



Parenting in the Digital Age: how are we doing?

By Eleanor Levy, Editor, Parent Info
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By Eleanor Levy, Editor, Parent Info, the free newsfeed service for parents run by schools on their own websites, produced by Parent Zone and CEOP, the child protection branch of the national crime agency

It's not easy being a digital parent

The world wide web is now over a quarter of a century old. Which means that an entire generation of parents has been grappling with a challenge that no previous generation has had to face.

They are the first mums and dads bringing up their children in the digital age – and they are doing it without a roadmap.

Most of us take our parenting style from our own experiences of 'being parented'. Sometimes, actively deciding that we're going to do it differently, sometimes reverting to techniques that were literally learnt at our mother's or father's knee.

But today's parents have had to learn how to deal with issues raised by living in the internet-enabled world pretty much as they go, without the benefit of being able to ask THEIR parents for advice.

Parents are trying to find a way through and, unsurprisingly, they are finding it tough.

Often upsetting stories in the media on subjects such as cyberbullying, online grooming and the long term, negative effects of excessive screen time on everything from mental health to posture, have made parents at best wary and, at worst, terrified of the online world their children will inevitably explore if they are to thrive in a digital world.

When it comes to advice for parents, quick fixes and emergency measures have often been the norm, as the pace of change has rushed ahead of our understanding of the problems.

A generation of so-called 'digital immigrants' have had to overcome years of unhelpful messages telling them their children are so far ahead of them in their use and understanding of technology that they have no chance of keeping pace.

Playing catch up

As with most sweeping statements, there is a kernel of truth in this. Today's young people have hungrily consumed the advances in digital technology. Not only are they spending a growing amount of their time [online](#), but they are actively curating their own environments, often broadcasting their lives and thoughts to the world without any input from adults.

These are no passive consumers of the internet, but a generation helping to develop and push it forward. Since the launch of YouTube in 2005, a steady flow of apps and services have followed that allow young people to share their lives with others they may never meet.

This willingness to take new technology to their hearts has inspired developers to create an ever-growing universe of apps and services for them that many parents struggle to keep up with.

From Bebo through Blackberry Messenger to Snapchat, Instagram and Musical.ly, the platforms de jour have evolved faster than most of us can keep up with them.

The simple fact is, as technology advances, we are all entering an unknown digital future.

The conversation around what role parents play in protecting their children from the risks they face when using these services has had to change.

Once, safety messages centred around limiting screen time and restricting many of the very features that make these services attractive to the young people using them.

Parents were encouraged to fight fires, rather than giving their children the knowledge to prevent the flames being fanned in the first place.

Advice to keep the computer in a family room became obsolete once the internet went mobile and could follow young users outside the home. Messages about blocking access and parental controls were questioned once studies began to suggest that they not only didn't make children safe, but that they actually had a [negative effect](#).

Research from organisations such as the Oxford Internet Institute turned attention to the crucial role of parents in nurturing online resilience in their children, and the importance of allowing young internet users to develop the ability to cope with whatever the online world throws at them through managed, independent use.

With such conflicting messages being directed towards them, what were parents supposed to do?

And what support can we, as professionals tasked with helping families thrive in the digital age, offer them?

We decided to ask the people at the sharp end of digital parenting – the children themselves.

How does the next generation think the previous one is handling issues like sexting, sharenting and online abuse in its many forms? Are the online rules they set their children being practised by the adults who are enforcing them?

What more can we, as adults, do to help them?

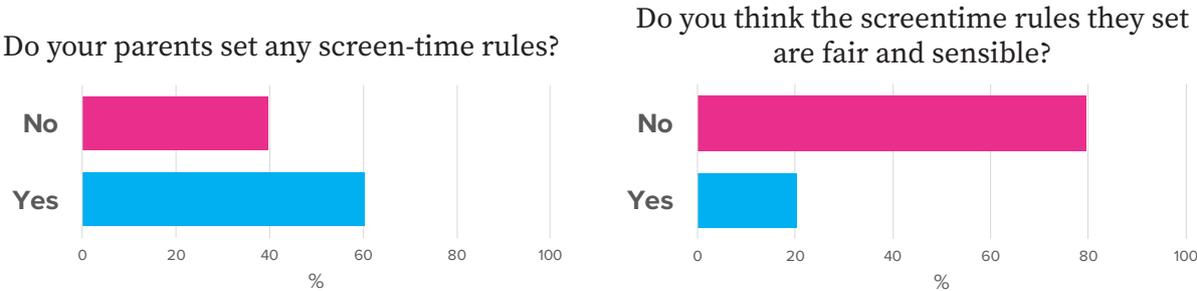
At Parent Zone, we have always been strong supporters of young people and their families embracing the online world and the positive things it has to offer – which includes finding the best way to deal with the negatives things that can sometimes occur.

So kids, tell us honestly – how are we doing?

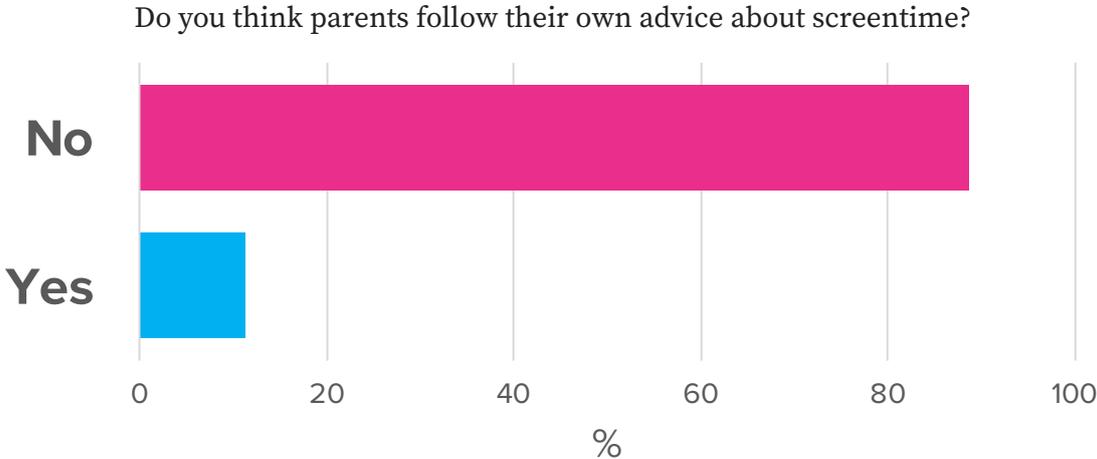
The research: findings

We spoke to 1000 young people aged between 12 and 16 and asked them their views on a number of issues related to their digital use. Their answers offer an essential insight into how they live their lives online – and how their parents react to it.

Do as I say, not as I do



Over 60% of parents (60.3%) set screen time rules, but nearly 80% (79.6%) of respondents think those rules are unfair – and an even greater number (88.8%) say their parents don't follow their own rules.

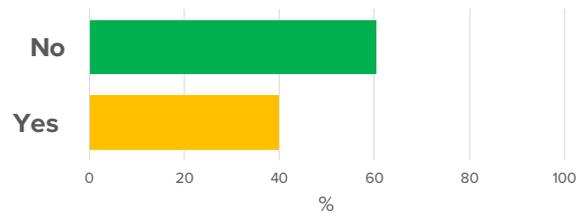


'My parents are always on their phones but it's like... "I'm working. I'm shopping. Shut up."'

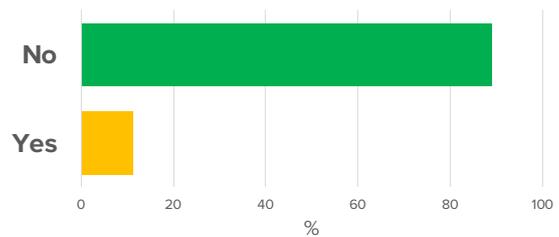
'I have no tech days. Like it's a disease.'

'They think we don't notice but we do. They use it more than me.'

Have your parents ever shared an embarrassing photo of you online?



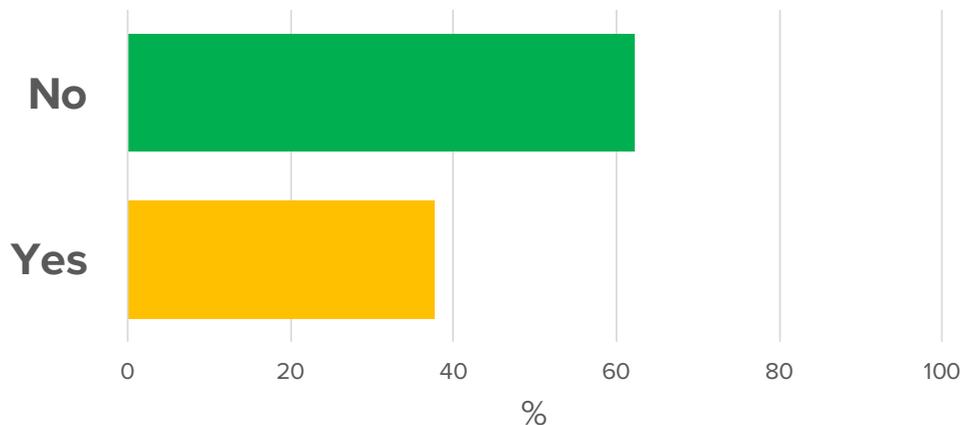
Did you ask them to remove it?



Over a third of respondents (39.8%) said a parent had shared an embarrassing image of them online, although most of them (88.9%) didn't ask them to take the image down when they did.

A similar number (37.7%) said they thought their parents had let them use social media too young.

Do you think you were too young when your parents first let you use social media?

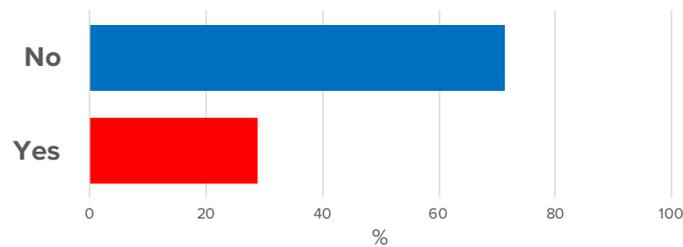


‘People use tech and that’s brilliant. What’s the deal about inventing something brilliant and then getting uptight when people use it?’

‘Adults don’t get it. We’re not allowed to just enjoy it - like they wouldn’t have done if it had been around when they were young.’

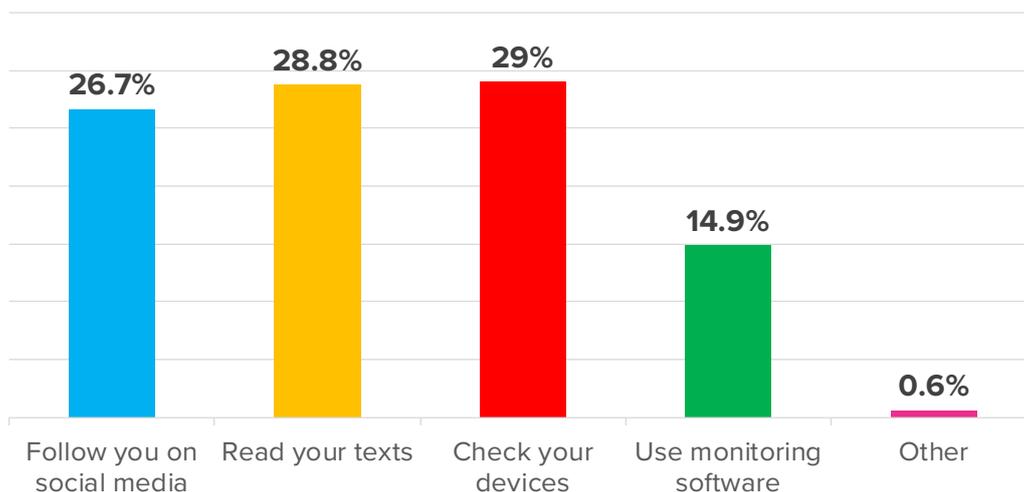
Keep out!

Do you think your parents respect your privacy online?



71.3% of respondents think their parents don't respect their privacy online, with nearly 30% of parents checking their child's devices (29%) and a similar number (28.8%) reading their texts. Other things parents do to check up on their children include using monitoring software, getting a sibling to 'spy' on them or making comments on their YouTube channel.

What do they do that makes you feel they are invading your privacy?



'Basically [they want] to know what I'm doing all the time. I get no freedom, they just think I'm meeting paedos or doing stupid shit.'

'They stalk me. Especially my mum.'

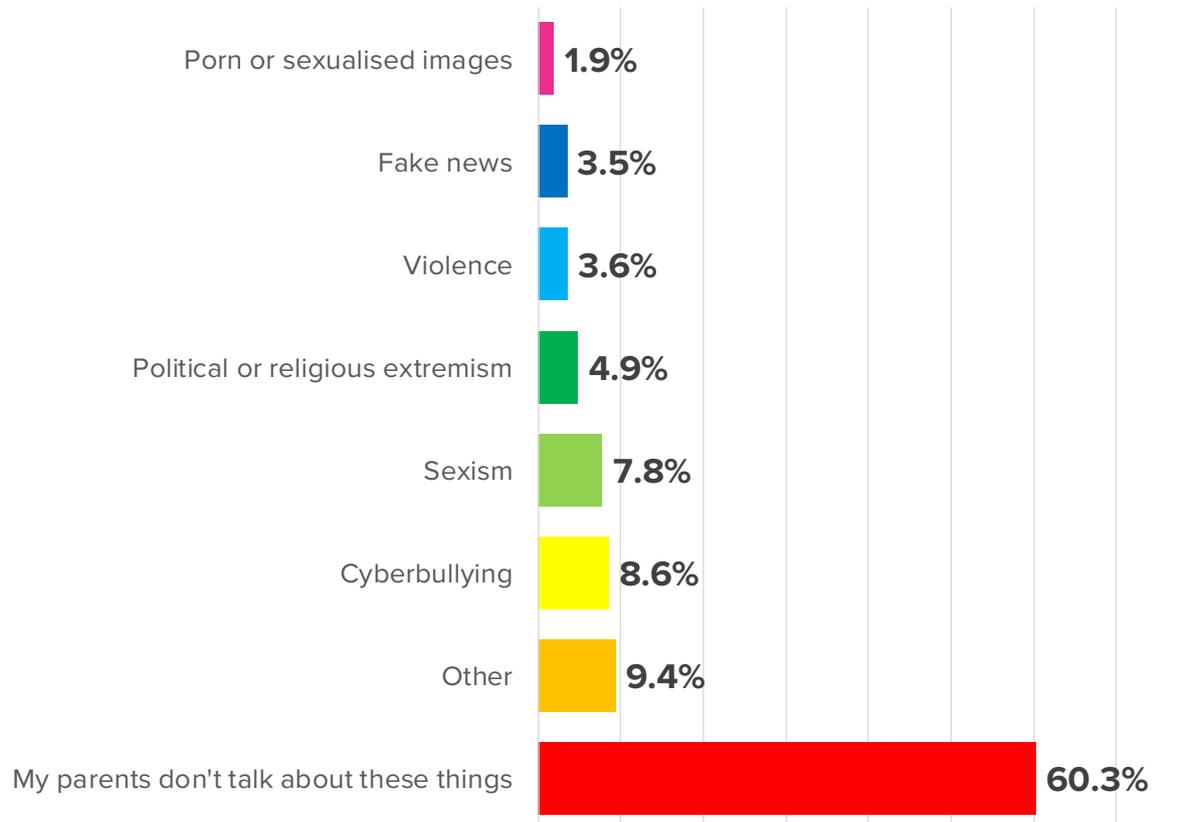
'They try to track me so I use fake accounts so I can have some privacy.'

'They try. I go stealth.'

'I don't want them to be my friend. I got friends for that.'

It's good to talk

Do you feel parents are generally doing a good job of speaking to their children about what they see online about the following subjects?



When we asked whether they thought parents were doing a good job talking about difficult subjects they might come across online (violence, porn or sexualised images, political or religious extremism, sexism, fake news or cyberbullying) 60.3% said their parents don't talk about those things.

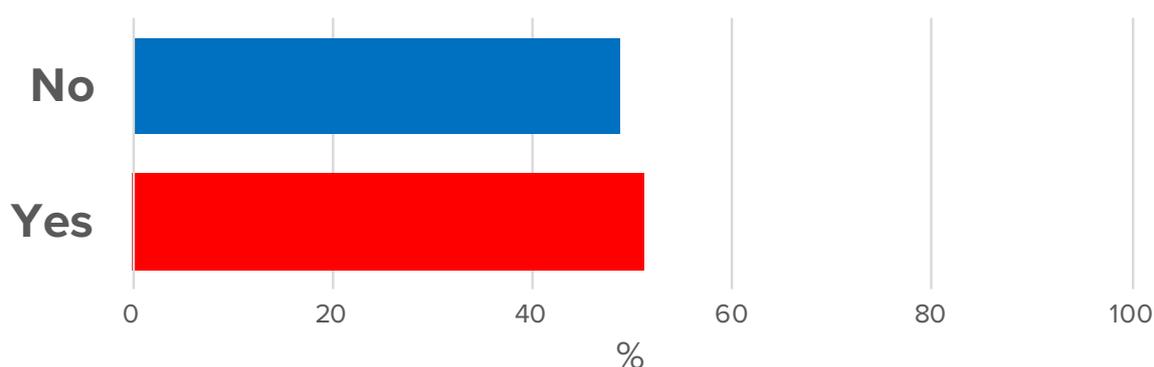
'I'd like them to talk to me but they seem embarrassed.'

The issues parents were most successful talking to their children about were cyberbullying (8.6%) and sexism (7.8%). Only 1.9% of respondents thought their parents had done a good job talking to them about online porn or sexualised images.

'My dad does porn so what's he going to say? Don't watch it? I don't think so.'

'My dad tried to tell me about porn. It was a joke. Don't think he's seen porn, he kept talking about mucky magazines. Tragic.'

When your parents talk to you about things that happen online do you find it helpful?



When their parents do talk about these subjects, just over half (51.3%) said it was helpful.

‘I had to talk to my Mum about something that happened that was really bad and she was amazing. She helped me sort it out.’

‘Talking is a big thing in my house and it helps. Other people don’t tell you the truth. I know my parents care about me.’

Overall, the younger generation are more positive than negative about how their parents are doing when it comes to helping them navigate the digital world. Over half (56.7%) gave their parents a score of 6 out of 10 or higher for how they are coping with technology. So, what can we do to get that figure closer to 10?

Conclusion

What do our findings tell us about parenting in the digital age?

First, the fact that half of the young people we spoke to (51.3%) said they were helped by talking to their parents about issues that had arisen in the online world is encouraging.

It chimes with the idea that supportive, informed parenting is vital in building digitally resilient children. It also begs the question, how do we help the 48.7% whose talks weren’t helpful to do it better? And to encourage those who never have those conversations in the first place to feel confident about doing so?

Second, our findings show that over three quarters of the young people we spoke to (77.6%) feel their parents don’t understand their online lives.

This doesn’t mean that Mum or Dad should immediately start uploading videos of themselves unboxing their new Flymo mower to their new YouTube channel, but it does indicate that showing an understanding and respect for what their children do online would be appreciated (77.4% of our respondents said this), and a positive step towards better communication about

a hugely important part of their child's life. Parenting can often feel like a miscommunication minefield. Technology and the online world doesn't cause this, but it can amplify the feelings of powerlessness some parents feel.

We think the following 5 rules, based on the findings of our survey, will go some way to helping the first generation of digital parents meet the challenge.

1. Show an interest in your children's online lives, but don't pry.

Giving your child space is not the same as being disinterested. It's fine to ask questions about who they are spending time with online, but how would you have felt if your own mum or dad had listened in on your phone calls to your friend, or read your diaries?

2. Get to know the apps and services they use.

Understanding the appeal of live streaming or Snapchat streaks, and showing an interest, will make them more likely to come to you if they have a problem. [Parent Info](#) is a free online service for parents, produced by digital parenting experts, Parent Zone, and CEOP, the child protection command of the National Crime agency. It offers expert content and advice via schools' own websites, including regularly updated guides for parents to the apps and services children and young people love.

3. Learn to talk about difficult subjects in a way both you and your child feel comfortable with.

This has never been easy as a parent, but there are ways to avoid those embarrassing chats. Talking doesn't just happen face to face – if your child spends their time staring at the phone screen, use it to start conversations or share advice and information.

4. Lead by example. No more 'do as I say, not what I do.'

However much young people affect an air of nonchalance, our study shows the vast majority still care what their parents think, and look to them as role models. Sorry – there's just no getting away from this one!

5. Give children freedom to explore – but provide boundaries and a safety blanket should things go wrong.

No parent wants to put their child at risk deliberately, but if children never take risks, and if they never encounter challenging situations, they will never learn to cope with them when you're not around to protect them.

To find out more about how to help children and young people in the digital world or to sign your school up for the free newsfeed service, go to www.parentinfo.org

Written by Eleanor Levy

Acknowledgements: Thanks to the 1000 young people who responded to our survey and shared their very strong and illuminating opinions with us. Thanks also to Yusuf Tamanna and Vicki Shotbolt for their input into this report, and to Zain Mahmood for the design.

Research conducted in September 2017 across the UK with 1000 children aged 12-16.

For more information on helping children thrive in the digital age go to:

www.parentzone.org.uk

CEOP's ThinkUKnow.co.uk

[UK Council for Child Internet Safety](#)

[Parent Info](#)



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