Let's start listening

A guide to what parents really think about tech, regulation and policy.

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Your Digital Family

Your Digital Family, from Meta and Parent Zone, is a hyper-local project of family community support and collaboration.

In 2020, Your Digital Family delivered a family quiz night, bringing parents and young people together to talk – not just about their relationship with tech, but also about how tech affects their relationships.

For the Listening Project, we spoke to 52 family organisations across the UK, from Carmarthen Youth Project in Wales to the Prince of Wales Youth Club in Canterbury, helping us hear from over 200 parents.

With thanks to all 52 organisations who signed up to take part.

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Why the Listening Project?

The Online Safety Bill aims to make the UK the safety place in the world to go online – especially for children. Yet it mentions parents only twice in over 230 pages.

It is quite an omission. No-one knows more about children than their parents or carers. As first educators, daily caregivers, emotional and financial support providers, and constant advocates, they are the people who care about children most. Yet we routinely forget to consider their needs or to ask their opinions.

Progress has been made for children – driven by a formal recognition in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that children have a right to be heard. Parents, however, are rarely acknowledged as the people who actually make decisions for, and with, their children.

Ask parents and they will tell you that they believe they know their children best.

Families are unique. Their values, resources and beliefs are a demonstration of the unique unit that is a family. It's therefore no surprise that when we embarked on a listening exercise with families, the clearest message of all was that parents want to make decisions about their family.

They expect sensible regulation and effective enforcement of existing rules but they don't want to be left as bystanders in decisions about their children.
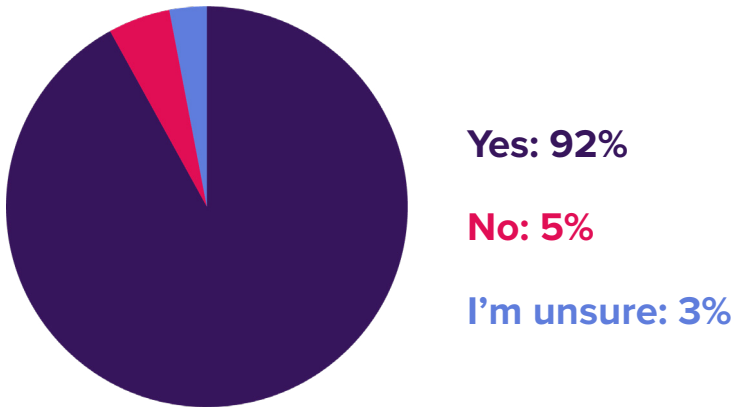
So what do parents think about tech, policy and regulation? The Your Digital Family Listening Project is designed to help all of us meet parents where they are. If we don't, we will lose their support and they will vote with their feet – as they do already – when rules don't align with their own boundaries.

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Who should decide what the right age is for children to access different online platforms?
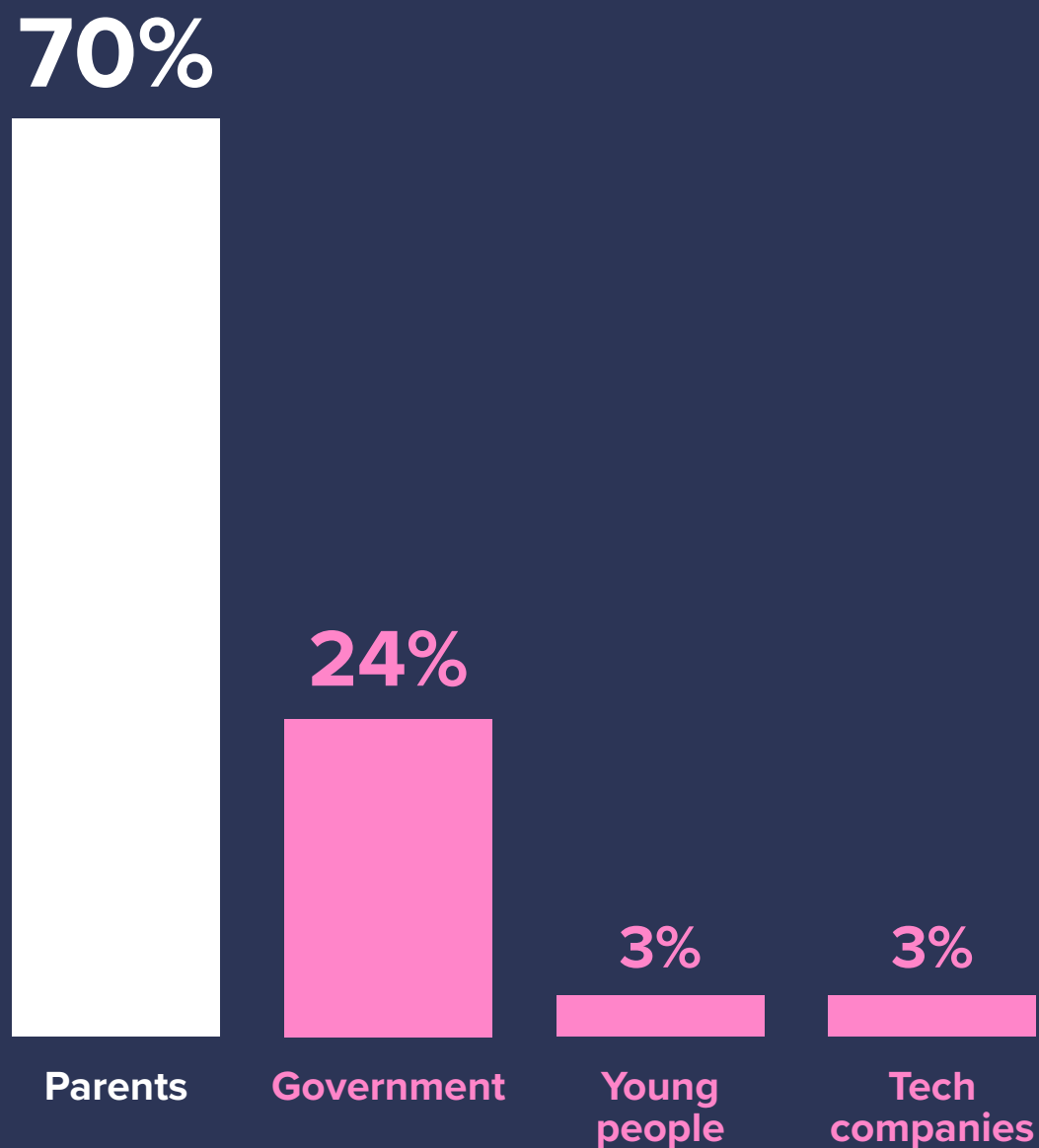
70%

24%

3%

3%

Parents   Government   Young people   Tech companies

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Age gating and verification

Should children only be able to use online platforms (e.g. Instagram) once they reach a certain age?

Yes: 92%
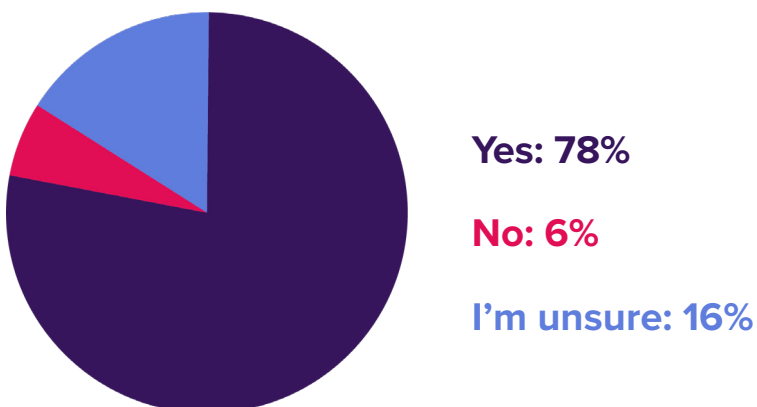
No: 5%

I'm unsure: 3%

At what age* should children be allowed to use… ?

Social media	**14 years**
Messaging apps	**13 years**
Streaming services	**11.6 years**
Online games	**11 years**

* Answers based on average of all responses

If there are age restrictions, should young people have to prove their age using a form of ID?

Yes: 78%

No: 6%

I'm unsure: 16%

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"I think that certain games and apps require a more mature way of thinking, so some young people shouldn't be allowed to use them or get access to them."

Age ratings and age gating matters to parents.

Over nine in ten (92%) in our listening exercise say that children should only use certain types of online platforms once they reach the appropriate age.

But who is best placed to determine what ages are appropriate? Certainly not the platforms themselves, is the overwhelming parental consensus.

Most parents (70%) believe it should be for them to decide age restrictions – and only 3% say the platforms should be responsible. This highlights a dilemma for policy makers, with only one in four parents (24%) believing government should be making the decision.

This matters more when you see the average age that parents believe certain types of online platforms become appropriate. Social media generally carries a minimum age rating of 13+, but parents believe that it should start at 14.

It might also be helpful if ratings weren't sometimes so confusing. Parents believe 13+ is suitable for messaging apps. However, Apple has rated WhatsApp as 12+ in its App Store, despite WhatsApp stating in its terms of use the app is suitable for ages 16+ in the UK.

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> "
>
> *"It is often helpful that children are protected from adult content. However disclosing age also makes them targetable in other ways."*

Whatever the age restrictions are, parents expect them to be properly enforced.

Over three quarters (78%) say that children should have to provide a form of ID to prove their age before using age-restricted online platforms.

This is not currently the case with most social media – with the exception of when a user's age is challenged by a platform moderator.

It's worth noting that many parents are very aware of the knock-on effects that age gating and the requirement to provide IDs to access certain online platforms, might create. These include:

- affordability of official/acceptable ID, and fake ID/verified account markets.
- children not having access to important online services and resources.
- verification discouraging children from services (like sexual health services), especially if anonymity matters (e.g. to report abuse).
- data security worries – abusing, selling, leaks, theft.

Clearly parents understand the complexity of age gating, but appropiate online access – in which they have a say – remains their wider priority.

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Privacy

80% of parents take steps to protect their child's privacy

A little over **19%** said they don't take steps to protect their child's identity when they post photos of them online. **44%** said they do take steps. **37%** said the question wasn't applicable to them or they don't post photos at all.

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> *"I never accept cookies. I give a false DOB unless there is a genuine reason not to. I stay on my guard, always questioning whether information being asked is absolutely required."*

Parents are taking active steps to protect their children's privacy. Fewer than 20% of parents in our exercise do nothing at all to protect it.

Many families describe a range of measures they are taking to ensure their child retains their privacy online, including:

- not posting photos of children.
- blurring school badges, road signs, faces and names.
- setting accounts to private or friends only.

This approach to privacy does not extend to their attitude towards how much privacy they themselves should afford their child. This includes monitoring children's activities, looking at who their child is friends with, and knowing their child's passwords.

In other words, the picture quickly becomes less clear cut.

Policy demonstrates a similarly mixed attitude when it comes to children and privacy. The Children's Code places emphasis on platforms to notify children if their parents are choosing to use parental controls. It says:

'If you provide parental controls, give the child age-appropriate information about this. If your online service allows a parent or carer to monitor their child's online activity or track their location, provide an obvious sign to the child when they are being monitored.'

Conversely, guidance from the Department for Education specifically instructs schools to monitor children online – but with no requirement to notify parents or children.

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Anonymity

You should only be allowed to be anonymous online if you are over 18:

21%

Being anonymous online has lots of benefits, so we should keep it:

21%

Being anonymous online causes too many problems – people should only be allowed to use their real identity:

58%

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> *"Allow anonymity but respond strongly to things like trolling and/or use advanced detection and removal programs for hurtful language."*

Of all the topics we surveyed parents on, anonymity drew out the widest range of views.

Parents are alive to the complexity of the debate, highlighting the importance of anonymity whilst recognising the problems with it. As one told us:

"It's easier to engage with online communities without being targeted or suffering a loss of privacy. Some would miss out on important benefits of anonymity like being able to engage with LGBTQI+ communities when you haven't yet come out to your parents."

Over half (58%) of parents in our exercise support the idea that you should use your real identity to post online – whilst around a quarter lean the other way. They highlight, in particular, how it supported whistleblowing and being able to engage in communities privately.

In fact, when presented with the benefits of anonymity, parents' viewpoints changed to a 50-50 split – between it being a risk worth taking and one that was too great to tolerate.

Once again, parents demonstrated a far greater level of understanding than they are often given credit for, particularly in flagging the potential for identifying information to be shared by platforms without users needing to publicly share their ID:

"Posting/engaging anonymously could be OK as long as the platform has the verified identity of the poster, even if it's not public. So people can be identified by platforms/ authorities if needed."

What emerges is that anonymity is something parents are thinking about. If age verification does become normalised, the question of online identity will become increasingly complex.

As it does, making sure parents are included in the decision-making process will be the only way to ensure they support verifying children's ID.

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We basically take everything with a pinch of salt

21%

52%
We tell our children not to believe everything they see online

15%

We struggle like lots of other families

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Media Literacy

Parents care about improving outcomes for their children.

Supporting their media literacy should be a priority so that it moves from an overlooked parenting skill to something that's as important as teaching a child to read or ride a bicycle.

A relatively low percentage (12%) of parents in our exercise say they had read information or taken steps to improve their media literacy.

Instead, they adopt a 'pinch of salt' approach – telling their children not to believe everything they see online.

Where families are trying to enhance their media literacy we saw positive signs of the types of behaviours that are often assumed to be missing. These include:

- actively supporting children – having discussions as a family.
- doing research – finding multiple sources, using trusted/reputable sources, seeing what others say about the reliability of a site.
- having safe-lists of approved/trusted channels and sites.

While that feels positive, it's less so when you consider that over 80% of parents aren't taking steps to develop their media literacy.

It's not difficult to imagine why: lack of time, awareness, availability of good support. Whatever the cause, it's not where we hope to be.

Research from the London School of Economics captures the urgency of improving media literacy in the context of unlocking digital opportunity. It says:

"… new possibilities for teaching, learning and parenting need to be accessible to everyone, if digitalisation is to have a positive impact on the inclusiveness, diversity and healthy growth of our society."

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An Action Plan

It's never easy to model effective responses for complex problems. Especially so when regulation, education and parenting have to keep up with an evolving digital world. In response to our listening exercise, we propose some clear calls to action.

1

Enforcement of consistent and appropriate age ratings
Most parents don't think children should access social media before 14 – and believe this should be enforced. Fair enough. But possibly the risks are not always so clear. Should online games – many of which feature social and gambling-like functions – be appropriate at 11+, as parents also believe? As much as parents want greater enforcement of age ratings, we may also need consistency and transparency, with a wider awareness of functionality and risk.

2

Consideration for parents around privacy
Policy around privacy for children appears to be being patched together – so further work is needed to establish where lines should be drawn. Children have defined rights around privacy – but parents want a say in what rights they have for monitoring their own child, so need to understand what these are. If we want parents to have trust in decisions that impact a child's privacy, it's essential we include them in discussions.

3

No quick-fixes for the anonymity conundrum
For such a complex issue as the right to anonymity, there is no simple action. Simply removing it would create many new problems – as parents highlight, even if they marginally believe it is the preferable choice. It's an area that needs further work with parents to understand the potential impacts.

4

Bring parents to the table
Our exercise suggests that parents are perhaps more media literate than many would credit – even if 80% say they take no steps to improve their understanding. Maybe their literacy is more based on common sense parenting than anything else. Parents clearly accept their responsibility for digital parenting – and want effective regulation. But that must be regulation that respects a parent's role as their child's primary care-giver and the person who know their child best. Listening is just the start.

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Appendix

Methodology and results

The Your Digital Family Listening Project ran during September and October 2022.

It included a survey available online to 52 organisations by three methods – to ensure it was accessible to as many people as possible. These were:

- a Full Survey sent out as a direct link.
- a 'Waiting Room' Survey (abridged to three questions for quick submission) accessed by QR code posters.
- live quiz events with time scheduled to complete the survey.

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Age-gating and verification

Should children only be able to use online platforms (eg, Instagram) once they reach a certain age?[1]
Yes: 92%
No: 5%
I'm unsure: 3%

At what age should children be allowed to use… ?[2] (answers on average)
Social media: 14
Messaging apps: 13
Streaming services: 11.6
Online games: 11

Who should decide what the right age is?[3]
Parents: 70%
Government: 24%
Tech companies: 3%
Young people: 3%

If there are age restrictions, should young people have to prove their age using a form of ID?[4]
Yes: 78%
No: 6%
I'm unsure: 16%

Would you have any worries about 'age gating' access to the internet as a whole for children and young people? Over a third expressed worries about age gating access and requiring verification. These included:

- Fake ID/verified account markets, and children generally finding ways of bypassing the restrictions.
- Children not having access to the online services they need. For example, vulnerable children who need to ask for help.
- Children not having access to online resources for school/homework.
- Verification discouraging children from services (like sexual health services), either because they can't verify, or verification causes too much friction, or because they need to remain anonymous (eg, to report abuse).
- There will be children from families who can't afford to buy official/acceptable ID, or don't enjoy ease of access to these for some other reason.
- Data security worries were common too – abusing data, selling data, leaks, theft and the consequences of these for the child.

1. The same question was asked in the Live Event Survey: Part 1, but there were only 11 responses. The percentages were: Yes: 82%, I'm unsure: 18%.
2. Live Event Survey: Part 1 results – Social media: 14, Streaming services: 14, Messaging apps: 13, Online games: 12.3
3. Live Event Survey: Part 1 results – Government: 45.5%, Parents: 45.5%, Tech companies: 9%.
4. Live Event Survey: Part 1 results – Yes: 64%, No: 18%, I'm unsure: 18%.

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Age-gating and verification (continued)

Would you have any worries about children needing to prove their age to access sites or apps?
In the Full Survey, over 40% expressed worries. These included:

- The demands of verification discouraging children from using the services they need. For example, sexual health.
- Children not using support services because they aren't able to do so anonymously. For example, reporting abuse either for themselves or a friend.
- Inequality of access to official forms of ID.
- Data security and safety – concerns around privacy and identity theft.
- Children circumventing the system by obtaining fake ID, or using someone else's.

In the Waiting Room Survey some themes were:

- Verified parental approval (without child age verification) would also be acceptable.
- Some sites should require proof of age, but not things like online sexual health services.
- Security concerns – worries around what information would be needed and how well it would be protected after upload/submission. Maybe it should be the parent verifying their own identity, and then permitting the child access.
- Online should have the same safeguards as offline (like for buying alcohol), but with online platforms the submission of official documentation gives rise to data security concerns and vulnerability to things like harassment/stalking/predators.
- Children will just find a way to trick the system.

Would you have any worries about children needing to provide more data about themselves in order to access a service or platform? Slightly under half expressed worries. These included:

- Children being asked for more data than is needed, and the platforms using the data for reasons other than AV (like advertising) or selling it.
- Data falling into the wrong hands (eg, scammers) through theft or leaks.

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Anonymity and identity

Should people have to use their real identities if they want to post online? In the Full Survey, over 60% said yes (against anonymity). Many who said yes also qualified this:

- It's easier to engage with online communities without being targeted or suffering a loss of privacy. Some would miss out on important benefits of anonymity like being able to engage with LGBTQI+ communities when you haven't yet come out to your parents.
- Posting/engaging anonymously could be OK as long as the platform has the verified identity of the poster, even if it's not public, so people can be identified by platforms/authorities if needed.
- About a third said the benefits to privacy and participation make anonymity a risk worth taking.
- Anonymity protects privacy (real names could open young people up to being targeted, stalked or harassed).
- Anonymity empowers whistleblowers and activists.

In the Waiting Room Survey:

- 37% said: 'No, people shouldn't have to use their real identities to post online'.
- 20% said: 'No, but…' with the most common qualification being that if they post anonymously they must still have their identity verified with the platform.
- 23% said: 'Yes, they should have to use their real identities'.
- 20% said: 'Tricky' and were on the fence.

These were qualified with the following comments:

- Maybe people shouldn't be made to publically share their identity, but the platform should have a record of their verified identity (in case it's needed to take action/to hold them accountable).
- Allow anonymity but respond strongly to things like trolling and/or use advanced detection and removal programs for hurtful language.
- People shouldn't have to use their real name because doing so undermines their safety.
- Don't allow anonymity – if someone is sharing information then knowing who it is (the source) is an important part of media literacy for those seeing it.
- Don't allow anonymity – people should be held responsible for hate crimes.

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Being anonymous also gives people a way to protect their identity, engage in debates and ask questions they might not want to put their name to. Does that make anonymity a risk worth taking?

- Just under 40% said yes.
- Just under 40% said no.
- Just over 20% were unsure or said maybe/sometimes.

If you had to vote for one thing or the other, which way would you go?

58% said: Being anonymous online causes too many problems – people should only be allowed to use their real identity

21% said: Being anonymous online has lots of benefits, so we should keep it.

21% said: You should only be allowed to be anonymous online if you are over 18.

Media literacy

How does your family approach the huge challenge of knowing what is reliable online and what isn't?

In the Full Survey:

- 52% said: We tell our children not to believe everything they see online.
- 21% said: We basically take everything with a pinch of salt.
- 15% said: We struggle like lots of other families.
- 12% said: We've had classes/read information about it so we are pretty savvy about things like adverts, misinformation, scams.

In the Waiting Room Survey some themes were:

- Don't take info at face value and find out the source.
- Monitor what children do and see online and put restrictions/controls on children's activity and access, check sites/apps before allowing children on them.
- Actively supporting children – having discussions, researching things as a family.
- Doing research – finding multiple sources, using trusted/reputable sources, seeing what others say about the reliability of a site.
- Safe-lists of approved/trusted channels and sites.

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