From Survive to Thrive:

Supporting digital family life after lockdown

Contents

Summary

Well over a year on from the first cases of Covid-19 and now into a second year of restrictions in the UK, it comes as no surprise that many children and their parents and carers increasingly used screens to connect to the outside world. Technology was a lifeline for us all, allowing us to connect with family and friends, for children to be educated through home learning and for everyone to be entertained and have fun in these uncertain times.

At regular intervals between January 2020 and March 2021, we asked parents about their children's use of technology, their concerns and attitudes to their children's online lives and perceptions of the impact on their wellbeing. This study gives us a unique view into how the family relationship with technology has changed from the pre-pandemic world through various periods of lockdown and adjustment to a new way of living virtually.

In March 2021 we supplemented this with some additional research questions, asking parents to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of this increased reliance on the connected home. This allows us to look forward to what help parents now need and how we can best support them as UK Covid restrictions start to lift.

Our research tells a story with two key parts. Parents have recognised the true benefits of connected technology through each successive period of lockdown. It is indeed hard to imagine what would have happened without it and where families would be now. Though a positive story exists, with more time in front of a screen, parents are increasingly concerned about their children encountering harm online and have noticed an increase in online activities particularly livestreaming as well as spending money online.

A recurring theme throughout the report is the overwhelming insight that children with some form of offline vulnerability have been disproportionately affected by the impact of Covid-19 in relation to technology use and its effects. They need our support more than ever to enable them to have a safer online experience and to thrive in the digital world as the physical world opens up again for us all.

"Without a doubt the last 12 months have been incredibly challenging for families as they've grappled with the impact of lockdown restrictions on their day to day lives. As the world came to a standstill we felt a sizeable shift in their reliance upon and use of technology, with it becoming a lifeline to continue to connect to the outside world. Our report gives us an interesting perspective on a unique period in time for families everywhere and how we can better support them as we move forward."

Carolyn Bunting
CEO, Internet Matters

Methodology

All participants were carefully screened to ensure they met the required criteria to take part and were suitable for this research.

The Internet Matters Parents Tracker has been running since 2017 with three waves of research being conducted each year. In each wave we interview 2,000 parents of children aged 5-16 across a broad socio-demographic background, on their children's digital usage, their specific concerns and experience of online harm and their own mediation techniques. To allow us to reflect on changes since before the Covid pandemic, this report uses data from the last 4 waves of the survey undertaken in January 2020, May 2020, October 2020 and March 2021.

For the wave conducted in March 2021, we included a specific set of questions about the impact of the pandemic to better understand parents' behaviours, attitudes and perception of their children's wellbeing during this time period.

Within the survey a child with vulnerabilities is defined by their parent or carer as registered disabled; having registered Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) status or an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP); having a registered carer/receiving a Carer's Allowance or having received professional medical treatment for mental health issues.

We recognise that every child is different and every child can be vulnerable - especially online. Further, facing offline vulnerabilities is not necessarily a static or permanent state. The datapoints in this report come from parents and carers talking about their children in this unprecedented time.

Overall volumes by wave

	Total	Parents of vulnerable children
Mar-21	2,001	400
Sept-20	2,006	361
May-20	2,005	367
Jan-20	2,007	334

1. What children have been doing online

Gaming is the activity of choice but the use of livestreaming and chatrooms are on the rise

It's been widely reported that children's screen time has increased during the pandemic. In our study, parents have reported a 32% increase in screen time usage on weekdays (from an average of 2.2 hours per weekday last year to 2.9 hours in March 2021), which more recently may be largely driven by mandatory online learning, and 14% at weekends (3.5 hours to 4.0 hours).

Gaming remains the single most popular activity amongst all children, with 61% of parents saying their children play games online on their own and 48% against others. The largest increases in online activities parents report over the last year have been in livestreaming – with children either watching live broadcasts (43% increase year on year) or actively broadcasting their own videos (89% increase year on year with one in six of all children participating) on platforms such as YouTube Live and Facebook Live.

Livestreaming gives children the opportunity to be creative, connect with a larger group of friends or followers and mirror their online heroes. However, receiving negative comments, an increased likelihood of children chatting to people they don't know and sharing or being exposed to inappropriate content are all potential risks. There is a danger of believing children are safe because we know where they are and it's important that parents educate themselves and talk to their children about how to enjoy the benefits of livestreaming safely, including having the relevant privacy settings and agreeing what is appropriate to share. There is a minimum age requirement of 13 to be able to livestream across most popular platforms. Parents need to be actively managing and administrating the account if their child is under that age.

Related to this, with the need to stay connected and opportunities to socialise restricted, parents also report that their use of chatrooms and forums has more than doubled from 5% to 13% over the last year.

43%
Increase year on year of children watching **live online broadcasts**

89%
Increase year on year of children **actively broadcasting** their own videos

"I've become more relaxed with the use of technology over the past 12 months…I've learnt that it's important for them to have this time, technology is becoming increasingly common and widely used and it's important they know how to use it and use it safely."
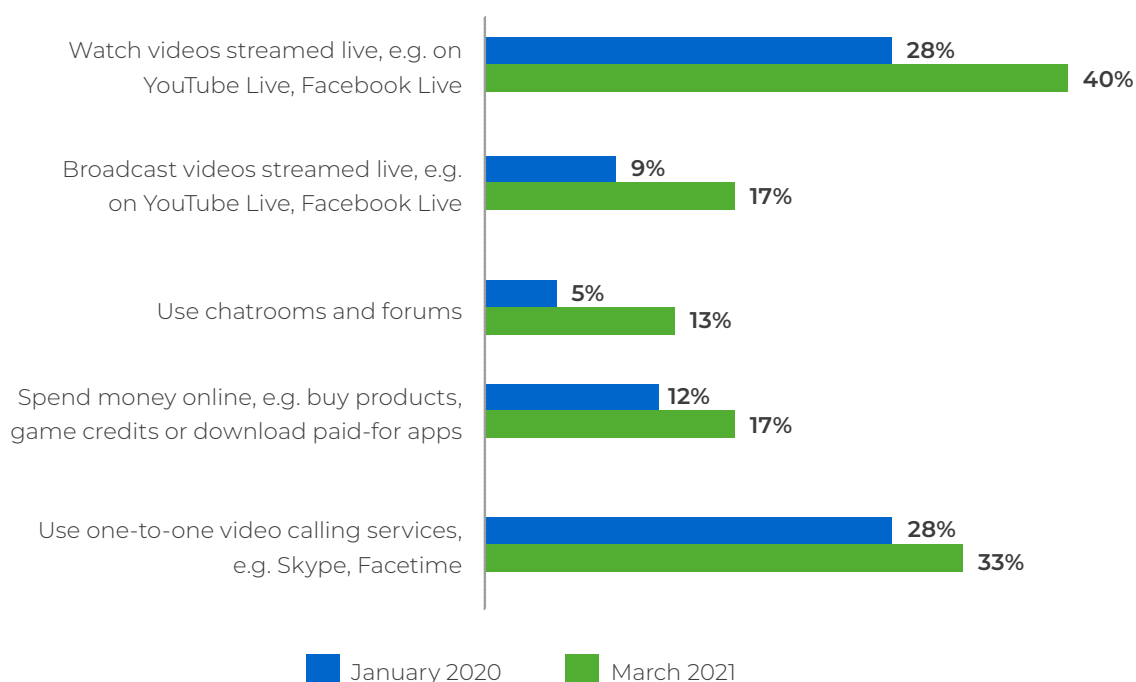**Mum, with two girls aged 8 and 4**

More children are spending money online

With gaming remaining the top online activity for children, parents also reported a 42% increase in spending money online, which includes game credits as well as online shopping and app purchases. Parents of vulnerable children reported a 64% increase. With shops closed for long periods of time, children have moved online in greater numbers to make purchases, but parents also report higher instances of in-game spending, which has increased by a third over the last year, particularly amongst boys. Parents are increasingly concerned about their child's online spending behaviour with 43% saying they're worried, especially when it comes to gambling on websites or in games and apps. It is important that parents have on-going conversations with their children about the risks of spending money online and how they might be susceptible to fraud, scams or other financial harms.

Top 5 changes in online activity since pre-Covid. All Children.

Watch videos streamed live, e.g. on YouTube Live, Facebook Live — January 2020: 28%, March 2021: 40%

Broadcast videos streamed live, e.g. on YouTube Live, Facebook Live — January 2020: 9%, March 2021: 17%

Use chatrooms and forums — January 2020: 5%, March 2021: 13%

Spend money online, e.g. buy products, game credits or download paid-for apps — January 2020: 12%, March 2021: 17%

Use one-to-one video calling services, e.g. Skype, Facetime — January 2020: 28%, March 2021: 33%

■ January 2020   ■ March 2021

2. How parents feel about their children's online world

Parents increasingly see the benefits of technology for children's wellbeing

Despite the negative impact the coronavirus has had on many aspects of family life, our research does paint a positive picture of how parents view their children's relationship with technology.

Over half of parents (56%) say their children's online world has had a positive impact on their life since the pandemic began. 80% agreed that technology has been a good tool for online learning and 78% saw the positive impact it had on allowing their children to socialise, stay connected and be entertained. Even more encouraging was the level of engagement parents were having with what their children were doing online with 60% saying they have become more involved in their children's online activities.

Overall, lockdown has had a positive effect on parents' confidence to keep their children safe online. As they spent more time with children this steadily increased and is up 3 percentage points over the last year. Aligned with the increase in screen time, around 25% say they have checked privacy settings and 15% have actively looked for information on online safety.

Perceptions of children's digital use on their overall wellbeing has also increased year on year, despite a slip back in late 2020, this is up 6 percentage points for all parents and 13 percentage points for parents of vulnerable children (this can be seen in the charts on page 8). This shows the impact of the latest lockdown when digital technology was more effectively supporting online learning and working with classmates during online lessons. As we reached the Covid anniversary, many parents had a better grasp of how to use technology to keep children connected.

56%
Over half of parents say their children's online world has **had a positive impact** on their life since the pandemic began
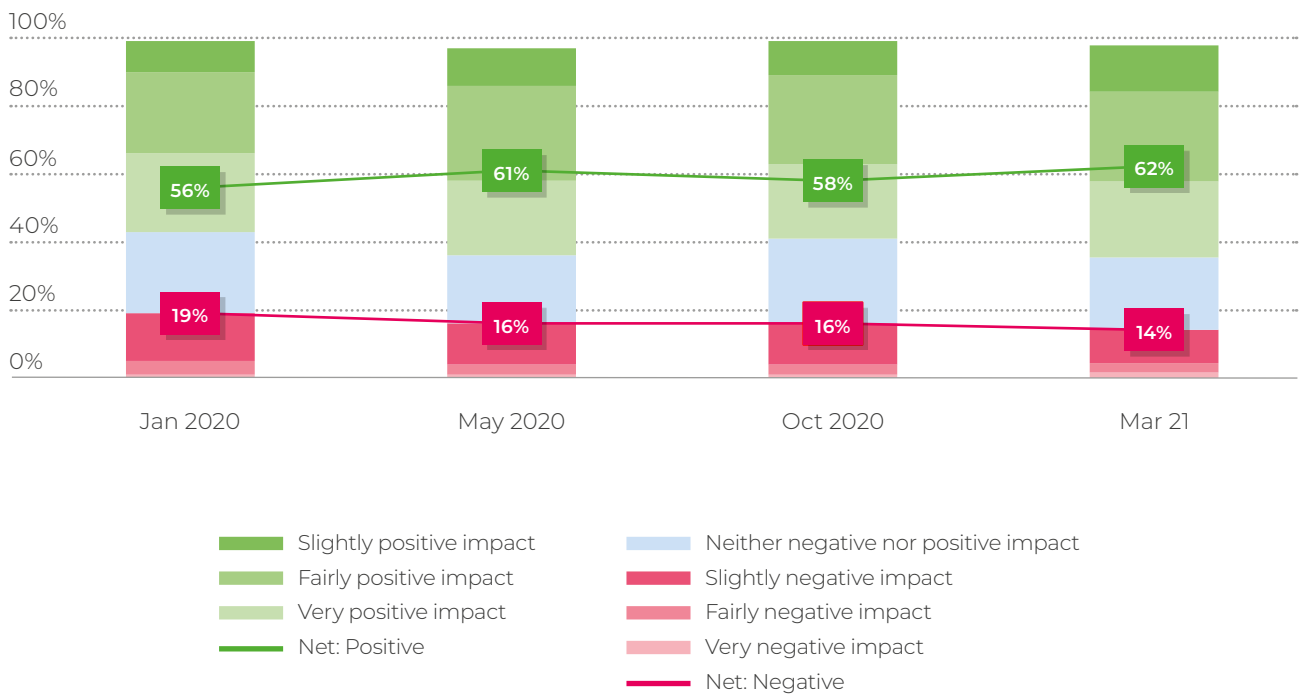
"My child has a group of friends who spend a lot of time dedicated to playing and communicating with each other online and in game. This community is extremely important to him, and is a big part of his wellbeing and identity."
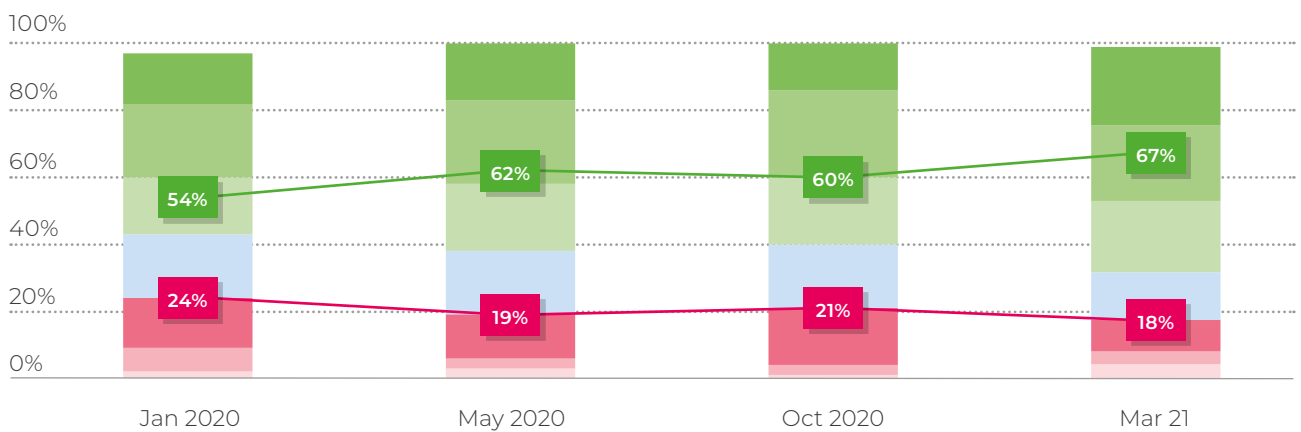
Mum, with two boys aged 16 and 8

Parent perceptions of impact of children's experience and use of technology on their overall wellbeing – All children

▉ Slightly positive impact	▉ Neither negative nor positive impact	
▉ Fairly positive impact	▉ Slightly negative impact	
▉ Very positive impact	▉ Fairly negative impact	
—— Net: Positive	▉ Very negative impact	
	—— Net: Negative	

Parent perceptions of impact of children's experience and use of technology on their overall wellbeing – Children with vulnerabilities

53%

More than half of parents agree that their child has become **too reliant on online technology**

Concern over online harm has increased

Even though parents have seen the positive benefits of technology through the last 12 months on their children's lives, more than half of parents (53%) agree that their child has become too reliant on online technology. Parents will need support in rebalancing screen time in the home as lockdown restrictions lift.

In our most recent wave of research undertaken before most children went back to school, parental concerns about online harms increased significantly for almost every issue we surveyed. This was most marked in relation to cyberbullying for which concern increased by 24% for all parents and 27% for parents of vulnerable children.

Parental concern about the following issues in relation to their children's online experience

	Vulnerable		Non-vulnerable (%)	
	March 2021 %	% Change from Oct 2020	March 2021 %	% Change from Oct 2020
Online bullying from people they know	65	↑27%	56	↑24%
Being affected by exposure to fake news	63	↑15%	55	↑20%
Viewing content promoting self-harm or suicide	63	↑15%	52	↑11%
Having a poor body image	63	↑13%	51	↑9%
Peer pressure to do things online	61	↑9%	53	↑8%
Viewing content which promotes dangerous eating habits	60	↑9%	49	↑11%
Exposure to hate speech	62	↑7%	53	↑13%
Suffering damage to their reputation	57	↑8%	48	↑12%
Viewing sexual content	64	↑7%	58	–
Giving away personal information online	65	↑5%	57	↑8%

*"Kids are more tech savvy than we give credit for.
They understand the soft skills around tech that I lack."*
Dad, with son aged 8

The other most common concerns were around content risks. With children spending more time in front of a screen, more of this was unsupervised. Two in five parents (39%) found themselves leaving their children alone with their devices for much longer periods of time than usual. This increases to 45% for children who were home-schooled most of the time. Parents trying to grapple with juggling the responsibilities of home schooling, childcare, working and keeping some sense of routine in the home found they relied on technology to manage the challenge of keeping children occupied.

With more time spent online, parental concern about their children's exposure to fake news and misinformation, hate speech, content promoting self-harm, suicide and eating disorders all increased.

We identified that for some of these issues the increased concern amongst all parents has translated into an upwards trend in actual lived experience, although the picture is mixed and the numbers relatively small. This is still cause for concern and we'll continue to monitor these trends through our ongoing tracking. However, the picture appears very different for parents of vulnerable children.

3. Children with vulnerabilities have been most impacted

The gap has widened for children with vulnerabilities

Every child is unique and so is their online experience. However, all of our research – with children and young people and with parents and carers – demonstrates that children facing offline vulnerabilities are more at risk online and that their offline vulnerabilities informs which types of risks they will encounter online. Our latest commissioned report, *Refuge and Risk,* written by Adrienne Katz and Aiman El Asam, and published by Internet Matters has improved our understanding of the digital experiences of children with vulnerabilities by determining that children facing multiple vulnerabilities were at enhanced risk.

This research also demonstrated that connectivity is a lifeline for these children - a place where they connect and play, free from the labels that so often dominate their offline lives. However, this dependence can mean they are more deeply affected when things go wrong.

Parents of children with vulnerabilities reported this greater reliance on technology with 21% of them more likely to purchase a new device for their child during the pandemic compared to parents of children without vulnerabilities (13%). Parents of children with vulnerabilities in the household were also more likely to allow them to visit sites or use apps that they would not typically use (18% vs. 10% of children without vulnerabilities).

Increased parental concern about online bullying became a reality for many vulnerable children in the last year as nearly a quarter of parents report that their child has experienced this, an increase of 21% since January 2020. The content risks were also more realised with an increase in experience of viewing content promoting self-harm or suicide and from radical or extremist groups. Also, there appears to be more evidence of coercion, with parents reporting a 40% increase in children experiencing peer pressure to do things online they wouldn't normally do, a 100% increase in fraud and identity theft and potentially linked to these, a 37% increase in suffering damage to their reputation due to their online activity.

It is difficult to tell whether these are genuine increases or a result of parents spending more time with their children and being more aware of their online lives. However, the trend is worrying. The pandemic has shown that the difference in experience of these issues between children with offline vulnerabilities and those without is pulling even further apart.

This reaffirms our ask to systematically and thoroughly consider the digital dimension in the lives of children with vulnerabilities to ensure they are better protected from online harm. If their exposure to technology has increased as a result of the pandemic and consequential lockdowns, they need our support more than ever.

23%

Nearly a quarter of parents of vulnerable children report that **their child has experienced online bullying**

"With my child being special needs, the responsibility lies with me to ensure my child is "online" safe."
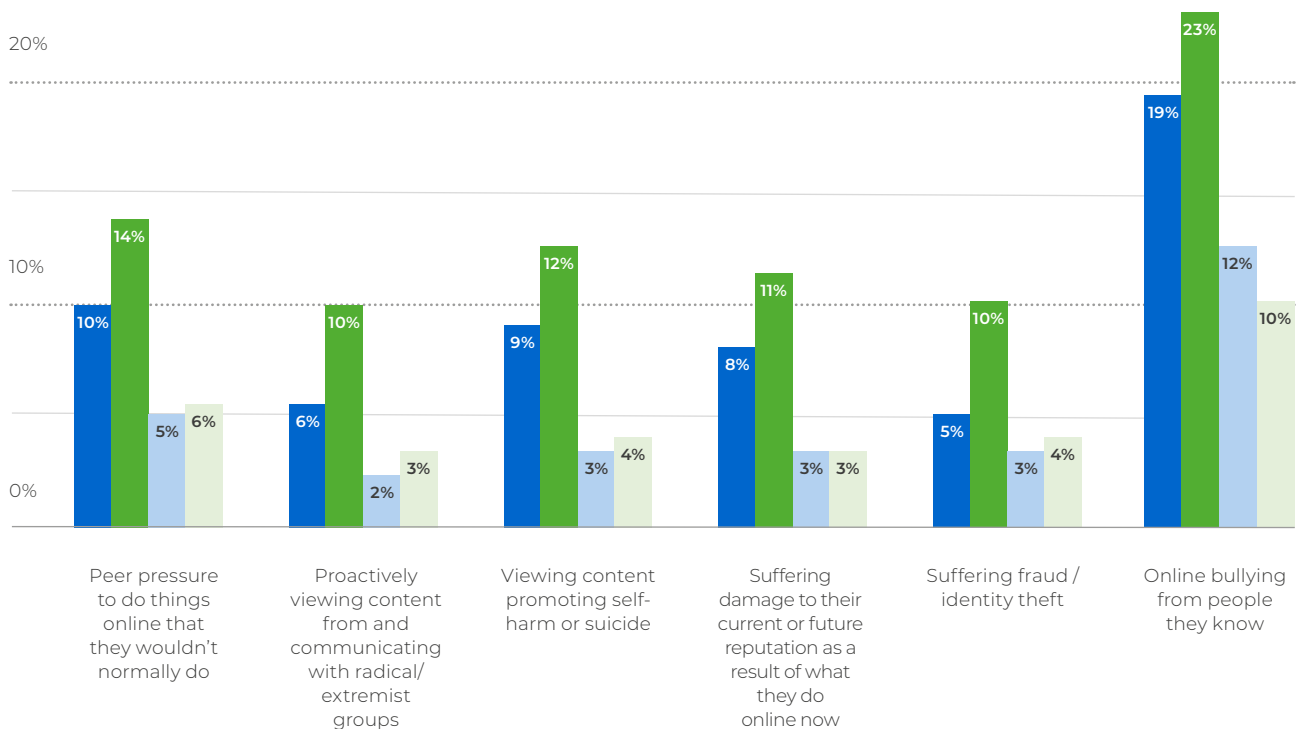**Dad, with son aged 13**

Encouragingly, with their increased challenges, parents of children with vulnerabilities report that they have engaged more frequently in conversations with their children about digital safety. In March this year, an additional 20% of parents said they had had a conversation on the subject in the last month compared to a year ago.

We know that one of the most effective ways of keeping all children and young people safe online is for parents, carers or trusted adults to be interested in their online lives and talk to them about it. For children facing offline vulnerabilities these conversations should be a mandatory part of safeguarding by professionals.

Q: And which of these issues are you aware your child or children has had direct experience of online?

● Vulnerable January 2020   ● Vulnerable March 2021   ● Non vulnerable January 2020   ● Non vulnerable March 2021

Issue	Vulnerable Jan 2020	Vulnerable Mar 2021	Non vulnerable Jan 2020	Non vulnerable Mar 2021
Peer pressure to do things online that they wouldn't normally do	10%	14%	5%	6%
Proactively viewing content from and communicating with radical/extremist groups	6%	10%	2%	3%
Viewing content promoting self-harm or suicide	9%	12%	3%	4%
Suffering damage to their current or future reputation as a result of what they do online now	8%	11%	3%	3%
Suffering fraud / identity theft	5%	10%	3%	4%
Online bullying from people they know	19%	23%	12%	10%

47%
of parents of vulnerable children told us that **children have become more anxious** as a result of spending more time online over the last 12 months

The impact on wellbeing has already been felt for vulnerable users and their families

While the majority of parents of children with vulnerabilities celebrate the benefits of technology for allowing their children to learn, connect to online communities and express themselves, our data has shown that they have also disproportionately suffered more of the negative consequences of increased time online during the pandemic.

Over half (51%) of parents of vulnerable children have told us their child showed concerning behaviour online throughout the pandemic and their relationship with technology has caused friction within the household with 48% saying their child's internet usage has caused disharmony in the family.

Around a third (32%) of all parents told us that children have become more anxious as a result of spending more time online over the last 12 months but for parents of vulnerable children this increases to 47%. Increased use of technology, with more hours spent gaming, on social media and viewing content from others also appears to have made vulnerable children more self-conscious (48% parents vs. 32% of parents without vulnerable children).

Whilst we continue to take strides forward in our work to support vulnerable children and young people in a digital world, this latest research tells us that we collectively still need to do more to support families and give vulnerable children the skills to flourish online and manage the impact on their sense of identity and mental health.

4. Adapting to the virtual school

Keeping children safe in the online learning environment was recognised by schools

A big change in education was triggered over the last 12 months and particularly as we moved into another period of lockdown which prevented children going back to school in early 2021. Along with colleges and universities, both primary and secondary schools adopted remote learning as standard. We explored parent's perceptions of this sudden shift from classroom to remote online learning and the effects on children.

Despite the challenges of home-schooling, 64% of parents were very positive about the online learning provision from schools as they strived to support families. Even more encouragingly, schools recognised the importance of keeping their pupils safe whilst online learning. Nearly three quarters of parents (74%) said they received information from their school about digital safety and 48% of parents said remote learning has helped their child better understand how to stay safe online.
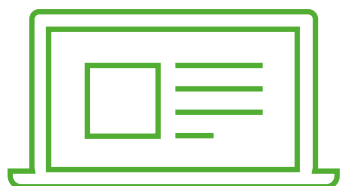
The level of parental support varied

Although a positive story exists for the provision of online classes for children, there was a division when we asked parents about being able to support their children to learn from home. Over 40% of parents told us they didn't have the time to fully support their child versus 37% who felt they did. Depending on the situation of the parents or carers, with many furloughed or working from home, different families were able to offer different levels of support for children and young people. Parents working at home may have had no choice but to sit their child down to manage online schoolwork independently, whilst others were more able to spend time with children to help them get the most out of their online classes. Perhaps reflective of their more complex needs, 57% of parents of vulnerable children said they couldn't fully support their child during this time.

Remote teaching can't fully replace the benefits of pupil-teacher contact

Whilst 59% of parents told us their children enjoyed and got a lot out of online lessons planned by their teachers, asking children to adapt to a new way of learning via screens resulted in their concentration suffering. Some 43% of parents agreed that their children had short attention spans during online lessons and technology seems to have acted as a barrier for some children to actively involve themselves in online classes, as over a third of parents felt their child struggled to contribute fully.

74%
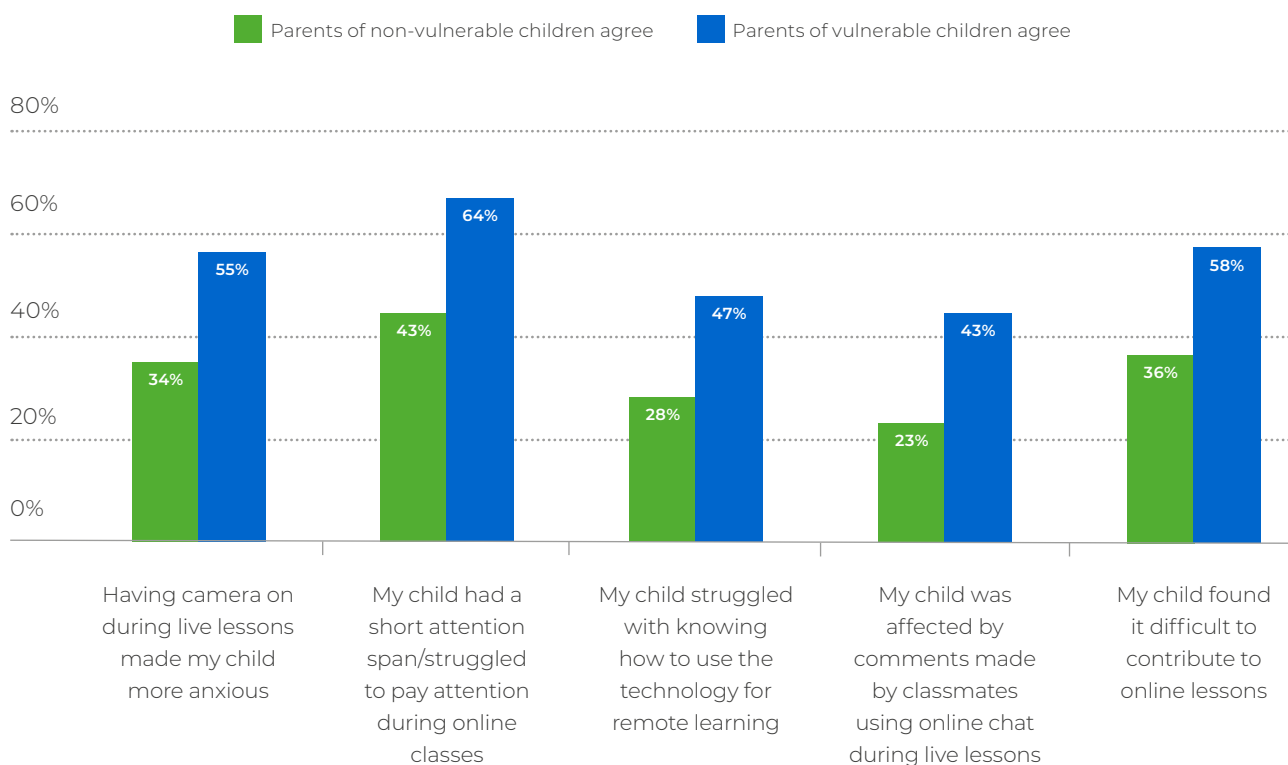**Nearly three quarters of parents** said they **received information** from their school about digital safety

"They need face-to-face contact with peers and teachers. the teachers did their best in a challenging situation, however teaching a kid with dyspraxia was difficult alongside work. Also, my oldest became quite depressed and insular and has improved since he has been back at school."
Mum, with children aged 11, 6 and 4

Overlaying this challenge with having a camera on during live classes, 34% of parents told us that this made their child more anxious, which increased to 55% when we asked parents of children with vulnerabilities. Well over half of parents of vulnerable children also reported difficulties with their concentration and ability to contribute to lessons. They were much more likely than parents of non-vulnerable children to say that their child had issues using the technology required and were affected by negative comments made by classmates in group chat.

For the majority of children who are now back at school full time, albeit in class bubbles, they are again enjoying the benefits of direct contact with teachers and classmates – without the screen as a filter. Our research shows that there are undoubtedly lessons to learn about effective remote teaching, particularly for those least able to adapt as we continue to face the ongoing threat of Covid cases in schools and pupils again having to isolate.

Parent's thoughts in relation to remote learning and taking part in school lessons via video call

■ Parents of non-vulnerable children agree   ■ Parents of vulnerable children agree

	Having camera on during live lessons made my child more anxious	My child had a short attention span/struggled to pay attention during online classes	My child struggled with knowing how to use the technology for remote learning	My child was affected by comments made by classmates using online chat during live lessons	My child found it difficult to contribute to online lessons
Non-vulnerable	34%	43%	28%	23%	36%
Vulnerable	55%	64%	47%	43%	58%

5. Looking Forward

At the start of 2020, we never would have imagined facing a pandemic that has tested families and pushed them to build resilience to overcome the challenges of adapting to a world that is more uncertain than ever. Undoubtedly this year has been tremendously tough for families. We are now at a time where lockdown restrictions are easing and we are left with the fallout of the impact it has had on children's relationships with technology and their overall sense of wellbeing.

Nearly two-thirds of parents have told us that they now require some type of help with thinking about their children's tech usage, the most needed advice being around the rebalancing of the amount of screen time their children have.

The most overwhelming need for support is felt amongst parents of children with vulnerabilities. They want to address their children's increased levels of anxiety (29%) after a year of isolation. As they move out of a virtual world, they also want to ensure children re-establish meaningful real life connections with friends and family (34%).

Children have spent more time being home-schooled in the last year than being in a physical classroom environment and the challenges of successfully transitioning children with vulnerabilities back into the usual school routine is something nearly a third of parents also acknowledge they need support with (32%). With vulnerable children's relationship with technology being more volatile than in a pre-Covid world, 1 in 5 parents also need help to continue important conversations with their children about online safety.

While there are many positives for all children, as this report reflects, the relationship vulnerable children have with technology and overall wellbeing has been the most adversely affected because of the pandemic. We will continue to work hard to connect parents with the right resources to help their children have safer and more positive online experiences.
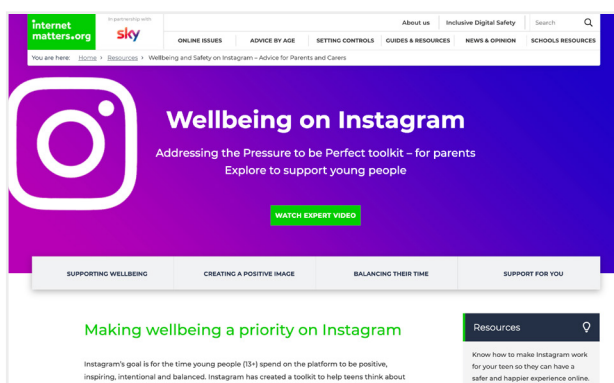
Final thoughts

There is a resounding ask from parents for further support as they acclimatise to their new normal a year on from the first Covid lockdown. Internet Matters continues to be committed to providing parents, carers and professionals with the right advice to allow their children to benefit safely from being online. The last 12 months have made a significant mark on children's relationship with technology and their overall wellbeing, which has been felt most acutely amongst those with offline vulnerabilities.

Refuge and Risk, written by Adrienne Katz and Aiman El Asam, and published by Internet Matters demonstrates there is more tech companies can do to support all children to stay safe online, and the forthcoming regulation with drive safety by design changes too. Internet Matters will prioritise delivering targeted education to parents, carers and professionals and we will continue to create, curate and promote dedicated advice and support for parents, carers and professionals. We will continue to make the case for vulnerable children to be routinely asked about their online lives by those that care for them.
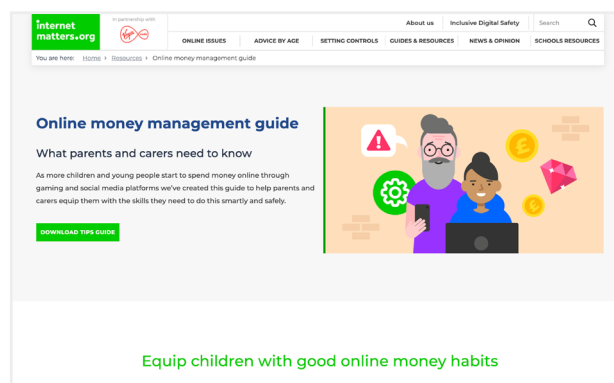
Covid has changed the way we all live. We are proud of the work Internet Matters has done to create a wealth of advice and resources for families to recover from its impact.
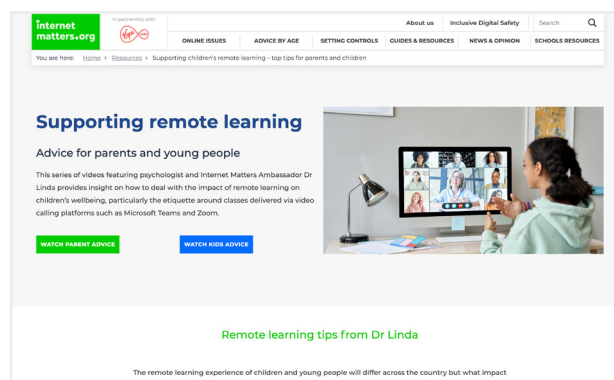
Key resources:

A parent toolkit on how to support children with the pressures of social media

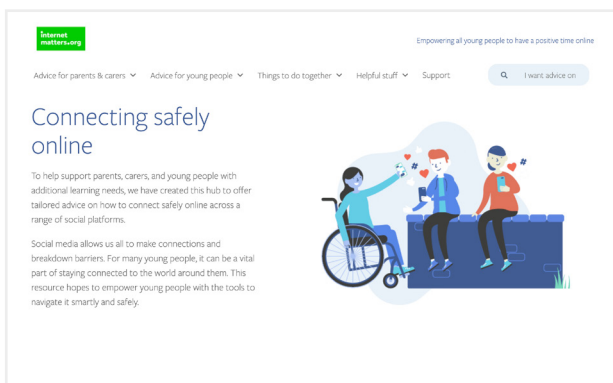**A parent's guild to help children manage money safely online**

A parent's guide to livestreaming and vlogging

Expert advice to support children with remote learning
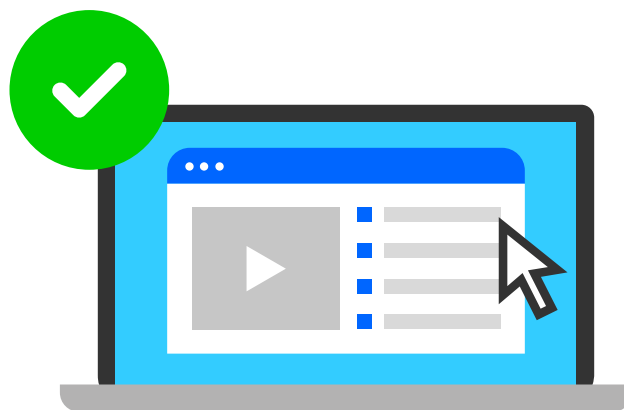
Specific resources for parents and professionals working with vulnerable children:

Advice for young people with additional learning needs and their parents/carers

Resources for parents, carers and professionals supporting children with SEND, care experience and those who identify as LGBTQ+ online

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