

# Empowered or overwhelmed?

Has an explosion of supervision and user empowerment tools for parents made things easier – or made a complex issue more difficult?

A Parent Zone report, April 2026

## About Parent Zone

Parent Zone is an organisation that sits at the heart of digital family life, providing advice, knowledge and support to shape the best possible future for children as they navigate a digitised world. Founded in 2005, we have collaborated with many organisations that share our vision, remaining responsive to the continually developing nature of digital technologies and how they intersect with family life. We recognise enormous opportunities, whilst understanding the challenges that accompany them.

# Summary

Three years after the release of our report '[Tools – A False Hope](#)', we have re-examined the number of user empowerment and parent supervision tools on a selection of platforms, to see how things have changed.

In a world increasingly (and understandably) concerned with the impact of social media and screen time on young people, we have found that there are many more tools to utilise, and they are quicker to find and activate. This points to welcome progress and a sign that technology companies are listening to the requirements of the Online Safety Act.

However, despite these improvements to tools, we continue to see rising levels of concern amongst parents and the challenge of setting and enforcing safety measures remains significant. According to the research agency More in Common, around a third of parents say setting limits on their child being online leads to conflict.<sup>1</sup>

When the previous government removed provisions to deal with legal but harmful content, they offered user empowerment tools as an alternative and better solution. Our findings suggest that our concerns about the efficacy of that approach were well founded. That is not to suggest that improvements in the tools aren't welcome. They play an important role in helping users manage their digital experiences. **But they cannot be seen as a panacea.** The focus on user empowerment tools has driven an explosion in both the range and quality of tools. But with additional tools comes additional complexity. That complexity can undermine empowerment by placing unreasonable burdens on the user. Far from allowing the user to manage their own experiences and those of their children better, the tools risk offering toolkits that are too extensive to assemble in any meaningful way.

In this report, we highlight the positive changes in both the range and usability of user empowerment tools alongside a massive increase in the number of tools. We also note with disappointment the limited signs that some of the issues raised in our previous report have been dealt with.

<sup>1</sup> [Parents Talk Online Safety | More In Common](#)

## Key takeaways

- There has been a significant increase in the number of ‘user controls’ in both user empowerment and parent supervision since 2023.
- The increase is driven mostly by a proliferation of user empowerment tools.
- Accessing and activating tools takes less time than in 2023.
- Parents report some improvements, but others remain frustrated and sceptical.
- Fragmentation and inconsistencies still create confusion and the potential for key settings to be missed.
- User controls, parental controls and tools are not clearly or consistently defined.
- A lack of easily accessible information about what tools are available and when they change impedes efforts to guide and support parents.

## Recommendations:

- Tools should be streamlined so that they don’t overlap and duplicate.
- Ofcom should more clearly define parent supervision and user empowerment tools.
- Ofcom should set a common language for tools so that users understand what they are getting and don’t have to learn new systems for each level of protection and each different platform.
- Ofcom should require platforms to include up-to-date, complete information about all the tools available as part of risk assessment and make this available to others, so that it can inform research and enhance guidance for parents.
- Safety by design should be explicitly added to the Online Safety Act, and Ofcom should publish a code of practice outlining exactly how platforms must comply with it. Tools should play a role in safety by design but they are not a complete solution. If designed and communicated badly they can undermine safety by design.

# Introduction

In April 2023, we released our report '[Tools – A False Hope](#)'. At the time, the Online Safety Act had just received royal assent, described by the government of the time as “*heralding a new era of internet safety and choice by placing world-first legal duties on social media platforms*”.<sup>2</sup> Yet concerns about the safety of their children online are still rife amongst parents.

It is not just Parent Zone that is increasingly focused on this – the safety of children online is an area which has received renewed attention. The current government describes it to be a ‘top priority’<sup>3</sup> for them, and there is widespread concern regarding the potential risks children are exposed to in online spaces, and the impact which screens may be having on their well-being.

At the time of our previous report’s publication, the Online Safety Act had not come into force. Since then, we have had the publication of several of Ofcom’s Codes of Practice, and in July last year, when these came into effect, services were required to comply with them. This includes a Code of Practice for User-to-User services and Search Engines, along with guidance for platforms on child access assessment, and age-assurance. Further changes to the raft of tools currently available are likely. In addition, under the Data (Use and Access) Act of June 2025, the ICO Age Appropriate Design Code is under review.

These changes have not taken place in isolation, but within a wider international context. We have seen the introduction of the EU Digital Services Act in 2023, the progress of the Kids Online Safety Act through the US Congress, and the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024, introduced at the end of 2025 in Australia. Now in 2026, the UK Government has announced a consultation on children’s social media use, including reference to “*exploring further interventions to support parents in helping their children navigate the digital landscape, for example, further guidance or simpler parental controls*”.<sup>4</sup>

It is within this context that we have come to revisit the work we did previously on user-empowerment and parent supervision tools.

<sup>2</sup> [Overwhelming support for Online Safety Act as rules making UK the safest place in the world to be online become law – GOV.UK](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Secretary of State statement to the House of Commons: 20 January – GOV.UK](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Government to drive action to improve children’s relationship with mobile phones and social media – GOV.UK](#)

# Scope

## Research questions

Building on the findings from our work in 2023, in this research, we aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How have parent supervision and user-empowerment tools changed since our last report?
2. Have changes to tools had an impact on a parents' experience of supervising their child's social media experience?

## Definitions

The Online Safety Act 2023 section 15<sup>5</sup> on 'user empowerment' duties, includes provisions that require providers of Category 1 services to offer "features which adult users may use or apply if they wish to increase their control over content" and that "reduce the likelihood of encountering, or alert them to the presence of, certain types of content". Services are required to ensure these 'control features' are made available to all adult users and are easy to access.

Services in scope are also required to "include clear and accessible provisions in the terms of service specifying which control features are offered and how users may take advantage of them."

Ofcom's Illegal Content Codes of Practice for user-to-user services<sup>6</sup> recommends that large services provide 'user controls' for blocking, muting, disabling comments and include user and monetised labelling schemes.

The Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user services<sup>7</sup> includes similar recommendations with the addition of "invitations to group chats".

Ofcom recommends that information about user controls should be "a) prominently displayed; and b) clear, comprehensible and easy for a child user to understand".

<sup>5</sup> [Online Safety Act 2023](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Illegal content Codes of Practice for user-to-user services – Ofcom](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Protection of Children Code of Practice for user-to-user specific services – Ofcom](#)

Ofcom’s Illegal Content Codes of Practice for search services<sup>8</sup> and Protection of Children Code of Practice for search services<sup>9</sup> reference blurring of images and other measures that may be taken proactively, but do not reference user controls specifically.

Ofcom’s Risk Assessment Guidance and Risk Profiles<sup>10</sup> recommends that services take into account the impact of any existing controls and that changes or discontinuing controls may constitute a significant change in risk. However, examples of controls included in this guidance are: “governance, use of proactive technology, measures to promote users’ media literacy and safe use of your service, and other systems and processes which could affect the level of risk”.

Definitions of key terms are included in Ofcom’s codes on illegal content; however, at the time of writing, we were unable to locate a specific definition for ‘user controls’ or ‘control features’.

Publicly available information we accessed on different services varied in completeness, terminology and categorisation of tools and features.

Therefore, for the purposes of this report, we have defined ‘parent supervision’ and ‘user empowerment’ tools as follows:

## Parent supervision tools

Tools and features that enable a parent<sup>11</sup> to monitor and manage their child’s account, time, content and/or contact with others.

## User empowerment tools

Tools and features designed to give individuals more control over their online experiences. These tools help users manage usage time, contacts and the content they see and interact with on various platforms.

Feature	Description
Content Control	Allows users to tailor their feeds to reduce exposure to unwanted content.
Reporting Mechanisms	Enables users to report harmful or inappropriate content or contact easily.
Blocking Options	Let users block specific users or types of content they find distressing.
Customisation Settings	Provides options to adjust privacy settings, usage time and content preferences.

<sup>8</sup> [Illegal content Codes of Practice for search services – Ofcom](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Protection of Children Code of Practice for search services – Ofcom](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Risk Assessment Guidance and Risk Profiles – Ofcom](#)

<sup>11</sup> Parents in this context refers to all adults with parenting responsibility

## User empowerment tools and parenting

Whilst our focus is on parents' experience and understanding of tools, we have not limited our research to parent supervision tools. Parents need an understanding of user empowerment tools in order to appreciate their child's online experiences and options, so that they can make informed decisions and be confident discussing concerns, and supporting their child.

## Methodology

As with our report in 2023, our intention with this research was to provide a snapshot of what parents may face when setting up, reviewing or managing common apps and platforms for their child.

To achieve this, we created new accounts for an adult and a 13-year-old (where possible). Our researcher then opened each option available to an adult and/or parent. Each tool within scope was logged and categorised according to our working definitions. The time taken to locate and activate the tools was recorded. Additional observations or challenges were noted alongside the log.

The logs were then reviewed by the wider team for completeness and consistency.

Whilst we have endeavoured to identify, log and categorise all the tools and options available, some tools may have been missed. Others may categorise tools slightly differently. However, we believe this approach is reflective of what an average user would be able to discover.

It should also be noted that the time required to find and activate a tool is likely to vary by user. It may depend on prior knowledge and experience (platform literacy), accessibility needs, device and connection, as well as their overall goals and motivation. However, we believe our timings are reflective of how long it may take someone with general familiarity with using social media platforms to follow the same approach as our researcher.

### Comparisons and exclusions

There have been many changes across platforms since 2023. This makes direct comparisons challenging. Further details on some of the key differences are included below. The overall comparison of parents' experience reflects the general changes parents have experienced since our last report.

It is also worth noting that the challenges we have encountered in comparing tools reflect the pace and scale of change that parents will also be experiencing.

## Services

In 2023, we tested eight apps/platforms: Google Search, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, YouTube Kids, and WhatsApp.

To reflect changes in use and behaviours, in this phase of research, we have tested an additional three platforms: Facebook Messenger, X and ChatGPT.

## Account centres

In this updated research, we have separated out Meta and Google account centres. These account centres generally include tools that allow users to customise and control how accounts, activity, data and settings are managed across apps within the same provider's ecosystem. Therefore, we have counted them once rather than for each platform. Separating this functionality recognises that the tools in account centres have their own context and that setting them once can apply across a number of services.

## Bundling

Individual tools are sometimes collected together into a bundle of similar items that may have an overall control. Whilst options within a bundle may be related in terms of function, the tools that are included in each bundle have changed over time. To address these issues, in this research, we have counted individual options within a bundle as separate tools. This reflects the full range of options available to a parent and hopefully makes future comparisons easier.

## Wider eco-system of tools

For the purposes of this report, we have not included additional controls that are available in supplementary services such as Google Family Link or Apple Family Sharing. We have also omitted third-party apps and services that provide parent supervision features, as these are not required to use the service, and, where there is a cost, they will not be universally accessible.

## X

X provides some parent supervision tools. However, our researcher was unable to access them directly as X requires parents to submit a formal ID for the parent and a birth certificate for the child. X also states that processing can then take up to 60 days. It was not feasible to complete this process in this research.

The tools that X lists as available to a parent once registration is complete have been included, but these have not been verified. The time to apply for registration has not been included.

## WhatsApp

In March 2026, WhatsApp announced the launch of parent managed accounts for pre-teens. However, these tools were not available for testing at the time of our research.

## Device

Platforms and tools were accessed via mobile where possible, as this will likely be the way that most parents and children experience them. However, there may be some differences between the app and web versions that have not been captured in this report.

Headsets and similar wearables were not included in this research. Additional tools are available for these devices. However, at the time of writing, the adoption of wearables by parents and children is relatively low. As these devices become more widely used by parents and children, they will need to be included in future reports.

## Findings

### How have parental supervisory and user-empowerment tools changed since our last report?

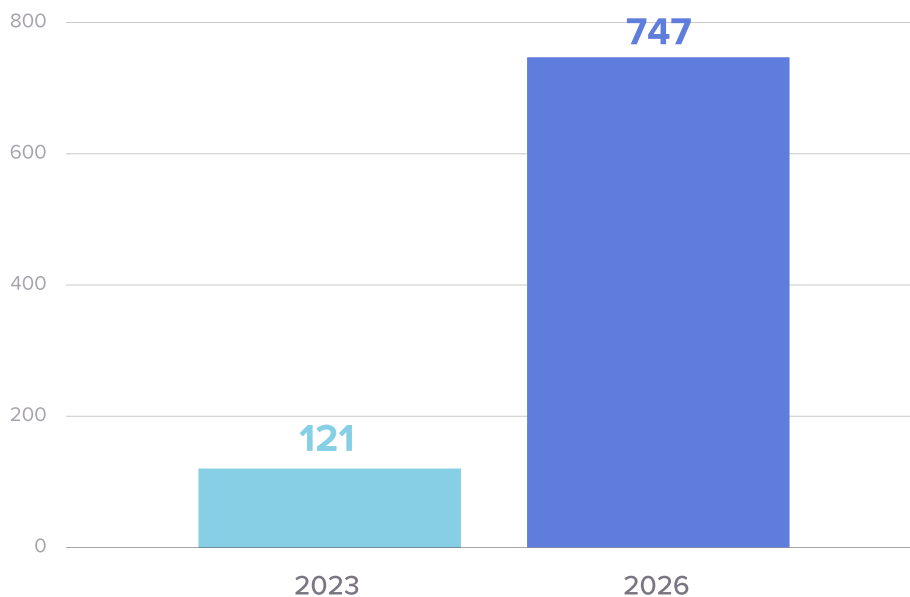
#### An increase in tools

In the spring of 2023, we found that across eight platforms, there were 121 tools. In comparison, in 2026, we have identified 747 tools. This represents an **increase of 626 tools**. When we include the additional platforms and account centres from this round, the number of tools goes up to 966 tools across 13 services.

Locating and activating all the tools in 2026 took our researcher three and a half hours. As noted, direct comparisons of the time taken are not possible, but overall, despite the increase in the number of tools, it was markedly less than the seven hours taken by the researcher in 2023.

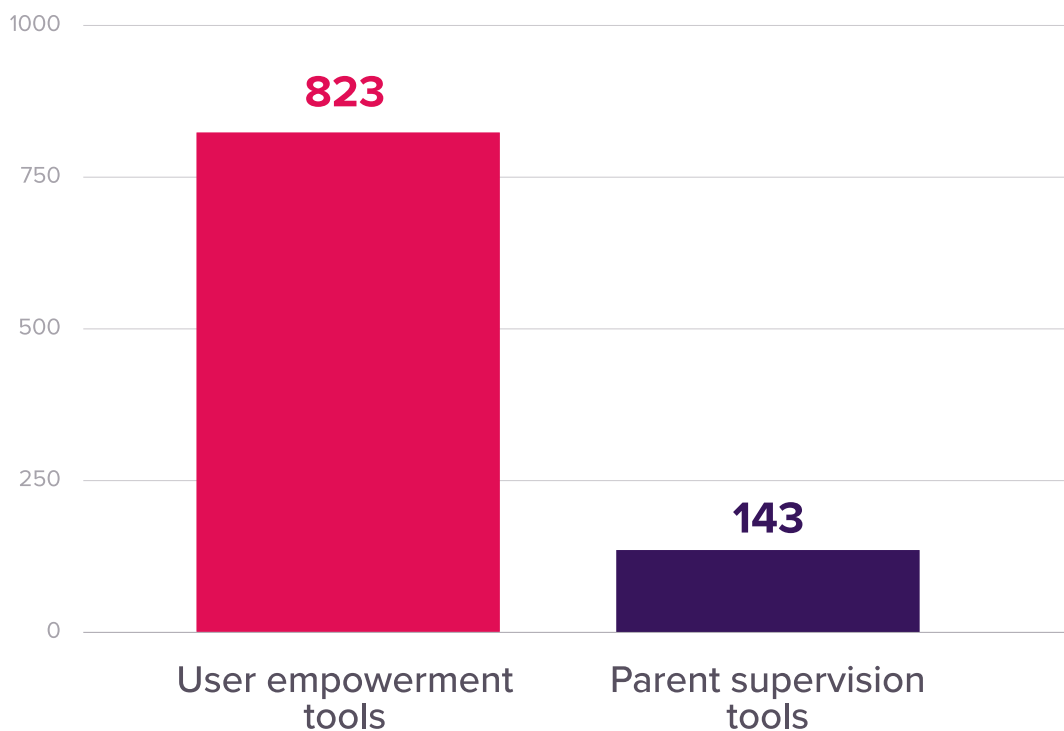
This change shows the proliferation of tools in the last few years, but also the improvements made to the experience of using them.

**Total number of tools tested across the same platforms in 2023 and 2026**

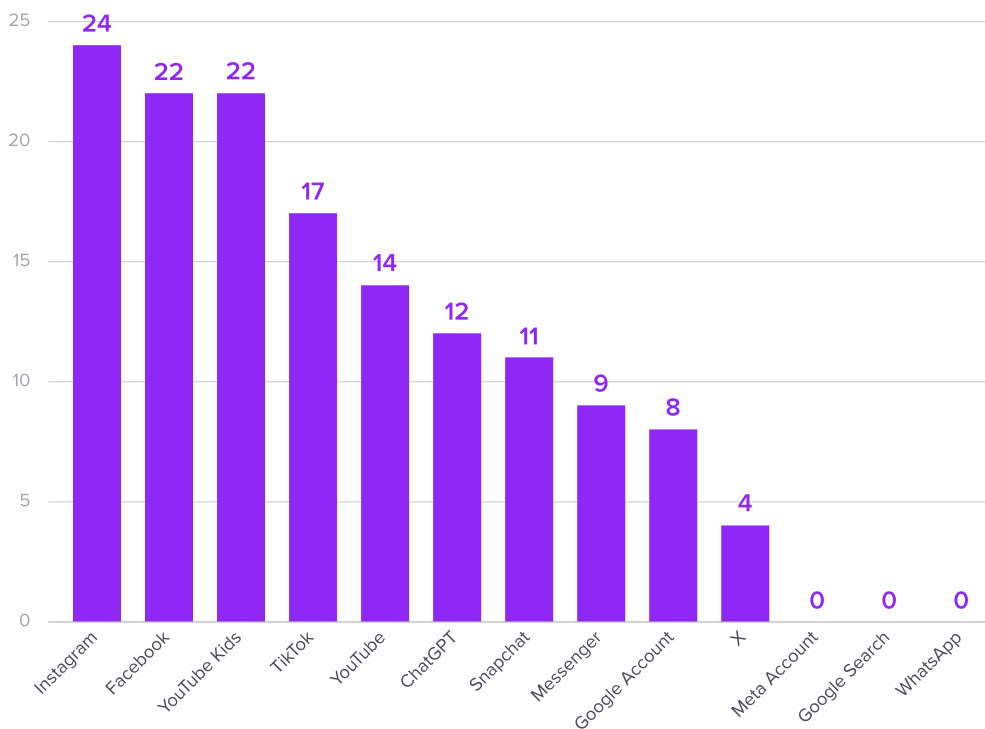


When looking at the purpose of the tools, we found that while there has been a growth in tools aimed at supporting parents to supervise their children online, the real driver of this growth has been user empowerment tools, aimed at all platform users to improve and personalise their online experience.

**Total number of user empowerment and parent supervision tools across all platforms tested**



### Number of Parent Supervision Tools by Platform



**\*In March 2026, WhatsApp announced the launch of [parent managed accounts for pre-teens](#). These were not available for testing at the time of our research. Parent Supervision tools for individual services that are accessed through the account centre have been logged against the relevant service.**

In winter 2023, after our initial report was published, we saw a shift in the Online Safety Bill. With the removal of ‘legal but harmful’, there was an increased focus on user empowerment and the provision of tools to allow this. Michelle Donelan, then Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, said:

*“Rather than tech giants’ algorithms alone deciding what users engage with, users themselves should have the option to decide. Adults should be empowered to choose whether or not to engage with legal forms of abuse and hatred if the platform they are using allows such content. So the ‘Third Shield’ puts a duty on platforms to provide their users with the functionality to control their exposure to unsolicited content that falls into this category.... For the first time, tech giants will be required to give individual adults genuine control over their own accounts and online experience.”<sup>12</sup>*

And these changes have begun to bring about a positive impact for adult users of these platforms. In 2024, the Ofcom Online Nation report found that 68% of adults had encountered potentially harmful content, but in 2025, 66% reported the same.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> [Online Safety Bill – Update](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Online Nation 2025 Report – Ofcom](#)

## The limitations

This shows the positive impact that regulation can have, but also the limitations of the current legislation and subsequent regulation/enforcement. Despite the positive trend, we are still seeing two-thirds of UK adults encountering potentially harmful content online, and over one-third reported ‘seeing something upsetting online’ in the same time period.<sup>14</sup>

Legislation has driven change, however, whether this increase in tools and improved user experience has solved the root problem is less clear. In the current context of a social media ‘ban’ being widely discussed as a possible solution to the harms children and teenagers face online, both the achievements and the limitations of legislation must be acknowledged.

## Frequency of change

When carrying out our research into the changes of tools on the list of platforms we previously examined, one thing was quickly discovered – it was very difficult to track the frequency of change.

Even now, the number of tools on any of the platforms we researched may have changed, or the functionality of any of the tools may have varied. Research carried out by Children and Screens examined the changes to platform policy or design from 2018-2023, divided in categories based on the ICO’s Age-Appropriate Design Code.<sup>15</sup>

It found the following number of changes made in four categories:

- Youth Safety and Well-Being: 44
- Age-Appropriate Design: 43
- Privacy, Security and Data Management: 31
- Time Management: 11

Whilst this report does not directly record changes made to the tools available on online platforms, it does highlight the probable impact of the Age-Appropriate Design Code on social media platforms. The time and resources needed to produce the Children and Screens report (five researchers over six years) underscores the challenge any parent would face trying to keep pace with the constant changes to technology and tools intended to keep children safer.

<sup>14</sup> [Online Nation 2025 Report – Ofcom](#)

<sup>15</sup> [UK Age-Appropriate Design Code Impact Assessment | Children and Screens](#)

## Have changes to tools had an impact on parents' experience of supervising their child's social media experience?

We have already discussed the positive impact of user empowerment tools on adult users of social media. But what of children, and the parents and other adults supporting them?

One key change identified in our testing of parent supervision tools is that there has been a shift towards moving accounts into supervision by default, and bundling together controls to be easily switched on and off. For example, in 2024, Instagram announced the introduction of Teen Accounts, for users under-16, which have built in protections turned on automatically.

In the feedback we received from parents,<sup>16</sup> most said they could find and use the parent supervision tools relatively easily. For those who had been using them for some time, the majority felt there had been some improvement in their experience.

*"I think some companies are taking more responsibility for the content viewed via their platforms".*

*"I feel like with some games and apps I have managed to set age restrictions and time restrictions well".*

It is worth noting that parents we heard from could only reflect on the tools they were aware of and had used. They were not provided with the full list of tools available on each platform and therefore, may not be aware of or use all the parent supervision or user empowerment tools available.

Despite the positive experiences that were shared with us, when diving deeper into the experience of these parents, it is clear that many of them are still dissatisfied with the tools they use to keep their children safe online:

*"Platforms have not prioritised making their platforms safe, and this includes making parental controls intuitive, on-by-default, and effective".*

*"It's often very hard to find the correct settings, and trial and error if they actually do what you want them to do. It would be really helpful to know all settings that are available and a checklist of recommended, particularly when starting out".*

*"Some of the controls appear to have been enhanced, but don't seem to be more effective in practice".*

<sup>16</sup> An online survey of 50 parents. 68% reported being able to find parental tools most or all of the time. 68% reported they could use parental tools most or all of the time. 59% reported that their experience of using parental tools had gotten marginally or significantly better.

In particular, several parents noted that despite setting up restrictions, their child could still access content they shouldn't be able to:

*“Sometimes things get through that shouldn’t”.*

*“Sometimes videos or adverts might show that aren’t always suitable”.*

*“Kids can still have access to games/videos not for their age even after restrictions have been put in place”.*

The limitations of the safety tools for children online are further illustrated in other research. There has been only a 3% drop in children aged 8-17 reporting that they had seen something ‘worrying or nasty’ online in the last twelve months, from 36% (2022)<sup>17</sup> to 33% (2025).<sup>18</sup>

In 2025, the main worry of parents of 3-17 year olds who are online was potential exposure to age-inappropriate content – three-quarters of parents said they were either fairly or very concerned about their child seeing content which is not appropriate for their age (76%) and the same proportion were concerned about them seeing ‘adult’ or sexual content (74%).<sup>19</sup>

17 [Online Nation Report 2022 – Ofcom](#)

18 [Online Nation Report 2025 – Ofcom](#)

19 [Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report – Ofcom](#)

# Conclusions

This brings us to the key question. Have tools delivered on their promise, or do they remain a false hope?

As we wrote back in 2023, “tools cannot do all the work”. They certainly have their part to play – and appear to be doing so reasonably well in some areas. Yet the proliferation of empowerment and supervision tools still requires an inordinate amount of work to be done by all platform users, including children and their parents. **We are approaching and may have passed the tool saturation point.** As tech companies start to consider the range and types of user empowerment tools and parental controls required for AI services it is essential they do so in the context of the current landscape.

- Tools should be easy to understand. They should not require users to read pages of legalese or dense terms and conditions.
- Ofcom should set a common language and protocols so that users understand what they are getting and don't have to learn new systems for each level of protection and each different platform.
- Tools should be streamlined so that they don't overlap and duplicate. Each site should have as few tools as possible consistent with offering users the protection they require.
- Tools to keep children out of the adult internet should respect their growing capacity and need for autonomy up to the age of 18, and their rights to participate and to education, play and information.

We are making progress towards achieving some of these aims, but more is possible. Under the ICO's Age-Appropriate Design Code, tools must be age appropriate, easy to use and prominent, and under the Online Safety Act, some specific elements of tools are mentioned. Future updates to the Online Safety Act could go further by requiring all user empowerment and safety tools to meet this same standard.

While the time taken to personalise the tools on the platforms we examined has reduced, it is still a significant period of time, and a huge amount of tools to utilise. For parents who may face an ever-growing list of apps, platforms and websites to personalise, monitor and understand, this remains a burden.

There are two key elements which must go alongside safety and empowerment tools.

The first is education. We cannot ignore the role media literacy should play in keeping children and adults safe online. With the ubiquitous presence of Artificial Intelligence in today's society, the skills provided by a robust media literacy education are vital. Being an enquiring, aware, and positive user of the internet is more important than ever.

The second is safety by design. Rather than constantly seeking to skirt around danger, hoping that by pressing the right combination of buttons, harmful content will be kept off our screens, safety by design should be an integral part of all platform design. Instead of locking children out of the internet, why are we not seeking to make it a place where they can thrive?

A combination of well-designed platforms, comprehensive media literacy education and effective, easy to understand safety and empowerment tools may not be the silver bullet answer so many are seeking, but a promise that if tech platforms and governments come together for the best interest of adults, children and families, a positive online space is possible.