p= .049, N=222). Children residing outside the city centre were more likely to avoid discussing the event. This finding suggests that children living outside urban areas may have fewer opportunities for open conversations about online safety or may be less likely to seek help due to cultural, familial, or regional differences in attitudes toward online behaviour and privacy.



Finally, the survey reveals a range of reactions from children following the last online incident that upset or disturbed them. Over one-third of children blocked the individual responsible, closed the browser or app, or attempted to get the person to stop contacting them. More than one-quarter of children deleted all messages from the individual, stopped using the internet for some time, or tried to get the person to leave them alone. Approximately one-fifth of children reported feeling guilty about what had transpired (as shown in Chart 12).

A Fisher's Exact Test revealed a significant association between age and the behaviour of ignoring the problem or hoping it would go away (p= .031). Younger children were more likely to exhibit this behaviour compared to older children. This could suggest that younger children might not yet have developed the coping mechanisms or confidence needed to address uncomfortable online situations directly. Additionally, younger children were found to be more likely to try to get back at the other person (p= .014), suggesting that they may react impulsively to online conflicts. Boys were more likely to exhibit this behaviour compared to girls (p= .004).



Conclusions

This study offers a detailed exploration of children's online behaviours, the risks they face, and their responses to these challenges, meeting the research objectives of understanding their digital engagement and vulnerabilities. Key findings highlight the complexities of children's online experiences and provide insights into areas requiring targeted interventions.

Most children displayed cautious behaviour online, particularly regarding friend requests and personal information sharing. Notably, nearly 34.3% of children accepted friend requests only with parental approval, reflecting a positive influence of parental guidance. However, a subset engaged in riskier activities, such as adding strangers or pretending to be someone else, underscoring gaps in awareness for certain age groups. Statistical analyses did not reveal significant associations between these behaviours and the demographic variables of age, gender, or residence area.

The majority of children had not encountered inappropriate content online, with 72.9% reporting no exposure to such material in the year preceding the survey. However, approximately one in six children had encountered inappropriate content occasionally, and significant associations emerged between age, gender, and specific types of exposure. For instance, younger children were more likely to encounter online discussions about self-harm, while older children were more likely to be exposed to hate speech or content about drug use. These findings highlight vulnerabilities that necessitate age-specific protective measures and monitoring.

Children's responses to unsettling online incidents varied, revealing differing levels of digital resilience. Blocking offenders and closing browsers were common, proactive strategies employed by more than one-third of children. However, younger children were significantly more likely to ignore problems or hope they would get resolved by themselves (p= .031), while they were also more inclined to retaliate against perpetrators (p= .014). Boys were particularly more likely to exhibit retaliatory behaviour than girls (p= .004). These findings suggest the importance of equipping children with constructive coping mechanisms and promoting emotional regulation as part of digital education.

When faced with unsettling incidents, more than one in three children turned to parents or friends for support, while one in four chose not to share the incident with anyone. Children living outside city centres were significantly more likely to avoid sharing these experiences (p= .049), reflecting potential barriers to accessing support in less urbanised areas. Additionally, older children were significantly more likely to seek help from a sibling over 18 years old (p= .030). These findings emphasise the need to strengthen trust and communication channels within families, particularly in non-urban settings, to encourage children to seek help when needed.

Awareness of online safety tools such as block and report buttons was significantly associated with age (p< .001), with older children showing greater familiarity. Younger children were less likely to know about these features, leaving them potentially more vulnerable to online risks. No significant associations emerged with gender or residence area, suggesting that awareness gaps are primarily age-related. These results highlight the necessity of integrating digital literacy education into early childhood curricula to familiarise younger users with essential safety mechanisms.

Incidents involving the misuse of personal information or exposure to harmful content were relatively rare, but they did occur. Younger children exhibited uncertainty regarding experiences like password misuse (p= .009) and online bullying, reflecting a potential lack of awareness about these risks. Older children were more likely to report spending money on online games or in-app purchases (p= .033), pointing to the need for financial literacy education alongside digital safety training. Additionally, children living in urban areas were significantly more likely to experience or hesitate to disclose incidents of being pressured to send inappropriate photos (p= .018). These results underline the need for targeted interventions addressing specific vulnerabilities in urban and rural settings.

Limitations

Several limitations impacted the design and outcomes of the study. First, despite efforts to reduce the questionnaire's length, it was reported that the overall length still acted as a deterrent for some children's participation. The language used in the survey was occasionally confusing for respondents, with certain questions that overlapped or were similar in nature being perceived as redundant. This led to a higher rate of incomplete responses during the initial stages of the survey, as participants either disengaged or struggled to comprehend the questions fully. To address this issue, additional consultations with teachers were arranged to help clarify the research rationale for both students and their parents, which helped mitigate some of the confusion.

A second limitation relates to the convenience sample used in this study. While the sample provided valuable insights into children's online attitudes, behaviours, and associated risks, it limits the ability to generalise the findings to the broader population. The study's sample, being non-random, may not adequately represent children from diverse backgrounds or different geographical areas, potentially affecting the results.

Parental reluctance to allow their children to participate in the study also posed a challenge. In some cases, parents considered the subject matter to be inappropriate for their children's age and, as a result, declined to give their consent for participation. This reluctance to participate further limited the diversity of experiences captured in the survey, as children from certain families or backgrounds were not represented in the data.

Overall, while the study offers a valuable snapshot of children's online behaviours and perceptions, the limitations related to survey design, sample selection, and parental consent need to be acknowledged when interpreting the results. Further research involving larger and more diverse samples would be beneficial to support generalisations and deepen the understanding of children's online experiences.

Recommendations

Based on the presented results, several recommendations are proposed to enhance children's online safety, digital literacy, and well-being.

Digital literacy programmes should be tailored to the developmental stages of children. Younger children need simplified, engaging education about basic online safety practices, such as not sharing personal information and recognising harm-ful content. For older children, the focus should shift toward equipping them with critical thinking skills to evaluate online interactions, recognise manipulation, and address complex risks like hate speech or cyberbullying. These programmes should include practical simulations and peer discussions to ensure active engagement.

Parental engagement is critical in mitigating online risks. Providing parents with workshops or digital toolkits can enhance their understanding of current online platforms and potential threats. Parents should be encouraged to establish trust-based dialogues with their children to create a judgment-free space for sharing concerns. This approach can help bridge the communication gap identified in some children's reluctance to disclose unsettling experiences.

Geographical and demographic-specific interventions can address unique vulnerabilities. Urban areas require more focus on combatting exposure to inappropriate content and social pressures, while rural communities may benefit from initiatives that build awareness of digital risks and strengthen support networks. Policymakers and educators must ensure equitable access to digital literacy programmes across diverse regions to prevent disparities.

Awareness campaigns should focus on teaching children how to utilise online safety tools, such as block and report functions, effectively. These campaigns should involve interactive demonstrations and age-appropriate messaging to ensure comprehension. Partnerships with popular digital platforms could amplify these efforts, encouraging these companies to incorporate more visible and intuitive safety features for children.

Financial literacy education should be integrated into broader digital safety programmes. Children need to understand the implications of in-app purchases and online gaming expenditures. Parents can also be guided on how to monitor and manage online spending to prevent financial exploitation.

Policymakers should enforce regulations requiring digital platforms to adopt child-centric safety measures. Platforms must implement robust age-verification systems, moderate content effectively, and offer accessible safety tools like help centres. Regulatory oversight should include penalties for non-compliance, incentivising platforms to prioritise children's well-being.

Future research should focus on reducing barriers that prevent comprehensive participation. Simplifying questionnaires, using age-appropriate language, and reducing survey length can improve response rates. Building trust with parents, especially around sensitive topics, can ensure broader representation and richer data for analysing children's online experiences.

Efforts to foster digital citizenship among children should include ethics education. Teaching empathy and respect in online interactions can discourage harmful behaviours like retaliatory actions or cyberbullying. Collaborative activities, such as role-playing scenarios, can help children internalise these values and apply them in their online interactions.

Recommendations for parents

• **Open Communication:** Parents should create a supportive environment where children feel comfortable discussing their online experiences, encourage daily conversations about digital activities and reassure children that they will not be judged or punished for sharing unsettling incidents.

• **Boundaries and Activity Monitoring:** Parents should make efforts to establish clear, age-appropriate rules for internet and device usage. They should utilise parental controls and regularly review children's online activity to ensure safety while respecting their privacy.

• **Education About Online Risks:** Acting proactively, they should provide children with guidance on identifying inappropriate content, understanding online grooming tactics, and safely managing friend requests. This would support children to critically evaluate the credibility of online interactions and sources.

• **Awareness raising of reporting mechanisms:** Parents should ensure their children know how to use safety tools such as block and report buttons on social media or gaming platforms and familiarise them with trusted helplines and reporting platforms available at national or regional levels.

• **Collaboration with Schools:** Parents should partner with schools to stay informed about digital safety curricula and participate in workshops or seminars addressing online safety issues. Working together, these actions can help reinforce consistent messages about internet safety.

Recommendations for schools

• **Integration of Digital Literacy into Curricula:** Schools can incorporate comprehensive digital literacy programmes into school curricula, aiming to teach children safe internet use, critical thinking, and how to identify and respond to online risks.

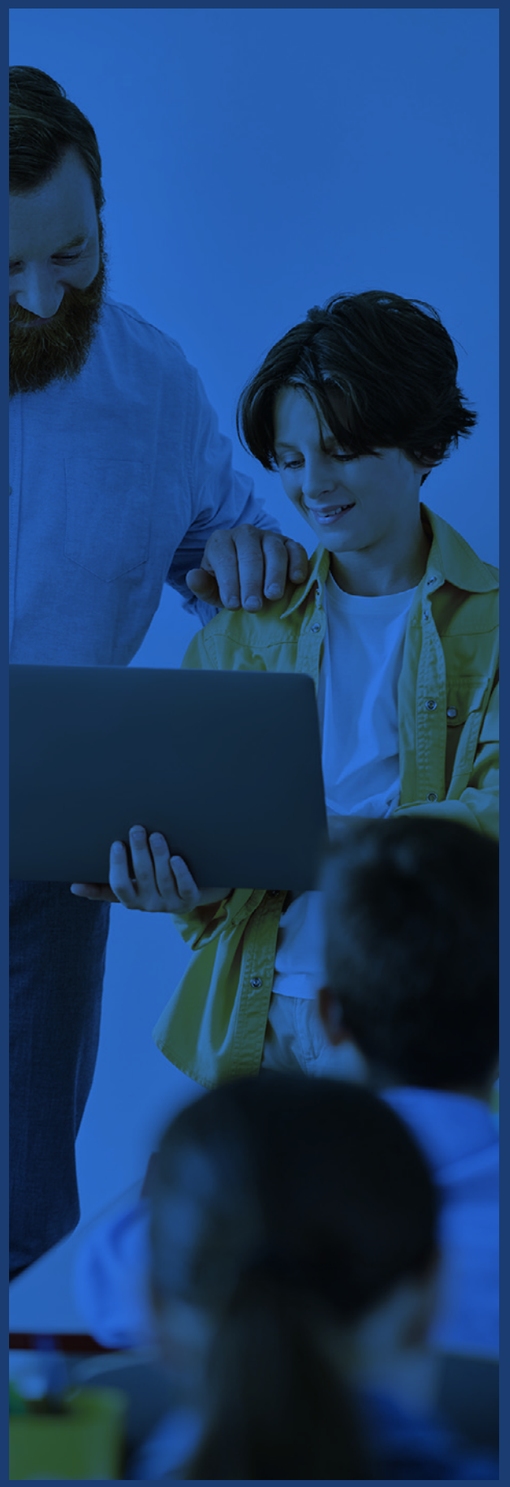
• **Development of Reporting Protocols and Support Systems:** Schools should have clear, accessible reporting mechanisms for online abuse or distressing incidents. Respectively, teachers and staff should be trained to handle reports sensitively and ensure children are aware of these resources.

• **Accessibility to psychological support:** Schools should provide access to counsellors trained in digital-era challenges, equipping children to handle emotional distress stemming from cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, or other traumatic online experiences. Building partnerships with mental health organisations can enhance the availability and quality of such support.

• **Engagement of families in Digital Safety Education:** Schools can organise workshops for parents to educate them about evolving online threats and how to protect children effectively. They can further provide them with resources to accompany and support awareness raising initiatives implemented in school, fostering a holistic approach to children's digital education.

• **Organisation of Peer-Led Initiatives:** Schools and community groups should develop peer-led initiatives where children can share experiences and learn from one another in a supervised setting. Peer interactions can normalise discussions about online risks and reduce the stigma around reporting unsettling incidents. Peer mentors can act as relatable guides, promoting a proactive approach to digital safety.

These actions can contribute to the creation of a holistic framework to protect children, promote responsible online behaviour, and empower them to navigate the digital landscape confidently and safely.



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