Parents' Concerns for 'Generation Internet'

A research study by Agechecked.com
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The Internet has revolutionised the world and the way we communicate. It has also reinvented childhood.

The Internet has changed how children learn, explore, and engage with the outside world. In the UK children are spending twice as much time online as they did a decade ago and the trend remains upward.

Unfortunately, alongside the many positive developments the Internet has brought us, there are some negatives. With a rising number of children being exposed to inappropriate content online, it's clear that the Internet poses new risks for parents to address.

This study* examines how the parents of 'Generation Internet' are responding. What is happening with technology in their households, what measures do they take, what are their biggest fears and how much support do they need?

Given the expansive landscape of the worldwide web and the often unfettered access given to children, how do parents feel about the possibility of their children accessing adult content (be that gambling, age certificated games, films or restricted products) online? And should there be tighter restrictions for online usage for younger users?

Recently, the UK Government followed up on its manifesto promise to increase efforts to protect children online. They have published the Digital Economy Bill which, if enacted, will make it a requirement for all online adult sites to require age verification with fines of up to £250,000 imposed on those to those who fail to comply.

The scope of any such protection needs to factor in the ever-evolving experiences of parents who are on the frontline of setting new boundaries for their children's online behaviour. Only by listening – and responding – to parents' concerns can legislators, businesses and other stakeholders interested in child welfare keep up with the landscape of this new online playground.

*Online survey of 1,500 UK adults, conducted in June 2016.
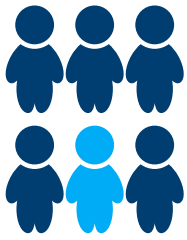
At what age do children first go online at home?

As many as one in six children begin their online experience at age 3 or under and over a quarter (28%) are using the Internet before they are of school age.

This means that online protection and education about safe Internet usage needs to begin very early.

A child's first online experiences need to be supervised using devices with basic protections in place – fortunately three year olds are yet to develop sophisticated password cracking skills.

The data also highlights the need for parents to familiarise themselves with the online habits of their young children. This isn't an issue that can be left to schools considering a quarter of children are active online before they enter their Reception year.

1 in 6

**begin their online experience at age 3 or under**

Late starters

The other end of the scale is also interesting, with one in five children (20%) not accessing the Internet until 10 years of age or older.

It suggests that some parents are taking a much more cautious approach, denying Internet access until their children reach high school.

This approach may also have its problems. With so much of daily life carried out online, are children missing out by not accessing online games and educational sites earlier? Would the guarantee of 'safe' online spaces make these parents feel more comfortable allowing limited access?

What age do children first go online?
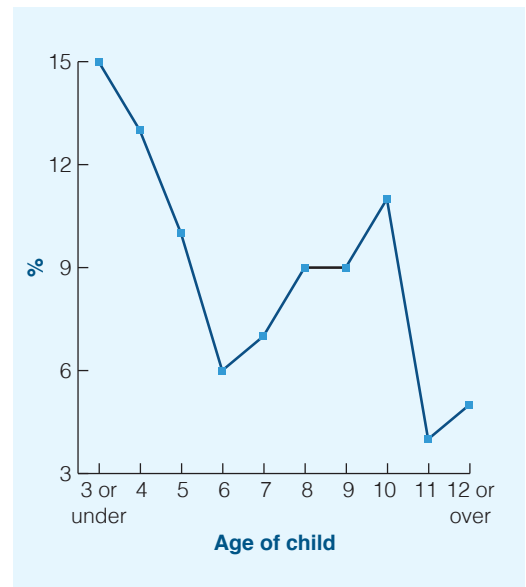
Online protection and education about safe Internet usage needs to begin very early.

How do children access the Internet?

The growing number of devices through which children can access the Internet poses additional problems for parents.

While 52% have access to a shared family computer that is more likely to be monitored, many can also access the Internet in other ways.

Over half (53%) have the ability to access the Internet through a handheld device (e.g. their own phone or tablet) and 25% have an Internet enabled computer in their bedroom.

This unsupervised use underlines the importance of being able to automatically restrict access to content and services that are age inappropriate (either through device settings or the website itself).

The variety of devices connected to the Internet is also a potential cause for concern. With games consoles and smart TVs potentially providing portals to violent or explicit images and experiences, parents need to aware that it is not just computers and phones that pose risks.

As the integration of the Internet into all our household devices increases, the issue of age verification is becoming ever more crucial to the wellbeing of 'Generation Internet'

64%
Games Console

53%
Their own handheld devices (e.g. smart phone, iPod, iPad)

52%
A shared family computer kept in a communal space

32%
Smart TV - e.g. that can access online services (such as iPlayer, youTube etc)

25%
A computer in their own room

59%
of children have used social media by the age of 10

Which sites cause parents that most concerns?

Although pornographic content is currently the focus of the government's efforts to introduce age verification, the percentage of parents concerned about social media or video sharing sites are almost as high.

Parents are concerned that their children may be accessing social media sites too young. Many have a minimum age requirement of 14 and yet studies report that 59% of children have used such sites by the age of 10.

The data reflects concerns about cyberbullying and risks to children's welfare. Central YMCA recently cited social networking as one of the ten major causes of harm to young people in the UK, and ranked it as the second fastest growing cause for concern.

Similarly, parents are all too aware that children absorb much of their content through video sharing sites. Reports reveal that teenagers use video sharing sites more than TV, and yet parents are uneasy about the broad range of content and lack of traditional regulation of these sites.

High numbers of parents also worry about online purchasing. The majority (51%) are concerned about potentially expensive in-app purchases. As many as 40% are also concerned that children might use the Internet to buy age restricted items such as knives or e-cigarettes.

Clearly, pornography is not the only area where parents feel they need help in protecting their children online.

Which sites cause parents the most concerns?

Site	%
Sites containing pornographic material (either accidental or deliberate access)	75
Social media channels (due to the threat of cyber bullying or risks to their welfare)	71
Video sharing sites that may contain violent or inappropriate content	70
Gaming sites that allow in-app purchase or game downloads	51
Film / TV sites (e.g. providing access to age Inappropriate content such as 18 rated films)	46
Shopping sites (allowing them to purchase restricted items - e.g. knives, e-cigarettes)	40

%

68%
are concerned about
their children being in
contact with people
using a false identity

Parents believe current age restrictions aren't working

The majority of parents (57%) believe that the current age restrictions to curtail the online activities of their children are not working effectively.

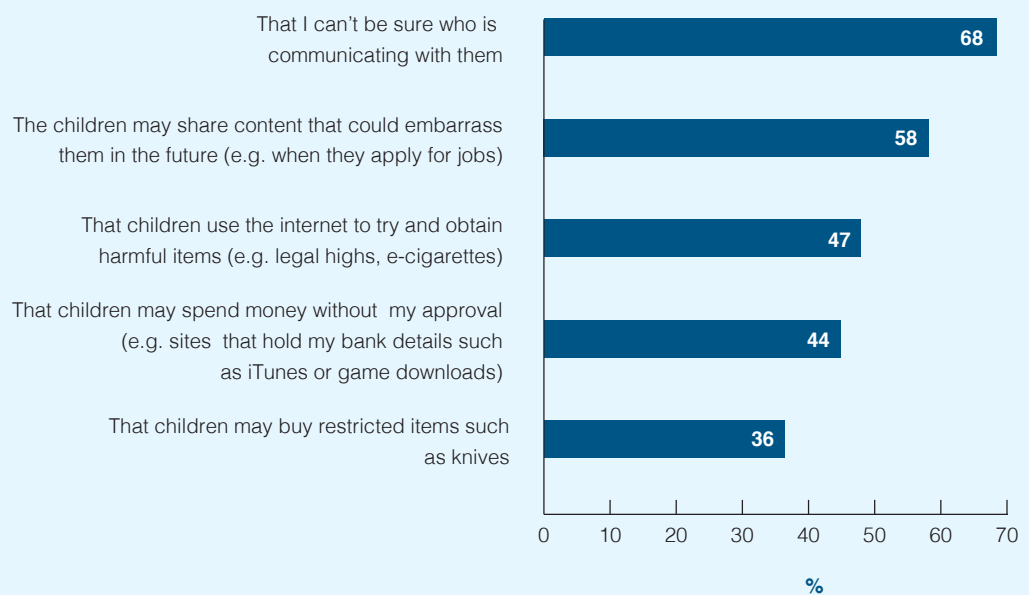They believe this poses a number of risks.

The major concern of parents is that their children are vulnerable to contact from people using false identities (68%).

Also high on the list of concerns is the ability of children to damage their reputation by sharing potentially embarrassing content (58%).

Online shopping is another cause of anxiety. Parents are concerned about children buying harmful items (47%), restricted products (36%) or making payments without approval.

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Parents concerns about children's online activities

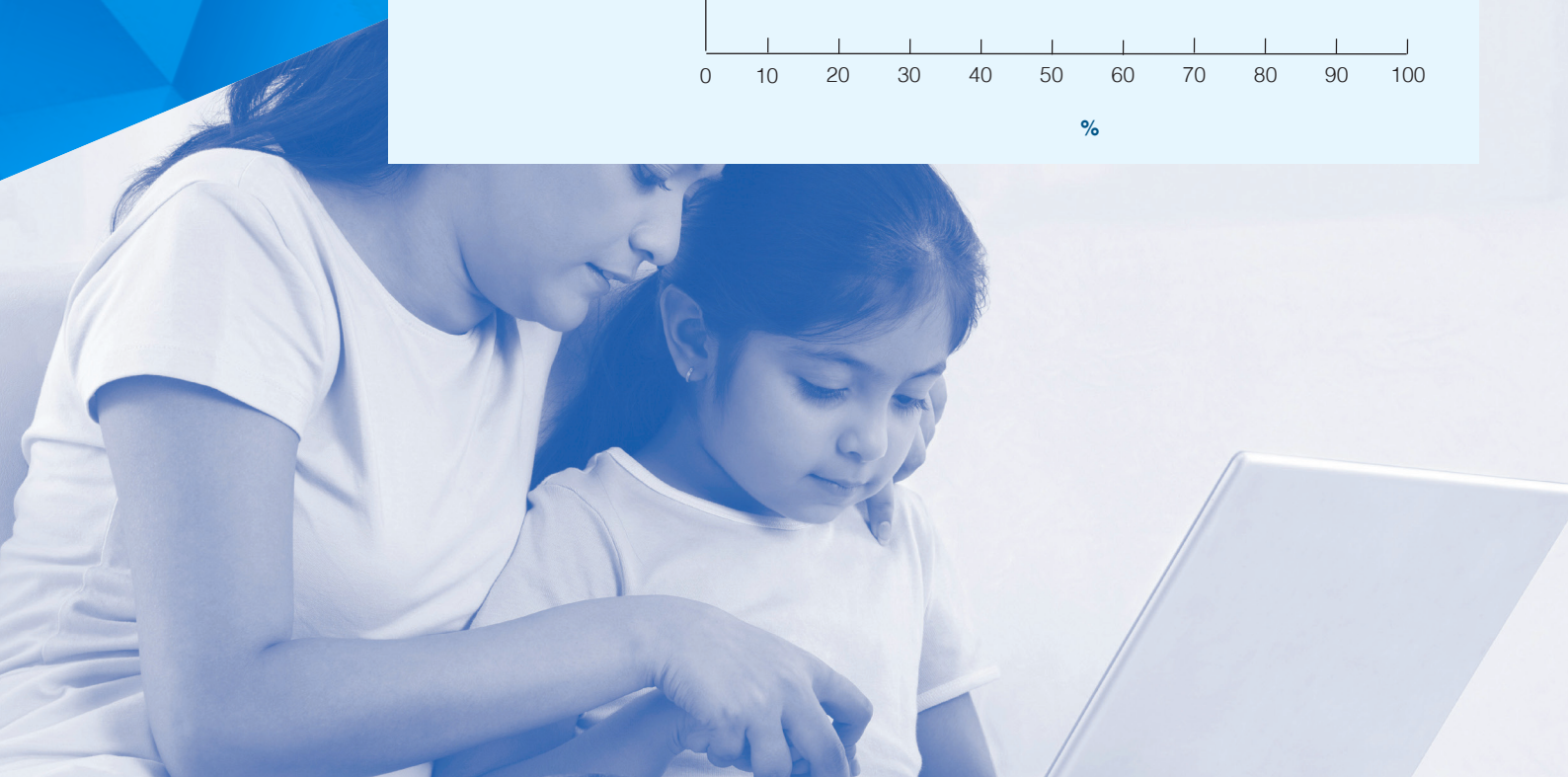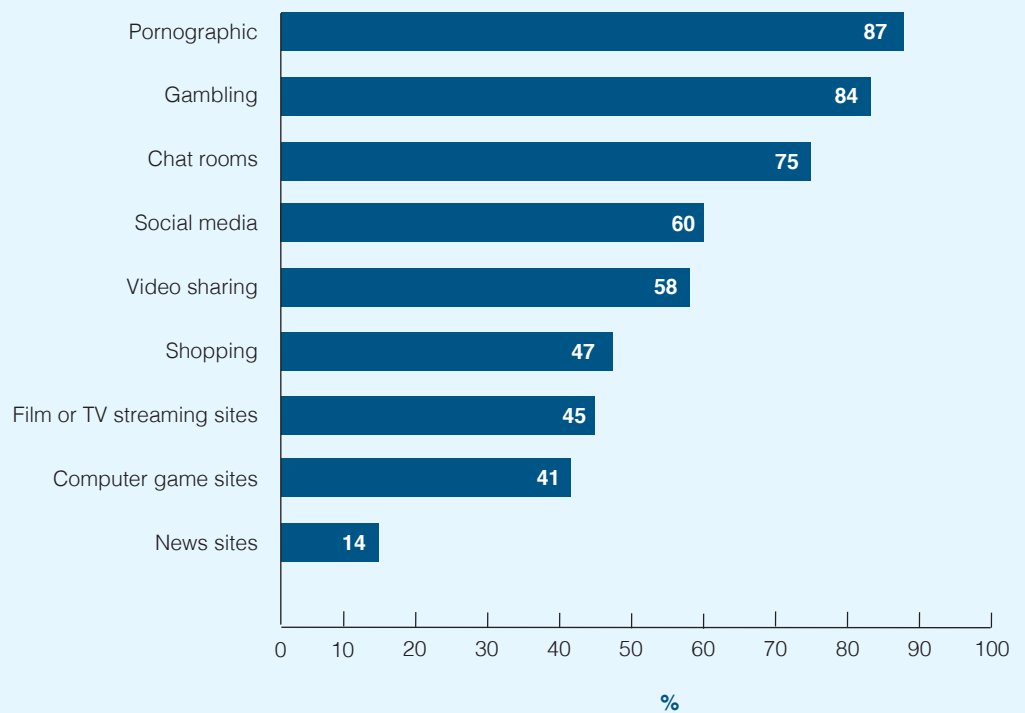| Concern	%
That I can't be sure who is communicating with them	68
The children may share content that could embarrass them in the future (e.g. when they apply for jobs)	58
That children use the internet to try and obtain harmful items (e.g. legal highs, e-cigarettes)	47
That children may spend money without my approval (e.g. sites that hold my bank details such as iTunes or game downloads)	44
That children may buy restricted items such as knives	36

%

Where would parents like to see stronger age controls?

Interestingly parents want to see action across the board, not just on the obvious age restricted online content and services (pornography and gambling).

Social media, video sharing, shopping and media sites all need to up their game when it comes to putting age controls in place according to parents.

Only news sites are seen, by the large majority of parents, to be suitable for open access.

On which sites do parents wish to see better age controls introduced?

Site	%
Pornographic	87
Gambling	84
Chat rooms	75
Social media	60
Video sharing	58
Shopping	47
Film or TV streaming sites	45
Computer game sites	41
News sites	14

%

Who is doing a good job on protecting our children online?

According to parents, virtually all relevant organisations should be doing more to provide adequate protections for children online or to help educate them about safe Internet usage. When asked to score the effectiveness of a range of organisations at protecting our children online (1 to 10), even the highest performing group (schools) scored only 5.9 from our sample.

The scores indicate a general sense of helplessness felt by the majority of parents, concerned that their children are at risk.

Parents feel that it is schools (5.9), ISPs (5.1) and gambling sites (5) that are doing the most to protect children.

Social media sites (4.4) and manufacturers of Internet-enabled devices (4.4) (e.g Apple and Samsung smartphones), should be concerned that their scores are nearly as low as the operators of porn sites (4.2) who came bottom in our table.

Parents are also clearly unimpressed with government efforts to date. Clearly there is a demand for a stronger lead from legislators to help raise the level of protection in this rapidly evolving sector.

Most effective at protecting children

1
Schools

2
ISPs

3
Gambling Sites

Least effective at protecting children

XXX
11
Pornographic sites

f
12
Social media sites

13
Manufacturing
(e.g. Apple,
Samsung)

Our conclusions

What is clear from this data is the sense of powerlessness parents feel in being able to control access to the increasing range and variety of digital media, entertainment and services.

While government efforts to date have been concentrated on the extremes of the digital world – e.g. pornography and gambling – parents see social media, video sharing, streaming and shopping sites as just as much of a potential risk.

They are worried about more subtle causes of harm to their children – communication with people who have bad intentions or damage to their child's reputation – just as much as exposure to explicit images.

What's also clear from this report is that the solution needs to be delivered by a range of organisations. Not just parents and schools, but site owners, government, technology companies and emerging media and communication services.

The fact that no one is perceived to be doing an effective job of protecting children is reflective of both the enormity of the task at hand and also the lack of a co-ordinated plan or effort.

The Internet is a wonderful resource for children providing new and unparalleled opportunities for learning, satisfying curiosity and making friends across the world.

However, more needs to be done to make this digital playground safe for our children, both for Generation Internet and generations to come.

The solution needs to be one delivered by a range of organisations. Not just parents and schools, but site owners, government, technology companies and emerging media and communication services.

About Agechecked.com

Agechecked.com is service that provides online age checks for websites that sell age-restricted goods and services. The service combines many age checking methods into a single solution that is straightforward for merchants to integrate onto their websites.

The service is fast and easy for consumers to use, and the wide range of methods available lead to the highest age checking pass rates online. Checks occur rapidly, with the majority of checks completed in under 10 seconds.

Agechecked.com is global solution – online customers receive an age checking service that is optimised by geographic location, so merchants can meet their responsibilities wherever they do business around the globe.

To find out more about agechecked.com please visit the website or click on this link for a short video introduction to the service.