



# What do parents think, and do, about their children's online privacy?

## Parenting for a Digital Future: Survey Report 3

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Parenting for a  
Digital Future





# Parenting for a Digital Future

## Executive summary

Debates about personal data and online privacy often make assumptions about parents' digital skills and sharing practices, how they view their children's online privacy, and whether parents have the skills to translate concerns about privacy into practical action. This report, the third in a series, is based on a nationally representative survey of 2032 UK parents of children aged 0-17 years old. We examine how UK parents view their own and their children's digital privacy, whether and how they share images of their children online, and how they negotiate new norms about parents' roles in supporting their child's safety and fostering their independence online.

- **Online privacy is the top barrier for parents' internet use** – indeed, while overall, parents report few barriers that limit their use of the internet, among those who do report barriers, privacy is the top concern – 12% of parents say this. Most parents (89%) go online 'almost daily' or more, and 11% of them say privacy concerns lead them to limit their internet use. Low frequency users, more often from low socio-economic status homes, are even more concerned about privacy – 17% say this, although their main barrier is lack of time.
- **Parents' investment in new technology is growing, despite privacy concerns** – this now includes smart home devices (e.g. Amazon Echo, Google Home), wearables and Virtual Reality devices, although these parents (more often younger parents and those from higher socio-economic status households) are still in the minority overall.
- **Digital privacy skills are not universal amongst parents or children** – while 58% of parents say they can change their privacy settings and 53% say they can decide which information to share online, these skills are not evenly spread. Mothers report greater ability to change privacy settings than fathers, for instance, even though fathers report that they are more concerned about privacy (and though fathers report greater creative digital skills like coding and editing). Parents report that children's skills increase with age, although there are still considerable gaps. For instance, among parents of 9-12 year olds, only 44% think their child is able to decide which information he or she should or should not share online, compared to 56% of parents of 13-17 year olds.
- **Parents who are especially concerned about privacy also share more images or videos of their child online.** Although parents who are concerned about privacy share more widely and more frequently about their children, they are also more likely to have asked their children for permission or to have shared at their child's request. It seems that, for them, the benefits (for example, keeping in touch with family and friends) outweigh their concerns. Or perhaps parents want to share more but struggle to manage how to do this, leading to privacy worries. A few parents (5%) report they later regretted sharing images or videos of their child online.
- **Children's privacy from parents?** It is a difficult balancing act for parents – both checking on their children online and encouraging their independence. Only 14% of parents of 9-12 year olds, though 48% of parents of 13-17 year olds, judged their child was old enough to have privacy from them online. Relatedly, on average, parents check their child's friends or messages on social media 'sometimes,' sometimes also 'friending' or 'following' them on social media – and they do this more often for younger children than for teenagers.

This report shows that policy-makers need to ensure that parents and children are better prepared to navigate issues of privacy online, and that developers take seriously concerns about



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privacy, so that parents and children do not sacrifice personal privacy for the sake of much-valued services and opportunities to connect online.

## About our research

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

- 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 idea of 'screen time' as a catch-all category, we explore how parents and children engage with different forms of media to learn, create, communicate and play – as an essential part of family life, but depending on their own values, interests 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. 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 consider:

- How do parents imagine digital media in 'the future' and does this affect their actions in the present? What opportunities and challenges do parents think technology bring?
- In what ways are digital media integrated into family life? How do parents balance the resulting risks and opportunities for their children?
- What strategies do parents develop to mitigate the risks and realise the opportunities opened up by digital media, and who supports them?

In this report, we focus on privacy and 'sharenting' (sharing information, images and video about children online). We ask why and how parents share their lives online, how concerned are parents about privacy online, and how confident are they about their and their children's digital skills?

Previous reports, survey methodology, data tables and the full questionnaire can be found at [www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/preparing-for-a-digital-future](http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/preparing-for-a-digital-future).

Survey questions were designed based on findings from our in-depth qualitative fieldwork with parents, carers, educators, children and young people from 73 families and in learning sites across London (reported separately, see [www.parenting.digital](http://www.parenting.digital) for updates).

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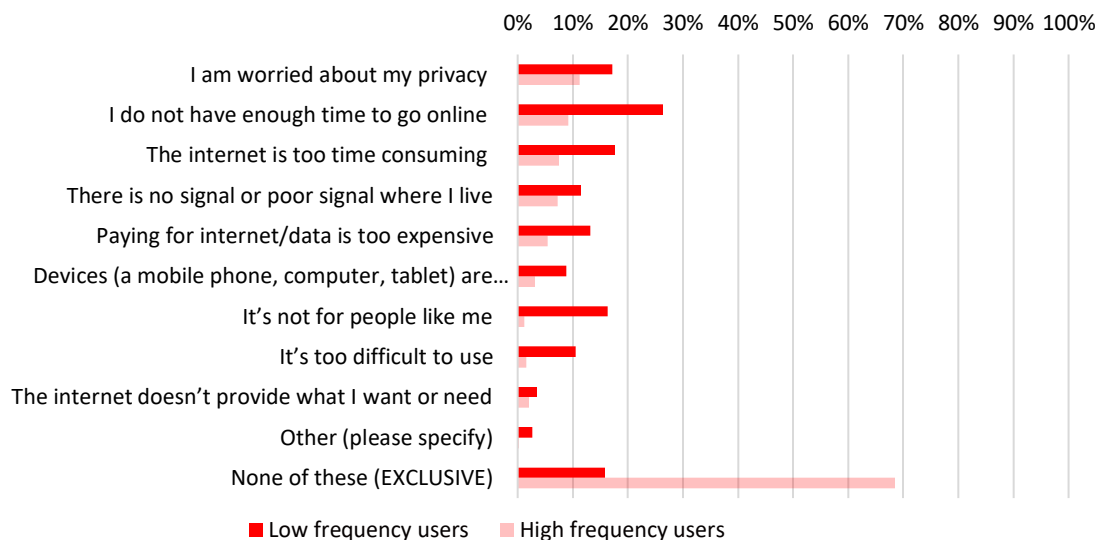
## Key findings

### *Privacy is the main barrier for parents going online followed by lack of time*

While generally parents report few barriers that limit or prevent their use of the internet, worrying about privacy is the top barrier (12% of all parents), followed by lack of time to go online (11%).<sup>1</sup>

- Among the 89% of parents who go online ‘daily or almost daily’ (‘high frequency users’, in the graph), privacy is the top concern which prevents or limits use (11% of these parents say this).
- Among the 11% of parents who go online less than daily, weekly or never (‘low internet users’ – more likely to be from low SES groups<sup>2</sup>), lack of time is their top concern (26%), followed by privacy (17%) and thinking the internet is ‘not for people like me’ (16%).
- Fathers (16%) are more concerned about privacy than mothers (9%). Other factors (the parent’s age, age of child, socio-economic status) make no difference.

**Do any of these factors limit or prevent your use of the internet?** Parents (%) who chose each answer option for Q6 (N=227 for low frequency users, N=1805 for high frequency users)



<sup>1</sup> This is likely to underestimate parental concerns about privacy, as here we just report the percentage of parents whose concerns are sufficient to *limit or prevent* their use own of the internet. Note, too, that the fieldwork was conducted in October 2017, before recent revelations about privacy online from commercial bodies.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents were grouped according to the socio-economic status (SES) of their household into categories A, B, C1, C2, D, and E based on responses about the household’s chief income earner. We refer to categories A and B as high SES parents, C1 and C2 as middle SES parents and D and E as low SES parents.

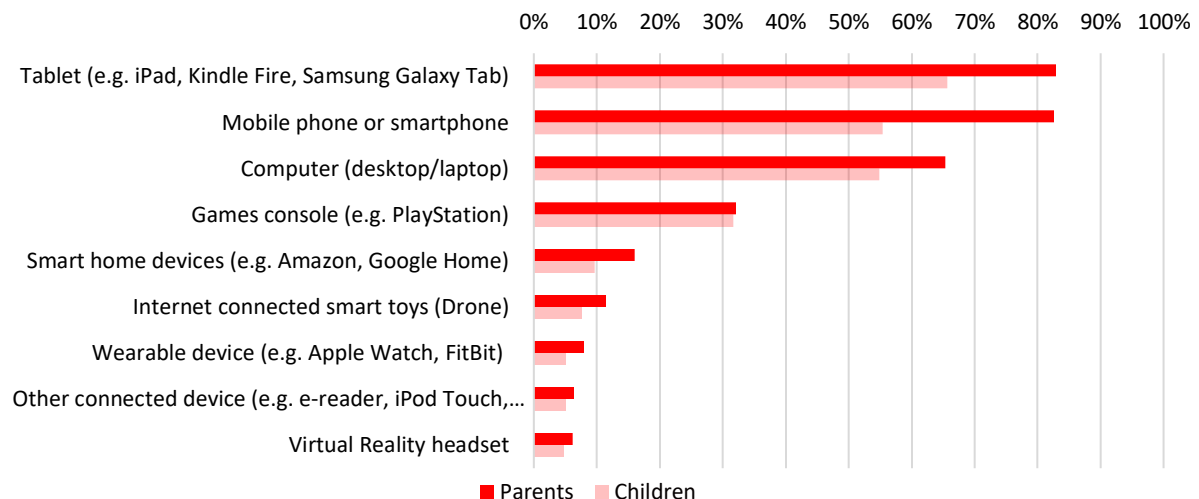
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## Parents are investing in new technologies despite concerns about privacy

Although some have privacy concerns, parents are nevertheless beginning to acquire emergent technologies for their homes, such as Internet of Things (IoT)<sup>3</sup> devices like smart home assistants and wearables or Virtual Reality (VR) headsets.

- On average, parents use three devices to go online – typically, tablet, smartphone, and computer. Fathers, high SES parents, younger parents and parents of younger children use a wider range of devices than other groups.
- 16% of parents say they have used a smart home device (e.g. Amazon Echo, Google Home) in the past month, 12% have used a wearable device, 8% an internet-connected smart toy and 6% a VR headset.
- Young parents, fathers, and high SES parents use more high-tech devices such as smart home devices or VR headsets.
- On average, children use two devices to go online. 10% of parents say their child has used a smart home device (e.g. Amazon Echo, Google Home) in the past month, and 5% have used a wearable device, 8% an internet-connected smart toy and 5% a VR headset.
- As with their parents, children of younger parents and high SES parents are more likely to use smart home devices (e.g. Amazon Echo, Google Home) or VR headsets.
- One in six children from high SES homes uses a smart home device and one in eight an internet-connected toy. More 9-12 year olds (8%) use Virtual Reality headsets than 13-17 (4%) year olds or other age groups.

**Thinking about when you/your child uses the internet, independently or with help, on any device/in any place, in the past month, have you/your child used any of these devices to go online? Parents who use the internet at least monthly (%) choosing each answer option for Q7 and Q10 (N=1959 for Q7, N=1699 for Q10)**



<sup>3</sup> See Apthorpe, Reisman, & Feamster, N. (2017), and Anscombe, (2018).



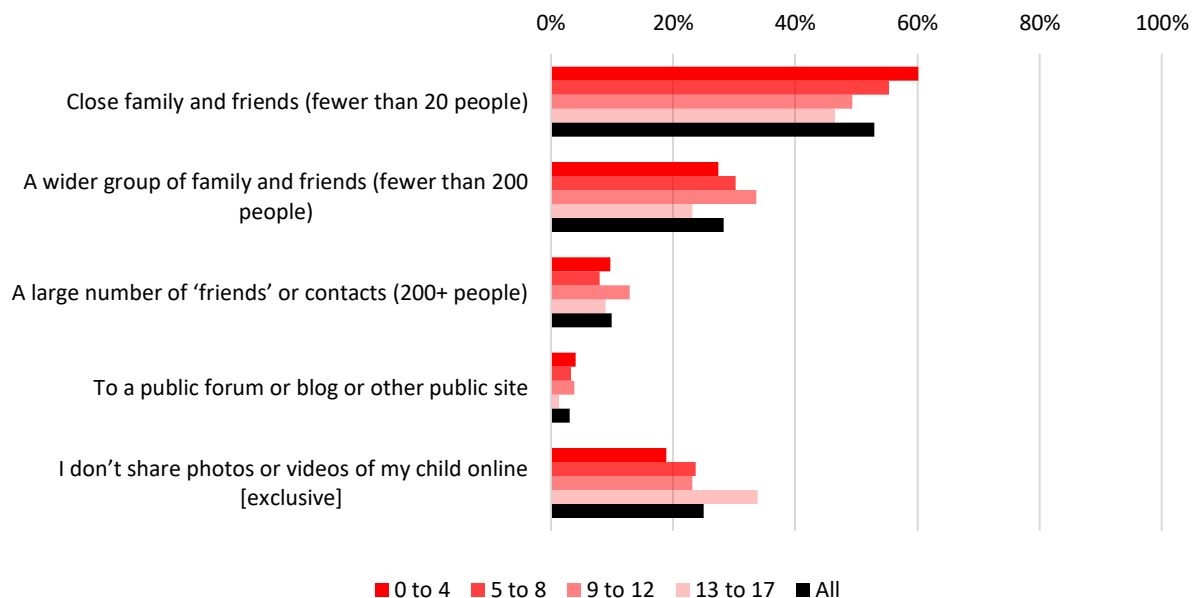
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## Most parents share photos of their child online, but not with a wide audience

Parents' growing embrace of digital technologies raises new questions about their privacy-related practices in relation to their children. The survey found that:

- Among parents who use the internet at least monthly (96% of all parents), most (75%) share some photos or videos of their children online. One quarter (25%) never share photos.
- However, half of parents who use the internet monthly (53%) share only with close family and friends (i.e. with fewer than 20 people).
- Most parents appear reluctant to share images of their children with a wide audience (more than 200 contacts) – only 10% of parents do this, and only 3% of parents report sharing images of their children on a public website like a parenting forum or blog.
- The frequency and scope of 'sharenting' or sharing photos about children online, has an inverse relationship to the child's age – 60% of parents of children under four share images of their child with close family and friends whereas only 47% of parents of 13-17 year olds do the same. This may be because parents of older children are often older themselves, and therefore less likely to use social media in general. Or it could also be because children gain more independence as they grow older, gaining their own social media accounts.

**Thinking of the photos or videos you share of your child online, who are these shared with?**  
*Parents who use the internet at least monthly (%) who chose each answer option for Q15, by*



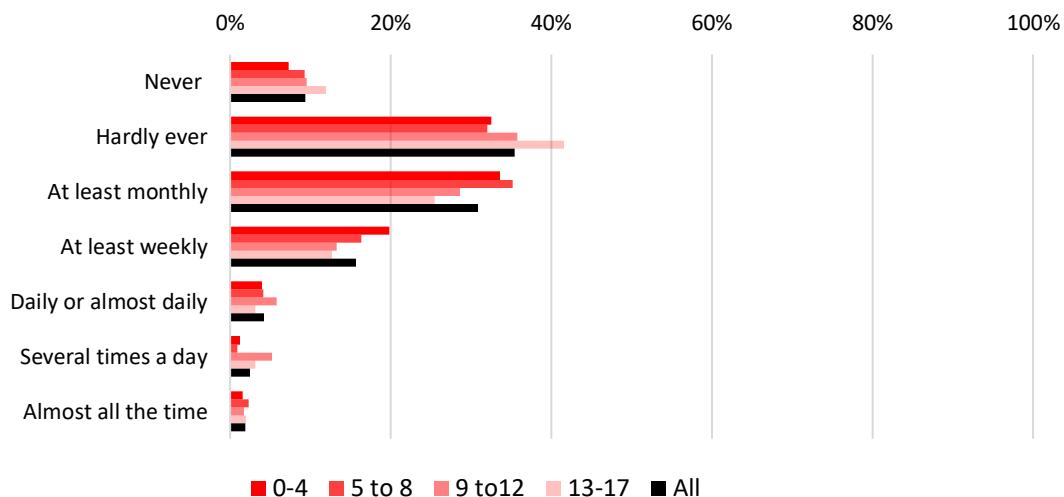
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## 'Sharenting' is uneven – younger parents and high SES parents share more

- Among parents who use the internet at least monthly and who have ever shared photos or videos of their child online (72% of all parents), one third (35%) does this very infrequently ('hardly ever'); however, one quarter of these parents (25%, or 18% of all parents) shares at least weekly.
- With regard to volume, 22% of parents who have ever shared photos or videos of their child say they did not share any pictures of their child in the last month; 63% said they shared 1-9 images, 12% shared 10-29 images, and only 3% shared more than 30 images.
- Younger parents and high SES parents share more frequently. The gender of the child or parent makes no difference. Nor does the age of the child make much difference to the overall frequency of sharing.
- Among parents who use the internet at least monthly and who shared photos or videos of their child online in the past month (65% of all parents), fathers share more images than mothers, younger parents more than older parents, middle SES more than low SES parents, and parents of children more than parents of teens – but while statistically significant, these are small differences.

Interestingly, although we filtered this question for parents who were at least monthly users of the internet and who had indicated on the previous question that they had shared a photo of their child online, we also found 9% of parents now saying that they 'never' share photos of their children. Perhaps these are parents who once shared but now have changed their minds about doing this.

**How often do you share/post/blog photos/videos of your child online?** Parents who use the internet at least monthly and who have ever shared photos or videos of their child online (%) who chose each answer option for Q16, by child age (N=1468)



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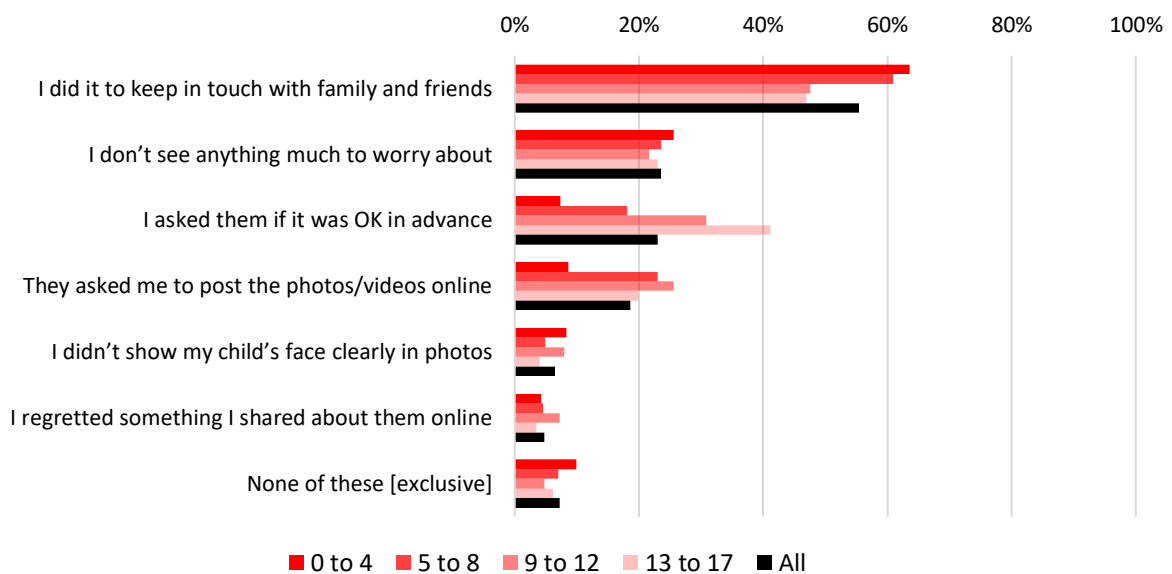
## Why do parents share their child's image online, and what privacy measures do they practice?

Of the 72% of parents who have shared a picture online and used the internet in the past month, 51% 'sharent' either monthly or more often. Why do they do this? And, while sharenting, did they implement additional privacy protections?

- Among these 'sharenting' parents, half say they did this to keep in touch with family and friends (mothers and parents of young children are especially likely to say this).
- One quarter say they see little to worry about in sharenting, with no significant demographic variation. This means that three quarters have some concerns.
- One quarter say they asked their child in advance if it was OK to share their image (especially fathers, older parents and parents of teenagers say this).
- Nearly one fifth of parents say the sharing was requested by the child.
- Few (5%) say they have regretted sharing an image of their child online (especially fathers and high SES parents express such regrets).
- Just 7% of sharenting parents made an effort *not* to show their child's face in the image (especially fathers, young parents, low internet-using parents).

### When you have shared photos or videos of your child online...

Parents who use the internet at least monthly and who have shared photos or videos of their child online in the past month (%) who chose each answer option for Q18, by child age (N=1032)





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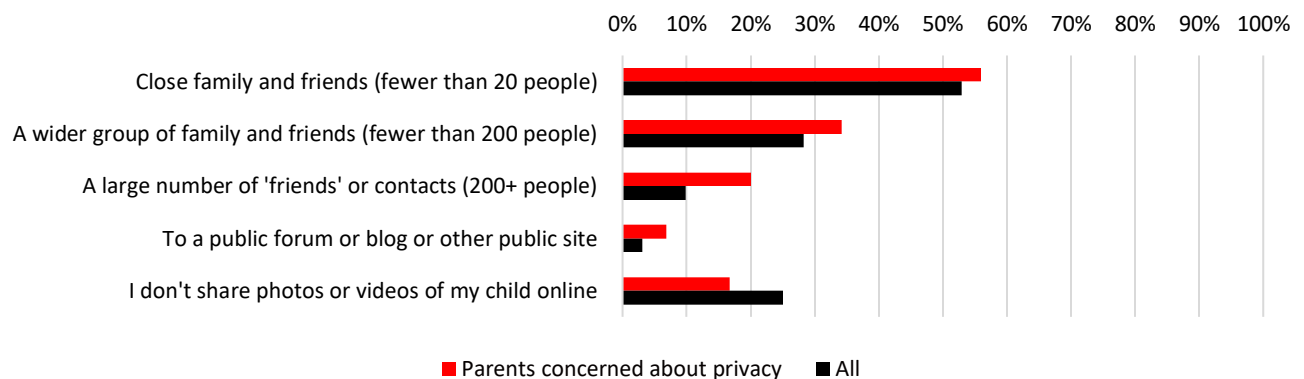
## Parents who share more are more worried about privacy

Although many do share images of their children online, this does not mean parents are unconcerned. We compared the experiences of parents who say that are so concerned about privacy that it limits their internet use (12% of all parents) with all parents, to see to what extent these concerns about privacy make a difference to their practices.

- The parents who say they are concerned about privacy are actually *more* likely to share images of their children online – both with close family or friends and with wider contacts. While we cannot know the causal direction from our survey data, it is interesting that these differences are more pronounced the more widely the images are shared – so parents who say they are concerned are much more likely to have shared images of children with over 200 contacts (20%) compared with parents in general (10%).
- Parents particularly concerned about privacy tend to share or post/blog photos or videos of their child online more often: 19% do so at least weekly compared with 16% of all parents. They also share more in number: 20% of them shared 10-29 photos/videos of their child online during the past month compared with 12% of all parents.

### Thinking of the photos or videos you share of your child online, who are these shared with?

Parents who use the internet at least monthly who are worried about privacy (%) who chose each answer option for Q15 (N=243 for parents concerned about privacy, N=1959 for All)



What explains the finding that parents concerned about privacy actually share more photos/videos of their child online and are more likely to do so to a larger audience? Here the evidence seems to show that these parents have put practices in place to help ensure that they and their children feel comfortable about what they share online, and so therefore feel able to share more. As the graph below shows:

- Parents who are concerned about privacy are more likely than average parents (e.g. those not especially concerned about privacy) to have been asked by their children specifically to share online (31% vs 19%).
- Parents concerned about privacy are much more likely to have asked their child for permission before they shared (35% of privacy-concerned parents versus 23% of all

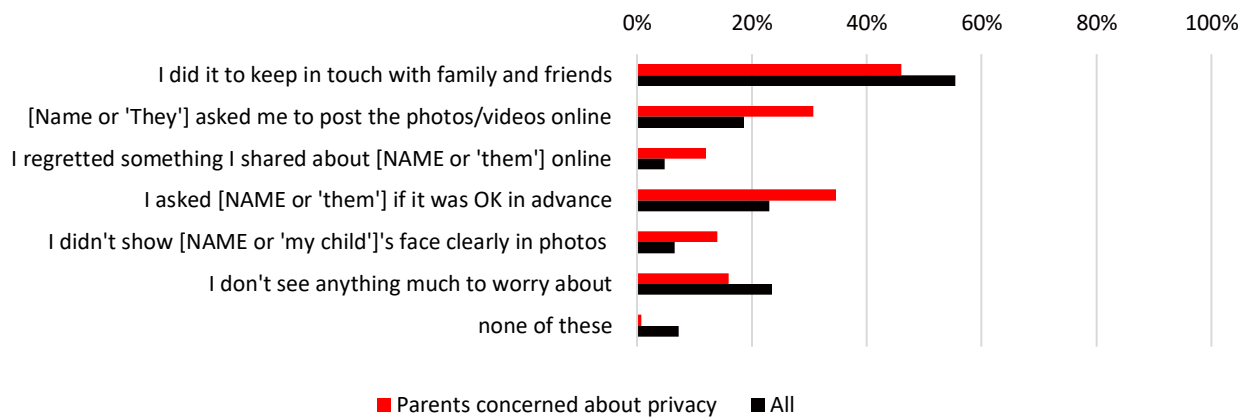
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parents), and are more likely not to share images that show their child's face (14% vs 7%).

- This suggests, rather than not sharing anything at all, that parents can work with their children to come up with privacy-respecting ways of sharing online that enable them to achieve benefits they value – for example, even though concerned about privacy, 46% of these parents still say they share images online to keep in touch with friends and family.

## When you have shared photos or videos of [NAME or 'your child'] online...

Parents who use the internet at least monthly, have shared photos or videos of their child online in the past month and who are worried about privacy (%) who chose each answer option for Q18 (N=243 for parents concerned about privacy, N=1032 for All)



## Parents are more confident of their own digital privacy skills than those of their children

Do parents have the digital skills to manage their and their child's privacy online? How do they view their child's skills? Our findings show that, regarding a wide range of digital skills, including privacy-related skills, parents report a fair number of gaps – for themselves and their children.

- We asked about ten different digital skills, from changing privacy settings, managing contacts, coding and more. Overall, internet-using parents report being able to do four of these ten things on average. Low internet-using parents, however, say they have just two of the ten digital skills.
- Parents' view of their children's skills varies greatly by the child's age, as expected. Parents of 0-8 year olds report competence in one skill on average, but 9-12 year olds are reported to have 3 to 4 of the ten skills, according to their parents, and teens 13-17 have 5 to 6 skills, considerably more than their parents.



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At least three of these skills are particularly relevant to privacy management – the ability to change one’s privacy settings, to decide which information to share online, and to manage one’s contacts online. How do parents and children fare with these?

## Parents’ privacy skills:

- Asked about these three privacy-related skills, 58% of parents say they can change their privacy settings, 57% can remove people from their contact lists, and 53% can decide which information to share online. For comparison, we have included the abilities to edit or create content – revealing better privacy than creative production skills overall.
- However, while across all the ten digital skills, fathers and mothers report similar levels of skill, mothers report better privacy skills than fathers (managing settings, deciding what to share, managing contacts), while fathers are more likely to say they know creative skills like coding and editing content online. Recall, above, that more fathers than mothers described themselves as being concerned about privacy in general – leading to questions of whether they are conscious that they haven’t translated their concerns into practice.
- High SES parents report more skills overall (especially more advanced creative skills like coding, or online content creation), as do parents of young children. While there’s little difference by SES in terms of parents’ privacy skills, younger parents are more able to manage their privacy settings and contact lists, and parents of younger children are better at managing their privacy settings.<sup>4</sup>

## Parents’ view of their child’s digital privacy skills:

- Over half of parents of 9-17 year olds thought their child could remove people from their friends or contact list, and half though they could manage their privacy settings. While this is encouraging it also indicates that parents of around half of 9-17 year olds think their child *lacks* these important privacy-maintenance skills. Only 44% of parents of 9-12 year olds think their child can decide which information they should share online.

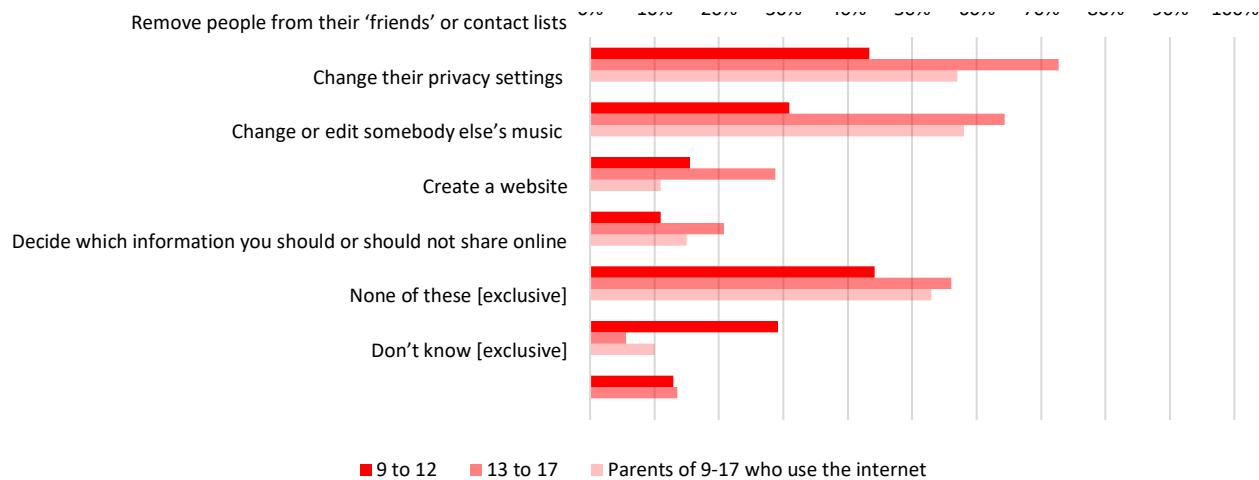
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<sup>4</sup> There is likely to be a relation between the age of child and age of parent, which we lack space to explore further here. Relatedly, there is likely to be a correlation among these different privacy skills.



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**Thinking about the different ways your child uses the internet (at home, at school/college, etc.), do they know how to ...** Parents of 9-17 year olds who use the internet (%) choosing each answer option for Q19 and Q21, by child age (N=1017 for Q19, N=1012 for Q21)

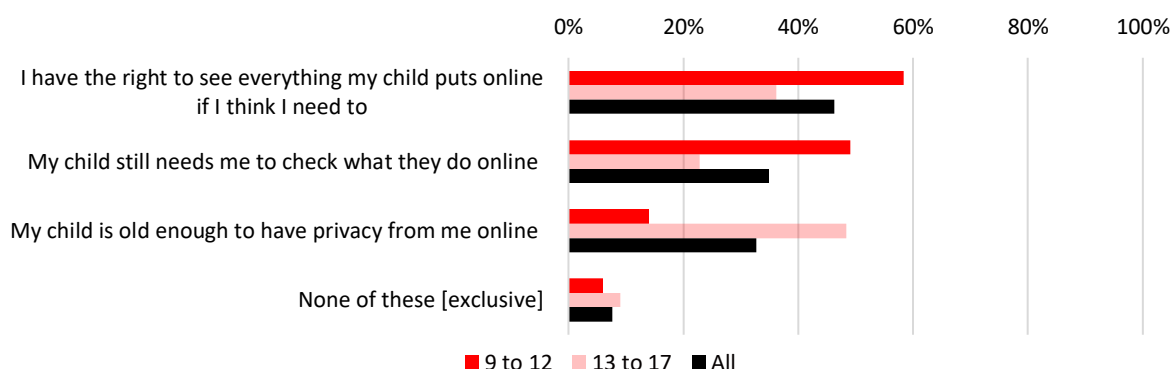


## Parents of 9-12 year olds tend to think their child is not ready to use the internet independently

- Given parents' views on their children's digital skills, it is unsurprising that, especially among parents of 9-12 year olds, many don't think their child is old enough to use the internet independently of their parents. Half of them (49%) think their child still needs them to check what they do online, and nearly two-thirds think this is their right as a parent.
- However, half of parents of 13-17 year olds do think their child is old enough to have privacy from them online. Less than a quarter of parents of children aged 13-17 believe they need to check what their child does online (23%). However, 36% believe that they do have the right to check what their child does online if they deem it necessary.

### Thinking about your child's use of the internet and phone...

Parents of children aged 9- 17 (%) choosing each answer option for Q39, by child age (N=470 for parents of 9-12, N=556 for parents of 13-17, N=1026 for All)



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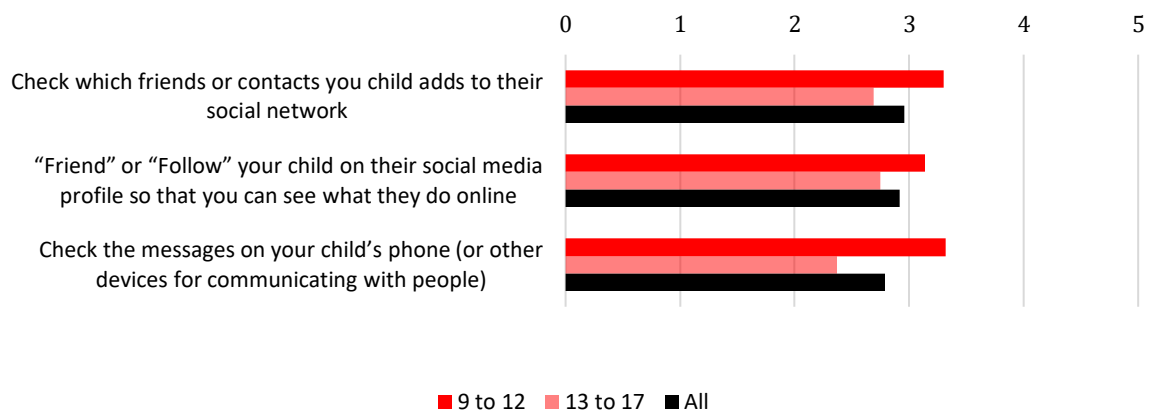
## Parents ‘sometimes’ check on their child’s use of social media, especially for younger children

It is a difficult balancing act for parents both to monitor their children online and foster their independence. Parents of children aged 9+ were asked whether and how they guide their child’s use of social media. We found that on average, parents check their child’s friends or messages on social media ‘sometimes,’ sometimes also ‘friending’ or ‘following’ them on social media.

- Younger parents are more likely to engage in forms of social monitoring (checking child’s contacts, messages and/or ‘friending’ or ‘following’ a child on a social network).
- Parents of younger children are also more likely to check their child’s use of social media, which is telling since many social networks are intended for those aged 13+. It seems parents take responsibility when they are aware that their child uses such networks ‘under-age’ – parents of 9-12 year olds say they check their child’s friends and/or messages with a frequency between ‘sometimes’ and ‘often.’
- As children grow up, parents monitor their social media use less frequently, although they continue to check in between ‘hardly ever’ and ‘sometimes.’
- Mothers are a little more likely than fathers to engage in all forms of social monitoring on social networks.

### Do you do any of these things in relation to your child’s internet use?

*all parents of children aged 9-17 (%) who chose each option for Q34 on a scale from 1 (never) to 3 (sometimes) to 5 (very often), (N=1026)*



## References

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## 'Parenting for a Digital Future' recent publications

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Recent posts have included:

- How families face the challenge of screen time
- Our analysis of recent debates, most recently around the launch of Facebook's Messenger Kids
- How new technologies impact on family life – from the use of robots and AI for families of children with disabilities to the strengths and limitations of VR for kids
- Research on the experience of families around the world – from Chile to Portugal, the Sudan to Singapore

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