

UK parents worried about screens, but children say they now feel safer online

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Author: Sally Weale

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UK parents are worried that screen time is taking over family life and damaging their children's physical health, yet young people say they feel more confident online and their "digital wellbeing" has improved, according to a major survey. More than half of parents (57%) who took part in the survey said they thought screen use was having an adverse effect on their child's sleep, while nearly two-thirds (63%) said it had a negative impact on health, up from 58% last year. Although parents were more anxious, their children provided a more positive view of their lives online, and reported feeling safer, more confident, more independent and empowered. "There's a positive story to tell this year," the report said. "The index scores reveal a rise in positive developmental, emotional and social experiences of children – a reversal of the downward trend observed in the previous two years." The report is the third annual Internet Matters Index, which attempts to track the impact of digital technology on children's physical, social, emotional, and developmental wellbeing. One of the main areas of concern the report highlights is the growing number of children being messaged online by strangers, particularly girls who are significantly more likely to experience the harms of being online. Almost half of 15- to 16-year-old girls reported being contacted by people they did not know, up from three in 10 a year earlier, while overall two-thirds of participating children (67%) reported harmful experiences online. Internet Matters, which is an internet safety organisation, asked parents to measure on a scale of 0-10 how far they agreed with the statement: "We often find ourselves spending time on our own devices rather than doing things together." Nearly a third (31%) selected scores of between eight and 10, up from 20% – "one of the most notable shifts" over the past year. Carolyn Bunting, the co-CEO of Internet Matters, said: "Parents need to ask how families can get the balance right between the time spent online and time spent offline, and whether they are always setting the best example for their children when it comes to using phones and other tech devices." Dame Rachel de Souza, the children's commissioner for England, said: "Over the last few months, I have been travelling all over England as part of my Big Ambition survey asking children and young people about what they want the next government to do and one issue that came up as being a big concern was online safety. "Too many are seeing really disturbing material and feel vulnerable online, which is why I am calling on the tech companies to step up and take immediate action to keep our children safe from online harm." Children who took part in the survey felt less affected by online harms than they did last year. A quarter (24%) saw racist, homophobic, or sexist content as really upsetting or scary, down from 35%, while one in 10 (9%) saw content promoting unrealistic body types as upsetting, down from 22%. "However," the report notes, "this could be because experiencing harm online might be becoming normalised in the eyes of children, something they see as inevitable and part and parcel of their online lives."

Other more positive findings include two-thirds (65%) of children saying spending time online makes them feel mostly happy and 75% viewing technology and the internet as important to their independence. Almost a quarter of children, however, admitted their online activities were having a physical impact, including fatigue, concentration difficulties, vision problems and poor posture. In a separate development, the NSPCC children's charity said young people were increasingly contacting its helpline, Childline, about AI child sexual abuse material and other harms linked to generative AI. A 15-year-old girl told the helpline a stranger had made fake nudes of her. "It looks so real, it's my face and my room in the background. They must have taken the pictures from my Instagram and edited them. "I'm so scared they will send them to my parents. The pictures are really convincing, and I don't think they'd believe me that they're fake." The NSPCC has joined forces with the US-based Common Sense Media to address the impact and risks of AI for children.