



[Department for  
Science, Innovation  
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Independent report

# Children's wellbeing online: What young people think about social media, safety and AI

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A young people's summary.

Prepared by Savanta on behalf of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) 2026

## Introduction + key findings

### What's this report about?

Social media is a huge part of life for most young people in the UK. Nearly every teenager has a smartphone - in our main survey, 97% of young people said they had a smartphone and 96% said they used social media. It's where you connect with friends, discover new things, follow creators, and find your communities.

But social media can also be hard to switch off from, and some of what's on there can be upsetting, stressful or even harmful. That's why the UK government asked researchers at Savanta, along with our partners at UK Youth, Volunteering Matters and the #iWill Movement to find out what young people, parents, and teachers actually think, and what changes, if any, should happen. Eight Youth Collaborators aged 16–21, drawn from across the UK, helped design and deliver this project

alongside the research team.

This report is a summary of what was found. It covers:

- what young people like about social media, and what they find difficult
- different views on a possible rule that would ban under-16s from using social media
- what young people say would actually help make things better online
- views on AI chatbots and how they should be used safely

This is a summary of the research. See the [full reports, including detailed findings from the surveys and the youth Hack events](#). The most important thing to know upfront: the young people who took part were not saying everything is fine as it is. They had lots of concerns. But many also had doubts about whether a complete ban on social media for under 16s would work, and they had some clear ideas about what they wanted instead.

## The key findings at a glance

- Social media is near-universal for young people: 97% of those aged 10–21 in the main survey had a smartphone, and 96% used social media.
- Young people have a mixed relationship with social media. Most say it helps them feel connected. Many also say it makes them anxious or worried about what others think.
- In the main survey, 29% of young people supported a full ban on social media for under-16s, and 48% said under-16s should be allowed on some platforms but not others. Parents, teachers and youth practitioners generally wanted a stronger approach, with most supporting a minimum age of 16 for access to social media.
- At the Hack events, most young people said they didn't support an outright ban, but nearly all agreed that something needs to change.
- Across all groups, there is strong support for more targeted changes: limiting risky features, restricting addictive design, and creating safer versions of apps for younger users.
- AI chatbots came up a lot as an area of concern, especially at the youth Hack events. Young people have strong views about misinformation, deepfakes and the need for AI labelling.

## How did we listen?

This research brought together views from a wide range of people across the UK. Here's how it worked:

### **1. Surveys with young people and parents**

Over 9,000 young people aged 10-21 completed an online survey. More than 5,000 parents also took part. Both groups were recruited to be representative of people across the UK, covering different regions, backgrounds and ages. We are calling this the 'main survey' throughout this report.

### **2. A public consultation**

A second set of surveys was available on a government website for anyone who wanted to share their views. More than 39,000 parents responded, alongside more than 5,000 young people. Because these respondents chose to take part themselves, they tended to have stronger opinions. Their views are included in this report, but noted separately from the main survey findings, and are referred to as the public consultation.

### **3. A survey of teachers and youth practitioners**

Over 2,200 teachers and youth practitioners also took part in their own survey. Their professional experience of working with children and young people gives a useful additional perspective.

### **4. Youth Hack events**

Seven in-person events were held with young people across the UK: in Belfast, Brighton, Caerphilly, Edinburgh, Gloucester, Ipswich and Newcastle. More than 200 young people aged 10–18 took part. These were not ordinary meetings; they were co-designed and co-delivered by young people. They were participatory events where young people discussed, debated and created their own proposals for how to make things safer online. Adults helped out but the ideas came from young people themselves.

Quotes in this report from the Hack events come directly from what young people said or wrote on the day.

### **5. Youth Collaborators**

Eight young people aged 16–21, from across the UK, worked as Youth Collaborators throughout the research. They were not just participants. They helped design the Hack events and, along with more than 20 other young #iWill ambassadors (26 young people in total), co-facilitated sessions, contributed to the analysis of both the survey findings and the qualitative outputs, and shaped the writing and campaign material of this report. Their involvement means that young people's perspectives are woven into how this research was put together, not just what it found. You can find out more about the Youth Collaborators at [\[LINK TO #iWill PAGE\]](#).

#### **Who took part in the Hack events?**

- Belfast — 56 young people aged 13-15

- Brighton — 18 young people aged 10–15
- Caerphilly — 40 young people aged 13–15
- Edinburgh — 46 young people aged 13–16
- Gloucester — 15 young people aged 10–18
- Ipswich — 60 young people aged 16–18
- Newcastle — 15 young people aged 10–16

## Chapter 1: Being online — what's life really like?

### How much time do young people spend online?

Almost all teenagers have a smartphone, and most are on social media every single day. The main survey found that young people spend an average of just over 4 hours a day on social media which is more than parents tend to think young people spend on social media. Parents thought children spent around 2 and a half hours a day online, but young people themselves reported spending longer than this.

Evenings and weekends are the most popular times to be online. But a significant number of young people also go on social media before school, and some during school hours.

# 97%

of young people surveyed had access to a smartphone

Most parents set some rules around social media use at home, but nearly all young people still use it regularly. This gap between what adults expect and what actually happens is an important part of the picture.

### Why does social media matter to young people?

At every Hack event, young people were clear that social media is not just entertainment, it's a part of how they live their lives. When researchers asked what they would do without it, their answers showed what they really value.

### **What young people said they like most about social media**

- Staying connected with friends — messaging, group chats, knowing what people are up to
- Finding news and information about the world
- Being part of communities around shared interests, like music, gaming or fandoms — especially for young people who couldn't find those communities nearby
- Studying — following study accounts, watching revision livestreams, using AI tools for learning
- Entertainment and creativity

For some young people, especially those living in rural areas or who belong to a cultural, faith or interest group that's hard to find people for locally, social media is described as the main way they can connect with people who shared their interests or experiences. Going out costs money that not everyone has. Social media, for many, is free social infrastructure.

### **The honest truth: many young people feel stuck**

Even though young people described real benefits, the mood in the Hack events was not enthusiastic. Many young people described feeling like they didn't really choose to be on social media, they were just born into it. The environment grew up around them. The mood at the events was often cynical as well as cautious.

Many said they were on social media more than they wanted to be. Several had tried using app timers or other tools to cut back but found they didn't really work. The design of the apps made it easy to override any limit.

“Why do adults use it if they don't want us to?” — Young person, Brighton Hack

Young people also noted that adults, including parents and teachers, use social media and AI tools a lot too. Some felt it was a bit unfair when restrictions were aimed only at children.

## **Chapter 2: The good, the bad and the complicated**

## What young people like about social media

In the main survey, 82% of young people surveyed said social media helped them feel connected to other people. 71% said it made them feel included. These are real positives that young people value and would not want to lose.

## What worries young people

But the picture is not all positive. In the main survey, 40% of young people said social media sometimes made them worry about what others think of them, and 39% said it made them feel anxious. These feelings were more common among girls and among disabled young people.

At the Hack events, young people went into much more detail about what they found difficult.

### Algorithms and endless scrolling

This was the single biggest topic across every Hack event. Young people described feeling like they had no control over what they saw. The feed just kept going, and the apps were designed to keep them watching.

Younger children said they felt like they didn't have much control over what the algorithm showed them, and some described being unable to stop seeing things they didn't want to see, even after indicating they weren't interested. Older teenagers said they had learned to manage their feed better but they still found the design problematic.

"Remove the like feature — then the need for validation will be eradicated and less people will post on social media apps." — Young person, Ipswich Hack

"I want to know who decides what we see and why." — Young person, Ipswich Hack

### Comment sections

Young people described comment sections as chaotic and poorly moderated. Some said the content was shocking. Many pointed out an inconsistency: an image could be removed as a post but then reposted as a comment, slipping through moderation. This felt, to them, like a loophole no one had bothered to fix.

"Social media companies finally cracked down on inappropriate content due to backlash from members of the community." — Written as an aspirational headline by young people at the Gloucester Hack

### Likes, follower counts and comparing yourself to others

Likes and follower counts were described as tools for competition rather than genuine connection. Younger children cared more about likes and follower counts themselves than older teens did. Several young people mentioned appreciating

the option on some platforms to hide how many likes a post gets because it removed the pressure to compete.

### **Influencers and unrealistic images**

Influencers came up at events across the country. Some were described as positive role models. But many young people also described influencer culture as creating pressure to look or live a certain way that most people can't achieve.

"It makes me feel bad about myself as I can't afford some of the things they post and I lose my confidence." — Young person, Belfast Hack

### **Group chats, disappearing messages and read receipts**

These features caused particular concern among younger age groups. Group chats were described as a common setting for bullying. Disappearing messages made it harder to report bullying because the evidence was gone. Read receipts created anxiety — did they see it? Are they ignoring me?

### **Contact from strangers**

Across several Hack events, young people raised concerns about being contacted by unknown adults. At one event, a facilitator asked everyone in the room to stand up if they'd ever been contacted online by someone they didn't know. Everyone stood up.

## **Chapter 3: Should under-16s be banned from social media?**

### **What different people think**

One of the biggest questions in this research was whether young people should be banned from using social media if they are under 16. The answers were different depending on who you asked.

### **Parents**

Parents in the main survey are strongly in favour. 76% agree that social media should have a minimum age of 16. Mothers tend to feel more strongly than fathers about this.

Parents who responded through the public consultation are even more emphatic. Over 9 in 10 support a ban. But it's worth remembering that these parents chose to get involved, which means they were more likely to have strong views.

It is also worth noting that when parents in the main survey were asked to weigh a ban against other approaches like restrictions on the most risky functions, the picture became more nuanced. Many ranked more targeted options ahead of a full ban. This is explored in more detail later in the report.

## Teachers and youth practitioners

Teachers and youth practitioners are also very supportive of a minimum age of 16. In fact, their level of support is the highest of any professionally surveyed group. But when asked to choose between a full ban and other approaches, they tend to prefer more targeted restrictions, such as limiting the most dangerous features.

## Young people

Young people have a very different view. In the main survey, 29% of young people support a full ban for under-16s. The most popular position is selective access: 48% say under-16s should be allowed on some platforms but not others. Only a small number think there should be no restrictions at all.

# 29%

of young people in the main survey supported a full ban for under-16s

At the Hack events, there was no group that strongly supported an outright ban. But that did not mean young people thought everything was fine.

## Why young people were sceptical about a ban

Young people raised 2 main types of objection:

It wouldn't work. Young people were clear that most of them would still find a way onto social media even if a ban existed. They described how it's easy to lie about your age, how parents sometimes log in on behalf of their children, and how photo-ID checks are simple to bypass. A ban that most people could get around in 5 minutes, they argued, would only punish those who followed the rules.

It would be unfair. Many young people said a ban would remove a digital space they didn't choose to grow up in, but which had become a central part of their

social lives. For those who didn't have alternative ways to stay connected, this felt like removing something without offering anything in its place.

Young people were also sceptical about whether adults would follow through on making real changes. They didn't trust social media companies to act without being forced, and many weren't confident that the government would enforce any rules effectively either.

"Young people were born and almost forced into using social media. It is unfair to completely ban it and take away a 'safe space' for young people." — Young person, Brighton Hack

## **What parents and young people expected from a ban**

Parents and young people also disagreed about what a ban would actually achieve. Parents mostly focus on the protective benefits: fewer children would see harmful content, children would be safer. Young people focus on the practical problems: most children would still get access, many would feel excluded, and those who complied with the rules would be at a social disadvantage compared to those who didn't.

Young people made a related point strongly: if a rule applies to everyone at platform level at the same time, the social impact of following it disappears. If it's just your family following the rule while others don't, it feels deeply unfair.

## **Chapter 4: What changes do young people actually want?**

### **More targeted changes got the most support**

Even though young people are sceptical about a blanket ban, they strongly support more targeted changes instead. In the main survey, 76% of young people agreed that restricting certain features would make social media safer for children. This is one of the areas where young people, parents and teachers and youth practitioners agree most.

75% of parents and 82% of teachers and youth practitioners felt the same way. When parents were asked to rank different approaches, they too most often put restricting the most dangerous features at the top of the list, ahead of a full ban.

## Safer features

Young people have a clear list of features they want changed. They weren't calling for social media to be shut down. They wanted it to be designed better.

### What young people want kept

- Messaging friends and group chats
- Access to news and information
- Communities around shared interests
- Educational and revision content

### What young people want fixed or removed

- Infinite scrolling and autoplay videos — these are specifically designed to keep you hooked
- The public 'like' count — seen as a tool for comparison, not connection
- Poorly moderated comment sections — including better and more consistent content rules
- Age-inappropriate advertising
- AI-generated accounts and bots spreading misinformation
- Algorithms that feel out of your control — young people wanted more transparency and user control

## Age-appropriate versions of apps

The most popular alternative to a ban, discussed independently at multiple Hack events, was the idea of age-segmented versions of existing platforms. Younger users would get an environment that was content-safe and restricted in specific features, while still being able to access the social and informational benefits of social media.

Young people were specific about what this would mean: no direct messaging for younger users, no video sending, stricter content rules, and a way to protect young people when they first join platforms, especially those aged 10-13 who are just starting out.

“Mental Health Improves Because of Different Age Groups In Apps” — Written as an aspirational headline by young people at the Caerphilly Hack

## **Time limits built into platforms**

Both young people and parents strongly support time-based restrictions such as daily limits and overnight access restrictions. 84% of young people in the main survey support at least one of these. Teachers and youth practitioners were even more supportive.

At the Hack events, young people were clear: they wanted these limits built into the platform itself, not just recommended for families. Individual self-control doesn't work well enough when the apps are designed to fight back.

“AI Clears Out Bullying on Social Media for Under 16s” — Written as an aspirational headline by young people at the Caerphilly Hack

## **Who should be responsible?**

Young people across the Hack events were consistent about one thing: no single person or organisation could fix this alone. They saw a clear division of responsibility:

- Tech companies should be responsible for content moderation, algorithm design and age verification.
- The government should set the rules and standards those companies must meet.
- Voluntary action by platforms is not enough. Binding rules with real consequences are needed.

Young people understood the commercial incentives at play. They knew that the features they found most harmful: endless scrolling, notification nudges, algorithmic recommendations, were also the features that made platforms money. That's why they didn't believe companies would act without being forced.

## **Chapter 5: AI — helpful, worrying, and everywhere**

## AI came up everywhere

AI chatbots and AI-generated content were a major theme at the Hack events, not because researchers pushed the topic, but because young people kept raising it themselves. At some Hack events, AI came up more than social media.

Young people have nuanced views. Many use AI tools regularly, including for homework, revision and answering questions they feel embarrassed to ask in class. But they also have serious concerns.

## What people see as useful about AI

Both parents and young people agree that AI's main benefits are practical and educational: getting quick answers, help with learning, creative support. Young people value AI tools that help them study or explore ideas.

## What worries people about AI

The biggest concern raised by young people at the Hack events was misinformation and deepfakes - content that looks completely real but has been generated or manipulated by AI. Young people described a world in which it was increasingly hard to know what was real and what wasn't.

Some groups made a sharp distinction between misinformation as false content that spreads without intent to deceive, and deliberate disinformation, which they saw as a more serious structural problem requiring government intervention.

The second major concern, shared by parents and young people, is AI chatbots that act like a romantic partner or close friend. Both groups rank this as one of the biggest risks, and teachers say they regularly observe children engaging with AI in ways that suggest they see it as real or human-like.

### The biggest AI concerns

- Misinformation and deepfakes
- AI chatbots acting like romantic partners or friends
- Over-reliance on AI for schoolwork, undermining independent thinking
- AI being used to spread extremist content or radicalise young people
- The environmental impact of AI, particularly its water use for cooling data centres (raised especially in Caerphilly and Newcastle)

## Strong support for AI restrictions

Across all groups, support for restrictions on AI was very high. Around 83–85% of both parents and young people aged 16–21 supported minimum age requirements for AI chatbots, with 85% of parents and 83% of young people aged 16–21 agreeing. Teachers and youth practitioners were similarly supportive, with 85% backing minimum age requirements and 86% backing feature restrictions on AI chatbots. An even higher proportion supported restrictions on specific features.

## What young people called for most strongly

The single most consistent practical demand across the Hack events was mandatory labelling of AI-generated content. Young people wanted a clear, visible marker on any image, video or text that had been created or edited by AI and suggested something like a watermark that you couldn't miss.

“AI watermark mandatory by law — I can now use social media confidently, knowing AI content is highlighted to me.” — Written as an aspirational headline by young people at the Newcastle Hack

Young people also called for AI literacy to be part of the school curriculum: teaching them how algorithms work, how to spot AI-generated content, and how to identify misinformation.

“Teaching how to use AI tools responsibly.” — Young person, Newcastle Hack

## AI for good

Young people are not purely negative about AI. Many describe genuinely positive uses: using AI to flag and remove harmful comments, supporting disabled users, helping with translation, and making education more accessible. One group in Newcastle proposed a government-backed AI health tool that only drew on NHS-approved sources, recognising that young people were already using AI to look up health concerns, and that improving those tools might be more realistic than trying to stop it happening.

“Helpful for people with disabilities — keeping translation abilities and accessibility features for disabled and foreign-language users.” — Young people, Caerphilly Hack

# Chapter 6: Proving who you are online

## Age checks and verification

One of the questions the research explored was whether people should have to verify their age before accessing certain platforms and whether that would help keep younger users safer.

## Parents and teachers were broadly supportive

81% of parents agree that adults should complete age checks more often if it means children are safer online. Teachers and youth practitioners agree at similar levels: 80% support more frequent age checks. There was also support from parents and professionals for age checks that apply to VPNs, which are tools that can be used to get around age restrictions. Around a quarter of parents say they either know or suspect their child has used a VPN.

## Young people were more mixed

In the main survey, 66% of young people aged 16–21 say age checks would help keep them safer. Young people who took part in the separate public consultation were more sceptical, focusing instead on the privacy risks, the risk of being excluded, and their doubts about whether it would actually work.

## The big concern: would it actually work?

At the Hack events, young people were open to stricter age verification in principle. Some said they would be willing to upload their passport or birth certificate to prove their age. But this openness always came with a catch: existing systems were so easy to get around that there wasn't much confidence that anything would really change.

"I would advise against the use of ID through the government as the databases in which this information is stored can be easily hacked." — Young person, Ipswich Hack

Some young people also raised data privacy as a concern. They didn't fully trust that their personal information would be kept safe. The Caerphilly group proposed

facial recognition combined with VPN-resistant technology as a more robust approach.

The overall message from young people on this was clear: we support better age verification, but only if it genuinely works and is properly enforced. Half-measures feel worse than nothing, because they give a false sense of security.

## **What does all of this mean?**

### **Young people want change — just not always the same change adults want**

The clearest thing to come out of this research is that young people are not asking to be left alone online. They described real problems, real harms, and real feelings of being unable to switch off. But they also described real benefits such as connection, community, information, fun that they don't want to lose.

The divide between parents, teachers and youth practitioners, and young people on a blanket ban is real. Parents, and teachers and youth practitioners, want strong, clear action. Young people are more sceptical about whether it would work and whether it's fair. But this doesn't mean young people are in the way of change. It means they want a different kind of change: targeted, practical and enforceable.

### **What young people want to see**

- Apps designed with younger users in mind — restricted features, age-appropriate content, safer environments for those just starting out
- Platform-level time limits and enforced breaks that apply to everyone, not just those with the willpower to set their own limits
- Proper moderation of comment sections and harmful content
- Algorithms that are transparent and give users real control over what they see
- Mandatory labelling of AI-generated content
- Robust age verification that actually works and is properly enforced
- Media literacy built into school education — teaching young people how platforms work, how to spot misinformation and what their data rights are
- Tech companies held to account by binding rules, not voluntary promises

# This research was made by young people, not just about them

The 7 Hack events were not focus groups where adults asked questions and young people answered them. They were spaces where young people led the discussion, built the proposals, and shaped what came out. Eight Youth Collaborators, aged 16-21, were involved throughout: not just at the events, but in the design of the research, the analysis of the findings, and the writing of this report.

That matters because it means the findings in this report are not just a snapshot of what young people think. They are a record of what young people worked out together, debated, and chose to put forward.

The research showed clearly that young people are not asking to be left alone online, and they are not asking to be protected from it in ways that remove the things they value. They are asking to be taken seriously: by platforms, by government, and by the adults in their lives.

“Children do have voices and they do know what they want.” — Young person, Ipswich Hack

The research is over. The conversation shouldn't be.

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