YMCA CHILTERN GROUP

“IT RUINED MY CHILDHOOD”

10,635 children share about pornography, sexual harassment, relationships, and how we should respond

Dignify
LET'S TALK ABOUT PORN

NATIONAL REPORT
2026

About Dignify

Dignify is a programme of YMCA Chiltern Group.

Our vision is to see children thriving in healthy relationships free from the harmful effects of pornography and empowered to defy the social norms of objectification.

We conduct research into children's experiences of pornography, sexual harassment and relationships, exploring the influences and challenges they encounter both online and offline. Using an evidence-based approach, we develop and deliver bespoke resources for schools, youth groups and parents, equipping them to support children in navigating an increasingly complex world. Through our education, research and advocacy, we champion positive change locally and nationally, believing that together we can build and share a new narrative for healthy relationships.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Dignify Research Team, Dignify Advisory Board, colleagues across YMCA Chiltern Group, partners in the Pornography Harms Coalition, Trust Impact and VRP Consulting for their support in making this report possible.

We are grateful to the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Police and Crime Commissioners, the Harpur Trust, HAB Law, and individual donors whose generosity funded many of the surveys referenced in this report. Special thanks to our partner schools, whose commitment to listening to children, facilitating the surveys, and using the findings to strengthen education and safeguarding practice made this research possible.

Above all, we thank the **10,635 children** who shared their experiences and perspectives. Their voices are at the heart of this report and continue to guide our work.

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Introduction from our CEO

Gone are the days of top-shelf magazines and DVDs. Pornography is no longer confined to specific places or formats. Today, it can appear across the digital world: on social media, through pop-up content, in messaging platforms, and increasingly within the technologies that are becoming part of everyday life.

As a parent, I find many of the findings in this report deeply concerning. Children are telling us that more needs to be done, and their responses reveal the continued reality of online harms in their lives. Yet, unlike some of our previous reports, this one also offers something many parents are longing for: a reason for hope.

Something appears to be shifting. While there is still much work to do, these findings suggest we may be seeing the early signs of progress resulting from the legislative and regulatory changes of recent years.

We are seeing evidence that some children are encountering pornography less frequently than in previous years, which could be an indication that the Online Safety Act is having an effect. These are encouraging signs. However, they should not lead to complacency. Rather, they should strengthen our resolve to address the challenges that remain.

This report highlights areas where further action is urgently needed, from the continued use of virtual private networks (VPNs), perhaps to bypass protections, to children's mixed perceptions of the effectiveness of the Online Safety Act. The progress we are beginning to see should inspire us to press on with greater determination, so that future reports capture a more positive story.

The evidence also demonstrates clear connections between early exposure to pornography, addiction and lower wellbeing. While we celebrate the lower rates of reported pornography viewing, we remain concerned by the high levels of reported pornography habits and addictions young people are struggling with, and the way it is translating into poor mental wellbeing and behaviours with people beyond themselves. We must ensure that greater support is available for those struggling with compulsive pornography viewing, and that education continues to provide children with a healthy framework for relationships and sex.

Whether you are reading this as a teacher, policymaker, parent, researcher, advocate, young person, or simply someone who cares about the wellbeing of children, I encourage you to read these findings with both honesty and hope. Let the concerns galvanise action, and let the signs of progress remind us that change is possible. Together, we can help create a digital world where children are protected, valued and able to thrive.



Guy Foxell
CEO, YMCA Chiltern Group



Research Context and Limitations

This report contains the responses of 10,635 children from 20 schools across four UK counties. Responses were collected between 12th January and 15th June 2026.

Context

Online Safety Act and RSE Guidelines

The data was collected during the 2025-26 academic year, at a time of significant change in education, safeguarding and online safety. It was gathered following the implementation of key child-safety provisions within the Online Safety Act, and shortly before the introduction of updated Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) guidance in England.

Ofsted

The findings are particularly relevant for educators and safeguarding professionals. Recent guidance from both government and Ofsted has emphasised the importance of helping children navigate harmful online content, unhealthy relationship norms and emerging digital risks. These findings provide a large-scale insight into the realities many children are currently experiencing.

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Agenda

The report has clear relevance to the wider Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) agenda. Misogyny, harmful sexual behaviour, pornography exposure and online influences are increasingly shaping the context in which children understand relationships. By amplifying their lived experiences, this research contributes to a growing focus on prevention and early intervention, helping strengthen understanding of how we can promote healthy, respectful relationships and prevent harm before it occurs.



Limitations

A full account of our methodology – including how schools were recruited, how the survey and focus groups were conducted, the statistical tests used, and our approach to ethics and safeguarding – can be found at the end of this report.

The dataset includes a high concentration of schools from Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire and is therefore not fully representative of the national school population. Schools varied considerably in type and context, and wider socio-economic, demographic and regional factors may have influenced the findings.

The survey uses broad gender categories and does not ask students to identify their sexual orientation. This reflects our commitment to protecting anonymity, particularly within smaller school communities.

As with all self-reported research, responses may be influenced by memory, social desirability bias or wider public discussion of the topics explored. Surveys were completed anonymously, but typically in classroom settings.

This survey uses a broad definition of pornography and does not distinguish between different formats or mediums. The definition provided to students before completing the survey can be found in the glossary.

Statistical significance testing was conducted on selected relationships within the dataset. Where a finding has been identified as statistically significant, it is marked with the symbol ◊, but this should not be interpreted as evidence of causation. Dignify's research is designed primarily as an exploratory insight into children's experiences and as a practical tool to support evidence-informed Relationships and Sex Education.

Behind every statistic is a child navigating an increasingly complex digital world. These findings highlight the importance of collective action from educators, parents, policymakers, technology companies and wider society to help children build healthy relationships, engage with the online world safely and confidently, and be protected from exploitation and harm. Listening to children's experiences must be at the heart of how we respond.

Content Warning

This report contains references to pornography, harmful sexual behaviour, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual violence and other online harms. Some readers may find the content distressing.

At Dignify, we believe it is important to talk honestly about the realities children are facing, even when those conversations are difficult. We encourage you to read this report with care, reflect on what you learn, and take breaks if needed.

If you would like support, please get in touch with us on admin@dignify.org or visit our website dignify.org/signposting

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the 2025-26 academic year, the first full year in which the main child-safety provisions of the Online Safety Act were in force, Dignify surveyed 10,635 children across 20 schools in four English counties.

This year's findings offer grounds for hope, but not complacency.

Whilst reported exposure to pornography has fallen substantially compared with previous years, earlier exposure is becoming more common and is associated with a range of harms, including sexual harassment, harmful sexual behaviour, addiction, nude image sharing and lower wellbeing.

What Children Told Us:

Pornography exposure has fallen but remains widespread

- **17%** of children have seen pornography – down by 25 percentage points from last year
- **50%** of repeat users watched pornography using a VPN
- **Only 16%** of children have noticed a reduction in harmful content on their social media feeds

Children are being exposed to pornography at younger ages

- The average age of first exposure has fallen to **11.6 years old**
- **48%** of children first viewed pornography by accident
- Children first exposed to pornography **before age 12** are more likely to report a habit or addiction and lower wellbeing

Early exposure is more likely to lead to addiction and associated harms

- **77%** of those who have seen pornography once, go on to look again
- **36%** of repeat users report a pornography habit or addiction
- **20%** of children who have seen pornography have acted it out. Research shows the majority of pornography contains violence[1]

Children are experiencing harmful sexual behaviour and often lack confidence to report it

- **1 in 4** witness sexual texts or messages in school at least monthly
- **58%** would not feel confident to report experiencing sexual harassment to school staff
- **37%** would not feel confident to report experiencing sexual harassment to a parent/carer

[1] Children's Commissioner for England, "A lot of it is actually just abuse": Young people and pornography (2023)

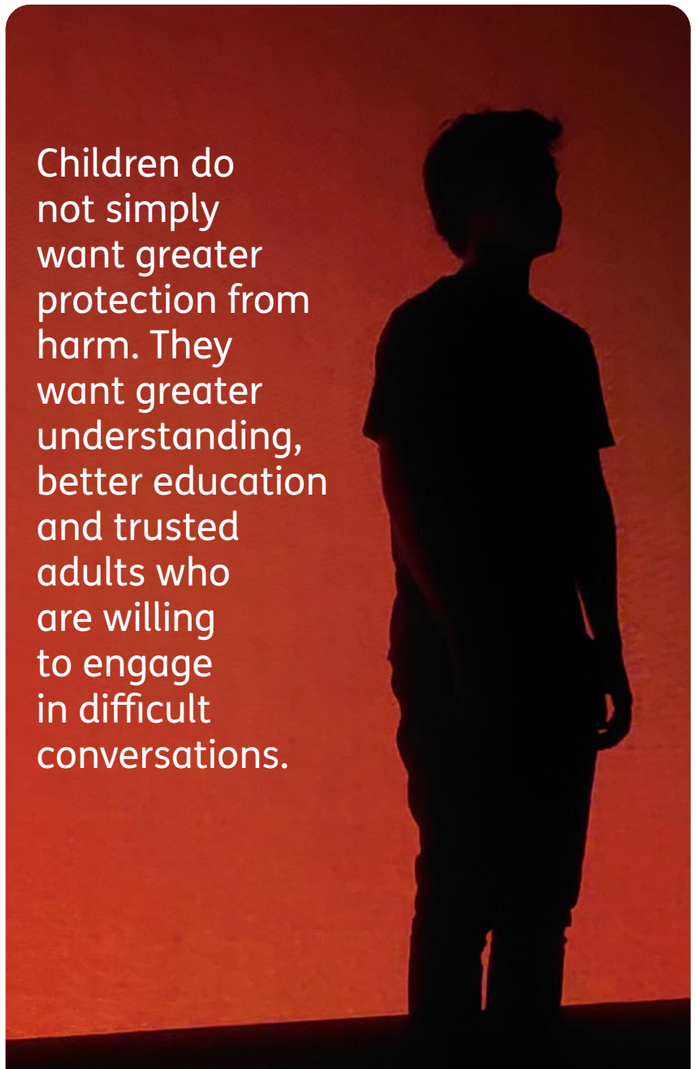
Online harms do not occur in isolation.

Pornography exposure, nude image sharing, addiction, harmful sexual behaviour and poor wellbeing were closely interconnected. For example, children who had viewed pornography were far more likely to report receiving a nude image (44% vs 7%). These findings suggest that online harms should not be viewed as separate issues, but as part of a broader ecosystem of risks shaping children's lives.

What Children Are Asking For:

58% of children believe more should be done to prevent children viewing pornography

One message emerged consistently throughout this year's research:



Children do not simply want greater protection from harm. They want greater understanding, better education and trusted adults who are willing to engage in difficult conversations.

Their views on Relationships and Sex Education, reporting concerns and the need for greater action on online harms reveal a critical safeguarding concern: reporting processes alone are not enough. Children need confidence that, when they speak, they will be heard, supported and taken seriously. Building that trust must be central to preventing and responding to sexual harassment.

Our Response

Dignify believes these findings point towards a whole-community response

ENGAGE Parents

Parents and carers play a critical role in creating open conversations early, and need practical guidance and support to help children navigate relationships, pornography and online harms.

EQUIP Schools

Schools are uniquely placed to provide effective relationships education and safeguarding, and need the training, time and resources to equip children with the knowledge, confidence and skills to navigate an increasingly complex world.

EMPOWER Children

Children are not only recipients of protection but active agents of change, and should be given safe spaces and opportunities to develop the confidence, skills and voice to shape healthier relationships and communities.

They are asking us to talk with them honestly, early and without shame.

That conversation can begin today: in a classroom, around a kitchen table, in a youth group or in a policy meeting.

Behind every statistic is a child navigating an increasingly complex digital world. Their voices should remain at the centre of how we respond.

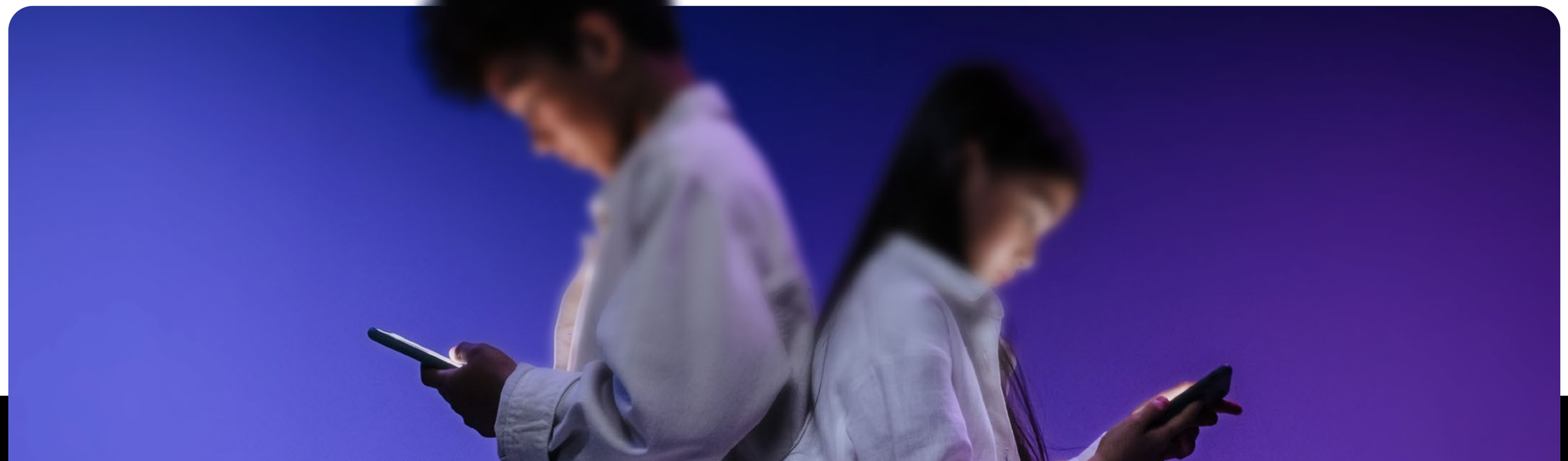
Policy Recommendations

Early signs of progress suggest that online safety regulation may be making a difference, but continued leadership, regulation, education and safeguarding are essential to protect children from evolving online harms:

> "It ruined my childhood"
> Female, Year 10

1. Establish clear government leadership on pornography-related harms
2. Strengthen enforcement of child-safety measures for evolving technologies
3. Make Relationships and Sex Education compulsory until age 18
4. Increase investment in preventative education and safeguarding
5. Ensure children's voices remain central to future online safety reforms

If you take one thing from this report, let it be this: children are not simply asking for greater protection. They are asking for greater understanding.



SECTION 1

THE REALITY

> I feel that [porn] somewhat changed my perspective on how I view people, it has especially influenced my ideas of what a 'good image' of sex might be.
>
> Year 10, **Male**

Children's Exposure to Pornography

Children are still encountering pornography at an age when they are developing their understanding of relationships, sex and identity.

The proportion of children reporting that they have seen pornography fell from 42% (953) in 2024-25 to 17% (1,492) in 2025-26, representing the lowest figure recorded in Dignify's research to date.[2]

This shift has occurred during the first academic year in which the main child-safety duties of the Online Safety Act have been in force. Since July 2025, online services within scope have been required to take stronger steps to prevent children accessing harmful content, including pornography.

Strengthened laws, education and safeguarding measures may be factors associated with the reduction in reported pornography exposure.

The average age children report first seeing pornography is 11.6 years old, down from 12.2 years old in 2024-25.

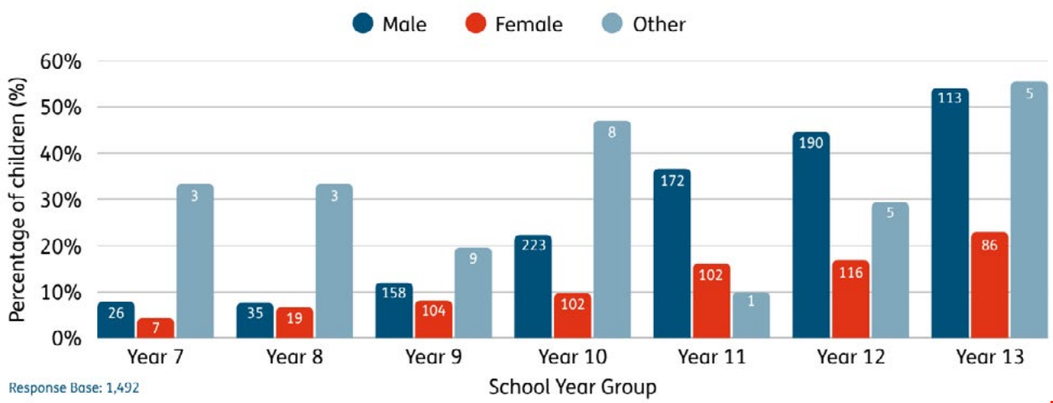
Over a third (38%, 563) of children who had viewed pornography were first exposed at age 11 or younger. Early exposure (11 or younger) was most common among other gendered students (59%, 20), followed by males (34%, 316) and females (42%, 227).

17% of children have seen pornography down from 42% in 2024-25

34% of Year 13 students have seen pornography

The average age children first view pornography has fallen to **11.6** years old

Chart 1: Pornography viewing and gender
(Number of children is shown within bar)

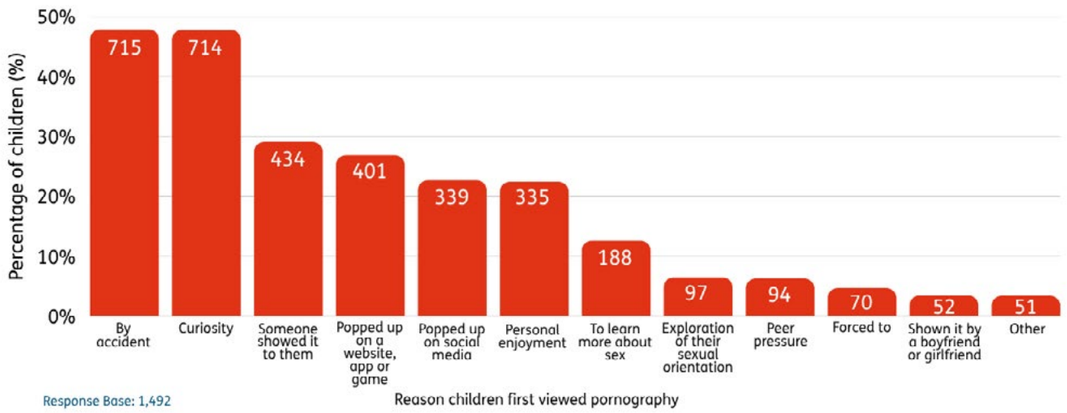


Response Base: 1,492

[2] Differences between years should be interpreted with caution, as the 2026 survey had a considerably larger sample size and a younger age profile than the 2025 survey (see Methodology).

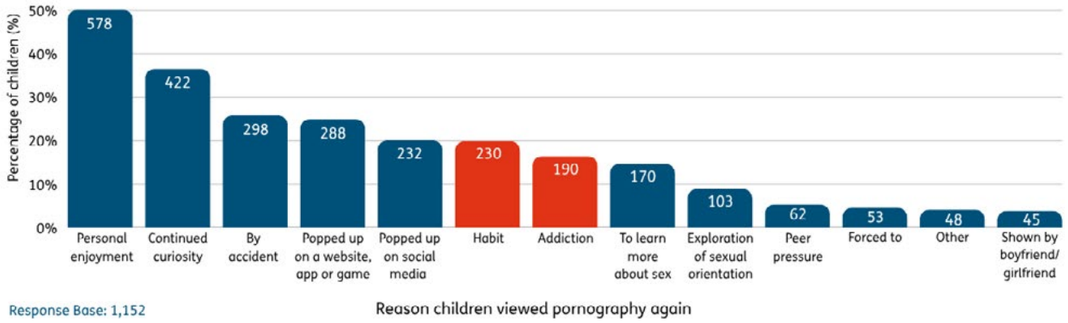
Reasons for Viewing

Chart 2: Main reasons children first viewed pornography
(Number of children is shown within bar)



Almost half of children came across pornography by accident (48%, 714), and over a quarter (27%, 401) first saw it because it popped up on a website or app they were using.

Chart 3: Main reasons children view pornography again
(Number of children is shown within bar)



Substantial gender differences emerged in children's reasons for repeatedly viewing pornography. Girls are more likely to have only viewed pornography once (30% females vs 19% males). Boys were substantially more likely than girls to cite personal enjoyment (58% vs. 32%), habit (23% vs. 11%) and addiction (20% vs. 8%) as reasons for continued viewing. By contrast, girls were more likely to describe repeat exposure as accidental (34% vs. 21%) or as content that appeared on websites, apps or platforms they were already using (58% vs. 37%). Curiosity remained a commonly reported reason across all groups. These findings suggest that repeated pornography exposure may occur through different pathways for different groups of children, highlighting the importance of both preventative education and wider online safety measures.

Frequency of Pornography Use

77% (1,152) of children who have seen pornography once, go on to look again.

Of those who looked again, we asked how regularly they viewed pornography:

- Around **1 in 12** (8%, 91) view pornography **several times a day**.
- Around **1 in 7** (14%, 162) view pornography **at least daily**.
- Over **1 in 3** (38%, 437) view pornography **at least weekly**.
- Over **half** (56%, 640) view pornography **at least monthly**.

Habits and Addiction

Our findings suggest that for many children, the challenges associated with pornography exposure remain substantial, particularly where exposure occurs at a younger age or develops into repeated use.

- **19%** (71) of female repeat viewers report having a habit or addiction.
- **42%** (318) of male repeat viewers report having a habit or addiction.

Children who reported having a pornography habit or addiction reported lower life satisfaction (5.24 vs. 5.81), happiness (5.19 vs. 5.67) and feelings that life was worthwhile (5.19 vs. 5.75) compared to those who did not report a habit or addiction.◊

The number of repeat viewers reporting a pornography habit or addiction rose to **36%** (420), up from 30% in 2024-5

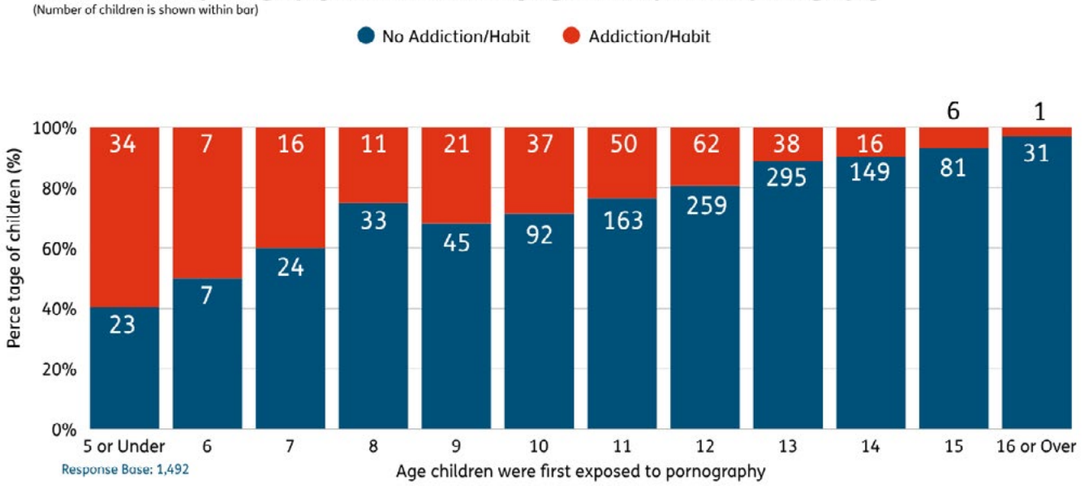
The Harms of Early Exposure

Age of first exposure also appeared to matter. Children who reported a pornography habit or addiction first encountered pornography at a significantly younger age than those who did not. More than half of those with a habit or addiction first viewed pornography aged 11 or younger (59%, 176), and their average age of first exposure was 10, compared with 12 among those who did not report a habit or addiction. ◊

Children first exposed to pornography aged 11 or younger were more than twice as likely to report a pornography habit or addiction as those first exposed aged 12 or over (31% vs. 13%).◊

Chart 4: Rate of pornography addiction/habit by age first exposed to pornography

(Number of children is shown within bar)



Earlier exposure was also associated with poorer wellbeing. **Children first viewing pornography before the age of 12 reported lower average life satisfaction** (5.23 vs. 5.98), happiness (5.10 vs. 5.85) and feelings that the things they do in life are worthwhile (5.15 vs. 5.93) than those who first viewed pornography later. [3]

Children first viewing pornography at age 11 or younger reported lower average life satisfaction

Perceptions of harm

Of those that had seen pornography at least once:

- **19%** (418) said they had found it to be **harmful** to them
- **8%** (119) found it **helpful**
- **7%** (99) found it **both** helpful and harmful
- **39%** (580) found it **neither** helpful nor harmful

Boys are nearly twice as likely as girls to describe pornography as helpful (Male: 9%,83; Female 5%, 27)

[3] ONS wellbeing is measured using four self-reported indicators on a scale from 0 to 10. Children are asked how satisfied they are with their life overall (life satisfaction), how happy they felt yesterday (happiness), to what extent they feel the things they do in life are worthwhile (worthwhileness), and how anxious they felt yesterday (anxiety). Higher scores indicate better wellbeing for life satisfaction, happiness and worthwhileness, whilst higher scores indicate greater anxiety on the fourth category.

Wider research supports our findings regarding the relationship between early pornography exposure and wellbeing. Taylor (2018) argues that adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to the influence of pornography because puberty is a formative period for sexual development, while the combination of sexual arousal and reward-based learning can reinforce strong neural associations and behavioural patterns.[4]

Wider Research

Similarly, *The Naked Truth Project*'s recent report brought together findings from a range of research studies and found strong evidence that pornography use is associated with a variety of mental health harms, including "anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, body dissatisfaction and broader psychological distress." [5] The report also found that early exposure to pornography was associated with higher levels of anxiety and stress later in life.

Importantly, our findings suggest that the effects associated with early pornography exposure may not be confined to adulthood. Differences in wellbeing are already observable whilst many children are still navigating adolescence.

Taken alongside the wider evidence base, these findings highlight the value of early support and intervention.

If children are encountering pornography before they have developed a secure understanding of healthy relationships, parents, schools and wider society all have a role to play in helping them make sense of what they have seen.

Section 2, '**THE RESPONSE'**, explores the evidence-informed approaches that may help protect children from harm and support healthy development when exposure occurs, as well as preventing that initial exposure in the first place.



[4] Taylor, E. (2018), Pornography as a Public Health Issue, p. 21.
[5] Naked Truth Project (2026), Pornography is Causing a Public Health Crisis, p. 6.

Thematic Analysis:

We carried out open-coded thematic analysis on the qualitative aspects of our School Survey. The following themes emerged from a question that asked children who had seen pornography why it had been either helpful or harmful for them, if they told us it had been so.

1) Addiction, Loss of Control and Habit Formation

The strongest theme that emerged from children was that of addiction, with many students volunteering this theme without prompting, suggesting that many young people themselves perceive pornography as something that can become difficult to control. They recognised escalating use over time, loss of self-control, compulsive use and difficulty stopping.

Responses that demonstrate this include:

"The addiction is very easy to grow and very hard to lose" – Male, Year 13

"Harmful because it has become a big addiction and I want it to stop" – Male, Year 11

"I just can't stop" – Other, Year 9

2) Negative Impact on Mental Health and Wellbeing

Students frequently linked pornography use to emotional distress. Even among those who reported benefits – such as sexual satisfaction – many simultaneously described guilt, shame or concerns about their mental wellbeing. Students described feeling "dirty" or struggling with anxiety and depression.

"It has given me poor mental health" – Male, Year 10

"Cause it has messed me up mentally" – Female, Year 9

"It caused me to fall into a state of poor mental health and depression" – Male, Year 12

3) Unrealistic Expectations of Sex, Bodies and Relationships

Students demonstrated a sophisticated awareness that pornography is often unrealistic. Many felt it had influenced their assumptions about appearance, behaviour, relationships and sexual expectations.

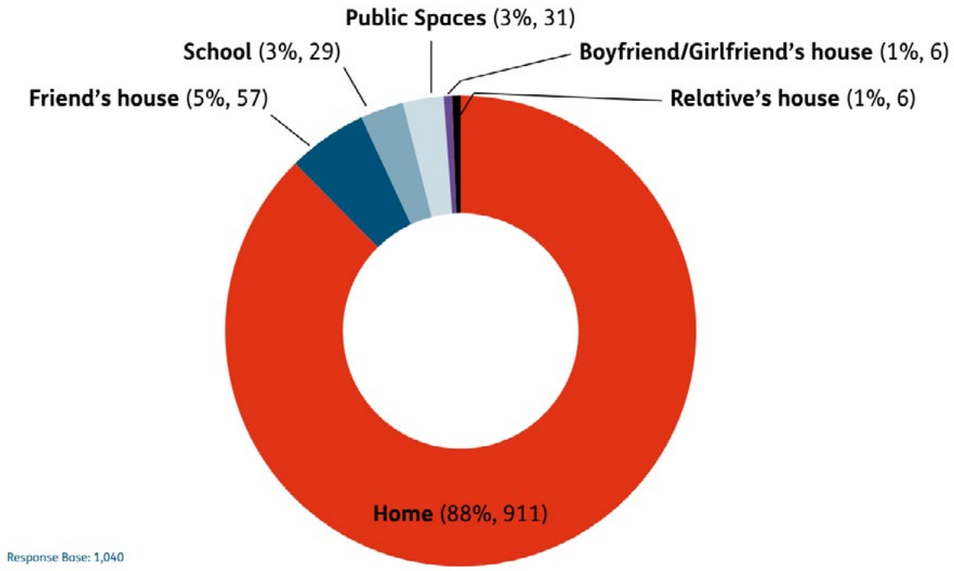
"It ruins [sic] perspective of sex" – Male, Year 12

"Helpful so that I can goon but harmful because it definitely ruined how I pictured girls bodies" Female, Year 10

Other themes that were observed included objectification of women, changed views of others, learning about sex, sexuality exploration and identity development, unwanted exposure, stress relief, relaxation and emotional regulation, disgust and trauma, time wasting, distraction and reduced motivation.

Devices, Platforms, and Virtual Private Networks

Chart 5: Where children view pornography most often



Response Base: 1,040

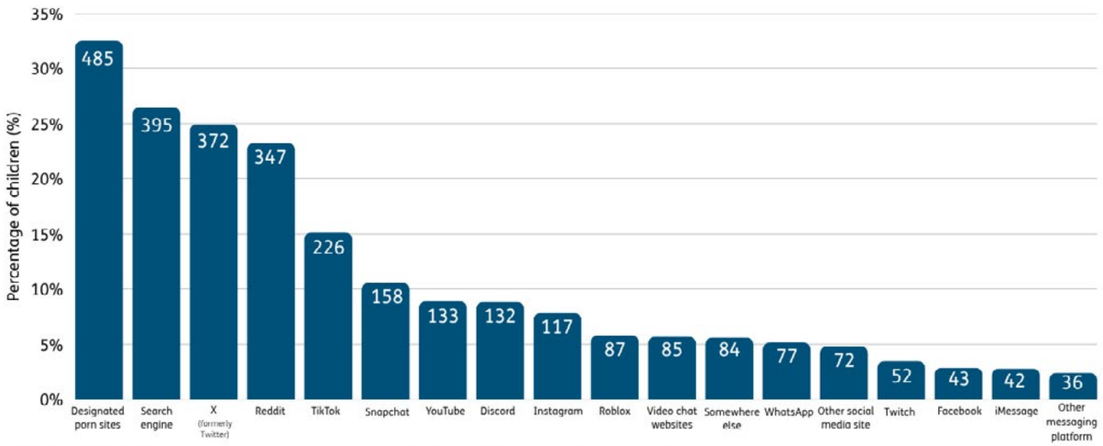
How Children Access Pornography

The overwhelming majority of children who had seen pornography told us they viewed it mainly at home (88%, 911). **80% (865) view it primarily on their phone.**

Primary platforms that children use to view pornography varied:

Chart 6: Websites or apps that children use to watch pornography

(Number of children is shown within bar)



Response Base: 1,492

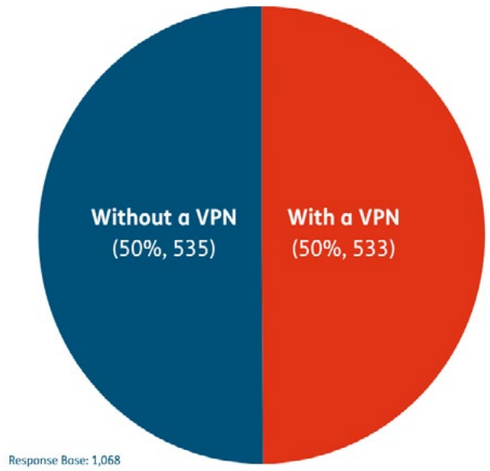
Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)

The introduction of highly effective age-assurance requirements under the Online Safety Act represents a significant step towards reducing children's access to pornography. However, our findings also point towards a challenge faced by any technology-based solution: some children actively seek ways around restrictions.

One example is the use of virtual private networks (VPNs), which can be used to disguise a user's location and, in some circumstances, bypass content restrictions of age checks.

For children who have seen pornography more than once, 50% (533) report using a VPN when doing so.

Chart 7: Children watching pornography with a VPN



Boys are substantially more likely to use a VPN. Among repeat viewers 57% (410) of males reported using a VPN, compared to 35% (112) of females.

Among children who identified addiction or habit, 58% (172) reported using a VPN when accessing pornography, compared with 30% (361) of those who did not identify addiction or habit.

In other words, children reporting more regular patterns of pornography use are also more likely to report using technology that is known as a way to bypass age restrictions.

Our qualitative research supports this. In a focus group discussion, students shared about the age verification measures reducing access to pornography. While some noted that it is harder to access pornography, others promptly shared that the restrictions were not without circumvention:

"It's really simple to bypass [the age restrictions], anyone with three braincells could bypass it."

"If you've grown up with the internet, you've grown up with all this knowledge about different things like firewalls, VPNs, ad blockers and everything like that. So you're automatically going to think of ways of bypassing it."
– Year 12 Male

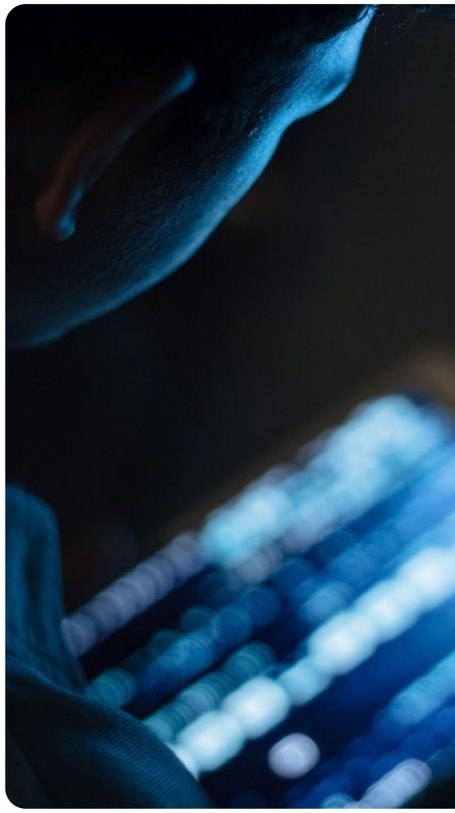
> "It's really simple to bypass [the age restrictions], anyone with three braincells could bypass it."

Research published by Internet Matters in 2026 suggests that VPN use has not dramatically increased following the introduction of age-verification requirements under the Online Safety Act.[6] The report also notes that, while age checks are now widespread, many families perceive them as relatively easy to circumvent.

The Children's Commissioner has previously warned that children may circumvent the Online Safety Act through VPN use and has urged that the government to explore measures to prevent VPN-based circumvention of age-assurance requirements, an exploration we hope the findings of this report will further emphasise the need for.[7] Similarly, Ofcom's report published in October 2026 recognised that no age assurance method is completely robust against circumvention by children.[8]

These findings highlight the complexity of relying on technical restrictions alone. Age assurance and platform regulation have an important role to play in reducing children's access to harmful content. However, technological safeguards are most effective when combined with informed parenting, digital literacy and relationships education that equips children to understand and navigate the online environments they encounter.

Section 2, '**THE RESPONSE**', explores these protective factors in greater detail.



From Passive Viewing to Active Participation

To explore whether pornography exposure remains a passive experience or begins to shape behaviour, we asked children who had viewed pornography more than once whether they had ever acted out something they had seen in pornography with another person.

Whilst this finding alone cannot tell us what behaviour was acted out, whether it was harmful, or what motivated it, it raises important questions about the role pornography may play in shaping children's understanding of sex, relationships and intimacy.

One in five (20%, 294) of children who have seen pornography, report acting out something they have seen in pornography with another person

[6] Freeman-Tayler, K. (2025), New data shows no rise in children's VPN Use After the Introduction of Online Age Checks
[7] Children's Commissioner for England (2025), Sex is Kind of Broken Now: Children and Pornography, p. 38.
[8] Ofcom (2026), Rapid assessment of highly effective age assurance at 16, p. 3.

We asked children what their reasons for acting out something they've seen in pornography with another person were. Of those who had:

- **57%** (169) did so **out of curiosity**.
- **52%** (154) did so for **their mutual enjoyment**.
- **28%** (83) did so for **their personal enjoyment**.
- **10%** (29) felt **pressured** to do so by the **other person**.

16% (13) of girls who had acted out something they had seen in porn, did so because they felt pressured to do so by the other person, notably higher than the 7% (14) of boys who said the same.

Our wider analysis identified a number of significant relationships associated with acting out pornography. Early exposure appears particularly relevant. More than half (56%, 166) of children who reported acting out pornography first viewed pornography before the age of 12. ◊ This adds to a broader pattern observed throughout the report, suggesting that earlier exposure to pornography is associated with a range of later experiences, both individual and relational.

Children who reported acting out pornography were also more likely to report pornography habit or addiction. ◊ More than one-third (39%, 114) identified pornography use as a habit or addiction, compared with around one in seven children (15%, 184) who had not acted out pornography. This suggests that acting out pornography may be more common amongst children reporting more established patterns of pornography use.

More than half (56%, 166) of children who reported acting out pornography first viewed pornography before the age of 12

"a lot of it is actually just abuse..."

The Children's Commissioner has warned that the pornography children encounter online is now frequently violent in nature

Our qualitative research offers some insight into why this may occur. Some students described turning to pornography to learn about sex or understand what they believed they were expected to do within a sexual relationship. If pornography is functioning as a source of sexual information, it is perhaps unsurprising that some young people report acting out what they have seen.

However, this should also be a cause for concern.

The Children's Commissioner has warned that the pornography children encounter online is now frequently violent in nature.[9] Research has identified widespread depictions of aggression, coercion and degrading behaviour within mainstream pornography, suggesting as much as 88% of pornographic videos contain physical aggression. More recent investigations have also highlighted the availability of increasingly extreme content, including material depicting non-consensual acts and sexual violence.[10]

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

The significance of this extends beyond pornography itself. Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) has become a major policy priority across the UK, with growing concern about the normalisation of misogyny, sexual aggression and harmful attitudes towards women and girls.[11] Government reviews of online harms have increasingly highlighted the role played by misogynistic online spaces and 'manosphere' content in shaping young people's attitudes towards gender, relationships and power.

Pornography should not be viewed in isolation from these wider concerns. Whilst pornography alone cannot explain harmful attitudes or behaviours, the normalisation of aggression, domination and sexual entitlement within pornography sits alongside many of the same issues currently being examined within the wider VAWG agenda.

The concerns are not limited to violence. Pornography commonly depicts behaviours that ignore or minimise safer-sex practices, including condom use.[12] As a result, researchers have argued that pornography may contribute to unrealistic expectations about sexual relationships, sexual performance, consent and sexual health. When pornography functions as a form of sex education, these messages may become particularly influential.

This raises an important safeguarding question: if pornography is helping to shape young people's understanding of relationships and sexual behaviour, what exactly are children being taught?

The next section explores one possible manifestation of this concern: children's experiences of sexual harassment within UK schools.



[9] Children's Commissioner for England (2025) "Sex is Kind of Broken Now: Children and Pornography", p. 38.
[10] Research on the increasing trend for 'sleep' porn demonstrates the way that the abuse of primarily women whilst they are unconscious has increased in demand. Vandoorne, S. et al. (2026), Exposing a Global 'Rape Academy', CNN.
[11] Crown Prosecution Service (2025), Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2025-2030.
[12] Tokunaga, R.S. et al. (2020), Is Pornography Consumption a Risk Factor for Condomless Sex?

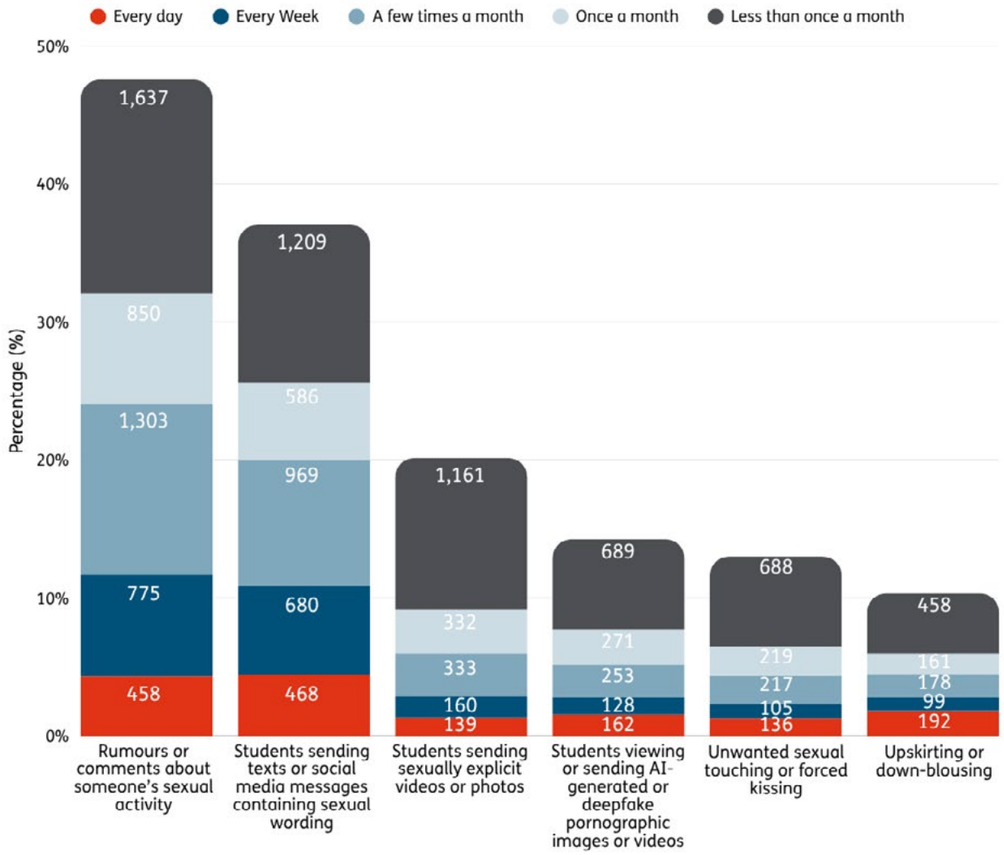
Sexual Harassment

Not every child would necessarily describe all the behaviours explored in this section as 'sexual harassment'. However, safeguarding experts, including Professor Simon Hackett, alongside organisations such as Ofsted, have consistently highlighted the importance of recognising a broad spectrum of harmful sexual behaviours, ranging from sexual rumours and comments to image-based abuse, unwanted touching and other behaviours that may become normalised amongst peers.[13]

For this reason, rather than asking children whether they had experienced "sexual harassment", we asked about a range of specific behaviours.

Chart 8: Frequency of children's observations of harmful sexual behaviour in school

(Number of children is shown within bar)



Response Base: 10,567

Harmful sexual behaviour

The findings suggest that many children continue to encounter harmful sexual behaviours as part of their school environment.

[13] Hackett, S. (2014), Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours: Research Review.
[14] Ofsted (2021), "Ofsted: culture change needed to tackle 'normalised' sexual harassment in schools and colleges".

Sexual rumours and comments were the most commonly observed behaviour. Nearly one-third of students (32%, 3,386) reported witnessing these behaviours at least monthly, including almost one in eight (12%, 1,233) who saw them every week or every day.

Sexual texts and messages were also common. More than one in four children (26%, 2,703) reported seeing these at least monthly, whilst over one in ten (11%, 1,148) witnessed them every week or every day. It is important to note that most of the responses were collected before the enforcement of the UK's new smartphone ban in schools in June 2026.

Other behaviours, whilst less common, remained far from rare. Around one in eleven students (9%, 964) reported seeing explicit photos or videos at least monthly. Similar proportions reported regularly encountering AI-generated deepfakes (8%, 814), unwanted touching or kissing (7%, 677), and upskirting or down-blousing (6%, 630).

Notable gender differences emerged across almost all forms of harmful sexual behaviour. Girls consistently reported witnessing harmful behaviours more frequently than boys, particularly sexual rumours and comments (38% vs. 30%), sexual texts and messages (35% vs. 24%), and upskirting or down-blousing (18% vs. 8%). Respondents selecting "Other" generally reported the highest levels of exposure across several categories, although the smaller sample size means these findings should be interpreted with caution. Together, these findings suggest that harmful sexual behaviour remains a visible part of many children's social environments, particularly for girls and gender-diverse young people.

Normalisation of Sexual Harassment

These findings extend beyond individual incidents.

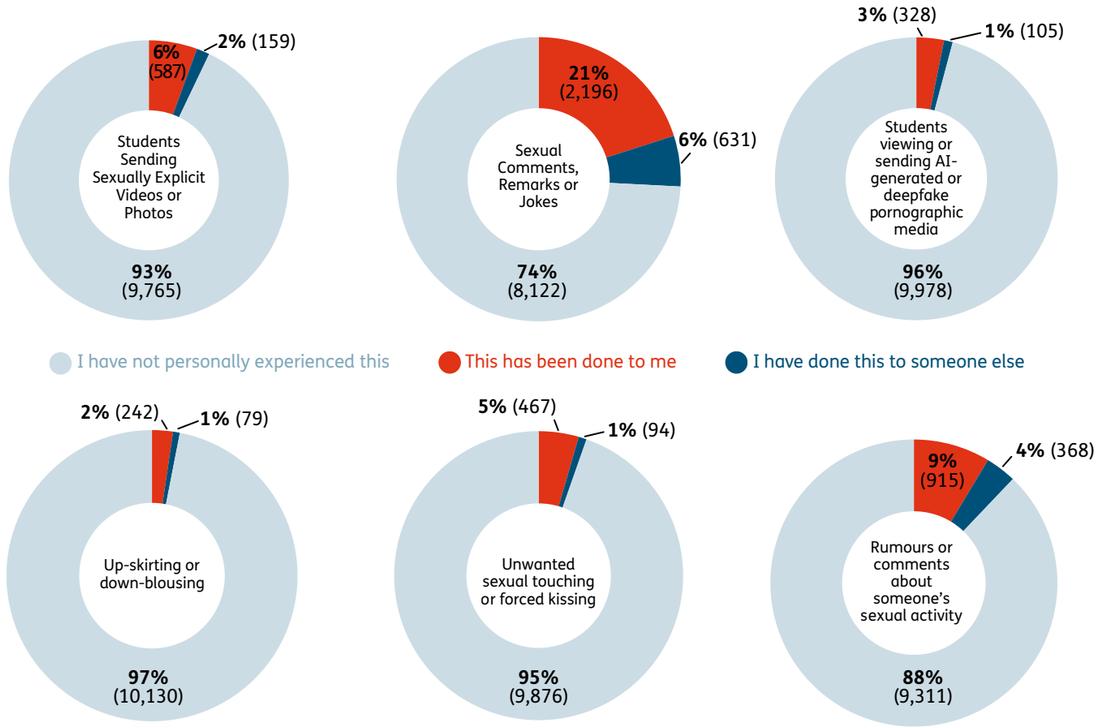
In recent years, growing attention has been paid to the relationship between harmful sexual behaviour, misogyny and the wider Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) agenda. The Children's Commissioner, Ofsted and successive government reviews have highlighted concerns that some young people are growing up in environments where sexual harassment is increasingly viewed as normal or inevitable.[14]

Where these behaviours become normalised, there is a risk that boundaries, consent, and mutual respect can become blurred.



Personal Experience of Sexual Harassment

Chart 9: Children's personal experience of harmful sexual behaviour



Response base varied because questions were not compulsory. Students could select both 'this has been done to me' *and* 'I have done this to someone else', which is why number totals within the pie chart also vary.

Children who reported experiencing harmful sexual behaviour consistently recorded poorer wellbeing outcomes than those who had not.

Children who had selected 'this has been done to me' for one or more of the above harmful sexual behaviours recorded poorer wellbeing across all four ONS measures, with lower life satisfaction, happiness and feelings that life is worthwhile, alongside higher anxiety levels.

The relationship was even more pronounced amongst children who reported experiencing unwanted sexual touching or forced kissing. Average life satisfaction was 4.82 among students reporting this experience, compared with 6.35 among those who did not. Happiness was similarly lower (4.85 vs. 6.18), as was the extent to which students felt the things they did in life were worthwhile (4.84 vs. 6.25). Average anxiety was substantially higher 5.00 vs. 3.59).

The consistency of the relationship suggests that harmful sexual behaviour should not be dismissed as a normal or harmless part of adolescence, but rather as a serious safeguarding concern that is having a notable impact on wellbeing.

Thematic Analysis:

Open-coded thematic analysis revealed the following key themes when we asked children if they had any more comments to share on harmful sexual behaviour taking place in their school. The key themes were:

1) Sexual Jokes, Rape Jokes and Sexualised Language are Normalised

The strongest theme was that sexual jokes and comments are common aspects of school culture, with students describing sexual noises, suggestive banter, jokes about sexual acts and rape jokes as frequent occurrences.

Responses that demonstrate this include:

"Lots of students make jokes about rape, abuse, Epstein files..." – Female, Year 7

"sexual jokes are normalised but still make people uncomfortable" – Female, Year 9

"seen someone put hand up girls skirt" – Male, Year 8

"Someone said she would rape me in my sleep and kiss me. Someone also stroked my back sexually when I said I don't want to be touched" – Female, Year 9

2) Unwanted Touching and Physical Harassment

A substantial number of students described unwanted physical contact including groping, forced hugging, touching bottoms, touching thighs, touching underneath skirts and inappropriate contact in changing rooms.

3) Image-Based Abuse and Nude Sharing

Many responses referenced the sharing of sexual images, which the following section will explore further. Examples included nudes being leaked, pornographic stickers being shared and explicit content being shown to peers.

"many people get sent nudes on social media" – Female, Year 9

"a video of her got leaked and everyone knows about it" – Female, Year 10

A Pattern of Overlapping Harms and Vulnerabilities

One of the clearest findings from our analysis was the extent to which harmful sexual behaviour overlapped with other experiences explored throughout this report.

Children who reported carrying out unwanted sexual touching or kissing towards another person were significantly more likely to have viewed pornography. ◊ Over half (54%, 42 students) of those who had engaged in unwanted sexual touching or kissing reported having viewed pornography.

Children who reported carrying out unwanted sexual touching or kissing towards another person were significantly more likely to have viewed pornography.

Similarly, children who reported carrying out unwanted sexual touching or kissing were also significantly more likely to: ◊

- **Have first viewed pornography before the age of 12**
  (76% of those who carried out unwanted sexual touching and kissing also viewed pornography before the age of 12, compared with 36% who didn't carry out unwanted sexual touching and kissing)
- **Report pornography habit or addiction**
  (69% vs. 16%)
- **Have acted out something they had seen in pornography**
  (58% vs 17%)
- **Have sent and received nude images**
  (23% vs. 2%) and (55% vs. 12%)
- **Have experienced sexual harassment themselves**
  (71% vs. 27%)
- **Have experienced unwanted touching or kissing themselves**
  (33% vs. 4%)
- **Have experienced AI-generated or deepfake images of themselves**
  (31% vs. 3%)

Though not able to demonstrate causation, these findings do suggest that harmful sexual behaviour may form part of a wider cluster of online experiences, relationship experiences and safeguarding vulnerabilities.

Rather than existing as isolated issues, pornography exposure, image sharing, harassment and harmful sexual behaviour often appear interconnected within children's lives.

Confidence Reporting Harmful Sexual Behaviour

58%
didn't feel confident to report experiencing sexual harassment to school staff

This finding has important safeguarding implications. Effective safeguarding relies not only on children knowing how to report concerns, but on feeling safe and confident enough to do so. How schools respond is therefore crucial to building trust and creating a culture where all students feel listened to, supported and able to speak out when something is wrong.

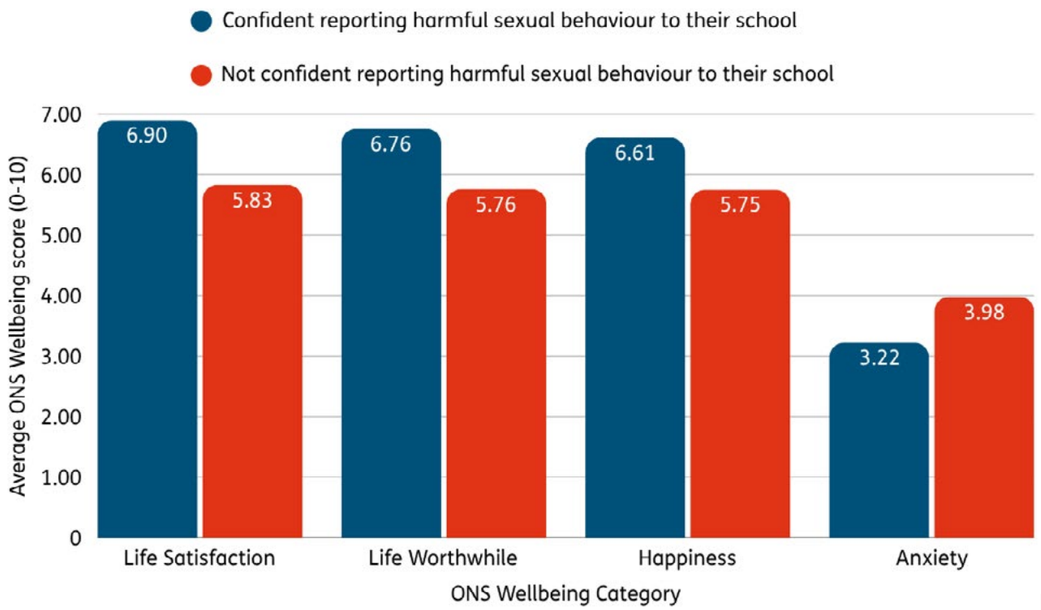
Gender differences emerged in children's confidence reporting harmful sexual behaviours. **Girls were less likely than boys to report confidence in telling school staff if they had personally experienced sexual harassment** (38% vs. 48%), whilst children selecting "Other" reported the lowest confidence of all groups (29%).

Across all genders, children were more willing to tell a parent or carer than a member of school staff, suggesting that families continue to play a critical safeguarding role.

Children also reported greater confidence reporting behaviours they witnessed than behaviours they experienced themselves, highlighting the additional barriers that may exist when concerns are personal.

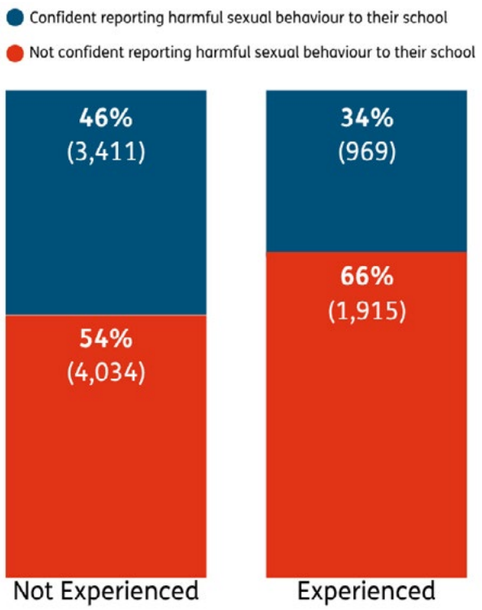
Children's confidence in seeking support is closely associated with their wider sense of safety and wellbeing.

Chart 10: Correlation between children's wellbeing and their confidence in reporting harmful sexual behaviour to their school



Response Base: 10,635

Student's confidence in reporting sexual harassment was also correlated with their personal experience of sexual harassment

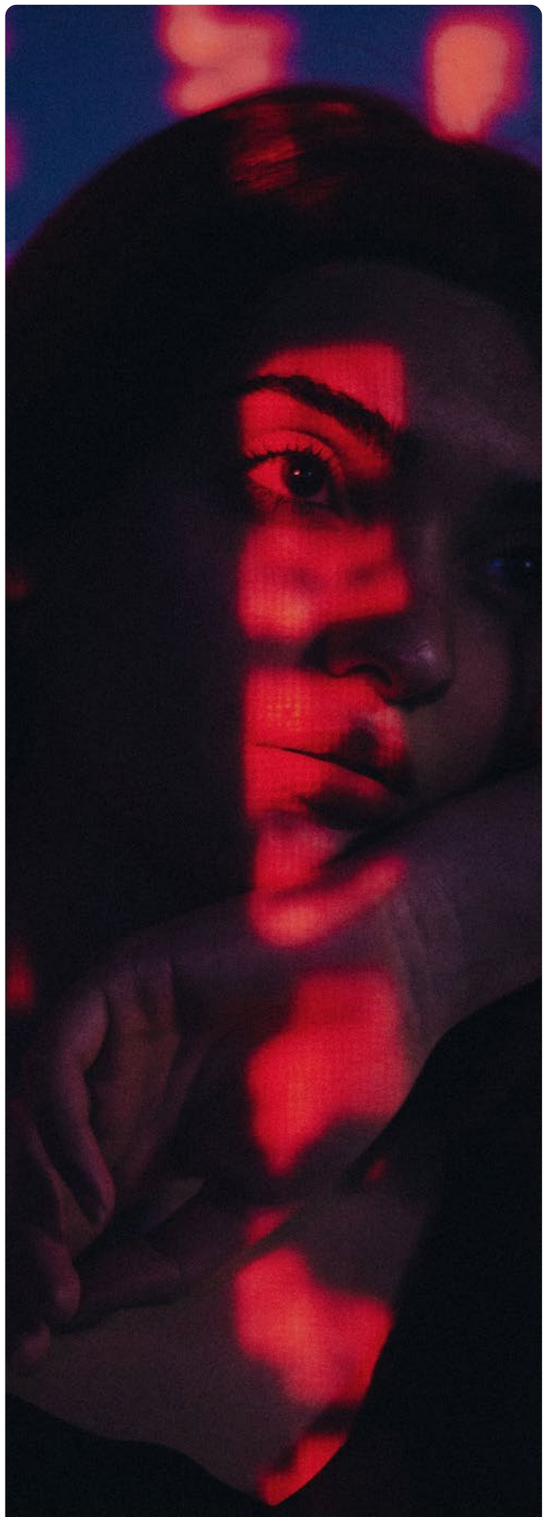


This presents a challenge for schools. The children most in need of support may not always be the most likely to seek it.

At the same time, our analysis suggests that school culture matters. Children who felt their school would take concerns seriously generally reported better wellbeing outcomes than those who lacked confidence in their school's response.

This should provide grounds for optimism. Whilst harmful sexual behaviour remains a significant challenge, children's experiences suggest that trusted adults, effective reporting systems and a culture that take concerns seriously may all play an important role in mitigating its impact.

Section 2: '**THE RESPONSE'**, explores this further.



Nude Sharing

The rapid growth of smartphones, social media and private messaging has transformed how young people communicate and explore relationships. Whilst image-sharing forms a normal part of online life for many, sexual image-sharing presents unique safeguarding risks for children and young people.

Encouragingly, awareness of the law remains high. This year, 84% (8,911) of students knew that it is illegal to share a nude or partially nude image of a person under the age of 18. This represents a slight decrease from last year's figure of 85%, but continues to suggest that most young people are aware of the legal framework surrounding nude image-sharing.

This awareness matters when interpreting the findings that follow. Greater understanding of the legal consequences of sharing nude images may contribute to safer online behaviour and reduced image sharing. Equally, it is possible that legal awareness may influence children's willingness to disclose their own behaviour in a survey. As a result, the figures reported here should be interpreted carefully.

Sending Nude Images:

- **5%** (30) of those who sent a nude, uploaded it to an online platform.
- This year, **3%** (267) of children reported sending a nude image, compared with 4% last year.

3%
(267) had sent a nude image.

Although this represents a relatively small proportion of students, each percentage point represents real children navigating decisions about relationships, trust, privacy and consent in an increasingly digital world.

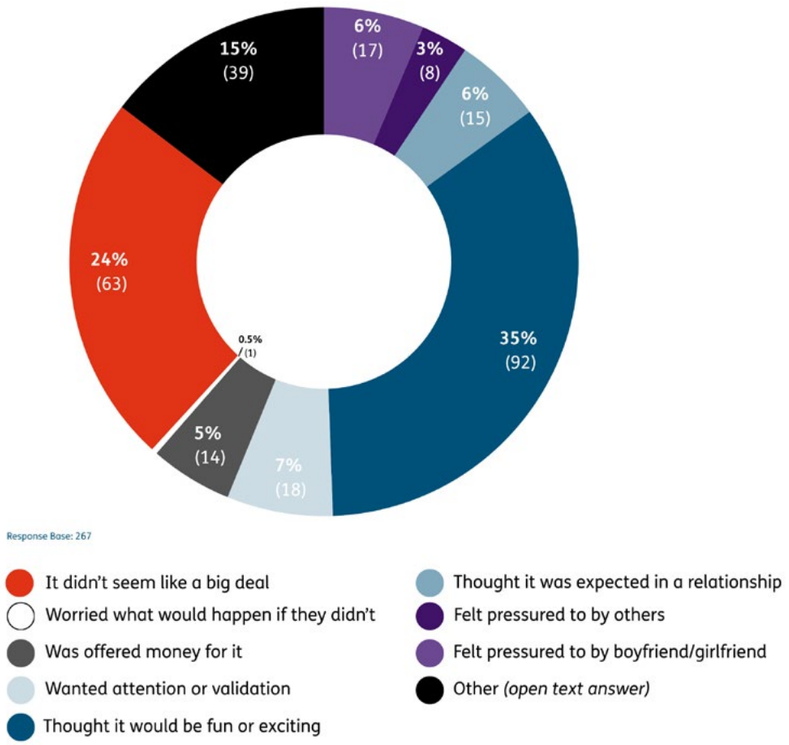
11%
(70) of those who sent a nude, sent a nude to a stranger.

The vast majority of children reported never sending a nude image. However, for those who did, the circumstances were often complex and varied. While some images were shared within existing relationships or friendships, others were shared with people not known offline, increasing the potential safeguarding risks faced by those children.

Our analysis found that children who had sent a nude image were significantly more likely to report a range of other behaviours explored throughout this report, including pornography exposure, pornography habit or addiction, and harmful sexual behaviour.

For example, children who reported carrying out unwanted sexual touching or kissing towards another person were ten times more likely to report having sent a nude image (23%, 10 vs. 2%, 236). Similarly, children who reported acting out something they had seen in pornography were substantially more likely to have sent a nude image (37%, 118 vs. 7%, 103).

Chart 12: Reason children sent a nude image



The reasons young people share sexual images are often more complex than public discussions sometimes suggest. Children's motivations may include relationship expectations, curiosity, pressure, or a combination of factors. For this reason, image-sharing should be understood as a safeguarding issue requiring education and support, rather than solely as a disciplinary concern.

We recognise and welcome the government's latest proposal for device-based restriction to prevent children from sharing nude images. Our upcoming sections, however, address a range of concerns we have following discussions with other organisations and experts, particularly around how rigorously this will be implemented, when other factors are at play.

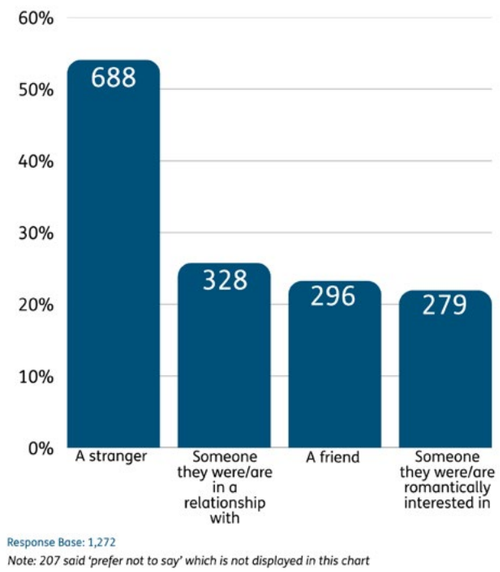
Receiving Nude Images

Whilst relatively few children reported sending a nude image, a considerably larger proportion reported receiving one. We do not ask the age of the person whose nude they received.

This year 12% (1,272) of children reported receiving a nude image, down from 18% in the previous year.

12%
(1,272) received a nude image

Chart 13: Who children received a nude image from



Response Base: 1,272
Note: 207 said 'prefer not to say' which is not displayed in this chart

The reduction is encouraging and may reflect a combination of greater legal awareness, changing online behaviours, increased safeguarding efforts, or wider digital policy changes.

Girls were more than twice as likely as boys to report receiving nude images from strangers (49%, 501 vs. 24%, 174), highlighting important safeguarding concerns around unsolicited image-sharing.

Children who reported acting out pornography were twice as likely to have received a nude image (67%, 205 vs. 33%, 488). Children who reported carrying out unwanted sexual touching or kissing towards another person were more than four times as likely to have received a nude image (55%, 46 vs. 12%, 1,188).



AI-Generated and "Nudify" Images

During the period in which this research was conducted, concerns about AI-generated images and so-called "nudify" or "nudification" apps received growing attention from policymakers, campaigners and the media. Whilst direct use appeared relatively uncommon in our sample, awareness was considerably higher. Overall, 46% (4,906) of children said they knew what nudify apps were, despite many reporting that they did not personally know anyone who had used one.

Boys were more likely to report exposure to nudify apps, both through personal use and through their friendship groups

These findings suggest that AI-generated image technologies are already part of many children's awareness, even when direct use remains limited. As government endeavours to strengthen protections against AI-generated intimate image abuse, continued education on consent, image manipulation and digital safety will be essential

Children who reported sending or receiving nude images were significantly more likely to report: ◊

- Viewing pornography
- Reporting a pornography habit or addiction
- Acting out something they had seen in pornography
- Experiencing sexual harassment
- Experiencing unwanted sexual touching or kissing
- Carrying out unwanted sexual touching or kissing toward another person ◊
- Experiencing AI-generated or deepfake images



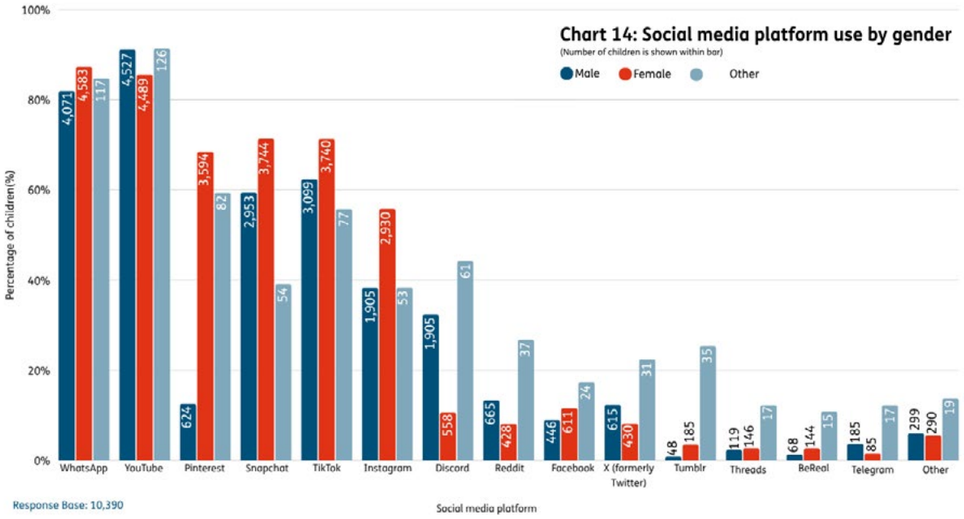
Social Media:

91%
of children use social media daily

Social media has become an almost universal feature of childhood. We found that:

- More than **9 in 10** students (91%, 9,709) reported using social media at least daily
- Almost **6 in 10** (58%, 6,143) use it several times a day or more

For many young people, social media is not an occasional activity, but a constant presence woven throughout everyday life.



The breadth of platforms used by young people highlights an important reality: children's online lives extend far beyond the handful of services that typically dominate public debate. Young people communicate, create, socialise, learn and consume content across a vast ecosystem of platforms, each with its own opportunities and risks.

The Opportunities and Challenges of Social Media

Young people's views of social media are nuanced.

While public discussion can often focus on risks, many students described clear benefits. Nearly two-thirds (65%, 6,904) agreed that social media helps them feel connected with their friends, whilst over half agreed that it allows them to show their creative side (55%, 5,796) and helps them to feel that they have friends who are there to support them (55%, 5,816).

Particularly during adolescence, digital spaces can provide opportunities to maintain friendships, explore interests, and connect with peers beyond geographical boundaries.

However, these benefits coexist alongside important challenges.

Almost one-third of students (32%, 3,356) agreed that social media makes them compare themselves with others. Around 2 in 5 (38%, 2,048) of girls reported comparing

themselves with others online, compared to less than 1 in 4 (24%, 1,246) of boys. Research has consistently linked social comparison to poorer self-esteem, body image concerns and reduced wellbeing, particularly amongst adolescents.

Although fewer students reported more serious negative experiences, 8% (890) agreed that social media makes them feel pressured to post content, whilst 8% (861) agreed that it leaves them feeling lonely or isolated.

The picture that emerges is therefore neither wholly positive nor wholly negative. Opportunities for connection and support are mingled with pressures, comparisons and experiences that may undermine wellbeing.

Social Media and Harmful Experiences

Children who reported carrying out unwanted sexual touching or kissing towards another person were more likely to use social media several times an hour (38%, 36 vs. 21%, 2,118). ◊

Similarly, regular social media use appeared more common amongst several groups already identified as experiencing higher rates of pornography exposure, nude image sharing and harmful sexual behaviour.

Smartphones and Earlier Online Access

Children are entering the online world at an increasingly young age.

Across the sample, the average reported age of receiving a first smartphone was 10 years old, with more than half of children receiving one by this age or younger. The significance of this should not be underestimated. Research from Internet Matters found that children spend an average of 25 hours online per week, with usage peaking at 29 hours amongst 16 year-olds, whilst two-fifths of children report feeling they spend too much time online.[15] Extended time online has been associated with a range of outcomes including poorer wellbeing, socialisation challenges and increased exposure to online harms.

Average age children first receive a smartphone is **10 years old**

Earlier smartphone usage was associated with several experiences explored elsewhere in this report. Children receiving their first smartphone before the age of 10 were more likely to have seen pornography and more likely to report first encountering pornography before the age of 12.

This doesn't mean smartphones themselves are harmful. Yet it does reinforce the importance of ensuring children are equipped with the knowledge, support and safeguards needed to navigate increasingly complex online environments.

[15] Internet Matters (2026), Internet Matters Pulse: Insights into children's digital lives.

Has the Online Safety Act Changed Children's Experiences?

The introduction of the **Online Safety Act** represents the most significant reform of online child protection legislation in a generation.

Dignify is proud to have supported advocacy efforts alongside other organisations within the Pornography Harms Coalition, recognising the urgent need for stronger protections for children online.

The legislation places new legal duties on platforms to assess risks to children, implement safety measures and introduce age-assurance processes where children may encounter harmful content. Importantly, these duties extend beyond traditional social media platforms and apply across a wide range of online services.

The diversity of platforms used by children in this survey reinforces the importance of that broader approach. If child protection measures are to be effective, they must work wherever children spend their time online.



The ultimate test of online safety policy is not whether legislation exists, but whether children experience meaningful improvements in their everyday lives.

With this in mind, we asked children whether they had noticed any change in the harmful or distressing content appearing on their social media feeds following the implementation of the Online Safety Act.

The findings were mixed:

- **16%** (1,668) reported noticing a positive change
- **28%** (2,949) reported noticing no change
- **39%** (4,105) were unsure whether they had noticed a change
- **16%** (1,671) said they had never seen harmful or distressing content
- **2%** (242) reported noticing an increase

Only a minority reported noticing a reduction in harmful or distressing content on their social media feeds, including 18% of boys and 14% of girls. Across all gender groups, the vast majority of children either had not noticed a change or were unsure, suggesting that many young people have yet to perceive a meaningful difference in their day-to-day online experience.

These results should be interpreted cautiously. Children were not informed in advance that they would later be asked this question and were therefore not consciously monitoring changes to their online experiences. The findings should therefore be understood as an exploratory measure of perception rather than a formal assessment of the Act's effectiveness.

58% (6,123) of children said that more should be done to prevent children from seeing pornography.

Children continue to tell us that they want stronger protections online. They want fewer harmful experiences, greater safety and greater confidence that adults are responding to their concerns.

The Online Safety Act represents an important step forward. However, our findings suggest that many children have yet to perceive a meaningful difference in their day-to-day online experiences.

This does not necessarily mean that the legislation is ineffective. Indeed, elsewhere in this report we identify several encouraging signs of progress. Lasting success will be measured not only by the introduction of regulatory safeguards, but by whether children experience fewer harms and feel better protected online.

Children need to feel heard by those who are there to protect them, and until children perceive the benefits of this legislation, it will not have achieved its full aims.

58%
(6,123) of children said that more should be done to protect children from seeing pornography



Children need to feel heard by those who are there to protect them, and until children perceive the benefits of this legislation, it will not have achieved its full aims.

HOW HAS PORNOGRAPHY BEEN HELPFUL OR HARMFUL TO YOU?

"I was too young to see that type of stuff and it was very traumatic to me because I was being made to watch it during a difficult time."

Female, Year 8

"I feel as if [watching porn] is part of growing up and calling it harmful should only be for children. Teens need it educationally and for personal enjoyment." Male, Year 9

"I feel that [porn] somewhat changed my perspective on how I view people, especially as it has influenced my perception on my ideas of what a 'good image' of sex might be." Male, Year 11

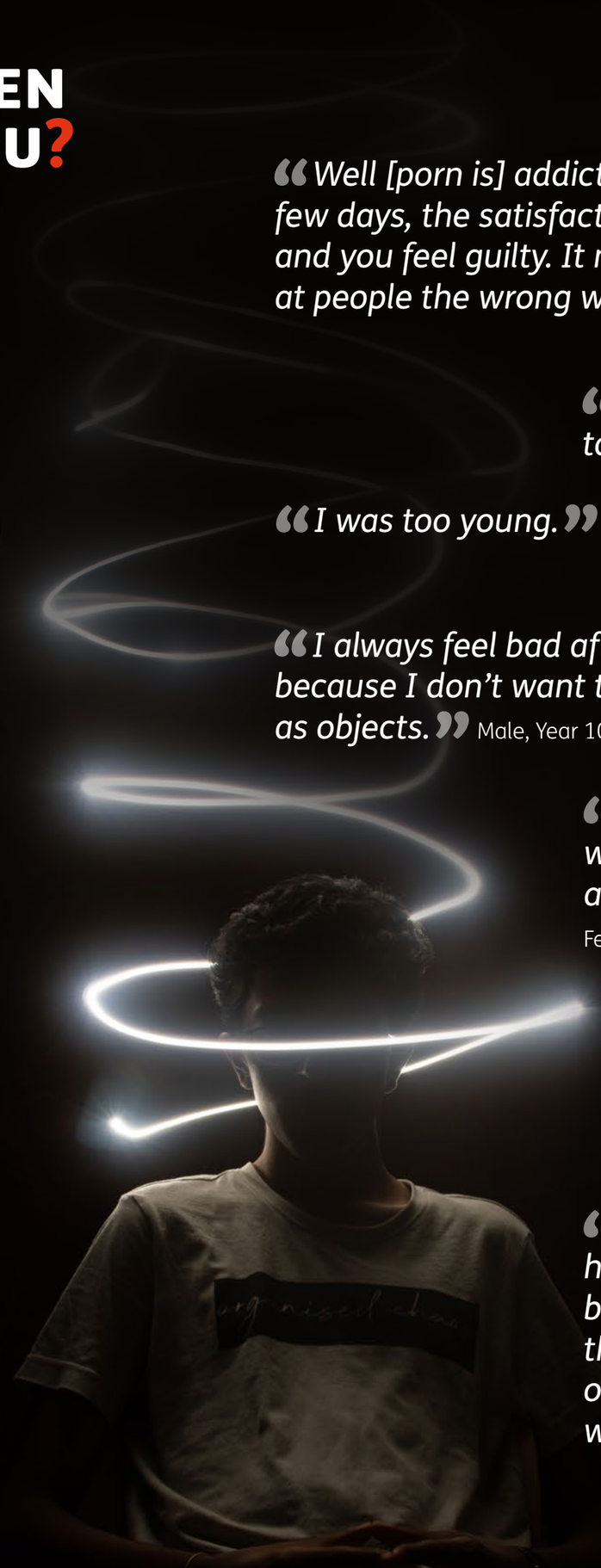
"[Porn] just made my life worse."

Male, Year 10

"Increased testosterone, better sleep, higher quality of life." Male, Year 11

"IT RUINED MY CHILDHOOD."

Female, Year 10



"Well [porn is] addicting and after a few days, the satisfaction vanishes and you feel guilty. It makes you look at people the wrong way." Male, Year 11

"[Porn] polluted my view on sex."

Male, Year 11

"I feel [porn] increases violence towards women." Male, Year 13

"I was too young." Female, Year 13

"I always feel bad after doing it because I don't want to see people as objects." Male, Year 10

"[Porn] causes shame or unhealthy habits." Female, Year 12

"[Porn] has negatively affected the way I think, view myself and my body and even the people around me."

Female, Year 10

"the addiction is very easy to grow and very hard to lose." Male, Year 13

"[I found porn] helpful because it helped me discover my interests but harmful because my partners in the past have pressured me to try out things they saw that I didn't want to." Female, Year 13

SECTION 2

THE RESPONSE

> Every school should be a safe, calm, and caring place where every child feels they belong and are seen.
>
> **Department of Education,** 2026

Throughout 'The Reality', children described the challenges of growing up in an increasingly connected world. They spoke about pornography, sexual harassment, social media, image sharing and the complex pressures that shape relationships both online and offline.

Yet one theme emerged repeatedly throughout the data: children are not simply asking for greater protection. They are asking for greater understanding, better education and trusted adults who are willing to engage in difficult conversations.

58% (6,123) said more should be done to prevent children viewing pornography. When asked what more could be done, the top four answers from those who responded were:

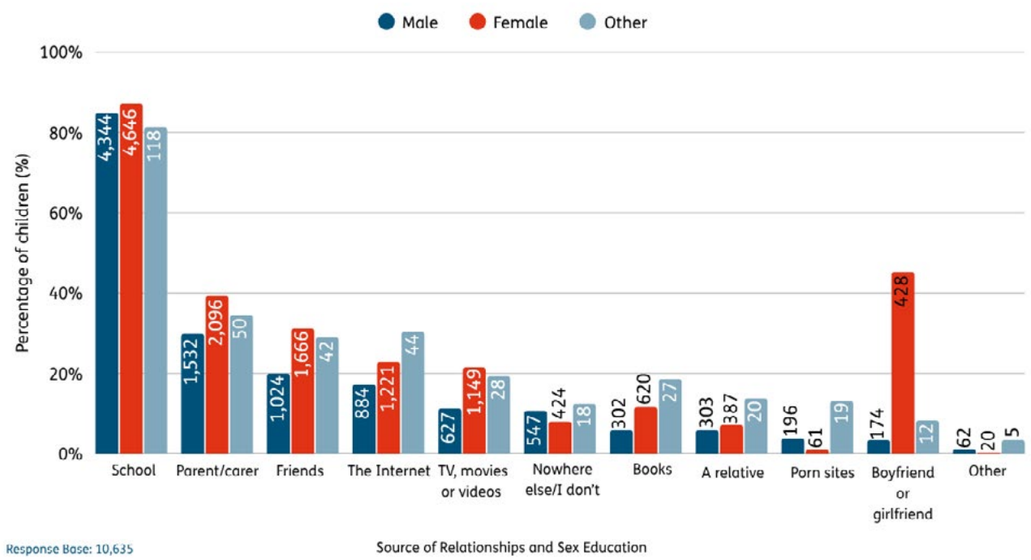
- **72%** (6,512) wanted stronger laws preventing pornography sites from showing content to under 18s.
- **70%** (6,284) wanted better filters to block pornography on social media.
- **51%** (4,572) wanted better education on the harms of pornography.
- **35%** (3,162) wanted trained, non-judgemental adults they could talk to about their experiences.

In both the survey and qualitative research, children expressed a desire for more support in understanding healthy relationships, consent, pornography, online influences and the realities of digital life. Some felt that key topics were introduced too late, whilst others reported misconceptions about pornography, sexual health and online harms.

This is where education around relationships and sex becomes critical. The chart below shows where children reported receiving sex and relationships education.

Chart 15: Source of Relationships and Sex Education by gender

(Number of children is shown within bar)



Response Base: 10,635

A Whole Community Approach

Whilst schools remain the most common source of Relationships and Sex Education, education does not take place solely in classrooms. Children learn from parents and carers, peers, social media, entertainment, the wider internet and, for some, pornography itself. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

Encouragingly, the proportion of children identifying a parent or carer as a source of Relationships and Sex Education increased from 20% in 2024-25 to 35% in 2025-26. This reinforces the important role parents and carers can play in helping children navigate an increasingly complex digital world.

Many of the challenges explored throughout this report are interconnected. Children exposed to pornography at younger ages were more likely to report pornography habit or addiction and poorer wellbeing outcomes. Experiences of pornography, nude image sharing, sexual harassment and harmful sexual behaviour frequently overlapped. Harmful behaviour is being experienced at home and at school.

Children are sharing that they would value more support in these areas:

"Teachers don't really talk about it so when children experience those types of things they feel lonely and isolated" Female, Year 7

"Schools need better education about the topic and the stigma around it needs to be broken down" Other, Year 11

In its 2021 Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges, Ofsted concluded that addressing harmful sexual behaviour requires a whole-community approach. The findings throughout this report support that conclusion.[16]

The following sections therefore explore three connected areas of response emerging from the findings:

ENGAGE Parents - strengthening the support, guidance and conversations children receive at home.

EQUIP Schools - providing education, safeguarding and safe spaces for discussion.

EMPOWER Children - giving children the knowledge, confidence and voice to be part of the solution.

[16] Ofsted (2021), Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges.

ENGAGE Parents

Why This Matters

- **88%** of children who watch pornography, do so at home
- **1 in 3** children would not feel confident reporting experiences of sexual harassment to their parents or carers
- **65%** of children would not identify a parent or carer as a source of relationships and sex education

Throughout **The Reality**, children described the shame, confusion and isolation that can often surround pornography, relationships and online harms.

One Year 10 student told us:

"I feel it has made me into a bad person. It's made me dirty."

She first encountered pornography at the age of seven whilst using a family device. Years later, she still described the experience as traumatic and confusing. When asked what would help protect children from pornography-related harms, her answer was not just stricter punishments or more rules. It was the importance of having "non-judgemental and trusted adults" she could talk to.

Parents tell us a similar story.

One parent told us that their child first encountered pornography at the age of 11 after being shown it by a friend. When the child eventually spoke about it months later, the parent felt completely unprepared.

"I didn't know what to say. I was worried I'd either overreact or say the wrong thing."

Rather than trying to have one perfect conversation, they started creating small opportunities to talk. Over time, discussions about online content grew into conversations about relationships, boundaries, self-worth and mental health.

Reflecting on the experience, the parent said:

"My child didn't need me to have all the answers. They just needed to know they could talk to me about it."

Stories like these remind us that children rarely need perfection from the adults around them. They need presence. They need somebody willing to engage, listen, ask questions and remain calm when difficult topics arise.

When parents move beyond embarrassment, children often do too. They're more likely to seek support, ask questions and develop healthy understandings of relationships if open conversations with their parents are more normal.

So what?

Healthy relationships begin long before conversations about pornography.

Parents and carers are children's first educators, and can shape children's understanding of trust, respect, boundaries and relationships from an early age. This matters because the foundations that protect children are often established long before a child encounters pornography or other online harms. Engagement does not mean having conversations about pornography with very young children. Rather, it means creating a family culture in which conversations are normal, questions are welcomed, and children know they can approach trusted adults without fear of shame or judgement.

The goal is not for parents to become experts. It is for children to grow up knowing there is a trusted adult they can turn to when something feels confusing, upsetting or harmful.

Where Can Parents Start?

Conversations

Parents and carers do not need one perfect conversation. What matters is creating opportunities for open, age-appropriate conversations throughout childhood, so that talking about relationships, feelings and experiences become normal.

Some helpful starting points can include:

- **Feelings and emotions**: helping children recognise, name and express what they are experiencing.
- **Boundaries and privacy**: understanding personal space, consent and respect for others.
- **Friendships and relationships**: recognising healthy and unhealthy behaviours.
- **Trust and help-seeking**: helping children identify which adults are safe to talk to if something feels uncomfortable, confusing or wrong.
- **Puberty and development**: helping children to understand physical and emotional changes, attraction and curiosity as they grow.
- **Digital life**: taking an active interest in children's online experiences and talking about social media, online influences, privacy settings and technologies such as VPNs, which can be used to bypass online protections.

These conversations may sometimes feel uncomfortable.[17] But creating a culture in which these conversations can be discussed helps children know that questions are welcome and that they have somewhere to turn when they encounter something they do not understand and feel unable to talk about it.

Children need adults who are willing to be brave first.

Healthy Boundaries

These conversations can sit alongside practical boundaries that support children's safety and wellbeing. Parental controls, privacy settings and agreed expectations around devices and online activity can all form part of this approach. As children grow, these boundaries evolve.

To find out about our parent resources, including our parent guide or parent and carer workshops, scan here



[17] Andiana, Y.A. and Slameto (2024), The Effectiveness of Parents' Roles in Children's Sex Education.

EQUIP Schools

Why This Matters

- 17% of children have seen pornography, which often portrays violence against women and girls
- Children who have a pornography habit or addiction are significantly more likely to carry out harmful sexual behaviour
- 1 in 3 do not feel their school takes reports of sexual harassment seriously
- More than 1,700 children did not know that sharing a nude image of a person under 18 is illegal

Policy Relevance:

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)

Schools are now expected to provide age-appropriate education that helps children understand healthy relationships, consent, online influences and safeguarding concerns. The updated guidance further emphasises the importance of helping children navigate an increasingly digital childhood.

Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)

KCSIE makes clear that safeguarding extends beyond responding to incidents. Schools are expected to take a preventative approach to issues such as sexual harassment, online harms, harmful sexual behaviour and child-on-child abuse.

Ofsted's Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges

Ofsted's 2021 review called for a whole-community approach to addressing harmful sexual behaviour and highlighted the need for schools to create cultures where children feel listened to, supported and safe.

The Department for Education White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving

The White Paper recognises that the nature of childhood is changing and that schools increasingly play a role in helping children navigate challenges arising from online life, wellbeing and relationships.

What Children Told Us

Schools are uniquely placed to support children in navigating the issues explored throughout this report.

These findings come at a time when many schools are already working hard to deliver Relationships and Sex Education, respond to safeguarding concerns and support children in navigating increasingly complex online environments. While the findings highlight signs of positive progress, they also suggest that many children would welcome more opportunities to discuss healthy relationships, consent, pornography, online influences and digital safety.[18]

Of particular concern, over half of children told us they would not feel confident reporting sexual harassment to school staff. Children who lacked confidence reporting concerns also recorded substantially poorer wellbeing scores across all four wellbeing measures.

Schools therefore play an important role in both education and safeguarding. Alongside delivering knowledge, they can help create trusted environments where children feel able to ask questions, discuss concerns and seek support.

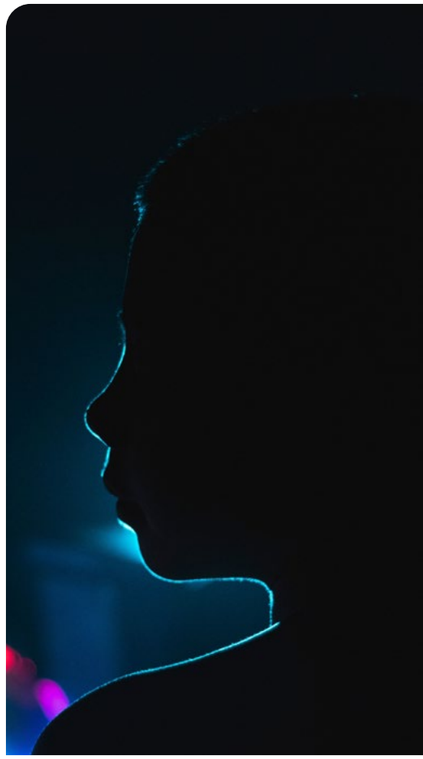
Relationships and Sex Education

Children's responses suggest that many value honest, age-appropriate education that reflects the realities they encounter both online and offline. Several participants highlighted the importance of discussing topics such as pornography, consent and healthy relationships in greater depth.

"Sex ed teachers should definitely talk more about the adverse effects of pornography use." - Male, Year 12

Many of the issues explored throughout this report are interconnected. Pornography exposure, sexual harassment, harmful sexual behaviour, nude image sharing and wellbeing concerns rarely exist in isolation. This highlights the importance of high-quality Relationships and Sex Education that helps children understand healthy relationships, consent, online influences and where to access support.

Evidence suggests that specialist external providers can complement RSE by bringing expertise, facilitating open discussion and creating memorable learning experiences that help children engage with topics that may be more difficult to explore in traditional classroom settings.[19]



[18] Setty, E. (2024), Co-designing guidance for Relationships and Sex Education to 'transform school cultures' with young people in England.
[19] Sex Education Forum (2021), External Agencies and RSE

CASE STUDY

Turning Insights Into Action and Creating Positive Change

For one secondary school, participation in the Dignify School Survey became the starting point for a longer-term commitment to relationships education, safeguarding and student voice.

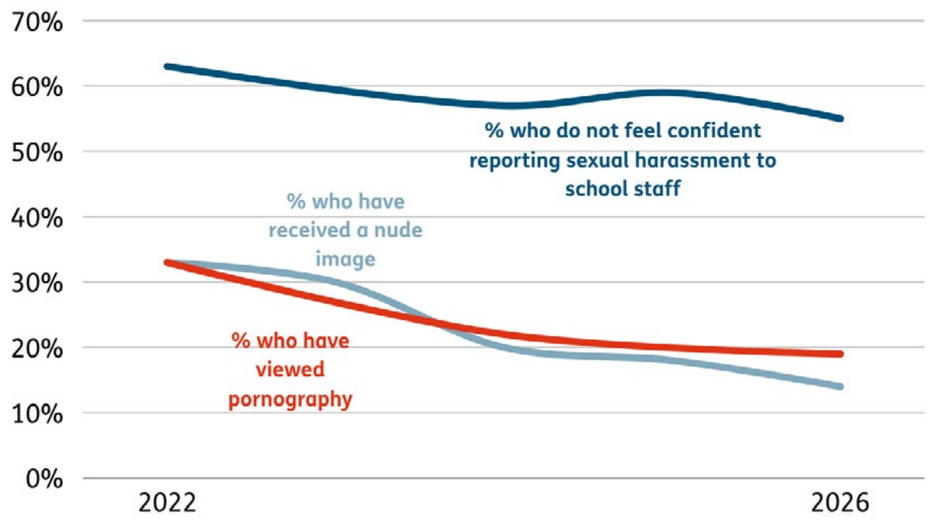
When the school first completed the survey in 2022, 33% of students reported receiving a nude image, whilst 33% reported having viewed pornography. Rather than treating these findings as a one-off snapshot, the school used the results to shape its ongoing Relationships and Sex Education and safeguarding approach. This included bringing in external professionals such as Dignify to deliver workshops around pornography, nude sharing and healthy relationships.

Over the following four years, the school continued to engage with the issues identified through the survey and monitor changes annually. By 2026, the proportion of students reporting that they had received a nude image had fallen from 33% to 14%, less than half the original level. Reported pornography exposure also fell from 33% to 19% during the same period.

At the same time, the proportion of students identifying a parent or carer as a source of relationships and sex education increased from 22% in 2022 to 37% in 2026. Confidence in reporting harmful sexual behaviour to school staff also improved, rising from 37% in 2022 to 45% in 2026.

Whilst many factors contribute to these outcomes and they mirror some of the national trends, this example demonstrates the value of an evidence-informed approach. Schools that listen to their pupils and adapt their response accordingly are better placed to create meaningful cultural change over time.

Chart 16: Progress from Case Study School



Student Voice

Children's responses highlight the importance of understanding the realities they encounter both online and offline. This could include listening to pupil voice, drawing on evidence, engaging parents and carers, and creating cultures where questions can be asked safely and conversations can happen before problems become crises.

School-level insight, including through tools such as the Dignify School Survey, can help schools better understand the experiences of their pupils and use this evidence to inform RSE, safeguarding priorities and wider support.

Staff Training

Equipping schools also means supporting staff. Children's responses suggest that relationships education is most effective when it is delivered confidently, consistently and in ways that feel relevant to their lives. As online environments continue to evolve, teachers and safeguarding teams need opportunities to develop their understanding of emerging issues, including online misogyny, pornography, AI-generated harms and image-based abuse.

Ultimately, the goal is not simply to protect children from harm, but to help them thrive. Schools play a vital role in helping children develop the knowledge, confidence and critical thinking skills needed to navigate relationships, digital life and the wider world with confidence and resilience.



To find out about our school survey, staff training or workshops and assemblies, scan here

EMPOWER Children

Why This Matters

- **58%** of children say more should be done to stop children from viewing pornography.
- **3,162** children told us they want more trusted adults they can talk to about their experiences.
- Children are growing up in a rapidly evolving digital world that presents new and complex challenges to their wellbeing, relationships and safety.

Protection and education are essential, but they are not the end of the story.

Children's responses throughout this report demonstrate considerable insight into the opportunities and challenges they face.

These findings suggest that children should not be viewed solely as recipients of protection. They are also active participants in shaping the relationships, communities and digital environments around them.

Empowering children means helping them develop the knowledge, confidence and critical thinking skills needed to make informed decisions, while supporting them to positively influence those around them.

This principle is reflected in initiatives such as Dignify's Ambassador Programme, where children help shape a Healthy Relationship School Charter, develop assemblies and lead conversations with their peers. As one participant reflected:

"The highlight was being part of something that can help make real change in the school community."

A Connected Response

Children do not develop in isolation. Their experiences are shaped by families, schools, youth leaders, sports coaches and many others within their communities. The findings throughout this report suggest that engaging parents, equipping schools and empowering children are not separate solutions, but interconnected parts of the same response.

No single organisation, school, family or policy can address these issues alone. Creating healthier relationships and safer communities requires a coordinated response across homes, schools and communities.

Children are not only at the heart of the challenges explored throughout this report. They are also at the heart of shaping the solutions.

To the 10,635 children who shared their experiences with us...

Thank you for your honesty. Thank you for your courage. And thank you for trusting us with your experiences and perspectives.

Your voices help us better understand the world you are growing up in and what needs to change so that more children can experience healthy, respectful relationships free from harm.

One thing became clear as we listened to you: you are not simply asking adults to protect you. You are asking adults to understand you.

You told us that you want better conversations. You want trusted adults you can talk to. You want support in understanding relationships, digital life and the challenges facing your generation. You want adults to take these issues seriously.

Your voices will help shape conversations in schools, homes, communities and policy discussions. They will inform future research, influence decision-makers and help adults better understand the realities of growing up today.

And thank you for helping us build a future in which more children can thrive in healthy relationships, free from the harms of pornography and sexual objectification.

We cannot wait to see what you do next.



SECTION 3

THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

> Protecting children online requires more than stronger rules. It requires effective enforcement, education, safeguarding and a willingness to listen to children's experiences.

Nicola Lee
Associate Director of Community Services

1 Establish clear government leadership on pornography-related harms

As members of the Pornography Harms Coalition, we join with partner organisations in calling for clearer government leadership on pornography-related harms.

Responsibility for these issues currently spans education, safeguarding, health, policing, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), and online safety, creating a risk of fragmented responses. Government should therefore designate a single department with responsibility for coordinating policy on pornography-related harms, monitoring emerging evidence and maintaining oversight of existing regulatory measures.

Whilst this year's findings suggest that pornography exposure may be falling, significant challenges remain. Only 16% of children reported noticing a reduction in harmful content on their social media feeds following implementation of the Online Safety Act, while 58% believe more should be done to prevent children viewing pornography.

This should include regular reviews of Online Safety Act implementation, highly effective age-assurance requirements and enforcement against non-compliant pornography providers. Alongside this, Ofcom must be supported and held accountable in its role as regulator, ensuring that protections remain effective and consistently enforced.

2 Strengthen enforcement of child-safety measures for evolving technologies

The Online Safety Act represents a significant step forward for child protection online. However, this report highlights the need for ongoing enforcement and adaptation as technologies, platforms and user behaviours continue to evolve.

Whilst pornography exposure has fallen, 50% of repeat pornography users report using a VPN when viewing pornography, highlighting the challenge of circumvention. New risks are also emerging through AI-generated sexual content, deepfakes and nudification technologies, whilst proposals for device-level protections against nude image sharing raise important questions about implementation and effectiveness.

Government and regulators should continue to monitor emerging technologies and assess whether existing protections remain fit for purpose. Similarly, cross-sector consultation should be ensured when investigating regulation of technologies such as VPNs, including potential measures that may mitigate circumvention risks.

As technology evolves, child-safety measures must evolve alongside it.

3 Make Relationships and Sex Education compulsory until age 18

Children's need for support does not end at age 16.

Throughout this report, older children continued to report pornography exposure, uncertainty around healthy relationships, nude image sharing and harmful sexual behaviour. By Year 13, one in three reported having seen pornography, demonstrating that many of the challenges explored in this report continue throughout later adolescence.

We therefore welcome the proposed Private Member's Bill led by Alistair Strathern MP, which seeks to make Relationships and Sex Education compulsory until age 18. This proposal reflects the reality that young people continue to navigate complex questions around consent, relationships, online harms and sexual behaviour throughout post-16 education and training.

Children and young people must continue to receive high-quality, age-appropriate education that equips them to understand healthy relationships, challenge harmful influences and navigate an increasingly complex digital world.

4 Increase investment in preventative education and safeguarding

The findings throughout this report strengthen the case for a preventative approach.

Children who encountered pornography at younger ages were significantly more likely to report a pornography habit or addiction, poorer wellbeing and a range of other vulnerabilities. Harmful sexual behaviour, pornography exposure, nude image sharing and sexual harassment also frequently appeared together within our dataset, highlighting the interconnected nature of these challenges.



Government should increase investment in education, safeguarding capacity and evidence-informed interventions that help children develop healthy understandings of relationships, consent, digital resilience and online safety before harmful attitudes or behaviours become established.

This should include investment in staff training, early support, specialist services and approaches that increase children's confidence in reporting concerns and seeking help when they need it. It should also support programmes that help children recognise healthy relationships, challenge harmful norms, and develop the skills needed to build respectful relationships throughout later adolescence and adulthood.

A strong preventative approach is not simply about reducing immediate harms. It is about reducing the likelihood of future exploitation, abuse, sexual violence and relationship harm. Investment in early intervention is therefore an investment in children's safety, wellbeing and future relationships.

5 Ensure children's voices remain central to future online safety reforms

One of the clearest findings in this report is that children have valuable insights into both the challenges they face and the solutions they believe are needed.

Across a survey of 10,635 children, young people consistently demonstrated nuanced understanding of the realities of growing up in a digital world and the steps they believe would better protect their generation.

When asked what more should be done to prevent children from viewing pornography:

- **72%** called for stronger laws preventing pornography sites from showing content to under-18s.
- **70%** wanted better filters to block pornography on social media.
- **51%** wanted better education on the harms of pornography.
- **35%** wanted trained, non-judgemental adults they could talk to about their experiences.

Future policy and online-safety reform should therefore be informed by children's lived experiences alongside parents, educators, safeguarding professionals, researchers and the technology sector.

Effective policy should be designed with children, not simply for them.

Methodology, Ethics, and Safeguarding

Research Design

The Dignify School Survey is a self-selected, school-based research project and a paid service offered to schools and colleges. During the 2025-26 academic year, participation costs were covered through external funding, reducing financial barriers and increasing the diversity of schools able to take part.

The survey is designed primarily to support schools in developing evidence-informed approaches to Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and safeguarding. As such, it should be understood as exploratory research rather than a hypothesis-driven academic study.

Students completed an anonymous online survey exploring experiences of social media, pornography, harmful sexual behaviour, nude image sharing, wellbeing and RSE. Responses were collected through FormAssembly, processed through Salesforce and analysed using Power BI.

Open-ended responses were analysed using thematic coding. Anonymous quotations are included throughout the report where they help explain or contextualise quantitative findings.

Sample and Demographics

A total of 10,635 students from 20 schools participated in the survey.

For readability, the term “children” is used throughout this report. Although approximately 3% of respondents were aged 18 and therefore legally adults, all participants were of school age and surveyed within an educational setting.

Participating schools were located across Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and the West Midlands. The sample included state comprehensive schools, academies, grammar schools, independent schools and specialist SEND settings, as well as both selective and non-selective schools. Mixed-sex and single-sex schools were also surveyed. School sample sizes ranged from 22 students to 1,064 students.

The sample was split by gender (50% female, 48% male, 1% other). Students from Years 7-13 participated, with Year 9 students representing the largest group (25%). The five most represented ethnic backgrounds were White British (49%), Indian (10%), Other White Background (7%), African (5%) and Pakistani (3%). 14% of respondents were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), 10% identified as having SEND, and 6% reported current or previous involvement with a social worker.

Qualitative Focus Groups

In June 2026, Dignify conducted three focus groups involving 12 students from one participating school across Years 10 and 12. Two groups were conducted separately by gender and one jointly. Themes and quotations are included where they provide additional context to survey findings.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical testing was conducted following data collection to explore relationships between variables, and any significant results have been marked with a ◊ throughout the report. Analyses included chi-Squared tests, Spearman’s Rank Correlations and independent samples t-tests.

As this was an exploratory study, findings should not be interpreted as evidence of causation. The large sample size (n = 10,635) means that relatively small differences between groups may achieve statistical significance, so results should be interpreted alongside effect sizes and practical significance.

Examples of statistically significant◊ findings included:

- Pornography viewing and receiving a nude image (44.0% vs 7.3%, $p < .001$, $\phi = .40$)
- Sexual harassment and receiving a nude image (31.8% vs 5.1%, $p < .001$, $\phi = .36$)
- Pornography habit/addiction and VPN use (57.8% vs 27.1%, $p < .001$, $\phi = .25$)
- Sending a nude image and pornography habit/addiction (39.8% vs 13.9%, $p < .001$, $\phi = .23$)

P-values indicate how likely a relationship is to have occurred by chance. Findings are generally considered statistically significant where $p < .05$, with many relationships in this dataset showing substantially stronger significance ($p < .001$). Effect sizes indicate the strength of a relationship, with phi (ϕ) values of approximately .10 considered small, .30 moderate and .50 large.

No multiple regression analyses or false discovery rate adjustments were applied. Findings should therefore be viewed as exploratory and hypothesis-generating rather than conclusive.

Future research would be valuable in testing and replicating the relationships identified within this dataset.

Research Ethics, Safeguarding and Data Protection

Consent and Anonymity

Schools were responsible for informing parents and carers in line with their usual procedures. Schools could review all survey questions in advance and, where appropriate, remove sensitive sections or provide an opt-out. Questions relating to pornography and other sensitive topics were required, with a "prefer not to say" option where appropriate. Students were free to stop the survey at any time. Questions on harmful sexual behaviour were not mandatory.

Surveys were completed with individual-level anonymity. No names, email addresses or IP addresses were collected. Limited demographic information was gathered to support analysis: age, year group, gender, ethnicity, FSM eligibility, SEND status, and current or previous involvement with a social worker. All data collection, storage and analysis were conducted in accordance with UK GDPR requirements. The dataset is retained securely by YMCA Chiltern Group and is not currently available for external secondary analysis.

Safeguarding

The survey is a research tool, not a safeguarding reporting mechanism, and is not designed to replace a school's own safeguarding systems. Children were told their responses were anonymous and could not be traced back to them or followed up individually. Signposting to support was provided throughout the survey and at its conclusion.

After the survey, all free-text responses were reviewed by Dignify. Potential safeguarding concerns, references to harmful behaviours and any identifying information were compiled into a separate safeguarding report shared with the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and survey liaison. As responses were anonymous, findings could not usually trigger an individual safeguarding response unless identifying information had been voluntarily provided, in which case the concern was flagged in the safeguarding report shared with the school's DSL.

Ethics Review

The project has not undergone external research ethics committee review. This reflects its origins as a school-commissioned service evaluation run by a charity, rather than a formal research project with an academic institution. We recognise the absence of external review as a limitation of the current report.

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Glossary

Age Assurance

Measures used by online services to determine or estimate a user's age. This can include age verification methods (such as photo ID checks) and age estimation methods (such as facial age estimation). Age assurance is used to help ensure children do not access age-inappropriate content, products or services.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Technology that enables computers to perform tasks that would normally require human intelligence, such as generating content, recognising patterns, answering questions or making predictions. In this report, AI is primarily discussed in relation to image generation, chatbots and deepfake content.

Consent

Freely given permission for something to happen. Consent must be informed, voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. Consent is a key principle in healthy relationships.

Deepfake

AI-generated or AI-manipulated content, such as images, videos or audio recordings, that realistically depicts a person saying or doing something that did not occur. Deepfakes may be created without a person's consent and can be used to produce sexually explicit content.

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)

Sexual behaviour displayed by children or young people that is developmentally inappropriate, harmful or abusive towards themselves or others. Harmful sexual behaviour can occur online or offline and may range from sexual harassment and coercion to unwanted touching, image-based abuse or sexual assault.

Highly Effective Age Assurance (HEAA)

The standard used by Ofcom under the Online Safety Act for age assurance measures that are technically accurate, reliable, robust and fair. Examples include facial age estimation, digital identity services and photo ID checks.

Misogyny

Prejudice, discrimination or hostility directed towards women and girls because they are women or girls. Misogyny can be expressed through attitudes, language, behaviours, social norms or online content that demeans, excludes or harms women and girls.

Nude Image

An image or video showing a person's genitals, breasts or buttocks, either fully or partially, or depicting sexual activity. This includes self-generated images, images shared between peers and digitally altered or AI-generated content.

Online Harm

A risk or negative experience encountered online that may affect a child's safety, wellbeing, development or rights. Online harms can include exposure to pornography, bullying, grooming, image-based abuse, sexual harassment, exploitation and harmful content.

Online Safety Act

The UK's Online Safety Act 2023 is legislation designed to improve online safety, particularly for children. It places legal duties on technology companies and online platforms to assess risks, reduce harmful content, and implement measures such as age assurance where appropriate.

Pornography

Any sexually explicit material (videos, photos, pictures, words or sound) that is intended to cause sexual excitement when viewed or heard. Pornography may include AI-generated or deepfake images or videos, as well as real sexually explicit material.

Pornography Habit or Addiction

A self-reported pattern of pornography use that a child considers to be either a habit or an addiction. Within this survey, a habit refers to repeated or regular pornography use that has become part of a person's routine, whilst an addiction refers to feeling compelled to view pornography despite wanting to stop or experiencing negative consequences. This reflects the definition provided to participants within the survey and is not a clinical diagnosis.

Relationships and Sex Education

The curriculum area through which children learn about relationships, consent, sexuality, sexual health, online safety and related topics. In England, Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education form part of statutory guidance.

Sexual Harassment

Unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. It can occur online or offline and may include comments, messages, rumours, image sharing, unwanted touching or coercion.

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

A term used by the UK Government to describe acts of violence, abuse or harassment that disproportionately affect women and girls. This includes sexual violence, domestic abuse, stalking, image-based abuse and online misogyny.

Virtual Private Network (VPN)

A service that routes a device's internet traffic through a remote server, masking its original location and internet connection. VPNs are commonly used for privacy and security purposes, but they can also be used to bypass geographical restrictions or age-assurance measures.

Wellbeing

A person's overall quality of life and ability to thrive. In this report, wellbeing is measured using Office for National Statistics (ONS) questions relating to life satisfaction, happiness, anxiety and whether participants feel the things they do in life are worthwhile.

Whole-Community Approach

An approach to safeguarding and healthy relationships that recognises children are influenced by multiple environments, including families, schools, peers, communities, online spaces and wider culture.

Dignify

YMCA | Here for young people Here for communities Here for you

LET'S CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

Together, we can help children thrive in healthy relationships, free from the harms of pornography and sexual objectification.

PARENTS/CARERS

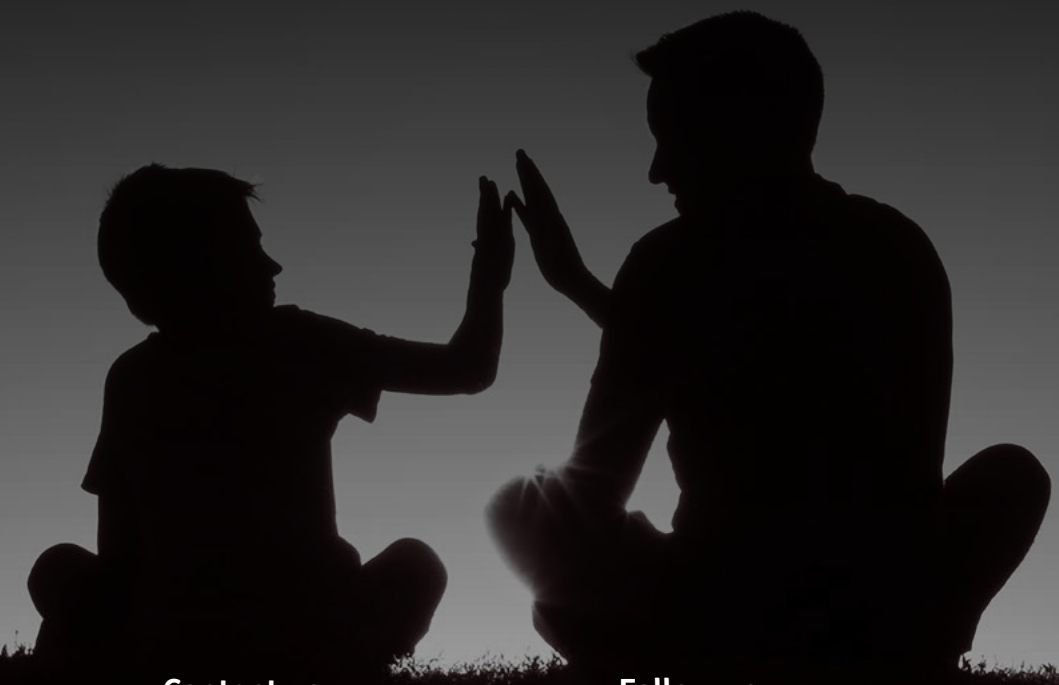
You can view our online resources or join our workshops to give you the confidence to start conversations about relationships and online life.

SCHOOLS

Your school can strengthen its RSE and safeguarding with our survey, assemblies, workshops, lesson plans and staff training.

YOUTH GROUPS

Your group can find resources and training opportunities to better support your young people – whatever setting you work in.



Find out more

- Learn more about us
- Explore our resources
- See how we can work together.

Contact us:
admin@dignify.org
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YMCA | Here for young people Here for communities Here for you

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

FAMILY & YOUTH WORK | HEALTH & WELLBEING | HOUSING | TRAINING & EDUCATION | SUPPORT & ADVICE