Public attitudes to smartphones, social media, and online safety

March 2025

Foreword

How many of us have seen a post on Instagram promoting hateful content? How many of us have seen a viral Tiktok video with content we know to be untrue? How many of us feel addicted to our smartphones and turn to them first thing in the morning? Now imagine what impact this is having on our children, who are so easily influenced by the content they see at a young age.

Our children need protecting more than anyone from the ills of social media. It cannot be disputed that excess screen time distracts from learning and has a negative impact on children's education. Ask any teacher and they will be able to tell you of rising behavioural incidents or greater safeguarding issues that they are having to deal with as a result of content young people view online.

It shouldn't have to be this way.

This research demonstrates that there is widespread support for greater regulation on social media access. Parents, and even young people themselves, are crying out for steps to be taken to better regulate content.

Controlling social media is a top priority for parents, and one they think that the Government should be taking more seriously. Young people also overwhelmingly think that social media generally does more harm than good to young people. The consensus is clear, with everyone agreed that children would be happier if social media did not exist.

Listening to the evidence from parents I was struck by how powerless so many of them feel. As a father this really resonated with me. We are all trying to do our best in keeping our children safe online, but we cannot regulate what they are encountering in the playground or what other children are showing them. This is why we need support from the government.

This is a clear public health issue that requires state intervention to solve. Social media giants should be made to have social responsibility to our children, and if they cannot do this, steps need to be taken to protect our children.
For too long the power of social media giants has gone unchecked. They have manufactured vast digital empires built upon a model that feeds young people addictive content, whether it is appropriate or not, to keep them on their platforms for as long as possible. They have proven they cannot be trusted to self-regulate, ignoring widespread concerns about harmful content, and even announcing that they will no longer fact-check content.

It is time for decisive action. The Government must take these concerns seriously and act to keep our children safe online. There needs to be stricter enforcement so that young people cannot get around restrictions and more research into how they are accessing harmful content.

In a world where we see more and more diagnoses of mental illness amongst young people, increases in behavioural issues in schools and misinformation being commonly spread online we must be doing all we can to protect our children from these harms. The lack of regulation on who can access social media and what content they are viewing has gone on too long.

Daniel Kebede, General Secretary of the National Education Union

Capturing the full breadth of public opinion

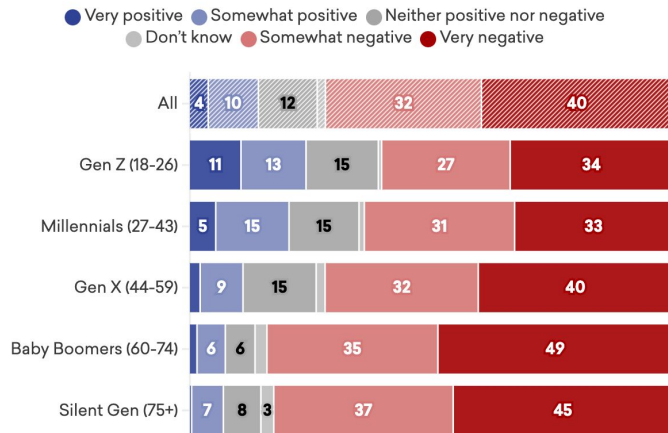| **Nationally Representative**	**Parents**	**Gen-Z (aged 16-24)**
1 representative poll (N = 2,016)	1 representative poll (N = 2,102)	1 representative poll (N = 1,675)
2 focus groups (Rother Valley and Newcastle-Under-Lyme)	4 focus groups (Darlington, Lowestoft, Pontrefact Castleford and Knottingly, Doncaster North, Hove and Portslade, and Brighton Kemptown)	2 focus groups (Houghton and Sunderland, and Ilford North)

The problem

72% of Britons say social media is harming kids

72% of Britons think that social media has a negative impact on young people

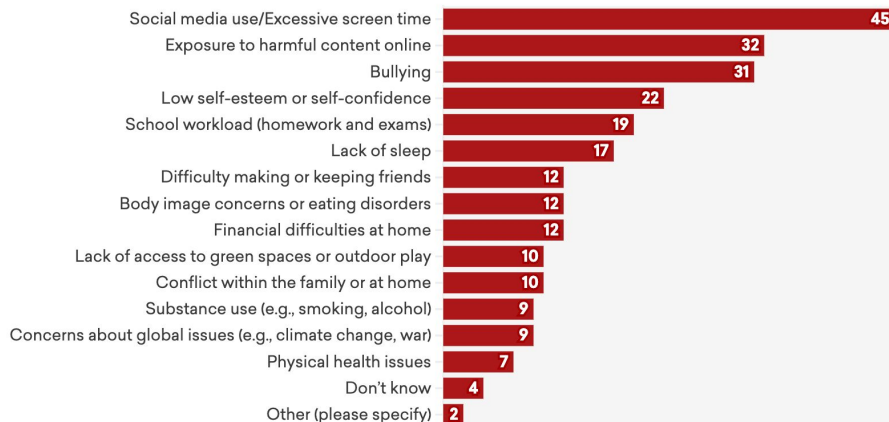**Would you say that social media has a positive or negative impact on children younger than 16?**

Legend:
- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- Neither positive nor negative
- Don't know
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative

Group	Very positive	Somewhat positive	Neither positive nor negative	Somewhat negative	Very negative
All	4	10	12	32	40
Gen Z (18-26)	11	13	15	27	34
Millennials (27-43)	5	15	15	31	33
Gen X (44-59)	9	15		32	40
Baby Boomers (60-74)	6	6		35	49
Silent Gen (75+)	7	8	3	37	45

"Social media can be as harmful as cigarettes or alcohol, yet we allow 13-year-olds access. It's crazy."
Nick, Parent, Rother Valley

For parents, social media use and online harms top the list of impacts on their children's mental health

Which of the following do you think has the biggest NEGATIVE impact on your child(ren)s' mental health? Select up to three.

Category	Value
Social media use/Excessive screen time	45
Exposure to harmful content online	32
Bullying	31
Low self-esteem or self-confidence	22
School workload (homework and exams)	19
Lack of sleep	17
Difficulty making or keeping friends	12
Body image concerns or eating disorders	12
Financial difficulties at home	12
Lack of access to green spaces or outdoor play	10
Conflict within the family or at home	10
Substance use (e.g., smoking, alcohol)	9
Concerns about global issues (e.g., climate change, war)	9
Physical health issues	7
Don't know	4
Other (please specify)	2

"My daughter witnessed self-harm on TikTok... we had to have that discussion really young."
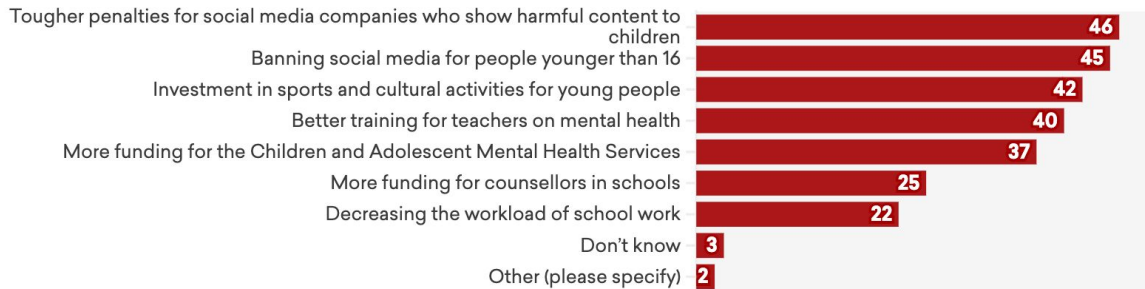Sarah, Parent, Lowestoft

Controlling social media is a top priority for parents...

Parents across Britain's divides rank social media use as the biggest risk to their children's mental health: it is ranked top for parents of all voter groups (including Conservative, Labour and Reform voters), and it also ranks highest for all parents regardless of how old their children are, although parents of teenagers rank it higher.

Furthermore, restrictions on social media also top the list of potential policies that would support young people's mental health.

Policies on social media are the most popular policies with parents to address young people's mental health

Which of the following policies do you think would have the best POSITIVE impact on children's mental health in Britain? Select up to three.

Policy	Value
Tougher penalties for social media companies who show harmful content to children	46
Banning social media for people younger than 16	45
Investment in sports and cultural activities for young people	42
Better training for teachers on mental health	40
More funding for the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services	37
More funding for counsellors in schools	25
Decreasing the workload of school work	22
Don't know	3
Other (please specify)	2

Source: More in Common, 2025 • N = 2,106 GB parents

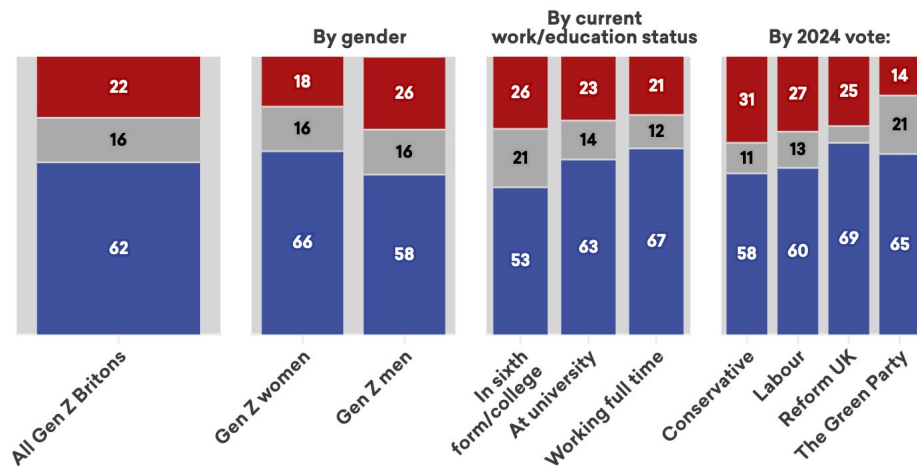**52% of parents say their children would be happier without social media.**

She would come onto the landing and she would go and get it in the night… I literally had it next to me at night time so she couldn't get to it." Jill, Parent, Hove

… and for Gen Z

Gen Z Britons overwhelmingly think social media does more harm than good to young people

On the whole, would you say that social media does more harm or more good for young people under the age of 16?

● Social media does more harm than good ● Don't know ● Social media does more good than harm

	By gender		By current work/education status			By 2024 vote:			

All Gen Z Britons — 22 / 16 / 62

By gender:
- Gen Z women — 18 / 16 / 66
- Gen Z men — 26 / 16 / 58

By current work/education status:
- In sixth form/college — 26 / 21 / 53
- At university — 23 / 14 / 63
- Working full time — 21 / 12 / 67

By 2024 vote:
- Conservative — 31 / 11 / 58
- Labour — 27 / 13 / 60
- Reform UK — 25 / 69
- The Green Party — 14 / 21 / 65

Source: More in Common • N = 1,675 Gen Z Britons

"Sometimes you have, like, the urge to improve your life... But then sometimes I just feel a bit guilty that I could have done something else."
Laura, 23, Ilford North

Almost half of Gen Z cite either social media or harmful online content as a top-three negative influence on teens' mental health.
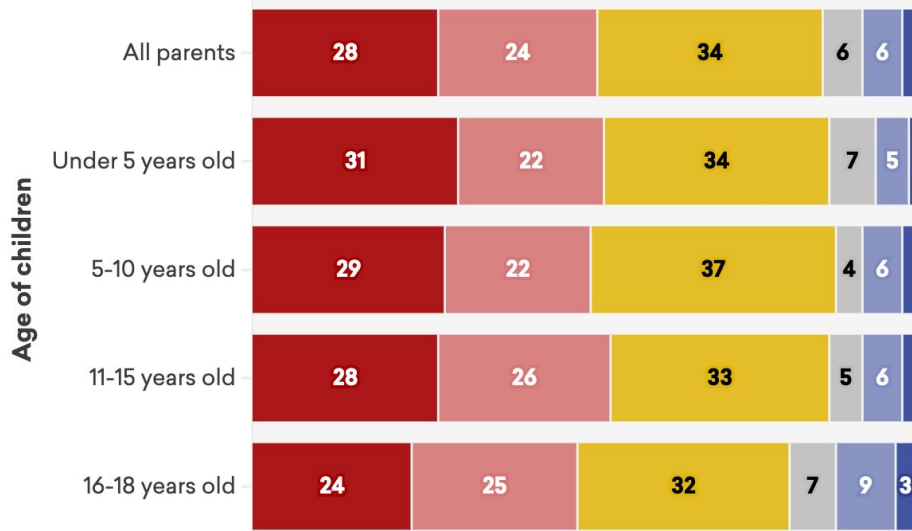
50% of Gen Z say they wish they had spent less time on their phones growing up.

Parents are worried about the impacts of social media across their children's lives

Most parents think their children would be happier if social media didn't exist

If social media did not exist at all, do you think your child would be…

● Much happier ● Slightly happier ● Neither happier nor sadder ● Don't know
● Slightly sadder ● Much sadder

Age of children

	Much happier	Slightly happier	Neither happier nor sadder	Don't know	Slightly sadder	Much sadder
All parents	28	24	34	6	6	
Under 5 years old	31	22	34	7	5	
5-10 years old	29	22	37	4	6	
11-15 years old	28	26	33	5	6	
16-18 years old	24	25	32	7	9	3

In total, 48 per cent of parents say their children spend too much time on social media

43 per cent say that their children's social media use **negatively impacts their family time;**

A third (36%) say that smartphone use is **impacting their child's sleep patterns;**

A quarter (26%) say that smartphone and social media use **has caused stress and anxiety for their child** - this is highest for parents of teenage girls where a third (32%) say the same;

30 per cent say that they **notice their child becoming withdrawn or isolated due to smartphone use** - this is highest with parents of teenage boys (at 37%);

A fifth (20%) say that their child's smartphone use is **negatively impacting their academic performance;**

Gen Z would be happier if social media didn't exist

74% say there should be stronger rules in place to protect younger people from harms on social media; only 17% say there is no need

78% say if they were a parent they would try to delay their child using social media for as long as possible.
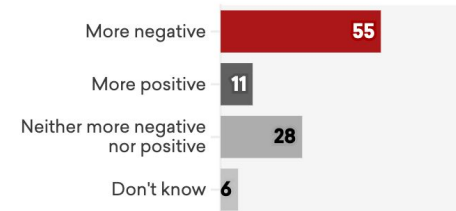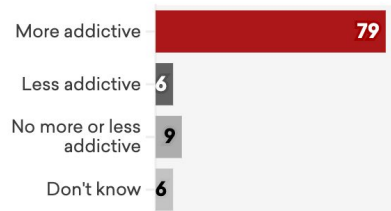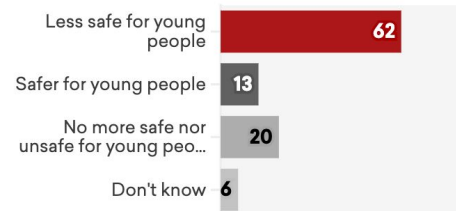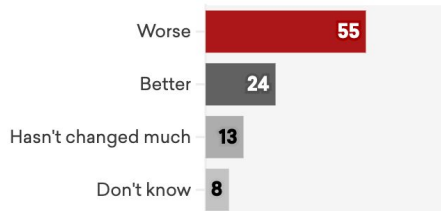
55% of Gen Z say life would be better if social media was banned for people under 16; only 22% say it would be worse

"14 to 16, I'd say it was really really negative... Tumblr was absolutely horrendous. There was a lot of eating disorders when I was in secondary school, and a lot of me and my friends latched onto that."
Laura, 23, Ilford North

Gen Z Britons overwhelmingly think that social media has changed for the worse in the last five years

In the last 5 years, would you say that social media has become:

Worse	55		Less safe for young people	62	
Better	24		Safer for young people	13	
Hasn't changed much	13		No more safe nor unsafe for young peo...	20	
Don't know	8		Don't know	6	
More addictive	79		More negative	55	
Less addictive	6		More positive	11	
No more or less addictive	9		Neither more negative nor positive	28	
Don't know	6		Don't know	6	

The collective action problem: Why people want government action

"If the government was saying, 'No, you have to be 16,' even if your kids are coming home like, 'Oh, my friends have got it,' you've kind of got that backing."
Julie, Parent, Darlington

"There's a real attachment... she gets a little bit lost if it's not near her, or you know, in her hands, or just in the pocket, there's a real obsessive trait coming."
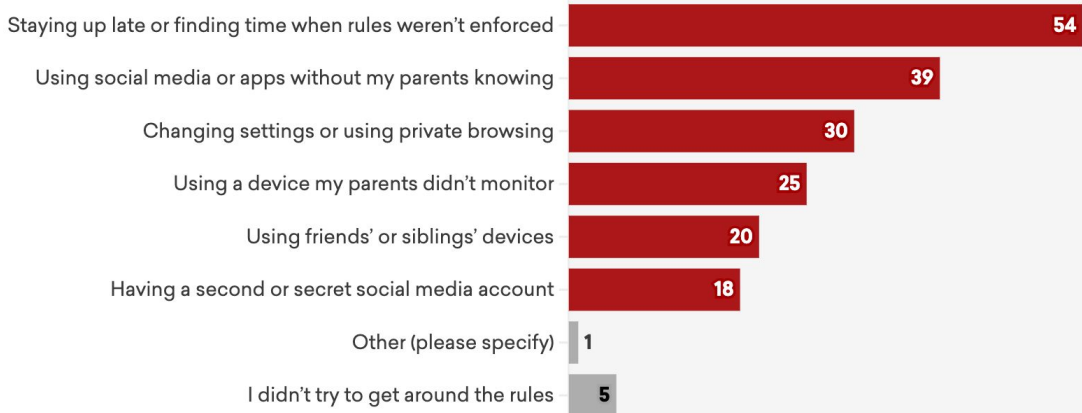*Alex, Parent, Lowestoft*

"Even if you do everything right at home, they're still going to see things at school, on their friends' phones, or when they're out."
Julie, Parent, Darlington

How do Gen Z get around smartphone rules?

If you got around the rules [that your parents set you on smartphone use], how did you do it? (Select all that apply)

Staying up late or finding time when rules weren't enforced	54
Using social media or apps without my parents knowing	39
Changing settings or using private browsing	30
Using a device my parents didn't monitor	25
Using friends' or siblings' devices	20
Having a second or secret social media account	18
Other (please specify)	1
I didn't try to get around the rules	5

From the focus groups and polling it is clear that tackling online harms is not something that people can do alone. Parents say they struggle to keep their kids off social media because the social pressure for them to be on is too great, 84% of Gen say they found ways to get around parental restrictions, and 69% of Gen Z say it would be difficult to quit social media.
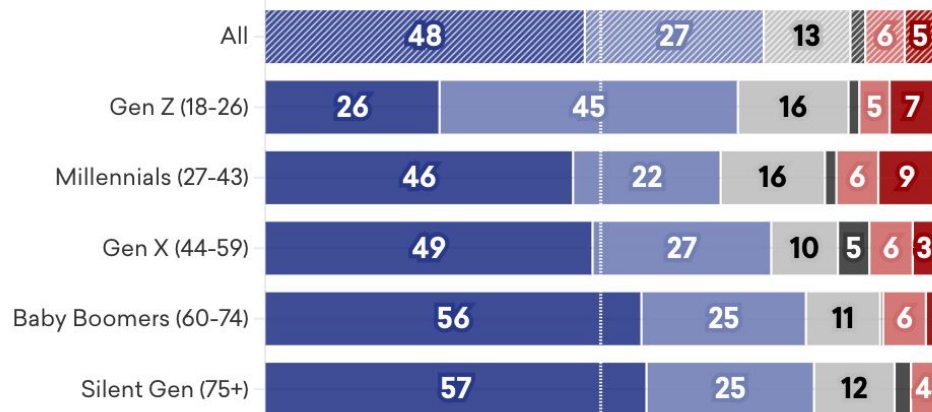
Regulating social media

Strong public support for raising the digital age of consent

Three quarters of Britons support increasing the age at which people can access social media

To what extent would you support or oppose raising the age at which children can use social media from 13 to 16?

● Strongly support ● Somewhat support ● Neither support nor oppose
● Don't know ● Somewhat oppose ● Strongly oppose

	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither	Don't know	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose
All	48	27	13		6	5
Gen Z (18-26)	26	45	16		5	7
Millennials (27-43)	46	22	16		6	9
Gen X (44-59)	49	27	10	5	6	3
Baby Boomers (60-74)	56	25	11		6	
Silent Gen (75+)	57	25	12		4	

Britons overwhelmingly support raising the digital age of consent to 16, meaning anyone younger could not access social media. Just 11 per cent are opposed.

A range of other policy measures on protecting young people from the harms of social media are also popular:

75% support **the creation of a new licensing scheme for 'child friendly' smartphones** (7% oppose)

79% support **giving Ofcom new powers** to prevent children being exposed to 'addictive by design' apps and services by internet companies (4% oppose)

77% support **commissioning new independent health guidance** on protecting young people from spending too much time on social media or facing other online harms (4% oppose)

Support for regulating social media spans Britain's divides

Most notably, this support spans all of Britain's voter groups - and many of the policies are most popular with Reform UK voters.

Support for these policies also spans other traditional divides in British politics: age, education level, region and more.

"These companies think they're untouchable, don't they?"
Wayne, Parent, Pontefract

"If the government used half the power that they can, like other countries do, it would make these social media companies stand up."
Claire, Parent, Pontefract

Three quarters of Britons support increasing the age at which people can access social media

To what extent would you support or oppose raising the age at which children can use social media from 13 to 16?

● Strongly support ● Somewhat support ● Neither support nor oppose
● Don't know ● Somewhat oppose ● Strongly oppose

	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose
All	48	27	13	6	5
Conservative	55	24	14		
Labour	49	26	13	6	6
Liberal Democrat	48	28	11	12	
Reform UK	56	25	10	4	
I did not/could not vote	44	28	13	7	6

Parents back raising the digital age of consent

86 per cent of parents support increasing the digital age of consent to 16, so that people under 16 cannot access social media.

"Thirteen is far too young. They're still kids, they're still learning about the world, and suddenly they've got access to everything."
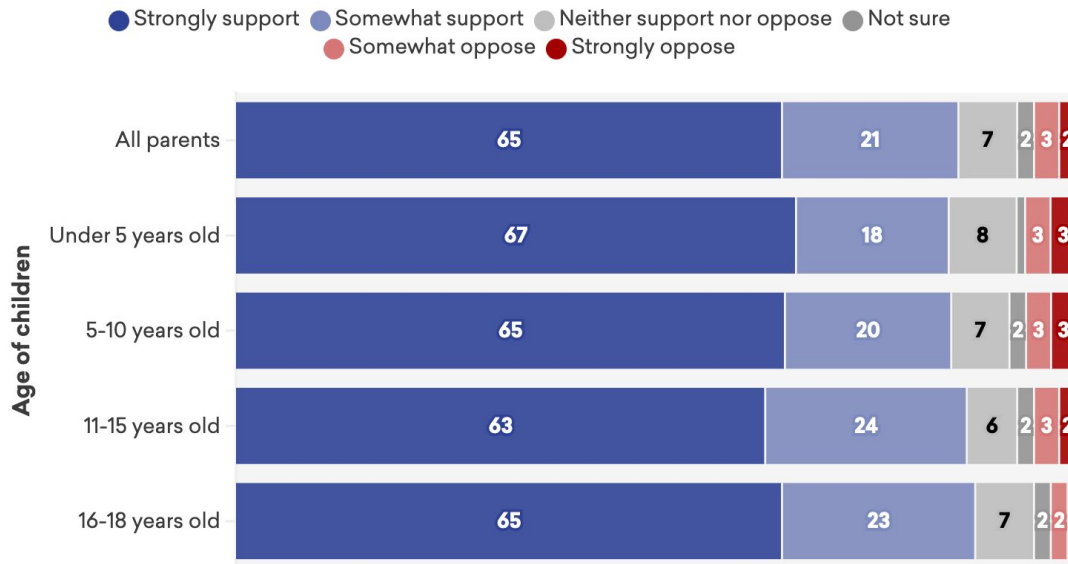*Michelle, Parent, Pontefract*

"My daughter witnessed self-harm on TikTok... we had to have that discussion really young."
Sarah, Parent, Lowestoft

The vast majority of parents support raising the digital age of consent

Do you support raising the digital age of consent from 13 to 16, so companies cannot collect data from children under 16 without parental consent?
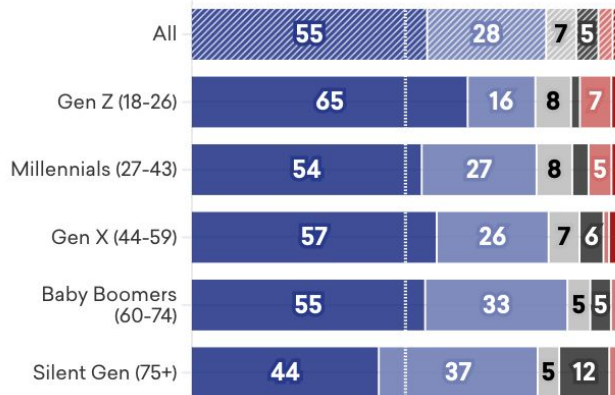
● Strongly support ● Somewhat support ● Neither support nor oppose ● Not sure
● Somewhat oppose ● Strongly oppose

Age of children	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither	Not sure	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose
All parents	65	21	7	2	3	2
Under 5 years old	67	18	8		3	3
5-10 years old	65	20	7	2	3	3
11-15 years old	63	24	6	2	3	2
16-18 years old	65	23	7		2	2

The specifics: demand for better enforcement and targeting specific apps

Most think that young people can get around current age restrictions on social media

In the UK, most social media platforms set a minimum age of 13 for children to create an account. In practice, how easy or difficult do you think it is for children under 13 to create social media accounts despite this rule?

■ Very easy ■ Somewhat easy ■ Neither easy nor difficult
■ Don't know ■ Somewhat difficult ■ Very difficult

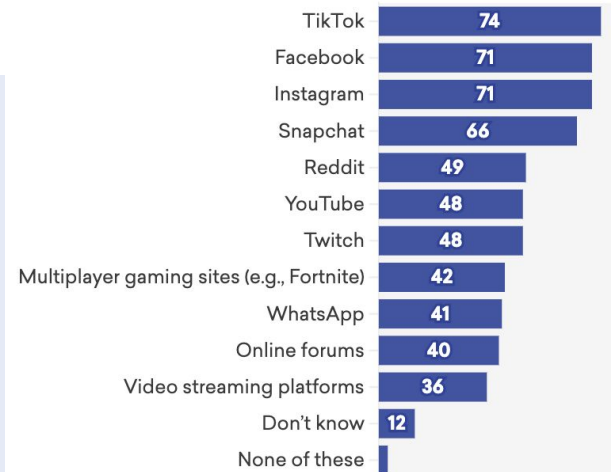|	Very easy	Somewhat easy	Neither	Don't know
All	55	28	7	5
Gen Z (18-26)	65	16	8	7
Millennials (27-43)	54	27	8	5
Gen X (44-59)	57	26	7	6
Baby Boomers (60-74)	55	33	5	5
Silent Gen (75+)	44	37	5	12

Currently, people think it is very easy for people get around the current age limit of 13 for social media platforms. For any new age limit to have credibility, it must be accompanied by effective mechanisms to enforce it.

At the same time, there is some discussion about which apps this app any ban should apply to. The overwhelming majority think that TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat should be included in such a ban, but there is more division over YouTube in particular.

TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat top the list of potential app bans

If the government were to increase the age at which young people could create a social media account to 16, which of the following should be included in those restrictions? (Select any that apply)
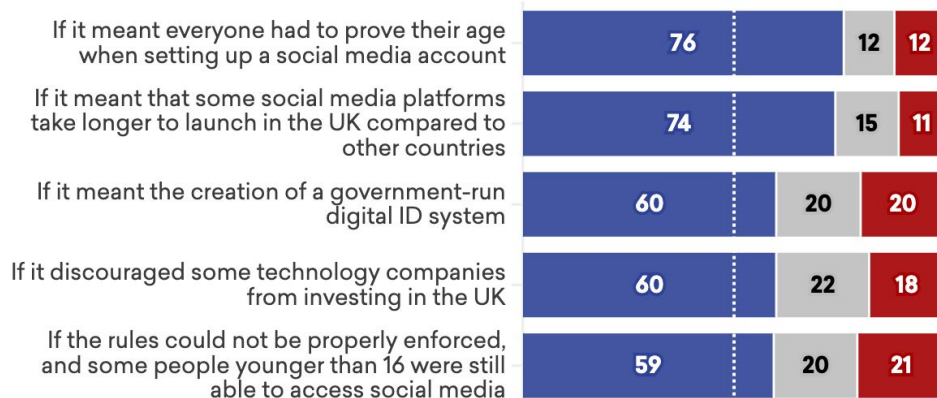
TikTok	74
Facebook	71
Instagram	71
Snapchat	66
Reddit	49
YouTube	48
Twitch	48
Multiplayer gaming sites (e.g., Fortnite)	42
WhatsApp	41
Online forums	40
Video streaming platforms	36
Don't know	12
None of these	

Age verification is popular in spite of tradeoffs

Support for raising the age of social media remains high even when tradeoffs are made clear

Would you support or oppose increasing the age at which people can access social media to 16 even if it meant each of the following...

- 🔵 I would support increasing the age at which people can access social media
- ⚪ Don't know
- 🔴 I would oppose increasing the age at which people can access social media

	Support	Don't know	Oppose
If it meant everyone had to prove their age when setting up a social media account	76	12	12
If it meant that some social media platforms take longer to launch in the UK compared to other countries	74	15	11
If it meant the creation of a government-run digital ID system	60	20	20
If it discouraged some technology companies from investing in the UK	60	22	18
If the rules could not be properly enforced, and some people younger than 16 were still able to access social media	59	20	21

The public rejects the argument that regulating social media will distract from other priorities The vast majority of Britons (79%) believe the government can tackle online harms while also addressing key priorities like the NHS and cost of living.
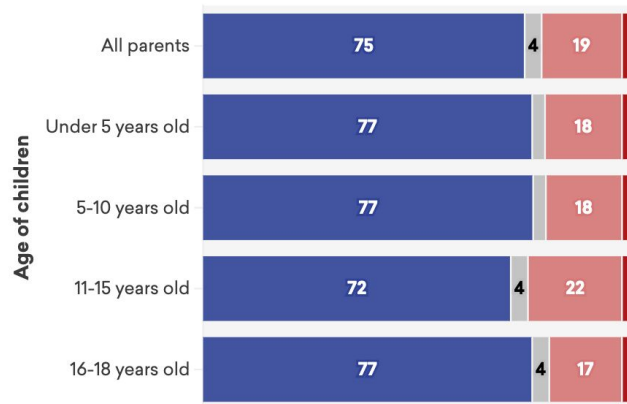
The public also supports age verification on social media in spite of potential privacy or ease-of-use tradeoffs. The public supports age verification through a range of methods: linking children's accounts to parents accounts (78% support), using government-issued ID (71%), or requiring in-person age verification at designated location such as post offices (66%).

Parents and Gen Z back age ID on social media

Three quarters of parents support legal requirements on social media platforms for age verification

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

- Social media platforms should be legally required to verify users' ages before allowing them to create an account
- Not sure
- Social media platforms should verify users' ages before allowing them to create an account, but it does not need to be a legal requirement
- Social media platforms should not verify users' ages before allowing them to create an account
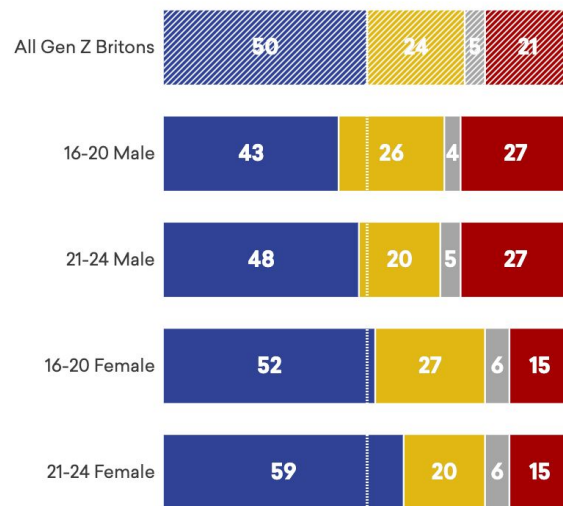
Age of children

	Blue	Grey	Red
All parents	75	4	19
Under 5 years old	77		18
5-10 years old	77		18
11-15 years old	72	4	22
16-18 years old	77	4	17

Three quarters of parents support legally requiring social media platforms to verify the ages of their users- holding across different demographic and social groups of parents.

Similarly, Gen Z tend to support age restrictions on social media up to the age of 16, and only 21% oppose it.

Gen Z tend to support an age verification rule for social media

How would you feel if social media apps required ID or verification codes to confirm your age, and not let anyone younger than 16 access the apps?

- I'd like it
- I don't mind either way
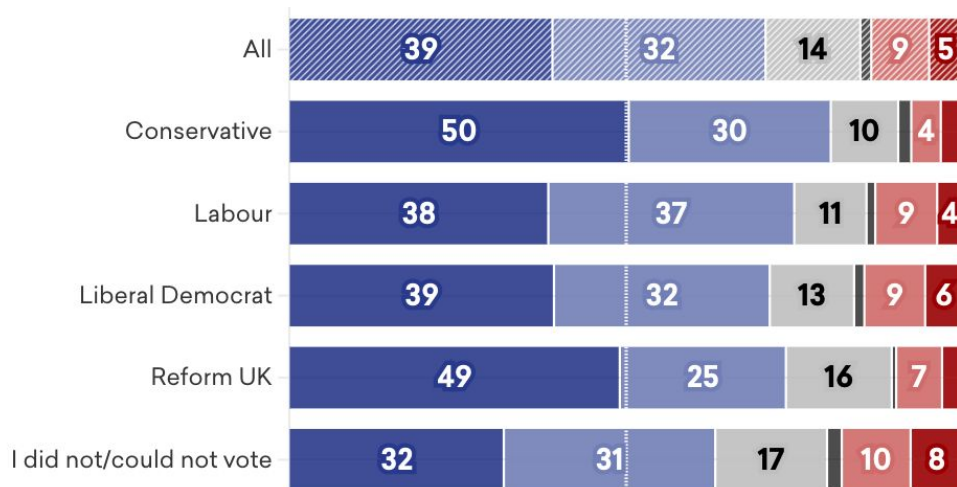- Not sure
- I wouldn't like it

	I'd like it	I don't mind either way	Not sure	I wouldn't like it
All Gen Z Britons	50	24	5	21
16-20 Male	43	26	4	27
21-24 Male	48	20	5	27
16-20 Female	52	27	6	15
21-24 Female	59	20	6	15

Controlling smartphones in school

Strong public support for a ban on smartphones in schools

71% support a ban on smartphones in school

To what extent would you support or oppose a national ban on the use of smartphones in schools, for people under 16?

● Strongly support ● Somewhat support ● Neither support nor oppose
● Don't know ● Somewhat oppose ● Strongly oppose

Group	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose
All	39	32	14	9	5
Conservative	50	30	10	4	
Labour	38	37	11	9	4
Liberal Democrat	39	32	13	9	6
Reform UK	49	25	16	7	
I did not/could not vote	32	31	17	10	8

The overwhelming majority of Britons support a national ban on the use of smartphones in schools for people under 16, and only 14% oppose. Like many of the other policies in this report, support spans all of Britain's voter groups.

"I think they should just be banned. They shouldn't be allowed in school at all."
Nick, Rother Valley

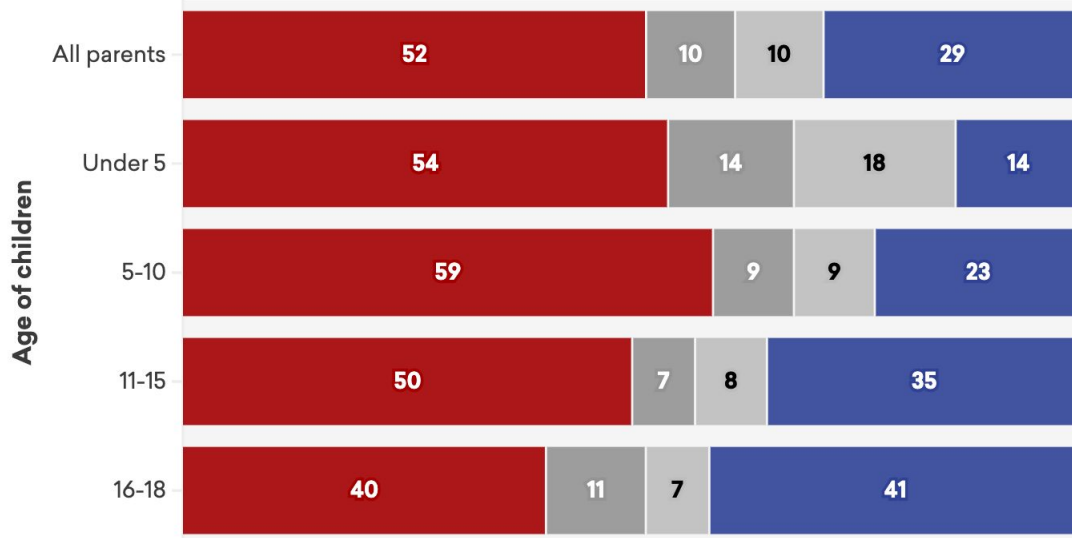# Parents strongly back tighter restrictions on smartphones in schools

52 per cent of parents would like their child's school to have tighter restrictions on smartphone use - only 10 per cent would like them to have less tight restrictions.

Parents are most likely to say that their children's schools smartphone policy works well if their child's school outright bans phones, and where schools have no restrictions on smartphone use parents are most likely to say this policy works poorly.

Most parents would like their children's school to have tighter smartphone policies

Do you think it would be better if your child's school had...

- 🔴 Tighter restrictions on smartphone use ⚫ Less tight restrictions on smartphone use
- ⚪ Don't know 🔵 It would make no difference

Age of children	Tighter	Less tight	Don't know	No difference
All parents	52	10	10	29
Under 5	54	14	18	14
5-10	59	9	9	23
11-15	50	7	8	35
16-18	40	11	7	41