



Protecting our Children in the Digital Age



**Fine Gael's Online
Safety Survey**

Published by Keira Keogh TD





FINE GAEL

Contents

Background	4
Executive Summary	5
Survey Results	6
Core Concerns & Actions wanted	8
The Child's Perspective	9
What Other Countries are doing	10
Policy Implications	12
Conclusions	13



Background

We live in a rapidly evolving, increasingly digitalised world, and young people are at the fore of that.

Our children's digital lives are a source of enrichment and a place where they can gain access to information and express themselves. We in Fine Gael understand the need to maintain a safe digital environment where parents can be sure that their children can learn and connect without the threats of harmful algorithms, pornography, cyberbullying, exploitation or disinformation.

As Chair of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Equality, I feel very strongly that we need new and robust policies in Ireland to ensure that social media companies & video sharing platforms take real responsibility for the safety of children and young people online. There is growing evidence that certain types of online activities can negatively impact both physical and mental well-being. Such impacts include sleep deprivation, anxiety, and potential links to eating disorders and self-harm, among other concerns. A coordinated response is essential, bringing together health perspectives, strong regulation, and effective education.

Fine Gael has led the way in driving forward policies to regulate online spaces. In 2021, we criminalised the non-consensual distribution of intimate images through Coco's Law. Penalties include an unlimited fine and/or 7 years imprisonment. We have also legislated to make it illegal to send, receive or share sexually explicit content of anyone under the age of 18.

We established Ireland's first Online Safety Media Commissioner who has the power to hold social media companies to account for platforming harmful content.

But we need to do more. We must protect children's rights in the digital world, including their rights to health and safety, privacy, participation, and above all, protection.

In September 2025, Fine Gael launched an Online Safety Survey to allow parents and guardians to share their views with us on making the internet a safer place for their children. I am pleased to be able to present this report, which outlines the findings of that survey.

I am grateful to all the parents and guardians who shared their insights through the Online Survey.

Keira Keogh

Executive Summary

Fine Gael's 2025 Children's Online Safety Survey gathered the views of over 2,200 parents across Ireland, providing a clear picture of family concerns in the digital age. The findings reveal widespread anxiety about harmful content, deep mistrust of technology companies, and a strong demand for tougher protections and better education.

Parents overwhelmingly support stricter age limits and verification: almost nine in ten believe social media should be restricted to those aged 16 and above, and most favour mandatory age checks for social media and adult websites. Norms around devices reflect this caution - over 90% believe children should be at least 13 before owning a smartphone, with many preferring 16 or older.

Despite proactive efforts at home, 83% of parents feel underprepared to manage online risks and lack sufficient tools or guidance. This sense of vulnerability is compounded by low trust in oversight, with more than 90% doubting platforms' commitment to child safety and most lacking confidence in regulators' ability to enforce standards.

I am calling for a complete prohibition on social media access for children under 16, a measure that would significantly reduce exposure to harmful content and online risks during formative years. Alongside this, we need robust digital literacy and online safety education for young people, parents, teachers, carers and youth workers with the skills to navigate technology safely. Ireland should also closely monitor the outcomes of Australia, France & the UK's new regulatory measures, using their evidence to inform our own approach and strengthen protections for children online.



SURVEY RESULTS

There is **overwhelming support for age limits & verifications.**

90%

think children should be at least 13 to own a smartphone

95%

support requiring parental permission for under-16s to open social media accounts

89%

of parents believe social media should be off-limits to under-16s

91%

favour mandatory age verification for social media and adult websites

83%

report they lack sufficient tools or information to protect their child online

Parents feel underprepared but they are willing to be proactive

84%

have household screen time rules, while 79% have some form of parental controls

95%

have little confidence in the national media regulator's ability to enforce safety standards

Parents have low trust in oversight.

93%

of parents do not trust social media companies to act in children's best interests

REPORTED USAGE PATTERNS:

66%

of children spend two hours or less online

41%

spend 0-1 hours

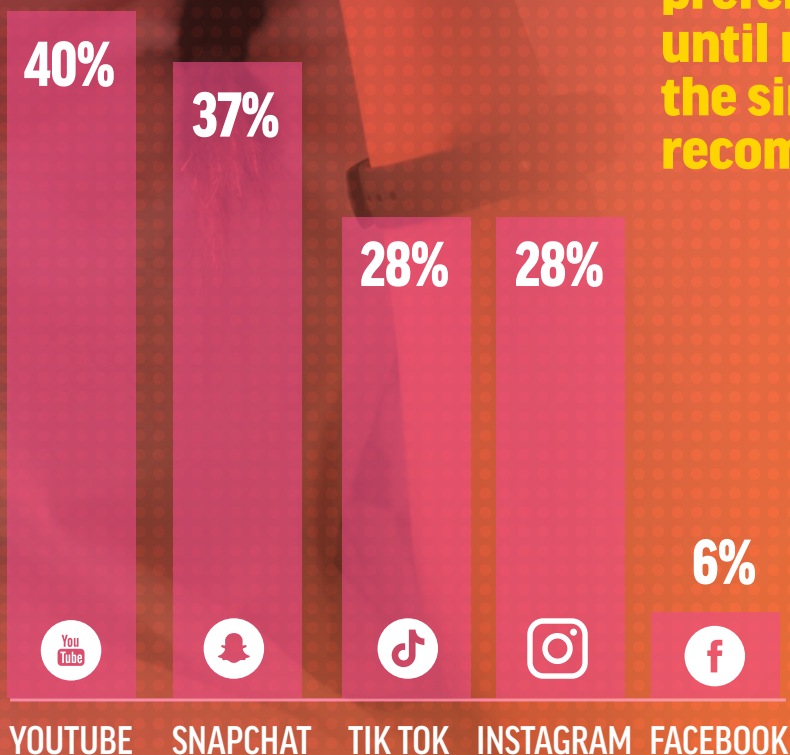
26%

spend 1-2 hours

16%

spend 2-3 hours

TOP PLATFORMS AMONG CHILDREN



Parents overwhelmingly prefer delaying smartphones until mid-teens, with 16 the single most common recommended age

56%

opted for 16, while 90% think children should be at least 13

Core concerns identified

- 1 Parental Awareness & Tools:**
Parents feel ill-equipped and call for better guidance and user-friendly safety tools.
- 2 Platform Safety & Regulation:**
There is widespread distrust regarding social networks and their ability to adequately moderate harmful content.
- 3 Exposure to Harmful Content:**
Nearly half of parents are not confident their child hasn't seen pornography or violent material. Absence of age verification amplifies this fear.

Most highly requested actions

- 1 Education First:**
Strong demand for earlier and stronger online safety education in schools and digital literacy programmes for parents and children.
- 2 Tougher Regulation:**
Calls for updated laws, stricter enforcement, and penalties for platforms that fail to protect minors.
- 3 Robust Age Verification:**
Parents want proof-of-age systems to block underage access to adult or high-risk content.
- 4 Support for Parents:**
Public awareness campaigns and simple, default parental controls to help families enforce rules at home.

The Child's Perspective

Based on findings from CyberSafeKids' 2025 Trends & Usage Report

I love to play roblox. You can make your own avatar, meet new people and play games with them.

Have you heard of it?

Jessica aged 11



28% of kids aged between 8 & 12 said "we have seen stuff online that 'bothered' us, but (50% of the time) we don't tell anyone.

Matthew aged 11



My mam and dad don't know what's on my FYP*. (63%) My friends said their parents don't know what they're doing online.

Éabha aged 12



"AI is super handy. (36%) Lots of my mates said they use chat bots for their homework, but don't tell my teacher that!"

Callum aged 15



Children's voices must be central in shaping online safety policies. Growing up online is their reality, restrictions alone won't prepare them for the future. We need to empower young people with practical tools and knowledge to navigate the internet safely. Meeting them where they are - through engaging formats like immersive comics and relatable characters such as cyber defenders - can make these lessons effective and fun.

* **FYP** - refers to 'For You Page' which is a personalised feed of videos that the app shows you based on what you've watched and liked before.

What are other countries doing?



France

- France has cracked down on pornography for minors.
- The Security and Digital Space (SREN) Laws include robust age verification for access to pornographic content, as well as penalties for platforms that fail to act on illegal content.
- Pornographic websites were given 3 months to display a screen blocking usage until the user's age has been verified, or face heavy fines. The user must now upload their ID to gain access.
- The age verification process must be overseen by an independent third party, not by the platform itself.
- The French broadcast authority (Arcom) is in charge of enforcement.
- Non-compliant platforms can face fines of up to 2% of their global revenue, ISP-ordered blocks, or be delisted in France.
- PornHub, Redtube and YouPorn have ceased operations in France in protest at these laws.



UK

- The United Kingdom has also introduced age verification systems.
- Under the 2023 Online Safety Act, platforms and social media that provide pornography, or material relating to suicide, self-harm or eating disorders, are obliged to verify the age of their users to ensure they are not under 18.
- As of 25 July 2025, all sites and apps that allow **pornography** need to have strong **age** checks in place. Non-compliant sites may face fines or be blocked in the UK.
- Data analytics firm Similarweb said PornHub lost more than one million visitors in just two weeks following the introduction of age verification.
- Recently, there has been a strong focus on VPNs as a loophole through which minors could potentially bypass age verification checks. The Children's Commissioner has called for the use of VPNs themselves to become age-verified



Australia

- From December 10th 2025 Australia will become the first country to ban children under 16 from having social media accounts
- Under the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024, platforms must take "reasonable steps" to ensure users are at least 16 years old or face fines of up to almost \$50 million for non-compliance.
- The goal of the Australian government is to protect the mental health of young people by reducing their exposure to online harms, such as cyberbullying and harmful content.
- Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok will be forced to remove users under the age of 16. Companies have agreed to comply but note difficulty with 'policing it' and encountering numerous challenges.
- There has been some criticism that the law is "vague" and "rushed".



Policy Implications

The survey provides a clear mandate for action. Irish parents strongly support:

- Expanding school-based online safety education and parent training.
- Encourage delayed smartphone and social media use, such as voluntary "wait until 16" pledges.
- Strengthening regulatory powers of Ireland's Online Safety Commissioner & Coimisiún na Meán to enforce content moderation, age verification and tackle algorithms which push harmful content for kids.
- Creating privacy-respecting age-verification systems that genuinely keep under-16s off restricted sites.

Parents are doing their part but want government and industry to match their efforts. By combining education, regulation, and practical supports, we can deliver the safer digital environment that families across Ireland are demanding.



Conclusions

The results of Fine Gael's Online Safety Survey paint a vivid picture of the challenges facing families in Ireland today. Parents are deeply invested in their children's digital lives, and while they recognise the opportunities that technology provides, they are equally clear eyed about the risks.

Many are already setting boundaries, delaying smartphone ownership, and using parental controls. Yet despite these efforts, the overwhelming sentiment is that families cannot shoulder this responsibility alone.

Parents are asking for a stronger partnership between households, schools, regulators, and industry. They want online safety education to begin earlier and to be embedded across the curriculum, not treated as an optional add on.

They want regulators to have the authority and resources to enforce standards, and they want platforms to be held accountable when they fail to protect children. They want age verification systems that are effective, privacy respecting, and consistent across platforms, so that children are not exposed to harmful content simply because of weak or inconsistent checks.

Fine Gael stands ready to respond by:

- Empowering through grassroots campaigns that encourage families to delay smartphone ownership until age 14 and postpone social media use until age 16.
- Accelerating digital Identity and ensuring there is effective, privacy preserving age verification by pushing Ireland's digital wallet rollout and leveraging the EU Presidency to see the launch of the European Digital Identity and Wallet by 2026, alongside working with like minded states to strengthen protections for children online.
- We will push for stronger regulation and enforcement by calling to ensure Comisiún na Meán has the resources and authority to regulate platforms effectively and impose tougher liability for harmful content.
- We must ensure social media and video-sharing platforms put children's health and well-being ahead of commercial interests, and take responsibility for reducing the risk of harmful or inappropriate content being recommended through their algorithms.

We must deliver stricter age restrictions on social media, we must empower our young users to understand the risks and responsibilities that come with protecting their health and safety online, we must have robust online safety education embedded in schools, across community and voluntary organisations and we must commit to learning from international best practice -including measures in Australia, France, and the UK - to ensure Ireland remains at the forefront of protecting children online.

This challenge belongs to all of us! We must work together, across government departments, across education and community, across parents, children, industry, and civil society. Online safety must be a shared priority, because safeguarding children in the digital world is a collective duty.



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