

Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World

Year Three
Index Report 2024

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Developed with:



Introduction

It is now three years since Internet Matters first embarked on a journey to measure the impact of digital technology on children's wellbeing, and the data continues to tell a fascinating story. There is often a temptation to speak about children's online lives in simplistic and broad-brush terms. Yet this research shows that the impact of technology is complex: it has both positive and negative elements, and varies according to a huge number of factors, including a child's age, gender and their own personal experience of being online.

In welcome news, this year's data has shown that children's digital wellbeing has overall improved, after a dip was experienced last year. At its best, the online world is a brilliant source of inspiration, creativity and fun. So it is wonderful to learn that young people feel that being online is helping them to be confident and independent, and that it is inspiring them to find new hobbies and plan their futures.

And yet, consistent with last year, it is still the case that a staggering two-thirds of young people report experiencing harm online – whether that's being bullied, being contacted by strangers, seeing extreme or hateful content, or something else. I am concerned that to younger generations who have grown up with technology, experiencing harm online is becoming

normalised: increasingly seen as an inevitability of online life, rather than something which can, and must, be tackled. We, the adults supporting and shaping children's online experiences, must remain ambitious and determined that things can be better.

In line with last year's report, and wider evidence from Internet Matters and others, this report shows that girls are significantly more likely to experience many of the harms of being online. Nearly half of 15-16 year old girls say that strangers have tried to message or contact them (up from 3 in 10 last year) while 13-14 year old girls are more likely to say that being online makes them feel lonely and isolated. This builds on findings from our research into online misogyny last year, which showed how sexist influencers and communities are creating a hostile environment for girls (and women) online. In light of findings such as these, it is welcome that the Online Safety Act was amended in its final stages to place greater emphasis on tackling violence against women and girls. We will continue to share evidence on the gendered-nature of online harms in 2024 to support these efforts, not least through a more in-depth study on the experience of teenage girls based on one-to-one interviews.

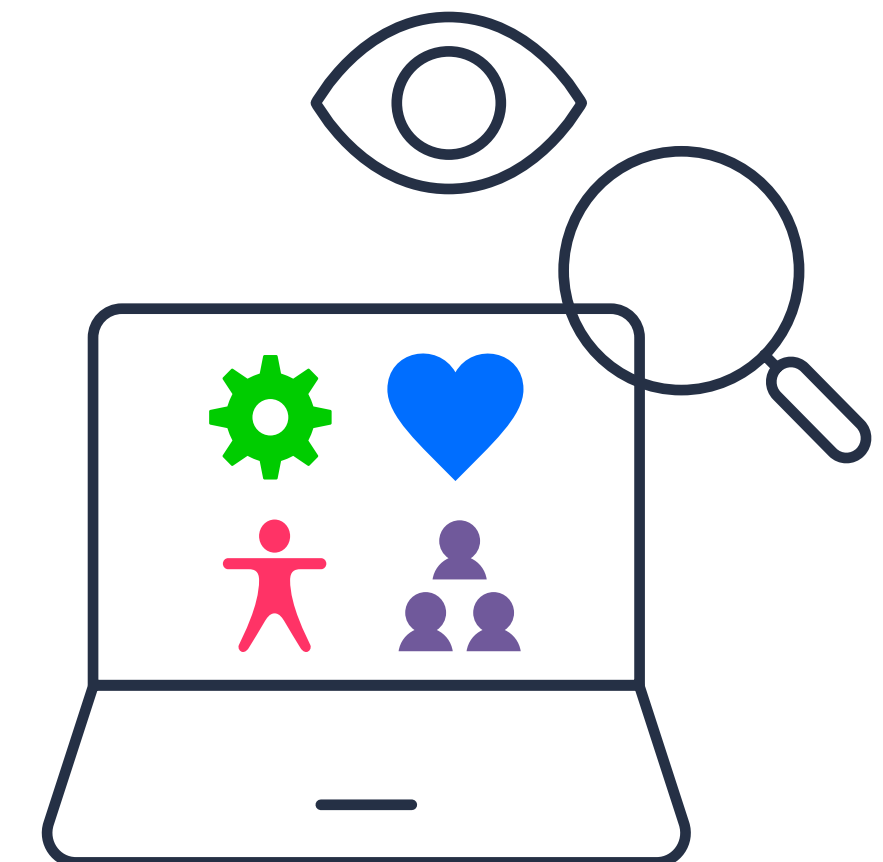
Children do not live in isolation, but are supported and influenced by their parents, carers and wider families. This is an obvious fact, but something which policy in

this area often forgets, with parents mentioned only a handful of times in the Online Safety Act. It is positive to see that this year there has been an increase in the proportion of parents taking steps to support children online, whether through use of technical tools (such as parental controls) or initiating conversations with children. But at the same time, parental anxiety about online harm has grown, as has their sense that tech is interfering with family life. This represents another key area in need of attention if we are to move the dial on children's digital wellbeing.

Internet Matters will be using the insights detailed in this report to shape our work for the coming year and beyond. We have been delighted to see growing interest in the Index across our networks, including from government departments, regulators, industry and other third sector organisations. As ever, we welcome your feedback on this latest iteration.

Finally, a huge thank you to everyone who made this work possible, including the team at BMG Research, who undertook this year's report with great skill and enthusiasm. We are equally grateful to all the children and families who participated in the research.

Carolyn Bunting MBE,
Joint CEO of Internet Matters



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Welcome to our report

This report is the third in a series of annual reports that evaluate and track the impact of digital technology on children's digital wellbeing.¹ This year's survey – populated with data from the third year of research with the children and parents of around 1,000 families – gives an up-to-date illustration of the effects of digital technology on children's wellbeing.

As with previous surveys, we break digital wellbeing down into four dimensions² and look at the impact of technology in each of these areas:

1. Physical wellbeing
2. Social wellbeing
3. Emotional wellbeing
4. Developmental wellbeing

This year, we've taken a slightly different approach to the report. We will not focus exclusively on the Index numbers themselves throughout the report; instead, we will use the index scores to set the scene before outlining some key changes and stories that sit behind the shifts,³ helping to bring to life the experiences of children and parents. Overall, we think a fascinating picture emerges, and generally, a positive one – although there are still key areas of concern.

How this report is structured

The report is split into four sections

In section 1, we focus on the bright side of tech, setting out that children's digital developmental, emotional and social wellbeing scores have improved since last year.

In section 2, we explore potential factors contributing to this change, including a trend where parents are taking increased steps to monitor and manage their children's internet use, alongside evidence of more parent-child dialogue about their children's online experiences.

In section 3, we highlight that while the shifts in index scores are generally positive, the negative aspects of online life haven't disappeared. In fact, in some areas, these downsides are intensifying.

Finally, section 4 reflects on some of the challenges parents encounter, from keeping up with their children's evolving digital habits to the intrusion of technology into family life.

Key findings across these sections are summarised over the following pages.

1. Year 1 Report: <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Internet-Matters-Digital-Wellbeing-Index-2022.pdf>. Year 2 Report: <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Internet-Matters-Childrens-Wellbeing-in-a-Digital-World-Index-report-2023-2.pdf>

2. The four dimensions of digital wellbeing were developed by Dr Diane Levine and her team at the University of Leicester. They are outlined in the following report: <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Internet-Matters-Wellbeing-In-A-Digital-World-1.pdf>

3. Any change where we have reported an increase since last year is statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval.



Key findings

Section 1: Cause for optimism

- **Digital wellbeing is improving:** There is a positive story to tell this year. The index scores reveal a rise in the positive developmental, emotional and social experiences of children, a reversal of the downward trend observed in the previous two years:
 1. **Confidence and Independence:** Children feel that the time they spend online and their online experiences are increasingly important in helping them feel confident and independent.
 2. **Inspiring young minds:** The online world is playing a greater role in shaping the lives of young people. Across the survey, we find children viewing the internet as an ever more significant resource for job inspiration, being creative, learning beyond the classroom, and discovering new hobbies.
 3. **Distance diminished:** We're seeing how online spaces are turning into lively social hubs, with children increasingly saying that being online makes them feel like they're part of a group.

The index scores reveal a rise in the positive developmental, emotional and social experiences of children online

Section 2: Connected families

- **More engaged parenting:** Various data points in the survey suggest that the rise in wellbeing is not simply a by-product of the UK emerging from the pandemic; rather, the data hints at unique factors at play within the digital realm itself. We point to two factors that are helping to drive up digital wellbeing:
 1. **More oversight:** An increasing number of parents are taking more steps to monitor and mediate their children's online activity. This includes an increase in families having certain devices that are for 'family use' or accounts for family activities, apps and settings to limit and measure screen time, monitoring of children's social media posts, and the practice of vetting apps, websites, or games for suitability.
 2. **Parent-child dialogue:** More parents this year say they have asked their children to show them what they are doing on their phone or device and discuss with them what they have been doing online. We also see more children talking to their parents after encountering a range of harmful experiences.

However, it is important to note that children's self-reported openness is different from parents' perceptions of openness. Most children report a certain degree of openness but are almost as likely to describe being 'somewhat' (42%) rather than 'very' (51%) open. This suggests that the awareness that parents have may be superficial, missing out on some deeper details, activities, or behaviour, even if they have a general idea about what their children are up to.

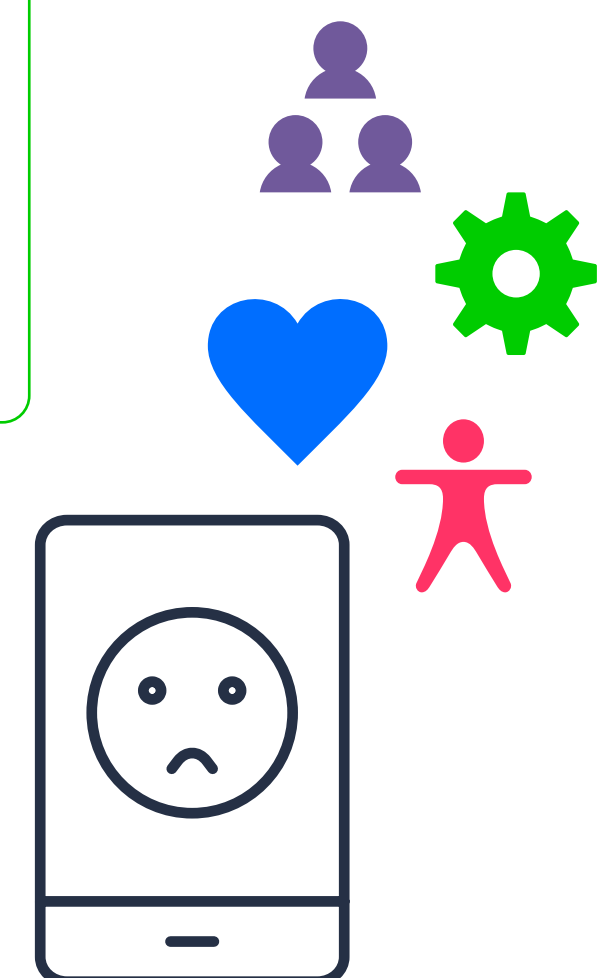
Section 3: Not all smooth surfing

- **Many children continue to experience the downsides of the digital world:** Despite the improvements in digital wellbeing, many children still grapple with the negative aspects of the internet. Across the survey, notable minorities of children say the internet fuels concern, worries and fears around issues ranging about their appearance, body image, or that they might say something wrong. Most of the negatives are generally consistent with last year, but with a couple of notable exceptions:
 1. **Rising stranger contact, particularly for older girls:** About two-thirds of children continue to report experiences online that could be harmful, stable with the last wave. Most of the individual experiences are also stable, but an increasing number of children say that strangers have tried to contact or message them, which is being driven by a rise in girls aged 15 and 16 reporting this (48% cf. 29% last year).
 2. **Online but alone:** A small but rising share feel lonelier and more isolated after spending time online. This feeling of isolation has increased among girls aged 13-14 (23% in this year versus 9% in 2022).
 3. **Screen time strain:** We've also seen an increase in both children and parents noticing the negative physical impacts of screen time. 63% of parents say they believe time online negatively impacts their child's physical health, up from 58%. Concerns specifically about screen time affecting sleep have also risen from 52% to 57% since last year.
- **A complex story for vulnerable children:** The data again shows that vulnerable groups, including children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those with experience of physical or mental health conditions, often over-index regarding experiencing the negative sides of online and tech, compared with other children. For example, these groups encounter more instances of abuse and bullying online – 35% and 46%, respectively, compared to 24% of those without vulnerabilities. However, highlighting the duality of online life, the digital world importantly offers them valuable spaces for positive engagement and support at the same time.
- **A change in how children feel about online harms:** Children who experienced online harms feel less affected by it than they did last year. For example, 24% saw racist, homophobic or sexist content as really upsetting or scary, a fall from 35% last year. The same is true for seeing content that promotes unrealistic body types; 9% found it really upsetting or scary, down from 22%.

About **two-thirds of children** continue to report harmful experiences online

Section 4: Continued challenges for parents

- **Keeping pace:** With children expanding their app repertoire and spending more time on their devices, parents have the daunting challenge of staying updated on emerging digital trends. The array of apps used by children is growing, including the rising popularity of platforms like BeReal, Roblox, and WhatsApp.
- **Rising parental concern:** While children's experiences of online harms have remained largely unchanged since last year, parents are reporting increased anxiety about their children being online. Parental worry about a range of harms is rising, including strangers contacting their children and exposure to sexual content and nudity.
- **Tech invasion:** Parents are increasingly noticing not only the health impacts of screen time but also how technology is diverting attention from family time towards devices. On a 0-10 scale, 31% selected scores of between 8 and 10 on the statement 'we often find ourselves spending time on our own devices rather than doing things together', relative to just 20% last year. This jump, in percentage point terms, represents one of the most notable shifts observed since last year.



Methodology and approach

Who we surveyed?

Results are based on an online survey of 1,001 UK children aged between 9 and 16 and their parents, with comparisons made to a similar sample of 1,138 in Wave 2 last year. Fieldwork for this wave was conducted between 25th August and 6th September 2023.

Wave	Sample definition	n.
2021	Children aged 9-15 and their parents	1,001
2022	Children aged 9-16 and their parents ⁴	1,138
2023	Children aged 9-16 and their parents	1,001

The survey was completed online with parents who had at least one child between 9-16 years old.⁵ Parents were first asked to answer a set of questions on the use of digital technology in relation to one of their children.⁶ The survey was then handed over to this child to answer a similar set of questions. Questions asked to parents and children were very similar to those asked last year.⁷

Quotas in line with ONS population estimates were put in place to ensure the sample was stratified by each age group, with equal representation of boys and girls at each age. This is in line with the approach taken in each previous wave, with the targets of boys and girls at each age in line with UK population estimates.

Weighting

The samples for both waves 2 and 3 were weighted consistently to ensure representativeness with the broader population of UK children and that any sample change effects were reduced from last year. Targets were gender, age, region and the Index of Multiple Deprivation, as well as parent gender to ensure a consistent distribution of male and female parents between waves.⁸

How the Index works

Internet Matters produced the first Digital World Index two years ago. The Index is derived from a framework developed in collaboration with Internet Matters by Dr Diane Levine and her team at the University of Leicester. This framework identifies four dimensions where digital technology can have the most impact (both positive and negative) on children's wellbeing:

- **Developmental wellbeing** – realisation of cognitive capabilities and achievement of educational potential; managing financial responsibilities that come with maturation; personal growth.
- **Emotional wellbeing** – healthy emotional development; ability to cope with stress and setbacks; spiritual development; development of thoughtful values and a positive outlook; space and opportunities to flourish; life purpose; autonomy; feeling successful.

- **Physical wellbeing** – achievement and maintenance of healthy thriving; development of physical capabilities; using technology in physical safety; access/lack of access to supportive or accessibility technologies.
- **Social wellbeing** – participation in wider communities including schools, clubs or societies; being an active citizen; ability to work with others; healthy interaction with online communities; maintenance of positive and sustainable online personae; managing the risks of grooming and exploitation; development and maintenance of good relations with significant people both online and offline; communication with people we know.

The accompanying report presents the trends in the Index changes to set the scene on children's digital wellbeing before exploring key changes and stories that lie behind these shifts.

Limitations around tracking back to the 2021 wave

While this report has included occasional references to Wave 1, we have limited ability to track the results from 2021 for the following reasons:

- The 2021 survey was conducted with children aged 9-15 and their parents.
- The questionnaire changed between Wave 1 and Wave 2, including new questions, order changes, and questions that have been framed differently.
- Differences in the index calculations since Wave 2 onwards which reflect changes to the questionnaire.
- Weighting has been applied to the Wave 2 and Wave 3 results (see above) but was unable to be retrospectively applied to Wave 1.

Most of the comparisons made to Wave 1 refer to broader trends that we are confident in, but we have typically avoided comparing exact figures due to the above limitations.

Please note that all the changes highlighted in this report, comparing data from 2022 to 2023 (covering waves 2 and 3), are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. This means that the observed differences in the findings between these two periods are highly unlikely to be due to chance and instead reflect genuine changes or trends.

4. 138 16 year olds added to survey but not included in most of the Wave 2 reporting to improve comparability.

5. For brevity we've referred to parents throughout this report but this could include legal guardians of children aged 9-16.

6. Where parents had more than one child in the 9-16 age range, one child was selected using a 'least fill method'.

7. The 2021 questionnaire contains some of the same metrics but much of the questionnaire was updated in 2022.

8. This means figures reported for Wave 2 given in this report may be slightly different to previous Internet Matters publications.

9. <https://www.internetmatters.org/about-us/children-and-families-wellbeing-in-a-digital-world-report/>



Section 1:

Cause for optimism: *Index scores suggest children benefitting more from the digital world than last year*



The bright side of tech

The narrative about children, technology, and the internet often gravitates towards the potential dangers and harms. These concerns, of course, are valid and crucial to address. However, it is also important to shed light on the beneficial aspects of how children experience the digital world.

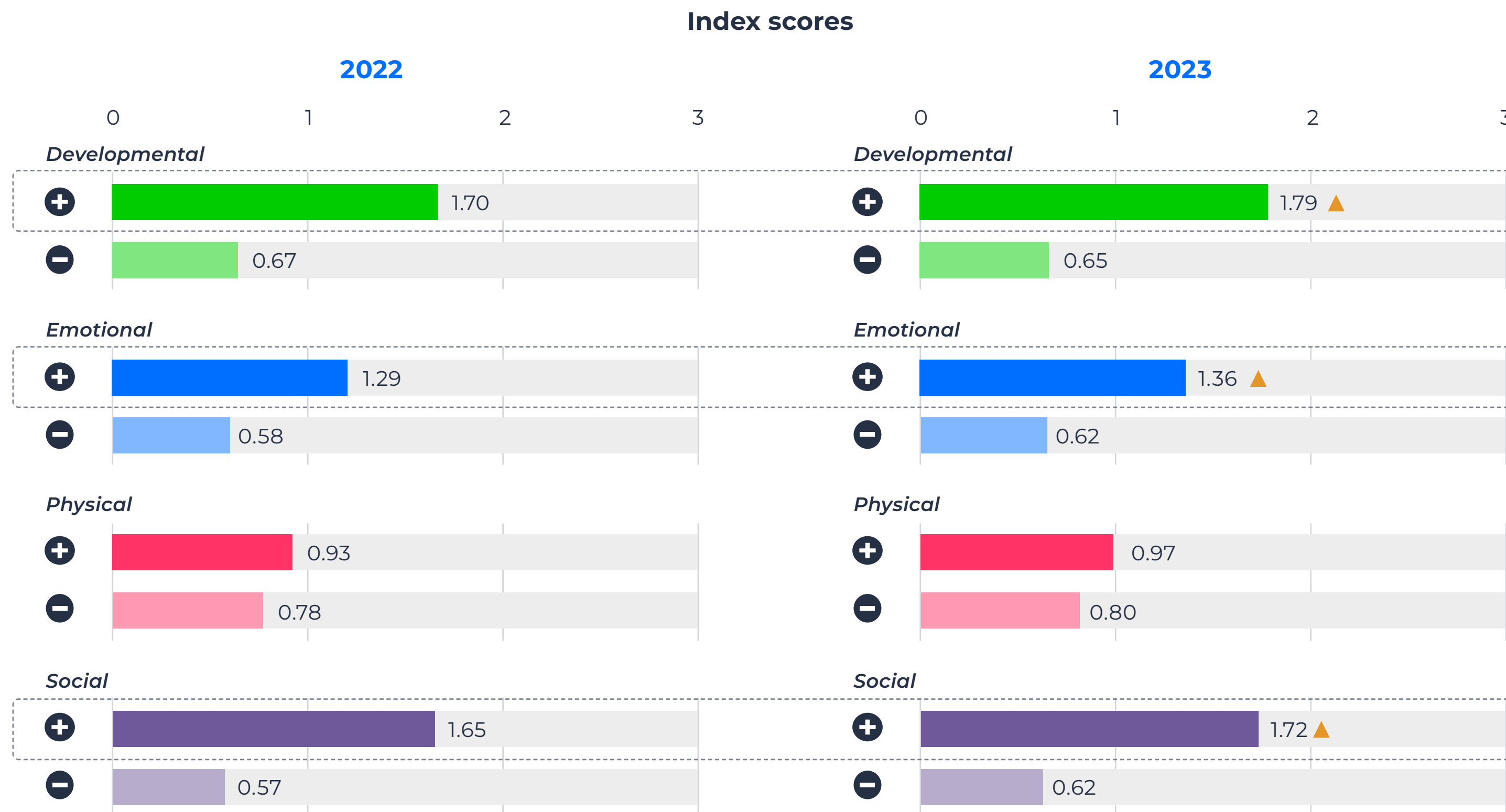
When we look at the index scores, which measure the children's feelings about their physical, social, emotional, and developmental online experiences, there's a clear trend: overall, positivity is winning out. More children in our survey have been reporting positive experiences in these areas, often far outnumbering those who identify with negative aspects. Parents' responses mirror this optimism, with their index scores similarly skewing more towards the positive than the negative.

Taking the children's scores in Figure 1 to illustrate, the gap between positive and negative is particularly wide for the social (1.72 for the positive compared to 0.60 for the negative) and developmental dimensions (1.79 for the positive compared to 0.65 for the negative). Even in the physical dimension, where the gap is narrower, the positive score still outweighs the negatives (0.97 compared to 0.80).¹⁰

While the scores have fluctuated over the years, this gap between positive and negative is not temporary – it's something we have seen for both parents and their children since the Index was first created in 2021.

¹⁰ The same is true across all dimensions among parents, with the gap between positive and negative score for the physical dimension even wider (1.58 cf. 0.94).

Figure 1. Cause for optimism: Index scores suggest children are benefitting more from technology and being online than last year



Breakdown of Index Scores
Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

----- Significant difference versus previous year

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Digital wellbeing is improving

In the last year, we’ve witnessed a rise across all the wellbeing dimensions, including significant increases across all but the physical dimension. We have seen a rise from 1.70 to 1.79 for the children’s developmental positive dimension, the emotional from 1.29 to 1.36, and the social from 1.65 to 1.72. The parent’s Index has also seen positive shifts in both the positive emotional and developmental dimensions.

Notably, this uptick is a reversal from the previous downward trend observed previously. Last year, we saw the positive impact of digital technology on children’s developmental and social wellbeing decline, with the negative impacts on physical wellbeing also growing.¹¹

We are conscious that although our index scores are rigorous and comprehensive, they’re not always as easy as percentages to understand. But the rises in these scores reflect real-world implications: quite simply, children are experiencing more of the benefits from their online activities - whether this is feeling more connected, more creative, or more empowered.

Figure 1 also reminds us that the negative aspects of the internet and technology have far from vanished. The negative scores on each dimension for children has remained stable since last year, indicating the adverse effects of being online are having a similar impact on young people as last year. This is something we cover in more depth in section 3.

However, first, we will delve deeper into these positive trends. We will do so by examining some of the key measures that have changed in the positive direction since last year. Think of it as connecting the dots — each positive shift in the data tells a part of a bigger story about how digital wellbeing on our Index has improved over the last 12 months.

¹¹ As discussed on page 7, questions included in the index between 2021 and 2022 changed, so tracking over time should be done so with caution.

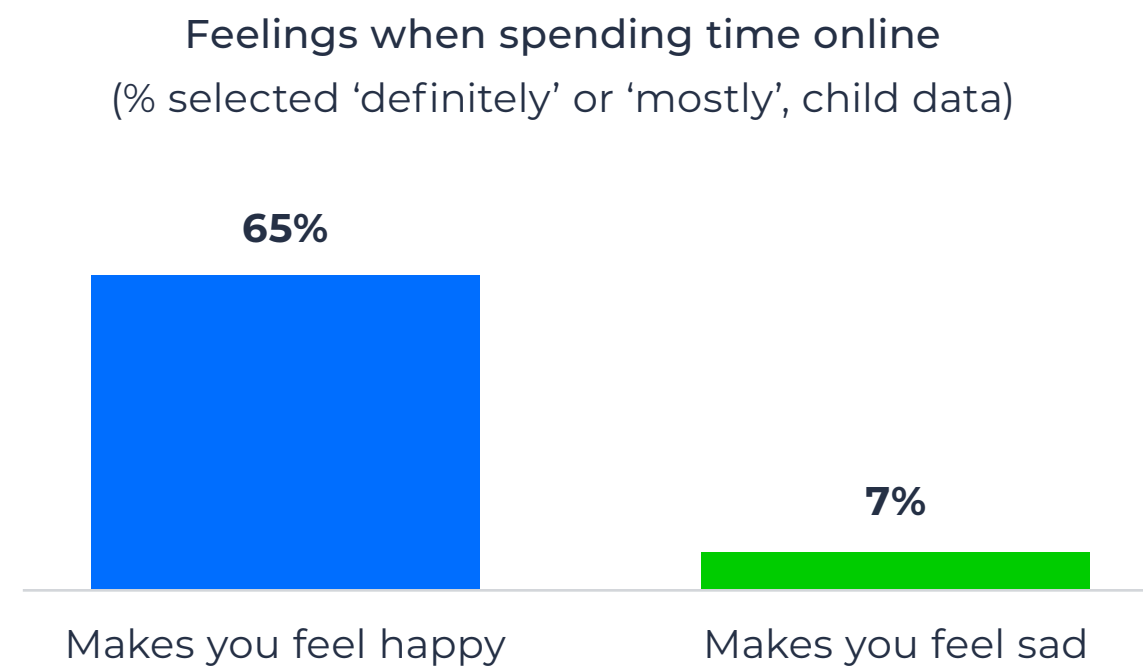
Online uplift: Spending time online leaves children feeling increasingly confident and independent

Source of happiness

The Index provides a multi-variable, holistic view of digital wellbeing. However, a simpler and more direct way we can assess wellbeing is quite simply asking children the extent to which spending time online leaves them feeling happy and sad.

Encouragingly, children continue to feel the online world is generally a source of happiness. Two-thirds (65%) of children report spending time online makes them feel at least mostly happy. On a separate question, a much smaller share (7%) say that spending time online makes them feel sad most or all of the time.

Figure 2. Online uplift: Two-thirds (65%) of children report spending time online makes them feel at least mostly happy



Q50. When you spend time online – on websites, apps, or games – does it do any of these things?
Base: Children (2023: 1,001)

Confidence and independence

Recent research shows that the online realm offers a space for children to express themselves freely, away from the pressures of face-to-face interactions.¹² In other words, the digital landscape provides a buffer, a space where they can be themselves, explore identities, and interact with peers and content in a way that feels safer.

Looking at our data for this year, there is good evidence to support this. We have seen an increase in children feeling more confident due to their online experiences. The percentage that say spending time online, whether it be websites, apps or games, makes them feel at least mostly confident has risen from 36% to 41%. A boost in self-assurance is particularly evident among boys, rising from 38% to 45%. In contrast, girls’ reporting of this effect has remained stable at 37% this year.

As well as feeling more confident, children feel the internet is an increasingly important source of independence. We find 75% of children now view technology and the internet as important to their independence, up from 69% previously. This increase is even more pronounced among girls in the 15-16 age group, where the share who describe it as important has jumped from 71% to 80%.

75% of children now view technology and the internet as important to their independence

12. See: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2023/top-trends-from-our-latest-look-at-peoples-online-lives>

Figure 3. Online uplift: Spending time online leaves children feeling increasingly confident and independent

Spending time online makes you feel confident (% ‘mostly’ or ‘definitely’, child data)



Importance of online/tech for independence (% ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ important, child data)



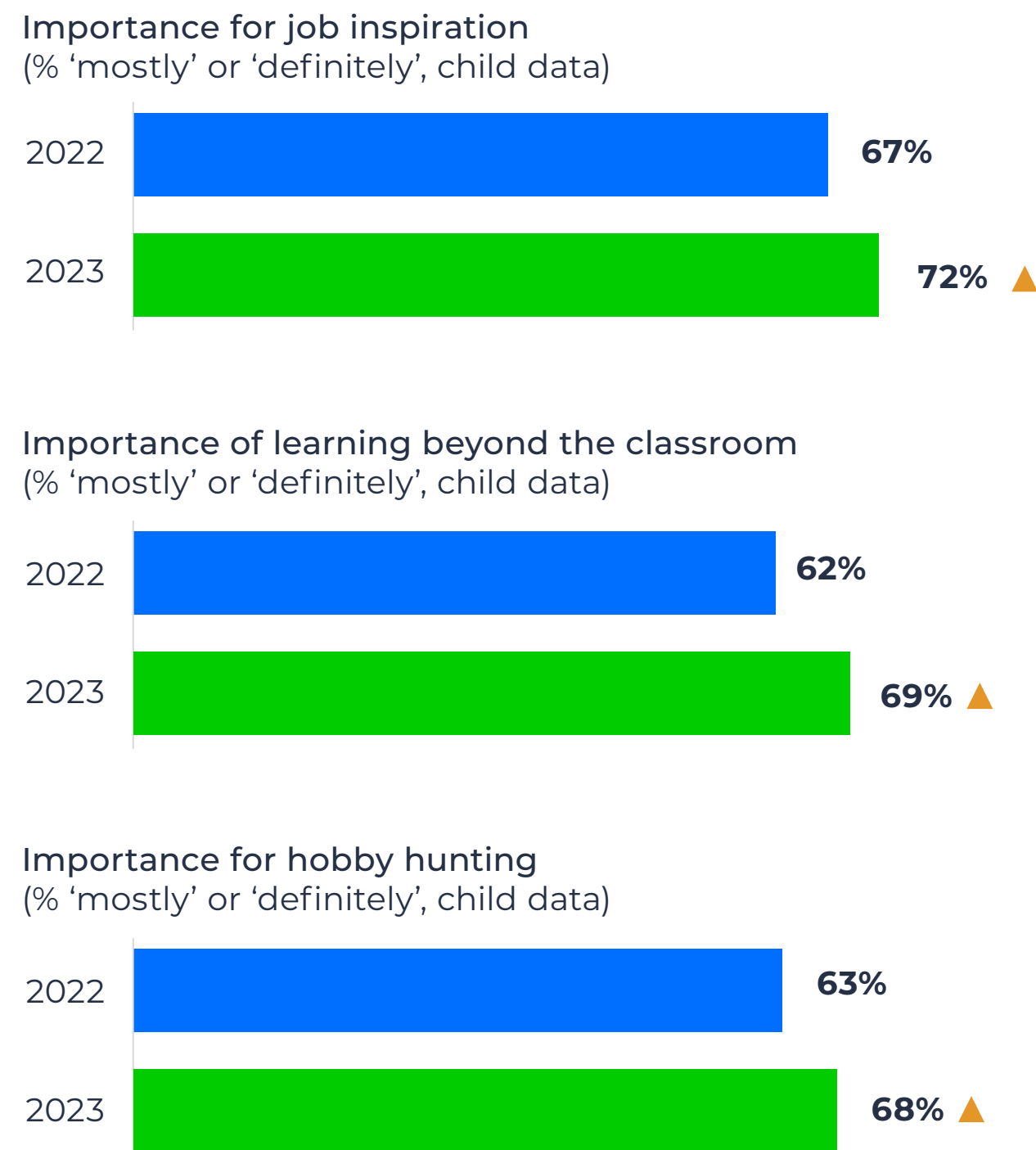
Q50.1. When you spend time online – on websites, apps, or games – does it do any of these things? - Make you feel confident.

Q60.1. How important do you think technology and being online has been for you for these things? - Being more independent and being able to do things by yourself.

Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Figure 4. Internet's growing role: Internet increasingly important for job inspiration, learning beyond the classroom, and hobby hunting



Q60.2. How important do you think technology and being online has been for you for these things? Getting ideas for what you would like to do in the future (e.g. as a job) Q60.3 Learning about things that no one would teach you about in real life. Q60.6. Being able to find new hobbies or things you are interested in.

Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Internet's growing role: The Internet is increasingly important for job inspiration, learning beyond the classroom, and hobby hunting'

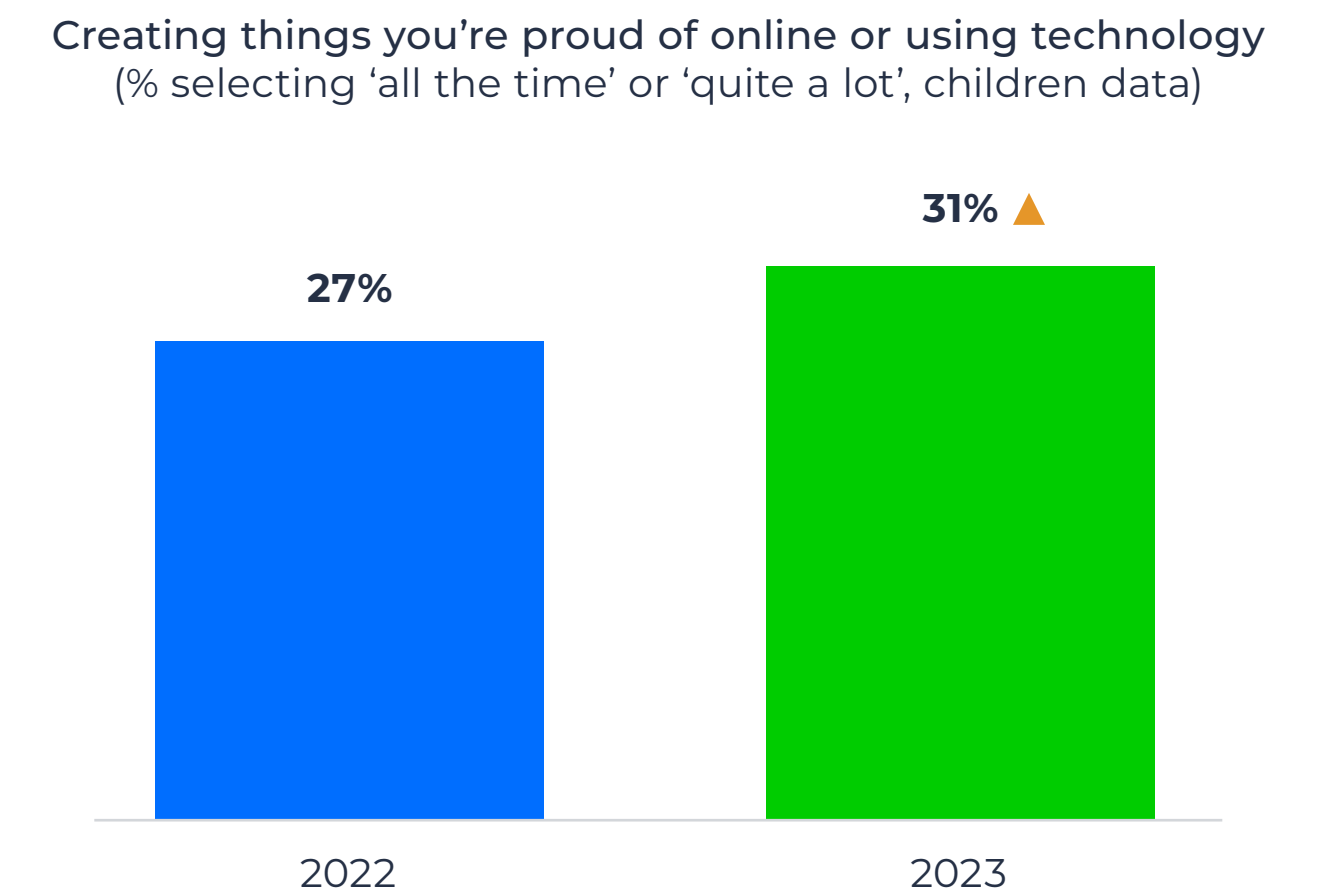
The online world is playing an increasingly important role in shaping the lives of young people. It's a world that extends far beyond casual conversations and gaming, touching the very core of how children learn, aspire, and pursue their passions. A closer look at the significant shifts and emerging trends shows:

- Digital creations:** The landscape of digital creation, particularly video production, is growing rapidly. This year, we find more children engaging in online creation or using technology to craft projects they're proud of, with the percentage doing so all the time or quite a lot increasing from 27% to 31% since last year. This trend is especially pronounced in girls aged 9-10, where there has been a rise from 26% to 43%. By contrast, boys of the same age are not reporting doing this more and are consistent since last year at 29%. Even parents are getting in on the act, with a growing number (62% compared to last year's 57%) feeling more confident about assisting their children in producing content on platforms like TikTok and YouTube.
- Career gateway:** There's been a 5-percentage point increase from last year in the number of children who find the internet is important for inspiration about future jobs, from 67% to 72%. Similarly, parents also increasingly see the internet as more important in helping their children plan for the future (66% to 74%).
- Beyond the classroom:** Children are also increasingly seeing the internet as a tool for learning about things not typically taught in traditional educational settings. 69% of children now say that the internet and technology play an important role in learning about things that no-one would teach them about in real life, a rise from 62% in the

previous year. Figures here are even higher for girls, particularly those at either end of the age range we surveyed (77% for girls aged 15 and 16, and 75% for 9 and 10-year-old girls).

- Hobby hunting:** A growing proportion of children also say the internet is becoming increasingly important in helping them discover and pursue a variety of hobbies and interests (68% cf. 63%).

Figure 5 Internet's growing role: The Internet is increasingly important for creating things children are proud of



Q59.3. How often do these things happen? - You create things you're proud of online or using technology (e.g. games or computer programmes).

Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Distance diminished: Digital world essential for keeping us socially connected

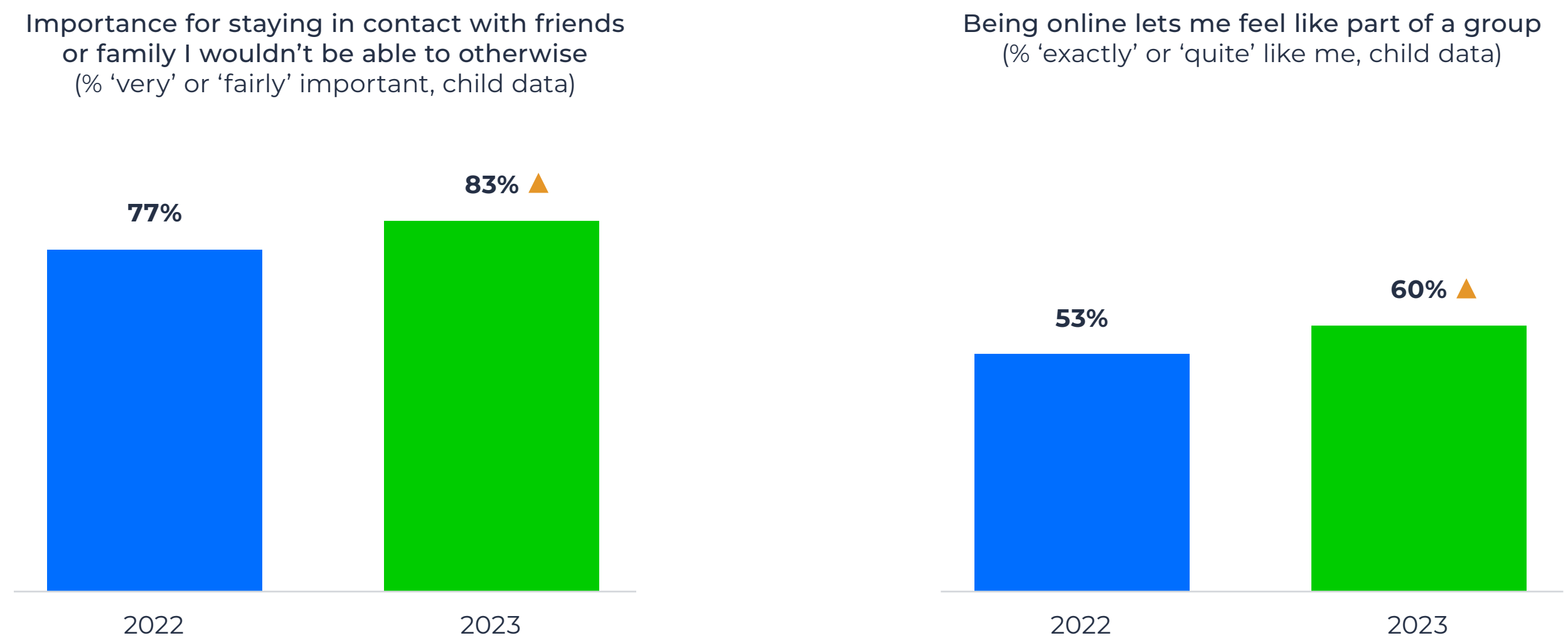
The vast majority of children continue to agree that digital technology is key for keeping in touch with friends (82%). This is consistent with last year, though not as high as it was in 2021 (86%), where tech was a lifeline during the pandemic, helping everyone stay connected.¹³

But the important social role of tech goes beyond just everyday chatting with friends and family generally. It's also crucial for keeping in touch with people far away; 83% of children, up from 77%, see digital communication as vital for maintaining bonds with friends or family they wouldn't be able to otherwise, underscoring tech's role in bridging physical gaps.

The story gets more interesting when we look at how children are finding a sense of belonging online. It's clear that digital devices and online platforms aren't just about games and videos; they're often about community, friendship and support. This year, 60% of children say that being online makes them feel like they're part of a group. That's a big leap from the 53% who felt the same way last year. We're, therefore, increasingly seeing how online spaces are turning into lively social hubs where children are making connections and forming friendships.

13. Given the changes to approach between 2021 and 2022, comparing results should be done so with caution.

Figure 6. Distance diminished: The digital world is essential for keeping us socially connected



Q55.2. How important do you think technology and being online has been for you for these things? - Being able to stay in contact with friends or family I wouldn't be able to otherwise (e.g. friends who live far away)

Q56.1. How much do each of these things sound like you? - Digital devices/ being online lets me feel like part of a group

Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year





Section 2:

Connected families:

Increased parental oversight and dialogue with children is improving digital wellbeing



Is the rise in digital wellbeing a post-pandemic effect? No strong evidence

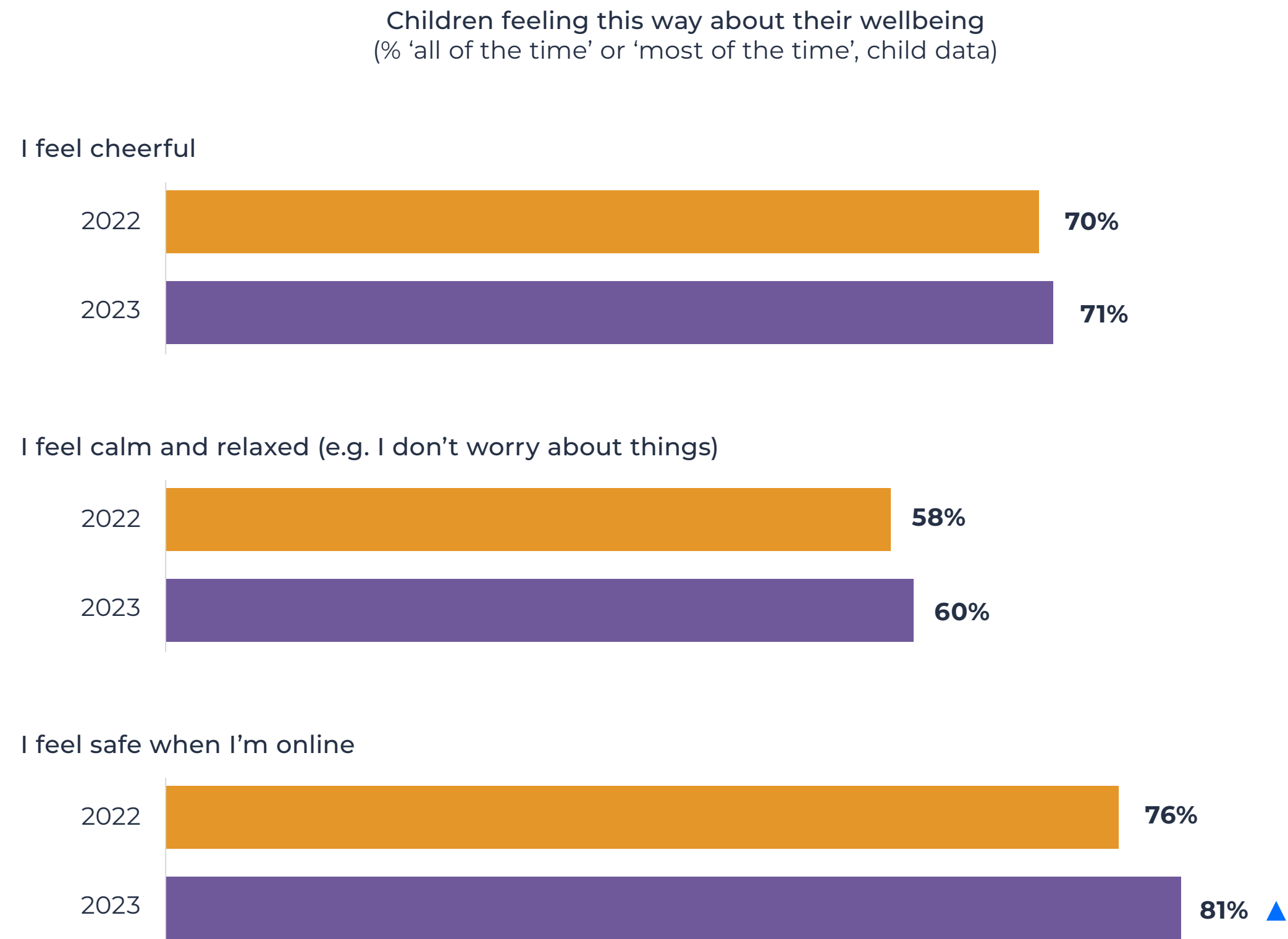
The recent rise in children's digital wellbeing charted over the previous year raises an intriguing question: Is this trend merely a by-product of the UK emerging from the pandemic? In other words, could it simply be a slice of a broader, more general upswing in overall wellbeing in the post-pandemic era? While it's a plausible theory, our data doesn't strongly support this connection.

As we discussed earlier, in the second wave of the digital wellbeing index, we actually observed a dip in children's development and social wellbeing.¹⁴ This decline goes against what we would expect if there was a clear connection between overall wellbeing improvements and digital wellbeing after the pandemic. This is especially relevant considering that during the summer of 2022, when the fieldwork for phase 2 was conducted, COVID-19 restrictions had generally been lifted, and the world was starting to recover.

Moreover, a closer look at the data reveals no significant long-term upward trend in general wellbeing this year. As well as questions about online experiences, our survey also asked broader statements surrounding how often children feel that good things will happen in their lives, that lots of people care about them and that they feel calm and relaxed. This wave's results on these kinds of statements are remarkably stable with last year. This divergence – between how children are saying being online increasingly makes them feel and how they say they are feeling generally – hints at unique factors at play within the digital realm itself.

¹⁴. See: <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Internet-Matters-Childrens-Wellbeing-in-a-Digital-World-Index-report-2023-2.pdf>

Figure 7. Is the rise in digital wellbeing a post-pandemic effect? No strong evidence



Q41.10. Here are some statements or descriptions about how you might have been feeling over the past couple of weeks. Please tell us how often you feel this way, using the options provided.

Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

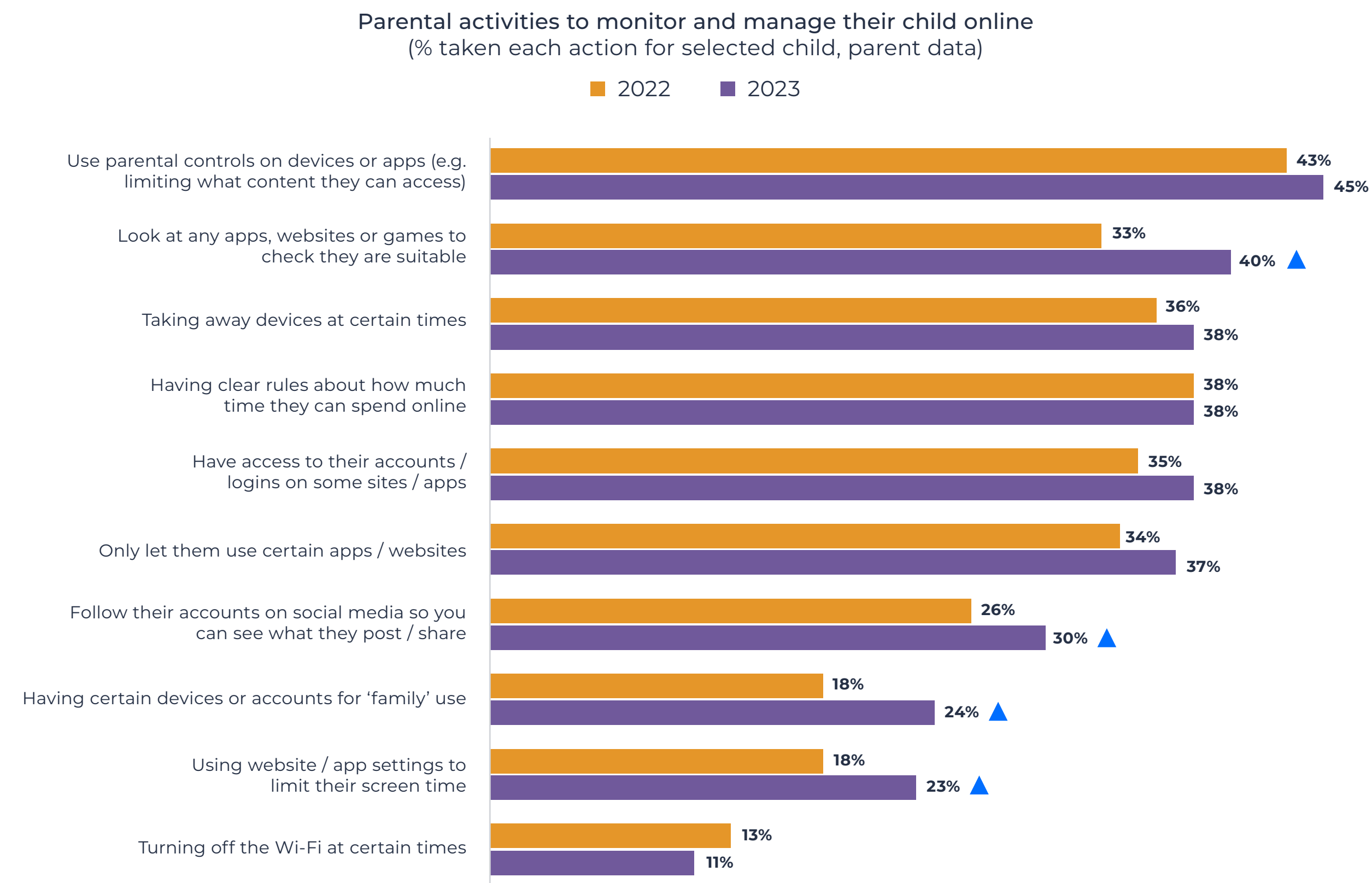
▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

A key observation supporting the impact that is exclusively taking place in the digital realm is the increase in children reporting a sense of safety online. Currently, about 81% of children feel safe online most of the time, a jump from 76% in the previous wave. This shift indicates that changes in the digital experience itself, perhaps in how children interact with the online world or how their parents may be supporting them, are contributing to this heightened sense of security.

In line with this growing sense of safety online, we've noted significant shifts in how children and parents approach internet use. As we will set out in the coming pages, these behavioural changes, along with their implications for digital wellbeing, are perhaps more plausible factors driving improvements in digital wellbeing since last year.



Figure 8. Parental oversight: Parental activities to monitor and manage their child's time online



Q20. Do you do any of the following things to manage what your <age> year old <son/daughter> does on their devices/online?
 Base: Parents (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)
 ▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Parental oversight: Parents are taking more action to monitor and mediate their children's time online

More steps to monitor and manage

A promising development, and one that Internet Matters finds particularly encouraging given our work in this area, is the increased involvement of parents in managing and supporting their children's internet use. This year's data shows 21% of parents can be classified as managing their children's usage 'a lot' (taking at least 7 of the 12 listed actions), an increase from 16% last year.

As outlined in Figure 8, this reflects an increasing number of parents who report taking several specific measures in greater numbers:

- **Family devices:** The use of devices for family use or accounts for family activities, such as shared gaming consoles or joint social media accounts, has grown from 18% to 24% since last year.¹⁵
- **Screen time:** There's a growing trend of parents using website and app settings to limit screen time (from 18% to 23%).

- **Monitoring:** An increasing share of parents say they monitor their children's social media posts (from 26% to 30%).
- **Vetting:** The practice of vetting apps, websites, or games for suitability has seen an increase from 33% to 40%.

While the figures are on the increase, differences across subgroups remain.

Firstly, there is a difference in age. As children approach adolescence, parental monitoring diminishes substantially (29% of parents manage devices 'a lot' for 9-12-year-olds, falling to 16% for 13-14-year-olds and falling further to 10% for parents of 15 and 16-year-olds). This trend reflects what you might expect, reflecting an inclination to give older children a greater degree of independence.

But age isn't the only differentiator. Socioeconomic backgrounds play a role, too. Parents in the higher socioeconomic groups, specifically the AB segment, are more likely to closely manage their children's device usage, with 24% falling into the 'manage a lot' category. This compares to just 16% of parents in the lower socioeconomic DE groups.¹⁶

15. While increased parental insight into children's online activities is beneficial, it risks exposure to inappropriate content if adult devices lack proper child safety setups.

16. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics classifies people into socio-economic groups like 'SEG AB' and 'SEG DE'. SEG AB covers higher and intermediate managerial, administrative, and professional roles, like doctors and senior managers. SEG DE includes semi-skilled and unskilled manual jobs, state pensioners, and the unemployed receiving state benefits.

Figure 9. Dialogue about digital: More parents are having conversations with their children about their online experiences

Parents who spoke with their children about what their child does on their device or asked to see their device (% taken each action for selected child, parent data)

Ask them to show you what they are doing on their phone/device



Discuss what they have been doing on their phone/online



Q20. Do you do any of the following things to manage what your <age> year old <son/daughter> does on their devices/online?

Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Dialogue about digital: More parents are having conversations with their children about their online experiences

Beyond the array of technical tools and measures available, open dialogue between children and parents is equally, if not more, important in helping keep children safe online and encouraging positive online experiences.

Internet Matters set out a number of steps that parents can take, such as encouraging early and frequent discussions, modelling open communication, and taking steps to create a supportive environment.¹⁷ Encouragingly, several signs across the survey suggest this sort of open dialogue between children and parents is on the rise. For example, we find:

- **More parents engaging in dialogue:** As well as more monitoring, more parents report engaging in dialogue with their children about what they are doing online. We see a rise from 37% to 42% of parents saying they have asked their child to show them what they are doing on their phone or device and a rise from 48% to 53% in discussing what they have been doing on their phone online.

- **Children reaching out after difficult experiences:** The most common response to online harms remains a conversation with parents, a trend that’s gaining strength. Notably, more children now talk to their parents after encountering online bullying (56% to 70%), misinformation (54% to 62%), or unfamiliar contacts (61% to 70%), reflecting an increase in trust and openness in the parent-child relationship since last year.
- **Parents know more:** 77% of children now feel that their parents know everything or most things when it comes to their online activities, up from 72% last year (although this includes a sizeable 53% who say they know most things, so not everything). It’s hard to say so definitively, but this likely reflects not just an increase in monitoring and managing behaviours, but also a shift towards more engaged, interactive parenting.

The link between engaged parenting and digital wellbeing

More parents taking steps to have a dialogue with their children and taking steps to monitor and manage their children’s internet usage isn’t just a positive in itself; our results suggest a link between taking these steps and higher digital wellbeing among children.

This is both true for practical steps to monitor and manage usage as well as having more dialogue. Firstly, we find children whose parents take the most steps to manage their activity report higher emotional (1.45 cf. 1.23) and developmental (1.98 cf. 1.70) positive index scores.

This data is heartening and aligns with Internet Matters’ recommendations for parents about setting up devices safely and choosing age-appropriate apps. Yet, as we consistently remind parents, technical tools and measures are only one part of online safety and should be paired with ongoing conversations with their children about their online lives, often a more critical factor.

The data also clearly shows that open and transparent dialogues between children and parents about online experiences are strongly linked to higher digital wellbeing scores, mirroring the positive impact observed with active monitoring and management of children’s online activities. Where parents have been having discussions with their children about what they are doing online, they report higher emotional (1.41 c.f. 1.30 whose parents are not having these discussions) and developmental (1.86 c.f. 1.72) positive index scores. In addition, children whose parents have not had these discussions have higher negative index scores for all elements of wellbeing.

17. See: <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Internet-Matters-Create-Environment-for-Kids-to-Talk-Jan-2023-2.pdf>

It's hard to pinpoint whether practical monitoring or open dialogue is more crucial in driving up digital wellbeing – the data shows a strong link for both. However, the evidence certainly suggests that both actions are helpful. Combining both approaches is likely to be the most beneficial course of action.

Some children withhold details about their online lives from their parents'

For the first time this wave, we asked children directly about how much they are open with their parents about their online activities, leading to some interesting findings.

Most children (93%) report a certain degree of openness with their parents about what they are doing online. However, children are almost as likely to describe being 'somewhat' (42%) rather than 'very' (51%) open, albeit with just 6% saying 'not very' open or not open 'at all'. In line with this, while we have noted an increase in children who think their parents know a lot about their online activities (from 72% last year to 77% this year), a majority of children say their parents


know most things (53%) about what they are doing online rather than everything (24%).

These findings indicate a selective sharing approach, where children might not be fully forthcoming. In other words, the awareness that parents have may be superficial, missing out on some deeper details, activities, or behaviour, even if they have a general idea about what their children are up to.

Delving into the nuances of age and gender reveals intriguing patterns. Among boys, a striking 58% of 9 to 10-year-olds say they are very open, a figure that reduces to 47% for 15 to 16-year-olds. The trend among girls is even more pronounced. While 68% of 9- and 10-year-old girls are very open, self-reported openness declines even more sharply in the older age groups (37% among 15- to 16-year-olds).

While it may be expected that older children are less open about their online behaviour, these trends underscore the evolving challenges parents face as their children grow. They also highlight the need for tailored communication strategies to navigate and support their children's changing experiences effectively.





Section 3: Not all smooth surfing: *Many children are still dealing with negative aspects of online life*

12%

of children say they often stop sports or exercise in favour of playing video games, watching TV, or using social media

Challenges persist: Despite the uptick in wellbeing, we can't forget that many young people are still having negative online experiences

Many still experience the downsides of the digital world

Earlier, we observed encouraging trends across various digital wellbeing index dimensions, indicating real-world improvements where children are feeling more confident, creative, independent, and connected. However, it is important to stress that many children still grapple with the negative aspects of the internet and technology, and that more needs to be done to reduce these negative impacts.

While the figures across the negative metrics haven't worsened since last year, they generally haven't improved either. This means that a substantial number of children continue to face a wide range of challenges. For example, looking across the survey, we find:

- **Appearance concerns:** 12% of children feel worried about how they look, such as their clothing choices, when they spend time online on websites, apps, or games. Worry is particularly high among girls aged 15 to 16 (18%) but also is high among boys aged 13 to 14 (15%).
- **Body image issues:** Similarly, 12% of children say spending time online mostly or definitely makes them worried about their body shape or size – this is higher among girls, particularly those aged 15 to 16 (20%).
- **Emotional impact:** 7% of children report feeling sad as a direct result of their activities online, figures which are fairly stable across age and gender groups.

- **Physical activity reduction:** 12% of children say they often stop sports or exercise in favour of playing video games, watching TV, or using social media – with boys (15%) more likely to say so than girls (10%).
- **Online communication anxiety:** 23% of respondents worry about saying something wrong on social media or online platforms, reflecting the pressure and anxiety associated with digital communication.

As for the figures we’ve cited, it appears that a low number of children are identifying with having these negative experiences – with the exception of the harmful interactions we discuss below. But we should not lose perspective of what this means; statistics often have a habit of depersonalising things. Remember, 15% of children equates to approximately just under 1 million UK children aged 9-16.

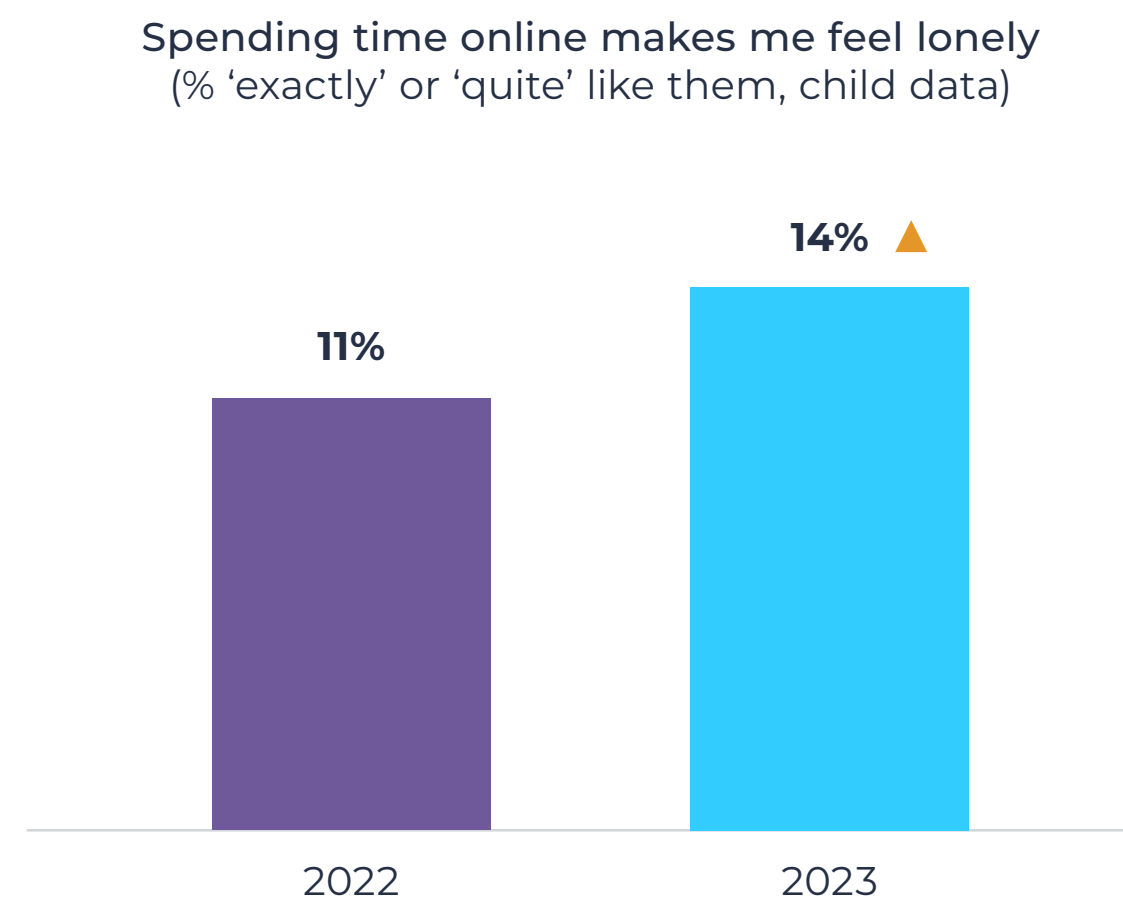
Online but alone

There are also a small number of areas where negatives have worsened since last year. We’ve already noted the internet’s crucial role in helping children stay connected socially, particularly with distant friends and family.

However, a small but rising number feel lonelier and more isolated due to their time online, increasing from 11% to 14% since last year. This feeling of isolation has increased notably among girls aged 13-14 (23% versus 9%). Although not an increase from last year, it is also particularly pronounced for boys aged 16 (21%).

These findings paint a complex picture of the digital world for children. It’s a space filled with opportunities for connection, yet it also poses significant challenges, including the risk of increased isolation. Understanding and addressing these complexities is vital to ensure children can navigate the online landscape in a way that is healthy and positive.

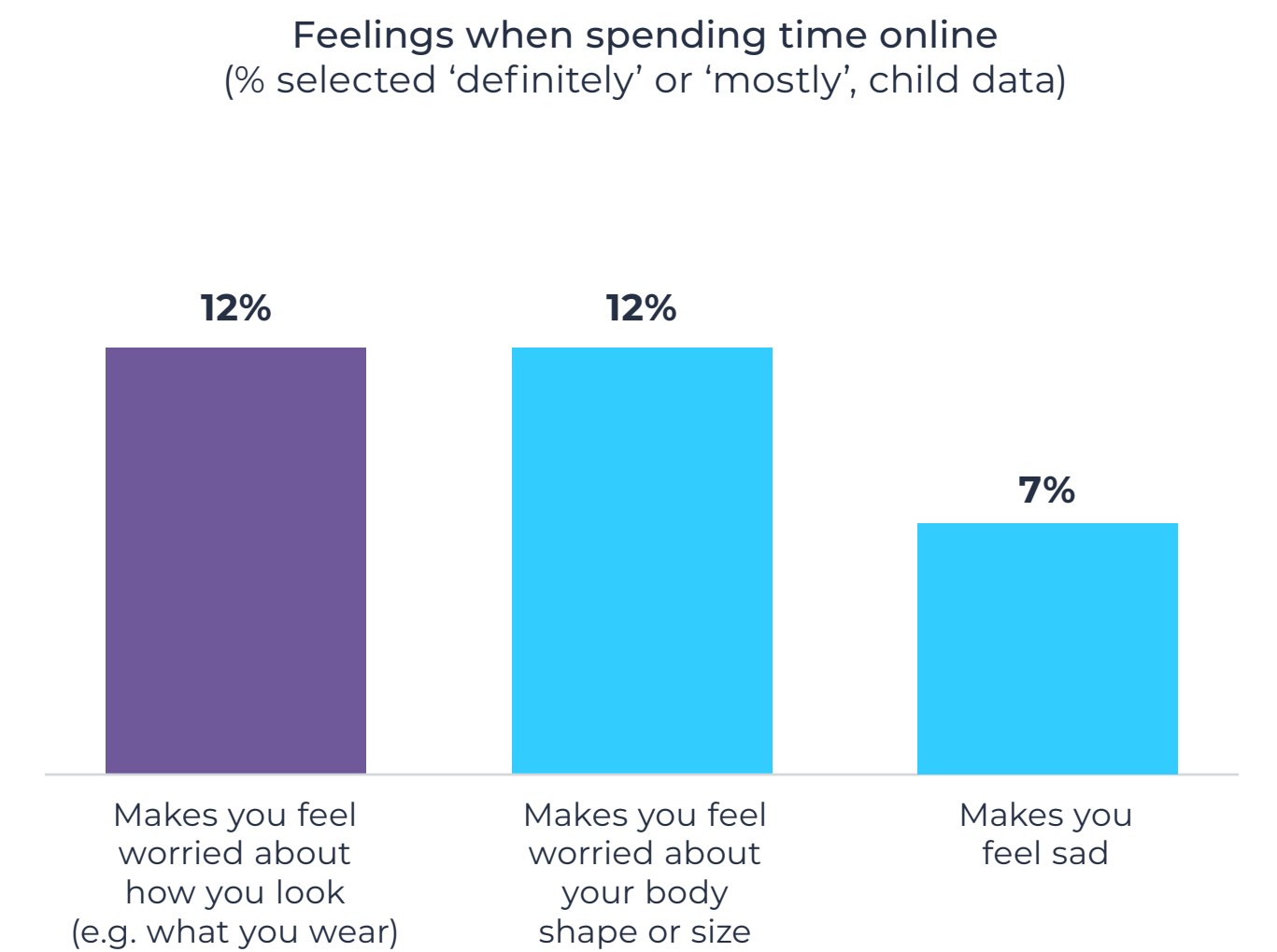
Figure 10. Challenges persist: Online experiences still bring a significant number of young people social, developmental, and emotional challenges



Q56.2. How much do each of these things sound like you? - Spending time online makes me feel lonely.
Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Figure 11. Challenges persist: Many young people are still having negative online experiences that impact their feelings



Q50. When you spend time online – on websites, apps, or games – does it do any of these things?
Base: Children (2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Screen time strain: Children increasingly feel time spent online is negatively impacting their physical health

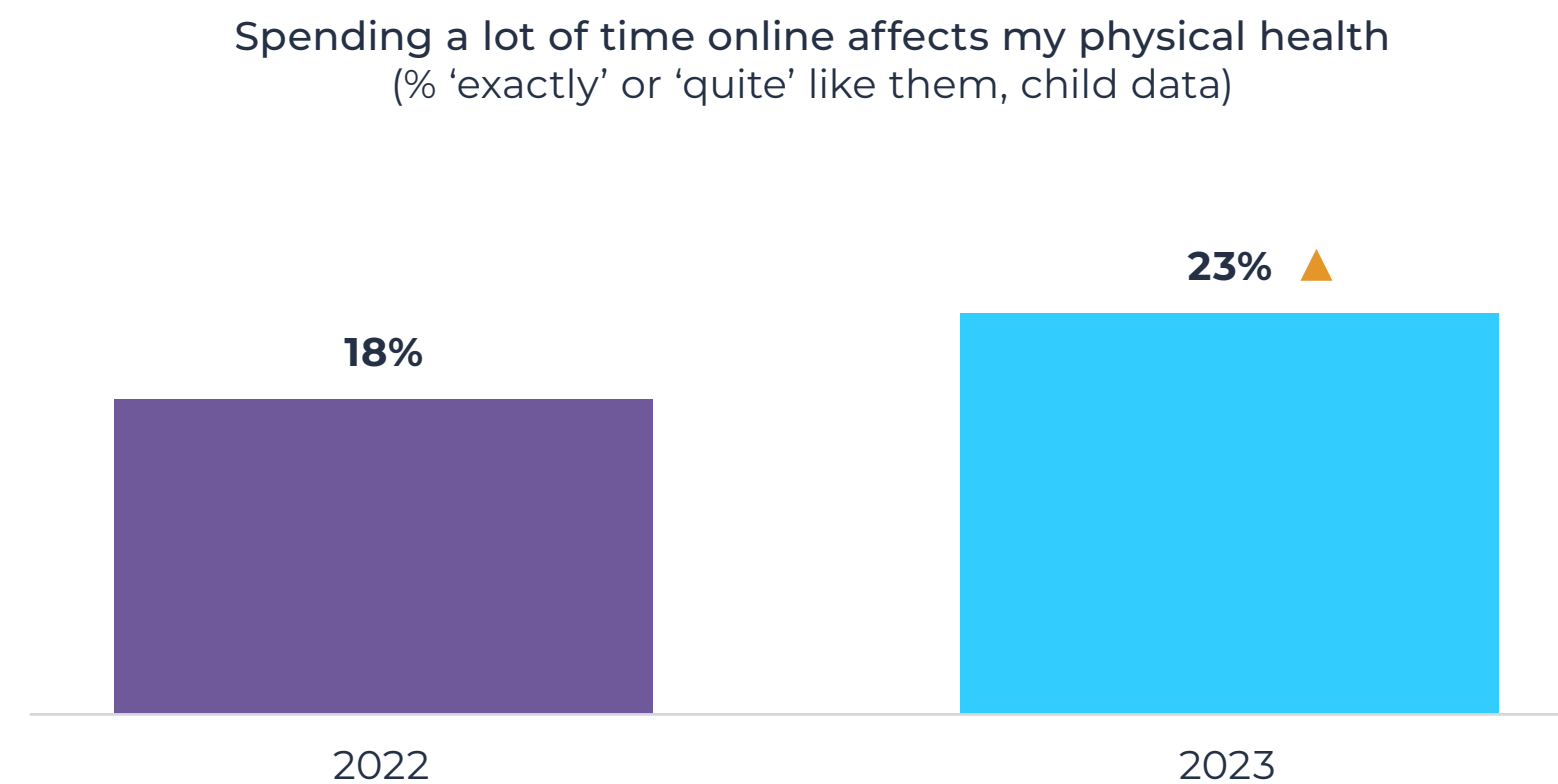
While a significant number of children still experience negative aspects of being online, these effects are generally not becoming more severe or widespread overall. However, alongside loneliness, there is another notable exception: an increase in children noticing the negative physical health impacts of screen time.

23% of children report experiencing negative physical effects from their online activities, an increase from 18% last year.¹⁸ The effects cited in the question range from fatigue and concentration difficulties to vision problems and poor posture, all effects of screen time that health experts warn about.¹⁹

Parents, too, are increasingly noticing the physical toll the online world is taking on their children. 63% say they believe time online negatively impacts their child’s health, up from 58%. Concerns specifically about screen time affecting sleep have also risen from 52% to 57% since last year. This follows an increase from 45% of parents who noticed the impact of being online on their children’s sleeping patterns in 2021.²⁰

This shift highlights a broader point: parents are worried not just about what their children are doing online but also about the sheer amount of time spent on screens and its physical ramifications. Indeed, we outlined earlier that parents are increasingly taking advantage of screen management tools, like website and app settings, that limit screen time (see page 15). However, it’s worth remembering that overall use of these is still relatively low – with only 23% of parents using apps to limit screen time and 13% turning off Wi-Fi at certain times.

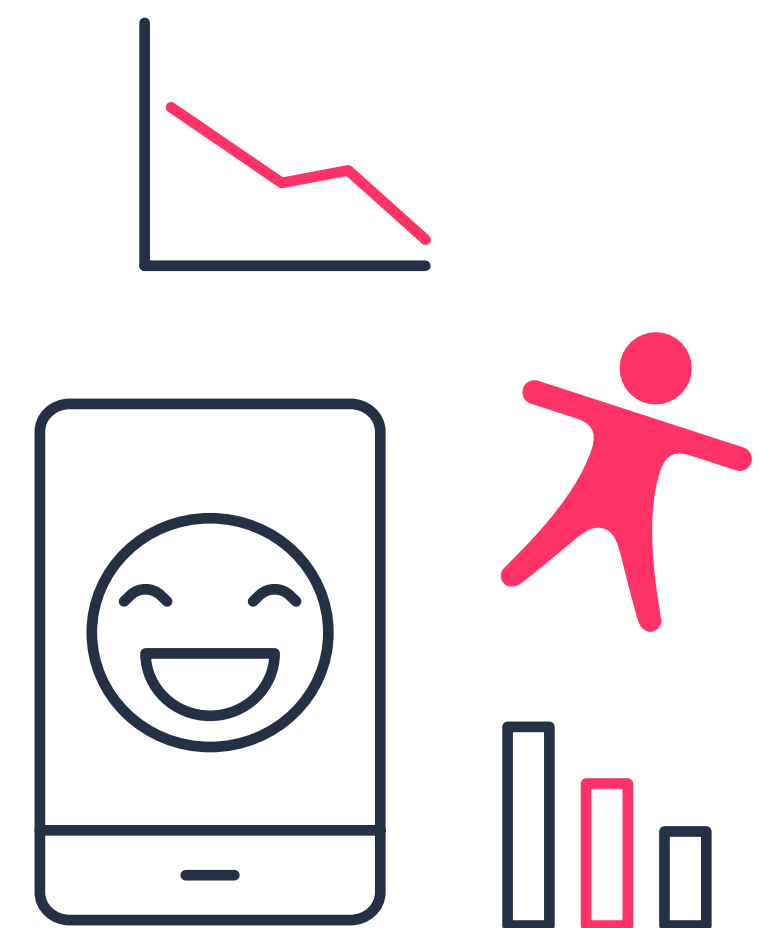
Figure 12. Screen time strain: Children increasingly feel the digital world is negatively impacting their physical health



Q58.6. How much do each of these things sound like you? Spending a lot of time online affects my physical health (e.g. makes me tired or unable to concentrate, affects my eyesight or posture)

Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year



18. % saying exactly or quite like them. Although the change in this specific measure is statistically significant, the overall positive and negative physical index scores for children remain consistent with 2022. Typically, shifts in multiple measures are required before overall dimension scores register statistically significant changes.

19. For example, see: https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-12/rcpch_screen_time_guide_-_final.pdf

20. Comparisons with 2021 should be treated with caution as the sample composition and weighting are different in 2022 and 2023.

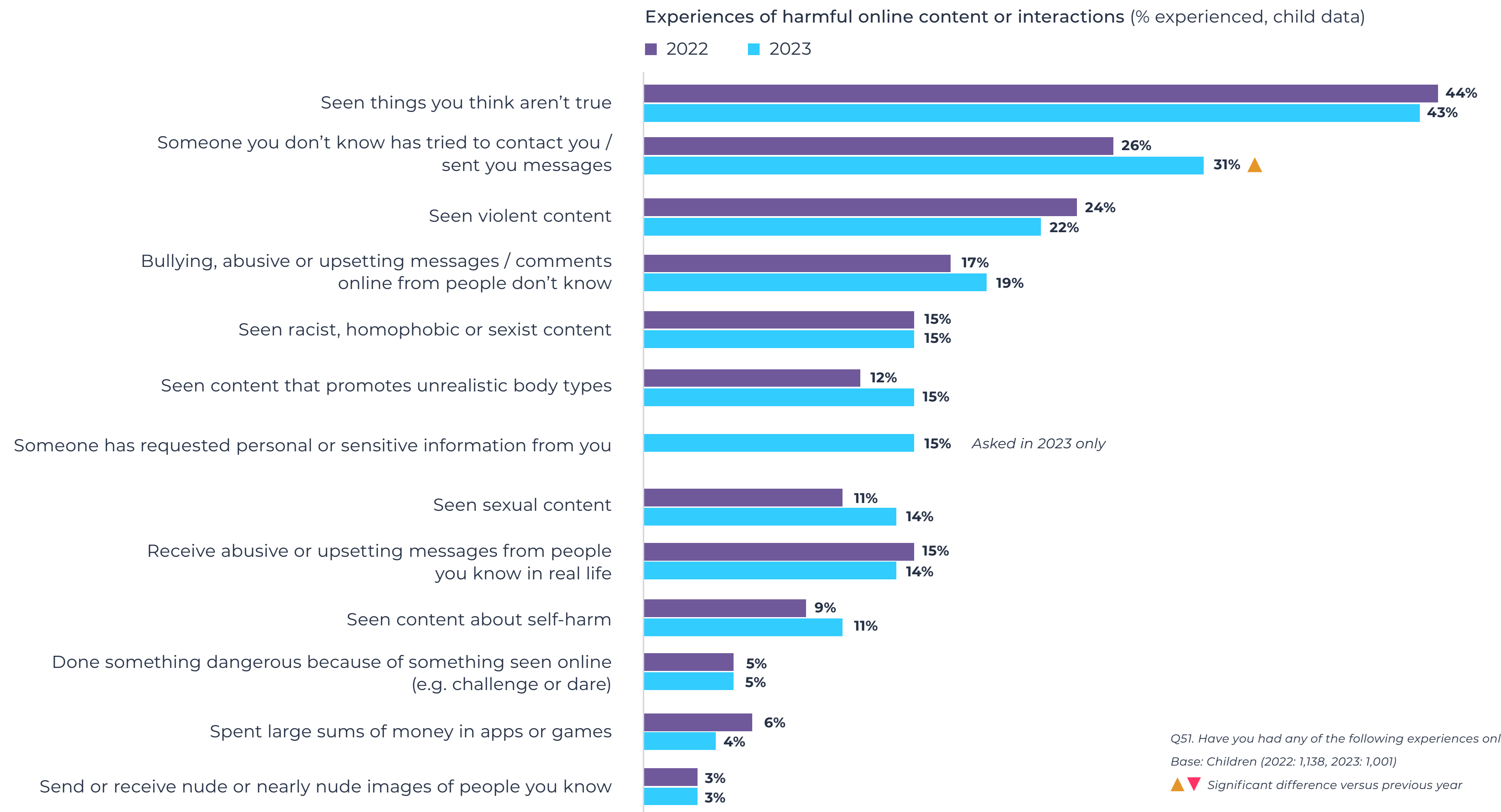
Enduring digital threats: Two-thirds continue to experience harmful online experiences

Rising stranger contact

Children continue to navigate a landscape filled with potential online hazards that have the potential to cause harm. This year’s findings show that about two-thirds (67%) of children report experiences online that are harmful (or potentially harmful), consistent with last year – see Figure 13 for a breakdown.

Of the individual harms listed, one has increased in prevalence since last year: a rise of 5 percentage points in children saying a stranger has tried to contact or send them messages (from 26% to 31%). The change is driven particularly by a rise in girls aged 15 and 16 reporting these experiences (48% compared to 29% last year).

Figure 13. Enduring Digital Threats: Two-thirds of children have experienced harm online



Q51. Have you had any of the following experiences online?
 Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)
 ▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Are experiences of online harms becoming normalised?

There is a clear link between online harms such as bullying and abuse and wider indicators of wellbeing, highlighting the potential ‘scarring’ effect of some interactions. For example, we find that 89% of young people with no experience of these harms feel safe online at least most of the time, falling to 79% of those who have experienced at least one. Of the specific harms, receiving abuse or being bullied appears to have the most detrimental impact on children feeling safe online. Only 71% of children who have experienced abuse or bullying feel safe online at least most of the time.

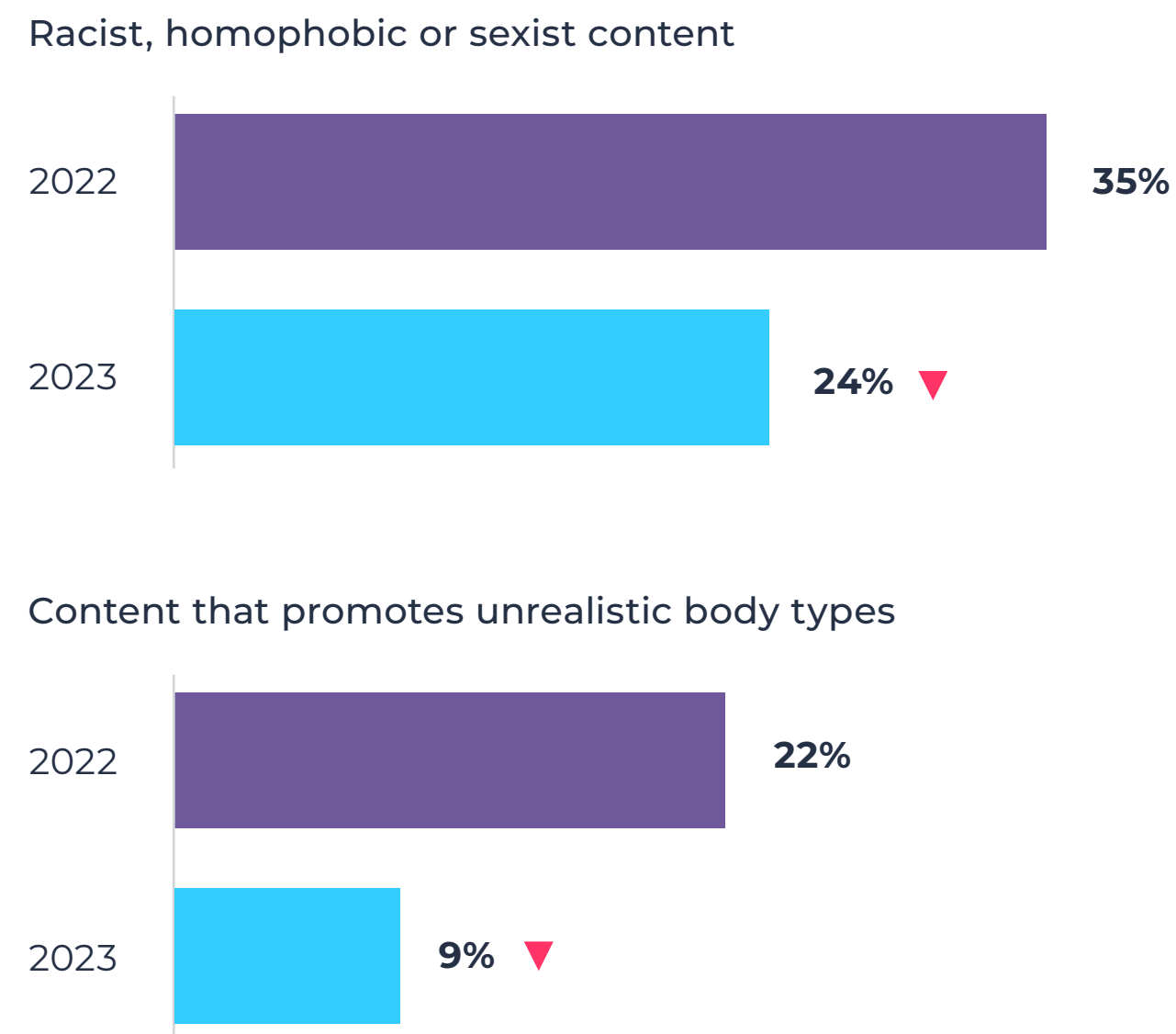
However, at the same time, we have also seen a change in how children perceive the impact of these online harms. Results for this year show children feel less affected by online harms than they were last year. For example, of those who saw racist, homophobic or sexist content, 24% found it really upsetting or scary, a fall from 35% last year. The same is true for seeing content that promotes unrealistic body types; 9% found it really upsetting or scary, down from 22%.²¹

This change could be a result of different factors. For instance, it could be a result of children becoming more resilient to online harms, having developed greater coping skills. But this is not necessarily the case – instead, 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.

21. Lower base sizes mean figures are potentially more volatile. Changes are statically significant but should still be treated with additional caution.

Figure 14. Enduring digital threats: Children feel less affected by negative experiences than they were last year

Feeling scared or worried after negative experiences
(% 6-7 on scared / worried scale, child data)

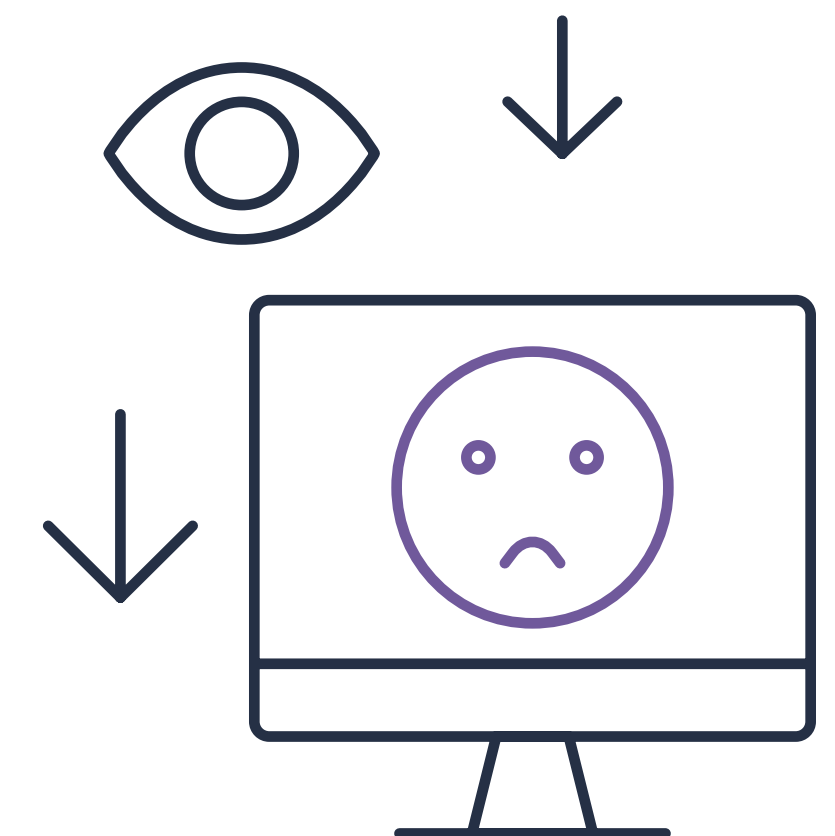


Q52. When these things have happened to you, how did they make you feel?

Base: All children who have seen Racist, homophobic or sexist content (2022: 168, 2023: 146) & All children who have seen Content that promotes unrealistic body types (2022: 139, 2023: 146).

NB. Lower base sizes mean figures are potentially more volatile. Changes are statically significant but should still be treated with additional caution.

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year



Digital divide: A complex story for vulnerable children

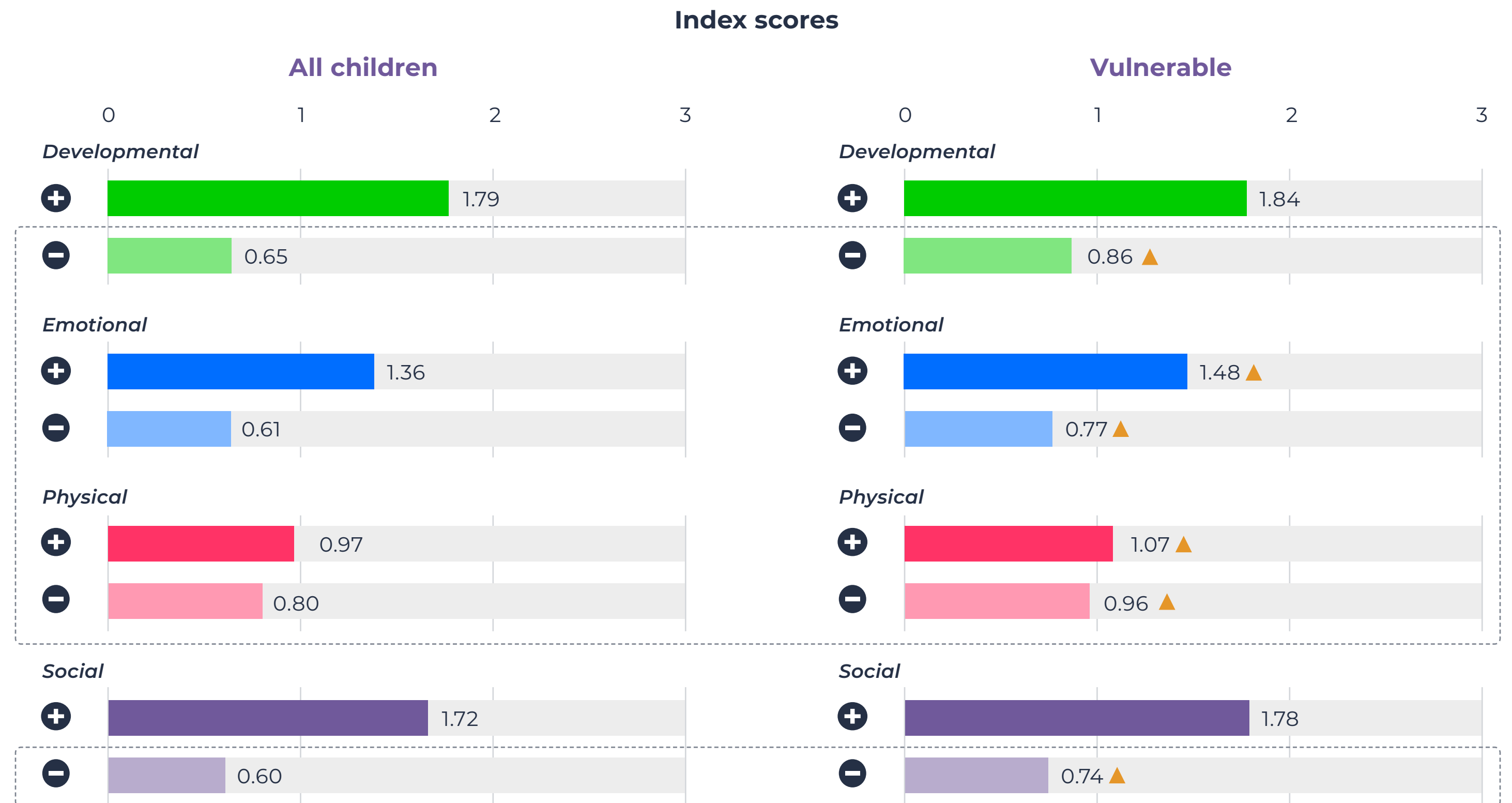
More negative online experiences

So far, we’ve generally talked about digital wellbeing largely at a broad level in terms of the picture for all children aged 9 to 16. However, delving deeper into the data illustrates that the impacts of the digital world are not uniformly felt across society. Vulnerable children, particularly, have a distinct experience.

Our data, consistent with previous findings, shows that certain vulnerable groups face greater challenges online. Children on free school meals, for instance, have notably higher negative index scores across various dimensions, including physical (1.02 c.f. 0.72 of those not on free school meals) and developmental (0.85 c.f. 0.58) negative index scores.

More pronounced is the situation for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) including those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). These children report significantly higher scores on all negative dimensions, especially those with an EHCP. Alarming, children in both these categories encounter more instances of abuse and bullying online – 35% and 38%, respectively, compared to 24% of those without vulnerabilities. These findings reinforce the need for professionals who support children with EHCPs to be aware of the risks and have the appropriate training to support them.

Figure 15. Digital divide: Vulnerable children over-index on both positive and negative dimensions



Breakdown of Index Scores by Vulnerability
Base: Children (1,001) & Children classified as Vulnerable (205)

----- Significant difference versus previous year

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

14% of children with an EHCP say they see things online that worry or upset them all the time or quite a lot, compared to just 6% of those without any vulnerabilities.

13% of children on free school meals have upsetting online interactions (including bullying) all of the time and quite a lot, compared to just 5% not on free school meals.

But experiences are mixed

However, there are some positive findings for vulnerable children. The data here again highlights the duality of online life. While children in vulnerable groups are more likely to experience the harmful side of the internet, the digital world also appears to offer more pronounced benefits to children in vulnerable groups, providing a space where they can find positive engagement and support. This is not unique to this year’s Index – these are patterns we’ve seen since the Index was launched back in 2021.

Children with EHCPs, for instance, show elevated positive physical and emotional wellbeing scores. Children with physical and mental health conditions report better positive emotional wellbeing scores, while those on free school meals exhibit positive scores across all dimensions, including physical, social, emotional, and developmental wellbeing.

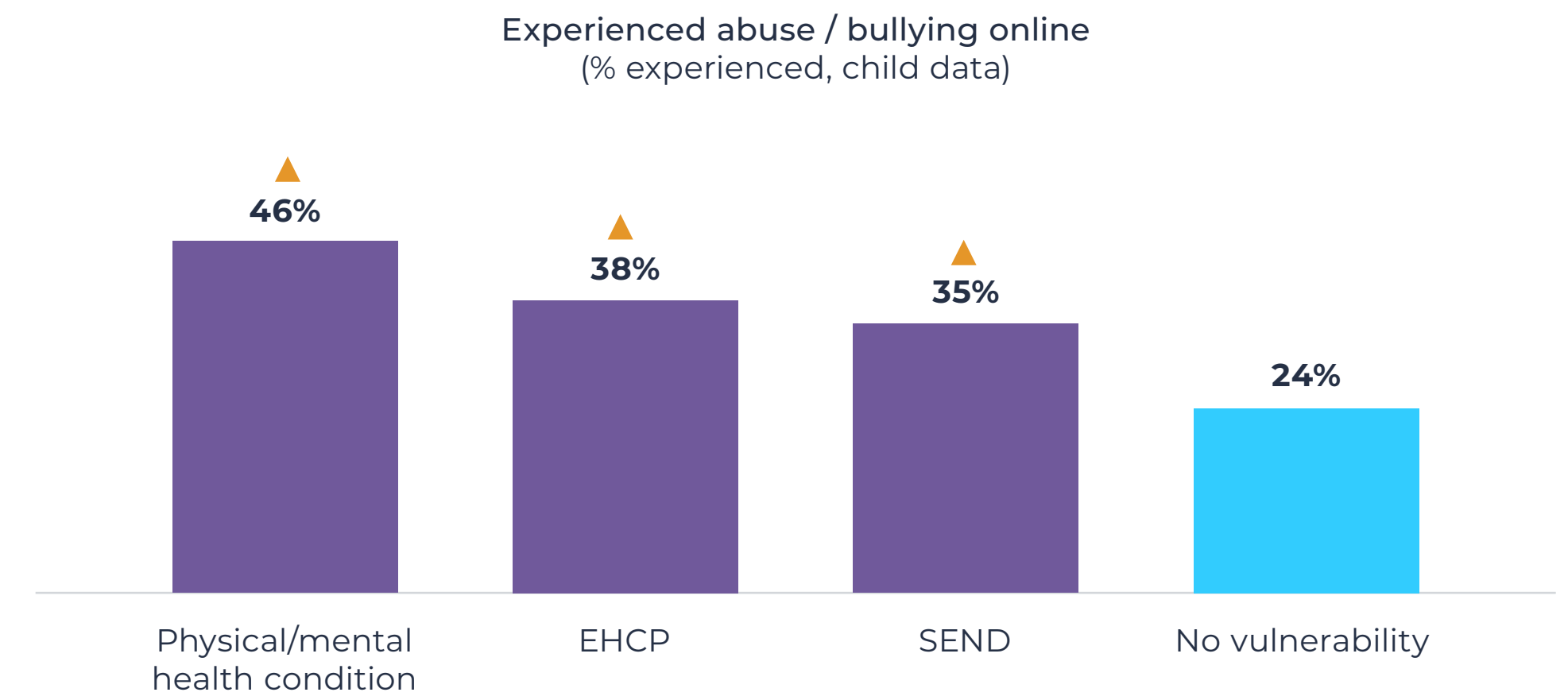
The parent data reinforces these findings. For example, Parents of SEND children have higher emotional positivity scores when reflecting on the impact and experiences of their children.

Notably, some aspects of digital experience are becoming more important for parents of vulnerable children.²² The importance of the internet in enabling these children to find supportive communities has risen this year to 62%, up from 57% in 2022. Similarly, more parents of vulnerable children say the internet is important for their children building and maintaining meaningful relationships (70% to 77%).

22. Note that data for vulnerable children combines data for those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), and with a physical or mental health condition. Combined figure does not include children on free school meals.

This presents a challenge for policymakers. In crafting digital policies and support strategies aimed at protecting vulnerable groups, it’s crucial to strike a delicate balance. The goal is to mitigate the challenges of online interactions without stifling the significant benefits these children gain from them.

Figure 16. Digital divide: Vulnerable children experience more instances of abuse and bullying online



Q51. Have you had any of the following experiences online? Receive abusive or upsetting messages from people you know in real life. Experiencing bullying, abusive or upsetting messages/comments online from people you don't know.

Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year



Section 4:

As negative experiences persist, parents continue to worry about the impact of the digital world on their children and family life

Digital consumption is rising in places, with the average time children spend online on some activities increasing.

Keeping pace: As children diversify their app use, parents face the uphill task of keeping up with the latest digital trends

Rising digital consumption

It might be a cliché to say the digital landscape is ever-changing. Still, our research underscores this reality, highlighting a vibrant and shifting landscape of apps and technology that continues to captivate young audiences.

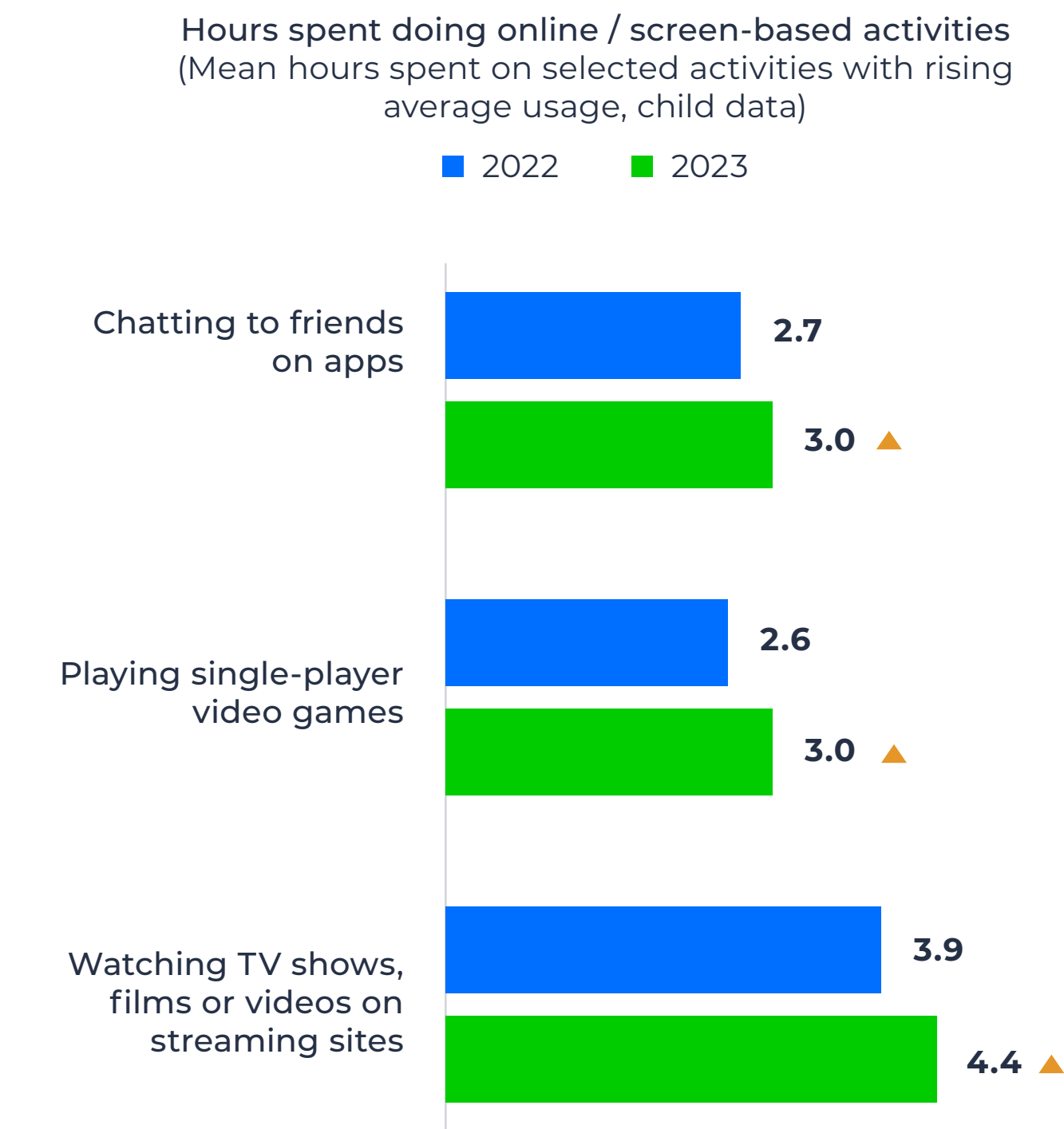
There are two main trends in online usage that we observe this year. Firstly, we see digital consumption rising in places, with the average time children spend online on some activities increasing. Many areas see usage rates that continue to be in line with last year, such as using forums and chat rooms, video calling, and browsing on social media. However, a trio of activities are demanding more of children's time:

1. Chatting to friends on apps, from an average of 2.7 hours to 3 hours a week
2. Watching TV shows, films or videos on streaming sites, from an average of 3.9 hours to 4.4 hours a week
3. Playing single-player video games, from an average of 2.6 hours to 3 hours a week

Strikingly, there's not a single reduction in mean hours for any of the digital activities we list in the survey. The rising time children are spending on devices is likely linked to several trends across this report. As we saw earlier on page 20, for example, both children and their parents are becoming increasingly concerned about the physical health effects of screen time.

However, the apprehensions of parents are not just limited to the physical health implications of rising screen use. As we outline later on page 29, the increasing usage of devices and screens coincides with growing concerns about the encroachment of screens into traditionally family-oriented time. As we set out, there's a growing unease about how this shift towards technology might be fraying the essential fabric of family life.

Figure 17. Keeping pace: As children diversify their app use, parents face the uphill task of keeping up with the latest digital trends



Q46. How much time do you spend doing each of these things in a normal week?
 Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)
 ▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

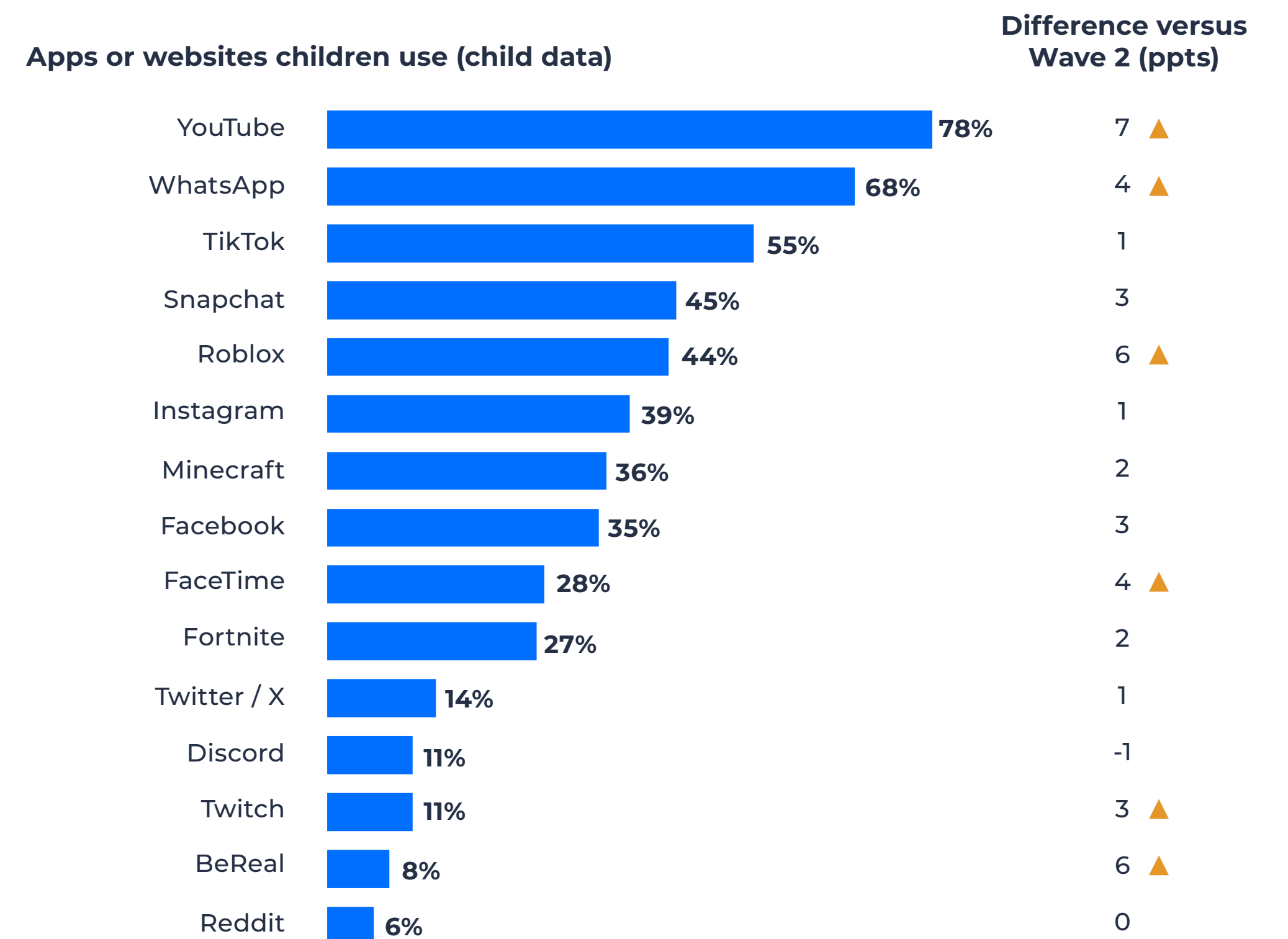
Diversification of app usage

Secondly, as children spend more time online, we also see increasing diversification in social app usage. The average number of apps children are using has grown since last year from an average of 4.7 social apps per child to 5.2. This rise was particularly apparent among teenagers ages 15 to 16, who now use an average of 6.5 apps, up from 5.3.

The rise in the overall number of platforms used is fuelled by a growing number of apps seeing growth in their young user base. Notably, we haven’t seen a single app significantly decrease in terms of the share of children who say they use them. Increases are reflected in several categories of platforms:

- **Smaller platforms:** Of the smaller apps, BeReal has seen the most notable growth. The platform, which encourages users to share spontaneous photos of their daily life at a random time each day, is now used by 8% of children, up from 2% last year.
- **Video content:** Despite already being the most widely used app, YouTube has continued to grow in young users. 78% of children use the app, up from 71% last year., with a particularly marked increase among 13–14-year-olds (70% to 82%).

Figure 18. Keeping pace: As children diversify their app use, parents face the uphill task of keeping up with the latest digital trends



Q48A. Which of these apps or websites do you use?
 Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)
 ▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

23. Apps listed in the question were: BeReal, Discord, Facebook, FaceTime, Fortnite, Instagram, Minecraft, Omegle, Reddit, Roblox, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, Tumblr, Twitch, Twitter / X, Wattpad, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Yubo.

- Communication:** Usage of messaging apps like WhatsApp (64% to 68%) and FaceTime (24% to 28%) are also growing in users, both up by 4 percentage points since our last survey. Delving deeper, we observe an interesting gender-based preference: boys are gravitating more towards WhatsApp (61% last year to 67% this year), while girls increasingly use FaceTime (28% to 34%). Young boys aged 11-12 are driving the increase in WhatsApp usage (from 58% to 80%) despite the minimum age to use WhatsApp being 16.
- Gaming:** Gaming-orientated platforms are also proving more popular among children this time round, with a higher percentage of children reporting usage of Roblox (38% to 44%) and Twitch (8% to 11%).

All this means parents are tasked with the increasingly challenging task of staying informed and up-to-date. Every app that children engage with has its unique set of functionalities, rules, communication methods, and, importantly, parental controls and terms of use. These elements vary significantly from one app to another, making the task of monitoring and guiding children's online activities all the more daunting.

Nevertheless, while there are differences between platforms, there are also many similarities, and parents should not feel that they need to know the ins and outs of every app their child uses in order to provide support.

Rising parental concern: Parents are increasingly worried about various harms their children might encounter online

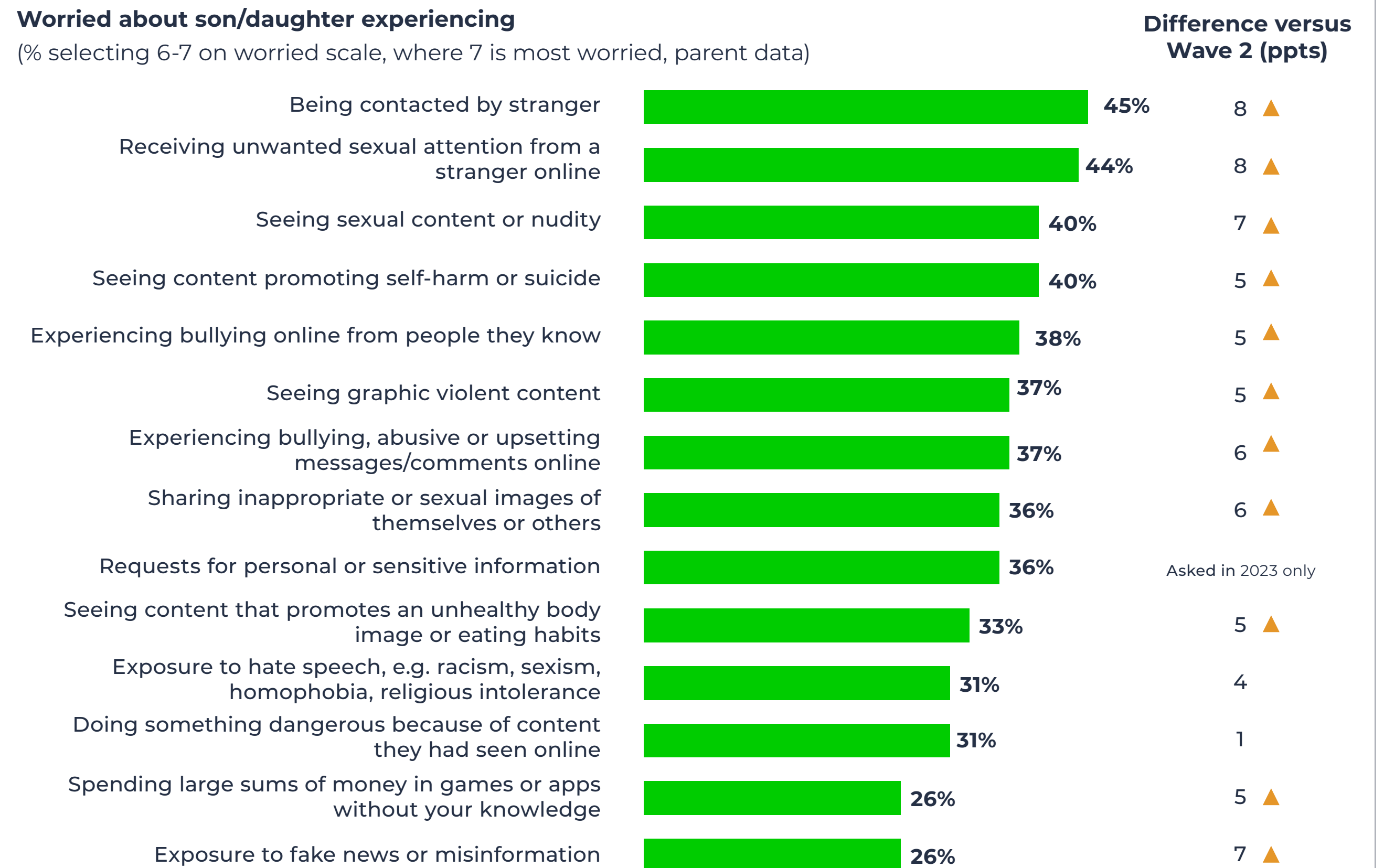
In our earlier sections, we showed that children's experiences of harmful online encounters remain largely unchanged last year, with the exception of stranger contact. While these scores remain at a high level, children themselves now tend to report being less impacted by these experiences.

However, somewhat paradoxically, parents are reporting increased anxiety about these experiences. Despite the consistency in the levels of harmful experiences encountered by children, there's a noticeable shift in parental concern about these harms.

Like last year, the primary worries for parents centre around strangers contacting their children, unwanted sexual attention, and exposure to sexual content and nudity. As Figure 19 shows, these concerns have intensified significantly, jumping by 7-8 percentage points since our last wave of research.

Also climbing the ladder of parental worry are fears about exposure to self-harm or suicide content and graphic violent material, both showing a 5-point increase. Bullying, both from known contacts and strangers, is also on the rise in terms of parental concern, up by 5-6 points.

Figure 19. Rising parental concern: Parents are increasingly worried about various harms their children might encounter online



Q48A. Which of these apps or websites do you use?

Base: Children (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Interestingly, issues like children spending large sums on apps and exposure to fake news, though lower on the list, have seen a rise in parental concern by 5-7 points. The only areas where worry levels remain steady are exposure to hate speech and doing something dangerous because of online content.

This growing anxiety among parents could be seen as alarming, but it might also be indicative of a more positive shift. This increased concern is likely a reflection of a deeper understanding and awareness of the digital world's risks and complexities. Indeed, as we outlined on page 15, what we're observing is not just a rise in anxiety but an increase in active involvement. This shows they're not just worried but also engaged and aware of what their children are doing online.

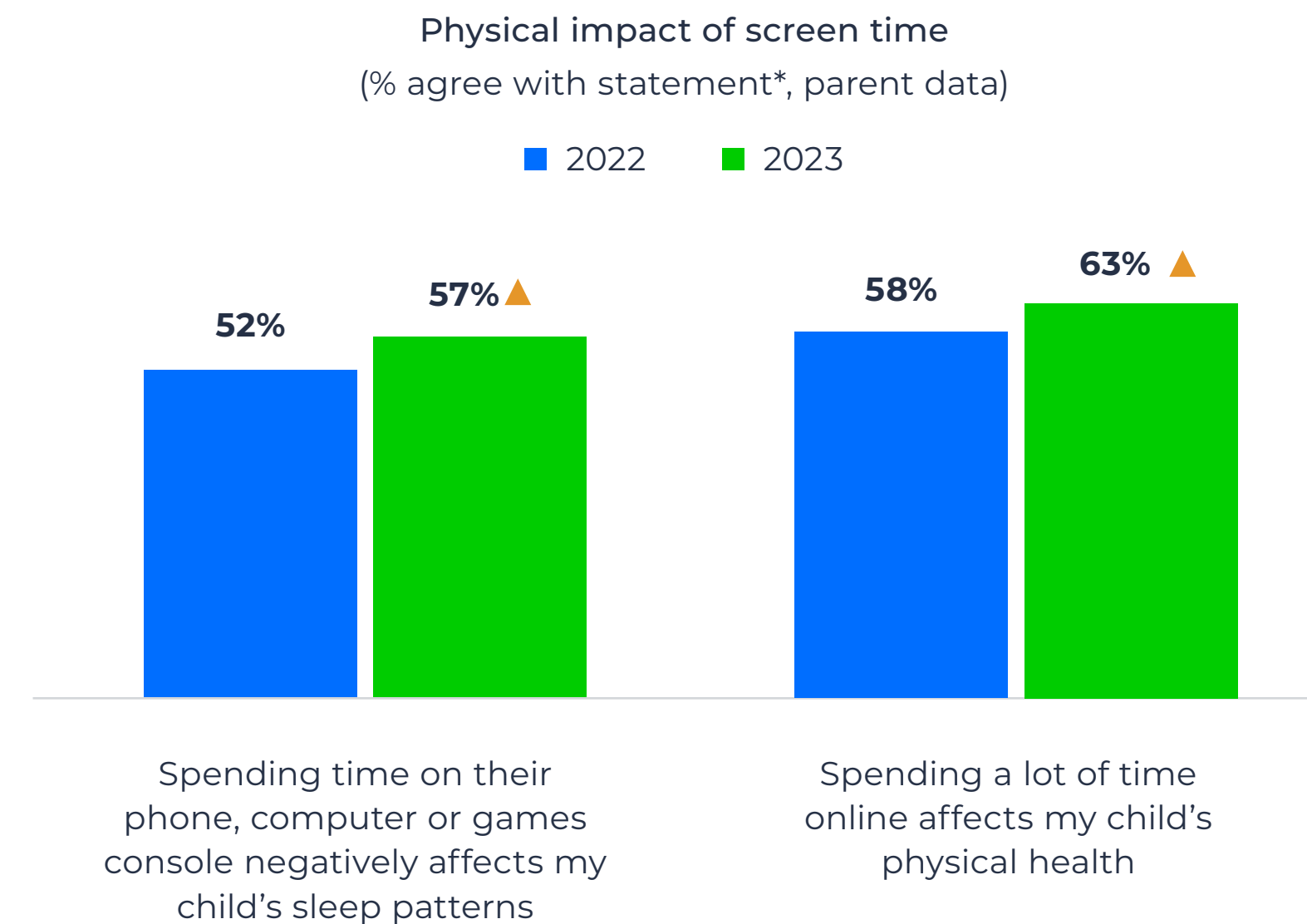
Tech invasion: Growing concern among parents that devices are overshadowing family interactions

Similar to last year, a quarter of children (26%) admit to feeling unable to control their time spent online, a figure that remarkably remains stable across different demographics – boys, girls, younger and older children alike. This echoes what we observed last year (where 28% admitted feeling this way) and aligns with research highlighting the addictive nature of devices and screens.²⁴

As highlighted on page 25, parents are increasingly worried about how this screen time affects their children's physical health and wellbeing. This growing concern about physical impacts aligns with the rising amount of time kids spend online, a trend we've already detailed earlier in this section. The connection is clear: as online time goes up, so does parental worry about its physical effects on their children.

But there's another dimension to this issue: the effect on family dynamics. This area has seen one of the most significant shifts in sentiment across our survey, with an increasing number of parents identifying that devices are overshadowing family interactions.

Figure 20. Tech invasion: Parents are increasingly worried about the physical impact of screen time on their children



Q28. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Base: Parents (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

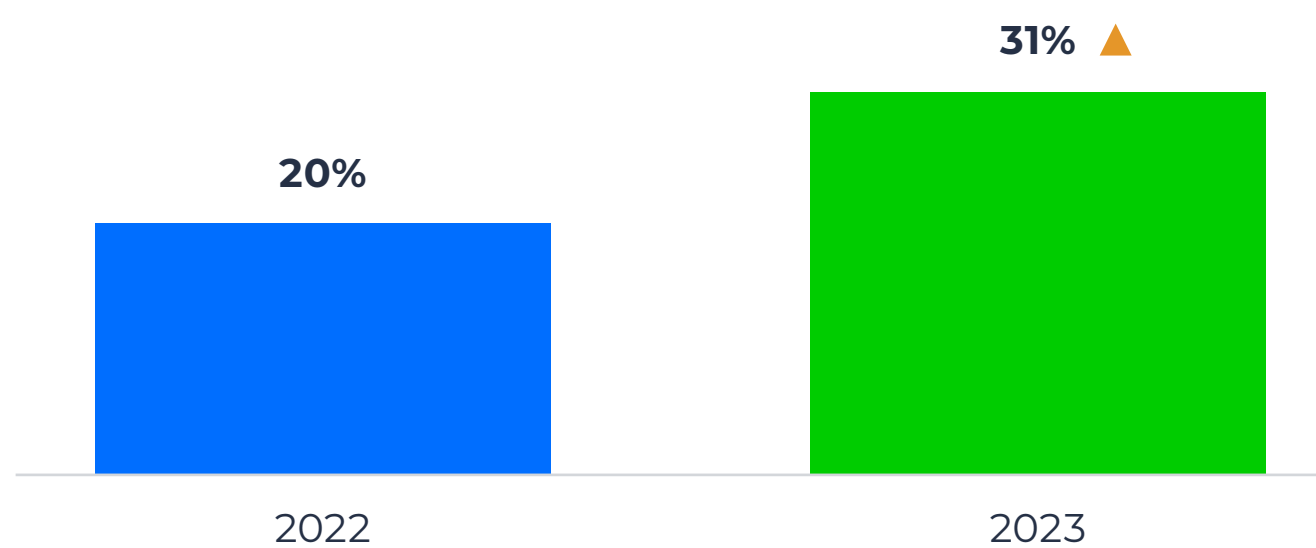
* On 1-7 Agree to Disagree scale, with 1 being 'Completely agree' and 7 being 'Completely disagree, figure includes parents who selected 1-3.

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

24. For example, see: <https://news.sky.com/story/smartphone-use-is-an-addiction-for-a-quarter-of-youngsters-study-shows-1187308>

Figure 21. Tech invasion: Growing concern among parents that devices are overshadowing family interactions

Spending time on our own devices rather than doing things together
(% who feel this statement describes their household*, parent data)



Q32.1. How well do the below describe what life is like in your home/household? – We often find ourselves spending time on our own devices (e.g. phones, consoles, TVs) rather than doing things together.

Base: Parents (2022: 1,138, 2023: 1,001)

* On 1-7 Agree to Disagree scale, with 1 being 'Completely agree' and 7 being 'Completely disagree, figure includes parents who selected 1-3.

▲ ▼ Significant difference versus previous year

Parents are observing a trend where family members are often absorbed in their devices rather than engaging in time with the family. In this wave, nearly one-third (31%) place themselves at between 8 and 10 on a scale in terms of finding themselves engaged with their own devices, like phones and consoles, rather than participating in collective family activities. This marks a considerable increase (+11 percentage points) from the previous survey, highlighting a shift towards solitary digital engagement over shared family time.²⁵

This trend raises crucial questions about the balance of screen time, especially in a family setting. How much isolated screen time is too much?²⁶ The challenge for parents is twofold: firstly, to help their children manage and limit their online time effectively, and secondly, to set a positive example themselves.

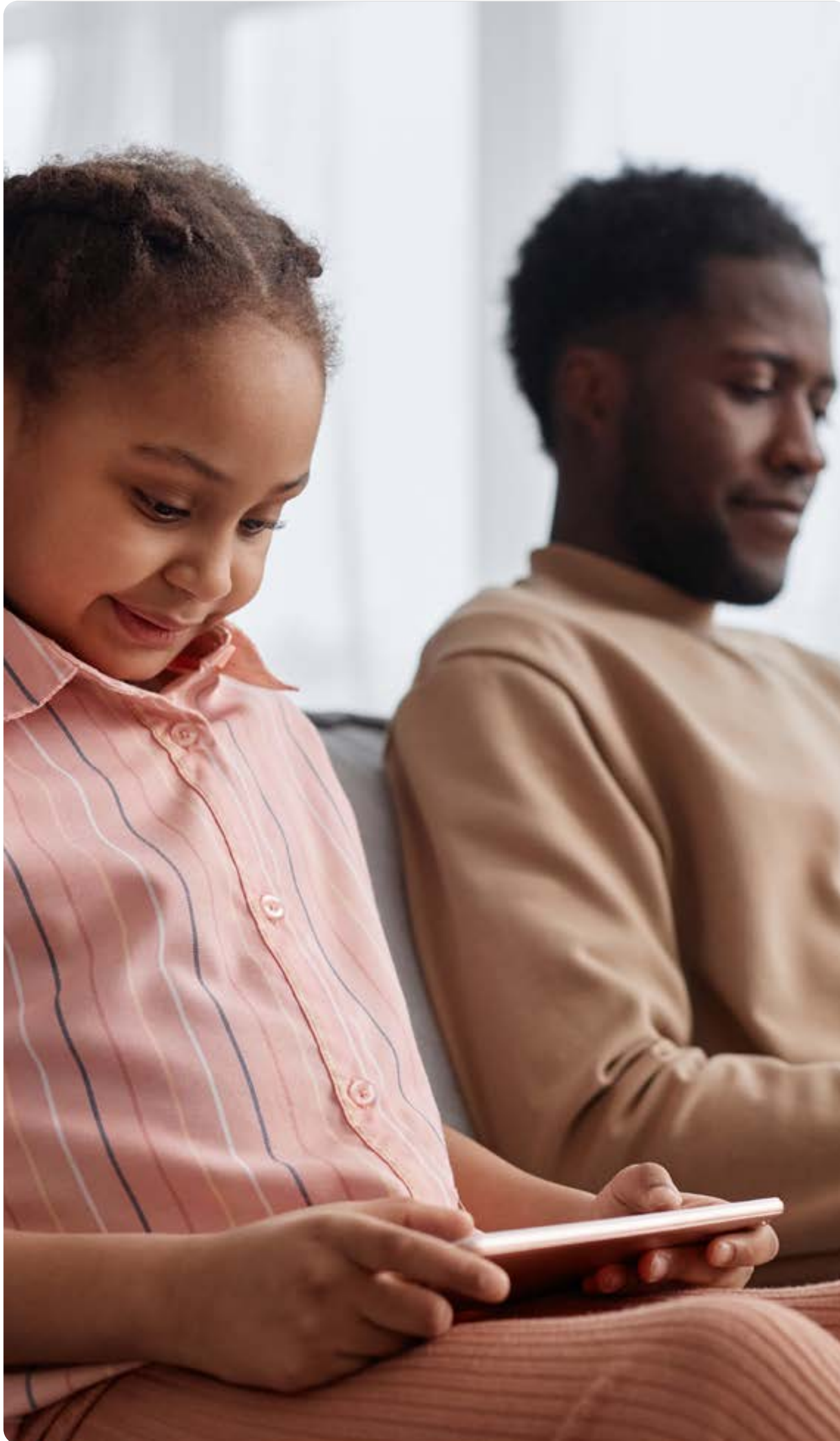
As children spend increasing amounts of time online, often in isolation rather than with family, it becomes imperative for parents to model healthy screen habits and create a family environment where digital devices are used in a balanced and controlled manner.



31% of parents place themselves at between 8 and 10 on a scale in terms of finding themselves engaged with their own devices, rather than participating in collective family activities

25. Figures cited for share of respondents selecting 8-10 on 0-10 scale, with 10 being 'completely describes our household' for the statement 'we often find ourselves spending time on our own devices rather than doing things together'.

26. For discussion, see: <https://www.forbes.com/health/family/how-much-screen-time-kids/>



Conclusions from Internet Matters

This is the third year we have conducted our Digital Wellbeing Index research. It continues to show that the impact of digital technology on children's lives is complex – it spans so many areas of children's lives, in both positive and negative ways. The impact varies according to many different factors, including the kinds of services and activities which a child engages with, the support they receive from their families and schools, along with personal characteristics such as their age and gender – to name just a few.

This complexity means there is no one-size-fits-all solution which will keep all children safe from harm online. But that does not mean that progress isn't possible. Instead, it shows that many different stakeholders have a role to play, and considered, evidence-based action is needed. We outline below our reflections on what our Digital Wellbeing Programme and wider research suggests this should look like.

A family-centred approach

The majority of young people tell us that when something goes wrong online, their first port of call is typically their parents. Parents normally know their children best, including what is and is not suitable for them to do online, and are uniquely placed to moderate and mediate children's online activity, given their role in purchasing and setting up devices and services on their child's behalf. All this shows that one of the best ways of supporting children's digital wellbeing is by supporting their parents and carers.

And yet, the important role of parents is often overlooked by policymakers in this space, with "affected persons" (i.e. parents) mentioned just a handful of times in the Online Safety Act.

It is very encouraging to see from this year's Index that parents and carers are taking greater action to help children avoid the negatives of being online, so that they can enjoy the positives. This includes the use of technical tools, such as parental controls, and also through simply initiating conversations. But this report also shows that parental anxiety about children's online lives has risen, on topics as diverse as sexual content, stranger contact and mis- and dis-information. Furthermore, there has been a jump in the number of parents who are observing that technology is getting in the way of them spending quality time with their children – rather than supporting this process.

If online safety regulation is going to have a material impact on children's lives, it needs to be sensitive to these factors and take a family-centred approach. Ofcom (the new online safety regulator) should explicitly call out parents in its forthcoming codes of practice, making clear how online platforms should consider them as a vital part of a child's user journey.

Internet Matters will continue to work with our diverse membership base to help online services put the needs of families first, including through the provision of high quality advice, information and guidance.

Reducing children's experiences of harm online

It is extremely welcome that this year's Index has shown improvements in children's digital wellbeing. Yet it remains the case that two-thirds of children say that they have experienced harm online. This is unacceptable and points to the need for continued focus and determination from all of us – not least from tech companies themselves, as well as government and regulators, parents and teachers.

Sometimes, efforts to improve children's online safety focus only on the most serious harms. While this is understandable and in many ways justified, it is important that we also tackle the more everyday harms that can have a significant cumulative impact on children's wellbeing – for example, excessive and unhealthy levels of screen time, which is observed by both parents and young people to be damaging. Platforms need to consider harms across this spectrum when thinking about the design of their services.

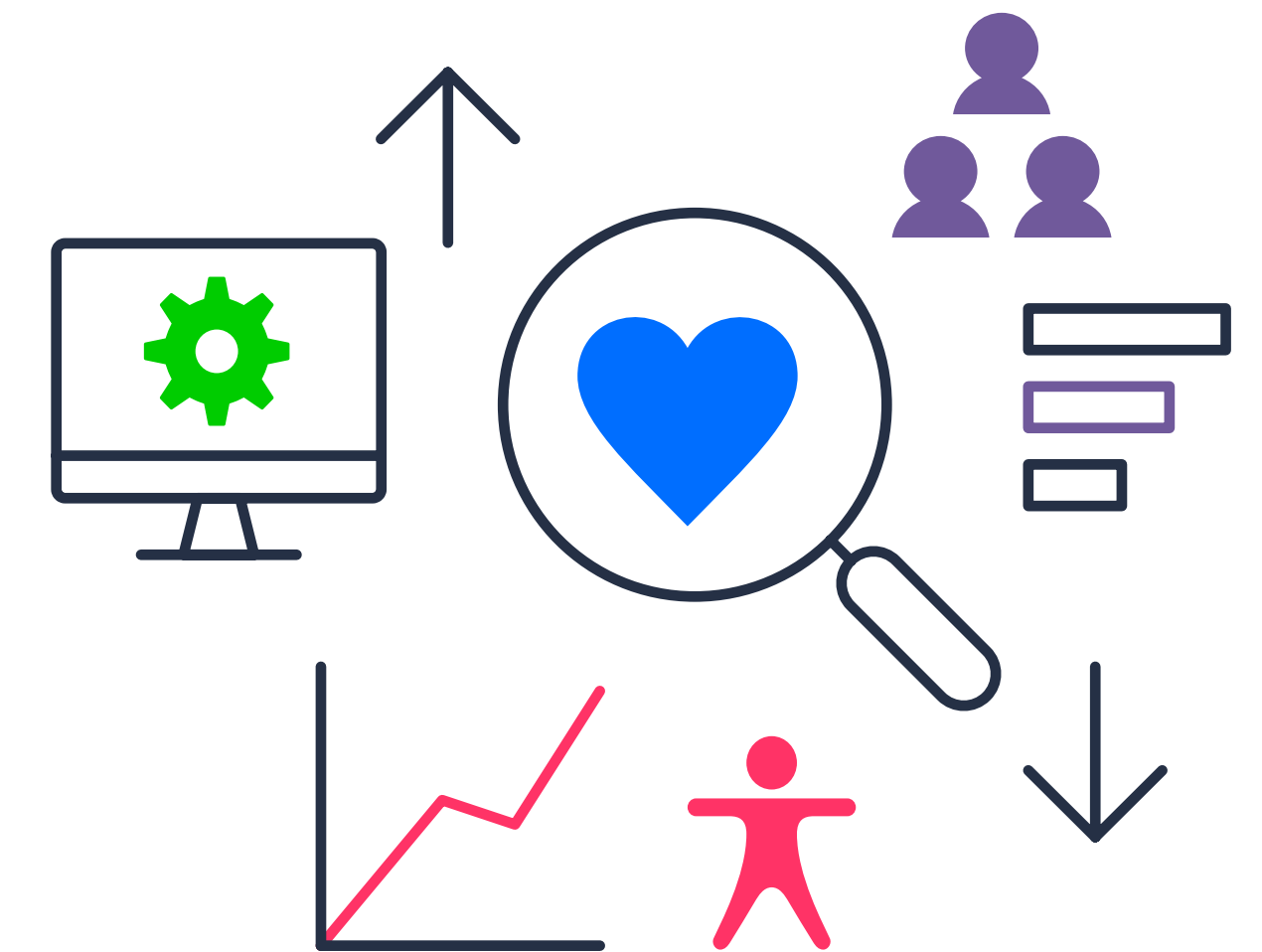
Under the Online Safety Act, many online services will be more accountable for ensuring that they have effective reporting and complaints systems and will be required to share information about how they identify and mitigate risk. Greater action in these areas is critical and it is important that reporting systems and transparency notices are accessible and intelligible to families.

Finally, this report builds on previous research from Internet Matters in pointing to the particular harm experienced online by girls. It is therefore welcome that as a result of the Online Safety Act, Ofcom is required to produce specific guidance on how online services can reduce the risk to women and girls using their platforms – although it is disappointing Ofcom have said this guidance will only be shared in draft format in 2025. Given the importance of the issue, Ofcom should bring this guidance forward, and online platforms should do more in the meantime to identify and mitigate harms experienced by girls. Internet Matters is following up on the findings within this report through a series of one-to-one interviews with teenage girls aged 13-16, along with parents, to better understand the nature, causes and impact of harms they experience online. We will share this additional research in the coming months.

The importance of media literacy

There is much to be done to ensure that children's digital wellbeing is promoted through the design and operation of online services. But even if this goal is achieved, it is not a silver bullet – education will remain an important factor in enabling children to stay safe online, so that they can make the most of the benefits, and the risks can be minimised.

We have already outlined above the importance of supporting parents, so that they can support children. One of the best routes of reaching both parents and children, and ensuring they have up-to-date resources and information, is through schools. But while some schools excel in their provision of online safety education, others struggle through lack of expertise, curriculum time and resources. This is not helped by the fact that online safety is split across multiple areas of the curriculum and can therefore fall between the gaps. Greater focus is needed within government, and specifically from the Department for Education, in order to ensure that all children leave school with the skills they need to operate safely and effectively in a digital world – especially with the rise of artificial intelligence, which is re-shaping so many sectors at such great speed, yet poses real challenges. Later this year, Internet Matters will be publishing a thought leadership report on what effective online safety education looks like in the modern world and how it can be delivered – as a general election approaches, we hope that this will help to enable media literacy to receive the attention it needs and deserves.



Internet Matters is following up on the findings in this report with a **deeper look at the online lives of teenage girls**, who have poorer wellbeing in key areas

Appendix 1. How index scores were calculated

The participants were asked to rate the importance or truth of statements about their technology use, their feelings about their technology use, and some questions about their household and family dynamics. Each statement has been assigned to one of the four dimensions of wellbeing and designated as relating to either the positive or negative effects of digital technology on children. The overall Index and the scores for each dimension are based on these answers.

How scores were developed for each positive and negative dimension

Each of the eight groupings (four dimensions with a positive and negative group) is represented by between three and eight survey items (please see Appendix 2 for details on all items used)

- Each item was scored out of three based on the strength of an individual response. For example, someone reporting that they do something 'all the time' scored higher than someone who reported that they did something 'occasionally'.
- For each dimension, the scores for related items were averaged (taking the arithmetic mean), providing a maximum score of three and a minimum of zero.

- The arithmetic mean of every respondent's dimension score provides our total scores, which in turn provide our baseline scores for the whole Index.
- Children's items created the children's Index and matched parents' items created the parents' Index.

The positive and negative aspects of all the dimensions were separated in the following way:

Developmental wellbeing:

- Positive items focus on whether children have been able to use digital tools to their advantage, enabling them to discover, learn and develop.
- Negative items focus on the extent to which children appear to be experiencing a lack of control over how they use digital technology, where it generates behaviour that has no obvious benefit or pay-off for the child.

Emotional wellbeing:

- Positive items focus on the positive influence digital technology can have on how children feel about themselves and the positive emotions it elicits.
- Negative items focus on the negative emotional reactions or experiences that the use of digital technology can produce in children.

Physical wellbeing:

- Positive items focus on the use of digital technology to facilitate physical activity by enabling children to learn and develop their knowledge and skills.
- Negative items focus on the opportunity costs and negative consequences that the overuse of digital technology can have on physical health and activity, such as preventing children from engaging in sports/exercise or impacting their sleep.

Social wellbeing:

- Positive items focus on the role that digital technology can play in enabling children to remain connected to others or form new, valuable connections, particularly in circumstances where this might otherwise not be possible or feasible.
- Negative items focus on the negative consequences that can arise from social interaction online.

Considerations in reviewing Index scores

While this framework is useful to categorise the ways in which children's wellbeing has developed since last year, there are, of course, many overlaps between these dimensions, and in reality, children's wellbeing cannot be isolated to only one specific dimension. For example, a child might become more active and see an increase in their physical wellbeing, and this, in turn, may also bring about an improvement in their mental health and an increase in their emotional wellbeing.

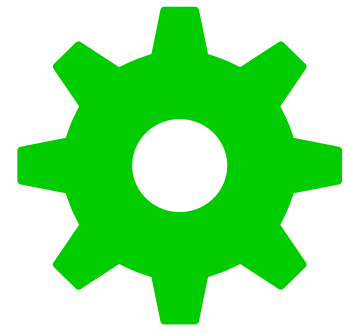
Similarly, it is also impossible to measure causality between the shifts in dimension scores: greater physical activity could be both the cause or result of better mental health, and as such, an increase in physical wellbeing could be both the cause and result of an increase in emotional wellbeing. The Index aims, therefore, to quantify children's digital wellbeing, whilst also acknowledging the nuances that occur across these different dimensions.

Appendix 2. Index Dimensions and items

The Index is based on four key dimensions identified in the Children and families' wellbeing in a digital world report²⁷ by Dr Diane Levine and team at the University of Leicester. The items that are included under each dimension were developed, refined, and selected for inclusion based on:

- The original definition of each dimension from the University of Leicester report.
- The qualitative research findings in earlier waves explored how these issues manifest and appear in the real lives of children across the UK.
- The testing of different survey question items during this previous qualitative research to establish which were better at tapping into these real-world experiences.

27. <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Internet-Matters-Wellbeing-In-A-Digital-World-1.pdf>



How digital technology impacts developmental wellbeing

Developmental wellbeing: realisation of cognitive capabilities and achievement of educational potential; managing financial responsibilities that come with maturation; personal growth.

To develop well in a digital world, you can benefit from: opportunities for learning new skills and developing a sense of wonder; opportunities to develop thinking, collaboration, organisation and problem-solving skills; opportunities to bring together content to offer to others; access to new information and online learning including gaining qualifications; exposure to alternative opinions, world-views and examples of mature rational discussion; secure understanding of how data are used; and the digital skills, confidence and competence for everyday tasks and roles in daily life (including work, homework, household administration and financial management). For some, technology can even provide an income stream, for example through the safe monetisation of digital platforms.

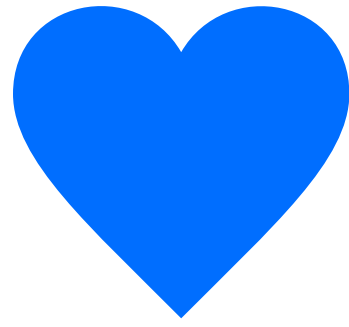
You will need to manage the risks from: exposure to disinformation; fake news; fallacies and conspiracy theories; living in an echo-chamber; wasting or missing opportunities to learn; seeing examples of unhelpful and irrational thinking; cybersecurity challenges such as managing personal data online; and challenges to financial wellbeing - such as exposure to the varied and subtle ways that online games take money from players, sometimes in tiny but repeated payments.

From *Children and families' wellbeing in a digital world*, University of Leicester

Items included in the Index for developmental wellbeing

+ or -	Children	Parents
Positive	Technology and being online has been important for me being more independent and being able to do things by myself	Technology and being online has been important for my child having more independence (e.g., because they can be contacted and are able to use their phone to get to places etc.)
	Technology and being online has been important for getting ideas for what I would like to do in the future (e.g., as a job)	Technology and being online has been important for my child thinking and planning for the future (e.g., what they would like to do after they leave school)
	Technology and being online has been important for me learning about things that no-one would teach me about in real life [13+ in year 1]	Technology and being online has been important for my child being able to learn about things no one would teach them in real life [added last year]
	Technology and being online has been important for helping me revise / learn things for school	Technology and being online has been important for my child being able to engage with schoolwork and other educational opportunities
	Technology and being online has been important for being able to find new hobbies or things I am interested in	My child benefits a lot from being able to look things up online that they are interested in
	I'm able to use the internet to earn money from some of the things I do online (e.g., website design, playing video games, sponsorship or payments from brands to promote things online/on social media) [15+ in year 1]	Technology and being online has been important for my child making money by using specific digital skills (e.g., website design, playing video games, sponsorship or payments from brands to promote things online/on social media) [15+ in year 1]
	I understand what personal information I should and shouldn't share online [added last year]	My child fully understands what personal information they should and shouldn't share online
	Technology and being online has been important for my child being able to learn new skills	

+ or -	Children	Parents
Negative	I keep playing the same games or watching the same TV shows/films even when I'm not enjoying it	My child spends a lot of time re-watching the same TV shows or re-playing the same games that they've seen or played before over and over again
	I run out of things to see on social media so scroll through the same things again [13+ in year 1]	My child spends a lot of time scrolling through the same things on social media [added last year]
	I quite easily spend money online without realising e.g., buying apps and spending money in games	My child spends money in apps or on games without realising
	I don't feel like I can control how much time I spend online	My child is not able to control how much time they spend online [added last year]
	I see something I don't like online or on social media, but don't know what to do about it	My child struggles to work out whether the information they are exposed to online / on social media is true



How digital technology impacts emotional wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing: healthy emotional development; ability to cope with stress and setbacks; spiritual development; development of thoughtful values and a positive outlook; space and opportunities to flourish; life purpose; autonomy; feeling successful.

To be well in a digital world, you can benefit from: opportunities for creativity and self-expression, for example online curation of links to hobbies; opportunities to be authentic, for self-validation and building self-worth; information about methods of self-regulation such as timed meditation practice apps; channels that let us articulate our emotions and validate our experiences, for example special interest groups on social media; exposure to positive role models; harmless strategies for distraction and management of emotional pain; opportunities to engage in joyful and enjoyable activities such as developing or operating in gameworlds.

You will need to manage the risks from: addiction; low self-worth; increased emotional distress; destructive behaviours or beliefs such as self-harm or radicalisation; shaming and isolation; 'doom-scrolling' (continual scrolling through negative news); unrealistic comparisons against impossible standards; exposure to harmful content such as extreme pornography; exposure to 'persuasive design' and a desire for constant, instant self-gratification.

From *Children and families' wellbeing in a digital world*, University of Leicester

Items included in the Index for emotional wellbeing

+ or -	Children	Parents
Positive	Spending time online makes me feel happy [13+ in year 1]	Being online makes my child happy [added last year]
	Being online has let me find people I admire and look up to [13+ in year 1]	Being online has enabled my child to find positive role models
	Being online has helped me to feel more comfortable with being 'me' [13+ in year 1]	Being online has helped my child to feel more comfortable with themselves [added last year]
	I create things I'm proud of online or using technology (e.g., games or computer programmes)	My child creates things they are proud of online or using technology (e.g., in games or with computer programmes) [added last year]
	I see things or people online that inspire me to try new things	Technology and being online has allowed my child to see things or people that inspire them to try new things [added last year]
	Being online has helped me learn more about people with different experiences to mine, which I wouldn't have come across otherwise [added last year]	Online platforms/resources have allowed my child to learn about and empathise with people who have different experiences to them, which they wouldn't have otherwise had exposure to
	I'm able to be myself online or on social media [13+ in year 1]	Digital devices/ being online has allowed my child to discover and pursue interests/hobbies that make them happy

+ or -	Children	Parents
Negative	I worry a lot about what other people think of me online (e.g., on social media)	My child worries a lot about how others perceive them online (especially social media)
	I see people online/on social media who make me feel sad because I'm not like them	My child compares themselves to people they see online/on social media in a way that I think is unhealthy
	I get more easily upset/angry when online or playing video games than when doing other things	My child gets more easily upset/angry when online or playing video games than when doing other things
	I post or say things online that I regret later	My child posts or says things online that they later regret [added last year]
	I get upset if something I post online/on social media does not get many likes or nice/positive comments	My child gets upset because something online or social media does not get the response they wanted it to (e.g., not enough 'likes', or interpreted the wrong way)
	I see things online that worry or upset me	My child sees things online that worry or upset them
	I worry about saying something wrong online/on social media	My child's online activity exposes them to content that encourages or supports unhealthy body image (e.g., extreme weight loss or muscle gain)



How digital technology impacts physical wellbeing

Physical wellbeing: achievement and maintenance of healthy thriving; development of physical capabilities; using technology in physical safety; access/lack of access to supportive or accessibility technologies.

To be well in a digital world, you can benefit from: opportunity to maintain a healthy balance between sedentary and active behaviours; to develop new physical skills; opportunities to participate in mobile digital activities; access to supportive or assistive technologies for those with chronic disabilities, for example reading pens or visual search engines, or 'adaptive switches' designed to help people independently activate switch enabled devices such as smartphones; information about healthy lifestyle choices; shared or learned activities for wellbeing (sports, exercise, relaxation).

You will need to manage the risks from: losing opportunities of doing healthy and joyful activity in favour of sedentary or shut-in lifestyles, sometimes called 'displacement'; sleep disruption; exposure to problematic temptations impacting physical health and wellbeing; exposure to potentially damaging content promoting unhealthy behaviours towards food or exercise or negative impact on nutrition; impact on self-ideation and body confidence.

From *Children and families' wellbeing in a digital world*, University of Leicester

Items included in the Index for physical wellbeing

+ or -	Children	Parents
Positive	I use the internet to learn new skills at a sport or physical activity	Technology and being online has been important for my child being able to learn skills or pick up tips for improving a sport or exercise activity they do (e.g., by watching videos on YouTube or reading about sports online)
	I use my phone to arrange to meet up to play sports or do activities outside	Technology and being online has been important for my child arranging to meet up and play sports or do outdoor activities [added last year]
	I use apps, websites and devices to help me stay healthy	My child uses apps, websites, or devices to help them stay healthy [added last year]
	I use apps or websites to find out about new sports or exercises I want to try out (e.g., seeing people doing a sport on social media) [added last year]	Technology and being online has been important for my child finding out about new sports or exercises they want to try out (e.g., seeing people doing a sport on social media)

+ or -	Children	Parents
Negative	I stopped playing a sport or doing exercise because I want to play video games, watch TV or be on social media	My child has stopped doing sports or exercise because they are too busy on their phone, computer, TV or games console
	I stay up late on my phone, playing games or watching TV (e.g. into the early hours of the morning once everyone else has gone to bed)	My child spends time on their phone, computer or games console which negatively affects their sleep patterns
	I spend a lot of time online which affects my physical health (e.g. makes me tired or unable to concentrate, affects my eyesight or posture) [added last year]	Spending a lot of time online affects my child's physical health (e.g., strains their eyes, makes them tired or unable to concentrate, affects their posture) [added last year]



How digital technology impacts social wellbeing

Social wellbeing: participation in wider communities including schools, clubs or societies; being an active citizen; ability to work with others; healthy interaction with online communities; maintenance of positive and sustainable online personae; managing the risks of grooming and exploitation; development and maintenance of good relations with significant people both online and offline; communication with people we know.

To be well in a digital world, you can benefit from: relationships with significant others who bring care and support, opportunities to both keep apart, and integrate online and offline relationships and the knowledge of when to do this; opportunities for shared experiences and building of new positive relationships; maintaining existing relationships; healthy and open communications; opportunities to help and support others; mentoring and being a mentor; access to community of 'people like me' (for example through digital activism or peer support groups); ability to move between communities; healthy interaction with unknown people or in public forums; positive reinforcement from community participation; maintenance of a non-destructive and age appropriate online presence; opportunities to be an active citizen.

You will need to manage the risks of: experiencing and exhibiting bullying behaviour, grooming and other forms of exploitation; forming and/or being unable to escape from destructive relationships; becoming cut off from family and friends; withdrawal and alienation; lack of communication or loneliness; unhealthy comparison with others; fear of missing out; participation in communities that are intrinsically harmful, abusive or antisocial participation styles; a digital footprint with negative consequences for the future; isolation from social interaction in digitally-mediated and physical life; exposure to racism and other forms of discrimination; development of antisocial behaviours and alienation from broader society (such as radicalisation).

From *Children and families' wellbeing in a digital world*, University of Leicester

Items included in the Index for social wellbeing

+ or -	Children	Parents
Positive	Technology and being online helps me to stay in close contact with my friends	Technology and being online helps my child stay in contact and maintain meaningful relationships with people who are important to them
	Technology and being online helps me to stay in contact with friends or family I wouldn't be able to otherwise (e.g., friends who live far away)	The internet and digital devices (e.g., smartphone) has helped my child to stay in contact with people they otherwise wouldn't have been able to do (e.g., relatives or friends who live far away)
	Technology and being online helps me meet people who become good friends	Technology and being online helps my child meet people who have become important friends
	Digital devices/being online lets me feel like part of a group [15+ in year 1]	Digital devices/being online has enabled my child to feel part of a group that they otherwise wouldn't have
	Technology and being online helps me find groups or communities that can offer me friendship and support [added last year]	Technology and being online helps my child find groups or communities that can offer friendship and support
	Technology and being online helps me participate in activities and events that are important to me [added last year]	Technology and being online helps my child to participate in activities and moments/events that are important to them

+ or -	Children	Parents
Negative	I have upsetting experiences interacting with other people online (e.g., bullying)	My child has had negative experiences interacting with other people online (e.g., bullying)
	Spending time online makes me feel lonely [added last year]	Spending time online makes my child feel lonely [added last year]
	I turn down opportunities to meet with friends so I can stay in on my phone, computer, or games console [added last year]	My child turns down opportunities to meet with friends so they can stay in on their phone, computer or games console
	I feel upset or uncomfortable because I see people being mean or unpleasant to each other online [added last year]	My child gets upset or uncomfortable because s/he sees people being mean or unpleasant to each other online [added last year]
	I avoid using certain apps, websites or games because of the way people act or talk to each other on them [added last year]	My child avoids using certain apps, websites or games because of the way people act or talk to each other on them [added last year]
	[Impact of] Someone you don't know has tried to contact you/sent you messages [added last year]	[Impact of] being contacted by a stranger online [added last year]
	If I miss out on things that are happening on social media among my friends, I get upset	We often find it difficult to get our child(ren) out of the house because they want to stay in and play video games, stream and watch TV programmes or be on their phone

About BMG

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