In the digital home, how do parents support their children and who supports them?

Parenting for a Digital Future: Survey Report 1

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Parenting for a Digital Future

Executive summary

Digital media have become deeply integrated into family life, extending old ways of connecting and introducing new ones. Contrary to what panicky headlines might have us believe, rather than displacing established ways of interacting, playing and communicating – digital media sit alongside them. Today, British families eat, shop and read together – *and* they watch TV, stream content, play video games, and use educational technology. They stop by to see friends and family *and* they text, use messaging apps and make video calls.

Yet parents have woefully few sources of support and advice when they have digital questions and dilemmas. In this report, released for Safer Internet Day 2018, we present key findings from a nationally representative survey of UK parents of children aged 0-17.

- **Digital media bring families together** – through television and movies and playing video games (favoured by fathers). Families turn to digital media to keep in touch, from calls, emails and texts to newer media like messaging apps and video chat. The latter are gaining in popularity, particularly amongst parents of younger children, whereas parents of teens are more likely to use social media to keep in touch with their children. While some families are engaging in creative activities together, this is the most uneven, with only high-income families likely to have created music, photos or videos together.
- '**Screen time,' more than particular digital activities, leads to conflict** – screen time does not cause the most conflict in families (sleep and behaviour have that distinction) but it is striking that parents report significantly more conflict about screen *time* than about *how* children use the technologies themselves.
- **Parents are working hard to enable children's online opportunities, and address risks** – with relatively little difference between mothers versus fathers or sons versus daughters, parents engage in a range of enabling (active talking) and restrictive (setting rules, using filters) strategies. However, the child's age makes a big difference. Parents of very young children mostly set screen time rules or use parental controls. Parents of 5-12 year olds and high-income parents are the most active overall, not only setting rules but also encouraging children to explore online.
- **Parents lack support for dealing with digital dilemmas** – for digital and non-digital dilemmas online searches are the first port of call for parenting questions. But other sources of support in parents' lives – partners, friends and relatives, health professionals or a child's school – are seen as better resources for *non*-digital questions more than digital ones. Notably, few parents feel they can turn to their *own* parents for digital advice, suggesting a generation gap that leaves parents unsupported when it comes to these essential and sometimes divisive issues.

The implications of these findings include that, rather than worrying about the catch-all notion of 'screen time' it might be better to focus on whether, when and why *particular* digital activities help or harm individual children. Further, policy makers should consider how to reach parents with guidance on digital matters in ways that are effective, inclusive, and tailored to the specific ages and needs of their children.

About our research

Parenting for a Digital Future investigates how parents and carers imagine and prepare for their own and their children's personal and professional futures in a digital age. We start from three crucial assumptions:

- **Parents are not merely a conduit** to understanding the media practices of children. Rather, our project focuses on the family as a whole, exploring parents' views, concerns, practices and experiences in their own right and in relation to their children.
- Contesting the frame of 'screen time' which sets digital media apart from 'real life,' **we explore how parents and children are engaging with different forms of media to learn, create, communicate and play** – as a now essential part of family life – and how they interpret these activities according to their own values, skills and needs.
- Transcending outdated ideas of 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants,' **we recognise that parents are themselves gaining digital skills and interests**, albeit unevenly, so we ask what they know and what difference it makes.

Here, we report on the findings from our nationally representative survey of UK parents, which surveyed 2032 parents of children aged 0-17 in late 2017. Participants were recruited via an online panel, supplemented with a sample of low or non-internet users interviewed in-person. Questions for the survey were based on findings from our previous in-depth qualitative interviews and fieldwork with parents, carers, educators, children and young people from 73 families and in learning sites across London, and our review of the relevant literature (reported separately, see www.parenting.digital for updates).

This multi-method research aims to understand parents' values, skills and attitudes towards digital media use in their own lives and how these influence their expectations for and management of digital media in the lives of their children. We specifically consider:

- How do parents imagine the role of digital media in 'the future' and does this affect their actions in the present? What opportunities and challenges do parents think technology may bring?
- In what ways are digital media integrated into family life and parenting and do parents find this integration beneficial?
- How do parents balance between the risks and opportunities they see being opened up by digital media? How do these compare with their other worries for the child(ren)?
- What strategies do parents develop to mitigate the risks and realise the opportunities opened up by digital media, and who or where do they go for advice?

This first report, released for Safer Internet Day 2018, focuses on how parents use digital media within the family. Future reports will focus on privacy and sharenting, digital parenting and generational change, parents' and children's digital skills, and more.

For our methodology, including a definition of socio-economic status (SES) categories, data tables and the full survey questionnaire, see www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/preparing-for-a-digital-future.

Key findings

Digital media are deeply integrated into family life

Parents and carers share a wide range of activities with their children aged 0-17 years old:

- In the past week, eight in 10 parents ate meals and watched TV/films together with their child(ren).
- Six in 10 shared sporting activities, shopping, family visits and talked together about things of importance to them.
- Over half played and read together, and four in 10 shared creative activities (more with daughters) or learning online together (more with sons).
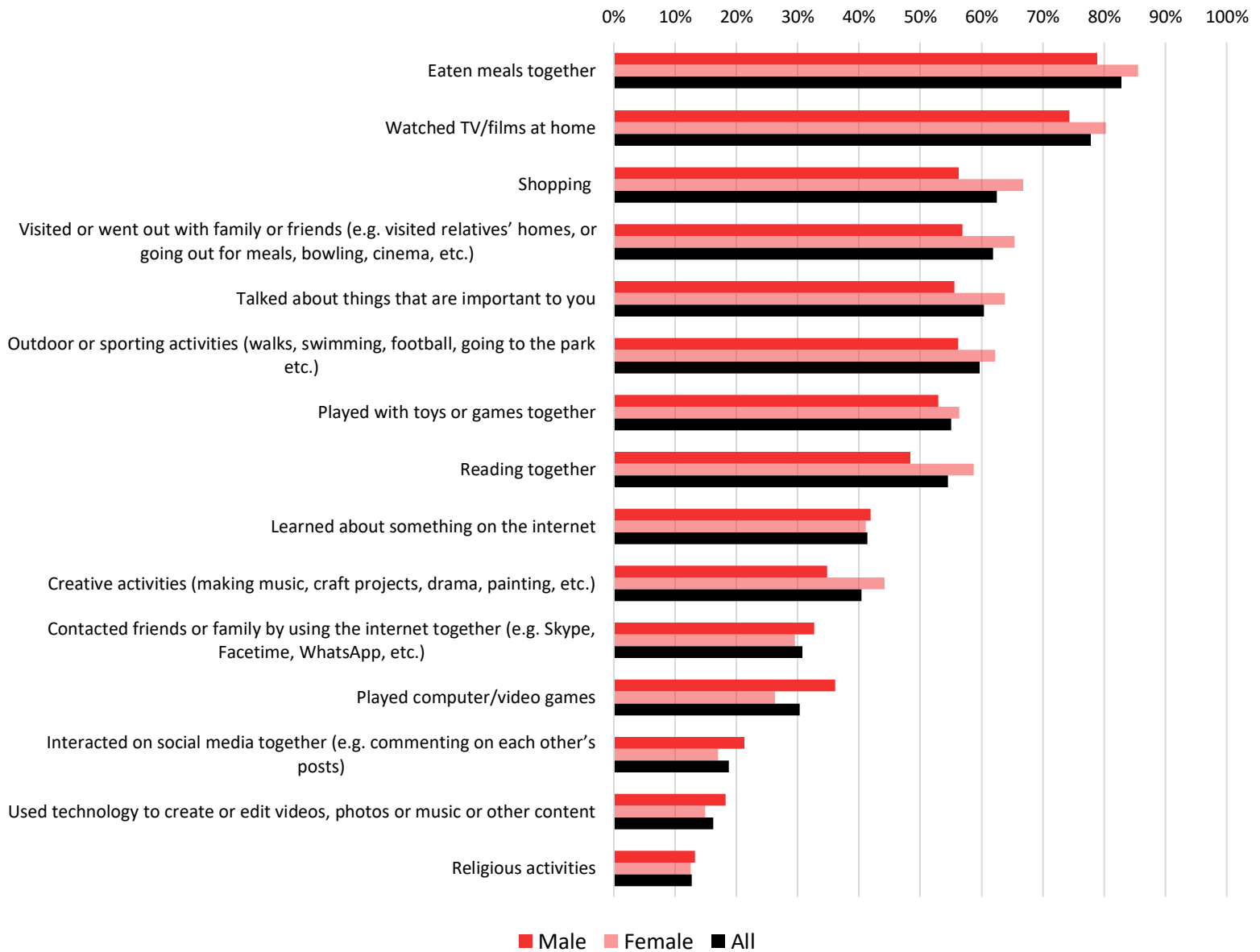
Parents' answers to our survey tell a rather different story from the panicky headlines – that media are destroying family life and separating family members from each other:

- Media- and internet-related activities are as common a way of sharing time within the family as are other activities, with television and films most often bringing parents and children together.
- While mothers report more activities with their children overall, fathers are particularly likely to say they play computer/video games with their children, suggesting that this can be a valued shared activity for them within the family.
- Digitally mediated communication of any form is more popular among younger than older parents, among high internet-using and better-off parents, and among those with the youngest children. Parents are most likely to use social media to stay in touch with their teenagers.
- Rarer are the families who share technologically creative or interactive activities – this is especially the case for the lowest socio-economic group.

See the graph on the next page.

Now thinking just of the past week, have you and your child done any of these activities together?

*Parents (%) choosing each answer option for Q11/12/13, by parent gender (n=2032)*

Legend: ■ Male ■ Female ■ All

Categories (top to bottom):
- Eaten meals together
- Watched TV/films at home
- Shopping
- Visited or went out with family or friends (e.g. visited relatives' homes, or going out for meals, bowling, cinema, etc.)
- Talked about things that are important to you
- Outdoor or sporting activities (walks, swimming, football, going to the park etc.)
- Played with toys or games together
- Reading together
- Learned about something on the internet
- Creative activities (making music, craft projects, drama, painting, etc.)
- Contacted friends or family by using the internet together (e.g. Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp, etc.)
- Played computer/video games
- Interacted on social media together (e.g. commenting on each other's posts)
- Used technology to create or edit videos, photos or music or other content
- Religious activities

Parents actively use the internet to support their parenting

- Five in six parents *who use the internet at least monthly,* use the internet to support their parenting activities, with half using it for educational purposes, four in ten using it to search for local activities and events or to download or stream content for their child, and three in ten using it for social arrangements, or for health information and advice related to their child.
- More mothers and younger parents are using the internet to find information about children's health than fathers. They are also more likely to use the internet to connect with other parents for support, as are middle SES parents.
- Almost half of the parents of 0-4 and 5-8 year olds go online to download or stream videos, apps or games for their child – as are the younger parents.
- Middle SES parents make most use of the internet to broker their child's opportunities to learn, engage in activities, join classes, etc.

In the past month have you used the internet to do any of these things for your child? *Parents who use the internet (%) choosing each answer option for Q8 (N=1959)*


Legend: ■ 0 to 4 ■ 5 to 8 ■ 9 to 12 ■ 13 to 17 ■ All
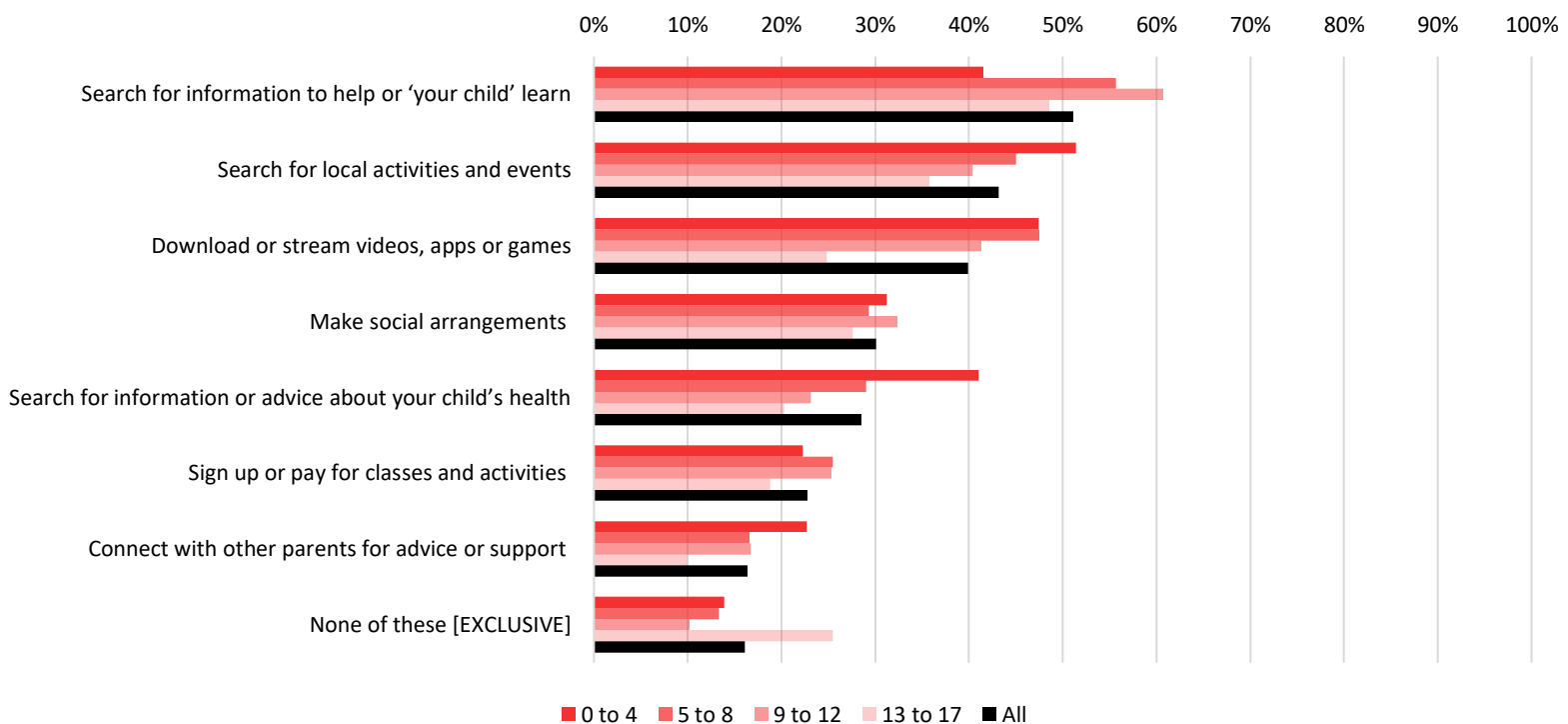
Digital media help families stay in touch

With family and friends increasingly dispersed, and parents often stuck at home or too busy to meet up with others, both old and new forms of communication are heavily used by parents.

- Phone calls (67% in the past week) and sending text messages (66%) are by far the most popular way for parents to contact family and friends. But face-to-face visits are not far behind, with over half (58%) in touch with family or friends this way in the past week.
- Four in ten use messaging apps, and around a quarter use email, video chat or social networking; very few send letters.
- Mothers are more likely than fathers to report messaging, while fathers prefer email over mothers. Younger parents report more video chat and use of messaging or social networking apps, while older parents prefer email; but they differ little in their use of phone calls or face-to-face visits.
- Middle-class parents report more communication of several kinds – writing letters, email, video chat. But these are less common forms of communication, and there are few differences for the more popular – phone, texting, face-to-face and social media.
- However, one in 20 of the poorest group said they used none of these in the past week.

In the past week, how have you been in touch with family or friends?
*Parents (%) choosing each answer option for Q14, by socioeconomic status*
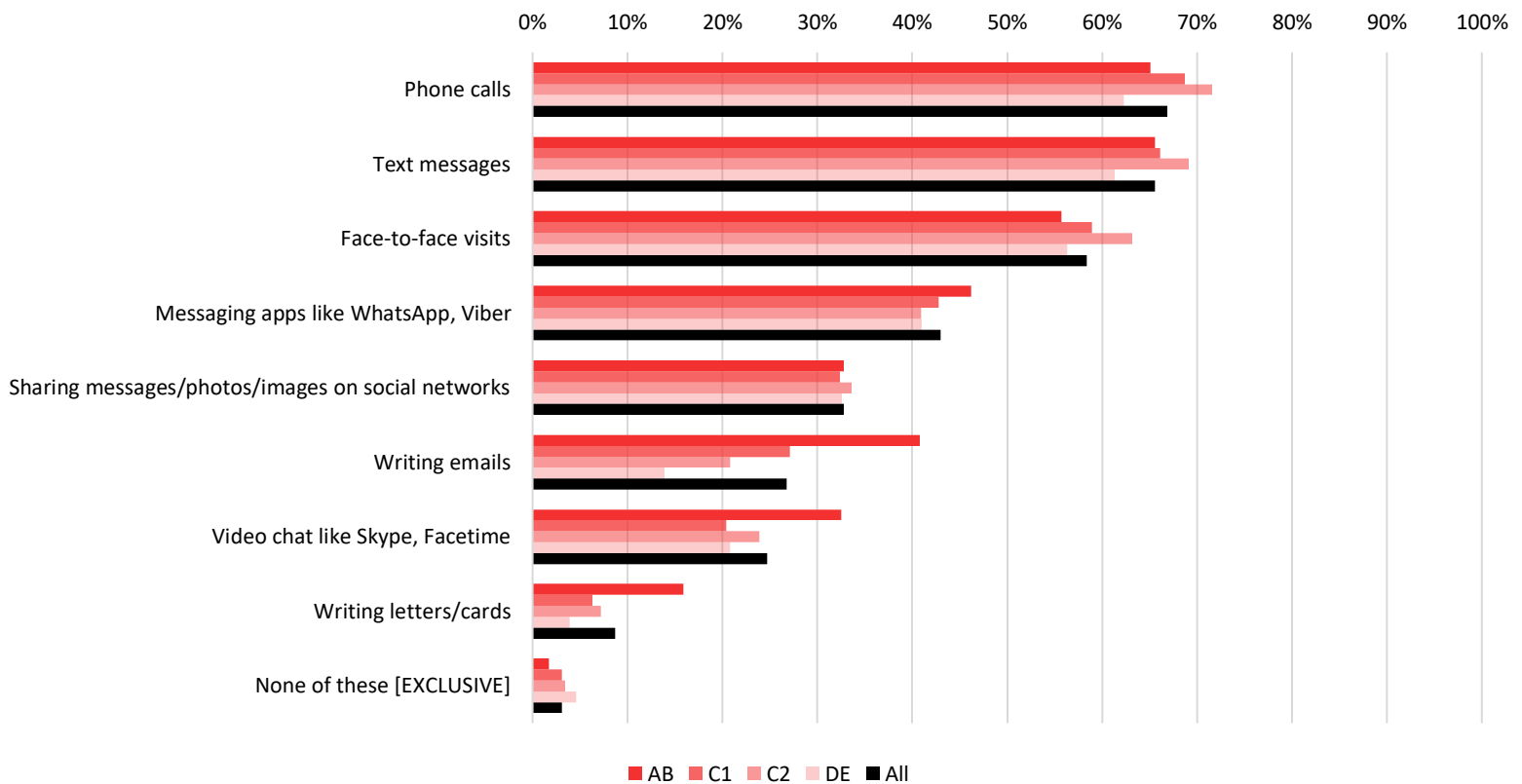
Digital media, especially 'screen time,' also lead to conflict

- Top sources of difficulty or conflict between parents and children are bedtime/sleep, 'their behaviour' and screen time, closely followed by eating, homework (especially in relation to sons) and chores (especially mothers). Less problematic are money, friends, clothing (more for daughters) or how they use technologies.
- Child age makes the biggest difference – toddlers occasion the least conflict, but when it occurs it relates to bedtime/sleep, eating and behaviour, with screen time following in fourth place. For 5-8 year olds, bedtime is top, followed by behaviour and, then, screen time, eating and homework. For 9-12 year olds, homework, screen time and behaviour are most problematic. For teens, chores/helping in the house has become an issue, followed by bedtime, screen time and homework.
- Screen time is less of an issue for parents from the lowest socio-economic status homes.
- It is notable that the amount of screen time is much more problematic than what children actually do with digital media. Screen time is also most problematic for parents of 5-12 year olds.

Do any of these lead to difficulties or conflict between you and your child?
Parents (%) choosing each answer option to Q38, by child's age (n=2032)
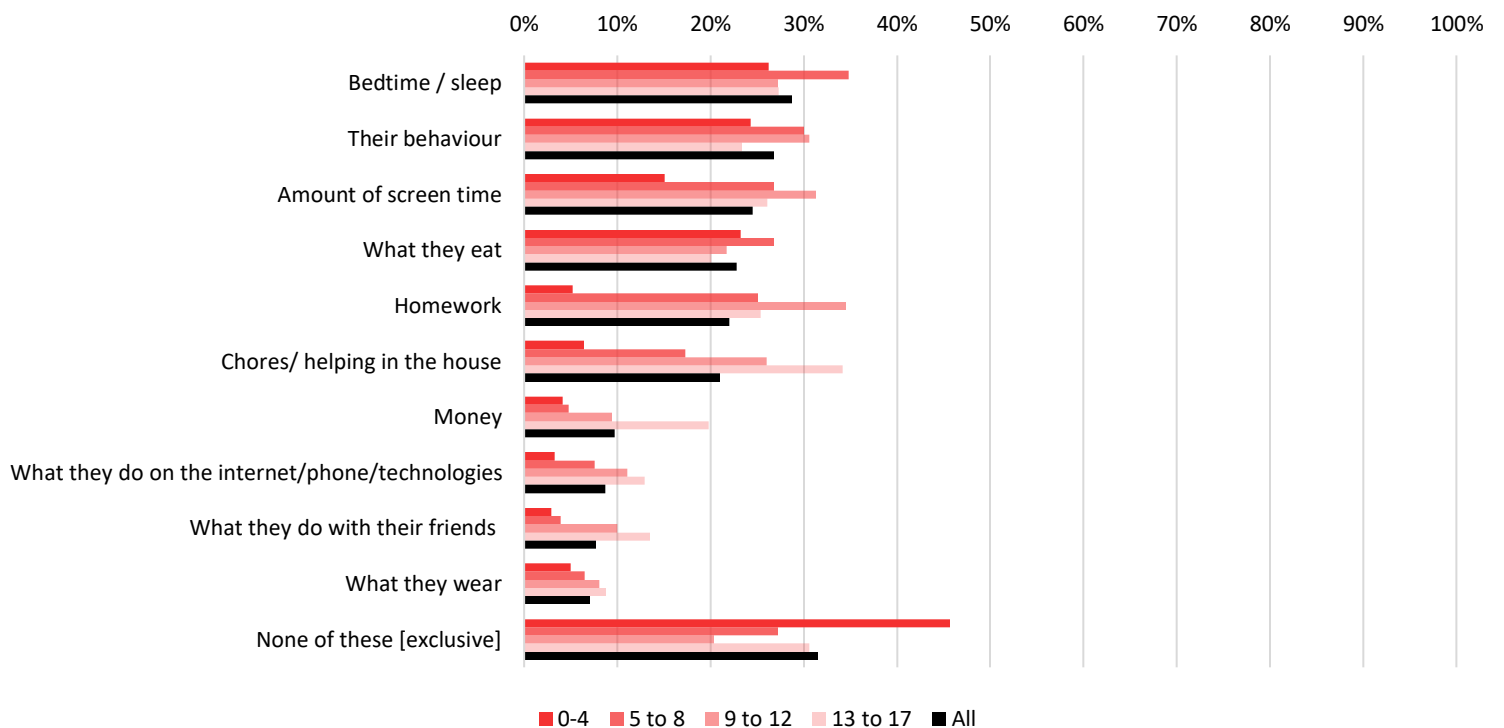
# Parents enable digital opportunities and address risks

Parents on average report 'sometimes' doing a range of enabling and restrictive forms of parental mediation. Their activities vary little for sons and daughters, but a lot by the child's age:

- For toddlers, preferred parental mediation involves rules about screen time, using parental controls or apps to manage their use, and sharing activities online together.
- For 5-12 year olds, parents do more overall, often using restrictive strategies such as screen time rules and parental controls and apps. They are also more likely to enable their child's digital media use – encouraging them to explore online, suggesting how to use the internet safely, talking to them about what they do online, sharing online activities with them, pointing them to good resources, and, last, resorting to treating device access as a reward or punishment depending on their child's behaviour.
- This broad approach changes again for teenagers, with parents replacing restrictive with conversational approaches, while sharing joint activities decreases somewhat.
- Mothers say they do a bit more than fathers in terms of rules and controls especially. Younger parents take a broader approach than older parents, perhaps because their children are younger. Parents of higher socioeconomic status do more of most activities.

Do you do any of these things in relation to your child's internet use?
Parents' average responses to Q33, by child's age
*(scale: 1=never, 2=hardly ever, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=very often)*
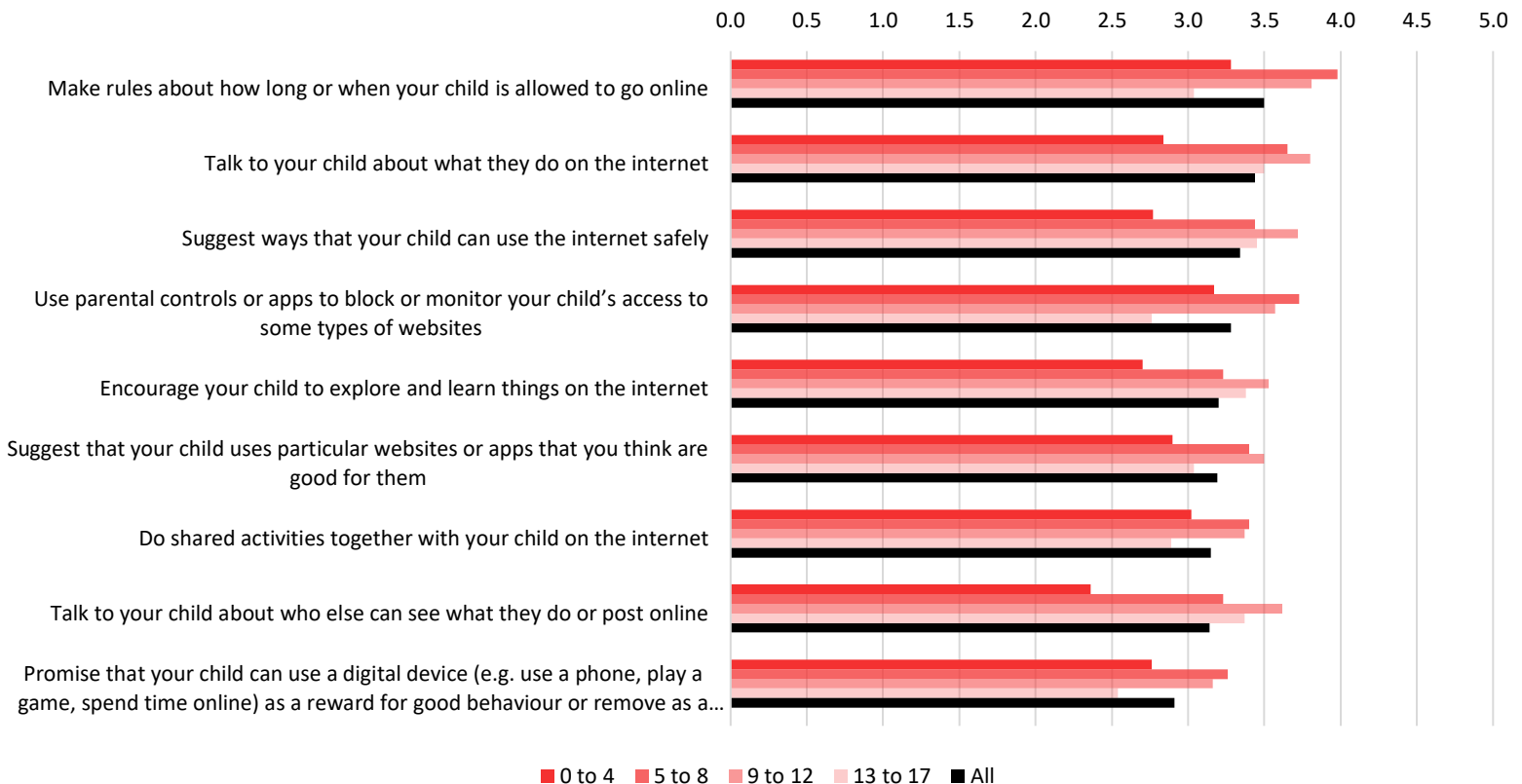
Digital media are becoming important to how parents enable their children's learning

Of the seven activities we asked about, to enable children's learning at home, parents reported an average of two. Parents of children in the middle years (5-12) do most, as do middle class parents. But a third of parents from the lowest socioeconomic group said they did none of them.

- Most common (half of parents) is using the internet to support their child's learning or schoolwork in some way or other. This is especially the case for parents who themselves use the internet frequently, and for middle-SES more than lower SES parents. It's much less common among parents of 0-4 year olds, though still a quarter say they do this. Almost as common (four in ten parents) is watching a video to support their child's learning.
- Interestingly, around four in ten parents say that they themselves use the internet for their own work or learning – this is strongly stratified by socio-economic status.
- There are few gender differences – for either parent or child. Parents do more with 5-12 year olds than with either toddlers or teens.
- Older parents use the internet to support their own work and their children's learning but younger parents use it more to download an educational app or game. Higher SES groups use the internet for more activities than lower status groups.

In the past year, have you...
*Parents (%) choosing each answer option for Q28, by child's age (N=2032)*

Legend: ■ 0 to 4 ■ 5 to 8 ■ 9 to 12 ■ 13 to 17 ■ All
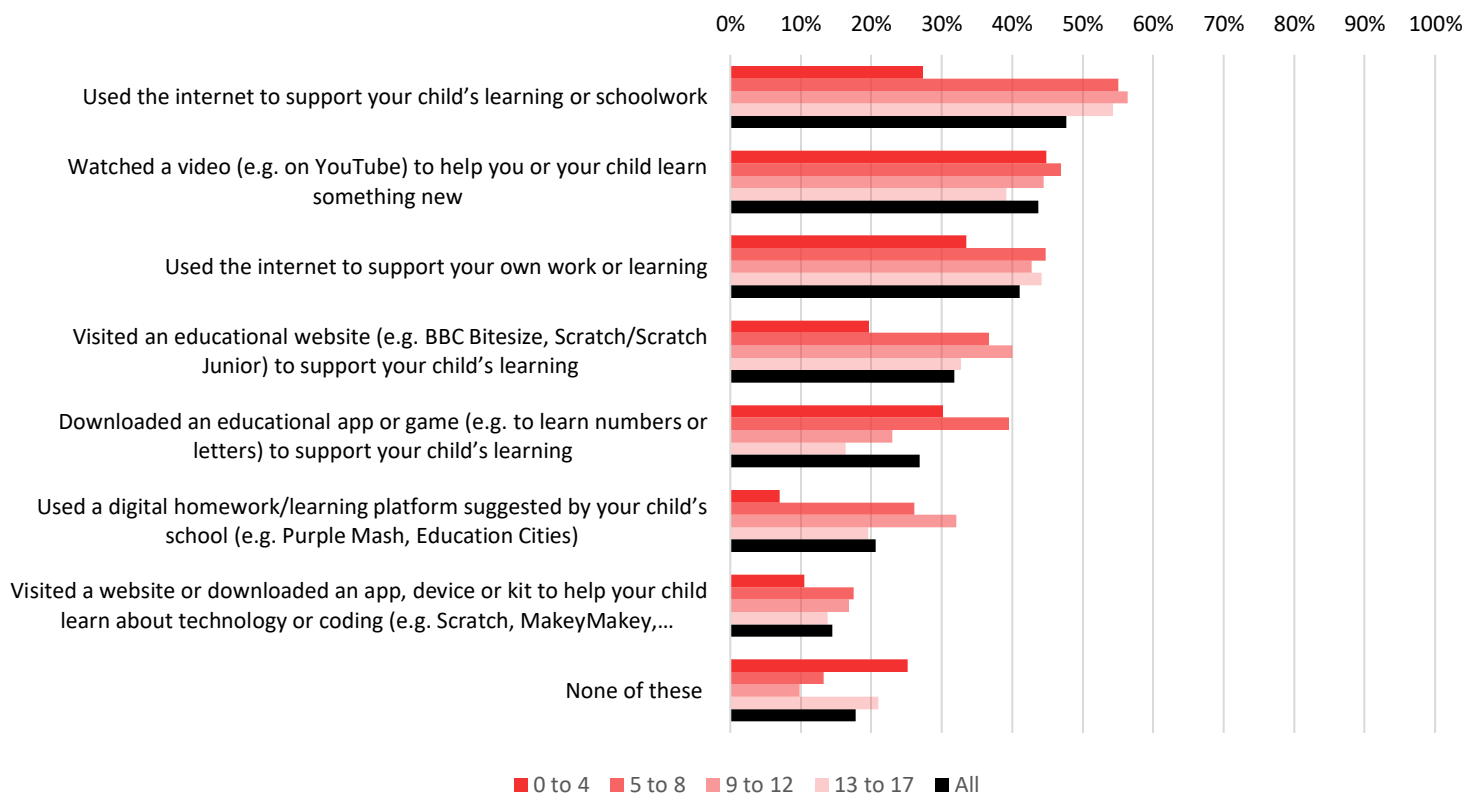
Parents seem uncertain which digital learning resources to choose

- How do parents know what kinds of digital support or services or apps to choose, to benefit their child's learning? We just asked this question of parents of 0-8 year olds, finding quite a range of sources being used by parents, though none is dominant.
- Most popular is either relying on a recommendation from the child's teacher, or friends/relatives, or just searching online.
- Few say they read the reviews (more fathers and young parents or parents of toddlers) or respond to other professional, expert or commercial advice, though young parents are reading parent blogs more than older parents.
- Parents of 5-8 year olds are finding their apps through their children's teachers or they say their child asked for the app they want.

If you have used or downloaded any of the above (Q28), how do you choose the apps/games etc. to support your child's learning?

Parents (%) responding to each answer option for Q29 (N=808)
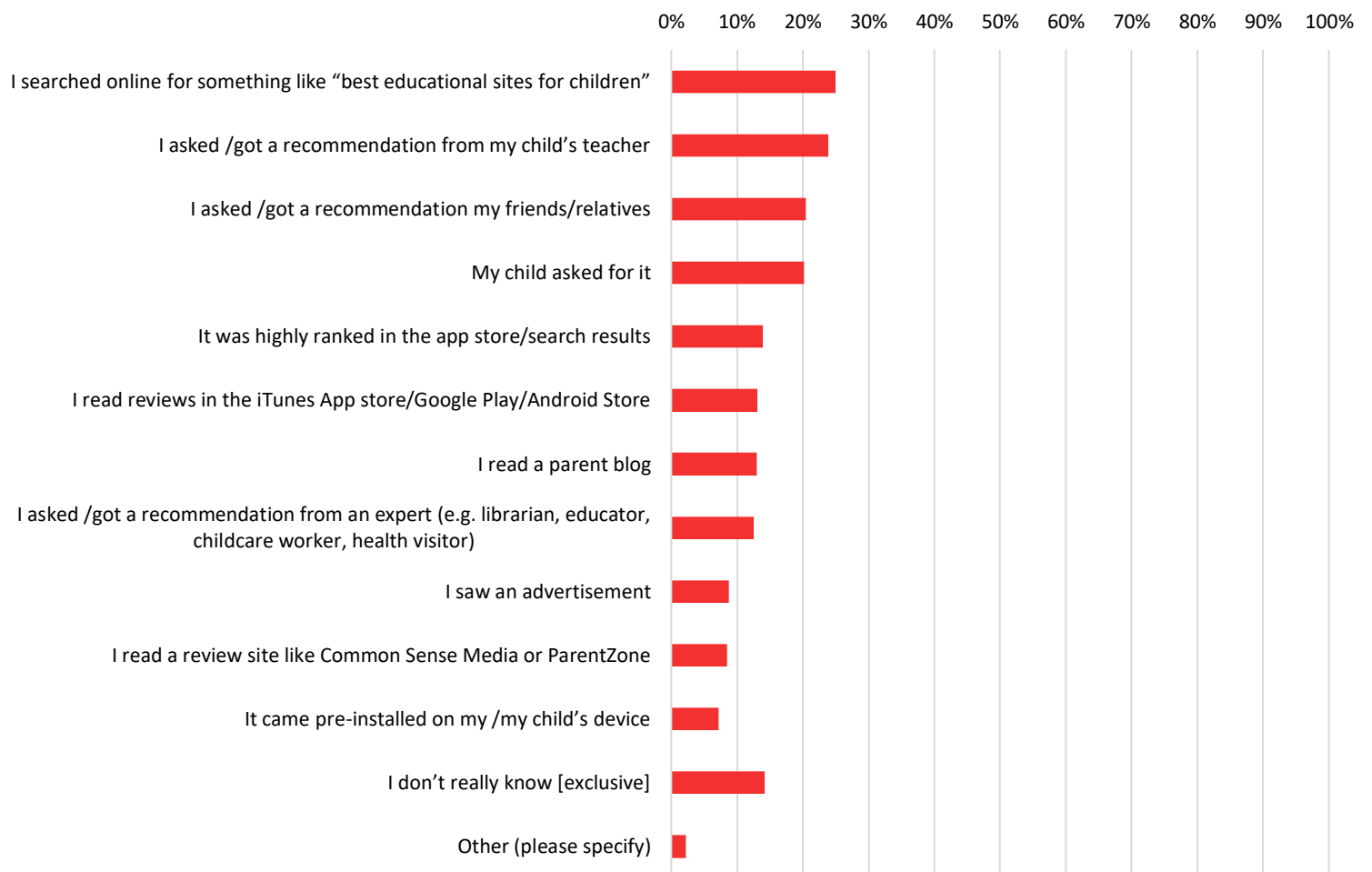
Parents lack support for digital dilemmas

Now that digital media appear firmly embedded in family life, where do parents turn for advice when they have a question or concern? To see if digital parenting problems are more or less supported than other parenting problems, we asked the same questions about each:

- Most striking is that the highest percentage of parents report dealing with their own problems by themselves. Around one third search online for the advice they need, or just figure it out for themselves. This implies a fair degree of self-sufficiency, as only 8% say they have nowhere to go (though 15% say this for digital problems). This raises questions of quality of the information they get online, since only 13% of parents report using official sites like the NHS for parenting advice.
- Parents' next most popular sources of advice are friends and relatives, and partners. But these are seen as more helpful for problems in general than for specifically digital ones.
- Other sources are little used – parenting websites, the child's school or educators (rarely turned to for guidance on digital matters), social networks, or official or media sources.
- Also striking is that while 28% of parents can turn to their own parent(s) for advice in general, only 9% do this for digital problems, suggesting a generation gap in support.

When you have a question or concern about your child or family, where do you go for advice?
Parents (%) choosing each answer option for Q22/23 (N=2032)
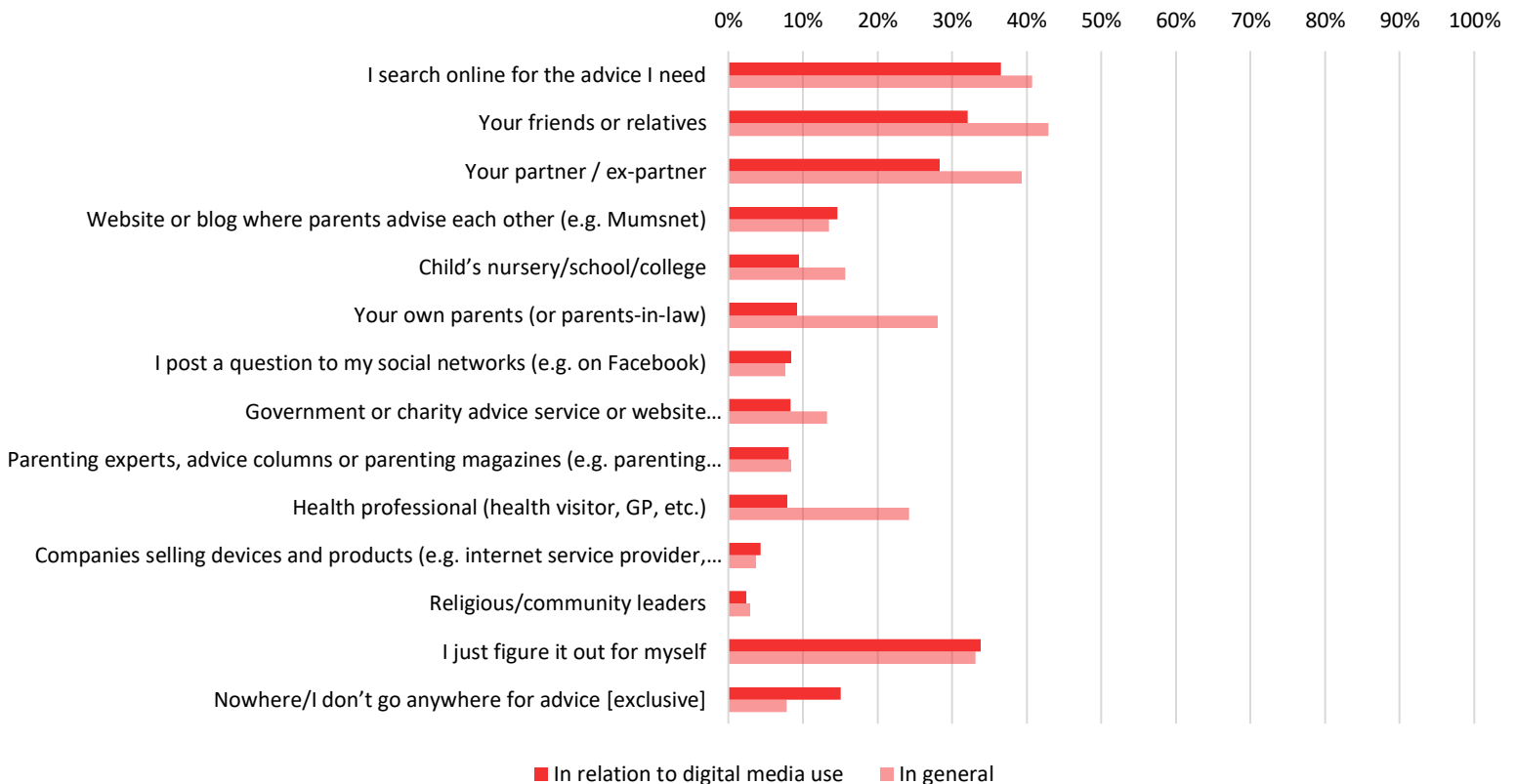
Parents are differently supported, however:

- Young parents are more likely to turn to their own parents or official advice services as well as to blogs, social networks, parenting experts and the internet.
- Mothers are more likely to turn to friends or relatives, their partner, their child's school and their social networks, compared with fathers.
- Wealthier parents are more likely to turn to online sources, while the poorest parents are most likely to have 'nowhere' to turn, as are parents of 0-4 year olds.

Parents are cautiously optimistic about digital media

- Parents are broadly, but not hugely positive about technology, judging that the benefits to their child are likely to outweigh the harms. This is particularly the case for benefits in terms of learning about technology, supporting school learning, pursuing hobbies and interests, being creative and expressive, and preparing for future work.
- They are a bit more doubtful, but still not negative overall, about possible benefits to their child in their developing relationships with family or friends, or learning social and emotional skills.
- Mothers are more likely to value learning benefits of technology; older parents are also a little more positive about learning skills than younger parents, while younger parents value more the potential for relationships and social/emotional learning. Parents of teenagers think that tech will help prepare them for work in the future.

Thinking about your child's use of technology, do you think that these help or hurt their chances of …?

Parents' average response to Q32 on a scale from 1 (help a lot) to 3 (makes no difference) to 5 (hurts a lot)

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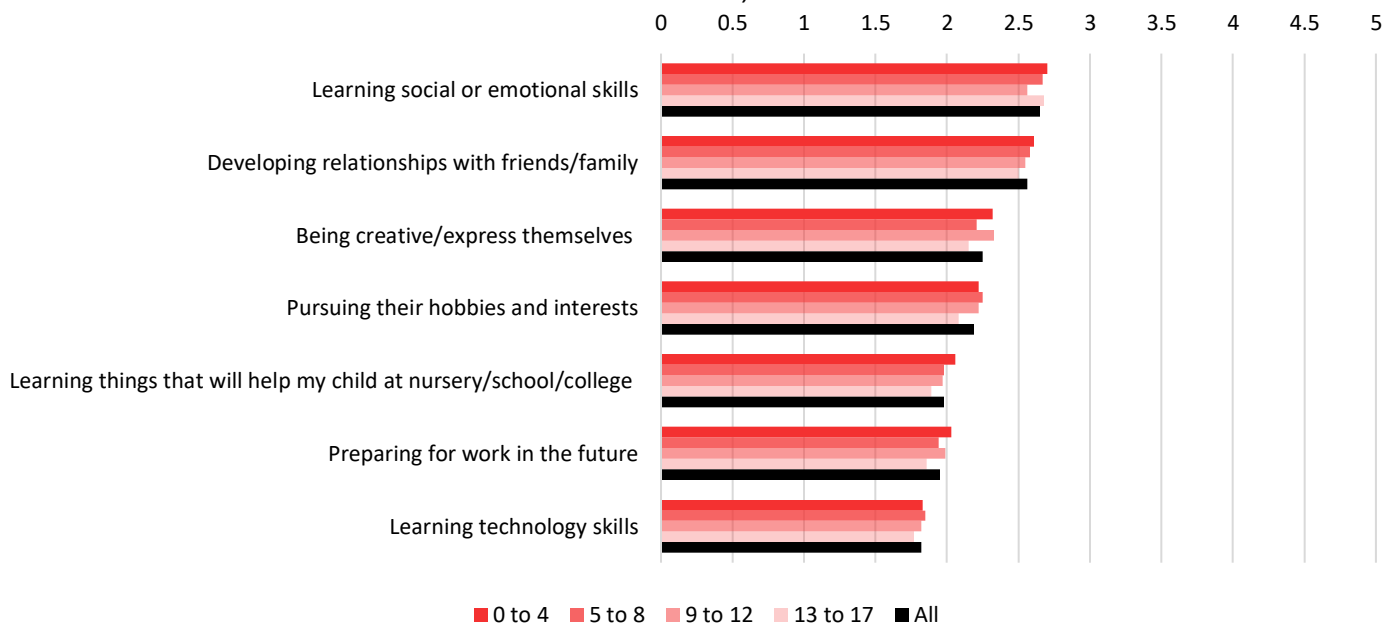
'Parenting for a Digital Future' publications

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- Blum-Ross, A. and Livingstone, S. (2017) "Sharenting," parent blogging and the boundaries of the digital self. *Popular Communication*, 15 (2): 110-125.

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- Blum-Ross, and Livingstone, S. (in press) The trouble with 'screen time' rules. *Nordicom Yearbook* special issue on parenting and digital media.

Our blog at www.parenting.digital

We aim to give researchers, advocates, industry and parents easy access to the latest research on parenting, children and digital media. Recent posts have included:

- Approaches to teaching children about fake news and privacy

- The BBC's Alice Webb on the future of children's content

- Evidence for new approaches to advising parents about 'screen time'

- Research and advocacy for supporting children with special needs or who are looked after

- Explorations of current debates from 'sharenting' to the Internet of Toys, digital books and VR

- Research on what parents and children think about digital media from researchers in China, Turkey, Pakistan, the Sudan, Jamaica, Chile and more

Acknowledgements

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